

Short Essay Response: Theory and Practice

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At first-glance Jeff Wall's *Milk* seems to be a gargantuan, back-lit, color-saturated, hyper-crisp take on Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Decisive Moment." At first glance. But Wall is not apt to hide his intentions. Wall is no ordinary documentary photographer. He considers himself to be a "painter of modern life" after Charles Baudelaire. However, in the mind of Jeff Wall "Painter of modern life" does not mean street photographer. In fact, he does not carry a camera regularly.¹ Rather he considers scenes from his imagination to be "in the here and now in the same way that something [he] might see in the street is here and now."² This makes Wall a conceptual artist with a knack for realizing his fictional visions. His work is part reality, part fiction, but always rooted in imagination and carefully crafted to maximize the aesthetic of the moment depicted.

Jean Baudrillard proposed four "successive phases of the image" in his work *Simulacra and Simulations*.³ The first phase Baudrillard proposed image as the reflection of a basic reality. This is the place of the normative documentary photographer – portraits of real life captured in a single frame. This is the place Jeff Wall would seem to occupy if one knew no better. However, Wall works in the vein of Cindy Sherman. His work nearly always looks as though it could be, as Baudrillard put it, "a reflection of reality."⁴ Wall has a certain documentary styling to his work. But, in reality, he has skipped happily to the fourth phase on Baudrillard's list. For instance, in *After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, Wall's photograph is based on a scene described in a fictional work of literature. In other words, "it bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum."⁵ It is a work of fiction based on fiction - a simulation of a simulation. In the event Wall uses a moment of realism, he uses it only as a springboard for imagination, but nothing more. This is evident in his 1984 work *Milk*. As Wall explained in a 1996 interview:

Milk derived from things I had seen on the street. My practice has been to reject the role of witness or journalist, of 'photographer,' which in my view objectifies the subject of the picture by masking the impulses and feelings of the picture-maker. The poetics or the 'productivity' of my work has been in the stagecraft and pictorial composition - what I call the 'cinematography.' This I hope makes it evident that the theme has been subjectivized, has been depicted, reconfigured according to my feelings and my literacy. That is why I think there is no 'referent' for these images, as such. They do not refer to a condition or moment that needs to have existed historically or socially; they make visible something peculiar to me.⁶

That Wall's work is conceptual and heavily based on theory is no secret. But Wall's images are not simplistic. He is not using theory as a crutch or an excuse to ignore the aesthetic; rather his theory is matched by precise execution. In *Milk*, Wall positioned and posed an actor, crouched and expressionless, holding a carton of milk, in front of a uniform brick wall. Why? To create a juxtaposition. The neutrality of the figure stands in stark contrast to the emotion of the carton of milk being crushed. The sharp angles and hard lines of the brick contrast with the splashing ark of the milk bursting forth from the carton. The perfection of the composition and lighting with the crisp clarity of the image contrasts the historic notion of photojournalistic imagery as rough, grainy and momentary. Wall uses all these qualities to formulate or abstract a moment, conversely. The formulated, angry, uncontrollable crushing and splashing of the milk is abstracted by the emotionless expression of everyman sitting in everyplace. There is tension and ambiguity in both his theory and practice, in his message and execution. That pairing of concept and craft is exactly what makes Wall's art both unique and great.

Wall's meaning in his work is not easily evident and his depiction of culture is somewhat twisted. His titles tell something of the moment he wishes to capture or the action he wishes to represent, as in *Dead Soldiers Talk* (a photograph of dead soldiers talking) or *Door Pusher* (a photograph of a man pushing on a door). But Wall's cinematic approach in transporting moments from their original context into a staged photo set blurs any cultural meaning that might be readily evidenced by his photography. So while on the one hand Wall may be depicting an explicit moment in time with period clothing, expressions and other cultural hints, on the other hand the time-shifting and staged composition fragment any original narrative and meaning. It would seem that Wall is content simply depicting those situations or moments that are "peculiar" to him, rather than stirring the pot of cultural commentary.

Wall's brilliance and originality is the ability to take moments long passed or fictions never experienced and make them come alive. He excels in making theory and idea tangible and experiential through photography. He creates believable fictional moments and puts them on display in monolithic proportion. Wall is a "painter of modern life," though it is no modern life anyone has ever experienced.

¹ Goldstein, Melissa. "THE Q&A: JEFF WALL, PHOTOGRAPHER | More Intelligent Life." More Intelligent Life. <http://www.moreintelligentlife.com/blog/melissa-goldstein/qa-jeff-wall-conceptual-artist> (accessed February 21, 2010).

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- ² Shapiro, David. "Jeff Wall | Museo Magazine." Issue 13 | Museo Magazine.
<http://www.museomagazine.com/issue-0/jeff-wall> (accessed February 21, 2010).
- ³ Baudrillard, Jean. "Baudrillard_Simulacra and Simulations." Stanford University.
http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html (accessed February 21, 2010).
- ⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. "Baudrillard_Simulacra and Simulations." Stanford University.
http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html (accessed February 21, 2010).
- ⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. "Baudrillard_Simulacra and Simulations." Stanford University.
http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html (accessed February 21, 2010).
- ⁶ "Arielle Pelenc in Correspondence with Jeff Wall," in *Jeff Wall. Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007). P. 258

