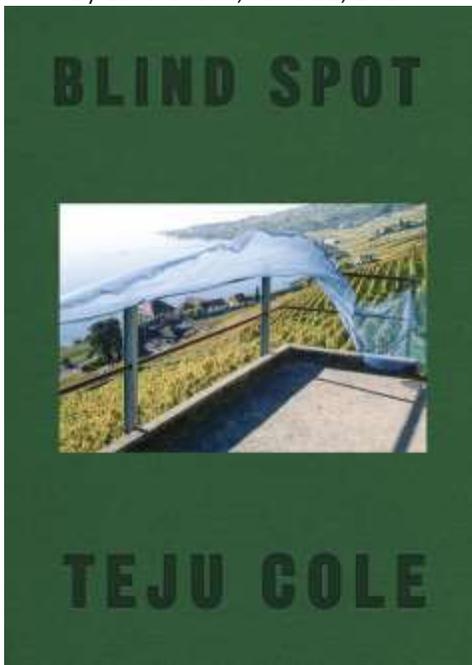


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BOOK REVIEW: BLIND SPOT BY TEJU COLE

By Leila Green, June 12, 2017



In 2011, Teju Cole went blind. As he would soon find out, this blindness was temporary: the result of papillophlebitis, a retinal vein occlusion. After a corrective surgery, Cole, photography critic for the New York Times Magazine and author of the 2011 novel, *Open City*, and the 2016 essay collection, *Known and Strange Things*, said: “The photography changed after that. The looking changed.”

Blind Spot is, at its core, a genre-bending collection of images juxtaposed with text. The texts—illustrious captions—tend to be poetically brief and to generally unearth something unseen in the image. However, this is no hidden object puzzle; Cole is not telling us what to uncover. Leaning away from instruction, he invites us into his own, fascinating way of seeing and interrogating the world. Part travelogue, part theoretical text, part historical excavation, part memoir, part poetry, *Blind Spot* follows a deeply visual trio of releases concerned with sight. In *Open City*, the main character, Julius, roams New York City and comments gratuitously on what he sees. In *Known and Strange Things*, curiosity leads Cole around the globe to pen essays on the peculiar, the political, the seen, and the inevitably unseen. *Blind Spot* contains both the same kinds of revelations about the seemingly mundane that punctuated *Open City* and the boundless inquisitiveness found in *Known and Strange Things*. In *Blind Spot*, Cole, an avid traveler, criss-crosses the planet, making crisp, intricate photographs in locations both often seen and rarely noticed.

Cole’s preoccupation with the unseen drives him to a startling array of places. Some, like Brooklyn and Berlin, are well-known. Others, like McMinnville, Wannsee and Brienersee warrant pinpointing on the book’s accompanying world map. Cities, in particular, invite a certain visual aloofness; an inability to engage intimately with images and others thanks to overstimulation. The conundrum of the city still entices Cole, who is fascinated by its endless intersections of life, space, and memory: “In the city, there is no shortage of stories, no scarcity of divulged secrets, only (it sometimes seems) a dearth of ears.” Aside from cityscapes, in *Blind Spot* Cole often points his flawless lens towards the periphery—the deliberately unseen—exposing ironies and meditating upon topics as varied as giraffes, longing, rage and dining.

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Blind Spot redefines travel photography, which tends to be concerned with capturing touristy landmarks, “exotic” peoples, and arresting landscapes. Shunning typical, obviously poignant photos of people or landmarks, Cole instead highlights ambiguous landscapes and peculiar structures; things you see everyday, but rarely notice. Committed to his unearthing of the earth, Cole opts to illuminate global “blind spots”—concentrating on detail, singularity, form, and memory. He photographs the quotidian: the pile of rubble, the obscured tip of a mountain, the ironic sign. These images, in their presumed plainness, do more work to connect us than a photo of the Statue of Liberty. They invite an ambiguity that suggests universality. There is no Arc de Triomphe in Selma, but like every place, there is wind, stone, and history. Cole has compiled a catalogue that evidences a startling sameness, splayed across borders, that undoes expectations of what we should see and know about ourselves, others, and the world.

Cole has a keen ability to distill meaning and conjure memory from images that are, at first sight, meaningless. His way of seeing fills in our own blindness. A vacant, graffitied road in Rome prompts a reflection on the intimacy of translation. A hodgepodge of light and darkness in Milan becomes a symbol for the trauma embedded in cities. A shadow of a ladder inevitably signals a pathway to heaven. A mangled bush of flowers rekindles the memory of an awkward bike collision. A photo of a drowned ship turns into a deeply felt cataloging of things left behind by the dead. These photos evoke physical and emotional memory for Cole, who traverses complex intellectual labyrinths and emerges with impressive philosophical quips. Often, these lines are so devastating that one can only close the book and set it down for a moment; let the blind spot bloom with gratuitous knowing.

This is a pseudo-theoretical text. Most notably, it requires a more complex understanding of literal darkness. Seeing into shadows, Cole breathes light into darkness, for “darkness is not empty, it is information at rest.” There are more stunning revelations about perception—“It is not only the leaves that grow. Shadows grow also.”—and the spectrum of light: “Color is the sound an object makes in response to light.”

Despite the slightly dizzying array of topics, ideas and visual information contained by Blind Spot, there is a singular vein pulsing throughout; a sense of commonality, eternity, and—accordingly—hope. Blind Spot is a reckoning with presence and absence; a sturdy bridge between known and unknown, a fierce manifesto for a revolutionary way of encountering the world.

Preoccupied with the synthesis of meaning from form, and the serendipitous resemblances between supposedly dissimilar things, Cole stands poised and alert with his lens, finely tuned to the echoes in an empty valley, gleaning insight from the shadows. Cole claims that “resurrection is far too close to death.” But this proximity, as with most of his revelations, is no accident. At one point, he compares the reflection of a tree branch into a murky puddle to his own retina. This is either an allusion to his past ocular trauma, or a comment on the disorderly origins of sight. From hectically assorted nerves and veins emerge surprising visual sense: a sky, a field, a smiling face. Out of chaos comes sight, comes understanding, comes meaning and memory. How can we trust this chaos? In what tangled vein lies truth? Vision begins and ends with us—or does it? As Cole puts it: “The soul cries wolf often, or has wolf cried it.”