The Ineffability of the Traumatic Past, but the Necessity to Testify

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“I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that”

--Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In his typical humorous style, Vonnegut’s speaks out against violence, or more specifically massacres, but in a way that seems simplified to the point of absurdity. Yet, in writing this, Vonnegut raises important and necessary questions on how to respond to violence and trauma. Is there anything intelligent to say about a traumatic event such as a massacre? If not, is there a necessity to speak about such a traumatic past that resists being constructed into a narrative?

Employing different combinations of visual and textual media as well as different discursive styles, Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Patricio Guzmán in his documentary *Chile, Obstinate Memory* and W.G. Sebald in his story of “Paul Bereyter” in *The Emigrants*, each set out to answer these questions. All three of these artists construct their works against a background of institutionalized, both willfully and ignorant, cultural silence. They argue that there is a necessity to speak out against this silence in response to trauma. Cultural amnesia threatens to consign important events in personal and collective history to oblivion. Each of these works also illustrates the difficulty in reconstructing a coherent and rational history of the traumatic past. The traumatic experience itself resists any logical and regular characterization. As such, the representation of these traumatic events through film, literature, or photography threatens
their authenticity and objectivity. Yet, there is an ethical necessity to confront and represent this past, so that it is not lost to a greater trend of cultural amnesia.

In this project, I will use a theory of trauma that moves from the psychoanalytical to the literary. As such, much of this theory is found in Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: trauma, narrative and history*. In her work that has become one of the cornerstones of trauma theory, Caruth expands the psychoanalytic to the literary in her interpretation of Freud and Lacan. However, I will begin my definition of trauma from “The Language of *Psycho-Analysis,*” in which the entry for trauma reads as follows: "An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization." There is necessarily a degree of subjectivity in this definition. The broad language in this definition seems to allow for a range in what could be considered a traumatic experience and what could constitute symptoms or “long-lasting effects” of this trauma.

Furthermore, the “incapacity to respond adequately” to the traumatic experience seems to suggest that there is something within traumatic experience, distinct from the normal, that resists definition. In her interpretation of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Caruth suggests that this is due to the overwhelming nature of the traumatic event:

The breach in the mind—the conscious awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, Freud suggests, but by "fright," the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized... one *moment too late*. The shock of the mind’s relation to the treat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known. (Caruth, 62)
The traumatic event is so overwhelming, that in the subject’s initial confrontation with it, he is unprepared. Freud and Caruth both explicitly suggest that the initial trauma is missed. As a consequence, the traumatic event has never been fully absorbed, instead, it only exists within the mind as a fractured, problematic entity. This seems to suggest that there is a period of latency between the initial traumatic event and its problematic inscription in memory. Since the subject cannot wrap his head around his experience, it remains a fragment. The survivor is not confronted with the task of processing his already existent traumatic memory. To the contrary, he is faced with the task of problematically constructing the trauma from an incomplete foundation of memory.

Due to this fundamental quality of the initial traumatic experience, trauma resists integration into a cogent narrative. While not a theoretical text, I find it useful here to turn to a discussion of the trauma in Stephanie Harris’ critical essay on *The Emigrants*, “The Return of the Dead:” “The traumatic experience is that which overwhelms memory, that which can never be effectively and fully integrated or inscribed in memory. As such, trauma acts as an interruption of meaningfulness in that the event is never given psychic meaning through incorporation into narrative memory” (Harris, 387). The traumatic event resists integration into memory and consequently the traumatic memory resists inscription into a coherent narrative.

If the traumatic experience resists recollection and the traumatic memory cannot be placed objectively into a logical narrative, why do Sebald, Vonnegut and Guzmán try to confront this issue? The answer turns out to be quite simple. In *Air War and Literature* Sebald discusses the culture of silence in Germany following World War II: “People’s ability to forget what they do not want to know, to overlook what is before
their eyes, was seldom put to the test better than in Germany at that time. The population decided—out of sheer panic at first—to carry on as if nothing had happened” (NHoD, 41). Similarly, in returning to Chile after Pinochet was no longer president, Guzmán witnessed a society trying “to carry on as if nothing had happened.” His documentary tries to recapture a traumatic past that is being erased by the passage of time. As a World War II veteran and survivor of the Dresden bombings, Vonnegut returns to an America that surprisingly knows nothing of this massacre. He seems to suggest that World War II has been inscribed into the official history as an overwhelming success while any moral qualms are brushed aside. He writes the novel to testify to his experiences at Dresden and as a result complicate the silence surrounding Dresden and the official discourse of World War II as an unparalleled military success. In *The Emigrants*, Sebald constructs his work so that the histories of four mostly German Jewish emigrants are not consigned to oblivion. It is worth noting, that Sebald complicates the construction of trauma even further, by placing the onus of representation on the second generation, not those who survived the trauma.

In this thesis I will try to demonstrate how the styles and devices used in these three works undermine their claims to objectivity due to the ineffability of trauma. Vonnegut’s disjointed and fantastical mode of story telling, Sebald’s inclusion of photography, and Guzmán’s juxtaposition of the past and present as well as his performance of the past all demonstrate the impossibility of understanding and representing the traumatic past. Yet, the publication of their works simultaneously emphasizes the necessity to try to remember and reconstruct this important past, so that it does not disappear with the passage of time.
I.

On the title page of the book, immediately following the already lengthy title:

_Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death_, Vonnegut adds an even lengthier cryptic message that introduces the rest of his novel:

KURT VONNEGUT
A FOURTH GENERATION GERMAN-AMERICAN
NOW LIVING IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES ON CAPE COD
[AND SMOKING TOO MUCH]
WHO, AS AN AMERICAN INFANTRY SCOUT
_HORS DE COMBAT_, AS A PRISONER OF WAR,
WITNESSED THE FIRE-BOMBING OF DRESDEN, GERMANY,
"THE FLORENCE OF THE ELBE," A LONG TIME AGO,
AND SURVIVED TO TELL THE TALE.
THIS IS A NOVEL SOMEWHAT IN THE TELEGRAPHIC
SCHIZOPHRENIC MANNER OF TALES OF THE PLANET
TRALFAMADORE, WHERE THE FLYING SAUCERS
COME FROM.
PEACE.

This introduction offers a preview of the confusion of the rest of the novel. More specifically, this message establishes the difficulty in categorizing the genre of Vonnegut’s text. This passage opens on an autobiographical note. Kurt Vonnegut places himself within the text and highlights his personal experience as a prisoner of war and witness to the fire-bombing of Dresden. The mention of his involvement in these events suggests that this novel inevitably deals with the theme of trauma and traumatic memory. Yet, immediately following this apparent claim to autobiographical truth, the introduction veers off into the fantastical: “this is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.” Vonnegut seems to suggest that he is unable to represent his traumatic personal history in a coherent, realistic manner. As is evident here and becomes clearer as the text progresses, these traumatic experiences resist telling.
Yet, Vonnegut feels a human responsibility, to testify to the horrors he witnessed during World War II. This novel is his “Duty Dance with Death” and his plea for Peace. However, in testifying to his traumatic experiences in the war, he must turn to the fantastical.

Vonnegut begins his novel in the same autobiographical manner as the introduction. He explains his desire to write the book, one that would “at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.” Unfortunately, his memory of the war and more specifically the bombing of Dresden were useless:

I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. [...] But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book anyway. [...] I think of how useless the Dresden part of my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about. (Vonnegut, 2-3)

He then goes on to recite two limericks, including one that goes: “‘My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin, I work in a lumbermill there. The people I meet when I walk down the street, They say, ‘What’s your name?’ And I say, My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin...’ And so on to infinity.” Vonnegut’s discussion of his dysfunctional memory, coupled with the nonsensical, repetitive limerick somewhat parallel, and elaborate on, the meaning of the introductory passage. Vonnegut testifies to having witnessed the bombings of Dresden, and his desire to write about it. Yet, explains his inability to do so. His inability to construct a coherent narrative about Dresden due to his faulty memory leads him towards the absurd. The limerick of Yon Yonson highlights the illogical and repetitive consequences of Vonnegut’s quest to report what he had seen. Shortly after this passage, Vonnegut describes his current engagement with the Dresden
bombings as “an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown”: “I have this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away” (5). He goes on to describe how he phones his old war buddies asking for “some help remembering stuff.” Vonnegut lives far away from the war both in time and space. However, he still engages with it on a regular basis.

