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Caspar David Friedrich through a Broken Windscreen: Arnold Odermatt's Peaceful Crash Scenes

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Romantic Scenes in Black and White

Let me describe a picture to you: imagine a mountain lake with a ruin sitting in the shallow water near the shore. Its reflection is almost perfect in the tranquil water. In the distance the majestic peaks of the Swiss Alps emerge from a sea of clouds hovering above the still lake. To the right a road, wet from a recent downpour, disappears towards the horizon. At the end of the road a large weeping willow extends its long hanging branches towards the water. Beneath it there is the tiny figure of a man with a dog. It is a tranquil scene, full of harmony; an invitation for contemplation – a scene typical of Romantic landscape painting.

Only, the picture I have described is not a painting, but a black and white photograph and the ruin in the foreground is not that of a medieval castle but the carcass of a crashed VW Beetle. Behind the man with the dog a warning triangle has been put up to alert drivers to the dangers ahead.



Fig. 1

The photograph, titled *Buochs, 1965*, is part of a series of 32 black and white photographs by the Swiss police officer Arnold Odermatt, which were shown at the Venice Biennale in 2001. All of these photographs show crash scenes, their titles matter-of-factly denoting the place and year of the accident, thus firmly placing them in a certain time in history, which is, however, immediately undermined by an otherwise timeless atmosphere. From the late 1950s to the 1970s Odermatt documented hundreds of car crashes for the Swiss traffic police. Beside the official analytical and detailed images that were meant for police investigation, he also created an extensive private collection of lyrical images, in which the wrecked cars appear freed of the chaos, the death and destruction of the crash. While these images were taken only a short time after the accident had happened, they are decidedly Romantic in their treatment of nature and the wrecked car within. They are not sensational and rather than curiosity or

excitement they evoke introspection. There are no dead or wounded, no blood, no mutilated bodies. Rather, the chaotic catastrophe of the accident is subsumed into an overall atmosphere of stillness and awe in front of the all-pervading presence of nature.

Odermatt's private collection of lyrical crash photographs was only discovered by the art world in the early 1990s, several decades after its creation. Allegedly, his son, the cinematographer Urs Odermatt, came across the collection while researching police footage from the 1960s for his film *Wachtmeister Zumbühl* (*Constable Zumbühl*, 1994). Realizing the artistic quality of the unusual and highly formalistic crash scenes he persuaded his father to put on a first exhibition. Since then, interest in Odermatt's work has been steadily growing and it has been shown in several solo and group shows in Europe and the USA, including the Venice Biennale in 2001.¹

Curator Harald Szeeman refers to Odermatt's photos as 'modern Romantic landscape[s] with accident'.² However, I would not see the accident as a mere addition to the Romantic landscape, but rather as the decisive element that makes the photographs into 'modern Romantic landscapes'. To be more precise, I want to claim that they can be read as a twentieth-century version of nineteenth-century ruin painting. Szeemann's 'accident' can be understood on two levels: on the one hand it simply denotes the crashed car and on the other it points to the event of the crash itself. In both cases the accident transposes the Romantic idea of the ruin into a contemporary context. This essay looks at how the Romantic concept of the ruin is continued and redefined by exploring Odermatt's photographs and juxtaposing them to the works of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), whose intricate landscape paintings reflect similar concerns with formality, structure and composition. Employing Friedrich's strategy of imposing order on the chaos of nature's forces, Odermatt transforms the individual catastrophe of the sudden destruction in the car crash into a universal aesthetic event.

Car Crash and Catastrophe

To speak of catastrophe in relation to a car crash requires some framing. Derived from the Greek *katastrechein*, to overturn, catastrophe denotes a great and often sudden calamity, the final and often fatal end of dramatic action, a momentous tragic event ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin.³ In the crash we experience the abrupt end to the smooth forward-trajectory of the car and often quite literally an 'overturning'. As motion comes to a sudden and devastating stop, the crash violently changes the lives of those that have survived and of those who are friends and relatives of the injured and the fatally wounded.

Driving is a matter of trust, in ourselves and in technology. Driving means to be in control, to control the car and through it, the road and everything around it. It is a form of manifesting one's place in the world. For the passenger, the car journey requires trust in technology and the abilities of the driver. As passengers we are not in immediate control but collectively we are part of this man-made machine that allows us to dominate the world around us. Though the possibility of the accident adds thrill and makes speeding exciting, most of us are confident that it will not happen to us. When it does happen it is devastating. Even when the crash is not grave, the momentary loss of control and the

Note: all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹ Though Odermatt is also renowned for his documentation of Swiss country life in the 1950s and '60s and has recently concentrated on more abstract photography, most of the exhibitions centre around his extensive work on car crashes.

² Arnold Odermatt, *Arnold Odermatt: Die Biennale Auswahl – 32 Photographien für Venedig. The Biennial Selection – 32 Photographs for Venice*, text Harald Szeemann, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Springer und Winckler: Berlin, 2002), p. 5.

³ "catastrophe." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2008. Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catastrophe> (viewed 6 June 2008).

exposure to the arbitrary forces of the accidental afford us a glimpse of death. Those who survive must rebuild their confidence in themselves and reconstruct their place in the world.

