

Michal Novotný: Tied to Landscapes

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"Another Bernard beer I said," someone shouts
behind me in the yellow train. I doze off.

When the revolution arrived at our block of flats it was just me and my mum. They had let my dad go to Germany to see my aunt, who had emigrated at the start of the 1970s. A maroon velour sports bag lay ready in the living room beside the settee. "In case they ever roll in again," said my mum. Maybe we'd have grabbed the maroon bag and sped off in our Škoda 105 across the border. Probably due to my upbringing I could only have one of two small racing cars in the survival bag. "Either the red or the yellow one. You have to choose."

No doubt as our own identity becomes more layered and complicated, its individual parts often become contradictory. Bittersweet. Repulsive and attractive at the same time. We know everything, but we still can't help it. In the mixture of conflicting emotions neither of the two paths leads anywhere.

Sometimes I think of the character Styrman from Čapek's Journey to the North. "Is it as nice where you live down there?" He says that his homeland of Troms, far from the polar circle, where the sun doesn't shine for two months in winter, is the most beautiful place in the world.

Where there is nothing, there are at least stories. Or like in the American songs. Why else would anyone go to Memphis? And what would Ostrava be without Balabán? I met a character in a nonstop bar on Českobratrská Street at three in the morning. Getting on a bit and with work-worn arms, but still at a good stage of drunkenness, laughing away like a boy. "Don't get mad, ha-ha, but I'd really, really like to see how you two do it," he said. "So would I," she shot back. And it was true, of course.

The Oldies festival. For those who had lived through the 1990s, the line up with E-rotic, DJ Bobo and East 17 was a trip back in time, despite the fact that it had been difficult to see these bands in Ostrava in the 90s. Modern art is like

a large wheel – at first we help to turn it and then soon we’re having problems running along to keep up with it. And then we fall underneath it. Gradually almost all of us become frozen in a certain time and context – the more so the faster a period transforms. But within the uneven distribution of street cred, some capital can even be squeezed out from former glories, it just depends where.

Take a deep breath, a handwritten description under a black-and-white photograph of a girl exhaling cigarette smoke, her head tilted in profile. A student in a dimly lit attic who first of all played songs for us by Karel Kryl, followed by speeches by politicians of the day. Tears in his eyes, it had been a long time since I had seen such resilience and bravery. But it’s something that can’t be communicated.

“Luna Cinema is perhaps the most romantic name for a bus stop in the world,” I wrote to you, continuing across the scorched grass to a block of flats, which was actually fairly luxurious. On the top floor in a drying room with cheap clothes from the market draped from clothes hangers, Eduard Halberštát gradually showed me practically his whole life’s work. All of his paintings contain at least some red so they went well with the red bench with the inscription Donated by Ostrava Metallurgical Construction Company, on which he had laid them out with his rough fingers, one by one, just for me. The last one was called Fire Brigade Committee. There was a lot to be found there, structural abstraction, pop, postmodernism, naive. Everything, but somehow slightly different.

A relief under the window ledge of one of the houses in Poruba depicted an allegory of a film. In sgraffito was an almost folk-stylized boy holding a camera with a tripod in one hand, his face is turned towards us and his index finger is raised in his other hand in the gesture of Plato from Rafael’s School of Athens. In the second frieze a boy with slightly dishevelled hair is holding up a film strip, which resembles asymmetrical Rocaille. Someone had sprayed a green swastika on a rosette in a nearby passage. An anachronism – it should perhaps be pointed out.

The backwardness of the economy often appears to go hand in hand with backwardness in art. I imagine it’s not so pleasant here in winter, said a Polish curator of documenta in Athens, who now lives in Switzerland, when we were walking together towards PLATO during a warm April in 2018.

It is my country, even if I don't belong to it, I say to myself and pedal off on my old mountain bike along the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris. An emigrant who never lived here, who never even wanted to live. Neglected and humiliated sediments. Like being dumb, in fact. From the beginning as though I wasn't even standing there, as if I was simply transparent. And yet, after a while, I always miss it here.

The editors of Octopus Press asked the curator Michal Novotný to write something using the motif of ruin to reflect on his relationship with Ostrava. However, we left it entirely up to the author as to what he would specifically focus on. He knew that in addition to it becoming a publication in its own right, his text would also become the starting point for an interpretation by Marek Pražák, an artist working in Ostrava. People from outside of Ostrava tend to succumb to stereotypes when they observe the city and attempt to come to terms with it. For those who live and work here, this is a very sensitive issue. We, therefore, attempted to construct a quasi-dialogue situation with an uncertain ending, through which we wanted to thematize and articulate this often traumatic experience.

Michal Novotný is a curator and critic; he is presently the director of the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Gallery Prague, and a lecturer at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. Between 2011 and 2018 he transformed the Futura Centre for Contemporary Art into an influential institution which gained recognition on a European level. He worked with the PLATO city gallery from 2016 to 2018 as a member of its conceptual team and external curator.

