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Picturing the Story: Image and Narrative in Brian Castro and W.G. Sebald

In a multi-genre writing unit I taught last year at Monash University, students were required to submit a draft of a piece of work before the final piece was handed in to be graded. My role was to provide suggestions to help students improve their draft pieces. One of the pieces submitted to me at this draft stage came from a student who had taken up an interest in Salsa dancing. She wrote a non-fiction article which, together with insightful nuggets of information about the language and history of the dance, recounted an evening out taking a beginners Salsa dance lesson at the Copacabana Club in Melbourne's Smith Street. Attached to the piece was a sheet of A3 paper folded in half so as to resemble an open magazine. The page had been divided up into sections with labels. Text. Photo. Text. Photo. etc. In my comment on the draft I indicated to the student that presenting the layout was unnecessary, as the only element of the assignment to be graded was the text, the writing - the important bits. The student, perhaps wisely, did not comply. The final version included a reasonable mock-up of a magazine spread complete with photographs of the student in various states of dance and (I assume) drunkenness at said bar. As I considered the piece, I was left with the feeling that indeed the text was somehow enhanced by the photographs of the student, and not just in the literal illustrative way that the student had intended. Despite the amateurism of the photographs, and probably because of it, the piece appeared to be more aesthetically complete than had been intended and I wished I could have taken this into account when grading it. But there were two reasons I couldn't: there was no indication in the explanatory notes accompanying the piece that the student had actually intended this level of sophistication; and nowhere could I find any sense that I had the scope or expertise to judge the quality of the images and their contribution to the meaning of the text.

It also struck me that in the student's resistance against my suggestion about the value of using images, I was coming across a writer, the type of whom might be becoming increasingly common, for whom the first impulse is toward image rather than text; the same neonate who figures in Jonathan Franzen's equation of generations when he writes in his essay 'The Reader in Exile' that 'For every reader who dies today, a viewer is born' (Franzen 2002: 165); the product of a culture that has absorbed into itself the centrality of the image in the way Urry articulates in his seminal study of the culture of tourism *The Tourist Gaze*: 'Our memories of places,' he writes, 'are largely structured through photographic images and the mainly verbal text we weave around images when they are on show to others,' (Urry 1990: 140). Image first. Text second.

Of course the use of images, and by this I mean images in the broader sense of photographs, drawings, paintings and the like, in concert with text, that is words, linguistic messages in the form of narrative and stories, is by no means a novel practice. Consider the work of the medieval illuminators of holy texts, and the renaissance woodcuts carved for the version of Aesop's Fables produced on Gutenberg's press. Perhaps it is of prime importance to remember that there was a time even further past when the image and the text were not yet separate. Recorded history is defined by the rise in Sumer 7000 years ago of cuneiform impressions in clay, falling somewhere between representaion of linguistic utterance and visually apprehensible objects. But, like Plato's original four-legged two-headed humans in the *Symposium*, words and images seem to have fallen foul of the gods and been rent asunder forever, flung into a mad dance, whose irregular beat searches in vain to restore their long-lost unity. And now, long after the split, any permanent reunion seems impossible. Image and text have metamorphosed independently, along lines of technology that have seen the image come closer and closer to the illusion of the real, the photographic theft of light and time, while the word has been cut off, fixed in abstract characters, undecipherable outside a connection with spoken language. But words are still said to evoke images, and every image's meaning hangs on a wall of words. What remains between the image and the text is the old yearning for unity.

What does this mean for the writer? Are we agents of this yearning? Is it our duty to make good the promise of the image as Berger puts it: 'In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it.' (Berger & Mohr 1982: 92) Must we be bound to the image, to serve its desire for many-sided, free interpretation?

In some quarters I think it means that the writer has come to envy the image. Jonathan Franzen again, identifies this envy as being manifested in a kind of resentment. He points to Bickerts' argument in *The Gutenberg Elegies* which presents reading as an internal activity and viewing an image as external, that the loss of the internal life represented by the decline of reading is to be mourned (Franzen 2002: 172). An ocularcentric culture, one images the writer complaining, hijacks the imagination of its erstwhile readers. The result is that some writers feel uncomfortable in the presence of the image. They feel that to engage with the image is some kind of guilty pleasure, an indulgence in the sinful world of eye candy. Franzen confesses his sin and repents by giving away his television set.

