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Nostalgia as political emotion and the discursive production of passive collective subjectivity: a critical rhetorical analysis of the Bulgarian Museum of Socialist Art

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Abstract: In 2011, Bulgaria became the latest country from the former Soviet bloc to create a Museum of Socialist Art. The Museum offers an opportunity to analyze the function of post-communist nostalgia in the production of passive collective subjectivities from a psychoanalytically informed rhetorical perspective. In particular, the Museum’s rhetoric suggests a productive dialectical contradiction through which nostalgia can operate to both stir desire for the past (communism) and to silence critical engagement with that past, all the while justifying the present social and political order (neo-liberal capitalism). To explain the constitution of an ambivalent discursive-affective relation between “the people” and a certain interpretation of the past, I draw on Slavoj Žižek’s understanding of *melancholy* as originating not from the loss of the object but from the withdrawal of the *object cause of desire*. The Museum’s rhetoric—as well as the broader official discourse within which it is embedded—suggests that enjoyment of the communist symbols is simultaneously enabled (through their physical presence) and prohibited (“we should remember the past, so as not to repeat it”). The potential discursive effects of this prohibition are also similar to the mechanism described in a diverse body of empirical research on celebrity death and nostalgia.

Keywords: nostalgia, rhetoric, psychoanalysis, collective subjectivity, socialist museums, Bulgaria.

“Communism and socialism are going where they belong – in history,” declared Bulgaria’s then-Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Simeon Diankov, at the opening of the Museum of Socialist Art (MSA) in Sofia, on September 19, 2011 [1]. After the collapse of communism in 1989, the artifacts were taken down from public spaces and stored in cellars and warehouses. Now the monuments stand quietly in the new 7,500-square-metre (80,729-square-foot) outdoor exhibit space. A branch of the Bulgarian National Art Gallery, the MSA is located outside Sofia’s downtown, near the offices of the National Police and the National Investigative Services. The exhibit includes a 550-square-meter indoor space housing 60 paintings and 25 statues, and an outdoor garden where 77 giant sculptures depicting communist Leaders, symbols and themes, are lined up along newly paved paths. Visitors can also view 45 minutes of communist-era newsreels, which also include footage from the demolition of the Mausoleum in Sofia that until 1990 held the embalmed body of communist leader Georgi Dimitrov. The white marble building was detonated in 1999, after a raging nationwide debate. The government invested 1.5 million euro (\$2.1 million) in the MSA, which it initially projected it would recover within two years through ticket sales (tickets cost three Euros). Another potential source of revenue is the

small souvenir shop at the museum which sells “Lenin and Dimitrov postcards along with mugs and T-shirts with the museum’s logo.” [2].

The establishment of such a venue more than two decades after the collapse of the communist regime —an effort, in part, to catch up with other countries from the former Soviet bloc—stirred controversy and debate in political, artistic, and academic circles. Some commentators welcomed the MSA as an opportunity to engage with the past in a dispassionate, non-judgmental, and non-ironic way [3]. Others argued that an opportunity for critical assessment of history had been squandered; that a much needed contestation over history had been sidetracked by nostalgic sentiment “for the repressive dictatorship, driven by its successors” and that the museum represented yet another attempt at historic revisionism by a “political elite with roots in the communist past.” [4]. Vezhdi Rashidov, Bulgarian Minister of Culture and eminent sculptor, who was the leading proponent and organizer of the museum, argued that the works on display possessed artistic value beyond any political or ideological content and represented some of the most renowned national artists of the 20th century [5]. However, in a scathing critique, Svetlana Kuiuimdzhieva from the Institute of Art Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences questioned not only the thematic and chronological logic behind the MSA collections, but also the very function of the museum as such. “A museum of what?,” she asked, arguing the new institution in fact represented the old ideology in action [6].

A number of scholars have traced these debates in detail, noting that the MSA is both productive and reflective of nostalgia and critiquing the ways in which it may be shaping collective memory of the communist period [7]. However, even though the MSA is a contested public space, a polyvalent text that partakes in the construction, selection, deflection, or erasure of the past in ways that serve present-day political purposes, it has received little attention from the perspective of rhetorical and public memory studies. Additionally, its affective, nostalgic, dimension has been assumed but has not been systematically analyzed. Memory places (such as monuments, memorials, and museums) “are especially powerful rhetorically” and they present an opportunity to analyze the imbrication of rhetoric, memory, and place [8]. Rhetoric is a “fundamentally public activity,” materially and politically consequential for the constitution, (re)articulation, and negotiation of collective identity; and so is public memory, which is rhetorical, affective, and frequently attached to physical places [9]. The purpose of this study, then, is to engage with the MSA as precisely an intersection of rhetoric, memory, and place with a focus on its nostalgic dimension in an attempt to understand its rhetorical complexity and its paradoxes.

