

The Aura of The Book

Larry Towell's *The Mennonites* as a Site of Discourse

© Peter Metelerkamp 2002

The Mennonites is a collection of photographs and words by Larry Towell, published in 2000 by Phaidon. One of the world's most highly decorated photojournalists(appendix), Towell spent the last decade of the 20th century on occasional extended sojourns among the Mennonites in Mexico and Canada, whom he had first encountered as migrant labourers in Ontario where he grew up and now farms himself. Apart from smaller and more esoteric publications this is his third major book, all concentrating on issues of land and those who live on it or are displaced from it.

In this essay I will briefly describe aspects of the book itself before widening the discussion to tentatively suggest possible ways in which this work may be placed on a provisional "map" of cultural production.

In any row of books of photography *The Mennonites* will stand out. Like *Inferno*, Phaidon's huge collection of the work of James Nachtwey, it is black - very black. But where *Inferno* commands attention by size and weight as much as by its intense darkness, *The Mennonites* offers a slightly different signifier of intent - it is sized and packaged like a traditional traveller's ledger or bible. It has black cloth covers and no dustjacket, and is cased in a black cloth-covered slipcase of heavy board. Opening the book one discovers further echoes. The text is printed on tissue-weight paper, and a string bookmark is bound into the cover. This is a book which suggests it will (like the old testament) log an epic journey. To take it from the shelf and to slide it from its case is to enter a ritual of arcane allure.

The physical qualities of the book are important not only from a marketing point of view but in placing it in the cultural terrain (if indeed one may make that distinction). Like a relic from the 19th century it is a solid monochrome material artefact in a colourfully "virtual" world of hyper-saturated indeterminacy. The restrained "quality" appeal of the book acknowledges the charms of nostalgia (with its very evident fundamentalist articulations in the contemporary world) as a form of resistance to the "future shock" of a nakedly cynical world order. And it is isolationist and anti-secularist practice as embodied by the Mennonite sect which forms the subject of Towell's tender but tough enquiry. To put the physical presentation of the book in context, an obvious contrast is offered by Laura Wilson's *Hutterites of Montana* which was also published in 2000. With its embossed silver title text over the serene

and stately image on the dust cover, this is a much less troubled and more conventionally "coffee table" treatment of a superficially similar traditionalist minority.

The Mennonites opens, without credits or publication details, with two pictures. The first is of three youths looking at the camera, defiantly self-conscious in their teenage manhood, blurred by differential focus before a shabby wall where the focus rests behind them on a crack, a slip of curtain and a patterned paper. The boy in the centre, his face lit from the side, holds a cigarette whose smoke curls up over his shadowed eye. This is an image which intensely and immediately proclaims its ambiguity, and in which the forces of dark and light are both literal and metaphoric. It offers both intense and direct engagement with a raw physical masculinity, but also a the light and tender presence of the grinning boys on the flanks, suggesting how unstable and tentative is the sense of self to which are being given access. In its blurring and reliance on what the viewer will infer, and the immediate confrontation with the camera, it announces that we cannot enter this book without being implicated in the process of looking.

The second picture is of a baby asleep on a folded jacket on the back of a trailer among bowls of cucumbers. Into the bottom of the frame a moving white-gloved hand intrudes alongside a wheel and above a pattern of leaves. On the edge of frame ragged shapes may be torn clothes. The subject matter has direct echoes in Dutch Genre painting of the 17th century and fascination with the weight and density of the material world. But the white gloved hand appearing slightly blurred by movement in the bottom right of the frame confirms that this is definitely a photograph - a space/time chop with the attendant reminder of its arbitrary nature.

As a "prologue" the images proclaim the subject-matter to follow - a world of allusive and ambiguous relationships, grounded in nature and rich in archetypal resonance, but never stable or simply quaint.

On the "title" page opposite the second picture ten-point Times text proclaims its puritan elevation of the humble by simply stating:

"The Mennonites
A biographical sketch

Larry Towell"

This is followed on the next page by a small statement emphasising the personal, fragmented, and provisional nature of the work, and the importance of memory. And indeed in its organisation the entire book has this quality of a workbook or journal. The slipcase which covered the pioneer bible or logbook was no affectation but a protection against the bumps and scuffs of the trail. With a sleight of hand which some may find disingenuous, *The Mennonites* proclaims its "humble" character.

