

Street Smart: 'Thinking Pictures' in the Tradition of Street Photography

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Published: September 2007

Abstract (E): The essay looks at a small photograph by Jeff Wall titled Clipped Branches, 2001. The hunch is that by studying a relatively uncomplicated work - a work apparently divorced from the questions of cinematography, the digitalization of the medium, narrative and allegorical reference -- we will be able to make a quick inroad to understanding the "largeness" of Wall's practice. And by largeness I mean that which escapes intention and marks this photograph as a thinking work. Untranslatability is the lesson to be thought.

I use the unique moment of turning to the title instead of looking at the work as a springboard to revisit Kant's sublime, and through a close reading of the image try to make the question of the aesthetic itself stand out like a figure: a figure given form by a texture of hesitations, of which the mimetic truth of the title is only one pole. The key interpretative problem confronted, is the imperative to build a floating and contingent notion of untranslatability into a running interpretation of the work, such that the fugitive nature of the image remains a constant horizon within and beyond which interpretation strives. Given the fact that the act of naming keeps cropping up, it seems that one of the risks interpretation of Wall's work runs is the referential horizon of the mimetic itself. I single out the turn to the title then, not simply as a depository of meaning, but as a site of a possible omission or elision that permits the truth effects of this picture to happen in the first place. The title offers a handle for a "paradigmatic comprehension" that the image otherwise resists. That is, one resorts to the title in face of the ever-present odds posed by a number of overlapping and conflicting narrative dynamics that involve reading as a successive, cumulative, and "syntagmatic process of apprehension." These are pictorial questions that have a real purchase on Wall's practice; a practice that courts the intelligence of photography more than most.



Fig. 1 Jeff Wall, *Clipped Branches*, 2001

One sees the image, moves in close, and like clockwork turns to the title at the picture's left hand side (fig. 1). It reads: "Jeff Wall, *Clipped Branches*, 2001." Reading the wall panel instead of looking at the work is a symptom: of our habits of looking; the rule of theory over practice; the short cuts to interpretation we are all guilty of taking; and finally, given this specific example, a register of avoiding the ever present visual oddities encountered in narrating the image as well as one hermeneutic horizon crucial to reading street photography. In this sub-genre of documentary photography, there is an implicit trust in the indexical function of the image that exceeds the boundaries of mimesis to such an extent, that what a viewer finds in the title will always be assumed to be a perfect echo of the transparency that resounds inside the frame. Given these last qualifications one gets nowhere in claiming the turn away from the image to its "caption" is simply paradigmatic of a more pervasive condition that effects the reception of all pictures, for the turn is impacted by questions of narration and the expectations surrounding the genre of street photography itself. More importantly, I will argue that turning away from the image is a reflex that points to a particular anxiety around the status of this photograph as a "thinking picture." The moment at which thought falls back for support on to the title, author, and date is also the moment at which (or better, within and beyond which) this picture thinks. Turning to the title distills a moment in which two constellations or modalities of thought have confronted one another: and, need it be said, one has proven more powerful than the other. How much more powerful will only come into focus when the dynamic between looking and reading in this very small, unassuming photograph is sufficiently pushed into articulating its very large thoughts -thought that moves us into the vicinity of Kant's notion of the sublime.

First of all, it should be said that *Clipped Branches* is not typical of Wall's work. At first glance the dark coloring of this sidewalk, curb, and tree-well militates against recognizing the work as a backlit transparency. Further, there is something about this patch of ground, with a tree trunk and some branches clipped back at its base

that speaks more of the everyday and the snapshot than what one would acknowledge as a work by the artist. In contrast to *After "Invisible Man"* by Ralph Ellison, the Preface 1999-2001, which one assumes is in dialogue with all of the largest questions raised by Wall's practice - the question of otherness, photography's relationship to literature and narrative, the problem of allegorical reference, and what Wall calls "cinematography" - *Clipped Branches* is a modest work to the say the least. Measuring a mere 79 cm x 89 cm, without the palpable signs of staging, indeed looking a bit shaky and lacking the balance of the *tableau* - perhaps the result of snapping a picture accidentally with the camera pointing precipitously downward - the work does not stand up to the idea of photography that we have come to expect from this photographer. Finally, we should note that like *Diagonal Composition*, 1993, which is the obvious precedent for the work, the varied shading and hues of the triangular areas in the picture suggest a formal study with echoes in the history of abstract painting, rather than a work anchored in a mimetic relationship to the world. This tension promotes a curious insubstantiality in the image that eclipses what we take to be photography's grounding in reference. At times the image seems to float. Tilted up as if at an obscure angle, save the tree and its patch of earth, the grey sections of pavement and sidewalk read as much as an abstract play of linguistic elements as an indexical image. Organized on the diagonal as such, orienting oneself *vis-à-vis* the work happens as a function of fictive space and not squaring up to the light box; a curious side-effect which blocks the viewer's identification of the work as one of Wall's signature pieces.

