L I M I N A

Exploring liminality through rural depopulation in Bulgaria

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Abstract:

The thesis 'Limina' is an exploration of the anthropological concept of liminality through depopulation in rural Bulgaria. The thesis consists of four parts. Part I-III are written components and include the theoretical ideas that inform the photographic work. Part IV consists of a physical photo-book titled *The Place of No Crows*.

Part I presents the origins of liminality as the middle part of a ritual rite of passage within small-scale societies, as defined by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor W. Turner. Part I also examines more contemporary interpretations of the concept by academics, such as Bjørn Thomassen and Árpád Szakolczai, and liminality's enduring relationship to moments or periods of transition.

Part II examines the context of rural depopulation in Bulgaria and proposes that similarities can be made between depopulation and liminality.

Part III essentially consists of three essays titled *Thoughts on Late Photography, Thoughts on Ruin, Thoughts on Threshold*. Through analysis of the photographic genre of 'Late Photography', as defined by contemporary photographic theorists, David Campany and Simon Faulkner, as well as through interpretation and historic depictions of both ruins and of thresholds in visual art, these essays explore the stylistic approach to the photographs featured in the photobook *The Place of No Crows*.

Part IV is the final component to this thesis and consists of a physical book titled *The Place of No Crows*. The book consists of 54 color photographs taken from three different trips to Bulgaria made between 2017 and 2019. The sequencing of the book follows the seasonal cycle in order to emphasize the overarching theme of transition. Besides liminality, the photographs are an examination of landscape, history and memory, within the context of contemporary rural Bulgaria.

Thesis supervisor: Heli Rekula
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Keyword: Bulgaria, Liminality, Depopulation, Communism, Landscape, Photography

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Prologue

I first set foot in Bulgaria back in 2012 when I spent one year traveling through Europe and Central Asia by bicycle. I started from my home in South London and ended in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan not far from the boarder of Western China. Once I crossed the border from Austria to Slovakia, I left Central Europe and found myself in unfamiliar territory. I knew very little about the Balkan states but there was something about these countries that captured my imagination. My understanding of the history of this region was limited and, in many ways these countries felt further away than they should considering their geographic location. Their interconnected communist past and more recently, their shared transitional experience towards democracy caught my interest.

Having been born in London 1990, I had naively grown up viewing communism in much the same way that I viewed WWII or the moon landings, an important historical event, but something that happened in the past, long before my time. While in some ways this is of course true, (European communism was very much over by the time I was old enough to know what the word communism actually meant), the trip showed me that the memory of communism was

very much alive; both within the physical landscape and architecture but also within the consciousness of those that lived through it. The way in which many of the individuals I met spoke of communism or even identified as either capitalist or communist, (often asking the same question of me), was very unfamiliar. No one had ever asked me with such intent, if I was a communist or a capitalist, as if it would have a resounding impact on our subsequent interaction. I had only heard these words spoken in such a way in Hollywood films and the Graham Green and John Le Carre novels read as a teenager. At one point, an elderly man, after beckoning me to the side of the road to say hello, removed his old communist party membership from of his jacket pocket as ID to show me his name. This act was a reminder that while politics, leaders, and governments may change in an instant; memory, experience and consciousness linger on. The nostalgia for communism that I observed in the Balkans made me question my own understanding of communism and what it meant to those that lived through it. The dichotomy between living physically in the present and introspectively in the past seemed a fascinating juxtaposition that evoked the qualities of liminality.

In Autumn 2017 more than five years later, I found myself revisiting some of the memories from this trip while listening to a podcast by a BBC journalist that had recently traveled through nearly abandoned villages reporting on Bulgaria's rural depopulation. The BBC's interest in this subject had been prompted by a United Nations report on ten countries around the world with worryingly high population decline.

The reported categorised Bulgaria as the having the fastest shrinking population in the world–its population had decreased by twenty percent since the end of communism in 1991.

When communism came to an end in Bulgaria, the collective farms, which had once employed a large majority of those living in Bulgaria's rural communities, were quickly disbanded generating large scale emigration from rural villages to larger towns and cities in search of work. The BBC had visited a village called Kalotinsi which had once maintained a population of 600 in its heyday, however, only 13 people remained at the time the show was broadcast. Much like rural villages all over the country it had once had a well-stocked grocery store, a school and a café along with other basic infrastructure, that had all long since disappeared. The remaining 13 inhabitants were left at the mercy of an entrepreneur that would deliver supplies to sell to the villagers once a week. When asked about the future of the village, the villagers simply replied that there is no future. Again, this seemed to reflect the atmosphere of liminality.

Although I hadn't been aware of the severity of Bulgaria's shrinking population in 2015, the stories from Kalotinsi were surprisingly familiar to me and I was instantly reminded of the unfamiliar strangeness of cycling through abandoned rural villages. The podcast reignited an interest in this region, and the idea of return in order to portray the atmosphere of living amongst the empty houses and schools that had once been occupied by friends and family. I

immediately sent the podcast to a Bulgarian friend also living Finland and we began discussing the possibilities of traveling to Bulgaria together in order to produce work on a series of photographs that would explore the quality of liminality through rural depopulation.

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The basis for this thesis was, therefore, the idea that depopulation can be viewed as a liminal experience. Thus, the written component of thesis explores liminality, from its origins as an anthropological concept very much grounded in ritual, through to more contemporary definitions. The thesis also presents why liminality, in particular, seemed an appropriate concept from which to view depopulation. Due to the nature of photographing in abandoned and semi abandoned regions, the thesis also considers the various ways in which ruins and thresholds have been depicted throughout the history of visual art and the relationship these motifs have had with transitional moments in time. The final component of this thesis is a physical book titled *The Place of No Crows*, which contains the photographic and artistic work produced in Bulgaria over the course of three years. Documentation of the book is included at the end of the thesis.

All in all, three trips to Bulgaria were made. The first trip in November 2017 to the Kardzali and Haskovo regions in Southern Bulgaria, the second trip, in February 2018 to Smolyan region and

the Rhodope Mountains, also in the south, and the third and final trip, in June 2019, to the North Eastern region of Vidin.

During the first two trips I traveled with fellow Aalto University and VCD student, Teodor Gerogiev, from Bulgaria. There had initially been a plan to collaborate on a book that would feature both photographs by myself and illustrations by Georgiev, with the photographs documenting the reality: the locations, interiors and landscapes, while the illustrations would re-enact, so to speak, the story's told by individuals we met. Unfortunately, due to work, studies and various other commitments, the collaboration did not materialize and the final work submitted for *The Place of No Crows* features only photographs by myself. The third trip to Bulgaria was subsequently made without Georgiev, however, I spent two days traveling with Alexenia Dimitrova (author of *The Iron Fist: Inside the archives of the Bulgarian secret police*), and one week with a local anthropologist Martin Petrov. Dimitrova and Petrov both acted as guide and translator but also sourced regions and villages relevant to the project, having both previously worked very closely with the subject of depopulation. The work I produced with Dimitrova has not been incorporated into the final project since the work took on a different and more journalistic quality which I have decided to submit to newspapers and magazines as a series of individualand journalist stories relating to depopulation. A fourth and final trip had been considered, however, plans were disrupted due to the Covid-19

pandemic in 2020 and it was then decided that the project would be completed with the material already gathered. The title for the book came from a conversation with Petrov whilst driving back to Sofia at the end of the third trip. Petrov explained that, when referring to the abandoned villages in the Vidin region, many of the individuals we had met seemed to use similar idiomatic phrases to refer to abandoned villages such as: '*a place of despair*', ' *a place where crows don't fly', or 'a place of no crow*s'. This phrase was thus adapted to become the title of the book: *The Place of No Crows.*

Part I

1.1 Thresholds

The meaning of liminality has undergone considerable transformations since it was first conceived. Having first appeared within the field of anthropology in the seminal work of French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (*The Rites of Passage* from here on) 1909, it is a term now widely found connected to many academic and artistic fields. Derived from the latin *'limen'*, meaning to cross a threshold (Merriam-Webster, 2021), liminality refers to the quality of ambiguity associated with any interstructural position where an individual or group of individuals have become detached from their previous status, have yet to become attached to a new one, and occupy a space in-between. It describes the process of transitioning from one status, place, or position, to another. Liminal periods can be uncomfortable because transitions are challenging, however, liminality offers some explanation as to why an individual, or a group of individuals, might feel a certain amount of discomfort during moments or periods of change. Although it may seem like an unusual concept, every individual experiences moments of liminality throughout their lifetime, transitions are universal and therefore the experience of liminality is something everyone can relate to.

