

# Shhh... this room speaks

A media-scenographic adaptation of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

Heide Hagebölling, Luis Negrón van Grieken

## Background: the story

W. G. Sebald's novel tracks the journey of self-discovery, a search for both identity and memories, undertaken by Jacques Austerlitz. As a small boy in 1938 he escapes the anti-Jewish terror and the threat of extermination posed by the National Socialists in Prague aboard a so-called Kindertransport train to England. He physically survives the Holocaust, yet suffers from the consequences of this trauma for the rest of his life.

The author and narrator of the novel first meets Austerlitz at Antwerp railway station. Austerlitz is studying the architecture of the waiting room thoroughly and philosophises on the life of the animals in the nearby Nocturama. There then follows a series of meetings between the two, some coincidental, some planned, over a period of 20 years: in the bar of the former Great Eastern Hotel in London, in a Parisian café, in Austerlitz's office. Each meeting opens up a new insight into his life, revealing that he is different to the person he first appears to be. His journeys through Europe are stations in his self-discovery.

Austerlitz grew up in Prague in the 1930s with his Jewish parents. Threatened by the Nazi occupation, his politically active father fled to Paris, disappearing without trace. The letters he sent home were confiscated by the occupying German troops. Austerlitz's mother, an actress and operetta singer, managed to arrange a place for her five-year-old son on one of the last Kindertransport trains to London. In England, Austerlitz was received and adopted by a minister and his wife. He then spent his childhood with a new identity in Wales. Memories become blurred.

At school he starts to find out about his real background when his history teacher, who also encourages him to study at Oxford, uses the Battle of Austerlitz to broach the subject of his past. However, the young boy is not ready to confront this other self and suppresses these facts. As an architectural historian, Austerlitz develops a growing obsession for railway station architecture and military defence structures, buildings that symbolise Europe's imperialist past, its struggle for power, its fortification and partition. At the same time he develops an intense interest in plants and nocturnal animals. He travels from London, restlessly, aimlessly, via Antwerp and Paris to Prague, where his enquiries in the State Archive lead him to Theresienstadt, with the growing knowledge that his mother was murdered there. All that's left is his former nanny Vera and a faded photograph of his mother.

## The play – dramaturgy and the intermedia scenario

The author and director Julia Afifi has translated Austerlitz's years of wandering and searching for identity into a *Stationendrama* (station drama), concentrating on nine locations that hold the key to his obsessions and self-discovery: Antwerp railway station, his office in London, the fort and later SS prison at Breendonk in Belgium, the home of the preacher and his classroom in Wales, scenes of his wandering and psychological distress in the nocturnal streets of London, the State Archive, the small flat of his former nanny Vera and the Nazi Archive in Prague.

The play was originally conceived for nine shipping containers installed in a public square. A request to play the complete Divadlo Komedie theatre building in Prague then led to a modification. An intermedia staging of the play is currently being created that will develop a new theatrical form somewhere between performance and theatre, artistic installation, video art, and experimental sound. Within this, a narrator represents the principal guiding force, leading the audience chronologically through the action.

Austerlitz's life journey and search for identity is implemented dramaturgically as a Stationendrama of the nine most important places in his self-discovery. Unlike in classical theatre, the audience is led—guided by strands of narrative—into the individual installations. As such, the division between stage and viewer is removed to the benefit of sensually intense experiential situations. The viewer is literally part of the action with the conventional distance to the “played” piece eliminated.

The stations have been integrated into the architecture of the Divadlo Komedie in Prague in response to the rooms and spaces available. However, they are conceived in such a way that individual, often module-like elements form the space and they can therefore also be used in other situations and performance spaces. Everyday objects are transformed into absurd, sometimes even abstract

constructions. Materials, colours, video and sound design reflect the inner world of the confused protagonist. Through the repetition of stylistic elements on all levels, a uniform design is retained across the various stations despite the great complexity. The dramaturgic sequence is like a journey through the landscape of Austerlitz's soul.

