

It all starts with a fire in Ernen, a village in the upper Valais, near the Italian border. Sometime in the mid-1990s, a barn burned down, and a number of sheep were killed. The villagers quickly cast suspicion on a young man, an outsider, whose family had moved into this tightly-knit, strongly catholic community a couple of years earlier. He was part of a group of youths who hung out together, skating, playing chess, and smoking lots of pot to alleviate their teenage boredom. The young man was prone to see the Devil and angels, when he was stoned, and had a knack to draw others into his delusions. Incidentally, he was not raised catholic by his parents, unlike the natives. It is an indication of the sway the church held over this small village that even the child of non-believers succumbed to its hallucinatory mythology of God and Devil, angels and demons. This story, related in four testimonials, is one of your entry points in the psychogeography of Ernen, which *White Rainbow Over a Mourning Landscape* explores.

You are standing on the village square of Ernen, a village of ancient, inward-looking tanned wooden houses. You first walk a couple hundred meters further along the main road. When you reach the border of the village, you spot three pillars on the top of a hill. It's the gallows of Ernen, where from mid-15th century to the late 18th century criminals from the Upper Valais were executed and witches burned. It towers above the village, visible from afar, from every direction, a stark admonition to stay within the bounds of law and custom. It is the only extant gallows of its kind in Switzerland. It has not been in use for centuries, yet it still subliminally haunts the imaginary of the locals, as you can surmise from the testimonials you will later read. It's the linchpin of *White Rainbow Over a Mourning Landscape*.

Now you walk back to the village square. You behold an almost tower-like building, as sturdy as it is representative. It's the *Zendenrathaus* (tithe hall), where the bailiff of the upper Valais, installed by the bishop of Sion, would sit in judgement, from the 15th century to until the Napoleonic invasion. You enter the building. In the basement, there are two claustrophobic prison cells and a torture chamber, where confessions were extracted from suspected witches and criminals. On the first floor, there's the low-ceilinged former courtroom, where you see the first part of the piece, *The Deformed Child of Faith*. In the middle of the room, there is a large old table, where the bailiff and his court would adjourn. Underneath a glass plate, you read the four testimonials, reminiscent of written legal depositions. They are based on conversations with Yachin, the young man accused of arson (censored at his behest), with two girls, close friends at the time, who were witnesses to one of his pot-induced visions of the devil, and with the young man's best friend at the time (also censored at Yachin's behest). They outline what it meant to grow up within the narrow confines of this village in the mid-1990s, when ancient rural customs and beliefs still only uneasily coexisted with modernity's promises and trappings. The aura of the courtroom, simple, yet venerable, makes

you realize that the accusation of arson, coupled with supposed encounters with the devil, may well have cost the young man his life two-hundred fifty years ago. More likely than not, he would have ended up on the nearby gallows.

On the walls of the courtroom, you see photographs in crimson red and black, taken with an infrared camera. Some of them show places mentioned in the stories on the table, others show the landscape around Ernen – a clearing in the woods, the gallows in the firelight at night, a cross on a mountain top, and so forth. The appearance of the infrared photographs makes you think of 19th-century spectral photography, which sought to capture paranormal phenomena. You speculate whether these are places where the young man, and probably many others, have encountered the Devil, demons, and angels since times immemorial. You wonder whether these rhetorical intimations of the supernatural are echoes of the imagined, or real, transgressions evoked in the witches' trials in this very room.

You leave the cramped confines of the *Zendenrathaus*. You walk towards the church, until you stand in front of the ground floor of a building, in between the houses of the pastor and of the church. This is the former youth club, where the young man and his gang of friends used to hang out, get drunk, smoke pot, listen to music, and play chess almost every evening during the long winters. It was set up sometime in the 1970s – no one quite remembers when – and re-opened and closed by successive generations of local youths. Today, it is no longer in use since there's only very few youths living in Ernen anymore. After the seeing the gallows and the old courtroom, you may be tempted to read the youth club as a token of a belated liberalization of mores in this village. Yet you may also consider it a harbinger of a different, maybe no less insidious, disciplinary apparatus. It at once acknowledged the existence of youth culture in the village, yet sought to control and contain it by instituting this space. As you remember from the testimonials, the accommodation of youth's desires and needs – a decisive motor of post-war urban consumer culture, incited and stoked by the media – was a belated and tenuous process in Ernen. It appears to be no accident that the youth club is situated right next to the pastor's house.

