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Ghost Towns: Frames of Perception and Strategies of Re-Inclusion

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In mass thoughts (manifolded in recent works of pop culture, such as *Silent Hill*, *Fallout*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: The Shadow Of Chernobyl* video games) an urban abandonment appears as something spontaneous, natural, inhabited by dangerous creatures and ghosts, as something unhuman, falling out of the social order. As noted by Rebecca Solnit, urban ruins are "the unconscious of the city, its memory, unknown, darkness, lost lands" (Solnit 2005: 89), and "with ruin a city comes to death, but generative death like the corpse that feeds flowers" (Ibid.: 90). Social sciences seem to have a certain difficulty in studying such an object as a "ghost town" because the uninhabited locality lacks the object of these sciences: the human being. Social sciences can make the declining town their object but disappearance of people brings about disappearance of the very possibility of any sociological approach to the ghost town. An urban abandonment comes out as a marginal phenomenon (even as an "anthropological scandal" as it is extremely hard to imagine a town lacking its social component), as a certain "seam", an intermediate state between the order of culture and the order of nature[1]. Therefore, there exists a doubtless "anthropological" need to produce both the models of perception of this marginal phenomenon (as reflected in the obvious abundance of its representations in works of mass culture) and the strategies for re-inclusion of the urban abandonment back into the sociocultural order. The main resource used for that is memory.

Visualization of the ghost towns

As urban abandonments are really hard-to-get-in objects for the great majority of people, they can be visually cognized only through photographs made by people infiltrating into them, the so-called "stalkers" (this word borrowed from the novel

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[1] As Jacques Derrida noted in his essay *Force and Signification*, "…the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself in pure language" (Derrida 2001: 4).

Roadside Picnic (1972) by Strugatsky brothers and the *Stalker* movie (1979) by Tarkovsky is used to denote urban explorers in Russia). It is usually photography that is the only cause for visiting abandonments for them. Photos of ghost towns are often "overconstructed" (Barthes 1997: 71), their composition is consciously built in such a way as to bring up steady associations with films seen or stereotype images of mass culture. Authors often perform postprocessing of their photos in the graphic editor to give them "stronger colors" or to stir up stronger emotions in the audience. For example, the photo may be given a specific deep red and brown color range, which is certain to bring up associations with the distinguishing aesthetics of the *Silent Hill* game series. In visual perception of urban abandonments the audience is prone to turn excessively to its "visual competence": a set of stereotype images and quotes disseminated in audio-visual works of mass culture. In reading the photos of ghost towns the individual psychological specific features are leveled down, the emotional responses to them are stereotypic as, according to Roland Barthes, the author has already decided for us how we should response to the "shocking" photos (Barthes 1997: 73) (that the pictures of deserted towns appear to be).

Abandonments throughout the history

The frames of perception of urban abandonments have their own history dating back centuries and are directly linked with the romantic and gothic frames of perception of architectural ruins. At first sight, urban abandonments differ nothing from architectural (historical) ruins: in both cases we see empty remains of man-created buildings. Indeed, the source of construction materials to build Rome were Etruscan ruins; in its turn, in the Middle Ages the Church used the ruins of Roman buildings for the same purposes, i.e. up to the Renaissance ancient ruins were not endued with any special symbolic meanings, they were treated in a purely utilitarian way. For the first time the "Protoromantic" frame of perception of ruins can be encountered in the cycle of the *Antiquités de Rome* sonnets (1556) of French poet Joachim du Bellay where Roman ruins are compared to a "talking corpse" (Woodward 2001: 93). The XVII century witnessed reframing of the social perception of ruins: they became an object of fine arts, were painted by Baroque artists, such as Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem, François de Nomé and Claude Lorrain. At the same time ruins became an essential part of the garden art, especially the English one (the so-called "follies"). In the XVIII century ruins were simultaneously an embodiment of "classical" European ideals (Greek, Roman) and

a specific exhibit representing the past that the modern age was able to overbear in its progressive development and that was demanded to be discrowned by the ideology of the Enlightenment (Schönle 2009; Id. 2011).

The XIX century witnessed the second reframing in perception of architectural ruins: they were placed in the aesthetic category of the sublime[2]. At the same time with emergence of the Gothic world view (as a response to the Enlightenment) ruins were perceived as something somber and ominous. The dawning of Gothic perception of ruins can be first seen in the works of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, an Italian archeologist, architect and graphic artist, who created numerous engravings of gloomy ruins, both Roman and contemporary to him urban ones) and *Carceri d'Invenzione* ("imaginary prisons"). In Gothic literature of the late XVIII–XIX centuries ruins are settings, the background for some bloodcurdling drama. For example, at the end of the earliest Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by English writer Horace Walpole a stroke of lightning turned the castle into ruins. The ruins there were a metaphor of the man's futile attempts to gain control over his life (Schönle 2009).

