

## **“Die Teufelskunst unserer Zeit”? Photographic Negotiations in Thomas Bernhard’s *Auslöschung***

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### **Bernhard and the Visual**

The literary biography section of any good German bookshop usually includes a generous selection of expensive, large-format, glossily illustrated books documenting the lives of famous authors. Even by the lavish standards of the German publishing industry, however, Thomas Bernhard is exceptional in this regard. Few authors have had volumes of photographs devoted not only to their lives, but also to their houses, the places in which they grew up, and the locations in which their novels are set.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps because of Bernhard’s withdrawal from the reading circuit at an early stage in his career, perhaps because of the reluctance with which he allowed himself to be interviewed in the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps, too, because of the myths he perpetuated about his early life, photographs of Bernhard continue to exert considerable public fascination.

The critical analyses to which photographs of Bernhard have given rise, however, imply that a certain anxiety surrounds the photographic image. In his introduction to one of the “Bernhard-Bildbände,” for example, Bernhard’s long-standing friend Wieland Schmied, erstwhile professor of art history at the University of Munich, claims that by the late 1970s or early 1980s, Bernhard “so weit *mit der Arbeit an sich selbst fertig* [war], daß er sich sicher fühlte, der Kamera nichts zu zeigen, was er nicht zeigen wollte. [...] Was er der Kamera enthüllte, waren Facetten einer großen Legende, war die Inszenierung der Wahrheit” (11–12). Yet he goes on to argue that while Bernhard’s books are the place to look if one wishes to find out who Bernhard really was, the photographs “ermöglichen [...] einen ersten Blick auf den Menschen hinter den Büchern” (13). So on the one hand we have a set of photographs that portray nothing but a cal-

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culated and stage-managed public image (cf. Honegger 70), while on the other hand they allow us access to Bernhard the man, the person behind the books—even though the books themselves are the true keys to the person!

Underlying these confused and self-contradictory statements is a deep uncertainty about the epistemological and referential status of photography. In its vexed relationship to the visual, Schmied's commentary has certain affinities with Bernhard's own work. Bernhard's texts evince an intense interest in the literary, philosophical, and musical heritage of Western Europe. His relationship to these art-forms is largely (though not exclusively) positive, and their structural and thematic import for his work has generated extensive critical commentary. The visual, on the other hand, plays a considerably less important role, and on the few occasions it is thematized, it is invariably problematic. In *Verstörung* (1967), for example, the young Krainer's defacement of the engravings of composers that adorn his room is a symptom of severe mental disturbance (75–76). Even *Alte Meister* (1985), a text that, as Gregor Hens has argued, is structured around the "Erfahrungsbereich des Visuellen" (145), betrays a profound anxiety about vision. By approximating, within its narrative structure, the manneristic technique of Tintoretto's *Weißbärtiger Mann*, *Alte Meister* thwarts rather than aids the reader's imaginative reconstruction of the novel's spatial setting (Hens 150). Reger's encounter with the "Engländer aus Wales," who claims to possess precisely the same Tintoretto painting as the one in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, allows Bernhard to articulate acute skepticism about the relationship of art to its objects, as well as about the possibility and value of artistic originality (*Alte Meister* 144–60). Finally, the text's concern with multiple angles of vision ultimately implies a perspectivist epistemology that relativizes vision's value as a mode of perception and an aid to cognition.

This problematization of the visual continues in Bernhard's last published novel, *Auslöschung* (1986), which contains extensive meditations on photography. The shift of emphasis from painting to photography is of far-reaching interpretative significance. The meaning of the paintings in *Alte Meister* derives from the fact that they are works of art whose status as bearers of cultural significance is effectively guaranteed by the museum in which they are confined. By contrast, photographs tend to circulate within and across a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. My main contention in this article is that the contexts within which photographs are taken and viewed are central to their meaning. The photographs discussed in *Auslöschung* are family snapshots and newspaper photographs. They play a central thematic and structural role in the telling of a family history, and it is only by considering their immediate narrative context that their function can be adequately understood.

### Bernhard on Photography

The narrator and protagonist of *Auslöschung*, Franz-Josef Murau, receives a telegram informing him of the death of his parents and elder brother in a road accident, whereupon he sits in his flat in Rome and looks at three family photographs while reminiscing about his past life on the family's ancestral estate, Wolfsegg, in Upper Austria. But his narrative musings are frequently interspersed with comments on photography, particularly in terms of its referentiality. Contemplating a photograph of his sisters, Caecilia and Amalia, Murau writes: "Das Foto zeigt zwei spöttische Gesichter, sagte ich mir, aber haben denn meine Schwestern tatsächlich diese spöttischen Gesichter? fragte ich mich. Haben sie diese spöttischen Gesichter in Wirklichkeit?" (243). He goes on to speculate that his sisters might only have worn such mocking expressions once, at the moment he happened to release the shutter, and comes to some damning conclusions about the photographic medium:

