

ARCADIAN RUINS: REMAINS OF THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN
ART

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Arcadian Ruins: Remains of the Past in Contemporary Russian Art

This thesis considers the subversive ways contemporary Russian art offers of looking at the ruins left by the recent Soviet past. It focuses on works of poetry and photography that capture the transformation of the landscape of industrial neighborhoods and how the material presence of the remains of the past exist in relation to the space of everyday life and shapes our perception of the present. Galina Rymbu's poetic depiction of the disintegration of the industrial landscape in the 1990s and the photographic project "Arcadia" by Anastasia Tsayder that captures the abandoned and overgrown Soviet garden cities dwell on these spaces in a way that is utterly non-nostalgic and suggestive of new ways of inhabiting them and weaving them into the plane of the historical now.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When I think about the Post-Soviet landscape, I think about my hometown Dimitrovgrad in the Volga Region in Russia. The recent Soviet past is hauntingly present there: in a name of a place, a ruin, or emptiness. A still standing pipe of the ruined factory in the woods is a signal to make the right turn to get to the small lake – once artificially made for another plant, and now home to a family of swans and a site where locals gather with thermoses with strong black tea. What looks like, especially in the autumn, a secret tunnel through the pine wood close to my neighborhood, used to be a railroad to a meat factory, which no longer exists. Its rails are broken and overgrown, its route no longer certain. The Post-Soviet landscape of the overgrown ruins radiates an affect that is hard to pin down. It can be romantic, nostalgic, discouraging, grounding, subversive, and, quite possibly, all these things. The material remains of the Soviet utopia has been both dissolving and crystalizing, both constituting the contemporary landscape and being excluded from it. This project is a study of art that deals with the ruins and overgrown spaces left after the collapse of the Soviet Union, attending to how three decades later these landscape sites shape the understanding of the historical present.

The relation to the Soviet Past has been thoroughly studied by scholars of Post-Soviet nostalgia. The groundbreaking study of nostalgia by Svetlana Boym *The Future of Nostalgia*, which set the framework for the conversation about nostalgia in the post-socialist context, was followed by comprehensive cultural research such as “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices” by Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, and a recent volume *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting*

the Empire's Legacies edited by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos and Ksenia Robbe. The fact that most of the discourse around the legacy of Soviet past is produced under the umbrella of nostalgia studies is explainable not only by the fact that nostalgia for Soviet times is a fully present and flourishing phenomenon in contemporary Russia¹, but also because of the flexibility and expansiveness of the concept of “nostalgia” that evolved over time. Boym’s argument about two main types of nostalgia—reflective and restorative—raised the notion that nostalgia can be dangerous, corruptive and ideologized, as well as productive and insightful in its reflective power. While restorative nostalgia seeks to recreate the ideal and absolute picture of the past, laying the ground for national and religious revivals, reflective nostalgia focuses on the meditation on ruins, imperfections of the past, and the passage of time. The idea that nostalgia can be regressive or subversive reflects perfectly the cultural discussion around it found in recent writings by cultural historians. As Nadkarni and Shevchenko note:

domestic cultural commentators attempt to distinguish “good” from “bad” nostalgia, scanning each manifestation for signs of its cultural “health,” while foreign mass media similarly divides nostalgia into either the thoroughgoing commodification of communist symbols (and hence, the triumph of capitalism) or, in contrast, the proof of dangerous atavistic cultural attachments. Meanwhile, scholars at home and abroad try to pose correctives to these mainstream arguments by viewing these very same nostalgic practices as critical and

¹ Olga Sobolevskaia, “Nostal’gicheskoe potreblenie: pochemu rossiiane pokupaiut tovary s sovetskoi simbolikoi,” HSE IQ, July 6, 2013, <https://iq.hse.ru/news/207301673.html>.

subversive, and thus an endorsement of neither the socialist past nor the capitalist present.²

This project prioritizes the critical and subversive potential of art that engages with the remains of the past, is situated in close proximity though outside of nostalgic practices; it is situated at a generational remove from the cultural conversation about the Post-Soviet nostalgia that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Art discussed in this thesis was created in the 2010s, by authors born in the last decade of the Soviet Union existence. Their art focuses on ruins and abandoned places in a way that omits the founding element of nostalgia – a longing to go back. Since the subversive potentialities of dwelling on ruins is at the heart of my project, concepts such as reflective nostalgia, offered by Boym, will be important for my analysis. The fact that the works I am analyzing are not nostalgic per se does not cancel out the fact that they exist in the context of the nostalgic longing that their objects, ruins and overgrown places radiate. The art considered in this thesis illuminates, in its own way, both dangerous and subversive potentialities of Post-Soviet nostalgia, while exploring the other means of reacting to the recent past.

The perception of history in the Post-Soviet period is at the core of examinations of the culture of that period in general, including the nostalgic branch with its focus on the fixation on the past and the ways in which it significantly alters the perception of the present. This project is also interested in the perception of history and the ways the landscape of ruins and overgrown spaces shape it. “There is no visible ‘horizon of

² Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices," *Ab Imperio* (2004/2), 490.

expectation.’ Utopia seems a category of the past—the future imagined in a bygone time—because it no longer belongs to the present of our societies. History itself appears as a landscape of ruins, a living legacy of pain,”³ writes Enzo Traverso in the introduction to *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. He argues that just as in preceding epochal turns, the fall of state socialism modified the perception of the past and propelled the emergence of a new historical imagination. Preceded by a century that saw revolutions that produced utopias and subsequently the eclipse of those utopias, the new century is characterized by “the overwhelming heaviness paralyzing the utopic imagination.”⁴ Traverso calls attention to historical sensibility that emerged in the 1990s and is characterized by a past that won’t go away and a future that cannot be invented or predicted except in the form of a catastrophe.

In many ways, this thesis is also concentrated on the historical present, though it doesn’t seek to uphold the critical thought that centers the present as the only healthy alternative to both utopian thought and an insistence on nostalgia. It is an attempt to comprehend the melancholic landscape of overgrown ruins as a space of direct experience, a reflection on the past, and possibly – a thought of the future. Traverso proposes that the melancholia saturated by the ruins of the twentieth century can be a form of resistance and endurance. Poet Galina Rymbu, who will be discussed in the first chapter, is preoccupied with the same thoughts, while rejecting the idea of the

³ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 7.

⁴ Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 4.

impossibility of imagining the future: “I think the solution is in the paradoxical synchronization of the hope for the future and the space of the catastrophe...Depression and melancholia are a means of knowledge.”⁵ The photographic project “Arcadia” by Anastasia Tsayder works with the landscape of the abandoned gardens and the ruins of what used to be parts of them, entering the long pictorial tradition of melancholic landscapes, yet her project takes this tradition past the temporality of loss. The poetry and photography that are considered in this thesis challenge the conception of a Post-Soviet temporality that is merely nostalgic, unable to detangle the attachments to the utopic past or is constrained by the historical present as the only space free of mythologies.

The works by the two contemporary artists considered in this thesis is centered around the landscapes transformed by the transition to the Post-Soviet era. The first chapter is dedicated to Rymbu’s poem “There were so many factories just in our neighborhood..,” where she revisits her childhood memories of growing up in the industrial neighborhood in the Siberian city of Omsk in the 1990s, in the decade following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is an account of the events that dramatically changed the landscape of her neighborhood: the factories where her parents used to work are being demolished, sold and re-sold or disappearing without a trace. Boym’s assessment of reflecting on the ruins and Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” provide the important concepts and insights into the nature of

⁵ Galina Rymbu, “Depressiia i melanholia – eto sposob znaniia,” Interview by Marieta Bozhovich and Anastasia Osipova, *Colta*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/22622-galina-rymbu-bolshoe-intervyu>.

history and our interaction with it from the standpoint of the “state of the emergency” of the present.

