

**The Fallacy of Images in Space Representation
Photography in Selected Works by DeLillo and W.G. Sebald**

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Abstract:

The need to describe space proves to be increasingly urgent in contemporary times. From the various forms by which literature has incorporated this theme: travel reportage, eco-literary narratives, in which space and the importance of place are increasingly gaining prominence, some works experiment new formal strategies to attempt to reformulate not only the concept of space but the way we observe it. What role, for example, does a photograph play when annexed to the literary text? While it is expected to help reinforce the “reality effect” of the story, as Barthes would have called it, on the other hand it may also make more troubling the reading of the space it proposes. As Italian researcher Davide Papotti (2014) writes: “The technical possibility of duplicating landscapes, whether through the reproduction of concretely real portions of land or through the virtualization of the landscapes themselves, does not necessarily imply an increase of their comprehensibility”. In the case of German writer W.G. Sebald, the focus on places and the passage of time and history finds an interesting comparison in the author's choice to annex images in his books, as if to emphasize the impossibility of preserving the present, except in vanishing forms. But if images do not show what a place looks like today, they reveal what it looked like in the past: they thus allow us to think about space with multiple degrees of interpretation. Such is the case with the American writer Don DeLillo, who fully expresses some of the nodal issues of postmodernism. If historical reality and its legacy enter a crisis, those who want to write must look elsewhere for new solutions. In this paper, starting with the two authors mentioned and their relationship with photography, we aim to

offer a reflection that problematizes, in literature, the ways in which we think about and represent space.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Space representation, Geocriticism, Literature and images

1. Attention to the superfluous: the ways of narrating space

Research on how to narrate space has produced remarkable results, experiments and fascinating interdisciplinary dialogues. From a cultural tradition that relegated the role of space to a passive or scenographic element, an important reassessment of the spatial axiom¹ has begun in recent decades: from the so-called “spatial turn”² to research conducted by geocriticism³, or even to recent debates in post-colonial studies⁴, the perception of space as well as its representation have become increasingly problematized issues.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, in the book *Critique et clinique* (1993), starting with the Shakespearian verse from Hamlet, “Time is out of joint”, recalls that reversal in the relationship between time and movement operated by Kant: “Le temps ne se rapporte plus au mouvement qu'il mesure, mais le mouvement au temps qui le conditionne” (Deleuze, p. 14). The idea of a rectified time that imposes on each movement the succession of its determinations will then allow Deleuze to refine his well-known notion of “devenir”. After Kant, then, it is clear how much of a clean break there was with the Aristotelian conception that subjected time to movement.

² Movement inaugurated by Edward Soja at the beginning of *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), in which was affirmed the potential of space as an interpretative category, stifled by a tradition that opposed it to time.

³ It is worth mentioning the book *Géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace*, published in 2011 by Bertrand Westphal. The French academic has inaugurated a critical methodology that looks at literary space in an openly interdisciplinary and comparative perspective.

⁴ We are thinking, among many, of Brian Harley's map deconstruction studies, or the cartographic decolonization work of Edward Said and Graham Huggan. Regarding Said, we remember above all the book *Culture and imperialism* (1993). For further problematization of the concept of map decolonization, see Huggan, 1989. Regarding Harley, and more specifically for a deconstructive look at cartographic material, a reference text is Harley, 1989.

Ian Sinclair's book *London Orbital* (2002), for example, in which the author walks the entire length of the M25, the major road that encircles London, with the aim of documenting the anonymous and over-exploited British periphery, reveals the narrative (and literary) interest for those spaces that normally play a marginal role, and which the anthropologist Marc Augé (1992) would have defined as "non-places". The writing technique used by Sinclair (1997), which he defines as "polaroid epiphanies" (p. 105), focuses on immortalizing sequences of seemingly banal images so to draw the reader's attention to all the uncommon details that would normally be ignored.

The renewed interest in space representation has therefore begun to explore the ways in which places we live in and pass through are explored and questioned, but also, and above all, to the formal strategies by which they are represented. In this paper, we would like to focus one of those strategies: the use of photography in literary texts. Our idea is that, despite the better visibility an image should provide, a photograph can also blur or compromise our place understanding. In the examples we propose here, photographs, or the act of photographing, as we shall see, further problematize the values we attribute to space and the way we observe it.

