

PASCAL GRANDMAISON: HALF OF THE DARKNESS

By Anja Bock

Contrary to photography's naturalization as utterly congruent with the world, photography's *real* is an encounter with the otherness of rupture, internment, and disinterment... In this way, photography's real is deeply other to that set of desires for the medium that we allow ourselves to make manifest to consciousness, that we can *bear* to make manifest to consciousness. – Eric Rosenberg

Pascal Grandmaison's photographic practice is an attempt to discover the shape of the non-illuminated and not-exposed. Through strategies of reversal, doubling, turning and inverting, he allows a peculiar air of strangeness to permeate otherwise familiar objects and situations: rocks turn into mythic landscapes, plastic tubing into hieroglyphics, and crumpled paper into "involuntary sculptures." Take for example his series of straight-on portraits entitled *Ouverture* (2006). The camera's eye is blinded by the light coming from the back, rendering the faces of the subjects as amorphous black objects with stray hairs and ears. Or consider *Fake Imagery of a World Upside Down* (2010), a photograph printed in negative in which a figure tumbles through an inverted landscape into a black bottomless sky.

Freud and Lacan meet in their insistence that the unconscious and the "real" must be approached through strategies of indirection, viewed awry, through screens or dreams, for example.¹ In Grandmaison's *Verre* series (2003-2006), immediate access to the object of desire is precluded: a pane of glass separates the "I" of camera from the yielding person, whose eyes are cast downward. Even though the glass is as transparent as the camera's lens (rhetorically speaking), enough light reflects off its surface to capture the photographer in the space. As such, rather than being positioned at the diagrammatic apex of modern optics, the "seer" is implicated in the perceptual field – Lacan's "gaze" – which reverses the lines of sight. Teasingly, however, the pane stands slightly to the side, foddering the wish to go straight through.

In an essay titled "What is a Photograph?" Margaret Iverson demonstrates Lacan's influence on Roland Barthes' penultimate *Camera Lucida* (1980). Specifically, she argues that the *punctum* "shares with the [Freud's] trauma and Lacan's anamorphic stain an uncoded, unassimilable quality."² It cannot be subsumed dialectically into the *studium* where it would be confined to

¹ Margaret Iverson, "What is a Photograph?" In Geoffrey Batchen, ed. *Photography Degree Zero*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 66.

² Iverson, 63.

the picture. Rather, the *punctum* disturbs its coherence and (re)activates a trauma, thus bursting out of the frame and, as Barthes famously states, “piercing” the viewer. All three – trauma, real, punctum – are unsymbolizable. Iverson writes, “There is, then, a blind spot in the orthodox perceptual field that Lacan calls the stain (*la tache*), defined, like the gaze, as “that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness.”³ In contrast to the transparency normally associated with vision – and by extension, with photography – this “stain” stresses the opacity and negativity of the gaze.

If the *Verre* series suggests this negativity by setting a pane of glass in the middle of the visual field like an obstacle to be overcome, Pascal Grandmaison’s *No Black Light* (2007) renders the pane literally absent. In this sequence of images, a pane of glass rotates in space, or the camera rotates around it. Rather than being transparent, however, it appears in the photograph as a variable black rectangle. To make these images, Grandmaison painted the glass green and then photographed it using a “chroma-key” or “greenscreen” process, which allowed the glass to be “keyed” out. Traces of this operation can be discerned in the ghostly contours of the glass in profile where the colour has not been totally eliminated.⁴ These “holes” in the image – black voids – can be thought of as a blind-spot, which, following Lacan, allows the possibility of the real to seep into the image. Or, stretching the Lacanian reading, as the *objet petit a*, “the hollowed out bits of one’s being”⁵ not (full)filled by language.

For all its strangeness, there is no pretense of surrealism in Grandmaison’s work, no “depth,” no expressionism. Rather, it is with incomparable technical acuity and conceptual rigour that Grandmaison makes strange. Consider the diptych *Hoping the Light Will Save Us* (2007) in which an outreached hand holding a heavy rock is doubled and inverted, defying gravity and playfully evoking the unsettling collusion of past, present and future inherent to photography. The green ting, the result of gels on the lens, has the effect of fictionalizing the documented event, as though it required extra-human “Hulkian” effort. Or consider *The Inverted Ghost* (2009), which is perhaps more of the genre of “horror” than “sci-fi.” The black, viscous form, which shines under the studio light, bears a deep hole. In diptych form, one cannot help but read the images as a face, as an eerie incarnation of an unimaginable entity – a ghost, a mind without a body.

