RECESSIONARY GOTHIC AND THE DEVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM
GREGORY CREWDSON'S 'IN A LONELY PLACE' | AMANDA HOWELL

Gregory Crewdson’s ‘In a Lonely Place’, recently hosted by the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane, brings together pieces from three series, his ‘Fireflies’ (1996), ‘Beneath the Roses’ (2003–2008), and ‘Sanctuary’ (2010). The large-scale, colour photographs selected from ‘Beneath the Roses’ dominate the show and are the sort of work for which the photographer is famous: elaborately staged, meticulously manipulated images that evoke the anxieties underpinning life in America. They focus attention on the sort of dead-alive small towns that abound in the United States, the sort of towns that drivers ignore, passengers sleep through, and no one stops in, unless they live there. These forgettable and forgotten, somehow inward-looking spaces of America are rendered with weird clarity, thanks to Crewdson’s elaborate process of production and post-production that illuminates them with light that is at once dramatic and theatrical, the stuff of movie sets, but also suggestive of those klieg-lit moments that precede a big storm. (Generally speaking, light is, in Crewdson’s work, what shadow is in film noir — expressive, ominous, and transformative.) The effect of this light is both narrative and atavistic, even as it focuses attention on those tiny-but-distinct details of domestic drama, those hints of mysterious scenarios captured in medias res: a trickle of blood here, a not-quite-hidden liquor bottle there, tire tracks in dirty snow, inexplicably bare feet, naked bodies, and cloaked expressions.
In their theatricality and expressivity, in the way that they draw attention to the most mundane of American settings and make it strange, Crewdson’s photographs draw on that same Gothic Romantic literary tradition whose influence (filtered through Hollywood, genres of horror and noir in particular) is currently so strong in cinema and especially in the new wave of cable television programming. (The one bit of commercial work Crewdson has done was, appropriately enough, for HBO’s Six Feet Under [2001–2005], an Alan Ball creation focused on the dramatic surrealities barely covered by the scrim of day-to-day life.) As Crewdson himself says of his work:

I’m interested in the question of narrative, how photography is distinct from, but connected to, other narrative forms like writing and film. This idea of creating a moment that’s frozen and mute, that perhaps ultimately asks more questions than it answers, proposes an open-ended and ambiguous narrative that allows the viewer to, in a sense, complete it. Ultimately, I’m interested in this ambiguous moment that draws the viewer in through photographic beauty, through repulsion, through some kind of tension.¹

In its use of Gothic tropes to create a world pervaded by loss, dominated by images of an America set adrift from its own social and economic certainties, ‘In a Lonely Place’ locates itself on the same uneasy ground occupied by both contemporary big screen images of global apocalypse and television series (like AMC’s Breaking Bad [2008–present] and The Walking Dead [2010–present]) devoted to the monstrous unmaking of middle class culture. More broadly, in their ambiguity, their play of beauty and repulsion, Crewdson’s images of America share Gothic narratives’ aim to reignite, through the manipulation of physical space, a sense of wonder in an otherwise rational world. Particularly relevant to his work is what Sigmund Freud, prompted by his own responses to gothic tales of the late 19th century, theorised as the unheimlich. Crewdson himself says, in 2013, what he wants more than anything, is that his work should evoke “an uncanny sensation”.²