2. The disquiet of a writer on the road

One of the most striking examples is undoubtedly that of German writer W.G. Sebald. In the book *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), separated in ten parts, the narrator, in which it is easy to discern Sebald himself, after a period of illness and nervous breakdown, goes on a journey (*An English Pilgrimage*, in fact, mentions the subtitle), "in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of [him] whenever [he has] completed a long stint of work" (p. 3). Again, as in Sinclair's case, the narrator's journey is on foot¹, so that attention can be paid to the details scattered throughout the territory. He travels a long itinerary, in Suffolk County, England, visiting hills,

¹ As Christian Moser (2010) puts it: "Sebald's endeavor to oppose the officious history of modern progress and enlightenment by an archeology of the particular, the marginal, and the incommensurable is related to the cultural practice of walking and its literary representation" (p. 40).

coasts and moors, making the meeting of a variety of mysterious and eccentric characters, and bringing up facts and stories about the places he visits.

To the narrative turn of the book, Sebald adds elements developed in an essayistic perspective, providing it with a curious, eclectic, hybridized composition. He will talk, among other topics, of historical phenomena and renowned personalities, like Michael Hamburger, poet and translator of Hölderlin, Thomas Browne, Joseph Conrad, Chateaubriand exile in England, and others. Moreover, to make the book structure even more undefinable, the author inserts photographs that will fragment the narrative linearity. This choice may generate, as Lilian R. Furst (2006) writes, a series of ambivalent readings: “the interspersal of photographs into the text creates a dimension of complexity because they are open to starkly contradictory interpretations” (p. 220). Indeed, photographs do not merely increase the “reality effect” that the text could provide; what Roland Barthes (1968), in an article of the same name, would have called “l’effet de réel” (p. 84-89). On the contrary, in the reproduction of space that they allow, photographs collaborate in an unexpected degree: weakening or making ambiguous the reality level, functioning as “a source of doubt”¹ (Furst, p. 222).

In the second part of *The Rings of Saturn*, when the narrator is planning his trip along Suffolk County, he gets a train to reach the destination of Lowestoft.

Through Brundall, Buckenham and Cantley, where, at the end of a straight roadway, a sugar-beet refinery with a belching smokestack sits in a green field like a steamer at a wharf, the line follows the River Yare, till at Reedham it crosses the water and, in a wide curve, enters the vast flatland that stretches southeast down to the sea. Save for the odd solitary cottage there is nothing to be seen but the grass and the rippling reeds, one or two sunken willows, and some ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilization. These are all that remains of the countless wind pumps and win-

¹ “Instead of creating the closure of certainty, as was assumed in the nineteenth century, photographs may nowadays be perceived as a source of doubt”.

dmills whose white sails revolved over the marshes of Halvergate and all along the coast until in the decades following the First World War, one after the other, they were all shut down. It's hard to imagine now, I was once told by someone who could remember the turning sails in his childhood, that the white flecks of the windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye. And when those bright little points faded, the whole region, so to speak, faded with them (p. 29-30).

Sebald's description of the English countryside, and the reflections that follow, are joined by a photograph, which shows the landscape as the narrator is seeing it: a canal, wild uncultivated grass, a small bridge hidden by vegetation, and the side of an old mill reduced to a ruin. The image provides complementary value to the description of the countryside, but at the same time blurs its reading, producing a peculiar ambiguity, what Didi-Huberman (1998) would have called “une *ouverture*, unique et momentanée, cette ouverture qui signera l'apparition comme telle”¹ (p. 15). Photography restores the temporal gap between past dimension and the present one, in which the mills are no longer there, making visible the shadow of a vanished time. “It takes just one awful second, I often think, and an entire epoch passes” (Sebald, p. 31), will say the narrator a few lines later. The image functionality does not consist in how the details are revealed, but in their absence. The words tell us how the landscape used to show itself; the present image confirms that now it is no longer like that. As Didi-Huberman writes:

Un paradoxe va éclore parce que l'apparaissant aura, pour un moment seulement, donné accès à ce bas-lieu, quelque chose qui évoquerait l'envers ou, mieux, l'enfer du monde visible – et c'est la région de la dissemblance. (p. 15)

The use of two devices allows Sebald to sweep between two temporal dimensions, making them react to each other, showing “l'enfer du monde

¹ “Que faut-il donc à l'apparition, à l'événement de l'apparaissant? Que faut-il juste avant que l'apparaissant ne se referme en son aspect présumé stable ou espéré définitif? Il faut une *ouverture*, unique et momentanée, cette ouverture qui signera l'apparition comme telle”.

