Document généré le 19 avr. 2024 12:07

Recherches sémiotiques
Semiotic Inquiry

RS·SI

Shadow Writing. W.G. Sebald's Syncretic Discourse

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Volume 28, numéro 1-2, 2008

Photographie
Photography

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044590ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/044590ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (imprimé)
1923-9920 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Pezzini, I. (2008). Shadow Writing. W.G. Sebald's Syncretic Discourse. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, *28*(1-2), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.7202/044590ar

Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse les rapports entre photographie et texte dans *De la destruction comme élément de l'histoire naturelle* de W.G. Sebald (2001). L'intermédialité est une caractéristique fondamentale de l'oeuvre de cet auteur, tant de sa fiction que de ses essais. *De la destruction...*, lequel est un essai, est une enquête engagée et émotionnelle sur le tabou qui pèse dans les esprits de la population allemande au sujet des bombardements massifs de l'Allemagne à la fin de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. Les photographies sont ici plus que des instruments de témoignage, elles contribuent à façonner avec le texte un réseau formel (plan de l'expression) et sémantique (plan du contenu) très dense. Ce qu'elles produisent est un "langage tiers" tout à fait nouveau et singulier, que l'auteur considère comme le seul langage susceptible d'aborder des sujets aussi complexes que la culpabilité, la faute, la répression et la mémoire.

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Shadow Writing. W.G. Sebald's Syncretic Discourse

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> … as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge.
>
> -W.G. Sebald

Preliminary Observations

W.G. Sebald is one of the more significant contemporary writers to have used the syncretic method of a systematic interpolation of verbal and visual materials, words and images, in his work. Although he is best known for his rather hybrid "essay-novels", the present study examines his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), a re-working of a cycle of lectures held in Zurich in the fall of 1997. The text focuses on the need to reconstruct a nation's collective memory of the most harrowing moment of its history, namely, its own destruction, and readers might therefore have expected Sebald's use of images to be more direct here than in his fiction: *i.e.* using the image as a testimonial, from which we can formulate hypotheses as to his methodology and thematic concerns to test against one's understanding of his other works.[1]

The intratextual images are not only photographs but "visual material" in the widest sense, and appear in the text without captions, and often with no given source. Indeed, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* contains photographs by named and unnamed photographers, pages reproduced from a variety of publications, documents containing photographs, photographs from other sources, including a film poster and postcards, and finally photographs of unverifiable provenance.

RS·SI, vol. 27 (2007) n° 3/vol. 28 (2008) nos 1-2 © Association canadienne de sémiotique/Canadian Semiotic Association

The images are thus an integral part of the work. The words and images echo each other while maintaining — often foregrounding — their mutual, signifying autonomy. The text resonates with images of various kinds, not least verbal, and with repeated concern for sight and *seeing*.

It is interesting to consider the specificity of this "discourse" from a semiotic perspective. Certainly, it would be reductive to read the images as secondary to the verbal texts in which they find themselves materially embedded. If plain good sense tells us that the flat surface of the page induces the reader to extend the written text's meaning to the perceived meaning of the image, and, *vice versa*, to try to anchor the sense of the image in the meaning of the text, it is just as is feasible to read image and text as autonomous and even, to some extent, as independent features: one conveying meaning through words, the other through visual means. More radically, it might even be possible to read in Sebald's strategy a "third language", alternating two different systems of writing, one alphabetical, the other visual and photographic. This in turn invites the reader to discern interrelations between the two modes of expression. *Seeing* can imply both *reading* and *looking*, and Sebald's texts invite a reflection on precisely this point.

Post-Hjelmslevian semiotics speaks of *syncretic semiotics*, *i.e.* signifying entities whose plane of expression is constituted of elements belonging to heterogeneous semiotics (*cf.* Greimas-Courtés 1986, *ad vocem*). I intend to analyse Sebald's text beginning with the content plane, in an attempt to underscore the levels of correspondence and co-extensivity among the different textual units, subsequently returning to the textual manifestation in order to understand more clearly both the distribution of its different means of expression, and the roles attributed to them.

1. *Luftkrieg und literatur:* the Structure of the Text

The book appears to be a cognitive discourse that is simultaneously interpretative and persuasive (*cf.* "Cognitive", in Greimas-Courtés 1986), pronounced by a (diegetic) first-person narrator who for brevity's sake I shall refer to as "Sebald". This narrator:

a. questions the repression and displacement of the German people by the systematic and, in his opinion, unnecessary destruction of German cities by allied planes at the end of the Second World War;
b. debates the motives for both this destruction and psychological repression;
c. considers the damage the repression has done to the construction of a new and truly democratic collective feeling of nationhood;
d. overviews all, partial or even ambiguous and/or negative remembrances and recreations of the period, especially in

literature;
e. affirms the function that literature should provide for events of this kind, and
f. ponders the "correct" form to be attributed to memory.

