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Lateness, Asymmetry, and Ecological Uncertainty in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes W.G. Sebald's novel The Rings of Saturn as a literary exploration of ecology and post-historicity. By examining Sebald's narrative through Timothy Morton's revision of Hegelian art history as "Asymmetry," a prolonged period of post-human Romanticism, Sebald's vision of history is positioned after the end of a sense of historical progress, a period of ruin and decline where nature begins to reclaim the landscape and history itself. This condition, I argue, is one instance in an ever-repeating cycle of historical and ecological "ends," whose foil is the concept of ecological melancholy. Ultimately this analysis is a case study in how literature of the Anthropocene so preoccupied with the notion of the "end" encourages narrative estrangement from the world, an estrangement I seek to suture – though not entirely heal – through the recognition of a new historical teleology of engagement with the ecological melancholy's potential for rebuilding.

Keywords: *Anthropocene; Aesthetics; Romanticism; Asymmetry*

Introduction

Nature is constantly in a state of flux, where landscape, over the course of geological time, is always changing. Historical events leave their indelible marks upon the land. This history is vast, so deep that at times it appears depthless. Recognizing this depth, artists may speak to humanity's desire to recall the passage of the ages, or transient times that we, according to Jeffery Jerome Cohen (2015), "cannot witness and yet are called upon, anxiously, to narrate" (p. 85). Change and anxious narration are both symptoms of the natural progression of time – artists often respond to change, especially in terms of climate, with ominous tones – though theorists of the Anthropocene claim that the degree and severity of change can be manipulated, and that humans can expand and contract the progression of time through technological geoengineering, depending on the industrial relation to landscape. Rapid changes wrought by industrialization appear to reveal greater degrees of alteration in scales more familiar to human perception: what might have transpired over the course of a century, or longer, may now happen in a mere generation, or even in a few years' time. Those who are old enough to remember a time before the change cannot help but feel lost in history's quickened passage and, like ancient seers who have lived long enough to witness the slow turning of an age, the observers of late-modernity and today witness a compressed sense of time, as they are apparently trapped in the temporal squeeze of the Anthropocene.

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Writing specifically about the use of photography in *The Rings of Saturn* – though this is a comment which can be applied widely to his inter-textual practice – Carsten Strathausen (2007) claims that German novelist W.G. Sebald's innumerable historical and literary references “enable – and call upon – readers to embark on a personal journey that is highly idiosyncratic, unpredictable, and immediate, thus forging a new path through the infinite space of their own lives” (p. 488). Indeed, the journey one makes with Sebald is deeply personal, but is that all it is, or does Sebald's fiction work to narrativize the intertwined histories of the subject and the world encompassing them? Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, a novel detailing a walking tour of the Suffolk coast, outlines a world where human narrators and creators acknowledge their estrangement from that world, rather than attempting to shape it as a product of creative genius. Sebald is preoccupied with the so-called “defect of history,” the feeling of having arrived on the scene too late to make any serious change, and the sense of repetition where one feels stuck at what is believed to be this end-point of history. Sebald's worlds engulf the narrative subject threatening their irrevocable loss in the abysses of space and time.

This paper analyzes *The Rings of Saturn* (hereafter *RS*) as a literary exploration of ecology and post-historicity. “Post-historicity” is understood here as the quasi-Hegelian approach to the “end” of history, not as a period of philosophical rebirth – as is the case in, for instance, Arthur Danto's resuscitation of the concept in light of Modern and Contemporary Art – but as the melancholic, ecologically pessimistic view of historical finality. Ecology, a historical view of nature alongside the human destruction of it, and post-historicity are concepts which are ultimately conjoined in their purpose: the “end” of history occurs simultaneously with the “end” of nature, brought about by the human propensity for violence and industrial manipulation of landscape.

