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PUBLIC MEMORY UNDERGROUND

*Photographs of Protest in Uwe Johnson's
The Third Book About Achim (1967)*

ABSTRACT: This paper offers a preliminary investigation of the interrelation between literature, photography, and public memory under the conditions of authoritarian and neoliberal state control. Focusing on a fictionalized photograph of the 1953 workers' uprising in East Germany in Uwe Johnson's novel *The Third Book about Achim* (1967), I explore the performative capacity of photo-literary spaces to open up, and disrupt, institutionalized productions of public memory. Whereas official memorial technologies tend to close down alternative interpretations of history, this essay shows how small-scale, clandestine, or itinerant photographs embedded in literary archives animate historical impasses and possibilities, which persist to be responded to by future readers. More specifically, drawing on affect theory and political philosophy, I aim to rehabilitate photography's indexicality as a performative register that enables human proximities across the boundaries of time and space.

KEYWORDS: Public Memory, Performativity, Photo Theory, Affect, Assembly.

Introduction

The visitor who arrives in Berlin today, nearly thirty years after the fall of the Wall, in search of remnants of the bulwark that once divided Europe, enters a carefully curated memorial terrain. Tourists, equipped with their camera phones, will find plenty of Wall mementos to choose from, scattered across the vast urban landscapes of a unified city and decaying in isolated pockets of redrawn neighborhoods. Invariably, however, nearly all of these sites, with their simplistic comprehensibility (Adorno 2015, 140) of the demolished Wall as an icon of authoritarian oppression, generate an advertisement for the triumph of Western market democracy—one that is consumed by the thousands of spectators who pass through the city every day.

Starting, for example, at the center of the city, near the former Gestapo headquarters and its adjacent exhibit, *Topography of Terror*, carefully preserved panels of the Berlin Wall form a massive row of tombstones, insinuating the proximity of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to

the dictatorship of the Third Reich. Or, a few kilometers northeast of Berlin's center, at Bernauer Strasse, where, at fifteen meters, the Wall reached one of its narrowest points, visitors are offered the opportunity to engage with Germany's Cold War history at the Berlin Wall Memorial. This large-scale arena, extending along 1.4 kilometers of the former border strip, showcases a restored original segment of the inner and outer barriers of the Wall, together with floodlights, border obstacles, and a watchtower. And, stepping up the commercial, appropriative management of public memory (Bach 2017, 3), the Wall exhibit at the former border crossing Checkpoint Charlie invites tourists from all over the world to take pictures of themselves framed by the anonymous, cored-out architecture of a repressive state, turning each individual into a historical actor.

What appears absent from this carefully curated post-reunification memoryscape (Ludwig 2011) is the GDR itself—and the populace, who provisionally assembled in the fall of 1989 to act in concert, to march silently in the streets of East Germany, claiming wordless, embodied action as a legitimate political mode (Butler 2015, 18). Today, passing through Berlin's downtown area near the site where the GDR's Palace of the Republic once stood, and where the castle of King Frederick the Great is currently being reconstructed, one nearly misses an elongated pillar displaying three small, faded photographs of demonstrators who gathered shortly before the fall of the Wall. While the minimalism of this memorial column may point to an anxiety, or critical reluctance, on part of the designers (commissioned by the city) to represent large crowds, we could also surmise that what has been forcefully evacuated from the city's contested public memory is the "we" of the people.

Either way, the past is normatively organized and framed, calling the mechanisms by which historical actors become recognizable—as well as the stability of the frame itself—into question (Butler 2009, 8). In today's post-reunification public sphere, the "we" of the people is rendered, quite literally, unseen, invisible, moved out of sight—were it not, that is, for a large-scale depiction of an earlier uprising, from 1953. Placed at the beginning of nearly every post-Wall exhibit as an iconic sign (Klausmeier 2015, 182-183), this image signals communism internally eroded and inevitably moved toward its own demise.

In this essay, I seek to challenge this closed-off, revisionist narrative, which celebrates the victory of capitalism and the West, once and for all, by shifting attention to the social and representational modes by which public memory—or, more precisely, the "memory of publics" (Phillips 2004, 6)—goes underground, persists, and awaits its perpetual animation. If the concept of public memory invokes the contingent conditions by

which a public body, often a nation-state, constitutes itself and deliberates its own existence, then the notion of “memory of publics” amplifies the contrast between the capacity of certain publics to authorize memories and the struggles of other publics to contest them. Taking into account that alternative interpretations of history often endure in smaller, more intimate forms, I wish to turn from the making of public memory in urban landscapes, nearly always driven by managerial strategies and neoliberal agendas (Huysen 2003; Till 2012), toward the treatment of the public sphere in the more granular, minor, self-reflexive, polyvalent spaces of literature. In particular, focusing on Uwe Johnson’s 1961 novel *The Third Book about Achim*, I explore to what extent small-scale literary spaces that incorporate fictionalized photography of public assembly can be conceptualized as future archives, where unforeclosed pasts continually open up, turning failure into potentiality (Badiou 2015).

