

MARRIAGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: TORPOR BY CHRIS KRAUS

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Torpor: torpidity – torporific (I. F. *torpere* to be sluggish)
Oxford English Dictionary

Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others...the intoxicating relativity of human things: the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.

Tersaments Betrayed – Milan Kundera

Torpor by Chris Krauss, recently published by Semiotext(e), is a brilliant, funny and moving novel about the failure of a marriage and about the moral vacuum created by the global “success” of contemporary American culture. This is not history on a grand scale but at ground level. The novel begins with a couple Sylvie and Jerome (S&J) walking along a road that significantly was once a wagon trail but is no longer used or maintained. Sylvie is a punk-formalist film and videomaker who writes applications for grants she never gets, works as a topless dancer to live and pay for her films, and occasionally teaches. Jerome is French, 18 years older than Sylvie, a serious academic tenured at Columbia who edits books of famous

continental philosophers – or as Sylvie describes him more cogently toward the end of the book: “French theory’s wandering pimp”. Aside from teaching he is working on a film called *Second Hand Hitler* and an essay called *The Anthropology of Unhappiness* – both projects, as one would expect, are being procrastinated over. S&J develop routines and word-play as most couples do creating a “small-civilization” which is how Henry James once described the state of being a couple. Jerome is a survivor of the War and “was struck too numb to actually convey its horror.” The War and the camps are his “home”. His favorite expression is “It could have been worse” - a refrain that repeats in the novel musically, becoming more ironic or absurd depending on each new context. Sylvie feels the need to have a child. They compromise and get a mongrel dog named Lily. Sylvie has three psychologically devastating abortions to comply with his family needs – commitments to a daughter by another woman – and then takes the initiative of taking their “small-civilization” to Romania after the fall of Ceausescu in order to adopt a child.

The novel charts the failure of this venture and the collapse of their marriage. In Kraus' previous novels *I Love Dick* and *Aliens and Anorexia* the line between fiction and the autobiographical was consciously obliterated. In *torpor* that obliteration is intensified by the third person narration that acts as a distancing device. S&J live in two separate "homes" that are in "quaint rural slums adjacent to resorts". The juxtaposition of extreme class differences becomes a running motif. In *torpor* we see an America that is recognizably contemporary. This is unusual as so much contemporary writing leaves out everyday realities in favor of "literature". One of the most intense of these juxtapositions happens when Sylvie sees the devastation of the Romanian people through fake Versace sunglasses. The execution of Rumania's dictator Ceausescu, the murder of Versace, the Chinese laborers who made the fake Versace's and the traumatized Romanians in Sylvie's path suddenly conflate and implode in one long stare as she surveys the wreckage of the 20th century from a taxi taking her – of course – from the airport to the hotel.

S&J are then compared to an “alpha-couple” reminiscent to Sylvie of the people in the American television sitcom *Thirtysomething*. That is they have “lives that they are invested in, where cards like Marriage, Family and Career are played closely to the heart, and small decisions matter.” In direct opposition to this socially integrated couple who have moved “closer to the fold” Sylvie remains faithful to a punk philosophy adamant (as only an adolescent can be) about authenticity, integrity and remaining faithful to the religion of rebellious art personified by artists from Van Gogh and Rimbaud to Artaud and Patti Smith. Sylvie gambled on the seriousness and weight of these feelings and at the age of “thirtysomething” comes to feel betrayed by her faith. This in itself is not so unusual. What is unique is the way Kraus creates a narrative that moves from California to Romania allowing us to see the relationship of Sylvie’s failure to the larger failures of a corporate culture that has – aside from the “slave-mentality” of the “free-market” - ground any depth of feeling and ideas into a flat screen where everything is equivalent – and by inference – nothing means or matters very much. The various people

sleepwalking throughout the “post-industrial/post-communist” western world that Sylvie encounters pass through her and leave a mark. She refuses to treat them as “interesting” or “colorful”. She tries to fight the good fight. That she loses is not the point – the road traveled tells us a lot about who we are at the moment.

The novel describes the world of academics, avant-garde artists, and their respective Salons. This is a privileged elite that must maintain the posture of egalitarian communality to maintain its own sense of reality. In *torpor* we see the holidays and the apartments paid for by grants, the magazines and the art (institutional critiques!) that cater to the tastes of cognoscente comically removed from the fray of what used to be called “engagement”. In this world Sylvie is at once an insider and an outsider – something that bonds the Jewish Frenchman who both loves and loathes France to her, a woman who cannot join her friends as they embrace the “New Traditionalism” but is also out of the loop in the conservative aristocracy (is there another kind?) of academe.

Jerome's friends regard Sylvie as an invisible prop that her husband has brought with him. In one of the funniest moments in the book she is made to sit beneath "several neo-expressionist paintings inspired roughly by DeKooning's *Women*. Sylvie sits beneath one painting of "two enormous cunt-lips sprouting fangs." The rest, as someone once said, is silence. The capitulation of all the characters in the book to the market realities of careerism and to the biological necessities of sex, family and children is rendered comically in prose worthy of Swift. The names S&J come from Georges Perec's *Things* a novel in which a couple become entranced by consumer objects to the point of forgetting their animal nature and their humanity. It is - significantly - subtitled "a novel of the sixties". The wit and the cultural baggage that define S&J's routines are defense mechanisms that work in the Hamptons and Los Angeles but come apart at the seams in precisely the place that S&J choose to go: Eastern Europe - where the weight of History is a palpable reality with consequences (no airquotes possible). History has not merely *not* come to an end, it is in your face like the stench of an open sewer. The human beings that are still alive have

been destroyed psychically many times over – but somehow they carry on – they live – and Sylvie listens to them. She learns not History but little histories through a long oral tradition (women talking to women). This is a beautiful mirror image of Jerome’s interview books with star philosophers talking about “culture”, about ideas, about abstractions.

In the dichotomy between the insights that Sylvie gains on that aborted trip to Romania and Jerome’s stoic passivity lies the heart of the book. The man who wants nothing to do with history so he *withdraws* and the woman desperate to enter history – by having a child – cancel each other out. Yet the novel is in a sense a love letter to Jerome and to his laconic despair – a torpor that Sylvie loves and hates. The trip to Romania becomes that most horrifying of events – a ready-made-narrative that can be brought out at dinner parties when there is a lull: ...”a well-crafted story to tell at dinners in New York and L.A. They’ll find ways of telling it that obscure the purpose of their trip. They won’t say that much about the orphan.” Their social smiles become fixed in some horrible *frieze* – a tableau of respectable despair. With Jerome’s

encouragement she starts to “date” by using a “Telepersonals Dating Hotline”. She finds a picture of herself from when she wanted to have a child and a family and realizes: “The woman in the picture is inescapably immersed in an expectant emptiness... the same emptiness that Sylvie likes to simulate by having recreational sex in Los Angeles. Safe in the suburbs of L.A., cheerfully pursuing a career in an art world that no longer matters much to her or to anyone, she sees a link between her present life and the photo.” In that link lies not only the failure of Sylvie to create a family because what makes Sylvie’s tragedy profound is not the depth of feeling – which would be profound regardless - but that it encompasses the aspirations the self-doubts and the biological needs of a generation that betrayed itself in favor of an agenda that was always a little abstract, ideal, and ultimately unreal.

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