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MOON LAKE

essays

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MOON LAKE

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a Bulgarian-German co-production

producer

DONKA ANGELOVA

altera

Delta Entertainment

in association with Stanev Films Berlin

co-producer Patrick Sandrin, Sofilm

principal cast

Yasna Bozhkova	EURIDICE
Vasil Chitanov	ORPHEUS
Gloria Petkova	GIRL IN LOVE
Simon Todorov	BOY IN LOVE

written and directed by Ivan Stanev

director of photography Stefan Ivanov

editor Remco Schuurbiers

casting Irina Marcheva

music by Sebastian Meissner

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MOON LAKE

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PREFACE

In March 2009, there was a private screening of Ivan Stanev's film *Moon Lake*, which was followed by a discussion. Parts of this discussion appeared later on in the cultural weekly *Kultura*. Not satisfied with their initial statements, however, some of the participants in the discussion decided to further elaborate on their responses to the film in texts they wrote in relative seclusion. I say "relative" because discussions, virtual or in person, continued. This book is the outcome. The very impulse of its creators to search for more precise formulations of their initial impressions as well as the unique character of their reflections testify to the fact that the film exerted a singular effect on each of them. Is it a film about the end, or about the deferral of the end? Is it somber, or serene? Is it political, or is it abstract? Is it scientific, or mythical? Is it all too familiar, or too vague? Is there too much, or too little plot in it? Does it remind us of other films, or not at all? And all those untidy kids, those proliferating Orpheuses and Eurydices, are they pitiful, miserable, subhuman, ridiculous, absurd, affected, charming, or, indeed, magnificent?

Some of the authors would take as a matter of fact Edvin Sugarev's claim that the (sub)lime landscape of Kamen Bryag, the Stone Shore, swirls in its moonlake waters the scrappy remnants of utopias from the last decade of communism: poetry, science and forebodings of an uncertain future in the settings of a seminar that has literally gone underground. Seen in this perspective, the

return of civilization to the caves, which the film presents, is, as Albena Stambolova puts it, a "memory world" following the script which the poet Ani Ilkov suggested as early as the beginning of the 1990s: "Young philosophers conceal their being and dedicate themselves to fierce existence by reading everything from Plato to Heidegger. After 1989, their fossils are uncovered in the vaults of Sofia University."¹

Among others, this obvious aspect of the film would be all but invisible. They would rather agree that the "inexhaustible truth of *Moon Lake*" appears in a "coupling of perspectives in which the perspective is always a point of disjunction of perspectives" (Darin Tenev). The film is not a film about this or that history, about this or that future, but is, rather, an attempt to tell the history of the very crack in time through the "quick as a lightning interruption of the frame" and through a "blink of the gaze," which allows to "open a space for the lunatic hallucinations, make the first humans emerge from the water, hurl them to the end of the world and bring them finally back to the starting point, so that the whole of *Moon Lake* itself would be such a blink." (Kamelia Spasova and Maria Kalinova).

And finally, all the participants in this discussion have no doubt that *Moon Lake* appears in a "period of stagnation" (Rajna Markova) and that, with all its perfectionist technique and directorial anarchism, it goes up against the dominant paradigms of the contemporary cinema, with its oscillation between ever more boring entertainment and ever more bigoted moralism. Ivan Stanev goes against the grain of the contemporary vision, damaged as it is

¹ Илков, Ани. Изворът на грознохубавите, Анубис, 1994, 11

by the images that bombard it. This is how I understand Bogdan Bogdanov's claim that the truth of *Moon Lake* is not in seeing but in gazing. Gazing defers seeing; it postpones and sabotages its clichés. One should gaze at *Moon Lake*. In epochs of boredom, which humanity has had before, the eye tries to find ways to open – to put it in Boyan Manchev's words – towards "the huge, imageless, unimaginable, and free desire of the world". If the texts, collected in this volume, succeed in offering an example for this deferral of the seeing, which the unimaginable demands, they will have fulfilled their task.

Miglena Nikolchina



Bogdan Bogdanov is a leading figure in classical studies and literary theory and the author of over 200 books, articles and translations in the field of university education, Ancient Greek literature, culture, philosophy, and human relations. He is Professor of Ancient Greek Literature, manager and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of New Bulgarian University. He has contributed to the modernization of Bulgarian education and academic environment, and to the development of civil society and democracy in Bulgaria.

Bogdan Bogdanov

IVAN STANEV'S *MOON LAKE*

Moon Lake by Ivan Stanev is an authorial film with its consciously carried out concept and vision. It is shot in Bulgarian locations but it shows, rather, the possible existence of a man who, being far from the ordinary buzz of words, sees and understands in an unusual manner. Hence the peculiar nontraditional narrative, the strange coloring, and movement of frames, and also the lucid and calmly pessimistic message. Of course, at a closer reading, it becomes clear that the message is compound: made of one, largely affirmative, thesis in the running film text and another one, a negative thesis coming from the context of the film art.

With regards to the negative thesis, I can handle the departure from the hypocrisy of the commonplace treatment of human life and the decisive separation from the philosophy and technique of commercial cinema. What mystifies me however is the positive thesis in the film text. In what follows, I will focus on this thesis. It would have been better if I could base myself on any of the artistic patterns that Ivan Stanev employs in the film, however I lack the necessary knowledge to uncover them. Therefore, I will take the safer road of the artistic suggestion, which, I think, the film exerts not only on me. I will think about *Moon Lake* as a self-contained work.

Upon first viewing, I acted critically, separating what had been achieved from what had not. I then saw the film

again, followed by two more times. What at first seemed to be incoherent turned out to be comprehensible. That's normal. I allowed the film text to settle in deeper, which is similar to the way I read literary and scientific texts. I live through the situations described in a text as well as through the different texts that emerge from it. On the other hand, repetitively rereading a text clarifies its "musical score" slowly but surely. The same thing happened while watching *Moon Lake*. The film that I initially liked only to a certain extent (partly, of course, because I value Ivan and his work), won me over completely upon further viewings. I realized the value of the film text, the impressive harmony of the visual flow and the film's message.

I would call this the mystery of achieving wholeness. The paradox is that the film is expressly disharmonious and that it operates with a great disbalance between the utmost documentary authenticity and the equally utmost theatricality. I can understand why Ivan Stanev chose to connect these hard-to-combine modes of film expression. It is because both, in their own way, undermine the poetics of commercial cinema and serve a truer world construction, which essentially constructs by means of deconstructing.

What happens to the individual man in the course of this construction? It is something crucial – he rids himself of the burden of individuality. How can this happen technically? First of all, by coupling. It is unlikely that Ivan is following Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* where the human being is defined as a coupling being. And yet, his humans are coupled. The couple is the primary human position in the world of *Moon Lake*. Orpheus and Eurydice are a couple as well as their pendant, the boy and girl in love; Karl and Marx form a strange pair and so do the

elderly man and woman under the shower; and there is the speechless pair of the sailor twins shown twice in the film.

This typical position has a number of variations. The first one is the male-female couple. In it, the woman is always following the man, walking after him or sitting behind him, eating the leftovers that he is tossing behind his back, riding on the second saddle of the tandem – maybe because of the Orpheus and Eurydice model, maybe because of the living example of the Muslim world, or maybe because of something personal. The second variant is the male-male couple. In this case, they are usually side-by-side, although in one frame Karl and Marx walk one after the other. Are there no female couples in *Moon Lake*? I can recall two cases but they do not seem to stand out.

The second position is that of a person in a small or large human group. No matter whether the separate individuals listen, play music, celebrate, or perch like birds on the hull of the ship *Moon Lake*, inside the group they have the same expression on their faces: joyfully gaping or pensively perplexed. The people in a group act like they are being photographed, they stare at the lens, they try to look one way or another but ultimately they remain expressionless. The third position is the strongest – those who stand alone: the welder in a short frame in the middle of the film and in a longer frame near the end, and, most of all, this other welder who remains alone, Orpheus.

What does a human being do when left alone? Work, create, search, gaze, shoot, keep himself busy – being busy as a matter of principle. Welding, this metaphor of being busy, which former epochs exalted, is simply a way of staying busy in *Moon Lake*. So is living, too – a hard-

to-grasp exposure to something out there that has to be done, seen, and understood, no matter what the outcome. Living is simply doing, gazing, and understanding.

The three positions of the coupled, group, and single human being are intersected by three vertical and markedly value-based categories of people. The lowest one is captured by the documentary mode of filming. This type of person is usually in a group, grinning, dancing, or just staring – the Roma people at the wedding, the people in the evening street, the soldiers collecting the dead bodies of the mermaids, the bathing man and woman, the old woman watching a socialist TV news report together with Orpheus.

Midway between the utterly real, as if photographed, people, and the lofty utterly theatrical people, there is the intermediate category of hesitating figures, now real, now theatrical. These are, in fact, the protagonists of the film – the pendant couple of Orpheus and Eurydice, the boy and girl in love. They seem to be real, really loving each other and genuinely conversing. At least so it seems when, for example the boy remarks, “I love your dirty mouth.” But then, after having uttered it, he repeats it in Italian and from a phrase with a referent; he essentially turns it into a sound form without meaning. The same happens to the obscene phrases of the girl: at the edge of meaning, they do not seem to be remarks from a real conversation but, rather, an uttered silence.

This is also the case with the quasi-programmatic conversation between the couple. The girl asks for a tale and then for one more. The boy awkwardly talks about Orpheus and Eurydice, then about the *Moon Lake* ship that would save humanity from extinction. Hastily, as in a recitation, the two stories – of the succeeding-failing

Orpheus in the distant past and of the possible success-failure in the distant future – come into context. But they are only sketches for narratives – unlike the film narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice which, without being a complete story, looks like one because of the references to the ancient myth, if not for other reasons.

Take for example, the scene with the women who attack Orpheus in a cheerful, dance-like manner. Not in order to rip him up for disrespecting femininity, as it is in the ancient story, but in order to drag him into it. And so they do: from time to time he is in a dress, in the dress of Eurydice. Maybe Ivan Stanev associates Orpheus with another cross-dressing, that of Pentheus who was furiously torn to pieces by bacchantes? In this case, the Roma women are only teasing Orpheus. True, this takes place against the background of a monstrous dumping ground above which the dashing herring-gulls frighteningly croak. Thus, in his film narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice, Ivan Stanev does not narrate but shows and refers. And he does so with caution, because the full story and the false construction lie in wait to invade the film text that seems to be happening gropingly.

Maybe the best device to ward off the bathos of the full story is the recitational theatricality. It has its classical manifestation in the depiction of the couple of Karl and Marx who either stand silent like statues, or one of them recites something absurd and out of context – like, of course, the formula, “Property is theft,” spoken in German. This short recitation has also its longer versions in the two lectures on the universe and black energy, and in the Ancient Greek choir declamation of the myth of the cave from Plato’s *Republic*. They are being listened to carefully, respectfully, but without any sign of comprehension: with

seemingly Intelligent, yet impenetrable expressions, just faces and bodies. There seems to be no difference between the people listening to these words, the ones sitting on the rusty edge of the *Moon Lake* ship, and the perching birds.

Much more convincing than the recited speech is the text of the music, especially the one coming out of a conch shell. In *Moon Lake*, there is also modern chamber music, which is, of course, rehearsed, with stopping and repeating. There are also wonderful passages with film music that congenially interpret extensive landscapes. They, too, however, refer to the myth of the universal musician-magician Orpheus shouldering his guitar. And yet, no words and no music in *Moon Lake* are as convincing as the absolute quiet and full silence. They are the unconditional conditions of what seems to be the genuine expression of bodies, places, and large ranges. The good speaking is silence.

This becomes also clear in the voicelessness of the ultimate theatrically-symbolic category of the human as visualized in the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice. They do not talk; they have no voices. At one point, drenched by a rainstorm at night, they seem to be shouting with their mouths wide open, leaving it unclear whether they are frightened or joyful. But their shouting is a facial gesture. Their bodies are sketches and outlines, especially the body of Orpheus, composed of parts, exposed to the world and to light, constantly becoming and changing. First, there are the bodies coming out of the sea, which initially are indistinguishable from the perching birds. Then, there is Orpheus taking Eurydice on his back and the ensuing joint body seen against the light. Metamorphosed bodies, smeared with dirt, faces and bodies connected

impersonally-suprapersonally. Eurydice's face constantly covered by her hair.

Eurydice is not wearing a dress and Orpheus wears Eurydice's dress – a shifting, displacing, exploration of a situation, living as if falling into a situation. This is the case with *Moon Lake*: the situation of an ensuing "welding" of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice to Plato's image-pattern of the cave. A myth reread specially, not so much as the myth of someone descending to the netherworld but of someone straying here at the edge between the land and the sea, no less transcendent than Hades, nor easier to see. A world here, a netherworld now, endangered by the future explosion of the sun.

For Orpheus, who failed and yet did lead Eurydice out, there is another task for leading or, perhaps, not leading out. After the recitation of the text about the cave from Plato's *Republic*, he manufactures a crown with small mirrors like the moving tentacles of a mollusk. Its purpose is seeing Eurydice without having to look back, but it also provides a means to see in general. As in the scene with the women who jokingly attack Orpheus, the story lies in wait to invade. The director prevents it; he does not allow Orpheus to become a hero. The film narrative remains loose: welding little mirrors like a child playing. Orpheus sees Eurydice sitting on a height behind him, and then he stops seeing, the mirror dims, a snail beautifully crawls across it.

The world and reality are labyrinths of signs, hard to encompass. That is why, in the range of life here and now, the problem is in the seeing, the showing, and the understanding. The same goes for the Orpheus in *Moon Lake*. Seeing Eurydice is just a sign of seeing per se. The more serious enterprise of Orpheus, therefore,

is photographing, looking for good shots, acquiring expressive images, catching situations. And maybe even more serious is the enterprise to arrange all this in an expressive order, which is the job of the director, of the creator of the film text. This is the enterprise of the director Orpheus, facing the reduplications of the moving world and of the moving and propelling gaze: of the world, which can be stopped and grasped, and of the reality, which is becoming, of flow itself.

The world in *Moon Lake* is a splendid world of wide spaces, a marine, coastal, and deep-water world, a world of paths and roads, of birds flying, perching, and floating on the surface of the sea, of waters moving in complicated colours. A steep strand hard to walk on, protruding pieces of rock, between them sand reminiscent of snow. A sun on the horizon, now higher, now lower, sinking and fading. A hanging moon, at first red and warm, then cold and grayish-white. Worlds with volume, shot emphatically, jump-cut without the suggestion of time flow. The eye gazes as long as possible, then it jumps to the next picture. No deceptive smoothness. I am talking about the gaze of the director, the cameraman, and the crew who have created the film text, about their world, not the world in general.

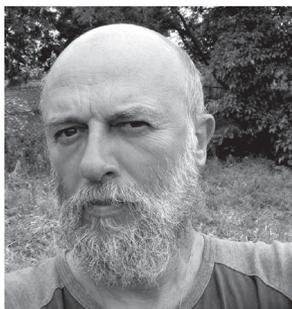
The sea, of course, has priority. But there is also an inland world, which is not cheerful. The dark black-and-white descent down a city boulevard, the cluttered houses of a small town, the hideous dumping ground. Forsaken, chaotic, natural. The famous Gypsy territory, a horse in a rickety shed and a child teasing the horse, a black grunting sow with a swarm of white piglets, garbage futilely swept by a young Gypsy. The existential serenity of people who could be anywhere. For everything is unconnected,

heaped; it is *this* without the otherness of the order of implacably intervening past and future. Although visually exaggerated and with startling accents, this picture is truthful. Such is our world on the continent.

Less so is the seaside world. Precisely because it is dear to Ivan Stanev, in *Moon Lake* it is theatrically arranged with rusty pumps, water tanks and shipwrecks like the ghostly *Moon Lake*, which will hardly serve the triumphal riddance of humanity from the distantly impending solar catastrophe. Especially if its inside looks like the labyrinth prison of the ship, shown in the end of the film. Yes. And yet, the implicit pessimism is visually alleviated; rust is not only decay but also a distinctive patina that the corroding fury of the sea adds to the imperfect human affairs and thus corrects by swallowing them.

If this is the world, a compilation of places, an assortment of frames, between which there is no smooth transition, what then is the reality of the flow of life? In it, of course, one grasps the grand lines of the stories of Orpheus and of the future exodus from earth. But reality per se is more modest. It is simply straying and exploring, the fate of noticing and understanding, of erratic flowing, composed of separate moments, linked unevenly with repetitions and jumps. Orpheus walks, he passes by Eurydice who is leaning against a white wall. In the next frame, he passes by her once again. Walking, repeating, going, and not knowing where. Going without arriving. Orpheus and Eurydice come out of the sea, they seem to walk solemnly, they go hither and thither. Finally they go back and sink into the sea from which they came. The truth is not in the arrival but in the walking, and not in the seeing but in the gazing. Therefore, one should watch *Moon Lake* over and over again.

In this sense, what I said in the beginning is definitely true: Ivan Stanev's film is a mystery of achieving wholeness. Not a wholeness that *has been* achieved but a wholeness that is *being* achieved. It seems to me that what happens to the spectator is exactly what has happened to Ivan. The script, no doubt, had ripened and it had to be realized but most likely it was not elaborated in detail, neither was it followed strictly in the making of the film. What, then, seems to have happened? Most likely, Ivan Stanev made his way into the mood and the passion of the crew he worked with, he struggled with them, and in this struggle, he adjusted and modified his conception. Thus, in the junction between the idea of the scriptwriter and the living work of the film-making, the text emerged, which also happened to me in a series of viewings, as well as in the writing of these lines, the way it surely has happened and will happen to other spectators and commentators. The only thing certain is that *Moon Lake* is a wonderful film and that it is an honour to the author and crew who created it.



Edvin Sugarev, one of the brightest figures of Bulgarian poetry and politics in the recent decades, is the author of over twenty books of poetry, literary studies and political analysis, of one novel, as well as hundreds of publications in periodicals. He has been elected twice as member of the Bulgarian Parliament and appointed ambassador to India and Mongolia. Poet, novelist, literary critic, politician, and journalist, Edvin Sugarev is Professor at the Literary Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and editor of "Literaturen vestnik," the major literary publication in Bulgaria.

Edvin Sugarev

FRAGMENTS ABOUT THE STONE SHORE, THE MERMAIDS AND SOMETHING MORE

*

While viewing Ivan Stanev's *Moon Lake*, I continuously perceived the inherent discord of my own viewing: a strange cocktail of complicity and lack of concentration as well as a problematic ambiguity. *The plot clashed with the landscape* but the two sides of this clash were uneven. I had inhabited these places for more than thirty years, I had spent every summer there. I knew every bay and every rock; every frame unleashed memories which had been piled up for decades. What I remembered hovered around the frames like a swarm of angry wasps. Consequently, the presence of these memories inhibited the messages of the director and the efforts of the film to suggest this or that to me remained far back.

I imagined that I would need to watch the film several times before I stop telling myself at each frame: "Oh, this was shot at that place where..." But finally, despite being distracted, I began to also feel something else: that what the film wanted to communicate to me had something in common with my choice to inhabit that narrow border, between the sea and the land, called "shore", and that this inhabiting itself, with all of its disorder and chaos, had something in common with the

myth of crossing the borderline between life and death – that is, with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In addition, my choice to inhabit Kamen Bryag, Stone Shore, was in fact the choice of a whole generation from the 1970s and 1980s. The choice to inhabit borderline territories, to make a home out of the wild, the nontrivial, and the provocative, abandoning all ordinariness, to live poetically, turning the border into a promised land, and turning the meaning of life into endless attempts to cross it – even when it is impossible, unthinkable, and backbreaking. A crossing by which you hope to reach yourself; a crossing that you yourself have chosen as your fate; a crossing that marks the beginning of your conquistadorial march into the unknown.

*

The cave is the work of a human hand – somebody has at some time given shape to the natural cavern, turning it into a shelter or a hermit's cove. A stone cot, a hewn rectangular chamber, and carved steps leading to an opening into another chamber. It is hard to notice it from the plateau – if you lean out above the edge from which Yaylata collapses into the sea, you can only see a small stone platform some three meters below you.

