Proposal Abstract

Abstract
This book manuscript examines the interrogation of photography and photographic practices in German and Austrian literature after 1945, to show the interrelation of media practices, literary aesthetics, and the representation of social and individual memory from the immediate postwar period to the present. The study includes writers from Austria and the former East and West Germanys, and novels written after unification in 1990. By taking the broader view of postwar German and Austrian literature within different successive socio-political parameters, I argue that the image-text relationship is not static but is informed by distinct political, social, cultural, and generational contexts. The project’s immediate focus in on German literature, photographic practices, and theory; however, the interdisciplinary scope of the study addresses more broadly the question of how representational practices across media shape cultural awareness and the construction of social histories and national identity.

Key words
German literature, 20th and 21st century
Austrian literature, 20th century
Photography, theory, 20th century
Photography and literature
Collective memory and literature
Proposal Description

In works of German and Austrian prose narrative in the post-war period, the reproduction of or allusion to individual photographs, their staging and later dissemination, their collection in family albums, their veracity, and even their absence serve as ways of thinking through problems of memory, history, and knowing that form the central crisis of these works. *Exposing the Past, Developing the Future* is the title of my book manuscript currently in preparation that examines the role of photography and photographic practices in German and Austrian literature in order to show the interrelation of media practices, literary aesthetics, and the representation of social and individual memory from the immediate postwar period to the present. Although a critical glance has been cast toward the workings of photography in fiction, the limited number of contributions on this topic are at odds with the large and growing number of literary works that interrogate the status of photography. My manuscript situates this question within the limited framework of literary writing in Germany and Austria since 1945, in order to investigate where these questions come to bear in the narration of the personal and public stories of Germany’s past and to show that the image-text relationship is not static but is informed by distinct political, social, cultural, and generational contexts.

In these works, the technology of memory is presented as a composite of what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the “image-text,” in which visual and verbal relations are staged; however, this narrative structure, like memory itself, is inherently unstable. The photograph is almost never presented as an unpremeditated, reassuringly stable image in which the world can be taken at face value. As a result these works are hardly classifiable as historical fiction which attempts to immerse the reader into certain historical events. Nor do they construct a coherent whole that penetrates the veil of individual memory, presenting us with a coherent and continuous life-story. Rather, they problematize the very process of passing on the story, or of historiography more generally, by drawing attention to the mediation of the acts of both recording (the photographer, the writer) as well as reception (the viewer, the reader). The mediation on visual objects within the novels upsets notions of narrative mastery and reflects on practices of both pictorial and linguistic representation. In my examination of these works of fiction, the interrelation of memory and media emerges as the dominant motif. The crisis of memory is not separable from the media a culture employs to record, store, and transmit knowledge. This takes on particular urgency for the second or third generation of postwar writers, who can only know or learn about the German past through various media.

In one of his earliest essays devoted to the subject of photography, the German cultural and media theorist Siegfried Kracauer observed the simultaneous emergence of modern photography and a new conceptualization of history—specifically, in the construction of significance, coherence and meaning, as well as on the order of the relation to time and mortality. Kracauer’s writings on photography provide my starting point in an introductory chapter that will provide context and historical background both for photography theory and
German postwar literature by presenting the long tradition of references to photography in German literature (from the 19th century photographic ‘look’ or gaze, and models of photographic posing and framing, to early 20th century parallels between modernity and photography). An introductory exposition to writings from Walter Benjamin, László Moholy-Nagy, Roland Barthes, and others set up the central questions that are employed and problematized by later authors in their engagement with the medium, namely the ambiguous status of the photograph as given/constructed, real/imagined, past/present.

