The soothing power of speed:

Elias Wessel's *Landscapes* in the cultural history of Russian space perception

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Russia in motion – Russia at a standstill. This contrast has long shaped Germany's thinking about the country at the eastern end of Europe. Desperately, we are clinging to this polarity born of myths and stereotypes: what could be more agitated than the Russian revolutions? What is more static than the "Russian soul"? This continues in an infinite number of mental images. If we emphasize the eternal tsarist empire in its supposedly unchanging power logic and the immense empire "frozen" by Siberian winters, we are confronted with a country characterized by the impenetrable modernization, with the troubled territory in which the German soldiers committed unimaginable acts of violence, and what is now again an unpredictable neighbor.

In contrast, if we think of the formative images of the Russian, these come almost unaffected by such contradictions to our minds – from Vladivostok via Lake Baikal, of which Klaus Bednarz has sung epically, to the fields and forests west of Moscow. Decades of travel portraits shape our view. Following

this, we seem to be able to reduce Russia to two terms: large and cold. But we often forget that the great European utopias and tragedies of the twentieth century became deeply embedded in landscape and society. But even if the wheat flourishes in the large fields of the former kolkhozes, and the snow falls a bit later on the furrows – below it we find European conflicts, the landscape impressions of our common history.

Since Ilia Repin and Isaak Levitan, this interpretive penetration of the Russian landscape has always led artists to look for the character of the Russian landscape. Now the painting photographer Elias Wessel joins in this tradition in his picture series Landscapes developed in Kursk. Whereas in Repin's images the inhabitants of the country who are marked by hard life are in the foreground and are reduced in Malewitsch's peasant pictures to collectively affected, hopeless souls, they disappear in Wessel's photographs. The landscape, it seems, speaks for itself. At first sight, one might say, it will be eternal, again still, again unchangeable.

But the appearance is deceptive. The impetus for this picture series gave an invitation to several artists from different western Russian provinces and Germany to Kursk. On the spot they were asked to document the beauty of the old Kursk suburbs and the surrounding countryside. Soon the fields would be torn up, roads cut into the woods and the suburbs, which were still characterized by wooden construction. Now, according to Mayor Nikolaj Ovcharov, modernity would move in with traffic lights, motorways and wheel checks. The local television was overwhelming, because the guest from

Speyer, Elias Wessel, would not only accompany the leap into modernity, but, in contrast to the numerous traditional painters, would use a very modern device “for the memory of future generations received – the camera.”[1] Mayor Ovcharov personally told him to take pictures of the “Speyerer Street”: “Today there is still no road pavement. But the tender is on its way and it will soon be built. That is why you have to capture that.”[2]

But for this conversion as well as for the documentation craftsmen are needed, not artists. Elias Wessel therefore decided not to document but to develop a perspective – much to the astonishment of the mayor who tried to make the best out of it and referred to Malevich, and in contrast to many of his colleagues on the ground.[3] Even though Elias Wessel approached the landscape like an unknown relative: Slowly, inquiringly, balancing the common and the foreign, thus interpreting the character. Rather intuitively, he intervened in a broader discussion in which the population and visitors of Russia negotiated the scenic relationship between silence and movement.

When the first stagecoaches tumbled over the floor and stone of the Tsar empire, the question arose as to what constitutes the context of the great empire and what characterizes local or regional structures. It was necessary

1 Anastasija Vramaskaja and Michail Novikov, „V Kursk sechalis’ hudoniki iz Rossii i Germanii“, 46TV (September 16, 2014), http://www.46tv.ru/new/culture/003313/print/.

2 Ibid.

3 Nina Nikimina and Michail Novikov, „Chramy, starye doma i ... ‚len obkoma‘ — Den’ goroda v Kurske otkrylsja vystavkoj“, 46TV (September 25, 2014), http://www.46tv.ru/new/culture/003352/.

to defeat Russia's "lack of direction".[4] Even Czarina Catherine II declared acceleration to be the basic prerequisite for the preservation of the empire: "Speed must replace the slowness arising from this long distance in the decision of the things which enter from distant places."[5] Domination over the space forced a constant modernization through improved mobility. Lenin also recognized the direct connection between power and movement when he ordered the "unconditional liquidation of the delays" and, as is known, failed.[6] In recent years, the study of history has increasingly devoted itself to the question of how the acceleration of modernity is connected with the expansion of power and the bureaucratization of the empire. Russia appears to be a fine example of the reduction in the size of the space, as diagnosed by David Harvey, by the acceleration of the means of transport – and thus the modernization of society as a whole.[7]

Our Kursk mayor Ovcharov is a part of this tradition. His action is also characterized by a linear belief in progress, and the change in the landscape appears as the ineradicable tribute to it. When, in 1909, Grigorij Vrioni, a completely unknown merchant, presented to the Russian Ministry of Treasury the adventurous suggestion of drawing a railway through the "fairy Russian beauty" of the North, he saw not only a lucrative business field but also the

4 Roland Cvetkovski, „Russlands Wegelosigkeit. Semiotiken einer Abwesenheit“, in Mastering Russian Spaces. Raum und Raumbewältigung als Probleme der russischen Geschichte, edited by Karl Schlögel (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011).