It does. Ruminating over the intricacies of the term heimlich, Freud notes that it means both familiar or intimate or of the home and also that which is hidden or concealed or secret—then the ‘un’ gives these complexities yet another twist. Endorsing F.W.J. Schelling’s formulation of the uncanny as being “something that should have remained hidden but has come out into the open”,³ Freud then goes on to consider the effects produced by both animism and the doppelgänger or lookalike in popular tales. These Gothic tropes are likewise evident in the intimate-yet-staged images of domestic life scattered through ‘In a Lonely Place’, whose quality of stillness is as much that of waxworks as photography. The conventional life-capturing, reality-recording capacity of the photograph, evident in its historical role of documenting the rural and urban spaces of the American scene, is qualified in Crewdson’s work by the gleaming perfection of detail. The aim of his production methods, which utilise a film-shoot-sized crew either on location or in a studio and then require months of digital post-production, is what Crewdson calls ‘a pure image’. By ‘pure’ he means that ‘there’s nothing out of focus, there’s no blurring, no grain. Anything you associate with anything photographic,
I don’t want in the picture. … I don’t want grain and I don’t want pixels’. As a consequence, however sad or sordid the details of the image might be—tired flesh, stained wallpaper, faded linoleum, rusted rails, or dirty snow—they shine as if created by a Pre-Raphaelite brush rather than recorded by a camera. As a consequence of his quest to achieve ‘transparency’, a ‘perfect representation’ and a ‘perfect world’, Crewdson—not unlike the plastic surgery addict whose quest for perfection leads, at a certain point, to something distinctly other—locates his images of small-town America in his own version of the ‘uncanny valley’, where the line between the animate and inanimate, real and the fabricated, the documented and imagined, is blurred. And, Crewdson, by making the familiar, strange, makes the ordinary impossible to ignore.

The most commonplace of domestic spaces and events get this uncanny treatment in ‘In a Lonely Place’: teenagers walk along a rail line; a woman stands on the street outside a lighted house after leaving a taxi; a young pregnant woman waits at an intersection for the light to change; a woman and a boy wait at a dinner table with two empty place settings; a car leaves tracks in the snow, while someone sits in a diner; a girl sits on a swing outside a trailer, watched from its window by a woman; a boy sits on a curb outside a mechanic’s shop where men talk; a man pushes a trolley filled with domestic goods down a deserted neighbourhood street; an older man sits in his robe in front of a television, while a younger woman makes dinner in the kitchen beyond; a young woman sits on the bed in a motel room, looking down at the baby next to her. The more overtly symbolic or self-consciously metaphoric images from ‘Beneath the Roses’ are left out of this show (just as ‘Beneath the Roses’, widely hailed as Crewdson’s masterpiece, is itself a departure from the more overtly surreal imagery of his 1998–2002 series, ‘Twilight’). Not included, for instance, is the horror-tinged image of a man excavating numerous suitcases and boxes from a clearing in a night-darkened forest—not is that of a woman sharing her bed with the desiccated remains of a huge bouquet of red roses—both images that shift focus in the series away from the strangeness of ordinary life into the heightened surrealities of dream and fantasy.

What is left from ‘Beneath the Roses’ appears to survey the most ordinary moments of small town life (a house on fire, a post-coital couple with a mattress in a wood, the most sensational). Prosaic as they are in subject matter, these photographs are dreamlike or even nightmarish in effect, as they demonstrate Crewdson’s debt to cinema by the affective force they achieve from lighting and setting. His lighting expert for ‘Under the Roses’, Rick Sands (his official title Director of Photography) is, not surprisingly, Hollywood trained and has worked for both Francis Ford Coppola on Bram Stoker’s Dracula (the 1992 film whose mise-en-scène was so much more eloquent than its actors) and Steven Spielberg’s 2001 film, Artificial Intelligence, where the expressivity of setting resonates thematically with its dark fairytale of animism, inhumanity, and robots who love too much.