Progressing, one finds both subject matter and treatment which have clear antecedents. This is another book of words and pictures, concentrating on the domestic and familiar lives of a picturesque marginal people - an entrant onto the

hallowed but recently much challenged ground of concerned documentary - of which *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* is perhaps the most famous and clear antecedent.

In terms of both process and outcome Towell's practice is rooted in participant photojournalism (I use this term to emphasise its ideological and methodological kinship with the participant observation strategies of anthropology) which he has undertaken with great success as a member of Magnum. But there is no doubt that the territory of *The Mennonites* is one seen and understood with very unusual breadth and depth. The remarkable intimacy of some of the images could not have been achieved except as the outcome of long and careful courtship. This is attested in text rich in lambent insights and in which Towell alludes to conversations which show his intimate and intense relationships with his subjects.

The photographs are exquisitely printed with at times astonishing modulations of tone in which the stygian interiors of hovels and the sun-blasted yards glimpsed through tired doorways are miraculously registered within the same frame and zonal range. (I guess at N-4 development in some cases.) This (not to mention the formal qualities of which more later) immediately proclaims them as the work of a supreme craftsman. The layout ranges from images printed full-bleed in dual-page spread across the gutter, to those in portrait format printed either opposite a blank page, or opposing one another, to (fewer) landscape format images printed on a single page with considerable white space. Clearly there has been attention to the rhythms of the book as a harmonic whole.

The text consists of eight short sections. It is printed on bible-weight paper and there is no evident continuity between each section and its neighbours. Although each section addresses a single settlement or "colony" of Mennonites, there is also no single mode of discussion, but a wide variety of techniques and tones. Each acts as a "provocation" - there is no strict correspondence between text and image and the text is itself layered. There are maps and few bare statistics but the writing veers from the description of a shared journey to Mexico with an indigent family, to a transcript of a reminiscence of a migration to Canada, to descriptions of people and relations within the community. A recurring theme is the introduction of electricity which is the subject of resistance by the church leaders who (almost certainly correctly) see it as a road to the dilution of their influence.

The writing is no doubt rooted in Towell's practice as a poet. If Riis wrote without any sense of irony and Agee wallowed in a rushing threnody of agonised self-reflection, Towell's writing is spare and drawn - pregnant with suggestion but richly self-aware. It is writing of the "third generation" of documentary, with the New Journalism behind it. Changing tone and strategy from section to section, Towell offers us both the "straightest" of hard-edged reportage and the most trenchant suggestiveness. His is the world of Magic Realism, in which dream and matter are one, and meanings dissolve into each other: "Now, for the first time, milk is worth less than petrol. Incidental income is earned by farming out the boys to neighbours at \$6 to \$8 per day. Proceeds pass through a revolving door where you see only your reflection dimly. Nothing beyond." Behind this lies the sensibility of surrealism - the utterly ordinary and mundane given gnomic resonance by a small shift of view. This is the writing of someone contemptuous of the dominant ideologies of advancement

and prosperity and disposed to see life and people in terms closer to Kafka and Beckett than Roy Stryker or Paul Taylor.

The text also acknowledges the self-destructive culture of the subjects and the interaction of Towell himself (with vague hints at his erotic feelings for some of the girls). So in combination with the images, it can be said to cut strongly against any univocal social-realist reading, and embrace a thoroughly "postmodern" sense of the documentary process as always partial and at base libidinal. This acknowledges the multivalent and inherently intentional nature of representations of "reality". More than this, though, the sense of something "between" text and images and as a hidden presence within the images themselves, hints at understandings and meanings beyond that which can be spoken or figured. This may be a key characteristic, and is something I will discuss in looking at the pictures.