Die Fotografie ist tatsächlich die Teufelskunst unserer Zeit, sagte ich mir, sie läßt uns jahrelang und jahrzehntelang und lebenslänglich spöttische Gesichter sehen, wo es nur ein einziges Mal solche spöttische Gesichter gegeben hat, nur einen einzigen Augenblick lang auf einem Foto, welches wir vollkommen unüberlegt gemacht haben, einem plötzlichen Einfall nachgebend. (243–44)

Here, then, photographic reference is seen as profoundly compromised because it abstracts and preserves a split-second image from the constant flux of phenomena and lends permanence to that which is transient: "Die Fotografie zeigt nur den grotesken und komischen *Augenblick*, dachte ich, sie zeigt nicht den Menschen, wie er alles in allem *zeitlebens* gewesen ist" (26, my italics).

Following on from this, Murau considers the ability of photographic images to function as an ersatz reality. The photograph of his sisters and their mocking expression has replaced any memory that Murau might have had of them, just as he can no longer think of Einstein or Churchill without seeing Einstein's extended tongue or Churchill's "argwöhnisch vorgezogene Unterlippe" (244). "Und ich glaube sogar," he writes, "nicht Churchill hat diese Memoiren geschrieben, sondern seine argwöhnisch vorgezogene Unterlippe, nicht Einstein hat diese weltbewegenden Sätze geschrieben, sondern seine herausgestreckte Zunge" (245). Murau here offers a radically metonymic reading of photography, which inverts the relationship between photographs and their referents: our access to reality is *mediated by* photographs, rather than being *represented in* them.

Elsewhere, however, Murau's reflections on photography imply a somewhat different conception of reference. The photographs of his brother and his parents, he claims, distort reality: "Die Menschen sind auf ihren Fotografien lächerliche, bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verschobene, ja verstümmelte Puppen" (29).

And yet he also stresses that individual photographs have the capacity to capture the character of the people they depict: the images of his parents and brother are “ungeheuer charakteristisch für die darauf Festgehaltenen” (27). Furthermore, he claims to be able to discern a level of reality behind the distortions of the photographic image:

Aber, sagte ich mir jetzt, so verzerrt die Eltern und mein Bruder auf diesen einzigen von mir gemachten Fotografien mit dem meinem Bruder gehörenden Fotoapparat sind, sie zeigen, je länger ich sie betrachte, hinter der Perversität und der Verzerrung doch die Wahrheit und die Wirklichkeit dieser sogenannten Abfotografierten, weil ich mich nicht um die Fotos kümmerge und die darauf Dargestellten nicht, wie sie das Foto in seiner gemeinen Verzerrung und Perversität zeigt, sehe, sondern wie *ich* sie sehe. (30)

As Günter Butzer has pointed out, these passages imply three mutually incompatible evaluations of photography. First, every photograph distorts reality. Second, *individual* photographs can capture the essential characteristics of the subject. Third, photography cannot capture the genuine nature of the subject, but can serve as a starting point for a mental evocation thereof (236).

Murau’s conceptually incoherent musings on photography have caused Bernhard’s critics considerable difficulty. Drawing on twentieth-century media theory, Butzer denies the capacity of photography to refer to a past reality or to function as an instrument of memory:

[Die Fotografie] bewahrt also nicht Vergangenes, sondern erzeugt etwas Neues, Gegenwärtiges, das sich in seiner Präsenz erschöpft. [...] Die Fotografie ist eben gerade kein Mittler des Vergangenen, sondern ein Medium, das sich seine eigene Realität schafft, die den Blick auf Geschichte verstellt, statt ihn zu ihr hin zu lenken. (237–38)<sup>2</sup>

Referring to the potential for images to replace reality, he also argues that newspaper photographs *produce* the news event rather than representing it. For Butzer, then, photographs exist in a dehistoricized eternal present. He goes on to relate the mechanical reproduction of images to Murau’s claim to have turned the Proustian “*mémoire involontaire*” (involuntary memory) into a mechanism that he can control at will (*Auslöschung* 619). This kind of mechanism, argues Butzer, removes memory from the realm of lived interiority and subjects it to the external regimen of the machine, with the result that “*der Tod selbst in Gestalt der Maschine die lebendige Erinnerung durchdringt*” (243).

