

TOM PAZDERKA is currently an Artist in Residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His MFA thesis, 'Psychoanalysis of the Cabin', was a partly autobiographical critique of Western culture, escape, seclusion and self-exclusion. The thesis weaves together history, biography, critical theory, and the topics of nostalgia, exile, and conspiracy theory. As well as being an Artist in Residence at UCSB, Tom has exhibited at the AD&A Museum, Santa Barbara, Parasol Projects, New York City, MeetFactory and Trafo Gallery in the Czech Republic, and the Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, North Carolina.

tompazderka@gmail.com

Short Circuit

Nostalgia and the Cabin

Tom Pazderka



I

IN 1818, CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH FINISHED HIS PAINTING 'WANDERER ABOVE A SEA OF FOG'. Friedrich who, whilst enjoying some fame during his lifetime, was forgotten as a relic of old age against the backdrop of progress and industrialisation, only to be resurrected twice in the twentieth century: revival first coinciding with the Nazi period in Germany, when his paintings were appropriated by National Socialism and reinterpreted as having a nationalistic sentiment; and blooming for a second time in the 1970s, when his work—and Friedrich himself, for that matter—were finally rehabilitated from a comatose state induced by the Nazi stamp of approval. Friedrich's paintings became widely known and extensively reproduced: 'Wanderer' itself was anointed as one of the most iconic images of nineteenth century Romanticism; copies and parodies followed in coronation's train. The image of the 'Wanderer' forms the basis for many Hollywood movie posters and the back shot, a look over the shoulder of a character surveying what is ahead, distils the scene to a set piece, at once simple and complex, a contradiction in paint. In the hands of Hollywood, the image of the 'Wanderer' is subsumed into capitalist ideology: an obverse of the nationalist sentiment ascribed to Friedrich's work in early twentieth century. He is forever surveying the lands over which he assumes control by his gaze. The second reading, however, is melancholic and nostalgic. The 'Wanderer's' gaze, though we never see where his eye is directed, is one of longing for oneness with the world, a world too immense for him to comprehend. On the contradictory nature of 'Wanderer', the historian John

Lewis Gaddis writes that Friedrich's painting suggests 'at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of the individual within it. We see no face, so it's impossible to know whether the prospect facing the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both'.

2

In a world emptied of authenticity, nostalgia and utopian thought are never too far away. In my work, two types of idealism—Western capitalism and Eastern European communism—meet, each with its own version of naïve optimism, innocence, purity and sublime sensibility, but also with its terrifying dimension, its own darkness and failures.

3

Especially interesting, in this regard, is the American veneration of the individual and nature. The individual stands in for a larger notion of freedom; an idea that originated in colonial America and gained popular currency in the nineteenth century with Thoreau and the Transcendentalists. Thoreau, the great admirer of nature and antagonist to the banality and stupidity of 'civilized' culture, was the precursor to existentialism and the idea of 'radical freedom'. He lived both. Perhaps because nature was 'too close, too wild, too savage', Thoreau was able to fall in love with it. Perhaps it was because that is how his contemporaries viewed nature; he was able to resist the temptation to follow the crowd. Where others saw evil and wilderness, Thoreau saw untamed beauty. The fact that our lives are dominated by technology, bureaucracy, and an ever widening economic divide, serves up the fact that individualist notions of the most radical kind are gaining ground. No longer is the individual connected to others and to nature. The individual is only connected vicariously: to a network of meaningless data accounting for the existence of countless other individuals whose lives are forever trapped in a stream of packets and bytes. No wonder utopian ideas and nostalgia return with a vengeance in the popular imaginary of the globalised technological West. If on the one hand colonial Americans saw nature as Edenic and on the other as tainted or outright satanic; there must now be a new kind of urban wilderness, both good and evil. The twentieth century can be described as just this, a period in which humanity tried to tame nature and finally subdue it to human will. Whether this project was a success or a failure remains moot.

4

For me, born during the twilight years of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, the failure of utopian idealism was an ever present occurrence in much the same way that the technological utopia is present in today's globalised society. Both promise something that cannot be delivered. The vestiges and ruins of a Stalinist past can still be seen in much of Eastern Europe, in the buildings and remnants of nationalist monuments; but similarly, the vestiges of a not so distant technological past of the United States are visible, decaying in the California desert, inside mountains and buried beneath concrete slabs miles below the earth. It is wonderful to live among the ruins of bygone days.

5

Empire in decline. After the last Soviet tanks rolled out of Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, the construction trucks quickly took their place, laying foundations for business parks, shopping centres, condominiums and fast food joints: monuments to a new ideology. We came to America in the mid-1990s, wide-eyed and full of optimism as countless others before us. Little did we know that the Reagan Revolution attempted, as a last resort, to inject its dying culture with life support in the shape of a giant national debt; dumping most of its toxic liabilities on the people least likely to be able to pay them off. In the words of Robert Hughes, the ‘American Century’ that began in 1945 ‘finished ignobly amid the glitzy triumphalism of Reagan’s presidency, and its squandered resources cannot simply be willed back into being’. To escape the dull and grey reality of post-communism for the fertile fields of American capitalism was like escaping a car crash and ending up strapped to a seat on an Amtrak heading straight for a train wreck, all in high-definition slow-motion courtesy of Fox, Columbia, or MGM. Maybe I share too much in the fatalism of the people of the Czech Republic: but are capitalism and communism not just different forms of slavery?