I call the car crash an 'individual catastrophe' as its immediate and strongest impact is limited to a relatively small circle of people – those involved and their friends and relatives. However, its almost daily occurrence on our roads and the fact that it is the most frequent cause of a non-natural death in the Western hemisphere, means that we are constantly aware of the possibility of the crash. It is the catastrophe that most threatens our lives. As such it has been the focus of art almost since the time of the invention of the car. From Salvador Dali to Andy Warhol, from James Rosenquist to Silvy Fleury, Sarah Lucas or Pipilotti Rist, artists have used the car crash in a variety of forms and expressions.⁴ In terms of photography we might think of Weegee or Mell Kilpatrick, who produced pictures of crash scenes which were often explicit in their portrayal of the mutilated bodies of the crash victims. Here, death is explicit, cruel and raw.

Michel Ribon writes:

With their endless possibilities of variation and modification, representations of Hell have always had an advantage over those of the Garden of Eden or Paradise, because they possess infinitely more aesthetic attractions and, as Adorno says, because they can *set free new aesthetic values*.⁵

The spectacle of violent death displayed in the car crash photographs of Weegee or Kilpatrick are representations of Hell. When we look at them we become aware of 'this fertile ambivalence, [...] these two articulated registers of the catastrophic fall: repulsion and attraction' or 'Eros and Thanatos'.⁶ Ribon argues that catastrophe is vital to art, which is at its most inventive and original when it focuses on the struggle between life and death. The depiction of quiet happiness, on the other hand, can very quickly lead to an inert and empty harmony that sterilises the imagination.⁷ Arnold Odermatt's photographs, however, are radically different from any explicit scenes of hell or human suffering. Illustrating Ribon's point about the multiplicity of ways inherent to representations of the catastrophe, they explore the destruction of the crash in a more subtle but no less effective way. I shall explain this in more detail below.

At the Venice Biennale Odermatt's photographs were shown as part of the exhibition 'Plateau of Humankind'. Szeemann explains that he chose Odermatt's work as representative for disasters caused by and affecting individuals.⁸ In the show these individual catastrophes were juxtaposed with the collective disaster of the explosion of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, recorded by the photographer Victor Maruchenko. Car crash and nuclear disaster – two catastrophes that shaped the twentieth century, but why choose Odermatt, why not Mell Kilpatrick or Weegee? While I can only speculate on Szeemann's reasons for his choice, my own lie in the fact that Odermatt was not interested in the spectacle of the crash. Weegee's and Kilpatrick's images are so explicit in their depiction of cruelty that they are difficult to look at, not to speak of studying them at greater length. They were made to shock and, even decades after they

⁴ For a more extensive survey of car crashes in art see Peter Wollen, 'Automobiles and Art', in *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, ed. by Joe Kerr and Peter Wollen, (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 25–49; or Johannes Bilstein and Matthias Winzen (eds.), *Ich bin mein Auto – Die machinellen Ebenbilder des Menschen*, Exh. cat. (Cologne: Walther König, 2001); or NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft Düsseldorf (ed.), *Auto-nom: Das Automobil in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, Exh. cat., (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003).

⁵ Par ses possibilités infiniment déclinables et modulables, la représentation de l'Enfer [...] a toujours eu, sur celles du jardin d'Eden et du Paradis, la supériorité de posséder infiniment plus d'attrait esthétiques et, comme le dit Adorno, de pouvoir libérer de nouvelles valeurs esthétiques. Michel Ribon. *Esthétique de la Catastrophe: Essai sur l'art et la catastrophe* (Paris: Kimé, 1999), p. 11. *Author's emphasis*.

⁶ 'cette féconde ambivalence, sur ces deux registres articulés de la chute catastrophique: la repulsion et l'attraction.' Michel Ribon. *Esthétique de la Catastrophe: Essai sur l'art et la catastrophe* (Paris: Kimé, 1999), p. 10.

⁷ Michel Ribon. *Esthétique de la Catastrophe: Essai sur l'art et la catastrophe* (Paris: Kimé, 1999), p. 11.

⁸ Odermatt, *Biennale Auswahl*, 2002, p. 6.

were first taken, they still do. Of course, one could also argue with Baudrillard that by the beginning of the 21st century images of extreme violence have lost their power to say anything at all. Odermatt in contrast, found a more subtle way to portray the catastrophe of the crash, which invites us to engage with it on a level beyond shock.

Looking at his photographs we might think of what Ribon writes of the internal unity of art:

This unity where all things represented come together to breathe as in an organic structure forms the basic of 'the aesthetic form' of the work in the sense Focillon uses it: the rhythmic articulation which, by establishing the order of the style, flows into space-time to create meaning.⁹

As I will show, the photographs display a sense of order and rhythm, which allows us to see the accidents as at once individual and universal. In a way they are depictions of the other side of hell as the catastrophe is vanquished through art.

Another reason why Szeemann chose Odermatt's images as iconic for the 20th-century disaster and why they gained international popularity so soon after having first been exhibited can be located in a general nostalgia for vintage cars and the peculiar design of mid-century European cars. With the exception of the Citroën DS, 1950s and '60s European cars appear friendly rather than aggressively futuristic like their American counterparts. Much smaller than the American car, many of them have dome-shaped roofs and curved bonnets rising gently above round and sometimes hooded lights. Even where they carry miniature tailfins they leave an overall impression of roundness – a kind of unobtrusive gentleness that inspires sympathy and trust and may be seen as highly symbolic for our idealized vision of the 1950s and early '60s as an era of hope and the revived trust in progress. The 'Déesse' on her part embodies all the fascination with space travel and the conquest of the universe. Looking at Odermatt's tranquil crash scenes from the distance of half a century we experience a strong sense of nostalgia for those bygone years – a nostalgia that finds its response in the continuing popularity of the Volkswagen Beetle, Chrysler's retro styled PT Cruiser and Crossfire and in Fiat's recent reissue of the original Cinquecento. However, Odermatt's sad metal carcasses produce a nostalgia tinged with a sense of the certainty of ruination. With car ownership having increased exponentially and continuing to grow, we can now no longer ignore pollution and the depletion of our energy resources. The end of the car appears more imminent than ever – the freedom of the road promised by the 1950s and '60s appears beyond reach and the crashed vintage car becomes a powerful symbol of those ruined hopes.