It was the Gothic frame of perception that gave rise to the contemporary, most popular frame of perception of a ghost town as "settings of a horror film" or a home of ghosts and otherworld forces (perfect examples are *Stalker* by Tarkovsky and *Silent Hill* series). The Gothic frame of perception of a ghost town has recently become popular in the context of societal processes: the rise of the neo-Gothic world outlook and crisis of humanism analyzed by Dina Khapaeva in her work *Gothic Society: Morphology of Nightmare*. According to Khapaeva, Gothic world view supplants the decaying humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment. The anthropocentric image of the world is substituted for a worldview where the human being no longer has the leading position. Like in the Middle Ages the modern world is populated by the undead, ghosts and monsters (Khapaeva 2008).

Albert Speer's "theory of ruin value"

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[2] "It seems that all must perish and that nothing endures. Every traveller has experienced this melancholy. Who has stood among the ruins of Carthage, Palmyra, Persepolis or Rome without being moved to reflect on the transience of empires and men, to mourn the loss of the rich and vigorous life of bygone ages?" (Hegel 1975: 32).

Admiration for ruins culminates in the Nazi neoromaticism: in the "theory of ruin value" (*Ruinenwerttheorie*) of Albert Speer, "Hitler's personal architect". According to Speer, the ruins that the buildings of the Third Reich would turn into centuries and millennia later were to look beautiful and noble, like Roman ruins (Speer 1970: 56). The architect was to develop both the project of the building and the project of the ruins that it would turn into. To a certain extent Speer's theory was a protest against the contemporary Functionalist architecture. Architectural functionalism took apart the values of architectural ruins and those of urban abandonments. Speer, however, intended to bring back the unity of the anthropological sense of historical and contemporary ruins. The remains of modern ghost towns are remains of Functionalist buildings knowingly lacking "the spirit" and the connotative meanings attributed to ancient ruins: "the house is a machine for living in" (Le Corbusier 1931: 4). Functionalist buildings are serial ones, that is they can be reproduced; for that reason, they are of no interest for the Culture that is supposed to be centered on the inimitable and the unique.

Strategies of re-inclusion of the ghost towns

Therefore, the society may just forget the ghost town and repress it (in the psychoanalytic sense). In this case the town becomes a metaphor, or an analog of the social unconscious, or even social unconscious itself. It is often not protected in any way, usually due to its inaccessibility, and stays marked on contemporary maps (like abandoned suburbs of Russian town Vorkuta).

Another strategy of management of the ghost town's memory is its (memory) institutionalization. In this case the ghost town is to be "old enough" and to be of historical interest. The practice of turning ghost towns into open-air museums is rather spread out in the USA: for example, town of Bodie (California) was abandoned in the 30's and became a U.S. National Historic Landmark in 1962. All the interiors and buildings of Bodie are now preserved in the "arrested decay" mode. The staff of the Bodie State Historic Park regularly replaces the roof tile of the buildings, renovates the foundations, replaces window glass, etc., inhibiting the natural process of dilapidation. However, every building must preserve its "ramshackle" appearance, i.e. in any case it is necessary to keep the general impression of "a ghost town of the Wild West time", the impression of long-time abandonment. Tourists visiting Bodie perceive its landscape and interiors in the way small towns of the Wild West time are shown in westerns

movies and on postcards, attributing a stereotype meaning that they borrowed from the social memory about the Wild West (DeLyser 1999; Glausiusz, Bosveld 2008). As we can see from this example, the ghost town is far from being a "dead town", it is included in the sociocultural order, is of historical value and great educational significance.

A ghost town may also become "a playground", a place for artistic self-expression, a workshop or even a material for creative activity. For example, in 2005 Pripyat was visited by graffiti artists from Moscow, Belarus and Germany who left a great amount of graffiti on the walls of the buildings. This action caused discontent of the community of the Pripyat's former residents. A ghost town may be also used as settings for a film: Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* (2000) was made in Namibian ghost town of Kolmanskop, some scenes of the *Battle Royale II* movie (2003) were shot on the Japanese abandoned coal mining island town of Gunkanjima.

The memory of a ghost town can be also conserved in communities of its former residents who can unite to form an Internet-community and create facebook-like social networks (for example, *iultin.ru* – a social network for former residents of Iul'tin town of Chukotka). They organize annual trips to their native place and even express civil position. For example, in the mid 00's the Russian state organized Pemboy proving ground on the place of Hal'mer-U ghost town (Vorkuta urban district). The then Russian president Vladimir Putin personally fired a missile at the building of *Dom kul'tury* (cultural center) of Hal'mer-U (NEWSru.com, 17.08.2005). Having learnt about that the former residents of the town wrote a collective letter to the Ministry of Defense asking to move the territory of Pemboy to another place. Their initiative failed (Guryanova, Vasilyev 2006: 177–179).

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