Barthes’ writes, the photograph is “a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time... a mad image, chafed by reality.”⁶ He associates

³ Iverson, 65.

⁴ I rely on Diana Nemiroff’s description in “The Big Day.” Knelman, Sara and Nemiroff, Diana, [Pascal Grandmaison: Double Take](#). Art Gallery of Hamilton, in collaboration with Carleton University Art Gallery, 2009. 34.

⁵ Iverson, 66.

⁶ Roland Barthes, [Camera Lucida](#). Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. 115.

this madness with an absolute realism outside “the civilized codes of perfect illusions.”⁷ If one takes a quick accounting of Grandmaison’s themes so far – ghosts and black holes, glass and unformed masses, eyes without bodies and heads without faces, blind-spots and “hope that the light will save us” – it is possible to infer a certain disillusionment with the “perfect” illusions created by photographic technology. Despite its dispassionate, cool/clean aesthetic, it seems as though the work is far from sober. Rather, it is melancholic, I would suggest, repeatedly trying to imagine something that is evasive, invisible and unthinkable without subjecting that “thing” to the tyranny of “tame” conventions. The “chaffing” is what is depicted.

This quest is of course doomed from the get-go: not only is the camera limited to a single point perspective at odds with phenomenological perception, but also, by definition, the real is “intractable” (to use Barthes’ word) and impossible to codify. Iverson writes,

[O]nly when the position of illusory mastery is vacated does the gaze come into full view. The two positions are mutually exclusive: the world of representation is given only if the immediacy of the real is sacrificed, and conversely, the real is glimpsed only when the vanity of the world conceived as my representation is renounced.⁸

Grandmaison, through technological savvy and strategies of indirection, allows the real to be intuited but fails – of course – to capture it.

More precisely, he *succeeds* in failing. This is most apparent in his photographic series *Void View* (2010). Comprised of twenty-eight photographs of ashes – the powdery residue of images taken by the NASA Hubble space telescope that Grandmaison destroyed by fire – this work attempts to reclaim the unimaginable, the infinity of the universe, by way of a rhetorical non-image. Speaking of his work, Grandmaison states: “I wanted to ... point out the fact that we try to deny the incomprehensible by destroying it. More generally, it seems to me that human thought cannot really plan and envision without producing a sort of visualization ‘error.’”⁹ *Void View*’s iconoclastic gesture is an attempt to claim the failures of imaging technologies as a positive and necessary cultural force. For, without these “errors,” the transformation of the world into image would be complete.

Not all of his work shares this goal. Sometimes the “failure” is on the level of subject matter, instead. Take for example *Soleil Differe* (2010), which features Montreal’s *Isle Sainte-Hélène* and *Isle Notre-Dame*, the fabricated site of Expo ’67. Shot in documentary style with a (seemingly) indifferent eye, Grandmaison offers a non-narrative sequence of stunning video extracts: a leaf caught in mid-air by a spider’s thread; birds chirping on their woodland perches;

⁷ Barthes, 119.

⁸ Iverson, 65.

⁹ Pascal Grandmaison in conversation with Béatrice Josse, “Before Beginning and Beyond the End.” In Pascal Grandmaison: Half of the Darkness [exhibition catalogue]. Curated by Kevin Muhlen. Casino Luxembourg, 2011. 295.

waves coursing around a boulder in opposing directions; the Buckminster dome shrouded by fog; crumbled concrete caught in a tangle of cobwebs; leaves lapping against stone; water running over walls; and a black-clad surfer riding the giant waves that crest in the canal due to the man-made islands. Over all, the video points to the forces of nature at their most elemental – the collision of water, rock and air, and the vegetal- and animal-kingdoms’ potential to thrive despite human intrusion. *Soleil Differe* points to the failure of the modernist dream to follow a straight arrow of time into an era of technological ease and leisure. Rather than serving as show-case of human action and potential, this man-made stage is now eroded and over-grown.

And, rather than serving as a reliable witness to the unfolding narrative of Enlightenment humanism, the camera now archives the incoherence of our contemporary dystopia. Modernism has passed before our eyes into history, burying hyper-rationalism and positivism along with it.