The following chapter will discuss the origins of liminality and its function within pre-industrial society through the works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor W. Turner, who are both recognised for the dissemination of the theory. Although Van Gennep coined the term liminality, it is Turner's developments that are generally believed to be responsible for its widespread use today (Thomassen, 2012, p.23). As a result of Turner's various publications there are now a multitude of significant writings that deal with the subject of liminality, however, it would not be possible to cover them all in this thesis. Since many of these publications seem to relate directly to either van Gennep and Turner, this chapter will present the origins of liminality via their research. However, the anthropologist and social scientist Bjørn Thomassen has made significant contributions to the concept more recently, showing that it is still a relevant and this thesis will, therefore, draw upon his simplified and apprehensible definition in relation to depopulation. It should also be acknowledged here that both van Gennep and Turner were predominantly exploring the liminal in a ritual context within small-scale, pre-industrial and pre-modern societies. Therefore, this chapter will aim to illustrate what relevance this theory has outside of these conditions. Finally, I will demonstrate how liminality became the framework for exploring a state of transition in relation to contemporary depopulation within rural Bulgarian, through the photographic project *The Place of No Crows.*

1.2 Origins

In *The Rites of Passage*, 1909, van Gennep suggests that the life of an individual in almost any society can be viewed as a series of passages from one position to another (van Gennep, 2019, p.64). The *'passages'* he refers to include significant life-cycle transitions such as birth, childhood, puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood and funerals for example (van Gennep, 2019, p.64). He recognised that these transitions are often enacted through various rituals and ceremonies which he characterises as *'rites of passage'* (van Gennep, 2019, p.64). The main purpose of rites of passage was to allow individuals or a group of individuals to transition from one status to another (van Gennep, 2019, p.64). van Gennep also made a distinction between rites that marked the passage of an individual from one status to another from rites which marked transitions of a passage of time for example, the beginning and end of a harvest or the new year (Thomassen, 2012, p.23). Furthermore, he observed that rites of passage, regardless of culture, society or origin, all shared a similar three-part structure, with each part containing its own rites. van Gennep subsequently characterised the structure of rites of passage as the following: (van Gennep, 2019, pp.57-58)

1. Preliminal, or rites of separation
2. Liminal, or rites of transition
3. Postliminal, or rites of incorporation

The preliminal stage consists of separating the individual from their former role or social status within the society. The individual then enters the liminal period or transitional phase from which they prepare for the new role. In many rituals observed by Van Gennep, liminality had its own spatial reality with participants often being removed from the social group during this part of the ritual (Thomassen, 2012, p.21). Anthropologist and social scientist Bjørn Thomassen notes how the Athenian ephebes (adolescents) were sent out to the *'uncultivated mountainsides'* to have their status altered while, in mythology, the young Odysseus was sent to the mountain slopes of Parnassus to perform his rite of passage to manhood (Thomassen, 2012, p.21). Finally, the postliminal stage helps re-integrate and incorporate the individual back into society and into their new status. van Gennep's discovery that this ritual pattern was in fact universally practiced signifies that all societies use rites to demarcate transitions. Thomassen states that claims of universality within anthropology are extremely rare, and therefore, reiterates that the universality of van Gennep's triparted structure is not to be underestimated (Thomassen, 2012, p.23). Although the concept of liminality is commonly

referenced both inside and outside the field of anthropology, it was initially ignored altogether when it was published in *The Rites of Passage*, 1909 and it be almost half a century before van Gennep's theory would be finally recognized (Thomassen, 2012, p.23).

1.3 Developments

In 1960, *The Rites of Passage* was translated and published in English for the first time. The book would have a profound effect on the social anthropologist, Victor W. Turner, who was immediately drawn to van Gennep's middle, liminal stage and its role in maintaining social order. Thomassen writes how Turner came across van Gennep's book at a time when he himself was living in a liminal state of suspense. Turner had just resigned from his post, sold his house and was currently waiting for his US visa which had been delayed due to his conscientious objection from the military during World War II (Thomassen, 2012, p.23). Turner's subsequent discovery of van Gennep's book and, therefore of liminality, inspired him to immediately write his now famous essay, *'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage'* from his 1967 book, The Forest of Symbols.

Turner, like van Gennep, understood rites of passage to be present in all pre-industrial societies, where change is enacted through ceremony and ritual (Turner, 1967, p.93). Furthermore, Turner viewed the notion of liminality an in-between state situated between two points in a social or hierarchical structure, as an essential

characteristic (Turner, 1967, p.94). Turner's research, however, focused more critically on the mid-transition (which he viewed as an integral building block to a stable community) while emphasizing the qualities of uncertainty and ambiguity connected to this middle liminal phase. In the aforementioned essay, Turner writes that during the first phase of a rite of passage an individual is symbolically detached from their previous status in the social structure, leaving them categorically ambiguous for the duration of the liminal stage, before being symbolically received into their new and stable status (Turner, 1967, p.93). These rituals and observances were designed in such a way as to impress the significance of the individual (and the group) upon the members of a community, or: *"… to give an outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process."*(Turner, 1967, p.92). Although, liminal rites were not just for individuals, for example, during a declaration of war, the group (either tribal or familial) charged with implementing revenge is first separated from society in order to acquire its own individuality. Subsequently, the group's members cannot re-enter society until after a performance of rites designed to remove their temporary individuality and therefore reintegrate them to the society (van Gennep, 2019, p.86). The purpose of liminality can be more visibly seen here to be a way of promoting social unity in times of uncertainty.

Throughout his career, Turner went into great depth researching the characteristics of liminality within pre-industrial societies, suggesting that liminality not only identified the importance of in-between

periods, but also acted as a tool for understanding the human reaction to moments of change and uncertainty. It is important to recognize, however, that during his lifetime Turner maintained a somewhat conservative view with regards to how his concept was used by others, insisting that it remain firmly within a ritual context. That is not to say that he did not explore the idea of liminal moments outside of ritual, however, in its place he conceived of a sub-concept which he used to refer to *'liminal-like'* moments within modern society. For this, he coined the term 'liminoid' which essentially translates to, resembling liminality.

Turner seemed to be suggesting that liminality, as described in ritual terms, is not present within moments of modernity where change is no longer bound up in ritual or ceremony. However, he did propose that liminal-like experiences can be found through events such as theatrical performances, music festivals, protests and carnivals (Turner, 1974, p.70). Within these events a temporary suspension of the ordinary structures of day-to-day life can be temporarily experienced. Liminoid experiences then, in contrast to liminality, appear to be optional and sought after. However, contemporary academics like Thomassen and Árpád Szakolczai, Professor of Sociology at University College Cork, Ireland, have both been highly critical of Turner's concept of liminoid claiming that it does not involve the resolution of a personal crisis, a change of status, or crucially, a transition: something which is considered integral to liminality (Thomassen, 2009, p.15). Thomassen has thus implied that

liminoid is in fact a step backwards in the development of liminality (Thomassen, 2009, p15). Furthermore, Szakolczai has posthumously accused Turner of professional blackmail, insisting that the theory of liminality plays a crucial role in offering a *"…novel, non-evolutionary and non-dualistic understanding of the relationship between social order and change."* (Szakolczai, 2014, p6). Besides strongly endorsing the use of liminality outside of ritual contexts, Szakolczai suggests that the term should be incorporated into the regular vocabulary of social thought and philosophy contending that all concepts are valuable research tools that should not be copyrighted by their authors (Szakolczai, 2015, p.165). The purpose, therefore, in acknowledging Turner's restrictions and the subsequent criticism is to recognize that he did explore liminality within modern contexts, however, the contemporary view is that liminoid does not provide a natural substitute for liminality (Thomassen, 2009, p15). For this reason, his restrictions on liminality have largely been ignored.

1.4 Modernity

Thomassen has noted that, despite Turner's claims on his concept he has also referred to liminality as any *'betwixt and between'* situation, concluding that, if taken literally this opens up liminality to a whole realm of possibilities, far beyond Turner's own suggestion that it should remain within a ritual context (Thomassen, 2012, p.24). Thomassen, therefore, proposes that liminality can be understood in two distinct dimensions: the first dimension is temporal and can be attributed to single moments, longer periods, or even whole epochs, while the second dimension is spatial and refers to single individuals, larger groups (cohorts, villages or minority groups), entire societies, and maybe even civilizations (Thomassen, 2012, p.24). The temporal dimension of liminality might include sudden events that impact an individual's life, the death of a family member, an illness or a divorce; or events that impact a much larger group of people including an entire society such as, invasion, war, natural disaster or a pandemic. The spatial dimensions of liminality might include thresholds, such as doorways and windows, neutral zones between nations, monasteries, prisons and airports (Thomassen, 2012, pp.25-26). Thomassen also tentatively adds a third-dimension drawing upon Karl Jaspers theory of the axial age:

'…an in-between period between two structured world-views and between two rounds of empire building… an age of uncertainty and contingency: an age where old certainties had lost their validity and where new ones were still not ready.' (Thomassen, 2012, p.44)

The distinctions above appear in the book *Liminal Landscapes, Travel, Experiences and the Spaces In-between*, in an essay by Bjorn Thomassen called *Revisiting Liminality*, where he attempts to offer a more contemporary view of liminality, drawing upon various aspects of both Van Gennep and Turner. Using Thomassen's abridged and more comprehensive definition I was able to find many similarities with the transition taking place as a consequence of depopulation in rural Bulgaria. Certainly, the end of communism and the transition to a capitalist economy could be viewed through Karl Jaspers axial age. However, on a more macro scale, aspects of Thomassen's spatial and temporal dimensions of liminality can be found within Bulgaria's rural depopulation.

Drawing on Thomassen's proposal that liminality can be found through as a sudden event that impacts the lives of an individual or group of people; the end of communism can be seen as a event that brought an end to the communal, agrarian structure of Bulgaria's collective farms. The long-lasting impacts of the end of communism in combination with the more recent effects of globalization have led to a spiral of emigration from rural communities towards more urbanized areas. This has left many of Bulgaria's rural communities

suspended in an ambiguous state between inhabited and uninhabited, tentatively moving towards the latter. The declining rural populations have also led to the slow collapse of infrastructure with schools, theatres, hospitals, dentists, surgeries and stores mostly being abandoned, exacerbating liminal qualities of uncertainty and ambiguity. In a spatial sense, these nearly abandoned villages have become liminal spaces, where normal infrastructure and ordinary day-to-day activities no longer exist as they once did. The inhabitants of these villages now have to travel outside of their villages in order to access work, supplies and other normative services such as doctor's appointments. In a temporal sense their status as liminal can be viewed as ongoing until the villages become abandoned entirely, at which point they will become something more like a *Terrain Vague*.