Addressing the border of the visible in public-memory formation more specifically, I argue that diegetically anchored photographs, as we find them in Johnson’s novel, can correlate with a heightened indexicality, a thingness, that the lyrical, traumatic, “actual” photographic images reproduced on the pages of works by Roland Barthes (2010) or W.G. Sebald (1999), for example, elide. That is to say, I aim to shift conversations about the borders of the visible away from well-established concerns with the spectral, the imaginary, and the constructed, directing their focus toward the materiality (however, fictionalized) of photographic objects. Objects can be circulated, moved, placed, and misplaced, can touch and be touched, and can heighten collaborative meaning making (akin to the process of assembly itself), calling us to respond in some way.

Pictorial Politics of 1953

Uwe Johnson’s high-modernist novel *Das Dritte Buch über Achim* was published in 1961, shortly before the building of the Berlin Wall, by the West German publisher Suhrkamp. The book, originally entitled “Description of a Description,” is a metafictional account of a failed attempt to comprehend the lives of others, particularly across the dividing lines of two vastly different political systems. Karsch, a journalist from the West, comes to the GDR in 1960 in order to write a biography about Achim, a cyclist, who has been built up by the state as an iconic symbol of socialism’s prowess in the aftermath of the war. Johnson himself left the GDR in 1959, reluctantly, after run-ins with Party administration and upon realizing his works would likely not be published in the East (Neumann

1994, 343-49). Discursive, self-reflexive, and often meandering in structure and tone, Johnson's novel performs its central theme—the limited knowability of an other—through a discontinuous but carefully metered form.

In the final part of the book, however, this mode of narrative and epistemological indeterminacy is briefly interrupted. Following an extensive section where Karsch appears to succumb to the fact that the material he has collected about Achim will never amount to more than disparate biographical possibilities, Johnson inserts a chapter with the heading “Now something else, for a change” (206). Invoking the evidentiary power of photography to expose what otherwise might have gone unnoticed, this chapter introduces an “ordinary snapshot” (Johnson 1967, 213) into the narrative, which presumably captures Achim, the socialist model citizen, among the demonstrators during the workers' uprising on June 17, 1953.

Although the historical context of this event is not articulated in Johnson's novel—the photograph arrives unexpectedly—we need to consider the geopolitical backdrop against which this pictorial reference to 1953 appears in order to understand how the book undermines the hegemonic narratives circulating in the public sphere at the time. In June of 1953—eight years after the end of the Second World War, four years after the division of Germany into two states, and three months after Stalin's death—the newly founded GDR was at a crisis point. Focusing on the accelerated collectivization of agriculture and the expansion of heavy industry, the policies of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had led to a shortage of food, consumer goods, and fuel, which contributed to a drastic increase of the number of people escaping to the West—more than two hundred thousand left in the first half of 1953 alone (Löhn 2003, 13-17). When the Party decreed that the productivity norms for industrial workers were to be raised by ten percent, essentially requiring them to produce more to earn the same pay, construction workers in Berlin went on strike; soon, production brigades all across the country marched through the streets of major cities, towns, and rural areas to demand free elections and better working conditions. Sweeping in other citizens, the unrest rose to more than three hundred thousand (Baring 1972, 52), which prompted the GDR government to call on police troops and Soviet tanks to restore order, and to pass down emergency laws (Millington 2014, 1). The differently mythologized versions of this event in the public-memory discourse of the East and the West mutually enforced each other in the Cold War geopolitics of the twentieth century: Western historiography and public media termed it a national uprising against the SED regime—a definition

that persists today (Klausmeier 2015, 187), while only a few scholars consider to probe the event as a workers' uprising, in the epicenters of the old working-class movements, informed by the unions, antifascist networks, and class struggle of the 1920s (Löhn 2003, 7-11, 26-34). In the FRG, June 17 was declared a national day of "German unity and remembrance"; the GDR deemed the unrest a fascist counterrevolutionary putsch directed by Western provocateurs.