In order to briefly consider some of the images, I will begin with those in the introductory section immediately following the title pages and the brief history, maps and statistics which comprise the first block of text. The first image is of a woman serving a man at table. In lighting as much as subject it has a "Vermeer" quality as it shows us a vision of female domesticity held in stasis and suspension - only in this case the shadowy but challenging male presence directly behind the suspended cutlery disables the potentially possessive-erotic gaze of the viewer, and, as with many other images, invites questions about patriarchal power. The next image is a formal portrait of the family round the table. In its formality as a group it has direct echoes of a Last Supper or one of the Dutch "guild" groups, with its plane broken by the uneven gazes of the children, alternately bored, direct, and curious, and the awkwardness and stolidity of the dark adult figures placed at odd intervals. But the reflections in the wide acreage of tabletop suggest subaqueous or subliminal subjectivities, beyond reach of the camera's gaze. The following image is a landscape with a difference - another example of "doubling" in which the billowing unfocused counterpane (the "land of counterpane" was a children's rhyme I once knew which dealt with fantasy and imagination) acts as both base and screen to the fringe of far hills and the two ragged shacks which frame the view. The next image of three men (in mourning?) standing covering their faces in a ragged wilderness alongside an empty buggy (in which a coil of rope lies like the memory of a crime) drawn by a white horse, is pure enigma, echoing Robert Frank (the car-crash mourners in *The Americans*) in creating a brooding unease. These qualities are continued. Of several images of migration and travel, the buggy and cart suggests worlds sliding past each other - the sense of transience caught by the vacant spaces of the frame. Like the image of the boy gazing in the cracked mirror it makes use of tonal difference - the white sheen of the trailer against the intense mobile scribble of the horses, and the shining framed face against the flush of water and the dark ploughland. The sequence concludes with an apparently serene image - the remains of a simple meal in a room into which light pours in bands; but again there is a sense of absence, of something elusive and of lives lived beyond the frame. This is a photograph of what is no longer there.

So already in the first sequence ideas are set out and expectations raised. But if we are expecting a book in which stylistic trickery will dominate, there is plenty of evidential "subject matter" to follow. This is in keeping with a text dense in details of the prices

of produce and labour. However this is never reducible to a single narrative point of view.

The home figures largely: the bleak sordid habitations of those indifferent to daintiness, serve as theatre for male/female interactions pregnant with unspoken tension and enigmatic potential. The implication of violent patriarchal dominance hangs heavy. In other images the shabby mud offers a space both protective and incarcerating, through whose crooked portals a world beyond may be glimpsed. (But in contrast to the transcendental promise of Velazquez what is glimpsed beyond the kitchen table is not the messiah but - to borrow from W.B. Yeats - "some rough beast which slouches towards Bethlehem to be born").

This is a world in which conscious and unconscious, human and animal, are in constant and shifting relationship, and it is depicted in "deep space" photography of a surpassing order. In cinema, deep space photography, enabled by the development of lenses and film stocks in the 1940's, and characterised by detailed mis-en-scene and deep focus, affords what Krackauer called "the redemption of reality"; it embraces ambiguity and complexity within the single frame, inviting and permitting a contemplative and "open" reading. The pioneer and master in cinema was Greg Toland who shot Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*. For me, this film derived in turn from the iconography of Rothstein, Evans, Lange and others of the FSA, stands as a persistent echo behind *The Mennonites*.

Relations between men and women figure prominently: in one image the intense dreamy eroticism of boy and girl is both heightened and challenged by the way the boy turns (in guilty or defiant complicity?) in intimate proximity toward the camera and the girl is seen in self-absorbed profile, banded by a slanting shaft of light. The "passionate shepherd" image of the couple clasping in front of the wagonload of corn might have come direct from an ancient tradition of pastoral but the "innocent and real" life opposed to the compromises of civilisation is all too evidently full of sharp thorny protrusions and a rocky path leading to nowhere. The flaxen headed girls in the cornfield is another example of intensely lyrical pastoral, but the image is equally one of splitting - with the eye led up from the central cluster of heads into the blank unstable space above, in which cornstalks prick at nothingness. It introduces a sequence dealing with child labour.

