

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF “THE RINGS OF SATURN” AND “PATIENCE (AFTER SEBALD)”

UMA ANÁLISE COMPARATIVA DE “OS ANÉIS DE SATURNO” E “PATIENCE (AFTER SEBALD)”

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Abstract: This article presents a comparative analysis of W. G. Sebald’s book *The Rings of Saturn* (1998) and Grant Gee’s film *Patience (After Sebald)* [2012]. As Sabine Wilke (2012) points out, Sebald did not provide a genre designation for three of his prose works, which means that he did not consider them as novels. Mixing up fact and fiction, his stories blur the line between literature and history, and hence establish a new form of “literary historiography” (WOLFF, 2014, p. 50). This hybridity is also manifested in Gee’s production, and this work explores in what aspects the latter can be considered an essay film, through the observation of questions of authorship and spectatorial experience. It argues that the book and the film are both based on a very similar concept of identity, according to which the writer and/or filmmaker’s I is but a tissue of citations from other texts. Likewise, it analyzes Sebald’s process of spatialization of time through the work of memory, and how this process is reflected in Gee’s inherently geographical approach, which emphasizes place and the mapping of consciousness.

Key-words: Comparative literature; Intermedial studies; W. G. Sebald

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta uma análise comparativa de *Os anéis de Saturno* (1998), obra de W. G. Sebald, e do filme *Patience (After Sebald)* [2012], dirigido pelo britânico Grant Gee. Como Sabine Wilke (2012) sugere, Sebald não ofereceu nenhuma designação de gênero para três de suas obras de prosa, o que indica que ele não as enquadrava na categoria de romance. Misturando fato e ficção, suas histórias borram os limites entre literatura e história, e assim estabelecem uma nova forma de “historiografia literária” (WOLF, 2014, p. 50). Tal hibridismo é também manifesto na produção de Grant Gee, e este trabalho pretende explorar em quais aspectos seu filme pode ser considerado um filme-ensaio, através da análise de questões relativas à autoria e à experiência espectadorial. Propõe-se que tanto a obra literária quanto a cinematográfica baseiam-se em conceito similar de identidade, de acordo com o qual o eu é nada mais do que um tecido de citações de outros textos. Da mesma forma, analisa-se o processo, em Sebald, de espacialização do tempo pelo trabalho da memória, e como tal processo se reflete na abordagem intrinsecamente geográfica de Gee, que enfatiza espaço e o mapeamento da consciência.

Palavras-chave: Literatura comparada; Intermidialidade; W. G. Sebald

Introduction

Writing at the Limits of Literature: No Boxes and All Boxes at Once

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Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1998) is a masterpiece in several respects, and as such it provokes questions concerning the limits and possibilities of storytelling at our moment in history, at the same time resisting any easy categorization. As Sabine Wilke (2012) points out, by constructing his narrators in a way that they share key experiences with the author himself, Sebald makes no claim to writing entirely fictitious works. "Indeed, the fact that Sebald did not provide a genre designation for three of his prose works (...) suggests that he did not consider them as novels" (WILKE, 2012, p. 134). By bringing together a variety of genres and blurring the boundaries between them, Sebald makes obsolete the traditional divisions and also establishes the ground for new modes of prose writing. In Grant Gee's *Patience (After Sebald)* [UK, 2012], his English publisher Christopher MacLehose tells of an occasion when Sebald was asked in which category he would like his book to be in, to which he replied with no hesitation: "I want all of them." As MacLehose remarks, that turned out to be a problem because, for logistical and commercial reasons, a book is only allowed three categories. In the end, he says, they had to be selected almost randomly, "but what Max was saying", he summarizes, was: "Don't put me in a box. I want to be in all the boxes" (GEE, 2012).