The main issues encountered while trying to situate depopulated sites within a theoretical framework was that most of the more well-known spatial concepts tend to focus on areas that are connected to urban environments. *Terrain Vague*, a term conceived by Solà-Morales is a collective term for all types of derelict or marginal lands that might colloquially be referred to as abandoned space or wasteland (Mariani and Barron, 2014, p.XI). The term is one in a long list of vocabulary that attempts to understand and define the places in which we live, and the places in-between the places that we live; these include, for example, Michel Foucault's *Heterotopia*, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and Mark Auges N*on-Places: An Introduction to Hypermodernity. Terrain Vagues* however, tend to be marginal or

interstitial places that have yet to be developed, are in the process of being developed, or where development has been halted. As Patrick Barron writes in his essay *At The Edge of the Pale*, they provide a *'negative blueprint'* for the cities we live in (Mariani and Barron, 2014, p.3). They are, in many ways, similar to Lefebvre's built space for the future, places yet to be developed or places with potential but they also include emptied lands: *"…parking lots and corridors of land between industrial complexes, commercial buildings, and residential development."* (Mariani and Barron, 2014, p.3). *Terrain Vague's* are therefore perhaps more of a marginal concept than a liminal concept, two ideas that Thomassen warns, should not be confused (Thomassen, 2012, p.21).

Terrain vague's often contain strange and alluring physical features such as abandoned buildings or wild and unkempt vegetation and they forms an interesting dichotomy between the convergence of urban and seemingly wild landscapes through a collision of organic and inorganic material. Derelict buildings such as abandoned factories, hospitals or schools are some of the more common examples of what might be found in terrain vague, however, on a slightly larger scale, derelict fairgrounds, theme parks and even sports arenas are often found deserted on the periphery. Patrick Barron writes how the most common terms used to refer to these places: wasteland, derelict and abandoned, carry with them negative assumptions, often implying that they are dangerous and should be avoided. Indeed, an abandoned factory site may contain residue of

toxic and dangerous chemicals, so these negative assumptions are not completely unfounded, however, they are at odds with other characterizations of unused spaces as sites of freedom, potential, and possibility (Mariani and Barron, 2014, p.4). Despite often confusing and negative connotations, terrain vague's often double up as thoroughfares and places of leisure through their interstructural nature. John Stilgoe underlines the importance of *'unsupervised'* lands in both the maturation of children and indeed adults too; the necessity and freedom to be able to explore space through play and to traverse known and unknown environments passing from the familiar to the strange (Mariani and Barron, 2014, p.10).

There is a similarity worth noting between Stilgoe's emphasis on unsupervised play and Turner's view of liminality as a creative endeavor. In fact, terrain vague's seem to contain many of the attributes connected to abandoned places such as depopulated villages, although they miss the most crucial aspect of depopulation: people. While depopulated areas are (often incorrectly) referred to as abandoned, they are usually lived spaces and this point is crucial to *The Place of No Crows.* Barron proposes that terrain vague's are often 'furtively inhabited' however, he seems to be referring to activities such as squatting. While a depopulated village could also be referred to as furtively inhabited, in this context this clarification could be misleading since a depopulated village was at one point, very much populated, and the act of depopulation usually happens somewhat passively and without categorical warning that it will become

abandoned. In this sense, it is difficult to categorize a village as abandoned if inhabitants still remain. Furthermore, if terrain vague's are viewed as places of opportunity, ripe for development, then in some ways, depopulated areas can be viewed as a mirror image since they are often neglected in future plans for economic development, essentially being left to their own demise. It is the transitional element of depopulation which seems to separate a depopulated village from a terrain vague and which emphasizes the liminal nature of depopulation. For this reason, the anthropological concept of liminality felt like a much more relevant framework for viewing depopulation in relation to my series.

Part II

2.1 Few and Far Between

The end of the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria led to widespread corruption, mass unemployment and growing poverty, especially in the rural communities. For those that had lived through generations of communism, the traditional sense of structure and authority began to disappear when communism came to an abrupt end. For the young, jobs became few and far between and for the elderly, living off of a state pension of approximately 100e became a constant struggle. The order and predictability of daily life was replaced with disorder and uncertainty. These reasons, combined with the breakup of the collective farm communities, led to a spiral of emigration from rural communities to the cities and from cities to other nations altogether. As individuals left home in search of stability and prosperity, rural populations began to decline leading to the collapse of infrastructure that once bound communities together. Everything including hospitals, schools, supermarkets, theatres and cinemas all began to close down since there was no longer a large enough demographic to support them.

Certain actions have been taken to account for the steep decline in Bulgaria's rural population. For example, many neighboring villages

have subsequently been grouped together in order to better facilitate certain aspects of governance, such as voting. In some cases, this has also allowed certain infrastructure, such as hospitals and clinics, to remain open, however, many elderly people are still unable to travel the unrealistically long distances for supplies and medical checkups. There are many examples of local entrepreneurs that have taken it upon themselves to organize weekly deliveries to the more remote towns and villages. In an act of either capitalist ingenuity or heartfelt generosity, these small operations nevertheless have allowed many of the elderly to remain in their homes while many of the towns and villages around them have had to be abandoned altogether. For the villages that are currently survived by a handful of inhabitants, they have become suspended in a limbo state where they are at once inhabited (barely) and seemingly uninhabited at the same time. There is feeling that many rural communities were simply left behind during the transition from communism to capitalism, condemning them to become relics of bygone era; museums of Bulgaria's communist past. The drastic change to the livelihoods of the people that have remained in these depopulated regions has, therefore, led to a growing amount of support for communism again in the hope that they might be able to restore their communities to their former glory. This feeling of hope and adoration for the past way of life is often found within the growing sense of nostalgia for communism that one often finds in Bulgaria's remote and depopulated villages.

2.2 Nostalgia

Western media has often had a tendency to highlight the most negative and totalitarian aspects of communist rule making it difficult for many western raised individuals to grasp how anyone might ever want to re-live the so-called *'horrors'* of communism. In her book, *The Communist Horizon* Jodi Dean writes how, since the fall of communism the word *'communism'* has attained such strong negative connotations within academic circles that the 70-year history of the USSR is often equated to the 26-years of Stalin's violent authoritarianism (Ghodsee, 2011, p.XVI). However, research coming out of Bulgaria, and other postsocialist nations in the eastern bloc, has in fact demonstrated that the political instability and social upheaval that followed the fall of communism has led to revival of support for more stringent government control. These investigations open the door for a concept like liminality as a way of examining how we understand certain human reactions and behaviors in times of transition.

In 2009, a survey was conducted by the US-based *Pew Research Center* in nine postcommunist countries on how public attitudes towards communism had changed since 1989. In Bulgaria,

specifically, 62% of participants said they were economically worse off than they were under communism, 76% claimed they were unsatisfied with democracy and only 13% felt that they were better off than they were under communism (Ghodsee, 2011, pp.177-178). The survey's findings concluded that among Bulgarian citizens there is a growing sense of nostalgia for the old way of life. Ghodsee puts this phenomenon down to the simple fact that stability is just more favorable than instability and for the lives of many Bulgaria citizens, democracy brought the latter. It is commonly overlooked in the West that the majority of individuals that lived under communism went about their daily lives just like any other citizen from any other society. Everyday routines followed the same universal patterns and most activities operated independent of the country's politics:

"…people fell in love, had families, and made coffee in the morning against the backdrop of totalitarianism, but it was the coffee making and the falling in love that always took precedence in their lives." (Ghodsee, 2011, p.179).

When communism abruptly came to an end, so did economic security and the everyday routines of ordinary people. Ghodsee writes how the *'rhythms'* of everyday life were replaced with *'chaos', 'uncertainty'* and *'disorientation'*, tapping into a similar vocabulary used within the discourse of liminality. By 2013, Bulgaria was the poorest country in the European Union and *"…many citizens lived in crushing poverty that no democratically elected government had been able to reverse."* (Ghodsee, 2015, p.XII). The government was forced

to resign following mass protests and it seemed that the country was in a constant state of uncertainty. The collective mood to return to some form of communism is much more easily understood as a reaction to these years of disorder. The key to the understanding the growing nostalgia for communism is therefore perhaps not a question of communism versus capitalism at all but a question of stability versus instability in relation to the daily lives of Bulgarian citizens. In times of uncertainty, we instinctually look for stability in whatever form it can be found. Liminality suggests that moments of transition can be uncomfortable and extended periods of uncertainty are extremely undesirable, having negative repercussions on social cohesion. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise then that, in a nation that has struggled to get a firm grip on democracy some of its citizens have begun to look more fondly on the past. In liminal terms, it can be viewed as a desire to return to the structure, stability and practicability of communist life. However, that is not to say that no attempts were made to maintain order and stability.

2.3 Transition

In the days shortly after the end of communism, a process known as *'privatization'* was put into effect in order to create a gradual transition and ease individuals and communities through the enormous changes ahead. The process aimed to gradually transfer state assets into private ownership with a stipulation that all of the newly privatized enterprises must continue to operate as usual for a minimum of two years in order to give individuals, communities, and economic practices time to adapt to the colossal shift in ideology and outlook (Ghodsee, 2011, p.184). The privatization process of course shows that there was some attempt to maintain order and reduce the impact of the transition on society, however, according to Ghodsee, it went largely unchecked (Ghodsee, 2011, p.184).

