

## The Thickness of Memory

It is no accident that landscape as an idea, a feeling, came into being at the same moment as geometrical perspective. Many authors have pointed that out and I only want to mention it in passing. Establishing a space as landscape means stopping, stepping back, looking in a particular way; *giving oneself* time.

There is nothing of that kind, theoretically, in the spaces Maria Bleda and José Maria Rosa usually photograph (partly to follow the fashion for initials and partly to space myself work on the keyboard, I shall refer to them as B+R, in a kind of authorial algorithm). What is recorded in their images are rather spaces for use, characterised by a function rather than an aesthetic quality (assuming that such a quality is not another function of the territory). Listing them in chronological order, the first function was competitive (in the sporting sense of the word); the second was still competitive (but in politics and war); and, lastly it has become, let us say, residential.

In that change in function lies one of the characteristics of B+R's work. Because the fact of photographing the spaces, of establishing them as landscape through the gaze, first, and the camera, second, means radically transforming their condition, their use. Let us look first at the football fields. Of course, these are not those "luxury" grounds, carpeted with springy turf and surrounded by terraces for thousands of spectators; rather they are fringe spaces which, for want of a better use, have been set aside as recreational areas for kids. And for that there is no need for springy turf or straight lines painted white. It is enough to mark their purpose. To make it possible. And that can be done with a wood or metal frame placed at each end. Those two totems are what really establish the space as a "football field". All the rest is luxury, accessory. You only need to watch a game between kids from any neighbourhood (provided the neighbourhood is "on the edge" because there is no free space in the more central ones). Here there are no sidelines or corners for kicking the ball into play. The point is to cover the space between the two goalposts, to *practise* it, while observing some of the other rules of the game (not touching the ball with your hand and not much else), and achieving the aim of football as a sport: getting the ball into the opponents' goal.

Like any good conceptual work, B+R's photos reduce all those regulations for using the space to a single gaze. The frame of the image, the emptiness of the space, occupied only by the *totem* of the goalposts, contains everything I have mentioned. The space of the image that opens up from the goal contains all the football matches which have been played on the ground evening after evening. And through that idea, and the discovery that the use is, in most cases, a thing of the past, as shown by the weeds invading the ground, the notion of time past slips in. The goal is not only a totem. It is also a ruin, though a modern one.

In the Romantic sensibility the ruin expresses both a yearning for time past and man's desire to be reunited with Nature. Betrayals of the subconscious. In spite of the long process of deromanticisation of taste, of strong conceptual faith, the old feelings, aesthetic or poetic, slip back in through the cracks. In the end melancholy is a feeling of the human soul. As the scorpion says to the frog as it drives

home its sting, knowing that they will both drown: I'm sorry, that's my nature. And in man's nature the same eternal questions always remain, and art must try to find answers.

The humble football fields, as they gradually fade away, dissolving into nature as the weeds spread, evoke times that may have been better, we shall never know, but which provide us with the feeling of safety the familiar gives us. A world marked out, enclosed, where we know our function. And where, once we have accomplished it, we start over.

The different images in the series show that idea at different stages. From the spaces that still have a clear use and function, even with the lines recently painted, to the ones that are just a memory in the shape of a rusted metal post. They are all summed up in that goal abandoned on the beach, a true space on the edge, where everything is quickly wiped out and one order (of the sand, the legendary territory of writing) is replaced twice a day by another (of the waves). The beach is also the highest expression of the fleeting nature of human life and the feeling of the eternal recurrence.

As we can see, the establishment of the point of view transforms the organisation of the ground, which goes from being a space determined by a function, making the game and, therefore, the meeting and practice of a social setting, possible to being a repository of memory and an artefact of melancholy.

### **Caesar, cum bello gallico**

The texts we used for Latin translation exercises in our childhood usually began with those words. They were short extracts from Julius Caesar's account of his campaign in Gaul. Then our heads, scarcely softened by the hardness of Latin, filled with a hotchpotch of history lessons and Sunday afternoons at the school cinema, with those swords and sandals movies starring Victor Mature flexing his muscles. Then, on that blurred image another was superimposed, ironic and scathing; it showed an arrogant Caesar eternally defeated by the unconquerable Gauls. And the glorious Gallic campaign was reduced to a demystifying vision. Just one name, Alesia, was unmentionable for *Astérix*' friends; but we found that out later.

