



SANCTUARY
GREGORY CREWDSON

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Essay by A. O. SCOTT

All exhibition prints *Untitled*, 2009–10

Pigmented inkjet prints

22 × 28 inches (55.9 × 96.5 cm)

NOTE: The works do not depict normal conditions at the Cinecittà lot,
and reflect Cinecittà's compliance with the artist's request that the studio staff refrain from
carrying out standard cleanup and maintenance procedures at the relevant sites.

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SANCTUARY *is dedicated to Lily and Walker*

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WHEN IN ROME

GREGORY CREWDSON'S SANCTUARY

by A. O. SCOTT

What I have in mind is a series of dreams based on a longing to visit Rome. . . .

SIGMUND FREUD

The Interpretation of Dreams

I.

You recognize this kind of dream. You are in a place that is at once familiar—named, known, specified by some curious annotative function of the mind—and utterly strange. You have never been here before, and yet you wander these byways with the unmistakable conviction of approaching a known destination. You proceed through a door or an opening, down a corridor or a street, and find yourself somewhere you did not expect: an alley opens into an enclosed chamber; a hallway leads into the open air. The walls, so solid from one perspective, turn out to be facades supported by flimsy timber and scaffolding—or maybe even illusions, superimposed on thin air. The style of architecture changes without warning, as if each successive courtyard represented a different era, a distinct ruined civilization heaped on top of the others without regard for chronology or coherence. Is that a temple? A parking lot? A rustic village square? A city street?

Are you indoors or out? The flat gray vault of the sky might be a painted backdrop, or an optical projection of some kind. And yet you feel an occasional stirring of breeze, note the grass and weeds sprouting underfoot, hear the crepuscular racket of birdsong: tokens of the natural world in the midst of what is obviously a constructed, artificial environment. Surrounded by those walls, you feel a profound sense of enclosure that is at once protective and confining. You are in a labyrinth without a center, and without an exit. There must have been an entrance, though. Surely you have not always been here. How did you get in?

Is anyone else here? Even though it is completely empty of people—an occasional statue tricks you for an instant into thinking that you are not alone, until its mute obduracy redoubles your solitude—this place is thick with implications of human presence. It feels haunted, its silent corners and promenades alive with associations that are at once vivid and impossible to grasp. You know this landscape, where it is found on the map and what its features mean, but that knowledge lies just beyond the borders of this particular dream. You are not in a physical space at all, you understand, but a landscape of consciousness, arranged according to the paradoxical laws of the unconscious.

But maybe it is also something else. Surely these weeds and timbers, these stones and buttresses, are not the fabrications of your mind alone. It seems possible that you have crossed some dream boundary and arrived at the place—the literal, actual, physical place—where dreams are made, stored, discarded, and recycled. Maybe you're not dreaming at all.

II.

*"Asking the way," moreover, was a direct allusion to Rome,
since it is well known that all roads lead there.*

—FREUD

You are indeed in Rome: the palpable, geographical Italian metropolis, thick with legend and choked with traffic. But this is a particular corner of Rome—a virtual, time bound empire tucked inside the Eternal City, a dream depository that has its origins in a historical nightmare.

The Cinecittà movie studio—aha! Of course! You knew it all along!—was built in 1937, commissioned by Benito Mussolini to serve the aligned causes of cinema and fascism. At its birth, this sprawling studio was consecrated to a monstrous imperial ambition. Like Joseph Goebbels, Mussolini and his henchman Luigi Freddi, Cinecittà's first administrator, conceived of movies as a potent instrument of propaganda and as the paradigmatic art form of a totalitarian state—"our strongest weapon." Cinecittà, an elephantine corporatist monument, would be both a factory and a showcase for this grandiose vision.

