



SEAN HOWARD

## A BURSTING SHELL: THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S LAST PICTURE

IN A FOREST NEARLY DESTROYED BY SHELL FIRE, A PHOTOGRAPHER HAD SET HIS CAMERA AND WAS PRESSING THE SHUTTER WHEN HE WAS INSTANTLY KILLED BY A FRAGMENT OF SHELL. THIS STRANGE PICTURE WAS FOUND IN THE CAMERA, SHOWING NOT ONLY THE BATTERED TREES AND SMOKE OF THE GUNS, BUT THE SCATTERED FRAGMENTS OF A SHELL AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S FALLING BODY.

¶ *First or last light? Top left, bloom of smoke, sun I think lifting, opening a grandly ruined scene, showstopper backdrop artfully devised: front and centre, a broad, branchless trunk, tower leaning slightly right, leading a line of ragged figures, brutalized, surrendering to the photographer. But he, too, surrenders, arms high, tilting slightly right (satchel over left shoulder), falling, it looks, through the camera, to and through the earth, slow spin from airlock, left arm brushing a cone of light, shellburst-fan from bottom left, moon surface fast approaching, pebble-comets tailing shadow. Right of the cone, firefly-flaws, meteor shower, light sharp as shrapnel.*

¶ A necessarily, perhaps, *accidental* masterpiece, fluke-Guernica, full of fine touches (matched angle of man and “tower”), fugue-like scoring of opposites: in/out, up/down, open/shut, sound/silence, vortex-as-stillness.

The way the fall leaves us standing (on the camera-tower!), not just aghast but *next*, onlookers (cone of light, door opening) forced to change our *outlook*.

¶ How long would such a masterpiece have taken—to become, I mean, *conceivable*? First literary Wavebreak, 1929/30: the *Last Picture* artist,

perhaps, inspired by *Goodbye, All Quiet, Under Fire. Fear*, Gabriel Chevalier—

It felt as if we had come to some place in the world which was part of a dream, that had gone beyond all the limits of reality....

¶ The artistry, too, of the title, subliminally-ramifying riffs on *The Last Supper*:

Christ-Cameraman (“Take; this is my body ...”); the War both the “blood of the covenant” and the break with all that, *the Gospel here ending*—in the crucified Wood!—Revelation of no Resurrection.

¶ (In DeLillo’s *Libra*, death of Lee Harvey Oswald—“nothing left to him but the pathway of the bullet”—the shot shooter utters “a deep grunt, heavy and desolate,” takes a final bow, slow “fall through a world of hurt.”

He “expired,” DeLillo says, “into aerospace....”)

¶ David Jones, looking out from the “Waste Land,” with its “sudden violences” and “long stillnesses,” “sharp contours” and “unformed voids,” saw it as, paradoxically, “a place of enchantment...perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15—that landscape spoke ‘with a grimly voice.’”

Actually book *vi*, 15: Lancelot—entering the Chapel Perilous to rob a corpse—warned “in a grimly voice” by a band of knights to “lay that sword from thee or else thou wilt die.”

¶ (Book iv, 15: “How Morgan le Fay saved a Knight that should have been drowned.”

Her work cut out at Passchendaele.)

¶ Assuming—cultural reflex—the Western Front, a year in at least.

Béla Zombory-Moldován, *The Burning of the World: A Memoir of 1914*—

My wretched sword keeps snagging in the undergrowth. Damn this thing! I wrench it off....

The wreckage of the forest gets worse and worse.... Sometimes the lines clump together, sometimes they get spaced wider apart, but how-

ever careful we are, the snapping of twigs and the shuffling sounds of movement through the undergrowth create a particular kind of muffled noise.... The trees ever more shattered; here and there, piles of rags, the dead, weapons by the hundred strewn about. I pick one up in the moonlight....

I pass a dead man lying on his back. A Royal Hungarian....

¶ (And later—September!—feeling “abandoned,” appalled at the inadequacy even of his art [painting]: “In the wrecked forest at Magierov, I had seen only a single bird: an exhausted crow sitting on a broken branch. At the sound of gunfire it, too, had flown off....)