Place names, sometimes connected with dates or people, gradually piled up in our young heads, and they have never quite lost a certain aura of mystery, or doubt. The one I felt closest was Navas de Tolosa, perhaps because it was the easiest one to visualise, gazing at the Romantic idealisation some 20th century painter with more zeal than facts and figures had made of that battle fought in 1212. Or because in the abbey of Roncesvalles there is a statue whose dimensions are said to correspond to the skeleton found in the tomb of Sancho the Strong, that brute, King of Navarre at that time who, legend has it, flung himself at the Moorish army, sword in hand, breaking the chains that prevented them from flexing. But there are more names, such as Bailén which, depending on the country where you read about it, becomes a victory for General Castaños; for Dupont, according to Napoleon's mausoleum in Paris; or for Wellington, who also notched it up on his tomb in Westminster Abbey.

As we can see, versions of the same historical event can be disparate and even contradictory. Bailén, Almansa and other names that populated the books we trawled through as children are no more than mentions of events of which we were told a tale that can only be partial. It proves, as

Danto points out, the falsity of Peirce's claim that the past is what is absolutely determined, fixed and dead, as opposed to the future, which is alive, malleable and still to be decided<sup>1</sup>. There is no single History nor, although we might conceive of one theoretically, any *ideal story*, which would give a full account of the whole event. Unless we hope to ape Borges' fable about the king who commissioned his cartographers to make a complete map of his realm. The result was one that overlaid the whole territory and so, since it was useless from a practical point of view, it was eventually abandoned.

The historical story is not exhaustive and is provisional by nature and it obtains a function precisely by not being completed. The story an eyewitness can tell can never be the "final" historical story, because there are factors indispensable to an understanding of it which can only be discovered with the passage of time. And because any historical story in turn is historically situated and determined; what is amazing for a chronicler of our times, let us say a new surgical technique, can be an outdated savagery for the person who rereads the chronicle a few years later.

Who won at Bailén: Castaños, Wellington or Dupont? The stories that make up the *official* histories of the countries of each general involved reach different conclusions, precisely because the facts taken into account for the construction of the story are different. Perhaps things were not quite so clear as our history books tell us and even if Castaños won, he would have had some difficulty but for the "hand" the British lent him. Could an eyewitness tell us a story sufficiently precise and adapted to the facts to enable us to reach a clear, definitive answer? Hardly. Amongst other things because the criteria with which we assess military events have changed a good deal since then, which rules out a correct interpretation of the events by a witness who saw everything (but not, for example, the consequences of the French defeat, since they belong to "his" future) and because of the different meaning of words such as bravery, honour and even strategy.

The stories of our origins consist of legends with a historical basis. From the standpoint of the discipline since the mid 19th century, the historian's task has been "investigating the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events<sup>2</sup>." Although for Hayden White that traditional conception of history leads to an ambiguity, in which narrative discourse is at once a form of narration and the object of the narration<sup>3</sup>. That process leads to a kind of story that usually takes the form of metonymy. What is interpreted in documents are symptoms, signs, marks of what happened.

That perspective brings out the unsuitability of the documentary instrument chosen by B+R in their inquiry into the names that make up the legends of our history (however tricky the expression may be these days). An unsuitability that is, of course, a conscious aim. No sign, no mark. At most the ruins of Calatañazor castle, far later than events which we cannot even date accurately. However, the *weight of history* fulfils its function; if not, remember the words of Miguel de Unamuno:

"The Reconquest! Our Cids had things that made the stones speak! And how the sacred stones of those moorlands speak to us!<sup>4</sup>"

But stones do not speak, except to archaeologists, who are the only ones capable of embarking on a complex conversation based on inference with them. On the contrary: the document the observer finds contains a discourse of the kind "this is where, in the year... the battle of... took place...". And it is from that unsuitability, from the total disconnection between what is evoked in the text and what is conjured up in the image, that the true discourse of the series emerges. From the deconstruction (in the ideological sense of the word) of our conception of landscape. A text as close as this one by Llamazares reminds us to what extent Romantic ideology is determined by the way we look around us:

"Landscape is memory. Beyond its boundaries, landscape sustains the traces of the past, rebuilds memories, projects onto the eye the shadows of another time that only exists now as a reflection of itself in the traveller's memory.<sup>5</sup>"

