

A Cinema Guild Release



Patience (After Sebald)

A film by Grant Gee

90 minutes / HD / 1.85:1 / Dolby Stereo / U.K. / In English / Not Rated
Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

The Cinema Guild, Inc.
115 West 30th Street, Suite 800
New York, NY 10001-4061
Tel: (212) 685-6242, Fax: (212) 685-4717
www.cinemaguild.com

SYNOPSIS

A richly textured essay film on landscape, art, history, life and loss, *Patience (After Sebald)* offers a unique exploration of the work and influence of internationally acclaimed writer W.G. Sebald (1944 – 2001). With contributions from major writers, artists and filmmakers, including Adam Phillips, Robert Macfarlane, Rick Moody and Tacita Dean, the film is structured around a walk through coastal East Anglia, the same path followed by Sebald in his ground-breaking book, "The Rings of Saturn." Directed by the Grierson Award winning director of *Joy Division*, *Patience* is the first film on this important and vital writer, and marks ten years since his untimely death.

ABOUT W.G. SEBALD

W.G. Sebald was born in Wertach im Allgau, Germany in 1944. He studied German language and literature in Freiburg, Switzerland and Manchester. In 1966 he took up a position as an assistant lecturer at the University of Manchester, and settled permanently in England in 1970. He was Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia, and the author of *Austerlitz*; *The Emigrants*, which won a series of major awards, including the Berlin Literature Prize, the Heinrich Boll Prize, the Heinrich Heine Prize and the Joseph Breitbach Prize; *The Rings of Saturn*; and *Vertigo*, among other important works.

W.G. Sebald wrote in his native tongue, German, and worked closely with his translators, especially Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell, to translate his work into English. He died in December 2001. He is widely regarded as one of the most important post-War European authors, and his work has proved decisively influential on numerous artists, writers and film-makers.

“In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast. I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching farback into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts”

An extract from *Rings of Saturn* by W. G. Sebald

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NOTES TOWARDS A FILM
By Grant Gee

W.G. Sebald has, in the ten years since his sudden death in a car crash (12/14/2001), begun to exert an almost uncanny influence over contemporary art and writing.

He's become one of those rarest of writers: the adjectival author, in the shortest possible time. 'Sebaldian' has entered the language. I wanted to find out why this is, and trace his influence through the zeitgeist.

Both my previous major long-form works – Radiohead's *Meeting People Is Easy* and *Joy Division* – as well as the recent short film *The Western Lands*, examined iconic contemporary artists in the context of the landscapes they inhabited, respectively the 'non-places' of international touring, the post-industrial wreckage of late 1970s Manchester and the lethal cliff faces of the Orkney Islands. These artists could not be understood fully without an understanding of the landscapes and locations they occupied. The dialogue between personality and place is thus central to my own artistic investigations.

Rarely has the idea and importance of place been more prominent in culture and thought than it is at the moment. There are many reasons for this, not least the effect of globalization, with its spread of 'sameness' and the subsequent alienation and lack of belonging people feel. As things are erased, so they become even more significant.

This destruction of 'place' is a kind of catastrophe in our imaginative lives. It doesn't have to take the form of explicit environmental or topographic change. Perhaps even more pernicious is the long-term psychological effect. Sebald's body of work is profoundly aware of this and offers the richest statement I have come across about the importance of attention to place and the histories it holds and has made. Properly to honor the associative nature of the book and the themes discussed, the 'essay film', a 'genre' employed to great effect by the likes of Chris Marker, Harun Farocki, Patrick Keiller and Chris Petit, seems a very helpful and productive means to explore such material.

Such a form allows for multiple tones and textures, essential when considering Sebald and place. It is also a personal form, not governed by pre-ordained structures and templates. I am extremely glad to have had the opportunity to work with this approach, and hope in a small way to have done justice, on film, to the remarkable work of this most important and influential writer.

GRANT GEE ON SEBALD AND CINEMA
An Interview by Craig Hubert for Bookforum.com

In *Patience (After Sebald)*, a former publisher of the late author W.G. Sebald shares an anecdote about the difficulty he had assigning a genre to *The Rings of Saturn*. Is it fiction, non-fiction, travel, or history? The work, ultimately, is unclassifiable. The same can be said of the film, a meditation on Sebald's walking tour of the Suffolk coast. Directed by Grant Gee, best known for his documentary *Joy Division*, the film explores Sebald's work through landscape, image, and atmosphere.

A few days before *Patience's* premiere at the New York Film Festival, Gee took some time to speak to *Bookforum* about the project.

BOOKFORUM: You're known for your work on music documentaries, but this film is different in subject matter. How did the project originate?