Compared to the breadth and complexity of *After "Invisible Man"*, *Clipped Branches* hardly deserves a second look. A quick scan summed up in a glance to the caption is about what it seems to demand, for about the most this photograph can muster is a sort of journalistic interest, say in the plight of trees, the barbarity of pruning methods, or the impoverishment and abjection that is a norm on East Cordova Street in Vancouver, B.C., where the photograph was taken. (We know in fact the photograph was taken here: on its first showings the work was originally titled, *Clipped Branches, East Cordova St., Vancouver, 1999*. (Wall 2001, 41) This change of heart, or worry over titling on the part of the photographer is worthy of note. It would seem to confirm our initial suspicions about the relative importance assigned the title *vis-à-vis* the photograph itself; the final short form falling short of the kind of information that this street photograph once provided.) In any case, I said "plight," "barbarity" and "impoverishment" because the downward glance may be easily construed as carrying a kind of emotional charge. I think it intended to conjure up the specter of photojournalism, an essentially liberal institution that reduces the medium of photography to human-interest stories, always for ideological purposes, and a subject on which this photographer has written extensively. Thus we should also note there are certain signs indicative of care as well. After all, leaves, twigs and cigarette butts have been swept off the sidewalk and into the tree well. In the end, of course, the title clips any of these human-interest stories back to the bud. More than likely these are merely projections that misconstrue photography as an extension of the institution of photojournalism, which is in the business of truth production. What the detached and objective voice of "Clipped Branches" gestures toward is the literal subject matter depicted, that it was no doubt stumbled upon, and that perhaps we are to make some allowance for a symbolic content which may be attributable to the artist.

All in all it is easy to pigeonhole this work through a variety of interpretative avenues. The gritty realism of the image itself, its abstract vocabulary, knowledge of authorship, the work's relative insignificance *vis-à-vis* other works in the corpus, and its mechanical appeal to the photojournalistic-like caption all help. They add up to the fundamental ways in which the singularity of this work is assigned value

and meaning. Closing meaning down through interpretative mastery is precisely what a notion like the "thinking picture" or untranslatability - terms I use interchangeably - should be galvanized against. Settling for a palimpsest of meanings by uncritically accepting the many hybrid frames of reference within which this image can be contextualized is no solution either. Untranslatability, or the thought that this picture thinks, is a far more stubborn and obdurate question, something more on the order of a remainder or leftover that escapes logical structure.

With the exception of *Odradek, Taboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994* which is exhibited alongside a wall panel containing a short text by Franz Kafka and two other works Wall describes as "accidents of reading", in the broader context of Wall's corpus the significance of titles is a rarity. (Wall 2005, 349) Of course, titling is important in all of Wall's works, but nowhere does the title actually find such a significant place in the dynamic of reading as it does in *Clipped Branches*. As an outspoken defender of aesthetic judgment and the pictorial tradition, Wall privileges the image above all else-especially *vis-à-vis* text. From the late 1970s onward, his practice of photography - something especially crystallized in his interest in cinematography - was dead set against the broad field of practices we have come to know as post-modern photography which came to prominence in New York in the 1980s. Inter-textuality is a very dirty word in Wall's corpus. And yet the fact of reading the title in face of this photograph is marked. The logic behind this curious phenomenon is varied and complex. No doubt we should hear at least some echo of Walter Benjamin's important reflections on the place of the caption in photojournalism, but it cannot be exclusively understood in light of this theorist's work on photography, or the circulation of photography in the broader context of the mass media - its uses, misuses and abuses by the institution of liberalism. In fact, the status of the title in *Clipped Branches* is far more intimately related to Wall's variously linked contemplations on the ontological depths plumbed by medium of photography and the way in which this relates to working within and against genre types.

