

Karen Remmler
Mount Holyoke College
kremmler@MtHolyoke.edu

Citing Memory in the work of Ruth Beckermann and W.G. Sebald

In my talk, I focus on a subject that is central to Ruth Beckermann's film aesthetic and essays: namely, face to face encounters at sites of memory. In my writing on the connection between places of burial and the more intangible desire to find closure, to bury one's dead, I am struck again and again, but the widening gap between individual memories of the past and the collectivizing and highly politicized pressure for individuals to incorporate their subjective memories into a collective, often national or group memory of the past. Beckermann explores this phenomenon in her films and essays.

I would like to focus on sites of memory, or perhaps more accurately sites of remembrance. These sites distinguish themselves from sites of history through the discontinuity and interruption of the historical flow that they embody. Memories emerge at a site when a divide between the past and the present takes place. As Aleida Assman has so vividly described, at a site of memory, a certain history has ceased, it has been more or less abruptly interrupted. The interrupted history manifests itself in ruins or in relics, that appear to be foreign remains and therefore, different from the surroundings and out of place. The interrupted history is petrified in the remains and exists in the present as an aberration, as something that can not be completely absorbed and thus completely forgotten. Repressed, yes, but forgotten, no. These remains are also often overlooked or unseen in the present, unless their traces are noticed by someone, usually in a moment of sudden insight or involuntary recollection. Often sites of memory are places of trauma for which no conscious narrative exists. Assmann warns that the prevalence of sites of memory across Europe is not just a manifestation of the modernity with its tendency for displacement and disruption, but a result of intentional violence and destruction.

These sites of memory are often intangible and they appear often in Beckermann's films, not as actual physical spaces, but as flashes of recognition, that take place in that crevice between historical documentation and subjective remembrance. Even as the location of the filming--a living room, the interior of a train passing through Vienna, a cold and sterile exhibit space, or a dream-like landscape, exist in reality, Beckermann's situating of memory in them, creates other, more compelling spaces. Of her film "Jenseits vom Krieg" (oddly translated as East of War), Beckermann writes: "Oft hatte ich historische Bilder vor Augen, riesige Schlachtengemälde, wo ich schreckliche Szenen verteilt über immenses Gebiet, das mit Krieg bezogen wurde, ereignen. Der Film mute eine ähnliche Qualität bekommen, eine Weite, welche die geographischen Dimensionen spürbar werden lt." It is the geographical dimensions of memory that interests me here. Memory as remembrance, as a space in which time is suspended and where insight becomes possible. How is the sense of being in place, of being displaced, and of being denied a home

compared to the experience of arriving and of creating a home? I am interested in how film can conjure up images of encounters at sites of memory that do not simply memorialize and commemorate the dead and the victims of atrocity and war. Rather, I want to ask how these sites that we can not enter, but which we sense as having a presence, come into being. A place that is not physical per se, but intangible. Intangible in that they are not corporeal or material, but sensed, not quite explicable.

I also want to explore why some places have become emblematic as representative of these intangible spaces of memory, place that is not unlike the waiting rooms at a large Antwerpen urban railroad, like the one that W.G. Sebald describes in his book "Austerlitz". The archival and, at the same time, haunting prose of Sebald's works such as "The Emigrants" or "Austerlitz" bear a close resemblance to the work of memory that Beckermann's films beg us to do. The protagonist, or rather the rememberer Austerlitz spends time in places in which time is seemingly suspended and where imaginary encounters with the dead take place. The photographs that appear in the text are themselves sites of memory, or as J. M. Coetzee as put it in a recent review of Sebald's work "a kind of eye or node of linkage between the past and the present, enabling the living to see the dead and the dead to see living, the survivors." The snapshots lead us to other places of encounter, the railroad waiting room and the train itself. Trains are eerie creatures--they are both the vehicles of escape and wonderous journeys and the ominous carriers of the deported and the doomed. Why are trains and railroad stations recurring images that stand in for intangible sites of memory where, for an instant outside of time, the repressed past comes into view?

In some ways, Beckermann has taken on many journeys by train in order to remind us that our perception is not only muddled by the passage of time and by selective memory, but also by the very technology that gets us from one place to another. What are the actual techniques by which a space for remembering is created and brings insight, as much as it may be elegiac, nostalgic, or melancholic?. One of the beauties of Beckermann's films, as Elfriede Jelinek once wrote is that they include these moments, too, even as they have an irony that cuts through the sentimentalization or romanticization of the past. We may recall from "Die Papierende Brücke" the emphasis is on loss, on sorrow, on the inability to bring closure to the grieving process, and yet nostalgic--a longing for a time seemingly less fraught with tragedy, atrocity, or hardship. Beckermann's films have created sites of memory that may appear melancholic or nostalgic at first glance. Yet, the gendering of spaces in Beckermann's spaces creates an alternative to the more elegiac images that are conjured in Sebald's textual and visual spaces of remembrance. By focusing on particular spaces of remembrance in Beckermann's films in comparison to Sebald's similar practice of intermeshing historical and individual memories, I will show how the gendered construction of cultural memory takes place with special attention to references to Austria as an imagined space.