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journals.sagepub.com/home/sls**Panu Minkkinen** *University of Helsinki, Finland*

Abstract

In fieldwork, the collection of qualitative empirical data is almost exclusively carried out on foot. When we study a ‘field’, it also suggests a terrain or an environment that we are meant to investigate. Yet the actual process of investigating something ‘on foot’, of *walking*, is seldom reflected on in any detail. The aim of this essay is to consider what this notion of investigating a field ‘on foot’ might mean for socio-legal scholarship. It focuses on the ways in which author WG Sebald’s walks in the Suffolk landscape, as portrayed in his novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), provide sensory stimuli for his meditations on themes such as the passing of time and identity. Sebald’s notion of walking is traced to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ idea of *bricolage* as a form of ‘patchwork’ knowledge formation, but the hybridity of Sebald’s resulting ‘fieldnotes’ suggest a closer affiliation with Walter Benjamin’s notion of *constellation*.

Keywords

Ethnography, literature, walking, Walter Benjamin, WG Sebald

Walking

When we conduct fieldwork, we collect qualitative data almost always on foot. We study a ‘field’ or, as James Clifford defines it, a ‘historically specific set of distances, boundaries, and modes of travel’ (Clifford, 1990: 64; also Van Maanen, 2011) which suggests the existence of a terrain or an environment that we are meant to look into in more detail. Yet the actual process of investigating ‘on foot’, of *walking*, is seldom reflected on in any detail. Whatever fieldnotes we may come up with tend to focus more on those with whom the walk may have been conducted or the destination that we set out to reach. The

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rhythmic experience of walking itself or how the fleeting sensory stimuli may affect our understanding of what is being investigated are hardly touched upon. The aim of this essay is to consider what this notion of investigating a field ‘on foot’ might mean for socio-legal scholarship mainly through a reading of WG Sebald’s novel *The Rings of Saturn*, first published in German in 1995 (Sebald, 1998).

Historically speaking, the beginnings of walking as a method can be traced to two points of origin that both relate to the study of urban environments: Walter Benjamin’s streetwalking *flâneur* as the keen observer of modern city culture (Benjamin, 2003b; also Tester, 1994), and Guy Debord’s ‘psycho-geographic’ radicalisation of urban exploration as the *dérive* (Debord, 2006a, 2006b; also Sadler, 1998). Indeed, walking would seem to be exceptionally suited for the observation and study of culturally dense spaces like cities and urban centres (e.g. Brown and Shortell, 2016; Shortell and Brown, 2016). Walking namely emulates the everyday practice with which we acquaint ourselves with new or unfamiliar surroundings (Pinder, 2001). The cultural density of the modern city that was already noted by the classics of urban sociology like Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1950; also DeFazio, 2011; Diaconu et al., 2011; historically Cowan and Steward, 2007) results in a certain sensory overload that requires unpacking making meditative walking particularly well suited to the task (Degen and Rose, 2012; Low, 2015; Middleton, 2010; Pink, 2009). In addition to conventional fieldnotes, walking also enables observations that are made in a variety of other ways such as, for example, collecting random objects discovered along the way (da Cunha, 2020), taking photographs (Tartia, 2018) or flash interviews (Goldstein, 2016: 131–138).

More recently, the idea of walking as a method has been developed further in particular by geographers (e.g. Barnes, 2019) and ethnographers (e.g. Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), and usually with an emphasis on *sensory walks* that can be conducted in a variety of spatial environments (e.g. Middleton, 2020; Richardson, 2015). In the ethnographic tradition, fieldnotes were usually considered as a way with which the ethnographer could document a reality that was expected to exist externally in relation to her. But today we would probably consider such a sharp distinction between the external and the internal – or between the impersonal ‘objective’ and the personal ‘subjective’ – as unfounded and would instead work through the observations made from an in-between position that is more in line with what a *reflexive ethnography* (Aunger, 2004) can offer. As artefacts, fieldnotes namely also enable self-expressive and personal accounts of the ethnographer’s own sensory experiences of the environments in which she is embedded. Photographs illustrate the point well. In Peter Metelerkamp’s words, photographs are ‘both useful as denotative records, and responsive to what [photographer] Bill Brandt famously called “atmosphere” – that is to say the subjectively experienced qualities of our being in space’ (Metelerkamp, 2013: 522). The same duality applies to all data collected from the field.