Romantic Ruins

Let us return to my opening hypothesis that Odermatt's car crashes can be seen as our contemporary equivalent to the Romantic ruin. In Romantic painting ruins worked as symbol of death and decay, of the transitoriness of life and the reassuring but also frightening eternity of nature; they expressed both a longing for a distant and unattainable time and place and a sense of awe in the face of the sublime powers of nature.¹⁰ The ruin embodies an ambiguity which informs Romantic sentiment at large: the longing for a union with nature and the desire to dominate it. Moreover, the crumbling remains of grand medieval aspirations represented an era of superstition and mystery, which had officially been

⁹ 'C'est cette unite, où toutes les choses représentées se mettent à respirer comme dans une structure organique, qui fonde 'la forme esthétique' de l'œuvre au sens où l'entend Focillon: l'articulation rythmique qui, en instaurant l'ordre du style, se déploie dans un espace-temps pour faire sens.' Michel Ribon. *Esthétique de la Catastrophe: Essai sur l'art et la catastrophe* (Paris: Kimé, 1999), p.11.

¹⁰ See Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (Vintage: London, 2002), esp. Chapter V. Helmut Börsch-Supan explores this notion of the ruin in Romanticism in his book on Caspar David Friedrich (Prestel: Munich, 1990); also see Andrea Sigmund, *Die romantische Ruine im Landschaftsgarten: Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis der Romantik zu Barock und Klassik* (Königshausen und Neumann: Würzburg, 2002).

defeated and superseded by the clear light of reason and logics, but which continued to persist in the minds of (wo)men and ousted itself in the enthusiasm for all things mysterious – from freak shows and spiritual séances to Gothic writing.¹¹

One could say that there are two sides to Romantic ruin painting: on the one hand the wild and passionate drama, where storm clouds gather above a churning sea while the skeletal remains of the ruined building stand out bright in the flash of lightning (Fig. 2);¹² on the other hand there is the quiet, thoughtful, introspective and melancholic painting, where the ruin invites the contemplation of the transience of human life in the face of nature's eternal cycle. The most prominent painter of this side of Romanticism is arguably Caspar David Friedrich, whose canvases often show the ruins of cathedrals or churches in the pale light of dusk or dawn when heaven and earth converge into an infinite horizon. However, whether the painting is dramatic or melancholic, in both cases the ruin is the result of a catastrophic turn in history, which brought about the downfall of former grandeur. And it is this downfall which we contemplate with Ribon's mixture of repulsion and attraction.



Fig. 2

Friedrich made numerous studies of actual ruins, in particular of the abbey ruins of Eldena, but he also painted visions of intact gothic churches and cathedrals in ruins, such as the church of St Mary in Neubrandenburg, the Jacobi Church of Greifswald and the Cathedral of Meissen. Here the ruin can be seen as a vision of the future and the certainty of death and decline for all things mortal or man-made. Hillmar Frank quotes Friedrich's description of his painting of the Cathedral of Meissen in ruins.¹³ Here the painter describes the tall young trees that have sprouted among the ruins, the destroyed altars and broken sculptures of saints and bishops. But despite all the destruction the painting is uplifting and amidst the wreckage a young protestant priest with a bible contemplates the blue sky above the broken arches. Frank writes of the religious-historical dimension, where the older medieval beliefs with their hierarchical and also quite limiting structure are superseded by the open arches with their unimpeded view to the

¹¹ Martin Willis discusses the continuous attraction of magic and the occult in the early nineteenth century further in *Mesmerists, Monsters and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent State University Press: Kent, Ohio, 2006), esp. pp. 31-4.

¹² For example J. M. W. Turner, *Dunstanborough Castle, Northumberland* (1828-29), John Constable, *Hadleigh Castle* (1828-29, Fig. 2), Sir George Beaumont, *Peel Castle in a Storm* (1806), or Paul Sandby, *Stormy Sea with Castle Ruin and Figures in Foreground* (ca. 1780).

¹³ The painting remained unfinished and was lost in 1859.

sky and the perspective of eternity.¹⁴ The vision of ruins is then at once a vision of destruction and liberation.

'The world must be romanticized,' wrote Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), 'by investing the common with a higher meaning, the ordinary with a mysterious significance, the well known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of infinity I romanticize it!'¹⁵ For Friedrich, painting visions of future ruination was one way of romanticizing the world, of making strange what is familiar and creating new meaning in old symbols. I will explore Friedrich's peculiarly Romantic way of portraying the world in greater detail below. Bearing Szeeman's comparison of Odermatt's photographs with Romantic painting in mind, we might wonder whether Odermatt, too, was romanticizing the world in his lyrical use of the camera and whether we as viewers are doing the same in our contemplation of his work.

