

THE LION'S PAW Christina Viragh

The question is do we see what we see.

Do we, for example, see a lion lustfully eyeing unsuspecting stags standing nearby, or do we see a kitsch picture amusingly and possibly somewhat maliciously combined with an unsuspecting lion, or do we see one thing and think we see the other?

Do we see the whole picture of the lion in the stag landscape and still disallow it because we know it isn't so, and above all, because we don't want to admit that the landscape might possibly be pretty with its little brook disappearing into depths that are barred to the zoo lion? Good taste dictates seeing the combination as combination, not as a harmonious whole but as the contrast between a dingy zoo and a counterfeit idyll.

But what do we really see?

Because all of this, the overall impression as well as what looks at first sight to be only an artful contrast, remains on the surface, remains a game with given elements, an invitation to play on, with the real tree trunk, for instance, that seems to have tumbled directly out of the stag landscape, or with the artificially mossy green patches that in both places apparently spring from the same idyllic vision, so that we wonder if the picture is not a complete whole after all: though not yet as the artist's assemblage of realities, as the combination of his own experience with found elements from our store of collective kitsch, but as the work of a denaturizer of nature, working backstage, exploiting trees and stags and a lion as staffage to conjure his own brand of anthropocentrism.

But the lion isn't cooperating. He's been photographed so that you really see him or rather the photograph's punctum, as Roland Barthes calls it, namely, his right paw dangling over the wall. That's it. The paw. And the language it speaks is more eloquent than the anecdote of the stags and the lion. What the paw tells us is so obvious that it does not even sink in right away, namely, that it is itself and for itself, in vibrant and perfect concentration, oblivious to its surroundings.

And thus, it opens the door to terrain that leaves superficial anecdote behind. It unhinges the picture, a quality that actually describes the true quality of Barthes' punctum. The punctum is not the quintessential summary of a picture; on the contrary, it undoes, it collapses the picture; the subject matter, what the picture supposedly represents, becomes secondary, because the punctum has opened the door to the shapeless, nonverbal and therefore creatively fuelled layer underneath. And this is where the paw, expressing only itself, leads us.

Like every punctum, this paw, this punctumpaw, is a mirror through which we can walk, like Alice did, only to find ourselves in the same world, except that it has now come to life, having jettisoned predetermined, predefined meaning and static relations to make room for a dynamically receptive approach, to inverted readings of the things around us. That, in turn, leads to much more than a mirror image; it means undoing the known, shaking up the alphabet of meaning. Look at the lion's paw, it forms the shape of a "Z", giving a hint that the picture should be read backwards.

There are the stairs in the zoo, for example, that just a minute ago cheerfully led into a kitschy scene and now, read backwards, suddenly appearing uncanny, derelict, plunging down into nothing, an undead being fighting oblivion. That is what we really see, and we also see that the stairs are, in fact, closely related to the picture of the stags above, which

is equally uncanny in its effort to turn a fleeting moment in nature into eternally petrified cosiness. A picture of horror, the whole thing: we see it now, and for the first time we realize that the lion has nothing to do with it, that he is so quietly and exclusively focused on the momentary act of lying that he doesn't even make an appearance in the picture, is not part of it. Lion on one hand; stags, brook and zoo on the other, this is the real duality of the picture.

If we wish, we can still simplify matters by focussing our attention on the line that divides the picture, as well as the others in this series, into an upper and lower half, reading it as an axis of reflection and then playing the games of contrast and complement which it spontaneously suggests. Why not? Why shouldn't we laugh about the girls in another picture, Munch-colored and merrily running away? After all, they're laughing too, playing their own games and racing to escape the breakers in the background. Or, as language can happily transcend pictorial boundaries, are the two possibly running away from the silhouettes of cut-out deer in another picture that conjures a cloying idyll similar to that inhabited by the stags? In this case, the girls' fright would be but laughter again, whereas the head of the deer to the right is a punctum that might well provoke genuine fear with its nebulous orientation, facing the viewer? away from the viewer?, until the entire picture deconstructs into an unsettling lack of direction.

The punctum is always unsettling even if it doesn't always lead to fright, just as we are not frightened by the picture of the nude beauty under a glass bell because there is a mountain peak in the background barely visible in the dawning light that counters un noble simplicity with sedate grandeur, which, like the lion, has nothing to do with the rest of the picture, nothing to do with the streetlamps or with the iron ramps and cables, themselves aesthetic in a different way, and certainly has nothing to do with any heavy-handed erotic symbolism, so that here we take pleasure in a three-fold subdivision of the picture and not in the surface dichotomy between the scene of a harbour and the scene of a girl.

Take pleasure and say to ourselves that real synchronous seeing may necessitate looking away. Not looking away from the picture and into a different corner of the room but away from the surface and into the picture itself where one single, permeable point rearranges the layers, possibly multiplying them and most certainly calling upon us to really perceive.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert