

*The Incomplete spectacle: Aberfan in its own image\**

by Chris Townsend

In *The Attraction of Onlookers* Shimon Attie offers us restrained yet intimate portraits of individuals; he also offers us an intimate portrait of the community that is the South Wales village of Aberfan. Filmed rotating slowly on a platform in front of the camera, each individual now interacts with the others on the screens around them and with the others who succeed them. They seem to float in space, isolated and without any form of location or context, identifiable only by the tools of their trade, the accoutrements of study or play, their robes and uniforms of office. To become understandable, to be interpreted, both by us and - as we shall see - in order to understand each other and the history to which they belong, these individuals have to be related both between images, one to another, and in series - one after another. Where these individuals, these citizens, belong is not Aberfan as a place, though that is where they all live. Nor do they belong to Aberfan as a history, or rather not to a specific historical trauma, though that is a history that they all live; whether it has been lived through, in some cases survived, or for the newcomers and those born in the last forty years, inherited. Where they belong - these individuals, these citizens - is in the *community* of Aberfan that they make. That is in Aberfan not as place or history, but as a network of friendships and antipathies, as a network of trust and support, caution and scepticism, as lives lived, everyday. This community, distinctively, has found itself in a void, been made by and through a catastrophic event and what came after. But the 'what came after' here is not a continuation of the event, not a series of events and after-effects imposed on those who already suffer. Rather it is because of that void - a certain spacing of history, a certain space which, often by neglect, has been given to the people of the village - that the community which preceded the catastrophe has rediscovered itself, that a new community has been made. It is this community, whose members can look each other in the face, experience each other, that has made history, and the transformation of place, its work, even as that transformation has made them and the village of Aberfan into a spectacle, an attraction *for* onlookers.

\* later expanded and included as chapter in *Art and Death* by Chris Townsend

Each of Attie's portraits is a detailed study of an individual or small group of people; a degree of scrutiny that we rarely, if ever, receive. The portrait is not a democratic genre of art, before the twentieth century it is rarely concerned with the ordinary or the collective. It is only with the advent of the camera, and projects such as that of the German photographer August Sander, whose 'Men of the Twentieth Century' attempted to document systematically the representative figures of ordinary life in Germany between two world wars, that we witness a concern with the mundane. (When we look at a great group portrait from history, such as Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch*, we are not usually aware that this is no ordinary group of men banded together to protect and police the city, but rather a social institution whose membership was keenly sought by those who wished to emphasize or enhance their already significant status and authority within the community. This is a painting of power and for power. It is this group that has commissioned Rembrandt, one of the leading, and therefore one of the costliest, painters of the day to make their portrait - a portrait that in itself further enhances collective and individual status.) In many ways, as the French art historian Louis Marin showed, whoever the portrait is of, always the portrait *is* the king; it exists as forms of representation that embody and disseminate power from the top down. All subsequent portraits, whether those of noblemen and women, clerics, soldiers, scholars, seek resemblance with their ruler the king's image and therefore seek to convey whatever degree of power and influence the sitter may exercise in a hierarchical society. The subject of the portrait may be an isolated individual, but through portraiture he is also exposed as belonging to a network of relationships - *he is, paradoxically, part of a community.*

Visually, Attie's portraits have more in common with Sander's than Rembrandt's, but we might say of them that they keep a watch over each other, even as they are watched over by us. We might say that they are historically significant figures, perhaps more significant in the relation of the mundanity of their daily lives to the events of a wider history than the aspirant Dutch burghers or petty renaissance priests and princelings. This is not an essay about "Aberfan", about a place as synecdoche of an awful historical event; rather it is about Shimon Attie's artwork about the citizens of Aberfan. We cannot

represent the deaths, we cannot represent the losses experienced by those who survived. However, even as Attie consciously places his subjects in a darkened void and a kind of spacing, within the video installation, we need to outline a relationship between the artwork and history. That void is only understandable as a void if it is framed. The disaster of 1966 defined Aberfan: even as it destroyed the history of the village as it had been to that point. It is that tragedy which makes the village, even today, the subject of media spectacle. One could say that, in the eyes of the media, in Aberfan every day since 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966 is always the day after the catastrophe. Yet that trauma emerged *from* Aberfan's history. Aberfan's identity before that day, its very existence, was predicated on the economy of mining at Merthyr Vale; the disaster was a consequence of neglect, of disdain even, towards the community by the management of the industry, by the hierarchies to which that management belonged, that manifested itself in other ways, ways that demeaned its members rather than destroying them. The disaster of the landslide did not change that situation; rather it exposed it and repeated it. One of the striking features of Aberfan's history after 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966, along with the niggardly compensation, is that a solitary social worker was appointed for one year to help the bereaved and the traumatised inhabitants of the village cope what had happened. To all intents the citizens of Aberfan were left to get on with it; they were in a void, just as they had been before the event. The difference was that now their struggle with history, their struggle to understand and shape what had happened and what was happening to them, was now the subject of media interest, they had become part of the media spectacle.

