

**Sebald's Anatomy Lesson:
About Three Images-Documents from *On the Natural History
of Destruction, The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz***

Muriel Pic

(Translated from French by Laura Winn in conjunction with the author)

W. G. Sebald's work endorses the use of archives: notably image-documents, which are widely used in his narratives as well as in his essays. The author is figured as the *observer* who *records* witness accounts (*Erzählen/Berichten*) and reconstructs them through montage. Sebald did not begin his career as a writer until his university career had reached maturity. He was first and foremost a researcher, and this is how he always presents himself in his narratives: inevitably their primal scene is that during some research he comes across some document whose particularity attracts his attention. As researcher and writer, Sebald is a man of the archives. His narratives encounter the fugitive and sublime shadows of the past in documents, images and texts found during his research. They are invaded by all sorts of documents that lend them an atmosphere of *Unheimlichkeit*, the angel of the bizarre crossing familiar space. In the work of Sebald, however, the quest for traces does not lead to historical fables. Quite on the contrary, the author's goal is to reinstate reality as it has been, to find a language through which the beings whose memory is confined to

the archives can survive: "One does not resuscitate the lives that have ended up in the archives. It is not a reason for making them die a second time. The space is narrow in which a narrative can be built that does not cancel or dissolve them, that keeps them available so that one day, and elsewhere, another narration can be made from their enigmatic presence. ... To have a taste for archives is visibly to wander through the words of others, to seek a language which preserves their pertinence."¹ What is this language in the work of Sebald? How legitimate is the literature in which it is elaborated?

I. Historical demagoguery and literary montage

With his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, this question takes a polemical turn. In this text, Sebald argues that German post-war literature has not played the essential role that he seeks for it: to give over to collective memory images of the destruction of German towns during the allied bombings: a plan for an all-out bombing campaign, which had been supported by groups within the Royal air force since 1940. This event of destruction actually poses serious problems, according to the author, concerning history and historical discourse because, between passive silence and a fanatical will to reconstruct, Germany chose to "banish memory."² What does this mean?

On the one hand, according to Sebald, it means that it is possible to diagnose in the survivors a double state of apathy and hysteria. This recognition of traumatic mutism and superactivity in the face of the shock explains that all the accounts of the horror of the destruction are trapped in "stereotyped lines". Sebald underlines "the psychological aspect of the recall of the traumatic experiences" and claims that we cannot ignore this natural reaction of the memory. On the other hand, there remains a cultural fact: "In my view, such a preoccupation with retrospective improvement of the self-image they wished to hand down was one of the main reasons for the inability of a whole generation of German authors to describe what they had seen, and to convey it to our minds."³ Behind this declaration, there is the argument that memories are destroyed by the use of "pre-established images fixed inside our heads"⁴ which are the representations of history.

To struggle against this repression, Winfried Georg Sebald sought exile quite early on, and this choice is related to his problematic relationship with Germany as is shown in his essay. Born in Bavaria at Wertach in the Allgäu Alps, in 1944, he left Germany, and finally became a university assistant at Manchester. He later became a lecturer at Norwich, where he founded a centre for literary translation in 1988, and where he died in a car

accident in 2001.

But exile, even if it is in the enemy country, is not enough to free the memories. The author proposes to take the archives back into hand, especially those of the Imperial War Museum in London, and from them, with them, re-member. This means to trace a “Natural History of destruction,” an expression that Sebald owes to an English journalist, Solly Zuckerman, and that was going to be the title of a documentary by Zuckerman on Hamburg devastated. But the text, never written, has become a phantom document, victim of the unconscious censorship also active in the English collective memory. So, to fight against these “false Absolutes”⁵ of history, Sebald experiments with a new method of historical knowledge, envisaged by Walter Benjamin, a cardinal reference for Sebald according to his private library:⁶ “The method for this work: literary montage. *I have nothing to say. Only things to show.* I am not going to uncover anything precious or attribute to myself spiritual formulae. But rags and cast-offs: I do not want to make their inventory, but allow them to obtain justice in the only possible way: by using them.”⁷ Thus Sebald always chooses in the archives marginal testimonies and documents, “which show very clearly the process of deterioration”: these “are without a doubt the constitutive pieces of a natural history of destruction as Solly Zuckerman probably imagined it at the time.”⁸ These documents not only show and testify to the destruction, they are also victims of it, because it is the archives that oblivion threatens to destroy. “Remnants of flaunted reality”⁹ waiting to be noticed in order to set free what they know of the past, these are the riddles of history, the carriers of its secret disease: the destruction of memory by “pre-established images fixed inside our heads.”¹⁰ Literary montage founds Sebald’s writing and implicates literature in a critique of historical representations. And this approach cannot but also entail the transformation of the literary text because, according to Benjamin once again, reading *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Döblin (an author about whom Sebald also wrote): “montage shatters the novel, as much from a structural as a stylistic point of view, creating new quite epic possibilities, notably in terms of form. Indeed, not any old montage material will do. True montage starts with the document.”¹¹