Furthermore, like many veterans suffering from PTSD, he needs alcohol in order to be able to discuss his trauma. His trauma is not simply trapped in the past; it seems to plague his otherwise normal life. Yet, he cannot bring this trauma to the present to try to confront it without the numbing and altering effects of alcohol.

Vonnegut’s personal experience in trying to remember soon comes into conflict with official discourse. While working as a public relations man for General Electric in Schenectady, Vonnegut requests information from the Air Force regarding the Dresden bombing: “who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on. I was answered by a man who, like myself, was in public relations. He said that he was sorry, but that the information was top secret still” (14). From a historical standpoint, Dresden had yet to really reach American consciousness. The United States government had yet to make much of the information public in hopes of maintaining better relations with West Germany. However, Vonnegut resists this official discourse of strategic silence. It is also important to note that his questions of causality are not answered. And, no causal answer justifying such a violent massacre would likely prove satisfactory for Vonnegut. Instead, he juxtaposes the silence and continued political posturing of military higher-ups with the veterans he met in Schenectady: “We had a lot of scrawny veterans and their scrawny wives for friends.
The nicest veterans in Schenectady, I thought, the kindest and funniest ones, the ones who hated war the most, were the ones who’d really fought” (13). For these veterans who had “really fought” in the war, the logistical aspects of the war had long been over. They had all “lost our baby fat” and entered into a different stage of their life, no longer invested in the global politics of war. Instead, it is these real soldiers “who hated the war the most.”

As a veteran who can testify to the atrocities of Dresden and the rest of the war, Vonnegut feels the necessity to speak of his experiences, against the official discourse of silence. Yet, he learns of the difficulty in writing about the war and the bombing of Dresden:

> It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like “Poo-tee-weet?” (24)

The birds question reflects the lack of intelligent reflection surrounding a massacre. The only response to the massacre is a question, a question incomprehensible to human ears. Yet, in the birds question is still desirous of a response. Vonnegut feels the need to emerge from this silence, as the survivor of such a massacre, yet, there is nothing appropriate for him to say.

In her brief discussion on *Slaughterhouse Five*, Aleida Assmann comments on Vonnegut’s struggle to make his memories adhere to typical literary tropes and structures. This topic would simply not conform to these standard practices and techniques: “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times.
The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper” (6). But, Vonnegut threw away all of these outlines and drafts. Assmann posits that “the convention and structures of fiction with which he was so familiar were simply of no use in this case. On the contrary, as became more and more apparent to him, they offered him a dangerous invitation to falsify” (Assmann, 270). Since the typical “climaxes and thrills” failed to accurately reflect Vonnegut’s trauma, it became clear that “historical and biographical trauma clearly demanded a different literary technique, and it needed to be radically experimental” (270). Assmann then summarizes Vonnegut’s new literary technique under two banners: “collage and science fiction.” Vonnegut’s use of these new genres is apparent in the movement from the first chapter of the text to his story of Billy Pilgrim. He prefigures this drastic shift in genre in the final pages of the first chapter of the novel.

Vonnegut ends the first chapter with a comparison of his project to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. More specifically he compares himself to Lot’s wife:

And Lot’s wife, of course, was not to look back where all the people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt.

... People aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore. I’ve finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this: Listen: Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time. It ends like this: Poo-tee-weet? (Vonnegut, 28)

Vonnegut experiences the human necessity to look back upon the destruction of human life. In doing so, he turns into a useless pillar of salt like Lot. Now that he has looked back and processed his trauma, he can finally move forward. While he cannot change nor repair in anyway the violence he looks back upon, he feels an ethical responsibility to
testify to this violence. But, as a pillar of salt that has survived a massacre in which everyone is supposed to be dead, Vonnegut cannot express his thoughts in a coherent and rational manner. His story of the war and the Dresden bombing is necessarily inexplicable through simple human language and construction. As a consequence, he proceeds to tell his war story through the lens of Billy Pilgrim, a World War II veteran and time and space traveler. In other words, he employs collage and science fiction techniques to better represent traumatic experiences.

Vonnegut moves immediately from this opening chapter into the story of Billy Pilgrim. Billy’s non-linear, chaotic life fits perfectly with Vonnegut’s suggestion that his war story cannot be told in a coherent and rational fashion. We are immediately commanded to “Listen” to Billy’s story and to acknowledge that he “has come unstuck in time” (29). Assmann points out that such a spatiotemporal relationship “brings (or forces) heterogeneous elements into unexpected constellations.” He cannot control his time travel, instead “Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren’t necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (Vonnegut, 29). Assmann goes on to argue that this discontinuity “‘breaks’ the spine of narrative, which is chronological sequence of events; it ‘disrupts’ connections and casts the fragments into arbitrary patterns” (Assmann, 271) By telling Billy’s life story in a disjointed and spastic manner Vonnegut rejects the concept of a linear historical chronology. In other words, Billy does not experience history as a pattern of cause and effect. Instead, in time traveling, his human agency becomes worthless and he is seemingly forced to follow a script when he jumps from one scene in life to the next.
The fatalistic determinism of Billy’s story continues with the introduction of the extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians and their worldview. Tralfamadorians do not see time linearly, instead, they see all moments at once: “when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past present and future, always have existed and always will exist” (34). This vision of time and determinism influences the popular refrain that runs throughout the text, as described by Billy: “Now, when I hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead, people, which is ‘So it goes.’” (34). This philosophy of time not only erases any notion of agency, it also eradicates the importance of emotion. Accordingly, this fatalistic attitude inspires quietism towards violence, horror and immorality.

 Appropriately, the repeated use of “so it goes” in the text influences a similar silencing effect on the reader. “So it goes” becomes a response to any form of death or violence in the story, not only human death, but also bacterial or animal death. These deaths, to which “so it goes” is the only response, range from a dog dying from internal bleeding after ingesting several nails, to bacteria being killed by the millions on a jacket that is being chemically cleaned. Some of these scenes are nearly unbearable to read while others are comical. The uniformity of response to these stories of death trivializes the importance of each one. The different emotions that should be experienced as a result of these scenes of death are reduced to a simple three-word phrase. “So it goes” reflects not only an inability to comprehend these events, but an unwillingness to even attempt to do so. In other words, since we are incapable of coming up with an appropriate rational response to these deaths, there is no reason to even try to recognize the individuality,
importance and horror of each one.

Yet, although Billy seems to subscribe to this deterministic philosophy, his spastic time travel is markedly different from the Tralfamadorian vision of time. The Tralfamadorian’s advise Billy “to concentrate on the happy moments in life, and to ignore the unhappy ones—to stare only at pretty things as eternity failed to go by” (249). Billy experiences life in more or less the exact opposite manner advised by his extraterrestrial caretakers. Instead, throughout the text he jumps from one unpleasant event in his life to the next. Or, more aptly put by Assmann, “Vonnegut stages trauma as temporal rootlessness.” He travels from the Battle of the Bulge to his father teaching him how to swim for the first time by throwing him into the deep end of a pool. While these events are in fact traumatic in their own right, Cacicedo points out that they act as a form of postponement: “Billy constantly circles around that central traumatic moment, almost recollecting it but, as is typical of traumatic memories, not quite managing to seize on the event” (Cacicedo, 363). Like Lot and Vonnegut, Billy must turn back to face his trauma.

Billy finally does confront the trauma he experienced in Dresden. Importantly, he exhibits a modicum of control in this confrontation in that he remembers the event rather than spastically traveling back in time: “Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly—as follows” (Vonnegut, 226). While Billy is more or less forced to remember through free association from a barbershop quartet singing at his wedding anniversary, he purposefully finds the association with this experience. The scene that follows is short, but precise recollection of the bombing of Dresden from Billy’s past. The brevity and conciseness
reflect the lack of intelligent things to say about a massacre: “There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, and everything that would burn” (227). There is no thoughtful reflection accompanying or informing this recollection. Instead, it is simply Billy’s memory of surviving the bombing of Dresden.