That the MSA would stir nostalgia in some of its visitors is not surprising. According to its curator, Bisera Yosifova, while children and youth know little about the communist period and about the historical figures and symbols on display at the museum, the elderly “come . . . driven by nostalgia, because that was part of their lives; they sit, and they look, and they cry.” [10]. Clearly, a segment of the general Bulgarian population remains sympathetic to the communist regime: the same month that the MSA opened, “hundreds of Bulgarians celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of the country’s long-serving dictator, Zhivkov.” [11]. However, while the MSA may have invoked in some a longing for the life they had during communism, it has also been remarkably unsuccessful in generating interest from the general public.

During my visit in the summer of 2012, what struck me the most about the Museum—apart from the fact that monuments I remembered from my childhood as truly imposing now seemed nondescript and diminished in stature—was the conspicuous absence of contextual information about the artifacts and the equally notable absence of visitors. Although the place had been open for almost a year, the guest book contained only a couple of pages of sentimental notes and expressions of deep gratitude for preserving the artistic treasures of what some of the commentators described as an important period of the national history. The guard on duty told me that no one really cares about the Museum, and no one, except for the occasional tourist, ever goes there.

More recently, the *Trud* reported that nearly 20 months after its opening, the MSA had only attracted 10,000 visitors, including tourists and students [12]. Perhaps these numbers reflect the public's apathetic attitude towards the totalitarian past. In Bulgaria, there has been a general lack of interest critical assessment of the period between 1944 and 1989, or in reckoning (whether legal, in the courts, or symbolic, in the museums) with the personages who actively engaged in what in a different context might be termed crimes against humanity [13]. It seems, then, that the MSA's nostalgic appeal or its effects are less than straightforward and that they connect to the simultaneous loss of interest/desire for the past and the resurgence of nostalgia for it that seem to define the broader social context. The MSA's own rhetoric displays a paradoxical layering of nostalgia and amnesia, offering rhetoricians a unique opportunity to analyze the production of public memory and forgetting.

As I shall argue, the Museum's rhetoric suggests a productive dialectical contradiction through which nostalgia can operate to both stir desire for the past (communism) and to silence critical engagement with that past, all the while justifying the present social and political order (capitalism). To explain how the museum partakes in the rhetorical production of public memory and national identity, I analyze the ambivalent discursive-affective relation between "the people" and their "past" in terms of the psychoanalytic understanding of melancholy developed in Slavoj Žižek's work. Melancholy, on this account, originates not from the loss of the object but from the withdrawal of the *object cause of desire*. Lost desire can sometimes be revived, if a symbolic prohibition— a public law or generally accepted social practice—is introduced: if something that is experienced as lost is in addition also prohibited, then it could become desirable again [14]. The pattern, then, is: lost desire, prohibition, renewed desire.

In particular, I suggest that the museum's officially enunciated purpose to remember the past, to even engage in melancholic *enjoyment* of its symbols, also implies its obverse supplement which mandates silence regarding the past, again through the absence of context and of information about any of the horrors of the totalitarian regime. Symptomatic of this inherently contradictory, yet potentially rhetorically productive, functioning of the museum are the following rhetorical elements: first, the rhetoric of the monument park and exhibit themselves, where the absence of both context and contestation is palpable and its effects are the production of a predominantly visual "place", in Michel de Certeau's [15] sense, that interpellates visitors as passive citizen-subjects rather than a "space" that invites acts of engagement and critique; second, the significant shift in the naming of the venue which results in the dis-articulation of "socialism" and "totalitarianism"; and, third, in general statements by officials such as the Minister of Culture, who simultaneously deny the ideological import of the artworks and emphasize the political importance of remembering

the past in the current market-driven environment. In other words, the Museum's rhetorical potential hinges on a peculiar imbrication of commemoration and amnesia, corroborated by the explicit absence of analysis and contextualization of the artifacts on display.

