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書　評
Reviews

W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity. By J. J. Long. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Pp. ix+ 224.

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J. J. Long's 2007 publication, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* is a marvelous key to guide us out of the world of Sebald's narratives and back into our own. For anyone who has ever been lost in the labyrinthine world of the four major narratives of Sebald, *The Emigrants*, *Austerlitz*, *Rings of Saturn* or *Vertigo*, Long's book *G. W. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* is a major reality check, or at least a virtual reality check as Sebald is cast in the role of Foucaultian stooge, the lost subject of modernity's drive to homogenize space, discipline the body, and archive everything out of existence. J. J. Long's reading of Sebald as the resistant agent of the State's drive to rationalize, the Savoir Vouloir Pouvoir Faire of Louis the XIV's Richelieu, extracts the clues scattered throughout Sebald's work, the maps, the libraries, the archives, the railways and hotels, and puts together a forceful reading of this enigmatic exiled German/Anglo writer.

Long announces in his introduction his thesis of containing the effects of modernization in Sebald's books by channeling Sebald's innate net of ambiguities into an encompassing theory. "One of the recurring thematic emphases in accounts of modernity, from Baudelaire and Marx to David Harvey, is that processes of rationalization are experienced as flux,

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ephemerality, instability, disorientation and fragmentation."[1] Long, while occasionally nodding to alternative readings leaves us with the overall impression that Sebald was a fugitive from the world of theory. As opposed to suggesting that Sebald may have been alternatively mapping a stranger experience than that of the ambiguities inherent in Foucault, Long tends to strong-arm the emotive content of reading Sebald, ploughing the reader's experience of these amazing texts aside to reveal the semantic rebar beneath. Take death for instance, Sebald's narratives are saturated with death, and as Long notes in one of his footnotes, "The Undiscover'd Country" is the title of one of Sebald's essays on Kafka, in which he traces the motif of death in The Castle.[2] While the motif of death provides Long with access to Sebald's response to the Holocaust as a crisis point in Modernity, it leaves the reader of a text like *The Rings of Saturn* wondering why the Dowager Empress of China Tz'u-his,

> took the greatest pleasure in lifeless things, and by day would sometimes stand for hours at the windows of her apartments staring out upon the silent lake to the north, which resembled a painting. The tiny figures of the gardeners in the distant lily fields, or those of the courtiers who skated on the blue ice in winter, did not recall to her the natural occupations and feelings of human kind, but were rather, like flies in a jamjar, already in the wanton power of death. Travellers who were in China between 1876 and 1879 report that, in the drought that had continued for years, whole provinces gave the impression of expiring under prisons of glass. Between seven and twenty million people …. are said to have died of starvation and exhaustion…[3]

[1] J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 10.

[2] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 10.

[3] W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: The Harvill Press, 1998), 150.

Sebald continues this "Undiscover'd Country" thought on a thread of silk entwining it with his comment, "The night of time, wrote Thomas Browne in his treatise of 1658, The Garden of Cyrus, far supasseth the day and who knows when was the Aequinox?" [4] Sebald weaves together undiscovered threads tying together China, Borges, and the Renaissance, hypnotically entangling his reader in the coincidences, and bitter ironies which connect them. However, does this form of presenting the lifeless panorama of a history already, perhaps bygone, or still to come, necessarily validate the 'now' of the Foucaultian present which Long clings to in his analysis? It seems to me that the "fantastic" which Long notices penetrating the texts of Sebald, actually are not shocking intrusions at all but belong to the past/present/past philosophical conundrum Sebald's texts produce: "the sighting of Dante, for example becomes ambiguous: the narrator 'believes' that he sees Dante.[5] Though dismissed as a 'turn,' it is the first of several visions whose ontological status is not called into question; the narrator 'recognizes' both Ludwig II of Bavaria on the streets of Venice[6] and the Winter Queen in a train compartment in Heidelberg, reading a book that turns out not to exist.[7] These encounters dramatize the invasion of the material world by the fantastic.[8]

Reading Sebald I would suggest does not leave one feeling that the fantastic has invaded the material world, but that the material world has disappeared in the temporal nexus conjured by the text. In other words I would suggest Sebald's texts are not a symptom of modernity, but a cure. When I am stuck in an airport or a hotel, I don't find myself in Sebald's world, but I do find myself wanting to open one of Sebald's books to get out of the rationalization of where I am. Sebald is a conjurer. Long understands this but

[4] Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 154.