The mechanical nature of photographic reproduction is the focus of two further accounts of photography in *Auslöschung*. Andreas Gößling and Hermann

Helms-Derfert read Murau's tirades against photography in terms of the critique of modernity that emerges throughout Bernhard's work. Gößling points out that in the age of mechanical reproduction, autonomous and reflective personhood ("Geist") degenerates into a "registrierenden, tautologisch verdoppelnden Verstandesmechanismus" (19). As a result, the clichéd newspaper reports about Murau's relatives' death merely repeat what the "Maschinenzeitalter" had already done to them: robbed them of authentic subjectivity and interiority (Gößling 19, 26). In the same vein, Helms-Derfert claims that Murau inveighs against photographic representation because of its tendency to divest the photographic subject of his or her inner life. He argues that the power of photography to dismantle the "Traditionswert" of the work of art—which Walter Benjamin had found potentially liberating ("Das Kunstwerk," erste Fassung, section 4)—has gone too far: *Auslöschung* shows that the photographic medium now destroys nature, history, and "Geist," as well as the auratic artwork. So Murau's fantasy of annihilating Wolfsegg duplicates the "Vernichtung von Geist und Natur" that characterises the era of mass media (168–69).

Despite differences of detail and emphasis, the interpretations of Murau's "Fotografiekritik" offered by Butzer, Gößling, and Helms-Derfert have certain concerns in common. They all stress photography's status as a technology of representation, and privilege Murau's assertion that photographs necessarily distort their subject while ignoring his attempts to rehabilitate photographic reference. Furthermore, they all make pronouncements about "photography" as though photographs always function in the same way irrespective of viewing context. Ultimately, they see Murau's discussion of photography as illustrating a theory of modernity and/or representation that pre-exists, and manifests itself within, the text of *Auslöschung*. A methodological consequence of this is decontextualization: none of the aforementioned critics accounts adequately for the immediate narrative context within which Murau both takes and views the photographs in *Auslöschung*. This approach ignores the fact that photography is not just a mode of representation, but a form of social praxis used for different ends in different personal and institutional situations. The meaning of photography is inseparable from how it is used.<sup>3</sup> Because Murau only describes his photographs and does not reproduce them in the text, we have no access to the images themselves. All we learn is *how Murau interprets them*. In order to do justice to Bernhard's text, then, we need to explore the individual and cultural contexts surrounding Murau's uses of the photographic medium. This will allow us to reassess Murau's own equivocal pronouncements on photography, representation, and reference.

### Family Photographs

Recent studies have devoted attention to representations of the family in Bernhard's work (Long, *Novels of Thomas Bernhard*; Hook 46–68), and these

studies have emerged concurrently with an increased scholarly interest in questions of family and domestic photography.<sup>4</sup> This confluence suggests that it might be timely to return to the photographs in *Auslöschung*, reading them through the prism of family history.

From an early stage in its development, photography became, as Marianne Hirsch argues, “the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation—the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family’s story would henceforth be told”; photography “both chronicles family rituals and constitutes the prime objective of those rituals,” and “perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record reality” (*Family Frames* 6–7). The implications of this are far-reaching. First, Hirsch maintains that photographs serve an end that is fundamentally narrative: while the photograph actually isolates and preserves one moment from the spatio-temporal continuum, these moments represent specific stages in the narrative of family life that can be reconstructed on the basis of the images they generate. Second, Hirsch privileges photography over the ritual it represents: photography is not an incidental by-product of ritual; on the contrary, family rituals are themselves organized in order to provide both the material and the occasion for the production of the photographic record.

For all its ostensible spontaneity, then, family photography is in no sense an ideologically innocent practice. It is a highly coded and conventionalized mode of representation that not only circumscribes the scope for aesthetic innovation, but places considerable constraints on all those involved in the photographic process: the subject, the photographer, and the viewer. These constraints correspond to what Hirsch has termed the “familial gaze,” by which she means the set of visual interrelations that constitute both the subjects and the viewer of the photographs as members of the family group. When Roland Barthes writes, “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (*Camera Lucida* 13), he is alluding to the fact that the act of photographing and being photographed involves a multi-layered set of constructions and projections that manifest themselves in, for example, the pose of the photographic subject and the choice of angle, lighting, focus, and framing on the part of the photographer. Hirsch’s discussion goes one step further in order to include the force of ideology: family photography is governed by the exchange of looks between the subject and the camera, and these looks are in turn determined by the ideology of the family. Furthermore, the way in which family photographs are usually “read” reinscribes the familial gaze in the act of reception. By conforming to the conventions of family photography, one implicitly asserts the value of domestic photography as a social practice, thereby defining oneself as part of a specific kinship group, as well as acquiescing in the wider ideology of the nuclear and extended family. Family photography thus fulfils the function of social integration.