Several images play with the abstractions and geometric formalism made familiar by modernist practice, allied with a consummate mastery of the decisive moment. A key picture is surely that of the slaughtered pig. This is as pure an example of the surrealist sensibility of high modernism as any in photography. It is trifurcated in subject and in spatial organisation, with no clear priority of interest or visual "centre". (The hand entering the shadow on the left is the sort of thing W.E. Smith had to introduce in the darkroom in his superimposition on the picture of Schweitzer to create the sense of layering which this image encompasses). It speaks of a "reality" in which clashing and discontinuous subjectivities and the forces of life and death, nurture and destruction, shadowy dream and blazing light, are brought into arrangement only by the mysterious and seemingly effortless "automatic writing" of the camera.

Another perhaps even more astonishing example of this formal bravura is the image in which Towell focuses simultaneously on the shiftless but grave shadowed figure of a man with a Fanta bottle sitting in a buggy, his eyes closed as if in shame or prayer, and the dark stetson-hatted profile reflected in the mirror of his car, while in the space provided at the interlinkage of the precise and elegant geometric forms of the buggy, transom, horse, and gawky pole behind, the ghostly figure of a girl, seriously enquiring into the strange matter of representation, blooms. Her blown hair trails into the tail of the horse, and in the one remaining space of the frame greedy poultry waddle their indifferent way across the dusty yard under a pale striated sky.

Identity, and the fractured questions it poses, is the formal as well as thematic subject of many pictures. I have mentioned the image of the boy with the cracked mirror in the opening sequence. The device of the mirror is in fact quite prominent. So the young men presumably pursuing the group of girls (the image is part of a series in which courtship is a dominant theme) are caught in the mirror of the pickup truck as if in a "different space" (in the Californian sense) - in a cultural zone only circumstantially related to that of the fleeing objects of their vengery.

Towards the end of the book there are several images of child labour: shot from a low angle they emphasise the intense and almost dominant presence of the crops. Among huge leaves the children move with fierce poetic intensity. In mood and tonal quality - the dusky chiaroscuro and overwhelming sense of the land - these images have antecedents in Millet. But the tone is not merely elegaic; the raw energy conveyed not only by viewpoint but by movement against the edges of the frame or the intrusion of a bird (Keats' "light winged Dryad"), suggests unspoken and primal forces.

Other stylistic and thematic precedents may be found. In the way in which limbs appear to touch as they are flattened across the camera plane, and in the extraordinary poise of their placement in frames at once open and stripped of redundancy, the pictures of young people goofing around in the final section of the book are reminiscent of Helen Levitt and are undoubtedly suggestive of similar themes of inchoate (erotic/thanatic) forces bound by synchronicity into unconscious patterning.

The final photograph is a classic "vanitas" image. (Vanitas is of course the theme of Ecclesiastes - a platonic cry against the illusory nature of the material world.) Next to the long receding side of an entirely contemporary and unglamorous trailer a man with the iconic appearance of the American pioneer of the sort immortalised by Henry Fonda, gazes at his reflection in an ornate mirror which might have mysteriously appeared from a Bourbon court. Behind him in lines which lead like those of the trailer-side towards a vanishing point above his head, the limitless stubble of the prairie glowers in the dusk. Worlds clash and are joined to an unseen destiny.

I hope I have hinted at the density and complexity of Towell's pictures, but also their consistent ability to hint at meanings beyond the surface. This is in keeping with the basic tenor of the book - its address to a world of loss, exile, and existential bewilderment.

It might seem cynical to identify the roots of some of the imagery - as if the use of established iconographic language makes the work "unoriginal" or somehow

discredited. But I would suggest this is very far from the case. In fact to begin to describe the images in words is to encounter their complexity and profundity. These are pictures which speak about the contemporary and the specific with the resources of a rich visual tradition. As will I hope be seen from this brief and necessarily partial list, Towells' subjects and tropes are often those of European painting and its descendants, and it is in general a richly "painterly" quality which gives the work its weight and appeal. But while subject-matter and style may be rooted in classicism and a sense of the traditions of aesthetic harmony, there is a consistent sense of open space, wide angles, and fractured planes which problematise the matter of seeing and introduce an element of self-reflexivity. Towell's pictures of Palestine and El Salvador acknowledge the position of the photographer in similar ways to those of Gilles Peress, and those in *The Mennonites* consistently interrupt any sense that theirs is a world without irony or doubt.