Like the Venice Film Festival, the other epitome of Il Duce's monstrous and ardent cinephilia, Cinecittà survived the collapse of his dictatorship, and achieved a glorious destiny in the postwar era, becoming the epicenter of a resurgent (if always chaotic) Italian cinema and a hub of international production. In the 1950s, the studio was known as "Hollywood on the Tiber." The chariot race in William Wyler's *Ben Hur*—at the time perhaps the most elaborate action sequence ever filmed—was shot in Cinecittà. Federico Fellini, who made most of his major films at least partly at the studio, adopted it as the explicit setting, you might almost say a featured character, in movies such as *8½* and *Intervista*. If you have seen those pictures—or Fellini's *Roma* and *Satyricon*, or any number of less exalted sex farces, historical epics, or Euro-American co-productions from the second half of the last century—you have traveled to Cinecittà.

Now, in the hard light of our own time, it is not what it used to be. The golden age of Italian cinema has long since waned, and parts of Cinecittà are not the hive of activity they used to be. Italian television programs (including the local version of the *Big Brother* reality franchise) are produced there, and every now and then an American production, lured by the vast available space, relatively cheap labor, and undeniable nostalgic cachet, will make use of the studio's back lots and

soundstages. Martin Scorsese, pursuing the grand historical folly that was *Gangs of New York*, commissioned a replica of pre-Civil War Manhattan inside its walls. Wes Anderson confected portions of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* there. The HBO sandal-and-toga series *Rome* was shot on Cinecittà sets that evoked the glory of the ancient empire.

Much of the *Rome* set, damaged in a fire in 2007, still stands, a modern stucco-and-plywood ruin in a city full of ancient stones. Pieces of Scorsese's old New York also remain, and the presence of these half-remembered structures contributes to the weird sense of familiarity in some of Gregory Crewdson's new photographs, which were taken in idle zones of Cinecittà in the summer of 2009. But the power of the photographs hardly depends on the intimation of costumed movie stars moving through these still frames, nor yet on the particular cultural associations of their settings. Some inkling of memory is clearly conjured by these images, but the status of that memory—is it collective or personal? yours or someone else's? real or illusory?—remains enigmatic, even as the pictures present it with bracing, almost painful clarity.

III.

*The possibility of creating composite structures stands foremost among the characteristics
which so often lend dreams a fantastic appearance, for it introduces into the
content of dreams elements which could never have been objects of actual perception.*

—FREUD

In some obvious respects, *Sanctuary* represents a departure for Crewdson. Those familiar with his earlier work—collected in the books *Twilight* and *Beneath the Roses*, among others—will immediately note what is missing. Color, for one thing. People, for another. And also a less easily identifiable quality, an element of staging, of incipient drama, of narrative content.

Crewdson's photographs do not tell stories, exactly, but they tend to look as if they did. Elaborately staged and lighted, they appear to freeze action, precisely as if they were stills from imaginary movies. A rich sense of artifice pervades them, even as the images themselves—characters in houses or on the streets of ordinary neighborhoods, caught in postures of domestic distress or implicit violence—conform to an aesthetic we tend to identify as realism.

This is not to deny their surreal qualities, but the tremor of the uncanny palpating in these pictures derives precisely from their vivid literalness. They might almost belong to the history of painting, in a line of quasi-narrative figuration that extends backward from Alex Katz through Edward Hopper and Balthus via Courbet and Manet to the Holland of Vermeer.

But the more powerful and immediate response, the commingled feeling of suspense, intimacy, mystery, and recognition that pulses through *Beneath the Roses*—the sense that what we are looking at is both actual and illusory—surely comes from the habit of movie watching. The saturated colors and chiaroscuro lighting; the free-floating intensity of feeling that animates the human figures, passes between them, and lingers in the air we could be looking at stills, or conjuring memories, from some lost artifact of 1950s Technicolor. Something by Alfred Hitchcock, Douglas Sirk, or Nicholas Ray; you can almost hear the sob and wail of a lush orchestral score fading as you turn the page. Crewdson's method has long been closely allied to filmmaking. His pictures are discontinuous and self-contained—no matter how quickly you flip the pages, they will not move—but to create them he marshals a machinery of illusion-making not very different from what you would find in a Hollywood (or Cinecittà) production.