In the Darkroom of the Soul

'The Volkswagen half submerged in the lake, with its door open, has the same poetry but not the same aura as Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*,' (Fig. 3) writes Szeemann. 'Like Romantic painting par excellence it has the drama, the *pathos* of the arrest of an event and its mutation into a state beyond time.'¹⁶ Photography, I would argue, is always concerned with 'the arrest of an event' and with eternalizing the moment – indeed much more so than painting. Like painting and unlike television or cinema, it invites, if not demands contemplation. Stopping time and making visible what would normally escape our attention, it isolates the moment from the flow of life and offers it to the contemplative and investigative gaze.¹⁷

Photography differs from all other forms of art by being able to capture a moment and depicting it accurately in every detail. When it was first invented in the first half of the 19th century it was hailed as a perfect device for the accurate recording and preservation of the present for the future. But this quality can also be seen as limiting the photograph to a mere reproductive rather than creative form of art. Barthes speaks of the 'finitude' of the image, which places it beyond the dialectical.¹⁸ However, photography never completely fulfilled the promise of accurate and objective depiction. It can never describe more than the personal view point of the photographer; just like brush and paint it becomes a tool in the creation of a personal vision.

Claiming that Caspar David Friedrich would be a photographer if he was alive today, Peter Bialobrzeski writes: "Friedrich anticipated a lot of the developments that later happened in photography. He no longer describes what is really there but paints pure contemplation."¹⁹ Odermatt's photographs fall

¹⁴ Hilmar Frank. *Aussichten ins Unermessliche: Perspektivität und Sinnoffenheit bei Caspar David Friedrich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), p.40.

¹⁵ 'Die Welt muß romanisiert werden! [...] Indem ich dem Gemeinen einen hohen Sinn, dem Gewöhnlichen ein geheimnisvolles Ansehn, dem Bekannten die Würde des Unbekannten, dem Endlichen einen unendlichen Schein gebe, so romantisiere ich es.' Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Schriften. Vol.2: Das Philosophische Werk I*, eds. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, Gerhard Schulz, (W. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 1960), p.545: 105.

¹⁶ 'La Volkswagen à moitié noyée dans le lac, porte ouverte, a la même poésie mais pas la même aura que le *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* de Caspar David Friedrich. Mais comme le tableau romantique par excellence, il y a du pathétique, le *pathos* de l'arrêt d'un événement et sa mutation en un état hors-temps.' Harald Szeemann, *Aubes – Rêveries au bord de Victor Hugo* (Maison de Victor Hugo: Paris, 2003), p. 49.

¹⁷ Among others, Susan Sontag has argued this point in *On Photography* (Penguin: London, 1978) and in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farar Straus and Giroux: New York, 2003); also see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Vintage: London, 1993).

¹⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1993, p. 90.

¹⁹ '... weil Friedrich da ganz viel vorwegnimmt was auch in der Fotografie passiert. Friedrich beschreibt ja nicht mehr was wirklich ist, sondern er malt pure Kontemplation.' Peter Bialobrzeski in an interview with WDR, 02 May 2006, http://www.wdr.de/themen/kultur/ausstellungen_2/friedrich_essen/index.jhtml (viewed 12 June 2008).

within Bialobrzewski's definition of photography as a contemplative form of expression. Like Friedrich's paintings, they go beyond factual representation. Deeply personal they are inhabited by a profoundly Romantic sense of transfiguration that allowed Szeemann to compare them to Friedrich's work.



Fig. 3

Let us look at photography through different eyes, through the eyes of a child. As a little boy the French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue imagined that he could capture the colour, smell and emotions of any particular moment by opening, closing and reopening his eyes and staring very hard at the scene. He called his 'invention' an 'eye-trap' – a trap to catch the instant of paralyzed time with all its surrounding atmosphere, emotions and sensations. This would allow him to store experience inside himself and access it, analyze and explore it in its original form at any given moment in the future.²⁰ Friedrich's working method closely resembles Lartigue's 'eye-trap'. To a certain degree, the painter, like the child Lartigue, turned himself into a camera. When he set out to paint, he took his sketchbook and pencil, went out into nature and made meticulous studies of rocks or trees or simply random parts of the landscape that he thought particularly interesting. These sketches are as precise and true to nature as photographs, but they would only form the basis, not the essence of the final painting. They served as components in the composition of the painting that happened in the tranquillity of the studio in recollection of the nature experience. 'Close your physical eye so that you can first see your painting with your spiritual eye,' Friedrich recommended. 'Then bring to light what you have seen

²⁰ Jacques-Henri Lartigue, *Mémoires sans Mémoire* (Robert Laffont: Paris, 1975), pp. 32f.

in the dark so that it may rework its effect from the outside inwards.²¹ The artist closing his eyes to see in the dark is comparable to the young Lartigue accessing the stored images of his eye-trap. What is developed in the darkroom of the soul and projected onto the canvas is not a reproduction of the actually perceivable landscape, but the reflection of a mood that originates in the artist's subconscious. It is at once deeply subjective and, in Friedrich's eye, also universally valid. Following Friedrich Schelling's belief that the human soul and nature were extensions of one universal spirit, he wrote: 'The artist's feeling is his law. Pure sensation can never be in contradiction to nature.'²²

Wieland Schmied calls Friedrich's paintings 'landscapes of the soul'²³. After all, they reflect not only the actual trees the painter had studied so painstakingly but also the emotions, the awe and deep religious sentiments his excursions into nature had awakened in him. Given the closeness of Friedrich's working method to Lartigue's 'eye-trap' it is tempting to speak not only of landscapes, but of 'photographs of the soul'. As we shall see, for his private collection of lyrical crash scenes, Odermatt, too, employed a similar method of delving into the inside and tapping the unconscious to capture a mood or sensation in the overall scene, which is absent from the detailed analytical photos that served pure police documentation.

