Gersht's Ghosts
Robert Rowland Smith

'Every angel is terrifying' (Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies)

Introduction

Staring at the wide whiteness marked out by black sticks, one soon surrenders to the snow. It feels endless, as if both mind and memory should now hibernate, give up their processing activity for the opiate of forgetting.

I'm picturing the photographs from ‘White Noise’ (images xxx). Without checking the external references, we might think we’re beholding a purely aesthetic study, in the manner say of Turner, of light and the way it effaces matter. As such, we are initially positioned as bourgeois consumers of effects designed to please the senses, ignorant of the pain that went into the manufacture of our pleasure. For these images of snowy fields were taken on the train route from Krakow to Auschwitz. All traces of horror have vanished, and in their place we are presented with a salving blankness, not just of beauty but of a seeming oblivion. We are being asked to forget even as the camera commemorates this ground of damnation. The camera says there is always a return, what I would call a ghost-effect, an effect at its most insistent and stylised in the perpetual fort-da, the hiding and revealing, of Yeudith Arnon rocking in and out of the shadows in the film 'Will You Dance For Me'. As the French word 'revenant' reminds us, a ghost is that which comes back. Behind the veils of beauty and forgetting, a certain past always reminds us of its presence. This presence that refuses to die is the presence of suffering that lives on.

This is the both compelling and unsettling affect of Ori Gersht’s work more generally. He presents us with self-consciously sublime imagery, while reminding us that the sublimity has come at a cost. It creates an uncomfortable moral charge. Out of suffering Gersht makes art, so is that to diminish or to respect the suffering? And if from that art we in turn take pleasure, does that make us degenerate? Would it be better to appreciate his work in a mood of self-denying solemnity?

The polarity is false, of course. What makes the art art is that it holds these two possibilities in tension with one another, never allowing the historical gravity to dominate the aesthetic yield it offers, and vice-versa. The tension becomes especially intense in the photographs of Japanese cherry-blossom (image numbers xxx). Iconic for a beauty never undermined by their perennial prettiness, the flowers engage every faculty we have for the exquisite. But cherry-blossom served as a symbol not only of Kamikaze pilots whose suicide missions caused them to fall out the sky like bloodied petals; but also for those pilots themselves who had them painted on their aeroplanes as livery.

As well as the suffering of the past, we have the suffering to come. Just as the angel evoked by the film 'Evaders' inhabits a reverse time frame, so the ghost sometimes arrives from the future. This is what happens in the third film, 'The Offering', which stretches the
anticipation of the killing of a bull to the most tensile lengths, making of the animal the ghost it will become. Ostensibly, the film's subject matter is the toilette of a matador as he prepares to fight, and as he, the smooth-skinned assassin, is trussed by a valet into his silks and finery, one is again seduced, even paralysed by the beauty of the scene. This helps to defer the promised terror, yet as the accompanying pictures in the third book demonstrate, there are clear links between the suffering of the bull to come and the suffering of Christ of which the bull is so uncanny an allegory. If the tragedy is so certain, it's because at this allegorical level it's already happened. Specifically, Gersht makes a parallel between the ‘picos’ inserted by the picador into the nape of the bull's neck and the shafts that pierced the body of Saint Sebastian (image number x) - and by association, the stigmata on Christ's body.

If one were looking for a unifying statement to account for the material in the boxset, it would for sure have to recognise the depth of cultural and religious reference, but also to insist upon the way in which the work adds up to much more than a bibliography of world-historical dolours. Not only because of that aesthetic surplus that Gersht is capable of generating, but because he never lets us forget that there is a technology involved, that of the camera. Pathos gets offset by production. There are magical transfigurings as light becomes black or white, there are moments when it becomes jewels of red or blue, and by all of these we may be mesmerised; but at the same time, we are reminded by the use a diptych or double screen, for example, that they have been styled, the effects carefully controlled. The camera is itself a less a witness than a ghost moving among what it records.

