

NEW EUROPE COLLEGE



LOST IN SPACE

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POST-SOVIET CITY: THE PUBLIC, THE MONUMENTS, THE INTELLECTUALS

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I

In my class on identity, we read Mikhail Bakhtin's famous lines:

To be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is in all respects and always on the boundary; while looking within, he looks into the eyes of the other, or through the eyes of the other... I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me. ¹

I want to show that the possibility of a contemporary ethics crystallizes around the dominating figure Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin and Stanley Cavell have addressed as "the other". The intersubjective dimension in the works of these philosophers has a common core in the situation of the humans who must lead an active human life in a changing world. Committed as I am to the task of keeping alive the words of

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Carol Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp. 311-12.

philosophers, I encourage my students to believe that they too have something to say.

It is sunny and warm outside. The sounds of downtown distract our attention. The simple appeal of a spring day seems to make it difficult for us to keep up with the existential elevation of Bakhtin's thought. I feel unable to gather the strength to object to one student's idea that as we all live close to the geographical border (the boundary!) between Europe and Asia, it may be relevant to set our geographical marginalization in a Bakhtinian context. And the class tends to understand in a literal way Bakhtin's words about "the eyes of the other": they recall the eyes of the foreigners whom we face every day on the streets. It is through their eyes that we look at our surroundings and at ourselves. "Can one do that?" - I ask. "At least we can look at their faces and see a certain expression in their eyes" - they exclaim. "And what do you see?" - "Curiosity, pity, indifference, sometimes disgust". - "Is it any different from the way you look at what you see?" - "Yes, because they have a term of comparison, while we live here constantly". - "But don't you think, - I persisted - that the difficulties we have in defining a boundary between the inside and the outside makes us turn into something like foreigners to ourselves? Think of the tremendous upheavals that have brought about changes in our lives, from the most trivial details of daily life to the large questions of existential choice. You include something, you adopt something, and you perform an act of faith in the fact that you have changed, rather than recognize yourself as changed. Or, with the idea of yourself as changed, you look around and are struck by how different everything seems to you. But to define just how you are different and different from what, seems almost impossible."

This unexpected juxtaposition of Bakhtin's *text* with the *images* of a particular place and with the exchange of gazes

made me think that what makes the context I teach in truly specific is how alien the *visual* seems to be to the teaching of philosophy and of the humanities. As if the nonspecific, non-local perspective on the essence of things that has been the traditional practice of philosophy had prevented it from developing an anthropological approach toward local customs and practices, including those philosophy itself is based on. I do not, of course, take the visual as being indistinguishable from the anthropological. I am referring to the parallel between the way classical philosophy subordinated visuality to the order of reason, and the way it set the claims of reason against the claims of intersubjectivity. The point thus is, how is it possible to replace a controlled vision based on the authoritarian rationality of a single philosophical subject, by plural vision based on an intersubjective relation. A vision that would allow for self-exposure, as well as for the unforeseen, coming from the other.

The classroom, with my chair in front of the class and the students sitting separately at their tables arranged in three rows – the typical arrangement of the pedagogic profession, at least in this country, the embodiment of social hierarchy – elevated me to the position of authority, located me as “advanced”, temporally and spatially, as already ethically formed or shaped, as the embodiment of ethics for them.² Yet, in the way we

² On the organization of pedagogical space see Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education*, London: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 58-59 as referred to in David Lloód & Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State*, New York and London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 19-21: “The elevation of the teacher... represents the ethical to them as the single, spatially isolated common object of their regard as much as by the superior development that his position in the pyramidal structure of the classroom instantiates.”

were talking there was some interaction between private and public. The problem we were discussing was oscillating between the experienced and the discursive. In the philosophy class, they were unwilling to forget about the particular, or the local, while I was haunted by the universal. My disciplined voice and their unruly voices; authority grounded in scholarly interpretation and naiveté; this mixture is inevitable when one tries to apply theory to experience directly.