The main contention of Hirsch's *Family Frames*, however, is that taking and reading family photographs can be a subversive act, a means of resisting the "familial gaze." This can serve two functions: it can allow tensions, rifts, and rivalries to emerge from the surface of images whose function is to perpetuate the myth of the cohesive nuclear unit, thereby contributing to a form of *Ideologiekritik* that takes the family as its object; it can also enable the individual subject to emancipate him- or herself from the narrow behavioral norms dictated by the ideology of kinship ties and social roles (*Family Frames* ch. 2, 4, 6). This is clearly of immediate relevance to Bernhard's *Auslöschung*. Understanding family photography not in terms of media theory and modernity but as an aspect of social practice allows us to relate Murau's own musings on photography to the thematics of *Auslöschung* in a way that is more adequate to the narrative context in which these reflections take place.

It is a critical commonplace that *Auslöschung* constitutes Murau's attempt to come to terms with what he calls his "Herkunftskomplex" (201). His final reckoning will be a treatise entitled "Auslöschung" and is categorized by Murau as an "Antiautobiografie." This is less a generic label than an indication that his autobiographical text is going to be oppositional in its approach (Butzer 220). Murau's writing project is just one episode in a lifelong attempt to escape the influence of his parents and Wolfsegg, their ancestral estate. His most radical gesture is to turn his back on his homeland and set up home in Rome. In light of Hirsch's comments on domestic photography, it is unsurprising that family snapshots, too, function as a site of resistance.

This resistance occurs first of all in the acts of taking and archiving images. The photographs on Murau's desk are the only three he has left; he has destroyed or discarded hundreds of others (248). The remaining images—one of his parents, one of his brother, and one of his sisters—were all taken by Murau himself, which means that he is in a position not only to describe the pictures, but to include details about the locations and circumstances in which they were produced. In many respects, the occasions on which the photographs were taken correspond to the conventions of family photography. Murau's parents were snapped while boarding a train at London's Victoria Station, returning to Austria after a tour of Britain (21). His brother is photographed on his sailboat on the Wolfgangsee (24), and his sisters are posing outside Onkel Georg's villa in Cannes (31). All these images depict holidays which, as Pierre Bourdieu writes, involve intensified social contact among members of the family group and hence "favor the intensification of a photographic practice whose express function is always to eternalize the grand moments and high points of family life" (59).<sup>5</sup>

However, the precise tactics Murau employs in order to take the pictures concerned represent a refusal to conform to convention. He deliberately sets out to photograph his parents and brother in order to emphasize their awkward postures or expressions, and their preposterous clothing (24). Furthermore, he photographs them at moments when they do not wish to be photographed:

Sie wollten damals nicht fotografiert werden und *wurden* von mir fotografiert. [...] Ich *wollte* wahrscheinlich lächerliche und komische Eltern auf dem Foto haben, das ich mir behalte, sagte ich mir. Ich wollte auch von meinem Bruder ein Foto haben, auf welchem er nicht *so* abgebildet ist, wie er tatsächlich ist, sondern ein solches, das ihn lächerlich zeigt [...]. (247–48)

In the act of photographing, Murau establishes a set of looking relations that disrupt the familial gaze. There is no reciprocity in the exchange of looks between subject and camera, and the episode turns into a power-struggle between competing wills—hence the repetition and typographical emphasis of “wollen” in the above quotation. Rather than being a collaborative process that both reflects and creates a sense of shared participation in the value-systems of the family unit, photography here becomes an agonistic enterprise whose ultimate goal is Murau’s self-assertion as different from his family.

The photograph of Murau’s sisters involves a different set of problems. Whereas Murau’s parents and brothers had been photographed against their will, his sisters “drängten sich ja sogar in diese Fotografie, sagte ich mir, ich erinnere mich genau, sie hatten sie haben wollen, sie hatten sich so in Pose gestellt, aneinandergerückt, Glück und Spontaneität vortäuschend” (241). His sisters, then, attempt to control the photographic image of themselves by striking poses that are intended to express the happiness and spontaneity associated with family snapshots. The narrator claims that he has no desire to take the photograph, but that his sisters forced him into it (241), and the end result is that his sisters’ faces depict not an unforced naturalness, but “die bar jeder Natürlichkeit entsetzliche Künstlichkeit [...], die sie so grausam entstellte” (241). Again, the familial gaze malfunctions, this time due to an incapacity on the part of Caecilia and Amalia to control their facial expressions.

