

BOOK REVIEW: THE SEEN AND UNSEEN IN TEJU COLE'S BLIND SPOT

By Saul Austerlitz, June 15, 2017



This book is enough to make the average person jealous. Teju Cole has spent the past decade or so travelling the world, primarily in his guise as a celebrated writer of fiction and polemical essays, taking photographs of what he has seen. From LaGuardia airport in New York to Beirut, to Rome to Nairobi to Zurich, Cole has come back with evidence of the physical world, always seen at a tilt.

Cole, the photography critic for The New York Times Magazine, has written at length about his work in the past, and each of his previous three books have included photos interspersed in the text, in the vein of the late WG Sebald's work. *Blind Spot* reverses the formula, with hundreds of Cole's photographs illuminated, explained or mystified by brief snippets of text.

It feels surprisingly challenging to describe a writer's visual work, when he has already taken a first stab at those descriptions. But as those familiar with his earlier efforts might expect, Cole prefers images that initially surprise and confound the sense of sight.

We look at what appears to be a classroom set up on a city street, or a stand of palm trees on an Omaha sidewalk, and it takes us a long moment to distinguish the real from the imagined. Cole is teaching us to see after his own fashion: "This in part was why signs, pictures, ads, and murals came to mean so much: they were neither more nor less than the 'real' elements by which they were framed."

A crabbier critic might argue that Cole's book is symptomatic of a culture ill-inclined to close Twitter and immerse fully into a work of literature that demands our attention. There may be something to that, but *Blind Spot* aligns nicely with recent work by Sarah Manguso, Sheila Heti, and Jenny Offill.

The text entries here are sometimes akin to parables, sometimes to fragments of an imagined larger text, sometimes to acidulous political commentaries, sometimes to diary entries. At times, the photos directly depict the action described in the text; at others, the relationship is loose at best. Cole expects our occasional confusion, and he seeks to stem our

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frustration with hints studded through the book: "Your progress is not a line, direct or winding, from one point to another, but a flickering series of scenes."

The scenes here are organised loosely thematically, rather than geographically. Chris Marker's unclassifiable masterpiece *Sans Soleil*, about another world traveller, is a touchstone here ("I pray to Tarkovsky, Marker, and Hitchcock," notes Cole), and like spotting cats in Marker's films, Cole expects attentive readers to identify resonances across continents and eras. That photo of the hotel armoire looks familiar from the 2016 essay collection *Known and Strange Things*; these photos are all of ladders, everywhere from an Italian cemetery to Cern, the high-energy physics laboratory, in Switzerland.

Cole's framing is perpetually off-kilter, deliberately chosen but purposefully eschewing context. One compelling shot of a young man, hoodie flung over his head, talking in a New York phone booth, is artfully framed to take in just enough of the surroundings and streetscape to tell us precisely nothing about where the picture might have been taken. Cole wants to confound and confuse us, wants us to hunger for the perspective that he refuses to provide.

A photograph, in Cole's equation, is less about what is depicted than what is not, just as a photographer is less the sum of his images than of those potential images he eschewed, ignored, or overlooked: "A photograph, which cannot contain all that swaggers on the eye, can at the same time reveal what the photographer did not see at the time."

A plastic water bottle on a restaurant table in Ferrara surprises Cole by looking disarmingly similar to the campanile depicted in a painting on the wall behind it.