The second chapter looks at the photography project “Arcadia” by Anastasia Tsayder. “Arcadia” tells the story of the garden-cities of the Soviet 1960s: the massive construction of new cities and industrial neighborhoods that adapted the idea of green spaces as gardens that would serve as recreational spaces for workers. After 1991 these gardens became places that were no longer cared for by the local governments; they grew wild and reclaimed the once controlled and designed space. The discussion of the subversive and non-nostalgic qualities of photography as medium in *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes serves as the theoretical framework for the discussion of Tsayder’s photographic works.

Rymbu’s poem and the photographs of “Arcadia” talk about the ruins and overgrown gardens that are part of existing neighborhoods, and that is the central aspiration of this thesis: to study how the landscapes of ruins that shape our historical perception are embedded in our living space. Industrial neighborhoods suffered the most drastic transformations in the transition to the post-industrial economy, while their working-class inhabitants became the most vulnerable group in the process of shedding the skin of the old Soviet identity, as their feelings of belonging to the visible and respected class slipped into a precariousness shaded by the new cultural and economic relations. “Working class people after the collapse of the USSR became an invisible group in the society. Their identity today relies on the memory about the Soviet past,”⁶

⁶ Olga Sobolevskaia, “‘Vse idut, i ia idu...’ Poteriannaia identichnost’ rabochih uralmasha,” *HSE IQ*, July 6, 2013, <https://iq.hse.ru/news/213569213.html>.

write the scholars from the Higher School of Economics, who did sociological research in the industrial neighborhood Uralmash of Ekaterinburg, a large city in the Urals. Their interviews reveal the residents' state of overwhelming nostalgia for the Soviet past, as the disintegration of a city where everything was organized – factories, houses, gardens – resulted in a complete existential disorientation; “if there are no factories, nothing, how are we supposed to live?” asks one of the respondents⁷. A study of the industrial neighborhood of Tushino in Moscow also confirms the attachment of the older residents to the factories at the centers of their neighborhoods⁸. Factories, or the places where they once were, are referred to by the researchers as “the reservoirs” of nostalgia and romantic sadness. Accordingly, the main focus of this thesis is to look at Rymbu's and Tsayder's responses to the Post-Soviet neighborhoods and to interrogate how their artistic works establish new relations to these nostalgic voids: the creative and reflective inclusion of these ruins and overgrown gardens into the space of our everyday life, into our historical now.

⁷ Olga Sobolevskaia, “Proizvodstvo nostalgii: pochemu naselenie zavodskih raionov predpochitaet zhit' proshlym,” *HSE IQ*, July 23, 2018, <https://iq.hse.ru/news/221849176.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER II

“THERE WILL COME A TIME WHEN NO ONE REMEBERS THIS”: FACTORY RUINS IN THE POETRY OF GALINA RYMBU

Galina Rymbu belongs to the constellation of authors, who, as literary scholar and Russian poetry translator Kevin M.F. Platt suggests, “rebelled against the literary and political scene.”⁹ “For the last couple of years I’m trying to work with something like the phenomenology of the perception of the political, with complex political (and not only) affects,”¹⁰ says Rymbu in her recent interview with the online literature and art journal *colta*. Her poetry dives into and explores fundamental processes like the transformation of our appearance and the appearance of the planet, of languages, machines and bodies.

In her cycles “Life in Space” (“Жизнь в Пространстве”), “Means of the Organization of Substance” (“Способы организации материи”), and “Fragments from the Cycle “Devoid of Characteristics” (“Фрагменты из цикла “Лишенные признаков””) she attempts to think of and describe a world where the planet-wide catastrophe has already happened. In this post-catastrophic world, everything has been altered on “political, tectonic and organic levels.” In the same interview with *colta*, she describes this world as “poetico-phenomenological cyberpunk” and an “(anti?post?) utopia” that creates a space for thought about the new language, new ways of communication and organization, new sensitivity that must be carved out from the bare ground. In the earlier cycle “Cosmos Avenue” (“Космический Проспект”) and other earlier poems, however,

⁹ Kevin M.F. Platt, “Pavel Arseniev’s Intervention in Lyric,” in *Reported Speech* (Cicada Press, 2019), 7.

¹⁰ Galina Rymbu, “Depressiia i melanholiia – eto sposob znaniia,” interview by Marietta Bozhovich and Anastasia Osipova, *Colta*, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/22622-galina-rymbu-bolshoe-intervyu>.

space and time are more recognizable. Several earlier poems are set in Rymbu's Siberian hometown of Omsk after the fall of the Soviet Union. One can trace the possible origins of the questions that the artist pursues in her anti- or post-utopian writings today – starting anew in a landscape of drastic change and the search for new ways of communication – in events and aspirations of the Post-Soviet time.

The range of literary figures important to her work is very diverse: from the poets Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and Osip Mandelstam to the revolutionary anarchist and geographer Piotr Kropotkin and the French writer and a thinker Maurice Blanchot. Among the most prominent influences on her writing is the early-Soviet writer Andrey Platonov, author of the novels *Chevengur* (Чевенгур, 1928) and *The Foundation Pit* (Котлован, 1930). Here is the point of confluence: the world of Platonov's works is also utopian and post-catastrophic; it is the world after the revolution. In *Foundation Pit* Platonov created an anti-utopian world which resembles the times of Stalin's first 5-year plan and collectivization. At the center of the novel is a group of workers who are digging an enormous foundation pit for a future house for the proletarians. The end of their work seems unapproachable, as they proceed to deepen the pit in a state of complete moral exhaustion from losing the meaning of their labor. Platonov carves his novel from ruins of language: characters speak with collages of official slogans and cut-outs from the newspapers. Platonov, according to Joseph Brodsky, "led Russian language into semantic impasse – or more precisely – found the cul-de-sac philosophy in language itself."¹¹

¹¹ Joseph Brodsky, "Predislovie k 'Kotlovanu' A. Platonova," accessed June 29, 2020, http://lib.ru/BRODSKIJ/br_platonov.txt

The same process of moral exhaustion and disorientation of workers, a situation of what seems like the dead-end of labor, as well as a persistent need for a new language is what characterizes the post-1991 world Rymbu describes in the poem that will be discussed in this chapter. In the introduction to Rymbu's collection "Life is Space," poet Anna Glazova, speaking about the importance of Platonov's project for Rymbu, notes: "poverty and ruins, that constituted everyday life, were for [Platonov] not the temporary cost of the new order, but exactly the resource from which the new humaneness was to be born."¹² The question of the Post-Soviet ruin as a resource and an origin is what interests me in the following analysis of the long poem, "There were so many factories just in our neighborhood..," which was published in 2014 in the Translit series (№14, "Pragmatics and Literature.")

