John Shaw

6/26/2010

Trenchant & Truncheon: An MFA Exhibition

Trenchant & Truncheon is a contemporary parable; a children's story not intended for children but rather for anyone who has lost their place in our world. Much like more traditional parables, *Trenchant & Truncheon* uses allegory to create a parallel between the young protagonist's experience and that of a contemporary individual. In a way, young Jack has seen more than many adults, having been forced to deal with some of the worst his world can muster: the violent death of his mother, the uncertainty of his father's employment and in a less defined way, society's capability for absolute brutality. The story is told through a sequence of traditionally printed black and white photographs, a choice of medium that provides an instantly readable image, while allowing for a specific and culturally familiar style of expressive exaggeration.

Superficially, the narrative of *Trenchant & Truncheon* is one that will strike most viewers as familiar, as parables often do. My narrative, however, deviates quickly from the traditional formula. Rather than following the lead of religious parables, which tend to reinforce a respect for tradition, authority, and the status quo, *Trenchant & Truncheon* suggests that these very things are the true sources of evil in our culture. This exhibition represents the first chapter in what is an extended parable, with each subsequent chapter addressing a social institution, a pillar if you will, that epitomizes the insidious and slow growing evil that plagues us as a people.

The fate and downfall of Detroit is of particular interest and importance to this project, due to my own personal connection to it. Having grown up in the shadow of Detroit, the state of the automotive industry was always a subject of great family interest. My grandfather was a life-long Chrysler man, and though both of my parents worked in public education, they instilled a

deep empathy for the working class, and a sense that we, as a family, were not above it, but rather some of the fortunate few to escape it before the crash.

The failure of the American automotive industry and subsequent disintegration of the working class is an often written about and lamented subject. Most commonly the companies are vilified, and rightly so! While it is the very nature of a corporation to increase market share and profit, the auto industry serves as an example of these capitalist principles gone too far. At it's height, entire communities were built around the manufacturing industry, with generations of families remaining loyal to their employers despite increasingly difficult times. When the moment finally came manufacturing products in these cities was no longer profitable, these corporations simply abandoned them, leaving behind a workforce of unskilled labor and the families they supported. The very people that remained loyal despite increasingly blatant indications the industries were failing were shown no regard and left in perdition.

Indeed, just as mass manufacturing built this country, these same Fordist ideals have been destroying it. By Fordist ideals, I refer specifically to the definition of Fordism as put forth by David Gartman, as a system of manufacture of goods typified by a fragmentation and automation of the manufacturing process. Combining Frederick Taylor's program of scientific management with Henry Ford's assembly line, Fordism removed the control of the production process from the hands of the workers and placed it in the hands of management (Gartman 122). Each worker became no more than an automaton, ignorant to the larger process, skilled only in the precisely timed element of manufacture for which they were responsible (Thompson). As the need for these unskilled line workers increased, so did the size of the city. Between 1910 and 1930, the population of Detroit more than tripled, from 465,766 to 1,568,662 (Gavrilovich). The economy of Detroit gradually became almost exclusively linked to the fate of the automotive companies, and with the American entrance to World War II in 1941, and the subsequent conversion of

automotive manufacturing to the manufacture of implements of war, Detroit and the automotive industry cemented their place as a true American Institution.

Jack's world is a grim mirror of our own deeply flawed existence. In the dark, dreary world of Jack's city, corporations control the fate of the masses while institutions, such as law and religion, serve as aggressors rather than protectors. These institutions act in a pathological manner, serving only themselves and their shareholders regardless of the cost to the general public or even their own employees. Institution can be a difficult word to define; it can be broad as in the institution of marriage, or specific, referring to a specific cultural entity such as the law. In this case, the institution refers to what I see as the four pillars of contemporary society. Industry, finance, law and finally religion serve as examples in this story of the corruptibility and ultimately the failure of humanity.