6

Today we are always in the process of some ‘great return’ to a ‘better future’ via a ‘better past’. This return is an instant in the process of becoming the future. In some sense Utopia, regardless of whether it is based on individualism or communitarianism, is a form of escape from the ever present idea of becoming. Understanding that the past is full of instances where the promise of a better future was a set of missteps, missed opportunities, chaos, war and suffering, we tend to be wary of the future and therefore of becoming. It is rather comforting and fulfilling to think of the world in an abstract sense as a world in which everything happens simultaneously or never actually happens at all. The present is all there is in the end. To live with the ramifications of the past, present and future, is to live with the traumatic notion of what authentic unmediated life really is.

7

My work excavates the promise of the unfulfilled potential of lived experience based on idealist thought. This idealism, far from being the fanciful object of eccentric minds or revolutionaries, is ingrained in the everyday. The idea of the single man surviving in the forest, a freedom unknown to modern man, unobstructed by the presence of others, a pristine Eden-like existence, is the zero-point coordinate of American ideology. Thoreau’s idea of solitude was the American dream of yesteryear before the corporate body began to mint its own version, based on the Jeffersonian model of ‘pursuit of happiness’ and private property. This time the family, not the individual, would play the role of the essential kernel of American ideology, separated from the greater whole yet necessarily linked to it. Theodore Kaczynski’s twenty five years spent living alone in a cabin in Montana from where he sent meticulously crafted mail bombs to political figures was the individualist American dream gone awry. Conversely, the socialist utopia counts on the absolute interrelatedness of the social body to its ideology as the truly functioning utopia. There the individual functions only as the necessary component of a larger mosaic; the family, an idealized image of the state—much like in the American version—functions as

the extended arm of the state. What ties both capitalist America and socialist Europe together is of course the way that both dealt with technology, and how they were either able or unable to cope with technological growth. Both America and Soviet Russia were heavily technologized by the mid-twentieth century. Soviet modernisation spared nothing and no one: its technology peaked at the height of the space race and when money and faith in the system faltered, due in no small part to a genuine legitimization crisis of the 1970s and 80s, what was left was a legacy of spent tech industry, tanks, rockets and jet fighters posing as monuments and playground equipment. In America, technology is synonymous with modernization and progress, and progress is by definition anti-nostalgic. Even the Soviets wanted nothing to do with nostalgic longing for the past in their feverish drive towards greater and greater technological achievements. But it is precisely at this moment, when progress is deified and tech industry giants assume the role of the self-appointed and most heinously Ayn Randian of leaders that we become nostalgic for pre-internet days and imagine what life would be like without constant notifications and Twitter feeds.

8

I believe this constant shifting back and forth between American and European cultures, unearthing possible meanings and histories, is a personal reconstitution of a sense of place and of home as ideological and personal constructs: I am, after all, a product of both 'worlds'. Ever since moving to Southern California, my focus has been on landscape, location, dwelling, home, place and nostalgia. I am interested in the intersections where these concepts take on a real appearance, where they are arrested, where they develop, and how we think about them. In political discourse, place and home are always tied to landscape and the experiences one has within the cultural understanding of each. Landscape as homeland is at the forefront of all nationalistic ideologies; whereas place is always where revolutionary battles give meaning to the universality of struggle and overcoming. Home and place are therefore also references to the nature of life split between the city (place) and the country (home) and the vacillation between the two.

9

The cabin is a trope that permeates both ideas of place and home, of the particular and the universal, and the familial and the individual. A home away from home, the cabin has many variants that speak to the common theme of escape from the present into the ethereal qualities of solitude and freedom: the cabin represents the life 'out there'; the 'man cave' represents the life 'in here'. The disappearing Western frontier subsumed the cabin and its function as common shelter, a place for migrating masses, crafts people and artisans. In the twentieth century, when the frontier finally disappeared for good; or, rather when it turned inward into cyberspace and outward into outer space, so too did the cabin transform into a place of rustic refuge and imagined return to simplicity, a second home, a vacation spot: contingency rather than necessity.

10

In contemporary culture, this escape has been gaining more and more ground: the motif of the individual surrounded by pristine primordial landscape with a

solitary hut or cabin abounds in films and is found over and over again in American and European literature and philosophy. Agrarian culture, the blood and soil politics of which Heidegger's hut was no small part, opened up the theme of German nationalism in the twentieth century and tied its social economy and ideology to the landscape. Thoreau's experience in the cabin at Walden Pond served as the ontological point of reference to American environmentalism and self-reliance. His influence can be traced through the development of national parks and reserves, anarchist and environmental movements, ranch life and homesteading, all the way to the new radical economy of resistance by the likes of Ted Kaczynski or the anti-government extreme right-wing Idaho separatists. The cabin is a symbol for freedom and the individual located within a romanticized landscape of natural harmony, even if this freedom exists for limited amounts of time such as on weekends or extended holidays. Even the green anarchist movement added to this dilemma of the interpellation of place and home, or the cabin and the individual, with its insistence on a life in nature, completely independent of city utilities: off the grid. Self-reliance, sustainability, survivalism, individualism, nationalism, anarchism, environmentalism, and so forth; these are the ideological symbols and traps of a life on the edge. Such a life can only be lived in contradiction, but such contradictions make life interesting and worth living.

University of California, Santa Barbara