¶ *Wood*, in Malory, *insane fury*, e.g., Lancelot as “wild wood as ever was man,” a now-striking jarring of wood as haven, the natural sanity “Merlin in his madness,” Jones reminds us, embraced: “There is a tradition that Merlin lost his reason because of the violence of the Battle of Arderydd and sought the solitude of the woods.” The battle, perhaps, a preview (tipping Merlin...) of Arthur’s final fight, the climax lovingly rendered in *Le Morte*: “And thus they fought all the long day and never stinted till it was near night, and by that time was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down. Then was Arthur wood wroth out of measure, when he saw his people so slain from him.” “Jesu mercy, said the king”—

where are all my noble knights come? Alas that ever I should see this doleful day, for now...I am come to mine end.

*And Merlin fled from that Last Picture, and hid him in a Sacred Wood, robed but in moonlight, and sighing dreamt the Ages, until a fearful cry....*

¶ “Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had strayed off from the straight path. / How hard it is to tell what it was like, / this wood of wilderness....”

Just three years after the War—millions of men, catastrophically, not straying—T. S. Eliot, reeking of Dante, insisted literature somehow remained *The Sacred Wood*, though one we had now to find our (winding) way back to.

Dante’s wood, though, neither blessed nor damned: the *choice*, up or

down, transcended by the Poet-Pilgrim's double movement, *descent to heaven*.

Telegram to Eliot: *Hell on Earth. Stop. Moon at our feet. Stop. Send... Word?*

¶ (Near death, *Comfort thyself*, said Malory's Arthur, *and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust to trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound...*)

Ah yes: Avalon, the Sacred, *Unwoundable* Isle.)

¶ "Paradoxical enchantment": in *The Birth of the Clinic*, his modest book about "space, language, and death," Foucault detects an unwitting "lyricism" (contra-diction) at the depersonalized heart of modern medicine: not just the "secretly linguistic structure" of all "facts," but a latent, deeply buried *poetics* of description. In the Nietzschean Age, he argues, poetry and science converge from different routes on the same point—

In what at first sight might seem a very strange way, the movement that sustained lyricism in the nineteenth century was one and the same as that by which man [sic] obtained positive knowledge of himself; but is it surprising that the figures of knowledge and those of language should obey the same profound law, and that the irruption of finitude should dominate, in the same way, this relation of man to death, which, in the first case, authorizes a scientific discourse in a rational form, and, in the second, opens up the source of a language that unfolds endlessly in the space left by the absence of the gods?

Put with lyrical precision: though what's profound, in fact, isn't any *law* but the *abyss* beneath (above, within) us, the proliferating development of the same "last picture." In which Wasteland, Science often claims succession from "God," the crown from Art, denying the *poetics* at its source!

¶ Some, of course, happy to *share* the crown: William Burroughs, confident science would become more artistic, art more scientific; or the Spatialists—canvas-rippers, tearers of the artful backdrop—declaring in their first manifesto (1947) not only that they "refused to think of science and art as two distinct phenomena" but that "artists anticipate scientific deeds"—that

from some kinds of art, as Burroughs said of his cut-up collages, *the future leaks out*.

Really: the *Future? 1947*, the latest “last pictures” from Auschwitz, Hiroshima.

The Spatialists, though, Future-fetishists, worthy successors to the pre-Great War Futurists, proto-fascist celebrants of violent speed, Art (planes crashing) a Visualized Kingdom of Noise, gleeful drawers—Avalon sunset!—of the bloodbath.

¶ The leading Spatialist, Lucio Fontana (designer of a shrine to “fascist martyrs” much admired by Mussolini; entrant in a contest to build an arch honouring the invasion of Abyssinia) prophesied in 1952 that the “architecture of the future will be a missile”—the same old “Faustian ballistics” described in *The Decline of the West* thirty years before, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*—triumphal arch!—rising from 1914.

¶ Violent speed, torn perspective, the Spatialist comet-tail rips in the picture—

flint-flame from pebbles, lunar shore at sunset—  
man, hand reaching, *fast* asleep....

¶ (“And when he”—the addict, end of *Infinite Jest*—“came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out.”)

¶ *Sous les pavés, la plage....*

And the Sea?

“My mind misgives”—

*Sous la terre, la lune....*

¶ Foucault writes (*Clinic*) of the “fine, innocent earth” beneath the “grass of words,” the world not soil but “stone,” the “death” that “reveals the profusion of bodies and their simple order.”

Death, too, the (dis)animating spirit (stone grass?) of clinical description, the “law of its discourse” generating nihilistic, scorched-earth revelation.

As here, the simple profusion of bodies—some moving, moaning?—

about to be ordered (to appear) by the camera....