The liminal space between the external and the internal has, of course, always been part and parcel of the epistemologies that socio-legal scholarship is rooted in. The non-positivistic ‘interpretive’ human sciences (Geertz, 1973; Martin, 1999) are premised on the assumption that the socio-legal scholar is inevitably embedded in a lifeworld that she shares with the social actors that she studies. By sharing a lifeworld and its meanings, she can achieve an accurate enough understanding of how that lifeworld unfolds by simply

observing and reflecting on how she and others dwell in it. Walking reflects life in this shared world well.

So what would walking mean more specifically for socio-legal scholarship? Olivia Barr has published a beautiful study on a mural called '40,000 Years' that runs down a brick wall on Lawson Street in Redfern, Sydney. Drawing on, among others, Tim Ingold (Ingold, 2011), Barr notes how:

it is only through embodied practice, that is by moving through places and accounting for their sensory experience, that we can access the different levels of meaning for each place.

This is why I walk past a mural and try to access different levels of meaning in the material layers of bricks covered in paint. (Barr, 2019: 9; also Barr, 2016, 2017)

In other words, Barr weaves the sensory experience of her own movement within the studied field into its analysis. This conscious awareness of walking – and, occasionally, of interrupting the rhythm by pausing even when there might be reason to continue onward – enables Barr to better reflect on the complex and pluralistic nature of intermingling varieties of law that are present in the rich texture of the mural and that Barr refers to as a 'kaleidoscope', and on the equally complex legal characteristics of the Aboriginal notion of *Country* more generally. Barr's kaleidoscopic pluralism is intended to challenge the dominant Western understanding of law that she sees as being overly 'monochromatic' suggesting the type of cartographic imagery where territorialist spaces are clearly separated from one another and colour coded. Each territorialist space is assumed to host a particular kind of legal system with, perhaps, minor pluralist variations. Investigating a site from a kaleidoscopic starting point questions the assertive claim of mainstream legal studies that these monolithic entities would somehow be the privileged place of law:

Attempting to notice and then navigate a kaleidoscope landscape expands the color spectrum and draws attention to the multiplicity of legal types or forms in all their magnificently diverse colors, and the complex bursts of combined color when they are overlaid. It also offers a way of seeing how multiple layers of different types of law – such as local regulations, federal mandates, and Aboriginal laws of *Country* for example – relentlessly interact to create, and recreate, unique legal places both above and below ground. (Barr, 2019: 10–11 [reference deleted])

Finding access to the complexities and possibly even incompatibilities inherent in a given field is, I believe, the basic advantage of exploring it through an 'embodied practice' of walking, as Barr puts it, in comparison to focusing on the environment to such an extent that the physicality of walking is bracketed out into a virtual or assumed movement that never really manages to find its way into the observations made.

Words associated with walking like 'sensory experience' and 'embodied practice' (see also Monaghan, 2004) will, of course, immediately ring the alarm bells of our epistemological gatekeepers who understand their objective to be 'disciplining the disciplines', that is, to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge takes place within certain acceptable bounds. So while this essay discusses walking, it is, perhaps, more about

these implied epistemological uncertainties. In the first part, I present some preliminary self-reflexive remarks on the wavering contexts that can be said to inform the interpretive disciplines relevant for contemporary socio-legal scholarship. In the second part, I discuss the ways in which Sebald frames his walks in the Suffolk coastal landscape in *The Rings of Saturn* so as to provide sensory stimuli for his meditations on themes such as the passing of time and identity, themes that are not directly linked to his 'field'. The walk, then, provides access to more associative interpretations of what one is studying than adhering to the conventions of social scientific inquiry would usually allow.¹ Sebald's notion of walking is then traced to ethnography, and more specifically, following Sebald's own lead, to Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of *bricolage* as a form of 'patch-work' knowledge formation. In the two final parts of the essay, I, however, suggest that the hybridity of Sebald's resulting 'fieldnotes' that bring together prose fiction, travelogue, diary entries, images, and so on, indicate a closer affiliation with Walter Benjamin's notion of *constellation*, an approach that Benjamin intended as an alternative method of history and that legal anthropologists like Michael Taussig have since developed further.²