W. G. Sebald has become worldly renowned after the publication – and subsequent translation to English – of prose works such as *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), *Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen* (1992), and *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995)². In *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, Mark McCulloh argues that Sebald's works "read like intricately digressive travelogues grounded in impressionistic memories and associations" (2003, p. xv). His prose orbits around the themes of memory – the loss of individual and collective memory –, the inevitability of destruction, and the trauma of the Second World War. His third prose work, *The Rings of Saturn*, is characterized by McCulloh as "even more exotic and difficult to describe than the other two, since it contains, in its ten chapters, so many multifarious narrative threads, historical links, and imaginative associations" (2003, p. xvii). Following its German original title, there is a subtitle: *Eine englische Wallfahrt*, or *An English Pilgrimage*. The text follows the footsteps of its first-person nameless narrator in a walking tour of the English region of Suffolk, after having completed a long stint of work, in the hope of dispelling, as he says, the emptiness that takes hold of him in occasions as such. His hope was realized up to a point, as he expresses a rare feeling of freedom. This feeling, however, was soon juxtaposed with a contradictory one, that ended up by putting him – in his own words – in "a state of almost total immobility":

² Published in English as *Vertigo* (1999), *The Emigrants* (1996), and *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), respectively.

At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. (SEBALD, 1999, p.13)

The pages that follow dive into a physical as well as a mental walk through desolate landscapes, the ruins of architectural and natural constructions, and the fragments of a past dispersed in overlapping layers over the ground. Mixing up fact and fiction, the stories and individuals with which the narrator comes across blur the line that separates literature and history. In *W. G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics* (2014), Lynn Wolff analyses how Sebald “reconstructs” history and what implications this has for the literary discourse in relation to historiography, arguing that he “fuses the two qualitatively different discourses of literature and history to reveal an interdiscursive form of literature” (p. 49). As she explains, Sebald devises a method that translates a new form of “literary historiography”:

[A] rewriting of history that incorporates certain heretofore unconsidered or underestimated sources, that offers new perspectives on history and storytelling (or story-making), and that privileges the literary discourse as a means of approaching, translating, and ultimately representing experiences, emotions, and events. (WOLFF, 2014, p.50)

The hybridism of his works is also explicit in his peculiar use of images interspersed with the verbal text, which, due to their foggy and unfocused character, work along with the narrative to communicate a sense of disorientation and a dream-like atmosphere. For David Kleinberg-Levin (2013), his stories and photographs resist the will to knowledge as a form of power insofar as they are always frustrating certainty and even the very possibility of knowledge. The images emerge as ghostly apparitions: “Images in which whatever comes into the light of appearance appears only in the process of disappearing” (KLEINBERG-LEVIN, 2013, p. 108). Reflecting the general tone of the narrative – from the very cadence of the sentences up to the dominant motifs – they “invariably show themselves in their submission to the phenomenological structure of eternal mourning” (2013, p. 108).

Grant Gee’s 2012 film *Patience (After Sebald)* makes use of Sebald’s treatment of photograph to produce a similar atmosphere, shooting most of the time in grainy black-and-white, although eventually superposing small frames of color film over the broader monochromatic image. In addition to the similarities between Gee’s production and Sebald’s book in the approach of image, *Patience* is also inherently Sebaldian in that it cannot be easily

categorized into a specific genre. In a review for *The New York Times*³, A. O. Scott (2012) says that *Patience* combines a number of genres, being at the same time “a landscape film, an essay film, a celebrity biography full of testimony from friends and colleagues and also a hauntingly original piece of literary criticism” (SCOTT, 2012). Throughout the reviews and articles written about Gee’s documentary, the label *essay film* is largely employed as an attempt to assign it to a definite category. However, the very origin and nature of this form is in itself hybrid, crossing all boundaries and resting “somewhere in between fiction and non-fiction” (RASCAROLI, 2008, p. 24). If a category is required, though, I believe *Patience* can be understood as an example of essay film, for it assembles the essential elements that characterize this highly experimental and fluid form⁴, such as subjectivity and reflectivity, as we are going to see more attentively in the following section.