But meanwhile, let us return to Friedrich and his embrace of Schelling's nature philosophy and the belief that nature should be the true origin and source of art. Visual art, according to Schelling, should be like silent poetry; beyond language it should look to the creative process of silent nature and express spiritual thought and concepts that originate in the soul through figure and form creating sensual works that are more than mere imitations of nature.²⁴ Though Friedrich's paintings closely describe actual elements of nature, the composition and lighting, the angle from which they are painted and their infinite depth produce an overall aura of the mysterious and the inexplicable. In many of his paintings the impression of enigmatic depth is intensified by a curious absence or dissolution of the middle ground. For all the photographic precision of the particular elements that make up the landscape, it is almost impossible to focus on the space between immediate foreground and far horizon. There is a void with nothing to hold the eye – a vast and overpowering emptiness that sucks in the small human figures that appear in so many of the paintings. Joseph Koerner quotes the artist's own explanation, writing that 'he empties his canvas in order to imagine, through an invocation of the void, an infinite, unrepresentable God.'²⁵ Friedrich had a pantheistic conception of the world: 'the divine is everywhere, even in a grain of sand,' he once remarked, but Koerner argues that the darkness and the feeling of solitude and futile yearning that pervade many of his canvases speak of a fundamental insecurity as to the existence of God or anything divine. The holy is indicated as 'potentiality' rather than certainty.²⁶ His

²¹ 'Schließe dein leibliches Auge, damit du mit dem geistigen Auge zuerst siehest dein Bild. Dann fördere zu Tage, was du im dunkeln gesehen, daß es zurück wirke auf ändern von außen nach Innen.' Caspar David Friedrich, "Äußerungen bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemälden von größtentheils noch lebenden und unlängst verstorbenen Künstlern." *Frankfurter Fundamente der Kunstgeschichte. Vol. XVI: Caspar David Friedrich: Kritische Edition der Schriften des Künstlers und seiner Zeitzeugen I*. Ed. Gerhard Eimer, Günther Rath. (Frankfurt am Main: 1999), p 35.

²² 'Des Künstlers Gefühl ist sein Gesetz. Reine Empfindung kann niemals entgegen der Natur sein.' Friedrich, "Äußerungen", p.24.

²³ Schmied, 'Die verschiedenen Gesichter der Romantik,' 1995, p. 31. Also see Börsch-Supan's interpretations of Friedrich's paintings and the painter's relation to nature and the spiritual world. (Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Prestel: Munich, 1990)).

²⁴ See F. W. J. Schelling, *Über das Verhältniß der bildenden Künste zu der Natur: Eine Rede zur Feier des 12. Oktobers als des allerhöchsten Namensfestes Seiner Königlichen Majestät von Bayern* (Philipp Krüll: Munich, 1807), p. 3.

²⁵ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (Reaktion Books: London, 1990), p. 16.

²⁶ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 1990, p. 18. Friedrich's uncertainty as to the existence of God and the sensation of awe he felt for the powers of nature were certainly also influenced by his traumatic childhood experience of losing his brother who drowned in a frozen river after having rescued Caspar David from the same fate. However, to reduce his oeuvre to personal trauma would ignore the

paintings emanate the ephemeral presence of something that is just beyond the viewer's grasp, something that intimates the very essence of being, but ultimately escapes being named. Writing about Neo-Romanticism in landscape photography of the 1990s Valerie Ann Leeds describes the portrayal of the void as an 'expression of memory and the unconscious' rather than as an evocation of the divine.²⁷ For Friedrich and his contemporaries it might have stood for both. We shall re-encounter the void in many of Odermatt's photographs, where it is partially responsible for the Romantic mood by taking the crashed car away from the fact of the accident and providing space for contemplation and inner exploration.

Divine Order

Friedrich's paintings speak of the loss of the old belief system where everyone and everything had its predetermined place in God's hierarchical world. But his landscapes have many meanings. The sensations of solitude, vastness and infinity emanating from his canvases certainly respond to Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime in which vastness as much as 'infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.'²⁸ Nineteenth-century art critics described Friedrich's paintings as profoundly disturbing and even today their often bleak and solemn setting produces a delightful shudder. Though they emanate solitude, melancholy and futility, they also bear witness to a profound belief in the spirituality of nature. Friedrich expresses in painting Novalis's desire for the radical romanticization of the world, which both painter and poet saw as the only way to 'find again the original meaning'²⁹ which had been lost in the Enlightenment. Pre-empting Baudrillard's later criticism of post-modernity, Novalis wrote:

Formerly everything was a manifestation of the spirit. Now we see nothing but dead repetition which we don't understand. The meaning of the hieroglyphs is missing. We're still living off the harvest of better times.³⁰

Friedrich's paintings are not dead repetitions. Following the guiding principles of Schelling or the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, they re-inscribe the 'hieroglyphs' – the symbols of the divine – with meaning. By reassembling actual elements of nature into very personal 'landscapes of the soul', Friedrich abstracts the familiar and reveals an infinite number of alternative landscapes. The austerity and the often symmetric staging of the single elements that make up the paintings suggest that everything is pervaded by the laws of a higher order. Friedrich knits an intricate web of symmetry and parallelism, where all elements of nature are related to one another in an overall harmony. As we shall see, Odermatt lends his landscapes the same parallel touch of personal experience and universal harmony despite using the seemingly reproductive and objective medium of photography.

universality he himself and many of his contemporaries and indeed our own contemporaries attribute(d) to it.

