

Aspects of the Rustic as Trope

[One speaks of] "purity" with a people's highly developed sense of language, which, in large society, establishes itself, above all, among the aristocratic and educated. Here it is decided what is to be considered as provincial, as dialect, and as normal; viz, "purity", then is positively the customary usage of the educated in society, which received its sanction through the *usus*, and the "impure" is everything else which attracts attention to it. Thus the "not-striking", is that which is pure.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, "Description of Ancient Rhetoric")¹

"Feeling, but deaf, seeing, but mute, they go their way."² Thus, Walter Benjamin on the forces that attract and pull awry. Roused by the influence of entropy on both the course of narration and the fated aspect of character in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin's focus is revealing. Bound to the soil and drawn to the soil only insofar as cultivation [*Bildung*] claims both mastery and distance from it, one finds hidden within the perspective of the landed gentry an indissoluble relation between sublimation and dissolution. Ironically for Benjamin, the landed gentry is drawn to the very ground upon which the "pure" and the "not-striking" is constituted. Nowhere is this tension better evinced than in the proprietary gaze. In typically Goethean fashion this novel turns upon a succession of striking scenes, eye-catching perspectives, and picturesque views. Forever falling upon the rustic incident, the "aristocratic and educated" claim to vision is apparently shot through with the permanence of something like the intractable force of gravity. Drawing on the high tradition of the tableau and a model of photojournalism, Roy Arden's *Terminal City* embodies precisely this tension. Following Nietzsche one might submit that the striking and the "not-striking" are inseparably correlative. In other words the cultivated gaze is one continuously struck dumb, pulled downward and askew. The cultivated gaze is suspended in a continual state of rustication.

Terminal City occupies a kind of supplementary position in Arden's work. It crystallizes one aspect of his almost ten years of picture making in the environs of Vancouver, British Columbia. It is in this sense continuous with the general subject matter, motifs, and concerns of his "Landscape of the Economy" series. More importantly, however, *Terminal City* is a formalization of this still ongoing project. The *Terminal City* suite focuses in on a specific aesthetic issue that might be usefully summed up as a morphology of the striking; a morphology of the striking approach to the practice of depiction one sees in the latter series. Never simply the product of a roving or vigi-

lant "I" on the look out for a good shot, the color photographs from the "Landscape of the Economy" series – a photograph like *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B. C., 1991* for instance – are rather the product of a subject who has just taken a painful shot to the eye. Always transitional sites – landscapes which register the economy or history, spaces and objects of modernization as much as deterioration – these pictures hinge on the question of the eye-sore: things that have struck, hooked, or caught the eye in a prehensile manner.³ There are, in general, very peculiar magnitudes attached to the objects depicted and the axes or direction from which they are seen that set up the conditions of a particularly charged specular relation. *Terminal City* takes up the essentially tropological nature of the latter series by literally framing the wider question of salience or strikingness in terms of the problem of historical emergence: a problem which is always governed by the turn toward the object, i.e., the turn toward rustication.

Simply put, Arden traces that historical transference or transition from an origin in the picturesque to a tendency in the *informe*. Mirroring an insipid decline that proceeds apace with development, *Terminal City* figures the convention of the rustic by narrating the modalities of its progressive enfeeblement. It is a peculiarly Western trajectory, the origins of which lead back from our own modernity, to the Romantic period, and ultimately to the birth of the ancient *Hesperos* itself. Thus at the very origin of the Platonic city – the city of philosophers – Athens, one finds the expulsion or exile of the poets to the country. "Sent-down" or "banished" from the *polis* – what Heidegger calls "the place of history, the there *in* which, *from* which, and *for* which history takes place"⁴ – the poetic condition *par excellence* is that of rustication. Etymology is obviously helpful here. Out of rustication one dregs up a precious, eroded history. The crux of Arden's project turns on a self-critical perspective that opens up the instant of time to this very history. With an eye for seeking out the signs of time – the course of ruination, or of nature in decay more generally – his practice turns on the rustication of what Nietzsche calls "the customary usage of the educated in society". These pictures circulate between the polarities of high and low, and one cannot but be struck by the swift and irresistible attraction that continuously pulls them toward the object in its dissolution.⁵