1 *Patience (After Sebald)* as an essay film: Authorship and the spectatorial experience

In an interview for the BOMB Magazine from 2012⁵, Grant Gee explains that the process of filmmaking, for him, consists in “the manipulation, the direction of consciousness along certain pathways over a period of time.” Taking Tarkovsky’s idea of sculpting in time, he argues that he tends to think very fundamentally about how long a certain event – in this case, the film – is going to last, “and about the way that consciousness will move during that period of time.” Following Katie Mitchell (GEE, 2012) in her comparison of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and Sebald’s works, Gee affirms that he is also mainly interested in the depiction of consciousness, “how you bring the most microscopic electrical connections within your brain and externalize them into an art form.” (GEE, 2012, interview for the BOMB Magazine). His approach is a very intimate one, in the most literal sense as well, since he tends to do most of the work by himself, from the shooting to the editing processes. The question of the authorial presence, therefore, is one of great concern, even when he is working on a more biographical project, such as *Patience*: in these cases, it is still his authorial voice that predominates as his “own take on another’s consciousness.” (GEE, 2012, interview for the BOMB Magazine).

In “The essay film: Problems, definitions, textual commitments” (2008), Rascaroli schematizes the basic aspects that constitute an essay film, travelling from the origins of the

³ Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/09/movies/patience-after-sebald-a-documentary.html? r=0>. Accessed in: 25 February 2016.

⁴ The use of the term *genre* is being deliberately avoided here, as Laura Rascaroli warns against “the temptation of overtheorizing the form or, worse, crystallizing it into a genre” (2008, p. 38).

⁵ Available at: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6855/>. Accessed in: 02 March 2016.

literary essay – as far back as Cicero and Seneca – to the emergence of this form in film theory and film practice. As the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems, an essay film can be distinguished from fiction and documentary in that it “does not propose itself as anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial voice” (2008, p. 35). This voice is not concerned with the presentation of a factual report, but instead it offers “an in-depth, personal, and thought-provoking reflection” (2008, p. 35). In this sense, heresy and openness are among the essay film’s key markers, as well as experimentation and idiosyncrasy. Another essential aspect of this form is the emphasis on the spectatorial experience. Instead of interpellating the spectator as a collective audience, it creates a spectatorial position in the singular, communicating directly with an individual interlocutor, and summoning her active intellectual and emotional engagement. As the author suggests:

The meaning of the film is constructed via this dialogue, in which the spectator has an important part to play; meanings are presented by the speaking subject as a subjective, personal meditation, rather than as objective truth. It is this subjective move, this speaking in the first person that mobilizes the subjectivity of the spectator. (RASCAROLI, 2008, p.37)

Grant Gee’s film is a multi-layered footage that was first conceived as an attempt at reenacting Sebald’s pilgrimage. The viewer is taken on a walk with the filmmaker after the author’s footsteps, while a series of artists, intellectuals, and people closely related to the German-born writer present their testimonies in the “talking head” format. Along with the voice-over, there are overlapping layers of image, from the predominant black-and-white shootings – that reflect the subjective reminiscences of Sebald’s and Gee’s melancholy spirit – to superposing small frames of color film, which mostly account for Gee’s actual footsteps along the journey.

Gee’s authorial presence is manifested through his intriguing composition of images and its combination with the people’s testimonies and Jonathan Pryce’s narration, reading passages from the book. When talking about the landscape of Suffolk, Katie Mitchell describes it in a way that can also be used to characterize his ghostly shootings: “[T]his landscape that looks really sort of innocent and normal, and yet you can’t move through it without it somehow rejecting you” (GEE, 2012). In a way, it is possible to say that Gee’s images trap the viewer into a confrontation with the otherness. By breaking any possibility of identity, the strangeness of his images and their disturbing effect step out of the limits of the known and summon the spectator to do the same, stepping out of herself and what she knows for granted to engage in an exploration that has no established rules and provides no direction or final meaning. You are walking but you do not know where you are going, and in fact you sense that you are going nowhere, but there is always

this underlying feeling that something is being approached, something that is there and is not there. As Kleinberg-Levin (2013, p. 108) suggests about Sebald's photographs, Gee's images also frustrate certainty and resist the will to knowledge as a form of power. The viewer is gradually pushed deeper and deeper into a maze, and as the solid references melt down in the course of this movement, the spectator is at some point taken aback by a strong feeling of disorientation. Toward the end of the movie, Lise Patt gives an account that, in a way, translates this sensation, and she tells of this theory she once heard that the gods, in their playful glee, "put us down in the wrong place, and we spend our entire life trying, not to find the place where we are supposed to be, but to find who we are supposed to be." (GEE, 2012). That is also the point where the spectator is invited to engage in a dialogical relationship with the film (and the filmmaker). Since the questions are in constant proliferation and no clear-cut answers are offered, the viewer must stand up and take an active part in the process of meaning construction.

