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BEAUTIFUL APOCALYPSE: Photography and the end

Surely it is anachronistic to place myth in an active relation with art? The Enlightenment, rationality and science condemned myth as a primitive stage, no longer relevant; myth might still be invoked, but only nostalgically, or because of its still useful and prestigious figures. In 1988, for example, the Corcoran Art Gallery called its exhibition of photos from the *National Geographic* collection "Odyssey", using as leitmotif a picture by Tomatso Enami of Japanese square-rigged sailing boats in 1920. Having introduced the theme, however, the organisers did nothing more with it, as if its meaning were self-evident. Myth's relevance, however, goes much deeper than that.

How is myth to be understood? Cassirer's view was that humanity created and used symbols spontaneously, and that a myth-making capacity was part of an innate tendency. Hans Blumenberg's reply, expounded at length in *Work on Myth*, was less a refutation of Cassirer's theory than a new approach. Blumenberg, imagining the original conditions which gave rise to myth, describes them as subject to the "absolutism of reality", which is how he refers to conditions of pure contingency. He asserts that the "absolutism of reality" was an ever-present factor, and that to cope with it, humanity developed less a system of myth than a set of names which might made it possible to address and negotiate with whatever forces were at large in that hostile "reality".

Blumenberg's implication is that this hostile reality is a constant condition, and that the anxieties of the "absolutism of reality" are as pressing now as when the founding stories were first spoken. If we are still subject to this absolutism, it must be presumed that we are still making comparable responses. It is my contention that Blumenberg's theory applies, and that symbol and myth still constitute an important part of our response to the ''absolutism of reality".

How might this absolutism be identified in the twentieth century? We remain as subject as ever to the thought of a world out of control, completely open to contingency. Modernism, c.1930, imagined possibilities of control, manifest in photography in the magnificent silver prints of Ansel Adams, for example, in which nature is represented with a unique clarity and metallic stillness. Implicit in modern landscape is an idea of terminal perfection, of a landscape sufficiently hardened to deny the vagaries of weather. Modern landscape was both a complement to and denial of the social landscape of a period in which contingency was everywhere evident. The moderns thought that good management would suffice, but their successors have been less confident. If we are more aware than them of the "absolutism of reality" this should mean that we are also more responsive to myth than before, and closer to the position occupied by Blumenberg's first symbol-users and narrators. But if myth remains part of our armoury against contingency, how is this expressed?

The *National Geographic* is as good an institution to keep in mind as any, for with a distribution of millions it can be seen as representative. It deals increasingly with the "absolutism of reality" manifest in over-population, climatic change and their consequences. These dire scenarios are exacerbated by a mankind out of control, felling rain forests and destroying habitat everywhere for short-term gain. The whole human operation looks set, according to this diagnosis, to come to an end within the foreseeable future.

How do photographers respond to this terrible state of affairs? Certainly not with pictures of matching frightfulness. The photography of ecological catastrophe is, paradoxically, one of extreme beauty - witness Georg Gerster's images of the encroaching Sahara. Catastrophism sees apocalypse as an opportunity to indulge in beauty; either that, or it is

the only possible approach to a reality too bleak to countenance. Blumenberg' reading of the legend of Perseus and Medusa makes Medusa a symbol of that fundamental and inimical "absolutism of reality" which can only be approached via mediation, in this case the reflections on the hero's metal shield. There are at least three such sites of catastrophe in recent photography: the Sahara and the Bangladesh delta, both areas subject to natural afflictions, and Haiti, which for a long time was synonymous with dystopia. All three sites gave rise to photography of unusual elegance.

The contention here is that catastrophe is too difficult to be addressed directly, and that deliberate beautification serves as a way of making the dire palatable. The wasted landscape with its wasted inhabitants - from Salgado's labourers in the Third World to Richard Misrach's deserted atomic test zones - is alluring enough to erase notions of tragedy and responsibility. Alex Webb's Haiti, composed of torn bodies and fabulous sunsets, makes an even more irresistible appeal to the aesthetic, until no amount of special pleading can reclaim the experience for decency. It is hard, as a consequence, to dislodge the idea that this post-modern mode means to call up the memory of an irresponsible moment prior to the coming of judgement. The sheer beauty of the world, as uncovered in this photography, is indifferent to ethics and to the modern teleology. It may turn out badly, but in the meantime the moment luxuriates in its fullness.

The myth at issue in this beautiful picture-making of catastrophe is that of the Creation. Nietzche's idea was that on the seventh day God took stock and found that what had been made was too perfect, and that if it was to continue in being had to be disrupted. This is, in effect, what shapes these late pictures with their traumatised moments in paradise. Where the modernists, by contrast, sided with Prometheus, boldly making his way against divine odds, these later artists have chosen to reflect on Paradise vitiated and on our innocent and lethal part in the process. According to their scheme we were introduced as an uncontrollably destructive and innocent element.

The whole will end badly, at least from the controlled modernist point of view, and the agents of doom will have been ourselves in our most authentic, irreproachable guise. One of the implications of the new anthropology and landscape art is that the world will be just as well without us, that its oceanic depths and new inorganic deserts would be just as satisfying to the Creator. Whatever God stands behind the dispensation expressed in these pictures may be concerned about the appearance of the created world, but cares little about the destiny of its creatures.

What sort of truth lies in this idea? From the point of view of common sense, it is apparent to any post-modern reader that the "absolutism of reality" will assert itself, and that we will end up in the sort of dire straits prophesied retrospectively by , for example, Richard Misrach. What art adds, and what is intolerable in the prose accounts, is precisely this infiltration of beauty in adversity, and a very much longer view which construes human presence as incidental rather than as the necessary element in the totality. Photography is deeply involved in this reworking of the creation myth; its proposal is that what might lie beyond textual and verbal formulation can well be envisaged, especially the desired apocalypse and a God indifferent to human destiny.

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