Immediately following this recollection Billy is finally able to tell of his experience in Dresden. Montana Wildhack, Billy’s companion on Tralfamadore requests that he tell her a story. His telling of the story on another planet reflects its inexpressibility in human terms. Furthermore, Billy’s description of the event is understated and brief. As Anne Fuchs suggests: “Billy’s brief account underlines once more that the excessive nature of the event remains inaccessible to all modes of representation” (Fuchs, 164). His artistic and metaphorical language in referring to himself and the other American soldiers as “moon men” further exemplify the difficulty in describing the bombing and its effect in regular, human terms. Billy even reflects on the impossibility of properly responding to this tragedy:

    Nobody talked much as the expedition crossed the moon. There was nothing appropriate to say. One thing was clear: Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and that anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design. There were to be no moon men at all. (Vonnegut, 230)

This passage is almost a direct copy of Vonnegut’s remarks to his publisher in the opening chapter of the novel. Both Vonnegut and Billy express difficulties in representing a traumatic past that resists a logical expression. Just as Vonnegut struggled for years to come to terms with the bombing of Dresden and finally published his novel, Billy haphazardly time travels before he is able to finally tell of his experience.
Vonnegut eventually speaks out against the institutional, strategic silence of the Air Force in the publication of his novel. Similarly, Billy speaks out in response to Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, the official U.S. Air Force historian.

As Billy is lying in his hospital bed after his plane crash, he is forced to share a room with Rumfoord. These two army veterans accompanying the same room in a hospital fits nicely Vonnegut’s comparison of those soldiers who “really fought” in the war with the commanders standing on the sidelines. As a soldier who “really fought,” Billy has come to hate the war. Rumfoord as a military commander maintains his militaristic and rational worldview. While Billy is incoherently mumbling nonsense, Rumfoord is being read the *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two* by his young, ditzy spouse. Rumfoord explains to Lily how the extent of the success of the bombing of Dresden “had been kept a secret for many years after the war—a secret from the American people” (244). Even though “it had been such a howling success,” it was kept silent “for fear that a lot of the bleeding hearts […] might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do” (245). Rumfoord, as the official war historian, disregards any moral or ethical doubts regarding the “success” of the bombing of Dresden. In thinking about things in a military manner, Rumfoord can only see the bombing as a success due to the fact that it accelerated the end of the war. Billy naturally opposes Rumfoord’s evaluation of the bombing. Furthermore, his simple existence complicates Rumfoord’s simplistic and reductive analysis of the event.

As Billy tries to speak up and testify as a witness to the bombing of Dresden, he is met by a continued militaristic opinion from Rumfoord. Billy’s first hand experience of the chaos caused by the Dresden bombing undermines the simplicity of Rumfoord’s
future authoritative publication: “Rumfoord was thinking in a military manner: that an inconvenient person, one whose death he wished for very much, for practical reasons, was suffering from a repulsive disease” (246). As their conversation progresses, Billy does not actively argue against Rumfoord’s view, however, his testimony still serves as an inconvenience Rumfoord’s official history:

‘I was in Dresden when it was bombed. I was a prisoner of war.’
Rumfoord sighed impatiently. ‘Word of honor,’ said Billy Pilgrim. ‘Do you believe me?’ ‘Must we talk about it now?,’ said Rumfoord. He had heard. He didn’t believe. ‘We don’t ever have to talk about it,’ said Billy. ‘I just want you to know: I was there.’ (254)

Billy seems to have abandoned the Tralfamadorian passivity, quietism and determinism in his desire to be heard by Rumfoord. While he does not, and effectively cannot, say anything intelligent about the massacre of Dresden, his testimony as a survivor complicates the deliberately simplistic official discourse regarding the war.

II.

“there is mist that no eye can dispel”

The story of Paul Bereyter begins with this cryptic epigraph on the title page. This short statement introduces the problem of representation that pervades the text. It seems to suggest that no one can properly capture, visually or otherwise, a true image of that which it examines. The passage possesses both individual and a more collective significance. “No eye” assumes an individual perspective or examination of the object. However, the passive verb use of “there is” without a specific subject implies a sense of permanence. It is not the fault of the “eye” that it cannot dispel this permanent mist. Instead, the mist is an innate quality that obscures any possible authentic representation by the subject. In the case of Sebald’s story, it seems that no eye can access and
concretely represent the traumatic history of another. More specifically, the author-narrator, no matter how hard he labors, cannot dispel the mist surrounding Paul Bereyter’s existence.

The story begins with a photograph of train tracks curving off into the distant landscape. We soon learn that this image may not be so innocent: “a short distance from S, where the railway track curves out of a willow copse into the open fields, he had lain himself down in front of a train” (27). While many photographs are interspersed throughout the story, this one is distinct from the others in the story in that it was taken by the author-narrator. Furthermore, during his life, Paul never encountered this photograph, unlike the others interspersed throughout the text. It does not testify to a specific moment in Paul’s life. Instead, it is a reconstruction of the final moments of Paul’s life through the lens of the narrator. The image depends upon the surrounding text for its meaning. It does not have any intrinsic meaning. Alone, the photograph is innocent, yet it takes on a different, potentially disingenuous meaning when paired with the text.

In Sebald’s story of Paul Bereyter, the author-narrator feels an ethical need to try to recover the life of his recently deceased elementary school teacher. The unnamed author-narrator begins his journey to uncover the details of Bereyter’s life in response to an obituary in the local paper that glosses over many of the important events in his life:

The obituary in the local paper was headed “Grief at the Loss of a Popular Teacher” and there was no mention of the fact that Paul Bereyter had died of his own free will, or through a self-destructive compulsion. It spoke merely of the dead man’s services to education, his dedicated care for his pupils, far beyond the call of duty, his great love of music, his astonishing inventiveness, and of much else in the same vein. Almost by way of an aside, the obituary added, with no further explanation, that during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practicing his chosen
profession. It was this curiously unconnected, inconsequential statement, as much as the violent manner of his death, which led me in the years that followed to think more and more about Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get beyond my own very fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know. (Sebald, 27-28)

The author-narrator feels as if the town of S has refused to pursue the true reasons behind Paul’s suicide. There is only a brief, tacit acknowledgment, “almost by way of an aside,” of the importance of WWII and the Third Reich in Paul’s life and death. The author-narrator identifies a cultural silencing of the history and trauma of the war and the Holocaust. As the story continues, we learn that the author-narrator knows only of the side of Paul that is briefly described in the obituary. The personal history of the author-narrator with respect to Paul specifically highlights “his dedicated care for his pupils, far beyond the call of duty, his great love of music, his astonishing inventiveness, and of much else in the same vein.” The author-narrator feels the ethical need to “get beyond my own fond memories” and discover a story that has long been hidden from him. Yet, is the truth of this deeper story necessarily inaccessible to the author-narrator? In other words, how can he seek to dispel a mist “that no eye can dispel?” Is his ethical desire to recover and preserve Paul’s history against a background of silence coupled with an ethical difficulty of representing this somewhat inaccessible history?

The author-narrator acknowledges the difficulty in representing the past. After his investigations with several people in S fail to illuminate the mystery behind Paul’s life and death more than the obituary, the author narrator attempts a new approach to understand Paul: “and so, belatedly, I tried to get closer to him, to imagine what his life was like…” (29). Yet, this does not produce any real results and eventually he comes to question the ethics of this method: “Such endeavors to imagine his life and death did not,
as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter” (29). We can already see an example of what the author-narrator would consider a “wrongful trespass” in the opening image of the text. In taking this photograph, the author-narrator quite accurately tried to “imagine his life and death.” As noted earlier, that photograph does not bring the narrator any closer to understanding Paul or representing his story.

After this point in the text, the author-narrator structures his writings in the form of a journey. There is a distinct, spatio-temporal starting point: “In December my family moved away from the village of W to the small town of S” (29). Structured as a journey, in an attempt to understand Paul’s life, this text should move from ignorance to clarity. Furthermore, coupled with this move from incomprehension to knowledge, after rejecting his approach that led him to a presumptuous, “wrongful trespass,” the author-narrator should be able to move towards a position of objectivity. Yet, the linear movement of the story is complicated by the process in which we come to learn of Paul’s story. The more we learn about Paul the more distant we become from Paul himself. The narrator relies heavily on the testimony of Mme Landau that he appropriates into his own text. Furthermore, the text becomes even more layered by the interspersed photography.

Yet, even though the story becomes more distant and layered, the author-narrator’s text retains a sense of coherence and unity. His language and descriptions remain the same even as the text approaches its climax. Other than an occasional “she said,” there is little physical separation between the author-narrator’s remarks and Mme Landau’s, even though her statements could be interpreted as “wrongful trespasses.” The
linguistic and more importantly aesthetic continuity seems to conflict with the incredibly layered text. It is at once a coherent, well-put together history of Paul’s life, while simultaneously fragmented and disjointed. This duality seems to highlight the difficulty of assigning a specific genre to Sebald’s work. It is at once fiction, yet it illustrates the history of Paul more thoroughly than any standard, non-transgressive history. The author-narrator’s project occupies this tenuous and space in between history and fiction.