visible”, the reality of things lost and forgotten. The representation of the same place, captured in different moments, using a double reading equipment, reveals the different levels of understanding from which space can be constituted, and the interpretative paths that it may allow. However, the knowledge the image brings does not seem to help the narrator to better place himself within it: if on the one hand the photograph provides a documenting effect on the countryside, on the other hand it seems to mystify the narrator's interpretation of it. As noticed by Furst, the “characteristic pattern of hyperrealism undercut by a current of uncertainty reiterates by mimicry the processes of memory, Sebald's cardinal theme” (p. 229). Before mimicking through writing the path of memory by alternating realistic elements with degrees of uncertainty, Sebald's concern on landscapes resides in the different layers of the past that coexist within them, from that dramatic ‘passage of time’ he is obsessed with, which photography is unable to fully return, and the feeling of disquiet to which these leads.

3. The hidden meaning of the image: new boundaries of imagination

In another example – that can be found in the eighth part of the book – the same procedure generates significantly different effects. The narrator is traveling along the east coast of Suffolk County and decides to visit the disused military base of Orfordness. The area was administered during the Two World Wars and the Cold War by the Minister of Defence with the purpose of carrying out various top-secret military tests. Nowadays, so exactly twenty years after Sebald visited it in 1992, Orfordness has become a nature reserve, accessible only by boat, where it is possible to see various protected bird species and an expanding flora. Back in 1992, when *The Rings of Saturn's* narrators visits the park, it is moreover a marshy and abandoned area, that fishermen believe to be cursed, and on which very few curious people take the risk to go. Therefore, being able to be transported by boat by a local, freshly disembarked, the narrator experiences a feeling of gloom and desolation:

Once we were on the other side, I took leave of my ferryman and, after climbing over the embankment, walked along a partially overgrown tarmac track running straight through a vast, yellowing field. The day was dull and oppressive, and there was so little bree-

ze that not even the ears of the delicate quaking grass were nodding. It was as if I were passing through an undiscovered country, and I still remember that I felt, at the same time, both utterly liberated and deeply despondent. I had not a single thought in my head. With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound. (p. 234)

The sense of oppression described here will later find a complementarity effect with the three photographs included by the author. But differently from the previous case, the images will not reproduce an historical gap between past and present, but rather between the different feelings the author will experience after landing in Orfordness. Along the dismantled military base stand abandoned buildings, skeletons of structures “in which for most of my lifetime hundreds of boffins had been at work devising new weapons systems” (p. 236). Those structures, “probably because of their odd conical shape”, produce a flicker of imagination, an evocative effect: the narrator says they looked “like the tumuli in which the mighty and powerful were buried in prehistoric times with all their tools and utensils, silver and gold”. Not being able to situate himself within that place (“It was as if I were passing through an undiscovered country”, p. 234) and feeling wholly disarmed (“I felt, at the same time, both utterly liberated and deeply despondent”, p. 234) the author seems to surrender himself to the place’s suggestive power. And the use of photography here, depicting a sort of abandoned bridge with pylons sadly towering at both ends, on one hand complements and reinforces the narrator’s impressions – because the reader can identify with his imaginative process – but on the other hand reconfigures those sensations, reintroducing an objective and realistic value of the location. It all hinges on a specific quality that we attribute to photographs, and which raises a contradiction: photographs should enhance and not fade the degree of authenticity in narrative contexts.

Shortly afterwards, the place’s suggestiveness leads the narrator to imagine a dystopian future:

My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations. But the closer I came to these ruins, the more

any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe. (p. 236)

Once again, the narrator feels projected into another time dimension than the present one; but not by seeing, as in the first case, the remains of an old human activity. Here, he plunges into a distant future, “amidst the remains of [his] own civilization after its extinction”. The next two photographs, the first one portraying a deserted expanse with round-roofed structures in the distance, and the second one taking a closer view of one of the buildings, seem to foster a place sense of experience despite the landscape description was so far portrayed as undefinable and mysterious. In the first sense of gloomy lostness, Sebald's choice to introduce the narrator's imagery, followed with photographs, allows to entirely reconceive the place's unintelligibility by providing a layering of interpretations that converge together. However, photography does not seem to dispel a sense of bewilderment. Sebald's description of space, in the cases presented here, is composed of several degrees of reading (textual and visual), without succeeding in providing a better understanding of places, but on the contrary, almost enhancing a sense of constitutive disorientation of the narrator-subject. Images do not bring space under the roof of the word, but rather bifurcate its reading levels, dissolving the illusion of a cohesive reality that may be grasped.

