

Immortal Stories

Adrian Martin

“The space which has to be traversed – that of language, desire, the body and knowledge – is that same risky terrain where Tiresias, the seer, came to a state of knowledge in blindness”. This is the artist statement that greeted visitors to Anne Ferran’s photographic exhibition *Carnal Knowledge* in Sydney during 1985. Its suite of expressionless, female faces in close-up, treated to seem as if they are weathered stones, formed a duet with the artist’s subsequent, major show, *Scenes on the Death of Nature* (1986), five large prints of a cluster of young women arranged in various neo-classical poses. Together, these works by Ferran set the scene for a haunting, very contemporary ensemble of obsessions and motifs, all of them trembling, not quite in focus: language, desire, the body and knowledge ... twinned with the strangeness of a mythic reference: Tiresias, the seer.

I want to tell a story – a story of stories. And to reflect upon the process of story telling – especially in the form of myth – that has become, in a fairly short time, a dominant approach to writing about contemporary photography and its relation to neighbouring arts (film, theatre, painting, theory). I want to figure out, at least a little, the place and deployment of myth (and its related terms: passion, the imaginary, desire) in contemporary artistic theory and practice.

What is it about the *tableau vivant*, with its posed grouping of models and objects as in *Scenes on the Death of Nature*, that marks it as a particularly contemporary practice in the 1980s? What chord does it strike? The use of minimalist pose and frozen gesture goes right back through the meta-fictional experiments of the 1960s and ‘70s, in films such as Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1972), Mark Rappaport’s *The Scenic Route* (1978) and the final section of Yvonne Rainer’s *Lives of Performers* (1972). Many of these works – as well as related efforts in theatre and performance art, not to mention the photo-art of Cindy Sherman – helped, in their intertextuality, to draw the close connection between

the pictorial form of the *tableau* and the venerable, sometimes glamorous institution of the *film still* (whether a reproduced frame from a movie reel, or the more posed and abstracted “production still”). Australian-Greek artist Peter Lyssiotis takes the mix further:

I haven't refined photography to the point where I can just use one shot to make a statement: I can't capture what Cartier-Bresson calls the “decisive moment”, so I work in sequences and use a text to complement the still.¹

In 1975, Manny Farber praised Rainer's films, Martha Rosler's “postcard diaries” and the “photo-fiction narratives” of Allan Sekula and others as “opening up the film, photo, painting format formerly closed to the possibility of informational facetiousness”, and operating in the “space or jar created by the disjunct” between “visual images and verbal texts”.² Yet something decisively more than the cooling-off or jamming-up of narrative conventions – something beyond the Brechtian or deconstructive rendering of every action, event and character as a stereotype – comes into play on this contemporary stage. Farber sensed it: this is a “crossed-media art involved with biography, myth, history”.³

In hindsight, the tableaux that have cut deepest into today's experimental culture are those of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle* (1963), Raúl Ruiz's *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (1979), Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1972), and Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964). And those which might define the current movement's specific practice are: in film, Chantal Akerman's *Toute une nuit* (1982), Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1980), Laleen Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon* (1985), Elfi Mikesch & Monika Treut's *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (1985), and Mark Titmarsh's *Legion* (1985); in Australian photography, the work of Ferran and of Suellen Symons (such as her lush 1986 exhibition *Privileged Mortals*); in theatre, Pina Bausch's dance troupe.

Although the majority of my examples are cinematic, one of the key attributes of the *tableau vivant* is the way it literally crosses several media within whichever specific

medium it comes to actualise itself. It is an impure form, not wholly any one but simultaneously any combination of the following: theatre, moving image, still image, painting, fiction, architecture. Ferran herself is at pains to insist that “these photos have formal characteristics normally associated with other media. This fact is significant in itself, literally significant”.⁴ *Tableau*-based work is curious and paradoxical: we witness films slowing down to, desiring to emulate the still photograph, and literally trembling with the tension required; and we gaze at photos in a perpetually frozen moment of torsion as if trying to animate themselves in order to take their place as simply passing frames in some unknown, imaginary film.

