

REVIEW: BLIND SPOT BY TEJU COLE

By James Belfield, October 29, 2017



Teju Cole's elegant combination of text and photography is a beautifully nuanced dance through historical and contemporary arts and philosophy.

The Nigerian-American author, journalist, social commentator and photographer whirls around the world finding inspiration from towns and cities as varied as Auckland, Sao Paulo, Ubud in Bali, Brienzersee in Switzerland, Venice and Nairobi, pairing, as he goes, stark, enigmatic photos with precise, evocative, poetic writing.

The swirl of references in both the writing and the composition and subject matter of the images creates a narrative maelstrom to the extent that the reader would do well to have an atlas and encyclopaedia (or at least a smartphone) at hand to work through the deluge of place names, philosophers, films, poets and artists that punctuate the text – although there's just as much delight in letting the balanced sentences wash over you as you seek to discover how (or even, whether) they relate to the associated image.

Cole, who delights in his near genre-less, social media-heavy career, has created an object which both delights in and despises its two most obvious influences: the coffee table photograph album and the weekend magazine travel article. It toys with both concepts and then buries them beneath total understanding of time and place.

Without ever settling his lens on a human face, there's an honest humanism to his photographs: a campervan parked behind a budding hedge, five fake designer handbags for sale on a Venice pavement, fallen petals on a patio floor in

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Lagos. Because the human is lacking, we go in search of it from the text, and often find a combination of ourselves and the author.

Sometimes Cole uses a haiku-like grace – a cloth draped drum-kit in Lagos is accompanied by "A few days after Christmas, musical instruments sleep in a primary school hall in Lagos. Gone is the noise of the schoolchildren. The year is ending. The silence roars like outer space."

Sometimes it's straight autobiography – in Lugano, "I said to her: I don't want to move to Switzerland. Quite the contrary. I like to visit Switzerland. When I'm not there, I long for it, but what I long for is the feeling of being an outsider there and, soon after, the feeling of leaving again so I can continue to long for it."

Other times he urges you to further exploration – a mirror leaning against a wall in Lagos inspires a comment about US artist Cy Twombly, a shrouded vehicle in a Bali garage inspires comments about the island's anti-communist massacres of 1965.

The question is always, why? Because this is our role as humans when facing blind spots. We fill them in with meaning and our own personality.

We learn that Blind Spot grew from Cole waking one morning in 2011 to discover he had gone blind in one eye – something that was eventually fixed by surgery but led to months of problems with depth perception. Problems he had to learn to adapt to – to reorient himself to.

And by creating a work of art out of that challenge, he has created almost a new interactive form of essay as each turn of the page becomes our own reorientation and we look to find visual and textual links and comparisons to what has gone before.