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A DIFFERENT KIND OF LONGING. IMAGE AND TEXT IN W.G. SEBALD'S *AUSTERLITZ*

In his book on images as entities imbued with a power to desire, W.J.T. Mitchell is concerned with the question: *What Do Pictures Want?* For him, an art historian who successfully transformed art history into a very particular kind of study of images, the question is relevant as it expresses the most important aspects of his analyses of the so-called pictorial turn. Mitchell suggests considering images as entities that “want neither to be levelled into ‘a history of images’ nor elevated into a ‘history of art,’ but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” (Mitchell 47). Although this proposition has been viewed, as Mitchell himself is ready to admit, as posing significant problems as far as practical analysis of images is concerned, my task here shall not be to attempt to prove that this kind of approach to images offers a convenient key for a reading of images and texts that I will be presenting further on. What I would like to suggest is that Mitchell’s approach may be a starting point and a perspective to be confronted with other practices of *reading* images and *viewing* texts. What Mitchell proposes is not a kind of semiotics or hermeneutics, but poetics. He states that the “question to ask of pictures from the standpoint of a poetics is not just what they mean or do but what they *want* – what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond” (Mitchell XV). In his view, this task is important, as images have traditionally been considered inferior to texts in the sense that their meaning had to be translated into words in order for it to be seriously taken into consideration, and for other reasons stemming from certain aspects of our culture. He states,

there is also, more fundamentally, the structural hostility of psychoanalysis toward images and visual representation. Classically, the Freudian attitude is that the image is a mere symptom, a substitute for an impossible desire, an illusory semblance or “ma-

nifest content” that is to be decoded, demystified, and ultimately eliminated in favour of a latent content expressed in language. (Mitchell 69)

In his book on the interpretation of dreams, Freud suggests that dreams are, like painting and sculpture, unable to speak for themselves (Freud 347).

In *What Do Pictures Want?* Mitchell is, then, both an adversary of Freud, as his intention is to let images speak for themselves, as well as his follower, as he operates on the grounds of most important tenets of psychoanalysis, namely desire and lack. In my analysis of the relations between image and text in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, I will be concerned with problems of lack and longing, yet my primary focus will be the relation between text and image that is marked by the former’s dominance over the latter. This interest will lead me to consider several of the recent works on images, philosophy of the image, and art history.

One of the most important of such works was written by W.J.T. Mitchell in 1986. In his *Iconology*, he does not follow the work of the forefather of this art historical methodology, namely Erwin Panofsky, nor does he seek to interpret images by means of texts, but tries to overcome the traditional division of the two, where the image is viewed as fundamentally incomprehensible without a textual commentary, and introduce a kind of differentiation between the two where the image is treated on its own terms. Mitchell continues thus, we might say, the work started many years earlier by Aby Warburg, who in the interwar period wrote a study on image and text in printed media in the era of Martin Luther. Warburg’s project of *Kulturwissenschaft* was, however, premature and it was only later that a broadened notion of the image could actually be introduced and accepted. Warburg’s understanding of the image was deeply cultural in the sense that he was not interested in images as belonging to the realm of art, but as media of collective memory, imprinted with cultural codes that are (often) unconsciously repeated throughout times and cultures in the form of *engram* (Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas*). Warburg’s reflections on cultural and anthropological aspects of images that account for their continuity have been fully understood and appreciated only recently and are now regarded as fundamental to the present discussions of cultural and individual memory. Although in his *Birth of Venus* Warburg’s analysis of renaissance painting is based on the study of poetry, he shows how certain figurations of emotional states (what he calls *Pathosformeln*) are based more on a process of unconscious repetition than on tradition and influence. In my analysis of images in Sebald’s work I will, then, try to afford an approach that takes into consideration the context of individual and collective memory as a means of emancipating the image from the text.