Book 1: Evaders

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

This passage, with its terrible admonition, hails from the translation of a famous text by Walter Benjamin. At one level, it is a lament, a biblical wailing for the fallenness of
humanity. What we myopically call progress is, through the all-seeing eyes of an angel, nothing less than a disaster. Small wonder: when the Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin wrote these words in continental Europe in the 1930s, he had every reason for trepidation. As his colleagues Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had pointed out, progress could be an alibi for violence; on his monument in PortBou was inscribed a phrase of his own conveying a similar sentiment: ‘There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.’ That the Nazi programme of ethnic cleansing saw itself as rational, even as logically necessary, only proved that Enlightenment ideals of reason could be taken to terrifying extremes. Perhaps for the first time in history, philosophers like Benjamin found themselves having to resist what was prosecuted in reason’s name.

The film Evaders, around which the first book is based, focusses on Walter Benjamin’s final journey, culminating in suicide, as he fled the Nazis. But to interpret the film as a ‘staging’ of that fated transit southwards would be to interpret it too narrowly, and there is a clue as to why in the Paul Klee painting to which Benjamin refers. Where the angel sees catastrophe, Klee makes us see only the angel, and the angel itself is not catastrophic: it is curious, compelling, redemptive, somewhat comic and even beautiful. Equally, for Ori Gersht to make a film about Benjamin, and to take photographs along the route he so dolefully trudged through the Pyrenees, is not simply to reconstruct a tragedy. In both cases, a transformation takes place, the transformation of a brutal fact from which we’d want to look away into an image that draws us in. Just as reason can be turned into terror, so terror can be turned into beauty.

The book abounds in images drawn from film archives, music videos and the history of art, images that allude to other images in turn. And so we the beholder find ourselves in a limited infinity, looking for the path that connects them, not sure if our journey takes us forward, backwards or sideways. Do the images follow a narrative progression? Or are they related to each other simply by association?

This hesitant interpretative journey we go on runs parallel to that of the Benjamin figure. As he stumbles ever forward, harried by the wind, the film scrambles the time sequence, repeating episodes, ending where it begins. From this disjointing of time, we can draw an oblique reference to the notion of ‘progress’ upon which Benjamin had cast such a cold eye. The way ahead is never straightforward, never not circumscribed by the past, and the word ‘evaders’ underscores it. Just as the film evokes the wandering Jew who, having scorned Christ, was damned to journeying until the Second Coming, so ‘evaders’ suggests that an onward march must be subject to detour, avoidance and evasion. Arrival is forever deferred.
The deferral takes on special meaning in the context of what is perhaps the chief trope at work in the first book - that of the quest in Romanticism. Its archetypal imagery comes from Caspar David Friedrich (image xxx), famous for painting tooth-sharp mountains wreathed about by mist, mountains conquered by isolated male heroes. These men - these Ubermenschen - had reached the roof of the world and in so doing attained a peak of human perfection. The vistas that were their reward opened as far into their own souls as across the jagged ranges. And yet this crowning moment of human excellence led on not to perpetual peace and the flowers of civilization but war, confusion, and displacement. When Gersht summons up such images of transcendence, we are invited to understand them with all the irony of a false dawn, with the knowledge of the tragedies that ensued. His homage to Friedrich, a photograph of granite crags that form a cup for a ghostly charge of pink fog, has been vacated (image number x). No human figure remains.

And yet there is a trace. Benjamin’s briefcase has been left, the briefcase, long since lost, said to have contained the notes for a magnum opus. Evaders is not a counsel of despair, and the work is not nihilistic. What Gersht finds if anything at the dark centre of these collapsed myths is qualified affirmation. Describing the film or the book as optimistic would be a stretch, and besides that’s not the point. Yet the bleakness is not unleavened, and what makes it rise is the admiration for Benjamin as a thinker in his time and of his time, a man capable of interpreting the global catastrophe taking place around him even as it was happening, a radical contemporary. Klee’s angel becomes, in Benjamin’s text, an avatar of Benjamin himself; in Gersht’s film, Benjamin becomes an angel for Gersht, an icon at once authentic and fantastical.