I begin this analysis by examining Sebald's historical perspective(s) through the lens of Timothy Morton's revision of the Hegelian trajectory of art history in the form of “Asymmetry,” a prolonged period of post-human Romanticism only now reaching its twilight. (I highlight Morton's critical stance as a foil to Sebald's novel in its linking of a post-historical philosophical outlook with an ecological approach to art as tool for understanding the contemporary climate crisis.) Sebald's vision of history, evidenced by the spatial and temporal framing provided by the narrator of the text, is positioned *after* the end of a sense of historical progress, a period of ruin and decline where nature begins to reclaim landscape and history itself. This narrative condition is revealed as one instance in an ever-repeating cycle of inevitable historical and ecological “ends,” whose counterpart is found in the concept of ecological melancholy. The juxtaposition of Sebald's novel and Morton's theory serves as a case study in how literature of the Anthropocene so preoccupied with the notion of the “end” encourages narrative estrangement from the world, an estrangement I seek to suture – but not entirely heal – not through a mythical holism of human and other-than-human entities, but through the recognition of a new historical teleology of engagement with the ecological melancholy's potential for rebuilding and rebirth.

Sebald's History

Observing the ruins of Reedham, where the remains of wind pumps and water mills dot the landscape like “relics of an extinct civilization,” and the surrounding regions of Haddiscoe and Herringfleet, on the road to the once-opulent hall of Somerleyton, Sebald's narrator faces



the painful effects of this quickened sense of time: “It takes just one awful second, I often think, and an entire epoch passes” (1998, p. 31). It is possible, of course, that this narrator is merely reflecting on the passage of time that is characteristic of *any* age of human history – Sebald’s tone, for instance, recalls the Renaissance’s deep longing for Classical culture which manifested artistically in a curious blend of nostalgia and pessimism, in pursuit of the so-called “sublime and contemplative life” – and that this attitude is not solely informed by his historical position as an Anthropocene-subject (see Huizinga 1996). However, what separates these reflections from a decentered sense of historical pessimism is the emphasis, in this passage and throughout *RS*, on ruin and decay in intimate relationship with the histories of industrialization, alongside military, social, and political trajectories of human conflict.

Sebald’s engagement with history and politics are inseparable from his observations on the historical nature of ruin and decay. Therefore, there is no escaping the material constraints of the world in which he wrote: that is, a world radically altered by human will and the exploitation of natural resources.

The “last glimpse of the land now being lost forever” – Sebald’s final reflection of the novel inspired by the works of one of the story’s frequent historical voices, the English author Thomas Browne – is not just a final look at the social and political conditions of human life at the end of the twentieth century, but of the *land* itself, changed so drastically by the people, industries, and governments that inhabit it. One wonders, then, what this world looks like, and what are the strange contours of its spatial and temporal valleys?

Sebald’s story, and thus his rendering of the natural world, ostensibly takes the form of an ambulatory walking tour of the Suffolk coast, where his narrator’s encounters with natural landscapes, ruined communities, and other people offer narrative digressions which form the basis of the novel. Through the medium of these digressions, the present world of the novel appears to meld into the fabric of the past, a melding made apparent through Sebald’s frequent use of intertextuality – Browne, Rembrandt, and Jorge Luis Borges are among his frequent interlocutors – as well as his employment of European history, mythical storytelling, and otherwise dream-like forays into the narrator’s obscure personal past.

The world presented here is both immediately accessible to the narrator, as he appears to have great freedom in recalling the enormity of that history, in all its biographical, mythological, and creative depth, but, at the same time, impenetrably dense, closed off to a subject who is never quite sure “how things were in ages past” (Sebald 1998, p. 84). It is the oscillation between knowledge and uncertainty, coupled with the sheer narrative depth of Sebald’s “imitations of a pre-modern and mythical temporality that allows for the presence of sea-monsters, prehistoric beasts, and post-apocalyptic survival,” that renders the narrative in a state of near-constant distraction, a mode which J.J. Long (2007) identifies as an “ontological flicker,” a term adopted from the work of Brian McHale (p. 139). McHale’s (2004) notion of the “ontological flicker,” and Long’s adoption of it in the analysis of Sebald’s work, highlights the murky and complex nature of the material addressed in *RS*, namely, the twin-histories of ecological destruction and modern socio-political violence, where the “officially accepted” version of events, and the troubling infallibility of memory and historical record, face off in the intermittent oscillation between two versions of the same world: an “ontological flicker” wherein “one moment, the official version [of history] seems to be eclipsed by the apocryphal version; the next moment, it is the apocryphal version that seems mirage-like, the official

version appearing solid, irrefutable” (p. 90). By incorporating such flickers, the world of Sebald’s novel opens into digressive spatial and temporal dimensions which have the potential to fragment a reader’s attention to its events and its general narrative logic, in which doubt, absent-mindedness, and the uncanny sense of repetition become key aspects of the experience of reading and, by extension, the *writing* of such an account of history and landscape. All textual and visual elements of the novel work in tandem to pose the question as to how space can be translated into the “dream, memory, or imagination” of textual form (Kraenzle 2007, p. 127). Moreover, the sense of time, not merely narrative but conceptual, or the *topos* of its thinking which surrounds the frame(s) of the work itself – late-modernity, post-modernity, and, most significantly here, the Anthropocene – frays history and the experience of space and time into a dissociative thread.