GRANT GEE: There's a company called Artevents who have this big project called The Re-Enchantment, which consists of five original commissions: a conceptual art piece, a performance piece, a book, a sculpture, and a film, all about various artists' response to place. It takes place over the course of a year, and these things are rolled out every two months or so. A guy named Gareth Evans, who's been a long term supporter of mine, who kind of kept me going with the short, noncommercial films I was making, said to me, 'Look. I like your films, and I realize that all your films are essentially about place, even the rock n' roll films.' He told me what I've been doing for the past ten years, unbeknownst to myself. So we got talking and we both discovered that we really loved Sebald. In fact, the climbing film I'd just done (*Western Lands*) had a line in it, "west is where the light died," and we both hit on the fact that in *The Rings of Saturn*, there's this line, "east is the direction of lost causes." It was a real hodge-podge of an idea initially, really messy. But after about a month or so of banging it around, I sort of hit on the idea of hanging it around the walk of *The Rings of Saturn*.

What was your level of interest in Sebald's work before you started the project?

I knew very little about him and I came to him very late, like a year or so before I started work on the film. A friend of mine said, 'have you read this yet,' and shamefully I hadn't. There's a very good article by Rick Moody about Sebald in which Moody comes up with the term "textual compulsion," to describe the feeling of discovering a writer and reading one book, then getting this itch soon after to read something else, and then having to read the next one, and the next one, until you've read everything that they've published. That's very much how it happened with me. So I read *The Rings of Saturn*, and I still can't quite work out what it is, how it operates on some people the way it does. It's a mental space that's quite troubling but is very addictive. Over the course of six months I just read everything by him, not so much about him.

In the film, different people have different opinions on the benefits of retracing Sebald's steps from the book. How important was it for you to do the walk from the book?

I knew the film was going to be very digressive—I wanted it to be about him, about the book, about the landscape, about people's responses to the book, about people's own personal stories that have nothing to do with Sebald. It was necessary to find a really tight, strong, structural device to hang all this diverse stuff on. The stronger and simpler I could make that structural device the easier it was going to be to structure the film. So it

became very important for me to go through the book line by line, to get the best maps possible, and to go, 'Okay, he talked about this, so he must have gone down that path, he wouldn't have gone down that main road.' I spent quite a long time doing that, and it was really important. Also, I've only just remembered this, actually. I'd recently been to see an exhibition of the artist Richard Long. I don't know if you know him.

No I'm not familiar.

He's a walker. He's an artist whose walks are his art. He does these very minimal but potent graphics based on each walk—a very straight formula that he devises for each piece. Something as simple and direct and formulaic as that was really important, because I knew everything else was going to drift, and I didn't know what people were going to say, or where the film was ultimately going to go. That made the concreteness of the walk really important.

Were you a walker before the film?

No, not really. Well, I only learned to drive two years ago. I'm not a great country walker; I'm a pedestrian and a cyclist more than anything else. The challenge of it—not that it's hugely strenuous, but I'd never done anything like it—was important to me. Here is a task, the simplicity of it.

The title of the film, *Patience*, doesn't have any direct relation to the book, but feels very Sebaldian.

Truth be told, the title came before this particular idea for the film. We went through about three major attempts and different proposals about how to do a film about Sebald. When we came up with the title *Patience*, it was because in the book *Austerlitz* there's a key scene in which the Sebaldian narrator comes across the Austerlitz character, sees him from behind in a room, and he has a stack of black-and-white photographs. The narrator says he can see Austerlitz dealing them out in a sequence like he's playing a game of *Patience*, which is like *Solitaire* in the States. The idea was that this guy is putting down family photos or location photos and hoping that a certain sequence of images will unlock the secret of his trauma. Obviously, thinking about montage and filmmaking, the idea of putting a certain sequence together that can unlock everything is very important. So I thought, okay, we can use this idea of dealing hands of images as a structural device. So we came up with this title, and when we decided not to take that approach, the title stuck. Luckily, thank God, when we interviewed Rick Moody, there's a bit in the film where he says a lot of people don't like *Rings of Saturn* because there's not a narrative drive pushing you through it. He says, 'I think that's a sign of impatience, that you're not being led through the book.'

While watching the film, I kept thinking of it in terms of an essay film, akin to the work of Chris Marker or Patrick Keiller. Were you looking at this type of work, or thinking of this form?

Robinson in Space and *Sans Soliel* are my favorite films. The trouble is—and I would love to be able to make films like that—I really don't like my writing voice. I'm not a writer. I can do short text, quirky writing, but nothing that can sustain ninety minutes. I certainly wouldn't like my voice slapped all over it. It's not really an essay film; it's my eye, it's me carrying the camera, it's me being more formally experimental with documentary than usual. It has some elements of the essay film. It is a very subjective assembly of comments; it's not supposed to be an objective portrait.