The Poem reads as fragments of stories about her parents and her childhood that took place in the Siberian city of Omsk in the 1990s. The world where these stories play out is an industrial neighborhood, its numerous factories and plants slowly vanishing. Rymbu speaks in an interview for the journal *Music&Literature* about the practical hardships of that time such as hunger, the absence of work, and ubiquitous criminal activity, as the world of the 1990's simultaneously continued to be shaped by the phantom presence of the Soviet past. Rymbu notes: "When I was a child, I didn't feel like I was living in a world that was principally different from the late Soviet period, which my parents were always talking about, which survived in books, in a lot of institutions,

¹² Anna Glazova, "Istets za silu," in *Zhizn' v prostranstve*, Galina Rymbu (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2018), 8.

and in general in all the material artifacts of daily life.”¹³ These details of material artifacts – scrap metal, details of cosmic rockets, peach juice –constitute in a poem the space of the past.

The storyline of the parents in a poem with its nostalgic numbness is complex and occupies a special place in this chapter. Parents are the ones who mark the complexity of the temporality described in the poem: the world of the 1990’s felt similar to the past that the parents shared and talked about but that the author never experienced directly. By turning to the narratives of her parents, the poetic narrator, the daughter, attempts to grasp the superimposed realms of the past and present. She thinks about not only her own memory but the precarious position of memory in general in the situation of the extreme generational split. Writing about someone else’s attachment to the past, a gaze to the past that seeps through generations, opens up the conversation of how one’s generational ties to the past encapsulate the language, that the new generation has no access to.

Insights about the relations between the past and the present generation is one of the reasons the early twentieth-century German thinker Walter Benjamin and his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is introduced in the following analysis. His writing, seen by Boym as one of the most central examples of modern nostalgia, carries the spirit that I recognize and admire in Rymbu’s text: careful consideration of the things of the past as revolutionary method for the critique of the present¹⁴. His vision of the past, present and

¹³ Galina Rymbu, “A Conversation with Galina Rymbu,” interview by Jonathan Platt, *Music&Literature*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2016/1/31/a-conversation-with-galina-rymbu>.

¹⁴ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s On the Concept of History*, (Verso, 2005), 2.

future as superimposed images activates the potential of Rymbu's practice to evoke different planes of time in search for the new language. His insights on the ability or inability to capture the images of the past, and the elemental, yet perilous character of those images, enable the discussion of Rymbu's poem that operates with visual imagery and is involved in a similar philosophical inquiry. At last, Benjamin's passion for rescuing the objects of the past with a firm belief that they can gain importance again in the future is what leads up to the central question of my work: how can we understand the industrial ruin as a resource for new ways of inhabiting the historical present and how is Rymbu's poetry participating in this process?

* * *

Tellingly, Rymbu's poem starts with a catalogue of all the factories in the poet's neighborhood:

Только в нашем районе было столько заводов:
Шинный завод, Кордный завод, Кислородный
(который никто не видел - только серые коробки и ни дымка, огонька)
Завод Автоматики, завод Кирпичный, Асфальтный, ТЭЦ-5,
Завод «Полёт» и проспект Космический и на это раз повторно
как будто бы воспоминание – залитые солнцем.¹⁵

¹⁵ Galina Rymbu, *Zhizn' v prostranstve*, (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2018), 79-83.

There were so many factories just in our neighborhood:

The tire plant and the tire cord plant, then the oxygen plant

(which no one ever saw—just grey boxes, neither smoke nor flame),

The automation plant, the brick and asphalt factories, Power Plant No. 5,

The “Flight” factory, and Cosmic Avenue, and this time repeated as if in a memory bathed in sunlight¹⁶.

The abundance of factory names instantly expands the space of the poem: we can look far and down Cosmic Avenue and grasp the whole neighborhood in its grand stillness. We see the neighborhood twice, as the last line makes us imagine it once again “bathed in sunlight.” This image is “this time repeated as if in a memory,” introducing us to the nature of the whole text: it is a product of labor, of repetitive and insistent tides of thoughts about the past. We observe this repetitive dwelling in the image of the oxygen plant. It is evoked later in the poem in a similar description: “and the oxygen plant was somewhere nearby, / or at least there was a bus stop with that name, but I never saw the plant itself— only the grey cubes of the buildings without a single flame, without smoke” (“и Кислородный завод где-то рядом, по крайней мере была такая остановка, / но самого завода я никогда не видела -только кубические серые здания без единого огонька, без дымка”). This time the image is slightly different, revealing the tiniest shifts of the remembered image: it references not the grey boxes, but the grey cubes of the buildings. To remember the disappearing space in a poem does not mean to seek to

¹⁶ Galina Rymbu, “Three Poems,” translated by Kevin M.F. Platt, *Asymptote*, Accessed June 29th, 2020, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/galina-rymbu-three-poems/>.

restore the image. Rather, the poet engages in a thoughtful observance of the thing that changes its forms on its way to disappearance: we can see the factories being sold, re-sold, and then re-sold again, and, in some cases, demolished and effaced. It is studying these material states of the disintegration – of material in space and of image in memory – that allows Rymbu to think anew about the flexibility and upheaval of remains of the past in the contemporary landscape.

The space of the poem is defined by the factories, along with other public spaces and institutions: a school, a café, a hospital, and a cemetery. It is only once in the poem that the poet's home is briefly mentioned. Factories produce everything from ice-cream to coffins, while workers “would play with the details on the empty shop floor, like kids” (“играли ими в пустых цехах как дети”) and are carried away to the cemetery straight from the factories, completing the cycle of life fully dependent on the institutes of production. The historical present depicted in the poem takes place in the factory, which by crumbling down erodes the sense of being present, of belonging to one's time. In his second *Thesis*, Benjamin outlines the idea of the direct connection of the feeling of happiness and the historical present: “Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to...”¹⁷ The air people breathe in the poem

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 254.

is clogged with factory smoke, and the narrator connects it with happy memories of playing with her father like this one:

И он забыл рыбалку вечернюю за асфальтным заводом в нашем районе
Где мы с ним в осенней рощице пускали кленовые самолётики и в небе
вился дым густой
От труб ТЭЦ-5

And he forgot about fishing in the evenings behind the asphalt factory in our
neighborhood

Where he and I would throw autumn whirlybirds in the maple grove, as thick
smoke curled across the sky

From the smokestacks of Power Plant No. 5

Leisure activities and games, fishing and throwing whirlybirds, happen in the landscape of continuous work of the factories and their smokestacks. The father used to fish behind the asphalt factory, as if hidden or fortified by it. This place behind the factory is a site of nature, a maple grove that offers the characters simple entertainment and infuses the fragment with color. The sturdy structures of the factories in the poem enfold, as it were, personal time, allowing for the hidden spaces of play and contentment. The disintegration of the industrial buildings undoes these enfolded places, which now only memory can fill in and inhabit. In this fragment father “forgets” the activities that used to bring him and his daughter happiness. The destruction of the factory is a fracture of the historical

present. Once fractured, it makes happiness unreachable, as the generation of the father finds itself outside its historical time during its lifetime.

The experience of losing one's own feeling of belonging to a historical plane reveals itself in many places in a poem where the poet directly refers to history. The following lines depict history's deviation from being "ours" and metamorphosis into something alien:

Это было нашей историей
А теперь
Это стало историей только о том
Как «пролетариат становится прекариатом»
И как плавится блочное болотное тёмное солнце
В свете новых работ

This was our history
And now
It's become just a story about
How the proletariat becomes the precariat
And how dark blocks of swampy sun melt
In the light of new jobs

Along with the sense of loss and the involuntary transition to a state of precariousness, there are still "new jobs," new labor. The sun in the passage, as if eclipsed by something,

is dark and melting. A similar image of the sun can be found in Benjamin's *Thesis IV*: "As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history."¹⁸ The transition to capitalism, away from "our history," through the description of the new works and labors expresses bewilderment, the anxiety of watching this slow turn of the past, a past that is beginning to be a story about something else, something that is "not ours."