[5] W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1999), 35, 43-44.

[6] Sebald, *Vertigo*, 53, 64.

[7] Sebald, *Vertigo*, 254, 289.

[8] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 104.

he tends to bend Sebald's conjurations to his own will, suggesting Sebald was a conjurer of the demons of modernity in order to critique them. "Though Sebald has rightly been praised for the pervasive critique of colonialism in his work, we should not be blind to moments where his critical distance collapses, giving way to a more affirmative representation of colonial desire.[9]

Of course it is the desire of Long to read Sebald as a theorist of the real, ie. colonialism, archives and railway stations, rather than as a Houdini of the real, an escape artist, or like Kafka, a hunger artist, someone for whom the real holds little temptation. One might consider how little sex ever plays a part in a Sebald narrative. Sleep walking, death watch or daydreaming, these exercises, all reminiscent of the affect of reading a Sebald book, do not necessarily comply to the strictures of a Foucauldian modernity. The Modernity grid invoked by Long's Foucault is posited as the prevailing paradigm subsequent upon the breakup of the Renaissance paradigm of similarities, compilations, correspondences, such as that found in what many would consider the great precursor to all of Sebald's work, Robert Burton's 'The Anatomy of Melancholy.' And why not see a slippage of paradigms, Sebald returning to the Renaissance in search of the undiscovered country, of a new way of knowledge, a new/old order of things? Long notes this aptitude in Sebald for an older paradigm of knowledge, but he won't allow Sebald to have it.

The narrator sits in a hotel restaurant in Limone, with his various papers and notes spread out around him, drawing connections between events that are distant from one another in time and space, but which seem to belong to the same order of meaning.[10] This constitutes an attempt to discover or construct a narrative and epistemological model that will allow the disparate events of the text to coalesce into a more meaningful whole.[11]

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[9] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 55.

[10] Sebald, *Vertigo*, 94, 112.

[11] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 106.

One notices the "this constitutes" assertion by Long. However, does it really constitute anything but Long's desire for the text to coalesce into a more meaningful 'modern' whole to be critiqued with the current tools of the trade. Sebald responds:

> What is the meaning of these similarities, intersections, and correspondences? Are they simply a matter of illusionary memory images (*Verxierbilder der Erinnerung*), self-deceptions or sensory deceptions, or are they the schemata of an order that is beyond our ken, but that is programmed into the chaos of human relationships that extends over both the quick and the dead? (LL 137-8)[12]

This quote in particular puts me in mind of Sebald's elective affinity for Renaissance knowledge acquisition. He writes like Hamlet's ghost, poisoned by Modernity but unsure if it has really killed him. It may have simply covered him up and awaits the subjective moment of his own disinterment, a moment forever procrastinated. Just as Long would see in this coming back from the land of the dead an imposition of modernity's map or grid on Sebald's narrators, I would rather read the words as translated (all Sebald's works are translated from the German) and see in them the inflections of the lost: "Despite a great effort to account for the last few days and how I had come to be in this place, I was unable even to determine whether I was in the land of the living or already in another place."[13] Long reads this lapse of the world, as: "the resulting loss of spatio-temporal co-ordinates produces a momentary dissolution of the narrator's subjectivity; his embodied materiality proves resistant to the cognitive prosthesis that the map represents."[14] (IAM 84-85) I find that reading Long's analysis leaves me in the grip of the modernist dialectic, I am either here or I am lost, as opposed to collapsing that

[12] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 106.

[13] Sebald, *Vertigo*, 115, 136.

[14] Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 84-85.

dialectic, which I feel in reading the works of Sebald, I am here and I am lost; time is out of joint.

I would suggest Sebald slips out of the stranglehold Long puts him in and sometimes seems to disappear altogether from the theoretical traps set out to ensnare him. In this I would suggest he resembles the 17th century mystic Angelus Silesias, who wrote:

> The Word continues to Be Born
> Truly, the eternal word continues to be born;
> Where? Inside, in a place where you lose yourself within. [15]

[15] Maria M. Bohm, *Angelus Silesius' Cherubinischer Wandersmann: A Modern Reading With Selected Translations* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1997), 83.

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