Knowledge Versus Truth

Most of us involved in disciplines that I've elsewhere called the 'human sciences' (Minkinen, 2017) – or the 'SSH disciplines' in more contemporary Euro-babble (e.g. Fleck et al., 2018) – have in one way or another resigned to some variation of post-metaphysics. The work that we do does not address 'truth' in any profound sense of the word even if we may insist that it can uncover 'facts' or produce 'knowledge'. Indeed, calling it 'work' already says as much. Perhaps this reflects the kind of defeatism typical of modernism that William Connolly called the 'primacy of epistemology' (Connolly, 1995: 1–40). We would probably be more comfortable arguing that the looming climate crisis is a 'fact' rather than a 'truth' even if the cataclysmic end-result is the same in both cases. It seems that in a secularised postmetaphysical world, only art and literature remain the privileged domains of truth.

But occasionally we may come across something that crosses over and blurs the supposedly established demarcation lines that separate science from art, factual knowledge from truth. So momentarily, even as 'mere' scholars, we may speak about truth without feeling too embarrassed about it. As a young socio-legal postgraduate, I remember how many of my professors and mentors regarded *Asylums*, Erving Goffman's collection of essays, as such a cross-over phenomenon (Goffman, 1961; for a recent appraisal, see Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015). 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions', the opening essay of the book, identified a set of characteristics that were distinctive of all total institutions, and, *mutatis mutandis*, we became aware of totalising characteristics in institutions like schools that we were not accustomed to measuring with the same yardsticks as, say, mental hospitals or prisons. These were, perhaps, Goffman's factual merits.

But the book achieved its unusual status in other ways that went above and beyond its mere factual merits. First, Goffman's style of writing was – at least in the Finnish edition that I was acquainted with³ – elegant and light, and in stark contrast to the book's sombre

topic. His heartfelt empathy for the people whose lives he was writing about would redefine, if not the vocabulary, then at least the tone with which prisoners, mental patients and other institutionally incarcerated individuals, the 'inmates' of Goffman's subtitle, were henceforth addressed.

But perhaps even more important was his way of doing research. In the 1960s, the social sciences were already saturated with large-N surveys and statistical analyses that were instrumentally valuable for technocracy-driven governance but which, at the same time, were as incompatible with any claims to truth as the natural sciences that served as their positivistic matrix. Goffman's work was different. His intimate way of conducting participant observation at the institute where he was working as a mental health assistant was, for want of a better term, 'sloppy'. Even though the method itself was already well established by that time, Goffman seemed to be following his own intuition rather than sticking to any distinct 'phases' or 'steps' that qualitative research textbooks insisted on. There is no reason to doubt either the reliability of Goffman's observations or the accuracy with which he recorded them. But reliability and accuracy are not the main issues here. Goffman's uniqueness resulted rather from the sensitivity and attention that he invested into his self-reflexion as he reworked his recorded observations into personal interpretations.

On top of the factual merits that established the traits that characterise all total institutions, we, then, have an ethical awareness, that is, Goffman's empathy, and a very particular brand of methodical self-reflexion that together gave the book its kinship relation to art and its affinity with truth.

Some 20 years later when I was already an independent scholar in my own right, the focus of institutional debates had moved from Goffman to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1995). As powerful and influential as Foucault's book was, it never crossed over in the same way. Nor could it have. Any reference to 'truth' would have fared poorly in Foucault's power-knowledge relations in which his own work, of course, had to take part. Foucault's merits were different. First, he studied texts rather than individuals or social actors. Even though he was personally committed to the French anti-prison movement of the time,⁴ Foucault conducted his research in archives and libraries rather than in the institutions that he was writing about. The factual merits were similar to Goffman's (see also e.g. Foucault, 2002: 75–76; Hacking, 2004; Leib, 2017), but Foucault's persuasiveness could not be inferred from his personal encounters with inmates. Rather, it resulted from his meticulous document analysis and the sheer power of its microscopic and highly detailed description. The details and their seemingly counter-intuitive interrelations allowed us to see completely new regularities of power that would otherwise have remained obscured by established discursive conventions. In this sense, Foucault was much more a scientist than a liberal arts scholar.