Many images in the text amplify the idea of turning away and of retreating. Father runs back home after receiving an injury at the factory, animals escape from the woods that are on fire. In Rymbu's poem history, like the sun, melts, and reveals what might be termed its back-and-forth-ness, its ability to change its quality. In multiple places in the poem history is being referred to as a "straight" line, though it is never a final condition, but a state that history acquires or recovers from: "After all, soon there will be nothing but the straight line of history" ("Ведь совсем скоро будет только прямая история"); "I'm four years old (when the line of history is straightest)" ("Мне 4 года [(время самой прямой истории)]"); and finally, "That's how the straight line of history runs out" ("Так уходит время прямой истории"). Straight history here is not only a concept, it is telling of the texture of the past that undergoes transformations in the poem. On the closing of one of the factories, Rymbu writes:

¹⁸ Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

И завод «Полёт» закрыли, а территорию разровняли и построили новые
дома для людей

Кто эти люди?

And the factory “Flight” was closed, and they flattened the territory and built new
houses for people -

Who are these people?

The Russian word *rozrovniat*’ (“to flatten”) has a very tactile quality to it. It calls attention to the visceral aspect of the flattening of the territory where the demolished factory building once stood. This flattening eradicates the ruins of history, stretching out its dark lagoons and folds. The poet doesn’t recognize people who inhabit the new houses on the new site. Theorizing reflective nostalgia, Svetlana Boym writes: “*Re-flection* suggests new flexibility, not the re-establishment of stasis.”¹⁹ Rymbu’s attention to texture of the past – it’s uncurling and straightening – is a part of the search for the way to engage with the past that would bypass these practices.

The discussion of the processes of transformation of history and its affect are fully realized in the main character of the poem, the father. The story begins when the father first comes into the city and starts to work at the factory “Flight” to produce details for space rockets. After this factory was closed and leveled to the ground, he started working in the “Natural Siberian Rubber” factory, which ended in an explosion and the father’s

¹⁹ Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2011), 49.

horrible wound from the chemicals. He then worked at the tire plant:

Там где катились чёрные-чёрные шины для машин будущего

Для людей настоящего, как он думал – для наших внуков, для ваших детей

In that place where the blackest tires were rolled out for the cars of the future

For the people of the present, and as he thought

for our grandchildren, for your children

Father's connection to the factory he works in is also his connection to a purposefulness that makes the thought of the future possible. This is evocative of Benjamin, who writes in the second *Thesis*: "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim."²⁰ The father works and imagines that the products of his labor will be realized and used by the new generation, maybe by his own daughter. However, the demolition of the industrial world of the poem makes this generational "claim" impossible. The poem depicts a retreat from this expectation. There can't be an agreement between the generations; there are no means of communication and making claims: "And if that's true, then what else can I say to my father?" ("И что я могу отцу в таком случае ещё выше сказать?")

After leaving the tire plant "father went off to do some other jobs at someone's dacha" ("ушёл к кому-то на дачу делать иные работы"); once again, we see how the

²⁰ Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 254.

subject undergoes a gradual change, as the transformations of the industrial reality inevitably deform and change this person: “Then he got laid off / And he came back to our home changed”(“и отца сократили, и он вошел в наш дом уже другим.”) It seems to interfere with his memory. First, after her father is fired (“And he forgot about fishing in the evening behind the asphalt factory”)(“И он забыл рыбалку вечернюю за асфальтным заводом в нашем районе”) and then again when he loses his fingers while performing a dangerous job to make money and must undergo an operation: “And now he does not even remember this.” (“А он уже и не помнит об этом.”) Rymbu’s thought here cherishes not so much the disappearing sights, but somebody else’s memory about those things. Such gradual forgetting of the past by the father makes the desirable communication even more distant, as the author is being left alone in the space of the memory once shared.

A perplexing and unfulfilled urge toward communication in the poem varies from the apprehension of the upcoming dialogue to the affirmation of its impossibility:

Ещё тогда я предчувствовала, что будет какой-то такой разговор,

Что рано или поздно он состоится, он начнётся,

И я не знала кто его будет вести,

Но я знала, что не смогу ничего сказать.

Как

Я буду в нём участвовать?

Even then I had the feeling that there would have to be
Some kind of conversation like this
That sooner or later it would happen, it would begin,
And I didn't know who would be having it,
But I knew I wouldn't have anything to say.

How

Could I possibly take part?

The language of this fragment is purely conversational, its vocabulary simple and its syntax stumbling and repetitive (“it would happen, it would begin”, “он состоится он начнется”). The flow of the poem is often imitative of conversational speech in a similar manner, its stream at times uninterrupted by the micro-pauses of the signs of punctuation: it regularly skips commas and periods. Tellingly, the sign that the poem doesn't skip a single time is the question mark: the poet asks ten questions over the course of the poem, constantly enfolded the narratives of the past, written in the past tense, into reflections and doubts of the present, written in the present and future tenses: “Who are these people?” “Who are we talking to?” “How could I possibly take part?”²¹ (“кто эти люди?” “с кем мы разговариваем?” “Как я буду в нём участвовать?”). The temporality of the present in the poem on the grammatical level illuminates the past, modifying it by its own concerns and doubts.

Even though the poem ends with a reflection on the absence of the metaphors: “There isn't one single metaphor here” (“здесь нет ни единой метафоры”), the poem

²¹ This sentence uses the verb in the future tense in Russian original.

incorporates many complex and glaring images (like the dark melting sun, mentioned above). Sometimes the metaphoric comparison is reached through the juxtaposition of neighboring images, as in the following lines juxtaposing language and the image of the knife:

Это о том как быть

Если у них есть нож который в любую минуту

может

А у тебя нет ничего кроме желания говорить иначе

Но с ними

На их языке

This is about how to be

If they have a knife that any minute

Can

And you have nothing but a desire to speak differently

But with them

In their language

Here Rymbu introduces the idea that in order to enter into a dialogue with the generation of her parents, the working class, poetry should retain the same readiness to fight. This sharpening of poetic language reflects violent scenes in the poem such as that featuring father's injury from acid, the image of how he lost the fingers on his left hand while working, and the tremendous factory fire and animals running from the burning woods near Moscow. These images are attempts to make poetic language sharpen itself, to

articulate violence, and may profitably be read alongside the flashes of danger of Benjamin. In Thesis VI Benjamin writes: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”²² I think that Rymbu’s descriptions of moments of danger, of unexpected pain, could be considered meditations on what happens to a person who experiences such a “flash” of history (the poem details how the factories have become dysfunctional and dangerous and how the workers engage in criminal activities after their shifts). It is likely that the “flash” of history exhausts a person instantly: after all, we question whether the depicted violence is directly connected to the gradual forgetting the father falls into. Her sharpening of the poetic language allows a moment of danger to occur in speech, giving a chance for history to reveal itself.