Ultimately, the work brings into sharp focus the very largest hermeneutic questions raised by the medium, and does so by way of questions that only street photography presupposes: in a nutshell, that the superficial caption provides information for readers that plumbs the truth effects of the medium itself. In this context, there are two things to note with regard to *Clipped Branches*. First, reading the caption offers a handle for a kind of totalizing knowledge that the image otherwise resists. Second, in reading the title, we do not get as much information as we expect from the genre; it comes up short of locating the image as an event that happened at a particular time and in a particular place. This said, having observed a number of viewers in front of the work it is not an exaggeration to say that turning to read the caption is the central event of the picture: the event around which all of the various resources of picturing are focused.

If a general argument can and should be made in support of reading the work through the optic of the title, the important point to remember is that *Clipped Branches* does not gesture to its title as a simple depository of meaning, but rather more as a site of a possible gap or insufficiency in knowledge. Whether the viewer's first encounter with the work when he makes straight for the title from the "clipped branches" at the bottom of the tree trunk itself, or a late, confident approach to the obscurities of the top right hand corner of the image, the title crops up. It is something one skips to in haste, curiosity, out of desperation, necessity, and also after careful deliberation. Whether a cursory scan or an intense session of visual matching one takes recourse in the title. The irredeemably untranslatable orders of experience one finds waiting in the photograph is what sends one back to the title

every time. Thus the burden of the essay: to build a floating and mutable notion of untranslatability into a detailed point-by-point description of the image; to have untranslatability looming on the horizon at whatever point of saturation one pulls back to the title from the image - something that forces the question of this picture, its title, and the variable gap between, into a close relationship with Kant's notion of the sublime. Thinking pictures are sublime: that this one manages to levy different resources at different moments, in face of varied strategies of reading makes it unique. It demands close reading! Here is Paul de Man's version of the problem in his essay "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant." He has been wondering why the section on the mathematical sublime could not be closed off, why Kant required a further discussion of the dynamic sublime. On Section 26 of the third *Critique* De Man writes:

In order to make the sublime appear in space we need, says Kant, two acts of the imagination: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension or summation (*comprehension aesthetica*), *Auffassung* and *Zusammenfassung*. Apprehension proceeds successively, as a syntagmatic, consecutive motion along an axis, and it can proceed ad infinitum without difficulty. Comprehension, however, which is a paradigmatic totalization of the apprehended trajectory, grows increasingly difficult as the space covered by apprehension grows larger. The model reminds one of a simple phenomenology of reading, in which one has to make constant syntheses to comprehend the successive unfolding of the text: the eye moves horizontally in succession whereas the mind has to combine vertically the cumulative understanding of what has been apprehended. The comprehension will soon reach a point at which it is saturated and will no longer be able to take in additional apprehensions: it cannot progress beyond a certain magnitude which marks the limit of the imagination. This ability of the imagination to achieve syntheses is a boon to the understanding, which is hardly conceivable without it, but this gain is countered by a corresponding loss. The comprehension discovers its own limitation, beyond which it cannot reach. (de Man 1976, 77)

The dynamic of the sublime is a lot to digest on its own, but in the context of turning to the wall panel in face of *Clipped Branches* it goes down a lot easier. For in turning from the image to the title, returning to the image and so on, one performs the dynamics of Kant's formal system. As a first step to isolate the sublime, allow me to single out a number of specific examples where the medium of photography seems to extend or reach beyond the frame to become something of an institutional or interpretative bias that impacts the title, yet remains intrinsic to the work's very coherence. Take those sites of narrative intensity that draw attention to the left hand side of the picture and thus make glancing to the title both a natural and easy temptation to fulfill. The clipped branches are as good a place as any to start. More or less the center of attention - at least from a viewing distance of about fifteen or twenty feet, where one begins to pick up on their value contrasts, and the sharpness of their medium sized details - on closer inspection they present an embattled area to be avoided at all costs. A veritable viper's nest of sticks that poke and scratch, the oddly tangible three-dimensional quality of this little thicket sends one scrambling. Because I take a wide berth from the uncertainties of the empty, out-of-focus band at top right, I turn to the left.