Sebald's books are, to risk a generalisation, predominantly about memory. The inclusion of pictures in his novels is supposed to work like an enhancement of the process of remembering, for memory works in images. Sebald's novels, due to their compulsive attempts at listing, memorising, storing and restoring memory, are often linked in critical commentaries with one of the most important concepts and phenomena of modernity, namely the archive. It is thus quite obvious what the author wants from the image, or what the reader expects from it: to store or restore memories. However, what needs to be asked if we decide to follow, at least for some time, in the footsteps of Mitchell, is: *what do these pictures want?* Yet, to answer this question we will need to look at them on their own terms and in their own environment, which is the environment of the text. What do they want in the text, or what do they want from it?

Before I attempt to answer this question, being fully aware of how naive this attempt may seem, or how futile it may prove, I first have to ask about the relation between text and image in Sebald's novels. Even a quick look at the contents of the pages suggests the dominance of the text in terms of occupied space, as well as something that may be understood as an apparently secondary, or ancillary function of the included images. What does, then, the text want from the image?

In *Austerlitz*, the narrator relates the story narrated to him by the eponymous Jacques Austerlitz, a man of Jewish origin who was brought to Wales at the beginning of the Second World War and raised by an elderly couple named Elias. Austerlitz describes how the past of his own family had been for a very long time a complete mystery to him, as was most of the past of his foster parents. One of the few possibilities to get an insight into the lives of his new family was through an album of photographs that showed images of their life in Llanwddyn. Due to the lack of information on the pictures, and due to their scarcity, Austerlitz develops a kind of obsession with the pictures, looking at them over and over again, as if this could make him understand them better:

As there were no other pictures of any kind in the manse, I leafed again and again through these few photographs, which came into my possession only much later along with the Calvinist calendar, until the people looking out of them, the blacksmith in his leather apron, Elias's father the sub-postmaster, the shepherd walking along the village street with his sheep, and most of all the girl sitting in a chair in the garden with her little dog on her lap, became as familiar to me as if I were living with them down at the bottom of the lake. (Sebald 72–74)

Right beneath this passage there is a picture of a girl sitting in a garden chair with a small dog on her lap and a doll on the ground with her back

leaning on the girl's ankle. The answer to the above posed question seems obvious enough: the text wants the picture to *illustrate* it. To present what the words have already described. And perhaps it wants the reader to look at the picture of the girl long enough to sense the same kind of familiarity, so that the picture of her becomes for us what it was for Austerlitz. The answer to the question: *what does the picture want?* seems to come so reluctantly that I eagerly go back to Mitchell's book to look for more hints. "What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all" (Mitchell 48). Is that really so?

Unwilling to accept "nothing" for an answer, I decide to refer to more traditional approaches to the study of the image and ask first about the image itself: what does it want (to say)? In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes advises to look not at the obvious in a picture, but at this one peculiar point where the meaning seems to be tearing itself towards us, namely something he refers to as *punctum* (Barthes 27). In the picture I am discussing, I would find the *punctum* not in the central figure of the girl with her dog, but in the figure of a doll which is holding something that could be a bunch of flowers or yet another, smaller doll. The doll invites our attention for two reasons: first, it is a clear white spot in otherwise dark surroundings, and second, it is a peculiar repetition of the figure of the girl with her dog. The girl has her dog, the doll has her...? At the same time, we may suspect that the doll also belongs to the girl. Her face and posture express calmness and happiness and we may guess that this condition is partly a result of the fact of ownership and the pleasure of taking care of someone that comes with it. Soon enough, the girl will be posing with her children and grandchildren: a responsible proprietress. This kind of analysis, an approach Barthes uses throughout his book, is convenient because it seems to offer a sense of getting inside the image and uncovering the real relations between elements and their meaning. It is also useful in this particular instance, as it easily refers us back to Sebald's text: the picture, such a poignant comment on ownership and belonging, is a powerful reminder of Austerlitz's lack, his not belonging where he is, and his not belonging anywhere in particular, as well as his sense of living his life in Wales in a state of complete incomprehension, as if he lived with all the people around him underwater.