Sebald is well known for the use of images in his work. Do you see Sebald's work as cinematic?

He says very little about cinema. There is one reference in an essay he wrote about *Kings of the Road* by Wim Wenders. He opens the essay with an interesting recollection of watching the film. He's that generation; he's absolutely of Wenders' generation. Once you know that, you can feel the similarities between Wenders and Sebald, but Sebald willfully took himself away from that culture. I think of Sebald more as a photographer. There's a quote I read somewhere where says he wasn't very interested in school and he spent most of his time in the darkroom of the school's photography lab. And there is something—I'm not sure if I've made this up or imagined it—about the way images work in his book: it feels to me like a black-and-white print developed under a red light, like it comes up out of whiteness, and if you leave it there it will black out in the tray. It's this kind of rising and sinking of the image; it's a very strange feeling in Sebald. The film I made is barely cinematic at all. It contains very basic, postcard compositions, more like photographs.

There are moments in the film when you incorporate footage of your own footsteps, shot with a digital camcorder – a small personal touch in the film, as if the conversations in the film are your own little tangents akin to Sebald's.

It's a horrible little flip camera; I don't know why I took it with me. It's great you picked up on that because most people just think it's horrible, these little feet. I knew in the absence of my narration or recorded voice, I wanted to put myself in it. I spent eight days walking on my own carrying this fucking heavy, heavy bag on my back, and I thought the physical aspect of the walk, the fact that it was actually a walk through it, seemed important. I wanted to get a sense of that. The imagery is all slightly archaic and I thought this kind of hugely compressed, very low-quality, digital stuff—absolutely vintage 2010 equipment—would somehow be a little hole through the middle of the film imagery to let you see the 21st century. It doesn't quite work, but that was the idea.

Do you see similarities between the work of Sebald and the work of other subjects you've documented? I was thinking of *Joy Division* while watching the film—of a certain atmosphere they share.

That's funny you use the word atmosphere, because the last moments of the Joy Division film feature the song "Atmosphere" and a walk in silence. At the end of the Radiohead film, the last words spoken are, "we hope that you choke," and then after the Joy Division film, you get a film about Sebald. And strangely enough, Sebald lived in Manchester when he first moved to England. In *The Emigrants*, there's a section where he's walking down Palatine Road, where Factory Records was. So that's a very bizarre connection. Other than that, I don't know. I bet there are a lot of people who have Sebald books on their shelves who have Joy Division records as well.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Grant Gee is a prolific cinematographer and film-maker, best known for directing definitive studies of music and musicians. He has been Grammy-nominated twice, for *Meeting People Is Easy* – about Radiohead - in 2000 and *Demon Days* – about Gorillaz - in 2006. His documentary *Joy Division* premiered at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival in 2007 and won the Sound and Vision award for 'Best Music Film 2007' at the CPH:DOX festival in Copenhagen, and the Audience Awards for Best Film at the Gdansk film festival 2008 and 'In-Edit' festival in Barcelona 2008. It also won the prestigious Grierson Award 2008 for Best Cinema Documentary. He also shot, edited and made motion graphics for the acclaimed feature documentary *Scott Walker: 30 Century Man*, for director Stephen Kijak in 2006.

Gee was born in 1964 in Plymouth. He studied Geography at the Universities of Oxford and Illinois. He has worked in film / video since 1990. He lives in Brighton with his wife and son.

ABOUT THE SOUNDTRACK

The soundtrack for *Patience (After Sebald)* was composed by The Caretaker (aka Leyland Kirby). The source material was sourced from Franz Schubert's 1827 piece 'Winterreise' and subjected to his perplexing processes, smudging and rubbing isolated fragments into a dust-caked haze of plangent keys, strangely resolved loops and de-pitched vocals which recede from view as eerily as they appear. More information can be found at <http://brainwashed.com/vvm/>

Featuring:

Tacita Dean
William Firebrace
Dan Gretton
Barbara Hui
Arthur Lubow
Robert Macfarlane
Christopher MacLehose
Jeremy Millar
Katie Mitchell
Rick Moody
Andrew Motion
Chris Petit
Adam Phillips
Iain Sinclair
Bill Swainson
Lise Patt
Marina Warner
Christopher Woodward

Crew:

Filmed and Directed by Grant Gee
Produced by Sarah Caddy, Gareth Evans, Di Robson
Executive Produced by Keith Griffiths (Illuminations Films)
Original Music by The Caretaker
Edited by Jerry Chater, Grant Gee
Production and Archive Manager: Ed Webb-Ingall
Associate Producer: Niloufer Sagar
Creative Consultant: Chris Drake
Researcher: Matthew Robinson