

LANDSCAPE IN MOTION

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Taking its form from the name of the street that it depicts, *Allee der Kosmonauten* departs from cinema's original meaning – movement – to explore the social and political landscape of the former East Berlin. Descending from above a row of trees, the camera drifts along the empty pavement of a wide avenue flanked by anodyne concrete blocks. At first sight, nothing seems remarkable in these images; just the awakening of a city like any other. Yet the absence of sound, together with the sweeping and slowly rotating camera movements, lend the scene an air of mystery. As the disembodied eye of the camera turns towards a side alley and suddenly lifts towards the sky, ascending above cars, trees and buildings, the grey street seems to escape gravity for a moment. The dull cityscape is abruptly upturned and the transfigured everyday landscape comes to embody the utopian aspirations of another time. Since my first encounter with Filipa César's work, I was captivated by the power of these images to give cinematic form to the desires of the past, and their ultimate decline.

As if the cosmonauts of the street's sign had landed in the city, *Allee der Kosmonauten* diverts an impulse towards outer space to an exploration of the layers of history inscribed in a landscape. The gliding camera movements and the disorientating effect that they convey recall the investigation of motion in the work of Michael Snow. The same fascination with cosmic expansion that gave the street its name informed Snow's orchestration of a cinematic landscape in his seminal film *La région centrale* (1971). In the heyday of NASA's programme of missions to outer space which culminated in man's landing on the moon, Snow conceived a specially designed device that allowed the camera to completely turn in on itself, producing movements in all directions. So the Canadian filmmaker sought to conquer a form of weightless cinema, with which he ironically hoped to achieve "the first rigorous filming of the moon itself".¹ In the midst of a stony desert in Quebec, a multiplicity of orbital, circular and spiral movements seem to encompass the entirety of the endless landscape. Only the shadow of the camera on the bare terrain hints at the invisible centre of these continuously rotating views, the subject of perception. Fascinated by the notebooks and snapshots that his father made as a cartographer surveying the mining districts of northern Canada, Snow here employs the camera as a "liberated eye" that maps out the topography of a territory and the means of its exploration.

In *Allee der Kosmonauten*, as in *La région centrale*, motion in itself becomes an expressive means to convey the experience of a place and its particular temporality. Cinematic movement is freed from any narrative or dramatic function. Nor does it abide by the rules of conventional geography. The ruler, compass and set square of the cartographer are dispensed with, as is any claim to precise description. A similar means of transport nevertheless brings both artists to remote destinations. Set in a natural wilderness, Snow's film liberates the process of perception from the confines of culture. Or rather, by emptying out the object of the gaze, it diverts our attention to the act of viewing itself. Throughout its three-hour duration, the repetitive rhythm of the imagery and the

unrelenting whirring sound of the mechanism bring the viewer closer to the cyclical temporality of nature. By way of contrast, *Allee der Kosmonauten* is an eight-minute drift across an urban landscape shaped by social and political tensions, and most notably by the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. César's restless camera seeks to liberate the utopian imagination embodied in the architectonic remains of the GDR, mapping out the psychogeography of the city and the desires and frustrations inscribed in its concrete flesh.

The journey starts and ends at the street sign that gives the avenue its name, which anchors the site to a particular moment in history. In 1978, the street was renamed "Allee der Kosmonauten" to commemorate the first cosmic flight of German astronaut Sigmund Jähn aboard a Soviet space ship. Causing sign and referent to coalesce, César's film visualises the tension between the weightless impulse to which the street sign refers and the gravity of the material context in which it is inscribed. The sinuous choreography of the camera stands in stark contrast with the rigidity of the architecture that it depicts. As the camera glides through the homogeneous concrete blocks that flank the avenue, its ascent evokes the utopian aspirations that connect rational modernist architecture to the Cold War's desire for cosmic expansion. Yet, the ambitions of the past collide with the stubborn materiality of buildings that now stand obsolete. Through a disjunction between landscape and movement, the film conveys a friction between the failed dreams of the past and their present remains.