The use of photography in the text emphasizes the documentary fiction style of the text. They testify to a distinct and real past. But, in doing so, they are somewhat manipulative. The photographs work both with and against the rest of the text. They do not simply increase the non-fictional aspects of the text. In her analysis of *The Emigrants*, Stephanie Harris discusses Roland Barthes theory of photography in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes claims that the photograph possesses a unique relationship with the past in that it is “absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency (and thereby, outside of meaning)” (Harris, 384). She goes on to illuminate this concept:

> Two things emerge from this conception of photography: one, the manner in which the photograph serves to authenticate an existential singularity, or a non-repeatable event; and two, the manner in which this singularity, or absolute particularity, resists our abilities to talk about a photograph in an abstract way because each photograph bears a distinct and unique message. In other words, the essential feature of photography complicates the very possibility that writing, or language more generally, can address its specific referentiality. (384)

In other words, the photographs testify to a distinct past, but a past that is so distinct that it cannot be placed into a greater context without language. Yet, the relationship of language to its referent simultaneously undermines the historical specificity of the photographs. The discordant placement of photographs within the story, often
interrupting single sentences, underscores this discontinuity between the linguistic and visual media.

This problematic relationship between language and photography is evident in the manner in which the photographs are integrated into the text. When Mme Landau describes Paul first love, Helen Hollaender, who died in the Holocaust, the author-narrator includes several photographs of Paul and Helen within the text. Mme Landau’s interpretation of these visual artifacts highlights this tenuous intermedial relationship: “for if these pictures can be trusted, she said, Helen Hollaender was an independent spirited, clever woman, and furthermore her waters ran deep. And in those waters Paul liked to see his own reflection” (Sebald, 48). Mme Landau paradoxically questions whether accurate representations of the past in photography can be trusted. Yet, as is evident in the structure of the story, and the inclusion of the photographs within the text, the text is dominant medium in which the author-narrator chooses to describe Paul and the photographs serve almost as interruptions to the text. Accordingly, these pictures, due to their absolute particular referentiality, might not integrate themselves seamlessly within the context of the rest of the story. The photographs of Helen, with their specific historical referents, are surrounded by aesthetic language from the author-narrator and more often Mme Landau. More specifically, the descriptions of Mme Landau depend on linguistic metaphors: “her waters ran deep. And in those waters Paul liked to see his own reflection.” This metaphorical language is necessarily imprecise. While the photographs of Helen testify to her singular existence in these moments of her life, the linguistic tropes employed by Mme Landau, within the author-narrator’s larger text,
problematically expand our understanding of her. Helen’s existence within the story is stretched to the general relationships of identity within language.

In his quest to uncover the history of Paul Bereyter, the author-narrator does not permit photographs to exist simply to testify to a single, non-repeatable event. Instead, they troublingly inform the rest of the narrative. With their inclusion within the narrative the photographs move from the ultimate nonfiction towards a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction. Yet these photographs cannot stand alone to describe the lives of those portrayed within them. This paradox is evident in the writing surrounding a photograph of Paul and several members of the Hollaender family: “How wretched he must have felt at that time is apparent in a small photograph taken one Sunday afternoon, which shows Paul on the left, a Paul who had plunged within a month from happiness to misfortune, and was so terribly thin that he seems almost to have reached a physical vanishing point” (49). Even though it is likely that Paul’s significant weight loss is a result of his depression from being removed from his teaching position, Mme Landau seems to presumptuously read too far into the photograph to ascribe this meaning to it. The presumptuousness of trying to come to a clear understanding of the past is demonstrated in the sentences immediately after: “Mme Landau could not tell me exactly what became of Helen Hollaender. Paul had preserved a resolute silence on the subject, possibly because he was plagued by a sense of having failed her or let her down” (49). Harris explains Sebald’s struggle of representing the past through these two media: “For how can the specificity of the photograph communicate any intelligible meaning without recourse to the cultural codes that elide its specificity? And how would the abstract mode of the linguistic symbol communicate the specificity of an event without the imaginative element which always
renders that representation a distortion” (Harris, 389). Accordingly, Mme Landau and the narrator give the photographs meaning by employing cultural codes that elide their specificity. Yet, they also depend on the imaginative element in language, for example the use of metaphor, which distorts the accurate representation of the past.

The story of Paul Bereyter appropriately concludes with a sense that the author-narrator has accomplished his goal of learning the “story I did not know,” but necessarily imperfectly. In the final passage of the story, from somewhat of a wrongful trespass, we come to our greatest understanding of Paul. Mme Landau relates how as a child Paul was obsessed with trains. Paul’s uncle noted that it was Paul’s destiny to “end up on the railways” (62). Mme Landau ruminates on how such an innocent story would come to carry such morbid significance:

When Paul told me this perfectly harmless holiday story, said Mme Landau, I could not possibly ascribe the importance to it that it now seems to have, though even then there was something about that last turn of phrase that made me uneasy. I suppose I did not immediately see the innocent meaning of Paul’s uncle’s expression, end up on the railways, and it struck me as darkly foreboding. The disquiet I experienced because of that momentary failure to see what was meant – I now sometimes feel at that moment I beheld an image of death – lasted only a very short time, and passed over me like the shadow of a bird in flight.

While maybe not as blatant of a “wrongful trespass” as the opening image of the text, Mme Landau seems to inscribe too much meaning in a simple turn of phrase. Her claim to have momentarily “beheld an image of death” seems to echo the author-narrators first expression of ethical unease in trying to imagine Paul’s life: “Such endeavors to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me.” Yet, if we are to believe that upon first hearing the phrase she did feel uneasy and experience something
darkly foreboding, we can still see the difficulty in grasping the past. She understood Paul’s desires to end his life on the railways, both literally and symbolically like Helen Hollaender and millions of other Jews in the Holocaust. Yet, this brief “image of death” is fleeting. Her description of this fleeting knowledge of the traumatic past is appropriately illustrated through imprecise metaphorical language. While she briefly understood an image of death, she cannot properly relate this knowledge.

The inability of photography and writing to fully capture and communicate the past leads to a sort of haunting. As discussed earlier, the trauma of the past can never be fully integrated into a coherent narrative. The photographs in the story are of the past, and the truth behind these photographs can never fully reach the present. A fragmented narrative of questionable veracity can only be brought up to the present through the troubling use of language. We witness a discontinuity between the past and present. The photographs represent a loss that cannot be overcome. But, as seen in the final passages regarding Paul’s destiny to “end up on the railways,” the past continually returns to the present. Furthermore, in the act of writing against the greater silence of the surrounding culture, the author-narrator feels the need to rescue this past from oblivion. Given the materials at hand, the author-narrator tries to do a sincere and honest job of sentimentalizing Bereyter’s, yet his project is necessarily impossible, as he acknowledges himself.

III.

*Chile: Obstinate Memory* begins as many films and works of art begin, with a dedication. Also, not out of the ordinary, Patricio Guzmán dedicates the film to his two daughters. In a film about tragic loss and personal and collective memory following
trauma, it seems a bit odd that Guzmán would dedicate his film to his daughters rather than someone who died during the conflict. On this same note, as we watch the film we learn that all but one of Guzmán’s relatives died during the Pinochet dictatorship as did one of his best friends and fellow cameraman in *The Battle of Chile*, Jorge Muller Silva. Why would Guzmán want to dedicate his film about memory to his living daughters instead of to the memory of his late friends and family members? I will argue that his film is made for not only his daughters, but for future generations in Chile. Guzmán makes this documentary to combat an institutionalized silence that pervades much of Chilean discourse regarding the atrocities committed by the Pinochet regime. His documentary creates an alternate narrative to the commonplace discussion that Pinochet saved the country from the communists who had wrecked the country both economically and morally. *Chile: Obstinate Memory* is noticeably less overtly political than *The Battle of Chile*. Guzmán wishes to testify to he and his friends’ experiences during the dictatorship in order to complicate the discourse of memory surrounding Pinochet’s dictatorship. Yet, in his testimony of the traumatic personal memory of several of his close friends and family members, he portrays the inability at representing the past in a coherent and linear manner. His documentary takes on a layered and collage-like form that seems to distance itself from the actual historical events it seeks to portray. Yet, even while the traumatic past is necessarily impossible to accurately represent, he feels a need to testify in order to combat the national discourse of silence.