HALF OF THE DARKNESS

Nowhere are the biases, limits and strangeness of photography – “the *ultimate* art form of modernity”¹⁰ – better exposed than in Pascal Grandmaison’s monumental *Half of the Darkness* (2010). Over 250 photographs, printed in negative, are laid out across four large plinths: craters and canyons, technological breakthroughs and arctic expeditions, fungal spores, prisms and dinosaurs, enormous robotic hands, rockets and chimpanzees, to name just a few, are featured in this sampling of imagery. The photographs are either candid or posed, aerial or macro, but in every case “man” is depicted at his best, conquering the world with his footprints, flags and various optic instruments. Astronauts and spaceships, as well as an old steam engine, rest alongside a bearded woman and a man covered in butterflies. And a defunct Ferris wheel speaks of an age passed by. Taken in sum, this display of disparate photographs functions like an ashen memorial for the discredited dream of modernity.

In an essay titled “Photography Is Over, If You Want It,” Eric Rosenberg states, “Our mistake, as well as our necessity, has been to account for photography as part of modernism’s taxonomy, its *evidence*.”¹¹ It was put to two impossible tasks, which continue through to today: on the one hand, photography is the “primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation.”¹² Take for example the photograph of the fisherman in *Half of the Darkness*, who is proudly holding his catch of the day, or the young family looking at a giant waterfall, or the photographs of various

¹⁰ Eric Rosenberg, “Photography is Over, If You Want It.” In Kelsey, Robin, and Stimson, Blake, eds. *The Meaning of Photography*. Clark Studies in the Visual Arts. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 191.

¹¹ Rosenberg, 190.

¹² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. 6.

athletes at the height of their jump or the summit of a mountain. In each case what is depicted is a wished-for identification. On the other hand, photography also promises a “mechanical form of objectivity”¹³ and advances a positivist approach to the world.¹⁴ The numerous close-up photographs of various scientific specimens illustrate this well – their mysteries are exposed, turned into objects of knowledge.

Due to this “double indexicality,”¹⁵ photography was heralded as a means of knowing the world *and* as a means of understanding the “self.” But more than drawing a parallel between them, the modernist investment in photography renewed the eighteenth-century promise to unite inner and outer realities in a process of self-realization.¹⁶ This alleged congruence is connoted by many of the images in *Half of the Darkness*. Consider for example the photographs of men (and they are men) wielding various optical devices to extend the parameters of their vision. In one image we see a man in the lab coat peering through a microscope: he is positioned as a unitary “I,” the sovereign subject of sight (as opposed to an object of the “gaze”), and under his lens he discovers a reflection of his powers of cognition. This congruence is thoroughly Kantian and the cornerstone of Western thought.

Julia Kristeva argued that “the rationalist attempt to transform the world into its own image is only one more interpretation which cannot see that it embraces a void.”¹⁷ As Grandmaison exposed in *Void View*, photography, as well, embraces a void – it assumes that the presence of the world is transparent to its aperture when in fact its perception is partial and finite. Photography materializes a painful disjunction with the world which Rosenberg calls “violent.” He writes, “By violence, I mean that photography itself ... is a phenomenon always at a disjunctive, perpendicular counterpoint to our actual experience, to our *being*.”¹⁸ Precisely because it can only record *half* of the darkness, photography cannot go to *the heart of darkness*. As Rosenberg states, “Photography allows us to enter a realm of pure fantasy based solely on connection with utter reality and yet a reality of ease, of dormancy, of sleep”¹⁹ – a reality that to Barthes (and Joseph Conrad) is a “kind of education” in “civility.”²⁰

¹³ Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, “Photography’s Double Index.” In Kelsey, Robin, and Stimson, Blake, eds. *The Meaning of Photography*. Clark Studies in the Visual Arts. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xii.

¹⁴ Urs Stahel, *Well, What is Photography?* Zurich: Scalo, 2003. 8.

¹⁵ Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, xi.

¹⁶ Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, xvi.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva as cited in Appignanesi, Richard, and Garrett, Chris. *Introducing Postmodernism*. Thriplow, UK: Icon Books, 2004. 104.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, 191.

¹⁹ Rosenberg, 192.

²⁰ Barthes, 28.