The traces of the past? What traces? Nothing remains on the ground of the cries of the combatants; indeed, we do not even know whether they really fought there. The marks of their advances or retreats, their very graves, disappeared long ago. The legend has been reduced to a story, a name, which links it to a portion of the territory. The photograph now performs a second act of naming by transforming the territory through the gaze. It is both interesting and disturbing to think about the different way in which the people who fought in the battle there must have looked at it. For them the ground was not, of course, a landscape, but at most an open space, suitable for army manoeuvres. Later, at a different time, as the stage for the action. Lastly, through the superimposition of a third *layer* of meaning: the one that covers it through the action of the gaze. Here is the territory converted by History into a palimpsest. The dissociation between the physical and the phenomenal that Berque mentions as the fundamental characteristic of Western perception of landscape<sup>6</sup> leads us to try to give an objective character to a relation with the territory which in no way springs from the physical, but from the projection of socialised historical memory onto it. On the *physical* layer of the territory stretches the phenomenological layer of the gaze, but that in turn is filtered by *history*.

Photographic representation establishes the supposed battle ground as a view. The idea of view and not *landscape* is based on the construction of the field of representation as a diptych. That choice has two consequences. The first is to abolish one of the principles of the image in perspective: its lack of internal reading *tempo*<sup>7</sup>. The image offers itself as what the observer apprehends at a glance. Nevertheless, the diptych implies temporality, since we have to move from one frame to another and the reading of one of them continues in the other, where we have to repeat some of the operations of organisation of form, determination of the horizon, etc. A task that corresponds to the one carried out by the photographer when framing his shot again after taking the first image and then recording the second. The difference is that whilst the photographer's operation establishes a linear time, the observer's formulates a circular one, in which there is neither beginning nor end. There is, of course, a reading convention that makes us begin with the image on the left and then move to the one on the right. But there is nothing to

prevent us from doing the opposite or to mark the point where the observation ends and the gaze leaves the picture. The reading time has the characteristics of legendary time.

All that insertion of temporality is due to the presence of a white fringe, a kind of wall or *passé-partout* that divides and, at the same time, links the two images. But the reading is not restricted to the temporal plane: it also extends to what its nature is: the spatial. The diptych -and this is the second consequence- makes us aware of the presence of the frame. It reveals the existence of an inside and an outside. And of an *out of field* which, in this case, and in one direction of the frame, is made explicit in the photograph beside it. That showing of the frame links up with the pictorial tradition of the early Renaissance and, more specifically, with the appearance of landscape in painting: through the window. Those windows do not always have a single light; they are often divided either by the frame of the panes or by a central mullion. In other words, the observer's perception of exterior space is *interrupted* by the presence of an element that hinders vision. There is continuity, but also occlusion. However, that is in the represented space, but it *can* also be in the representation space.

B+R use the diptych as a *panorama*, *i.e.*, as a strict prolongation from one picture to the other of the field of the image, focusing their discourse more on the construction of a circular gaze: the gaze of a spectator who turns from his position on the ground to take it all in. As such, the spectator is aware of the frame, but his task is to wipe it out in the act of reading. To be capable of eliminating it and to prolong the field from one image to another.

We could deduce from the idea of view the implicit existence of an omniscient observer, placed at the point of maximum visibility, as constructed by pictorial tradition, but the relation between the viewpoint and the horizon immediately discards that possibility. It is exactly the opposite. An observer whose position on the ground provides him with a limited and explicitly fragmented knowledge: a good metaphor for what usually remains of the stories that tell of baffles that took place long ago, closer to legend than history. But that string of names, illustrated with images that say so much and so little, make up the story on the basis of which collective identity can be woven or unravelled. They are, as Juaristi says, the woods of our origins.

### **The sewer of culture**

Sewer, yes, although the term is pejorative, because that is where everything has ended up for thousands of years. All we are, all we were: our secretions, our excrescences, the products of our culture and the tolls that have been paid, in the form of shipwreck, to allow us to pass from one shore to the other. Yes, the Mediterranean is the sea of our culture and, by extension, of what we call Western culture. If there is such a thing as euro centrism, which there is, its sentimental core is not in the colleges of Oxford or the lecture theatres of the Sorbonne, but in a dusk gazing at this sea of cultures.