The familial gaze does not exhaust itself in the act of photographing and being photographed; it also determines the way in which images are interpreted in the act of viewing. Here Murau once more shows himself to be resistant to the conventions of family photography. First and most obviously, he chooses to keep the three photographs that depict his parents and siblings in the least favorable light. Second, he reads the images not as documents of the “high points of family life” (Bourdieu 59), but as symptoms of all that the family represses. In his “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” and his “Kunstwerk” essay (in its various versions), Walter Benjamin writes of “das Optisch-Unbewußte,” the “optical unconscious.” According to Benjamin, photography not only represents the visible external world, but can actually expand the range of human vision to reveal aspects of reality—in particular physiological movement—that had hitherto remained invisible. “Vom Optisch-Unbewußten,” he writes, “erfahren wir erst durch [die Kamera], wie von dem Triebhaft-Unbewußten durch die Psychoanalyse” (“Das Kunstwerk,” section 13 of both versions). In other words, pho-

tography, like psychoanalysis, has the capacity to make manifest that which normally remains latent. In the case of domestic photography, it can bring to light that which must be repressed if the ideology of the family is to be perpetuated. Murau's subversion of the familial gaze serves precisely this end.

As Kathleen Thorpe and Hermann Helms-Derfert have argued, Murau uses the photographs of his parents in order to expose their complicity in the Nazi occupation of Austria (Thorpe 39–50; Helms-Derfert 165–66). This involves an associative process that links the image described to other images within the text. Murau himself draws attention to the fact that the plus-fours his father is wearing in the Victoria Station picture were a constant part of his father's attire during the Nazi period. He had received the local *Gauleiter* while wearing them and "sagt fortwährend *Heil Hitler* in dieser Habigpumphose" (246). The thing that Murau notices about his mother in the picture is that her neck appears exaggeratedly long. This links the photograph to the Nazi era, his mother having damaged her neck in a desperate attempt to take down a Swastika flag before the arrival of the Allies at the end of the War (Helms-Derfert 165–66). In addition, the photograph refers to the painting of the Madonna and Child hanging on the wall of the Wolfsegg dairy: "Der Hals der Muttergottes auf diesem Bild ist so lang, wie ich noch niemals einen gemalten Hals gesehen habe, allen Erfahrungen der Anatomie vollkommen widersprechend" (523). This denigration of religious iconography is not coincidental. Paintings of the Madonna and Child tend to represent not so much the Holy Family as a set of culturally specific ideals of motherhood (Sturken and Cartwright 36–37). By subjecting the Wolfsegg Madonna to ridicule and comparing her implicitly with his own mother, Murau both mocks his mother's utter failure to live up to conventional standards of maternal nurturing and implies the synonymy of Catholicism and Nazism, which formed Bernhard's most provocative polemical assertion and found its most explicit articulation in *Die Ursache* (1975).

Of his brother's photograph, Murau writes: "Der Mann auf dem Foto ist ein verbitterter Mensch, den das Alleinsein mit seinen Eltern ruiniert hat. Die sportliche Kleidung verdeckt nur mühselig die Krankheiten, die ihn bereits vollkommen in Besitz genommen haben. Sein Lächeln ist, wie man sagt, verquält" (24). The sickly body that is perceptible beneath the sporty clothing corresponds to the inner bitterness that the smile cannot hide. In both cases, the "optical unconscious" revealed by the camera allows Murau, and hence also the reader, to perceive what the ideology of the family would conceal: the fact that the very institution whose values are supposed to be celebrated in family photographs is shown to be responsible for the deformations of the individual that the photograph exposes. Similarly, the "spöttische[ ] Gesichter" of his sisters suggest that unconscious factors were at work when that photograph was taken, preventing Caecilia and Amalia from concealing their mockery at the very moment when such concealment was most desirable.

In addition to keeping only three unflattering pictures of his family and reading them in terms of the “Optisch-Unbewußte,” Murau employs a third technique in order to subvert the familial gaze. As Marianne Hirsch notes, family photography serves an important narrative purpose (*Family Frames* 6–7, *passim*). The one fundamental principle that informs both narrative and photography is selectivity: as with any form-giving enterprise, choices have to be made regarding what is significant and what is not. The conventional subjects of family photographs, namely the rituals by which the ideology of kinship are periodically reasserted, provide the family historian with a body of iconic representations of significant events to which all other events can be subordinated in the storytelling process. The nature and the content of family stories are thus to a large degree determined by the content and structure of the family album (cf. Starl 153).

Murau’s three portraits represent a *reductio ad absurdum* of the “family album,” parodying conventional archival practices and resisting the norms of family historiography. Whereas the Wolfseggers conceived of history as “die zu Hunderten und Tausenden aufeinandergelegten Ruhmesblätter,” Murau expresses his desire to peer into the family’s “fürchterliche[ ] Geschichtsabgründe” (57). The oppositional stance that Murau adopts towards the accumulation of “Ruhmesblätter” corresponds to his refusal to compile a family album. In both instances, he calls into question the family’s “Selbstverständnis,” or self-image, and, as we have seen, seeks to make manifest the aspects of family life that the familial gaze necessarily strives to repress. The narrative implications of this are that Murau tells the family story in a way that foregrounds the abysmal aspects of the recent past. At one level this concerns his parents’ implication in Nazism, their regular social congress with local *Gauleiter*, and the fact that they allowed ex-Nazis to hide in the “Kindervilla” for several years after 1945. At another level Murau uses the photographs of his siblings in order to focus on his mother’s egotism, cruelty, and pathological desire for control, and the effects these have had on her offspring.

