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Between Propaganda and Cultural Diplomacy: Nostalgia towards Socialist Realism in Post-Communist Bulgaria

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During the Communist period Socialist Realism was part of the superstructure, as understood by the Communist ideology; as such it was subordinated to politics and articulated its objectives functioning as propaganda, thus seeking to create an idealized image of the Communist life both within the country and as a foreign policy. More than 20 years after the fall of Communism, in the fragmented post-modern and post-Communist artworld of the country, developed in the context of pluralistic national and transnational dialogues, surprisingly or not 38% of the population prefers the Communist state (“Barometer of the New Europe” study, 2005). Nostalgia towards the Communist past and Socialist Realism emerges as a substantial sign of an unfulfilled debate over the past and questions the status of fine art in the post-Communist situation.

This paper argues that nostalgia towards Socialist Realism is one of the impediments, which hinder fine art to function as cultural diplomacy because it maintains a sense of an illusory wholeness, which connects the artworld of the country to the closeness and the grand recit of Communism.

Introducing aspects of a current practice based research, this paper focuses on institutional and personal examples of nostalgia, examined in relation to the functions of fine art as propaganda. Nostalgia is scrutinized through the strategies of display of Socialist Realist monuments and paintings, strategies that provoke images to be ‘read’ as myths instead of critically discussed, as well as in attempts to be institutionalized by private museums of Communism. Critical views on nostalgia are explored through the works of the contemporary artists Nedko Solakov and Luben Kostov. Discussing debates on Socialist Realism and its status, this paper seeks to explore ways fine art to function as cultural diplomacy, ways that derive by an open dialogue on Socialist Realism beyond the political and provoking free exchange of ideas.

Keywords: grand recit, post-Communism, Socialist Realism, propaganda, nostalgia

During the Communist period in Bulgaria fine art was positioned as part of the superstructure, which, according to the Communist ideology, has relatively independent status and changes historically¹. As such it adopted a quite ambivalent position as both subordinated to politics and important part of establishing and maintaining an idealized image of the Communist life style. “Presentation of “desired” as “real” is embedded in the very essence of Socialist Realism”². The role of fine art was reduced to an illustration of the Communist ideology and its ‘translation’ into a visual language, relevant to the working class. As part of foreign policy fine art articulated its objectives, namely to present the prosperity of Communism in opposition to the ‘decadent’ world of capitalism. In this way it functioned as propaganda, thus losing its value as creating unique and independent cultural products that derive from the demand for knowledge.

The Marxist idea of ‘totality’ was embodied in Communism as ideology and political practice and hence in Socialist Realism. Fine art was claimed to be evaluated according to criteria of authenticity and accuracy, in relation to an ‘objective reality’. In this way fine art was subordinated to the metanarrative of the totalitarian ideology. In the post-Communist situation the artists found themselves in new political and economical relations. Before 1989 their life and creativity were inevitably connected to the Great narrative of Communism whether as members of the Communist party or dissidents. After the fall of Communism the grand recit should have been collapsed too. In many aspects it did collapse because the artworld of the country has developed in the context of national and transnational communication, following the striving of the country to take part in international debates. Yet, surprisingly or not, in this pluralistic situation 38% of the population says that they prefer the Communist state (“Barometer of the New Europe” study, 2005). More striking is the fact that the vast majority of the young people do not know crucial facts about Communism, for instance more than 60% of them do not know the meaning of terms such as ‘the Iron Curtain’ or ‘gulag’; for some of them Gulag appears to be a web search engine (Tzekov, 2013). This fact itself indicates an unfulfilled debate on the past and once again emphasizes the importance of discussing nostalgia.