Of course I am casting the tension between text and image in too melodramatic a light. But it makes the point that the writer, the literary writer, even the student writer in a course of study in Creative Writing at a tertiary institution, need not be puritanically warned away from engaging more directly with the image. Rather, it might be useful to explore avenues of experimentation, to engage with the ways in which the text and the image are being used in tandem in the practice of contemporary literary fiction and explore how it might be possible to deduce something about the writing process and how images contribute to the aesthetic effect of the work as a whole.

Brian Castro and W.G. Sebald, whose writings are similarly attuned and traverse some of the same melancholic - if hemispherically opposite - ground, illustrate perfectly to me the generation of a particular aesthetic effect which is achieved when the text and, in this case, photographic images are presented as a contiguous whole. They present what seems at

first to be a seemingly literal and unified message (image as simple illustration of text) but which, in my reading, come to appear as being purposely disconnected. The following examples describe some of these images and the contexts in which they appear.

Brian Castro's *Shanghai Dancing* is a self-described fictional autobiography. The opening pages present two family trees culminating in the union of the Castro and Wing families in the persons of Arnaldo Castro and Jasmine Wing and the production of their offspring António. António, it would appear, is the 'I' and the 'he' of the shifting narrative point of view. Of course this immediately presents the reader with an uncertainty. We recognise that as autobiography this is meant to be the life of Brian, but because we cannot find any Brian on the family tree, it is also not the life of Brian. Instead the narrator is António Castro, a fictional vehicle for Castro's autobiography. An autobiography at liberty to graze on the paddocks of invention, but fixed to the real with the evidence of photographs. The photographs are placed in the text un-captioned and without attribution.

In one photograph a man stands on a beach, holding in his stomach, puffing his chest out, and rippling his biceps à la Charles Atlas. The adjacent text, continuous with the narrative, reads:

> Your father was hopeless at business. He was all show and loved women, the high life, and what he called class. He kept hearing angels while Lobo kept his ear to the ground. Your father could have retired to Miami, passed his remaining days in Little Havana arm wrestling, sipping curaçao and chatting with exiled Cubans in their pork pie hats and Hawaiian shirts. And you...you wouldn't be writing books. (Castro 2003: 197)

A few pages along a photographic/photocopied reproduction of an advertisement for Sunlight Soap appears in which a demure woman possibly in a touched-up photograph (possibly coloured in the original?) sits smiling on a bench in an elegant Chinese dress that hugs her crossed knees beneath her folded hands. Above it the conclusion of an episode about the narrator's mother: 'To think that she once did advertisements for Sunlight Soap' (Castro 2003: 247).

W.G. Sebald's four works of prose fiction *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* all use photographic and other images in a similar vein. The images again are unattributed and uncaptioned.

In *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998) we read to the bottom of page 59:

> Perhaps it was that darkening that called to my mind an article I had clipped from the *Eastern Daily Press* several months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake. During the last War, the report read, Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the camp at Bergen Belsen on the 14th of April 1945.

When the page is turned, instead of the continuation of the sentence, we are faced with what John Banville describes as 'a two-page spread showing bodies piled at random in a pine wood' (Banville 2001). The quality of the image however is poor, the bodies could easily be mistaken for lumpy earth, or collapsed tents.

In *Vertigo*, the narrator, a close fictional version of the author, has his passport inadvertently spirited away while in a hotel on Lake Garda. He presents himself at the German consulate in Milan.

> At length, a short, not to say dwarfish consular official settled himself on a sort of barstool behind an enormous typing machine in order to enter in dotted letters the details I had given concerning my person into a new passport. Emerging from the consulate building with this newly issued proof of my freedom to come and go as I pleased in my pocket, I decided to take a stroll around the streets of Milan... (Sebald 2002b: 114-115)

The date is the 4th of August 1987. On the same page is a reproduction of W.G. Sebald's passport, issued on 04 August 1987 in Milan; the photograph identifying the author is partially obscured by a thick black line.

It seems almost self-evident that the photographs presented by both Castro and Sebald should be described as illustrations of the text. Indeed, Banville writes that the pages of Sebald's books are 'illustrated with blurry, anonymous, and yet curiously affecting photographs' and that these photographs when

> viewed out of context, can seem positively twee, and sometimes they do smack of literal-mindedness: one finds oneself recalling the BBC television comedy sketch mocking the illustrative obsessions of the compilers of newscasts, in which mention of the government position of Lord Privy Seal is backed by shots of Jesus Christ, an outdoor lavatory, and an aquatic mammal balancing a ball on its nose. (Banville 2001)

Tess Lewis writing in *The New Criterion* describes the use of photographs in Sebald thus:

> Sebald punctuates his precise elegant prose with grainy black-and-white photographs of people, details from paintings, pages from diaries, train tickets, receipts, and documents, many of which are tainted with a faint air of dubious authenticity. These illustrations simultaneously reinforce and undermine the narrator's credibility. (Lewis 2001: 85)

Evelyn Juers in her essay on Sebald 'W', wonders a little plaintively, whether, after his sudden success, there might emerge a host of Sebald imitators. 'It's not difficult,' she writes, 'to illustrate prose with photographs' (Juers 2002: 112).