You climb down, leaning on the rock's edges above the vertical cliff some twenty meters high; you step on the platform and you are there – in the second "apartment," as the archaeologists used to call it. A long, narrow crack in the rock reaches the first chamber – the sea

swashes in the background. The walls of the crack are made of a black, slippery rock, but still there are enough edges and grips to enable one to climb up or down. The strangest thing is the sea at the end – it is emerald, with a dense colour, peppered with light – not the kind of light that shines on the surface from the sun; no, the sun never touches the water's surface through this crack. The water surfaces from below, as if from the bottom – from some openings below. It looks strange and mysterious, as if belonging to another world, as if belonging to the beyond. It comes from that insecure, deceitful territory of silence and lightness through which Orpheus descended in order to look for Eurydice. Maybe he climbed down through this particular crack; maybe it was during this time that the strange contrast between the light at the bottom and the black, impenetrable rocks of the ascent in whose folds Orpheus lost his beloved forever came into being.

*

The world will never end. Only our world will end: inevitably and soon, very soon. Not with a bang but a whimper, as Eliot has it. Ivan Stanev repeats it over and over in the film:

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

In one of the scenes, in response to these words, symbolic students scatter off and sink into nearby gaps between the rocks while their teacher, out of frame, utters Eliot's existential incantation. We see the students sink into the ground but we are inhibited from seeing where they go because of the horizontal view. In fact, these are tombs – Sarmatian tombs hewn approximately in the 4th or 5th century A.D. A narrow crevice in the rock, often with steps, and a rectangular opening lead you into the burial chamber. Once it was covered by a heavy stone slab; now all slabs are removed and their chambers, trapezium-shaped and widening at the bottom, gape towards the sky. There is nothing inside, of course: the tombs were plundered quite before Škorpil described them.

My friend Vlado liked to make love in these burial chambers. I do not know if the girls were especially excited but regardless, they used to agree to partake in this eccentric idea. Now I think that there is something more than an erotic whim behind that – this is one way of bringing love and death together, of coupling them, making them mirror one another.

In fact, this is what Orpheus does in his attempt to take Eurydice out of the netherworld: he creates an access. He builds a bridge – a bridge between the living and the dead – and sacrificially builds himself into it. Is this the way the world – our world – ends, with such an immurement? I would say that this is a worthy end – and whimper here is out of place.

*

The Stone Shore is not just the village of Kamen Bryag, my place of power; no, it encompasses the stretch from cape Kaliakra to cape Shabla – a chaos of cliffs, rocks overturned by the waves, caves, almost tropical jungles in the sinks of the plateau, three-meters high thorns and wild figs with a forcefully erotic aroma, hermit coves, tombs and remains of fortresses; a sharp and pointed landscape that we chose for our clutching – for the pauses between the timpani rolls of which Georgi Rupchev spoke in his poem "The Death of Tybalt" – the time that was available to us in the timelessness; the scream of that primordial authenticity for the sake of which life is given to us. This shore was our shelter – we crawled like crabs throughout it, we sank into its cracks and we raved – almost absolutely free, inaccessible to anyone. Here, the dates and days of the week were forgotten, as were ambitions and obligations, prejudices and restraints. Naked and sun-tanned, we forgot about "before" and "after" and enjoyed our "now," this extensive, seemingly eternal present made of simple gestures and indolent pleasures. We were together and everyone was alone in one's self, self-sufficient and complete like a bird in flight, like a cliff in the surf.

I have often asked myself why this place sounded and smelled so different – and what made our life there so genuine and so vital. I don't know – but sometimes I think that we liked it so much because of its holes and chasms – and because it was a borderline between the elements; it was a chopped, edgy place – and at the

same time it was somehow cozy, folded into itself, with folds that sheltered and hid us.

This remote corner of Bulgaria is the place with the widest and the most powerful horizon that you can imagine; there the region of Dobrudja and the sea meet as one absolutely flat plane, undisturbed even by a single hillock – so that the sun rises huge and red above the sea and sets just as huge and red over the seemingly endless fields covered with skimpy cornstalks and crestfallen sunflowers. It is so flat that if you look from the centre of Kamen Bryag to the sea which laps several hundred meters away, you will see it as a blue hill towering above the surface.

Nevertheless, this plane was fractured – and *we lived in the cracks*. The fields ended by a sudden fall – fifteen, twenty, sometimes thirty meters high cliffs, narrow bays, huge jutting rocks, and boulders the size of a large house fallen from the shore. This sudden fall modified the perspective, unsettled the dimensions and perceptions, agitated the senses, and saturated with life and drama the narrow band wedged into the monotonous blue-yellow plain. In fact, we didn't live by the shore, *we lived in the shore* – it was a totally different habitat, incompatible with the external world. Descending into that world – because there you *always descend* – we entered ourselves and we touched another I, much more primordial and authentic than the one which we carried around in the outer world and which had a name, a place, and a mission. This no longer interested us, no – not here and now – not in the eternal “now” of this shore; we descended into ourselves the way Orpheus had descended into the netherworld in search of

Eurydice; we would drag our real self up to the outside self trying to become one with ourselves, to achieve ourselves, to be real – and sometimes it looked as if we succeeded – in very short moments, always here, always on this shore, always in the chasm, always between heaven and hell: between the paradise lost and the hell forgotten for a while.

We slept on a platform under an over-hanging rock, in sleeping bags only, on a few bales of straw taken from the field. Four meters below, the sea was splashing; the platform was above a deep water-carved cave – and when there were waves, we would hear them and feel how they rumbled literally below us, shaking the rock on which we lay. When the sea was stormier, it would erupt like a geyser before us and the splashes would drench our sleeping bags; sometimes we had to get out quickly and find shelter with our friends, the speleologists, who lived in a spacious rock cove a few meters above us. I remember once, as we were cooking beans at the corner of the rock niche, a large wave suddenly rose, put out our fire and overturned the pot. I also remember a real storm which even the speleologists could not withstand. Together, we all went up onto the shore and spent the night there – under the moonlight, amidst the thundering waves whose projecting splashes sometimes rose above the edge of the cliff itself – a whole twenty meters above sea level. We had to wait a long time for the niche to dry up before we could clean off the remaining mud and the rotten straw.

This was how we lived in the niche, day by day. Time was erased; we forgot to count the days. The way we organized our life was a visual proof of how relative all

worries and necessities are, and how little, in fact, is needed to make ourselves feel happy and thankful. We rose in the morning, groped sleepily for the toothbrush and paste, walked a few paces and jumped into the sea – there, while swimming, we had our morning toilet. We ate on plastic plates which we then threw with a swing into the water, where they stayed for a couple of hours while the hermit-crabs and the waves took care of their cleaning, and then somebody would dive with a snorkel and goggles to bring them back up. We soaked our clothes in washing powder and then tied them on a rope attached to the inflatable boat – we made a circle in the bay and declared them washed. We talked, drank, made love, swam. And that was all.

Now I know that in fact we were running from ourselves, that in fact we were howling and scratching on the Wall, that in fact we were hiding from the Proxy, and that in fact we were trying to fill with life the pauses between the timpani rolls – hopelessly ill of nausea and self-disgust in the middle of timelessness, in the middle of the vulgar state against whose borders we slammed like birds in a cage. And we kept descending, descending, descending into ourselves – in a quest for the lost innocence, for the happiness to live authentically and breathe freely even under this doomed sky – looking for those strange Eurydices of the end of the 20th century whose existence you could only anticipate or imagine – but could not touch them, or see them outside of the dream. We descended into ourselves and dragged to the surface only shadows, only fragile gleams, only pain, only the verdict: “No exit.” We tore ourselves, wasted ourselves, spent ourselves in manias and impossible projects; we

raved, raged, rampaged in this scarce piece of time and space. But we didn’t give up. No, we didn’t. Even though there was never any hope.

*

Moon Lake is a partly dismantled ship left in the shallows of a microscopic harbour between Tyulenovo and cape Shabla. There they used to cut old ships into pieces – and even now a rust-eaten storage shed is stretched there on the rocks like a dead centipede. There were buzzed cranes and blowtorches, as old ships went for scrap. Gradually this activity died out and several half-cut hulls were left to loom above the waters; sometimes we circled by boat around them, sometimes we climbed on board with the hope of finding a forgotten brass piece that would serve some purpose in our cave existence. The half-cut hulls became more and more rusty and ruined, and on the shore, in the early times of democracy, they opened a sea club – a restaurant plus a hotel, with the idea that some day this would become a yacht harbour. In the dawn of the new millennium, a security company bought the spot and immediately destroyed the little hotel with its restaurant – it had its own plans for this little bay, protected by a pier – and these plans could be summarized in one word: smuggling. After years in which unidentified barges kept mooring in the bay, finally the bandits were detected and arrested together with a barge of smuggled cigarettes. Now, the place is abandoned, nobody uses it for anything, it is only fit as a setting to shoot a film.

*

For authors like Ivan Stanev, the most important quality of a text is the degree to which it questions the figures and situations, the mythologemes and moral dilemmas that it contains – provided that this questioning aims at tectonic shifts in our cultural memory, provokes breakdowns, and creates fissures through which we can see how foreign and shockingly different what we believed to be obvious actually is. This is also the case with *Moon Lake*. The film plays with identifications: Orpheus and Eurydice are doubled – the myth is incarnated in two typologically different, temporally distant couples. The versions of the myth that each of them develops are also different as are the situational codes invested in the different situations. The first couple seems to experience the tragedy inherent in the classical myth – their story is in fact the first tale told by the second Orpheus to the sun-speckled and foul-mouthed second Eurydice. And the second tale is their own story – they are the ones who must leave the doomed earth with *Moon Lake* – the ship that does not look much like a spaceship but it obviously alludes to Noah's ark.

The first Orpheus draws his Eurydice from the swamp whose black mud is the sign of death. He does so with an effort, crossing the time that dooms us all, and in this drawing out, the splashes of dirty water under their feet fly backwards – and the birds also fly backwards. They come out from death whose role in this case is taken by the Tuzla of Shabla¹ – and at a certain moment the

myth of taking someone back from death is literalized: Orpheus drags the lifeless body of Eurydice across the muddy wilderness, and her limp legs leave a long, unbroken trail. Orpheus and Eurydice leave death but they remain *connected* to the realm of Hades – and this connection, at a certain point, demonizes them – in their hysterical rage against the storm, with black teeth and faces. It is as if the abandoned death attracts them and they circle in its orbit – to return finally back to the mud – from where they emerged in the first scene of the film. This togetherness of the return – and this simultaneous and voluntary sinking into the world of shadows – is Ivan Stanev's peculiar reference to the classical myth.

In the second couple, this seriousness is absent – and the very mythological context is parodied. The parody is upheld, on the one hand, by the couple's hooligan dialogues, and on the other, by various elements that are foreign to the mythological: for example, taking Eurydice out is done with the aid of a tandem bike. The parodistic development of the myth, however, culminates in a grotesque – mostly because of the overlapping of typologically different myths. Thus the myth of Orpheus overlaps with that of Noah; the young Orpheus, the Orpheus of the future, must take his Eurydice not out of the realm of death but out of the earth itself, out of the human world that has been turned, through its hypothetical doom, into a realm of Hades.

purposes; today the young tourists charge the mud, dense as black paint, with esthetic functions – by drawing all kinds of surrealist patterns on their naked bodies.

¹ The literal translation of “tuzla” is “swamp”. In the past, the mud of the swamp near Shabla was used for medical

The connection between the two couples – despite their different incarnations in the myth – is symbolically outlined, by means of some repeated situations, changes of characters, sudden interruptions and collapses of “their” plots, by means of dissolutions of identity and sudden proliferations – e.g. when Orpheus sees two different Eurydices through his rear-view mirrors. They are even in alternating colours, in the conflict between the red and the black. The same is done also by means of diverse symbolic overlays – with the aid of meager, seemingly unimportant details. For instance – a sign of the Orphism of Orpheus and his visual “business card” is the eponymous electric guitar (Bulgarian-made – hail the native stuff! – which, moreover, appears with a logo sometimes in Bulgarian and sometimes in Latin letters), which he carries around like Bruce Springsteen – with the neck down. In some frames this guitar (which in itself is a parodic detail because it is out of tune and it is impossible to play it because at least half of the pegs are missing) is covered in dried mud. But this same mud is the sign of another emanation of the Orphic; it is the mud from which the mythologically constructed Orpheus extracts Eurydice in the opening scene of the film. By the overlapping of these visions, the “serious” and the parodic layers of the mythological, its ontological and its grotesquely actualized status are also overlapped. The orchestration of the plot in *Moon Lake* relies on such syncopations that dramatically provoke, parody, or outright reverse the ordinary meaning–sanctified by tradition – of the story told through the myth. It is this technique which relies on the sudden startling that bestows ontological depth to the carelessly scattered

nests of the plot or just situations randomly thrown together.

An important role in the doubling and the problematization of meanings is played by the mythological overlapping mentioned above. The myth of Orpheus overlaps with the myth of Noah; that is, the Orpheus of the future is burdened with the Old Testament mission of the doddering drunkard who must become the father of humanity after the deluge – that is, after the apocalypse dispensed as a divine retribution – to the humans who live in the principle formulated in the film itself: “Don’t give a damn! Whoever has fucked, has fucked, whoever has died, has died.” At the same time, the myth of the deluge in the Old Testament becomes mixed up with the eschatological myth in the New Testament–the apocalypse of John which, with regard to human time, is an apocalypse of the future; the apocalypse from which maybe Orpheus tries to take out Eurydice. But in this case, the speaker of St. John is T.S. Eliot with his verses about the world that ends not with a bang but a whimper. In other verses, he has said that the past and the future are two rivers that flow into the present. This is what Ivan Stanev does in *Moon Lake* – he fuses the past and the future, he marries their mythologies into a nebulous conditionality, which can also just as easily be thought of also as a metaphor of our present.

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The magic of the myth of Orpheus is largely due to the condition that Hades laid out for the taking of Eurydice out of his kingdom. The prohibition to look back, however, does not exclusively belong to Old Greek mythology. This is also the condition which Jehovah – through one of his angels – set up for Lot as the chance to take his family out of Sodom and save himself from God’s retribution over the sinful city. Lot too, takes his wife out of the realm of impending death, although it is not him but her who looks back – and turns into a statue of salt.² In some sense, the taboo on looking backwards, into the past, is also the main motif in the myth of Moses who takes the chosen nation out of Egypt and leads it for four decades through the desert, as a means to make it forget the long convenient years of slavery, the mechanisms of acquiescence and the coziness of materialism. And their remembrance, seen here as the return to the old pagan deities and the worship of the golden calf, is essentially that same look back which Jehovah condemns by killing almost all of those who had set out for the Promised Land.

“Don’t look!” shouts the young Orpheus to the sun-speckled Eurydice when they ride their tandem near the dead mermaids. And thus he pronounces the same taboo that Hades imposes in the original myth – and that Jehovah imposes on Lot and the children of Israel. At least for me, this is not a secondary episode;

² Actually, he too has the mission to be the father of the new humanity – he too, like Job, will perform it by letting himself be intoxicated and made love to by his daughters.

the encounter with the dead bodies is laden with meaning – not to mention the absurd remarks that the two are exchanging. However, maybe the most impressive aspect of the whole excessively terse script is the way that Ivan Stanev communicates in visions and situations, not in words.

The scene is as follows: the two ride their tandem along a deserted road. At a certain moment, near them, near some odd-looking fence, there are dead mermaids lying on the asphalt. Their bodies are thin, fine, and morbidly pale – a sharp contrast to their heavy, limp tails. Orpheus insists that Eurydice does not look, and yet, she nevertheless looks, and asks what it is. The answer is shockingly soulless: “Moronic mermaids! They have no sense of orientation, they get stuck in the shallows like whales.” The reaction of Eurydice to this explanation is no less drastic – it is the already quoted existential formula: “Don’t give a damn! Whoever has fucked, has fucked, whoever has died, has died.” The couple passes on. A little later an open lorry arrives with young soldiers dressed in camouflage uniforms who – absurdly hurrying – collect the dead mermaids into their lorry. (Imagine how the soldiers enjoyed carrying these tender bodies, commented Miglena Nikolchina on the scene.)

The mermaids, however, do not look at all moronic, as Orpheus describes them, nor have they become stuck “like whales” in any shallows; in fact, their presence near the road cannot possibly be explained by such arguments. If we are to talk in the language of reality, their bodies lie near a road that runs half a kilometer away from the sea. Moreover, there are no shallows by the shore, but rather the sea hits a twenty meters high

rock bluff on which climbing and descending are only possible through two or three paths, quite distant from this place.

The mermaids look beautiful – a strange, sick, anemic beauty – with the beauty that the poet Yavorov ascribed to the violets. They are beautiful in their fragility, with their otherness, with their non-belonging to *this here*. They are beautiful with their completeness in death;³ they are realized through it – as if achieving the love they have been denied in their lifetime (if we imagine them through the optic of the most famous text dedicated to them – *The Little Mermaid* by Andersen). And it is not so much that they have no sense of orientation, but rather, it is man who has none – the man of today, of the 21st century, who can quite justly be described as a *wandering creature*, groping for the exit from the increasingly unbearable existential hell created by man himself. This is what Orpheus turns out to be with his funny beetle helmet and the rear-view goggles through which he hopes to outsmart the basic taboo imposed by Hades, the basic taboo of the gods in general, of gods everywhere whenever they decide to take note of the man groping to find his way: *Do not look back!*

The mermaids, however, appear once again. Orpheus has ordered fish in a lousy seaside bar located above

³ They are also ontologically related to death; they are born in it – in fact, the Slavic mermaid, the rusalka, is most often the reborn soul of a hapless unfortunate maiden whose love was rejected or who lost her loved one – and has sought salvation in death – but death in the water realm, by drowning.

a little bay with boats in it. He sits below a mermaid primitively drawn on the wall above him – corpulent and kitschy, the exact antipode of the dead mermaids near the road. He is served a big fish which fills the whole plate – maybe a bluefish or a mullet; he looks at the bay and notices a careless man approaching the shore by boat. His boat is full of dead mermaids. Orpheus bows his head over the plate, takes the fish and fiercely drives his teeth into its head. (“The fish is a mermaid”, commented Miglena.)

This presence of mermaids in the myth of Orpheus is strange; its very interpretation, as related to the sea, the water, and the aquatic – to a generating and engulfing essence – is odd. The older (and somewhat more classical) couple of Orpheus and Eurydice appears out of the swampy waters and disappears there once again: the swamp is their Lethe. The myth of Orpheus is entwined with the myth of the end of the world, evoked by Eliot’s verses but also by mythologemes of a wholly different order – those of Noah’s Ark – the metal womb of a ship inhabited by birds, frogs and other creatures, by which the young couple of Orpheus and Eurydice (who both are and are not a part of the closed community of masters and pupils) are going to sail to the sky. However, next to the ship that looks like it has been assembled by scraps of dismantled ship hulls, there sits an aged man tiredly lighting his cigarette at his camp bed. It appears that he has been working long hours with his blowtorch on the rusty-iron wreck. It is unclear whether he is cutting or welding it.

Is that man not Orpheus – worn out decades later and no longer able to draw anybody out from anywhere? Is that blowtorch the same blowtorch with which

Orpheus made a pair of rear-sighted glasses so that he would not lose sight of Eurydice? Although I am uncertain as to whether this was deliberate in the film, the moment Orpheus puts on his constructed helmet he becomes blind to what is ahead – he can now only see it indirectly, through the lens of the video camera, through its virtual and hallucinatory crutches. Above all else, the very identity of the beloved woman begins to fall apart – two different Eurydices appear in the mirrors: the red and the black one—the dead and the pale sun-speckled one. – In fact, the pieces of iron welded by the blowtorch over Orpheus’ skull are a bridge connecting the different hypostases of the mythological couple – or maybe connecting reality and myth? And finally: this Noah’s ark patched with old pieces of iron, is that not the half-built leftover ship *Moon Lake*, never completed by the old worn out man with the blowtorch? Completely devoid of meaning, never achieved—just as we never reached “ourselves” in our infinite descent throughout the years at Stone Shore?