Johnson's text, set only seven years after the uprising, accentuates historical forgetting. The photo of the protesters arrives one day in an anonymous package, and when it is inspected by Karsch—and also Achim's lover, Karin—it fails to activate any historical knowledge:

It meant nothing to him. The object Karin was staring at between stiffly raised hands was a streaked aluminum plaque with two recently cut-off sides; on it, in the middle, the print of an ordinary snapshot had been glued. It showed a sunny street, and between the houses a column of marchers without flags, in the foreground the first row of men in white overalls, their arms locked together. . . . The outlines were clear, each face recognizable; of course Karsch saw that it was Achim walking in the first row, but it meant nothing to him. (Johnson 1967, 213).

Achim's potential involvement in the 1953 uprising, as well as the anonymous mailing of the photo, carries significant risk. Images of these protests were nearly absent in the GDR's highly controlled public sphere. In an essay entitled "The Smiling Face of Dictatorship," Stefan Wolle points out that in visualizing the key concepts of the single-party state—harmony, purity, order, and security—the GDR created a pictorial program with the severe beauty and undeviating regularity of an Orthodox iconostasis (1997, 127). Pictures showing direct confrontation with the state, or any sort of public unrest, were rare in the historiography of the GDR.

While it appears for a moment that Johnson wishes to invest into a logic of exposing the invisible, that which may be otherwise hidden from view, the handling of the photo in the narrative, and certainly in the GDR's public sphere, undermines such a reading. The following outlines three rather different processes by which Johnson's text undoes, oversignifies, and suspends the logic of indexicality—the logic by which the photographic image is linked to a prior situation or event, giving rise to the state of having been there. Exploring these processes sheds light on the capacity of photo-literary spaces to move beyond the binaries of post-1989 public-memory politics toward an ethico-political and ontological futurity.

Self-Erasure

Although the photo emerges as proof of historical reality, and, more specifically, of Achim's concealed dissent, it is precisely the appearance of the photo in a literary sphere that destabilizes the knowability of 1953 as an actual event. First off, the text has to perform for the reader what Karsch, working on Achim's biography, did just moments before the package arrived: "putting a photograph into description" (Johnson 1967, 207) in order to render it visible—or, shall we say, legible. The pictorial sense of "description" might ring rather quaint, but Johnson's work, which preceded the heyday of deconstructionism by a decade, involves a translative carrying across the discursive realm of words into the realm of images (all within a literary sphere, of course), teasing out the latter's textual resemblance (Derrida 2010). For, as it turns out, the reader never quite knows what "realities" belong to the "actual" (fictionalized) image—the narrator's rendering, Karsch's perception, an eyewitness account, or Karin's gaze.

As if to take the disclosive function of photography (and of writing, and history) to its limits, the truth value established by the snapshot quite literally falls apart by the end of the book, when Karsch capitulates and says, "I can't picture it..." (Johnson 1967, 242). Indexical certainty has receded into a vanishing point, into the borders of the visible/legible and knowable. Like a densely pixelated image that ultimately exposes nothing, we never find out if Achim was at the demonstrations, which has prompted scholars to identify the photo as a *Leerstelle*, a blank space, or an ellipsis (Horend 2000, 118).

It may seem, then, that Johnson's destabilizing treatment of a fictionalized (textual) photograph, with its emphasis of self-erasure and the deferral of meaning (Derrida 2010), comes close to the melancholic, mournful register scholars ascribe to Sebald's inclusion of actual photographs in his literary works (1997; 1999). Like Barthes, whose *Camera Lucida* deals with the spectral and the vanishing, in relation to loss, Sebald associates the photo image more with the future perfect than the past—and in that sense, similar to Johnson, unhinges any fixity of original meaning. Looking backward, however, toward that which the image always already discloses as dead, or about to be dead, neither Barthes's nor Sebald's thanatographical reflections temper with the image's finality. In her recent *History of Photography*, Kaja Silverman suggests this mobilization of the future perfect renders the future as unchanging as the past (2015, 4). Yet a closer look at the passage in which Karsch and Karin examine the photograph of the 1953 protesters can reveal a second process

by which the photo-literary space in Johnson's novel pushes—tangibly—beyond itself, and past an elegiac sense that the future is “all used up.”