So, Sebald seeks through montage to recover a historical reality which escapes the constructions of history. And what is more, the literary montage is the condition of the readability of documents because it is also a montage of points of view. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Sebald places opposite the accounts which are less credible because of their subjectivity, a document whose objectivity is that of a clinician: the account of an anatomical dissection, *Findings of pathological and anatomical investigations after the raids of Hamburg in 1943-1945. With thirty illustrations and eleven*

plates. Here, he shows a taboo image, that of opening a corpse, the metaphor of a real argument about destruction. What is more, it is a description which does not imagine reality but actually puts it into images, because he respects one of the particularities of anatomical treatises, from Vésale onwards, which is to be always accompanied by a large number of plates. With this text, written by a certain Dr. Siegfried Gräff, the objective point of view is at work. But Sebald does not claim this objectivity to be the only way to tell the reality of destruction. This text is of interest not so much because of its objective status as document, but because of its context: in fact, Sebald takes this extract from Hubert Fichte's novel *Detleivs Imitationem, Grünspan*.¹² In this way, the document (found in a library by Fichte's hero) whose reality is hyperbolic, is only of interest when placed within a fictional context. In the example we have just seen, the montage is operated *via* a fiction, Fichte's novel. If literary montage is placed right from the start within the framework of the relationship between fiction and history, it is in order to criticise this dichotomy and recognise the effectiveness of the *particular* in the investigation of knowledge. What does this entail? It entails not considering a document as proof that brings all of the reality with it and delivers a positive truth, nor as an account whose value is compromised by subjectivity. The literary montage of documents exposes the *role of literature in epistemological writing*, a definition of *literature as the particular in history*, as the place where a form of reasoning, or rather a montage, is elaborated from a double point of view, from a montage of looking, history's objectivity and witness accounts' subjectivity. This montage of looking characterised the public operation of dissection in the anatomical theatres of the Renaissance: the point of view of the anatomist who opens up the body is doubled by that of the spectators. More than simply a montage of points of view, this is the elaboration of an experience in looking, and we are dealing with the displacement of the point of view of the anatomist in literary space.¹³ In *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, the montage of the anatomical document is operated through a quotation from Fichte's novel: it means that the objectivity and the reality of the account are doubled by the subjectivity and the fiction of the novel. A montage of points of view, which, in the eyes of this man ready to sacrifice everything but the "experience of looking," is essential in order to see *and* show the taboo reality of destruction. In fact, with the opening of memory, the discovery of a taboo and an unconscious trauma comes to light.

II. The body of history

But the account of the Dr. Siegfried Gräff is not the only anatomical

document in the work of Sebald. And it is time to place alongside the text of the anatomical account an image taken from *The Rings of Saturn*, a narrative by Sebald: I mean the famous Rembrandt's *Doctor Tulp's Anatomy Lesson* (fig.1). Why did Sebald choose this image from 1632, at the heart of a long pictorial tradition since the fourteenth century of the representation of this exercise of knowledge, the anatomical dissection? Not only be-



Fig. 1 Rembrandt, *Dr. Tulp's Anatomy lesson*, 1632, oil on canvas, 169, 5 x 216, 5 cm, *Mauritshuis*, The Hague.

cause it is one of the most famous images of this tradition, but I suggest for two other reasons: firstly, because this painting had a double that was *destroyed* in a fire in 1723, *Doctor John Deyman's Anatomy Lesson* from 1656. Secondly, because this painting presents a montage: that of an anatomical plate in a painted image. The exhibition of the tendons of an opened forearm in *Doctor Tulp's Anatomy Lesson* is directly inspired by the frontispiece of Vésale's illustrated work of 1543, *De corporis humani fabrica libri septem*. When Sebald approaches this painting, in the first chapter of *Die Ringe des Saturn*, he is in the middle of tracing the biography of Thomas Browne, author of a strange work of 1610 entitled *Hydrotaphia urn burial, with an account of some urns found at Brampton in Norfolk* (where Sebald lived) which discusses sepulchral rituals and the decomposition of bodies through a reflection on death. Sebald considers it highly likely that Thomas Browne was present at this lesson. Sebald analyses Rembrandt's painting in terms of a montage of points of view and notably compares the

spectator of the painting with the spectator of the dissection, a comparison which implicates the reader. An analysis of points of view which is shown in the painting through a montage and leads to the acknowledgement of the disappearance of the real body replaced by a mechanical body. That one is the body of Descartes' man-machine, the body of the anatomical atlas which appears in this painting: in the dissected left hand which is "purely an academic figure taken from the anatomical atlas."¹⁴ According to Francis Barker, in his book *The Tremulous Private Body*,¹⁵ Sebald thus wants to thwart the claim that Rembrandt's painting does not respond to the rules of realism: he shows the montage of a plate of an anatomical atlas in the painting. However, he is more than a realist in the sense that he is preoccupied by the impossible point of view, that of the corpse that has lived right to the end the experience of destruction. This point of view is at the centre of the division between the pictorial and the anatomical, between historical time and subjectivity, it is the blind spot and the illumination which must characterise all true experiences of the point of view in Sebald's work, and which allows for the montage, here created by the painter.