In this respect, the use of mirrors in many images is worth discussing in more detail. As signifier not only of vanity but of self-reflection, alienated selfhood and the uncertain nature of "truth" the mirror became prominent in art of the early bourgeois era of the 17th century. This was of course a time of the birth of the middle class proper (as opposed to the merchant princes who preceded them) and of enormous and sudden social mobility alongside productive multiplication. (It was also, of course, the era of the adoption of the preaching of Menno Simons as one of a range of puritan voices crying against the new materialism). In the case of Towell's Mennonites centuries later, the images of reflection are still used to suggest questions about identity. But this time the search for "meaning" takes place in a world which is not so much carrying forward as rushing past, its subjects. The latter-day inheritors of Simons' renunciatory dogma find their sense of reality, it seems, cast into doubt not (like the materialist middle class of the genre-painting period) by their vertiginous assumption of new modes and roles, but by their entrapment in those which have lost their currency.

If early Baroque century painting (both the "world-within a world" and the mirror device are famously employed by Velazquez, for example) is one clear root for Towell's iconography then it might not be too far-fetched to suggest that the Romantic Sublime accounts for key aspects of his sensibility. His pictures, just as much as those of Friedrich or Fueseli, are "frightful", offering to the (sub)urban reader a glimpse at a world of primal forces beneath and beyond ordinary speech. It is the sense of the evanescent and "vanishing" nature of meaning (to which I have alluded in describing some of Towell's compositions) which is perhaps central to this sense of the "inexpressible". In fact the word inspired is not inappropriate here, for what is essential to the sense of the sublime is the ancient idea of spirit or breath. Echoing Van Gogh, the photograph of birds flocking is both an image of migration (as is the swift in 22) and a pure metaphor for what George Steiner calls "presence"; a visual correspondent to the music of Olivier Messiaen. Several other pictures show the force and operation of wind (Shelley's "destroyer and preserver") and the place of humans and creatures is invariably tenuous and often precarious, either in terms of the frame or in actual physical balance. suggestion is that the world is darker, grander, more dense in spirit, than our faculties can encompass. This is Longinus's definition of the Sublime. In the Romantic era the focus shifted to the agonised experience of the entrapped subject, consigned to endless pursuit of the ineffable (Keats' *Ode to a*

Nightingale or Schiller's sense of the free spirit in the enclosing body). As symbols perhaps of a human freedom chained but still free, the child labourers of Towell's pictures are essentially Promethean figures; conforming to the romantic experience of the Sublime as a state of longing-in-entrapment.

Seen thus, under the onslaught of layered uncertainty and overwhelming primal force pictured by Towell, the quaint traditional dress of the Mennonites comes to stand not for some sure bulwark against the vertigo of change but itself a noble/pathetic (romantic-heroic) "vanity" incapable of sustaining the sense of dignity at which it aims. The mirrors hold illusory figures destined for ultimate dissolution.

So is *The Mennonites* merely another foray into "victim photography"? I trust I have shown that its complexity, sympathy, and clear sense of the linkages between the world it depicts and Towell's own, absolve it from possible charges of condescension or simple sensationalist exploitation.

But another way of addressing the cultural and political dimensions of the work is to consider it within the world in which it is produced and received. After all, the "significance" of nuances of style and process must be judged in terms of how these may influence potential viewers and readers. So in considering cultural artefacts I think it is important not only to look at their internal "content" but also to consider their context: the processes by which they come to our view, and their likely audience.

Without developing a discussion worthy of a very substantial treatment in itself, one may state the obvious in recognising that the works which come before us in the commercial and "public" arena are only a small selection from the possible. Those which appear are valorised by a consensual process in which the education system, curators (who are themselves products of that system), patrons (Charles Saatchi in our national milieu), critics, and publishers act as a circle of influence to make reputations and to teach us how to see and what to "appreciate". Gramsci's seminal writings on the role of intellectuals and the construction of hegemony are of course pertinent here.

