

SAILOR

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Fine Arts

MAY 2009

To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of
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SAILOR

Abstract

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Washington State University
May 2009

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The project “Sailor” is a search. This search is imbedded within the subject. It does not have a defined goal or even a path. It is a breakaway from the defined here and now into the middle of nowhere. The here and now is who we are, and who we have been, and all that made us be it. It is our “cozy prison”.

The protagonist frantically thrives to find the key out of his or her own “cozy prison”. The protagonist dares to look beyond the iron bars, beyond the comfort zone, and becomes a fugitive. The protagonist feels unprotected, lost, disoriented, hopeless, and yet satisfied. The need for discovery keeps circulating. The only right place to be is the one in which he or she is not.

This work drags the viewer along a desperate inner search for a higher meaning materialized into a physical wandering. Yet, the viewer will feel that the search is worthwhile. The viewer will feel the subject. The viewer will be the subject. They are one.

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My fascination with travel and my interest and investigation of time and space has formed my visual language in photography. Many times I thought I had arrived at a point that would have satisfied this longing for travel but my wandering spirit always asked for more. Through these experiences, my main focus of doing artistic work is not to “find” an ultimate solution, answer or finish line, but to communicate the “search” and to dissect and understand its roots. Growing up in an East German village, covered by the warmth of socialism, I was strongly influenced and guided by the “big brother” Soviet Union. Light years away from the Promised Land and the Western highways, I experienced a childhood in what I call now a “cozy prison.” During my work as a photojournalist and after my German photography diploma, I had the chance to travel to the Siberian part of Russia in January 2006. Like a flashback to what I haven’t seen and felt for over fifteen years, I remembered my father, waiting for a Russian Ikarus bus on a crisp winter evening to take him back home from the dark and grey industrial part of town where he used to work as an engineer. These memories have visually influenced my work.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, I knew there was something out there called America, but the sources of information were limited and the access was denied. Through my propensity towards travel and freedom I was fascinated by the mystery of the west. Twenty years later and after several road trips and thousands of miles, I have been to almost every corner of the United States and lived in different parts of this nation. Over

the years, my work has been, at least partly, a homage to the exploration of Americana and the American land.

Now, I live in a small place in the wide-open spaces of the American Northwest. An isolated college town located in an agricultural area that mostly consists of rolling wheat fields. I thought about using Pullman and The Palouse with the idea to strictly confront myself with, and to comment on, the very place I am living in. The town seems to me like an island in an ocean or like an oasis in a desert. It is a partly developed and comfortable place. Though, the town is isolated because of its vast and spacious rural surroundings. Unlike German or European landscapes, one can drive for hours through the land and not hit a city. Due to some structural similarities and my recurring feelings of comfort and isolation, Pullman and The Palouse remind me of the concept of “cozy prison.” Of course The Palouse is not Eastern Germany and Pullman is not the village I grew up in. But I can use those places to merge the past with the present, which creates a conceived future. This has to be explained in two layers. The first layer allegorizes my own history and some of my childhood experiences from growing up in Eastern Germany. The second layer depicts an actual place, America, which is now real but used to be a distant and unknown land. The conclusion is a fusion and a confusion of past and present that results in a fictive future: a seemingly Post Eastern European scenario that takes place on American ground. In this fictive future, which is constructed of past and present, the viewer is situated in the here and now. This is important to the freshness of

the work. The viewer should feel present in this confused place that takes him back and forth between historical and futuristic innuendos.

This fictive scenario contains multiple influences in addition to the ones from my personal history. I am influenced by photography that goes all the way back to pioneers like Robert Frank. After all, Frank also worked with filmmaking and video art. Nevertheless, it has taken me a while to consciously consider and adapt the influence of the moving image into my own work. For this present project, I am mostly inspired and influenced by the selected work of filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky (*Stalker*, *Solaris*) from Russia, Michaelangelo Antonioni (*Red Desert*, *The Passenger*) from Italy and German filmmaker Wim Wenders (*In the Course of Time*, *Wrong Move*, *Alice in the Cities*). In regards to content and visuals, the characteristics of these films that fascinated and amazed me are: the slow pace, the search for identity, the loss and arbitrariness of orientation, the poetic quality of the pictures themselves and the fact that the films give the viewer slots of time to think about what they see and experience while watching.