That briefcase, however, is also a prop. It’s not the real thing. Here, as in the two other books and films, a certain theatricality runs through, a theatricality we might want at first to dismiss on the grounds that it undermines the earnestness of the work. The book includes, for example, a photograph from a production of Waiting for Godot (image number xxs), a play easily accounted for as nihilistic. But as readers of Beckett will know, any nihilism is always mediated as theatre, all tragedy seen through a fine but irremovable comic gauze. There’s an element of shrewdness, even wit, in Gersht’s work, that we might feel it’s sacrilegious to name, given the metaphysical heaviness of the context. It’s what adds drama to truth, and it’s the same intelligence that recognises he’s working in an artificial medium, and for the viewer makes the artifice part of the experience.

I say ‘viewer’, but the film isn’t silent. True, the photographs in the book by definition have no sound accompaniment, but Evaders does, and it’s integral. We listen as we watch, and what we hear are haunting sounds that might be emanating from the very chambers of Benjamin’s beating heart. Most thrilling of all is the clang made by his boots as he stomps through an iron memorial near PortBou created by Danny Karavan, his black figure occluding the light like a giant hawk, its wings draped at its side. It’s a terrible tolling, like the bell of a ghost ship or the banging on the hull of a blighted vessel that’s been wrecked.

We are, in any case, near the Mediterranean coast, scene of arrival and departure. No sooner does Benjamin get there than he disappears. Or at least the man disappears. One of the startling effects of Gersht’s film is to remind us of the death-cheating properties of the camera. That the dead live on through photographs, that they can be made to walk again, like ghosts, by movies that can be played over and over.
Book 2: Will You Dance For Me

Every time she rocks back in her chair she is drowned again. Yeudith Arnon dips in and out of the darkness as if she were being dunked like a witch in her black weeds - or water-boarded. Every time she disappears it feels like it is forever, but she will keep coming up for air, her spirit refusing to be consumed by the blackness. Refusal being the origin of this woman's creative endeavour. Having refused to dance for the Nazis, she vowed to make dancing her career, and even at this autumn stage of her life we find her ‘dancing’ in her chair. She turned an absolute no into an absolute yes, her motion both repeating the trauma of the camps and sublimating it into a kind of ecstasy. Gersht's film then plays out this dialectic of light and dark.

But the yes that refuses to die has not, for all that, the strength to resist time. This is a study of ageing, of both its decrepitude and its beauty. Yeudith Arnon’s face has become as leathery with age as that of a sybil. The almost embalmed pouches that are her cheeks could hold some store to take with her into the underworld she continually plunges back into like a mythic queen. The exposed teeth lead us to infer the skull beneath the skin. Her head appears lacquered, black and gold, like that of an ancient Chinaman on an imperial screen. Yet her longevity is also informing us that she has chosen to die in the fullness of time, not prematurely in the camps. Ripeness is all, her weathered skin has written upon it: I will die when it is right, not when it is wrong.

In this regard, the inclusion in the second book of a Rembrandt self-portrait carries weight. It will sound bizarre, but arguably ‘Will You Dance for Me’ is a self-portrait too, a portrait of Arnon by Arnon, facilitated by Gersht. It’s not simply the intimacy and respect with which he, the young Israeli film-maker, treats her, the graceful old Jewess. It’s that he has created a space, a capsule, in which we become sensible to her reflecting on herself, bathing in memory, and accepting her own history in all its singularity. It’s what happens in the Rembrandt, and it’s what makes the Rembrandt so challenging for a third party to observe. The grand master ushers us inside the precincts of his own self-awareness, where we watch him accept himself, all in all, good and bad, without remainder.

The book also includes stills from Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog* (images xxx), a documentary issued in 1955 about Auschwitz and Majdanek. Setting aside the subject matter - which is obviously congruent with that of ‘Will You Dance for Me’ - the images invite us to consider Ori Gersht within an artistic tradition of his own construction. Indeed, this book and the two others in the trilogy stand as a statement of his canon, and his relationship to it. On the one hand, Gersht offers a kind of limitless gift to these masters - Rembrandt, Resnais, Goya, Velázquez - who have gone before him: it’s a gesture of humility. On the other hand, we sense his claim to fraternity with them. There is a degree
of entitlement here, a readiness by the latecomer, Ori Gersht, to join those who came before, in proper order. And when we watch Yeudith through Ori’s eyes, we are seeing him let her go into her own fate, while at the same time knowing that his own mortality has been taken into account, that he is not blandly separate from her in the logic of generations as they succeed one another. He is not exempt, not just the detached film-maker with his apparatus and his software and his hindsight; he has his place among it all.