In order to address this aspect of the book as a publishing venture I spent some hours with Amanda Renshaw, who heads the publishing team at Phaidon in London. Phaidon's development as a contemporary publisher of photography dates from their "re-launch" after the company was bought from the Receivers by its current owner Richard Schlagman in 1990. In developing its photography slate it has used a package of publications aimed at larger and smaller markets. So the commemorative *Century*, astutely packaged and marketed as a blockbuster, has sold 500,000 copies. Steve McCurry who as Renshaw astutely observes "takes pictures many amateur photographers would like to take, but does it better", has sold some 15000, but the *Mennonites*, which she describes as aimed at those with an interest in "serious photography", is expected to sell no more than about 4000 copies, and to merely recover its costs. The enterprise is inherently speculative - the large retrospectives by George Rodger and Ian Berry have not been profitable, despite the fame of the former and topical weight of the latter. An insight into the global market is provided by *Magnum Degrees*. Despite its association with a very prominent and widely attended 50th birthday exhibition which toured major metropolitan galleries, this has sold only

around 15000 copies. Most of those have been in France and UK, and fewer than 2000 in USA. This might serve as a chastening brake on one's sense that New York is the immense and vital centre of the photographic world, and is also attributable, according to Renshaw, to Magnum's notoriously fractious and inefficient New York bureau who have failed to establish Magnum as brand in the US, in contrast to France where it retains enormous prestige.

To put these sales in context, 12 million people watch *Coronation Street*, and a million watch a "successful" TV documentary or any one of the "reality" shows saturating British "factual" television. If 100,000 watch a serious TV documentary in Britain it will be deemed to have "failed". By these standards *The Mennonites* with putative sales of 4000, does not even register on the cultural map

So book publishing itself must be seen as a nest of niches within a greater complex of cultural nodes, with art publishing no more than a small cell. Unsurprisingly, attempts to make Phaidon more profitable under its previous corporate owners failed dismally and it was only the personal chutzpah and initiative of Schlagman and his team which re-established it as a viable entity. As Amanda Renshaw observes, "You don't do this unless you love it." Though photography is only one strand of Phaidon's operation, as a photographic publisher it is comparable in size and ambition to Scalo and Aperture, and much larger than Hatje Cantz which re-packages exhibition catalogues, or Dewi Lewis who is essentially a one-person operation. So the world of photography publishing as a whole is a small one and the photography book a tiny niche product.

Nevertheless, Phaidon receive "thousands" of proposals for books from those who wish to be published. In general, however, only those of established reputation are worth the risk. This is of course where reputation and consensus come to bear. The book both marks and enlarges a reputation which already exists via exhibition, prizes and (for photojournalism) the buzz in the cafe's at Arles and Perpignan. As a commercial enterprise (as opposed to a public gallery or private patron) Phaidon does not think of itself as a "maker" of cultural reputation, but sees itself as covering a number of bases. These include the "contemporary history" remit of the softback Contemporary Artists series, the more speculative and occasional works such as *Century*, and the back-catalogue of which Gombrich is the mainstay and indeed the "banker" of the company.

To publish Towell, as with any work, took at least a year from the signing of the contract to the appearance of the book on the shelves, with perhaps six months for the Commissioning Editor to derive the proposal leading up to that. As with most Phaidon publications, the initial submission from Towell was a box of proof prints and some text on A4. This was given to the designer to develop as a book concept and the "bible" device was the designer's. At least half the budget is spent on development, and the rest divided between manufacture and overheads. The author gets a maximum of 10% of the wholesale price, which is itself 50% of the cover price. This means that after ten years work and expense Towell may gross in the region of £6000 for his masterpiece. But it also means that with no more than about £60,000 one may both reach an audience of devotees, and recover one's costs.....

Although photography is likely to remain a fairly small niche at Phaidon in a slate which is actively embracing architecture, design and the history of style, there is clearly great pleasure and pride in publishing work like Larry Towell's. My final image from my visit is of Amanda Renshaw's hand resting gently on the cover of *The Mennonites* in a protective gesture.