Wenders' "*In the Course of Time*" from 1976 is a road movie that forgoes psychological motivation, suspense and dramatic tension. It deals with the difficulties of communication and the Americanization of German life¹. To me, this is an American movie on German ground. Wenders shows two characters that are looking for some significance in life².

In Antonioni's "*Red Desert*" (1964) the use of fog and the industrial scenery were

particularly interesting ideas to create visual metaphors. The walk of the protagonists in the fog and the fragile psychological state of the main female character, gave me another interpretation of the loss of orientation and more inspiration for the search of identity.

Probably a major inspiration and connection, was found in Tarkovsky's 1979 movie "Stalker." Because of its length and its lack of speed in the plot, this film burns up a lot of the viewer's energy. One scene shows a wide and wild rural land that contains almost vanished remains of civilization. On the other hand we experience a dark and bleak urban industrial location. In this film, two people and their guide are trying to find their way through an alienated land. Tarkovsky's portrayal of the characters' attempt to orientate fascinated me enormously. "Stalker" represents the concept of a science-fiction movie through an ambiance and atmosphere, which is carried by the strained and tense behavior of the characters and the structure of alienation that Tarkovsky consciously forms in the mind of the viewer.

In my own work, I replaced photography with video to transform my personal background and my artistic influences into one merged visual form. Working with photography gave me a very good platform to define my methods of composing and arranging. I spent a great deal of time to explore different narrative possibilities. When beginning to shoot video I am usually unaware of how I am going to assemble the footage. This approach gives an essential freshness and vitality to the work, like finding parts of a puzzle. During my work with color photography, the idea of going back to

black and white has always been on my mind. I remember one of the photo-philosophic conversations I had with an Italian friend of mine a couple of years ago. He raised the assumption that “real” photography can only be black and white. Given the hypothesis that the essential content of a photograph can only be shown in black and white, then color photography is only surface tension. If color photography is a design and a disguise, then black and white shows the image as naked as it can be, without any beautification. Nevertheless, black and white can sometimes suggest that it is history or the past.

In the beginning of the project “Sailor”, I started walking and running through the fields videotaping my surroundings. While editing and playing with the layout and visual ideas, I recognized that the single image of the moving camera through the fields needed some compositional balance. The use of a diptych keeps the viewer active and away from getting seasick of the walking and running in this disorienting environment. I use the double screen as an element to increase tension but it is important that the two video screens connect formally. In addition, the idea of past, present and future is being communicated through the interaction of the two screens. For example, the disoriented, panicked, running person juxtaposed with the industrial and urban still images can easily be interpreted as visions of going back and forth between past and present. One screen can be seen as a flashback or a thought, and the other screen is the actual presence of the moment. The dynamic between the two screens conveys the nescience and the resulting inquisitiveness that keep the viewer alert and sharp.

The main content of the video is the wandering and running in the fields. The wanderer in the fields is separated from civilization. This person is in a permanent state of travel. But it is not an easygoing joyride. The rhythm and speed of the camera show urgency. It is claustrophobic and confusing. It can be an escape from and also a search for the mysterious unknown. The viewer becomes the protagonist and is either the outsider or the insider. The walking and running reflects a trance-like and almost meditative feeling as well as producing anxiety and stress. This is being intensified when both screens show a very similar or even the same scenario. The walking is a symbol for the psychological state of restlessness.

Disorientation is the main feeling of the protagonist and is generated by the breathless and aggressive running and walking in the bleak and confusing fields. The fog in the back of the landscape covers the horizon. The constricted sight, the lack of sky and the fact that there is no reference point restrain the orientation and activate a feeling of isolation and being lost. The visual isolation through the fog as well as the footage of the endless wired fence, symbolize and convey the walker's and the viewer's detachment from the unfamiliar environment.

