

SOMETIME

SOMEWHERE

the seventies.

i.sunwoo

In the company of some fellow students self-consciously attempting to behave “appropriately,” I not so long ago found myself at an event (party?) populated by a prestigious coterie of architects, academics, curators, & journalists—a sea of demure Prada & the occasional flash of eccentric socks animating the voids between carefully placed pieces of mid-century modern furniture. Muted, *Blow-Up* played on a background monitor, later transitioning into *Contempt*. Before *Playtime* could make its inevitable appearance in the tastefully predictable queue, I began to retreat into my own fantasy, dreaming up a cinematic program for my own imaginary party. Tellingly, this was dominated by variations on the theme of teenage rebellion: *Valley Girl* (a dash of romance), *Over the Edge* (a heavy dose of violence), *Dazed & Confused* (a period piece!), & other selections from a “coming of age” genre that I expect would not have encountered many chords to strike between those carefully placed pieces of mid-century modern furniture, whose voids evoked the outlines of what one might call a generation gap.

As a student of architectural history I am continually intrigued by & delight in such gaps. I often take “recreational research breaks” from my own writing by indulging in works of fiction & film. On the one hand seeking inspiration for narrative technique (architecture could do with a bit more storytelling, no?), these “breaks” are also admittedly naïve efforts to experience a zeitgeist exotic to my contemporary palate, yet relevant, however tangentially, to my own research (on the history of architectural education, &

more specifically, the pedagogy of Alvin Boyarsky – including his chairmanship at the AA).

The most recent effort took up the postwar “modern classic” *Lucky Jim*, Kingsley Amis’ comedic portrayal of the tragedy of academic life, set in one of Britain’s red brick universities. As with Ballard, Jarman, or *Synth Britannia* (a BBC documentary on the birth of electronic music in 70s Britain), it stood in contrast to the hope & glory of traditional historical accounts, and opened narrow yet illuminating windows onto the culture of that decade.

Certainly, “the seventies” is an elusive periodization, one that through both strategic & unwitting ambiguity has been repeatedly invoked during recent discussions concerning the AA’s future & its present. And yet the resulting ubiquity of such periodization has so abstracted that hallowed (as the invocations, compounded by the delirious name-dropping of notable alumni, would have us believe) moment in the school’s past that that moment has been rendered, I suspect, somewhat monolithic & opaque to current students (many of them born in the 1980s, some even the 1990s!).

However, unlike other educational institutions ossified by streams of tenure, the composition of the AA is one of a porosity in flux, a simultaneity of multiple & overlapping generation gaps which if actively & critically viewed with equal curiosity by parties on all sides could operate as beautifully productive spaces of inquiry & endless adolescent daydreams, rather than as passive measures of historical distance & voids for the suspension of myths.

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exit strategy.

(a meditation on vladimir nabokov’s pnin)

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February, 1957. A wintry day at fictional Waindell College, somewhere in the fictional Northeastern United States. The world is at its greyest. Bare-armed campus elms, no longer adorned by leafy crenellations, offer no resistance to the freezing air. The sun carves a shallow transit against the cirrus formations: silvery, aeriform scars illuminated by a hovering pale orb in the withering light. The previous year is only recently dead, and the new year, fraught with growing pains, is just coming to terms with its own anxieties. The future, unclear, is inevitable, looming.

Atoms have just been spilt, their energy uncontrolled and dangerous. Boundaries, thought and drawn, calcify East and West. Sputnik is yet to become a wandering star. Yet even within the secluded groves of this Waindelled world, the faintest flickering of distant events prime the murmuring heart. All is not well in the world that is the University.

An imaginary professor of Russian literature has just found out, to crushing disappointment, that he has been assigned to teach a theater course in the French department. His name is Timofey Pnin. Son of an ophthalmologist, survivor of “The Hitler War,” sifting through the flotsam and jetsam of a failed marriage, Pnin mulls over his latest failure. Tenure was not guaranteed, but in the fantastic, cobweb-ridden corners of Pnin’s mind, it was a possibility as distant, tangible, and impossible as a nebula.

Witness the exit strategy, the transition, the turning-over. Lists are made, appointments

canceled or confirmed. Our elderly professor, defeated, collects his meager belongings in a small valise: tortoise-shell glasses too narrow for his crown, an omnibus volume of Sherlock Holmes stories, a fob of linen, a brilliant set of false teeth. Everything else seems like a film played backwards. Dishes are emptied of food and leap into the covert in neat, ceramic ziggurats. The sink fills and empties repeatedly, trash disappearing into the whorls and eddies of an infinite drain. Table and bed linens crumple into orthogonal forms and fly into closet drawers in spectral choreographies. These are the last days. Pnin writes to his landlord: “Dear Mr. ____ : Behold the instructions for closing a bank account.”

Our esteemed professor enters a small, four-door blue sedan, & takes the driveway out from his rented house through the tall trees onto a busy street. A sure, if not steady driver, he leans into the gas pedal to avoid a swerving truck. Waindellians remembered a bluish blur leaving acrid smoke and petrol in its wake. “Did I just see Pnin?” they ask, commenting on an image-like composition of bald pate, glasses, & brilliant teeth accompanied by guttural threnodies of vrooms and even more vrooms. Pnin sightings increase in frequency as the car speeds away to some unknown terminus. And he is gone.

In the wake of this noisy, smoky departure, there’s nothing. But wait: Is that a rustle of leaves? A cool breeze stirs the budding boughs. An icicle falls from a tree and shatters on the soft earth with a plink. Spring is not as far off as it seems.

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WHAT
DOES
THIS
MEAN?