Sebald’s Strange Cinematic Prose: *stasis* and *kinesis*

*Sebald’s works of fiction are recognisable by the audacious, occasionally mischievous insertion of photographs into his prose. Images exiled from some other time and place are apparently domesticated in an alterity which seems resistant to a conventional sense of the narrative. The idea of cinematic *kinesis* is suggested by Sebald’s montage of self-reflexive strangeness, the dynamic, unbounded word-images of his “voice-over-domesticated” prose unfolding in the reader’s mind with the unexpected rupture of *stasis* afforded by the random sequence of the exiled photographic images. These arrest the cinematic flow of contingency created in the reader’s mind by the narrator’s voice, creating contemplative space and critical distance in a way that the urgent momentum of film resists with its insistent futurity.*

“[…] why artow comen in-to this solitarie place of myn exil?”
Boethius (translated by Geoffrey Chaucer)\(^1\)

“Il faut bien bander l’ame pour lui faire sentir comme elle s’écoule”;
Michel de Montaigne\(^2\)

“‘It was’, says Michael Krüger, ‘a strange thing to wander in a city with Max, in that he always had his camera to hand. He would sometimes stop every few paces and take a picture. Always trying to capture and preserve something he had seen.’”\(^3\)

I want to imagine that Boethius’ question, “Why have you come into this solitary place of my exile?”, in Chaucer’s translation, has a double function: that it might be asked by readers of Sebald’s prose fiction texts in respect to that Sebaldian voice which connects those anonymous, quasi-autobiographical narrators and their texts with their spectral author, and that it might be asked by Sebald himself, as the historical person the author, of the ghosts of the future, that is to say his readers, now and in the future.

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In asking this question of Sebald’s texts, “Why have you come into this solitary place of my exile?”, I’ll try to elicit one aspect of Sebaldian poetics: the way in which the temporalised *kinesis* of the voicing of the verbal text brings to life, in a constructed present tense, the *stasis* of the temporal freeze that are the still images in his texts, the point-to-point itinerary or stations, those moments from the past. By this I mean both the images inserted into the text and the images Sebald paints with his painterly eye in his prose, together with the pictures that the reader’s imagination creates over which she may pause for contemplation before resuming the reading journey. The kinetic present tense is located in the subjective response of the reader or the viewer, in which moment of lived intensity, of the kind Montaigne describes, the text, that stasis, is brought to life. As Roland Barthes has taught us, the author is dead, and the text mediates the birth of the reader for its own resurrection.

I want to suggest that Sebald’s observing and recording mind, his *Wunderkammer*-producing imagination, employs the cinematic text’s generic form in this stasis–kinesis formulation, which is the form of his prose fiction. The stasis is not only the frozen images, those instantiations of the past, which rupture the verbal text, but also the points at which the narration or digressive reflection slows down to a contemplative pause, before the journey of the travelling pilgrim begins once more in his written text, the kinesis informing the reader’s mind.

This layered movement or activity is played out in the reader’s mind as we stop, pause, consider, reflect, travel outside the text to research or read further, before returning to the text and its progress. It is no new thing to claim that the activity of the mind of a reader, or the mind in general, runs like a continuous film, but Sebald’s use of it in the form of his prose texts, which foreground explicitly the act of reading itself, builds in part, possibly thanks to his Gymnasium education, on the ancient classical tradition of inserting different forms into a text which is both oral and written – the choral odes in Doric Greek and the main text with its Attic Greek hexameters, and Homeric poetry with its sequence of episodes punctuated, as Boethius’ poem is, by static moments which reflect on the action.

McCulloh, in his essay “The Stylistics of Stasis”, quotes Tim Parks:

Like the “rhythmic scenes” that correspond visually to the verbal structures-strophes of Homer’s classical poem, the peripatetic episodes experienced by Sebald’s narrators, though strikingly original in their manner of incorporating allusions, meditations, and digressions of various kinds, are without progress in the sense that Parks attributes to film. Stasis is not merely a feature of Sebald’s recursive narrative technique, ever “on the verge”, but it is the status of art as such.4

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