Hegel, Romanticism, and Asymmetry

To say these that the worlds created in Sebald’s novel are merely “imaginary,” rather than *realistic*, is to miss the point of literary imagination altogether: this logic is “derived from the world of human imagination,” and its link to that world is unbreakable, for its existence relies on the brutal realities of nature and human activity (Bond 2004, p. 33). What results in Sebald’s imaginative presentation of history, where human subjects are meant to face the brutal reality of their impact on the world around them, and which one can thoroughly recognize as a rendering of the spatial reality of the Anthropocene, is an *asymmetrical* view of history and the narrative subject’s position within it.

If it is true that human beings inhabit a period of geological history, beginning as early as 1790 when human deposits of carbon are detectable in some of the remotest parts of the Earth, and if indeed the “substrata of [the] earthly reality” which we inhabit is now directly affected by our carbon-emitting ways of life, this begs the question, at least for ecological thinker Timothy Morton (2014), as to which period in *artistic* history we now inhabit (p. 43). By “period” of art history, Morton is referring to the system of phases proposed by German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) in his posthumously published lectures on aesthetics. Hegel’s phases of art refer to a process of coming-into-being which applies to a diverse set of artistic activities, in a worldwide panorama providing a historical trajectory for the movement of *Geist*, often translated into English as “spirit” or “mind,” but more specifically referring to an essential unity of self-consciousness, a feature unique to human thought and existence which in Hegel’s philosophical system maintains its own concrete unity, acting as an agent in the creative world and driving historical succession in the arts. These periods follow a progression of *Geist*’s earliest, most “underdeveloped” Symbolic form, approaching the articulation of philosophical thought in its most “developed” Romantic form, in poetry and philosophy itself.

For Morton, responding to and adapting Hegel’s aesthetic system to a reinterpretation of the Anthropocene, the Romantic phase of the arts is seen as ongoing through various permutations in a so-called “march of the -isms” – Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, *et al.* – which have followed in the wake of Romanticism’s height. The visceral, beating heart of Romantic expression, for Morton, is the human subject’s ability to identify the human in the other-than-human, to render the world as an object of observation and tool for artistic expression, wherein “the *beyond* [of nature] disappears and reappears within people” (p. 43). Romantic expression is, at its core, an anticipation of Anthropocentric logic, where the natural



world, whether in its pastoral beauty or sublime terror, exists as an object of aesthetic contemplation, a canvas for the artist's genius, and a simulacrum of humanity's "will to power" (to borrow Nietzsche's phrase) or *perceived* power, over the natural world itself, to make apparent the possibility of expression in any natural vista. Each "-ism" in the march has served as a brief, but significant, incursion of other-than-human entities into creative expression. Abstract style and thinking, with roots both in the "rippling" gestures of Monet's painting and the "pure" abstraction of Pollack or Rothko, gives way to the vastness of the substance of human consciousness. What is expressed in abstract art serves to integrate the outside world and inner subject in a vision of "weird" unknowability. But what is aesthetics to make of Hegel and Romanticism now, at the so-called "end of history"?