5 Roland Cvetkovski, Modernisierung durch Beschleunigung: Raum und Mobilität im Zarenreich (Frankfurt/Main New York: Campus-Verl, 2006), 18.

6 Ibid, 9–10.

7 David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Malden, MA, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 1990).

founding of “one society for society.” The Russian historian Walter Sperling notes in his wonderful book on the railroad in the Russian province that “the world of 1850 has also irrevocably changed in Russia: all that is standing and standing evaporates.”[8] And what was in earlier times the railroad, is now today’s highway. The promise is renewed and the steaming bearers of earlier modernism become symbols of backwardness.

Even though the coal power has long given way to the diesel fuel, the struggle against this mantra of Russian backwardness characterizes the relationship between today’s politicians and the past. At the same time, the Kursk infrastructure expansion realized a central post-Soviet promise. When Viktor Suchodrev translated Nikita Khrushchev’s statement made during his famous US trip in 1959 while flying over the expansive American suburbs, that this life was terribly fragmented and communal, which is why Soviet citizens had no interest in houses and cars, the interpreter thought silently: “But I want a car! I want a house!”.[9] This he revealed in an interview with the New York Times in 2005 and only by now this promise seems to be achievable for all the inhabitants of Russia - in Kursk and elsewhere. Ovcharov is now faced with the dilemma that this will for individuality and acceleration collides with the image of the “Russian soul” which he is cultivating at the same time. Especially in the western border regions, this stereotype of eternity and peculiarity has once again gained in importance in

8 Walter Sperling, Der Aufbruch der Provinz: Die Eisenbahn und die Neurordnung der Räume im Zarenreich (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 2011), 183, 240–1.

9 Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Cars for Comrades. The Life of the Soviet Automobile (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), 222.

recent conflicts, and is proudly carried forward by Putin supporters as a disciplinary modus. However, this has nothing to do with the complex presence of the past in Russia, but serves a quite traditional and by no means Russia-specific legitimacy of a policy that has been adversely affected by the emerging middle class. Even if the pendulum is currently moving in the other direction, the landscape saves these processes and inscribes them. Thus, a new layer arises in the landscape -manifested coherence of the historical epochs. We cannot decode these levels solely by analyzing political self-portrayals. Asking about the effects of the overlapping times on the locations and inhabitants, the historian and Russia-expert Karl Schlögel demanded some time ago to switch from the power to the living conditions and to refocus on a “culture of the place description”.[10]

However, this is not only to be achieved by the use of methods from social sciences and the humanities, rather the academic disciplines are entering the home of art and literature. The historian can describe the history of railway construction from Moscow to Petushki in all its social facets. Only the artist, however, makes a poem out of it and thus packs a sharp, contemporary analysis of the Soviet society in the probably greatest buffoon of literary history.[11]

“Making visible, what is hidden” is the guideline for all these considerations of culture and the environment and unites the maxims of art

10 Karl Schlögel, „Die Wiederkehr des Raums - auch in der Osteuropakunde“, Osteuropa 55, Nr. 3 (2005): 13.

11 Wenedikt Jerofejew, Die Reise nach Petuschki: Ein Poem (Munich, Zurich: Piper, 1978).

and science. Instead of giving in to the narrative of replacing silence with speed, Elias Wessel turns the table: his Kursk pictures are quiet and show extreme movements at the same time. He remains photographically in place and at the same time accelerates digitally. What he thus depicts is the eternity of change. From this perspective, the Kursk Landscapes do not reflect characteristics specific for Russia, but rather the core of what differs from the per se always man-made landscapes and the romantic illustrations of a supposedly “real” environment.[12] In the sense of Bruno Latour’s, Wessel’s Landscapes are too present to be abstract art, but also too abstract to represent the present.[13] Here the circle closes. The landscape of Russia serves Wessel not only as a stage on which the comedies and dramas of European history take place, it is in the sense of Piscator part of the play. Elias Wessel makes this visible – precisely because he packs character in dynamism, because he observes the observer, to put it in Luhmann’s words.

The Kursk Mayor may have expected something different, but in his Landscapes Elias Wessel documents the essence of the human-environment relationship, the simultaneity of stagnation and change, of stillness and speed, of the social and the abstract. Kursk disappears into the conceptual, and is thus re-emerging as an expression of European ideas of dynamism, change and modernity. Without brushes or words, Wessel’s photography

12 On the relationship between landscape and environment, see: Werner Krauss, „Die ‚Goldene Ringelgansfeder‘: Dingpolitik an der Nordseeküste“, in Bruno Latours Kollektive. Kontroversen zur Entgrenzung des Sozialen, ed. By Georg Kneer, Markus Schroer, and Erhard Schüttpelz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 425–456.

13 Bruno Latour, Wir sind nie modern gewesen. Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995), 14.

offers us an anatomy of landscape painting that reveals the basic patterns of our culturally and traditionally shaped landscape perception. In Wessel’s Landscapes we therefore see less abstract Kursk landscapes, but rather our own historically shaped view.