The book is comprised of three chapters[2] individually titled and numbered. It' discourse is veridictional, seeking to grasp an intrinsic "reality of things" which is more satisfying than appearances, which are generally accepted as true, while experimenting with a specific method of research. The argument is non-linear in structure, proceeding almost by systematic *digression*. What Sebald is performing in his text is precisely what he repeatedly states is the "sound method" for recreating memory: patient montage and synopsis of the most extensive and varied documentation possible, based on elements of every description and never limited in any way, even in the case of personal recollections of which, as we shall see, he is particularly wary.

Personal involvement, however, is mandatory in order to ensure responsibility and commitment to pronouncements. This results in composite passages which vary greatly in tone: at times there is a bureaucratic, procedural approach in structuring the work's diverse visual and verbal content; at other times, the aspects of a personal or collective analysis, in which memories and disparate images of varied provenance take on a privileged role in providing proof, condensation, symbolic evocation, and affective investment.

The title of the English edition is *On the Natural History of Destruction*. The table of contents indicates the original title in translation: *Air War and Literature*. One main theme concerns the conditions which make the English title's oxymoron possible: there is nothing "natural" in the history of this particular destruction, even though "nature" does indeed play a part: in its indifference to such total devastation; in equipping human beings with instinctive mechanisms of self-defence; in providing alibis to concealed actions of bad faith; and in presenting itself as the ghastly horizon of humanity's return to its original primitive state.

The cover used for the German, English and Italian editions (see fig. 1) shows a photograph of the Red Army's celebrated taking of Berlin by one of the first great war journalists: Evgenij Anan'evic Chaldej. The photograph's (ironic?) title is *Ruhe Berlin. Berlin, 30. April 1945* (which can be translated as either "Peace to Berlin" or "Berlin Rest In Peace"). The photo has been cut down to a square, and thus "re-enunciated", emphasising the upper half of the *Reichstag* torn open by the shells from a formation of seven fighter-bombers. The "heavenly attack"-effect is maximised, in the German and English editions, by an oblique white band with the book's title crossing the photo and further splitting buildings and bombers. In the "original" print, however, (the photograph can be viewed at www.zlb.de) the *Reichstag* in its entirety seems to be under attack by a Soviet tank advancing menacingly from the right,

across the huge square.

Figure 1 - *Ruhe Berlin. Berlin, 30. April 1945*

2. Chapter I, or, On a Book That Was Never Written

Figure 2

The book begins by evoking "the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War" (Sebald 2004: 3) and the horror which necessarily accompanied it. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, this work of annihilation "seems to have left scarcely trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness" (*Ibid*: 4):

> Despite the enormous efforts whereby some kind of practicable *modus vivendi* has [been] restored after every attack, *even after 1950 wooden crosses still stood on the piles of rubble in towns like Pforzheim*, which lost almost one-third of its 60 000 inhabitants in a single raid on the night of February 22, 1945. (*Ibid*. [My italics])

Figure 2 shows the first photo to appear in the text. Its insertion into a sentence is indicative of what will prove to be a consistently applied strategy. A close, almost literal relationship is established between the sentence and the image. In the bottom-left of the photo a bell-tower, which still appears imposing even after it has been shrivelled by fire, rises up from a vast field of rubble, while on the right, on a mound closer to the foreground, three large

crosses and a tabernacle stand out against the sky: an image of Golgotha. Compared with the written text, the photo emphasises the contrast between the *horizontality* to which the city has been reduced, and the *verticality* of the religious symbols. The latter suggest the *recherché* quality of art in times of peace — namely, the remains of the huge church in carved stone, now at some remove, contrasted to the rudimentary funereal sign, in close-up: an improvised construction in times of war.

The next two pairs of images in the book have a direct relationship with the text and are presented as examples of the ideological usage "Sebald" stigmatises. The first pair comes from a pamphlet on the rebuilding of the city of Worms between 1945 and 1955, and gives a "before" and "after" views of the *Kammererstrasse* (figs. 3-4).

Figures 3 & 4

The pamphlet's rhetorical strategy transforms the destruction of the "before" view into "something more like the first stage of a brave new word" (*Ibid.*: 6). A similar effect is achieved by "postcards that travellers in Germany can buy today at the newsstands of Frankfurt am Main", and on which is printed "Frankfurt — Gestern + Heute" (fig. 5). The reconstruction of cities serving to erase the country's previous history: a focus on the future which ended up forcing the German people to "enjoin in silence about the past", instead of working towards the positive aim of the full "realisation of democracy" (*Ibid.*:7).