At the extreme left hand side of the picture - it appears to have been cropped out in the 2001 version - one finds a brown leaf sticking in from the framing edge. This leaf does not look to be sitting on the fictive ground of the sidewalk, so much as

stuck between the actual transparency and the metal frame of the light box. The *trompe l'oeil* effect of this leaf catches one's eye. It pulls one in toward the left hand side of the image. A cigarette butt that is located at the bottom left-hand corner of the picture precipitates a similar experience. In relation to the viewer's distance from the tree-trunk, one's proximity to this bit of detritus is quite remarkable. It suggests or imagines a closeness to this region of the image that is not readily available elsewhere, especially in the triangle of sidewalk immediately to its right where one would expect to find similar spatial indicators. Finally, take the leaf that extends leftward from the clipped branches themselves. It looks normal enough. What is curious is that from a distance this leaf looks unmistakably like a splotch of green paint dropped on the pictorial surface itself. It has a kind of matte finish unlike the shininess of its counterpart. It is hard to take your eyes off this blotch once it has caught your eye, and like an insect lured in by a splash of color, one heads straight for it-something that again positions one on the left hand side of the picture, in proximity to the wall panel.

In addition to these details that pull the viewer in and animate an object-by-object description at the left hand side of the picture, a second dimension of pictorial resources confound the viewer, sending him in either of two directions: ultimately, scuttling off camera left, but not before leading one up and right. These visual curiosities include the lop-sidedness of the composition that leans heavily to the bottom left, the rhomboid or diagonal layout itself, and the odd depth of field which is optimally showcased in the microscopic bits of dirt at bottom left, ultimately to become cloudy and lacking focus at upper right. As a whole these elements constitute the principle narrative trajectory in the work, a movement from lower left to upper right and back again. What I point to is little more than a sensation of movement or speed implicated in the band of details that run diagonally upward and which one views because of its trajectory and eventual dissipation of focus with nothing more than a darting glance. This movement is corroborated by tonal variations, between the grey brown triangle at lower left that seems to move toward the viewer, and the steelier blue triangle at right that falls away into the distance of the lighter parallelograms on top. The overall cast of the picture exaggerates this: color waffles between oranges and blues. One experiences something similar in an early work entitled *The Bridge*, 1980, where the eye runs along a band of miniaturized details and tactility's and does not engage with larger tonal areas. I take the hyper real detailing of this band of detailing as indications that dialogue with the work is intended to begin at the lower left hand side of the picture, move up and diagonally right, only to fall back to the title after being repulsed by the far corner. Suffice it to say that along with the various other visual instabilities - especially, the disjunctions between a global light source and shadow on the micro-textual level - the wall panel provides a clear and concise translation of a number of profoundly untranslatable experiences in the image, and there is no better time to resort to the title than after one's cursory scan of the clipped branches, a more intense scrutinizing of details, or concerted attempts to focus on the upper right quadrant of the image.

We can theorize the question of reading in *Clipped Branches* thusly: the viewer is confronted by three types of reading: an extrinsic and literalized form focused in the title, which hinges on interpretation, and an intrinsic form of reading that nestles within looking. These two types of reading constitute the verifiable poles of engagement with the kind of pictures we call street photography. The second form of reading is far more fugitive than the first: it is what we commonly call narrativity. It nestles within the so-called *coup d'oeil* and can be defined as the narrative content of a global and instantaneous look: a dynamic that underwrites a paradigmatic form of comprehension. Inasmuch, this second form of reading is a question of understanding as apprehension; a successive, cumulative, and

syntagmatic motion of reading, which slowly and surely manages to colonize more and more of the picture, before it takes recourse in the metaphoric totalization of a title-following de Man's reading of Kant, a paradigmatic and transparent moment of comprehension. If we are to capture the way this picture thinks we need to figure a third form of reading that registers the increasingly larger narrative loops reading traces, but as a limit within and beyond each successive moment of comprehension.

Ideally in the genre of street photography, everything is oriented toward the processes of translation; processes crystallized in the transparency of the title and the web of referential meanings that are constitutive of the truth effects of documentary photography as a whole. However, in the example of *Clipped Branches*, one is strung out between an urge to look up and rightward on the one hand, and a sort of meek turn to the relative security of the lower left hand corner. From the safety of this mooring in details, narrative prompts one to lasso more and more of the visual anomalies of the picture-say, the fuzziness, the rushed cropping, the curious angle, the short depth of field, the striking immediacy of the image, all of which are typical effects found in the genre. One turns to the title, but not before looking at the image, scrutinizing its details, following its diagonals; at one limit letting one's eye run along and up the sharp right hand edge of the tree trunk; at another limit, allowing oneself to follow the mounting intensity of white flecks that culminate at the top edge of the picture; at yet another limit, daring to track the three leaves that punctuate a pathway from sidewalk to road at upper right. Each moment encourages close reading, each pushes apprehension further toward the upper reaches of the right hand corner, but at the same time is sufficiently disorienting that the narrator returns to the certainties of the lower left hand side of the image, and ultimately the identity forged in the name of the title.