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But the mermaids, the dead mermaids – what are they, why are they here – besides the proliferating and decomposing Orpheuses and Eurydices? Should we seek at all an explanation for the worrying presence of their deadness? Should we explain the dramatic disregard for their doom – expressed in the comment of Orpheus, in the cynical sweeping statement of Eurydice, and in the crunchy sound by

which the teeth of Orpheus cut into the head of the fish? (By the way, you are totally right, Megy, it really *is* a mermaid – fishing boats moor underneath that bar, and the careless man in the boat with the dead mermaids seems as happy as if he was returning after a good day of fishing..)

If one could answer these questions unambiguously, *Moon Like* would be a poor and cheap film. In my opinion – without striving to prove it – I can say that it is not such a film, despite the endless juggling between kitsch and myth. In this epoch of thrillers, I never the less believe that a film is art rather than industry when it problematizes things – images, situations, mythologemes – instead of offering them as a well-digested pap to the moron who is ready to pay some ten euros for a cheap thrill: that is, when it is syncopated. When it is interrupted by episodes that have no logical explanation. When it disrupts the spectator’s expectation and turns the lining of what is shown inside out in order to show us the inexpressible. Such were the films of Tarkovsky, of Antonioni, of Godard. Such is Ivan Stanev’s film. The dead mermaids are there and have no intention of explaining themselves. Only groundless hypotheses are possible. What follows is one such hypothesis.

The myth of the mermaids – in the paradoxical version of Ivan Stanev – is the *reversed myth of Orpheus*. Here, it is not the man who descends into the beyond but the woman, the Mermaid, who ascends into the other world, as foreign and deadly to her as the kingdom of Hades is to men. The motif is cognate, or at least could be: crossing the borderline between life and death in search of the beloved one, or the erotic partner – but

the direction is reversed, as is the gender. And another difference – the mermaid cannot escape destruction after crossing this borderline: thus death is inevitable; the price for trespassing into the insuperable – it is so according to Ivan Stanev, and even according to Andersen in *The Little Mermaid*.

However, it is not so from the perspective of Orpheus: with his songs, he hopes to cheat death and to charm its ruler, the guardians of its territories and the ferryman Charon who transports him to them.– He hopes to get out safely and take Eurydice with him. He fails one step away from fulfilling these hopes, but remains hopeful – and this hope is such a necessary hope!! – that such a drawing out of death was indeed possible.

However, not everybody would accept these hopes as a quality belonging to Orpheus. There are alternative readings of this myth. For instance, the one done by Plato who, in *Symposium*, talks of another myth – that of Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, who sacrificed her life to save her husband Admetus after his parents refused to perform such a sacrifice. Plato points out that thanks to this noble deed, Alcestis is among the few who, after their death, have received permission to return to earth alive. Speaking otherwise, she succeeded by sacrificing herself – in the games with death, things always boil down to self-sacrifice.

For purposes of comparison, Plato quotes the myth of Orpheus, in the following words:

“But as to Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, the lyre player, [the gods] sent him back empty and gave him only the apparition of the one for whom he had come but did not give her to him, because he showed no courage; he was

only a lyre player and did not dare, like Alcestis, to die for his love, and invented, instead, a plan how to enter Hades alive; moreover they (the gods) later caused his death at the hands of women as a punishment for his cowardice.”

Unlike Orpheus, the mermaids do not try to cheat death. They know that they will die once they leave their world, which is the world beyond for us, in order to break through into our world, one that is a beyond, a deadly world for them. Driven by love or simply by a drive, they enter straightforwardly without stratagems or pretentiousness. In other words, the dead mermaids are the myth of Orpheus, fully realized and without compromise. They are what he only strives to become in his attempt to trick the laws of the universe, in dancing on the edge between the two worlds. And it is for this trickery and play that he will be punished and will lose Eurydice forever – and will be torn into pieces by the maenads for having turned his back to the other women in his mourning for her. On a tangential, yet related note, the mermaids are thought also as guardians of the sea who abduct the mariners and captains who become charmed by their songs – another role that makes them akin to the sirens, a role that is the exact antipode of the descent of Orpheus into the netherworld. Only the goal is different here. In this role, the mermaids are a kind of sea maenads.

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Reality, however, is a different story. The film takes us into the typical landscape of Stone Shore, but only my memory can give it that strange vividness and depth, so dramatically different from its function as a part of the film's organism. The road with the dead mermaids is the one between the villages of Kamen Bryag and Tyulenovo. A melancholic, deserted road between the azure of the sea and the sunflower fields in which one sees the "herons" moving up and down like ghosts, symbolically charged in the film as signs of abandonment in the civilization of the mechanical – pumps for petroleum extraction attached to enormous tanks, which look like mechanical chickens that lower their necks to the ground and raise them again, often with a long, extended moan.

The place where their lifeless bodies lie is near to the gate of the military barracks – the military built them and, without ever using them for anything, abandoned them. The peasants gradually began to make use of these abandoned goods: the kilometers of barbed wire, the concrete posts, the tiles, and the woodwork. Only naked walls remain.

The barracks were located between the road and the sea – their territory contained the "stairs" – the first of a large series of caves hewn or shaped by human hands in the high vertical cliffs. Hewn deep into the thick rock, steep, half-worn steps go down from the shore – a few meters below they end up into the bluff. Next to them – but not close enough to step over – there was a hewn cave with two openings. Up in the rocks, next to the stairs themselves, there was a deeply carved sign, a kind of omega.

With the speleologists, we made a whole expedition to find out what these stairs were and what they had been used for. We found nothing – except for a deep crack near the water under the cave. We snuck in – first by swimming, then with lobster crawling – as far as we could go without getting stuck. The water inside became less and less salty, until in the end it was outright potable.

This year, as I revisited this place, it seemed incredible to me that I used to climb down these stairs without any security rope; they looked so steep and dangerous. It seemed that the quality of inhabiting this shore had been irreversibly lost – maybe due to my change of lifestyle – I now inhabit a bungalow in Kamen Bryag rather than the rock niche in the Ashaluka bay near Tyulenovo. I never found the omega carved in the rock – maybe it was overgrown with moss or some treasure seeker erased it in order to keep the Place for himself. But what was this place itself? A remnant of a secret hermit cove, a rock church, a shelter for the rejected? Who used to descend these stairs and who used to climb back up them?

Maybe while the full moon was out the mermaids climbed them in search for men – not thinking that this climbing was, for them, a descent into Hades. Or maybe the old cunning Orpheus had descended here – and crawled like a crab into the crack from which the waters of the Lethe leaked into the sea.

The bar, near which the careless man was mooring with his boat full of dead mermaids, has a pretentious name: "The Black Pearl". It is located next to the fishermen huts of Tyulenovo. Actually, it had this name before the TIM group bought it from the mayor in Shabla, and before

they kicked out the former leaseholder, a humble man from the village who naively invested his savings for the improvement of the “object” that had been given to him. When I first sat at a table in this little bar 33 years ago, it had no name at all. They called it “the lower pub” as distinct from the upper one – that is, from the mid-village drinking and shopping centre. It was a rare privilege for a little village to have as many as two pubs – and the Tyulenovo inhabitants were justifiably proud of this fact.

The lower pub was a simple booth with a reed shelter over a concrete platform for the tables. There also used to be a second platform – open, seven or eight meters above the sea, but a winter storm swept it, meanwhile breaking in two the rock in the centre of the bay which was the size of an average apartment building. In the reeds of the low roof, there used to live one of the most beautiful spiders I have ever seen: everybody knew him, they showed him to the newcomers, they drank *mastika* [strong anise liqueur] to his health – it was a kind of talisman and nobody even thought of killing him.

Like every bar, this one also had a disgusting stereotypical sign with the opening hours – from/to. But here this “to” wasn’t valid – the pub was open until there were no more thirsty people. Somewhere around two at night, the pub keeper Uncle Geno would become exhausted – then he would call out to one of us, give one of us the apron, the cash-box, and the key – and the bar continued to run. We paid most diligently for every drink and, on the next day, we gave Geno the exact account: that much was drunk, that much eaten, that much was spent.

Of course, we drank a lot and regularly. After bar hours, we had about a kilometer to walk along the shore cliffs

and then we had to climb down a very narrow path above the abyss to the niche or to the cave. One of the speleologists had already fallen – from 15 meter high – and managed to break a rock edge with his skull – but he survived, because by some improbable chance, he fell upon a shallow strip of water between the jagged rocks. However, he did break quite a few of his bones, of course. So it was necessary to take measures, we used a long, strong rope which we entrusted to the barkeeper, pledging our word that whoever got too drunk, we would simply tie him in the pub and leave him there. I remember how we once tied my friend Jerry who had drunk seven “*clouds*” [anise liqueur plus mint liqueur]. In the morning, we found him sleeping under a table with his leg tied to the pillar. We untied him, he was indescribably thirsty – he drank in a single gulp a whole litre of mineral water and instantly, just before our eyes, he became as drunk as he had been the night before.

Sometimes, however, we would decide that it was humiliating to play the tying game, and so we invented a great way of avoiding the dangers of the high cliffs – we just reached the bar by sea: a few of us in one boat, while the others swam alongside. The latter was preferable – to swim a whole kilometer back was enough to sober you up. It was so beautiful to glide in the night along the dark categorical rocks, to see how your body glows by the surrounding plankton and how the bodies of the others glow. To reach your cliff with an absolutely precise feeling of orientation, even on a moonless night – not like the mermaids who, according to Orpheus, have no such feeling, and moronically get stuck like whales in the shallows. Yes, I had a good

orientation near the cliffs of the Stone Shore, but would I be so well oriented if I were to swim across the dark waters of the Lethe? Would I have the same feeling of orientation in the other world – in that world beyond, which exists parallel to our life? No, for this, I cannot be certain.



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Albena Stambolova

MEMORY WORLD

Moon Lake is a film by the director Ivan Stanev. Throughout the last couple of decades, all of Ivan Stanev's projects as a director display two traits: he is not only a director but also the author of the texts – in this case the script; and his performances, theatrical or cinematographic, are unforgettable.

Therefore, this is where I will start from: the intertwining of a strong authorial writing style with memory. I will focus on the title of the film. To my knowledge, since ancient times the symbol of water and moon relate to memory, to the imprints of begetting and death, to the emotional matrix of the world, to introspection and making sense of experience – the experience of life and of the "Other," on the other side of mirrors and water surfaces.

An external coincidence in this line of thought is that Donka Angelova, a Bulgarian woman, produced the film. It was shot on Bulgarian territory, on Ivan Stanev's native Black Sea coast. Those who play in the film are amateurs – local inhabitants, as it were. What remains is to find out whether the return to the genesis (or exodus), is a possible interpretive resource.

So much about nature and the elements. Their structural rearrangement in the film qua artifact unfolds pictures whose sequence seems to be marked by a palpable blinking of the eye. An eye outside the field of vision is watching motions. These motions are done in-line with

the world beyond the human: the world where birds fly before the surface of the sun rising from the waters, where waves wash over shores and the sky descends to the dried grass and the cracked skin of the earth. It is in this world, existing beyond humans, that humans emerge, come out of the water and start walking.

The formation of couples is done, or sanctified, in a verse by Emily Dickinson quoted in the film: "I'm nobody! Who are you?/ Are you nobody, too?/ Then there's a pair of us..." From this point on, the film is replete with wandering characters, often coupled, sometimes in groups, and later, closer to the end, single. Movement for them is immanent, interrupted by stops that are part of the movement itself. With close reference to Orpheus and Eurydice exiting Hades, the male-female couples shift and evolve undisturbed and unswerving in that no man's land between two worlds – upper and lower, outside and inside. Specific to Stanev's style are the condensed and tense performances (verbal or non), which, although close to being mechanical, are incantational: governed by an impulse whose source is simultaneously within and without. In this way, a peculiar union is achieved of world and human, of the world of humans and of humans in the world, from where there is another retreat beyond the field of vision, namely to the blinking eye that lets characters slip from one frame only to catch them in another. This is how, in my opinion, the idea of infinity is set up in the film: the wandering in a restricted and repetitive space that emerges and vanishes together with the characters.

In this world, poetry and philosophy are the plots. The figures, now washed in strong light, now outlined as silhouettes, are sublated in their reciprocal reflections, memorized in cameras and mirrors. The devastated land,

or the wrecked and washed up *Moon Lake* ship alternate with their own beautiful and wholesome visionary being, which is inaccessible to those who stare at deceitful shadows. Things exist somewhere but, despite the unswerving movement, they do not coincide with their own eidos.

"This is the way the world ends." This line by T. S. Eliot is uttered in chorus by the group of philosophy students in the cave by the sea. The poem, learned through oral repetition, expresses this way of finishing the world – not with a "bang" but with a whimper. Here I will allow myself to read "whimper," against all odds, as the cry not so much of those leaving this world but of those coming to it – the newborns cry out when passing from the watery substance into the air. In this very moment, they lose their memory associated with water in order to begin their search for *l'âme soeur* under the sky.

The theme of Orpheus and Eurydice is reduced here to their journey through the wasteland between two lands. Their moving figures are like words constantly being written, sliding over their inaccessible core meanings. This is the exact opposite to Jean Cocteau's vision in his film "Orpheus," where the ecstatic static dominates in the gazing reflections. Here, the movement, which follows the order established by the will of the gods, is presented as unending or, rather, as ending in its beginning – which can be seen in the very end of the film. The very substance of the film is this delineation of the movement of the two characters, of all the coupled characters, who for a certain time become dissolved into the multitude of the matrimony, no longer possible for them.

The wedding in the film acts as an approach to the revelry of the maenads who, in the myth, put an end to Orpheus'

life. In *Moon Lake*, Orpheus makes himself lost in the nuptial festivity, which is denied to him, and as a result seems to provoke the appearance of the maenads. He then returns with his shadow sister into the bosom from whence they originally came – backwards, like a tape slowly rolling in reverse.

I don't want to overanalyze things that are not in the film but I will still permit myself to make an association. In the ancient myth, Orpheus is a masterful musician who enchants even the inanimate world with his songs. The price he pays is losing his wife, Eurydice, to the netherworld. He is offered the chance to get her back under one condition: he may not look back at her until they have both reached the upper world. That is, he has to remain blind to the visible beauty, to the external manifestation of love. He, however, is tempted to look back, and subsequently loses her irreversibly. This determines his vulnerability and ultimate death – he is no longer capable of taming the elements, the wild animals, and the raging maenads. In *Moon Lake*, poetry is scattered throughout the world. The poet is separated from it; he wanders across borders, constantly experiencing the trial of looking.

Considering everything that has been described thus far, I would venture to say that *Moon Lake* is a film that reads. Its reading unfolds in a natural rhythm, since it is elegantly inscribed into what is seen, into the visual field. The world without humans, the natural world, coincides with the world of man-made words, with the worlding of the world. This is, I think, where the unity of the film exists. The memory inscription occurs somewhere between human words and water; it is shared between them.

Although true, it is not enough to say that the film is beautiful. The film is very demanding of its spectators in a controlled manner, one that may put a strain on them. Words in different languages can be heard throughout the film – English, French, Greek, etc. Expressing both poetical and philosophical ideas, it is not enough to understand these words. But rather, they seem to have been let loose into the free space under the vault of the sky where they soar freely and occasionally return to those who uttered them.

Distilled to the world's extremes, *Moon Lake* works with earth, water, sky (air), wood, and metal – it operates with the elements from which, according to the Chinese, the world was created. It is shot entirely outdoors – it is open to the upper and to the lower – and to remind you once again, in those lands that are inscribed into the memory of origin, in this case, Ivan Stanev's origin. But also the origin of all of us humans, from Ancient times to our present moment.



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Dorothea Tabakova

FORWARD IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

When I was offered to take part in the filming of *Moon Lake*, I agreed without hesitation, guided primarily by my curiosity for unfamiliar activities. I was supposed to play myself – the teacher of Ancient Greek – and teach the passage in Plato’s *Republic* which relates to the myth of the cave.

Based on my habits acquired as a university classical philologist, I expected that “teaching” meant introducing students to the meaning of the text. However, during the shooting process, it became clear to me that the goal was different. I was just supposed to recite Plato’s text and the young people were supposed to repeat it after me. They were dislocated in humble poses facing the wall of one of the caves at Yaylata, and there was a projection on the uneven wall in front of them. One could recognize Orpheus and Eurydice in the figures projected on the wall.

Taking Plato’s metaphor so literally initially made me feel uneasy. I felt confused by the linking of the two myths and the fact that my teaching consisted in a simple chanting of the Ancient Greek text without even trying to delve deeper into it.

But my skepticism evaporated during the process of shooting the film. The rhythm of Plato’s phrases carried me away. My endeavor to articulate words as clearly

as possible so that the young people, who had no experience with this language, could repeat them, was in itself a suggestion of a great gap in my usual work with university students – the sensuousness. The traditional methods of teaching classical languages exclude it in principle. Paradoxically, in introducing young classical philologists to oral culture, I have given them many other things, but not the Spoken Word. And in this moment, when the rhythm of the text from the *Republic* merged with my breath, I felt that I was really teaching Ancient Greek. I was not presenting them with the by-product of an endless tradition, but I was simply leading them by the hand, leading them with my voice.

The relation between sound and meaning in *Moon Lake* is generally problematized, displaced, and at times, almost destroyed. In this decomposing world, the link between signifier and signified is decomposed in its turn, because the destruction of the World is, above all, a loss of the code, of the coordinate system into which every single atom is inscribed.

While viewing the film (and more so with each proceeding viewing), I became aware that my semi-invisibility in it was not an accident, but rather it was necessary for me to remain “only with my voice on,” just like in the Pythagorean school where the master would speak to the beginners from behind a curtain. And the reversed inscription ΠΛΑΤΩΝ.ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ was supposed to be exactly a mirror-image – in this world of endless playing with the mirror, reversing the directions hither and thither, a non-Euclidian space and a non-linear time.

The invisibility of the Master is carefully pursued in the film. The teacher of English literature who interprets the

verses of T. S. Eliot is seen unfocused in half face; only the sea behind him is focused. The astronomer talking about dark matter is dark himself, his gesticulating hands are black and ghostly. The musician who instructs the string quartet is behind the scene. Visible, however, are the students, sensuously detailed with every freckle of the Girl-in-Love, every wrinkle on the faces shouting in the storm, every spot of paint on their clumsy hands, and every fold on their clothes. In the end, the man with the blowtorch will also be visible, but we will discuss him later. Visible are the cliffs, the grass, the birds, and the sun. The oil pumps at Tyulenovo, the pieces of pipes, the wreckage of the *Moon Lake* tanker, the rust, and the patina. The professors, however, are not there. Knowledge has stepped beyond its bearers. They are depersonalized – literally, not metaphorically. There are no teachers; therefore there is probably no school. There are ghosts personifying their beloved Knowledge, dissolving in it and uttering it with a reticent, cloudy clarity: non-dialogic, uncommunicative, not caring if there are people in front of them. Can there be any continuity if it is not carried by living human beings? Books? But there are no books. In this post-Gutenbergian and post-Fahrenheit 451 world, the material vehicles of culture are dead: the guitar of Orpheus is moldy; it is electric and there is nothing to plug it in. Nothing talks to anything: Plato with Lermontov, Eliot with physics. The world is torn into atoms. The lecturers seem also to be “unplugged.”

The students do not preserve world culture; they serve as an echo to it in the moment when it is gone. In the young people who chant Eliot’s end of the world verse, we can hardly recognize any reference to “the Book People” in *Fahrenheit 451*; I, rather, think of another literary dystopia,

T. Tolstaya's *The Slynx* – a catastrophic world of mutants where books are rewarded with immense respect but the code for understanding them, “the alphabet,” has been irretrievably lost. Reading – in the widest sense of the word – is not forbidden, it is impossible.