Critics often contend that Murau’s desire to escape the influence of Wolfsegg represents an attempt to assert the self in opposition to his family and Austrian society, but that his efforts end up merely emphasizing the fact that he remains fixated on his homeland. In material terms, he is financially dependent on his parents’ allowance; in ideological terms, his extravagant praise for Rome and criticism of Wolfsegg replicate the North/South topographical divide that forms part of the Austrian collective imaginary; in psychological terms, Murau takes pleasure in the feudalistic power that devolves upon him as the surviving male heir, even though he had condemned such behavior in his father; and in terms of ritual, Murau participates fully in the funeral solemnities, with the result that he is reintegrated into the family he has striven to reject.<sup>6</sup>

Such claims result in a pessimistic sense of futility surrounding any attempt at self-assertion. With regard to *Auslöschung*, however, the one serious problem

with statements of this kind is that they ignore the moment of writing. Certainly, the text dramatizes the process by which Murau is "recuperated" by family ideology in the aftermath of his parents' and brother's deaths. But the text ends with Murau returning to Rome, having divested himself of the Wolfsegg estate. Once there, he begins his report, which, of course, demonstrates the continued influence of Wolfsegg *and* his attempts to emancipate himself from his "Herkunftskomplex." It is clearly inadequate, then, to plot this process in linear terms as struggle followed by failure. On the contrary, the demands of the family and the need for self-assertion exist in a relationship of perpetual tension that can only be dealt with via a continual process of negotiation.

In this light, Murau's relationship to family photographs and his subversion of the familial gaze become more comprehensible. The first point to note is that subversion can only ever take place with reference to the thing one wishes to subvert. So despite Murau's reading the photographs "against the grain," the fact remains that his very use of family photographs demonstrates his extrication in familial convention. He does not possess a camera (28), but nevertheless takes photographs in stereotypical situations, thereby adopting the position of the father, who, as the photographer, is typically the structuring absence of family snaps. Murau keeps his photographs to hand in the desk of his Roman apartment and looks at them when he wishes to evoke memories of his parents and siblings. This use of family photographs conforms fully to standard practice. But as we have seen, Murau's production and reception of the images is determined by an oppositional stance that seeks to undermine conventional structures of looking, reveal the fact that family history can be perpetuated only through massive repression, and establish a distance between himself (as critical observer) and those who subscribe uncritically to family ideology. Murau thus observes the formal practices surrounding family photography, while appropriating them for his own ends in terms of image content, production, and reception. This is an attempt to negotiate a space for self-assertion in the face of social and familial structures whose influence—as Bernhard's texts show time after time—is all-pervasive, but can nevertheless be subjected to tactical, localized subversion.

### **Photographs and Mourning**

The context in which Murau views his three family snapshots is not merely conditioned by the familial gaze, of course. On a much more immediate level, it is occasioned by the news of his parents' and brother's untimely deaths. Butzer argues that Murau's attempts to use photography in the service of *remembering* are doomed to failure: "Murau versucht das Unmögliche, mit Hilfe der Fotografien Vergangenes zu erinnern, und zeigt dessen Scheitern" (240). But the photographs can be seen as something other than a mnemonic aid. Helms-Derfert hints at this when he writes, "photographische Porträts [erfreuen sich] als Andenken und Gedenkbilder seit mehr als einem Jahrhundert allgemeiner Belieb-

heit” (164).<sup>7</sup> But his concentration on the self-reflexivity of *Auslöschung* means that he does not address the aspects of “sozialer Alltagspraxis” that might allow us to consider photography not in terms of its referential and epistemological value, but in terms of its use.

The relationship between photography and death has been analyzed in various ways. When Cathy N. Davidson writes that “every photograph snuffs” (672), she is referring to the fact that photographs seem to preserve their objects in a death-like state. At the same time, however, they have the uncanny capacity to bring the dead back to life. This is a point addressed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. He describes the photograph as “this image which produces death while trying to conserve life” (92), but modifies this with the realization that photographs of those who are now dead owe much of their power to a confusion of temporality that includes both the past and the future: “he is dead and he is going to die” (96).<sup>8</sup> The simultaneous presence and absence that governs every semiotic medium becomes particularly acute in photographs because of their physical resemblance to the thing they depict. It is thus inadequate to dismiss photographs as existing in an eternal present and possessing no temporal value, as both Helms-Derfert and Butzer tend to do. Murau’s use of family snapshots has to be seen in the light of the dual function of photography, which is to make present that which is absent, and to signal the absence of the thing it stands in for.