Rusticity is continually capturing the attention. Functioning in terms of a condition of possibility for salience itself, it seems the very motor behind the act of conjuration or depiction. In each individual photograph, it is with an almost palpable sense of the circuitry between attraction and repulsion that impurity strikes that which the eye has already sanctioned as pure, or that the eye is drawn down to the level of the detail and raised up again by this self-same concentration on the medium. In the *Terminal City* suite as a whole, narration proceeds down a scale of ever worsening notes that turn upon ever heightened acts of sublimation. The concomitance of these divergent imperatives is clear. An overgrown garage borders on the picturesque. Via a crooked path the rusticity of a northern settlement creeps up on the inner city. A miserable "queen-size" bed holds court among the weeds. A pathetic array of spent condoms shuttle between their abject status and the height of modernist abstraction. Quite literally pictures of tropes, one comes upon the rustic conventions of Constable, Atget, Zille, Evans, Wols, Pollock, Smithson, Sherman and Wall alike, only to stumble over the photojournalistic model in which Arden's photographs are uniformly couched.⁶ Phenomenologically speaking, the rustic turn is the mirror of a continual process

of falling into time and place. As the turn to consciousness itself, the action of rustication is the essential history that Arden's work sounds out.

Drifting from trope to trope in a periodic and discontinuous progression that intends consciousness, transplanted from the rural to an urban setting which the cultivated have learned to abhor, the educated viewer is urged through an act of mimesis to take up the lowly habits of a tramp. Positioned somewhere between the disinterested gaze of the Reverend Gilpin and the furtive glance of a ragpicker one roots along picturesque backalleys, through blighted woods, vacated sidings, and down eroded trails. Heavy with a sense of the day-to-day routine, these are pictures haunted by dispossession. Neither the sublime nor the beautiful is at stake here. What is at issue, is the affect-laden charge animating the relation between them. This tension, which is central to the picturesque, draws the eye continuously down from sublimity toward the object of rustication; from a cold and implacable landscape to the object or detail shot through with a rough, ramshackle, and often scatological charm. Divided and paradoxical, these photographs work hard to body forth a threshold condition. By superseding that dialectic which has traditionally structured discussions of photography in terms of the binary construction between the document and art, they lay bare a kind of fugitive predicament. This fugitiveness, wherein visibility swings so wildly between the terms of its possibility that the current on which it flows is itself rendered opaque, is central to grasping Arden's work. It is the crux of any Realist art worth the name.⁷

As a rhetorical practice, the essential condition of Realism is an ironic one. It is grounded in nothing more nor less than a double bind. It is consubstantial with nothing other than the process of historical emergence. Occupying a heterotopic condition (both in the individual image and in the suite as a whole), Arden's Realism narrates the passing or transitive movement which shuttles a dissolute materiality into meaning. This circuitry between opposites underwrites the disembedding leap into figuration which is metaphor. As an absence at the heart of figuration, a kind of harmonic interval, the transit in question is none other than the action or process of turning that is the trope. Holding up a perfect mirror to the world, it mouths the riddle with which Nietzsche begins *Ecce Homo*: "I am ... already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old".⁸ As an embodiment of the exchange relation itself, the condition of Realism is a mirror of the subject's own constitution. *Terminal City* figures the passing of a trope. It narrates the modalities of that essential history (now) in which being comes to nothing.

Perhaps the key question with which the viewer is faced hinges upon how one is to read this narrative of emergence that is at once a dissolution. The relation to the cinematographic and the work of Jeff Wall is obviously important here. More to the point is the imperative within photography as "the most transparent of art mediums" toward what Clement Greenberg has called the "literary".⁹ That the arch defender of abstraction in painting should call for photography to be "literary" should be of little surprise.¹⁰ The fact is, that unlike the medium of painting, photography as a modernist art was felt on the most essential level to be constituted through depiction. It was Walker Evans' achievement to have struck a deep lyric note within the very form of the prosaic. For a critic who had long wished a great realist painter would arrive on the scene possessed of all the expressivity of high modernist abstraction, Greenberg's praise for Evans should

not add to the confusion. Hardly a new Titian, Evans had revealed that the historical instant of time housed within it a potentially speculative movement.

If one views this movement through the optic of Greenberg's commitment to color, one might profitably think of this imperative internal to photography's indexical sign in terms of a banishment, or indeed rustication from the constraints of the Platonic city. As a loss of language's communicative potential, a spiraling downward from surface appearance into depth, the time honored trope of rustication has since the very dawn of the West, gnawed away at all that is "True" and "Good" under the Platonic sun. Set in opposition to the Agora, against the academy, and closely allied with Greenberg's own work against mimesis, the "literary" in Arden's photography is a meta-temporal movement or narrative drive consubstantial with the entropic action of Greenberg's favorite word: "dissipate". Though of course, one would have to distinguish Greenberg's more thoroughgoing idealism on the question of materialism from that of Arden's, which is almost certainly in the tradition of Bataille's base materialism. We are confronted by what Yves-Alain Bois has called the imperative toward "declass(ify)ing"¹¹: here, through the caprice of classifying types of subject matter that span the history of the trope of rustication.