The echo of the students' recitations confirms – like any echo – the sound without its meaning. As myth has it, Echo was a nymph left without her body and without any will for her own words after she had been deprived of the love of Narcissus. A dead, mechanized power of the voice. I already spoke about the meaning without voice in my routine work – the way I present Ancient Greek texts to my students, the double lie of tradition. I am now talking of the voice without meaning. Echo is beyond corporeality, beyond emotion, beyond will. The emancipated voice is like the shadow of Peter Schlemiel: sooner or later, it becomes dangerous for the one from whom it has become detached.

The echo-vocalization of Plato, Eliot, Rilke, and Lermontov in the film is sinister precisely because of this deprivation of personality, emotion and will, which can easily grow into something that brings destruction. Shouting Eliot's verse in an ecstatic rhythm, “This is the way the world ends,” the students seem to finish the world's destruction, unable to not only produce a bang but also a whimper; soulless, serene in their transcendence, headed for nowhere with their tandem. The encounter with the dead mermaids is beyond perplexity, beyond emotion, sunk in the cynical indifference of those who have crossed the line. The only possible reaction is “couldn't care less.” No sorrow or joy, no anxiety for someone else's death, nor for one's own impending death, or for the demise of the world.

What remains after Echo? The punished Narcissus remains, sunken irreversibly in the mirror world, unable to look forward, because in the mirror looking forwards is looking back. The mirror encloses in its field not only space but also time. And the present seems to be absent. The symmetry of the mirror world, on the one hand doubles and multiplies the images until the image is completely lost, and, on the other hand, it merges the beginning and, the end, the past and the future. “Forwards” and “backwards” are equalized: we face what is impending but it is also behind us because it is unknown; and the past is behind our back but it is also in front of us since it is the only thing we can discern. The end of the world differs from the Big Bang only in its extension. The endless duration of the end – the duration of the whole film – correlates to the suddenness of emergence as the Bang correlates to the Whimper. The Whimper is simply an explosion stretched over time, a record played at an infinitely low speed...

Into this prolonged, never-ceasing end, the Beginning itself is woven: the emergence of the primordial couple from the Nothingness. The frames with the clumsily pacing male and female bodies, still merged with the original mud of Creation, at times androgynously welded into the semblance of a single body, are shot in a backward motion. The waves wash upon their feet centripetally, the birds fly backwards. Only the sun's motion is progressive. In the end, this frame will be shown in the reversed, but the actual direction – the man and the woman will literally walk backwards into the mud. However, this framework outlines not the beginning and the end but the attempt to pull (Eurydice, the ship, the world) out to safety, and its failure.

In this world of a confused space-time continuum, nothing new can happen by definition. Everything has been done already. There is no progress; there is repetition, which becomes more and more ritualistic and hollow. Every step of Orpheus in space, every splinter of a lecture, of music or of verse, is secondary. The feeling of *déjà vu* is strengthened by the repeated frames and motifs and by the soundtrack which continuously seems to be biting its own tail. It flows from itself into itself like the primordial Ocean.

I recall again the misgivings I had during the shooting of the film. Yes, the film projection on the cave wall parallel to Plato's text is kitsch. It is also easy to recognize Orpheus as kitsch, and kitsch in the second power, used and abused for unhealthy identification games. However, weaving such elements into the fabric of the film is not slipping into kitsch but rather an intelligent play with its means. I will not embark on theorizing kitsch here. I will only say that every cultural fact, detached from its natural context, losing the network of connections that holds it upright can easily slip into kitsch. A work ripped out of its environment and put in the museum is also a potential bearer of this risk. It sounds blasphemous. The museum, in its very concept, is the place of high culture. From this point on, the change of signs between high and low is only a matter of the way in which the objects are used or preserved in the museum space. Those who have had the misery of succumbing to the tourist temptation of peeking at La Gioconda in the Louvre must have realized that – even if not admitting it to themselves. *Mona Lisa* belongs to one world. The thick pane of protective glass, the Japanese tourists with their powerful cameras,

pushing forward to take a picture with it, the boorish guards preventing them from doing so – these are from another world. These two worlds, welded together in the space of the museum, do not generate a third world, or a dialog, or a postmodern collage. Designed as a territory of memory and knowledge, the Museum carries the risk of turning into a *par excellence* territory of kitsch when its usage becomes aligned not of the meeting with the global culture but of tourist routes.

The film constantly plays on this tension between high culture and its potential kitschy museification – without irony, but with a tragic feeling. The factory-made sign “Orpheus” on the broken guitar is absurd. And what do people do in the cave school? They preserve high culture. The camera glides across the faces of the listeners. They are beautiful, young, attentive – and not understanding. There is humility and obedience but no understanding. The use of culture here is ritualistic; culture is repeated like a mantra which, however, can lend no strength. Torn out of its roots, high knowledge destroys itself, turning into empty mumbo-jumbo. If rituals, in principle, serve to affirm the cyclical movement of the world, here they are powerless. The world has stopped turning. Time is dead. No rhythmic chanting or spell mumbling can bring it out of the depth of nothingness into which it has fallen to restart its pulse. Even language is devoid of meaning; the Babylonian mixture of various tongues is just an exercise in glossolalia. Only the connection to the primary elements – water, storm, sun – has not been cut yet. It is not by chance that there is so much nature in this very unnatural film. Nature is the last thing that stays. There is nothing ecstatic in the cave school. Teachers and students incessantly moil over the idea of ecstasy but

they do not achieve it. They are looking for it everywhere – and it is precisely these pieces of knowledge, emerging from the primary feeling of space, time, and rhythm, that are especially beautiful in their impossibility. This is why those scenes in which Orpheus touches the shell-horn with erotic tenderness and extracts a voice from it are so splendid. The seeking, thinking, groping hands of the musician are beautiful, beautiful is the disordered sound of bongos in the background. And for that same reason, the string quartet is absurd and inappropriate: helplessly salon-like and sterile against the cave’s arch and the deep blue sky.

Just as the past and the future, the mirror image and the real image, are coupled, the stories that the film tells (or does it?) are also coupled and multiplied like reflections in a mirrored room. The past story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the future story of the escape from the Earth on the *Moon Lake* ship, are told simultaneously, while the couple of young people, the contemporary avatars of the ancient couple, lie in rock sepulchers – together but also separately. Every couple, becomes double in its turn, as in the division of an embryo cell. Eurydice is one but the sun-speckled girl is also her, in a way. She walks after Orpheus but, in his intricate rear-view mirror, she doubles in red and in black garments. Even the snails crawling up his mirror are two, each having two reflections and two traces on the glass. One more Eurydice shows up, a hippy with an acoustic guitar hanging on her shoulder. The Eurydices become many: here is the dark-skinned Roma bride at the Gypsy wedding, and the old lady living in the times of socialist newsreels. Even Orpheus himself is, at a certain point, Eurydice, androgynously merging

with her black garments. This proliferation can end in no other way but with the enraged bacchantes – another face of the beloved one, multiplied to facelessness. Here, they are Gypsies in motley dresses – the brightest spot of colour in the whole film – and they emerge right from the dumping ground, cheerful and careless in their primal aggression.

Immediately after the first impressions from the private showing of the film, we argued for a long time about the appropriateness of the moment with the Gypsy wedding. Viewing it superficially, we could be left with the impression of a clash between Orpheus and the new, anti-cultural vitality, leading to degradation and self-destruction, and that this is the precise counterpoint of the mirthless cave school. But that would be too much of a simplification. This is why the prolonged episode of the wedding, shocking with its almost amateur, “wedding-like” quality, is wholly necessary. There, Orpheus does not meet a new world at all, but rather he encounters another face of the same deadness, of the world *post mortem*. The movements of the dancing women, seemingly charged with energy and erotic teasing, are dead through the all-seeing eye of Orpheus’s camera. They are another kind of non-vitality. Another form of attempt to ritualistically use the world, yet another form devoid of content and power. The dumping ground symbolizes this deadness.

It would be equally misleading to oppose the world of the school to the world of technology. All technical details – an oil pump, a tap from which nothing flows, factory halls where nothing is produced, ladders in a ship that lead nowhere – are self-sufficient and beautiful in their non-functionality. The world is running idle. The rust

and patina that cover it are more beautiful than itself. Nothing serves any purpose. Even the joyful narrative of the creation of this technical world, seen through the small black-and-white TV set of Eurydice, the old woman, is just a part of a ritual. A ritual no one believes in.

Finally, some disparate images: the things that come up to the surface regarding the memory of the film, valuable in itself and acutely sensuous. These images skillfully intrude; they surreptitiously get under one's skin. Their repetitions are rhythmical, related to periodically emerging sound motifs (not necessarily musical), and they slightly surprise each time. These are all familiar things estranged to the degree of impossibility. In this post mortem world, what is most ordinary looks most surprising.

The sun, twisted, torn apart, moving in jerks. Bloody. Lemon-yellow. Black. Gypsy fortune-tellers near the Fire foretell Orpheus that the world is going to end very soon, the sun will explode just in some four billion years, there is no time to even say goodbye. The sun in a frame, however, is never charged with ominousness. Rather, it is suffering, aged, doomed, and pacified. There is no aggression in the red colours of the sunrise, only the convulsive disruptions in its movement conveys that the rhythm of the world is ill beyond remedy.

The sea. A mirror. A distorted mirror. Another surface to tear apart and reverse. A sea to drown in. A sea-path to the secret cave.

The birds. Here, they fly both forwards and backwards, time can be turned inside out for them too. And only three immobile birds: three petrified cormorants, the only odd number in this world of couples.

The earth. Cracked, thirsty, scorched. Toponyms are written on it, toponyms of the geography of the Moon, that destination desired and never reached. As if the Moon has become imprinted on the Earth in an apocalyptic clash and every point of the Earth's surface carries the memory of the impact.

The face of the Girl in Love. A constellation of sun-speckles. Blurry spots of paint. A sharp profile like the relief of a mountain. Thick lips uttering obscenities in estrangement. The camera seems to repeat after the Boy: "I love your dirty mouth."

The narrative of the end of the world begins and ends in mud. It is of mud and mud it will become. The flight to the Moon is not going to take place. Here is also the *deus ex machina* – among all the ghostly bodies, dissolved in their reflections, there is a painfully concrete image: that strange anti-demiurge coming with the blowtorch to dismantle the fragile, nobly rotting world – the worker with the steel eyes and overalls, with wrinkles on his face and a masculine cigarette, the master who burns through the final full stop and goes to sleep. Salvation is cancelled.



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Rajna Markova

INCREASINGLY IMPOSSIBLE ADVENTURE

Is it possible to write about a film from the standpoint of “the situation today,” yet avoid sounding profanely provocative or overtly polemical? Is it possible to write about its underlying technology without being necessarily boring? Or is it possible to write about both its political and technological aspects simultaneously, without hearing someone grumble in opposition to “the mixing up” of languages?

After watching the film at a private viewing in March 2009, my first reaction was that it was anarchistic. Not because of the brief appearance of the band of anarchists in one of the cave scenes, highlighted by their black and red banner and odd hairdos. Actually, even though this scene did not stand out for me upon first viewing, for no obvious reason I made an instant decision that I needed to hold on to my perception of this spirit of anarchism. Now, months later, I am thinking: maybe it is not exactly a spirit of anarchism but rather a spirit of adventure? Or maybe avant-garde? Rhizomatics? Or, all of them together? Clearly, it all comes down to some peculiarity of my perception and all that off-screen/-scene/ unseen & obscene information I have internalized. Or maybe plain and simple, my perceptions are presently skewed by expecting a mail package containing Virilio’s *War and Cinema*? The truth is that in the film I recognize many elements of the anarchist aesthetic tradition of the 1960s,

a form of Situationism in action, “aesthetics of everyday life” (readymades) rendered through technology into a sophisticated final product.

Even the fact that *Moon Lake* is the first and so far the only (domestically made and) privately produced film is a remarkable detail that turns it into a praiseworthy adventure similar to those achieved by the Debord-Lebovici tandem in the 1960s. This detail is, however, worth describing for reasons that go beyond our domestic, extremely uncooperative, inadequate cultural milieu and touch on the current global situation: *Moon Lake* is coming out during a period of stagnation. Having enjoyed an exuberance of diversity, the stage is collapsing at a neck-breaking speed into some “healthy” conformism, set on spewing more and more “stars” and less and less art.

The market’s logic is not as chaotic as it would like it to be!

In this line of thought, as of recently, does art stand any chance of happening as an act of resistance, as an act of unique, underground guerrilla warfare with its meager budgets and inability to achieve its creative potential? There is no need to lie: when all that matters is the show, the spectacle, “the only fame is that bestowed by the grace and favor of the Court of spectators, after which disgrace may swiftly follow.” Because “an anti-spectacular fame has become something extremely rare.”

I just quoted Debord. He seems to have written more for our times than his. After him, if nothing else, that entire *La Nouvelle Vague* thing managed to happen in filmmaking.

In this line of thought, from now on, can anything new happen in cinema, or art in general, that is not affiliated

with the Court of spectators, and, at the same time, end up being something more than an amateurish DIY product?

Anarchistic on the Level of Production

It is difficult to try and make art on a modest budget and attract public attention unless you are a brutal agitator, demagogue, verbal terrorist, robber of someone else’s property (intellectual or otherwise), or an outright psychopath.

Without being *Dogme*, the film was shot on location lacking any set decorations and almost without props. The actors are all amateurs (the director’s decision); local people or members of the production crew were often employed as extras. I witnessed the initial chaos, caused by the awkward, seemingly absent work organization, which sort of stirred up panic within the ranks of “the old guard.” But the artist Yovo Panchev, one of the young crew members, described it to me this way:

“In general, we carried on intuitively, and did quite well, actually. Ivan, as a theater director, would provide his recommendations and solutions about the set, using metaphors as examples or giving directions for the atmosphere. In terms of detail, it was important to work with mise-en-scène-related objects, the bare minimum (just like on his theater stage). That way the objects became like fetishes and at the same time provided the keys to the codes of the visual language. The film’s poetics

was led by Stefan Ivanov's camera work. The art crew played a relatively small, subordinate role, facilitating the final decisions.

Some improvisations turned out quite intriguing, but as a whole the film's poetics follow the synchronized dictate: "camera – director," which, in its categorical, yet non-oppressive way, left the environment and its residents in a state of natural development and communication."

An outsider could easily conclude that such a rejection of strictly hierarchical organization may be the only possible way to conduct some activities on location in extreme conditions and on a minimal budget, but it must have been difficult. (I managed to survive exactly 10 days there!) The director's refusal, clearly ostensible, to subject the work process to any pre-conceived intentions seems to have rendered it truly exposed, to some degree, to the will of chance; a work style that from a certain moment on has charged the film with energy and magic.

I am now straining my lay memory for other such risky experiments, but all that comes to my mind are a few *Dogme 95* films with their devotion to realism, super-Puritanism, or William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They, however, are not a proper comparison. In Greaves' film, I recollect some frozen, forced dialogues and later a sort of "rebellion" of the crew, an attempt to usurp the film and remove it from the director's hold, but no, it is by far not the same! It seems that the low-budget, avant-garde cinema I know is largely an attempt at demystifying the very act of filmmaking. *Moon Lake* is almost the opposite case. Rather, it reminds me of my favorite Derek Jarman experiment, *The Angelic Conversation*. Or even my

equally favorite Greenaway. *Moon Lake* has no ambition to demystify cinema (despite the oddly stiff dialogues), which is even better! That is why art is art, because it is artificial! As an experiment and art-house drama fan, I have seen plenty of demagogue endeavors, only to finally live to the day when the process of demystification (or maybe the demystification of the process) becomes in its own right, in some amazingly mysterious way, a unique commercial product. Wondering what I am talking about? Demystifications would hardly provoke anyone's interest these days. Even *The Lord of the Ring* creators released two bestselling DVDs immortalizing the film's post-production and turning the very technology they had used into a fetish, that "Digital Grading," special-effects technology.

"Every-day-life realism in the familiar pseudorealistic tonality." This is the style, in the director's words, that *Moon Lake* strives to avoid. Because "few dare to understand motion picture as an extension of pictorial art with new means of expression." Maybe that is why *Moon Lake* fares well when compared to Greenaway's films. However, while Greenaway paints a fresco, Ivan Stanev's chiaroscuro is as ethereal as ink, gouache, and pencil on color paper.

Avant-garde on the Level of Post-production

The dictionary definition of "anarchistic" or "avant-garde" is quickly and easily associated with the idea of a wretched but self-righteous work in the DIY aesthetics. The digital grading technology, the one that was used to

create the special effects in *The Lord of the Rings*, which was also used in *Moon Lake*, is as far away from the DIY aesthetics as it gets.

In the elite Babelsberg studio, the chaos is channeled into a process; the anarchy of reality, shot on kilometers of reel film, is digitalized, pixilated, and subjected to careful manipulation.

According to the director, the visual concept had been planned out and developed from the very beginning in the following way:

Scenes with the ancient couple were shot on 35 mm film.

Scenes with the modern day couple were shot on Super 16 mm film.

Cave scenes were shot in high definition with a 35mm optics.

Orpheus, the lost tourist in the new times, was shot with a hand-held amateur camera, and (having already lost Eurydice) sees the world in even lower definition.

Therefore, due to the fine differences in data, the several layers of the storyline become visible and distinguished, “more or less on a subconscious level, since the untrained eye instinctively catches the differences among the various carriers.”

The idea to use Digital Grading technology in the post-production phase has served as the backbone of this entire visual concept. Here is a brief description of how the technology works: after the footage is scanned and digitalized, it undergoes color manipulation and image adjustment with the help of this whimsical and complex technology; during this phase the range of possible

manipulations, from introducing fine changes to particular details to changing the colour mood, is practically endless. This new technology is not yet researched enough and carries risks. After undergoing digital grading, the footage is turned back into a film negative – yet another very dangerous, almost alchemic process that often fails at the slightest error of the grading artist managing the process. In that case, the film becomes a brownish-green mess, and the entire effort goes to the dogs.

Until recently, colour manipulation was simply a process conducted in photochemical laboratories. The goal was to ensure homogenous color, rather than profound interference with the film’s aesthetics. The Digital Grading technology brings new dimensions to the old concept. The colourists have a lot of freedom to use their own taste, insight, and sense of measure – or to demonstrate the lack of them. Digital grading is at its best a form of art, and at its worst, kitsch, even if the process is error-free. The term “*power window*” that recently became fashionable, can give us an idea about how much sway the colourist now holds. The power window is the area selected inside the frame that is subject to manipulation. This is where the adjustment and saturation of hues, contrast, and the pixilation of texture are being done, leaving the rest of the film untouched even within a single frame. It is also possible to use animation inside the power window. The snail crawling up Orpheus’s mirror still baffles me: is it animation or sheer coincidence, caught by the ever-vigilant eye of the cameraman? What about any one of the three cormorants with symmetrically spread wings, like mythic gryphons, at the entrance of the kingdom of the dead?

Actually, what difference does it make? *Moon Lake* de facto came together during the editing phase, and the credit for the excellent result goes to the post-production house *The Post Republic*, the Babelsberg studio in Potsdam (the oldest film studio of this scale internationally that features *The Blue Angel* among other works), and last but not least in significance, the teamwork between the cameraman Stefan Ivanov and editor Remco Schuurbiers.

Impressive on the Level of Soundtrack

I was instantly enamored with the soundtrack. Meditative and unobtrusive, a typical Ambient; it dissolves and incorporates the crystal grids of many styles, ranging from Schubert's romanticism to church music to *Shut Up Band's* ethnic jazz (coincidentally or not, they turned out to be in the village of Tyulenovo during the filming). Plus all those strange sounds that the sound guys were "catching" like butterflies in the wasteland during the production, and the Foley sound effects added later in the studio. All of that was layered onto a single score and united in a multi-layer Dolby Surround sound mix by sound designer Matthias Schwab.

