

Review Essay

Carol Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 296 pp.

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Across the Anglophone world W.G. Sebald (1944-2001) is perhaps the most well known author of the last quarter century writing in German. Eyes are everywhere in his work: from *Unrecounted*, a book that paired Jan Peter Tripp's series of paintings of pairs of eyes with short epigrams by Sebald, to Jacques Austerlitz' struggle with his diminishing eyesight (in *Austerlitz*) and Max Ferber's (or Aurach's, in the German original) enlarged eye from a photograph reprinted in a magazine that the narrator studies over and over again (in *The Emigrants*). Sebald's reader encounters painterly and painted eyes, as well as critical eyes and those criticized for their failure to see what is important (in the reflections on Rembrandt's painting "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" in *The Rings of Saturn*). Most immediately evident to even a casual Sebald reader, of course, is the reader's eye that is called upon as it navigates the relationship of the many photographs and other images to the prose texts (both narrative and critical) of which they form part. Thus, it is with very good reason that in this book Carol Jacobs chooses to focus on vision as the guiding motif, or trope, in her survey of Sebald's writings. Of course, it is not just a question of collecting all the instances in which Sebald's narrators, and Sebald as a literary critic, fasten on the sensory capacity of eyesight. The larger question of how Sebald's poetic techniques sustain an awareness of the double-sided character of this faculty is of primary

concern to Jacobs throughout. “Sebald’s project is not [...] to make us see” (6), she remarks early on, indicating that the inability of many of the figures in his texts to see clearly with respect to personal or collective history is not necessarily counterbalanced by a narrator, or author, in possession of the answers to their questions. On the other hand, if compromised sight is “a way of being in the world” (8), then any interest in truth as far as it applies to the affairs of that world cannot simply resign itself to celebrating the obscure, or the blind spot. Both blindness *and* insight, then. (Even though Paul de Man is nowhere directly invoked in this book, Jacobs’ prior engagement with de Man’s work in other places suggests that this pairing of terms well describes the scope of the term ‘vision’ in the title.)

From the first sentence of Jacobs’ preface (which contains a reflection on the relation of a title to the text that follows it) to the last sentence of the last chapter (which quotes Sebald on the importance of considering truth in relation to the stories he tells), Jacobs rightly insists that the literary modeling of the trope of sight, in Sebald’s case, does not amount to an uncomplicated way of showing what cannot be told. Neither, however, does Sebald consign to irrelevance the struggle with clarity of vision, by attempting to gain an overview or a semantic purchase on things. Many of the photographs in Sebald’s texts, for example, may be deliberately blurry or difficult to bring into a determinate relation with the text surrounding them (166), but Jacobs explains that this should not be taken to imply an incapacity for (moral) judgment (175). This is most evident in her discussion of Sebald’s lectures on *Air War and Literature*: here Sebald took German postwar literary authors to task for failing to “cast a steady gaze at reality” (77), that is, to confront the physical and moral devastation in the aftermath of World War II without resorting to pseudo-mythical language and the familiar schema of tragedy. In Jacobs’ words, he “calls for a language that makes us see” (78). A careful reader—and Jacobs most certainly must count as one—quickly realizes, however, that the very God’s-eye perspective and the ‘synoptic’ view bringing several perspectives together (rather than attempting to ‘stay true’ to a single one) are in fact also to be found in Sebald’s own run at a literary

description of air attacks in the lectures. Jacobs concludes that Sebald's moral position ultimately cannot consist in being 'right' about what a literary text should look like, or should have looked like. His stance, rather, is "between the impossible perspectives of direct observation and the all-encompassing, distant glance" (90): as a chronicler of the air war he, like the narrators in his prose works, is forced to reflect on events he has not immediately experienced (having been born just as they occurred), or which, in memory, are not directly accessible and thus require the mediation of narrative. So it makes good sense for Sebald to call Alexander Kluge a voice of "enlightenment" when, in *Air War and Literature*, he cites Kluge's pseudo-documentary account of the air attack that leveled Kluge's hometown Haberstadt on April 8, 1945. Ultimately, Jacobs posits, it is both Kluge's and Sebald's aim to determine what, if anything, human beings may learn from historical calamity. The question, then, is not what the 'proper' form of literary representation might be, but what "epistemological" (94) import literature may have. Knowledge, for Jacobs, clearly means an ability to reflect on the human condition under circumstances such as the ones in question here that illustrate the capacity of the human race to severely diminish or even eradicate itself (97). The formal device Jacobs identifies as the marker of the possibility—though certainly not the guarantee—of learning from the past, in whichever limited or indirect form, is that of citation. The differential repetition of text or image in a new context may achieve what affirmative claims cannot, and Sebald's ironic citation from Kluge is a case in point: only a few days after the devastation the survivors in Halberstadt beat tracks across the mountains of ruins that connected to existing paths, thus continuing on in ways that indicate persistence on the one hand, but also an instinctual continuation of the status quo. Did they 'learn a lesson' from British 'moral bombing'? And if they did not or could not, can the literary figuration of this scene succeed where sheer violence fails?