If at one time photography was tied in some substantive way to its subject matter, in the context of Arden's work the vertiginous aspect of the gaze troubles or rusticates the mimetic function all the while keeping the task of depiction intact. Arden's is a project steeped within the Realist tradition that strives to draw out the idea of mimesis upon which it is based. Much that is tempting to read into Arden's work – all that intends upon subject matter and thematization; all that emphasizes a moribund social history of the region – can be categorically dismissed in terms of its inability to comprehend the level upon which history gains entrance, is insinuated within, or has a purchase on the practice of depiction. History animates this photography on the most literal level of depiction, a mythic level that is one with the constitutive moment of the medium and simultaneous to its dissolution.

Take *Hastings Street Sidewalk, Vancouver, B. C., 1996* as only one possible ending. Like many of Arden's outdoor pictures it literalizes the process or action of turning itself. By undermining a number of established perspectival conventions the sidelong glance renders a repressed history in all its immediacy. Once the bustling center of Vancouver, now a rotten core, Hastings Street lays claim to the corporeal. Marked by a kind of convexity or mounding up of the picture plane, the surface itself seems to embody the bulbous pressure of watery eyes in a convulsive fit. All one need do is inhabit this hunch-back glance in passing ... Eyes askew ... Chest aheave ... Overhanging porticulus ... Tastes like bile in the morning to me! Charged with the effects of marginal distortion, surfeit with a radical foreshortening and vanishing point too low and too close, absolutely loaded with what the great Leonardo described as "every false relation and disagreement of proportion that can be imagined in a wretched work",¹² a history of the street rises like a sickening lump in ones throat. One can but think of Milton in 1642 on the occasion of his rustication from the University of Cambridge: not simply "sent down" or "banished" to the country, but as he put it "*vomited out ... into a Suburbe sinke*".¹³ With every look the rustication of the gaze renders the cultivated figure an expression of historical will. Mirroring its own emergence it seems the figure can but reflect on the root and soil of its own history: the striking, the figure-making trope, the dissolute, the *informe*, the rustic.

Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Description of Ancient Rhetoric", in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, edited and translated by S. L. Gilman, C. Blair, D. J. Parent, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 27.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, eds. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 304.
- 3 That these photographs are marked by a kind of convexity of the picture plane, often warping and swelling the plane in the manner of a contusion is not unrelated to this question.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 117.
- 5 One should mention that this over-arching imperative is equally visible in the works of those photographers whom Arden has consistently looked to and plumbed. There is that documentary concern for the obsolete and worn out, i.e., an attachment to the object on the verge of its historical disappearance in Atget. There is the fairly straightforward roughness and simplicity of Walker Evans in America's deep south; specifically with the family and in the home of Floyd Burroughs. Or take the case of Wols for instance: homeless, drifting, and creaturely; with his coarse and artless style, his lack of sophistication, and yet ultimately over-turning, or "rusticating" as Jeff Wall has put it, the conventions of the historical avant-garde simultaneous to their invention.
- 6 Wolfgang Kemp, "Images of Decay: Photography in the Picturesque Tradition", *October* 54, Fall 1990, pp. 103-133.
- 7 Roy Arden, "Kennedy Bradshaw: Vernacular Photography and Realism", *Canadian Art*, Winter 1998, vol. 15, n°. 4, pp. 38-43.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 222.
- 9 Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston", *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 60, 63.
- 10 It is a point already well rehearsed by Jeff Wall and Roy Arden. See Roy Arden "Photography, Genre and Continuity", in *bonus: Damian Moppett, Howard Ursuliak, Kelly Wood*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1997, p. 5; See also Jeff Wall, "«Marks of Indifference»: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art", *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-75*, A. Goldstan and A. Rorimer eds., Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1995, pp. 247, 260.
- 11 Yves-Alain Bois, "B, Base Materialism", in Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 53.
- 12 Leonardo da Vinci quoted by Erwin Panofsky, in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. C. S. Wood, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 80.
- 13 John Milton, "An Apology Against A Pamphlet", *Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Vol. 1, 1624-1642*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 884.