Goffman was, then, an example of a social scientist whose work crossed over into the realm of the arts because it somehow 'rang truer' than your average sociology treatise. Such a crossing-over can, of course, move in the opposite direction, as well. Think of, for example, Bernd and Hilla Becher's famous photographs of water towers (Becher and Becher, 1988; see also e.g. Lange, 2007). Although we might initially classify the project as 'fine art photography', some of its features point in another direction: the Bechers only used a view camera that was capable of producing exceptionally high-quality images

compatible with laboratory standards, the photographs were shot from angles that would 'objectify' the water towers minimising any implications of personal artistic interpretation, and in addition to the repetitive 'typologies' of the industrial buildings that were being photographed, the pictures were further serialised by identical lighting conditions that resulted from shooting only during certain seasons of the year, in similar overcast conditions, and at specific times of the day. The various projects of the Bechers reflected the kind of pedantry, meticulous attention to detail and excessive formalism that one was more accustomed to associating with scientifically motivated photographic documentation than with the fine arts.⁵

There are, then, two crossovers covering a single domain: a first that starts off as science but reveals itself as something akin to art, and a second that, conversely, would seem to be rooted in the arts but includes practices or structures that we customarily associate with the sciences. The crossover domain has a disciplinary parallel, as well. Originally the field of socio-legal studies was associated with a relatively narrow definition of a 'scientifically valid' sociology of law that still underpins much of the research. In the UK, the seminal work of, for instance, Hazel Genn (e.g. Genn, 1999) and Roger Cotterrell (e.g. Cotterrell, 1992) are landmarks in this type of research, and on the other side of the Atlantic, similar research has been conducted by members of the law and society movement (e.g. Friedman, 1977; Sarat and Ewick, 2015). Disenchantment with the limitations of a policy-driven technocratic agenda soon allowed the multidisciplinary ethos inherent in socio-legal work to branch out to include approaches that we would rather identify as cultural theory (e.g. Sarat and Simon, 2003) or the humanities (e.g. Sarat et al., 2009). Commenting on the Nuffield Report (Genn et al., 2006), Linda Mulcahy captures this disenchantment well:

A constraint that all of us have felt as empirical researchers is the feeling of moving from one funded project to the next without having time to reflect on the data collected and develop theory from it. Yet it is this vital part of each research project that helps us to put back into the academy and resist the pressure to become handmaidens of policy makers. (Mulcahy, 2007: 3)

And perhaps it is this multidisciplinary and hybrid domain, populated by potentially disagreeing legal scholars, social scientists, cultural theorists, humanities scholars and others, where crossovers reach from science towards art, from knowledge towards truth – or vice versa – that we can today call 'socio-legal'.

Bricolage

My own epiphanous 'Goffman moment' resembled the second direction of the crossover in the sense that it was a work of art, a novel, that resonated with the kind of research that I wanted to do. London-based friends gave me Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald, 1998) as a present. I knew of Sebald but had not read the novel before. In the novel, Sebald's unreliable first-person narrator explored a North Sea coastal environment by walking while meditating on issues such as memory and identity. In the resulting 'field-notes', text and image, different literary genres like prose fiction, essay and travelogue, fact and fiction, all intermingled to produce a trembling meaning that, to me, 'rang truer'

than any geographically accurate and scientifically validated description of the same environment ever could have. In an interview, Sebald commented on his own position as an observing walker in the following way:

The walker's approach to viewing nature is a phenomenological one and the scientist's approach is a much more incisive one, but they all belong together. And in my view, even today it is true that scientists very frequently write better than novelists. (Silverblatt, 2007: 81)

Note the liminal space between the walking phenomenologist (e.g. Roy, 2017) and the incisiveness of the scientist (e.g. Theisen, 2006) into which Sebald positions himself. These two poles that 'belong together' re-articulate a common distinction between sensory perception and knowledge in which the latter represents some unitary whole that sensory data is organised into with the help of spatial and temporal schemata. Although it was easy enough to detect that Sebald the literary author was here flirting with the sciences, it took me a while to understand more precisely the direction into which his flirting was pointing. Two things intuitively attracted me.