Tactile Looking

Theories of photography in the twentieth century have connected the image to ocular operations and to the primacy of sight. Johnson's mid-century text, however, introduces a sense that photographs also can and, in fact, need to be touched if they are to be engaged in the construction of knowledge: “The object Karin was staring at between stiffly raised hands was a streaked aluminum plaque with two recently cut-off sides; on it, in the middle, the print of an ordinary snapshot had been glued” (Johnson 1967, 260). Rather than squaring comfortably with the logic of deconstruction, the photo's object-like, tactile quality quite literally sticks out, and remains on the page. Of course, tactile objects impart a sense of weight and solidity; they arise from direct contact with reality. Touch can signify three-dimensional space, as opposed to photography's optical flatness, and may also be enlisted in the discourse of the authentic—to offer proof or validation. In a book chapter entitled “Tactile Looking,” Margret Olin draws attention to the material quality of images, shifting the focus of photo theory from treating images as texts to treating them as sites that create, and that produce relationships between people (2012, 1-17). From this angle, then, the evidentiary, or even disclosive, content of photographic images is less important than the collaborative, specular relations they enable.

Leaving it unclear whether Achim appears among the workers, the photograph in Johnson's novel needs to be touched, handled—generally, treated as an object. At one point, Karsch takes it to the actual site of the workers' uprising, near the jail (of an unnamed city), assembling a disparate community of protagonists (Karsch, Achim, Karin) and eyewitnesses, whose voices and gazes are often only indirectly cast back into the narrative diegesis (Johnson 1967, 215, 236-237). However unreliably and divergent, the itinerant photo-object, made for the hands, so to speak, serves as a mnemonic tool to bring the public's memory to the fore.

The result of the collaborative, interpretive work enabled by the forbidden photograph in the novel, a new corporeal, embodied rendition of the 1953 marches emerges from the deep underground of Johnson's literary archive: “*The masons were not boisterous, almost quietly they marched forward arm in arm; they answered calls and waved back with the serene [heiteren] dignity of adults who are all together on the market simply to*

represent themselves" (1967, 237; 1961, 289; italics mine). In this version, the protesters did not act out a fixed anticommunist program (as today's public memory implies), but the performance of an embodied assembly itself produced the political meaning of concerted action. This kind of spontaneous self-gathering needs to be understood in and of itself as a political enactment, regardless of the slogans the protesters may or may not have vocalized (Butler 2015, 18). As Hannah Arendt suggests, the people streaming into the street are motivated by something "irresistible," something akin to a bodily need or sensation (Arendt 1963, 114 quoted in Butler 2015, 46). Although this revolutionary motivation may be born out of a base necessity, elsewhere Arendt links resistance movements, more freely, to a desire for "public happiness." "Stripped of all masks," she writes, people are able to experience a freedom from officialdom—and they do so not "because they acted against tyranny" but "because they [have] become 'challengers,' [have] taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, [have] begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom [can] appear" (1977, 4). Echoing this public affect of joy, eyewitnesses of the uprising on June 17, 1953, described their participation in the mass assembly in the market square in Halle as "euphoric" and "unforgettable" (Löhn 2013, 152-153).

Johnson's vision of the 1953 uprising as a potential space of unbound ideology, where people delighted simply in the act of taking a stance, may have been informed by photographs he held in his own archive. After the author's untimely death, in 1984, scholars found the book *The Uprising*, by Stefan Brant (1954), in his library (Zetzschke 1994, 196). Interestingly, Brant's book includes a frontal shot of workers striding forward in the streets, arm in arm (1954, 98), which closely resembles the focalized narrative image in Johnson's novel (1967, 237) that I have championed as an alternative, emergent reading of the gatherings in 1953. The focal point of this scene is a kind of coexistent, horizontal relationality, one based on brotherhood and solidarity. When these two portrayals are taken together, the image in Brant's book highlights how the marching bodies in Johnson's text, in their frontal roundness, almost appear to leap off the page.

Given that the photograph in Johnson's novel performatively insists on a heightened tactile association with indexicality (Olin 2012), we might be prompted to ask, "What does the image-object want?" (Mitchell 2005). What does it want from "us," its readers, onlookers, or witnesses—from those who can nearly touch it and are touched by it in its present future temporality, where it emerges from deep archival space? Here we have to step into a vastness, into a wide-angle view, into that which forever is, to expose a kind of photo-literary futurity.

Analogy

By “photo-literary futurity” I have referred to the capacity of small-scale intermedial spaces to defossilize established narratives and historical interpretations, and to open, through the very different works of self-erasure or tactile looking, into possible horizons. But this trajectory does not necessarily have to expand in linear fashion from the past. Let us recall that the photographic image in Johnson’s novel may have formed out of nothing—the photograph emerges in the story’s present temporality, the early 1960s, without prior announcement, almost as if it made itself. The envelope containing the image arrived anonymously in Karsch’s apartment, and his attempts to trace how it may have come into his possession fail. As if needing to be anchored in an indexical, technological reality, the photograph, an ordinary snapshot—a *Kontaktabzug*—comes fastened to a thin metal plate (Johnson 1967, 260), conjuring the early processing of analog photography. When in the end neither a sender, an embodied intentionality, can be identified for the emerging image nor a camera remembered, or tied to the scene, the photograph appears authorless, thing-like, traversing, nearly mystically, one might say, across time and space. It may almost seem that through an image that is unhinged, the world appears to us as if from the future, relating to us in a new way. In *Miracle of Analogy*, Kaja Silverman reminds us of the social and ontological saving power of photography: “The photographic image not only analogizes the external world, but also links us to one another through a particularly binding and democratizing kind of analogy” (2015, 87). In other words, she suggests those involved with photography have the capacity to form a kind of republic.