The documentary begins at the primary event of trauma, the coup d’état on September 11, 1973. In representing this fundamental event, Guzmán overlaps or layers several different visual and auditory media. The film begins with by introducing us to
Juan, a good friend of Guzmán’s and a former presidential bodyguard to Salvador Allende. Juan’s story of his experience at the Moneda is accompanied by a variety film footage and photography. This excessive layering reflects the difficulty in representing the story surrounding what Assmann would call a “place of trauma.” She distinguishes a place of trauma from a place of memory by stressing the irrepresentability of the former:

Whereas the place of memory is stabilized by the story that is told about it, with the place supporting and authenticating the story, the defining feature of the place of trauma is that its story cannot be narrated. The narrative is blocked either by psychological pressure on the individual or by social taboos within the community. (Assmann, 312)

 Appropriately, both Juan and Guzmán are struck with an inability or unwillingness to speak when they reenter the Moneda for the first time in twenty-three years:

Desde entonces Juan nunca ha dejado de recordar el combate de la Moneda. Era el día de su boda y casi fue el día de su muerte. Ahora entra al palacio como ayudante de nuestro equipo de filmación para evocar algunos momentos. Igual que yo es la primera vez, en 23 años, que él vuelve a este lugar. Ni él ni yo queremos hablar demasiado. Los mejores amigos de Juan desaparecieron aquí. En aquellos años yo venía con frecuencia aquí y muchas veces me encontré con Juan. El es uno de los tantos personajes anónimos que yo filmé en esa época para hacer La Batalla de Chile...

Juan has never been able to forget La Moneda battle. It was his wedding day. It was almost the day he died. He can now return here, disguised as a film crew member. For us both, it’s the first time in 23 years we’ve crossed the threshold. His best friends died here. At the time, I often came here and met Juan. He was one of the anonymous persons I filmed to make The Battle of Chile.

Curiously, even though Juan and Guzman were friends, Guzmán points out that he remained anonymous in his prior film. The Battle of Chile depicts the struggles of a group of people, the Popular Union, trying to act together to better the nation. The collective struggle does not necessitate many names because it is exactly such: “a collective struggle.” In making Juan anonymous in his prior film, along with many other
members of the Popular Unity, Guzmán seems to reflect the socialist ideal of a nameless unity. In his namelessness, Juan has symbolically sacrificed himself for the collective cause. Yet, a film about memory, Juan’s identity and personal testimony are necessary. Guzmán’s depiction of the story of the coup d’état through Juan suggests the necessary subjectivity of memory.

Juan and Guzmán bring to the Moneda a specific set of memories that define the space for them. It is useful again to turn to Assmann and here discussion on the complexity of conflicting ownership of places of trauma: “The many-layered complexity of this place of trauma arises no least from the heterogeneity of the memories and perspectives of those who claim the place as theirs and those who come to visit it” (Assmann, 313). This complexity is exemplified when Juan, dressed in civilian’s clothes, watches from a distance as soldiers perform duties similar to ones he may have done a couple of decades earlier. Guzmán emphasizes this uncanny relationship to the palace and the guards by overlapping this scene with a recording of the “Venceremos,” the anthem of the Popular Union. While the place has fundamentally changed, for Juan and Guzmán the memory of the coup d’état and Allende’s brief stint as president are inscribed in the palace. In other words, Juan and Guzmán continue to identify La Moneda with their past experiences of the place. Furthermore, for both Guzmán and Juan, their relationship with La Moneda has already been somewhat captured by *The Battle of Chile*. This too is shown in this scene as Guzmán overlaps current footage of Juan physically retracing his steps through the palace with stills from *The Battle of Chile* that depict Juan as a guard. At one point in Juan and Guzmán’s journey through the palace Juan looks out of a window onto the street below. However, instead of seeing the
street in the 1990s, he sees several of Pinochet’s soldiers poised to fire into the building. Just after this scene Guzmán stands on a balcony and pans across the screen to show a relatively empty street below. He juxtaposes this uneventful scene of present day with a scene of a Popular Union rally taken from the exact same location. For both Juan and Guzmán, the past is intrinsically connected to this building. Yet, even though the past has such an obdurate presence in the memory of Juan and Guzmán, it can never be fully recaptured. Again I will turn to Assmann and here discussion on the aura of places of trauma: “The strange bond between distance and proximity gives them their aura, and through them one seeks direct contact with the past” and “an auratic place in this sense does not promise an unmediated experience; it is, rather, a place where the unbridgeable gap between present and past can be experienced” (322). Guzmán shows how the memory of such a traumatic even possesses a similar, uncanny quality. Although “Juan has never been able to forget La Moneda battle,” he does not wish to speak much upon returning. The past traumatic event is at once always present while also simultaneously inaccessible.

Similar to Vonnegut and Sebald, Guzmán constructs an incredibly layered narrative from Juan’s experience in the battle of La Moneda. To begin with, Juan’s narration of his own experience is divided into two separate parts: his narration while revisiting La Moneda and a more interview-like account of these same events. Guzmán’s narration occasionally takes precedence to inform the viewer of the greater historical circumstances and to describe his personal involvement in these important events. Additionally, Isidro and Manuel, another two former bodyguards, of Allende describe their own involvement in the conflict. This narration is interspersed with footage and
stills from *The Battle of Chile* as well as other photographs. Many of these photographs, as well as some of the video footage are examined by other friends of Guzmán and Juan. Together, they are trying to identify themselves or others who are alive, dead, or disappeared. Finally, a painter, José Balmes, reappropriates one particular photograph of Juan lying on his back, with his arms strewn in the air, after having been shot in the stomach. Balmes describes the complexity, ambiguity and fluidity of Juan’s movement and presence in this photograph that captures Juan’s immediate reaction to immense physical pain. This artist’s rendition, based upon his own opinion and interpretation of a photograph of Juan, is separated by several degrees from Juan’s account of his own story and even more Juan’s actual experience of the event. Similarly, the actual historical event, told from many different individual lenses and perspectives, assumes a collage-like form. No singular narrative is sufficient to capture such a traumatic event, instead, they unite to form a fragmentary collective that comes to tell a history that necessarily cannot testify with complete accuracy to the actual historical event. From these multiple perspectives, Guzmán tries to convey the “aura” of such a place of trauma even though it is difficult to access as the viewer from a necessarily mediated perspective. Yet, this layered narrative and the distancing from Juan’s actual experience does not diminish the emotional weight of the history. We can still witness and share in Juan’s sadness in describing his lost compatriots. We can still experience the combination of grief and anger in Isidro’s description of how the only disappeared who reappeared, reappeared in pieces. In summation, Guzmán demonstrates how access to the actual traumatic event is necessarily mediated, yet the mediated representation still bears an immense emotional weight.
Even though Guzmán admits to the difficulty in forming a coherent representation of the past, he feels the ethical necessity to try to tell the traumatic history that has largely been ignored by public discourse. Immediately after he discusses he and Juan’s return to La Moneda after twenty-three long years, he describes the cultural silencing taking place in Chile. To provide evidence, he notes that *The Battle of Chile*, which serves as a testimony to an alternate history to that given by the government, has never been shown in Chile:

*un largo filme documental sobre la experiencia de la Unidad Popular. Después del golpe de Estado, esta película fue proyectada en 37 países y ganó muchos premios. Aquí, en este lugar, se había gestado un movimiento de masas impresionante que pudimos filmar durante un año, a veces sin saber muy bien lo que hacíamos. Sin embargo, hasta hoy La Batalla de Chile, nunca se ha estrenado en Chile. Durante la dictadura de Pinochet fue prohibida y todavía hoy los distribuidores no se sienten cómodos para exhibirla. Para muchos el tema de la memoria es un tema encerrado.*

The film was shown in 37 countries and won many prizes. Within these very walls, 23 years ago, the fate of a popular movement was decided. We filmed it for a year, often not knowing what we were doing. Until now, “The Battle of Chile” has never been shown in my country. It was banned under Pinochet’s dictatorship. Even today, distributors wont take the risk. For many people, this memory has been suppressed.

This discourse seeks to describe an inability to represent ones past that is “blocked either by psychological pressure on the individual or by social taboos within the community” (Assmann, 312). Shortly after this passage, we can see several examples of people who have closed their memory and who have left traumatic experiences unprocessed. The first, and possibly most striking example is that of Carmen Vivanco. An active member of the Popular Union, she lost five of her family members during the Pinochet dictatorship. She is identified by one of Guzmán’s friends as they are watching *The Battle of Chile*. Yet, she is hesitant to acknowledge that she is the woman portrayed in
the film. She remarks that it could be her, but she cannot be sure. She is unwilling to testify to her past, a past marked by psychological trauma and kept silent in the present by an overwhelming discourse of forgetting. In her reluctance to speak, Carmen threatens the survival of her past and that of her murdered relatives.