But what of other forms of distribution or, to use the jargon of this essay, "sites of discourse"? Only 3% of people who go to exhibitions buy the catalogue. With this informing my curiosity I visited the exhibition of pictures from *The Mennonites* which happens to be on at Canada House after a spell at the Scottish National Gallery. I found this interesting and contradictory as a site. In the first place, the exhibition is rather uninvitingly advertised by two small billboards hanging crookedly from slightly rusted railings on the front colonnade of the building - hardly a challenge to the sleek invitations of the Sainsbury Wing directly opposite, with its life-size model of a cow painted all over in a Dutch landscape. Statist barriers to entry - a thorough untipping of one's bag at the command of the concierge, followed by passage through an x-ray machine - put an effective throttle on casual browsers. The pictures themselves are displayed in what is in effect a large vestibule to the offices of the high commission - with the in/out doors on one wall and a corridor leading to ominous governmental spaces ahead. With perfunctory down-lighters, a small notice describing the Mennonites (and avoiding the details of migrant labour) and another with a biography of Larry Towell, there is a clear sense that one is in the presence of not so much a national treasure as a public convenience.

The co-ordinates in which this locates are of course other exhibitions on in London at the time. In photography, most immediate among them is the display of Mario Testino celebrity portraits viewable on payment of a £6 admission in the (supposedly public) National Portrait Gallery by those (and there appear to have been tens of thousands) addicted to the ideological fantasies of our culture.

In contrast, I was alone on the embossed linoleum throughout my 20 minutes with the Mennonites, apart from a fellow passing through who remarked that the pictures reminded him of his childhood in Saskatchewan in the 1930's. Observing his bourgeois confidence I responded that this could surely not be so and in the ensuing conversation I discovered that he had spent his career as an Assistant Director of feature films. However I realised that despite what one might presume to have been a background of relatively sophisticated visual awareness he was responding not to the specific content or visual qualities of the pictures but merely to a superficial sense of pre-mechanised rural life. (I, on the other hand, was intrigued by the quality of the prints which, as proved by the tape-measure readily plucked by my companion from his briefcase, were in many cases printed at 20"x30" while retaining a sharp smoothness I can only attribute to a very deft hand with either dilute Rodinal or perhaps a d23 derivative).

What struck me about the exhibition was not merely the slightly shabby institutional nature of the display, which is a classic "white cube" approach with museum-mounting in the "MOMA" square-section hardwood frame. More notably, some of the "tough" photographs from the book are absent - that is to say those which feature the intrusive and fracturing presence of the modern, and the ironic and unstable clash of

worlds. Perhaps most evident among these omissions is the final image in the book. In contrast, the family portrait which most obviously echoes Rothstein, the Dust Bowl and stoic pioneer resistance(27) , is given centre placement on the wall between the two entrance doors and opposite the corridor which leads back into the High Commission,. So in comparison to the book (and of course the absence of text is an important factor) the exhibition gives a much safer and more traditional view of a "vanishing culture" in a "poor but honest" vein of sentimental romanticism.

But what is missing is not only the evidence of dysfunction or contradiction which is so much part of the book, but the impact of the book as artefact itself. I feel that there is something so dark and intense and as it were brooding about the presence of the book in one's hands, that when one pages through the text (which cannot be done without delicacy and care) to address the stark staring quality of the pictures (which are identified only loosely by place and date in a sequence of thumbnails at the end) one feels oneself in the presence of some singular piece of evidence - the "true account" to which I alluded in my introductory description; a testament of passionate engagement rather than merely a collection of beautiful pictures.