Clipped Branches imagines a very particular kind of viewer: a close, patient and attentive reader - no doubt, one familiar with large format photography - and one in no way immune to the temptations of simply reading photography off a journalistic caption. Reading inch by inch, stumbling from one detail to the next in order to digest as much of the picture as possible is the sort of thing this picture was designed to elicit. And yet the grime that collects on the pavement, the larger bits and pieces of dirt in the tree well, the discarded packet of gum, the intense green speckles of lichen on the tree trunk, the sharply delineated and almost fluorescent right hand side of the tree never quite add up to a seamless whole. One enters the world of this picture through close and scrupulous reading and by virtue of such reading continually bumps up against the limits of these epistemological frames of knowledge, because they exist one beside the other within a single frame of reference. Take the impregnable upper right hand corner: it neatly summarizes this picture's range of epistemological shifts in perspective, scale, speed, color, and relative proximity or closeness. I read it three ways. First, as a parallelogram that is oriented to the literal plane of the transparency itself; second, a parallelogram that fits the fictive space of the diagonal which moves off right and into distance; third, a far more improbable parallelogram that sits perpendicular to the fictive line drawn by the curb, and inasmuch projects out at an angle to the picture plane itself. This formal element folds upward at a ninety-degree angle to the pavement as if one is seeing the vertical wall (different from the picture plane) of some sort of force field. No wonder, one turns to the caption on the picture's left hand side!

It is along the almost surgical incision angling into the picture plane and running along the height of the right side of the tree trunk that I would say one bumps up against this photograph's last ditch attempt to secure a kind of epistemological

knowledge that is safe from the prying eyes of viewers and the institution of photojournalism. I take the wedge as a sign of the madeness of this picture, a mark of its facticity as photographic language. The line drawn by this invisible force field blocks one entrance into the lighter toned space beyond. One is continually trying to punch through this wedge for sky, but it seems that one can only grasp this illusive horizon (perhaps the dawn of a new day) when one grasps it peripherally.

In fact, what this image tries to picture is a look up that exists only at the margins of awareness. Look closely at the white powder at the bottom center of the tree well. When one zooms in on it, one gains an edge on the white speckling in the pavement below, the clipped branch ends above, and most importantly the patches of white material at the upper left and especially right hand corner. Moving in close to the white powder functions in two registers then: it initiates the viewer into the detailed world of the picture; and secondly, permit's that viewer's peripheral awareness to stray. Trying to make sense of what exactly the white material at the upper limit of the image may be is not done with the same obsessiveness with which one hunts down details. One glances up to this nether region quickly and returns back down to the world of focus with only probable and makeshift meanings. Things happen at the periphery only when one is absorbed down below. It seems as if light floods into the picture from the upper right hand corner, especially. One imagines glimpsing an impressionistic sky with the sun just setting, but the vague identity of white clouds flattened as if by their very distance on the horizon, turn to a lost cargo of drywall when one bothers to look up. Incredibly the gritty genre of street photography here seems to touch its opposite: the sentimental form of impressionist painting.

In *Clipped Branches*, the third form of reading exists within the *aporia* between language as an extrinsic and intrinsic form of reference. We can call this suture where reading is performed, the penultimate stage of thought in this thinking picture. It marks the sublime as a plug or suture forged between two equally compelling and persuasive forms of reference. To quote the photographer himself, at a limit point like this one is confronted by "a thread of stylistic and technical indecisiveness . a practice with a . theoretical and political stake . in not choosing between fact and artifice, in working only in the shadow of choice, in hesitating." (Wall 2003, 192) At both ends of this aberrant spectrum we are, as Andrzej Warminski puts it, in "thrall to ideology" (Warminski 1995, 26) - "aesthetic ideology" as Paul de Man would remind us. (de Man 1996) In refusing to confuse or collapse linguistic reality with natural reality this photograph marks the sublime; it figures this beyond as an aporetic structure. Thinking pictures in the tradition of street photography ruminate in the untranslatable suture between such hermeneutic horizons and linguistic constructions. And if we are still well out of earshot to make out precisely what this and other pictures are thinking, through aporetic lip reading of the rhetorical kind we are at least positioned on the threshold of staging this last and most important ethical encounter.

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