In contrast, the smaller-scale, monochrome photographs in *Sanctuary* were shot on a digital camera with a minimal crew in a relatively short period of time. Except for a few cases where he brought a source of illumination into the frame, Crewdson used available light, shooting early and late in the day when the blazing of the Roman summer sun was fairly tame. He sprayed down the dust with water, and made puddles that served as reflecting surfaces, but otherwise everything you see in this tour of Cinecittà is as he found it. (Offers from the studio administration to trim weeds and clear out trash were politely declined.)

To some extent, then, this project represents a foray into documentary. Historical precedent can be found in the empty Paris streetscapes of Eugène Atget, or in Camilo José Vergara's studies of de-industrialized American cities. But the notable difference is that while those bodies of work contemplate the mute facticity of buildings and sidewalks in order to glean something about the social reality of cities, Crewdson peers into the soul of a place that, strictly speaking, never had any social reality at all. And yet its material presence—the brute quiddity of all that timber and metal rebar, the frayed edges and smooth surfaces of all that stuff—is undeniable.

One feature of the digital format is a hallucinatory depth of focus, so that the eye's natural desire to blur, foreshorten, and catalog is thwarted. And the space

itself is not organized according to any conventional functional hierarchy. None of these structures has any function other than to be captured by a camera and to give an appearance, from a certain angle, of being something else. *Sanctuary* does not so much destroy that illusion—an illusion genetically connected to the visual fantasies of Crewdson's previous work—as sneak up on it. It takes you to the other side of the scenery, into the ordinarily invisible realm behind the visual artifice.

The phrase "behind the scenes" has rarely been so apt, or so irrelevant: it promises gossip, insider knowledge, demystification, none of which Crewdson provides. Behind the scenes there is nothing. But we are hardly staring into an abyss. The unconscious abhors a vacuum, and the mind will fill empty spaces with meaning and emotion. And it is their ability simultaneously to invite and to thwart this kind of speculation—the reverie of a solitary walker tiptoeing through secret places and dreaming fragmentary epics, romances, comedies, and histories—that gives the photographs in *Sanctuary* their power. That, and their intensely personal quality. These are not dream images, as Crewdson's phantom movie stills might have been, but rather images of what Freud called the dream work, or of its aftermath. A literal question—what is left behind when the movie has wrapped and the cast and crew have departed?—produces a symbolic analog. What is left of the world we dreamed up after we awaken?

IV.

*A fourth dream, which took place shortly after the first one,
took me to Rome once more. . . .*

—FREUD

You are seeing the place, at last, as it really is: a place of refuge, where the violence of history, which built these edifices as if in a single day and wrecked them in the blink of an eye, has at last abated. The ruins provide comfort. The walls, encircling you in an irregular, accidental maze, don't so much block the outside as nullify the very idea of an outside. This is the place.

A sanctuary can also refer to a tomb, and the more time you spend here the more thoroughly ghost-ridden it seems. You remember, as if from another lifetime, a dark coffin-shaped room pierced by a single beam of light. The shadows on the wall were human figures, projections of a lost civilization. They smoked, whispered,

suffered, fell in and out of love. Their deaths were heart-rending and dramatic, but never permanent. And yet they were less substantial than the dark velvet air in which they circulated. And when they vanished you wondered where to look for them again.

You lost count of how many times you sat there gazing at them, and the stories and situations that seemed so consequential at first viewing blurred and dissipated as you moved on to other, more worldly habits. But certain moments, certain pictures persisted. The blond woman in the black dress descending into the Roman fountain. The room full of women, tormenting and tormented by that man in his jaunty hat and melancholy sunglasses. The coliseum with its angry throng.

No need to ask directions. You know the way. It is blindingly clear in your recollection: the studio gate, with its tidy little guardhouse flanked by two driveways. That was surely your entry point. You remember it so clearly: the woman sitting inside, as the man in pulls up in his car. A story is underway; the day's dream work is about to begin. Everything is about to fall into place; the hidden key that will make sense of it all is almost in your grasp. Because you know this one. You've seen it. The title is right on the tip of your tongue. You will pay close attention this time.

And then you are awake.

