

Glory Land Trail of Tears

Video by Nina Staehli, 2015

By Urs Kuenzi, art theoretician and independent curator, Berlin

"And the star-spangled banner
in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free
and the home of the brave!"

In the land of the free

Blackness. At first there is only sound: a train rattling on tracks, ta-dak, ta-dak, ta-dak. Then, an image of the American flag blowing in the wind; the sound of invisible ropes creaking. Again the train rattles, ta-dak, ta-dak, ta-dak. Blackness. An almost eerie chafing: footsteps, as the next image reveals. We see a figure, wearing a camouflage uniform, from the waist down walking across a dry field. At first we only see the figure's head as a shadow cast on a satellite dish. He then puts his head deep into the dish, listening more closely: ta-dak, ta-dak, ta-dak. This is Sparrow, one of the two characters in Nina Staehli's video "Glory Land - Trail of Tears". Then, the American flag reappears, almost threateningly. Blackness. Someone is running, first through snow, then across a map, until finally the camera revolves around TearHead, the movie's other protagonist, who is clearly standing in front of a monument.

After this suspenseful opening exposition, we follow both figures on their journey along the Trail of Tears - or one of the various trails taken by American Indians after they were violently driven out of their ancestral territories and forced to relocate across the country¹. Across an American no man's land, we think, when we see the desolateness of many of the images. Perhaps today a few of the Indians can still see the tears of their ancestors who for months were driven through these landscapes. Perhaps they feel comfort by wandering along the same trails, evoking the memory of their ancestors. But TearHead and Sparrow do not appear to be making much headway. Even though TearHead cannot see anything through his thick head of hair, he is constantly putting his hands over his eyes.

To be sure, like all of Nina Staehli's Big Headsⁱⁱ, these figures are ambivalent. TearHead's name already hints at ambiguity: a 'tear' is not only a fluid secreted from our eyes when we're sad but also the result of something being ripped apart by force. TearHead's gestures could be a sign of shame or desperation, or of his inability to recognize and accept the truth. He might be torn inside, but he himself also has destructive potential. And nobody dares to cross Sparrow's path. Because even though he's waving a white flag, he's wearing a camouflage uniform. And who would deign to believe that anyone in fatigues could act in the name of peace? Recalling the first scene of the film with the satellite dishes, we are reminded of the NSA spy affair: some argue its legitimacy because it was carried out in the name of freedom while others argue that it was an abuse of the very same thing. Sparrow traipses rather clumsily through the landscape as though wanting to make peace where there was never any war to begin with. That is, until he wants to ride into battle on a gorilla's back. But when the light turns green he doesn't budge.

On the road

Fittingly enough, Nina Staehli filmed the "Glory Land"ⁱⁱⁱ video on a travel scholarship from the Canton of Zug, Switzerland. She thus approached the foreign land with, and literally inside of, two of her own creations. As Staehli is usually the inhabitant of her costumes, TearHead and Sparrow are also the artist's alter egos.

Jack Kerouac used the freedom to be "on the road", thus immortalizing the myth of the tramp drifting from place to place across the country in the back of freight trains. Western films are also chock full of images depicting a wide open countryside just waiting to be conquered. If only the Indians hadn't been in the settlers' way, the latter could have spared the ruthless massacre that ensued. And what of the rags to riches myth, the American Dream? How many millions of immigrants dream(ed) of obtaining fortune in the New World? While some left of their own volition, others were driven from their homelands. And they went on to displace and drive out the Native Americans from their own land.

Many of the countless stories of displacement around the world are too quickly forgotten. While monuments are erected to remind people of a past injustice in one place, a new injustice is taking place in another.

No wonder TearHead desperately covers his eyes.

Glory Land?

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see."^{iv}

"Amazing Grace" is the unofficial national anthem of the Cherokee Indians, almost all of whom were converted to Christianity during their expulsion from their homeland. Given the catastrophe that befell them, the lyrics of this song are, depending on your perspective, nothing short of cynical. And while some sing proudly of a glorious land under an American flag, others have been forever robbed of their native soil. They are native, but where?

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trail_of_Tears

ⁱⁱ www.ninastaehli.ch

ⁱⁱⁱ The "Glory Land" video is part of a work cycle that encompasses performances, paintings and sculptures as well as interviews with Native Americans.