The individual stations were developed, in collaboration with the director, by the "Austerlitz project group" of the Media Scenography faculty at the Academy for Media Arts Cologne: Irena Wolf, Michael König, Luis Negrón van Grieken, Chih Ming Fan, supervised by Heide Hagebölling.

### Kunsthau Rhenania

Four of the nine stations conceived have thus far been realised, for the exhibition in Kunsthau Rhenania in April 2011 and subsequently for the Academy of Media Arts Cologne's annual exhibition in July 2011.

The special feature of the literary adaptation is in the multimedia interpretation of the material: places condense acoustically in vivid, partially abstract, sound collages of great intensity, their visual representation is not as a likeness, but rather as a jigsaw of torn experience, fragmentary memory and mental constitution. The narrative brings the literary tissue alive in all its subjective moments and opens up a view into the inner workings of a complex life.

As such it is not an exhibition but rather an experiment, giving literature a narrative space, which—unlike theatre or film—must invent and generate its own stylistic means and laws. This room speaks. A complex audiovisual landscape arises that opens up into individual themes on closer inspection:

### Station 1 – Antwerp railway station

This video-sound installation by Luis Negrón, with two screens jutting into the space, depicts Austerlitz's passion for the mighty architecture of railway stations and the growth in logistics at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. He is particularly interested in Antwerp railway station, with the neighbouring diamond district and the Nocturama of the nearby zoo. The installation projects dominantly, architecturally into the space and as such refers to its role models. Moving collages of the railway station building pick up on this era of logistics but also the condition of restlessness and inner disquiet. The video sequence, generated from photos, creates a confusing effect: vanishing points and perspectives are broken up, sequences appear displaced, the images seem to fold and break like a journey through time and memory.

The montage also refers to the obsessive activity of the collector: Austerlitz collects—on a large scale—maps, route networks and views. In the collage, the piercing eyes of the nocturnal animals living in the Nocturama break through images of train tracks. In this the author behaves in a similar fashion to the character in his novel: »...on the road as a historiographer he collects the memories, the life stories of his protagonists or the history of places.«

### Station 5 – school years in Wales

This station, created by Irena Wolf, is the key to Austerlitz finding his own identity. After the history teacher, who has to lie on the floor due to a back complaint, finishes his long lecture on the Battle of Austerlitz, he takes the place name as an opportunity to induct the pupil to his background and his real family name. Austerlitz now becomes Austerlitz.

The inner turmoil and helplessness of the young boy become visible: well-organised whitewashed school furniture tumble through the space in a circular motion and pile up like an ice floe to form a threatening mound of rubble. Everything is becoming unhinged.

This disintegration of an ordered world is overlaid with the projection of precisely drawn tactical field plans with an army of miniature soldiers, seeming almost fragile but whose amplified shadows indicate their real offensive potential, marching over them.

In the midst of this scene the teacher (actor), lying on the floor, is completely absorbed in his graphic descriptions. The sounds of break time, pupils' voices, footsteps, running along the corridor, singing and school bells come together in a complex sound collage created by Chih Ming Fan.

### Station 6 – nocturnal wanderings in London

After finishing teaching as an architectural historian in London, Austerlitz increasingly questions himself as to his real identity and the meaning of life. He feels ever more alienated from reality. Plagued by sleeplessness and restlessness he begins to wander through the nocturnal streets of London. He's particularly drawn to Liverpool St. Station. There he sits, his thoughts, images and language becoming more blurred than ever before. In the escalation of this almost hallucinatory condition he thinks he can see himself as a small boy, waiting amongst the travellers, a little green rucksack next to him, while the English preacher and his wife, his foster parents, approach him.

In a large projection, staggered over several layers, images of train stations, people, traffic, snatches of words and lights combine to form an audiovisual composition. Reality and delusions mixed with the text

of the narrator transcend their boundaries. Nothing is tangible or determinable anymore, everything is in the flux of the unfathomable. The protagonist's existential crisis reaches its climax. By breaking up the projection surface into freely-hanging staggered areas—some deep, others out-of-focus—as well as overlaying surfaces, Michael König has created a walk-in landscape of the soul, a symbolic image of the splintered perception of the protagonist. Simultaneously, the viewers and listeners walking between the projection surfaces become actors themselves: their shadows and outlines become part of the nocturnal London scene.