It is notable that Murau takes the photographs out of his desk as an immediate reaction to his bereavement. His reading of the images is thus determined not by the mnemonic imperative, but by the need to mourn. As Freud shows in his seminal essay “Trauer und Melancholie,” mourning involves a gradual withdrawal of bound (cathected) libidinal energies from an object that reality-testing shows to be no longer there:

Die Realitätsprüfung hat gezeigt, daß das geliebte Objekt nicht mehr besteht, und erläßt nun die Aufforderung, alle Libido aus ihren Verknüpfungen mit diesem Objekt abzuziehen. [...] Jede einzelne der Erinnerungen und Erwartungen, in denen die Libido an das Objekt geknüpft war, wird eingestellt, überbesetzt und an ihr die Loslösung der Libido vollzogen. (199)

We may wish to modify this model, since the extent to which his parents are “geliebte Objekte” in a conventional sense is questionable (although Murau does occasionally attest to the loving nature of his familial relationships). But there is no doubt that loss of close family necessitates a gradual withdrawal of affective investment, be it positive or negative, from the lost object. In the dialectic of absence and presence that characterizes photographic representation, we can see an analogue of the process of mourning during which, as Freud remarks, the object

world becomes full of things that function as signifiers, both evoking the presence and marking the absence of the lost person.

While the role of photographs in the process of memorialization has often been noted, then, it becomes clear that photographs can also be an important means by which "Trauerarbeit" might be effected.<sup>9</sup> The viewing of images represents a way of both reminding oneself of the existence of the object and facing up to his or her death. This manifests itself in the structure of the text. Murau's looking at the photographs over the course of a single afternoon forms a stable and linear time level during which he takes numerous excursions into the past. But precisely this structure, in which linearity is constantly disrupted by a series of complex flashbacks-within-flashbacks, means that at the level of the narrative *discourse*, discussion of the photographs recurs periodically. This element of repetition and return dramatizes the mechanism of mourning according to which freeing up cathected energy does not take place immediately, but via a gradual process of working through.<sup>10</sup>

At this point we can address the press photographs that Murau encounters in the second part of the text when he returns to Wolfsegg and discovers a pile of newspaper reports of the accident in the kitchen. Newspapers are one of the most widespread contexts in which photographic images are viewed, and photojournalism demands a different mode of reading from the images contained in the family album.<sup>11</sup> News photographs both represent the event and constitute that event as news; they are generally read as sources of information rather than as aesthetic objects. The problem in *Auslöschung* is that the "reader" of the images, Franz Josef Murau, is the son of the woman depicted, which, as we have seen, places him within a set of looking relations that are different from those of an anonymous newspaper reader. This becomes apparent in the contradictions that emerge throughout the episode. Murau devours the newspaper reports and yet is repulsed not only by the perfidy of the sensationalizing articles themselves, but also by his own "Niedrigkeit" and "Gemeinheit" (409) in reading them; he cannot stop himself from devouring them, but is then haunted by an obsessive if largely imaginary conviction that the cook caught him in the act (409), and that he has betrayed himself by leaving his wallet under the pile of newspapers (428). While he describes himself as a typical devourer of sensational newspaper stories, he is this time overcome by nausea (403), but this does not stop him from greedily consuming the reports and the images they contain.

I have argued elsewhere that this represents a scopophilic desire to see the mutilated female corpse even though such desire is prohibited by social protocol ("Resisting Bernhard" 46). It is equally possible, however, to read this passage in terms of the two kinds of gaze that here come into conflict. On the one hand, Murau the inveterate newspaper reader desires sensation. On the other hand, Murau the bereaved son needs to see the photographs as part of the mourning process. Photographs provide a focal point around which competing scopic impulses within Murau can crystallize. Furthermore, the photographs come to

function as cenotaphs, which are monuments that mark an empty tomb. Both stand in for what is no longer there: the body. While this goes for all photographs, it is particularly relevant to a discussion of the newspaper reports of Murau's mother's death, because her body is literally absent. The bodies of Johannes and Murau's father are fully intact after the road accident and can therefore be laid out according to the cultural conventions of Catholic Austria, whereas the maternal body is so badly mutilated that her coffin-lid is firmly screwed down. In the absence of a visible, physical corpse, the press photographs confirm her bodily existence even as they testify to her death.