What enters the *tableau*, transforming it from being merely a play on, or inquiry into, congealed pictorial and historical conventions? One particular, Australian conjuncture could not be more striking: a detail from Ferran’s *The Perpetuation* (showing adolescent girls draped in neo-classical garments and poses) on the cover of the Australian edition of philosopher Luce Irigaray’s *Divine Women*. This text begins:

While writing *Amante Marine, Passions élémentaires, L’oubli de l’air*, I was thinking of doing a study of our relations to the elements: water, earth, fire air. I wanted to go back to this natural material which makes up our bodies, in which our lives and environment are grounded; the flesh of our passions. I was following a profound intuition, and one that is necessary and obscure, even if it is mixed with other thoughts.⁵

The *tableau vivant* is a related manifestation or symptom of this same “profound intuition, and one that is necessary and obscure”. It is an intuition aiming towards the *scene* – now rendered as the “other scene”, forbidden or forgotten by modernity – of “the flesh of our passions”.

In an article on the current *Carmen* craze (near-simultaneous films by Carlos Saura, Francesco Rosi, Jean-Luc Godard and Peter Brooks), Louise Burchill gives a

related account of those contemporary practices which, while giving themselves the edge of a “post” appellation (postmodernism, postfeminism), proceed by evoking “the impossibility of comprehending certain phenomena by the word” and deploying “a before or a beyond” which is “other than the dialectical” intellectual legacy of a previous (broadly, Marxist) phase.⁶ While asserting the break which allows our next cultural moment to flow on, an appeal is simultaneously made for a return to originary questions, primal emotions and archaic myths. Irigaray’s text resonates with this trend (“I wanted to go back to this natural material which makes up our bodies”), as does, in another way, Godard’s *Hail Mary* (1985). (Beating at the door in all of this is the much touted “return to religion” in our time, also evident, albeit ambivalently, in the post-semiotic work of Julia Kristeva.)⁷

Burchill’s analysis utilises statements from the influential *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Libération* critic, Serge Daney, providing an important clue to this growing *episteme* of our time. Daney distinguishes between the 1970s practices of “*dispositifs*, assemblages, montage”⁸ – the earlier use of the *tableau* form as a way of serialising gestures and fragmenting narrative lines is one example – and the 1980s return to practices which appear more stable, unified and holistic. More than simply an aesthetic shift, however, this stylistic difference corresponds to a move from (in Daney’s terms) *desire* (characterising the ‘70s) to *passion* (the ‘80s). Desire (Gilles Deleuze-style) called forth decentring and scattered, multiple threads; passion, by contrast, demands the *scene* and especially the *scenario*. His formula: “If desire is montage, passion is the scenario in its purest state”.⁹ Hence, the penchant for mythic stories – like that of Carmen, the tale which founds sexual difference in the murderous conflict of its unbridgeable chasm – or Biblical stories, or legends from antiquity; as well as a lust for primal scenes, intact, timeless, whole.

The *tableau vivant* today draws around itself the aura of the *immortal* – the frozen, pregnant constellation which is not of our time and hence for all times, not quite fully either alive or dead. (My title alludes to Orson Welles’ 1968 film *The Immortal Story*, a tale that cautions us about the finally unbreachable wall between myth and

reality.) It hits us as the fragment of an immemorial scene (witness the proliferation of neoclassical props and references in Symons' *Privileged Mortals*) – the fragment not just as some bit which can be connected up to a practical/conceptual machine (a 1970s-style assemblage), but as metonym of something whole, full, plentiful. Pierre Klossowski – whose work resonates with the wish to return to classical form – says of his literary and pictorial practice:

When I give an account of some incident, I concentrate on the discontinuity, I always show that what one is now seeing is not necessarily the cause or consequence of an action. I only saw isolated scenes or the gaps between them. The first thing I always saw in these incidents was a discontinuity, thus a fragment. But it was a fragment containing the totality, a fragment which stands for the whole.¹⁰

There is something deeper still: the sense that these frozen moments address us like echoes escaped from a past world, calling us back to lost unities, to a wholeness. In this, the *tableau* form has become profoundly nostalgic, as well as, at times, melancholic.