4. DeLillo and the act of photographing as an act of (liturgical) space displacement

Another relevant author who attempts to deconstruct space as a single, compact block, and who seems to diversify it, displaying its structural discontinuity, is the American writer Don DeLillo. In the case we will present here, we will not focus on an image, or a photograph, but rather on the very act of photographing.

White Noise (1985) describes the life of Jack Gladney, a university professor who is specialized in Hitler studies, a course of study he invented himself. The novel is divided into three parts, with a total of forty chapters. But we can attempt to divide the story into two main sections: the first part of the novel documents the bourgeois and very American life of Jack family;

in the second half, a chemical spill from a rail car releases a black noxious cloud that forces all the inhabitants of Jack's home region to evacuate. Being in contact with the toxin, Jack is forced to confront the idea of death. The novel offers a very satirical portrait of American society, with its fears and contradictions: from the difficulties of interacting with one's children, to betrayal, hypochondria and the consumerism of the average American family.

In the passage we propose here, Jack's character is invited by his eccentric friend and colleague Murray on an outing to see what appears to be "the most photographed barn in America".

Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides – pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book. "No one sees the barn," he said finally (DeLillo, p. 12).

In this case, the author proposes a non-homogeneous spatial schematization due to tourist activity that breaks the landscape's continuity. Traffic signs participate in opening a new dimension in space by transfiguring attraction into event. To such an extent that, Murray's character says:

Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn". He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others. "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies (p. 12).

The barn goes so far as to lose its reality dimension, turning into something to which Murray's attributes a spiritual if not sacred significance.

Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. (p.12)

The use of aura recalls Walter Benjamin's reflection on artwork, the sublime representation of a remoteness, a transcendence, a halo that envelops the contemplated artistic object. The tourist attraction seems to stand halfway between the work of art, which invites to a specific and encoded form of contemplation, and the sacrality of a place, as if, following Murray's reasoning, the tourist attraction – and consequently the barn – reflected both the value of the work of art and the sacredness of the place. In this case, however, the aura of the place is 'empowered', as if it was a real devotion process, by the act of photographing, which turns out to be the actual event of observation. So much so, that it will always be Murray who will pronounce the famous sentence: "They are taking pictures of taking pictures" (p. 13).

The author, in this case, seems to associate photography with a dispersive function of spatial representativeness. As in his other books, DeLillo creates a derivative dimension of reality, or what we might consider more simply postmodernist: for its lack of confidence in historical truth, in the terms in which Jameson (1989) defined it. For this reason, the hermeneutic unity of places is always compromised: space appears fragmented into more interpretative degrees, producing a frayed effect of spatial reality.

The criticism of the consumerist system of the late 20th century dwells on the author's description of the supermarket, which is constant throughout the novel, but also on modern man's interaction with the various facilities and services scattered throughout public space. As Christian Moraru (1997) writes, "the consumer faces his or her own consumption, a paradoxical disappearance not beneath surfaces but on them, which eliminates the difference between the consumer and the consumed" (p. 198). In fact, it is precisely the concept of self-identity and the demarcation between subject and context that is then called into question.

“What was the barn like before it was photographed?” he said. “What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now”. He seemed immensely pleased by this (DeLillo, p. 13).

“We've agreed to be part of a collective perception”, had said Murray in the passage mentioned above. The act of photographing cancels individuality to the point of generating a single adoring choir, which offers itself devoutly to the barn as in a religious procession. The flattening of the individual takes place within the tourist event: the road signs and the people snapping pictures irreversibly impair the perception of the space they indicate. And photography, or the mere act of it, in the cases we have analyzed here, has fulfilled this function.

Conclusion

More than increasing the truthfulness of a story or enhancing spatial comprehensibility, photographs, in the examples collected here, or the mere act of photographing, invite a reflection on the (very diluted) concept of space, as a polyvalent, even contradictory dimension of reality. In this article, we have tried to demonstrate how labile are the instruments with which space is supposed to be depicted. In both cases, but on two different levels, the examples given here reveal a constitutive tension of space in being represented according to criteria of absolute truthfulness. And what better than photography, which is supposed to tell us what inhabits space, can instead show us how fallacious our perception of the world is?

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