So, we have to operate a dissection on the body of history, the body of time that we carry on our wrists. We have to break this time in order to go back, reconstructing a particular time-space through montage. But the practice of literary montage bears witness especially to a particular notion of time which emerges in the twentieth century with the cinematic process from which literary montage, whether manipulating texts or images, borrows its model of composition. Montage in turn supposes disassembly, decomposition, a form of destruction; all literary montage is a secondary destruction. For Sebald, discovering the reality of destruction, reconstructing this reality, implies a destruction, a "disarticulation of time" to use Cioran's phrase from *Précis de Décomposition*, which Sebald cites in "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Amery."¹⁶ We have to disarticulate historical time, open the image it gives us,¹⁷ which destroys our particular images, break the clocks of this time whose universality is senseless.¹⁸ And without any doubt, Sebald's narratives bear witness to a concept of time where anachronisms pour in continually, where writing, through a *mise en abyme* of body and place, asserts itself as a temporal reconstruction leading towards lived experience. The experience of the shock and vertigo, felt when we recognise something, a never-ending experience which from resemblance to resemblance "grabs the view and renders it interminable."¹⁹

III. Poetics of the gases: an atmospheric experience

This experience is the one that Sebald offers to his reader through the

montage by resemblance. And it is time again to place alongside the text of the anatomical account and *Doctor Tulp's Anatomy Lesson* a third image taken from *Austerlitz*: a plan of Liverpool Street Station (fig.2) which, Sebald notes, “resembles an anatomical plate.”²⁰ This time, the author provides us with a plan of the space where the revival of the memory happens: when Jacques Austerlitz’s steps are guided by “a confused internal necessity” towards a disused waiting room in Liverpool Street Station in London,

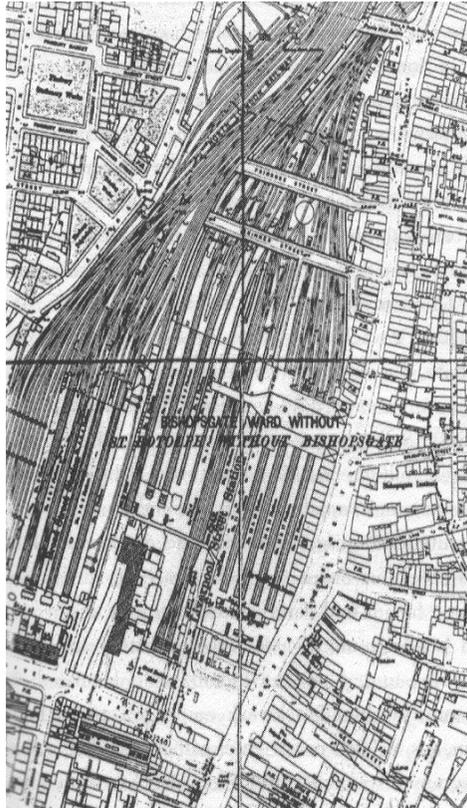


Fig. 2 Map of *Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz*.

where he will rediscover the truth about his past, the place is filled with “dust, soot, steam” whereas “only a diffused greyness filters through the panes.”²¹ This disused waiting room, which is soon to be knocked down, the same room where many years before he arrived for the first time in England from Prague, was sent at the last minute by his mother who was deported soon after and never returned. In fact, a whole lexicon of atmosphere appears when memory moves towards violent remembrance, a vertiginous experience that occurs at key moments in Sebald’s narratives. It is through a “thick fog,” “vapours” or “gases” that memory will remember what

it has repressed for too long. And, as Sebald remarks in *The Rings of Saturn*, this vapour is exactly the vapour that the dead body lets off when it has just been opened by the anatomist. The will to open the body of history, a metaphor suggested by Sebald's narratives, can be understood in the terms of a poetics of gases, an expression connected, obviously, to the theme of genocide in his works. Between history and natural history, this poetics leads the reader to confront images and documents where gases, vapours or dust appear, for example in a series of anatomical images.