As for the authorial presence in the essay film, Rascaroli affirms that "the cinematic essayist creates an enunciator who is very close to the real, extra-textual author" (2008, p. 35). The origins of the essay film can be traced back to *cinéma vérité's* experiments, alongside with the first-person and autobiographical fiction cinema of the Parisian Nouvelle Vague of the late 1950s and 1960s, "with its theorization of the personal 'cinema of authors'" (2008, p. 30). The inscription of the authorial figure, therefore, constitutes a key feature of the essay film, and it can be actualized in a number of ways, more or less direct (for instance, by making the filmmaker's body visible and his/her voice heard, or through camera movements, the use of a narrator, among others).

In an interview from 2001 for the Bookworm⁶, Sebald acknowledges the influence of Thomas Bernhard's prose on his works, arguing that Bernhard invented a "kind of periscopic form of narrative" (SEBALD, 2001, interview for the Bookworm) in which he only tells you what he heard from others. For Sebald, the appeal of this new form resides in the fact that it is no longer possible to conceive of an omniscient narrator, who is constantly working "behind the scenes." In most of his prose works – and especially in *The Rings of Saturn* –, he presents a first person narrator who is very close to the author himself, and the narrative arises from his subjective interactions with other people and the landscape within a process that gradually subsides his own personal voice, which then incorporates – and even becomes – the voice of the other. From that overall panorama, made up of real places and people as well as fictitious ones, emerges a complex cosmology, as Iain Sinclair (GEE, 2012) puts it when comparing him to

⁶ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSFcTWIg-Pg>. Accessed in: 25 February 2016.

William Blake. It is possible to say, in a way, that Sebald is engaged in a larger mechanism of “making speak”: making the landscape, the hidden and the forgotten, and nature as a whole leave their fatal muteness and communicate through language. The erasing of the narrator as a subject is so intense that it allows for the emergence of what Nabokov called “the dreamlife of debris.” As Robert Macfarlane explains in *Patience*, it happens in a way that

When you concentrate on a material object, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into its surface (...) and that seems to happen again and again in Sebald, that what begins as a particular object – that is seen in all its specificity and radiance – slowly shimmers, becomes a kind of quicksand, sucks the gaze of the viewer (...) and we find ourselves at Bergen-Belsen or in the Congo. (GEE, 2012)

In a similar way, Gee also renounces an explicit subjective voice, manifesting his authorial presence through the voices of others, the montage, camera movements, and the composition of overlapping layers of image. He seems to be more concerned, therefore, in communicating through a “making speak” – and here the landscape plays an essential role, as it does in Sebald. Like the writer, he is interested in the construction of a cosmology – or, to be more specific, a constellation. From a very space-oriented perspective, he thinks about the images and thoughts and how to arrange them in the film, as he explains in his interview for the BOMB Magazine⁷:

Thinking about the constellations of the stars, they are only perceived in this form from a certain perspective. But then, you can rotate them and get another perspective and the form of the thing can change. There’s something in that idea of trying to assemble and rotate. (GEE, 2012)

In a sense, it is as if he presented the elements in certain arrangements, going up to a point and then retreating in order to give them voice(s), hence allowing for an openness of signification that makes possible the emergence of hidden connections, buried similarities. This laying out of a system of associations and encyclopedic links is at the core of Sebald’s narrative, and it is reflected in Gee’s production insofar as he gathers this vastness of fragmented elements and through his very arrangement of them, he establishes a horizontal and intertwined chain of meanings. Bianca Theisen (2006) suggests that Sebald’s strange coincidences and correspondences “are inspired by a baroque embrace of vast networks of hidden signification, and [Thomas] Browne’s belief in recurring patterns in particular” (THEISEN, 2006, p. 569). The “ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency” (SEBALD, 1999, p. 194) and the recurrence of similar – or identical – minds, as Theisen argues, are infused by the author with