As the various state-owned businesses were quickly privatized, the new owners went against the privatization policies and chose to prioritize short-term gains over long-term economic stability. They did this by sacking staff and selling company assets, such as heavy machinery and equipment, rather than maintaining production. The privatization process therefore did not succeed in providing the stability needed for industry, economy and the communal mindset

to adapt to the new culture of capitalism. Instead, it led to mass unemployment, crushed Bulgarian industry and left a vacuum that was quickly filled by a new class of corrupt officials fueled by greed and hungry for power (Ghodsee, 2011, p.185). The legacy of these events remains visible within the Bulgarian landscape today.

2.4 Conclusion

The vast changes that have happened to many of Bulgaria's rural communities due to depopulation combined with the growing nostalgia for Bulgaria's communist past seem suggests of a kind of limbo state. The fact that thirty years on from the fall of communism, the neglect of these rural communities has only been exacerbated, indicates that the sense of structure and order that once existed in rural communities has long since disappeared and will likely never be replaced. It also implies that the end of communism is not the only factor in keeping these regions abandoned. Depopulation is, of course, not unique to Bulgaria, in fact, it is a global phenomenon that has become prevalent in nearly all developed countries, as a consequence of globalization and the economic emphasis this structure places on small urban trading environments. What drew me to Bulgarian depopulation, however, was the visibly interconnected narratives at play, where the major forces of the past, such as communism, remain visibly present within the present landscape of these rural communities. It creates a fascinating dichotomy between past and present narratives with a visible interplay between memory, culture and history. It is in many ways, therefore, the ideal landscape for exploring liminality.

Part III

3.1 The Place of No Crows

From the conception of *The Place of No Crows* I took interest in the transition taking place as a consequence of depopulation and ideas such as end of community, the move from inhabited to uninhabited, as well as combining both historic and current narratives. However, I was constantly exposed to visually stunning landscapes, intriguing scenes of abandonment and extremely personal stories about Bulgaria and people's lives. I found it difficult to resist the temptation to pursue every opportunity presented to me for fear of missing something crucial. Balancing the theoretical ideas of liminality with the reality of being there on the ground and speaking with real people was occasionally quite anxiety inducing. The process of figuring out exactly what photographs were necessary for the project, was therefore difficult and often overwhelming. As a consequence of this, I had a tendency to say yes to many of the opportunities suggested to me, with the idea that I might let these opportunities serendipitously guide the project. This of course left much of the narrative arch of the project to be constructed months after the final trip and since this was my first time working on a series with this kind of theoretical or conceptual framework, these were just some of the lessons that I learnt.

While making the *The Place of No Crows* there were two dominant themes or motifs that I was drawn towards from the beginning. There was something that attracted me to the symbolic character of *the ruin* as an expression of both historic and recent abandonment and I was fascinated by the possibilities that lay in the depictions of *the threshold* (borders, fences, windows and doors) and the referential quality of the threshold in connection with liminality. Both of these motifs have their place in the history of visual arts; which is something else that I have been drawn to: making connections and references to things that have come before. Stylistically, I applied a formal and simplistic compositional approach to the images which achieved a stillness that reflected the nature of the subject I was dealing with. The coming pages will lay out some of the thoughts and ideas I have regarding photography, and art more generally, but also some thoughts on composition in relation to both David Campany's and Simon Faulkner's opposing positions on *Late Photography*. This will give a richer insight into my intentions as a photographer, rather than just simply going through my working process.

3.2 Thoughts on Late Photography

There is a familiarity in the aesthetic approach of *The Place of No Crows* to the genre of Late Photography as described by David Campany in the essay *Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the problems of 'Late Photography'*, published in 2003. Campany first used this phrase to highlight a movement in documentary photography towards photographing events or conflicts, after the event has taken place (Campany, 2003). Within this genre there has generally been a tendency towards producing quiet, static photographs, something closer to forensic photography than the more active photographs of traditional photojournalism (Campany, 2003). Scenes are often photographed at the aftermath of an event, devoid of people with minimal or no human activity, apart from the implied consequences of their actions. Campany considers this shift to be the result of photography's own existential crisis in the wake of video and other media technologies taking on roles traditionally held by photography. As a consequence, photography has conceded its place as the sole recorder of the decisive moment and now *"…turns up late, wanders through the places where things have happened totting up the effects of the worlds activity…"* (Campany, 2003). Furthermore, photography seems to have wholeheartedly embraced its new role of documenting

the aftermath; a move that Campany does not view in a positive light.

The muteness of the aftermath photograph, often employing a straightforward and simplistic composition with the main point of focus placed in the center of the frame, emphasizes the stillness of the scene and subsequently allows the image to appear uncontaminated by the noise and movement of the televisual. Television and film, therefore, still rely heavily on photography to highlight particularly thought-provoking moments by appropriating the open-ended nature of late photography: *"…it is not that a photograph says a thousand words, rather, that a thousand words can be said about it."* (Campany, 2003), thus the role of the documentary photograph today seems to present a kind of *'mythic'* summary of contemporary events. Campany is highly critical of photographs that take an open-ended approach; he claims, they have the potential to disconnect us from the harsh reality of the world. In his view, distancing the spectator from the event portrayed in a photograph can be highly problematic since it allows for aesthetics to dominate the spectator's response. Furthermore, when the images are (inevitably) shown in a magazine or a gallery, this exacerbates the void between the spectator and the event leaving the photograph more like *"...the trace of a trace of an event..."* (Campany, 2003). Campany uses the differing approaches to photography of *The Vietnam War* and *The Gulf War* to explore this shift.

For a number of reasons, political, social and technological, there is a striking difference between the way in which *The Vietnam War* and *The Gulf War* were seen. Most crucially, photographers were simply not granted the same amount of freedom and access to photograph during The Gulf War as they had been in Vietnam. Most photography from the latter, therefore, appeared once the war was already over and photographers were finally allowed in without restraint or censorship. These images, in contrast to the real time coverage of The Vietnam War, reveal the immediate aftermath or the traces of war: destroyed buildings, blown out vehicles, scarred deserts and scattered bodies. Due to the lack of *'action'* at the aftermath of war, the photographs were less dynamic, slower and more formally composed than photographs of The Vietnam War. Campany writes that these images consequently had a *post-traumatic disposition*, a kind of *mournful paralysis* and that photography had discovered in the aftermath how *seductively melancholia* it could be (Campany, 2003). Although Campany views the ambiguous quality of late photographs in a negative light, there is an opposing view presented by Simon Faulkner in his essay, that the openness of these images can lead to a more active engagement with the events depicted. Furthermore, a certain amount of distance from trauma of horrific events can potentially allow for the necessary breathing space to comprehend the events behind the visuals.

Faulkner argues that the formally simplistic framing of late photography can also be viewed as a way of reserving judgment on

the content of an image and in some cases, it can even be read as a respectful approach to photographing sensitive subject matter. The compositional elements of late photographs seem to imply that the photographers have tried to avoid concealing or encoding any overt messages within the image itself (Faulkner, 2014, p.124). It is, of course, impossible to avoid connotations altogether and Faulkner therefore sites John Szarkowski describing Walker Evan's photography as an example of what is being signified by the photographer when they make these kinds of still images: *"…puritanically economical, precisely measured, frontal, unemotional, dryly textured…and insistently factual…"* (Faulkner, 2014, p.123). Drawing upon Szarkowski then, the intention of late photographs can be seen to present rather than to comment. As a consequence, the meaning of these images will certainly remain more ambiguous, as Campany has observed, however, that doesn't necessarily indicate that meaning is altogether lost (Faulkner, 2014, p.124).

Faulkner discusses a photograph taken by Simon Norfolk, depicting the remains of Israeli buses blown up by Palestinian terrorists, in order to highlight the potential of late photographs. The compositional elements in Norfolk's photograph, leave the photographers intentions somewhat ambiguous, though crucially, the image also manages to avoid political rhetoric (Faulkner, 2014, p.124). Faulkner argues that by restraining from overt political indictment Norfolk's photograph has far greater potential to offer an alternative perspective on events that goes beyond the binary views

of the Israeli-Palestine conflict: *"…the openness of the late photograph allows for an unfixing of meaning in terms of relationships between established ideological positions and visual motifs."* (Faulkner, 2014, p.125). Although this type of image analysis places a large amount of expectation on the spectator, it can allow for a more nuanced engagement with the wider context of a conflict, with aspects of human behavior but it also suggests a shift in how photographers approach and compose their images. While, this open-endedness has also been criticized as a means to avoid any kind political commentary and therefore responsibility, the open-ended nature of late photography can offer an alternate avenue of dialogue to the high-intensity frontline photographs from The Vietnam War that had little restraint when portraying chaos and violence. Could the crucial difference, between the static late photographs and the more dynamic photojournalistic images be that late photographs carry a greater potential for metaphorical signification? If so, then encouraging a spectator to look beyond reductionist or overly simplistic narratives can potentially allow for a more nuanced and deeper engagement with a wider historic context, as intended by Norfolk.