Beside the use of verbal tense and articulation of violence, it is worth highlighting the structures of the sentences. Rymbu uses repetition several times in the poem. The line “details details details” (“детали детали детали”) read aloud forces the mouth into a certain repetitive production-like motion, while the repetition; “and the animals fled *and the animals fled*” (“и бежали животные *и бежали животные*”) recreates the repetitiveness that occurs in the speech affected by the insistence and unfathomability of the matter; but it is also a repetition of a sudden realization, an articulation of awe. There is a noticeable abundance of conjunctions, especially ones used for contrast like “but”, “though” (“но”, “а”). Their frequent appearances in each fragment interrupt the flow of sentences, which are constantly being set against themselves, cracked in the middle by

²² Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

negation or doubt. Other types of conjunctions such as “and,” “or,” “also” (“и,” “еще,” “или”) are just as numerous. Placed at the beginning of lines anaphorically, they facilitate the repetitive tides of thoughts and memories, while not allowing the hierarchy of a single plot to establish itself in the text: every other memory and event “also” happened, “and” so did the following one. The landscape of material disintegration of factories and plants is captured by Rymbu with a language of a similar complex texture with cracks and fragments.

The look at the ruins of the industrial neighborhoods that Rymbu undertakes in her poem has many qualities that resemble reflective nostalgia as Boym defined it: it is oriented towards the individual narrative and the imperfections of the past, and it “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.”²³ The famous turn towards the debris of the past of Benjamin’s Angel of History for Boym is a foundational example of modern nostalgia, that “can neither make whole the past nor embrace the future.”²⁴ The angel of history is an image to push off from in order to comprehend the difference of Rymbu’s subversive look at the ruins: it does not seek to make “whole what was has been smashed” nor does it seek to rescue anybody, to “awaken the dead.” Most importantly: there is no feeling of impossibility of staying that the angel signifies. On the contrary, Rymbu, through the experimentation with the language that represents the conversation with the previous generation, the lost and excluded working class, accumulates the dynamic revolutionary force that marks Benjamin’s nostalgia, but is in

²³ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

no way constrained by its cul-de-sac temporality. The ruin of the factory, carefully enfolded by clutter of history, becomes a material resource of that force.

CHAPTER III

A LOOK AT THE SOVIET GARDEN CITIES: REFLECTING ON THE FRACTURES OF HISTORY

In March 2019 the photography exhibition “The New Landscape” curated by Petr Antonov and Anastasia Tsayder opened in the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center in Ekaterinburg, Russia. Projects by seven prominent photographers were displayed in the first attempt to collect explorations into the anthropogenic Post-Soviet landscape and its shift from industrial to post-industrial, from Soviet to Russian. The displayed projects work with various places and sites all over Russia: they include documentation of Siberian surfaces after the industry left them, desolate places in Russia with less than one living person per square kilometer, or depict how economic changes transform the urban environments of cities and the outskirts of megapolises.²⁵ The curatorial description of the exhibition emphasizes the rise of interest in critically re-thinking the landscape in Russian photography dating from the mid-1990s and culminating in 2010s²⁶. One of the projects displayed at “The New Landscape,” “Arcadia” by Anastasia Tsayder, is in the focus of this chapter.

The project “Arcadia” was initiated in 2016; it documents Soviet garden cities. The idea of the garden city was first proposed in 1898 by Ebenezer Howard in the United Kingdom. The garden city originated as an alternative to the crowded and unhealthy living conditions of the working class in big, industrial cities and projected the utopian

²⁵ More information about the projects and the artists can be found at: Eltsin Center, “Vystavka ‘Novyj Peizazh,’” Accessed June 29, 2020, <https://yeltsin.ru/affair/vystavka-novyj-peizazh/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

aspirations of the ideal design of living space. Howard's city planning combined industrial and residential areas with proportionate green areas that could provide a space for recreation for the working class. The idea of the garden city instantly became popular, making its way to the Russian Empire (several newspapers from 1913 reflect the plans of the Kazan railroad system to seek finance to build the city-garden for its workers)²⁷, and was later implemented in city planning in the Soviet Union. Scholar Gennady Obatinin suggests that the fascination with the idea of garden cities can be traced in the famous poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky from 1929, "Khrenov's Story About Kuznetsk Construction and the People of Kuznetsk" (Рассказ Хренова о Кузнецкстрое и о Людях Кузнецка") with its refrain: "Four years from now there will be a garden city!" ("Через четыре года/здесь будет город-сад!")²⁸ The idea of green recreational spaces for the workers, conceived at the turn of the twentieth century, was widely implemented in the 1960s in the Soviet Union, the era of massive construction of new cities and expansions of existing ones.

"Arcadia" documents the aftermath of the utopian project of the 1960s. As Tsayder herself notes, "The Soviet Garden City was to turn every 'microdistrict'—the new basic element in Soviet urban planning—into the socialist workers' paradise. The transition from the socialist economy to the free market and from industrial to post-industrial society relieved man of the responsibility to care for the city garden, and the

²⁷ Gennadii Obatinin, "Mayakovsky. "Rasskaz Khrenova o Kuznetskstroie i ludiah Kuznetska," *Arzamas*, Accessed June 29, 2020, <https://arzamas.academy/courses/22/4>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

urban vegetation started to reclaim new spaces.”²⁹ “Arcadia” was shot in a number of cities in Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The photographs were displayed at the exhibition as digital pigment prints, along with a single-channel video. The photographs discussed in this thesis were filmed with an analogue camera³⁰.

Both Rymbu’s and Tsayder’s works explore the Post-Soviet neighborhoods transformed by the fractures of the historical moment—a moment that caused destruction and abandonment. While these transformations still shape the neighborhoods and cities, the question of co-habitation with them (or inhabiting them) is an important part of dealing with the historical present. What does it mean to pass by an abandoned garden, to reconstruct it, or to look at a photograph of it? How does our navigation of the space of such a drastic historical turn affect our perception of history and of the historical now? If Rymbu’s recollection of the destroyed and vanished factories suggests inhabiting the space of the catastrophe, the photographs of “Arcadia” offer a view of a similar experience of inhabiting the fractures of history, this time performed by the greenery. Is there a way to interact with spaces like abandoned garden cities, and inevitably the events that shaped them, in a way that wouldn’t trigger restorative nostalgia and the desire to reconstruct the past, but through a means of creative engagement that could facilitate the seamless interweaving of them into the historical present?

* * *

²⁹ Anastasia Tsayder, *Arcadia*, Accessed June 29, 2020, <http://tsayder.com/works/arcadia/>.

³⁰ Anastasia Tsayder, personal email to the author, June 23, 2020.

The title of the project – “Arcadia” – envelops the photographs in a long pictorial tradition. Arcadia, or an Arcadian place of untouched, luscious nature, imagined as the home of Pan in Ancient Greece, was the subject of the first landscape paintings of Classicism, and later developed by Romantic artists. Through its long pictorial history, the image of Arcadia embodied not only a fascination with nature and ruins, but also a direct reflection on the fleeting nature of life and mortality. Romantic is one of the ways to describe the landscape that the Soviet Union left behind: the landscape of ruins and abandonment, with many sites overgrown over the course of past decades. “Once conceived with the concept of the socialist paradise, the utopian garden city in mind, today these cities re-conquered by plants create the new romantic landscape of the post-Soviet space,”³¹ says Tsayder in her commentary on the project. The romantic rebellion against Classicism and the rationalization of nature gains its new relevance in “Arcadia”: the abandoned gardens challenge the strict forms of the Soviet past. Cherished and cultivated in the era of industrialization, the pictorial myth of Arcadia enters its new, post-industrial realm in Tsayder’s project.