First, I had gradually become aware of the weaknesses of the type of critically oriented metaconceptualism that I had dabbled with for most of my professional life (e.g. Minkkinen, 1999, 2009). The figure of the 'walking phenomenologist' underlined the absence of any empirically observable world in my work back to which my concepts could ultimately be traced. Subsequently I also recognised this as something that had made my work unnecessarily stale and politically inefficient.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, the liminal space of Sebald's position was somehow reminiscent of Goffman's methodological 'sloppiness'. Despite his fascination for incisiveness and knowledge, Sebald was, of course, far from a large-N social scientist. He made no conscious effort to fit his data into airtight conceptual boxes or to arrange his data clusters into logical constructs. Describing his fondness for unsystematic thinking in his own thesis work, Sebald claimed that he explored the world around him like a 'dog following the advice of his nose' (Cuomo, 2007: 94). Systematic patterns would always leave overflow or residue that Sebald often specifically focused on. But neither was the first-person narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* free to disregard the data-based evidence that he had collected over the course of his coastal walks. So the position in between was clearly a strained one.

Many interpreters of Sebald have drawn the conclusion that this curious relationship to scientific inquiry implies an analogy with ethnography. In addition to pencilled glosses allegedly found in books from Sebald's private library, a common source for this claim has been an interview, originally published in 1993, in which Sebald described his own work routines in the following way:

I work using the system of *bricolage* – in Lévi-Strauss' meaning. It is a form of savage work, of prerational thought, in which one assembles coincidentally accumulated findings until they begin to make some sense. (Sebald, 2011: 84 [my translation])

It is worth repeating how Claude Lévi-Strauss began his discussion of *bricolage* in *The Savage Mind*:

Myths and rites are far from being, as has often been held, the product of man's 'myth-making faculty', turning its back on reality. Their principal value is indeed to preserve until the present time the remains of methods of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type: those which nature authorised from the starting point of a speculative organization and exploitation of the sensible world in sensible terms. This science of the concrete was necessarily restricted by its essence to results other than those destined to be achieved by the exact natural sciences but it was no less scientific and its results no less genuine. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 16)

In Lévi-Strauss' terms, mythical thinking is, then, one of two forms of a 'science of the concrete', an 'intellectual *bricolage*' or logic according to which sensory data is organised into meaningful wholes using a finite number of available components that the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* has stumbled upon and collected together. Metaphorically such a broad and unspecific notion of *bricolage* points conveniently towards the Romanticist idea of the genius author that serves certain strains of Sebald scholarship well (e.g. Chandler, 2003). But it is considerably less convenient if one wants to find a comfortable fit with Lévi-Strauss' own epistemological emphases. By making the distinction between two types of scientific knowledge – the 'technical' knowledge accredited to the 'engineer' on the one hand, and the 'mythical' knowledge of the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* on the other – Lévi-Strauss, the Saussurian structuralist, clearly associates himself more with the former. A structuralist account of *bricolage* is, in other words, a 'scientific' explanation of how mythical knowledge is produced, while Sebald's interview, as well as many of the interpretations drawn from it, identify the author with the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* as the producer of mythical knowledge. Something doesn't quite add up because Lévi-Strauss' scheme provides no neutral 'third' position from which the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* herself could self-reflexively comprehend her own position as the producer of mythical knowledge (on these and other problems in coupling Sebald with Lévi-Strauss, see e.g. Hutchinson, 2009: 52–55).

Ethnography and Ethnographies

But perhaps the 'third' position can be found elsewhere. JJ Long (Long, 2011; see also Long, 2007) has attempted to show how it might be located by focusing on Sebald's critical adoptions of other ethnographic conventions. After recognising the problems that arise from Sebald's self-professed affiliation with Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur/bricoleuse*, Long identifies two such conventions that find some support in Sebald's own texts.