¶ Fontana also claimed (1968), “my discovery was the hole and that’s it,” holes “punched,” art critic Sarah Whitfield writes, “through the canvas from behind”—

their rough edges casting flint-like shadows similar to those made by craters on distant planets. The close-up view of the canvas shuts out its edge, thus intensifying the suggestion of an alien and uncharted landscape.

But by the time he landed (self-described Columbus of The Gap), *plenty* of footprints! Edmund Blunden’s, for example—

We held Jerusalem Crater, an enormous hole in brown exploded soil with a pool in the bottom of it; we held it, but our post was at the bottom of it too.

¶ Fontana obsessed by the space race he doubtless anticipated, the clinical-mechanical gaze trained on, *itself scarring* the moon, the stone hole damaged by the “countless impacts” (Whitfield) he loved to reproduce, an enchanting violence “contained within an image of eerie stillness,” where “particles of glitter settle on the surface, abrasive and sharp.”

“Today,” their second manifesto (1948) proclaimed, “we Spatialist artists have escaped from our Tower, we have broken out of our corporeal bodies, our chrysalis, and we have looked down on ourselves from above, photographing the Earth from a rocket in full flight.”

Chrysalis: *Houston, the butterfly has landed!*

Cameras sweeping like a net.

¶ (Pretty sure not, but after a few days gazing a *figure*, edge of the smoke-plume—itself solidifying, under inspection, to a vast, old-growth trunk—standing [white cap, black peak] to attention, eyes left at the cameraman....)

¶ The shell-fragment pebble-comets also like:  
...marbles, door opening on the nursery floor...

...a few, hard jelly, *eyes left*...  
 ...shadow-blood (*the Future!*) from stone...  
 ...*individual atoms*, dragged (to the modern eye) by some nanobeam,  
 tracks gouged....

¶ 1981, the Scanning Tunneling Microscope (STM) conjured up at IBM's Zürich Laboratory, not primarily to observe but *move*, click-drag atoms, one by one: 35 xenon pebbles, for example, *spellbound* as I, B, M, perfect nanotshell, science an International Business Machine.

The Zürich Wizards, Nobel in pocket, opened an online *STM Image Gallery* (rooms including "Blue Period," "Atomilism"), works created by a "new method for confining electrons" to "artificial structures" called "quantum corrals," sandbox-canvases on which "mirages" appear, real atoms lured by "phantoms," a feint creating "in the artists a compulsion to have complete control of not only the atomic landscape, but the electronic landscape also."

Many scapes *lunar*, loose rock invisibly gathered and shaped, sterile crop-circles.

¶ I don't know what compelled our artist to risk this picture, but I keep picturing *him*, utterly convinced, *one shot* away, name-making Masterpiece, *never before*....

¶ In Henry James' 1903 story *The Beast in the Jungle*, an unexceptional man constantly expects attack-by-Revelation, "carrying his concentrated burden, his perpetual suspense"—something, he guesses, spectacularly *symbolic* ("I don't know...I don't focus...I only know I'm exposed").

Falls in love, *pretty much*, resists commitment, partly to spare her from the "Beast." When she dies, "everything"—

fell together, confessed, explained, overwhelmed, leaving him most of all stupefied at the blindness he had cherished. The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance—he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. That was the rare stroke—that was his visitation. So he saw it, in pale horror, while the pieces fitted and fitted.

“He saw,” James says, “the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast”—but not *himself*, falling into the picture:

His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb.

“It was the truth, vivid and monstrous, that all the while he had waited the wait was itself his portion”: for such men, would the outbreak of War not have held added symbolic significance, been grasped as a “rare” chance *to be a man*, avoid the “lurking...visitation”?

Chance, even, to *flee* symbolism, the horror of *personal* significance—shake off the shadow of Self?

¶ James’ protagonist, in a way, kin to Dostoyevsky’s thought-addict, the Underground Man, or Robert Musil’s Ulrich, *The Man Without Qualities*—man who, anyway (Hamlet!), can’t *connect* his qualities with those of his time, the house-of-cards Vienna of 1913/14.

¶ In Part II, *Pseudoreality Prevails*, Ulrich “actually” (rare word for him) enters “the holy of holies,” the Imperial State Library: “It felt like being inside an enormous brain. Imagine being totally surrounded....”

Sensing something the billions of words won’t tell him: this is where “it” (the “brain-death”) will happen, the site where the planes crash—

*Inside the black box.*

¶ (In a Moscow library, 1990, haltingly translating a scornful review of Brezhnev’s collected jerks—

...and you suddenly realize, this is it, all it comes down to, an old man drooling slogans, “together we are building,” yes, we are, monumental garbage....)