Sebald's use of photographs in his texts often follows a similar citational logic. The point is not to make something directly visible for inspection (in compensation for a failure of language, for example), but instead to prompt the

reader/viewer to reflect on visual representation as such. In her chapter on *The Emigrants* (first published as an article in 2004, and also included in her 2008 collection *Skirting the Ethical*), Jacobs discusses Sebald's inclusion of photographs taken in the Litzmannstadt ghetto by its chief accountant, Genewein, who had documented ghetto life in more than 400 photographs "to celebrate the Nazi sense of 'organization'" (36). By presenting some of these photos as part of the narrative of "Max Aurach," Jacobs writes, the narrator at the end of the book puts himself (and, by extension, the reader) in Genewein's position, seeing through the lens what he saw, yet also knowing who it was that took these photos and for what purpose. A narrator such as this cannot be "a martyr to his art" (38), being bound up in complicated ways with what is depicted. The same is true for the reader, who is not simply looking at self-explanatory 'documentation' but must put herself in a relation to events such as those photographed by Genewein, some of whose subjects were violently prevented from being in a position to give their own account.

The last chapter of Jacobs' book is dedicated to a survey of Sebald's numerous interviews, recently collected in *Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis* (edited by Torsten Hoffmann, 2012). His transition from literary critic in the 1970s and early 1980s to literary author by the late 1980s is touched on here, and Jacobs quotes Sebald's self-evaluation of a natural progression from one to the other (165), not least because both forms do require extensive research, even if not necessarily of a strictly academic kind. Claims to truth and knowledge, Jacobs argues at certain points in the book, are advanced in both cases, though she also argues that attempts at restitution by means of literature can ultimately *not* be grounded in knowledge (115). It would have been compelling to also have her account of Sebald's early critical work in books and essays that are not touched on here; some of Sebald's muscular critique of ideology advanced there certainly forces the question of literary—and literary-critical—truth claims, and is perhaps not as easily aligned with Sebald's later literary texts in all its particulars as its author appeared to believe.

Throughout her book Jacobs presents close readings of Sebald's text, in chapters of varying length on all of his major literary texts except *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (translated into English as *Vertigo*). She herself notes explicitly that her analyses are less concerned than some of the existing Sebald scholarship with situating his writing in larger literary or theoretical contexts (178). Jacobs' work—though not usually concerned with contemporary literature—has always been a stellar example of such attentiveness to the text, whether in Plato or Kleist, in Benjamin or the British Romantics. Sebald's prose richly repays the practice of slowing down the act of interpretation in this way, perhaps echoing Sebaldian narrators such as the one in *The Rings of Saturn* who chooses to travel through Suffolk on foot rather than by any faster means of transport. In her chapter on this particular book, Jacobs accordingly touches on only a limited number of chapters, yet this very refusal to aim for completeness paradoxically resonates with her detailed look at Thomas Browne's figure of the *Quincunx*—a single pattern Browne thought to run through all forms of life—that is invoked in one of the parts of the book she does discuss. The wondrous coexistence in Sebald's writing—as in Thomas Browne's model—of seemingly continuous networks that appear to gather together the most unlikely elements on the one hand, and, on the other, “the experience of being ruptured away from the prose's subject matter, with a sense of fragmentation, toward something else not yet assimilated” (58) is masterfully explored in Jacobs' analyses. They dwell on detail, yet in doing so never lose sight of the larger thematic configurations and critical preoccupations in which that detail finds itself inscribed.