This paper argues that nostalgia within post-Communist Bulgaria is one of the impediments of critical debate on the Communist past. Nostalgia in the field of fine art is not directed to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism but rather to its functions in relation to politics. In this sense it constitutes a public discourse that obstructs the acknowledgment of fine art

as independent by the dominant political discourse and as a means of cultural diplomacy. Exploring nostalgia, its manifestations and relation to the grand recit of Communism, this paper endeavours to suggest possible alternatives of the current relations to the past. It argues that one of the ways to develop significant cultural products as part of cultural diplomacy is the ability to critically discuss the past, beyond the political and ideological. This paper suggests that critical views on nostalgia, articulated by the means of fine art, could take important part in re-examining the totalitarian past and consequently could provide a ground for an open dialogue. Nostalgia is explored here as supported by institutions sanctioned by the state - "the Museum of the Socialist Art", as well as in individual attempts to be institutionalized - private museums of Socialism. "The Museum of the Socialist Art" is explored as one of the key institutions, which define the dialogue in the arts. It is under the administration of Ministry of Culture, which also manages the Bulgarian cultural institutes abroad and thereby directly influences the cultural diplomacy of the country.

Nostalgia within the Post-Communist Artworld of Bulgaria

In the field of fine art in Bulgaria nostalgia towards Socialist Realism manifests itself through the opinions of artists (expressed in surveys in the Union of Bulgarian Artists), in certain institutions responsible for art legislation and distribution (Ministry of Culture, the Union of Bulgarian Artists, etc.) and through public and artists' reactions to exhibitions from the Communist past. Others examples of nostalgia for the past could be found in websites on graphic design, songs and films from the Communist era; billboards dedicated to Communist leaders, etc.

Nostalgia is considered by some scholars as reaction to the present, to the rapid social and cultural changes that have been taking place over the last decades. "... Most often the impulses of nostalgia are not (only) emotions but rather a response to current social discomfort, a metaphor of a rising sense of failure and decline over the past two decades"³. Nostalgia is also claimed to be 'useful' as far as it represents "a way to remain critically skeptical about the current conditions of capitalist democratization"⁴. This paper does not renounce the skepticism derived by the current conditions that could provoke nostalgia. Yet it chooses to emphasize the impact of this trend, which, transferred into the post-Communist situation promotes continuity to Communism. According to Christopher Lasch

We need to distinguish between nostalgia and the reassuring memory of happy times, which serves to link the present to the past and to provide a sense of continuity. The emotional appeal of happy memories does not depend on disengagement of the present, the hallmark of the nostalgic attitude.⁵

Having influenced the debate over the past, nostalgia chooses to discuss only certain features of the Communist period, such as 'the secure and simple life' and 'the low prices'. In this way other key features of the Communist state - the repressions, insolvent centralized planned economy and ideological control over fine art, restrictions to travel even within the national borders, etc. - remain unexplored or even forgotten. As a result, the past appears to be revived and critical thinking for its heritage relinquished. Nostalgia collects and preserves components from the collapsed Communism, keeping the possibility at some point 'the entity' to be reinstated. Beneath the seeming pluralism of the debate towards the past, it maintains a monologic view over history, thus turning the selected elements into a total perspective. In this way it connects the post-Communist artworld to the metanarrative of Communism and its claims for total and objective knowledge that could be articulated in a single view, usually expressed by a position of power.

A helpful way to understand nostalgia is provided by Roland Barthes' concept of myth. Barthes defines myth as a system of communication, a mode of signification determined not by the object of its message "but by the way in which it utters this message"⁶. Myth constitutes a second-order semiological system, in which what is a sign in a previous system becomes a mere signifier in the second.

The materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different in the start, are reduced to pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth⁷.

In this way the meaning of the myth resembles more of a truth rather than something arbitrary or contradictory; it appears natural to the observers and convinces them easily of its truthfulness.

Barthes' concept of myth can be applied to the monuments and paintings from Socialist Realism as represented in post-Communist context. The concept facilitates the process of examination of nostalgia and its influence over fine art in Bulgaria after 1989. The relations to the spaces, where they are exhibited, endeavor to transform them into material for myths and thus to change their initial meaning. As such the images from Socialist Realism are displayed in quite specific ways in the post-Communist context, ways that provoke and maintain nostalgia towards the goals, status and functions of fine art before 1989. According to Barthes myth articulates a concept that bears a whole new history. The new meanings

signify attempts the past to be rewritten, maybe in an attempt an eternal return of history to be attained? The myths appear as facts, pretending to articulate 'truthful' and 'real' images of Communism.