When we think of “Arcadia” in which urban planning and building of the gardens are being thought of through art, it is interesting to note that in case of Arcadian myth the histories of building the gardens and making art are in fact intertwined. Back in the Renaissance era, paintings with Arcadian landscapes influenced the development of Romantic gardens, landscape design projects seeking to imagine Arcadia as a physical space. These gardens were designed to evoke specific feelings and philosophical thoughts

³¹ Tsayder, *Arcadia*.

for a stroller: “A garden building built as a ‘ruin’ would provide a contemplative sign for the potential demise of any great civilization (Rome, Greece), and serve as a warning to the contemporary viewer.”³² Gardens, depicted in “Arcadia,” were once artificially designed, yet obtained the state of wild lushness in time, hiding the ruins of not just any fallen Empire. And while “Arcadia” invites us for a philosophical walk through the Post-Soviet gardens, we might ask ourselves what does it mean to have an interaction with a landscape that is stimulating and revealing, directing us and pointing us towards impressions and thoughts?

The photographs in the project don’t follow an easily definable narrative arc, making it possible to approach them from any place. Looking at *figure 1*, our eye first meets the building, or the part of it that we can see, placed in the center of the image. It’s a multiple story building of pale color with many squares of windows and balconies: a standard unit of the construction in the 1960s that appear on many photographs of the project. When our eye leaves the geometrical center of the image, the true emphasis reveals itself: the layers of green on the foreground composed of trees, the thicket and the grass. The space of the image is charged with the slow and rebellious dynamic of the greenery that forms the void of a non-place around the building. There is no struggle, but rather placid surrender. If we look at the photograph for some time, our attention is inevitably lifted by a poplar on the left: it is cone-shaped and bursts up with the power that leaves the building looking almost twice as small. To the left of it, we can see a lamppost that stands parallel to the stately poplar but is nothing more than a pale blue

³² David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 91.

line not yet lit up. The photograph is bathed in the warm, late spring or early summer light characteristic of northern climes. All photographs from “Arcadia” have this warm and all-pervading light, which creates an interesting dialogue with a line from Rymbu’s poem: “and this time repeated as if in a memory bathed in sunlight.” (“и на это раз повторно как будто бы воспоминание – залитые солнцем.”)³³ This warm light makes the photographs more habitable for our gaze, more real, as if we could find that place we made a secret detour during a walk in our own neighborhood.



Figure 1

³³ Galina Rymbu, *Three Poems*.

The importance of light and its functions are considered by French theorist Roland Barthes in his personal essay, *Camera Lucida*. For him, it is the light in the photograph that provides an intimate connection with the thing from the past depicted on the photograph. He writes: “From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.”³⁴ He also compares the light to “a sort of umbilical cord” that “links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze.”³⁵ Carrying that crucial function, it is also evocative of the first landscape paintings—paintings that anticipate photography’s light effects. For instance, Claude Lorrain’s classic landscapes “were bathed in warm, sumptuous sunlight,” “his pictures conjured up an imagined antiquity, an ‘Arcadia’ with long shadows and deep horizons.”³⁶ This kind of light signified both dawn and dusk, metaphorically – both the beginning and the end. The light in the photographs from “Arcadia” is similarly elusive. Most of the photographs are imbued with a warm light that sometimes has a clarity of a morning, and sometimes the fullness of a sunset, or – a faded light emerging in the mist. In *Figure 2* the row of tall poplars cast long shadows which merge with the shadow in the foreground. The cone of the shadow on the asphalt contrasts with the luminous space that peeks through between the buildings and trees. The objects in that far plane of all-pervading light seem to be almost transparent. The

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 80.

³⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 81.

³⁶ Bate, *Photography*, 92.

light of the photograph lures us into the equilibrium of times: the photographs are not only the images of the past but also evoke the expectation of the coming day.



Figure 2

Time in “Arcadia” inevitably takes a utopian turn, as the space of the abandoned garden in the photographs seems to be a superimposition of two utopian visions. Here Soviet utopia, which charged the building of the gardens and was oriented towards the unseen, yet surely coming future, merges with the sense of Edenic loss of an Arcadia that mourns the unattainable past. As if these two visions would destabilize and exclude each other, Tsayder refers to these spaces as “voids”: “Gradually occupied by plants the

microdistricts create the voids of 'non-places' where one can feel exempt from total surveillance and social pressure. The placid landscape of neighborhoods and cities, equally indistinguishable from one another, becomes filled with vegetation unnoticeably acquiring a feral state.”³⁷ Trees and plants growing into their own shapes and exploring the space around them are no longer constrained by the ideological force that sustained them, nor do they submit to the new order of things. Completely neglected by present-day affairs, or, as Benjamin writes on the images of the past, “not recognized by the present day as one of its own concerns,” it trespasses the potentiality of being “lost in a void”³⁸; instead, it embodies it. Gardens captured in “Arcadia” are peculiar folds of History, an unsupervised space of fresh and uncaring sovereignty.

The visual representation of the void of “Arcadia” relies on the overwhelming green of the plants and trees that create a specific perception of space in the photographs. In *figures 3* and *4* vegetation takes up most of the space in the photograph. We don’t see the contrasting white of the sky, and the apartment buildings that we can recognize appear only fragmentary, entangled in the larger scope of the greenery. The main visual force of *figure 3* is directed upward: two trees frame the photograph on each side, while our eye is immediately captured by the dark, overgrown trunk of the tree in the middle. The light barely seeps through the tops of the crowns, leaving the rest of the space of the garden in the cool shade, in its own environment. Beneath the disordered organic waves of green, we find the contrasting texture of the asphalt. It looks like an empty space where no thread of today’s paths trespasses: its edges are covered in dry leaves and dirt,

³⁷ Tsayder, *Arcadia*.

³⁸ Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

while weeds are making their way through the asphalt surface. There are barely visible pieces of trash in the grass on the left. All of it a reminder that it isn't a natural site of untouched beauty, but a space left on its own after a receding historical tide.



Figure 3

The vegetative fabric of leaves, branches and thicket in *figures 3* and *4* envelops the world of the abandoned garden; we see the outside world through the veil of its texture. The edges of *figure 4* are taken up by the dense and expansive crowns on top of the photograph and on the left side, and blooming bushes on the right. Following this frame our eyes are directed towards the center. There, the V-shaped tree expands

upwards, its two massive branches rhyming with the parallel lines of the branches of the nearby trees. The overwhelming homogeneity of the green accentuates the small, bright touches of color at the center: pink and yellow graffiti on the corner of the building, the blue of the clothesline, and the warm orange color of the flowers.



Figure 4

There is an inconspicuous diagonal line of the walking path in the foreground, yet it is hard to imagine a trespasser. The space of the photograph is filled with various layers of green, and despite the openness of the center and a path running through, we get a sense

of the seclusion or uniqueness of the garden's environment. The void of the non-place is realized through its own rhythms of time.

The main antithesis of the photographs of "Arcadia" is realized in the buildings whose white or pale-colored strict forms contrast with the chaotic green of the gardens. These two components of the landscape encapsulate different states: buildings, and mostly multiple-story apartment buildings, are the form of the inhabited present, while the unapproachable space of the former city garden seems to be a space devoid of time and excluded from the present. The relations between the two in the photographs are complex. Inhabited spaces and their hierarchy of lines seem indifferent to the waves of vegetation that carry the force of reaching out and expansion: we observe the contours of order dissolving in the softness of the grass.