Yet, the problem with this kind of analysis is that it is still very much based on traditional semiotics; it seems to suggest that an image (and especially its *punctum*) has a peculiar kind of power over us, a power that can be understood if a semiotic analysis is put in operation. But does it tell us anything about the real *life and loves* of this particular image? If the answer is no, we might also try to analyse this picture following different routes.

The first route will be a journey taking as its guide Hans Belting's remarks about the concept of the image as a fundamentally anthropological notion. According to Belting, the image is always a product of individual or collective symbolisation. What is more, an anthropological understanding of it emphasises an interdisciplinary approach that takes into consideration the temporal aspect of images (Belting 13). In this optic, a human being does not own or rule over images, he or she is a site of images, being ruled by them despite the continuous efforts to govern images that he or she actively produces. Belting suggests that, in contrast to the text, the "what" of an image – its content or subject – is almost impossible to determine, and it is the "how" – how an image works, and how it becomes an image in the first place – that he is predominantly concerned with (14). To answer this question, Belting refers to the concept of the medium. He states that "how" depends on the medium through which we perceive images, and it is only through a particular medium that an image can actually be an image. Images can be treated as cognitive media that mediate themselves differently than texts (36). It is the medium that makes it possible for us to perceive images as images, and not as bodies or objects.

To talk about the medium is important, as Belting persuasively shows, because there is a fundamental difference between the image and the medium: the former is always mental in nature, whereas the latter always material, even if they are completely united in and through our perception (39). In the act of perception we separate the image from the medium. In the case of the picture of the girl in *Austerlitz*, the medium is, of course, photography. In the act of looking at the picture and in the act of analysing it (as in the one I suggested above) the medium becomes transparent: I remove the discussion of the medium of photography and look at the picture as if it was not a picture at all; not a *picture* of a girl, but, quite simply, a girl whose presence is represented by means of a picture. It is, perhaps, natural to do so, yet it should be avoided: the medium of photography as a *mediator* between us and the represented (the girl) has to be taken into consideration if the question: *what does the picture want?* is to be answered at all. Sebald's work is inseparably linked with the most important concepts and phenomena of modernity; I have already mentioned the notion of the archive, and photography as an emphatically modernist invention should be included in my analysis as well. Photography, as Belting articulates, is a medium of the body that produces its own actual image. This immobile image, a frozen still from the "movement of life" works as a sign of lost memory (58). It is in and through the picture of the girl appearing next to the text about her that Sebald manages to make her presence *present* for us. And at the same time, it is the very medium of photography, with its insistence on the *absence* of what is *present* in the picture,

that he puts an emphasis on the problem of loss and lack, in this case the lack of belonging.

It is not only Mitchell who is convinced that rhetoric of the image closes up other kinds of interpretation and reduces the image to something it is not. Mieke Bal, yet another of my important guides in this text, a theorist of culture who just like Mitchell seeks to find modes of a new kind of picture analysis, comments on this reductive act of rhetoric in her *Quoting Caravaggio*, where she, among other things, discusses the deconstructivist practices of Paul de Man. Bal writes: “De Man ignores the visual nature of the object he is looking at as well as the bodily nature of speech. What he calls semiotic in avowedly just grammar; but that reduction is mobilised for the sake of establishing an opposition that he can then deconstruct in favour of ambiguity” (Bal 85). Bal makes a point about the power of the image that resembles in a sense the one made by Mitchell. She writes: “If visual art makes any sense at all beyond the narrow domain of beauty and the affective domain of pleasure, it is because art, too, *thinks*; it is thought. Not the thought about it, or the thought expressed in it, but visual thought, the thought embodied in form” (115). It is this content of the image, its own visual intelligence, so to speak, which is being neglected by most art histories and theories. Another neglected aspect, which we can in a sense view as coming together with the former one, is an aspect of temporality. As Bal proposes, “time has such a self-evidence about it that it is mostly neglected both in semiotic theory and in the study of visual art” (179). Bal is very radical in her insistence that objects of cultural analysis should not be labelled excessively. In *Travelling Concepts* (2002) she persuasively shows how saying that something *is* an image or a story or anything else, which means using a concept to describe something, actually masks interpretative choices (Bal 22). The problem with traditional art history that uses tools such as iconography is that it covers the image with text up to the point when it disappears (60). What she suggests instead is a continuous movement and an act of translation (in Walter Benjamin’s terms) that do not limit the image, but open it up, so to speak (61). In the chapter devoted to an analysis of how images work, she discusses artworks that in her view work as metaphors that are internally torn between visuality and language (67).

