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Udora: The Beauty of Mowing the Grass Together

Narcissus did not fall in love with himself; he fell in love with his own image, his reflection on water. Narcissism rejects beauty, and also love. While mirrors only reflect existing surfaces, beauty is a window allowing a glimpse into something other, at what is not you, an alterity. We find it in our mysterious past and in our dreams of a future that is more than a prolongation of the present. Those who feel trapped in a modern artificial world find it in the refreshing materiality of nature, and those who see material body and world as a cage escape it through soothing or demanding spirituality. The beauty of landscape lies not in the eye of the beholder, but in the emotional repercussions of the many human and natural forces that form it. (Bigell 2018.)



Images in the essay: Werner Bigell



I. TRACES OF THE DISASTER

After a long trip to the village of Patrakovo in the Udora District, I encountered beauty: the endless green sea of the forest with its suggestion of infinity and the northern summer with its brief and delirious vitality. It was June, the month of mosquitoes. I was told that, in Soviet times, there were fewer mosquitoes. Really? Why? Mosquitoes like high grass and, in Soviet times, there was a collective dairy farm here, where the grass was cut regularly. But not anymore. Patrakovo once had 120 inhabitants; now there are seven. My view of the landscape began to change (Bigell, & Cheng

2014). There was a shadow hanging over Udora's beauty; in fact, I was in an economic disaster zone. The signs of the meltdown were all over the place. Walking around, I found rusty machinery from Soviet times. I saw a sign for the store where, once, customers could not only buy products but sell what they produced or collected as well. I saw old maps showing the land use plans of the collective farm. There used to be an airport. There also used to be Bulgarian forest workers; a few remain and take care of their memories in a museum in Ussyorsk. The landscape I saw housed a void: it was an anti-landscape, where human projections onto the land had failed (Bigell, 2014).



There were no more cows, no dairy production, and the milk pails are now used for transporting water. What I first saw as beautiful meadow was in fact abandoned farmland with uncut grass. The young trees on it suddenly looked menacing, the endless green sea of the forest reaffirming its superiority over the grassland.

In an abandoned school hung a portrait of Lenin. What was meant as a determined look on his face to build a new world now looks like the determination to figure out what went wrong. In the museum of the still-used school in Bolshaya Pyssa can be found a table with fanfares, a drum and a stack of red bandanas. The table did not look like a museum display; rather, the items had been put there for the next event that would never come.

Our grammar lacks a tense. We have the future perfect, the past of the future (“I will have baked a cake”), but we lack the future of the past (it could be formed, though, as in “Masha was going to be a cosmonaut”). The world of the past had futures. And now? As former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once said, “Whoever has visions should see a doctor”, while, for Margaret Thatcher, “there is no alternative”. I experience nostalgia for the future.

II. ENDURING PRESENCE

Not everything disappeared. The spirits are still there, as in a shamanic sign on a rock, in a field or in churches that were used for storage in Soviet times. Nature, as well as its rivers and forest, is the most obvious presence. But who owns it? What is the role of the local people in Udora when it comes to land use and resource exploitation? When you feed the printer with a new stack of copy paper, it may well be a tree from Udora, processed by the paper mill close to Syktyvkar.



There are still people and there are the stories of those people. Some came unexpectedly, such as personal stories from the war in Afghanistan. In many houses, I saw heritage collections in the form of artefacts: a fisherman showed me his collection of previously used spears, traps and nets. In this sense, Udora is a living museum, a so-called ecomuseum¹ (Bigell 2012) without having the status of one. There are still inhabited houses, some permanently so, some used as summerhouses, and some, as in the photo below, taken in Patrakovo, waiting for tourists.



With collective farming gone, people have reverted to a pre-industrial subsistence life: hunting, fishing, small-scale farming, berry picking and trapping (see the trap below).



¹An ecomuseum is a museum where artefacts are left in their surroundings and where local people use and take care of them and are responsible for managing their heritage and museum. I argue that this pattern of heritage management is widespread but not always acknowledged.

Food is the common denominator for past and future, from Soviet dairy farming to today's subsistence. Landscapes provide specific crops, but consumption patterns also create landscapes. Infrastructure is needed; traditional refrigerators are used because of blackouts. Eating together is used in rituals, confirming a 'we' that includes the guest. Eating is participation in materiality and also connects to the spiritual world, such as in the Eucharist. In the years after Udora, I interviewed farmers from an ecological network in Thailand and allotment gardeners in Germany, asking them what was beautiful about their farm or garden. Their answers were in unison: natural diversity, community and the fact that you can eat what it produces. I suspect that people in Udora would agree. (Bigell 2018.)

III. A NEW FUTURE?



Most people I spoke to were sceptical about a revival of agriculture in the region because of its latitude and poor roads (that was before economic sanctions boosted Russian agriculture). But, following an initiative by Dina Ivanovna, a network formed for the promotion of tourism, where people pool their resources and skills. Someone will offer a cooking course using a traditional stove, another has a car and will accompany hunters, and others will create a Pitrim Sorokin memorial route. I was shown the remnants of a salt-winning plant deep in the forest, planned by German engineers around 1900. I asked how many tourists see it per year. "Oh, you are the first one", was the answer.

During my visit, the villagers of the region were arranging the Komi Spring Festival for the first time in many years. This was a hopeful sign. Whoever dreams of a new future for Udora must think in terms of a new 'we'.

While traditional landscape painting assumes a single perspective of a distant outsider looking at the well-composed elements of nature, with some human beings thrown in either for scale or for symbolic representation, there is a different way to look at the landscape. It is possible to discover the many human, non-human and sometimes inhuman forces creating it, as well as to listen to those who live and work in it. The well-composed singular view falls apart and real human beings, not symbols, emerge from this vernacular perspective¹ (Olwig 1996).

¹Kenneth Olwig distinguishes between a spatial perspective on landscape of one outside observer and what he calls a "platial" or place-oriented one, with several perspectives from the inside. An example of the former is Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog", an example for the latter is Pieter Bruegel's painting "The Harvest". The platial meaning, according to Olwig, is older and its meaning lingers on in the concept of landscape in Germanic languages.

Work, the transformation of the world, creates solidarity. This does not necessarily mean that we conquer and destroy the world, but create a home in it. When an invisible disaster struck Udora, many left their land and home. But there is a dedicated stubbornness in those who remain. They preserve the beauty of the past and see the beauty of a common future. It is not clear yet as to how it will look, but hopefully the grass will be cut again.



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