A Private Museum of Communism

Since the fall of Communism and apart from the official museums dedicated to the Communist era, private museums all over the country indicate an increased interest in this period. The first Private Museum of Socialism in Pleven (an unfinished project), the Red Ceiling in Tarnovo, the house of Krasimir Kozlev in Liaskovets and the Collection of "Elias Canetti" Association in Ruse, The House of Todor Zhivkov⁸ in his home village, Virtual Museum of Socialist Graphic Design, and even collections exhibited in restaurants' interiors are all dedicated to legitimize private viewpoints over Communism.

One symptomatic example is The Museum of Socialism in Garvan village, Northeastern Bulgaria. It is examined by Rossitza Guentcheva as an attempt for "remembering and museumizing socialism" that represents "different figures of memory, going beyond the classic debate between a totalitarian paradigm and everyday-objects-centered "normalizing" perspective, namely lived socialism"⁹. The museum is an attempt for institutionalizing nostalgia; as distinguished from the 'museumizing' suggested by Guentcheva this paper argues that it attempts to place nostalgia beyond the notion of individual experience and thus supports its more significant impact as a public discourse. Without claiming to offer a complete image of the totalitarian past, the museum is an interesting and authentic space for exploring nostalgia as it presents a sincere memory. The latter recalls only desirable details from the recent past; in this sense the museum provides a viewpoint that is closer to a utopian vision than a critical debate.

The museum was created before the establishment of the official "Museum of the Socialist Art". As such it has "no hegemonic model on which to emulate"¹⁰ and developed its authentic personal understanding of Communism without juxtaposition to a dominant institutionalized discourse.

The exhibition starts with the coat of arms, two maps of Bulgaria, and a large scale portrait of Todor Zhivkov - signs that connect the memory of Communism to the idea of national identity. The exhibition traces consecutively the various stages of life under Communism - in one of the halls the viewer can see objects from school life: pioneering ties, school uniforms and textbooks; objects dedicated to the young, photographs of people from the village as students, as well as portraits of famous Communists killed young during the revolution. The next room presents objects from the next logical stage of life during Communism - membership in the party, represented by membership cards and scenarios for party celebrations. The other rooms are concerned with 'amusement' and labour during Communism, mostly in the local cooperative farms represented by a large amount of photographs.

The exposition shows an orderly way of life with its clear development and logic that is assigned by the ideological rules of the Communist party. There is no sensation of constraint in the museum. The nostalgic memory clears all 'unpleasant' displays of Communism; instead the visitor is drawn into a cozy atmosphere that invites him/her to an almost utopian life. Guentcheva points out that the museum is a way of connecting the personal stories of the villagers to the big stories of the "socialist regime, centered on the party, public participation, discipline and labor"¹¹; it also shows how they could be reconciled - the personal stories follow the logic and hierarchy set by the metanarratives.

In the framework created by the museum, art objects function as signs from the past, as myths, which are mere evidences of the existence of partisans and political leaders and signify their past and maybe present greatness. Insignificant and valuable objects are exhibited together, without any concern of aesthetic criteria. In this way the objects are imbued with value from the museum's creators as reminders of a past that should be relived. Placed outside aesthetical criteria, fine art serves as an illustration of the Communist ideas. The nostalgic sense of the exposition transfers this hierarchy in post-Communism and thus maintains the function of the cultural products as inseparable part of politics. Metanarratives are once again more important than art.

"The Museum of the Socialist Art"¹²

A new museum for showing Socialist Realism was established in 2011 in Sofia. This was the first museum dedicated to the Communist period in the country. Indeed, it was a late one since Communism collapsed more than 20 years ago. Still, it was a big event. Yet from the very beginning a wide range of concerns arose, which directed public attention to nostalgia towards the recent past. First, the name of the museum implies that the institution claims to show an overall picture of fine art under the Communist regime. Second, the lack of information about the works presented at the museum, as well as their selection and arrangement constitute an additional aspect designed to provoke an emotional response from the public

rather than an attempt for understanding the Communist period. The monuments and paintings at the museum are turned into mere signifiers, providing a reduced image of the past. In a way the museum resembles a ritual place where the spectators are invited to stand in nostalgic silence in memory of Communism. As a result, the institution articulates a sensation of an actual reality, a reality which endeavours to revive an idealized image of the Communist past.