Each institution acts in a remarkably consistent manner, promoting its own agenda regardless of the benefit or cost to the public (Achbar). While this concept may seem innocuous in a capitalist society, where we are taught that profit and progress are kings, it is a deeply flawed idea. Indeed the very notion of a social institution is a construct that is supposed to create comfort and protection for those involved (Zalta). This dichotomy highlights the problems inherent to cotemporary social institutions: those that were created for the benefit of the masses—religion and law and order—have come to be managed far too much like private corporations, while private corporations, industry and finance have come to be relied on far too heavily as institutions of protection. These social institutions have become intrinsically woven into the fabric of everyday life, controlling our actions, our habits and even our thoughts.

To express this hopeless parallel world, a grim expressive aesthetic is required. The tenets of Expressionist art, specifically those put forth by the German Expressionist filmmakers and painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, help provide a framework for the visual

style of *Trenchant & Truncheon*. By deviating from a realistic, representational mode of photography, I intend to create a world where the emotion of the characters is palpable. Exaggeration of common and familiar forms, such as the human body or architecture, plays a large role in this expressive style of photographic illustration. This exaggeration is inspired by the paintings and woodcuts of such Expressionist luminaries as George Grosz, Ernst Kirchner and Edvard Munch.

The twisted, chaotic composition of George Grosz's *The Funeral* helps suggest the misery and disease of then-contemporary city dwelling. The warped perspective employed by Grosz creates a claustrophobic sense that the city itself will topple, crushing its inhabitants. The glaring white cross held by the priest figure creates a focal point in the chaos, but not one that allows for any sense of stability or relief. The tonal contrast of the stark white cross is a convention repeated in *Trenchant & Truncheon* as a method of focusing the viewer's eye on the symbolically important elements of the photograph.

The stylistic influence of Ernst Kirchner can be found primarily in the character design of *Trenchant & Truncheon*. Kirchner's elongated, simplified human forms spoke to the de-humanization inherent to post-industrial revolution city life. Kirchner's 1913 painting *Street, Berlin* depicts the upper class of the city out on an evening walk. The warped and inconsistent perspective groups the people into claustrophobic packs, together but utterly alone in the savage city. The figures' faces appear like masks, blocking any interpretation of each subject's humanity, replacing it with a polished veneer of propriety and cultural homogeneity. The replacement of organic, curving lines with harsh angular ones further removes any sense of comfort or safety in the city. While color plays a large role in Kirchner's paintings, it can certainly play no role in a black and white photograph!

To compensate for this fact, specific, dramatic lighting is used in *Trenchant & Truncheon* for a similarly emotive effect.
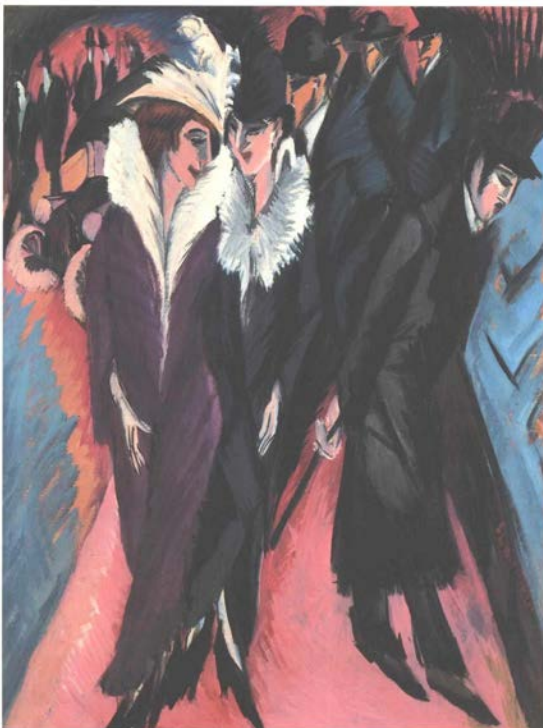
Unlike the city dwellers in the paintings of Ernst Kirchner, the title characters, Mr. Trenchant and Mr. Truncheon are not simply inhabitants or victims of the city. They are, in fact, quite the opposite. Mr. Trenchant and Mr. Truncheon are personifications of all that is wrong and evil in the city. The caricatures of George Grosz serve as a prime influence in the design of the older of these two despicable villains. Mr. Trenchant—who is named for an adjective meaning incisive or keen, caustic and cutting, vigorous and effective—appears old and gaunt, as if the evil he embodies has rotted him from the inside (Dictionary.com). His liver-spotted visage belies the intensity and terrible will that lie below the surface. Simplified facial planes suggest the plutocrats in Grosz's 1926 Eclipse of the Sun, as well as the masks in Kirchner's work, and speak to the villains being utterly devoid of humanity or compassion. Mr. Trenchant's clothing also suggests a lineage to these expressionist painters. His top hat, waistcoat and long black overcoat evoke the dress of the upper class gentleman in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, suggesting he is of the managerial class who removed the control of manufacturing from the worker.

His counterpart, Mr. Truncheon, takes his name from the noun that can be defined most simply as a club, but more archaically as a staff carried as a symbol of authority (Dictionary.com). Mr. Truncheon is at his most basic level a weapon; a personification of the evil and violence humanity is capable of. With little will of his own, Mr. Truncheon is more akin to the worker than the manager, controlled by Mr. Trenchant, he is driven only by violence. His dress—simple black pants, heavy boots, suspenders and a white shirt—evoke the factory worker depicted in the industrial photographs of Luke Swank. While Mr. Trenchant represents the evil beset on the people by management, Mr. Truncheon represents the crushing social conformity that the industrialized city demands. His skull shaped face, accentuated by dark, heavy mutton chops, is reminiscent of the skeletal faces of the city dwellers in Edvard Munch's painting *Evening on Karl Johan Street*. As with Munch's painting, the skeletal form depicts a living death in the character. Someone who still walks the city's streets, but has been robbed of vitality and individuality. The only indications of Mr. Truncheon's age lie in his heavily scarred face. Although he appears younger than Mr. Trenchant, his evil nature, and its effects on his humanity are far more visible.

The young protagonist, Jack, is far less based on the expressionist aesthetic than his adversaries. While a certain angularity is common in the faces of all three characters, the proportions in Jack's face, as well as his significantly smaller size, are intended to set him apart. Jack's age is indeterminate, but his size compared to his surroundings suggest that he is no older than 10. The proportions of his face, enlarged eyes, rounder cheeks and smaller chin help the viewer empathize and cement his difference from the villains. This size differential is emphasized through the placement of the characters and camera and choice of lens focal length.

The photographic style of *Trenchant & Truncheon* owes a deep gratitude to both the German Expressionist and later American Film Noir genres of cinema. Through the use of stark contrast and sharp, angular lighting, the emotional mood of the scene is conveyed in a visual manner. Deep black shadows fill the spaces between set pieces, constructed in a modular fashion similar to theatrical flats. This method of construction allows for a great deal of flexibility in shooting and lighting angles, as well as mimicking the stark, theatrical mise en scène of the Expressionist films. Sets and characters were designed and constructed in grey scale, to both ease previsualization of the photograph and allow for more precise metering. The modular construction of the sets allowed for physical distortion where walls are often askew rather than parallel to enhance the distorted perspective. This distortion is accomplished primarily through the use of wide- angle lenses, ranging from 90mm to 50mm. The use of these wide lenses creates a sense of depth and space in the relatively small sets. By relying on a wide-angle lens' ability to visually expand spaces, the scale of the figures (primarily Jack) within the sets can be manipulated.

Camera placement and angle play an important role in *Trenchant & Truncheon*. Once again, conventions of the early Expressionist films have been employed to further the emotive qualities of the photographs. The Dutch tilt is a practice often associated with this era, but not

uncommon to contemporary filmmaking. The camera angle is skewed in a Dutch tilt, so that the horizon line (or any other horizontal line for that matter) is diagonal. This creates a deep sense of unease and psychological tension within a frame. Often in contemporary film, these tilts are used to suggest insanity or terror being experienced by the protagonist. *Trenchant & Truncheon* uses the tilts in a similar manner, often depicting the two villains in a tilted frame, particularly when the camera point of view is similar to that of Jack. An example of this use of tilted line is frame #11. The use of a slight Dutch tilt creates a composition with exclusively diagonal lines, promoting a sense of psychological tension. Again, a Dutch tilt is employed in frame #22. As Jack descends carefully into the blackness of the first floor, a tilt as well as a strong downward angle emphasize both his movement through the frame and the fear he must be feeling.