The darkness that surrounds Attie's subjects, whether in the video installation or accompanying photographs, might be understood as symbolic as much as it is a literal, quietly spectacular framing device, but it is not a symbol of the moment. The blackness is not there to describe a caesura, the absolute break in history that we might take 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966 to have been. It is not to say that the only context for these people is a non-context, not to say that on this day the village of Aberfan ended in catastrophe, not to say that the only way in which its citizens can be envisaged is in emptiness. Nor is the darkness there to *literalise* the blackness of coal, nor of burial, the blackness of memory, nor a perpetual sense of mourning – though it might invoke all those things. Though the

mass-media might want to depict the village thus, Aberfan does not go daily dressed in mourning wear. The catastrophe *was* not an event that defined and fixed the place forever, nor a trauma lived through, mourned and then “healthily” forgotten. (This would be the psychologist’s model of mourning; incorporation, memorial, and coming out the other side forgetting, mostly.) The catastrophe is an event that is lived through and lived with; that at once shapes Aberfan and is constantly reshaped by it. The event is not one of the past tense that determines perpetually the future; it is immediate, lived with, lives on, and is a property of the community. In sharp contrast to the media version of history as spectacle, this is history as lived experience.

Here I want to invoke a hypothesis by the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, which has an important resonance for Aberfan as place *and* people, and which Shimon Attie seems to me to be capturing in his video and photographs:

History...does not belong primarily to time, nor to succession, nor to causality, but to community, or to being-in-common. And this is so because community itself is historical. Which means that it is not a substance, nor a subject; it is not a common being, which could be the goal or culmination of a progressive process. It is rather a being-*in*-common which only *happens*, or which is happening, an event, more than a “being”. [FH, 149]

This is not, conventionally, how we think of history: history is ‘events in time’; it is one-thing-after-another. A conventional view would have it that Aberfan only exists after the visible, representable event, that history begins in October 1966 at the same moment as it comes to a catastrophic end. This is the view of the world’s media, reiterating trauma as spectacle for passive audiences. In that presentation of catastrophe the mass media overlooks its own responsibility for a critical analysis of events and fails to account that even the day after the event, the event changes. History is always being resumed, even in the moment of the disastrous happening, even as the world around us ends.

But how is history resumed? How does it come to belong to “us”, to a community in the real world rather than to individuals in portraits? I want to suggest that in the village of Aberfan, history was resumed by a group of people, the community, who were made by the event and who took that history to be theirs. To quote Nancy again: ‘The happening consists in bringing forth a certain spacing of time, where something takes place, in

*inaugurating* time itself. Today it is the resumption of history that takes place as our historical event, as the way we *eventually* are in history.' [FH 156] It is not, not exclusively, perhaps not at all, the happening of October 1966 that is the historical event that gives us a timescale by which to measure things, to say that this is the fortieth anniversary of the landslide and the loss of so many lives. This is what gives us 'our time', or as Nancy says 'by its spacing, the possibility of being *we*'. It is the resumption of history, the next thing and the next, that the community does within 'a certain common space of time' [FH 157-158] that is the historical event.

What is this resumption then? I would say that it is what Shimon Attie shows us in all its ordinary dignity. It is work on behalf of each other through which the self comes to history. It is the daily business of running a sweetshop or a café; where one is maintained by newcomers to the village and its ways who are nonetheless accommodated to it, as an event, and accommodating of it, as an event and the other is run by a woman, a child of 1966, who explains her survival by the fortune of being in one classroom rather than another. It is the daily business of being a schoolchild, forty years on, in a village that once lost almost the entire generation of its children. How can such a child, whose parents were quite likely born after the event, have any consciousness of that legacy? And how can they not? Being a child in Aberfan means something special; it means being a symbol for other members of the community; those who remember, those of who lost children, those who looked at each other in the ordinariness and tormented grief of their faces and lived on. Attie gently but brilliantly illuminates the dichotomy of the present and the past that is lived with, seating the girl at an old desk, as if she somehow occupied two different times within the same space.