This essay proceeds as follows: after a concise review of the relevant literature of nostalgia in general and post-communist nostalgia in particular, I then turn to the psychoanalytic understanding of nostalgia and its significance for understanding the rhetorical complexities of the MSA and its broader social context where nostalgia and indifference for the communist past intersects with ambivalence towards the current democratic capitalist system. In the final section I engage in a close reading of the rhetoric of and about the MSA.

A broad look at nostalgia as political emotion

Etymologically, the term combines the Greek words *nostos*, or "return home," and *algia*, or "longing." [16]. Once considered to be a psychological illness, today nostalgia is used more generally to describe yearning for an idealized past and homesickness. There is a general consensus that nostalgia reflects the inescapable sense of loss that defines modern and late modern subjectivity [17], but can also be understood as a psychological coping mechanism, a buffer against existential threats, and a mechanism for reducing feelings of loneliness by strengthening social bonds and increasing self-regard [18]. In a related way, nostalgic cultural products can sometimes serve as a means for healing a ruptured community, because they help construct a sense of collective unity and belonging, resulting in cultural integration [19]. Rhetorical scholars have attended to nostalgia's role in the constitution of individual and collective identity, arguing that sentimental rhetoric can serve as a "means of political image (re)construction." [20] and "as a resource or grammar for the rhetorical performance of the self," especially in the context of a postmodern fragmented world [21]. However, they have also cautioned that nostalgia can serve in seemingly contradictory terms as both "an escape" from politics, and as a form of "authoritarian fiction," with possible socially debilitating effects [22].

Scholars outside the field of rhetorical studies have also been critical of nostalgia, primarily because of the ways in which it can produce obedient political subjects, willing to cede their agency to those in power. Zala Volčič, for instance, argues that "[n]ostalgia offers an idealized version of an unattainable past that can stunt the cultural imagination by discounting and excluding real viable options for social change." [23]. Furthermore, nostalgia "is often deliberately employed to deny the present, creating . . . 'a profound gap between the sanitized nostalgic reproductions and the actual traumatic history'." [24]. Frederic Jameson goes even further to suggest that nostalgia is a mechanism produced by the broader framework of neoliberal capitalism, which is marked by the alienation of the subject. Within this context, the subject is barred from actual historical knowledge [25]. Of course, absolute historical "truth" or complete historical knowledge is impossible, as Marita Sturken has demonstrated, memory and history are always "entangled" in complex ways [26]. Moreover, memory is processual, partisan, partial, contested, and constructed (that is, necessarily mediated through our symbolic systems) [27]. It is precisely this fluidity of public memory that makes it such a rich terrain for rhetorical analysis, especially in the context of post-communist societies where publics have complex relations to their past, marked most recently by the widespread resurgence of nostalgia.

Post-communist nostalgia and disillusionment with the present

The phenomenon of post-communist nostalgia is the subject of a robust body of literature [28]. The sentiment is often attributed to the slow and dissatisfactory post-1989 transformation of many Eastern and Central European (CEE) societies, which still suffer economic hardships and austerity, the effects of a deteriorating social safety net, and the persistence of nepotism and corruption in the political system [29]. The challenges and the uncertainties of a long and difficult social, economic, and political transition in many post-communist societies has elicited the sentimental desire to return to the (imaginary and idealized) past or, to what Ljubica Spaskovska terms a communist “renaissance.” [30].

In Bulgaria, for instance, the number of citizens who see the transition to capitalism as positive dropped from 73 percent in 1991 to 53 percent in 2009. However, recent studies suggest that there is a significant age gap in the public’s attitudes towards the past. While Eastern Europeans of all ages are concerned about the political and economic development of their societies, those between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine are much more likely than the older generation to support capitalism and democracy. However, in Bulgaria, both groups view the current economic situation as being worse than under communism (66 percent of those over 40 and 53 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 39). Furthermore, only 16 percent of younger people and 8 percent of the older generation agree that ordinary people have benefited from the changes since 1989/1991 [31]. The general disillusionment with the transition to democracy and capitalism presents a situation potentially ripe for the flourishing of nostalgia for the past, which is why the MSA could produce sentimental rhetorical effects and why its paradoxes deserve special attention.