It’s hard, then, not to think of the way in which history is woven out of two filaments, one personal, one public. Here is Yeudith Arnon in an intensely private retrospective, still dancing out the aftermath of the Holocaust, itself continuing to reverberate. You might say that history is nothing but the public adding-up of a billion personal experiences, yet if this is so, it implies that no one person can experience the whole. As in Evaders, history is larger than the humanity that creates it, and that’s what makes us blind to our own evils as they amass above our eye-line. The best we can do, as Arnon does, and Gersht does, is to provide a connecting wire between the infinitely private and the infinitely public, if only for a brief period. Perhaps that’s the role of art - with the proviso that art is not just a servant: it’s also occupied with itself. It has all the narcissism of a dancer, and just as well, for without this narcissism there’d be no urge to find beauty and reflect it.

Book 3: The Offering

And now we have come to the sun of Andalucia, the land of Lorca, the burning pictures of ritualised Catholicism and their strange imbrication with Arab or ‘Moorish’ culture.

We have also come forward in time, to the present day. As we watch the watchers watching a bullfight, we are struck by the ordinary modernity of their open-collar shirts and sunglasses. Struck because the ritual they observe has little of the modern about it at all: the comfortable democracy of their apparel contrasts sharply with the formality and archaism of the event. It is a ritual of blood, the arena evoking the cruel curves of the Colosseum and the slaughter of animals for sport. To trace too direct a link between this blood ritual and that of the Eucharist might be fatuous, and yet it’s where our more primal mind wants to go: at some point, the sacrifice of animals, the sacrifice of humans and the sacrifice of gods becomes the same. Equally, the bullfight is only man versus beast at one level; at another, both man and beast are each preoccupied with something greater than either of them, namely their own death, and their own death by blood.

The camera has brought us into the matador’s dressing-room, and just as we watch the audience outside, inside we are made to feel like voyeurs. The sense of trespass is only increased by the suggestion that although the camera appears to hide and to hide us, it is also involved in producing what it sees, just as the crowd are not innocent bystanders but agents, commissioners of the spectacle they consume. There’s no innocence in Gersht’s work, only degrees of guilt, and this inhibits us from indulging in the facile pathos of victim
and perpetrator. What unites the two in ‘The Offering’ is performance, a mutual pact, a lust for gazing at events in which blood and beauty are so stained with each other that trying to tell them apart becomes futile.

Inside the boudoir, the contradictions accumulate. The bullfight, this most virile of tests, this gladiatorial challenge that calls for expenditure of testosterone - one recalls the testicles of the bull as depicted by Picasso in Guernica, the festival of masculinity in Hemingway - requires its male protagonist not to become encased in armour, but to wear white lace, fuchsia stockings, a braided court jacket, and shoes as delicate as ballet pumps. The princely killer could be in the dressing room for a Rococo piece of theatre, coiffing himself for entry to the court at Versailles, fluffing for a display of Tartufferie, even preening before striding the catwalk at Versace. He is not only dressed like a woman, he's dressed like a little girl dressing a doll, and even like the doll itself. Gersht has included in the book one of Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo dolly-maids (image xxx), just like those of Velázquez from the sovereign quarters of Philip II, who are members of the chorus-line of ‘meninas’, half human, half clockwork; not to mention a portrait of Philip himself in ‘armour’ as fancy as anything donned by the ladies (image xxx).

Yet the toreador is being dressed by a man, which makes the scene both more masculine and more feminine at the same time. One can see the ritual as that of an older man cross-dressing a younger ephebe in the lingerie he needs to get him aroused, the matador a male whore, compliantly getting himself up for his paying client, only to be undone and ravaged as soon as the laces are all fastened. At one point the valet seems about to take his master a tergo, penetrating the one who is to penetrate the bull, in a homosexual chain of being that reverses the accepted order of nature not least because the servant takes the dominant role.