⁷ Available at: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6855/>. Accessed in: 02 March 2016.

the assumption that “the writer’s *I* is but a tissue of citations from other texts, or, as Roland Barthes specifies in *S/Z*, from lost codes.” (2006, p. 590). In *The Rings of Saturn*, the presence of the narrator is so porous, so permeable to the landscapes, stories, and people he encounters along the way, that his boundaries become extremely fluid, and in certain moments it is quite difficult to determine with certainty to whom that voice in the text belongs.

This notion of identity – and hence of the author – as a complex web of citations is heavily emphasized in *Patience*, and in his interview for BOMB Magazine, Gee uses the expression “palimpsest” to describe his perception and approach of the filmic material. He claims that he conceives of elements of film as separate instruments which play at the same time (GEE, 2012, interview for the BOMB Magazine). The talking heads, the archive footage, his own shootings, the soundtrack, the superposed images are all assembled and treated as a multi-layered – and relatively fragmented – unity. There are several lines of meaning, and hence several temporalities, working at the same time. To begin with, there is Gee’s actual walking journey after Sebald’s footsteps (depicted through the smaller frames of color film that now and then are superimposed over the broader frame). Then there is his more subjective – and highly aesthetic – rambling (portrayed in the black-and-white landscape shootings that pervade most of the movie). The photographs and external shots are occasionally interspersed with images of the book pages, which are then accompanied by Jonathan Pryce’s narration. Finally, there are the talking heads – who, most of the time, are manifested only through the voice-over –; and amidst this labyrinthic assembling emerges, in the crossroads of possible meanings, a multi-faceted authorial presence. Trying to footsteps Sebald’s earlier footsteps and “turn his own method back upon him” (GEE, 2012), to borrow Macfarlane’s expression, Grant Gee succeeds, up to a point, in reconstructing the text’s somnambulistic state and ever greater astonishment – and horror:

Lost in the thoughts that went round in my head incessantly, and numbed by this crazed flowering, I stuck to the sandy path until to my astonishment, not to say horror, I found myself back again at the same tangled thicket from which I had emerged about an hour before, or, as it now seemed to me, in some distant past. (SEBALD, 1999, p.179)

2 Amidst the debris of memory: The spatialization of time

In the epigraph of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald quotes the following encyclopedic entry:

The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet’s equator. In all likelihood these are

fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect. (Roche limit) *Brockhaus Encyclopaedia*

As Lynn Wolff reminds us, Sebald describes the central structural conceit of his book as “the concentric circles that move outwards, the outer circles always determining the inner ones” (2014, p. 156). The above mentioned epigraph also sheds some light on this idea, both on a structural level and on the level of textual interpretation. Circling around the melancholy of memory loss, *The Rings of Saturn* depicts this movement of orbiting around a past that exerts an immense gravitational pull, but when one gets too close, the destruction is inevitable and all that is left are the fragments of history and the dispersed ruins of memory. Saturn, in this sense, is the Father of Death, and it incarnates the “destructive aspect of time”⁸ (ROOB, 2015, p. 171). The architecture of memory, in fact, is laid out in an inherently spatial perspective. The narrator walks through the landscapes and stories as if walking through a series of galleries, all of which coexist and are situated on the same horizontal level. The rejection of chronological time is heavily felt, and is actually presented, in a sense, as the only possible approach if one intends to dive deeper into the water tables of time and allow for the emergence of its intersections, buried correspondences. It is on this underground stratum, where time turns into space and its arrow succumbs to stagnation, that the living and the dead can appear in the same field of vision. As Wolff suggests in relation to *Austerlitz*, this notion of uncertain temporal borders results in the suspicion that “there is no time at all, which would in turn mean that the living and the dead co-exist in the same space” (WOLFF, 2014, p. 157).