One of the most influential accounts of post-communist nostalgia is Svetlana Boym’s book *The Future of Nostalgia*. Boym offers a typology of the sentiment, delineating two types of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia that thinks of itself “as truth and tradition” and “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” and reflective nostalgia that accepts uncertainty and change, sustains the ambivalence and even irony of longing and belonging, and questions notions of absolute truth [32]. While Boym’s valuable distinction would certainly apply to the MSA, relegating its rhetoric to the restorative end of the spectrum, it is not sufficient in explicating all the nuances in the nostalgic mechanism that I am concerned with in this essay. It is in Slavoj Žižek’s work that we find a conception of nostalgia amenable to the analysis of rhetoric, memory, and place.

Ideology and the production of melancholic subjectivity

Žižek’s work entails the synergistic reading of German idealism (especially Hegel) and the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis, in particular, informs Žižek’s understanding of nostalgia. Of course, a detailed review of Lacan’s theoretical corpus is beyond the scope of this essay, but I will provide a heavily truncated explanation of the psychoanalytical conception of the subject, particularly as it appears in Žižek’s work in relation to ideology and the mechanism of nostalgia or melancholy.

The subject, or any given social formation (*individual or collective*), is, for Lacan, an *effect* of the signifier, and social construction becomes possible precisely because meaning does not depend on some stable signified or a transcendental signifier. Every social formation (hegemony, a “nation,” etc.) can be understood as a politically and materially consequential but nevertheless historically contingent and inherently unstable discursive articulation, structured around a constitutive lack (there is no permanent, central term that can anchor the formation; a “people” or a political system is always in flux). Furthermore, lack produces

the subject's desire and its incessant pursuit for a full and stable identity, which of course is impossible within any system of signification [33].

Still, the subject confuses this ontological lack with loss – that is, the structural impossibility of a “perfect” society with an empirical obstacle (such as an “enemy,” a marginalized social group etc., that stands in the way of “our way of life”). This confusion is precisely what Žižek, following Giorgio Agamben, identifies as the mechanism of melancholy: “The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object [say, the retrospectively idealized “way of life” during communism] what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.” [34]. However, there is one more important nuance to the mechanism of melancholy that directly relates to MSA's possible rhetorical effects. Melancholy (or nostalgia), Žižek points out can occur not when we lose the object, but when we lose the desire for it. In such cases a prohibition may be introduced “precisely a desperate, secondary attempt to resuscitate desire.” [35]. It is precisely this sequence of melancholy (lost desire, prohibition, and possibly rekindled desire) that interests me here.

This mechanism of nostalgia finds an interesting parallel and empirical footing in a diverse body of research that focuses on celebrity death and nostalgia [36]. The “desire” for a given celebrity—even if it is someone who has gone into relative oblivion—spikes, at least temporarily after they die. Deceased celebrities as cultural symbols frequently return to “haunt” as simulacra, through advertising, re-runs and re-makes of cultural products in which they starred. Although in the case of the MSA the artifacts depict actual historical figures, as well as ideological symbols and ideas, and although those artifacts are material rather than simulacra, the mechanism of nostalgia they trigger may be similar.

The parallel between the possible effects of the museum and the production of nostalgic sentiment in consumer (including celebrity) culture is not farfetched [37]. In fact, the articulation of consumerism and post-communist nostalgia is quite widespread in many CEE countries where communist symbols and brands are re-entering the new socio-economic context as nostalgia-tinged consumer products [38]. For older people who remember communism, these products are a reminder of their youth, while the younger generation finds them trendy [39]. Along with the interest in the popular culture of the past, there has also been a renewed fascination with public memory, including the creation of museums and exhibits about the communist period, which have enjoyed significant success [40]. Ironically, then, post-communist nostalgia can function as part and parcel of a market-based capitalist society.

The MSA comes on the heels of these developments and in a context of a bustling nostalgic cultural industry, which however has effectively silenced critical assessments of the past. In Bulgaria, the waves of post-1989 melancholia swelled primarily with “memoirs, memories, personal biographies, stories of the former regime” authored mostly by people who had “held places in the old hierarchy, in the higher echelons of power” while the voices of those who were victimized by the regime and of ordinary citizens have been marginalized [41].