But although we live on its shores, the Mediterranean is not our invention; it is a Saxon one. As a concept the Mediterranean is the product of the northerners' passion for the light and the vestiges of the cultures of the south. Of the rite of the Grand Tour, the origin of the modern curse of tourism. In *The Volcano Lover*, Susan Sontag tries to describe that enlightened passion in the shape of the obligation to make a new pilgrimage which, instead of leading to Santiago, ended up on the Amalfi coast and the passion for the possession of antiques<sup>8</sup>. Both activities, that of tourist and that of collector, have something of the hoarding impulse, of unstructured accumulation. The Cavaliere in Sontag's novel tries to possess *all* objects for the simple pleasure of having them *himself* rather than a rival. The desire of the inveterate traveller, of the old-style tourist (not the coach-bound version of today), is not *to be* but *to have been* in all the places. The one collects objects, the other places. For both of them the photograph is a multipurpose tool, like those gilt-handled knives. It serves as proof of possession, as safe deposit and as substitute. The impulse to possess and the impulse to visit are dampened by being diverted into the photographic image. The obsessions of both are to be found in this series of places which the memory of what is Mediterranean has marked along the coasts of our home sea. They are the proofs of our antiquity, from which our ancestors came time and again. They do not, of course, allow us to dream of a monolithic identity, but they do bear witness to a complex mesh of millennia. In those places, whose names (Syracuse, Cartagena, Alexandria) have been repeated on other continents as a means of maintaining links with the origins, our memory is stored.

I said before that only archaeologists are authorised to hold conversations with stones. But I have always been struck by the way they make them talk. To visit any *site* (a place where memory can be extracted from the ground like a mineral) is always something of a disappointment. The *thickness* of memories is generally little more than a couple of feet. Just the height of two or three rows of stones, which mark the shape of what was once a Roman domus or a Greek temple. However, for the archaeologist those stones speak of ways of life, provide facts and figures on household economy or social organisation. Definitely, only they are authorised to speak to stones. Not us. we are just visitors, tourists, consumers of memory. And that is the position we are placed in by the images of the third *major series* of B+R's work. With one structural difference from the previous ones. If in "Campos de batalla" [Battlefields] our position was one of an observer of an image, someone who of necessity looks at the image and not the setting, in this one we are invited to take on the role of observer *in* the image, to put ourselves inside it, to assume the principle of the vicarious gaze and see through the person who saw for us.

The different competence of the observer comes from the structure of each of the blocks that make up the series and poses, not a vision of images, but a journey round the territory. And so the visit to Castellar de Meca is structured as an *itinerary upwards*, which culminates in the grey sky. Ampúrias invites a different gaze. A close gaze by someone scrutinising the ground and finding only crumbled memory, the traces of an ancient Greek mosaic. The return to black and white to approach the ancient Celtic cities heightens the feeling of distance between what the image shows and what the information in the text affirms. Hence the night photos, which show the

only way in which it is possible to see the city: by closing one's eyes. Lastly the pair of images *scaena* and *cavea* pose a relation of field and counterfield which locates the observer on the spot where theatrical tradition placed the chorus. But, unlike in Greek tragedy, the observer transmuted into chorus knows nothing. The only thing that returns his gaze is emptiness.

Disguised as landscapes, the spaces photographed by B+R nevertheless require a very different reading, which in no way concerns the structuring of an extension according to a point of view, but tries, by confronting the observer with what the image shows, to bring out to what extent our reading of landscape is not so much a perception of topographical or visual elements as a *projection* onto those elements of a whose series of discourses whose aim is to bind us to a territory, to create bonds that justify permanence and sedentariness. And which differentiate us from "other people". The images of Guardamar clearly pose that idea of belonging. What they show is, simply, the Mediterranean.

#### Notes

1 Arthur Danto: *Historia y narración*. Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, p. 101

2 Hayden White: *The Content of the Form*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p.27 3 *ibid.* p. 28

4 Miguel de Unamuno: "Por las tierras del *Cid*" *Paisajes del alma*. Reproduced in Marina Romero: *Paisaje y literatura de España*. Madrid, Tecnos, p. 88

5 Julio Llamazares: *El río del olvido*. Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1990, p. 7

6 Augustin Berque: *Cinq propositions pour une théorie du paysage*. Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1994, p. 23

7 See Norman Btyson: *Vision and Painting. Me Logic of the Gaze*, Yale University Press, 1986 1983. pp. 92-98

8 Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1992