From this perspective, across a vast expanse, Achim’s awkward, immobile face (“his mouth was open in embarrassed laughter” [Johnson 1967, 260])—or, in any case, its printed offspring—roams around in search of “kin” able to accommodate that which we might otherwise foreclose. In a post-1989, post-reunification public sphere, that would be Achim’s reluctance to participate in what is now framed as a national uprising against a communist state.

Coda: Open Future

As I mentioned at the outset, Germany’s public-memorial domain today is greatly invested in a revisionist narrative of the West’s victory over the GDR’s dictatorial regime (or the *Unrechtsstaat*, the illegitimate state, as it

is called in “legal” parlance). This ideological compression of the complex modern history of the Wall—or the GDR’s antifascist political project, for that matter—is centrally staged at the entrance of Berlin’s major Wall exhibit, where a monumental image, along with the caption “National uprising on June 17, 1953” (credit: Schirmer, ullstein bild), shows civilians protesting in a public square of Berlin, confronted by a Soviet tank. Iconic through its reiterations in school books and exhibits, this symbol of anticommunist, anti-Soviet defiance insinuates a teleological narrative that leads inevitably from a presumably unequivocal call for Western capitalist democracy in 1953 to the unrest in 1989, and, subsequently, to the fall of the Wall and Germany’s reunification (Schöne 2013, 128-134). As this public-memory space is tightly regulated—by uncontested, evidentiary archival technologies and a disavowal of the normative conditions by which political subjects become recognizable—it renders the history of the GDR as a closed one, from start to finish.

Without this violent shutter of the museum archive (Azoulay 2017), it would not be possible to occlude the spontaneous, unformed public assemblies that linger outside of normatively established frames. What the public does not see in these macroinstitutions, what does not appear in the memorial sphere today, are those photographs of the 1953 uprising that are dispersive, or even provisional, in tone and choreography, such as the small-scale images of unbound crowds emerging from Uwe Johnson’s library (Brant 1954, 96, 188). Destabilizing any notion of historical closure or unilateral, homogenous action, the “neat geometric pattern of spectators” in these images “beg[ins] to curl under the observer’s eye” (Johnson, 1967, 226). Notably, these decontextualized, unframed, full-page images of protesters assembling in the streets of East Germany on June 17, 1953, quite literally spill out of Brant’s *The Uprising* (1954, 96, 188), which, as I mentioned earlier, Johnson had in his possession. Although this early historiographical account of the unrest initiates the normative narrative about 1953 as an “always already decided” resistance against the Soviet-led SED regime, favored by the West, the images’ abundant depictions of embodied persistence and unorganized self-gathering continue to wreck the very public frame by which the bifurcated meanings of 1953—and, more generally, postwar and Cold War history after 1989—have been produced.

If certain stories about the past are no longer performed in talking, reading viewing, or commemorative rituals, they risk dying out in cultural terms, becoming obsolete or inert. In the process they may be replaced or overwritten by narratives that more directly affirm latter-day hegemonic concerns and identity formations (Erll 2012, 2). However, as we have seen,

the inchoate, heterogeneous impulses of past events have the capacity to persist, recede, and recirculate in the subterranean passageways and boundless microarchives of literary texts, and in the library archives of their authors. Here in particular, it is in intermedial photo-literary spaces that meanings are always emergent rather than stable, and that the mediation and remediation of unfinalizable pasts create the undercurrents of cultural memory that are ready to touch and be touched by the future.

Public memory will always orient itself toward that which is safe and manageable in the dominant framework of reference (Arendt 1977, 6). Yet the fluidly calibrated borders of the visible and knowable in Johnson's work teach us otherwise; they return us to the open, where the failures of the past ("It did not get them anywhere" [Johnson 1967, 240]) turn possible, where the provisional assembly—the self-constituting, unrehearsed "acting together" (Johnson 1967, 239) of the people, rather than expressive, pre-determined agendas—take place, make space, and should no longer be allowed to fail.

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