In the introduction to his series *The Battlespace*, Norfolk describes how he intends his photographs to be understood *"…the ruins in my artworks are philosophical metaphors for the foolishness of pride, of awe and the sublime and, most importantly to me, the vanity of Empire."* (Norfolk, n.d). This suggests that he is encouraging the spectator to engage with something deeper regarding human behavior

and the tendency toward violence; rather than just commenting on the conflict depicted. Faulkner also quotes an interview with Norfolk where he expands upon the dichotomy between traditional photojournalism and late photographs: *"…photojournalism is a great tool for telling very simple stories: Here's a good guy. Here's a bad guy. But the stuff I was dealing with was getting more and more complicated…"* (Faulkner, 2014, p.125). It is clear that Norfolk sees a far greater potential to photographs than simply illustrating the chaos of conflict, upholding binary good vs evil narratives, or overtly condemning one side in order to sympathize with another. He seems to view photography as a more in-depth and pragmatic educational tool for examining the human condition. This is for sure a different and a more nuanced approach to that of traditional news images of conflict, but as Norfolk suggests, the geopolitical crisis' of today are getting more and more complex and therefore require new and experimental avenues in documentation.

Faulkner does accept that there is certain amount of openness to late images and therefore they may indeed distance the spectator from the events depicted, however, he also suggests that there is nothing that fundamentally equates distance to misunderstanding or a lack of empathy (Faulkner, 2014, p.125). A certain amount of *space to breath* when faced with difficult, traumatic and sensitive subject matter allows the spectator room to reflect upon and comprehend an event. Especially when viewed in opposition to more distressing images that might evoke feelings of outrage or confusion at the

unfathomable state of war or conflict (Faulkner, 2014, p.125). In this sense, distance or space, can be viewed in as a positive characteristic. Furthermore, must we conclude that one approach to documenting a subject eclipse all others? Surely context and intention must contribute to why and how an image is made. Might it therefore be plausible that exposure to more varied and nuanced styles of image-making has the potential to lead to a greater awareness of how to understand and engage photographs? Where Campany sees the muteness of late photography as impeding analysis, if a spectator has to think beyond the surface of what is visible then they are already engaging in a more considered and thought-provoking process. It is very plausible that this leads to alternative dialogues and as Faulkner suggests, there is no aspect of late photographs that fundamentally negates this outcome.

Although the *The Place of No Crows* does not deal with scenes of conflict; my approach does share many characteristics with late photography as described by Campany and Faulkner. Similarities and analogies can of course be found within the visual aspects of destruction caused by war or conflict and the deterioration and decay of abandoned sites as they succumb to the elements. Depictions often convey an atmosphere of silence, a kind of calm after the storm, with a feeling that something has happened here; an unknown event or activity that has caused the devastation we see. However, it was not merely this resemblance that drew me to this approach of image-making, but also the more open-ended and ambiguous approach to

late photographs. From the very beginning it was clear that I didn't want to produce active or dynamic images: firstly, I didn't want to lead the viewer towards any kind of definitive conclusion about the places I was photographing, (if that is at all possible), secondly, dynamic photography is so closely associated with photojournalism and more linear storytelling. I wanted the photographs in the series to appear still, frozen in time, and ambiguous in meaning, in order to reflect liminality. Given that liminality is connected to transition, it would be reasonable to expect some kind of *movement*, however, I wanted to emphasize the documentary aspect of this project so I chose to avoid slow shutter speeds and motion blur. While the overarching theme may be conceptual, the people and the places are real and I didn't want there to be any ambiguity about that.

My interest was to find a way to combine the multiple historic and contemporary threads that impact depopulation (communism, globalization) into a scene that appears multifaceted and layered. The resulting images were largely static (although some 'action' is occasionally present) and formally straightforward, photographed almost entirely with a tripod, with a focus on landscapes, portraits and symbolic details and motifs that referenced to the overarching theme. These same allusions appear time and again throughout the project in order to reiterate certain ideas. The ruin can be seen to reflect the passing of time and the various overlapping historical narratives, while the thresholds reflect the cyclical nature of endings and beginnings as a direct connotation of liminality.

3.3 Thoughts on Ruin

Georg Simmel describes the abandoned ruin as the only art in which the will of the spirit and the necessity of nature actually find peace (Simmel, 1958, pp.380-385). There is a difference, therefore, between a ruin destroyed at the hands of humans and an abandoned ruin left to decay by forces of nature. The overwhelming of a work of humans by the power of nature merely suggests that nature never fully extinguished its rightful claim to the work. Even in its material state, the ruin was a part of nature and with time, reassimilates itself back into its surroundings through a *"…peaceful unity of belonging…"* (Simmel, 1958, p.384). In this sense, Simmel writes, abandoned ruins may appear tragic or melancholic but they are never sad. What strikes us about the abandoned modern ruin is our own indifference, the fact that we let them decay through a kind of positive passivity: *"…whereby man makes himself the accomplice of nature and of that one of its inherent tendencies which is dramatically opposed to his own essential interests…"*(Simmel, 1958, p.380).

The ruin has long since been a subject in art, with an especially rich history in painting. A great number of Romantic painters in Britain around the 1800s were beginning to notice the large number of time-

worn, yet enduring medieval towers that were scattered around the British Isles (Hawes, 1983, p.462). Artists such as John Constable, William Turner, Joseph Wright of Derby are all practitioners who actively engaged in the genre of ruin painting. Louis Hawes cites a letter by Constable expressing his thoughts on the ruin:

"…the size of many of them, and seen as they now are standing in solitary and imposing grandeur in neglected and almost deserted spots, imparts a particular sentiment, and gives a solemn air to even the country itself, and they cannot fail to impress the mind of the stranger with the mingled emotions of melancholy and admiration… The venerable grandeur of these edifices, with the charm and mellowing hand of time hath cast over them, gives them an aspect of extreme solemnity and pathos." (Hawes, 1983, p.458)

Constable's text is undoubtedly loaded with a romantic sensibility that was beginning to emerge at this time period. However, Hawes highlights in his essay Constable's Hadleigh Castle and British Romantic Ruin Painting, that although the genre of documenting ruin around the late 18th century was changing, it was still largely dominated by topographical draftsman, such as Moses Griffiths, who usually worked on site, with a highly literal and reportorial technique in order to faithfully record visual facts (Hawes, 1983, p.458). When Constable finally completed his painting of Hadleigh Castle back at his home, years after he had made his preliminary sketches, it was one of the most emotionally charged ruin paintings to come out

of the genre (Hawes, 1983, p.455). Furthermore, Constable took *liberties* with the two towers in his depiction of Hadleigh Castle, by making them appear gracefully more slender and closer together, in a more artistic composition (Hawes, 1983, p.461). That is not to say that Constable was the only painter to apply an emotive and illustrative quality to ruin painting at this time. Joseph Wright of Derby was also one of the earliest British painters to bring a *mood* approach to the dominating topographical genre by painting his *Lakeside by Moonlight with a Castle Ruin at Nighttime*, depicting the medieval tower silhouetted against a moonlight night sky. Even at the time it was considered a suggestive and *poetic* painting, illustrating a divide between the two different approaches (Hawes, 1983, p.461).

It is interesting to note how familiar this divide seems today. One can almost imagine the topographical draftsmen as the photojournalists of today, and the painters as the fine art photographers debating over the meanings and merits of their own approach to documenting an event. The intention of including this historical reference to painting is to highlight a familiar sounding debate in contemporary photography relating to documenting ruins. Some of the more common accusations against ruin photography are that the photographs often romanticize and aestheticize ruin. The idea that there is an aesthetic beauty in ruin, therefore, seems to be deeply divisive, yet the debate appears to have been going on for over two-hundred years, reflecting the complex challenge that exists in deciphering something as subjective and non-quantative as visual arts

and photography. There are almost always abandoned ruins around us, whether we notice them or not; photographing and entering ruins is both an extremely popular amateur hobby as well as a professional endeavor pursued by artists, architects, archeologists and academics alike. Considering that some of the most common reasons for abandonment are extremely traumatic events: drought, famine, war, conflict, natural disasters (Pompei) or manmade disasters (Chernobyl), it is, of course, important to consider how these ruins came about and therefore, how they are portrayed. Due to more recent consequences of globalization such as rural depopulation and urbanization there is very likely going to an increase in contemporary ruins and abandoned places in the near future. Although an abandoned building from the 1990s feels relatively insignificant and underwhelming compared to the medieval castles of Europe, the events and causes that led to their abandonment remain important and should be considered. Since abandonment is such an integral part to *The Place of No Crows*, it would be remiss to discuss the ruin without presenting a few of the current debates surrounding the subject.

In the joint essay, *Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography* Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen propose an alternative view to the contemporary criticism of *ruin porn* in archeological photography (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.8). They criticize what they deem to be a largely denunciative discourse and highlight the archeological potential of ruin photographs.

Furthermore, they emphasize the need for rethink and approach how aesthetics is discussed within an academic setting, and the necessity to reinvigorate the dialogue around ruin photography. In order to do this, they target three main points of contention and by turning them on their head, conclude that the alleged shortcomings about ruin photography is in fact exactly where its value lies (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.9).

To briefly summarize their essay: The first argument against ruin photographs is that they oftentimes appear selective suggesting that the ruins can only be seen to represent the photographers own taste bias (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.10). Pétursdóttir and Olsen argue that the *selective* critique of ruin photographs discounts a whole realm of sensual engagement with the ruin on the part of the photographer. They do not deny that photographs are highly selective and, therefore, biased, however, they emphasize that the act of going inside a ruin, experiencing it through all of one's senses: the assemblage of sights, smells, and sounds, is far more sensual and complex than the criticism acknowledges. Ruined space stands in stark contrast to the order and structure of the material world and offers a kind of liminal experience, and an encounter with the unfamiliar; ruin photographs, therefore, cannot be simply reduced to socially prescribed notions of beauty.