The minimized visual elements are mementos from my photographic experience. I was looking for elegant combinations to give the piece rhythm and space. To keep those still and stagnant images more organic, I videotaped the material with a handheld camera. I am aware that this controlling and observing behavior communicates quietness and peacefulness, but also a frightening and distanced feeling. The dreary institutional

buildings have a sense of civilization, but the place is deserted. The footage shows peaceful and abandoned sceneries with a resonating notion of catastrophe. It seems that everyone left suddenly but not too long ago. Or is everyone dead?

The footage that was taken from an airplane in the sky is reminiscent of a surveillance camera that acts as a visual vacuum cleaner. An eye that sucks in everything it sees, like a spy. This might also be a visualized leftover and memory from the controlling communist society in former Eastern Europe. The confrontation of the decisive and determined aerial shots with the indecisive and confused walking of the fields is like hunter and hunted or predator and prey.

Investigation takes place throughout the whole video: in the fields, in the stagnant footage as well as in the sky and in the tunnel. Investigation means to be curious and inquiring. A fascination with discovery is a main message in the work. What is this tunnel? Is it the gate out? Is it an entrance? Is it a shelter? The tunnel can be a symbol for all those things, but an answer is not provided. Here again, the viewer finds him or herself in a reflective state and is unsure about the upcoming behavior. The permanently shifting horizon line of the shoreless landscapes, the aerial images, the industrial shots and the institutional laboratory architecture, all help to create the idea of confusion.

Inspired from the visual style in Tarkovsky's "Stalker" and Antonioni's "Red Desert", I like the idea of creating the appearance of a post-apocalyptic scenery. The absence of people and the bleak fields remind of a nuclear wasteland. The land has a dead

quality. The decision to show the video in black and white pushes the nostalgic as well as the futuristic notion of the video. This contradiction helps the work to appear as unreal and alienated. Going back to my description of “cozy prison”, the only thing that is left is a hint of prison and a possible escape from it. Nevertheless, the coziness remains as a memory of the past in a transcendent and subconscious way. It was not my intent in the first place to visualize the idea of “cozy prison” but to see where this concept can take me.

The use of sound is a necessary support for the drama of the whole piece. An audio layer can support the withering of coziness as well as questioning the motivation of the enthusiastic running. Unearthly and eerie sounds are opposed by the nostalgic sound of the vinyl, which suggests that someone has forgotten to take the record off the player. This is another allegory for leftovers of the past.

Despite all this information, I do not want to lead the viewer into a fixed and specified idea with one meaning or one interpretation of the piece. My personal approach is not a necessary influence because it might limit thoughts and interpretation. The video is supposed to be a free-spirited and an engaging piece. Nevertheless, a main idea of the work is to confront and challenge the viewer with his or her own apperception and perceptual capacity. Since the video is looping and has no exact or underlying beginning or end, the viewer can enter the piece at any given point and still get an idea of the rhythm and feeling. The work is constructed that way because it is more important that

the viewer finds a way into the rhythm of the footage than to make up a consecutive narrative plot. Also, I see this work as an exercise for myself to create an illusion and to communicate an experience.

During my work with photography, I always felt that the art moment had to be at the very point of time when the photograph is taken. In shooting video, this moment does either not exist or exists in a very high quantity due to the permanent absorption of light into the video camera. Since the art moment is a construct of a feeling, I do not find that moment in the process of making the work, but at the very end when the viewer watches and becomes the final element of the work. The viewer is being asked to participate. The piece becomes alive in the moment(s) that the viewer is being carried through landscape and scenery.

Finally, the title “Sailor” is a metaphor. The roaming camera in the fields is like someone that hasn’t found the harbor or the shore but is still wandering through the open sea. Since there is no water at all, the fields are like a tideland. But sailing is not possible in a tideland. It can only be an illusion...

1 www.wimwenders.com/movies/movies_spec/kingsoftheroad

2 www.wimwenders.com/movies/movies_spec/kingsoftheroad