### Station 9 – Nazi Archive in Prague

After intensively searching through innumerable documents in the theatre archive in Prague, Austerlitz discovers the photo of an actress. From his vague memories he recognises his mother Agata. Research in the Nazi Archive leads him to the sad realisation that his mother was murdered in Theresienstadt. The faded portrait is the only remaining memento.

Smashed and cracked panes of glass serve as the projection surfaces of fragmentary memories. As if in a dream, images of pigeons flying up from the banks of the Vltava, thousands of hands rising in the Nazi salute, train carriages rolling, views of Prague's parks dissolving, synagogues burning run on repeat.

The fragmentary events condense, become clear and blurred at the same time. The viewer passes through a collective and simultaneously very personal story in this parcourse of memories. Michael König has given three-dimensionality to this station too: the viewer wanders through the oppressive fragments of early European and, particularly, German history.

### A landscape of images and sound – a place that speaks

The decision to abandon the original concept of the Divadlo Komedie theatre in order to give the piece a further setting led to numerous new approaches. Most important was the fact of now presenting the Stationendramas, developed for individual performance spaces and isolated from one another, in one room and to completely do without partitions. Where there were previously narrative emphases—which developed, in terms of content, in a continuous succession, similarly to the process of reading—a higher, integrated level of narrative and experience was now introduced: the story unfolds in front of the viewer's eyes, the sound must also be such that it, on one hand, embodies the whole story, yet on the other hand supports the linearity of the story. Simultaneously, this once again makes rather unusual demands of the dramaturgy and scenography of the piece.

We were now playing on a macro level and micro levels that behaved hierarchically in relation to one another, or, expressed in a spatial metaphor: there was now a landscape that we had to look and listen into and places that we had to explore.

On the synchronic level of this narrative model, the individual stations form a networked narrative cosmos: every position, every lighting setup, every projection, every arrangement has importance for the other stations and for the whole. On the diachronic level of the individual stations, the story unfolds in its thematic depth. With this in mind, one sound landscape, which in our view would support the meaning of the complete work, was also developed: with the key experiences of driving trains, material sounds of the city, language that is no longer language, and the faded, distant and at the same abstract singing of the cantor.

The individual narrative strands of the story then become more concrete within the stations, both optically as well as acoustically. The sequences of speech were recorded—staged with soundscapes and mixes that provoke fields of associations, emotions and meanings—with the help of the director Julia Afifi and the actor Gregor Höppner. The visual side was approached with comparable methods: there are areas that become accessible from afar and others that require being looked at and heard exactly and very selectively. So directional sound domes, ultrasonic sound “showers” and—on the most intimate level—wireless headphones were also employed in addition to the speakers.

The room speaks. It attempts to grasp feelings, facts, mental states on one hand and literary sensibilities and qualities on the other hand, with its own linguistic possibilities and its canon of intermedia codings. The group involved would like to expand this experiment and the spatial narrative to two or three further essential stations and—as originally intended—integrate actors with their intense corporeal and verbal presence. A further challenge.

»[...] AA  
AA  
AA.«

Shhh. This room speaks.

Images:  
Heide Hagebölling / media-scenography.org

1 Julia Höntzsch, “Von Bruchstücken und Erinnerung W.G. Sebalds Erzählungen,” in *Chronik 2006–2009*, ed. Elger Esser (Karlsruhe: Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, 2009).

2 A repetitive gesture like a “long-drawn-out scream”. Work of the painter Gaston Novelli as represented in the novel *Austerlitz*. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001).

KHM annual exhibition, 2011: partial view of the towering classroom; view of the projection landscape »nocturnal wanderings in London« and the Nazi Archive in Prague projection  
Rhenania, 2011: the towering classroom with overhead projections and cast shadows  
Rhenania, 2011: Nazi archive in Prague, view through the passage of shattered panes / shards of memory  
Rhenania, 2011: general view