The second argument is that ruin photographs are superficial, they touch upon the surface of things without digging too deep into the

Abandoned Village,
Haskovo Province, 2017

subject matter, with no archeological equivalent of post-excavation efforts, no post-analysis and no interpretation (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018. P11). However, Pétursdóttir and Olsen view the superficiality of photographs as one of its most redeeming and enduring qualities:

"Not only is the photograph capable of grasping things' presence in a different and more immediate way than text, but the photograph's tautological nature also ensures the endurance of this banal depiction…the photograph allows us to turn that situated moment of prehistoric and 'innocent' wonder into a momentum that endures." (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.19).

The third line of criticism is that these photographs romanticize and aestheticize modern ruins, celebrating beauty at the expense of human trauma (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.11). Pétursdóttir and Olsen suggest that the nostalgic, romantic and melancholic qualities often attributed to photographs of ruin may be due to their similarity to baroque and romantic paintings of ruins, having inspired many photographic approaches and characteristics. Apocalyptic representation of failure and abandonment might also be connected to cultural depictions of *filmic violence* or *dystopian science fiction* which may influence how these images are perceived (Edensor, 2018, p.24). These associations and reactions to viewing images can therefore also be understood through Barthes punctum: the latent effect of photographs that may never have been intended:

"The ignition of this aesthetic affordance is always already present in the things depicted—and brought forward not necessarily because the photographer intended to do so but because of the photograph's indiscriminating attentiveness to the surface of things. The punctum is thus truly a very 'superficial' phenomenon—an aesthetic effect in the form of a primitive, instant reaction to a reality encountered." (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.20).

Pétursdóttir and Olsen therefore suggest that the discussion of ruin photography should be separated from representation alone and incorporate a much broader field of analysis to include what the images are intended for and how successfully this has been achieve (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.14). Through tracing the etymology of 'aesthetic' they also caution that its origins as a sensory experience have become lost through impulsive accusations surrounding the suspicion of beauty and the pleasure aspects of images: *"… it is traced to the two Greek words aisthiticos and aisthisis, where the former refers to 'that which is perceptive by feeling' and the latter to 'the sensory experience of perception'…"* (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018, p.15). In this sense, Pétursdóttir and Olsen proposing that we view aesthetics as a pre-linguistic encounter, not merely a veneer that is added afterwards. Similar dilemmas of representation are explored by Jacques Rancière's in his enquiries into aesthetics. Rancière also emphasizes the conflict between sensory presentation, the effect of a photographic image on the body, and the act of making sense of the image highlighting the need for a more critical analysis of photographic aesthetics:

"…art is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses are put to and the effects they result in. The question of images of the divine and the right to produce such images or the ban placed on them falls within this regime, as well as the question of the status and signification of the images produced." (Rancière, 2004, pp.20-21)

Finally, despite contemporary distrust of images, they contest that photographs still maintain a certain amount of autonomy and, therefore, an ability to resist the meanings attributed to them, and that we should acknowledge this tautological integrity. Due to the mimesis of a photograph-its ability to record what is in front of it, they defend the historical and archival significance of ruin photography. Needless to say, they find that the current debate on the aesthetics of ruin photography falls short, ignoring many of the philosophical questions that both photography and encountering photographs entails. Furthermore, they underline the dangers of reducing *aestheticizing* to a verb merely aimed at propagating a movement against certain kinds of image making. Pétursdóttir and Olsen make many compelling intellectual arguments in support of ruin photography, however, they do not actively engage with specific images within their essay. There are however, many examples of how photographs of ruin and contemporary ruin have been used to examine and represent larger philosophical questions about human nature.

Georg Simmel distinguishes between impact of a ruin left to decay and those destroyed by humans, ascribing the peacefulness of abandoned ruin to its character as the present form of the past. The implication the life that once dwelled there resolves the conflict of past and present into one united form. Similarly, photographer Simon Norfolk has emphasized the potential of ruins and their ability to engage spectators with the past: *"…ruins are not just traces of the past, but instances where the past intrudes on the present in a meaningful way…"*(Faulkner, 2014, p.126). In The Place of No Crows, there is an apparent dichotomy between present and past viewed through soviet architecture that has endured thirty years of decay and recently abandoned buildings that look as if the inhabitants have left only yesterday. While many of the factories and warehouses were abandoned shortly after the fall of communism, the more recently abandoned buildings are due to more recent effects of depopulation. The contrast between the amount of decay imposed upon these ruins implies that what we see is not only a consequence of past events but of something happening in the now and may therefore carry on into the future. The ruin consequently draws a direct thread between historical and contemporary events suggesting that things that have happened continue to influence what is currently happening, or in other words, history cannot be simply reduced to events that have already passed. The ruin therefore also reflects the Nietzschean idea of *historic reoccurrence:* empires, civilizations, the powerful, rise and fall and will continue to do so (Faulkner, 2014, p.126).

Faulkner sites various examples of how ruins have been portrayed in a way that utilizes the metaphoric potential of late photography. Images of abandoned soviet military bases taken by Angus Boulton, on the one hand, attest to the triumph of the west in the cold war but on the other evoke more existential questions such as, if this powerful military order fell into ruin, why then, should the same thing not happen to those of the contemporary period? (Faulkner, 2014, p.127). This sentiment is reflected by Norfolk in an interview where he discusses the merits of ruin photography in relation to their position as a motif within art history:

"…these artworks were not examples of dreamy-headed pictorialism but profound philosophical and political metaphors for the foolishness of pride; for awe of the sublime; and, most importantly…for the vanity of Empire…" (Faulkner, 2014, p.126)

In the Necropolis project by Koi Ruper and Gilad Ophir, the pair photographed abandoned Israeli military facilities. Photographs of crumbling military buildings with discarded items strewn across the overgrown site, aimed to present the (Israeli) spectator with an alternative view of the military. Their intention was to lift the façade on the military, reveal its fragility as an institution and questioning its highly regarded position at the center of Israeli society (Faulkner, 2014, p128). Faulkner writes how these images were crucially created at a time of emerging critical attitudes towards the military after a series of its failures. Israel was therefore beginning

to engage in a peace process that should have brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end. These photographs were intended to portray the country's military failures as an outdated approach, while presenting the potential for an alternative and demilitarized future (Faulkner, 2014, p.129), in this sense, the ruin can even be viewed as way of prompting dialogues and ideas about shaping the future. This is a theme explored by Monica Takvam in her essay *Introduction to Nostalgias: Visual Longing* where she highlights the potential of photographs to allow for a *contemporary post-mortem* of past events, while utilizing the photographic object as a trigger to recall events and emotions (Takvam, pp.100-101). The photograph, therefore, not only allows us to preserve memories but act as a way to revisit and question the past while contemplating the future; a kind of *vehicle for memory* (Faulkner, 2014, p.132). Perhaps this is why Ruper and Ophir also worked in black and white, to exploit the *that-has-been* quality of the photograph and thereby portray Israel's military approach as a by-gone era. In this sense they might have viewed their project not only as a critique but as a way to suggest an alternative path forward. Unfortunately, given the situation today, their photographs largely testify to the continued militarization of the conflict supporting the idea of historical reoccurrence.

Buzludzha Monument, Stara Zagora Province, 2018

Abandoned Theatre, Gabrovo Province, 2018

Abandoned Boarding House, Kosovo, Vidin Province, 2019

3.4 Thoughts on Thresholds

The other recurring theme was the threshold (borders, fences, windows and doors) and the referential quality of the threshold in connection with liminality. Both of these motifs have their place in the history of visual arts and I have been drawn to the idea of making visual connections and references to approaches to image-making that have come before.

In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep describes rite of separation that once occurred as a matter of leaving one's own land at the moment of entering a neutral territory (van Gennep, 2012, p.65). The act of crossing into a neutral zone has been known to be ritualized in various ways, for example, when General Ulysses S Grant visited Asyut in Egypt, a bull was sacrificed with the head placed on one side of the border and the body on the other so that Grant had to pass between them as he stepped over the blood. These border *portals* can be witnessed in a grander scale through the Roman arch of triumph or the Egyptian and Babylonian *threshold guardians* such as the Sphinx and various statues of winged dragons and other monsters (van Gennep, 2019, pp.66-68). The crossing of such a site would have at one time included a rite of separation, upon leaving, and a