The term *illustration* is a misleading one here. An illustration suggests a clarifying link between the image and the text, that light is being cast on how the text ought to be visualised. This is not exactly the case. And to give them their due Banville and Lewis, despite their reliance on the term *illustration*, both identify this uncertainty. Banville makes light of their near absurd literality and Lewis engages with the question of the reliability of the narrator. It seems clear that the very purpose of these images is to elicit this sense of doubt about their final status, that they engage in an aesthetics of discontinuity. This is a similar discontinuity as experienced between the image and text in Castro.

In the light of this aesthetic of discontinuity, what do we make in *Shanghai Dancing* of the image of a child perhaps three, maybe four years old - ostensibly the narrator, Antontio-not-Brian - standing in the place on the roof of his childhood home where a Chinese bandit had been beaten half to death and then beheaded beside the water tank?

> It happened just a few short years before this photo was taken, and you can configure the cold ambition behind the camera to implant the beast in me as well and I, caught in the crosshairs of the German lens, squinting back in sideways contemplation of the dreaded future. (Castro 2003: 322)

Is this Brian Castro the author in a photograph lifted from his family album which has been recast in a skewed ficto-autobiographical light? Surely it must be. This is a fictional-autobiography after all. If there is a slippage between fiction and biography in this text then how does this apply to the image?

A naive reading allows us to read the 'I' of the photograph and the 'I' of the text as being of the same substance, existing on the same plane. But in this case we know they are not. Both the text and the photograph become unreadable, their message cannot surmount the unresolvable wall that Castro has erected between them. The photograph emerges from the world of non-fiction, it is the product and evidence of the observable world. If the work we are reading is fiction - a novel - a misrepresentation must be taking place. The image cannot be a simple illustration of a passage in the text.

Similarly with the Sunlight Soap advertisement mentioned earlier. Whose mother is this in the image? Brian's or Antonio's? We read for a connection between image and text. That link appears literal. The advertisement could be real. It looks authentic. And even if it is a real advertisement, not digitally mocked-up by the author himself, we still have no proof that this really is the narrator's mother.

And further on, the voice of the narrator's father, Arnaldo Castro, speaks: 'I was to play the clarinet in a dance band with Billy 'The Kid' Souza on drums, and Mickey Rocha on bass and Jaime Guimereis on piano. The Shimin Syncopators.' (Castro 2003: 318). The photograph set into the text shows a drummer, a saxophonist (not a clarinettist) and a man obscured by the drummer and kit, with his head bowed. It couldn't be the double bass he is playing. Surely that would protrude above the drum kit. Perhaps it is the piano? Is this the Jaime Guimereis who in the narrative of *Shanghai Dancing* was run through by a Japanese sentry with a bayonet over a petty lapse in etiquette during the occupation of Hong Kong? Is this really the Shimin Syncopators? Did they ever exist?

We read for a connection. The man on the beach in the photograph looks like he might be in Miami. Is this the narrator's father? If it is Miami, then this couldn't be him in his retirement. We've just been told this is not what he is doing. Is it an imagined version of the father's foregone life in retirement? No. This is a photograph after all and the photograph does not lie. There is no connection.

Sebald makes like gestures in his similarly quasi-autobiographical novels. Have we been told the true story of how the author came to have his passport issued in Milan on this day, or has there been a

misrepresentation? What are those strange grainy lumps in the forest contextualised by reference to Bergen-Belsen?