Aberfan has not become a community *through* death, which is how the mass-media spectacle would portray it, but it has become a community through the unspectacular work that human beings do in response to calamity and to death. Attie, through his attention to his subjects, through the way in which they turn towards and away from each other, I think lays plain what this is. It is the face-to-face encounter, the meeting of the other person. I do not mean here that ordinary meeting, important though that is. Community, history begins, or recommences, with the meeting of one to another, the

face stripped bare of artifice, reduced to its most fundamental elements to a point where it is almost unbearable. This is what our experience of death does to us. As the Jewish and French thinker Emmanuel Levinas put it: 'We encounter death in the face of the other.' [GDT 105]. But we might also take from that statement that we encounter the other in the face of death – it is at that moment that we encounter others. Not as we would have them in our image, so that we might say 'oh, they are just like us', but to meet them in all their wild difference, their impossibility. Elsewhere Levinas talks about the presence of the face as such a violent intrusion on our experience of the world, turning our possessive gaze into generosity. [TI 34] This is where the mass-media fails, since it exists to enable us to recognise and 'understand' other people – that is to reduce them to versions of ourselves. It refuses to acknowledge an ethics without imperatives. This is where art *may* succeed, since freed by the realism of photography and television from the role of portraiture as symbolic communication of the image as power, it may belong to a different economy, that of the local and the personal. Art *may*, and I think Shimon Attie's art here does, tell us about relation, about the juxtaposition of the impossible that makes up a real community in space and time. Where the portrait would once have told us about the singular power of the individual, and collectively of the dynasty (across time) or the hierarchy (across space), in the video installation we see a nobility of the ordinary, a relation of images that have no power over each other. Where once we had the power of the singular, here we see the power of the group directed towards the outside world.

Especially, I think Attie's art tells us about that *turning* to generosity from our own self-interest. [The word Levinas uses in French is *muant*, which may mean transformation in the sense of a metamorphosis, or of a violent turning inside out.] This is not only what it means to be a survivor of someone else's death; it is what it means to see the face of a survivor. It is the call to a generosity beyond calculation that is the source of community and the possibility of a stake in one's own history. I'm thinking here of the faces of the older members of the community that Attie shows us: those who were young, bereaved, distraught mothers and fathers, forty years ago; those who raced from the colliery to dig their children out, and failed, and the faces of those too who lost no one, and yet had to look at the faces of their friends and neighbours and say that in recognising you, for the

first time, I too have lost everything. These are now the faces, beatific, intense, resigned, or maybe simply tired, of those who have given a life of service in supporting one another, in learning how to survive on one's own. They may be too the faces of those whose pension for a life of work in the pit is the daily wearing of a mask, just to be able to breathe. Perhaps this is a face we would rather not see, but a face that, precisely because it makes us uncomfortable, because it tells us where responsibility lies, that we must see. Levinas writes: 'What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is *par excellence* the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own.' [GDT 105] Is it too much to say that it is the traumas of history, experienced as real, not as mediation, that compel us to love one another? Is this what Aberfan learned to do? Is it too much to say that in the faces of that community, even when they are estranged from each other, Shimon Attie tells us something about love as continuing, historical process; as work, rather than sympathy or pathos as momentary event?

What was it, Ernst Bloch wondered, that led those who had no need of revolution, those who had all the benefits of power and safety, to become revolutionaries. His answer was fundamentally humanistic; it was 'the spectacle of misery, the frustration of the neighbour'. [GDT 94] Levinas sees in this the power not just of economic and social injustice and alienation, but of death itself, to make and shape communities and to make and shape history. His answer is the same as Bloch's: we work towards tomorrow, knowing that there will be no utopian ending, but nonetheless called to an ethical action by the suffering that is, *or that one day will be*, written in the other's face. Nothing special, then: it is daily labour in vain that gives us our identity; that inscribes our portrait in the world. Aberfan was an ordinary Welsh mining village; today it is an ordinary Welsh village; nothing special. It is at the same time extraordinary. This is not in its legacy of trauma, it is not as an 'attraction to onlookers', a spectacle of grief. Rather it is extraordinary in the way in which its citizens have, through the simple dignified act of going on living and never forgetting, refashioned themselves in history and in their own image.