In other words, from the outset, the production of prominent nostalgic cultural products in Bulgaria has tended to favor an official interpretation of the past. The MSA is aligned with this trend, but because its symbolic mandate is accompanied by an implicit prohibition, it

interpellates the Bulgarian public within a paralyzing rhetorical matrix. The MSA simultaneously invites visitors to enjoy the symbols of the past and bars them from doing so; holds the tantalizing image of an ideal de-contextualized and de-historicized past before their eyes only to assert the value of the present political context. The following sections analyze this rhetorical paradox.

Analyzing the rhetoric of and about the Museum of socialist art

Memory places, such as the MSA, explains James Loewen, function as the site of convergence of three temporal moments: first, the site's manifest narrative, "the event or person heralded in its text"; second, "the story of its erection or preservation. The images on our monuments and the language on our markers reflect the attitudes and ideas of the time" they were built; and, third, the present time of viewing the museum [42]. Because the MSA is still quite new, the third and second temporal points overlap. For this reason, my focus here is on the first and second temporal moments and the implicit tension between them. The MSA exhibits' expressed or manifest narrative is representative of the dominant ideological view of the communist regime and is charged with nostalgic appeals.

Furthermore, because this narrative is conveyed through almost exclusively visual means (the artworks themselves) and there is hardly any textual context and interpretation provided, it stages a "visual place" in Michel de Certeau's sense [43]. With regards to the second temporal dimension, while little is said about the artifacts' "erection or preservation," the official narrative about the building of the MSA and its purpose (remember the past, so as not to repeat it), as well the symbolic and practical consequences of its location (outside the city center and not too easily accessible), all imply the prohibition to enjoy.

Visiting the MSA entails an almost exclusively visual experience. Apart from title of the piece, author's name, and year, there is no other information about the either the artifacts or their historical period. Additionally, the spaces of both the indoor exhibit and the outdoor monument park are open, and there is no particular way in which one can or should look at the displays. Both spatially and temporally the visitor remains somewhat disoriented. There is no specific chronological or thematic arrangement of the artifacts (Figure 1). "Display practices that emphasize the object and its peculiarities marshal visitors to adopt a 'delectating vision' - one of delight and wonder." [44]. This is not a place conducive to an informed, critical assessment. Instead, the expressed content of the selected works is heroic and romantic, and potentially evocative of nostalgia.

The MSA thus creates a visual *place* in de Certeau's sense—rather than a "practiced space" that elicits active physical and intellectual engagement—that interpellates the viewer as a passive subject confronted with "timeless" aesthetics and themes [45]. The museum's melancholic rhetoric presents a reductive, yet potentially enticing view of a "perfect society" under communism, productive of the sentiment of nostalgia and of the melancholic subject's always already failed pursuit for the impossible object of the romanticized past. Both the timelessness implied by the museum "place" and the logic of nostalgia are conducive to the production of nationalist sentiment—a rhetorical effect not lost to the MSA creators.

During the MSA's opening ceremony, the Minister of Culture stated that "A People that does not build museums, temples, roads, will be lost to history." Then he joked that he would often tell the then-Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, that he should "Build roads, so that we can get to

the museums.” [46]. He added that the public should talk more about a cult for the motherland than a cult for personality, because personalities remain behind the museum display windows. Rashidov’s awkward attempts at humor notwithstanding, his statement suggests that the MSA’s melancholic vibe was channeled by Borisov’s cabinet to unify the Bulgarian “people” behind signifiers such as “the motherland” and the symbols of national pride, putatively represented by the eminent Bulgarian artists’ works included in the collections.

Similarly, the consistent emphasis on the purely aesthetic, versus the ideological, value of the exhibits sanitizes and depoliticizes them in ways that retroactively purify the past. The Bulgarian citizenry is invited to enjoy the works of art as neutral objects of beauty:

“A new generation will emerge, young and pure, which must not be deprived of the history and heritage of its people,” said Culture Minister Vezhdi Rashidov. He said much of the socialist art goes beyond propaganda. “Many of the objects here have a high art value” . . . “These art works, discarded as ‘totalitarian,’ are true masterpieces,” Rashidov said, hailing the “masterful craftsmanship, brilliant compositions, beautiful artistic solutions.” [47].

This emphasis on aesthetics not only invites passive reception of the museum and its collections but also further augments the MSA’s expressed narrative. Indeed, the MSA exhibit privileges the grand narrative of heroic and romantic themes that reflect and serve the hegemonic purposes of the now defunct regime. Most of the artworks depict universal romanticized themes and personalities connected to the communist movement: revolutionary poets, workers on strike, partisans meeting in the woods to plan the uprising, etc.