Not only gravity, but also the linearity of time seems suspended in the grey street. Attentive to the vestiges of the present, *Allee der Kosmonauten* brings to mind Eugène Atget's photographs of dilapidated Paris streets at the turn of the last century. In the aftermath of Haussman's urban renovation, Atget carefully documented the remains of the old city fated to disappear under the development fuelled by modern capitalism. Consciously avoiding depictions of the modern views and attractions of Second Empire Paris, his albums praise the forgotten and obsolete over and above the utilitarian. Devoid of any human presence or narrative action, Atget's pictures, like Filipa César's film, invest a great deal in the apparent insignificance of the minutiae of material traces. Like archaeologists of the present, they disclose the layering of history beneath the timeworn façades of the city or its rusty street signs. As Walter Benjamin noted, by looking at "what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift, [...] [Atget's photographs] too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they pump the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship".² Similarly, César's film dispenses with the affirmative language of historical discourse to explore a politics of form.

By looking at the material traces of the past as a crystallisation of the ideologies that shaped them, *Allee der Kosmonauten* allows the complexities of the communist era to come into view. The journey along the avenue reverses the gesture of commemoration contained in the street sign. In giving name to this landscape, the GDR authorities aimed to leave a trace of the accomplishments of the socialist republic for future remembrance. Behind the memorial inscribed by the regime, the silent witness of the street's buildings allows another memory to emerge – the memory of the architecture which continues to mark the landscape and inform the everyday lives of the inhabitants of a great part of the former East Berlin. The concrete blocks stand here as monuments in the original sense of the word: they are tokens that remind us of the past, without ever having intended to do so. Where a name speaks of an impulse towards new frontiers, the architecture reveals the characteristic *Plattenbau* urbanism of the GDR, a cheap method of construction, which made use of large, prefabricated concrete slabs. Indeed the borough of Marzahn, where Allee der Kosmonauten is situated, was a rural area on the outskirts of Berlin until the

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mid-seventies, when extensive housing estates were built to solve the country's housing shortage. In spite of the splashes of colour which today attempt to revive their façades, the homogeneous and functional blocks depicted in the film reveal the other side of the utopian aspirations of communism – the imposition of a social and political form upon everyday lives.

Alongside their enigmatic barrenness, what bridges the century that separates Atget's photographs from César's film is their ability to make the absent present – namely, a political system that has now vanished. A topographical exploration therefore becomes an archaeological journey through time, which reveals as much of the layering of history as of the moment of its excavation. Yet, whereas the urban decay of old Paris testifies to a nostalgic desire for the past, *Allee der Kosmonauten* not only evokes the memory of the recent past but also that of an imagined future. In the image of a street, different times coalesce: the past inscribed in the socialist architecture, the utopian future embodied in the weightless movement of the camera, but also the present tense of the journey. Indeed it is the desire to re-imagine the present landscape of the former East Berlin that calls upon the past utopian imagery to break free from the confines of its material remains.

In the translation of an architectonic form (concrete blocks) to a cinematic form (block of time), emerges an idea of memory, which is directly engaged in a cinematic thought process. As well as presenting us with a moving landscape, *Allee der Kosmonauten* invites us to see a landscape under the motion of history. As in Atget's photographs, the lens of the camera allows for an enhanced perception of the everyday; it renders visible details of the past inscribed in the present landscape, which are invisible to the naked eye. Also through a montage of image and movement, César's weightless camera visualises the tension between the crystallisation of a form – the stillness of downtrodden architecture – and an impulse of movement – a desire for the future. If *Allee der Kosmonauten* is so captivating it is because it makes visible this invisible passage between past and future. Or rather, in comparing both images, the decay of the past and the urge for change, it suggests a third meaning: the desire to transform the present.

It is the movement between images, rather than moving images themselves that makes this transit from the solid to the ethereal a political one. Without need to resort to archival images or accounts of witnesses of the past, *Allee der Kosmonauten* invites the viewer to envisage latent images of state socialism as ghostly presences in the concrete buildings. Here César not only liberates the motion of the camera to explore the surface of a territory, but also the creative memory of the viewer, in order to critically and endlessly re-imagine the present in which we live. The drifting of the camera across the cityscape sparks a movement of the imagination – a flux of associations between the image of the former East Berlin, the imagery of the GDR, the utopian aspirations of modernity and the present political landscape of Germany. It is this unfolding of images that loads *Allee der Kosmonauten* with the weight of history. In triggering rapports between images seen and remembered, César's film activates the critical potential of imagination, and of cinema, to re-signify political forms. Through the lens of her camera, every journey down the Allee der Kosmonauten gives rise to unpredicted associations of images, disclosing new itineraries across past, present and future.

1 Michael Snow, *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, Waterloo, Ontario Wilfrid Laurier University Press, p. 56.

2 Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One-Way Street*, London Verso, 1979, p. 250.