Figure 5

After a discussion of the bombing's fundamental uselessness, and England's political motives for pursuing it, there follows a *critique of various testimonies* of the bombings. Here, the *need to know*, which the narrator considers mandatory, and the *not wanting to know* that he encounters, lead to the emergence of other "modalizations" of the visual. Besides the *not being able to see*, there existed, above all, a *not knowing how to see*, and the reason for this is explained thusly:

> In recounting their lived experience, almost all the bombing's survivors accounts — diverse, and generally fragmentary — reveal *a curious blindness to experience, the result of extremely narrow, biased or skewed perspectives* (Sebald 2004: 20 [My italics]).

In analysing these false perspectives, "Sebald" cites a BBC radio's reporting of an attack on Berlin, deemed "disappointing", and not simply because, as he admits, very little happened which was in any way describable. The many quotations in English reveal all the gung-ho excitement of the reporter and crew faced with the "wall of lights and fire" produced by the bombs: an almost aesthetic appreciation, approaching a form of the "sublime", though described in a far-from sublime language: "By God, that looks like a bloody good show!" (*Ibid*. 21-22) [3]

A new photo (fig. 6) appears on the page right in the middle of the reporter's "decisive" statement: "We are running straight into the most gigantic display of soundless fireworks in the world and here we go to drop our bombs on Berlin" (*Ibid.*: 21). The image provides an "external view" that counterbalances the "internal voices" from the small bomber plane. We see sinuous, luminous trails overlaid on rectilinear tracks at the bottom-right of the image — the plane in the sky *versus* the anti-aircraft guns on the ground. The war is here "reduced" to a static, plastic contrast between a small dark form and a number of luminous trails in the silent darkness of the sky.

Figure 6

Yet, "Sebald" concludes:

> The need to know was at odds with a desire to close down the senses (*Ibid.*: 23);
>
> Those who had escaped the catastrophe were unreliable and partly blinded witnesses (*Ibid.*: 24).

Such, of course, is the psychological blindness that results from a traumatizing experience: it pertains to that cross-section of witnesses who may go under the name of *survivors.*[4] The substantial *weakness* of these "natural narratives[5]" rests on the sheer unlikeliness that extreme experiences can ever be translated into everyday conversation without being reduced to mere accounts of individual self-preservation. In fact, there is a built-in erratic tendency and an inherent discontinuity to so-called "natural narratives", that make them irreconcilable with the normal workings of memory and make them seem fictitious. This patina of non-authenticity is also due to eye-witnesses' tendency to over-rely on hackneyed expressions in their testimonies ("a prey to the flames", "the fateful night" etc.), the function of which is to blank out and neutralise "experiences [that lie] beyond our ability to comprehend":

> The death by fire (...) must inevitably have led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping. The accounts of individual eyewitnesses, therefore, are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals. (*Ibid.*: 25-26)

For one to become a plausible witness it is not sufficient to have directly experienced something; authenticity should not be accorded to an eyewitness testimony solely on the basis of its objective truth. Authenticity must be established, rather, with regards to the *meaning of the testimony*. The problem lies in determining how this can be achieved.

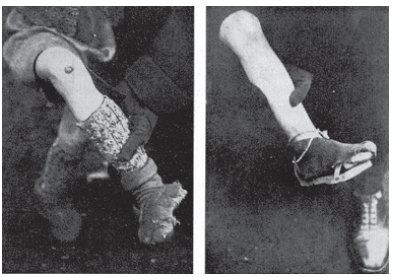
A method is clearly indicated, however, in "Sebald's' last sentence above. The text goes on to offer a reconstruction of "Operation Gomorra" over Hamburg in 1943, a chronicle harrowingly precise in its description of bombing techniques and their ghastly outcome. Only one photograph appears in the pages devoted to this searing account of the many injured and dead bodies left behind in the aftermath of the bombings. It is of some respite to the reader that the photograph is as blurred as the text is appallingly clear. Only vaguely can we discern the many contorted remains dispersed across the field of vision. Sections of the image hint at dismemberment and disfigurement; there emerges a shapelessness all so unrecognizable as to appear inhuman. The text calls up further, terrible images from eye-witness accounts, though the dominant behaviour among the surviving witnesses was to "avert our eyes", often irreparably. Time works against memory. Solly Zuckerman, an English soldier who intended to, but never did write the "Natural History of Destruction" (the latter having inspired the English title of the book) confessed many years after the fact that he remembered nothing of what had once seemed to him so urgent to record:

> All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble. (*Ibid.*: 32)

3. Chapter II, or How Not to Write a Book About Destruction

How ought such a natural history of destruction to begin? "Sebald" blends the mass of data connatural to more conventionally historical accounts with an abstract meditation on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, *à propos* various types of discourse from the post-war period: literary, cinematographic, not to mention those of the "chroniclers of horrors" as they were called: the war's scientist's and accountants. Lastly, there are also the so-called "personal" (*i.e.* individually anecdotal) accounts.