The bulk of the book is structured chronologically and divided into sections that group authors according to the privileged site of the photographic triad: the subject of the photograph or the pro-filmic event, the photographer, and the viewer of the photograph. As opposed to a survey of post-war fiction that takes up photography thematically, the temporal framework I employ serves to situate the aesthetic, formal, and theoretical concerns of successive generations of writers within specific socio-political contexts. Ranging from the immediate postwar generation to the most contemporary novelists, and including writers from Austria and the former East and West Germany, as well as novels written after unification, these works bring together a diverse group of voices and viewpoints. Section one begins with the earliest postwar works, and the tension between a validation of the objective, de-aestheticized image of reality (Heinrich Böll), and its overt politicization as a component of the public (press photos) and the private (family albums) archive (Uwe Johnson, Christa Wolf). Section two highlights the implicit critique of the image in the so-called ‘new subjectivity’ of the 1970s (Peter Henisch, Peter Handke, Ingeborg Bachmann) as a critique of the prescriptive role of photographic images. Rather than a retreat to an apolitical, interiorized realm as this period is typically characterized, I argue that these authors offer a new politics of the production of the image. Section three examines the work of three writers of the 1990s and 2000s (W.G. Sebald, Monika Maron, Marcel Beyer) and the turn to an imaginative investment in the photograph in the reconstruction of the past and the mediatization of memory. Their shared emphases on the viewers of photographs both real and fantastic and gesture to the “present tense” of the image and an ethics of looking. My final section takes up the work of Alexander Kluge, with a specific focus on his Neue Geschichten [New Stories/ Histories], a sprawling hybrid work that mediates between personal experience and public recording and discourse. Kluge’s critique of media practices and his conception of a “productive public sphere” resonates with the media philosopher Vilém Flusser who has argued that a philosophy of photography is necessary in order to raise photographic practice to the level of consciousness. As the first techno-image, the photograph is highly instructive, if not paradigmatic, especially because the camera has remained a relatively primitive apparatus (at least before the ubiquity of digital image-making techniques). Therefore, in Kluge’s work a criticism of photography can serve as a model for contemporary critical thought and has important consequences beyond the immediate field of photography.

My project engages with some of the larger questions defining the field of contemporary German studies: the construction of personal and national identity, the problem of historiography, and the relationship between literature and other media. Although these areas have individually been explored either within the context of a particular author or as a broader survey of over fifty years of literary history, my work intends to show how these questions are intimately connected. Further, if postwar German literary history is often narrated as a series of breaks and new beginnings (1945 or 1989), I argue that a history of postwar German literature
intersects with a history of media, especially image-based recording, that reaches back into the early part of the twentieth century and situates literature within the broader context of media practices in the social realm and across disciplines. Although the project focuses almost exclusively on German fiction of the postwar era, the implications of this interdisciplinary study should have significance for more broadly construed analyses of the interactions between literature and other media within and across other national contexts, as well as for an understanding of how media images shape cultural awareness and the construction of social histories and national identity.

The impetus for this project has been my broader interest in the relationship of literature to the larger media environment, specifically the linkages among textual, audio, and visual recording. My first book, *Mediating Modernity: German Literature and the “New” Media, 1895-1930* (Penn State University Press, 2009), addresses this question at the beginning of the twentieth century, examining the response of German and American literary authors to the rapidly emerging technologies of film, the photograph, and sound recording. My scholarly background includes not only the study and close analysis of literary texts, but moreover, expertise in media theory, film and photographic theory, and the growing body of scholarship on the relationship between text and image.

As part of this project I have already published three articles in leading journals in German studies (“The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*” in *The German Quarterly*; “Imag(in)ing the Past: The Family Album in Marcel Beyer’s *Spione*” in *Gegenwartsliteratur*; and “Dis-Orienting Photography: Making, Reading, Exhibiting Images in Peter Henisch’s *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* (2003)” in *Modern Austrian Literature*). A fourth article, “Kluge’s *Auswege*” is currently under review at *Germanic Review*. The appearance of these articles and their subsequent citation by other authors confirms the value and viability of the larger book project. These articles constitute the larger part of sections three and four of the book, as well as a subsection of section two. As outlined in my budget, I will use the PESCA funding as summer salary. This will permit me to work full time on the book over summer 2010, during which time I will complete section one and the remainder of section two. With the funding, I expect to have a first full draft (sections one through four) of the manuscript in fall 2010. By the end of winter 2011, I will have the introduction and a polished version of the manuscript complete and ready for submission. Within one year of the award, I anticipate that the manuscript will be under review at a major university press.