What model of representation does the museum maintain? According to Carol Duncan, “advocates of art museums almost always argue one of the two ideals: educational museum or the aesthetic museum”¹³. The educational model is considered to be more democratic and popular, whereas the aesthetical model – more elitist. The “Museum of the Socialist Art” functions outside these two models. According to the museum’s organizers the only valuable works of the Communist period are these displayed in the institutions’ expositions. Interesting is the claim of the museum’s curator that the works are examples of “pure art”¹⁴. Thus Socialist Realism is separated from the political power and Communist ideology. In contrast, the term ‘socialism’ in the title focuses the spectator’s attention to the exact opposite proposition – fine art is correlated to socialism and articulates its ideology. In this way the museum does not provide a space for aesthetic contemplation, instead it places fine art as dependant from ‘socialism’.

The museum consists of a sculpture park of 7500 square metres and an indoor exhibition space (550 square metres). In a separate small space the viewer can watch a documentary film on Communism which assembles parts of propaganda films created before 1989 and a small number of images from post-Communist Bulgaria. In the propaganda films, the paths of the narrator is expressed by phrases such as “they [the children] are brimming with filial affection and gratitude [towards the visiting leaders]”; “on earth shall be Communism”, “...the faces of working people, shining with joy”, etc. In opposition, the frames from the post-Communist present show images of destruction and gloominess – demolition of monuments, dreary landscapes of abandoned factories and grey resident buildings. The past seems to be reduced to the imagery of the old propaganda films, whether the present is regarded as consisted of gloomy landscapes and images of destruction. There are no comments on the films at the museum. Thus we face an ambivalent position toward fine art – from the one hand, images are left to recall the past by themselves, which supports the idea that fine art has crucial role of representing the past. The creators of the expositions assume that images would be powerful enough to represent a ‘truthful’ image of the past. From the other hand, fine art is placed in a deliberately created framework of interpretations, which attempts to obstruct any ‘unnecessary’ critical views.

A large number of sculptures surround the viewer in the sculpture park. They are all different sizes and represent various subjects – from monuments of Soviet and Bulgarian Communist leaders (Lenin, Stalin, Georgi Dimitrov, Dimitur Blagoev, Todor Zhivkov, etc.) to small sculptures of workers and partisans. An example of a Socialist Realist image turned into material of myth could be found in the relief placed just beside the name of the museum. The central place emphasizes its importance to the exposition. The work is concerned with one of the fundamental subjects of Socialist Realism – the proletariat. The details of the six figures depicted show them facing one direction. The faces represent different people from the working class, of various ages; there is even a child in the centre of the composition. The viewer sees a bandaged head and a man holding a staff, maybe a flagstaff or some kind of weapon. The figures seem as part of a bigger scene from an organized fight – it could be an uprising or a revolution. The composition looks homogeneous; the figures almost merge into one, which emphasizes the unity of the people against a common enemy. In “The Communist Manifesto” Marx maintains that historically every form of society has been based on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes¹⁵. The class struggle defines “the content and direction of culture”¹⁶. Thus the central place of the relief at the museum is well-deserved. The context of displaying the work suggests a new understanding. In post-Communist context otherwise uncontroversial interpretation - that it represents the ideological enemy of Communism does not seem so obvious. The new meaning of the work transfers the glory of the proletariat in post-Communism; it suggests that this glory is not elapsed, it just needs a new (or maybe not?) aim.

The museum invites the viewer to read the myths and thus to experience the past. It does not intend to decipher them or to open a critical debate on the Communist period or its heritage. Form and meaning are perceived at once; past and present are merged into one. Temporality is not important in the museum; time is turned into space. The Communist leaders are once again confident on their high pedestals; the partisans and the proletariat are fighting once more for an upcoming revolution.

A Possible Alternative

The examples above show individual and institutionalized attempts to shift the debate over the recent past and to replace it by myths that endeavour to revive the ruined Communist reality; they discuss institutions, which agenda is defined by their relation to the past and their unwillingness to overcome it. Contemporary fine art is deeply influenced by these unfulfilled

debates; fine art practices outside the institutions are placed in a marginal position. Having lost their connection to the metanarrative of Communism, they appear fragmented and unable to find a common ground for a dialogue.