Six photographs serve to punctuate the book's second chapter. "Sebald" observes that these photographs could have belonged to soldier Zuckerman's unwritten "Natural History". They attest in quite a concrete manner to the wide-spread degradation of post-war Germany — like those from an English report entitled *The Misery of Boots*, which the journalist Victor Gollanz ordered to be taken in 1946. From this report, "Sebald" reproduces two matching vertical photographs (figs. 7-8), in both of which, against a black background, the black thumb of a gloved hand is seen against the pale skin of two seated children. One of their small legs faces the camera, which draws attention to the strange assembly of scraps and laces which the children wear as shoes. In one of the photographs, a perfectly laced adult shoe is visible, in the bottom-right corner. Spots of reflected light indicate that the shoes are made of firm shiny leather. These two photos eloquently oppose the large and the small, the well-shaped and the shapeless, the rich and the poor. The pairing of these images further establishes visual rhymes, the clearest of which is the oblique angle from which the children's legs are photographed. These visual rhymes in turn implement a *series*: the seriality of journalistic documentation which orders and sorts, transforming the misery of the children into depersonalized anonymous histories.



Figures 7 & 8 - *The Misery of Boots*

In the following photograph (fig. 9), vegetation is seen invading a city in ruins; the photograph shows the alley where the children from the previous mentioned photos had their picture taken.

Figure 9

A basic, constant opposition emerges in the book between *photographs of human beings* and *photographs of places and objects*. The cityscapes are always deserted (the written text explains how the life-forms which survive and develop in these now dehumanised cities are basically "unrepresentable"). They are also very rarely named in the text: the photographs might show a city, road, or monument, but it is up to the reader to find out and verify if they correspond to "real" places. The reader thus becomes the agent verifying the discourse's alleged authenticity. More important, however, is the human gaze which, by resting on these images of destruction, accords them a more general value of *antonomasia*.

As for the "bodies" which appear in these photographs, they are either concealed (in cockpits), dismembered (the children's legs which serve as a synecdoche for the rest of their bodies, absent from the frame), disfigured and almost unrecognisably human, or else indicate, as we shall see, "social bodies", like "cinema actors" or "listeners", or the ideal typology of the Germanic girl-child. Only in the case of the smiling group of German pilots, shot down near Norwich, is there any actual identification of the subjects: the photograph accompanies a written document recording their deaths.

In reconstructing the Germans' *survival strategies* "Sebald" examines their habit of listening to music. This can be seen both as an act of collective gratitude for having survived, but also, more importantly, of "perverse pride" in having, like no other people in history, given such proof of themselves in countenancing so much adversity. The image (fig. 10) which cuts into this paragraph is of a large hall full of listeners, "throughout the country, then, with brimming eyes and ears trained on the music" (*Ibid.*: 45) — and thus "deaf" as well as "blind", both alike and different from ourselves, as we ask what it is that hypnotises them so. In the front row people are seen sitting back or leaning forwards eagerly on the backs of the row in front. It could be a school concert. Sociological details strike the eye: a girl's Tyrolean costume, which includes her felt, feathered hat, resting upon her combed blond hair.

Figure 10

"Sebald" gives very few of the texts from the period he examines a positive evaluation. Among the works he approves is Nossack's "protocol novel":

> He was the only writer of the time to try recording what he actually saw as plainly as possible (…) plain facts: the season of the year, the weather, the observer's viewpoint (…) the burnt-out scenery, chimneys that curiously still remain standing, washing put out to dry on a rack outside a kitchen window, a torn curtain blowing from an empty veranda, a living room sofa with a crochet cover, countless other objects lost forever (…) On the whole, the moral imperative for at least one writer to describe (…) leads him to abandon elaboration. (Sebald 2004: 58-59)

What Nossack provides is described by "Sebald" as "facts". Although in reality they compose a list of "images", all of which might have emerged from the photographs chosen by Sebald for his books: images at writing's *degree zero*. None is a shock-horror photograph, none represent the "decisive moment" caught in passing, but instead they present state of things, states of facts: bare but charged with the discreet power of an enigma, and useful in being able to form part of the "precision and responsibility" we ask of a literary form which is "indispensable to a man who knows and does not close his eyes"[6], and drawing on materials which cannot be judged by the criteria of traditional aesthetics.