However, despite the museum’s decontextualized rhetoric, the erasure of multiple and conflicting memories and historical facts about the communist regime can never be total, not in the least because visitors to the museum would bring their own divergent memories and experiences of the past. In other words, the universalizing tendencies of the MSA’s visual display can never fully conceal the artifacts’ necessarily fragmented, contradictory, and historically contingent nature, because, as Alan Stanbridge points out, “artifacts are contingent upon—and cannot be divorced from—their specific histories and cultural contexts.” [48].



Figure 1. Images from the opening day of the MSA. This is likely the heaviest visitor traffic the museum has had. Author's personal photograph.

Just as significant as what is on “display” is what is omitted, concealed, absent. For instance, the MSA includes no hint of the more disturbing aspects of the communist regime, including the plight of artists who were considered as dissident or subversive. The past is thus sanitized of any negative or controversial readings. As critical rhetoricians are well aware, the significant absences, gaps, and elisions (conscious or unconscious) from any given text usually serve the purposes of the dominant power to the exclusions of any dissident or dissonant voices. As Ott, Aoki, and Dickinson insightfully observe, “[a]bsence is not without meaning; rather, it is a fully embodied rhetorical experience. And like a well-placed pause in a speech, it is a material space filled with affect.” [49]. Along with these absences, the glaring inconsistencies in the museum’s narrative also merit a mention.

The museum includes works from before the establishment of the communist regime by authors who are not associated with socialist realism. For example, one of the most prominent pieces is Ivan Funev’s bas-relief “The Third Class” (Figure 1) which is displayed by the entrance to the museum, next to its name. But its selection befuddles Adriana Chernin, who points out that this piece (along with several others at the MSA) was created in 1935, a decade before the establishment of communism in Bulgaria. She adds that while the work—which depicts the open window of a packed train choked with the desperate faces of poor people pushing through, trying to get a breath of air—levies a harsh critique against class inequality and social injustice, these themes cannot automatically be claimed as hallmarks of the Bulgarian totalitarian regime. In fact, no later than the 19th century these themes were already consciously explored by artists and developed along with Realism. Additionally, social critique is characteristic of free societies [50].



Figure 2. “The Third Class” by Ivan Funev, next to the words “Museum of Socialist Art.” Author’s personal photo.

The inconsistencies do not stop with the inclusion “The Third Class.” Rossitza Guentcheva points to the paradox that “the museum features artists who were persecuted and censored during the communist period for their ‘formalism’ and propensity for ‘western influences’ (like Alexander Zhendov, for example, or Nikola Tanev, who was once interred at the Kutsian labour camp).” [51]. There is, however, no information provided that would make the average visitor aware of the serious politics behind the artifacts. “At the same time,” continues Guentcheva, “the very censors, despots, and party parasites among the artists active during communist times are missing. Thus marginal works with an overt political character stand side by side with valuable works which survived by chance and despite the pressure of the communist party.” [52]. A more historically honest display, argues Maria Guineva,

[S]hould include pictures of the Belene concentration camp and other camps, of tortured victims, their witness accounts, of all infinite atrocities committed by the regime, of the endless lines over the constant shortage of basic staples...In order to teach history, get rid of Communist mentality, bring an end to Communist nostalgia and to fears of totalitarian rebirth, our brand-new and needed museum must become a true Hall of Shame, instead of a Hall of Fame.” [53].

The naming of the museum: dis-articulating totalitarianism and socialism

Initially designated as a Museum of Totalitarian Art, promptly before it opened, the venue underwent a name-change, which surprised those who had urged that Bulgaria should follow in the footsteps of other post-communist countries and critically engage with the past. According to the museum’s curator, Bisera Yosifova, the change was made in light of “‘emotional extremism’ in evaluating the past, and argued the museum contains valuable works by some of the best known painters and sculptors of the time.” [54]. But divorcing aesthetics from its political and didactic function, excluding contextual information, or diluting the historical boundaries of the communist period by loosely associating it with what

are deemed to be socialist ideas, is not a neutral act devoid of ideological consequences. If “totalitarianism” is accepted as the master signifier or the paradigmatic term of the period in question, then “socialism” would acquire a meaning relevant for that articulation. The historical associations would be quite negative and would be likely to foster debate and a more critical engagement with the museum’s collections, and perhaps even to a broader discussion of the past. Public debate appears to have been carefully avoided, as even the MSA’s location was in part selected based on its symbolically on-objectionable status: “Located outside the [capital’s] historic center, the proposed site is unencumbered by any other historical significance, and allows for the exhibit’s unbiased viewing.” [55].