A possible alternative of nostalgia could be found in contemporary fine art practices outside the official art institutions. They offer art products, which objectives are not set by power relations but rather in the context of a free debate over the totalitarian past of the country. Speaking at American University, EWI's Vice President for the Strategic Trust-Building Initiative and Track 2 Diplomacy David Firestein presents his thoughts on cultural diplomacy. According to him one of the objectives of cultural diplomacy includes "convincing people to understand us and like us"¹⁷. And since "changing minds at the level of intellectual argument is nearly impossible, the most effective messages are created by means of the arts, they are organic, personal and emotional"¹⁸. Therefore an artwork should be developed in relation to important public discourses in society and should provide a personal and emotional insight. In the context of the examples discussed above, the requirement to fine art to be 'organic' seems inadequate as the public agenda - defined by the art institutions and sanctioned by the state - offers mostly repetitive topics and views that maintain myths instead of provoking a critical debate. For that reason the role of fine art could be slightly different. Here two possible directions will be discussed: fine art as 'deciphering' the myths from the past and fine art as suggesting discussions over issues left aside from the public attention.

Suggesting fine art as a way of maintaining critical debate on the past would assume that it possesses a cognitive function that allows it to offer new knowledge on the subject matter. This assumption is supported by the concept of art proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in his book "The Limits of Art". According to him fine art derives from artist's devotion to a knowledge of the world¹⁹.

"To make an artwork, one has to practice an acceptance of the world and this acceptance begins with tolerance, continues with attentiveness and respect and culminates in love – a love devoid of the selfish desire for possession"²⁰.

Todorov elaborates his concept after Iris Murdoch's idea developed in opposition to the "Romantic image of artists using their work of expressions of the self"²¹. According to Murdoch "great art involves removing the self to make room for the world and its discovery"²². Artists are driven by "an inner need to understand and reveal a facet of the world"²³, an aim that differs not only from the willingness for self-expression, but also from the longing for success or art as entertainment. Todorov's concept does not accept reduction of fine art to an illustration of a thesis. "The world is complex and great works of art possess an ambiguity that recreates this complexity instead of submitting it to a dogma"²⁴. The concept of fine art suggested by Todorov appears as an alternative both to the metanarratives of Communism and the fragmentation of the post-Communist artworld in Bulgaria. It suggests respect to the otherness and provides a ground for open debates.

Contemporary fine art in Bulgaria could provide critical perspectives on Socialist Realism and the totalitarian past by deciphering the myths created by the cultural institutions and thus developing a dialogue that could function as cultural diplomacy. It would support separation of images of Socialist Realism, provided and emphasized by nostalgia, and the idea of national identity. This dialogue would state the willingness of the country to overcome its totalitarian past and by doing so it would endorse democratic values as key values for the country.

As myths the images from Socialist Realism could be perceived in three ways according to Barthes' concept, ways which differ from each other mostly in means of relation between form and meaning. The first type acquires the form not to be regarded as important; it is perceived as "an empty symbol"²⁵ of a concept. This type of reading is used mostly by the producers of myths, who start "with a concept and seek a form for it"²⁶. The second type of perception clearly distinguishes form and meaning. It deciphers the myth, understanding the initial distortion between form and meaning embedded into the myth in order to produce a new signification. Finally, if the focus of the understanding is on form and meaning as in inseparable unity, this would lead to accepting the myth as real and natural, which would accomplish its central goals. In the third type of reading the myth passes from semiology to ideology and thus transforms history into nature. In this way we read the myth, we "live it as a story at once true and unreal"²⁷.

Distinguishing form and content, as suggested by Barthes, contemporary fine art practices can decipher the myths from the past that haunt the post-Communist present. The installation "Time (Machine for Breaking Idols)" created in 1989 by Luben Kostov and exhibited in the Third Istanbul Biennale engages in a debate on the myths from the past. The installation comprises a wooden structure made of gears and beams. It seems like the machine literary smashes small objects that could be the idols of the past. Idols are turned into objects that can be destroyed by physical force, i. e. they do not possess any pseudo-religious features. Reducing them to trivial objects, the artist questions the 'truthfulness' of the myths from the past.

