



BLIND LANDINGS

By Juli Carson

The Cold War is Dead. Long live the Cold War.

1989—the year the Berlin Wall was torn down—ended the era of a divided Europe between Western and Russian influence. In historical consciousness, 1989 therefore functions as a kind of *hinge* between the political era of the mid-century Cold War and the post-political era of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, symbolically demarcating the “before” and “after” of these two epochs. *Dreamtime™*, an exhibition by Jane and Louise Wilson, is the aesthetic through-line within this historical arc.

Let's begin with the exhibition's historical *mise-en-scènes*. *Stasi City*, 1997—positioned in the exhibition as a kind of political primal scene—presents a four-channel film installation of the abandoned headquarters of the defunct East German secret police Staatssicherheit (unofficially called Stasi City), produced a few years after the reunification of Germany. *Dream Time*, 2001—positioned here as a counter-part—presents a single-channel film montage of the Russian launching of the International Space Rocket at Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, produced when Vladimir Putin was courting Western collaboration as a means of recovering from the catastrophically corrupt Boris Yeltsin years. Meanwhile, two supplemental photographic elements stand in dialogue with these films. *Blind Landing (H-bomb Test Site, Lab 4)*, 2013 pictures one of the dilapidated cold-war era H-bomb test laboratories on Orford Ness in Suffolk where secret military tests were conducted by The Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE). While a large-scale series of archival images, produced in 2015, most notably picture Lyn Barlow and two other women breaching the chain-link fence at the Greenham Common (circa 1983). The event was part of the Women's Peace Protest where again nuclear weapons were placed at RAF, an airfield fifty-five miles west of London that opened in 1942 and was used by the US Airforce from WWII until 1992, after the Cold War's presumed end.

We must also consider the exhibition title *Dreamtime™* itself. As a phrase, “dream time” is polysemic, at once denoting an artwork produced by the Wilsons, a space rocket launched by the Russians called *Dreamtime™*, and, most notably, Freud's concept of the dreamwork. It's helpful to recall that for Freud, dreams are both illogical *and* allegorical, a rebus in need of decoding. Accordingly, the immersive aforementioned installations comprising *Dreamtime™* give us an historical dreamscape to unpack, a constellation of image-traces that determine, in-as-much as they are determined *by*, popular culture.



As visual artifacts, the historical sites the Wilsons' “picture” are deftly deconstructed through a highly mediated process of abstraction, in order to distill the pathological essence of the original traumatic sites and what they might point to in the future. In so doing, two different views of a given thing—an historical event, a ruin, a cultural artifact—are proffered for the viewer to (re)experience, although this experience is indeed received differently in the present than it was in the past, and, moreover, it is viewed from just as many different perspectives in our present as it was in the past. The historical effect of all this is a kind of psychic *parallax-en-abyme* within the aesthetic field.

Which brings us back to history. For Western identified globalists, a “post-political” world was shored up by the “end of history” myth, ushered in by the supposed end of communism and the inevitable victory of both liberal democracy and capitalism in 1992. This was most famously expounded by Francis Fukuyama, who, in 1989, proclaimed: “The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident...in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.”¹ Timothy Snyder, in his more recent book *The Road to Unfreedom: Russian, Europe, America*, calls this the *politics of inevitability*, “a sense that the future is just more of the present, that the laws of progress are known, that there are no alternatives, and therefore nothing really to be done.”² And yet, this sense of inevitability abruptly ended with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, returning to us a Cold War reality—one we had aspirationally repressed. It would seem, then, that the long arc towards a post-historical 21st century has, in fact, circled us back to the historical 20th mid-century. Although, when reflecting on the West's mid-century political primal scene—the European/American battle between autocracy, parliamentarism, and communism, on one hand, and modernism, the aesthetic avant-garde, and realism, on the other—it's not really a return. It's more a matter of holding the 20th century in our minds within a 21st century point of parallax vision, a concept to which I'll turn momentarily. But first, a Russian joke told in the wake of the Soviet Union's disintegration is a performative nod in this direction.