And so on. Values of masculinity and femininity, of master and slave, of beast and man, have become entirely interlaced, and, back in the arena, one forgets to be surprised at the presence of so many women in the audience. Of what kind is the gratification being sought? Is it sexual? Religious? Aesthetic? All three? And if all three, are they effectively identical? What the film suggests is that at the level of imagery the mind makes no distinctions, even if at the level of morality we insist on boundaries as if life depended on it. In this respect, the film operates on dream logic, making connections across the oneiric or sub-rational synapses and producing a single brocade of interwoven designs and colours, united in all their discrepancies from each other.

As if to temper the gratification, Gersht shows us nothing of the contest itself. In this, he obeys the rules of theatre as laid down by Aristotle who stipulated that a death may never be shown on stage, only reported. Nor do we see the bull. The gratification isn't tempered, however, so much as displaced. In many ways, it's better seeing this than seeing the tauromachy. There's all the anticipation and none of its discharge. Neither the beauty of the bullfighter’s costume nor the lean handsomeness of the imagined bull are yet blurred by the action to come. We have the strange sensation of being clear-sighted in the presence of a massacre, sober at a bacchanalian feast.

Let's not infer from this that ‘The Offering’ is ‘against blood sports'. Or for them. The work is amoral, and besides, the book based around it has no qualms about including photographs of the mortally-wounded animal wearing its Indian-chief headgear of sunk arrows. We also get Goya with his blasted vignette of two journeymen on the plain beating
the brains out of each other (image xxx), and Rembrandt’s anatomy lesson (image xxx). Vegetarian art this is not. But nor is it complicit in the violence. Rather, it’s a non-interventive intervention, one that arrives after the first cut has been made, partly to document, partly to relish the fascinating imagery which rituals of brutality engender. And partly to steal that imagery and turn it into something it never knew it might be used for: one of the many astonishing features of ‘The Offering’ is the apparent lack of awareness on the part of matador or audience as to how, at Gersht’s hands, they are, for better or for worse, to be reframed.

In any case, the most disturbing part of the book, perhaps, is the emptiest. I mean the four photographs of the cell in which the bull is penned before the games commence. The walls are whitewashed, but browned where the animals’ flanks have rubbed against them. If it weren’t so godforsaken, so reminiscent of a dungeon or yes, a gas chamber, it could be a chapel carved out of the Sierra Nevada for the succour of pilgrims. What it evokes more, however, are the caves at Lascaux, and in so doing, another reversal is made. Instead of pictures of oxen by primitive humans, we get the dumb signature on the wall of the beasts themselves. Animal art, so to speak. The mark-making is crude, of course - no idealisation of the creature is aimed at. But it’s hard not to be moved by this evidence of the bull’s experience of death row and how successive animals have committed their presence in it to the white walls, besmirching them with what is not blood but what could be fear itself.

So perhaps it is a kind of animal chapel. The very fact of these marks is enough, enough to generate a rude superstitiousness, if not a religion, and a counterpoint to the matador’s fastidious arranging of images, icons and talismans. Even beneath his costume he wears shining medals, trophies, talismans. These are echoed by the religious badges he has gathered at the domestic shrine where he dresses. Symbols for good luck and for divine grace merge as the saints, ready to bless and to be blessed, look on.

Afterword

One is conscious, after seeing the films and looking through the books, of two seemingly opposite tendencies in Ori Gersht’s work, tendencies which it is that work’s mission to reconcile.

The first is the tendency towards scale, to the magnitude of life and death, to the history and the fate of Europe, its religion and its culture. The stage occupied by the works is vast. The second, however, is the tendency towards detail, as manifested, say, in the stills of close-ups from Jeanne D’Arc (images xxx). Gersht doesn’t privilege one over the other, and the fact that he makes no judgments about what he records allows us to shuttle our attention between the two, the macro and the micro, without interference. Somewhat like a gifted teacher, he gives rein to our intellectual mobility without being didactic.

Not that we’re off the hook: he does insist that we look, that we take the images in, and that we do so at a studious pace. We are inside a generous space, allowed to wander and to roam, to both consider the metaphysical and wonder at the beautiful, but we are inside, and we’re not let out easily. These are works that keep us close to them, long after we’ve walked away. Like the revenant, they keep coming back.