²⁷ Valerie Ann Leeds, *Seeking the Sublime: Neo-Romanticism in Landscape Photography*. Exh. Cat. (Southeast Museum of Photography, 1995), p. 7.

²⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) (Scholar Press: Menston, 1970), p. 129.

²⁹ 'So findet man den ursprünglichen Sinn wieder.' Novalis, *Schriften*. Vol.2, 1960, p. 545: 105.

³⁰ 'Ehemals war alles Geistererscheinung. Jetzt sehn wir nichts, als todte Wiederholung, die wir nicht verstehn. Die Bedeutung der Hieroglyfe fehlt. Wir leben noch von der Frucht besserer Zeiten.' Novalis, *Schriften*. Vol.2, 1960, p. 545: 104.



Fig. 4

Let us look at *Abbey in an Oak Forest* (1809-10, Fig. 4), which was inspired by the ruins of the abbey of Eldena near Greifswald. Flanked by four bare oaks on each side, the ruin takes the centre of the painting. Though the trees themselves have wild and twisted shapes, the overall impression is one of harmony and symmetry, as the height of the trees on the left is reflected by those on the right and the scraggly bush in the left bottom corner is repeated on the right bottom corner. The group of monks walking towards the central arch is taken up by the wooden crosses on the left, which appear to march through a sort of doorway intimated by the ghostly apparition of two huge gravestones.

Friedrich's masterly employment of geometric patterns calls to mind Ribon's notion of the rhythm and order underlying aesthetics. In Friedrich's own time this was already articulated by Novalis and his reverence for the clear language of mathematics: 'Those who do not treat a mathematical book with devotion and fail to read it like the Word of God, do not understand it. Every line is an axis of the world.'³¹ And here he may have referred back to Leibniz. As Michel Serres shows, Leibniz believed that through perspective and mathematics everything could be put into a universal order and harmony.

The difficulty [in doing so] consists in the fact that for any given plurality, for any given disorder there exists *only one point* around which everything can be placed in order; this point exists and it is unique. From anywhere else disorder and indetermination remain. From then on, *to know* a plurality of things [...] consists in *discovering this point* from which their disorder can be resolved, *uno intuitu*, into a unique law of order.³²

Like Leibniz, Novalis assumed that the world was based on an underlying order which could be understood through mathematics. For him, this order was a manifestation of the divine and mathematics a way to approaching divinity and to thus regaining the human's lost position within the overall harmony.

³¹ 'Wer ein mathematisches Buch nicht mit Andacht ergreift und es wie Gottes Wort liest, der versteht es nicht. Jede Linie ist eine Weltachse.' Novalis, *Fragments I*, ed. Ewald Wasmuth (Lambert Schneider: Heidelberg, 1957), p. 126.

³² 'La difficulté réside dans ce fait que, pour une pluralité donnée, pour un désordre donné, il n'existe qu'un point à partir duquel tout se remet en ordre: ce point existe et il est unique. De toutes parts ailleurs, le désordre semble demeurer, et l'indétermination. Dès lors, connaître une pluralité de choses [...] consiste à découvrir ce point à partir duquel leur désordre se résout, *uno intuitu*, en une loi d'ordre unique.' Michel Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, Vol. 1, (Paris, 1968), p. 244, author's emphasis.

Let us return to Odermatt's ruins, the abandoned crashed cars. Carcasses, empty shells, sad remains of an ephemeral object, it is hard to compare them to Friedrich's ancient castles and cathedrals – unless we remember Roland Barthes's famous statement, that 'cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals.'³³ Barthes's text was inspired by the Citroën DS, the 'Goddess' ('Déesse') on Europe's roads. Poised to lift off the ground with its hydraulic rear-wheel fittings and its spaceship-like body, the DS clearly aspired towards higher spheres. It represents not only the supreme creation of the twentieth century – the car as such – but also the belief in automobility and technology.



Fig. 5

In *Stansstad*, 1967 (Fig. 5) the beautiful spaceship is shattered to pieces, one door and its boot have fallen off, another door and the right front wing are barely attached to the rest of the bodywork. But even in this devastated state the DS retains a quiet dignity, reflected in the woman who stands at the side of the road with her hands folded as if in prayer. The whole set-up of the photograph, its semblance of tranquillity which contrasts so starkly with its subject, suggests that the ruins of the crashed car contain a knowledge that goes beyond the fact of its destruction.

While the painter is free to compose, to change, to construct or abstract, the photographer can only choose the frame, the lighting and the focus. Still, the photograph can fulfil Schelling's demands: it, too, can originate in the soul. 'A good photograph must be silent,' declared Barthes. To understand it, we must shut our eyes to make it speak in silence:

The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: 'Technique', 'Reality', 'Reportage', 'Art', etc: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness.³⁴

Though Barthes speaks as the viewer rather than the photographer, Odermatt's explanation of his working methods leads us to assume that the image that speaks in silence must, like Friedrich's paintings, also originate in silence.