“What was the most devastating artillery shot in all history?”

*“The Aurora fired a single blank in 1917 and caused seventy-six years of destruction.”*³

Long forgotten by most, other than scholars of Russian history, the Aurora was the legendary cruiser that fired the first shot signaling the Bolsheviks' storming of the Russian Winter Palace—then occupied by the Provisional Government—on October 25th, 1917. And with it,



the long bloody journey towards establishing the USSR was forged. Seventy-six years later, on Christmas Day, 1991, the USSR officially ended. Down went the Soviet flag, up went the Russian tricolor, officiating the Union's disintegration. Suddenly, the Russian federal government was a sovereign state, as were the USSR's former constituent republics. This was the historical stage for Fukuyama's aspirational myth as much as it is for Snyder's more recent critique. Hence, one 20th century sea-changing event, and two 21st viewpoints, with the “Cold War” moving peripatetically between the two.

The Parallax View

With regards to sight, parallax denotes the apparent displacement of an object viewed along two different lines of sight, whereby an illusion is created because things are really moving *out there*. In reality, they are only moving in our eyes because *we* are moving in relation to the object. From a parallax viewpoint, in terms of time-space, objects that are closer to us therefore appear *as if* they are farther away from each other, and, inversely, objects that are more distance appear closer to each other. This is how astronomers calculate the distance of celestial bodies. But we can also use parallax to think of historical consciousness, whereby the closer we are to events the more distinct from each other they appear. Inversely, the farther away from events we are the blurrier of a mass they seem. Hence, the construction of homogenous movements with beginnings and endings that informed Fukuyama's politics of end of history theory. That said, this kind of dialectical thinking gets deconstructed when we think of things through parallax vision, which is quite similar to Walter Benjamin's notion of stereoscopic vision: the same *event* viewed twice, not by two eyes, but through two periods in time.⁴ A reminder, here, that “Stereopsis” denotes the overlapping vision fields that use parallax to gain depth perception within binocular vision. It's precisely through such binocular disparity that the visual cortex produces depth perception in our minds. Stereoscopy does the same thing artificially: two identical 2-dimensional images are presented to the eye by way of a viewing mechanism that produces a 3-dimensional *illusion*.

My argument is that parallax vision is a good way to reconsider the Wilsons' aesthetic approach to image production. Not only does this allow us to connect sight to the subjective condition of *looking*, but it also affords us the ability to consider ruins as a kind of non-linear

Cover: *Stasi City (Floating Figure with Flask)*, detail, C-print, 1997
 Left: *Blind Landing (H-bomb Test Site, Lab 4)*, detail, C-print, 2013
 Center: *Stasi City (Paternoster)*, detail, C-print, 1997
 Right: *Dream Time*, video still, 2001
 Images © Jane and Louise Wilson, courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

time travel. Hence the Wilsons' concept of a (parallax) *future ruin*, one whereby we simultaneously reflect upon the past, think in the present, and project onto the future. For this is the temporal effect of *Stasi City*, in front of which we are simultaneously transported to the period 1950-1990 (when the Staatssicherheit was operational), 1996 (when *Stasi City* was shot), 2023 (when *Stasi City* is exhibited at UC Irvine), to an implied anterior future—a moment when *this* will have been—though we don't yet know what “this” might be. A newly divided Europe? A victorious Ukraine? Perhaps an entire geo-political sea-change? Hence the metaphoric power of the suspended figure that concludes *Stasi City*. Appearing as if in a vacuum, the figure is confined to a single room, in stark contrast to the Wilsons' camera eye that wanders freely through the Stasi's labyrinthian city. Together, this invokes the existential crisis of all dictatorships: the simultaneity of physical confinement and imagined freedom. As the Wilsons' put it:

In the GDR, there was a Utopian dream of space travel, you could travel into space but you could not travel to West Berlin. The concept being, you were able to travel thousands and thousands of miles upwards but not allowed to make the short trip West because there was a wall. ⁵

Although that wall has since fallen, the collapsed contradiction between physical confinement and infinite “space travel”—real or imagined—has mutated into the present condition whereby many are still mandated to confinement—think of pregnant women unable to cross certain US state lines post SCOTUS' Dobbs' decision—all the while able to “go” *anywhere* in the world via the internet. Hence, the parallax of two things in time, a place where one is stuck, a place where one wishes to go, and the illusion of moving between the two.