Here is some more information about the main score. It was written by Klimek, one of Sebastian Meissner's many artistic reincarnations. Meissner is a Polish Jew, who has been living in Berlin for many years and worked with Mille Plateaux and Sub Rosa, among others – two of the most interesting avant-garde labels that Ambient fans in Bulgaria know. Under a number of aliases, e.g. Bizz Circuits, Random Inc., Random Industries, Autopoieses, Klimek, he has engaged himself in various other activities,

such as sampling and visual and acoustic experimentation. His approach to music is intensely abstract and may be described as "deconstruction of the relationship between geographical, historical, and political representation grids." To my question of how he managed to avoid the Orpheus clichés in *Moon Lake's* score, he admitted that the score was not specially written for *Moon Lake*, that it came from his album *Dedications* (Anticipate, USA, 2007), and was selected and added during the film's editing stage by Remco Schuurbiers, another very interesting multimedia artist. Clichés naturally chip away when music becomes the bridge between the virtual landscape in the artist's imagination and the outside reality. With an ease characteristic for the ambient genre, the soundtrack brings art into the empirical experience of life (or rather, the opposite), avoiding the banal sound clichés to which even artists using field recordings easily succumb. In one of his interviews, Meissner says that he imagines himself as an audio traveler, not an audio tourist. He says he does not seek exoticism and recognizable patterns in the music he makes. Obviously, he is not a demagogue.

Rhizomatic on the Level of Plot

There is seemingly no plot. There is a cloud of key words: *sinus amoris*, a gigantic clash, strings, a supernova, the twin paradox, a ship. There is a host of names: Nerval, Blanchot, Poe, Rilke, Plato, and Eliot. There are roaming, ghostly couples, whose horizontal routes almost never cross – they are no different than space objects in strange constellations. The apocalypse is already there (it has always been there), just like the ship of salvation.

The listeners do not hear, the onlookers do not see. Only the disoriented mermaids make the foolish mistake to cross the borders of their world and perish in ours, due to disturbances in their perception. And Orpheus, otherwise vigilant, almost constantly looks backwards.

He looks like an animal, eats like an animal, and howls like an animal. The animal is, however, sad. This is not the Savage who comes to rescue us from the shackles of the Brave New World so we can get closer to God and poetry; rather, this is the Savage of Aldous Huxley. *Moon Lake* is peppered with primitivist references, although it is not seeking to escape from the horror through dreams of some new Golden Age. It is not seeking an escape into exoticism. Nothing idyllic or pastoral can be detected in the sun-scorched, oil-pipes punctured field. The present is life in caves, where technology is non-existent, only culture exists, or more precisely its remnants; a life twice as sad for denying itself the rapture of destruction, the enthusiasm of the final razing of those dear remnants, the ones *Moon Lake* seems to pick up and rearrange with nostalgia and love, following Proust and not Baudelaire, Benjamin and not Bataille, Orpheus and not Dionysius.

There, in the cave commune, we can even meet Marx, surprisingly alive, having endured century-long attacks by the free hawks of critical rationalism (as if to confirm my questionable theory).

Also disguised as a remnant is the last hope of mankind is the age-old myth of the ship of salvation sailing up into the heavens. It is not a luminous flying machine, on board of which those who have earned their salvation will set off for other worlds. It is a corroded metallic body, the remains of the ruined recent past.

Erosion is not chaos. These are not the blind energies of Dionysius. *Moon Lake* is enraptured with erosion, with the tarnish that has covered all things human as chaos increasingly acquires the appearance of an ice-cold *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the symbol of which can be seen on the reverse side of the U.S. dollar, and whose trash-infested technological suburbs are inhabited by technological troglodytes, subsisting on the leftovers from past feasts.



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Todor P. Todorov

THE RUSALKA

The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world

Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition"

Out of love, young girls seek their death in the water. This is the poetics and the ontology of the Slavic mermaid, the *rusalka* – death, water, and love. Desired death. The dead maidens, usually drowned, turn into seductive hybrid creatures akin to the sirens, the bird women whose enticing song is addressed to the underworld. According to Ovid (*Metamorphoses* V, 551), the sirens are friends of Persephone and after her being abducted by Hades into the world of the dead, they incessantly call her with their songs.

The *rusalkas* are signs of death, erotic and unambiguously dangerous signs. They leave their natural place, their death (water) and they transgress into the world of the living. This allows them to be recognized as undead creatures, as figures and messengers of undeadness, as understood by Žižek. This is the last bosom and the ultimate goal of the death drive understood not simply as dissolution and peace in death, as unconsciousness or as the biological instinct to return into the inanimate, but rather, as pointing to the continuity and flow of life beyond birth and death, before the splitting (*Spaltung*)

of the separate, and in this sense, deficient, individual life. This is the magic tearing in pieces of *principii individuationis*: the intoxicating call of the primordial oneness, of nature and life before their breaking apart into individuals (Nietzsche, Bataille). It is the hypnotic triumph of the excess of life, which is, however, experienced as a fascinating and horrific conflict, dazing and enticingly dreadful, as a fantastic and simultaneously terrifying dream. This undeadness, this tangible transcendence lures and frightens because it overwhelmingly surpasses the functional, individual fragment of life. It has an attractive erotic power. Notably, Romanticism situates the mythology of many of the so-called undead creatures (such as vampires) in the poetics of the erotic. This is the dialectic and the mutual penetration of eroticism, death, and the life instinct itself. The world of the mythical offers a wide range of representatives of this dialectic, signs of the delightfully scary and invigorating destruction. Among them are the *rusalkas*.

A *rusalka* is like an event, a meeting. This is the Eros of death and the gazing at death.

The *rusalkas* (akin to the nymphs, sirens, water fairies, and spirits) usually offer travelers their help and salvation, their promise to take them through mists, swamps and woods, but instead they bewilder and drown them. Or they lure them with their unparalleled beauty, with the tempting magic of water and love, to drag the poor wretches to the bottom. The beauty of the *rusalkas*, which they possess by definition, is where the gazing at death, the longing for death takes place. Only in northern Russia the *rusalkas* appear as hairy and hideous women. This shows certain ambivalence

in the shocking signs of transgression. They either appear as utterly beautiful (fairies, nymphs, *rusalkas* etc.) or as disgusting, ugly, and repugnant (e.g. harpies, gorgons).

The delight of destruction is beautifully horrific. It is possible for the gaze toward something beautiful to be accompanied by that which may also harm us (Quignard). Beauty and horror can be indistinguishable. In this sense, Quignard takes recourse to the verb *méduser* as that which hampers our escape from what we should be escaping and which makes us “worship” our own fear, makes us “worship” our horror of ourselves, at the risk of dying.

The beauty of horror drags to the sea’s depths. This is the fascinating rapture and the dangerous excitement of a feared return. The shipwrecked sailors drowning beneath the cliffs of the island of the sirens are just as much prisoners of the dream of this return as the travelers abducted into the underwater palaces of the *rusalkas*. They respond to the song (or beauty) that opens the desired entrance to the beyond. Beauties with bluish-green hair take them tenderly by the hand and lead them beyond life, into the amorous bliss of water. This is what the drive demands (Lacan) and what, in the order of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, we resist (the ropes of Ulysses). We talk of the *rusalkas*, we turn them into a myth in order to get away from them by enclosing them in discourse; in order to kill them. The symbol is the murder of the Thing (Lacan). Language is exorcism and externalization of the deadly Eros. For the latter, we have the feeling of absence, of being deprived of what we desire. We talk in order not to listen to the song of the sirens.

The love delight, with which the guests from that magic abyss beneath life attract us, is to be understood in the context of what Lacan calls *jouissance* – the real goal of the death drive, the delight beyond pleasure, the sweet pain of orgasm that exceeds the confines of this life. This orgasmic arche-thrill should not be identified with sexual pleasure (though it is one of its entrances), nor with quenching the desire, which is never complete – there is always a deficiency, an absence, something that eludes us and impels us to look for a new desire. It consists of a certain fullness and definitiveness beyond pleasure. *Jouissance* does not serve any purpose (*ne sert à rien*); it is not an enjoyment of anything (*jouir de*): each “something” would compromise the finality, the beyondness, and the excess of this breakthrough. This is the disappearance, the *drowning* in the uterine waters of life that we have lost – the frightening but enchanting undeadness that captures us by gazing at us from death. Beyond words, from the depths of Night, we are followed by the petrifying or entrancing gaze of the Gorgon, of the *rusalka*; by the magic call of the siren. The eyes, the doors of life, the most *alive* part of the body, are where the Medusa possesses death. This is the paradox and the dialectic of undeadness, of the *jouissance* that is unachievable within the confines of the world, in the realm of mortals.

The transgression into eroticism promises a return to the incessancy of this delight, promises a return to death (Bataille). This is why the *rusalkas* are figures in the poetics of the beautiful and the erotic; this is why they are precisely *erotic* signs of death. The myth speaks of a whole genus of creatures and images,

externalized voices of undeadness, of the desired and lost *jouissance*. The *rusalka* is a metonymy.

It is an auric creature in Benjamin’s sense – the appearance of a remoteness, however close it may be. In their aura, the bottomlessness of life appears. And of death, too.

Although cases of male *rusalkas* (“*rusals*”) are known, these creatures still remain dominantly female. Mythology and folklore present a whole range of female creatures inhabiting deadly water-spaces: nymphs, naiads, nereids, *rusalkas*, *vilas*, *samodivas*, etc. The very poetics of death in water is feminine. There is a similar tonality in its literary history too, from Ophelia through *The Bridge of Sighs* to Virginia Woolf. The Victorian era even witnessed a certain frenzy, which became fashionable, around the suicides of women drowned in the water’s abyss. Like the *rusalkas*, they were often seduced and abandoned girls who had suffered a shipwreck while in love. In that period, an average of 500 women per year threw themselves in the Thames.¹ According to T. J. Edelstein, the image of the drowned woman turned into an “embodiment of a Victorian mythology.”² The literary and visual representations of this image experienced a boom at the time. The iconography of this boom reaffirms the feminineness of death in water. In the death of the young drowned woman in Thomas Wood’s *The Bridge of Sighs*, “All that remains of her / Now is pure

¹ Cf. Richie, J. Ewing, *Night Side of London*, London 1857.

² Edelstein, T.J., “They Sang ‘The Song of the Shirt’: Visual Iconology of the Seamstress” in: *Victorian Studies* 23.2, Indiana University Press 1980, pp. 183-210.

womanly' and "Only the beautiful." The death in water and the poetics of desiring it has a feminine character: Mother Water.

The life instinct that makes the meeting with the *rusalka* possible takes the form of a despair that is indistinguishable from admiration. The ecstasy of downfall. The song of the sirens is extremely low, it comes from a place foreign to man, and it evokes in him that liminal pleasure of the downfall, a satisfaction that cannot be experienced under ordinary conditions of life. (Blanchot) It is perceived as a natural noise but beyond the limits of the natural. This is the song of the abyss, which, once heard, unlocks that place, that abyss from which the chant arrives and into which the enchanting voices of the sirens – the voices of the undeadness – urge us to disappear.

According to Blanchot, the struggle, the drama that unfolds between Ulysses and the sirens can be called metaphysical in a certain sense. Each of the two sides wants to be everything, to be the whole world, the whole life. Each one claims to be absolute. And each one wants to make the co-existence with another impossible. However, at the same time, each desires more than anything in the world to meet and to coexist.

The song of the siren, like the gaze of a *rusalka*, promises an ultimate, supernatural delight (*jouissance*). It also promises transformation. To lose your own form and body, even your life, to go beyond the natural boundaries where you have been constricted, in order to overflow and to dissolve into a fuller, more perfect and more *alive* nature. In short, it promises a desired transgression: to abandon yourself, to break free. This is the magic and transmutation of undeadness. Hermaphroditus,

abducted by the nymph Salmacis, loses his gender in the water to acquire a new, more complete corporeality. The erotic vampirism of these creatures entices, with the delightful and perilous vertigo, the temptation to extinguish oneself in a more full-bloodied, all-engulfing and magic life, uninterrupted by the burden of consciousness. These are the voices of the death Eros, of undeadness, which always drag inwards, into the water, and captivate with the horror of some inhuman beauty, with the nostalgia for a lost unearthly delight. This is the voice of the *rusalka*.

Ivan Stanev's film *Moon Lake* contains two short, enigmatic scenes where the spectator sees the dead bodies of mermaids or *rusalkas* – their beautiful, pale, unearthly, and lifeless bodies. The first of these scenes – the protagonists find the dead bodies on the land, by the road – might do with a traditional explanation; the second scene, however, demands a totally new perspective. As a rule, every transgressive creature has its boundaries and its chronotope, its admissible times and places of presence. Once crossed, these boundaries kill. For instance, it is believed that if the skin of a mermaid dries, she will die forever. In this case what is intuitively troubling, is the sight of a *rusalka* losing her life, the force of her Eros. This death, hence, is the sign of a more essential confusion, of a more essential loss. In the second episode, however, the bodies are being taken from the sea, from the water itself, into a fishing boat. Death has gotten hold of them in their most natural, *alive* place. This corresponds to the overall chronotope of the film where time and place coincide: it is the end of the

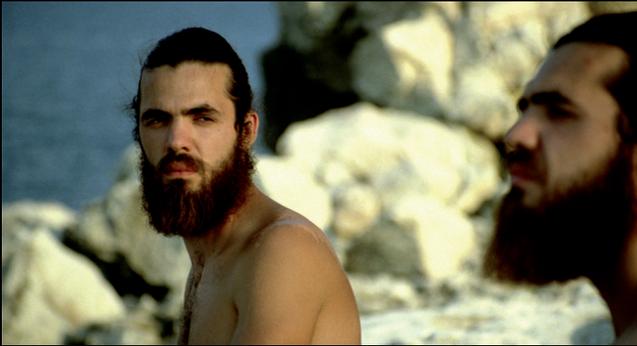
world, in one sense, or another. Humans have lost their gifts and skills, their natural orientation; they have lost their knowledge. Life has assumed the appearance of a dream. However, their loss exceeds even this. Death is no longer attractive. The world ends.



























Kamelia Spassova
Maria Kalinova

THE POINT OF THE GAZE: DOUBLES

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Astronomical Doubles [Synchronization]

The fantasy generated by the theory of relativity, known as “the paradox of the twins,” has been actually realized with a couple of synchronized atomic clocks. The one brother clock was placed in a satellite moving at a speed of eight to eleven kilometers per second. Since time flows differently depending on the speed of motion, this twin began to lag behind. That is why it returned to its immobile double as younger than it – time up there ran more slowly.

In the final assessment, the twins experiment does not discover immortality. It turns out, rather, that if we move fast enough, the end may be significantly postponed and, paradoxically, from an external point of view we will seem to be slowing down.

The end comes in slow motion, *This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper*. The final lines of *The Hollow Men* by T.S. Eliot, chanted incessantly in *Moon Lake*, go over and over this light ending of the world in order to articulate the very infinite deceleration of the end through that monotonous repetition. The disruption of the continuing endlessness is marked by doubles: they

are the place where repetition becomes real and the shadow becomes solid.

The theory of relativity and the twin paradox explain how the reduplicated temporality of Ivan Stanev's film functions as a plot maker. Orpheus-and-Eurydice and the boy-and-girl-in-love are the two twins that continually become discrepant. The first couple tries to assemble pieces of the mythical past; the other one moves to the forthcoming apocalypse (without revelations) to shut itself away in *Moon Lake*, the ship that will hurl them somewhere beyond the world, where there is no end.

The meeting of the twins, the synchronization of the past with the future, however, brings back something that has already been close to death, and in this sense it can be brought out only as a horrifying stiffness, a sculpture, a monument. The point of the twin's joined gaze inevitably plays the role of an ideological place as well as the counter-place of an anecdote. This double topos is decomposed and reassembled in the film in the coupling of the names "Karl" and "Marx." Karl – Marx are doubles: there is Karl and there is his living monument Marx. They become one but, in the new reconstruction of the political mechanism, the ideological is wrought together with the comical.

The past, which flashes in its duplicity, stirs hilariously and adds: "Marx." The old clocks of the "dishabited inhabitants"¹ are still racing with time, the petroleum equipment ticks up and down, forward and back, one, two.

¹ A reference to Ivan Stanev's book *Izbitite obitateli. Poeziya, drama, teoriya. Iz tetrakite na edin zakosnyal modernist* [The Dishabited Inhabitants. Poetry, Drama, Theory. From the Notebooks of a Belated Modernist]. Sofia: Virga, 1994.

The Double Retakes of the Dream [The Language-Breaking God]

The figure of the twins in *Moon Lake* substantiates the rhythm of the film as interruptive, elliptic, and constantly beginning anew; it shakes the world in its transcendental and epistemological limits. The repetitive and mirroring dynamic, which keeps pulsating in the face of the end itself, is unable to stop the production of mythical dreams. The doubles introduce us to this interruptive order where repetitions and series replace the originals. They do not appear gradually, they have already been here as two. Their genesis is always the retake, they are double by birth, and this is what cuts into pieces the traditional counting and provenance. The originals have remained somewhere far back in the past or they have never really existed as anything else but fictions of a present inclined to look back. There is no meeting of one identity with another, no regular addition of one to one, but a start from two, a repeated event, or rather, the event as repetition.

While Ivan Stanev's previous visual experiment, *Villa dei Misteri*, works radically with both collage and the merging of cinema with theater and the clip by dwelling on the figure of Dionysus and of the orgasmic, excessive movement, of the vertical eruption, the grasping movement in *Moon Lake* is the simultaneously possible-impossible turning back, and the organizing figure is Orpheus-and-Eurydice.

The two films can be contrasted on the basis of this mythological shift from Dionysus to Orpheus, but one can also analyze their meeting, their gazing into one another. The orgiastic Dionysus, torn apart by the titans,

must tear apart Orpheus, with the bacchantes providing this two-way connection between the one tearing and the one being torn. The unveiling gaze of Orpheus, a Dionysian spasm in which he gazes back in the abyss, is the tearing gaze which turns Eurydice into an eternal shadow.

Although its plot is more stable than that of *Villa dei Misteri*, *Moon Lake* retains its ability for abrupt interruptions, flashing slits, and breaks in language. The short circuits in the film come as disruptions in the ordinary rhythm of the cinematic language: the shift of the background and the focus, the flashing interruption by the appearance of the 25th frame, the backlights, the display through the negative, the fast forwarding, the forward movement as a reversed, backward movement are all devices used to cleave the linear progression and to introduce the disruption into the very materiality of movement. They are the slits derived from turning back, the place where what was left behind reappears, the Dionysian transgression of Orpheus against the prohibition to look back – the meeting of Orpheus-and-Eurydice in death. The proliferation of shadows, reflections, and mirrored surfaces ceases, the doubles come to an end precisely in this impatient and intolerable gaze that has become a part of the very language of the film.

The Crack in Time [Noon or Abyss]

Alenka Zupančič uses the Nietzschean figure of “the shortest shadow” that the sun casts at noon, to delineate the logic of this internal cleavage that produces the two.

“The “great midday” (which becomes the predominant figure of this “crack in time”) is conceived by Nietzsche as a kind of ultimate perspective. Its singularity resides in the fact that it is not a point of view, but the point of the gaze.”² The language of *Moon Lake* is constructed out of attempts to grasp this point of the gaze and tell the story of such a crack in time. The interruptions and the cracks in the tape are leading constructive principles. The very first frames that are seemingly completely static, the impressions, the sun at a standstill, introduce us to the great midday. They are suddenly interrupted by a flashing cut in the frame, by a momentary change of day into night, of the sun into its double the moon, by a short blink of the gaze that comes to crack or erupt– to give an image to this folded shadow. A blink to open a space for the lunatic hallucinations, to make the first humans emerge from the water, to hurl them to the end of the world and bring them finally back to the starting point, so that the whole of *Moon Lake* itself would be such a blink.