First, Sebald himself draws a parallel between ethnography and travel literature by noting how certain forms of 'ethnographic novellas'⁶ lead to a cross-contamination of sorts. In order to make an exotic environment familiar to a reader, something resembling scientific inquiry draws on simplified 'typical features' that have, in fact, only been created for narrative purposes. At the same time, these simplifications become caricatures that in the process acquire unfounded scientific validity. Long claims that these reservations are a critical echo of what anthropologists call the 'salvage paradigm'. James Clifford describes this 'pastoral' paradigm in the following way:

In Western taxonomy and memory the various non-Western “ethnographic presents” are actually pasts. They represent culturally distinct times (“traditions”) always about to undergo the impact of disruptive changes associated with the influence of trade, media, missionaries, commodities, ethnographers, tourists, the exotic art market, the “world system,” etc. A relatively recent period of authenticity is repeatedly followed by a deluge of corruption, transformation, modernization. (Clifford, 1987: 122; see also Clifford, 1986)

In other words, by trying to rescue a threatened authenticity that supposedly exists outside of Western time and space, ethnography also forces it onto a ‘not-quite-there-yet’ point on a common historical timeline that can only destroy any authenticity there may have been to begin with. From Sebald’s point of view, this is a danger that is inherent in all ethnographies that attempt to draw an unknown ‘other’ into the light of familiarity through writing. The elaboration of the ‘typical features’ that are meant to communicate the unknown phenomenon actually end up hastening its destruction.

Second, while the author and narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* is clearly a participant observer immersed in a ‘foreign’ East-Anglian – culturally English – environment, Long claims that for Sebald the relationship between the observer and what is being observed is far removed from the stark separation that conventional ethnography implies. This issue has, of course, been widely debated in anthropology, as well. Charlotte Aull Davies (Davies, 1999: 14–15), to take one example, uses the term ‘de-differentiation’ to describe the gradual process in which the ability to separate observer from observed, researcher from world, has been increasingly questioned. De-differentiated ethnographies are less likely to make strong claims about the ability of fieldwork observations to represent a reality that is radically external in relation to the observer. Ultimately, as the distinction between observer and observed becomes ever more difficult to make, ethnographers can be said to create their objects of study rather than to discover them. Unable to make claims about phenomena that are sufficiently external in relation to herself, the ethnographer is also more intimately bound to her particular ethnographies. The resulting self-reflexivity produces scholarship that is more about the ethnographer herself than her alleged object of study ridding her of the privileged voice of scientific authority.

Long claims that in *The Rings of Saturn*, a similar de-differentiating effect is achieved by juxtaposing two interchangeable characters. On the one hand, we have a German narrator whose ethnographic gaze follows the occasionally perplexing undertakings of the English, and on the other, the narrator’s anglicised alter ego whose relationship with his native Germany is characterised by the equally perplexed sentiments of an expat. With this move, ‘the rhetorical basis of the power differential [prioritising the observer over the observed] turns out to be provisional and its authority dissolves’ (Long, 2011: 424).

If we want to find a similar entanglement in scholarship more generally, then it could, perhaps, be put in the following way. While an empirical reality, first observed by the walking phenomenologist and then organised systematically by the incisive scientist, can provide validity for the knowledge that is consequently produced, writing it down will inevitably complement the knowledge with an authorial self-reflexion that questions the very foundations on which that validity is built. This double bind reiterates the distinction made between *ethnography as method* (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and

ethnography as writing (e.g. Atkinson, 1990, 2020) where the product of the latter, that is, the individual ‘ethnographies’ that we write, destabilise the logic of empirical validity without which those ethnographies would, nonetheless, be impossible. We can identify the same rhetorical entanglement in both Goffman and Sebald, in both a social science that stretches out towards the arts, and in literature that finds its collaborative partner in the sciences.