Considered from the point of view of mourning, then, the play of absence and presence in photographs can again be understood in terms of negotiation. It is a negotiation that takes two forms. On the one hand, Murau repeatedly confronts images of his brother, his father, and especially his decapitated mother in order to come to terms with their physical absence and the continuing emotional investment from which he wishes to free himself. On the other hand, looking at photographs allows Murau to take part in what has become a central mourning ritual in the West, while also refusing to acquiesce in other aspects of the same ritual, the most radical example being his resolute disobedience of the injunction not to speak ill of the dead. Murau negotiates a position for himself both within the economic and familial relations that have unexpectedly come into being in the aftermath of his parents' death, and within a set of social practices that he wishes to both observe and denigrate.

Far from demonstrating Murau's inability to escape the influence of his family or illustrating the failure of his attempts at remembrance, then, looking at photographs is an aspect of social practice that permits Murau to come to terms with a set of familial circumstances that he can neither fully embrace nor fully renounce. By both conforming to and subverting the exigencies of the familial gaze, and by mobilizing the dialectic of absence and presence inherent in the photographic image in the service of "Trauerarbeit," Murau finds a use for photography that circumvents the referential and epistemological doubt that characterizes his own explicit reflections on the medium.

The foregoing discussion has shown that an investigation of the contextual use of photographs allows us to circumvent the paradoxical discussion of photographic reference in *Auslöschung*. Only by means of such investigation can the role of photography within the narrative economy of *Auslöschung* and the psychological economy of its narrator be fully understood. Photography emerges as a means by which Murau can negotiate between two sets of competing demands. On the one hand, it allows him to assert himself against the ideology of the family without, however, fully renouncing filial responsibility or, indeed, denying the traces that the family has left within his own subjectivity. On the other hand, photographs as semiotic medium allow Murau to remember the dead while acknowledging their absence. Indeed, Murau's own use of photography implies

that it can have positive uses that exceed his own negative evaluations of the medium, thereby relativizing his own claim that photography is the "Teufelskunst unserer Zeit."

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### NOTES

1. See Dreissinger, Baumgartner, and the three volumes by Erika Schmied.

2. It should be noted that Butzer's reading of Kracauer, Barthes, and Benjamin is highly tendentious. Kracauer and Barthes, in particular, reflect in subtle and nuanced ways on the temporality of the photograph, but Butzer conveniently ignores this aspect of their work.

3. See Tagg for the most influential and rigorous statement of the contextualist position.

4. For a historical account of domestic photography in Germany, see Starl, especially the section "Erinnerung als Bild" (148–57). The classic sociological account of family photography remains Bourdieu. An important recent study is Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames*, to which I shall return later in this article. The insights she develops here are explored further in the excellent contributions to her edited volume *The Familial Gaze*.

5. "[...] favorisent l'intensification d'une pratique photographique qui a toujours pour fonction expresse d'éterniser les grands moments et les hauts lieux de la vie familiale"; English translation by the author.

6. See, e.g., Butzer 226–27; Helms-Derfert 161; Hook, 61–63.

7. On the use of photography for mourning purposes, see also Ruby.

8. The translation here has been modified to reflect the intensely personal focus of the French original, "il est mort et il va mourir" (Barthes, *La chambre claire* 1175).

9. Butzer's comment that *Auslöschung* cannot be read as an instance of failed psychoanalytic "Trauerarbeit" appears at the end of a 60-page dissection of the novel that eschews psychoanalysis completely, even though the initial framework of Butzer's study is heavily psychoanalytic in orientation. According to Butzer, the reasons for the non-applicability of the psychoanalytic model are pervasive deictic ambiguity and the destruction of narrative order, both of which lead to the dissolution of the narrator's subjectivity (269–70). This, however, begs numerous questions. If the narrator has no subjectivity, how can Butzer repeatedly refer to him as the narrator? On what grounds does Butzer equate "Erinnerungsarbeit" with "Trauerarbeit" (267) when the two are in fact profoundly different in psychoanalytic theory? Why should confused narrative hierarchies be incompatible with memory? On this latter point, see Dori Laub's accounts of his experiences as a therapist working with Holocaust survivors, "Bearing Witness" and "An Event without a Witness." Laub shows that memory does not

take the form of linear recall, but has to be pieced together in a fragmentary way and may not actually lead to the kind of “total narrative” that Butzer repeatedly assumes is a precondition of remembering. Butzer also seems to confuse individual mourning with the collective remembering of the victims of Nazism.

10. *Pace* Butzer, it cannot be argued that Murau makes no distinction between the photographs of the dead (his parents and Johannes) and those of the living (Caecilia and Amalia). Grammatical tense alone means that Murau relates the photographs of his sisters to present reality and, indeed, the imminent confrontation that awaits him in Wolfsegg (242–43). The narrative context shows that the images of his sisters are not viewed in the service of mourning.

11. Once again, the tendency of Butzer, Gößling, and Helms-Derfert to employ the same analytic concepts to both domestic and journalistic photographs results in undifferentiated readings of the function of photographs within the text.

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