

A Little Reassurance in Barbaric Times...

For readers of Walter Benjamin or Craig Owens, one might expect allegorical treatments, especially of notions as historically charged as Utopia, to be melancholic. The chief virtue of Ronnie Bass' video installation, *The Astronomer: Part I Departure from Shed* currently at Marginal Utility, consists in its steady refusal of this "postmodern" temptation.



Such sentiments, in my view, are too easily amenable to the ideological consensus concerning the 'end of utopias'—the slogan of a historical sequence (since the 1980s) that has seen the crippling rise of a market fundamentalism intent on dismantling all breeds of socialism, except of course when it comes to the perennial exception, the rich. The steadfastness with which Ronnie Bass' astronomer desires to depart and the vulnerability of his blanket-draped companion in the face of this exigency (a projection at least in part of the astronomer's own anxieties) is refreshingly committed to a Utopian impulse that draws almost naively on the proto-socialist

imagination of Fourier or Saint-Simon.

Conveyed through a lyrical ballad sung by Ronnie Bass himself, the story depicts the near failure of a couple to escape when they had the chance. We do not know what has taken place or why, but we know that it is time to go and that the necessity of departure is imminent. Indifferent to the spectacle of calamity, the story focuses rather on the human, all too human, emotion of fear. Although we know that the astronomer must be in possession of some knowledge that necessitates escape, Bass does not focus on his role as amateur scientist, as the tinkerer in his shed. Rather, he attends to the Astronomer's capacities for fraternal consolation, whose tone is infinitely removed from the patronizing tone of the man of knowledge.

The astronomer remains the committed figure of the one who soberly gazes out towards other worlds. Yet, it is not the power of scientific judgment, but courage and fortitude that prove decisive. He thus seems to add a crucial nuance to the importance of Engel's recognition that Socialism "stands on the shoulders of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, three men who despite their fantasies and utopianism are to be reckoned among the most significant minds of all times, for they anticipated with genius countless matters whose accuracy we now demonstrate scientifically." For Bass it is not lack of science, but cowardice, an emotional deficit, which nearly thwarts the departure.

It is precisely the courage to imagine that the astronomer must muster, which is to say, summon from his fearful comrade. The blanketed character, fluctuating between references to Cousin Itt from the Addams Family and Linus van Pelt, Charlie Brown's blanket-dependent best friend, is less a figure of the uncanny than a symbol of the childish need for security—a refusal to see, whose basis is emotional rather than the result of a lack of knowledge.



This apparently fatal flaw is neither treated grandiloquently or sentimentally. It does not prove tragic. The courage is mustered for the departure and, even if it may be too late, the characters set out on the voyage without any kind of melancholic lament. We are left with a sentiment of hope in severely muted tones. Stripped of its rhetorical flourishes and its pseudo urgency, the figure of hope with which Bass leaves us seems to be a potent antidote to the recent high engineering of this utopian motif by the Obama campaign. Who on the eve of the anniversary of Obama's inauguration does not now see the campaign's rhetorical abuses, to borrow a phrase from Frederic Jameson, "as the mere lure and bait for ideology (hope being after all also the principle of the cruelest confidence games and of hucksterism as a fine art)."

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