What does passion have to do with any of this? It relates to the figure of the trembling body, the body given over, at last, to the languor of passivity: intensities hitherto forbidden in the scenes of our radical desire. Here, the most popular reference from religious art is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, twinned with Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) in the tableau vivant staged by Laleen Jayamanne in her experimental semi-feature *A Song of Ceylon* (1985): in this version, art critic Edward Colless holds aloft artist-in-drag Juan Dávila, as James Stewart held Kim Novak. Jayamanne has remarked:

The human body, in the agitation of performance or love, may aspire to the poised stillness of the puppet's body and face, whether made of *papier-mâché* or wood. If such aspirations are sustained through a variety of tribulations, both mundane and ecstatic, endemic to film and love, flesh and bone may then be

moulded, held, stretched and surrendered to the pull of gravity without relinquishing grace. It is an ancient passion that the performer activates by gazing at her double the puppet.¹¹

So, the scene has been set for a return to origins and a pondering of primal questions (what is love, desire, man, woman?). A space of “before and beyond” is cleared that mysteriously and magically beckons as the space of the *imaginary*. The distances to be travelled – from real or symbolic to imaginary, and from present to past – will be bridged by the business of story telling and myth spinning.

The stories being told of photography at present are truly immortal stories, mythical tales that see, in the photographic image and the photographic act, the trace of a distant origin: a myth of the birth of desire, or vision, or loss, or memory. In the same way that every story (as Roland Barthes persuaded us with his literary genius) tells the story of Oedipus,¹² it can seem today that every photograph tells the story of Orpheus. This is the story of which Maurice Blanchot (another literary hero for our time) has written:

For Orpheus, then, everything sinks into the certainty of failure, where the only remaining compensation is the uncertainty of the work – for does the work ever exist? As we look at the most certain masterpiece, whose beginning dazzles us with its brilliance and decisiveness, we find that we are also faced with something which is fading away, a work that has suddenly become invisible again, is no longer there, and has never been there. This sudden eclipse is the distant memory of Orpheus’ gaze, it is a nostalgic return to the uncertainty of the origin.¹³

The trembling moment of Orpheus’ gaze back at Eurydice in the underworld – the hinge moment between life and death, between possession and loss – also becomes, in contemporary art, the “freeze frame” or still that incarnates an intense feeling of the

immortal, and the immemorial. It is a moment, frozen but eternally alive, that is obsessively recaptured and retold. So many classic films – *Vertigo*, *Blow Out* (1981), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Citizen Kane* (1941) – as we return to them now in evoked and appropriated forms, go over the ground of a stinging, wistful moment of loss, founding a *haunted memory*.¹⁴ Our revisiting of these movies signals another “nostalgic return to the uncertainty of the origin”.

Photography is often yoked to this originary moment – tied into a reflection concerning death, loss and nostalgia. In many films such as Miklós Jancsó’s *Private Vices, Public Virtues* (1976) or Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966), a still photograph (and/or its taking) figure ominously in the fiction as the element that brings death and stasis down upon or into the movements of life. The poignancy of works like Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1972), Otar Iosseliani’s *Favourites of the Moon* (1984), Godard’s *Every Man for Himself* (1980) or Peter Lyssiotis’ *The Occupant* (1985) arises from the association they forge between the device of the freeze frame and the significance of a death. (Lyssiotis: “That stillness becomes a sort of death thing for me”).¹⁵ Edward Colless evokes photography’s status:

[It] has long been regarded as the modern emblem of mortality. Its seizure of the fugitive, prodigious fluidity of movement was repeatedly interpreted as a ghastly premonition of *rigor mortis*. [...] The photograph supplies the truth of the moment all too harshly: that the moment is doomed to pass away.¹⁶

