Anti-Conclusion: The Russian Ending

Negative Capability and Second Reflection: Is That All There Is?

And Polo said: “The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”¹

The revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still journeying through purgatory.²

The Russian Ending: negative capability

I conclude my discussion of Adorno’s aesthetic theory by considering a single work of art, the particular type of aesthetics this artwork generates, and the impact of that aesthetics on critical theory. Tacita Dean’s The Russian Ending, 2001, consists of twenty black and white³ digitally manipulated photogravures, which are themselves based on found postcard images, collected by the artist on various visits to European flea-markets. Most of the images in the suite of prints depict natural or man-made disasters, catastrophes, deaths and accidents – circa WWI. The Russian Ending is neither cheerful viewing nor light entertainment.

For instance, the first print in the series, suitably entitled Ship of Death, shows a small wooden vessel at sea, conveying shrouded dead bodies to their final destination. The image is blurred, grainy and impressionistic, and the figures are ghostly. It is a difficult image to read, and it seems a somewhat odd choice for a postcard. Ship of Death resembles both a Turner seascape and Poe’s maelström. It clearly reflects Dean’s ongoing
interest in the nautical, in circumnavigations and ethereal 'locations, never destinations.' Each image in the suite of prints is annotated, or scripted. Handwritten white fragments of text, notes or captions, directions and arrows, suggest that each image may be a production still, a scenario extracted from a wider narrative, possibly an episode for a disaster film whose narrative plot one may only imagine. Many of the notes address how the scene should be seen and direct the imagined cinematography accordingly (lighting, sound-track, camera positioning and tracking are all indicated). For instance, scrawled over the image in Ship of Death, one may read (from left to right) ‘LAST SCENE,’ ‘ferryman,’ ‘slow movement,’ ‘BYE BYE→’ ‘STYX,’ ‘→exit,’ ‘(Hades),’ ‘END,’ et al. The Russian Ending, then, is like a film in progress, a working proposition, and a storyboard.

These annotated flea-market images are found arks of lost moments, relics ‘at once mute and richly suggestive (...) a kind of force field.’ The images are pregnant with history. As Dorothea Dietrich puts it, in her article on The Russian Ending, ‘each image encapsulates an exceptional moment that demands to be retold or imagined’ (SB 50), yet, explanations are not provided and the images remain enigmatic. The Russian Ending seems to say something and conceal it in the same breath, it is a story without end, or a story without one end in particular. As Stephen Deuchar put it, ‘Dean’s visual and intellectual narratives are not resolved by endings: they require and request their audience’s participation and speculation and are thereby offered with an apparently generous ambiguity.’

The title of Dean’s work plays on this ambiguity, on this subversive intrigue. It is derived from ‘the early years of the Danish film industry when each film was produced in two versions, one with a happy ending for the American market, the other with a tragic ending for Russian audiences.’ The Russian Ending presents visions of the tragic and the negative not the heroic and the affirmative. This is art as the consciousness of plight or awareness of affliction. The whole work is tinged with melancholy. The Russian Ending is art as the ever broken promise of happiness. A failed or an abandoned vision appears, parts of which may well be worth recollecting. It may well function as a ‘protest against forgetting.’ Wolfram Pichler describes something of this impulse operating in Dean’s work:

[T]o hold on to that which is evanescent or is in the act of vanishing (for example, a cloud or a shadow or someone who is going away),