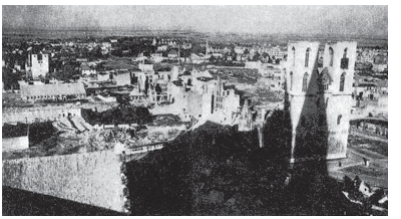
Yet the documents never speak in isolation. The "information value" of authentic eye-witnesses accounts (including the reports of the "chroniclers of horror", anatomo-pathologists, and other scientists interested in the effects of war) emerges when they enact an "archaeological" dig — much like that which Alexander Kluge (whom "Sebald" discusses) felt the need for thirty some years after the war. Interestingly, the "dig" produced accounts of opposite and equally irrational modes of behaviour under the bombings.

One example, from Kluge, is that of Frau Schrader, who worked furiously at removing the still smoking rubble of the Capitol Cinema for the two o'clock showing: for her, "the fact that the right wing of the theatre had been destroyed … had no connection, either logical or dramatic, with the scheduled film", part of the regular screening program program for years (p. 62). A poster of the film in question,

Heimkehhr, (*Homecoming* 1941), is reproduced in the book: the film is Nazi propaganda meant to justify the 1940 invasion of Poland. In this case the testimonial value of the document in Kluge's narrative replaces its original advertising — and propagandist — value. As for the film, it provided, in the actor's physiognomies and in its pictorial design, a glimpse into the period's *Zeitgeist*. The winter landscape, family homes lining the wide road extending to a frozen horizon of snow, and the skeletal black trees all stand as metaphors of the country's *interiority* under Nazism.

The end of the chapter is a meditation on memory as a possible source for "alternative outcomes for history" and for a future unburdened by repressed experience. The photo of figure 11 is seen. It is possible to distinguish in the photograph the romantic city of Halberstadt, again from the outlines of its churches: in the background, on the left, stands the Moritzkirche; on the right, there is the cathedral of St. Stephen.

Figure 11



"The sun bears heavily down on the city, since there is hardly any shade" (*Ibid.*: 66-67), Kluge once wrote of a bombed cityscape. In the photograph, shadow is almost inexistent because virtually nothing in the ruins is high enough to project one. But then, from a source outside the frame, a large patch of contoured shadow overlaps part of the ruins, beginning from the bottom, and extending as far as St. Stephen's. It could be the shadow of St. Martin's, from which Kluge wondered whether it might not have been possible quickly to raise a huge white flag, six sheets sewn together, to ward off the bombings. "Sebald" comments':

> (Kluge) looks at the destruction of his hometown with the horrified fixity of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history," whose "face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. (*Ibid.*: 67)

To ponder this image is, then, to participate in a succession of gazes — Benjamin's, Kluge's, Sebald's, the anonymous photographer's, and perhaps many others — as we are forcibly led to line-up behind them, adopting a critical and compassionate stance.

4. Chapter III, or On the Chasms of History

The third chapter has four illustrations integrated into the text: a page from a commemorative volume from 1963, a photograph of a detail of a bedroom, the Nazi fortress of Ordenburg, and lastly a document of the *Luftwaffe* pilots.

The first part of the chapter is the most intensely personal in the book. here, in a sort of personal case-history, "Sebald" explains why he still feels so involved in his nation's past, and so frustrated and bewildered both by the silence and by the memories it keeps of itself. He speaks of his early childhood. Although at the time of the destruction he was little more than one year old, and therefore too young to remember it, he states:

> ... when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge. (*Ibid.*: 71)

In complete contrast, a 1963 brochure advertising Sonthofen — today a thriving ski-resort — comments on the images of a mountain landscape of narcissi and of a young blond-pigtailed girl with the following caption: "The war took much from us, but our beautiful native landscapes were left untouched, as flourishing as ever" (*Ibid.*: ivi).

