

Walking with W.G. Sebald

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Knowledge vs truth

Most of us involved in the social sciences and the humanities have in one way or another resigned to some variation of postmetaphysics. 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, the fact that we call 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). So 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 the 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, fact from truth. So momentarily, even as ‘mere’ scholars, we may speak about truth without feeling overtly embarrassed about it. As a young undergraduate, I remember how many of my professors and mentors regarded *Asylums* (Goffman 1961), Erving Goffman’s collection of essays, as such a cross-over phenomenon. ‘On the Characteristics of Total Institutions’, the opening essay of the book, identified a set of recognisable traits that were distinctive of all total institutions, and, *mutatis mutandis*, we became aware of totalising traits 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, elegant and light, and in stark contrast to the book’s sombre topics. 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 field of the social sciences was 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' 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.

So on top of the factual merits — the traits that characterise all total institutions — we 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 twenty years later when I was already an independent postgraduate scholar in my own right — albeit still young — 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 time¹, 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; 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. Now, 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 - 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, 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 in 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 the fine arts.

Bricolage

My own 'Goffman moment' was similar in the sense that it was a work of art, a novel, that resonated with the kind of research that I wanted to do. Jennie and Pete Smith, friends and artists affiliated with the London-based collective By Beck Road 19, gave me W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998) as a present. I knew of Sebald but had not read him before. In the novel, the unreliable first-person narrator explored a North Sea coastal environment while meditating on issues such as memory and identity. Text and image, different literary genres like prose fiction, essay and travelogue, fact and fiction, all intermingled to produce a wavering meaning that, to me, 'rang truer' than any geographically accurate and self-assured description of the same environment ever could have. In an interview, Sebald commented on his own wavering position 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 more and more 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; Minkkinen 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, Sebald’s wavering 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’s 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)

So in Lévi-Strauss's terms, mythical thinking is 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 parts 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's 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's 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).

Ethnographies

But perhaps the 'third' position can be found elsewhere. J.J. 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's *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'² 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 research 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 by the incisive scientist, can provide credibility 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 credibility is built. This double bind reiterates the distinction made between *ethnography as method* (e.g. Hammersley - Atkinson 2007) and *ethnography as writing* (e.g. Atkinson 1990; Atkinson 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.

Constellations

Many commentators have noted that irrespective of Sebald's possible fascination for 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. Preuschhoff 2016; Preuschhoff 2018). To me, the kinship has less to do with any particular appreciation of literature, or even 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 *flâneur* (see e.g. Coates 2017; Jenks - 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' (see especially the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' in 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 (see Minkinen 2013; also e.g. Lambrianou 2004; Löwy 1980; Löwy 1992). This is what is sometimes perhaps too expediently condensed into the 'early' Benjamin before his 1924 trip to Capri where he read György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* for the first time and met Anna 'Asja' Lācis, the Marxist theatre director and 'Bolshevik actress'. So at least on the face of it, this is not yet a properly 'Frankfurtian' Benjamin, if he ever was one. One argument might be that what attracted Sebald to Benjamin was, in fact, not any Frankfurt-brand of Marxism at all but, rather, a 'romantic anti-capitalism' of sorts (Löwy 1994; Sayre - Löwy 1984).

And so, 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. So 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. And as such it may be more inclined to generate the kind of 'disruptive paradigms' that we should be on the lookout for.

This idea has not gone unnoticed by ethnographers themselves either (e.g. Sieber - 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 2003: 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)

So here again, just like with Sebald, the ethnographer's method cannot be Lévi-Strauss's scientific anthropology but, rather, something resembling a 'love of muted and even defective storytelling as a form of analysis' (Taussig 2006: vii) practiced by the *bricoleur/bricoleuse* herself whose 'prerational' thinking the scientist is merely attempting to describe.

In the words of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 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.
(Hofmannsthal 1914: 45)

These are Death's closing lines in *Death and the Fool*, a play that was significant for Benjamin (see e.g. Witte 1991: 64-67; Cacciari 2009), 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).

Notes

¹ 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 - Foucault - Vidal-Naquet 1971; English translation available as 'Manifesto' 2013).

² 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).

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