Legendary History, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Ryan Trecartin

As Philadelphia-based artist Ryan Trecartin continues his rise through the art world two positions have coalesced around his work. One position articulates a kind of postmodern discourse: Trecartin is showing the dissolution of all subjects, all genders, all relations. There is free-play, free-affect, free-love. The other, which I have argued for in a specific context, is a Marxist/Situationist line, which sees in Trecartin's work primarily an affirmative act of culture which, in its failed subversiveness, serves only as a mirror and reflection of the dominant mode.

Trecartin's recent artist talk at the Institute of Contemporary Art in late April gives me cause to return to the questions raised by his work and its place in contemporary U.S. culture. As I am considering here a quick look of the pieces he showed at the lecture and his general reception, my aim is not so much to understand the work itself as its place in these contemporary debates. Moreover, the analysis is primarily formal, and therefore necessarily partial.

His lecture showed precisely why reception of his practice has been so split. For example, when asked about the appellation "queer" to his work (Trecartin is part of the ICA's new show, *Queer Voices*), he deflected the meaning of queer as a gender or sexuality-based phenomenon. Rather, and I paraphrase, he stated that queer for him was a general sense of opposition to the norm. Then, he tellingly added, "Maybe."

What exactly Trecartin means by opposition or by norm is not entirely clear. Again, if the norm is conceived as the policing of identity, specificity of relations, fixity of subject-positions, then, sure, Trecartin's work is oppositional. If norm is defined, alternatively, as the "new spirit of capitalism," that is, as flexible, adaptive and creative, then, well, queer has just become the new norm. The partially dialectical status of these positions is affirmed in the dissolution of both queer and norm in their mutually interchangeable positions within the opposing discourses.

What I want to suggest in returning to Trecartin's talk here, then, is that we need to seek a position outside this mutually destructive dialectic which relies on the vast theorization norm / opposition and thereby cannot take account of the variegated planes of contemporary existence. As postmodernism has been the frame of *Machete's* reading group this month, we can begin by asking how that term, primarily theorized in the late 70s and early 80s, relates to Trecartin's work nearly 30 years later. Indeed, if there is an increasing belief that the idea of postmodernism is no longer an adequate name for contemporary culture, it is precisely because of practices like Trecartin's which, in particular, bring to the fore questions of technology, interactivity and networks which are simply outside the analysis of say, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* or Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* – the documents which defined postmodern culture as historical depthlessness for Fredric Jameson.

There is a brief moment in Jameson's work on postmodernism where he compares his project to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Jameson is explicitly trying to understand how postmodernism represents contemporary reality, akin to how Auerbach sketched the forms of mimesis from Homer to modernism. In returning to Auerbach's framework, I want to raise the question, "What is at stake in the methods Trecartin uses to represent reality?"

In the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, Auerbach makes a distinction between history and legend. He writes, "Even when the legendary does not immediately betray itself by elements of the miraculous…it is generally quickly recognizable by its composition. It runs far too smoothly." Legend eliminates, synthesizes, reduces. History is contradictory, confused, complex. The characters of legend are "clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives and the continuity of whose feelings and actions remains uninterrupted." Auerbach, writing in the shadow of Nazism, finds such motives, logics and rational actors completely absent from history proper.

Now it might seem at first as if Trecartin's work should be characterized as historical: the characters are fluid, the actions are complex and confused, the logic of actions is unclear. But this is the postmodern reading. The critical reading is quite the opposite: Trecartin's work is ahistorical; there is a smoothness in its very appearance of striation; there is a simplification of the complexity of history and domination. My counter proposal is that both positions are in a sense accurate, or, more specifically, that Trecartin's work in fact represents a dissolution of the opposition between legend and history.

In an interview in 2009, Trecartin stated, "I see my characters exploring a technologically driven yet non-gender-centric psychologically complex transitional world which is inherently positive and energetic as opposed to neutral and formulaic." History (the speed of current events) becomes legend (the smooth fluidity of energy). The complexity of the present is not represented as smoothness; rather it is that very smoothness.

My point is not that such a reflection is uninteresting and misrepresents "the way things really are." Nor that Trecartin's works are unsophisticated, sophomoric or uninteresting – they are not. My interest rather is to get at the meaning of this "transitional world," which, it seems to me, is precisely posed to conflate the distinction between legendary and historic narrative. And I am questioning the grounds on which Trecartin can claim this world to be "inherently positive," when every technological innovation has varied potentials for both positivity and negativity.

For Auerbach, the distinction between legend (more often found in the Homeric epic) and history (more in the Biblical narratives) allowed him to articulate a relationship between narrative strategy, representation and authority. More history meant more "background," (that is, more unspoken meanings), which meant more authority via mystery and a "demand" for interpretation. It meant a kind of text that did not try to let one escape from reality, but to make its own reality construct the meaning of the world as such. Again, Trecartin appears to present both at the same time: one escapes from reality into a reality which it turns out was the reality of the world all along. At least, this is the claim.

I cannot offer yet a direct assessment of the meaning of such a dissolution, or such a view of technology. Suffice it to say I am skeptical. My concern with the reception of his work has been and remains to be that it overshadows more concrete, more critical, and more self-reflexive practices which do not fit as easily into the demands of today's mainstream curatorial practices. But still, like technology itself, Trecartin's work has various potentials (both positive and negative) and a serious consideration of them cannot begin when we are simply making claims about Trecartin's capacity to represent the "contemporary condition," or even future conditions.

To think in these terms might move us past Jameson's framework of a singular identity of the present which can be synthetically stated and either affirmed or opposed. Auerbach's subtler thesis in *Mimesis* is that there are multiple modes of representation available at any given time and that these modes bear directly on questions of interpretation, authority and history. It is not in fact the case that in "our contemporary moment" we have lost the ability to distinguish between legend and history; but I do feel that this is the case with Trecartin's work. The stakes of such a dissolution will be the subject of future deliberations.

For now, I am thinking here in some un-figured way of the scene in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, when Major T. J. "King" Kong, unaware that his mission has been aborted, jumps on an atomic bomb and rides it out of the plane like a cowboy, triggering a global destruction system and bringing an end to nearly all life on earth.

-Avi Alpert