During this time at high noon, objects dress in their own shadows;³ they incorporate them maximally without a complete adhesion and without losing the edge of the double. The myth of Orpheus descending into death to find the shadow of his loved one and then take her out in the flesh is related in the film to the myth of the cave from Book 7 of Plato’s *Republic*. In both myths, the decisive moment is that of turning back. But while Orpheus loses the possibility for a real Eurydice by

² Zupančič, Alenka. *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2003, 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

turning around his gaze, for the people of the cave the act of turning around refocuses their gaze and brings them to what is more and more Real. The liberation of the gaze, the realization about the cave fire, leaving the cave and staring at the reflections in the water and at the shadows in daylight are the slow steps in an idealist ascent attempting to achieve the noon so that things can enter themselves. The students in the caves of *Moon Lake*, however, do not take this slow path. Their task is to convene the scientists and put together the knowledge, and then launch themselves directly into space. So it is only the shadows in the cave that they see; it is only the reiterating echo of somebody else's words that they hear; listlessly staring is all they do. At the same time, there is someone for whom the turning back is pending. The turning back, which the film defers, is the gaze into the abyss: this is the gaze, which produces the crack in time and which makes it impossible for time to be measured absolutely, in the same way twice.

Recursive Paranoia [Optic]

In the twin paradox, the backwards gaze is the moment when, having become younger, the double returns, and meets the other one. In *Moon Lake*, the turning of twins towards each other creates the effect of recursive paranoia, in so far as recursion signifies turning to oneself, but in the case of doubles, oneself is always somebody else.

The reversed advancement, which is always a return, and this return, which is always advancement, is shown through an image of exception in Binka Zhelyazkova's film

The Big Night Bathing. This film is thematically related to the official cultural policy of the 1980s with its focus on the popularization of the Thracian myth of Orpheus and of the legitimating figure of the ancient musician. However, it treats the myth ambiguously: on the one hand, it demystifies it ironically (through the final tragedy of the main character) and, on the other, it reveals its ideologically veiled excess (through the intellectual perversion). The image of exception that catastrophically couples progress and regress is a crab that instead of going backwards, moves forwards.

The bang-whimper, which advances like a reversed crab in Ivan Stanev's film, is manifested in the scene with the mad animal voiceless shrieking of Orpheus and Eurydice in the night storm. The frame continues with the storm clearing up and with a slow return to the couple's normal faces, unaffected by chaos as if they never went through it. Technically, this moment is shot and then put in reverse but the effect that it achieves is one of a lightning flash, a cutting that leaves no consequences. This is also the moment which introduces the night, the rage, the disruptions, as well as the mirage ship *Moon Lake* with all the students perched on it. The reversal of the storm as well as the opening and final scene with the couple emerging from/returning to the water, use this technique of rewinding which, similar to recursion, loses any stable point of rest, turning the beginning and the end into a double entrance into the film. The beginning and the end are the two recursive mirrors, the twins between whom shadows and reflections gather and disperse, but between whom there is also the possibility of random lightning slits. The optics of rear sight which

shield Orpheus – mirrors and cameras – are technical devices which produce only copies, dim visions without an aura of their own. They cannot guarantee what happens behind him, just like the handicraft objects before the fire only throw misleading shadows in the myth of the cave. There is a significant moment in the film when the first mirror is produced and welded by Orpheus. Heaps of dust falls on Eurydice, but since the mirror is dim, Orpheus perceives the dust as part of its surface. In this uncertainty and hesitation between object and image, between “behind” and “in front,” the twosome emerges. Its figure is illustrated by the two snails sticking together and barely moving on the surface of the mirror.

In the same way, the twins proper in the film are stuck one to another but also between the reflected and the reflecting. They cross the film in order to import the real redoubling, a time paradox, to places surfeited by shadows, by dreams within dreams, by imitations of imitations. The very first appearance of twins takes place the moment when Orpheus and Eurydice are eating watermelon skins on the rusty and wrecked ship *Moon Lake*. Orpheus throws the skins back without knowing whether they reach Eurydice. The twins Karl-and-Marx pass by and dump a turbot in the space between Orpheus and Eurydice. It is hardly by chance that the gift of the twins is precisely a turbot, a fish possessing the ability of mimicry, of hiding by completely merging with its environment. Mimicry presupposes a close external resemblance between the imitating organism and its model and, as such, it can cut into the syntactic distance of Orpheus-and-Eurydice. The incision of mimicry and of the literally

double (the twins) cleaves the dynamic of original-and-copy. As a result, the film will be haunted by reflections until the end.

The Author and the End of the Film [Stanev]

In *Moon Lake*, the mythological, the poetic, the cosmic, the musical, and the visual layers constitute a complex language that clarifies and obscures, literalizes and implies, and, in all this, reduplicates. The plot is redoubled; Orpheus and Eurydice are redoubled; the bicycle is two-seated; Orpheus is redoubled in Eurydice, while Eurydice is redoubled in the double mirrors in a black and in a red dress; Orpheus splits into a man and a woman; even inscriptions such as “Orpheus” on the guitar and Plato’s *Republic* are double; there are the reduplicating frames of the death amidst the white sand. Besides the pair Karl and Marx (apart from Orpheus and Eurydice, they are the only named characters in the film), there is another pair of twins, which proves that, with the unlocking of time, more and more real doubles appear. The second couple of twins are the guardians at the entrance of the *Moon Lake* ship, which bears the sign “No entry.” Doubles punctuate the flow of events in *Moon Lake* through their recursive optic. Their reduplicating appearance connects and reduplicates the perspectives of the beginning and of the end, and so, when the end of the film comes, it does not presuppose an end but a turning of the gaze back. The gaze into the abyss, the gaze of Orpheus toward Eurydice, is the gaze of the author at *Moon Lake* – a gesture that has to cut the tape off. It amounts to taking the radical risk of

discontinuing the shooting and looking back in order to solidify what has been seen and turn it into an oeuvre. In the end of the film, a man cuts into pieces the rusty *Moon Lake* ship, relaxes and lies down to sleep in the middle of nothingness, and just before closing his eyes he opens them again, he blinks, and he sees.



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Darin Tenev

A VALLEY OF DYING STARS

I

They walk in line. The boy walks first; the girl follows after him. The boy, the present, is trying to look back; the girl, the past, is trying to save herself, but the past is unredeemable and the present is doomed: it falls apart in its very attempt to preserve itself. The present falls apart into quotations, allusions, references, gazes, insecure desire, and useless wisdom. Dissimilated, jumbled, it is no longer this boy, it is a whole community in which the boy is boys, the girl is girls, everyone is anyone, a community of empty people, moved – without action – by shadows.

These lines offer a possible approach to Ivan Stanev’s *Moon Lake*, an approach trying to take into account the amount of knowledge that the film has woven into its paradoxical narrative. This knowledge explains what happens but, being a part of what happens, it cannot be the last instance guaranteeing the meaning of the film, nor a secure standpoint for interpretation, since it offers no super-order, no meta-language. This knowledge opens many doors to the film and yet, it does so not by positioning itself outside (of the work) but, on the contrary, by staying within it, by remaining at the level of the narrative. This is why the lines above, with the explicit reference to Orpheus and Eurydice, offer just one possible approach.

They make no claims that would have been in any way illegitimate: the story of Orpheus who must not turn back if he wants to lead Eurydice out of the netherworld is, in the broadest sense of the term, a quotation among the other quotations in the film from T. S. Eliot, Baudelaire, Rilke, Plato, etc. But, just as this quotation allows us to read all the other quotations and the whole film through it, so can the story of Orpheus and the whole film be read through Rilke, Plato, or Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.

This might give the wrong impression that any interpretation relying on the "knowledge" in the film, in so far as an element of the situation is used for describing the situation in its totality, would be only relative, untrue, and arbitrary. This, however, is not the case. The perspectives which the film opens on itself, and which are its own perspectives, allow the truth to emerge without changing the level. These perspectives are themselves a movement between perspectives:

"...there is a perspective (on things) that emerges only when one shifts perspectives. It does not exist as a separate perspective with its own point of view; yet it is a perspective. We now have an answer to the question [...]: How is it possible to formulate the thesis about all truths being perspective truths without this statement being a meta-statement, exempt from the situation it describes? The answer is: the point from which it is possible to formulate this thesis is the point of disjunction introduced into the reality of a given situation by the shift of perspective."¹

¹ Zupančič, Alenka. *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2003, 113.

By assembling different perspectives *Moon Lake* achieves precisely this: it turns each of them into a movement towards all the others, but also towards itself. Thus each perspective becomes a point of disjunction. As a result the film itself functions as an active interpretation which does not allow the spectator simply to explain this or that scene, or the work as a whole, *through* the texts it quotes or refers to. To understand the film through the texts it refers to, we must have understood the texts themselves, which, however, we can only do through the film, since it has changed their meaning. It is in this coupling of perspectives, where the perspective is always a point of disjunction of perspectives, that, it could be claimed, there appears the inexhaustible truth of *Moon Lake*.

If Eurydice is assumed to be the past that Orpheus is trying to preserve and bring back from the dead, then are we not dealing with an allegorical reading made possible by the film itself? More precisely, such a reading is made possible by the way in which the film metonymically connects scenes where the girl follows the boy while he tries to invent a device to see her, with scenes where young people in a cave listen to lectures on diverse subjects, transmitting to them the already unintelligible wisdom of the past. This metonymy allegorizes the story of Orpheus; the story, in its turn, from this point on becomes an element, through which Ivan Stanev's work begins to open towards itself and to interpret itself.

No doubt, the diverse types of reference (to literary works, languages, cultural entities, music, painting, exact sciences, political theory, etc.) should be traced one by one, and the inexhaustibility unfolding before the

spectator should not dishearten but, rather, encourage the outlining of truth each time – within the specifics of those perspectival intersections.

In the following lines, I will propose a reading of such an intersection between *Moon Lake* and T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, which is one of the few works quoted in their entirety in the film (during one of the lectures in the caves; the lecture, besides, provides the spectator with a certain interpretation of *The Hollow Men* within the confines of the film). Moreover, the concluding lines of the poem sound throughout the film, repeated, apparently without any understanding, by two of the characters attending the lecture. This places Eliot's work among the ones that deserve foremost attention.

Here, I will read *The Hollow Men* as if the work is about the film. The function of this "as if" is to allow us to take into account neither the poem before or after the film, nor the film through the poem, but, rather, the poem together with the film, at the point of disjunction, where perspectives intersect.

II

In the future timelessness that *Moon Lake* presents, the opening line ("We are the hollow men"²) seems to reveal the situation of the small community of the survivors of an unnamed and obscure catastrophe that

² T.S.Eliot, "The Hollow Men," *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962*, London: Faber & Faber, 1962, p. 89. The poem is on pages 89-92 of the quoted edition; in what follows there will be no more additional references to the separate pages.

has seemingly devastated the world. They walk and talk, they perform actions, but everything is devoid of meaning, aimless, futile. This situation is, we can say, obvious. But this is precisely why the really interesting question surfaces with the second step, the second line – "We are the stuffed men:" what is it that the hollow men are full of, or rather, filled with? For their emptiness in Eliot's work is only one side of the story, the other side being the absence of this emptiness, the impossibility of emptiness to stay empty. "Headpiece filled with straw," the fourth line explains. But if the heads are the straw that fills the headpiece, what is the rest of the body stuffed with? Straw – the spectator can interpret it as an inability to think, judge, evaluate, etc. The characters in *Moon Lake* are, as a whole, unable to think beyond a certain limit. (Should we exclude the cave teachers from that number? Aren't they among the most spectacular examples of the limits of thought – everyone in his/her own subject, so that the way out and the outside have become unthinkable, ungraspable by their thoughts? We will dwell again on this hypothesis shortly.) Straw or dried grass is what fills the hollow heads of the hollow men. Therefore, one can conclude, they fail to understand or become aware of what happens to them, what surrounds them, what they live through. Thought, judgment, and understanding are the things of which they have been bereft, but they, these hollow men, do not feel the emptiness because the straw does not allow it; they live a full (filled with meaninglessness: straw) life, failing to formulate the problem, to formulate a problem, to raise a (the) question. This is why their voices "are quiet and meaningless/ as wind in dry grass." "Leaning together"

their heads, they have formed a strange non-thinking community,³ an unthinking community of heads that have been emptied and then emptied of emptiness (this is the role, as I said, of the straw). Communication between these heads is impossible because their words are too “quiet” and they do not hear what they are saying, and, furthermore, even if they did, their words would be devoid of meaning (“meaningless”). (It is worth making a short digression here to have a closer look at the comparison concerning the quietness and meaninglessness of the voices. The dry voices are quiet and meaningless *as* “wind in dry grass/ Or rats’ feet over broken glass/ In our dry cellar.” What strikes us is the repeated use of *dry*: “dried voices,” “dry grass,” “dry cellar” (as it becomes clear from the context, *dry* also means *dried up*). Outdoors, it is the grass; indoors, it is the cellar or basement – our own space, the home (“*our dry cellar*”) but in its underground (do we dare say, in its unconscious?). Other than sterility, draught thus relates to some time past, a time when the grass was not yet dry and the glasses were not yet broken. The voices are meaningless and quiet like sterility but also like the meaningless trace of a past of which memory is lost. Or,

³ The question of community is among the most important and interesting questions posed by the film. There is the community of the cave people; the community of lovers who cannot meet (which, consciously or not, presents an inter-textual link to Kitano Takeshi’s *Dolls*); the community at the Roma wedding; the community of birds at the beginning of the film; the community of seamen, etc. In this light, could one suggest the dangerous hypothesis that the only possibility for a community is to be a non-thinking community? I will not elaborate this problematic here but it will loom in the background of my further discussion.

to be more precise: not the past per se but the turning towards it, the meeting with it, is the meaninglessness: the wind in the dry grass, the rat’s feet over the broken glass in the dry cellar.

The headpieces are filled with straw, with heads of straw. What about the bodies? What fills them? These bodies, the ones lined one next to the other in the cave; listening to lectures on foreign languages, poetry, physics, philosophy; moving in strange synchronicities when they ride a tandem, or swim, or walk backwards, or wash, or play music, or paint; moving and inactive at the same time – it could be said that they have absorbed, “incarnated” everything that the heads can no longer understand or think. *The bodies live the incomprehensible. They live the unthinkable.* The characters assimilate the past that is taught to them, e.g. the poems of T. S. Eliot (which are both just an example and more than an example; and this is valid for all other references), precisely through their bodies. This is made evident by the way in which the lips of two of the characters repeat throughout the whole film, without putting any meaning into them, the last lines of the poem (“*This is the way the world ends...*”). It is made even more evident by the way in which all those attending the lectures repeat expressions in foreign languages, or phrases, unintelligible to them, from Plato’s *Republic*. (This image is mirrored in the repeated dance moves of the people at the Roma wedding, offering a troubling reduplication of what should be precisely the opposite: a disparity). The past fills their bodies and turns them into its marionettes – marionettes of wisdom but in no way wise marionettes.

But are not the bodies themselves also full of straw? These “stuffed men”, are they “crammed,” or rather taxidermized? The latter is probably the more natural reading. It is confirmed not only by the expression “stuffed men” in English, in the light of which the straw-filled headpieces will be a synecdoche of the whole body, but also by an image which appears in the second part of the poem and in which the lyrical character likens himself to a scarecrow: “Let me also wear/ Such deliberate disguises/ Rat’s coat, crow skin, crossed staves.” At this stage, however, it has become clear that the straw itself, the straw that can fill the bodies, is a figure, but a figure of what? What else but the past made meaningless, the betrayed wisdom? In this case, it is no longer necessary to retain the somewhat artificial opposition between head and body. Once emptied and then filled with the straw of a knowledge bereft of significance and importance, the head will reveal thought itself as a body. Thought, as represented in Stanev’s film, is the thought that has reached its limit and gone beyond: *the thought becomes body*. This body, the body remembering the knowledge and the past, is best represented precisely by the teachers, by the masters in whom knowledge is already a pure bodily reflex which the lips utter, the hearing registers, and the hands follow. What they teach is not some mental achievement but bodily drills that the young people in the caves, listening and not understanding, slowly assimilate: gymnastics. The thought which becomes body makes the body coincide totally with itself and thus disappear, dissolve. This can be seen precisely in the bodies of the masters. Sometimes a master’s body becomes the background of what used to serve as a

background to it: the sea, which instead, is brought to the foreground (this is the case with the one who talks of *The Hollow Men*). Sometimes all we can see of the body is the shadowy outline; sometimes the spectator only hears the voice – the voice as the body totally coinciding with itself, the body that is both empty and full, emptied, filled.

This self-coinciding body, however, is an ideal point whose impossibility is what the film actually demonstrates. The bodies are always learning bodies; they never coincide with themselves. Their emptiness never corresponds to their fullness, to what they are filled with. Non-coincidence is the cause for movement and inaction. The bodies move but they do not act, they are never (in) themselves; hence the impression of aimless movement of the characters.

This has nothing to do with the traditional mind-body dualism. No. Here thought becomes body, which cannot be the body that it nevertheless is. The body is this thought-body and something different, something incorporeal. When thought becomes body, it is revealed that there is some wholly incorporeal residue or *restance* of the body which is an opposite – to what? To the thought, to the body. The apparition of the invisible that *Moon Lake* shows is an apparition precisely of this incorporeal *restance* of the body. This is why this film is inhabited by phantoms – the manifested invisible, the slit of the corporeal not coinciding with itself. But before we talk of phantoms, a specification or, rather, a reminder is necessary: the body must not be thought through completeness, through solidness; it is hollow, empty. Neither should it be thought as a living body; it is beyond the alive-dead opposition. In

the film, its movements are expressed not only through the gait and gestures of the people, but also through the rolling of the tandem, the repetitive displacements of mechanic pumps, the installing of a shower on a cistern, the uttering of the characters' words. It is possible for these movements to be movements of this body precisely because the body (but it is always more than one, always at least four) is empty. If we turn back for a moment to the straw and summarize its double role, we will be able to also delineate the intricately constructed emptiness of the body. The first thing we said about straw was that it – cramming the headpieces of the hollow men – expresses the inability to think, judge, and understand. Secondly, after sublating the misleading body-head opposition, we revealed straw as a figure of the past bereft of meaning with all its knowledge and wisdom. From these two premises, one can infer a crucial statement about *Moon Lake*. The past, wisdom, and knowledge⁴ express the very

⁴ Both above and here, the past, wisdom, and knowledge are placed together as synonyms. Despite the need for careful distinctions, I will not engage here in a close discussion of the demarcation lines between them. I will afford just a glance at the complexity of the situation: the film *seems to* offer the picture of a time placed in an indefinite future in which all that is taught to the young people of the caves corresponds to the state of knowledge that is contemporary to the film's shooting. Thus the film itself reveals itself as a present conceived as a past, a present intersected with itself as past. But is this not the situation also of what the film represents: in the (fictional) present of the film narrative, the (real) present of the film is a past that intersects the other present; but the two times are not so clearly opposed, since the (real) time of the film, albeit fictionalized, serves as a context to the narrative and even at the level of the narrative is con-temporary to the

inability to think and understand. The past is what obstructs understanding, what makes understanding impossible; all hermeneutics is excluded from the represented situation. The past is the unintelligible and the unthinkable which fills the bodies like material for taxidermy. (Isn't the delicate nostalgia that permeates *Moon Lake* hidden here?)

We can now take the next step. The past that expresses the inability to think and understand, while filling up the emptiness of the hollow men, does not in fact introduce any fullness. It creates body out of thought, pushing thought beyond its limit, but in the same gesture ("gesture without motion") it shows the empty as different from itself. *The non-coincidence of the body with itself is a non-coincidence of the empty with the empty*. This is not a matter of any residue of meaning but of a *minimal difference* between two types of meaninglessness.⁵ The

other present. There are two split present times, a double core of fiction and reality, split and splitting one another, respectively as future and as past. This is quite a simplified picture but it already allows us to see why making the past synonymous to the present day knowledge and wisdom is legitimate – the reason lies in the need to complicate the concept of the past in the film. In the end of this text, I will return to the problem through a concept not introduced so far, the one of "myth."