In *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* environmental critic Stacy Alaimo dedicates a chapter to the question of what the neighboring of controlled inhabited spaces to places of wilderness can offer in terms of suggesting new ways of thinking about our own situatedness. Alaimo's argument focuses on the great potential of softening and eliminating the borders and walls that are supposed to protect the inhabited space from the wilderness and of introducing the element of interconnection, openness to what she calls of the unexpected: "An ethics of inhabiting revels in the pleasure of interconnection and the joy of unexpected."³⁹ She argues that the garden in the history of Western modernity is merely an extension of the house itself,

³⁹ Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 18.

“fenced, bordered and ‘clean,’” as was the case with the carefully controlled park areas of the Soviet 1960s. Alaimo’s thinking is engaged in how the introduction of the pleasure of interconnection can create a more productive, creative response to the issues of protecting the ecology. I believe that this way of thinking is interesting to consider while reevaluating our relationship towards the void of non-places left by recent historical events. Interestingly, the “essential gesture” of the photographer, according to Barthes, is to surprise,⁴⁰ which is a way of interaction that provokes the unexpected response and suggests a playful interaction.

One way of achieving the openness and interconnectedness that can foster a creative dialogue with abandoned places would be to reevaluate our role as spectators. For Barthes, a Spectator looks at the photographs and has only “sentimental reasons” to be interested in them and an Operator has a whole different experience, because he is the one who takes the photograph.⁴¹ It is possible that the medium of “Arcadia” makes us Spectators, observers of the images of wild vegetation. Yet, the depicted plants, trees, and thickets seems to be in a state of constant movement and suggest interaction: we can see the grass growing through the tile or the ivy slowly creeping up the building. Alaimo, collecting examples from unplanned gardens, quotes the artist Patricia Johanson, who says that the experience of such gardens “turn[s] spectators into participants, ensuring both a creative response and some consideration of forces that affect the landscape and

⁴⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 21.

our lives.”⁴² Photographs of “Arcadia” are themselves such a creative response. The short video⁴³ that supplements the project is a compelling example of the introduction of playfulness and joy. Metal construction that resembles what used to be a carousel stands overgrown in the bushes and trees and becomes a rack for the firework, its champagne-colored sparks bursting and melting in the gloominess of twilight. The reflective and creative engagement with the landscape in “Arcadia” puts us in the middle of it, brings us in: the vantage point is always situated within the green spaces. It feels like we’re strolling through the garden city and sometimes we find ourselves in places where no physical path is imaginable.

The relationship of the inhabited space and the void of the non-place of the garden is not that of opposition, and the most captivating elements of the photographs are the ones depicting the ways the gardens spread into the urban landscape. Most of the space of *figure 5* is taken up by the tree branches and grass, which resemble a slow green wave that rolls upward toward the high-rise building. Our location as observers is unclear if not dizzying: we find ourselves in the midst of a wave with its slopes and expansions. The verticality of the building, along with its geometrical divisions of blocks and windows, is obscured by the turbulence of branches and leaves. This obscurity is evident in the way that the natural light is present in the photograph. We can see how only the top of the building is sunlit, and only the top of the tree’s crown on the right catches the light, but most of the building stands in the shadow of the trees. The way that the vegetation

⁴² Alaimo, *Exposed*, 35.

⁴³ Tsayder, *Arcadia*.

interacts with the building, a part of social organization, is by means of disturbance: it permeates the space and intercepts the light. The abandoned garden, a wound of recent historical events, is the space that exists close to the space of everyday life, yet always secluded and always behind the invisible borderline of habitation. Reflecting on green spaces' aspirations of co-existence is necessary.



Figure 5

Figure 6 portrays a closer interaction of the greenery and residential building. This photograph displays on the right the edge of the building, and, in a dialogue of symmetry, trees on the left. In between them there are forking paths, one of them is an

asphalt road that abruptly ends when it turns toward the green space, continuing as bare earth. The vine creeping up the building's side is visually impressive: the corner of the building is so overgrown that it resembles a tall tree.



Figure 6

While spreading on the building, it both follows its main visual vertical vectors and embarks on its own explorations in the chaotic clusters and sprouts. As we are looking at them we notice that the rectangles of the balconies, once uniformly designed, with time have become unique: Some of them have windows, some do not; they are of different colors, and on one of them we see pots with blooming red flowers while the wild vine

stretches toward them. The garden next to the building is fenced off but can barely contain the mellowness of the thriving bushes. Their varying types, of various heights and textures, blend in with the distant forest in the background, where our attention goes following the stable balance of the photograph.

One of the most intriguing details of *figure 6* are the blooming pink bushes. They are fenced in, but their abundance overflows, escaping the enclosure and infiltrating the space beyond it. (Barthes writes that punctum is “a kind of subtle beyond,” that launches our desire beyond the photograph.⁴⁴ I think of these subtle and sure intentions of the greenery to infiltrate the enclosures and the lines of order as appealing to us and striving beyond the space photographed.) Fences can be seen as a separate motif in “Arcadia.” In *figure 2* in the lower left-hand corner we see the garden bed that is separated from the sidewalk with a low fence. The fencing’s fragile light blue arcs repeat the long-arched leaves of the grass behind them. The bushes are significantly higher than the fence, whose surface is partly damaged and fractured. The fence in the lower left-hand corner of *figure 3* fades into the thicket completely and seamlessly. These elements of disturbance, the permeating motion through the lines constituted by the ideological and utopian (urban) plans, are very compelling to consider when we talk about nostalgia for these abandoned places.

Here we must go back to the concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia that Boym introduced. We also must acknowledge that nostalgia is being experienced

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 59.

intensely in the Post-Soviet living and industrial neighborhoods (microdistricts), which has been explored in multiple studies⁴⁵. According to Boym, restorative nostalgia, protecting the absolute truth, synthesizes one solid national identity. The danger of this unification is apparent. Winding, flexible and sprawling vegetation in “Arcadia” performs an act of disturbance that in itself is a powerful, subversive practice. Disturbance as subversion to oppressive structures and myths among others is theorized by Lee Edelman in *No future: Queer theory and The Death Drive*, a book on queer resistance to the myth of futurity. His relies on the necessity to disturb identity: “the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.”⁴⁶ The act of disturbance performed by the plants ultimately disrupts the unified identity that nostalgia generates. Moreover, the medium of photography facilitates and amplifies this, as, according to Barthes, certain photographs include a *punctum* or a subjective and unintentional element that disturbs the obvious message of the photograph or *studium*, which belongs to the realm of political testimonies and historical scenes.⁴⁷

It is not only the residential buildings and inhabited urban spaces that appear in the photographs of the gardens. Many of them capture ruins of bridges, stairs, roads and other objects that were once a seminal part of the plan of the garden city and are a

⁴⁵ See articles: Anna Strelnikova, “Smysly zhizni, ukorenennye v prostranstve: nostalgicheskaiia identichnost’ zhitelei ‘zavodskih’ raionov,” in *Smysly Zhizni Rossiiskoi Intellegentsii*, edited by Zhan Toschchenko, (Moscow: Russian State University of Humanities, 2018,) 275-280 and Sobolevskaia, “Nostal’gicheskoe potreblenie.”