Romanticism, of course, did not entirely dissipate with the rise of Modernism, as the influence of Romanticism has persisted throughout modern and contemporary ecological art. Morton's "age of asymmetry," as a continuation of Hegel's system, is an attempt to understand the perpetual influence of Romanticism on observational subjects (with the modern Romantic narrator, or at least its specter, at the center) as knowledge about the world outside the human subject. Asymmetry instigates an artistic confrontation between the human and other-than-human. To put this in another way, advances in scientific knowledge – advances which increase our understanding of everyday reality, and the apparently hidden world beneath the surface of this reality, which can be explicated through the tools of scientific discourse – sometimes force us to rethink the relationship between human and nonhuman agents. Morton offers the example of Warner Herzog's film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), a documentary about the pre-historic figurative paintings preserved in the caves of Chauvet-Point-d'Arc in southern France, where, at the ending of the film, Herzog problematizes the traditional Romantic narrator's approach to the other-than-human. Instead of ending on a meditation of the cave's captivating aura – one can imagine a Romantic narrator who envisions the painted handprints found there as a kind of tactile window between humans of the past and present, bridging the not-so-impassible divide between then and now – Herzog focuses on a pack of albino crocodiles and the "alien worlds formed by run-off from a nearby power plant" (Morton 2014, p. 41). The post-Romantic coda, the possibility of world *after* human beings which is so drastically shaped by human influence, provides the curious shape for asymmetrical art, where there is some other-than-human future awaiting the Romantic narrator's story. What appears to be a sense of estrangement between the narrator and their world is this intrusion of the other-than-human into everyday life and the eruption of the past or the future in the direct moment of narrative reflection. It is here that Romanticism, and its attempts to wrangle the other-than-human toward reflective and sublime ends, accepts its own limits, and, in the face of its shortcomings, must find a suitable resting place for its narrator, lost in ecological asymmetry and the flickers of a past, present, and future which constantly intrude the work.

In Sebald's novel, it seems that Herzog's post-Romantic coda has already transpired long before the story's telling, rendering the narrator the "albino alligator" of this particular landscape. Sebald's narrator appears trapped in a world where the logic of narrative – that is, the logic of historical and experiential temporality distilled into its textual narrative voice – has crumbled and fallen into uncanny repetition. This repetition gives way to a type of coda that resists the allure of the apocalyptic trope(s) characteristic of popular representations of the world "after humanity." Rather than telling a story where the other-than-human has

triumphed completely over the human subject – often conceived in the image of the enjungled cityscape as the tragic but necessary end to humanity's exploitation of nature – Sebald narrativizes a subject's desperate efforts to record the "last" moments of history (or at least humanity's late story) before the ground recedes from under, and all is lost. In this world, a narrator can scarcely make any lasting change upon the landscape: most of the action that transpires over the course of the tale is *past tense*, not merely in the sense that the past is being readily retold *as* past, but because it has already happened long before the narrator is able to respond to it in any significant way other than through his ambulatory reflections told, as it turns out, in the frame story of a hospital bed, as recalled in the opening pages of the text. Sebald characterizes this lateness with the mundane image of a broken gramophone:

No matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind are far more often than we suspect, since we all move, one after another, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency [...] Perhaps there is in this as yet unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication some kind of anticipation of the end, a venture into the void, a sort of disengagement, which, like a gramophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes, has less to do with the damage to the machine itself than with an irreparable defect in its program (pp. 187-88).

The "defect," in this case, appears to be the narrative subject's inability to recognize the asymmetrical shape of their position in relation to history. Such a narrator intimately knows the *effects* of ecological and historical devastation, but is incapable of identifying its deep-rooted *causes*, as well as its implications for the future of their project. Or perhaps it is the case that Sebald's narrator both conforms to the asymmetrical Romanticism of Morton's aesthetics, as well as eroding its edifice from the inside out. Such a view would serve "neither to soothe nor assuage" the pains caused by such a defect, but rather "make these (material and mental) things knowable" (Swales 2004, p. 28). Though it remains to be seen how helpful such a knowing would prove at the "end" of human history, or at the very least, the end of this side of humanity's ever-spinning gramophone record.

Nevertheless, Sebald's obsession with the repetitions of temporality, both wide-spread and personal, speak to his contrary account of historical teleology, or what literary historian John Beck (2004) refers to as "interpretative uncertainty." This method entails a wholesale challenge to the projects of Enlightenment rationality and industrial capitalism, wherein history is envisioned not in terms of the linear trajectory of the genres born of its influence – "the novel, biography, or autobiography" – but rather "a tidal temporal ingress and egress," where the so-called cultural collapse of the late-twentieth century is pictured not as the apocalyptic end of "linear history but a phase of decay that repeats and monstrously mirrors other such phases" (Beck 2004, p. 82). Sebald suggests subtle, micro-scales which may be mapped onto the more easily definable epochs of linear time. Beck refers to these micro-histories as "fractal forms," whose gestures "confirm the sinister spiral of decay and deterioration, whether we are considering individual lives, towns, empires, geographies, universes, theories of representation, time, and history" (p. 82). What is revealed in the study of these fractals, whose pattern is so carefully embedded into the sound and sight of repetition at the end of the endlessly-looping gramophone record, is the terminal fault of representation, the strain of disintegration at the heart of Sebald's ambient storytelling: all one can do is "walk



through and read the signs” of change, or perhaps, in a gesture of misguided autonomy, flip the record to play on its reverse side, though it remains to be seen whether the same malfunctions would persist there (Beck 2004, p. 86).