⁵ The notion of minimal difference is used here in a sense close to that of Alenka Zupančič or Slavoj Žižek (see e.g. Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow*, op. cit.; Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 2008; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 2006). The theme of the two types of meaninglessness, which appears also in the form of two types of darkness, two types of death, etc., and which in each case involves a difference that does not allow a simple division of the

difficulty in pinpointing this minimal difference is not due merely to the fact that it concerns emptiness but also to the fact that the hollow men retain some semblance of form (we can say with Eliot “shape without form”), a form wrapping the tattered emptiness. The spectator can always slip and decide that this is all about ordinary young people, about an ordinary albeit somewhat strange world in which love, joys, etc. are the same as anywhere else and exist as the hackneyed “eternal themes.” This, however, will be far from the truth (the very construction of which, in the movement between

two elements, is characteristic of Eliot’s poetry as a whole and can be easily traced at least from *The Waste Land* up until *Four Quartets*. (The difference between the early and the late Eliot could, perhaps, be defined as such: if in the beginning the double meaninglessness and the double death are what deprives one of hope, after *Ash Wednesday* and especially in *Four Quartets*, they still allow for some hope. Cf. in “East Coker” of *Four Quartets*, the third part: “O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark [...] let the dark come upon you/ Which shall be the darkness of God.” As for *The Hollow Men*, most critics lay an emphasis on the division of death into two realms, one of which is nevertheless “good,” the so-called “other realm of death.” This interpretation seems justified only to some extent, since the reunion of the two realms is a “hope only of empty men.” A careful reading not only shows the ambivalence of the “other realm of death” but, in fact, questions the clear distinction between the two realms without allowing them to merge. On this, however, I will dwell later.)

In this text, due to the nature of the analysis, I have abstained from references to other works by both Eliot and Ivan Stanev. With one exception, until the end I will stick to this rule. I will only use the occasion of this footnote to point out that quite a few elements in the film refer to other works of the poet; it is enough to mention the mermaids which, under one form or another, are present in Eliot’s poetry from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

perspectives, inevitably avoids “eternal themes” and always talks of something else as well, meanwhile redefining the meaning of words like “love”). The residue form can only show emptiness through purely formal work in the film’s making: one form intersected by another in order to reveal a deeper cleavage, that of emptiness. How is this achieved formally? It is by what Kamelia Spassova and Maria Kalinova call “short circuits” in the film: “the shifting of the background and the focus, the flashing interruption by the appearing of the 25th frame, the backlights, the display through the negative, the fast forward, the forward movement as a reversed backward movement,” etc.⁶ All of these devices are a way of transcending form through form – to illuminate – not simply the empty, but also the hiatus that has emerged in it, as well as the ghostly residue of body that is not reducible neither to body nor to thought. This cannot be narrated nor simply said (here this text stiffens indexically in just doubling the film), it can only be shown. This peculiar technique of the film has already been noted, in the Wittgensteinian terms used also here, by Deyan Deyanov in a conversation about the film: “Throughout the film, in none of the scenes, it is said how the world is going to end although it is said that “This is the way the world ends.” The way in which the world is going to end is not told but shown.”⁷ Paradoxically, what can only be shown is

⁶ See “The point of the gaze. Doubles” in this volume. These speculations might offer an additional perspective to the theme of doubles as it is developed by the two authors.

⁷ Deyan Deyanov, “A Conversation on Ivan Stanev’s *Moon Lake*,” *Kultura*, no. 15, 14 April 2009.

what cannot be shown – the cleavage, the splitting of the empty.

The empty body no longer shows a link between action, perception, and thought, because thought itself has become body and thus every sensory perception is referred to another sensory perception, every body – only to another body. That is why there is no act but only motion. That is why the force is paralyzed. That is why the emotion meets no response. That is why there is no potency but only existence and there is no essence but only descent.⁸ But this is also why the bodies are always in a community, they are never alone, bodies are community gathered by what tears them apart.

III

Ivan Stanev's film thus puts together what in Eliot's poem seems divided – the two realms of death, "the dead land" and "death's other Kingdom." What is put together is united without being equal to one. The experience

⁸ Eliot, "The Hollow Men": "Shape without form, shade without colour,/ Paralyzed force, gesture without motion"; Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow [...] Between the emotion/ And the response/ Falls the Shadow [...] Between the potency/ And the existence/ Between the essence/ And the descent/ Falls the Shadow." The shadow is what fills the bodies, what tears darkness and darkness apart. Its function is not simply to separate the one from the other, e.g. potency from existence, but also to split the existence itself, or each of both elements. As a heritage from the past that first separates past from future, and, secondly, tears the present itself *through* the past.

that the work represents is, after the tearing apart and the putting together, the attempt of the one realm to see and *mirror itself* in the other, of Orpheus to see Eurydice. As some of the final scenes with Orpheus demonstrate, he himself *becomes* Eurydice but fails to see her. This last statement, actually, seems strange since in the many devices that he produces in order to see her, *she can indeed be seen*. The spectator sees her reflected, represented, imprinted, etc. Why does Orpheus seem not to see her? The answer may come from *The Hollow Men*: "The eyes are not here/There are no eyes here". No eyes here. Why? Because vision gives information to the brain; but thought has become body and vision is impossible – the information passes from one apparatus to another, with no room for processing it. There are no eyes or ears, etc. any longer. The automatic repetition of the works heard in a mechanism is brought to the extreme with un-vision.⁹ The eyes of Orpheus cannot *see* Eurydice; they also register her, after the mirrors and the cameras, however they have nowhere else to transmit her but back to the exterior: and Eurydice begins to multiply. Registering Eurydice makes her double and triple.

But the real difficulty lies elsewhere. Because Orpheus does not in fact want to see Eurydice –not at all. Eurydice, as the past, the shadow, the meaningless repetition, is what prevents Orpheus from seeing himself. What Orpheus wants is to look at himself, to

⁹ Interestingly, it seems that throughout the film the eyes are only meant to see with, they are nothing besides an organ of vision. They are not eyes to weep with (as we can say with an implicit reference to Derrida).

mirror himself in himself, since he would then coincide with himself and become pure voice. (This thread of the voice as a self-coinciding body is spun once again here, since it is Orpheus who, more than any teacher and master, must be pure voice, mere music, the best musician, and in the film he is silent. The guitar he carries does not play and cannot even be tuned up – it is “quiet and meaningless.”) Orpheus is on a quest for himself. Divided, he seems to want to be one again. It can also be said otherwise. Orpheus wants to be Narcissus. Eurydice is what prevents Orpheus from becoming Narcissus. Let us remember what are the stakes in this allegory: it is about the future present that wants to retain its sovereign unity, its indivisibility, and its presence. It does not want to depend on anything else, but wants to be absolutely self-contained. In order to reach its goal, the future present projects a future future (this is the second narrative, the story of “Moon Lake” and the departure of the ship) for which it begins to prepare as if for the only possible salvation. However, the past that it needs for this plan has turned into a condition of impossibility in relation to the plan, and before that to the present. The present is empty but filled – torn by the past, without identity, as unsaveable as the past that it attempts to save in order to preserve itself. Thus the past is revealed as a task. In this complex – but simplified here for the purposes of analysis – dialectics, the two stories gradually come closer to one another in order to overlay past and future; hence the ambivalence whether the film is hopeless or it still leaves some hope. To put the issue this way, however, is misleading, since the overlaid past and future do not reveal any

alternative to the present but solely maintain its split emptiness. Thus the eyes that are not here, the eyes of death’s other Kingdom, are neither in the past nor in the future nor in any alternative world. “Those who have crossed with direct eyes” toward the other ream of death “remember” the hollow men not as lost souls but precisely as “hollow men,” Eliot writes. But this “remember,” in the light of the above speculations, reveals precisely the dimension of the past that has torn the present in such a way that the present creates its own image unable to see it, separated from itself, turned into an image. No one remembers no one; it is only the disruption of the heritage of the past that makes one present to construct an image from which it tries to look at itself only to not recognize itself. It is interesting, in this light, to consider the frequent appearance of eyes in *The Hollow Men* that, however, never can see those who are eyeless. Upon every meeting of the two worlds, the gazes are directed to broken columns and stones (“the eyes are/ sunlight on a broken column,” to which the later “broken stone” and “stone images” refer – a reference to the “heap of broken images” in the first part of *The Waste Land*) – the cracked image inherited from the past. The dream reveals the eyes as unseeing but throwing light. However, what they illuminate, they destroy.¹⁰ The presence of eyes and their absence are the two

¹⁰ This is especially evident in the reference to *The Waste Land* where the poet says: “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats” and, even purely metonymically, unfolds the connection of the light of the sun (*sunlight* in *The Hollow Men*) to the destruction of the durable (the stone) and the images.

sides of the same thing, of the same destruction. The two sides do not coincide but they remain the sides of precisely one thing. Death's other kingdom is the same dead land as different from itself. And hence the dying stars would be the conjoined image of the absence of eyes and their destructive action. The gaze of the unseeing Orpheus is destructive but the first thing it destroys is Orpheus himself. Orpheus is not blind, since that would imply the presence of eyes, while where there are eyes, there are no eyes. The gaze has taken away the eyes; it has torn the present apart. The gaze with which Orpheus looks, therefore, is not his. This is the gaze of Eurydice, the past that splits the present. This would be the next turn in this strange dialectics. The destructive gaze of Orpheus is Eurydice: before the Orpheus with eyes and the eyeless Orpheus – both as the same Orpheus. And the next conclusion: Eurydice commits suicide. Eurydice, who is already dead, kills herself to die once again. Orpheus is the real heir of this incessant tragedy. Incessant, because the dead Eurydice continues to be the stuff with which the empty body of Orpheus's community is filled, and she continues to kill herself. And thus Orpheus is doomed to repeat his descent into the other kingdom of death in a quest for himself. Orpheus wants to be Narcissus, but Orpheus is Sisyphus. This is the way the world ends. And along with that: this is the way the world does not end. His whimper is the double lament for the endlessness: turn around and everything starts over again. Orpheus is Orpheus and is not Orpheus – they are two but they do not see each other. Eurydice is multiplied by the one while the other reveals the actless motion in which seeing Eurydice has lost all

meaning (moreover, in this second pair in the film, a combination of non-Orpheus and non-Eurydice, non-Eurydice comes several times before Orpheus and walks before him, without any consequences whatsoever). They – the ones, the others – walk ahead and back simultaneously. The sunrise is a sunset and vice versa. And in this overlaying, the repetition is the disruption which, between empty and empty, generates phantoms.

Here's where everything ends only to start again: at the end doomed to repetition, there are two things left to be said without developing them further. They are related not so much to what is told as to the way it is told. First: the phantoms generated, the disruptions, the cleavage between empty and empty, etc. – these are also *technical effects*, effects of the technology. It cannot be otherwise. This is the doubling of form in which thought has become body. Technology – this is the body-thought. *Moon Lake* was shot from the position that it expresses. The story it tells (a story that in a sense cannot be told) is already an effect, one of the first doublings that happens *before* the fiction (of course, the distinction between fiction and reality in this case must be used with utter care with regard to the constant interweaving and not in the last place – as will become clear shortly – to the movement of perspectives that fiction makes possible in reality).

Secondly, there is the material used. All of that past, that knowledge that does not allow itself to coincide with itself and does not allow to be mastered and tamed, the stories of Orpheus and the *Moon Lake* ship, the quotations and references, are the heritage of a past that I will call "mythical." From the perspective

set here, the whole film can be regarded as an attempt to redefine myth (and also maybe the question and the way in which we ask “What is myth?”). Myth here is not some structural invariant, nor an ideology, nor a narrative of the absolute past, nor an era of gods, nor a legitimation, nor an explanation of the unexplainable, nor the expression of ancient fears, nor a logic different from that of the logos. The myth is the unthinkable that tears apart the present and does not allow it to either come out of itself or coincide with itself; the myth is the past as an impasse of the present; the myth is the point of irreflexivity doomed to a repetition, in which the repeated and the divided constantly stands apart from itself without understanding it. Exactly *qua* heritage the myth determines the past. Thus one can talk of the latest up-to-date theories in one field or another, of fantastic fabrications referring to future discoveries; through the myth, however, all this functions as past in the specific meaning in which it is conceived here.

The last question that we could ask is: what would be the way out (if possible) from the myth? It is clear that this will not be the lightning that shows the sky of dying stars as a background. No, rather, a lightning tearing the lightning, an entirely artificial nature without essence, which moves between perspectives – the action by which *Moon Lake* passes beyond the movement of technology to let truth speak.



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Miglena Nikolchina

ORPHEUS AND TECHNOLOGY

Orpheus and Prometheus

In the film *Moon Lake*, Orpheus functions as a cultural hero, as coextensive to civilization and as its principle. The film achieves this by representing the wanderings of an ancient and a future Orpheus, whose trajectories inscribe their mysterious figures on a landscape comprised of primordial silt, archaic ruins, modern waste, and moon scenery. Chronologically stratified and yet recognizably modern, this landscape reverberates as speech (from Plato to Eliot and Machado), as music (from the conch shell to electronic instruments), and as a diachronic object world (from the horse-drawn cart to the Jaguar). In it, living and dead languages merge; the gripping, almost inaudible call of whales pierces the squeaking of rusty oil pumps; a fortune-teller and an astrophysicist join forces in their prophecies.

The stakes are obvious in opting for Orpheus – rather than a classical cultural hero like Prometheus – by way of speaking of man, of the human and of humanity, of “all the arts,” of gazing into the past and of clairvoyance: this choice presupposes some musical key. No matter whether he appears to be a crook and a trickster or a self-sacrificing benefactor, as a rule the cultural hero deals with beginnings, inceptions, and inventions. On

the other hand, as a “symbol of progressing civilization” (A. F. Losev), Prometheus is, furthermore, the figure of an impending beginning, of a future transformation, of the call of the new. However, the first thing one cannot fail to notice about *Moon Lake* is that it seems to be a film about the end (“not with a bang but a whimper”) rather than the beginning, and that in it the beginning itself is (conceptually, but also in technical, cinematographic terms) a reversed ending. I note this obvious aspect of the film in order to make more emphatically my own claim that this film about the end, about the lingering of the end, about the end as “the time that remains” before the Apocalypse, is serene. I will call this pessimistic serenity Orpheus.

The New Orpheus

The cultural hero is as a rule dual – he is often ambivalent in himself but he also splits into himself and a twin brother (for Prometheus, the foreseer, this is Epimetheus, “the hindsighted, the improvident one”). Thus, along with its other aspects as discussed in diverse perspectives by Darin Tenev, and by Kamelia Spassova and Maria Kalinova in this book, the shedding of doubles and twins in *Moon Lake* has this archaic “trickster” aspect as well, which springs directly from the element of the myth. It is as if, in taking on the role of a cultural hero, Orpheus must out of necessity become double: the way every Promethean character who brings order, inescapably ushers in the shadow, which messes things up. In the film, this very long shadow drags its cosmogonic aspects through the motif of the sun’s death: “very soon,

in just some four billion years – no time to say goodbye,” as well as through the hypothesis of the dark energy. This hypothesis is explained by an astrophysicist whose outline is engraved like a black shape against the velvety-petroleum background of the sea, which appears to be the foreground: the speaker himself is hollowed out as a figure of dark energy, as the antigravitation that some day will unweave every molecule and every atom in the universe – the way Orpheus is dismembered by the bacchantes.

And so, Orpheus is double.

One is ancient, the other one – to put it again in the language applied to Prometheus – is “new”. The first one – burdened with the heavy shadow of Eurydice, which he drags out of the silt – is muddy and gravitational; the other one is full of wings and flight. In the identical chronotope, on the edge between sea and land, between the human and the lunar, each of them unfolds their own plot: one belonging to the mythological past, the other one to a quasi-science-fiction future. And yet! The “old” Orpheus, the one whom we perceive as earlier and properly mythological, enacts the end of the story of Orpheus – the attempt to bring Eurydice out of the land of shadows and the failure of this attempt. He doesn’t have the right to look back at her; they do not talk to each other; with faces turned in different directions, they wail and howl as befit creatures who have crawled out of Hades; she plods along after him, exhausted. In one especially shocking sequence, she is sitting behind him and eats watermelon leftovers that he tosses backwards to her. By the way, the episode with taking Eurydice out of hell is believed to be a relatively late addition to the mythological career of

the singer with miraculous powers over animate and inanimate nature.

The “new” Orpheus – the later and maybe future one – inhabits the beginning of this story. Eurydice is alive; it is possible for them to look at each other; and, furthermore, the light, airy, carefree, and captivating Eurydice often takes the lead: she calls out “little Orpheus” to get back in; she asks him whether he is “Nobody.” She provokes him to tell stories, and, in spite of the obscenity of her “dirty little mouth,” in spite of her pledges never to reach the horrible age of twenty, in spite of the ancient tombs where both lie while he tells her the stories of the past and the future Orpheus, her union with her boy is fresh, innocent, cheerful, and ethereal like the daughters of air whom Andersen’s Little Mermaid joins after the death with which everybody tried to scare her.

And so, the old couple is muddy, heavy, falling apart even before Eurydice is lost, chthonic, and speechless; the new couple is rhythmically synchronized like the tandem bike with which they merrily cruise under the sun that is constantly stuck on the horizon. Is it rising? Or setting? Even if their world is dying, they are children. And what if they chant the mantras of perishing universes? In their dreams or in reality, they will fly away. Repeating “This is the way the world ends” like a nursery rhyme is the very postponing of that end.

Let me say it again: the old Orpheus loses Eurydice; the new one is with her.

Prometheus in the Underworld

It is well known that, as part of the punishment for violating the divine will and giving fire to humans, Prometheus is cast for some time in hell. However, this chapter in his biography is usually ignored – we see him stealing the fire, creating man, bound to the rock, and finally unbound. There is, though, a splendid short essay by Albert Camus entitled “Prometheus in the Underworld” where Prometheus’s descent into hell is given precise coordinates: if it is characteristic for Prometheus that he “cannot separate machines from art,” if he loves humankind so much that he gives them “fire and freedom, technology and art,” then hell is our act of separating them, our concern with technology only and not with art, with the body only and not with the spirit.

In *Moon Lake*, Ivan Stanev introduces the turning to technology as the core of the disaster. In order to lead Eurydice out of hell, Orpheus must not look back just as the people in Plato’s myth of the cave cannot turn back to the source of light. The moment when technology becomes the means for overcoming this impossibility – the moment when the “old” Orpheus in *Moon Lake* invents his strange contrivances so that he can see Eurydice in them without having to turn back and subsequently becomes, as the fortune-teller says, “an artificial little man;” that is, the moment when he resorts to prostheses in order to outwit the prohibition and when looking becomes a mechanism that is turning in itself – this is the moment when Eurydice is lost. In the film, she begins to disappear, then to multiply, then to incarnate herself in Orpheus, “the first sodomite,” according to some sources.

He is a gentle boy, this Orpheus, a meek musician, as suggested by Phaedrus's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. Unlike Prometheus, he is not a rebel, he does not challenge cosmic laws, he does not trespass, and he does not knock his head against the supreme divine will. He does not have that "insolence toward the universe" of which Russell speaks with reference to Prometheus and the Old Greek "dread of hubris." According to Phaedrus, it even turns out that he is a coward who, instead of dying from love, most miserably chooses to enter Hades alive and whimper Eurydice out from the gods. Not with a bang but a whimper. For this lack of courage, he receives an apparition and not the living Eurydice.

Technology, therefore, appears as the fruit of this cowardice rather than of Promethean hubris. In *Moon Lake*, technology does not have the appearance of some titanic daring but of doomed cunning. In most cases, we see it rusty, squeaking, disassembled and decomposing in the land it has sterilized. Orpheus, with his beetle-like eye-prostheses, is ridiculous and pitiful – not seeing, not playing, not talking, but grimly munching on the magical world that he is supposed to be seeking (in the scene where he gnaws at a fish while a kitsch picture of a siren appears in his rear-sight spectacles, and a fishing boat harvests dead mermaids behind his back).

Prometheus in the Underworld: this is Orpheus.