Jacques Austerlitz, the eponymous hero of Sebald's final work of prose fiction, escapes Europe on the Kindertransport and suffers the erasure of his identity, submerged in the deeply religious world of a Calvinist minister and his wife in rural Wales. Despite having known the fact of his hidden identity for many years, it is only late in life that he engages in an active reconstruction of his past, and searches for clues about his mother Agáta. John Banville claims that '[t]he movement, toward the close of the book, when we are finally shown a photograph of a woman who is almost certainly Agáta, is one of the most moving moments that the reader is likely to encounter in modern literature' (Banville 2001). Why so moving? Is it because of the uplifting pathos built into the naive reading that connects son and long-perished mother? I think there is something more, something darker going on here. There is also a sense that we know that the woman in the photograph is real (Sebald 2002a: 353). Whoever she is, she once existed. She may well be someone's mother. A photograph lifted by Sebald from a family album somewhere. Not the mother of Jacques Austerlitz at all. The same gap, the same disconnection, that pervades the relationship between image and text in Castro's *Shanghai Dancing* is at work here.

In her study of post-War West German literature and the Holocaust, *The Language of Silence*, Ernestine Schlant describes this trait of Sebald's work. She writes that it is spoken in

> a language of mourning and melancholy so pervasive that it applies even when the text speaks of other events and times… In Sebald's book (she is writing now of *The Emigrants*) the victims speak, and they fall silent when the limits of what can be said have been reached. (Schlant 1999: 234)

The mourning and melancholia do not serve to atone for the past, the dead cannot be retrieved, just as between the images and the text a profound unalterable silence is maintained.

Between the literal illumination of the texts and these texts' uncertain status, somewhere between fiction and autobiography, there remains an uncanny semiotic gap - a silent no-man's land that plays with Barthes' understanding of photographs as being 'a message without a code' (Barthes 1977: 17). Unless they have been labelled, or captioned (even in the way Breton captions the photographs and drawings in his surrealist novel *Nadja*) photographs are silenced. The linguistic aspect of text is the vocal, articulate element - the photograph is silent, enigmatic - it must be voiced by the text. In both Castro and Sebald the photograph is allowed to do what Castro himself describes is at work in Sebald, he is 'resisting the vortex while speaking the vortex.' (Castro 2002: 125)

This silence is related to Barthes' idea of the text (the linguistic message) acting as a technique 'intended to fix the floating signifiers in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs' (Barthes 1977: 39). The photograph is always an uncertain sign - in this case the text too is uncertain. Just when we believe, naively, that one speaks literally to the other, we must in a more sophisticated reading realise that the message collapses. Silence remains. It is in this silence that we find an aesthetic effect - the effect, the emotion it generates, is one of discomfort,

disappointment, sadness, loss, melancholy. As Castro has it in his elegy for Sebald, 'Blue Max', 'the photos...form the border between life and death, signifying silence, but possessing a mnemonic power in their textual spaces. They are, in some sense, a mental self-portrait, more personal than the text' (Castro 2002: 124).

So we come to the question of how all this might benefit the student in a creative writing course apart from equipping them with the ability to identify and possibly use an aesthetic device by throwing a few obscure photographs into the mix. The answer lies in how the introduction of images into text in this Castro/Sebald model actively exposes something about the writing process.

It acknowledges that the act of writing is not a mimetic act, but one of artifice - something relatively new writers are prone to forget. Castro recognises this idea. 'Facts,' he writes in an essay on *Shanghai Dancing* as a work-in-progress, 'are always constituted, like history. Put together with gaps.' (Castro 1999: 209)

It seems obvious in the works of Castro and Sebald that the photographs they use must be collected and culled, ordered and made to relate to the text. They become part of the text themselves. Words too must engage with the same process, the words must speak to each other, but to achieve depth and texture, must also participate in the active rendering of silences, gaps must be allowed to remain.

Schlant says on Sebald's *The Emigrants* that, 'The narrator describes the circumstances of his own life at the time he becomes interested in the lives of these "others"; he describes the note-taking and the travels necessary for his research, so that the narratives are also works-in-progress constructed in front of the reader' (Schlant 1999: 225). There is a layering of fiction and fact here again in which the photographs - as evidence of the real - participate. The process of writing the novel is fictionalised within the novel.

It reminds us finally of the idea that writing is a type of performance, a shaking together of disparate elements that, with craft, love, intellect, persistence and risk, can be moulded into good writing. I think this is what I identified in my Salsa dancing student's work. A clear laying bare of the rough foundations. The end result is a kind of exposition of something about the process of writing that presentation of text alone often seems to leave unarticulated, a kind of raw performance of the text's very materiality and an echo of what Sebald says about his writing process in relation to the photographs in his work:

> I write up to these pictures and I write out of them also, so they are really part of the text and not illustrations and hence, if they were produced in a much better form, which would be technically very easy to do nowadays, then they would ruin the text. They must not stand out; they must be of the same leaden grain as the rest. (Sebald in Bigsby 2001: 155)

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