The culpably oleographic quality of the images meshes in "Sebald's" mind with the images of destruction which had, somehow, communicated "a sense of home' to him:

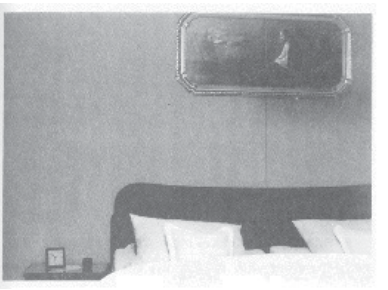
> I know now that at the time, when I was lying in my bassinet on the balcony of the Seefeld house and looking up at the pale blue sky, there was a pall of smoke in the air all over Europe, over the rearguard actions in east and west, over the ruins of the German cities, and over the camps where untold numbers of people were burnt (...). (*Ibid.*: ivi)

These thick, black clouds, contrast with the much whiter ones of the sanitized version of Sonthofen in the photograph. In the image accompanying "Sebald's" account, the dark clouds occupy two thirds of the illustration of Hitler's bastion, Ordensburg, one of three great Nazi military schools. Ordensburg was located close to the alpine village of Sonthofen. This lead to a bombing which spared the Nazi fortress but killed all the patients in a nearby hospital, as well as one Mater Sebalda who was nursing them. Thick, black clouds, often present in Sebald's illustrations, testify to a *celestial* space which is anything but utopian.

With these images we enter the innermost region of "Sebald's" personal testimony. An illustration, showing a bed head with an overhanging picture (fig. 12), stands as testimonial of, above all, the

psychic dimension of the text.

Figure 12



The room appears to be "Sebald's" parents' room and the painting a religious one:

> It was a bluish oleograph in the Nazarene style, showing Christ before his Passion seated deep in thought in the moonlit, nocturnal Garden of Gethsemane. (Sebald 2004: 73)

It was, however, his memory of having found, even in Corsica, stones commemorating those killed in the *lagers* (there was scarcely a place in Europe from which no one had been deported to his death in those years), that seems to have nudged "Sebald" into remembering seing a picture just like it in Corsica, in a church in Morosaglia. The coincidence establishing unlooked-for isotopic connections between the journey of those deported from Corsica to Germany, and that of the picture, being "moved" from Germany to Corsica. The "vertigo" he describes of below is, we surmise, due to the fact that Sebald's father had initially bought the reproduction of the painting in Bamberg, the birthplace of Von Stauffenberg, master-mind behind the plot against Hitler of 20 July 1944, while in Morosaglia (where "Sebald" had found the same picture) had been the birthplace of General Paoli, the leader of the Corsican Revolution in the eighteenth century. Therefore, a painting of the Passion here stands for two equally failed attempts at social and historical renewal.

> Such is the dark backward and abyss of time. Everything lies all jumbled up in it, and when you look down you feel dizzy and afraid. (*Ibid.*: 74)

Biographies suddenly appear to merge and blend: "Sebald's" father belonged to the same regiment as Von Stauffenberg and he had the same age as one of four German pilots who died in an air raid in 1942 (and who, for good measure, was born the same day as "Sebald"), falling in a field close to Sebald's house in England, where "you sense the dead souls of the men who never came back from their missions, and of those who perished in the vast fires" (*Ibid.*: 77).

Since it is the attached document which gives the pilots' birthdays, one might infer that it is the image, in this case, that provides "Sebald"

with the information whereby collective and personal memory may be associated. The process, however, is none the less effective for being quasi-involuntary, as opposed to the "constructed" recollections of Germany's destruction.

5. Concluding Remarks

Debt, difficulties, and the proper forms of memory are the themes which characterise the work of W.G. Sebald. In *Luftkrieg und Literatur* his enquiry, conducted explicitly, and, through extensive research, constructs itself while debating its own becoming. A semiotician whose work readily comes to mind here is Juri M. Lotman. According to him, only that which has been translated from reality into one of the "languages of culture" can ever become part of the common "heritage of memory" (1970). Lotman also helps us understand how Sebald moves among different languages or systems of expression in his work, conceiving the text as a dynamic field, a semiotic space characterised by heterogeneity and intersegmental tension as the different parts (verbal and visual) come together and establish a dialogue. According to Lotman:

> A text that can be represented as a structural unity of two or more sub-texts, codified by different and mutually untranslatable codes. These sub-texts may present themselves as locally-ordered spaces, in which case the text in its various parts can be read using different languages, or can appear as a set of different strata which however remain unchanged throughout the syntagm of the whole text. In this second case, the text offers a dual reading: quotidian and symbolic, for example. All cases evincing a contrapuntal conflict between different semiotic languages within a unitary structure will be considered rhetorical texts. (Lotman 1998: 102)

For Lotman, then, a text's structure may rely on *intra*-textual relations among different *sub*-texts (in Sebald's case, this is illustrated by the co-presence of images and verbal language). These *sub*-texts are not necessarily in conflict with one another, rather, their relation may exemplify what Jakobson in his famous typology. refered to as *intersemiotic translation* (Jakobson 1959). The co-presence of two expressive means creating a dynamic content plane where it is possible to read the photographs as *interpretants* of the verbal discourse, and *vice versa*. In such instances, the text offers *triggering* and *defusing* devices that can either emphasize or conceal the interdependance of the two modes of expression thanks to various textual operations of "magnification"/"narcotisation" or "relaxation/ossification" (*cf.* Dusi 2003: 90).

