GREGORY CREWDSON: BENEATH THE ROSES

BY RUSSELL BANKS

The frequently made comparisons of Crewdson's work to the movies—Steven Spielberg, Wes Anderson, David Lynch, etc.—are suggestive and derive from the "look" of the pictures, which resemble no visual artifact made by man so much as 1950s Technicolor movie stills posted in the lobby of the Palace Theater in Lake Placid, New York, or the Star in Concord, New Hampshire, or the Capitol in Montpelier, Vermont. The small-town theaters of my boyhood and adolescence. They're like stop-action shots, inviting one, *obliging* one, especially perhaps if one is an adolescent boy, to concentrate on the details.

The comparisons to movies derive also from the way in which the contents of the pictures are assembled and staged—the special way in which the photographs are made. They do not conceal their staging (the staging, its artificiality, is practically flaunted), but like movies they are obviously expensive to produce and require an enormous amount of planning and huge crews and vast amounts of equipment and machinery. And similarly, their production depends upon trust and collaboration among many people with many different skills and types of expertise. They are assembled like soundstages, most of them built in and around the decaying mill town of North Adams, and Pittsfield, Massachusetts, with the characters (and they are characters, rather than subjects) played by local citizens and sometimes by professional actors. A single shoot can force a town to reroute automobile traffic for entire days. So it's natural to want to compare them to the movies.

Yet it seems to me that inasmuch as the viewer is required to do a crucial part of the creative work him- or herself, Crewdson's photographs engage one's mind more like good fiction than movies. When we watch a movie, after all, we are prohibited from using our imagination. It's not part of the deal. It's all done for us. Moviegoing is essentially a passive experience. What's on the screen enters our eyes and ears and fills our minds entirely, leaving us with no room or choice but to check our imaginations at the door. Movies, in contrast to the glossy stills posted in the lobby to announce and advance them, nullify both memory and hope. We can't bring our personal pasts, our memories and erasures, our fantasies and denials, our dream lives and our nightmares to the movies and plug them into the narrative, using the material of our secret inner lives to fill out and amplify the fast-moving, sound-tracked imagery on the screen and give it personal meaning, the way we do when, silently, slowly, in complete control of our rate of perception, we read a novel. Or the way we do when we peer into the photographs made by Gregory Crewdson.

For as much as Crewdson's secret inner life is surely revealed by his photographs, on viewing them one's own secret inner life is necessarily revealed, too—at least to oneself. And revelation produces change. Movies do many things to and for us; but they almost never change us. Not at the moment of viewing, anyhow. Later, maybe, they can, after they've been stored for a while in our memory banks and have been compounded there and can be drawn upon as if they were part of our remembered experience of the world; as if we, too, had hung out with Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca in 1944 or had watched Atlanta burn. Simply, we don't bring that part of ourselves to the experience of going to the movies. Movies provide no half-completed alternative reality ready to have its blanks filled in; no fictional world where we can reside long enough to furnish it with our preexisting memories, dreams, and reflections.

Further to that, a single isolated photograph by itself, even one of Crewdson's, cannot change the viewer or the photographer himself, any more than a single chapter from a novel can change the reader or the novelist himself. No, you have to see or make a *series* of pictures; you have to read or write the entire novel. You have to expose yourself to an alternative world, a *fictional* world, if you will, and enter it; and not only that, you have to live there for a long time, for hours and days and weeks and even longer, years, and fill it out, and in, with your own imaginings. A glance, a quick look-see, will not do it. And this is as true for the photographer himself as for the viewer, as true for the novelist as for his or her reader.