Photography is bound up with this pathos of time and also of space: the distance between lens and subject, a cruel mimicry of the unbridgeable gap between self and other, desiring subject and desired object. Stephen Dwoskin’s experimental films, particularly from the autobiographical and narrative period inaugurated by *Behindert* (1974), capture this sort of agonised longing concentrated in the shaky gaze of the camera lens. The associative signalling of death and its relation to photography pops up centrally again in Ingrid Periz’s essay on Suellen Symons, which opposes (*après* Derrida) “the crypt’s role of disguise and containment” to the traditional framing of this art “within a

rhetoric of a fidelity to truth”:

Symons claims the quality uniting the characters represented here, Heloise and Abelard, the Virgin and Christ, the allegories of the Past and the Future etc., to be that of passion. The legend attending each character enjoys a reputation enhanced by, in fact only possible through, death and each of these deaths procured through passion.¹⁷

So photography stages a primal scene of passion (“those moments within the formula wherein passion may be imaged and disguised”).¹⁸ A very particular kind of passion, moreover – interior, aesthetic, classical, religious, as in the Passion of Christ, a Romantic ambience of solitude and twilight which Godard captures so well as he gazes at the *tableaux vivants* of Delacroix, Ingres, Rembrandt and others in *Passion*.

None of these reveries could quite have taken the place and prominence that they have unless photography had not been indissolubly united with the realm of the imaginary. Jane Gallop captures the association perfectly:

It is often said that photography is a strange hybrid of nature and art or art and the real. Photography is an art like sex is fantasy, desire, imagination. It is one’s own ideas projected onto the world, shaping and distorting the world, framing the world and making into an object of art or an object of desire. Photography is also something else. Besides being art, it seems to have some quite special relation to the real.¹⁹

Gallop is formulating the grounds for the particular affect of the photographic image, that “something more” which leaps out of the frame, based on Barthes’ now famous distinction in *Camera Lucida* between studium (all that is classical and coded in a photograph) and punctum (what “stings” or pierces the viewer).²⁰ She sees photography’s situation as being beyond that “rhetoric of a fidelity to truth” (i.e., beyond a simple

documentary relation to the real). And she thus joins those writer-theorists who have rendered the photographic medium as, in an essential or originary way, “mad” (Barthes) or “surreal” (Sontag)²¹ – the doorway to an irrational, seething imaginary.

However, Gallop works through this idea in order to raise a fundamental question, a critical doubt paralleling that of Louise Burchill’s discussion of the *Carmen* cycle. For why is the “beyond” to which writers are fond of gesturing, sometimes so vague (ineffable, perverse, subjective), and even ultimately so conventional, old-fashioned in the worst, most regressive sense? Daney gave his own response to this alarming situation:

We had to turn the desiring-machine page in order to re-find its reverse side, faithful to every post-whatever rendezvous: *passion*. That is to say: opera, *Carmen*, etc. That is to say, tradition. Literary tradition, with (as we already get in Mérimée) this mix of psychological positivism and diabolic fantasy (to replace the unconscious). Cinematic tradition, with the same ingredients, as in Clouzot or Duvivier. [...] And finally, screenwriting tradition. *Carmen* may be fatal, but her story is easy to write. Anyone can do it in a week!²²

The notion (quite prevalent in the arts at the moment) that the myths which circulate in our cultural space have a “disturbing truth” because they are the constant reminder of, and the tantalising invitation back into, our primal selves is a flawed idea; but it is reinforced, for instance, by aspects of Irigaray’s *Divine Women* text: “Once we start interrogating the Melusine myth, through its extensions and different versions, we come to question the thing which attracts us to it or even fascinates us; a mystery, a key to our identity”.²³ Yet such confusion or slippage is likely to continue so long as we conceptualise the unconscious and the imaginary as transgressive forces erupting from an archaic base. One can see Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen grappling with this issue – the articulation between the unconscious myth on the one hand, and political history on the other – in and around their film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977).²⁴

The question today is: what can we know *with* the movable – not immutable or

originary – structures of myth? Georges Bataille wrote, shortly after the end of World War II: “Myths, whether they be lasting or fugitive, vanish like rivers in the sea in the absence of myth which is their lament and their truth”.²⁵ Modern culture exhibits strategic *dérives* from, rewritings of, mythic fiction (the case of Jean Cocteau is exemplary) that choose not to adopt the regressive mode of “before and beyond”, but grasp this “fugitive” quality of myths as they arrive to us in scraps today – source of both lament (melancholy) and truth (insight).

