

An Examination of the Absolute, or, The Mosquitoes of Mnemosyne

Grutas, a video trilogy by Astrid Nippoldt

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“Den bängsten Traum begleitet/ Ein heimliches Gefühl, Daß
alles nichts bedeutet / Und wär es noch so schwül.” (Hebbel)

The Grutas of Malinauskas

Grutas is a Lithuanian town an hour southeast of the capital Vilnius, immersed in a wood of birch trees and conifers. The sandy-smelling soil is ideal for mushrooms that propagate their rhizomes underground, as fast as the wind. Anyone wandering through the woods in the autumn, basket in hand, will be surprised to run into a gigantic Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, seated on a pedestal. His gaze stretches across the clearing, proffering equal amounts of paternal sentiment and energetic determination. He sits upright in front of comparatively curved birch trees, his left arm resting on a closed book. One is strongly tempted to open it and read it to him aloud: *According to some ideologues (...) Lithuania (or was it Germany?) in the last few years has gone through an unparalleled revolution. The decomposition of the Hegelian philosophy, (...) has developed into a universal ferment into which all the 'powers of the past' are swept. In the general chaos mighty empires have risen only to meet with immediate demise, heroes have entered the scene only to be hurled back into obscurity by bolder and stronger rivals. (...) Certainly it is an interesting event we are dealing with: the putrescence of the absolute spirit.*¹

These are the opening words of Marx and Engels in their critique of *The German Ideology* of 1846, referring to the philosophies of Hegel, Feuerbach and Stirner, who insisted on denying social stratification. The caustic polemic of Marx and Engels could well be applied to that sequence of events that has brought Grutas today to become one of the most curious and surprising places of the old Eastern Bloc. It is this recent confrontation with the once-absolute that fascinates Astrid Nippoldt, finding tangible form through such bizarre aesthetic means:

Grutas holds 66 statues, reliefs, busts, colossuses, some weighing as much as 75 tons, detritus of the Communist revolution without head or legs, covered with scratches and paint, puppets for ideologues and other giants, beloved, tossed aside and then newly mended. The incursion of Astrid Nippoldt through Grutas begins in this political-fairy tale forest that jumbles the current categories of the aesthetically prized/despised, the politically inoffensive/dangerous. The gap between current and past values attributed to the sculptures, the uncertainty of the foreign spectator and the imbalance between political desire and aesthetic ability to enact are the ideal starting point for Nippoldt's own interventions: countless clones of Marx, Engels and Lenin are synchronized here in removing the revolutionary moment. With an air of grotesque bourgeoisie, with petticoats, waistcoats and solid bronze shoes, the triad of communism, now exposed to the open hunting-ground, is sentenced to multiplication unprotected by any transcendental shelter.

The salvation of the condemned is due to the peculiar historical sense of a Lithuanian who, after finding fortune in selling mushrooms, invested his wealth in creating an asylum for politically persecuted sculptures (presumably with the purpose of rendering homage to the victims of violence and terror perpetrated by Communism). Viliumas Malinauskas, the owner of Grutas, sought a place that resembled the Siberian landscape, an enigmatic warning for the sculptures, whose hideaway had to acquire an aftertaste of blood and forced labor. So that this fact would escape no one, he had guard towers built at regular intervals along the edge of the forest. Once the initial annoyance subsides, the continuous broadcasting of Soviet tearjerkers (*Vólga Vólga, Moscow Nights*), whose propagandistic effects have always been overestimated, produces a sense of quiet intimacy. *A cheerful song warms your heart, it will never tire you.*

The good old dialectical sublation of meanings reappears in the saving of the politically abandoned and aesthetically abject, as its expatriation into the apparently wild land gains involuntarily a re-educational notion. It seems as if the political and aesthetic tightrope only functions in adverse climatic conditions. Once the weather is better, the symbolic collapse is inevitable. Not only does the forest re-encode the sculptures

(so lucky is naturalism!), but the sculptures themselves, placed in every corner of the path, challenge the docile, unthreatening forest with their monumental nature. The examination of the Absolute unerringly hunts for a balance amid good intentions and historical oblivion.

Nippoldt's Trilogy of Grutas

Almost by accident, out of curiosity, Astrid Nippoldt lost herself with her video camera in the Grutas Park. Here, she found what distinguishes her work and that is perhaps most convincingly evident in her video *Concorde* (2005), an imbalance stemming from a pre-constituted political-aesthetic setting. At first glance Nippoldt's approach to the place with its contradictory meanings appears casual. As in an endoscopic surgery, which rarely leaves scars, Nippoldt moves as though she were invisible through the mined land (the fact that she appears physically for a moment doesn't change the fact). From an inside viewpoint the weights have shifted.