Another constant device in Sebald's essay consists of severing photographs from their original context and inserting them into a new discursive environment. This operation is often conflictual: for instance, apparently pleasant, positive images are denounced by Sebald as the vehicle of subtle mystification. According to Lotman such "textual"

embedding is not simply "an operation of adapting and inserting external messages into the memory of culture", but is also a stimulus for its "self-development", one capable of producing unforeseen results (Lotman 1970: 256). This idea is of considerable interest, particularly with reference to the problem of textual efficacy. Sebald's project is the archaeological excavation and refounding of collective memory — although he labours under no illusion. His intention is to rouse and provoke his readers, not least through the montage of text and images. Jacques Geninasca (1998), from a theoritical perspective compatible with Lotman's, has shown how the discursive organisation of aesthetic texts creates interrelated *textual spaces*: text and image can, for example, evince relations of semantic equivalence, and instead foster semantic transformations and growth as the text weaves back and forth between them: such results are produced by changes in the enunciator's modal state — from the cognitive to the thymic — in accord with the hierarchy of semantic changes the reader encounters in the search for textual coherence and cohesion. The reader's ability to perceive and elucidate these transformations constitutes a case of "semiosis in action".

Similarly, the *authenticity* of a text is not evaluated simply in terms of pragmatic, extensional operations. It also concerns the quality of the voice, the subject's openness to reappraisal, and the ability to combine sensitivity with intelligence in reviewing experience and communicating it steadily and directly.

Furthermore, in order for meaning to emerge, the subject of enunciation must take a stand in the "dialogical field" of representation. In general terms, this field corresponds to the sum of all the diverse discourses that form a culture, understood that literary and aesthetic discourses belong to the life of a society. In a semiotics of enunciation concerned with one's ability to invest language and make it one's own, the reader becomes the locus where sociologically and historically determined discourses and speakers meet and relate.[7]

Images in Sebald's writings seem to signal a double layer of enunciative work. The single photographs carry their own enunciative trace, their very existence presupposing an initial "enunciator" in the photographer having taken the picture. Equally, however, they belong to a new "syncretic" enunciation: Sebald's own. Here, a sort of "patina"-effect is created at the concrete, material level of the text. For reasons that are contingent, even typographical, yet not extraneous to Sebald's poetics, this "patina"-effect encloses and homogenizes the verbal and the visual alike into a single (dialogical) statement.[8]

Practical and purely editorial considerations apart, this patina (or haze), which is present in all editions of Sebald's work, serves also to make the images homogeneous and, in some way, coeval, whatever their age or provenance. All come from the past, the darkroom of communal memory.

Photographs take on the role of *informant* in exactly the same way as those human "informants", who are actorialised in works of narrative: "a cognitive subject provided by the knowledge (partial or total) of the enunciator, who installs it in the discourse as mediator with respect to the enunciator" (*cf.* "Informant", in Greimas-Courtés 1986). The interesting aspect in this case is that the enunciator never completely takes on the photographer-informant's knowledge as his own: as a photographic "text", this knowledge always requires interpretation.

Regarding the substance of expression, *Luftkrieg und literature*'s photographs possess a quality of mental image or personal memory, the "clarity" and reliability of which Sebald himself questions and challenges repeatedly.[9] The fact that these images are low-definition makes their legibility difficult. Undoubtedly, this vitiates or reduces the evidential or probative evidence usually accorded to photographs, as well as the "injunction to observe" which characterises most "shocking" images. The reduced size of the printed photograph, and, even more, the print quality and type, produce a level of expression which softens the outlines of the never-foregrounded figures (eidetic contrasts) and their iconic density (contrasts of light and colour). This creates an effect which is in keeping with an "inner vision", and thus a particular affective tone emerges which induces more than meets the eye.

Some of these images are, in fact, clear, to the extent that the writing within them is more or less legible. However, semiotic consideration of modes of vision and the use of blurred images can help us understand how this shifts the focus onto the enunciative agency and its various aspectual strategies of concealment and focalization while, at the same time, tensively challenging the latter's ability to see and to know (Fontanille 1995; Dusi 2003: 276).