Another installation by the same artist - "Machine for Applause" (1989) explores the cult of personality during Communism. The wooden machine represents three human sized figures. They are connected through a mechanism to a button on the floor and start to applaud enthusiastically when the viewer presses it. After 1989 Luben Kostov was among the first artists who began to use the public space of the city as a space not only for exposure to work, but also to seek direct contact and interaction with the viewer (Michaylova, 2009). The two installations and the ways he exhibited them contribute to an alternative status of fine art as independent and critical to the dominant political discourse and nostalgia towards the totalitarian past.

The installation "I Miss Socialism, Maybe" by Nedko Solakov offers another example of critical approach to nostalgia. The artist exhibited his work as part of a solo exhibition in Beijing, thereby directing international attention to this issue. On a wall, painted in bright red colour, the artist drew the eyes of Big Brother, who stare at the viewer with a look of indifference. The indifference makes them even more frightening. 21 videos are spread amongst cushions in the shape of Chinese letters, constituting the "I miss Socialism, maybe" phrase. In the words of the artist "almost none of these videos are directly related to that theme. But what they do show is the confused inner world of a middle-aged man who still believes that a better world will come, again"²⁸. In order to elucidate his viewpoint on the subject further, he added the following handwritten text on the wall:

I miss the Big Brother eyes, why? Because my friends and I dream of how nice it would be when the Big Brother's eyes would be gone forever. Yes they are gone, but they have been replaced by many more pairs of eyes following you²⁹.

The installation "I Miss Socialism, Maybe" articulates an intriguing view on nostalgia; it could be regarded as nostalgic yet in the same time it opens up possibilities for a dialogue on nostalgia as a reaction of the post-Communist conditions, which have not met the expectations of the artists, lived during Communism. It provides new perspectives of looking at nostalgia, its aims and premises. We could interpret nostalgia as "useful"³⁰ as an ideological problem engendered by the liberal present³¹, or to develop our own perspective on it; in any case this kind of artworks, in their unique visual language and ways to communicate with us would help us to expand our minds and discover new viewpoints, to affirm a dialogue in means of fine art as part of cultural exchanges that face the challenges of cultural diplomacy in the post-Communist and post-modern world.

Notes

¹ Berdyaev, 1948, p. 96.

² Doynov, 2010.

³ Avramov, 2012.

⁴ Barney, 2009, p. 133.

⁵ Lasch, 1991, p. 82-83.

⁶ Barthes, 1972, p. 114

⁷ Barthes, 1972, p. 114

⁸ Todor Zhivkov was the leader of the Communist party and accordingly the country for more than 30 years.

⁹ Guentcheva, 2013.

¹⁰ Guentcheva, 2013.

¹¹ Guentcheva, 2013.

¹² The translation of the title does not belong to me, it is written on a signboard in front of the museum.

¹³ Duncan, 2005, p. 4.

¹⁴ Quoted by Guentcheva, 2012, p. 126.

¹⁵ John Morgan, 2005, p. 391.

¹⁶ Kadarkay, 1991, p. 342.

¹⁷ Firestein, 2010.

¹⁸ Firestein, 2010.

¹⁹ Todorov, 2010, p. 82.

²⁰ Todorov, 2010, p. 81.

²¹ Todorov, 2010, p. 81.

²² Quoted by Todorov, 2010, p. 81.

²³ Todorov, 2010, p. 90.

²⁴ Todorov, 2010, p. 87.

²⁵ Barthes, 1972, p. 128.

²⁶ Barthes, 1972, p. 128.

²⁷ Barthes, 1972, p. 128.

²⁸ Solakov, 2011.

²⁹ Quoted by Fowkes, 2013, p. 14.

³⁰ Barney, 2009, p. 133.

³¹ Todorova, 2010.

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Bio-note

I am currently in my third year of PhD in Fine Art, in the University of Southampton. During my MA in Fine Art at the same university, I developed series of paintings on the Communist past and our memory on it, looking mostly at the relations between the Communist ideology and utopia. My PhD thesis has continued these examinations - I have been working on a practice based research on the continuity between Communism and post-Communism in Bulgaria, focusing on nostalgia and rewriting the past. Most of my paintings can be found at www.ninapancheva.info.

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