Many commentators have noted that irrespective of Sebald’s possible fascination with Lévi-Strauss and ethnography, his ties with and to Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School are more important. As Sebald himself wrote about his own university studies in the 1960s:

I have often wondered how dismal and distorted our appreciation of literature might have remained had not the gradually appearing writings of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School – which was, in effect, a Jewish school for the investigation of bourgeois social and intellectual history – provided an alternative perspective. (Sebald, 2014: 8; see also e.g. Dubow, 2007; Hutchinson, 2011)

Indeed, it is hard to avoid noticing a certain kinship between Sebald and Benjamin, even if we go beyond the somewhat facile Romanticist associations that are often made in the English-speaking world between German writers (e.g. Preuschoff, 2016, 2018). The kinship has less to do with any particular appreciation of literature, or with any notion that Benjamin may have had about the empirical world ‘out there’ even if Sebald’s walking phenomenologist may have something in common with Benjamin’s *flaneur* (see e.g. Coates, 2017; Jenks and Neves, 2000). To me, the relationship between the two is more evident in Sebald’s self-professed attachment to *bricolage* and Benjamin’s unique ideas about ‘method’ especially in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ of his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (see Benjamin, 2009: 27–56).

David Kleinberg-Levin notes that the most recognisable feature in Sebald’s storytelling is a certain affective mood that he achieves by assigning a particular emotional physiognomy to a whole sentence: ‘Making the sentence or constellation, not the word, the major aesthetic unit gives his narrative its distinctive stylistic form’ (Kleinberg-Levin, 2013: 97). Kleinberg-Levin’s choice of words is no coincidence here. For Benjamin, the *constellation* was, of course, an approach that he began developing in the 1920s into an alternative method of history as he was distancing himself from the influence of Hermann Cohen and the Marburg School and gradually gravitating towards Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘new thinking’ (see Minkinen, 2013; also e.g. Lambrianou, 2004; Löwy, 1980, 1992).⁷

If we consider Sebald’s ‘ethnographies-by-*bricolage*’ in Benjaminian terms as constellations (Benjamin, 2009: 34–35; Gilloch, 2002), we may be in a better position to appreciate Sebald’s critical and ‘self-destructive’ notion of writing, as well. A constellation allows the walking phenomenologist to view the interrelations between independent units of sensory data in ways that grant them some autonomy even within the real-world contexts in which they appear, but without bracketing them into isolated and self-sustained phenomena either. A constellation allows for relational nuances which, to quote Theodor Adorno’s reading of Benjamin, a classifying procedure would regard as ‘either a matter

of indifference or a burden' (Adorno, 2004: 162), that is, as the overflow or residue mentioned earlier. In conventional narrative configurations, a scruffy seaside hotel that the walking phenomenologist has stumbled upon in Suffolk may all too easily find a convenient slot in, say, an 'excursion around an eastern English wetland' (cf. Matless, 2014). But in a constellation, it may connect with seemingly odd bedfellows such as, for example, an affective self-reflexion on estrangement and the passing of time.

Benjamin's idea has resonated in the interpretive disciplines in other ways, as well. Starting from the 1980s, narration and the ability to tell stories have become an important – and inevitable – aspect of non-positivistic and antinaturalist strains in both history (Ricoeur, 1984/1985; White, 1987) and ethnography (Bishop, 1992; Geertz, 1988; Webster, 1983). The ability to bring disparate forms of data together into coherent wholes becomes ever more important as the amount, variety and complexity of available information grows. Feminist scholars have created a methodical way of dealing with this complexity called *data quilting* that is strikingly similar to Benjamin's idea of constellations. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's distinction between 'embroidering' and 'patchwork' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 475–477), Paula Saukko, to take one example, draws her own disparate data on the bodily experience of anorexia together with the idea of 'quilting' that, unlike traditional scientific 'embroidering', is not based on the identification of recurring patterns that emanate from the structural dictates of a centre. Indeed, patchwork quilts have no centre, and 'the basic motif (the patch) is multiple, giving rise to more rhythmic resonances and disjunctures that account for the unity of and tensions within the piece' (Saukko, 2008: 112; also Anandarajan and Hill, 2019; Koelsch, 2012). In other words, in terms of walking, we can think of the collected fieldnotes, the observations made, the self-reflexive associations, the photographs and other images, the random objects found, and so on, as well as the sensory experience of the walk itself, as patches in a quilt that enable interpretations that would be impossible if we merely followed the dictates of a fixed epistemology.