Steven Spielberg is one of Crewdson’s influences, as is Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch, each of whom is adept in what Hitchcock called ‘pure cinema’—by which he meant purely visual storytelling.
Each is a dexterous manipulator of mise-en-scène and audience expectation, as is Crewdson himself. The most distinctly Spielbergian of Crewdson’s images in its use of light and its subject matter is also one of the most simple of ‘In a Lonely Place’. In Untitled (Shane) (2006), Crewdson focuses on a local boy who had been hanging around the production. When shooting, he told the boy to imagine ‘a dream world, where everything is perfect’. The boy stands in the darkened undergrowth beneath a railroad trestle. He is alone and looking up, both apparently held in thrall and isolated by the diffused light above and behind him. Without any other narrative hints offered, it is an image of potentiality and vulnerability, of simultaneous promise and threat. Like the not-quite-adolescent children who populate and often walk point in Spielberg’s films, he is on the cusp, a harbinger of what is to come, as well as a point of identification for the most hopeful and most susceptible aspects of the viewer. One of the first images one saw in the IMA display of ‘In a Lonely Place’, he alerts us to the relative youth and apparent vulnerability of many of the human figures in the show (most of whom are much younger, for instance, than the cars on the road of the home town Crewdson has conjured for them). He is an image of futurity, but Crewdson’s small town America, with its almost post-apocalyptically empty streets and aimless wandering inhabitants, does not seem to have much future to offer him.

Young and somehow exposed in his moment of dreaming, this figure serves as a reminder that the torment and corruption of innocence has long been central to the Gothic and its pleasures, pleasures that, in turn, have served as a vehicle for ideas and themes too difficult, taboo or transgressive to articulate in any other form. In the 18th century, female sexuality and gendered power relations were its central focus; from the 19th to 20th centuries, Gothic tales turn to a wider array of psychosexual concerns and social taboos of the time: not just female sexuality, but the sexuality of children, homosexuality, incest, and necrophilia.Hints of such thematic concerns circulate through ‘In a Lonely Place’, but their scenarios, as Crewdson points out, await completion by the fears and anxieties of the viewer. Bring your own obsessions. So, while surveying the mostly youthful population of this rather decrepit slice of Americana, the viewer who identifies, empathises and speculates upon the scenarios in play, is positioned as both victim and chief tormentor (positioning familiar, of course, to any reader or viewer of gothic fiction). Who do the mother and son wait for at the table and how do we read their blank and downcast looks? What do we make of the abandoned liquor bottle and melting drink on the kitchen bench behind them and what has been taken from the drawer left partly open? What is the relationship between the old man in front of the television and the younger woman in the kitchen? Why is the sight of his naked
chest and legs, white as death in the blue light of a television and a sharp contrast to her fully-clothed youthfulness, so unsettling?

Such lines of questioning lead back to the perversions of and potential for horror in the family romance, but psychosexual themes are not the only taboo subject matter engaged by Gothic texts, nor are they the only—or even arguably the chief—theme of Crewdson’s work as seen in ‘In a Lonely Place’. Varieties of American Gothic utilise the generic mission to unsettle not just for the sake of suspense or excitement, but to explore social issues via the representation, for instance, of regional cultures. In the fictions of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty (not to mention the pop horror fictions of Anne Rice or, more recently, HBO’s True Blood) the grotesque characters and situations, decadent and derelict settings, crime and violence of the American South are depicted as outgrowths of poverty, racism, and alienation. Ultimately, these fictions appear less a straightforward representation of depraved regional character, than a return to what is repressed, more generally, in America’s official accounts of itself—especially with regard to the always problematic issues of race and class.

For all that Crewdson’s locations are in the American Northeast, in their focus on the shabbier elements of the regional U.S. the photographs of ‘Beneath the Roses’ recall, more than a little, the Southern Gothic subgenre. The several locations used for these photographs, Rutland, Vermont, Pittsfield and Adams, Massachusetts, have in common their respective histories of boom and bust. These are reflected in the shape of Crewdson’s imaginary town, a familiar one that recounts, a bit like the rings of a tree, the historical progress (or in this context, devolution) from industrial to post-industrial America: brick storefronts and respectably well-preserved two-story Carpenter’s Gothic homes of the 19th and early 20th century in the centre give way to seedier early to mid-20th century clapboard boxes a bit further out, followed by weed-infested rail yards, quasi-industrial wastelands, and, finally, an ex-urban rust belt of vintage 1970s and 1980s mobile homes and cars, hedged and encroached upon by dark woods and fields. Crewdson, whose own stable, upper-middle class upbringing as the son of a psychoanalyst he credits with giving him the security to explore the darker side of American life, is a New Yorker since birth. But his family has long owned a vacation cabin in the scenic Berkshires not far from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, his favourite town for location shoots. (Its recent renaissance as an arts and tourist hub is credited, in part, to Crewdson’s work there.) If the intimate interiors Crewdson created on a Massachusetts soundstage suggest family romance-gone-bad, the all-too-familiar geography of Crewdson’s imaginary town makes it the uncanny double of Pittsfield and the many places like it that fell into disarray by the 1970s. A doppelgänger that returns the viewer to other types of crises, economic and social, as well as the always touchy, if not absolutely taboo, subject of social class in America.