The disarticulation of totalitarianism and socialism is evident in the obfuscating interview comments by the Minister of Culture [56]. A couple of brief examples will suffice in showing how the definitions of the two terms become stretched both temporally and conceptually, to the point of rendering them meaningless. “Totalitarianism,” in Rashidov’s discourse, becomes a marker of mental disposition, a behavioral characteristic, and a political regime that knows not historically contingent bounds:

Look, the word totalitarian refers to anyone who has a dictatorial mentality. The new democracy also has its dictators [here Rashidov inserts a reference to Ahmed Dogan, chairman of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms] So that’s how the notion can be expanded. Totalitarian power refers to people who have an authoritarian behavior and regime. And it does not just refer to a period that can last a very long time Maybe we should have in Bulgaria a museum of the totalitarian leader and it will probably turn out to be a very interesting museum. Starting from the time of the monarchy to the present day [57].

Like totalitarianism, the definition of socialism also becomes anachronistic:

Rashidov: In the museum are stored items that concern one specific period that is ideological, because socialism is the ideology.

Interviewer: “Communism, if we have to be precise.”

Rashidov: “Well then, we can say Jesus, as well, because he proselytized almost communism. It makes no difference what we call it. What matter is that this is the ideology of a certain period that we have lived through. And totalitarian is too broad of a concept, it continues to this day [58].

The disarticulation of totalitarianism and socialism simultaneously invites disengagement from the past and, by sanitizing it, a nostalgic desire to return to it. Implicitly, this rhetoric also implies embracing the present system, as the very justification for the museum is dressed in the language of capitalism. As part of the rationale for the establishment of the MSA, the minister of Culture offered the argument that the venue would quickly generate enough income through tourism to recover the taxpayers’ investment in the park; furthermore, he asserted that the past should not be forgotten, so as not to be repeated. Rhetorically, then, the monument park functions—as we saw in the preceding discussion—to both justify the current Bulgarian capitalist system and to open the possibility for renewed enjoyment of the symbols of the past (the museum will bring a return on investment; we should not forget and repeat, implying that the past was worse than our present socio-political system). At the same time, as permission for enjoyment is granted, the possibility of possession of the idealized past is denied as the public is told that this history should not be repeated, but this sanctioning of the past could work paradoxically to bring renewed interest in and desire for the past (the paradox of the mechanism of nostalgia

suggested by Žižek). It is this splitting nostalgic sentiment that serves to justify the present neoliberal capitalist order that ultimately benefits those in power.

Conclusion

This project analyzes the function of nostalgia in the production of passive collective subjectivities. Following Slavoj Žižek, I suggested that, contrary to the traditional psychological sequence leading to the onset of nostalgia - first enjoyment, then prohibition, then melancholy – the production of passive subjects may proceed through the following stages: first melancholy (loss of desire), then prohibition (in hopes of rekindling desire). (2000) I call this process “splitting nostalgia,” borrowing from classical psychoanalysis, which defines splitting as a subconscious defense mechanism that is part of normal early personality development but can also be pathological. Splitting helps manage complex and contradictory entities (external object, as well as the subject her/himself) by radically dividing reality and repressing that which is subconsciously uncomfortable. I illustrated this mechanism through the example of the Bulgarian Museum of Socialist Art, which both stirs nostalgia and longing for a simpler fictitious past and serves as a prohibition to return to it, thus producing obedient political subjects, suspended between nostalgia for the past and uncritical acceptance of the present.

The re-emergence of the monuments serves simultaneously as a mechanism to celebrate, replace, and forget the past, potentially manufacturing a broad range of emotional reactions from the Bulgarian public, including nostalgic longing for the past. But here there is also an important gesture of prohibition to enjoy. While displaying the relics of the past, the political elites argue that that past should not be repeated; while honoring explicit material representations of the regime that served as part of its ideological apparatus, they argue for their purely aesthetic value: a move that is ideological *par excellence*.

Citations and notes:

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