'Muted and Defective Storytelling'

This resemblance has not gone unnoticed by ethnographers themselves either (e.g. Sieber and Truskolaski, 2017). Towards the end of his *Law in a Lawless Land*, an ethnographic diary of how ordinary Colombians are caught up in the interminable and violent conflicts between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and the Colombian military, Michael Taussig quotes Benjamin's well-known criticism of writing history as if it was individual events simply organised successively like beads on a rosary. This is one of the places where Benjamin takes up the idea of a constellation, but in this context as a way to account for history as what he calls 'now-time' (see Benjamin, 2003a: 397; also Hamacher, 2005). Taussig associates his own ethnographic work with Benjamin's history precisely at this epistemological and 'methodological' level:

It [the constellation] was not a method I consciously sought. It followed the paths of recollection and their unexpected associations through different lapses of time as they opened out from a diary I kept for two weeks in May 2001. The "now time" that Benjamin refers us to is incandescent for me in a continuous present the diarist puts onto the page as

events slip away the instant they are recorded, yet in doing so they trigger recollections with other events long past so as to create meaningful constellations, more meaningful in that, as Benjamin points out, they connect the present era with an earlier one through unexpected juxtaposition. (Taussig, 2003: 184–185)

Here again, just like with Sebald, the ethnographer's method cannot be Lévi-Strauss' scientific anthropology but, rather, something resembling a 'love of muted and even defective storytelling as a form of analysis' (Taussig, 2006: vii) practised by the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* herself whose 'prerational' thinking the scientist is merely attempting to describe. 'Muted and defective storytelling' produces the same kind of 'wavering truth' that I earlier associated with Barr's 'embodied practice' of walking.

In the words of Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), Austrian author, poet and playwright:

How wonderful these humans are, indeed,
Who do explain the inexplicable,
And what was never writ, they read;
The intricate they, subjugating, bind,
And thru eternal darkness paths they find.
(von Hofmannsthal, 1914: 45)

These are Death's closing lines in *Death and the Fool* (1894), a play that was significant for Benjamin (see e.g. Cacciari, 2009; Witte, 1991: 64–67), and as far as these particular verses go, something that also seems fitting for both Benjamin's own constellations and any interpretive attempts to come to terms with them. Including Sebald's (on Sebald and Hofmannsthal, see e.g. Sebald, 1985).

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Notes

1. There is apparently even scientific evidence of the positive effects that walking can have on creative thinking (see Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014).

2. Perhaps by way of a detour, this essay is also a belated tribute to my friend Peter Fitzpatrick (1941–2020), a keen walker himself and a close acquaintance of British ‘walking artist’ Hamish Fulton (Fulton, 2002).
3. The book was translated at the initiative of the ‘November Movement’, one of the anti-institutional and ‘abolitionist’ collectives in the Nordic countries in the 1970s (see Mathiesen, 2015: 73–78).
4. Together with fellow radicals, political thinker Jean-Marie Domenach and historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Foucault established an ‘information group on prisons’ the aim of which was to raise awareness of the appalling conditions of inmates in French prisons (see Domenach et al., 1971; English translation available as *Manifesto*, 2013).
5. Another well-known example of a fine arts photography project approaching a scientific ethos is August Sander’s monumental and encyclopaedic collection *People of the 20th Century* (Sander, 2002; also Sander, 1978). Over the course of six decades, Sander photographed thousands of portraits that he then meticulously classified into seven archetypal groups (The Farmer, The Skilled Tradesman, The Woman, Classes and Professions, The Artists, The City and The Last People) and numerous subgroups or portfolios.
6. Sebald’s specific reference here is to 19th and 20th century ghetto literature that attempted to reconstruct the Ashkenazi past of German Jews (see e.g. Hess, 2010: 72–110).
7. There is a certain shallowness to Benjamin scholarship in critical legal and socio-legal work that, to a large extent, seems intent to limit itself to Derridian interpretations of ‘Critique of Violence’. A rare exception is James Martel (see Martel, 2011, 2012, 2014).

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