In *Half of the Darkness*, photography's promises and corollaries are depicted as absences rather than presences. What takes on a presence instead are the non-illuminated parts of the image that the camera could not capture. By exposing the "negatives" Grandmaison interrupts habitual ways of viewing images and slows down their consumption. Snow turns black and pupils turn white and the whole world looks inside out. In a conversation about this work, Grandmaison states,

I like your idea that truth can reveal itself more fully in darkness. The title *Half of the Darkness* seems to direct us to only half of the truth. But, in revealing that which is hidden, dark, real, aren't we bringing a certain subjectivity, or classification, to bear after all? Doesn't claiming to reveal the truth in fact upend it, subjecting it to opinion? One half of the truth – the other half lost in illustrating it – a little like infinity.²¹

Half of the Darkness puts into question the authority of visual information by calling attention to the "visualization 'error'"²² of the photographic (and modernist) viewpoint.

Through Grandmaison's selection of images, which parade human achievements, the dream of human liberty through technological progress takes on the nostalgic tone of the "it-has-been." These spectres of ideology find an appropriate burial ground in the modern institution of the museum. The staging that Grandmaison designed for *Half of the Darkness* is oddly reminiscent of Edward Steichen's infamous *Family of Man* exhibition in 1955, which followed a universal humanist agenda. In a scathing review, Barthes described *The Family of Man* as follows:

Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behavior where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices.'²³

The exclusion of differences, of the other, is taken to its "logical conclusion" in the practice of genocide, a link which Grandmaison makes blatant: the museological stagecraft of *Half of the Darkness* is similar to what one finds in Holocaust museums – row after row of black and white photographs, documents of the lives destroyed by the Nazi regime.

Barthes described his experience of photography as "a fascinating and funereal enigma."²⁴

Through its uncanny white shadows and prone display, *Half of the Darkness* reveals the inverse of the *studium*, the other side of the civilization's "polite interest."²⁵ What are "enlightened"

²¹ Grandmaison, 295.

²² Grandmaison, 295.

²³ Roland Barthes as cited in Geoffrey Batchen, "Palinode: An Introduction." In Geoffrey Batchen, ed. *Photography Degree Zero*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 5.

²⁴ Barthes as cited in Batchen, 9.

²⁵ Barthes, 27.

are the camera's blind-spots: blacks too deep to penetrate by the mind and eye alike. Visual constructions of historical "truth" come to look like so many fluctuating memories. "Memory is photography's ultimate archive," writes Rosenberg, "[b]ut it is a chimerical one, for memory in the end will always go its own way, refusing to contain an object outside of itself, a technology other to its own formation."²⁶ Rather than being lined-up in a transmittable historical narrative, *Half of the Darkness* is an abundant archive, a non-hierarchical database of ghostly impressions, non-linear and nearly nonsensical. It is as if Grandmaison opened the shadows to allow the viewers' subjectivity to flow in, thereby reclaiming what was lost in the process of objectification and supplementing the photographs' partiality – its mask of meaning – with the spectre of otherness.

Let us return to the *Ouverture* series with which this essay opened. Pascal Grandmaison's practice is accumulative, and so now, after considering many subsequent works as well as the stunning *Half of the Darkness*, its impact is easier to articulate: in the contours of these portrait heads, we fail to recognize their "identity." Grandmaison points to our inability to know ourselves in the face of the photograph. These "portraits" are like facing the obstinacy of a mute, enigmatic child or the impossible question "what are you thinking?"²⁷ The *studium* cannot encode the "other" at the heart of the "self" – the half that is lost in illustrating it.

The more we look at Grandmaison's work, the more it becomes clear that the challenge he poses is deeply philosophical: reclaiming what is lost, what falls by the wayside of signification, and uncovering the positive values of all sorts of "voids." His photographs and videos are not elaborate conceptual puzzles or demonstrations of discursive virtuosity. They are not made to be decoded, leaving the satisfaction of a completed cross-word puzzle that one soon forgets. Rather, Grandmaison counters hyper-rationalism and positivism with a certain romanticism that searches for pre-binary plenitude. We could call this an updated realism. That is, the reality which Grandmaison faces has nothing to do with empiricism: it has to do with the Lacanian real without which we would be perpetually limited to the "civilized code of perfect illusions."²⁸

²⁶ Rosenberg, 191.

²⁷ See Stahel, 7.

²⁸ Barthes, 119.