Likewise, memory functions as a mechanism that forsakes the fundamental principles of the temporal experience, breaking at once with its sequentiality, unidirectionality, and irreversibility. Its elements, now withdrawn from the chronological flux, pile up simultaneously over the same ground. The landscapes across which the narrator wanders and the remnants he encounters along the journey constitute, in reality, the scenery and debris of memory itself. Inside and outside merge into a continuum, and the fragments on the horizon represent all that is left from a past now only accessible in its destruction:

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as this surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable. (SEBALD, 1999, p.185)

⁸ Translated to English by the author.

Just as Walter Benjamin, Sebald seems to be searching for means of spatializing the world, and in this process memory becomes his major instrument. The work of memory – or reading oneself backwards –, as Susan Sontag (1981) proposes in relation to the saturnine philosopher, engenders a temporal collapse: “Memory, the staging of the past, turns the flow of events into tableaux. Benjamin is not trying to recover his past but to understand it: to condense it into spatial forms, its premonitory structures.” (SONTAG, 1981, p. 115-6). For something to be understood, therefore, it is fundamental to understand its topography, to know how to chart it. In Sebald, likewise, it is possible to identify a similar struggle towards the mapping of history, memory, and in a broader perspective, time itself. Past and future are detached from their connotations of before and after, and the present moment is dispossessed of the primacy of experience, since the three of them now coexist side by side.

In a half intuitive, half conscious manner, as he admits, Grant Gee carries this preoccupation at the heart of his creative process. According to Taien Ng-Chan (2015), *Patience* “can be considered a deep map, one that demonstrates a necessary synthesis of story map and grid map, or the narrative and the functionalistic, by using both as frameworks for a cinematic exploration” (2015, p. 555). This geographical approach can be perceived from the very beginning, since the first image that we see is a Google Map with placemarkers and lines stretching out all over the world. The first interviewee, furthermore, is Barbara Hui, writer and creator of the Litmap project, who decided to plot each of the geographic places present in Sebald’s book using the Google Maps Application Program Interface (API) tool. As Ng-Chan remarks, Hui acknowledges Sebald’s spatialized view of history that sees the local as globally defined, and then translates it graphically “through the use of connecting lines that join distant countries to the places of Sebald and Gee’s walking tour” (Ng-CHAN, 2015, p. 559). For Ng-Chan, *Patience* can be thought “as a kind of itinerary map that guides one through a personal and emotional topography, both Sebald’s and Gee’s” (2015, p. 566). She argues that it is an example of how cinema can function as a powerful tool for deep mapping, “as it can both record and recount the narratives, emotions, memories and histories, as well as the locations and geographies that are associated with a place” (2015, p. 566).

It is interesting to note how the use of such tools develops along the movie. In the first instance, there is a quite objective approach, with Hui’s voice-over explaining how she mapped all the locations, while the image shows a Google Map filled with placemarkers and lines. Then, on another occasion, as Hui tries to zoom in to locate a shop, she is frustrated by the fact that the place could not be found. Toward the middle of the film, the Google Map’s placemarkers and

lines appear again, now in the context of a discussion about Thomas Browne’s quincunx and the reading of one of the book’s most bewildering scenes, in which the narrator finds himself lost in a maze. This time, instead of objectively referring to a real location, the placemarkers gradually merge with an image of Browne’s quincunx, and then even that dissolves and all that remains are random placemarkers superposed over the shooting of a bleak seaside area. Accompanying the rhythm of the film, their use serves for illustrating the deepening process of loss in which both the movie and the viewer are moving. Quoting Macfarlane, Ng-Chan explains that such grid maps can be very powerful tools, but their virtue is also their danger: “they reduce the world only to data” and “record space independent of being” (Ng-CHAN, 2015, p. 560). In the last scene described, their power of referentiality is completely dissolved as the solid geographic locations cease to be a source of orientation. Following the narrator’s immersion into a rip that suddenly opens up – “when you’re wandering alone and then things sort of rip or tear, and you see things as they actually are” (GEE, 2012) –, the placemarkers and lines gradually lose all meaning and dive along in this reality in which there is no possibility of one finding a path.