As a police photographer he had to analyze the crash scene through the lens and capture it from every aspect that could be helpful in reconstructing the course of the accident itself. But once he had finished with the official documentation, he waited until everyone had left. Only then was he free to abstract the accident into figure and form. Often completely alone with the

³³ Roland Barthes, 'The new Citroën' *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Paladin: London, 1973), pp. 95-7 (p. 95).

³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 2000, pp. 54f.

deserted car wreck he went in search of the perfect angle, which would allow him to show the event in a different light without actually changing it. He calls these photographs 'Bauchfotos' ('belly shots') – photos that were taken on instinct, photos that came from the inside.³⁵ Like Friedrich's paintings they are 'landscapes of the soul', seen with the spiritual eye before being captured by the mechanical eye of the camera. Odermatt embraces Friedrich's notion that 'a picture must not be invented but felt.'³⁶ Further he insists that his photographs are the product of intuition and highly skilled craft and were never meant to be art. 'Not even in my wildest dreams would I have thought of myself as an artist back then,' he says, 'it was a craft. I simply had the ambition to produce technically demanding work.'³⁷ Rejecting the name of artist, he sees himself more like Lartigue's eye-trap, the man turned camera. 'If it's an artistic intention that makes a work of art, as has so often been claimed,' remarks Barry Schwabsky, 'then one would have to say that Szeemann and those who followed him in appreciating Odermatt's photographs are deluding themselves, or else substituting their own artistic intentions for those lacking in the photographer himself.'³⁸ However, if one locates artistic intention not in artistic autonomy but in formal control, then the photographs' 'air of strangeness, of unfamiliarity is the best evidence of their maker's rigorous intention, whatever he may have called it.'³⁹

Indeed his 'belly shots' fall squarely within Schelling's definition of art as silent poetry that expresses the spirituality of creative nature. 'A good photograph has to be focused, you should be able to see everything you want on it,' says Odermatt.⁴⁰ And what he wanted to see was above all figure and form, symmetry and harmony – something beyond the devastation of the traffic accident. The accident, after all, transforms and this transformation, the birth of something new, is what he was interested in. Hence, his crashed cars look more like bizarre but beautiful sculptures than the sites of death and tragedy. Moreover, displaying Friedrich's striking sense of symmetry and parallelisms the photographs are pervaded by Novalis's divine geometric order. Odermatt clearly had an eye for Leibniz's ideal point 'around which everything can be placed in order.'⁴¹

Underlying each of the photographs is a harmonious and symmetric pattern created by an intricate interplay of lines, triangles and rectangles, which are all related to each other either by parallelism, repetition or reflection. The photographs emanate a serene clarity – everything appears to rest in its designated place, nothing is redundant. *Buochs, 1965*, for example, follows an alternate pattern of black and white bands descending from the upper left corner to the lower right. The white band of water that cuts through the middle is defined by the two parallel lines of the grassy bank on the right side and the dark reflection of the mountains on the left. Two shapes of black interrupt the white

³⁵ Odermatt quoted in Hans-Hermann Kotte, 'Idyll mit Beule: Warum die Kunstszene die Unfallbilder des Schweizer Polizeifotografen Arnold Odermatt entdeckte' *Berliner Zeitung*, 01 August 2001; <http://www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/2001/0801/vermishtes/0007/index.html> (viewed 12 June 2008). Dada photographers, too, spoke of 'bellyshots' to describe instinctual photography. Here, however, the term refers to the camera being held at belly height while taking pictures. Odermatt in contrast never completely relinquished the control of the eye.

³⁶ Friedrich, "Äußerungen", p. 36.

³⁷ 'Nie im Traum habe ich mich damals als Künstler gesehen, ich habe handwerklich gearbeitet. Ich hatte einfach den Ehrgeiz technisch anspruchsvoll zu arbeiten.' Odermatt quoted in Stefan Domke, 'Bei Odermatt wird die Karambolage zur Kunst: Leverkusener Museum widmet Schweizer Polizeifotografen eine Ausstellung', WDR, 21 March 2002; <http://www.wdr.de/themen/kultur/ausstellungen/odermatt/index.jhtml> (viewed 12 June 2008).

³⁸ Barry Schwabsky, 'Arnold Odermatt – Reviews: Chicago.' *Art Forum International*, Vol. 41, no. 5, Jan 2003, p. 142.

³⁹ Schwabsky, 'Arnold Odermatt', 2003, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Odermatt quoted in Kotte, 'Idyll mit Beule,' 2001, n. p.

⁴¹ Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz*, 1968, p. 39.

band: the sinking Beetle and the promontory of land with the willow on top. Beetle and promontory are roughly the same size and can be connected by a line parallel to the two mentioned before. To heighten the impression of symmetry even more, the shape of the floating car at once takes up the round crown of the weeping willow and mirrors the peaked line of the mountains in its own triangular reflection in the water. Thus it appears to be as much part of the natural scenery as the mountains themselves. Through Odermatt's skilful manipulation the accident is domesticated; the chaos it threatened is neutralized as the policeman re-establishes law and order and the catastrophe becomes comprehensible even if not explicable.