⁴⁶ Lee Edelman, *No future: Queer theory and The Death Drive*. (Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25-26.

necessary element of the romantic landscape of today's gardens. A ruin in a romantic painting is an object that radiates the past, becoming a site of departure to a dream. Its porous nature opens up space for a dream and for feeling to enter. The medium of photography, as Barthes argues, does not necessarily make us dream. However, it occasionally grants the viewer the bittersweet sensation of *punctum*. *Punctum*, a central concept of Barthes's theory of photography in *Camera Lucida*, is a strong, wounding yet pleasurable sensation that one experiences by looking at a photograph that has the potential to disrupt the photograph's dominant, organizing principle or *studium*. The subjective experience of *punctum*, Barthes claims, is always triggered by a specific detail, a part. It's possible to think of the ruins as such "partialness," something whose entire nature is defined in terms of its lack of wholeness.

Figure 7 tells the story of the overgrown space under a bridge. On the foreground in the right-hand corner we can see a fragment of the sunlit stairs, which are an extension of the larger concrete construction that is hard to identify. The construction material is rich in texture. It is especially evident in the part displayed in the lower right-hand corner, with its horizontal traces of perhaps paint or markings of another origin, the material crumbling and wet. Between the two sets of stairs the vegetation luxuriates enfolded in the remains of the construction. The diagonal lines of the stairs constitute the implied motion of the image, it's inconclusiveness letting our gaze glide back and forth over its overgrown surface.

The photograph's space is also defined by the bridge that occupies a large part of it. Its darkness and depth contrasts with the sunny tranquility of the ruin, and the elaborate ornamentation of the railing as well as the strict geometric forms of its base

with the dense and moving chaos of leaves. Once a liminal space, the ruin of the stairs suggests the motion, the direction of which in time and space we can no longer comprehend.



Figure 7

The ruin in *figure 8*, similarly, is hard to identify. The concrete form resembles part of a bridge that is no longer there. It stands on the edge of a muddy and overgrown body of water, heavy branches of trees hanging above it. The tiles on the foreground no longer restrain the shoreline: the grass emerges through the cracks and surrounds them. The vantage point of the photograph puts us close to the water, though we can't possibly see the paths leading to the ruin. Thanks to the dynamic lines of the branches that take up

most of the space of the photograph, our eye keeps coming back to the ruin, its edge a downwards diagonal ending abruptly and cutting off the motion of our eye. In both *figures 7 and 8* the partialness of the ruin makes it virtually impossible to construct any narrative, any form or order: it is a remnant of disintegration rather than of organization. This prompts us to question how it influences our perception of the time of the image and our thinking about its history.



Figure 8

In chapter 16 of *Camera Lucida* Barthes elaborates on how the medium of photography speculates with our desire of inhabitation. He writes about a photograph

from the nineteenth century that depicts an old house in Grenada. His affection for the photograph is dictated by his realization that he wishes to live there; he concludes that for him the photographs of a landscape must be habitable, not visitable.⁴⁸ This desire to inhabit operates with a specific sense of time: it is an invitation to an unspecified time in the future, it is “fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself.”⁴⁹ The feeling that we receive from the photographs of “Arcadia” is very different: it is not an invitation to dream of inhabitation, for a ruin does not make us dream about the future in a utopian manner.

This impression is encapsulated in *figure 9*, whose foreground is composed of a wild, entangled grassy area that takes over the remains of the pavement and the stone construction, perhaps a former pool or fountain. The unstable, diagonal vectors of the overgrown construction intersect with the vertical stillness of the high-rise buildings. These remains vanish further into the permeating thicket. The geometry of the ruin—a line, a plane of surface—is fractured by the thriving vegetation. These fresh-cut fragments of material are deprived of any reference to the past. We can’t say for sure what this construction was, or where these paths of pavement lead. It isn’t the fantasmatic desire about the utopian future that the photograph evokes; it is the dead end of the utopic projection. Nevertheless, by being visitable, and not habitable, the photograph invites us into a temporality devoid of myths.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.



Figure 9

Though Barthes claims that “in front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory,” nostalgia and photography do share common components. He himself outlines the relationship between the past and the present in the photograph as one of superimposition: “In photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

A similar principle of superimposition can be found in one of the definitions of nostalgia by Svetlana Boym. She remarks that, “A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life.”⁵¹ While looking at the photographs in Tsayder’s project, we easily sense that superimposition of contemporary reality, its material presence, and the utopian dreams of the past that shaped it. Yet the nostalgic element in “Arcadia” is only elusively present in the form of reflective contemplation of the ruins, while such contemplation reveals a subversive and mobilizing potential. These photographs attest to what-has-been. They don’t call up the past but attest to it. And as we stroll through the photographs of the overgrown gardens of the Post-Soviet landscape, we necessarily come back to the Barthesian question: *Why am I alive here and now?*⁵²

⁵¹ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

⁵² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 84.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

A non-nostalgic look at the ruins and overgrown spaces of the Post-Soviet landscape is not only possible, but urgent. Realizing the presence of the destruction and ruination within our contemporary neighborhoods is vital to our situatedness in the present, as the material presence of the ruin neutralizes the haunting and deceptive images of the past, and the overgrown gardens create the spaces of a de-ideologized and idiosyncratic presence.

One of the biggest concerns of the prevailing and overwhelming nostalgia is the rupture between the generations that found themselves on opposite sides of the collapse of the USSR. The nostalgia of the older generation whose identity relied heavily on the Soviet past creates the impossibility for a common language with the generation that grew up in the landscape of the already fallen empire. Poetical experiments such as Rymbu's are not only an insightful look at this historical rupture; they are also an attempt at carving out a language that might find its way to the side of the conversation that is encapsulated in the nostalgia for the times gone by. As neighborhoods change, their appearance undergoes further transformations, and the new inhabitants might not have the same attachments to spaces that once had special social meaning like the abandoned gardens from Tsayder's "Arcadia." It is a site of disconnection from the past, and, at the same time, it marks the potentiality of the re-establishment of the meaning of those places, a chance for an intervention against further exclusion and abnegation.

The occasional characterization of Post-Soviet phenomenon as romantic, be it the “romantic sadness” of the working class or the “romantic landscapes” of the neighborhoods, deserves closer and more in-depth consideration. Benjamin’s theoretical re-evaluation of Romanticism and nostalgia as revolutionary practices can be very fruitful in the conversation about the ruins and overgrown spaces of the Post-Soviet landscape. If post-socialist time is characterized by the inability of thinking and imagining the future as the ruin attests to the pain and failure, the romantic perspective can help to contextualize Soviet ruins as sites of the imagination and of dream.

One of the definitions of nostalgia that Svetlana Boym provides is that it is a “guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetical failure.”⁵³ There can be no way to resolve the nostalgia for the Soviet past, if the general narrative about the “catastrophe” of the fall of the Soviet Union keeps re-producing the passive role of all who experienced it as if it was something that happened to us, that destroyed the places we loved. There must be a different way, a new language and a new approach to the spaces around us, that can turn this narrative of passive mourning and melancholia into active practices of conversation and reflection. Even if there was a much-yearned-for way to go back, a secret turn through time and space, this “homecoming” would be futile and blank, unless we understand ourselves as active participants in the historical rupture of the recent past and feel in the crumbling and the rustle of the overgrown ruins the resonance of our own rhythms.

⁵³ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

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