

the artist is a social being who doesn't merely render what he sees in a purely optic sense because he has been conditioned to perceive various objects in the light of the culture in which he exists. Bryson then moves on to the sacred cows of semiotics—Barthes, in particular—and maintains that their formalist grids, which try to limit the boundaries of a painting to the square inches of paint, are simply deficient because “the conditions of material life” that exist outside the frame are generally ignored: “paint-



ing is embedded in social discourse which formalism is hardly able to see.”

Bryson cites Chinese painting as being, in a sense, superior to Western productions in that they are more self-reflexive: “Painting in China is predicated on the acknowledgment and indeed the cultivation of deictic markers.” That is, whereas Western painting tends to try to efface its materiality (i.e., real grapes, not paint), the Chinese brush strokes effectively call attention to themselves *as* brush strokes while simultaneously portraying a mountain or a bamboo grove. Bryson insists “that painting *as sign* must be the fundamental assumption of a materialist art history; that the place where the sign arises is the *interindividual* territory of recognition; that the concept of the sign's meaning cannot be divorced from its embodiment *in context*.” As program notes for a critical practice, these pointers are not wholly incorrect: a painted image certainly signifies more than that which it portrays, assuming that it is meant to have social currency and is not merely a

creation for the sake of itself; the perceptions of the viewers must be taken into account (e.g., whereas a Byzantine painter knew that his audience would automatically know the chapter and verse of his image, a contemporary viewer of the same thing requires a highly annotated field guide to Christian-

ity). Too great a concern with the painting as image can lead to a sterile aestheticism; too great a concern with the social milieu can lead to Socialist Realism. A fine line must be drawn with a steady hand. But Bryson's ring finger is gesticulating wildly, and the consequent blur isn't particularly illuminating. (SM)

Images, images, ima . . .

The Work of Atget: *The Ancien Régime*; The Museum of Modern Art; New York.

Bill Harris: *New York at Night*; Stewart, Tabori & Chang; New York.

Robert Freson: *The Taste of France*; Stewart, Tabori & Chang; New York.

Ansel Adams: *Examples*; New York Graphic Society/Little, Brown; Boston.

William Manchester: *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy*; Little, Brown; Boston.

Photography reigns supreme and today no one would dare deny it the rank of art. Yet, we are more certain about this self-evident truth when looking at the images of Atget, who still belongs to the 19th-century tradition of the magicians of the post-daguerreotype, or to that of Adams—who is one of the most distinguished perpetrators of that legacy. We wrote about the first two albums in this series of photographs by Eugene Atget published in this country (*Chronicles of Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 8, August 1983), and have acknowledged his pioneering genius, subtle significance, and priceless heritage. *The Ancien Régime* only confirms our opinion. In it, Atget consolidates with an incomparable visual consistency, our acquaintance with the grandeur and depth of what is called French civilization. Confronted with the imagery, one feels more poignantly than

ever that “*les civilisations sont mortelles*”—as formulated by Verlaine, Atget's contemporary. Emptiness and decay seem to suffuse the plates, but, oddly enough, there's something ennobling and hopeful in a Versailles without tourists. And looking at the façade of Petit Trianon through Atget's antiquated lens makes one instantly recognize how the past and present mix in French cultural destiny, and where all those great tastemakers of elegance like St. Laurent and Givenchy come from. Tradition, tradi . . .

New York at Night is exactly the opposite: both tradition and subtlety are drained off from this copious, lush volume of pictures as if a vacuum cleaner were trained on them. Only big cities live at night, while other cities sleep—which makes them no less rich in complexities and substances, just half-alive. By *big* we mean not necessarily large cities but the grandiose, mean, and ebullient—those like New York City. The images are evocative, superbly reproduced, and composed into an integral volume. They also deserve some better text. The introduction by one Mr. Soares (listed on the flap as “author of many books,” employed, at one time, by both *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine) consists of listing statistics and restaurants. The same, more or less, goes for Mr. Bill Harris, who provided the body text: he tries, rather tediously, to capture the soul of New York through the reporting of factual data. The flatness of his commentary is in reverse proportion to the vertical eruption of architectural forms that leap from the pages and

which, for almost a century, define New York in mankind's imagination. Harris was also an employee of *The New York Times*, which proves that little can be more boring than a native journalist who attempts to render justice to a fascinating city. We closed the resplendent album with an impression that by concentrating on bars and Rolls Royces, the authors have left the truly fascinating aspects of New York untouched.