A case in point is Chaldej's cover photograph, mentioned earlier. Although, it illustrates an event as it is happening, the temporal effect is singular. Its overall physical quality, — *i.e.* the result of conditions of exposure and printing, — "ages" the photograph considerably.[10] It bears, as it were, the stigmata of a testimony, the weight of some remote enunciation, which goes beyond the specific *ça a été* which it announces.[11]

These are images, moreover, which invoke an "intimacy" between the various agents of enunciation, for they require not only a cognitive reading but a *compassionate* one as well — a joint act of compassion even. The reading contract offered and required by the text hightens its intersubjective aspect by involving perception — therefore the body — and affect. For this reason it is important that the reader should "see" and "feel" what Sebald saw and felt, and, most importantly, should give it thoughtful consideration. The perception and analysis of the images' "plastic" and figurative aspects can never find completion in the pure contemplation of their composition. Straining towards a sense which transcends their aesthetic, sensual dimension, they provide a means — a window or screen — with which to construct an authenticity commensurate with the author's discourse.

Notes

1 Jean-Marie Floch has attempted to classify the different "discourses on photography" onto a semiotic square of axiologies, on the basis of the fundamental opposition between "photography conceived as an auxiliary to the arts and sciences" — which would also include photographic-evidence — and "photography conceived as an art". As will be obvious from my reading, it is virtually impossible to reduce Sebald's use of photography to such a neat axiology. (Floch 1986).

2 Different editions of the book contain other works, such as an essay on Alfred Andersch, a prime example, according to Sebald, of how *not* to create a literary memory of the German catastrophe. I shall here take into consideration only the first part of the book.

3 *Cf.* Boltanski 1992, on the different topics used to represent suffering.

4 *Cf.* the re-elaboration of the different typologies proposed in De Maria 2006: 77-80.

5 The distinction between natural and artificial narrative, attributed to Teun Van Dijk (1974), is taken up again by Umberto Eco in *Lector in fabula* (1979), chap. 4: "both are examples of descriptions of actions, the first referring to events presented as having actually occurred (e.g. news reporting in newspapers), the second concerning individuals and facts attributed to separate worlds at a distance from our own experience. Naturally, artificial narrative respects few of the pragmatic conditions to which natural narrative is subject (e.g., the author is under no obligation to tell the truth or prove his/her assertions)..." (Eco 1979: 70).

6 Elias Canetti, commenting on the diary of a Hiroshima survivor.

7 For further important research on the topic of efficacy see Fontanille (2004), an essential integration and extension to the present work.

8 Enunciation devices in Sebald are frequently quite complex, in part owing to the multiple threading of narratives and voices. In the short story on Stendhal's biography, e.g., in *Vertigo* (Sebald 1990), the device is that of a third-person narrator who superimposes himself onto the authorial voice of Henri Beyle, becoming responsible for the manipulations of and interrelations between text and image (the use of images inside the text was also typical of Stendhal as autobiographer).

9 Robert Castel (1965) emphasises photography's role in mediating and linking conscious and unconscious instances of subjectivity, to produce a basic homology between photographic and personal images (like dream images, photographs create a sort of translation space for the contents of the unconscious): hence, too, the function of photography in the process of grieving.

10 Chaldej's perhaps most famous photograph catches a precise moment, directly following on from the image in the present photograph: the moment in which the Red Army flag is planted on the ruined *Reichstag*.

11 *Cf.* in contrast, the "effect of presence" and contemporary quality of the digital image, most memorably that of the fall of the Twin Towers, still perfect after a number of years.

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Abstract

The article examines the interrelation of photograph and text in W.G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2001). This intermediality is, indeed, characteristic of Sebald's work in both fiction and non-fiction. *On the Natural History...* belongs to the latter category, an involved and emotional examination of the collective repression in the consciousness of the German people of the carpet-bombing of Germany at the end of World War II. Here too the photographs have a function which goes far beyond that of testimony, the images constructing a complex plot within and with the text, on the level of both expression and content. What they produce is a new and singular "third language", the only idiom capable of dealing with such complex issues of pain and blame, repression and memory.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les rapports entre photographie et texte dans *De la destruction comme élément de l'histoire naturelle* de W.G. Sebald (2001). L'intermédialité est une caractéristique fondamentale de l'oeuvre de cet auteur, tant de sa fiction que de ses essais. *De la destruction...*, lequel est un essai, est une enquête engagée et émotionnelle sur le tabou qui pèse dans les esprits de la population allemande au sujet des bombardements massifs de l'Allemagne à la fin de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. Les photographies sont ici plus que des instruments de témoignage, elles contribuent à façonner avec le texte un réseau formel (plan de l'expression) et sémantique (plan du contenu) très dense. Ce qu'elles produisent est un "langage tiers" tout à fait nouveau et singulier, que l'auteur considère comme le seul langage susceptible d'aborder des sujets aussi complexes que la culpabilité, la faute, la répression et la mémoire.

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