There is anxiety over this increased sense of perceptive ability, an epistemological shock wherein the narrator knows enough about his own position to understand how woefully inadequate his observations are at uncovering the “truth” of history. Resignation follows: all change has already transpired now, and one can do little but record its devastating effects. The “story,” if we can even call it as such, becomes a list of things to do after the end of time has already passed. Greg Bond (2004), writing about the ecological pessimism elsewhere in Sebald’s catalog, envisions this end as a melancholy of “barren emptiness and death, because humankind is just one further experiment undertaken by nature on its inexorable path of self-destruction” (p. 34). Bond takes this logic a step further, suggesting that as such an agent of destruction, nature does seek to obliterate humanity but, “using us as one of its agents, destroys itself” (p. 34). It is little wonder – in light of such a self-destructive vision of the natural world – that Sebald’s narrator writes of his “sense of estrangement [...] becoming more and more dreadful” with each passing reflection (Sebald 1998, p. 225). The only course of action appears to narrativize a journey through history in order to stave off one’s seemingly inevitable alienation from those very same locations and temporalities. Even in the case of the narrator’s own dreams, where the supposed continuity between visions of self and of landscape are laid out, both are revealed to be endlessly complicated through their labyrinthine interconnections. At one point, recounting a specific dream, the narrator reveals just how enmeshed these feelings of self and location are:

I was on Dunwich Heath once more in a dream, walking the endlessly winding paths which I was convinced had been created solely for me. Dead tired and ready to lie down anywhere, as dusk fell I gained a raised area where a little Chinese pavilion has been built, as in the middle of the yew maze at Somerleyton. And when I looked down from this vantage point I saw the labyrinth, the light sandy ground, the sharply dilated contours of hedges taller than a man and almost pitch-black now—a pattern simple in comparison with the tortuous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain (pp. 172-73).

In Sebald’s literary vision of the Suffolk coast, a shore on the ocean of the wider world, the struggle is not so much constructing a believable and compelling account of landscape, but rather distinguishing oneself, one’s dreams and personal history, from the social and environmental tides which constantly threaten (at least *appear*) to engulf the subject. We may therefore conceive such struggle as an *ambient* account of the post-Romantic narrator’s position in larger alienating super-structures of the Anthropocene, an attempt to render the narrative subjectivity as arising from, and threatening to disintegrate, the landscape purportedly rendered in the text. If we are to follow, then, Bond’s (2004) proclamation that nature merely uses the subject for the purposes of its own destruction, this makes such a task of separating oneself from that landscape more difficult, if not impossible. Ambiance here appears to consume the subject, swallowing the landscape of the Real into an aimless, purposeless disintegration of all sense and hope. Though the narrator feels that the world “had been created solely for [him],” he lacks the agency, when standing at its summit, to see the maze as a “site of projection,” ready for him to use to fill in the “gaps” in his own

conception of self (Ward 2004, p. 58). Such a “high vantage-point” as the one provided in the narrator’s dream of the Somerleyton maze encompasses the two extremes of personal self-reflection through an ambient view of the Anthropocene: to see the all-encompassing view from above, the “‘inhuman’ perspective where the observer is not part of the landscape,” and yet to see it as an uncanny dream-product, a revelation of one’s brain and therefore inalienable segment of the self (Ward 2004, p. 59). Attempting to envision a scene at distances both near and far can reveal, perhaps as Simon Ward suggests, the artificial and edificial natures of such projections, though it cannot at any point totally *remove* the human from an otherwise depopulated landscape (Ward 2004, p. 70). Even in such visions, where Sebald’s narrator is acknowledging his own post-Romantic estrangement from the world, rather than shaping it wholeheartedly as a product of genius, there is still, at its core, a *shaping of world*, the construction of an ambiance teetering between the interminable “defects” of the model and the desire to see a self who is embedded, in however alienated a fashion, within that world at its supposed “end.”