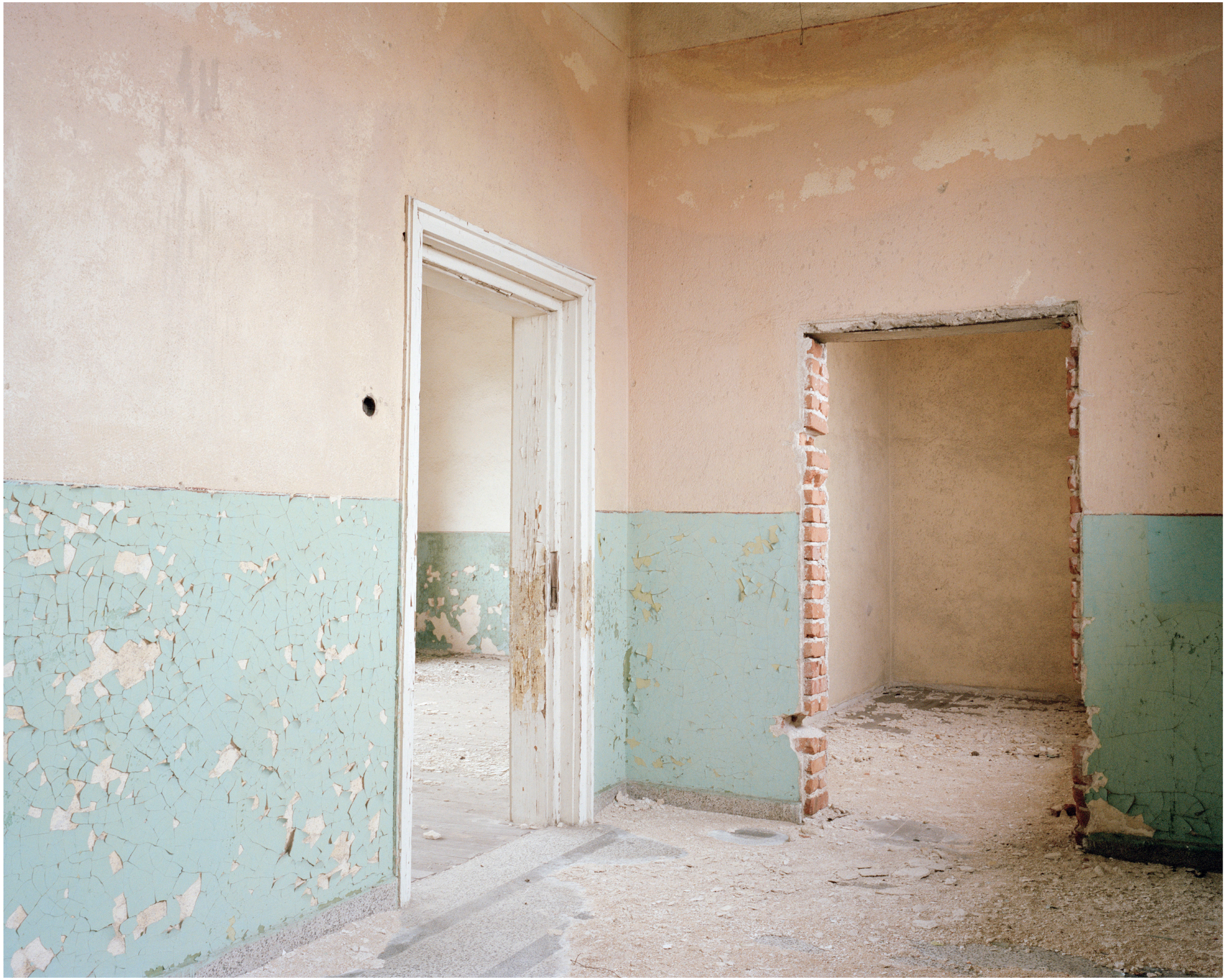
rite of incorporation, upon returning. These ceremonies vary but often consisted of a ritual sacrifice, or some other kind of offering (van Gennep, 2019, pp.66-68). van Gennep writes how the territorial crossings or rituals can be interpreted as a passage by which a person leaves one world behind and enters a new one (van Gennep, 2019, pp.66). Furthermore, he writes how the symbols demarcating neutral or liminal zones vary hugely in scale, from the 20-meter-high Sphinx to a small stone or a door beam (van Gennep, 2019, pp.66). The door as a symbol of boundary crossing has played an important role in many different cultures and, despite an array of different ceremonies that include: sprinkling blood or perfume, or hanging or nailing objects to the door frame, they have all served the same symbolic purpose:

"…the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore, to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world." (van Gennep, 2019, pp.67).

Drawing upon these symbolic meanings attributed to thresholds *The Place of No Crows* utilized this motif in order to emphasize and reference the theme of liminality. The work of the Realist painters Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth have both been of inspiration to my work and provide an interesting example of how depictions of thresholds have been used as a motif in visual art.

Hopper's paintings featuring windows as a focal point, often depict solitary figures gazing longingly out of them. In Hoppers *Hotel Window, 1955*, he portrays an elegantly dressed woman seated on a couch in a hotel lobby. The woman is seen to be staring out into the darkened window to the nothingness beyond and there is a deep sense of loneliness about this painting. His characters often appear lost or tired, and the world he depicts seems to be one where social interaction is sparce. Even when he does portray multiple characters within a scene, they are often alone and rarely communicating with each other. The overall atmosphere is one of strangeness and uncertainty.

Hopper was known to have explored themes of isolation and loneliness but there is also a strong sense of waiting, which can be closely connected to liminality; the uncertainty that change brings such as not knowing what the future will bring. One of the things Hopper manages to capture so well in his paintings is a feeling or atmosphere of time standing still. He often does this by portraying his subjects looking through or standing next to thresholds such as windows and doors. We often associate the act of looking out of a window with the act of waiting, reflecting and dreaming. The image of a child at school staring out of the class room window, daydreaming, waiting for school to end comes to mind. Windows are treacherous in this sense; they frame the world outside but also act as a barrier separating us from it. Alfred Hitchcock utilizes this tension in his film *Rear Window* while James Stewart's character, L.



Abandoned School, Siva Reka, Haskovo Province, 2017

B. Jefferies, who has been bound to a wheel chair after an almost fatal accident spends his days watching the mundane and routine activities of his neighbors, until one day he believes that he's witnessed a murder. The tension throughout the film is driven by his ability to see what is happening in contrast with his helpless inability to do anything about it. Hoppers characters also share this same feeling of helplessness, their loneliness and isolation appear beyond their control; they are resigned to watching the world go by, rather than being active participants in it. The themes of alienation and loneliness often attributed to Hopper and Wyeth share many characteristics in common with liminality and perhaps they more closely resemble the type of permanent liminality as described by Árpád Szakolczai:

"…a continuous testing, a constant search for self-overcoming, an incessant breaking down of traditional boundaries, and an existential sense of alienation and loss of being-at-home that in the modern episteme establishes itself as normality." (Thomassen, 2012, p.30)

So pervasive are Hopper's and Wyeth's depictions of thresholds that the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC previously dedicated an entire exhibition to Andrew Wyeth's window paintings, Charles Brock and Nancy K. Anderson published a book called *Andrew Wyeth: Looking Out, Looking In* specifical about Wyeth's window paintings; while Edward Hoppers window paintings (*Hotel Window 1955, Night Windows 1928 and At The Window 1940* to name a few),

Abandoned Boarding House, Kosovo, Vidin Province, 2019

have been the subject of numerous academic and journalist articles, including a Master's Thesis by Wendy Lopez at Colorado State University, 1990. The symbolic use of thresholds, however, cannot be solely attributed to these two artists.

Depictions of thresholds, specifically windows and doors, as a visual *motif*, had somewhat of a golden age within European painting during the 19th century. This is curious since this time period was one of immense political, philosophical and technological

development and a strong case could be made for the industrial revolution to be viewed as a liminal moment between a traditional and modern Europe. An exhibition, at the *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*, and accompanying book, both titled, *Rooms with a View: The Open Window in the 19th Century* in 2011, Curated by Sabine Rewald, offers an interpretation as to why so many 19th Century painters adopted the window as a tool for expression:

"…the Romantics found a potent symbol for the experience of standing on the threshold between an interior and the outside world. The juxtaposition of the close familiarity of a room and the uncertain, often idealized vision of what lies beyond was immediately recognized as a metaphor for unfulfilled longing." (Rewald, 2011, p.3).

The exhibition features some of the most prominent European painters of the period who all utilized the window to as a tool for reflecting upon their own *sense of claustrophobia, expression of yearning* and *view on to the world* (Rewald, 2011, pp.3-20). On the backdrop of such immense changes taking place within society, the window became their tool for comprehending past and present. Caspar David Friedrich's paintings portrayed window frames on multiple occasions, often contrasting dull, bland interiors with bright, colorful landscapes and seascapes reflecting the expanse of nature and the possibility of experience beyond. Rewald even described Friedrich's window depictions as a threshold between his *outer and inner world* (Rewald, 2011, pp.3). In the work of Vilhelm Hammershøi the window presents a view beyond the bourgeois rigidity and banality

of the home, with figures often depicted leaning out of windows in order to gaze down to the street below. One painting in particular, by Adolph Menzel titled *The Artist's Bedroom in Ritterstrasse, 1847*, provides a perfect example for understanding the window as a tool for juxtaposing past and present. The painting portrays the artists bedroom in Berlin, naturally lit by a tall window with the curtains partially drawn. There is order to the bedroom, however, beyond the window frame and in the distance a changing cityscape can be seen:

"It is a realistic view of the rapidly changing city, quite unlike the bucolic views favored by the Romantic artists. Menzel was fascinated by the chaotic juxtaposition of old and new, which he could witness directly from his apartment…Tall new apartment buildings abut low, ancient, half-timbered houses, survivors of the area's recent rural past. In the distance, above the green treetops, work is being completed on the roof of another tall structure…" (Rewald, 2011, p.71).

Menzel's painting heavily revolves around the use and placement of the window acting as a frame within a frame. The room presents the interior world–ordered, comfortable and safe, in contrast with the exterior world–chaotic, changing and uncertain. For the Romantic painters the window offered a simple way of contemplating the changes manifesting the world around them. In this sense, the motif can be seen a symbolic of passing from one era to the next and a way of contemplating what van Gennep might have referred to as *a new world.*

The significance of the window as a motif within visual art continued on well into the 20th century, influencing even the abstract paintings of Piet Mondrian (Rewald, 2011, p.20). The intrigue of the window has remained a dominant theme in photography and is visible through, for example, *John Divola's* series *Zuma*, and *John Pfahl's Picture Windows*, which both focus predominantly on windows. The threshold has left such a lasting impression on culture that it has even pervaded spoken language through idioms such as, *a window of opportunity, a window on the world of,* for example. In many cases it is a simple and obvious metaphor, yet, its persistent use implies that thresholds carry a large amount of gravitas within our collective imagination and that the simplest ideas are often the most effective.