The lighting in *Trenchant & Truncheon* is significant in both adding to the emotive qualities of the photographs, and giving each of the characters a unique identity. Jack is almost always lit with a fairly even side-light, at a similar elevation to his face.

This minimizes any look of wrinkle or age, softening his features. Placing his skin tone near the top of the tonal range also adds to the appearance of smooth youthful features. While Jack's face is often partially cast in shadow, the split generally occurs vertically, with the light side acting as the brightest spot in the composition, creating a natural focal point. This technique of lighting is similar to the glaring white cross in the previously mentioned George Grosz painting, *The Funeral*. An example of this can be found in frame #10 where Jack's face acts as the primary focal point, and then his gaze draws the eye back to the shadow creeping across his floor.

Conversely, Mr. Trenchant and Mr. Truncheon are primarily lit with under and overhead lighting, casting deep shadows in their craggy faces. In frame #18, Mr. Truncheon is lit from above and to the right, his heavy brow ridge casting his eye sockets into exaggerated depth. His

many scars are also enhanced by this side lighting, and with the left side of his face cast in relative shadow, the upturn of the right side of his mouth is twisted into a sneer. Without Jack in the frame, the highlight on Mr. Truncheon's shirt can be placed at the top of the tonal scale, helping separate it from his similarly light- toned hands. Since Mr. Truncheon is essentially an attack dog for the far more intelligent and articulate Mr. Truncheon, this more simplified lighting scheme works well for him. He rarely requires an expression beyond simple menace.

His counterpart, Mr. Trenchant, is lit in a more complex manner, to help facilitate the viewer's reading of his more complex persona. The primary lighting angle used for Mr. Trenchant is similar to the over and under lighting used on Mr. Truncheon, but often varies. The overhead lighting accentuates the sharp point in his brow ridge, and when combined with a glint of highlight reflecting off of his eyes, creates the impression of a quick and sharp mind. Mr. Trenchant is lit in a style that is more frontal to the camera than that of Mr. Truncheon, causing larger portions of his face to be bathed in light. This manner of lighting is much closer to that used on Jack, and focuses the viewer on the details of Mr. Trenchant's ancient face. This slightly flatter lighting highlights his liver spots and pockmarks, reinforcing his age and separating him from the other characters. By placing his skin tone just below the high end of the tonal range, the focus is maintained on the young protagonist while still rendering Mr. Trenchant in nice detail.

As a body of work read in a specific sequence, each frame of *Trenchant & Truncheon* relies on the comparison and contrast of the surrounding frames to control both narrative and visual pacing. In the case of frames #14, 15, 16 and 17, the camera angles and lens lengths are a planned movement. The sequence begins as Mr. Trenchant holds Jack by the throat in frame #14, then the camera tracks right, elevates and pulls back. This change of camera placement reveals more of the scene, and emphasizes the action of Mr. Trenchant throwing Jack into the dresser. A slim depth of field accentuates this action; by throwing Jack slightly out of focus, an emphasis is

placed on a slightly diagonal path of movement as well as the more obvious lateral movement. In frame #16, the camera depresses, moves in closer and tilts up slightly. A lower corner of the bed, visible in the left hand of the frame, reinforces this low angle and introduces Jack's point of view as well as Mr. Trenchant's larger companion. Frame #17 finishes the sequence by once again pulling back while maintaining the low angle. This angle reveals Jack, slumped on the floor after violently striking the dresser.