Conclusion: Art After Nature?

The textual, narrative archive of Sebald’s work, with its meticulous hoarding of place-names, stories, and photographs doesn’t just speak to each narrator’s desire to “escape the increasing emptiness” of life, but a drive to revisit and revise this history from the perspective of the authorial future. This position is the ultimate optimism – if we can even speak of such a thing here – of Sebald’s approach to history. This approach is a symptom of the desire to somehow “fix” the errors of history by ceaselessly textualizing the inner, psychological space of the self, alongside the external, geographical space of landscape. The inability to remedy disaster results, for Sebald’s narrator, in feelings of hopelessness and melancholy: that one has arrived on the scene too late to solve any crisis, and must instead merely record the tragedy which has already unfolded. Because this moment of crisis is not the end-point of history but merely the final sequence in a series of sequences to-be-repeated in the future, one perhaps already feels the listless exhaustion of a future narrator or historian, who approaches their world with the same kind of revelation, once again both too late to suture the wounds of the past, and too early to warn their audience of future cyclicity. Above all, the creative and optimistic thrust of art is thrown into question, cast through the melancholy mode of ecological collapse.

Sebald’s feeling of lateness and the premature is the clearest aspect of the asymmetrical Anthropocene we can discern in the novel, which engages at length with narrative estrangement from the world to-be-(re)created in art. The forms of destruction he witnesses are so great, that he is plagued by a melancholy of lateness, and the feeling that he cannot do much of anything to change the course of history. Such a view, I have argued, is “asymmetrical,” seeing this so-called “end” of history through the eyes of a post-Romantic subject whose despair does not cease with his own narration, but extends infinitely into the future, toward a cycle of repeating histories, and therefore repeating ends. Sebald’s narrative subject is so disconnected from the world he attempts to render in textual form, that this world breaks down into ever-repeating loops, replicating in his mind the patterns of ecological destruction witnessed in the observation of both recent and ancient catastrophes.

Is it possible to speak of the “end of history” and the Anthropocene in the same breath, as referents to a single or unified cause? Is the “end of art,” and the creative responses to the pluralism of modern and contemporary expression, the inevitable result of impending



ecological collapse? Art speaks to a constant engagement with world, but the question of what constitutes this “world” is always in question, and in this debate rests the major thrust of the interrogative, symbolic nature of creative expression. If everything has indeed “already happened,” as Sebald’s sense of the end of history insinuates, then how can the subject meaningfully connect with history at any given point? The lessons of Sebald’s novel do not need to conform to a total expression of the so-called end of history, in the vein of Fukuyama’s now-antiquated proclamations, nor must it even succumb to Danto’s semi-Hegelian declaration of the “end of art,” in which quasi-philosophical abstraction conquers all. The rise of a new period of history, and the terminus of modern history as we know it, provides the opportunity to begin a “genuine history” in which future history itself may be driven by more rational and well-rounded views of technological expansion, the use of natural resources, and the existential relevance of art itself are rendered as parts of a fragile totality (Marchenkov 2014, p. 235-236). History has not, after all, ended in the novel, it is merely turning over in a process that will mirror the current complications of our age.

Until humanity recognizes and remedies the fatalism at the core of this epochal turning, there is little hope for a future in which humans and other-than-humans might live in attunement. Sebald’s diagnosis of the defect of history entails a deficiency of reason and the absence of a historical teleology which fails to recognize the end of industrial progress. Rather than recognizing the rise of a new period of history, a period in which the notion of progress looks nothing like the present, this teleology prefers to await the day that industrial progress reaches its period of ultimate fulfilment. And so, the cycle continues, and this defect remains the crucial feature of its undoing. We may, however, read Sebald, in dialogue with Morton, more optimistically: the gramophone need not endlessly loop – other music may be chosen, each piece reaching its end, its album finally tucked away for the selection of the next. The asymmetric view arises when the spirit of history itself cannot see its own ending as final – it cannot envision the state in which another history might arise, so it endlessly loops its rehearsed ending for a more desirable outcome. Art after nature in the future must be taken as the prime instigator in the promotion of this teleological revision, and the ending and building of one period for another, or else this post-historical lens remains the only way in which the future will ever be imagined.

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