Robert Freson's *The Taste of France* is a tantalizing delight. The quality of photography, typography, reproduction, and printing are unsurpassed, but to apply this kind of visual seduction to presenting perhaps the best food on earth is cruel. The perverse greatness of the volume lies in the circumstance that it focuses on folksy, outrightly peasant cuisine and alimentation, and brings back to the world's attention the mere fact that the real beatitudes and glories of eating are not in *Maxim's* or *Tour d'Argent*, but somewhere in Languedoc, Touraine, and Anjou. This is the most powerful populist manifesto available in the American book market to date, and whoever will be first to identify oneself with it—be it George McGovern or Jerry Falwell—will score a triumph for his party, program, or ideology.

Ansel Adams is the single most convincing and effective environmentalist



alive. We are not too taken with the ecologist argument as the acme of human cognitive effort and logical

acumen, yet, looking at Mr. Adams's picture makes us uncharacteristically benign even toward the inanities of the Sierra Club dialectics. The haunting beauty of his imagery is well-known in the better-educated strata of our society, and any attempt to describe their form and content seems both futile and somehow diminishing of anyone who would attempt such a task. The photographs should be consumed as they are, for eyes only, and venerated as such. The loving care with which the New York Graphic Society and Little, Brown published Mr. Adams's book is laudable.

Mr. Manchester's *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy* has as much text as it has pictures. We leave the former to historians, political scientists, and social critics, but the latter is splendid and valuable as a document of how far modern journalistic photography can render a subject worshiped if it only wishes to do so. Some will say that it is a biased iconography, or graphic mythmaking. Maybe so. But because of the historic idiosyncrasy of his fate, John Kennedy can already be placed above our quotidian strifes. This volume gladly serves as a sample of how to do it. ☐

THE AMERICAN PROSCENIUM

Demo Liberal Chutzpah

Once again, President Reagan has spoken out about the collapse of the American educational system (and correctly so) and stated facts that will hit anyone who has an average IQ, and one that is uncontaminated by liberal orthodoxy, with a force of a brick:

Classrooms across the country are not temples of learning, teaching the lessons of goodwill, civility and wisdom important to the whole fabric of American life. . . . Each month, some 2-1/2 million students [are] victims of robberies and thefts and [in 1978] more than 250,000 students suffered physical attacks. In large cities . . . students . . . [are] afraid to go to school. . . . One psychiatrist who treats teachers said many of them suffer symptoms identical to those of World War I shell-shock victims.

And once again, a spokesman for the Democratic Party, a congressman from California, came up with an astonishing rebuke—an argument that boggles the mind through the sheer power of the insolence of a lie:

This is brought about in large part by

this administration's cuts in educational programs, including cuts in the school-lunch program, cuts in student aid and the attempt to eliminate the Department of Education.

So, let's once again call to mind truths as simple and self-evident as heliocentrism. The deterioration, degeneration, decay, and final failure of American education began under President Kennedy, when the manipulation of American sociocultural ethos became the exclusive franchise of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Consequently, a tremendous bureaucratic machine was erected, whose principles and laws were institutionalized and ruthlessly enforced

Fleeting Truths

Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, responding to a question about the status of his organization in the late 20th century:

The union is never defeated. As long as it stays it endures. The union will endure.

Presumably, it will stay. But what if it leaves? Or is defeated? Is Socrates a man? ☐