You enter the youth club, the site of the second part of the exhibition *The Arpeggiator of the Mind*. The first thing you notice are the black-and-white wall paintings – a hang glider in front of an alpine panorama, the face of woman, a portrait of Che Guevara. They all date from 1983. Together, they seem to outline a teenage mythology of desires: the promises of freedom and risk taking engendered by delta flying; the seductions of sex and fashion, which animate the young woman's face; and finally a spirit of rebellion, whose token is the exhausted cliché of Che's face. On a shelf, you discover an old folder with photographs from the youth club in the 1990s, which allow you to study

the clothes and haircuts, which at the time epitomized style in this alpine village. You see young men and women (the latter mostly with perms) lounging around, drinking, and playing games. They appear almost touchingly innocent and recklessly wasted, saturated with boredom and tense with sexual desire – it smells like teen spirit.

You then notice a fourth wall painting in the second room, which at first glance fits well with the others. It's a black-and-white painting of Pan, the Greek god of nature, well-beloved by Romantics, Symbolists, and 20th-century neo-pagans. At first, you might have thought it's the Devil, whose iconography assimilated many of Pan's features, not least the goats' legs. Upon reflection, it becomes clear that it must have been added for this exhibition. You could read it as an allegory of teenage drives and urges – Eros, abandon, and inebriation. Or you might read as a rather more complex symbol of nature, undermining the Catholic concept of the Devil, which so haunted the young man accused of burning the barn. The gods of antiquity were immanent to the world, they did not reside in some faraway heaven. Personifying aspects of the world, both benign and cruel, they facilitated a mediation between man and his surroundings, enabling him to find a place in the world. The self-same world is considered fallen in Catholic mythology, tainted by original sin and ruled over by the Devil. Man's duty is not only to "subdue the earth" (Gen. 1:28), but also to subdue everything in himself that is bound to nature. He is both split from the world, and split within. Man's dependency on nature is a consequence of his original sin, his expulsion from paradise. His home is not this world; it rather is an exile, from which death will eventually free him, if he has lead a life free from sin.

It is easy to see why this mythology resonated with people living in a remote alpine valley, dependent upon the clemency of the weather and the whims, and vicissitudes, of nature, since it proclaimed the possibility of a liberation from nature in the afterlife. Hence the ornate splendour of the churches in the Upper Valais, which seem to want to rival the majesty of the landscape, and the numerous small chapels dotting the landscape, as if they wanted to colonise and subdue it. They offered a foretaste of a celestial life, freed from the strictures of nature. The lure of Christianity's eschatological perspectives has lessened, at least in Europe, yet the dilemma of man's relation to nature remains unresolved, more urgent even than ever. You could conceive of the figure of Pan, half man, half animal, as a cipher of a possible resolution to this dilemma, an invitation to a reconciliation with nature, within and without man.

The Janus-faced character of the mountains is also evident in you see affixed to a cabinet door. It is an appropriated early 20th-century photograph of a cavern in the Rhône glacier, which you remember seeing as an infrared photograph in the courtroom. Since the 1870s, every summer a

cavern has been hammered into the Rhône glacier, which figures prominently in the lore of the Valais. Legend has it that unredeemed poor souls have to do penance by wandering around glacier, where you might even encounter them on certain nights. You may read the image of the cavern as an epitome of nature's sublime or as a foreboding of supernatural horrors. It's your choice; nature will remain indifferent to your projections. Or won't it?

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