If we are to believe the testimonies of those familiar with archives, the material contact with the past produces an emotional shock, a feeling, a stupor, a singular experience for each of us. Through its traces, the past becomes close, envelops and transports us. A scene is conjured up before our eyes, a smile is drawn once again. The auratic experience in the time of remembrance is translated in the work of Sebald – strongly influenced by Walter Benjamin's theory of memory,²² which takes the image as its central point – by a series of atmospheric phenomena. Indeed, more effective in some people's eyes than literary fiction, the document is this trace that creates an exchange between the near and the far, produces a dialectic between the present and the past: "Traces and aura. Traces are the appearance of proximity, however far away that which left them may be. Aura is the appearance of the far off, however near that which evokes it may be. With traces we seize the object; with aura it is the object that becomes our master."²³ Aura and atmosphere, trace and archive are thus the essential components of a reconstruction of the past which transmits the familiar experience of those who have a taste for archives: "One can slowly examine [the close weave of the archive] and dissect it in minute detail: something else subsists however, which is nameless and which scientific experiment is at a loss to explain. Indeed, it would not claim such explanation to be its role, even if confronted by it. This is of course the surplus of life that floods the archive and provokes the reader in his most intimate self."²⁴ A "surplus of life" or again "something more that remains unexpressed," according to Hubertus Tellenbach's definition of the atmospheric: "In any experience of our senses [in this case the touch of the document] there is something more that remains unexpressed. This something more exceeds the real fact, but that we feel at the same time, we can call it the atmospheric."²⁵

But if atmosphere is to archive what aura is to trace, that is to say the *sine qua non* of an experience of remembrance wherein the reality of the past lies, then it is difficult to prove its historical legitimacy. Indeed, as Arlette Farge notes, the emotion felt by the historian working in the archives has no place in scientific discourse. Yet, it must necessarily breathe life into the language charged with reconstructing the past. And if "we can rid our-

selves of the illusion of universality, a total and definitive truth ... we cannot dismiss truth, nor even spurn it, we can never lead it astray and the space between these two poles is very narrow."²⁶ Probably, Sebald's work is dedicated to the investigation of this historiographer's room for manoeuvre and the language that he chose to preserve the words of the other is that of a poetics of gases. But the writer speaks about the most difficult events of history in order to show us how destruction begets destruction: the *Luftkrieg* and the Holocaust. As literary montage (montage of point of view and montage by resemblance) is the language that Sebald chooses to reinstate the enigmatic presence of the past, one will comprehend that his narratives cannot go without the images and documentary texts that accompany them: traces offered up to the reader in the materiality of the work, they carry him along with the narrator in a series of wanderings on the "banks of time."²⁷

Freie Universität, Berlin and EHESS, Paris
muriel.pic@gmail.com

NOTES

- ¹ Arlette Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 147.
- ² W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* [1999] (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Verlag, 2001), p. 32. [Translator's note: quotations are freely translated; references are to the German editions. Most of Sebald's works (*The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Vertigo*, *Austerlitz*, *After Nature*) are translated in English. *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell, (Hamish Hamilton, London, 2003).]
- ³ Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 7.
- ⁴ Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2003), p. 109. *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (NY: Random House, 2001).
- ⁵ Cioran, *Précis de décomposition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 9.
- ⁶ A part of Sebald's library is conserved at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.
- ⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band V. 1, herausgegeben von Rolf Tiedeman (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 574. My emphasis.
- ⁸ Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, p. 45.
- ⁹ Arlette Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive*, p. 117.
- ¹⁰ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 89.
- ¹¹ Sebald, "Krisis des Romans: Zu Döblins Alexanderplatz", *Gesammelten Werk*, ed. Hella Tiedeman-Bertels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 3: 232.

- ¹² Hubert Fichte, *Detlevs Imitationem, Grünspan* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982).
- ¹³ Rafael Mandressi, *Le Regard de l'anatomiste* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), pp. 245-83.
- ¹⁴ Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturns* [1997] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), p. 23. *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (N.Y: New Directions, 1998).
- ¹⁵ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984). We can find this book in Sebald's library.
- ¹⁶ This article on Jean Amery's *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (1977) is published in English at the end of *On the Natural History of Destruction*, pp. 149-95.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 109.
- ¹⁸ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 148.
- ¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Ressassement éternel* (Paris: Minuit, 1951), p. 67.
- ²⁰ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 194.
- ²¹ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 189.
- ²² Cf. Sebald, "Schock und Ästhetik: Zu den Romanen Döblins", *Orbis Litterarum*, 30 (1975), pp. 241-50.
- ²³ Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, p. 560.
- ²⁴ Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive*, p. 113.
- ²⁵ Hubertus Tellenbach, *Geschmack und Atmosphäre* (Salzburg: O. Muller, 1968), p. 47.
- ²⁶ Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive*, p. 114.
- ²⁷ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 150.