Sitting Lenin

The video begins with a passer-by trying to climb onto a statue in the woods. Her objective is clear: she wants to jump into Lenin's lap. It's not easy, however. Her awkward movements (far from the days of childhood climbing) and slightly accelerated speed give the scene an air of silent movies and slapstick. A man, not more skilled than she, comes to her aid. Having finally reached the pedestal, the woman takes off her shoes. The sun peeks through a canopy of leaves and strikes the lens, a sudden blinding ray of light. She continues to climb towards his lap. Lenin's gaze still stretches over the clearing. A kingdom for his thoughts. Beams of light float like mute dialogue bubbles over his temple. Lenin does not mind that the lady takes hold of the folds of his waistcoat before posing with her sunglasses for the family photo album (a woman posing on the lap of a posed gentleman). Lenin appears much cooler than the woman. As soon as the photograph is taken, the legitimization of her child-like transgression vanishes. The woman starts to climb down as quickly as she can. She then exits the scene like a fawn while shaking the dust off her hands and hooves.

Grutas

This piece begins with a panning shot through a metal fence. A house comes into view and then is gone. The camera's eye rests on a fountain, pausing for a few moments on its water particles. The image is now in color, the metal fence forgotten. The fountain will then be replaced by another "irrigation" system: the irritating broadcasting from the watchtowers. The camera zooms into the playground where a mother is twirling dreamily with her son on a tire suspended from a rope. Perhaps it is the utopia of happiness for every man that brings about the worst ideologies. The playful frame with its Russian melodies is sharpened by two off-screen voices. A child begs insistently: *Dear, dear magician, can you conjure up... – Yes, what? – A castle like Sleeping Beauty's, with lots of towers.* The male voice – isn't that Gert Fröbe? – sounds so very regretful: *Oh, not today, maybe tomorrow.*

The film with Fröbe and Heinz Rühmann comes to mind, *Es geschah am hellichten Tag* (*It Happened in Broad Daylight*, D/CH, 1958), from the novel *Das Versprechen* (*The Pledge*) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Rühmann plays the part of the Commissar Matthäi, investigating the murder of a child. Unable to unmask the murderer, he looks for a child to use as bait. The moment of the showdown arrives. Unforgettable is the scene where Gert Fröbe as the villain approaches the little girl in the woods, opens his black coat and, with an elegant flair, pulls out a hand puppet from inside his coat, gives him a graceful bow and makes him speak. Unlike the singsong of the towers, the two German voices are irritatingly close, almost touching the observer's body. *Oh, not today, maybe tomorrow...* Is this not perhaps the promise of Utopia, close by or far away? Utopia, the overturning of Benjamin's aura, not a fabric of time and space but a promise of proximity, distant as it may be. Its sticky sweetness, sweeter than the chocolate truffles with almonds that Fröbe offers the little girl, penetrates into the observer's imagination and captures his fantasy with promises: I'll make you grow up, certainly, if not today, then tomorrow.

While the camera's eye moves along the row of towers, linking to fragments of memories of the film, there is an unexpected twist in the narrative: the utopia of childhood, the nostalgia of an understanding companion dissolve into feelings of threat and danger. It's as though a quick shadow were moving through the watchtower, though this is only the deception of overly acute senses.

Suddenly a tormented scream scares the wits out of the spectator. It is Gert Fröbe. Those who know the film, know what atrocious truth provoked the scream, which is more of a roar triggered by the turn of events. Fröbe screams when he doesn't find the girl at the meeting place, but instead a child lying face down with dislocated arms. Someone has obviously arrived before him. It is a victimless crime: it is just a dummy lying among the leaves in the ditch. What happened? Who dares to break the spell of a magus? Who dares to play around with a maniac, stealing his victim from under his nose?

What happens when Nippoldt transposes the scream to Grutas, letting it loose in the woods? Can one mess with sculptures right in the middle of a fixed *mise-en-scène* of dubious pedagogical value, which aims at intimidation and fails? Certainly one can, indeed one must. Astrid Nippoldt does it intentionally and well. Fröbe's scream is followed by an image that sticks in the memory more than any other, because the scream, with its perceptible and audible ambivalence, its shock and consternation, lays the groundwork for it: the image of a gigantic Karl Marx. And since the voices of the film begin to echo and seek out visual prey, the bronze Marx suddenly becomes a puppet, a too-serious bait for something monstrous which the image alone neither captures nor uncovers—no, it is the image itself that is captured. Near and far, utopia and ideology face one another in the invisible space between image and sound in a duel whose outcome remains uncertain.