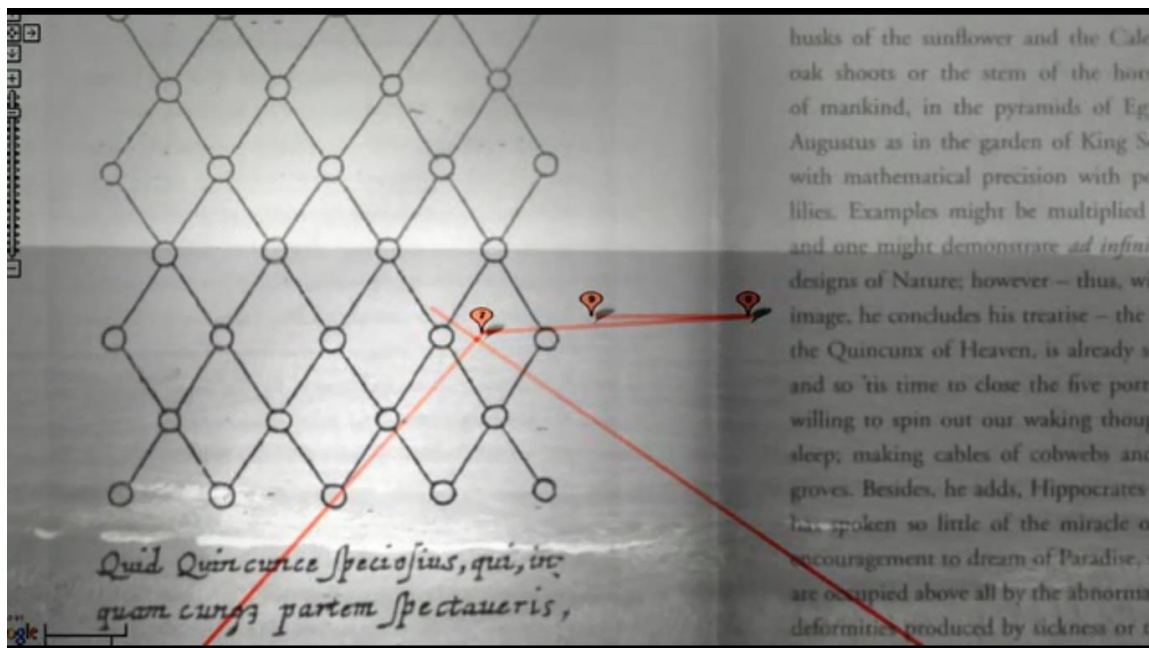


Figure 1: Google Map’s placemarkers and Browne’s quincunx

Finally, it is also noteworthy the way by which Gee translates into filmic language Sebald’s particular relation to place. In his interview for the Bookworm (2001), the writer remarks that, in order to accomplish something like Bernhard’s periscopic narrative, one needs to look, to spend “great amounts of time in actually exposing oneself to places that no one else goes to”

(SEBALD, 2001, interview for the Bookworm). In these desolate landscapes, in a sense deprived of a deeper human mapping that would condition their perception within specific referentials, the narrator almost literally listens to the objects, remnants, natural elements. He perceives the space not as a blank, but as something that carries and manifests the ruins of all the stories that happened there, as ghosts simultaneously treading the same ground. In *Patience*, Gee transposes such a perception through the use of overlapping layers of image: for instance, when artist Tacita Dean is telling about the various Sebaldian coincidences that have again and again linked her to a small town in the Netherlands, and her father's story of a cloth map he found after an airplane crash, the filmmaker slowly superimposes an archive footage from the Second World War over the image of a bleak landscape, probably related to the place mentioned by Dean. This happens constantly along the film, and succeeds in translating Sebald's perception of space as a gathering of overlapping fragments of individual and collective stories.