Carmen Vivanco’s unwillingness to testify to her traumatic experience during the Pinochet dictatorship can easily be compared with the official discourse surrounding the dictatorship. Later on in the film, Guzmán portrays several men, who seem to speak as authority figures, responding to his film and describing their account of the Pinochet dictatorship. The first speaker proclaims that he is certain that the United States was not involved in the military overthrow. As evidence, he cites the unparalleled efficiency of the coup and the lack of casualties inflicted by the regime: a figure he cites at 2123. He claims that this anti-subversive fight against communism caused the fewest casualties of any in all of Latin America. His rational, analytical and seemingly well-versed response seems to reconstruct the history of the Pinochet dictatorship as the unified fight of a capitalist supermajority against a small socialist and communist minority. In using the political terms, he legitimizes the violence committed by the Pinochet regime. Furthermore, his numerical comparison of the regime’s casualties reduces the human impact caused by this violence. A second pro-Pinochet speaker then notes that Guzmán’s documentary can simply be grouped within a larger narrative of global anti-Pinochet propaganda. His placement of *The Battle of Chile* on the same plane as international criticism of Pinochet seems to suggest that Guzmán’s view is uninformed and lacking of a deeper knowledge of the specificity of Chilean history and culture.
Guzmán utilizes the character of Ernesto Malbran in a somewhat manipulative manner. Ernesto plays a large role in the film and acts as an authoritative force advocating for the necessity to educate the second generation about the coup d’état and Pinochet dictatorship. His seemingly well-prepared monologues on the subject of memory noticeably differ from the indecisive, melancholy, nuanced opinions of many of the different figures in the film. Guzmán introduces Ernesto in such a way that appropriately distinguishes him from the other characters in the documentary: “Ernesto, amigo de la universidad siempre tuvo la virtud de hablar y de vivir con más pasión que los otros. Hoy día es profesor también es una de las personas de la batalla de chile.”

“Ernesto was a close friend of mine at university. He always lived and spoke more passionately than others. He’s now a professor. He was also in the battle of Chile.”

Ernesto’s introduction is somewhat disingenuous to the viewer. Guzmán fails to mention that he is a well-known Chilean actor. Ernesto’s introduction as a professor seems to provide him with an authoritative position. However, he is a professor of acting, not of history, psychology, anthropology or any subject that could qualify him as an expert on the subject of memory. This is not to say that his opinions are invalid. Instead, his role as a professor does not necessarily afford him a greater knowledge on the subject. His polemical statements should be evaluated on the same plane as those of Ignacio, Perelman, Juan and others. It is unclear as to whether Guzmán privileges Ernesto’s point of view. The English translation that “he always lived and spoke more passionately than others” does not seem to favor his opinion. The original Spanish uses the word “virtud” or virtue in characterizing Ernesto’s ability to speak. His virtue seems to imply that he
possesses a combination of strength and moral goodness that enhances his ability to speak more truthfully and honestly about traumatic memory.

Many of Ernesto’s remarks in the film take on an argumentative tone that is otherwise relatively absent. His statements seem to directly contrast those of the Pinochetistas in the film. Ernesto’s polemical and political discourse can be seen in his memory of the Popular Union:

> Yo desde niño sentí siempre Patricio que estaba en el medio de un gran Aventura. De juro, yo siempre sentí que la vida es un gran aventure. [...] El propósito hacer una revolución aun que la voluntad construir el socialismo en el base de pluralismo y libertad. En ese camino inevitablemente a un conflicto armado. La unidad Popular era ese nave de sonadores. Avanzado con un sueño colectivo. Que se hizo pedazo. Que este sueño arrastrar y unir todo un país, levantar a todo un país, era el sueño de justicia. Todos van a tener derecho al educación a la salud a la vivienda... Era un sueño noble. Es muy duro cuando un sueño se hace pedazo. Y cuando uno se da cuenta que no puede avanzar sin soñar. Porque el soñar es consubstancial al la manera de entender la vida que tiene uno. No pueden sacrificar los fines por los medios. Es lo gran mensaje aquí. Y a mi, lo que me espanta en, lo que me preocupa en este país es que aquí se han entregado una información distorsionada de la realidad.

Since my childhood I’ve always felt I was a great adventurer at heart. I swear, life is one big adventure for me. [...] The idea was a revolution, even if Allende wanted to build a socialist country on the basis of democracy, pluralism and freedom. The path could only lead to an armed confrontation. The Popular Union was a “ship of dreamers,” propelled by a collective dream which ran aground. The dream was to carry along, and unite the entire country. It was a dream of justice the right to education good health and accommodation. It was a noble dream. The failure of a dream is hard to take especially knowing you can’t progress without dreams. Because dreaming is part of the way we apprehend life. You cannot sacrifice the ends for the means. That is the grand message I learned. What shocks and concerns me about this country is that we are given a false version of reality.

Ernesto speaks with fluency and ease about the failure of the dream of the Popular Union. His articulate speech also comes off as somewhat simplistic. His conception of the
Popular Union as a “ship of dreamers, propelled by a collective dream that ran aground” seems rosy and reductionist. It reduces a complex issue to simplistic, metaphorical terms that do not do it justice. Ernesto’s continued political, or even polemical, approach to the failure of the dream of the Popular Union appears on the same plane of argument as the Pinochetistas. Ernesto considers their position a “false version of reality,” while they consider his position as pro-Allende propaganda. Their dueling discourses appear authoritative, yet they seem to oversimplify the memory of this time period.

The ease in which these argumentative figures discuss their opinions of the Popular Union and the Pinochet regime is contrasted with Guzmán’s uncle Ignacio’s difficulty in constructing a coherent narrative of the past. We are first introduced to Ignacio as he is struggling to play Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” on an out of tune piano in an otherwise empty room. This piece, or rather, Ignacio’s rendition of this piece, has already served as an overture to several other scenes in the film. The slow, drawn out notes that accompany other scenes in the film seem to enhance the sorrowful mood of these scenes and the film in general. Yet, it is in this scene, fairly late on in the film, that we learn that Ignacio is the performer of this music. The problems of memory as portrayed in these other scenes is now connected to Ignacio’s personal, performative music. As such, Guzmán seems to emphasize the subjectivity of memory. Appropriately, we learn that Ignacio does claim some responsibility for the history conveyed in the film in that he is responsible for the transportation of the film reels of The Battle of Chile out of Chile.

Guzmán begins this scene with his uncle by identifying Ignacio as an eighty-year-old man who “has a good memory, I think.” We then hear Ignacio remark, logically in
response to his lackluster piano playing, “Bad, very bad.” However, the juxtaposition of these two phrases seems to suggest the imperfection of Ignacio’s memory. His piano playing takes on a metaphorical significance towards the discourse of the representation of memory. As he struggles to play the piece, he remarks, “it’s the pianist’s fault, not the piano’s.” Yet, it is quite easy to notice that Ignacio difficulty to play the piece is amplified by the horribly out of tune piano. Following the logic of the metaphor, it is both the nature of memory and the memory of the individual that cause the difficulty in representing historical truth. As previously noted, while the Pinochetistas seem to easily speak about the past, Ignacio struggles to play the piano. The camera focuses on his face and hands as he searches for the right notes on the keyboard. We can quite easily see his physical frailty. He struggles to remember and perform the piece. Nonetheless, he possesses a stubborn willingness to pound out the notes. He feels the necessity to represent, although problematically, his personal, decaying memory.

Shortly after this scene we see Ignacio in front of a memorial commemorating the lives of the deceased and disappeared Chilean citizens during the Pinochet regime. As Ignacio exclaims “so many names,” the camera focuses in on one name in particular: Jorge Muller Silva. Jorge helped Guzmán film The Battle of Chile and was killed shortly after the coup. Prior to this scene at the memorial, we learn of Jorge and the pain caused by his death. While he was part of the Popular Unity movement, Pablo Perelman, another filmmaker describes his unique qualities. He notes how Jorge was a petty bourgeoisie who believed in the communist and socialist dream of the party. He enjoyed material things and preferred the beach to a mass demonstration. We then learn of the difficulty his father, Perelman, Guzmán and others felt after he died. Guzmán captures
several of them crying while remembering Jorge’s life and death. This emotional complexity surrounding a single person murdered during the dictatorship confronts the statistical analysis provided by the Pinochetistas. The memorial itself is also problematized in that it seems to reduce the identity and memory of countless individuals simply to their names. Ignacio’s exclamation “so many names” in light of the focus on Jorge emphasizes the inability to represent and capture the memory of the deceased.