Orpheus at the Black Sea

However, we can think of Orpheus not as a mythical, but rather a historical figure, a contemporary of Pythagoras, as real or as legendary, as Homer – not only a poet

but also a theologian, the founder of a mystery cult, the author of texts, which were, furthermore, written down, since his disciples, according to Plato's *Republic*, spread "a clatter of books" with Orpheus's name across Greece; and as the father of Mousaios – another poet. The representations of Orpheus's severed head (as legend has it, after his dismemberment, his head and lyre reached the coasts of Lesbos, a famous island of poets), which were done by dictating to scribes who write on clay tables, express the very essence of writing, which preserves the voice, the sound-producing head, not the body. Just as the film does, Orphic texts speak of beginnings and of the end: they provide directions how to get across death, how – as the words in one of the preserved Orphic commentaries states – to accomplish the life–death–life transition.

Although not a rebel, this Orpheus is, as Marcel Detienne puts it, a "dissident." Detienne relates this Orpheus to the Black Sea: the most appropriate scenery, it turns out, for Ivan Stanev's dissident cinematographic esthetics whose biographical, historical, and political frame in the last decade of communism Edvin Sougarev so vividly reconstructs. A vegetarian in an era when gods and humans share the eating of bloody sacrifices; a breakaway whose magic power is in sound rather than in force; a lover of seclusion (as the "new" Orpheus explains with a verse from Lermontov, answering the question of the living Eurydice whether he, too, is a "Nobody"); a herald of purification and a bearer of the knowledge retained in dreams and in death – exiting, and exiting, and exiting from hell – this is the specialty of Orpheus. He knows those places.

Orpheus and the Little Mermaid

Anxious, unthinkable, almost ultrasonic, this call, which, it turns out, is the signal of whales searching for one another, accompanies, in the film, the appearance of the silver corpses of “moronic mermaids,” who, just like deluded suicidal whales, crash against the shore and perish. Andersen’s Mermaid is the reverse image of Orpheus: she comes out of the depths into the upper world at the price of losing her voice. This is her chance to give a soul to the body of her love. In the film, her quest fails because – and in the same way as – the old Orpheus fails: he fails because he insists on seeing and replaces his sense for the invisible with technology; and she fails because she cannot lose her voice, she cannot suppress the call that smashes her onto the rocks, because she refuses to accept the ineffable and the unfeasible in love. According to *Moon Lake*, Orpheus is the soul that the mermaid seeks; this hysterical sissy who has lost his voice is her Eurydice.

The School in the Caves

If the vigorous and fearless Prometheus of Aeschylus used knowledge to bring out of the caves the people who had been drenched in darkness, the return of knowledge into the caves – which the film presents as the paradox of the survival of knowledge today – is precisely the task for Orpheus, the melancholic loser. What was written turns back once again to oral memory, lucidity returns to the spell, and names, to anonymity. The new couple does not look back at the old one; the myth tells us that *this is how it must be*.

The Coming Film

Moon Lake is a double film – not only because its plot is double; or because it looks both to the past and to the future; or because it is full of couples and twins. This is also the case because there is one film that flows before your eyes and another one that follows you. *Moon Lake* has to be viewed more than once not just because it is different at each viewing but because it incorporates its theme and its making into the viewing itself. This is a film that comes after itself, it leads itself the way Orpheus leads Eurydice: with all its sensuousness and although it rubs itself against our gaze like the lunar body of a dreamt of mermaid, it takes place after an interval, after the withdrawal of the gaze, from behind your back, from the position of an invisible overtaking. I turn back to look – and it keeps coming.



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Boyan Manchev

AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD

To Miglena and Ivan who drew me into an end-of-the-world drama.

The fragments that follow were written in the first half of 2007. They elliptically develop an obsessive motif, the motif of the end of the world. They were inspired by Ivan Stanev's invitation for me to take part in Moon Lake as a "philosopher." More specifically, their inspiration came from our conversations about the film's idea. As a result of these conversations, the fragments, which I jotted down in my spare moments, became interwoven with the experimental, hypothetical experience of the end of the world by a character, which remained somewhat vague and which was conceived specifically for this purpose. This imaginary character embodies attitudes and elements from the biography of Baudlaire (one of the "conceptual personages" in Stanev's project) and of some philosophers who took the path of the "cursed poet" even further. In short, the character is a terminally-ill philosopher at the end of the world. So these pieces include fragments from the inner speech of a (conceptual) personage who does not expect to come into being.

Worldless

30 June 2007, Paris

There are times when I feel that I have chosen the most ungrateful work – the work of thought. I feel it in the tissue of my brain where concepts seem to delve. Philosophy sometimes feels like a dedication to the body. When the twilight of the longest day thickens the shiver of the blood runs ahead of knowledge.

Old age distances us from the end of the world.

Abandoned to the conditions of time and space, outside of the world.

* * *

25 July 2007, Tyulenovo

And so, here I am, at the “end of the world.” My notes on the end of the world have become soggy in less than an hour while I was browsing through them sitting under the grapevine arbour of the last hotel, beyond which there is only wilderness. The wind is almost stormy, it hurls around air masses swollen with humidity, and yet everything seems to stand still. Everything *becomes* still. The humidity is so dense it obscures the sky, and blurs the sun. The horizon is no longer a limit. It is the dilution and the saturation that cut across me.

Notes for a lecture about the end of the world

Il n’y a pas de garantie, ni empirique ni métaphysique, que la fin du monde ne soit pas imminente. Finitude radicale : pour la première fois la fin de notre vie pourrait coïncider avec la fin du monde. Et cette première fois est première chaque fois. Or la fin du monde devrait être pensée comme absolument imminente. Telle est l’essence même de la pensée : la pensée ne peut avoir d’autre point de départ que l’expérience de la finitude radicale du monde.

Le monde n’est pas la chair de la pensée que par l’imminence absolue de sa fin.

C’est pourquoi la réflexion sur la fin du monde est non seulement un objet philosophique absolument légitime mais impérative. Penser le monde donc non pas a partir de sa création toujours douteuse mais a partir de sa fin toujours présente dans son anticipation inévitable. L’idée du monde n’est pas possible sans l’idée de la limite, c’est-à-dire de la fin du monde – ou bien de son néant, le terme, le gouffre, le vide. Mais ce n’est pas la fiction (du) vide a partir de laquelle on déduirait la substance du monde ; la fin du monde est le rythme même du cœur du monde.

End-of-the-worldly

Here and now, facing the end of the world, it is time to admit that the idea of a world no longer belongs to us – and that, in fact, it has never belonged to us.

If the end of the world is coming, is this a sufficient argument for dedicating the remaining time of thought to *what is happening* (to us)? Is it at all possible to think of the end – of the absolute event which will be the discontinuation of all eventness? This is the question for today.

In fact, shouldn't we conceive the "end of the world" as a rebellion of nature? The world is not a human deed and its disruption is not unleashed by the non-coincidence of hand and language.

We know nothing of the world without man; maybe the world is nothing but this ignorance.

When the deluge washes the world away
The beauty of salvation will be the beginning of horror.

No world is more finite than this one.
The last breath of the world.

Anywhere out of the world, or the end of the journey at the world's limit

To run away from the world, further and further. With Baudelaire: *anywhere out of the world*. Or with Bataille: always further, where your only country is.

People talk about "escaping from the world" – this, of course, is a common place, an unbearable triteness. They also talk, somewhat more pertinently, about leaving in search for the unknown; in search for new worlds. In all cases, however, there is something greater and more essential: it is the *crossing* – the crossing of space.

Crossing the limit: this is to say, not becoming inscribed in the world's limit, not departing, not leaving the world – *anywhere out of the world* – but responding to the exigency of its excess; following the movement of its excess; never stopping at the limit; being the limit itself in its incessant expansion; being a frontier which encounters emptiness and digs an even more intense, neutral emptiness in the very heart of emptiness.

The world is not contained in its place. There is no limit of the world for us to step over: the world is its own excess; it is excess itself. In other words, the world is its own exodus.

The "cursed" (*the cursed poets*, as the phrase goes) or the "possessed" are those who have succeeded in responding to the powerful subterranean push of the world's desire – the huge, imageless, unimaginable, and free desire of the world. Therefore, this is not an escape

from the world but rather a certain possession – in the sense of being possessed by an evil spirit – a possession by the contagion of the exorbitance of the world: it means being the frontier of the movement of the world, which is its own excess.

The limit is a front – a *meteorological front* – in the grips of transformation, just like illness, the excess of the body cutting through finiteness, is a front.

Our bodies are always at the edge, at the limit, sneaking into the pulse of the skin, outside themselves: blood transfusion, poison infusion, metastases, ecstatic cells, you, your body, a metastasis, unlimited exorbitance of my body, boundary of the boundless, your skin, my skin, this incessant front, this infinite fold, the infinite fold of our intersecting skins growing into each other, and the earth growing through our cells, and the water running through our cells, and the air – the infinite skin of our nakedness, the infinite exposure of our finiteness, of our nakedness.

You depart, you are at the border, you are the border itself: you are the limit.

Where is the limit of the world? The limit is without limits.

This limit *is* the world.

There is no end of the world – the end is infinite because the end, the limit, the frontier that always goes beyond itself, is its own excess.

That is, what happens to us here and now at the end of the world is nothing but the end of the end.

Are we at the border of the world, or beyond it?

We talk of leaving the world, of an exodus. But in a world that is its own nothingness all we can have is the Exodus of the world. The end of the world *is the world itself* – the void of the world which we have overpopulated without ever populating it.

Thus, the vector of the Exodus is the vector of the world itself.

Breathing out its emptiness.

The end of the world is not an explosion but a quieting down.

Remaining deaf to the apocalyptic fireworks, the “illuminations,” the ecstasies, and the hallucinations, you welcome the austerity and the modesty of the end. You stay immobile in a neutral space with no appeal and no charm, where everything dies out slowly and imperceptibly.

You fall silent.

The end of the world is like a very long day – you go to sleep the moment night falls.

The end of the world is like a white night, like the polar day – a light that glows without meeting any obstacle in its way, no limit.

So, we are at the limit of the world.
We are the limit itself.

The end of the journey is the abyss.

Sickness. To the last breath

Who commits suicide in the end of the world? Poets only?

AIDS. To be infected at the end of the world – to carry death in you before the end, a death which will never see the world – which will be stifled in the bud.

“Thus the girl, the one who prescribes syphilis, appears to him as a kind of priestess, as a sacred personage, and instigates in him an intense curiosity combined with adoration.” (Michel Butor on Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval in *Histoire extraordinaire. Essai sur un rêve de Baudelaire*).

Death will come as that “girl” sucking on your contaminated penis, a wild innocence, which “knows everything.” Idiotized by your own eschatological narcissism, would you miss the hushing of the end, you “cursed poet”?

Life, the crime that must be atoned for. Is there innocence in nature? Or nothing but the brutal inertia of crime, petrified violence, boundless and hopeless horror?

Life is the degeneration of matter – a disorder of the impenetrable inertness of matter where everything “boils and seethes,” just like in hell.

The effacement of man; the effacement of the planet. The cosmogonic De Sade.

* * *

What does “world” mean? The world is not the earth. The world, they say, is the Open. But in this case its opening has closed up forever – or maybe it has opened too much until the empty core was torn apart, scattered irreversibly... but sufficiently. The world... why am I talking about this at all? The fatigue, always here, in this tired body, the weight of the cells, the slowing down of the blood, the physical pain in the brain. The work of the brain is like a continuous inflammation, like an infection. The virus spreads.

The microscopic virus, whose nucleotides we collect, is our common home.

One day we will return to put the atoms of the world together again. Restore the world, piece by piece, starting from the virus. Resurrect the dead. Who knows? Perhaps we will really be able to do it but decide that it is no longer worth the effort, or discover that we have no desire whatsoever to do it. And why should we do it, anyway? We are tired gods, not powerless but tired. Let us sleep, let us sleep while the night is falling

No to the apocalyptic ecstasy! I refuse to be among the DJs of the last planetary show: “the end of the world.” An exodus? Together? Resurrect the dead? Thanks, but no thanks. Count me out. Sleep, here goes a simple pleasure.

You put on the thick skin of sleep; you inhale; you assimilate the liquid of sleep deep inside – gas in the alveoli, in the softened tissues... A few final images; this is all. Something enormous and imageless is here.

You talk to those whom nothing will reach, to whom nothing will be handed down, who will carry nothing further, no memory, just unrecognizable, degenerated images, so much the better.

The world will perish without our children.

Deeper and deeper, down to the womb of the night.

Northern sea. After the end of the world

31 July 2007

Every first thought begins from the end of the world.

Only here, at the end of the world, does thought meet its beginning.

Frantic freedom.

The torch of the North is flaring

As green as the grey sea

Dim without limit like the sky

Like the bent crowns of the poplars, like the curved stems of the reeds, like the rugged surface of the firths, like the inebriated cries of the birds, like the crazed eyes of the wild cat, like the thrust of the wind, like the waning fire of the sun, like the ebb of the inevitable, like the imperceptible shift of the compass.

The wind lashes through the hair and blows sand under the shirt and trousers; splashes from the waves hit the feet; the red-haired girl looms against the horizon where the cape cuts deep into the sea and the soil crumbles into the sand: beyond them, there is only the loop of mystery.

The day, only halfway, is only now beginning.

The humidity swells

With the splashes of the waves,

with the raids of the wind, with the whirls of the sand, and the noon that hovers above the dunes.

In the roar of the sea and the wind, there nests an

imperceptible hush, neither a warning nor a promise; I think this is blindness.

“The end of the world is everywhere.”

The dark land without confines

The horizon approaches us.

At the foot of the dune, we no longer see the lake or the sea, but the noise of the stormy surf and the wind in the reeds engulfs us.

The evening star is above the dark field, the lighthouse blinks rhythmically behind our backs and a ghostly glow before us trembles above the dunes. The rest is darkness without shores.

From notebook "North"

5 August – 2 September 2007

It is intoxicating not to be with those who write history

A few monstrous truths will flash for a moment and that will be all.

It is a huge effort to entice a resisting world.
But this effort is fertile.

Man is the animal that will succeed in destroying the world.

Le suicide sans fin.

The end of the world is everywhere, in every instant, the only constant of the world. The axis of the world.

A sunset at the banks of the Rhone. This is how, overrun by the lava, in a trance, the world will end.

Epilogue.

The end of the world according to *Moon Lake*

The end of the world is an obsession partaken by Ivan Stanev, and probably also by every restless thought. The end of the world is not an absolute moment but a place – the place where thought begins.

And so, the end of the world took place as *Moon Lake*.

The end of the world is the cherished obsession of the film industry ever since its inception. And indeed, is there a myth, other than the eschatological one, which has the power to mobilize or, rather, to possess the collective psyche to the extent of reducing it to an idiotized, bland piece of matter ready for exploitation – for the seeds of propaganda and consumerist orgasm?

The first impression of *Moon Lake* is an impression of beauty, the beauty that has long been deserted by "the sphere of art" to enrich the tourist industry. The beauty of a landscape, of a panoramic frame. But with each successive frame, this beauty becomes starker and gloomier, heavier and lighter at the same time: more and more meaningless. Here beauty is a beginning – not just of horror but just a beginning, a natural element: a "natural" force with no subject, no eyes.

The film is "esthetical" but only at first sight: sight is excluded from it. There is no subject, no eyes to which the world is presented. The world is not present. It is completely of the past. What happens to the contingent gaze of the contingent personages drifting amidst the landscape is the passing of what has already passed.

There is no eye for which the world *is*. No hero, no gaze. The disconcerted Ulysses at the end of the world is not another clown of the apocalypse but a meaningless, random, nondescript amateur. Neither is he the imperceptible door through which the messiah will enter. The place where the journey loses its meaning, where Ulysses loses his meaning, is the limit of the world. Here he is, Ulysses, at the end of the world. Ulysses is not going to return from the future, he is drifting in an extended and unsurpassable instant.

Moon Lake tries to insert this incessant drifting into an image. Here Ulysses is called Orpheus.

Moon Lake is not an esthetic or estheticizing film; it is “aesthetic” or “aestheticizing:” it returns to the etymologic depths of the esthetic, to the Greek *aisthesis*, to the sensory experience and trial. The film creates the illusion of redundancy of meaning, i.e., of form. But the intense sensory materiality which unfolds before the subjectless eye of the camera¹ melts the form so that, finally, what emerges from it is an intense, energetically present image; an image that is neither a personage nor a magnitude in the field of meaning. This image is unreadable. Indeed, the speech, the language, and the cultural references they bear seem superfluous (the echolalia in the film: e.g. the repetitive “this is the way the world ends” turning into a meaningless mantra). But this redundancy, this superfluity is an excess. Language is reduced to voice, the voice to noise – to sensory matter. The meaning is

¹ This is the place to acclaim the achievements of Stefan Ivanov, the cameraman of *Moon Lake*, co-author of the extraordinary imagery of the film – an eye embodying the unquiet visions of the director.

melted into sensory matter, into a sensory trial and a sensory experience.

In *Moon Lake* the world ends in no other way but precisely as matter, in a soldered materiality, in the *image* of materiality, but without forms. Not a physical or material end of the world, but matter as the end of the world.

This world and *this* end of the world are a form of world.

Thus *Moon Lake* is not a film “simply” about the end of the world, but a film about *the way the world ends* – about the mode of the world’s end. What mode is this? No, this is not the banal eschatological mode, not a catastrophic collapse of screams bloodsheds punishments retributions atonements revelations of infinite truths ecstasy – not the absolute end as an absolute event; it is a hushing un-happening un-event (pseudo-)normality of everyday life straying drifting decelerating losing stopping being unproductive – a drifting unproductive community with no clear goal, no leaders, not organized, not mobilized, not working, not creative.

The end of the world *is* a world – not, however, like some humanist myth of the beginning, of the golden age, of the ideal humanity in Eden – but as a world after the end of the world – *the end of the world as a world* – a world of the implacable, insatiable finiteness. No salvation. No dialectic ascent. No economy.

Yes, here, at this end of the world, the end of the world according to *Moon Lake*, amid the nostalgia and the hushing, an affirming, “optimistic” tone endures: the affirmation of an apocalyptic form of world. “May God grant everyone” such an end of the world. Only its enduring moment would draw us out of the *global* resignation of

the world amidst the monstrous growth of the unworldly wasteland, the wasteland of swollen, atrophic newyorks, ejecting their venomous sperm into the pure darkness of the empty sky, the wasteland of the con-sumption of the world.

The end of the world is not only a punishment, retribution, or an exodus; it is not only a metamorphosis or an *oeuvre*, but it is active movement, wandering, wasting of the meaning in the void, unfocusing, focusing, resistance, struggle.

Apostasy, alteration, change.

(P.S. July 2009. And if some day, in the midst of our pre-apocalyptic reverie, in the midst of our pre-apocalyptic cultural echolalia, we suddenly open our eyes as if awoken from a nightmare, in order to spread open with horror before the unparalleled monstrosity of this world with all of its frantic beauty, wouldn't we then salute with a scream the fireball that would instantly blur the unbearable oval of the sky: NO FUTURE!)



Donka Angelova holds M.A. degrees in Cultural Studies, Bulgarian Studies, and German Studies at Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria. Since 2006 she has been manager of the *altera* publishing house and art-center, whose activities include exhibitions, the publishing of fiction, poetry and academic books, as well as various initiatives in the sphere of culture and the arts. She is the producer of *Moon Lake*, which is one of the first privately produced feature films in Bulgaria.



Ivan Stanev was born in 1959 in Varna, Bulgaria. He attended a German-language high school, and later studied Theatre Directing at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, and Philosophy at the Sofia University. He founded an experimental theatre group, which led to severe conflicts with censorship. Not allowed to work as a director anymore, he started to translate the works of Theodor Adorno and Heiner Müller, in the meantime writing plays, poems and essays, all to be published much later. In 1988, he was invited to present his work *The Wound Woyzeck* at a theatre festival in West Berlin. He decided not to go back and to live in exile instead. He began to write in German and staged his plays in various German theatres. Due to his growing interest in visual arts, he directed and produced two experimental videos: *Villa dei Misteri* and *Luxor Las Vegas*. In 2007 he was invited by independent producer Donka Angelova to make a film in his country of origin, without any financial support from state organizations in Bulgaria. The film was shot in the summer of 2007. The entire post-production was done in Berlin. *Moon Lake* is Ivan Stanev's first feature film, shot on 35 mm.

MOON LAKE

essays

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