¶ The brain the belly of the beast: Ulrich in the library to help plan the 70th anniversary—in 1918—of the accession to the throne of Emperor Franz Josef, a Parallel Campaign to outshine the German celebration, the same year, of the Kaiser’s 30th Jubilee. The parameters clear—Emperor of Peace, European Milestone, True Austria, Property and Culture—but *how* take advantage, in the words of the woman directing the project, of “a unique,

never-to-recur opportunity to bring into existence what must be regarded as the greatest and most important thing in the world”:

“Do you have something specific in mind?” Ulrich asked naively.

No, Diotima did not have anything specific in mind.... After a moment she smiled and replied: “There is so much that is great and good that has not yet been realized that the choice will not be easy. But we will set up committees....”

¶ How to fix, in short, the hole at the heart, the “empty, invisible space, with reality standing inside it like a child’s toy town deserted by the imagination”—the phantom “capital” Ulrich sensed in himself and others, the Art he’d love to love:

I’d play the piano or paint a picture, but it’d be like putting up a screen to hide a hole in the wall.... You said yourself that we avoid looking at the hole out of habit or laziness, or else we let ourselves be distracted from it by bad things. Well, there’s a simple answer: That’s the hole we have to escape through!

¶ Progress: by Summer 1914, four working titles: *The Austrian Year*; *The World Year*; *The Austrian Peace Year*; *The Austrian World Peace Year*.

The relative merits endlessly discussed, nuances sifted, difficult choices approaching.

¶ (In Sarah Lang’s post-apocalyptic novel *For Tamara*, the narrator, scribbling notes to her daughter, recalls with amazement: “We had agreed the kitchen & bathroom faucets should be equal quality.”)

¶ For Carl Jung, the War made cultural sense of personal breakdown, bombardment by nightmare and apparition: October 1913, “Repeated vision of flood and death of thousands and the voice that said that this will become real”; Autumn 1913, “Vision of the sea of blood covering the northern lands”; December 1913, “Image of a dead hero and the slaying of Siegfried”; Christmas Day 1913, “Image of the foot of a giant stepping on a city”; May 1914, “A voice says that the sacrificed fall left and right”; etc. “I had the feeling,” Jung wrote in 1925, of succumbing to “psychosis, and from this feel-

ing I was not released until August 1st 1914.” And in 1952: “I learned from the newspapers”—the day after delivering a lecture on schizophrenia, after which he expected to “go mad”—“that war had broken out. Finally I understood.... I understood that my dreams and my visions came to me from the subsoil [*sous les pavés!*] of the collective unconscious.”

The Parallel Campaign of the Psyche, bringing “into existence what must be regarded as the greatest and most important thing in the world”—

*Le Cri de Merlin....*

## FIGURES

### I. Propaganda—

slow  
spin...

\*

New? August '14,  
millions, *click &*  
*drag*

\*

Deserter! Merlin fleeing  
the *in camera*  
world...

\*

Outstretched, no  
takers—*Excalibur*  
*at Passchendaele*

\*

“Grievous wound”—  
the King healed  
at the *clinic?*

\*

(Jung—the *in-*  
break of  
war!)

\*

Sacred Wood?  
*The Waste-*  
*Lab*

\*

Come to this—

Toyota

*Avalon*

\*

New Dawn—

*Art's*

*crow*

\*

(God?

*Big*

*Poppy)*

\*

Clever!

*Faust's ascent*

*to hell*

\*

The Infinite

Cemeteries—*sous*

*les paves...*

\*

*(the world dragged*

*to the modern*

*eye)*

\*

The Big House—

last card,

face down...

II. Atom—

*spun*

*world*

\*

Darkroom—

white

poppies

\*

Forest floor—  
God's hand  
in hell

\*

(Blunden reading  
Blake in Jerusalem...)

\*

Proof! Prints, *the*  
*beast on the*  
*moon...*

\*

Shot—  
*Merlin*  
*waking*

III. War's

mirror—  
shot glass

\*

(Nietzsche—  
*God unearthing*  
*men*)

\*

Jung, *the*  
*dark healing*  
*the room*

\*

Hell—  
Faust in  
Avalon

\*

"Grimly voice"—after  
the bombardment,  
*silence the cry...*

IV. New outlook—

*Earth*  
*waning*