The end of the film juxtaposes Ignacio’s mental and physical fragility with Ernesto’s overwhelming assuredness with respect to the future of memory in Chile. Towards the end of the film, we see a class of students at the Universidad de Chile respond to their first viewing of *The Battle of Chile*. Their experience of the rise and fall of the Popular Union is mediated through film footage. These students are the products of such a conflict; many of these students have family members who were killed during the events portrayed in the film. Although these students have a personal, direct connection to the traumatic events, having never directly experienced the events in the film, they cannot fully grasp it. Nonetheless, this experience, while only partial and impersonal, is still traumatic. Many, if not all of the students seem to be in a state of shock. Stunned by a dramatic visual encounter with such violent and traumatic personal events, many of the students are left in tears. When several finally do speak, their responses vary and seem to exemplify the inevitable confusion in response to a traumatic experience. One young woman remarks about how she is proud of her people, even though they failed in their goals. A male student cries as he laments on how men can be so violent and cruel. Another student discusses all the anger and confusion he has felt throughout his life as a cause of the events portrayed in the film. And, even more
powerful still, others remain almost paralyzed by the film and can be seen crying uncontrollably. At the emotional climax of the film, Ernesto recites what seems like a previously prepared speech:

En esa nave de locos. Siento feliz de haber sido un tributante. Pero lo que quiero decir, es lo siguiente, que en esta hora difícil, en que han caído los modelos, y los ideologías sirven el tiempo que tal cosa. Debemos de asumir la tarea de constituirnos el imágenes vivientes para que los jóvenes, que miran a todos lados buscando donde se acararse sepan que este no es un naufragio es una tembladera de piso, nada más.

I was glad to be part of the crew on this ship of madmen. But I’d like to say, today while models and ideologies no longer have any value, we should accept to be the memory, living witnesses for the young people looking everywhere for something to hold on to. They should know that the coup d’état was not a shipwreck, but a small earthquake, nothing else.

Guzmán seems to utilize the emotional quotient of the film to inject such an opinionated and authoritative statement. Ernesto’s, statements are rather contradictory. He proclaims that in this difficult time “models and ideologies no longer have any value.” However, his metaphor seems to suggest that his “ship of madmen” have not shipwrecked, instead they’ve only been sidetracked by a small earthquake. Ernesto continues to glorify the dream of the Popular Union and suggests that he and the other survivors must serve as “living witnesses” and guides for the young people to hold on to. Ernesto gives this speech with a fixed, commanding gaze. While the camera focuses on him, we can see crying students sitting behind him. He both visually and thematically serves as the guiding force for the students behind him. He offers a concrete message that the survivors must “accept to be the memory” for the younger generation. Yet, this message does not coincide very smoothly with the other “living witnesses” in the film. Ignacio, Juan, Jorge’s father and others all seem to possess fragmented memories and struggle to come to grips with the past as well as Ernesto. They do not express the same continued
political fervor.

Guzmán chooses not to end his film with this authoritative, concrete message. Instead, the last seen is without any dialogue. We witness Ignacio walking down the street slowly, accompanied by Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” The camera does not show his face; instead, it begins to follow him as he moves across the screen. But, the camera does not keep pace with Ignacio. We follow behind him, but at a pace in which, if both parties continuing their movement, we will eventually lose sight of him. The film cuts to its credits as Ignacio is still easily close enough to see, but his individual characteristics are relatively imperceptible. As one of the films “living witnesses,” Ignacio is rapidly fading. At age eighty, it seems that time will inevitably get the best of him and he will soon be unable to testify to his experiences during the dictatorship.

Ignacio’s role as a witness is especially crucial to this film, in that he ensured the survival of the reels of the *Battle of Chile*. He allowed the students in the prior scene to experience a mediated viewing of the trauma of the dictatorship. However, Guzmán highlights the fact that as a living witness, Ignacio is fading. By ending the film with an image of Ignacio walking away, it privileges Ignacio’s individual experiences and his ability to testify to them. Through Ernesto, Guzmán emphasizes the important role of the survivors in serving as living witnesses for the next generation. Furthermore, Guzmán’s role as a politically active filmmaker emphasizes such a need to testify and represent the past. Yet, he ends the film by exemplifying the fragile relationship with the traumatic past.

**Conclusion:**
It is useful here to turn again to Assmann and her definition of trauma as a “physical imprint of excessive affect that cannot be transposed into language; it resists shape and reflection and therefore cannot assume the status of memory” (Assmann, 267). Yet, Guzmán, Vonnegut and Sebald do confront trauma and the issue of traumatic memory in their works. Assmann goes on to argue that it is “a certain degree of self-distancing” that makes it possible for people to engage with trauma and that trauma resists this distancing because it is inscribed upon the body. Caruth’s conception of trauma of the traumatic experience and its effects seem to somewhat conflict with this approach. She posits that the traumatic experience is so overwhelming, that the subject misses the traumatic experience. How can the missed traumatic experience become so irremovably bound to the subject? The traumatic experience seems to take on a dual quality: it is inextricably tied to the subject, yet it remains ineffable. Guzmán, Sebald, and Vonnegut each acknowledge the ineffability of traumatic memory. Nonetheless, they manage to write about the subject. In order to do so, they employ a distancing effect. These works all become incredibly layered and take on a collage like form in order to distance the subject from the traumatic experience. This serves to make traumatic memory representable. However, as a consequence, this distancing effect limits claims to objectivity. Vonnegut admits in the first chapter to the failure of his project. Sebald emphasizes the presence of a mist that cannot be dispelled. Guzmán’s film becomes so intricately layered and full of different opinions and testimonies that it is impossible to derive a concrete and objective narrative.

While these three works express similar opinions on the subject of trauma and memory, they differ somewhat in form and style. The primary, and most notable
difference is that of the narrator, or narrative voice. Vonnegut begins his work by identifying himself within the text and with an assertion of relative truth: “All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn’t his. [...] And so on. I’ve changed all their names” (1). He goes on to identify his current person as “an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown” (3). While Vonnegut acknowledges that he writes the story of Billy Pilgrim, he is almost entirely absent from Billy’s story. If chapters two through nine were read separately from the first and final chapters, Billy’s story would seem to have a third person omniscient narrator. In the final chapter Vonnegut reestablishes his presence in the text. He describes returning to Dresden with O’Hare. Shortly after, he identifies himself with respect to Billy: “He was going back there in 1945, two days after the city was destroyed. Now Billy and the rest were being marched into the ruins by their guards. I was there. O’Hare was there. We had spent the past two nights in the blind inn-keeper’s stable” (271). Vonnegut establishes that his story is distinct from that of Billy. He has access to Billy’s life story, even knows Billy personally, but is still distinct and distant from Billy.

Guzmán in a somewhat similar fashion, is an actor in his own work. He does not appear visually in the work, but it is evident he is behind the lens. Furthermore, he serves as the principal narrator, introducing the other characters in the film. The characters often refer to him as Patricio when they are speaking. Alvaro Undurraga, from his own memory, describes to Guzmán, what he remembers of Guzmán when he encountered him in the national stadium. Many times, we know Guzmán is behind the camera capturing his friends speaking, but we rarely hear Guzmán’s voice outside of his context as a
narrator. He is implicitly present, but somewhat hides his identity behind the camera. However, his editorial and filmic choices construct the film and leave with it a personal imprint. In short, Guzmán is somewhat distant, but at the same time, always present.

Sebald does not appear in name in his text, so it is more fruitful to discuss the role of the author-narrator instead. The author-narrator begins to discover more about Paul’s life in a personal manner. More specifically, he tries to imagine Paul’s life and death. After insisting that this is a wrongful trespass, he tries to reconstruct Paul’s life from his own memories. This personal mode of storytelling becomes more and more impersonal. The bulk of the story ends up being told by Mme Landau and accompanied by pictures of Paul and friends and family from earlier in his life. The story remains written by the author-narrator, and put into his own language and structure, but it becomes somewhat distant from his own experiences.