Figure 2: Superposition of an archive footage over a landscape photograph

Last minute commentary:

A patient pilgrimage towards the gaining of one's soul

Approaching the end of the film, Lise Patt raises a question: “What are we trying to accomplish by doing this?” (GEE, 2012). Indeed, while navigating through Sebald's pages or Gee's film, one has a sense of being led nowhere. Even worse, one feels to be getting more and more lost as time goes by. As Katie Mitchell says at one point, it is as if Sebald had no skin, so

that when he falls in the rips that open up and take him into another reality, he cannot sober up and walk away. A similar thing seems to happen to the reader: plunging deeper into the maze, when one tries to return some pages to understand what is going on, it oddly seems that the narrative has changed, so one keeps moving back and forth, but the threads just become more volatile.

In an article from 2008, Anthony Rudd remarks that patience – like other apparently passive virtues – is not very highly regarded nowadays. One of the reasons that he suggests for that has to do with “the culture of a technocratic-consumer society in which the demand for instant gratification is systematically promoted” (RUDD, 2008, p. 494). However, even today its importance has not diminished, since no task that demands a certain amount of time and concentration can be accomplished without some draughts of patience.

In three of his *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* (1990), Soren Kierkegaard engages in an exploration of patience as a means for gaining one’s soul. As he explains, the soul is in contradiction and is self-contradiction: it is the contradiction of the temporal and the eternal, and as such it can be gained and possessed at the same time. What is more, “it can be possessed only in such a way that it is gained and gained in such a way that it is possessed” (KIERKEGAARD, 1990, p. 163). In overall terms, to gain one’s soul in patience means accepting transience, means liberating from all attachments created by desire and anxiety, and means diving into a space of unlimited silence. Patience is the instrument as well as the end: it is the means to achieve it and the end achieved.

A person does not first gain his soul and then have the need for patience to preserve it, but he gains it in no other way than by preserving it, and therefore patience is the first and patience is the last, precisely because patience is just as active [*handlende*] as it is passive [*lidende*] and just as passive as it is active. (KIERKEGAARD, 1990, p. 187)

Both in *The Rings of Saturn* and in *Patience (After Sebald)*, the narrator and the filmmaker engage in a slumbering walk towards nowhere. In fact, they actually seem to intend to get lost: lost from the known, lost from identity, lost from themselves. As Kleinberg-Levin suggests:

The telling of stories takes time; but Sebald’s stories also give time – time lost and even time to come – to those willing to give the stories their time. Perhaps it is this untimely timelessness, this defiance of time’s urgency, and indeed of time’s obliteration of pastness, weaving a languorous, contemplative mood in a world of frenetic movement, feverish haste and vertiginous speeds, that makes his prose so compelling, so spellbinding. (KLEINBERG-LEVIN, 2013, p.111)

As he explicitly states, Sebald is attempting to dismantle time's incessant advancement, its knife and the constant stabbing that leaves only destruction behind. In this sense, Sebald's narrator expects nothing, has no direction, and refuses to participate in a teleological flow. As previously mentioned, he depicts a process of gradual disappearing as a subjectivity. It would not be extreme to say that, in some moments, he becomes no more than a gaze. And it is exactly this movement that allows him the access into other realities, deeper levels of understanding, and the merging with people and objects encountered along the way.

Sebald and Gee's greatest achievement, therefore, is to achieve nothing. They undertake a patient contemplation. Patience is both their means and their goal, and through this sort of dissolution, they engage in something very close to a pilgrimage: it is not a pilgrimage towards a final destination, nor does it possess an itinerary, but as one of the interviewees mention along the film, it is a pilgrimage in its most original sense of healing. Through an interior silencing mainly manifested in a "making speak" – making the hidden, the forgotten, the mute communicate through language –, I believe both Sebald and Gee participate in a movement very similar to Kierkegaard's gaining of the soul in patience. If anything is ever gained, however, one cannot say, but as the moon of Saturn continued as dust after the destruction, so something went on in its journey when leaving the body in the end of the book, and similarly, in the film, the fog on the road slowly revealed the traces of a presence one thought lost forever.



Figure 3

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