Fig. 6

However, there is more to the photographs than their precise mathematical clarity. Despite the clear definitions of line, light and shadow, they retain a certain vagueness and suggestiveness as somewhere on the far horizon their profound depth of field trails off into painterly imprecision. In *Buochs*, 1965 the clarity gives way to the mists rising above the still water, veiling the foothills of the mountain chain. Or, to use another example, in *Beckenried*, 1969 (Fig. 6), it is impossible to focus on the far horizon that stretches away above the suspended wheels of the car. As trees merge with clouds we cannot tell what we are looking at. In other photographs we encounter the emptiness that haunted Friedrich's paintings as the crashed car is pushed to one corner of the picture, either with a vast empty foreground leading towards it as in *Beckenried*, 1969, or with an overpowering empty background as in *Hergiswil*, 1967 (Fig. 7). The tension between the clear definition of figure and form and the uncertainty of the far horizon paired with the spaciousness of the landscape lend Odermatt's pictures their Romantic mood.

Undermining his work as policeman, Odermatt suggests that every accident hides an explanation and a meaning that can only be sensed and that lies beyond the reach of the logics of assumption and deduction of police investigation. The photographs he took for his private collection and which are now treated as art, never set out to investigate any particular accident. And yet they provide evidence. Through his elaborate method of establishing the correct lighting and angle Odermatt creates a sensation of duration that is characteristic of early portrait photography and about which Walter Benjamin wrote:

the viewer feels the irresistible urge to look [...] for the tiny spark of the accidental, the here and now in which reality has permeated the image character, to find the inconspicuous place where even today the

particular circumstances of that long-gone minute so eloquently contain the future that we can discover it in retrospect.⁴²



Fig. 7

Though Odermatt's lyrical photographs document the crash, the evidence they provide fails to clarify the sequence of events that lead to the accident. Rather it places the accident into a wider context. In the embrace with nature the finite – the man-made car – acquires the appearance of the infinite as human strife loses its significance in the face of an almighty nature and the actuality of the accident disappears into a universal and harmonious unity. One is tempted to quote Byron's admiring exclamation in front of the Coliseum in Rome: 'A noble wreck in ruinous perfection.'⁴³

Eternal Transitoriness

Above I argued that it is the inclusion of the accident – denoting both the crashed car and the temporal event – that makes Odermatt's landscapes into 'modern Romantic landscapes' rather than just imitations of Romantic landscape painting. It is the suddenness of the accident as opposed to the slow decay of Friedrich's ruins I am interested in here. What Byron saw in the ruins of Rome and Friedrich felt in the crumbling archways of Eldena was the force of nature and the power of time. They saw the work of centuries of decay and corruption. What we see in Odermatt's photographs, on the other hand, is the work of an instant. The cars have been transformed into ruins within the fraction of a second; and, unlike the

⁴² '...fühlt der Beschauer unwiderstehlich den Zwang, [...] das winzige Fünkchen Zufall, Hier und Jetzt, zu suchen, mit dem die Wirklichkeit den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat, die unscheinbare Stelle zu finden, in welcher, im Sosein jener längstvergangenen Minute das Künftige noch heute und so beredt nistet, daß wir rückblickend, es entdecken können,' Walter Benjamin. "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1968, 2nd ed.) pp. 65-94, (p.71f.).

⁴³ George Gordon Noel Byron (Lord Byron), *Manfred*. Vol. XVIII, Part 6, l.30. The Harvard Classics (P.F. Collier & Son: New York, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/18/6/ (viewed: 12 June 2008), n.p.

ruins of antiquity or medieval times, they will be removed within hours of the accident. Product of our fast-lived culture, the car wreck is ephemeral and will disappear without trace other than Odermatt's photographic plates. Captured by the lens – in another fraction of a second, the time it takes for the shutter to close – the wreck becomes transfixed in a state of eternity. Often the aftermath of an accident is referred to as a time of paralysis when everything is frozen. The click of Odermatt's camera is the only thing that breaks this death-like trance – only to preserve it. The shutter-speed of the camera mimics the suddenness of the crash just as the slow process of observation, sketching and ultimately painting reflects the slow motion of corruption in Friedrich's ruin paintings.

For the viewer, however, both the paintings and the photographs appear eerily timeless. And though we view photographs in a different manner from paintings – after all they appear to show the truthful depiction of a real event – Odermatt's images are such highly formalistic compositions that the reality of the event disappears behind the imagery. The power of the photographs lies in the fact that they manage to suggest the possibility of a return to a Romantic conception of nature and the belief in a universal harmony. By doing so, they make it possible for us to place the individual catastrophe of the car crash in a universal context and to make sense of the arbitrary destruction of the accident.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Arnold Odermatt, *Buochs*, 1965, 1965, gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. (c) Urs Odermatt, Windisch.

Fig. 2. John Constable, *Hadleigh Castle*, 1828–29, oil on canvas, 122 x 164.5 cm. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

Fig. 3. Caspar David Friedrich, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, 1817–18, Oil on canvas, 94,8 x 74,8 cm. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Fig. 4. Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in an Oak Forest*, 1809–10, oil on canvas, 110.4 x 171 cm. Nationalgalerie (Galerie der Romantik), Berlin.

Fig. 5. Arnold Odermatt, *Stansstad*, 1967, 1967, gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. (c) Urs Odermatt, Windisch.

Fig. 6. Arnold Odermatt, *Beckenried*, 1969, 1969, gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. (c) Urs Odermatt, Windisch.

Fig. 7. Arnold Odermatt, *Hergiswil*, 1967, 1967, gelatin silver print, 30 x 30 cm. (c) Urs Odermatt, Windisch.

For more information on Arnold Odermatt please see www.arnold-odermatt.ch