As noted earlier, Vonnegut’s distances himself from his own traumatic experience by representing the trauma from the fictional perspective of Billy Pilgrim. Assmann discusses Billy Pilgrim’s substitute position as the bearer of Vonnegut’s traumatic experiences: “Vonnegut has invented a childlike figure whom he makes into the defamiliarizing bearer of his own autobiographical experiences. This character confronts the whole world of war as a complete outsider.” But this distancing from Vonnegut to Billy is more complicated. Billy is a “complete outsider,” his disjointed experience of time, space and the world in general fictionalizes the experience of trauma. It is using this strategy that Vonnegut manages to keep the trauma at a distance, while simultaneously close enough to represent.
Guzmán constructs his film by overlapping multiple perspectives. This serves as a distancing effect that allows him to engage with a historical narrative and more importantly memory. While he is undoubtedly in charge of the editing, and the man controlling the camera, the film is constructed from many different perspectives and media. As noted earlier, the opening segments of the film portray the original traumatic event of the attack on the Moneda. The film begins its focus with Juan. It then expands to illuminate Juan’s story with personal statements from Guzmán, photographs and video footage from the attack, artwork, and other testimonies. These different layers each engage in someway with the historical past and in somewhat different ways with Juan’s story. The narrative created through this layering process is incredibly disjointed and without a coherent structure. Guzmán engages with his own trauma, but alongside the trauma of others. Consequently, there is no singular focus. His personal involvement in the issues of trauma and memory are at once omnipresent in that it is his film, yet, they are simultaneously layered and disrupted by overlapping perspectives.

The author-narrator in the story of Paul Bereyter layers his story in a similar manner to that of Guzmán. He combines his own imaginations and childhood recollections, Mme Landau’s memories, and photographs in order to illustrate and narrate Paul’s life. As previously discussed, these photographs testify to an authentic truth and absolute particular, yet necessitate an overarching narrative in order to possess any greater meaning. These photographs are consequently explained by Mme Landau and placed into a larger narrative of the author narrator’s overarching story. The story is at once always in the author-narrator’s writing and organized through his thoughts, yet at the same time separated from him through different perspectives and media.
Interestingly, and as a direct contrast to Vonnegut and Guzmán’s works, the author-narrator in Sebald’s text does not portray Paul’s traumatic experience. Mme Landau describes how “there could be little doubt that Helen and her mother had been deported” and that Paul “was plagued by a sense of having failed her or let her down” (Sebald, 49). Similarly, she tells the story of Paul’s father’s heart attack and death immediately before the war. Finally, and even more tacitly, Mme Landau notes that Paul “served, if that is the word, for six years, in the motorized artillery, […] and doubtless saw more than the heart or eye can bear” (56). Since the author-narrator did not experience Paul’s trauma, and Paul is no longer present to narrate his own story, the author-narrator only very briefly and superficially engages with Paul’s traumatic experience. The actual traumatic event remains even more distant from the text than in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Chile: Obstinate Memory*, yet at the same time it is acknowledged by the author-narrator and recognized by the reader.

The creation of the fictional character of Billy Pilgrim allows for Vonnegut to represent the trauma of the bombing of Dresden. More specifically, Billy’s altered and unique experience of the world serve as a proper fictional medium through which Vonnegut can engage with his traumatic memory. Billy’s science fiction-like worldview is evident of the effects of trauma:

> The genre takes on a special role in a world that – under the impact of trauma – has lost its realistic shape and is therefore constantly being fictionalized. To put this in more general terms, the trauma of the world war has shattered the structures of real-life experience and the standards of normality; in order to go on living, it is essential to find new means of orientation. (Assmann)

Billy’s spatiotemporal experience is evidently exemplary of that of someone afflicted by trauma. In other words, a traumatic experience changes one’s life permanently. While
Billy does testify to his Dresden experience by talking with Rumfoord, his perception of the world does not change. He still remains unstuck in time, though he does become a vocal advocate for Tralfamadorian philosophy. On the other hand, Vonnegut’s experience is distinct from Billy’s. Vonnegut struggled to write *Slaughterhouse Five*, but after its completion of this failure of a book, he claims “people aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore” (28). Now that Vonnegut has looked back, he no longer needs to anymore. On the other hand, Vonnegut’s fictional creation remains travelling through time and space. It seems that Vonnegut permanently displaced his traumatic memories through writing into the fictional life of his protagonist. Vonnegut can move forward from his traumatic experience, without looking back, now that he has substituted his trauma using the spastic, time-travelling figure of Billy Pilgrim.

Sebald’s story of Paul Bereyter possesses a similar relationship between the author narrator and the survivor of trauma. The author-narrator completes his story of Paul’s life. While it is necessarily incomplete, it seems to sufficiently illustrate Paul’s life. Unlike the author-narrator, Paul responds quite differently upon reexamining his life. The author-narrator remembers some aspects of Paul’s personality that could be described as melancholic. According to the author-narrator, Paul seemed almost like a shell of a human being at times. He describes how Paul’s speaking ability “sometimes gave one the feeling that it was all being powered by clockwork inside him and Paul in his entirety was a mechanical human made of tin and other metal parts, and might be put out of operation at the smallest functional hitch” (Sebald, 35). This description, along
with his Paul’s emotional response to music, seem to suggest that Paul remained forever changed by the trauma he experienced during the war.

In reexamining his own life, Paul reconstructs a narrative of his own. Curiously, he turned to the past upon losing his sight. As he no longer engage visually with the present, he began to focus on the past. To put it differently, as life around him became more and more obscure, Paul’s vision of the past became clearer. Paul effectively writes himself into history: “he read and read – Altenberg, Trakl, […] all of them writers who had taken their own lives or had been close to doing so. He copied out passages into notebooks which give a good idea of how much the lives of these particular authors interested him” (58). Paul seemingly takes these stories as his own, reinscribing his place within history: “Paul had been gathering evidence, the mounting weight of which, as his investigation proceeded, finally convinced him that he belonged to the exiles and not to the people of S” (59). Paul then physically places himself alongside his recently discovered Jewish compatriots by committing suicide along the trains. Different from Vonnegut, when Paul looks back upon his traumatic memories he rewrites his past with a sense of certainty. He does not examine his past through writing as a therapeutic measure that eventually allows him to move forward. Instead, he symbolically, and physically attempts to rewrite his past by aligning himself with deceased Jewish writers and committing suicide along the trains. Paul’s unfortunate ending upon rewriting his life contrasts with that of the author-narrator. Writing in response to what he sees as an oppressive silence following the war, the author narrator successfully represents Paul’s life as a means of moving forward.
Unlike in Paul Bereyter’s story *The Emigrants* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, there is no singular protagonist in *Chile: Obstinate Memory*. Guzmán focuses on the lives of several different friends and other strangers. Guzmán portrays characters that interact with their traumatic memories in vastly different ways. Carmen Vivanco refuses to acknowledge herself in a photograph testifying to her participation in a Popular Union rally. It seems that she has effectively closed herself off from her own past. Perelman regrets not having cried more after the death of his good friend Jorge Muller Silva. Ernesto Malbran continues speaking passionately about the revolutionary spirit of the Popular Union and Allende government. He stresses the importance of passing on the heroic memory of his fallen compatriots to the next generation. Guzmán’s uncle Ignacio is the only member of his family still alive after the Pinochet dictatorship. He preserved the tapes for *The Battle of Chile*, ensuring that the history of the Popular Union would not be forgotten. Yet, his memory and body are slowly fading.

This multiperspectival focus of the film regarding the subject of memory is especially evident in the public performance of the anthem of the Popular Union. As a band of students plays the anthem of the Popular Union, Guzmán focuses the camera on a cross-section of society. We see men in suits, assumed to be former Pinochet supporters, uneasy at this modern demonstration. Guzmán also captures several other men and women cheering. One man makes a “V” sign with his fingers, a symbol for the “venceremos” or victory of the Popular Union. Others remain somewhat dumbfounded by this anachronistic performance. This musical performance, seemingly from the past, causes onlookers’ memories to resurface to the present. It seems as if the traumatic past remains trapped inside of these different individuals. Yet, the traumatic past also
stubbornly remains in many different spaces: both physical, such as the Estadio Nacional or the Moneda, and symbolic. It seems that in a country that largely refrains from discussing its recent traumatic past, these problematic memories can resurface from an encounter with a variety of internal and external stimuli. Traumatic memories are simultaneously very distant, yet at the same time easily accessible. Yet, in the case of Ignacio, and soon with the other figures in the film, they will soon disappear along with their traumatic memories. The next generation will be left with a limited, more distant, and mediated experience of this trauma. The Estadio Nacional and the Moneda will soon lose some of their memorial significance as this generation disappears. An already partial understanding of traumatic memory will soon become even more limited with the inevitable passage of time.

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