I will now look at a different picture from Sebald’s *Austerlitz* and try to find out what it *thinks* and how it can be *translated* into different terms. I will choose a picture that seems to me to work as this kind of visual metaphor that is both visual and linguistic. The final parts of the novel take place in the National Library in Paris, where Austerlitz tries to discover some facts about his family history and especially about the present whereabouts of his father. Unable to do so because of the maze-like architectonic structure of the building and unfriendly procedures in the library, he sits there frustrated looking

out of the window or reading random novels. His quest is thus over, with no answers reached. The description of his troubles in the library goes on for several pages, where he describes the horrific building with its “symptoms of paralysis,” “complexity of the information and control systems,” “chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability,” and “appearing to consist entirely of obstructions” (392–393). Somewhere in the middle of the long passage there is a black-and-white picture of a part of the library taken at an extraordinary angle with a focus on a tree-covered courtyard that in the picture looks more like a dark pit in-between absurd concrete surfaces. Two of the four towers of the library can be seen, with a pattern of floors and windows suggestive of bookshelves. As a picture of a modern, functional library, the biggest one in France and working as a site of national heritage, it seems to convey a double message. To follow Bal’s remarks about the *thought* inherent in images, as well as her comments about their temporal aspect, I would like to suggest that as a visual metaphor the picture *thinks* the failure of modernity in its many aspects, embodied here in the failed modernist architectural project that was supposed to be functional, but proved threatening, in its compulsive archiving of every book and document that fails to offer knowledge when one needs it, in the incomprehensible structure of this complex that is supposed to function as an ultimate memory storage, yet seems to be the epitome of abandonment, forgetting and ruination. The very temporal aspect of this picture, its evocation of the past by means of (photographical) almost indexical relation with what once has been, makes us almost hear what it is *thinking* of. Where the picture of the girl with her dog seemed to be all about looking out for the future with calm and trust (her anticipating gaze, her comfortable pose), the picture of the library is all but future-oriented.

My final guide in this text, Georges Didi-Huberman, begins his book on the aims of (a certain) art history by describing a sense of paradox we experience when we are looking at an image: “What reaches us immediately and straightaway,” he writes, “is marked with trouble, like a self-evidence that is somehow obscure. Whereas what initially seemed clear and distinct is, we soon realise, the result of a long detour – a mediation, a usage of words. Perfectly banal, in the end, this paradox. [...] All this on one and the same surface of a picture or sculpture, where nothing has been hidden, where everything before us has been, simply, presented” (Didi-Huberman 1). The problem with art history is, then, that it rejects what it has right there, in front of its very eyes, and detaches itself from it by means of words, texts, and commentaries. We need to go back to the image itself, to confront it anew. Didi-Huberman’s call for a new kind of approach is yet another suggestion to give justice to the image, a suggestion which goes hand in hand with all these risky, yet certainly rewarding experiments undertaken by Mitchell, Bal, and Belting. I have pre-

sented here my own understanding of what kind of possibilities their viewing of images may suggest to a reader of Sebald's novels. I have tried to provide an answer to the question: *what do these pictures want, what do they think?* and, certainly, the one I have presented above is all but satisfactory. Perhaps they actually want what Mitchell suggests in his book: nothing at all, or just to be asked what it is that they want and long for. What I attempted here was to fulfil this wish at least partly: as readers of literature and viewers of art we tend to treat text in art as commentary, and an image in a book as an illustration. The pictures included in Sebald's novels demand a different kind of attention, and a different kind of analysis, one that will take into consideration their different kind of longing for a relation with the text and with the viewer.

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