Vladimir, Rabrovo, Vidin Province, 2019

Abandoned School, Blenika, Kardzhali Province, 2019

Pastor Mitko Asenov, Bulgarian Church of God, Smolyan Province, 2018

Epilogue

The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore the anthropological concept of liminality through photographs taken of depopulated communities in rural Bulgaria. The thesis was separated into four parts: Part I, II and III contain written components while Part IV consists of the photographs in the form of a book. Part I analyses the theoretical ideas that informed the photographs drawing upon the research of anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor W. Turner, through to the more contemporary understandings of liminality explored by academics Bjørn Thomassen and Árpád Szakolczai. It also describes how the concept of liminality became the framework for viewing depopulation, in relation to other spatial concepts, such as Terrain Vague. Part II proposes that similarities can be made between rural depopulation in a Bulgarian context and the contemporary theoretical framework for liminality as proposed by Bjørn Thomassen. Part III explores the genre of Late Photography, through essays by contemporary theorists, David Campany and Simon Faulkner as well as depictions of ruin and of thresholds within visual arts. Part IV is the physical book titled *The Place of Now Crows.* Documentation of the book follows the end of this chapter.

Much was revealed about my approach to working as a photographer through the process of editing the photographs into a sequence for the book. There was an intention from the beginning to adopt the ruin and the threshold as a recurring motif to reflect the passing of time, however, in the book format (I have learnt) there is an extremely fine line between recurring–in the most positive sense, and repetitive–in the most laborious. The more similar images that were brought into a sequence, the more repetitive it began to feel, emphasizing the possibility that the images were simply not diverse enough. Despite spending a little over a year experimenting with sequences and conceptual approaches, the final sequence still feels as if there is something missing; not more images, just more variation in images. This could partly be due to the amount of distance between photographer and subject, as a consequence of the approach I took to traveling rather freely through depopulated Bulgaria and photographing almost entirely on a tripod. This issue of *distance* might therefore have been resolved by focusing on one village and getting to know the inhabitants and the surroundings more intimately, rather than trying to cover such a large area. Different types of photographs may also have been achieved by occasionally removing the camera from the tripod.

I believe that there is a lot to be learnt from the concept of liminality regarding the human experience of transition and, therefore, how individuals and communities cope with extreme moments or periods of change. However, I would have liked to have gone deeper into the

sociological aspects of this concept and, although I did speak with many individuals, I did not conduct interviews per se. In hindsight it might have been more beneficial to the *usefulness* of this project to include some more personal stories and anecdotes about the experience of depopulation. A more in-depth series of interviews to accompany the photographs might have offered more universally applicable *knowledge* relating to the experience of depopulation.

Subsequently, this project should not be considered an anthropological study on Bulgarian communities or people. Aside from the main theme of liminality, the project can be viewed as an examination of landscape, history and memory, in the context of Bulgaria. However, one of the most interesting but also problematic aspects of photographs are the meanings and narratives that can be later attributed to images and thus, the dichotomy between the reality and the wider implications of a photograph. This evokes one of the most concerning aspects of documentary photography and also of my series: *was it right to use a place or a country such as Bulgaria, in order to explore a concept such as liminality?*

Depopulation is a global phenomenon, not a Bulgarian phenomenon, therefore, why not explore liminality through depopulation in Finland, the UK or a combination of many different nations for that matter? The fact that I had previously spent time in Bulgaria meant that it felt somehow familiar to me and therefore less disconcerting to return there. I had my own memories of the visible traces that

communism left upon the Bulgarian landscape and, combined with the extremity of Bulgarian depopulation, it was easy to conclude that this was an ideal location to explore liminality. However, my position as an outsider and the image that these photographs might potentially constuct about Bulgaria as a whole, remains rather concerning.

These anxieties have in fact led to a complete reevaluation of how I should work in the future and how similar universal themes such as liminality or transition could be explored in a less problematic context. The liminal aspects of my own status in Finland, for example, have become more apparent over the last year while I have been applying for permanent residency in the wake of the UK leaving the European Union. While the outcome is more than likely positive, the situation remains uncertain. This context offers an opportunity to explore a subject such as liminality in a much more personal way whilst also engaging themes connected to freedom of movement and national identity, which have become extremely prevalent within European political discourse, in recent years. This example is only a thought, nothing more, but it does reflect how I have begun to think about photography and representation in relation to what type of projects I wish to make; as well as the level of interrogation I will likely apply to my own future project ideas. Furthermore, the process of traveling to Bulgaria three times over the last three years has made me weary of this *urge* of mine to travel. The ethical and environmental impact of flying in order to make photographs

is problematic and should always be a consideration. It is therefore unlikely that I will find myself working in this way in the future, without extremely good reason or justification.

The process of engaging with a project at such high intensity for so long has been somewhat overwhelming, although it has brought many revelations about my own working process. The optimism and motivation experienced at the beginning of the project, were, over time reduced to anxiety and insecurity, revealing that my approach to working, in this instance, may have proved to be inadequate for the subject matter.

Moving forward, however, I believe that many of these realizations can be viewed in a positive light. This project and thesis has given me the time and space to reflect upon aspects of my practise and methods in a way that is simply not possible in most fast paced working environments. Despite my own resignations and concerns regarding the ethics of this work, the process of analyzing and scrutinizing my own photographs at this level has been revealing in the most informative and illuminating sense; and thus, it remains an invaluable and beneficial act.

Book Documentation

Technical Information:

Title: The Place of No Crows

Cover: Hardback / Oatmeal linen cover
& full-color dust jacket

Paper: Mohawk ProPhoto Pearl 140gsm

Size: 32.5 cm x 27.7 cm

Content: 120 pages, 54 color photographs

Text: Introduction by Daniel Court

Language: English

Printer: Blurb

The artistic work consists of a dummy book titled *The Place of No Crows*. The main aim of the book was to convey the essential qualities of liminality: uncertainty and ambiguity. The images are presented as one single image per spread, placed on the right-hand page with the page number on the left hand page. The images are loosely sequence in order of season, beginning in Autumn and ending in Winter, after one full seasonal cycle. All image captions can be found at the back of the book on pages 114-115.

Introduction text:

Since the fall of communism many of Bulgaria's rural communities have become largely uninhabited or, in many cases, abandoned entirely. These abandoned villages present themselves like the ruins of an ancient civilization, however, they are riddled with evidence of a not-so-distant past. The Place of No Crows: a local expression from North Western Bulgaria that refers to an abandoned village, explores these rural communities as a liminal landscape situated between the dream of a utopia and a nation on the road to democracy. Within the architectural ruins lies the grandeur of Bulgaria's soviet past, ensuring that it remains inexplicably present within the surrounding landscape.

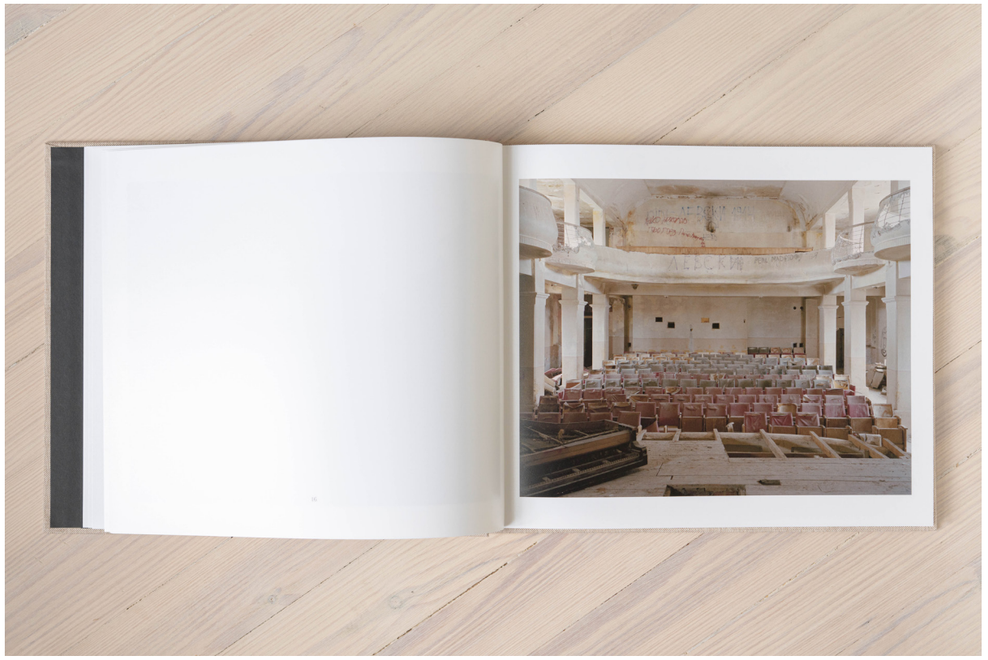

THE
PLACE
OF
NO
CROWS
Daniel Court

Page 1

Page 2-3

Page 3-4 (Title / Author)

Page 4-5 (Introduction text)



Pages 16-17

Page 38-39

Page 85

Page 21

Pages 114-115 (Image captions)

Oatmeal linen cover

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