Adele

Her full name is Adele Siauciunaite, a poet from Lithuania (1914-1938), utterly unknown in Italy and elsewhere. She seems to emerge directly from the forest, tall and beautiful. On her back, the long dress swells with the wind like a wedding gown. Her décolleté glows in the sunlight. She firmly grasps her dress with her right hand, her left arm held slightly back, looking off to one side. Nippoldt has mounted the camera at a considerable distance. Since nothing happens at first, the spectator (who would like to see more of Adele) becomes nervous. Mosquitoes buzz around in front of the lens. There is a sound in the air, like the wind enclosed in a metal blowgun. *Bzz, bzzz, bzzzz*. The scene doesn't change for a while. Then a hand appears, waving furiously in annoyance. Nippoldt leaves her position behind the camera to move in front of the lens, into the swarm of mosquitoes, her head down, hands waving in front of her face and at the height of her ears. Whether the aim is to distract attention from Adele, avoid being stung by the insects, or to finally free herself from the oppressive noise that fills the air, is left to the observer's discretion.

And the mosquitoes? They couldn't care less. They stubbornly remain in front of the lovely, brave Adele, and form an almost protective war cloud full of aggressiveness and indifference toward its victims. It almost looks like the encounter of two Greek demi-gods who find themselves here to form a powerful dyad, almost as though the goddesses of vengeance, the Erynies, had arranged a tryst in this clearing with their mythological counterpart, Mnemosyne, goddess of memory and mother of the Muse.

With her robe blown by the wind and gaze off to one side, Adele, compared to the classical representations on Greek vases, wears the robes of Mnemosyne well. With dignified severity she seems to challenge the agitation around her. Yet in a place such as Grutas there is a subtle dividing line between a contemplation that provides tranquility and insight, and a painful memory that clutches and paralyzes thought and pricks the conscience. Perhaps they are also Mnemosyne's mosquitoes, who won't be shaken off and chased away, but stubbornly persist in their purpose certain that they always win in the end. The Grutas mosquitoes know no pause. Anyone seeking to get rid of them risks attracting them instead. *I don't know what has happened to the flies today: they are simply rabid*, said a soldier in the play *Les Mouches (The Flies)* by that lover of the Erynies Jean-Paul Sartre. A second soldier replies: *I don't even dare yawn anymore, I'm so afraid they'll fall into my mouth and start a dance at the bottom of my throat.*²

The Flies

A dance at the bottom of one's throat, this seems to be the buzzing Nippoldt has inserted in her film, a synthetic sound that could easily come from the London club scene. Captured sounds, later to be released in unreal situations, are Nippoldt's specialty (in her video *Bloop*, 2004, it is the primitive murmur of the seas, confusing sound and senses; in *wy o ming*, 2002, the theme from *Dances With Wolves*, suddenly accompanies the image of the treetops speeding by outside the train window). Actually the noise comes from a single fly trapped in a glass with a microphone. If the purpose of philosophy since Wittgenstein consists of showing the fly the way out of the glass, we might say that art should show the way back in.

Nippoldt's work is intriguing and intricate. As the visual sensation is reduced, the off-screen voices, captured sounds and multifaceted noises emerge more joyfully. Below the threshold of the visible the sonorous begins to capture the spectator's imagination. Even minimal artistic intervention is extremely risky in a place that emanates such a profound ambivalence as Grutas, a place where the desire for *mise-en-scène*, pedagogical Eros and historical baggage result in contrasting interests, and in which nature and aesthetics finally reverse their roles, so that aesthetics become natural and nature ideological. Nippoldt moves with caution and courage across this semantically, aesthetically, and politically mined terrain. How does she create meaning where everything is already hyper-encoded?

Nippoldt's dramaturgy furtively insinuates uncertainty and destabilization. All three works begin like a simple documentation of facts, but the genre gets out of hand. What should stay in the background suddenly comes to the fore: at times it is the posing of passers-by, other times the invasiveness of the mosquitoes, other times the irrefutable attack of involuntary memory (visual and acoustic). Nippoldt flirts with the inevitable and launches an open-ended conclusion, an uncertainty in an age of superlatives, so emptied of every utopia that a new ideology emerges: *He or she who is constantly searching may be... what? saved?!*³

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets*.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches* (The Flies)

³ paraphrasing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, 2nd Part, Act V, 11936/7