The Overview Effect

There's a phrase Frank White coined in the early 80s while flying over the Earth: *the overview effect*. And with it, he derived his humanist theory that the sublime experience of space travel would temper the destructive forces of competitive nation states. True, early Soviet cosmonauts are said to have remarked on the beauty of Earth in reference to the perceived illusion of a borderless world seen only from space, an inspired hope at the peak of the Cold War. But, as Marina Koren notes: “As powerful as it can be, the overview effect fades. Eventually, gravity and worldly responsibilities restore their hold.”⁶

As with “dream time,” the phrase “blind landing” is polysemic, at once denoting an artwork by the Wilsons, an aerospace term denoting the use of instruments for flying an aircraft due to lack of visibility because of weather, and the military industrial complex's ability to launch unmanned missiles and drones. Seeing as we've *blind-landed* into a Neo-Cold War, let's look around at this dreamscape. It seems that it's still a world of airplanes, rockets, missiles, and strong men, but now, taking recourse to Antonio Negri's concept of a headless, Post-Postmodern Empire, we're witnessing the arrival of billionaire “private diplomats.” Think Elon Musk and Jeffery Bezos in terms of SpaceX and Blue Origin, respectively. These are the protagonists who are outmaneuvering the ancient regime of such Cold Warrior companies as Northrop Grumman, shoving their way into the 20th century fight between theocratic, autocratic, and democratic heads-of-states.

So how do artworks like *Stasi City*, *Dream Time*, *Blind Landing*, and the archival montage of Greenham images speak amidst this historical reshuffle? Quite eloquently. From the position of what Theodor Adorno

called *aesthetic distance* the Wilsons' vantage point acknowledges the *a priori* entanglement between real world politics and formal aesthetics, and, from there, wage an aesthetic critique of real events as a *negative knowledge* of the world.⁷ There is no starker contrast to the Wilsons' expanded approach to the overview effect than with Musk's limited one. Just witness his on-line video presentation of Starship Rocket in 2021.⁸ Lauding “an exciting future, full of wonder & possibility, out among the stars,” he rolled a video montage of SpaceX engineers launching a Tesla— “driven” by a mannequin astronaut— into space orbit, all accompanied by David Bowie's famed “Is There Life on Mars?” Returning to his speech, Musk quipped that he'd put the spaceman in the car to confuse the aliens. Alas, the parallax of where we stand today. Space travel from two views, one aesthetically critical the other regressively mythological, with the Anthropocene hanging in the balance, bouncing between them.

- 1 In *The End of History?* Francis Fukuyama further argued that “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” in: *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, No. 16. pp. 1, 5.
- 2 Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), p. 6.
- 3 Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-century Soviet and Russian history in anecdotes*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 158.
- 4 See: Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, (New York: First Mariner Books, 2019), pp. 196-209.
- 5 “Questions to Jane and Louise Wilson from Raimund Kummer,” in *Jane & Louise Wilson: Stasi City*, (Kunstverein Hannover, 1997), p. ix.
- 6 Marina Koren, “Seeing Earth from Space Will Change You. The Question is How,” *The Atlantic*, January/February, 2022, p. 25.
- 7 Theodor Adorno, “Reconciliation Under Duress,” *Aesthetics and Politics: Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism*, (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 160.
- 8 <https://www.spacex.com/vehicles/starship/>

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