

Juren's "K" images.

Ever since images have become emancipated from object representation or text illustration, (photos do this better), they can concentrate upon the task which has been their's since time immemorial: they can aim at being models for existential experiences on the part of those who look at them. The term "aesthetic", if taken etymologically, expresses this primordial task of image making: images are to disturb and shock their viewers and prevent them from falling into anaesthesia. But this poses a problem for a viewer who tries to criticize an image. Such a one is challenged to state as clearly as possible in which way the image has shocked him, and how it has influenced his existential experience of the world. Now this is usually not a very serious problem: the vast majority of images do not disturb the critical viewer, and therefore have no impact whatsoever on his experience of the world. Those are redundant images, and if the critic is to be honest, he will say nothing about them. This is not the case with the images which are the subject of this paper. The critic must say something about them, because they did shock him. The problem is: how to state clearly what shocks him?

There is an easy way to do so: use the theory of information. Three "K" images stand in front of me, and they are not redundant. They are informative, to the extent in which they show improbabilities. I can enumerate those improbabilities by analyzing the images into various levels. For instance: they have been produced by an improbable combination of various techniques. Or: they show improbable color combinations. Again: their fundamental structure is the letter "KE", which, in French, is a rare and therefore informative letter. If I did indeed use information theory in my critical approach, I would contribute to the clarification of the shock the images provoked in me. Were it not for the fact that the images are informative, I would have bypassed them as I do most of the images that are presented to me. However: the degree of information contained within the images is not what really shocked me. It is nothing but the hook upon which my shocking experience with them is suspended. This is why I must try a different approach toward them.

There is a climate of urgency, of haste, of breathlessness about them, and that climate transmits itself to the viewer. Where does one hasten to, and what is it that one is fleeing from? There is a word which gives an answer, and that word is "sketch". The images are sketches, they are schematic, and those terms stem from the Greek root "sche", which means "to snatch". Thus the images are of the kind "schemata", (breathlessly snatching images), and we know this kind from history: Goya's and even Leonardo's sketches come to mind. Yes, but I do not believe that this will help to explain the shock of these images. Because the ancient image makers were in a hurry to snatch something in flight, some form, some feeling, some idea, and that is why they made sketches. Juren, on the contrary, is in a hurry to escape from something that is snatching at him. His sketches are models for the experience of escape, for the desperate will to break out from somewhere. What is it one tries to escape from?

The answer is written upon the images themselves in so many letters;

from "Kolima". Yes, but this cannot be the true answer. Why should anyone who lives in the apparently peaceful and humane south of France try so desperately to escape from a Siberian Gulag? It is true: the fact that there are Gulags is difficult to accept, and one should never forget this. Still: this is not what the images are really saying. They show us instead, and they do so concretely, that wherever we look about us with honesty, and whenever we look within us with honesty, we find nothing but invisible Kolimas: they show us concretely that we are living within invisible Gulags, and that we harbor invisible Gulags. Thus the images show us something we knew all along: we have been expelled from the world and from ourselves into an intolerable Siberia, and we should try, if we are honest, to break out from this exile of ours.

We knew that all along, and there were moments of insight when we knew it quite clearly. But what shocks us at looking at those images is this public confession of this private knowledge of ours. This is what wakens us out from our anaesthesia of habit and banal living. There is somebody else, his name is Juren, and he goes through the same experience of exile as we do, and he articulates this experience for our sake. Now this is precisely what the term "art" should convey, (were it not for its banalizing misuse): the act of articulating clearly a private, inarticulate experience, and to exhibit it in public. Juren has experienced something we have experienced ourselves, he articulates this in his own name as well as in ours, and thus he challenges us to assume this experience of ours with full, articulate consciousness. He challenges us to assume it as a model for our future experiences.

I do not want to exaggerate this shock I am here describing. Juren's images are not the only and exclusive public articulation of the experience of being exiled, which is an experience very characteristic of the present situation. We have other, and very impressive models for this experience ever since Kafka. Which goes to say that Juren's images are inspired by the "spirit of our time", that they are contemporary images. Still: each model articulates the spirit of its time through the filter of an individual experience: in the present case the experience of being exiled has been filtered through Juren's personality before it reaches us through his images. As from now my own experience of exile will be enriched by the undefinable flavor "Juren", and in this sense it will become different from what it was before my seeing his images. Which is, in my opinion, the highest form of gratitude one can express where images are concerned.