Since the post-World War II suburbanisation of the United States, the ‘American Dream’—ever the focus of Crewdson’s work—has focused on a family, a house of one’s own and a better future for one’s children. In this context, the stillness and stasis of the America imagined by ‘In a Lonely Place’ becomes particularly ominous as well as quite timely in its implications. When the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 prompted widespread unemployment in the U.S., along with a decline in home values, increases in foreclosures and bankruptcies, rises in gas and food prices, it signalled a dramatic shift in popular perception of the American middle class, directing public attention to what had been, in fact, decades of its growing social and economic vulnerability. According to various demographic and sociological studies of the economic trend toward income disparity in the United States, this 21st century crisis highlighted a much longer trend toward a widening gap between wealth and poverty and reduced social mobility. A history suggested by the shape of down-at-the-heel small towns throughout the U.S., it is captured and consolidated and given a new, distinctly uncanny reality in the imaginary America of ‘In a Lonely Place’, where alienation and unease filters through all its spaces and whose population looks, thanks to the work of Crewdson’s casting director Juliane Hiam in finding appropriate local talent, ‘like they’ve lived a hard life’.

Interestingly, it is not the images from ‘Beneath the Roses’, but rather the photographs of ‘Sanctuary’ in which Crewdson himself sees the effect of the Global Financial Crisis:

I was preparing for these pictures and making them as banks were collapsing, and I think I was very conscious of that sense of things in ruin... The pictures reflect that in some way—emptied out façades, and scaffolding. They do wind up being among my most direct and personal pictures.

The studio backlot images of ‘Sanctuary’ speak, perhaps even more overtly than those of ‘Beneath the Roses’, to a sense of dreams—the kind you see on the big screen—abandoned and lost. Crewdson’s oft-repeated adage, ‘you can’t get away from yourself’, embraces his interest in the uncanny, his dark Gothic vision of the family, but also, more broadly, a sense of the vulnerability of the worlds he returns to repeatedly. Crewdson’s earliest photographs, those 1990s dioramas of Eden-on-the-cusp-of-the-Fall suburban landscapes, suggested, with their weirdly sincere but imperfectly-
rendered nostalgic kitsch, the work of some hobbyist in the distant future piecing together a dream of past perfection. With ‘In a Lonely Place’, Crewdson appears to work much closer to home even when he is in the back lots of Cinémathèque studios in Rome. From this perspective, the phenomena of crepuscular bioluminescence recorded in ‘Fireflies’—photographs made at that cabin in the Berkshires—appears ephemeral not just in its lawn-level focus on insect life, but in its attempt to capture a certain stage of childhood when fireflies, lighting up humid summer nights, fascinated. But when juxtaposed with the selections from ‘Beneath the Roses’, the nostalgic ephemera of ‘Fireflies’ becomes something more portentous: it highlights the evanescence of Crewdson’s small-town America with its pervasive sense of recession, of entropy, of loss; it is ‘lonely’ not just because it is isolated, but because it is a place from which dreams have fled.

Notes
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
11. Interview with Bradford Morrow, BOMB, op. cit.

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