This raises the wider question of the aura of the book. I use this term knowingly to echo Walter Benjamin. His analysis ascribes the mystique of art to its "aura" as a unique embodiment of privileged and perhaps transcendental insight , and suggests that this is what is challenged by the age of mechanical reproduction in which the artefact loses any distinctive individuality. The book is of course the paradoxical form here - for though as a material object it is utterly of the mechanical age (and indeed a marker of its beginning) as the repository of the thoughts of an individual it is also the shrine of the hallowed presence of the individual (bourgeois) subject. The book is the primary expressive form of the culture of bourgeois individualism and the claim for authenticity which is thence vested in the individual sensibility. (The by-lines in any newspaper will confirm the disproportionate prestige accorded to writer and mere photographer.) And "The Book" (the vernacular bible) is of course the ur-text of the Protestant revolution, of mass literacy, of the family as site of worship, of the validation of personal memory as the underwriting site of identity, and of personal conscience as the primary site of "truth". It is this culture which has of course come under such intense challenge in the "postmodern" age - in which the "death of the author" and the transmutation of the citizen into consumerist "type" have coincided. So to make and make with evident care a fine and careful book in contemporary culture is perhaps also to reassert individual sensibility as a site of an aesthetic capable of plenitude.

I have suggested that Towell's pictures partake of the romantic sublime as a zone of truth - a counterpoint to banal venality and the cynical. There are interesting questions here concerning religion and nostalgia as forms of resistance in the contemporary world, and the secularised spirituality of romanticism as a force for resistance. It is perhaps no coincidence that Towell's earlier books are concerned with the land and with irredentist struggles to reclaim what is being lost in the face of technocratic and invasive imperialism.

However, one must acknowledge that the appreciation of "serious photography" is essentially confined to a world of the middle-class connoisseur. Any political impact

to which it might once have aspired has been drowned by the strident banalities of the TV news. So if one must "evaluate" photographic publications, what are the criteria to be employed? Mastery of the discourse might certainly be one - Towell's huge prestige as a "photographer's photographer" is partly because anyone who has tried to take the sort of pictures which to him seem so natural, will know how difficult they are. His challenges are of a degree beyond those of the studio - involving the instantaneous organisation of a frame so as to preserve a precise sense of poised flux, the breathing world held but never strangled. In this he is indeed (as the dustjacket to *Then, Palestine* rather vulgarly proclaims) an heir to Cartier-Bresson. And what is required in this practice is not merely technique but a certain refinement of sensibility: a vision which is subtle, penetrating, complex, sophisticated, and all the while humane. In photographic terms this is classicism; and its prestige and attraction might be analogous to a new rendition of Mozart rather than a piece of pop music.

So who are the 4000 who will buy *The Mennonites*? Towell's book is both a celebration of a certain kind of photography and of what that photography stands for. This is a tradition which sees the full-frame 35mm snapshot as a site of fleeting insights and ironic truths. In that respect Towell may come at the contemporary world on a train from Emerson via Zen, in which the idea of perfection maintains its currency by a paradoxical appeal to the always vanishing. It is a measure of the greatness of his work that it does so without ever becoming naive or simplistic. Radiant, dark, quiet, dignified, complex, tender, mirrored, "polysemic", exquisitely poised, seen, acknowledged, known.... a meeting of many eyes and minds and hearts. If the Mennonites themselves stand against the tide of the contemporary, perhaps we do too - our nostalgia not for nostrums bound in vellum, but for a plenitude figured in the elusive conjunctions of which the camera is capable.

Bibliography

Frank, Robert *The Americans* 1993 (new edition) Manchester, Cornerhouse

Nachtwey, James *Inferno* 1999 London, Phaidon

Steiner, George *Real Presences* 1989, London, Faber

Towell, Larry *El Salvador*, 1997, New York, Norton
Then, Palestine, 1998, New York, Aperture
The Mennonites, 2000, London, Phaidon

Wilson, Laura *Hutterites of Montana*, 2000, New Haven, Yale UP

References

I have assumed acquaintance with several historic examples (e.g. Keats and Shelley) which I consider to be in the common domain and for which I do not have specific references.

Among pictures I had in mind were:

Friedrich	<i>Landscape in the Silesian Mountains</i> Munich
Fueseli	<i>Obsession</i>
Millet	<i>The Gleaners</i> Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Velazquez	<i>Kitchen Scene in the House of Martha and Mary</i> National Gallery London
	<i>Rokeby Venus</i> National Gallery, London
	<i>Las Meninas</i> Prado, Madrid
Vermeer	<i>Kitchen Maid</i> Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

.