Myths told in the present are *of* and *for* the present. We have grown somewhat too accustomed, lately, to positioning knowledge and “the symbolic” as the bad side of a binary set-up which valorises, above all else, passion and the imaginary. Work such as Anne Ferran’s in photo-art or Godard’s in cinema is valuable and exemplary for the way it draws on all the powerful rhetorical and affective resources of myth-evocation, whilst never relinquishing the potential for a skeptical double-take on the dreams of our modernity. The complex angle of vision thus created is close to Bataille’s paradoxical sense of the positive worth of an “absence of myth” in the contemporary world:

If by abolishing the mythic universe we have lost the universe, the action of a revealing loss is itself connected to the death of myth. And today, because a myth is dead or dying, we see through it more easily than if it were alive: it is the need that perfects the transparency, the suffering which makes the suffering become joyful.²⁶

(1986)

“Immortal Stories” combines an unpublished lecture of this title given at the Victorian Centre for Photography (23 May 1986) with an essay drawn from it published in Photofile (Summer 1986), and reprinted in Blair French (ed.), Photo Files: An Australian Photography Reader (Power Publications/Australian Centre for Photography, 1999).

NOTES

1. Peter Lyssiotis, “*The Occupant*”, *Cantrills Filmnotes*, no. 49/50 (April 1986), p. 41.

2. Manny Farber with Patricia Patterson, *Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber* (New York: The Library of America, 2009), pp. 738-739.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 739.
4. Anne Ferran, *Scenes on the Death of Nature* catalogue (Sydney, 1986), unpaginated.
5. Luce Irigaray (trans. Stephen Muecke), *Divine Women* (Sydney: Local Consumption, 1986), p. 1.
6. Louise Burchill, "Carmen", *Fade to Black* (Sydney College of the Arts, 1985), pp. 27-30.
7. See Julia Kristeva (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
8. Serge Daney, "Mérimée, l'éternel scénariste" (1984), reprinted in *La maison cinéma et le monde. 2: Les années Libé 1981-1985* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002), p. 537.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rémy Zaugg and Pierre Klossowski (trans. Allen Weiss & Chantal Khan Malek), "Simulacra", *Art & Text*, no. 18 (July 1985), p. 65.
11. Laleen Jayamanne, "A Song of Ceylon", *Cantrills Filmnotes*, no. 47/48 (August 1985), p. 7. Reprinted in her *Toward Cinema and Its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).
12. See Roland Barthes (trans. Richard Howard), *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
13. Maurice Blanchot (trans. Lydia Davis), *The Gaze of Orpheus* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 103.
14. See the final chapter of Adrian Martin, *Mysteries of Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018).
15. Lyssiotis, "The Occupant", p. 41.
16. Edward Colless, *The Error of My Ways: Selected Writing 1981-1994* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern

Art, 1995), p. 125.

17. Ingrid Periz, *Suellen Symons: Privileged Mortals* catalogue (Sydney: The Performance Space, 1986), unpaginated.

18. Ibid.

19. Jane Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Photo Text", *Afterimage* (April 1985), p. 16.

20. See Roland Barthes (trans. Richard Howard), *Camera Lucida* (London: Flamingo, 1984).

21. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Allan Lane, 1978).

22. Daney, "Mérimée, l'éternel scénariste", p. 537.

23. Irigaray, *Divine Women*, p. 1.

24. See Laura Mulvey, "The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx", in James Donald (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 27-50.

25. Georges Bataille (trans. Michael Richardson), *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 48.

26. Ibid.

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