

**Bertrand Fleuret**

*Landmasses and Railways*

J & L Books, Atlanta, 2009

ISBN: 978-0-9799188-3-4

It is commonly accepted that every picture tells a story. Yet storytelling with pictures is also a complex and challenging enterprise that requires much more than the mere presentation of storytelling pictures. Since the meaning of pictures remains so often open to debate, more is needed to warrant the clear and transparent communication of the images: one needs words, for instance a title, a caption, or an accompanying text; but one may need also a specific type of presentation, for instance a book, i.e. a device that infers almost automatically a narrative reading, for turning the page is often associated with a leap in time, and so a series of pictures can be read more easily as a sequence that corresponds with a journey through time.

Bertrand Fleuret's *Landmasses and Railways* clearly play with all these models and assumptions. Yet at the same time his book cleverly defies and transforms them. Despite being deceptively simple, it relies upon the very clarity and transparency of its images and their arrangement to raise fundamental questions on what it means to tell stories with pictures in books.

As soon as a photograph enters into a book, its status shifts. First, pictures in books are no longer pictures, they become printed matter, the materiality of the book that hosts them being part of the materiality of the pictures themselves. The format of a book (even if the picture is not printed full page) and the quality of its paper (often very different from the paper used to print pictures that are exhibited in museums and galleries) for instance are not external or secondary aspects of the picture, but part of its flesh and bones. Am I overinterpreting Bertrand Fleuret when I read his title in this perspective: aren't landmasses a metaphorical representation of the host medium that receives the inscription of the then no less metaphorical railways?) Second, pictures in a book obey a very paradoxical logic of sequentiality. Pictures of this kind are certainly part of a series, and are thus meant to be seen in a certain order, but at the same time they are also radically separated from the pictures on the other pages of the book, which it is impossible to see simultaneously (here as well the

difference with the gallery or museum space is telling). And am I overinterpreting here as well when I hear in the combination of the words 'landmasses' and railways' an echo of this tension: isn't a 'masse' something that does not move, and isn't a 'way' something that opens space for travelling?

Pictures, in other words, become printed pages, and these pages cannot stand alone, however isolated they may be from one another. One of the most inspiring and innovative aspects of *Landmasses and Railways* is that Bertrand Fleuret suggests an intimate relationship between these two characteristics of photographs being included in books. His work can be read indeed as an attempt to such a relationship, and in this regard these very beautiful and aesthetic images acquire also a strong theoretical character. They may tell stories, undoubtedly, inevitably, yet at the same time they make us also understand how storytelling works in picture books.

The first characteristic that strikes us in this book is the fact that the pictures are printed on non-glossy paper. This feature produces in these often very dark images an effect of blurring, of out of focus, of radical ambivalence. This effect may remember from time to time the traditional ideal of pictorialism, yet its real strategy is totally different. What the vagueness suggests in these images, is not the aesthetic surplus value of the image itself, but the hesitations and uncertainties of the human operator at the moment of the picture-taking. What we see in the blurredness and the greyness of many images, is the involvement and the commitment of their maker, whom we imagine troubled by his very act of image-making. The stakes of the out of focus are therefore quite different than in pictorialism: in the latter case, blurring the image is a way of transforming the photograph into a tableau (and this might be seen as a form of hubris); in the former case, it reflects the human presence of its maker, the distance that he feels between the image as he has taken it and the image as he could have taken it (and this attitude reveals a fundamental modesty, which helps involve the reader). At a more general level, it could be suggested that the out of focus quality of many images of *Landmasses and Railways* establish a secret communication between the various layers that are intermingled in photographs: the operator, the camera, the printing press, the picture, the reader.

This multilayeredness of every image is then linked by Bertrand Fleuret to the narrative dimension to the book, to the fact that it can become a real travel, although certainly not one

in the traditional sense of the word. For at first sight *Landmasses and Railways* does tell no story at all. On the contrary, much seems to be done to block such a narrative perspective. The title is more spatial and descriptive than temporal and narrative. And if the first two sections have more or less storytelling titles ('The Melancholy of Departure', 'Approaching the City'), the three last sections downsize this dimension dramatically ('Inside the Walls', 'An Empty Building', 'The Garden'). In addition, there is no clear sequentiality in the thematic ordering of the images. What each of the five sections proposes is less a progression than a series of variations on the same theme, with once in a while surprises that force us to rethink the very cohesion of each section. In no sense is there a possibility to decipher the transition from one page to another as corresponding with a movement in time. We shift from one image to another, not from one moment in time to another. One might even defend that Bertrand Fleuret's book is definitely antinarrative: not only does it block much that generally functions as a narrative trigger, but it seems also to tease the reader's eagerness to find stories everywhere. *Landmasses and Railways* clearly refuses to provide the reader with clues and alibis that might allow him to leap from one image to another and to proceed to the way-out as soon as possible. On the contrary, by disappointing this almost natural desire for stories, Bertrand Fleuret helps the reader to stay on each page, and to transform the time invested in each image into a new kind of narrative.

Corollarily, and here the out of focus technique and all what it involves returns in an unexpected way, Bertrand Fleuret creates even newer ways of telling by emphasizing the solidarity between photographer and spectator. If one accepts that the blurring of the images reveals, among many other things of course, the hesitations of the photographer refusing to make a choice in favour of 'this' (decisive?) picture while leaving out all the rest, and if one accepts also that the succession of pictures that are variations on similar themes exposes something of the genealogy of the book, *Landmasses and Railways* becomes a journey that author and reader share from the very first till the very last of its pages. Each page proposes a new image, as an attempt to find the ideal illustration of the theme uttered by title and subtitle, and this image is the starting point of a trial and error protocol that brings the author to make new propositions while enabling the reader to evaluate them in a unobtrusive way.

The specific use of the double spread, which I consider the second salient feature of this book, hints into the same direction. The transformation of the pictures is not just achieved by its new materiality (the difference between picture and picture as printed in this book) or by its new

narrativity (the difference between a sequence of pictures as obeying a story logic and temporality that also exist outside the book and a sequence of pictures that invite to read each picture separately as a story in itself), but also and foremost by the systematic tension between picture and page. Although, once again, the page lay-out is extremely simple, the very astute montage techniques used by Bertrand Fleuret make that no picture is left unchanged: either two pictures, one on the left page, one on the right page, are glued together into a totally new composition thanks to the deletion of the central gutter, or one single image is virtually split by the very visible presence of the fold, which leaves a clear mark on the dark surface of the picture. In each case, the book changes the picture, which is either recombined or cut-up.

*Landmasses and Railways* promises a traditional journey, both melancholic (we no longer travel by railway, and if we do, we know that a railway journey is no longer what it used to be) and modern (the link with landmasses and continents give a globalized twist to the idea of travelling). But to the careful reader, it offers something quite different: not a journey into the world with the help of a book, but a journey into the book with the help of the world.

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