A smaller sequence within the overall sequence can also be found in frames #19, 20 and 21. As Mr. Truncheon pulls Jack to his feet in frame #19, the shot maintains a middle length, framing all three characters together, with an upward angle and the use of a wide-angle lens enhancing the difference in size between Jack and his tormentors. The camera then pulls back and elevates slightly, revealing the room and Mr. Trenchant's offer of escape.   With frame #21, the shot from #20 reverses, placing Jack in the foreground and running for the door, and keeps the villains in soft focus behind him. The use of a Dutch tilt maintains the sense of scale between the characters by placing both Mr. Trenchant and Mr. Truncheon well above Jack in the composition. The tilt also emphasizes the lower left-hand corner of the frame as both the source of the primary light and the endpoint of the movement within the composition.

In the end *Trenchant & Truncheon* is a primarily a story about our own existence in a commoditized, corporately controlled world. By sharing a format with familiar children's stories, the narrative contains relatable and familiar elements, allowing the viewer to easily recognize the parallels to the contemporary world without losing the fantastical and surreal elements of the body of work. The viewer's connection to the work is largely hinged on the character of Jack, a young boy who has suffered the slings and arrows of misfortune in a city and a culture that has become obsolete. As Jack is pursued by personifications of the evil and malevolence, Mr.'s Trenchant and Truncheon, the viewer is brought into a world not so unlike their own and

encouraged to contemplate their own experiences. An almost hyperbolic sense of spatial distortion is borrowed from the early 20th century film genre of German Expressionism to amplify the sense of terror in Jack's experience as well as to separate his world from our own. Lighting elements, also inspired by the conventions of Expressionist film and its American offshoot Film Noir further this dystopian take on our familiar world. Deep pools of shadow and light not only guide the viewer through the compositions, but also add emotionally expressive elements to the characters and their surroundings, ultimately allowing the viewer to empathize with the plight and flight of young Jack, and leading them through the narrative.

Bibliography

Achbar, Mark, and Jennifer Abbott, dir. *The Corporation*. Writ. Joel Bakan. 2005. Zeitgeist
Films.

Bossen, Howard and Luke Swank. *Luke Swank, Modernist Photographer*. Pittsburgh: University
of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.

Carringer, Robert L. " 'Citizen Kane', 'The Great Gatsby', and Some Conventions of American
Narrative." *Critical Inquiry* 2.2 (1975): 307-25.

Clarke, John R. "Expressionism in Film and Architecture: Hans Poelzig's Sets for Paul Wegner's
The Golem." *Art Journal* 34.2 (1974): 115-24.

Dimendberg, Edward. "Down These Seen Streets a Man Must Go: Siegfried Kracauer,
'Hollywood's Terror Films' and the Spatiality of Film Noir." *New German Critique* 1.89
(2003): 113-43.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices From the Legendary
Cartoonist*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008.

Eisner, Will. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York: W.W. Norton and
Company, 2008.

Gartman, David. "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism?" *The Sociological
Quarterly* 39.1 (1998): 119-37.

Gavrilovich, Peter, and Bill McGraw. *The Detroit Almanac*. Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 2000.
N.P.

Kaes, Anton. "Silent Cinema." *Monatshefte* 82.3 (1990): 246-56.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994.

Naremore, James. "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea." *Film Quarterly* 49.2 (1995):
12-28.

Resch, Robert P. "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-
Four." *boundry2,* 24.1 (1997): 137-76.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Stanford University, n.d. Web. 10
June 2010. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-institutions/

Thompson, Fred. "Fordism, Post-Fordism and the Flexible System of Production." .Williamette
University, n.d. Web. 10 June 2010. http://www.willamette.edu/~fthompso
/MgmtCon/Fordism_&_Postfordism.html

Titford, John S. "Object-Subject Relationships in German Expressionist Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 13.1 (1973): 17-24.

"trenchant." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 26 Jun. 2010. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/trenchant.

"truncheon." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 26 Jun. 2010. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/truncheon.

Walker, John. "City Jungles and Expressionist Reifications from Brecht to Hammett." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.1 (1998): 119-33.

Williams, Douglas E. "Ideology as Dystopia: An Interpretation of 'Blade Runner'." *International Political Science Review* 9.4 (1988): 381-94.