Giving up your own “psycho-geography” and attempting to cultivate a sort of anthropological viewing both of yourself and of the place of your dwelling appears to be a necessity. It is rather the exchange of gazes that reveals that your reflection on yourself is changing and always includes the other, first one’s self as the other, second the self as constituted by heteronomous relations with others. It seems that the place of our dwelling, the way we see it, has something to do with structures and processes through which our self-contained subjectivities construct and reconstruct our personal worlds of meaning. Eager to understand a world that is today fast escaping our grasp, we seem to attempt to understand it not in terms of a global comprehension, but as a tangible one, as one that allows for visual engagement. Thus, the city we live in, called Ekaterinburg, formerly Sverdlovsk (after one of the bloodiest Russian revolutionaries, Jacob Sverdlov, whose name this city bore until 1991), located in the Ural mountains, in what used to be the “heart of industrial Russia”, one of the most important parts of the military-industrial-nation-state, the site of airspace industry, one of those “closed” cities where foreigners were not allowed to go, seen by them today as an exotic culture, highly contested by different elite groups, this city becomes our classroom, too.

Ours is a large industrial city, founded in 1729. Granite Ural Mountains, pine and fir forests, rivers, lakes, and an

3. Public Place – Private Spaces / Loc public – Spații private

abundance of natural resources, all were attractions for the pioneers who came from the West (Moscow) to build metallurgical plants here and to conquer and “civilize” the local inhabitants. The dynamic activity of the enthusiasts of industrialization in the nineteenth-century was energized by a growing domination of nature. Since then, this land, which is called the industrial heart of Russia, has continuously digested nomadic peoples, religious and political dissidents, people who were forcibly sent here to build factories, mines and roads in the 1920s and 1930s, those who fled during World War II from Ukraine and Western Russia to escape the Nazis, and those who had to leave the former Soviet Republics in the 1990s. Above all, Ekaterinburg was for centuries the transfer point, first for imperial, and later for Soviet prison camps. But don’t expect to see all these layers of history now! What you see downtown is a bland Soviet neo-classicism, some constructivist buildings and neighborhoods from the 1920s, a few elegant mansions and palaces from the 19th century, and a few pedestrian-friendly malls and boulevards. But once you leave the downtown, you inevitably find yourself in one of the thousand-bedroom neighborhoods surrounding the industrial center. Some show a bit of class, but most are dreadful. Monotonous blocks after monotonous blocks.

Besides being an object of study, the city remains a dwelling place, which is felt and experienced. Urban journeys offer us a space for self-reflection. There arises the question of immanence: what kind of method, what kind of discourse is immanent to its object, given that the object is in a state of flux? If one wants to look at the place of one’s dwelling not in sentimental or romantic ways, but in order to find social history at work, in listening to the interrogations of its many voices? If those who write about Moscow or Petersburg inevitably find

themselves under the pressure of a dense mass of texts written since the eighteenth century about these cities, and are thus competing with the words uttered by poets and sociologists, semioticians and historians, in trying to describe them, those who reflect on a marginal city, on a provincial one, lack this kind of textual support. It is widely accepted that we now live in a period when all the master narratives of modernity (those of culture, progress, liberal democracy, emancipation of the working class) ceased, more or less simultaneously, to provide coherence and meaning to our existence. What makes things even worse is that the oral history of the cities remains a largely neglected field. Thus, there appears a specific task: that of bringing personal “voices” to the domain of public knowledge. Without the researcher, the public cannot hear these “voices”.

Layers of time become embodied in things, in walls, in new buildings, in the patches of new paint on the Khrushchev-era apartment buildings, nearly in ruins. Layers of language, of discourse, previously unavailable texts, half-digested, lacking a definite context to make them understandable, produce inchoate psychic impulses, intellectual twists in a decentered nexus of influences. According to Paul Ricoeur, “any fact, however complete or explicit, cannot be said to be a future or a past one, if we do not know the date of the utterance that pronounces it”.³ One needs to pass through lived time, through lived space and through what Ricoeur terms, with reference to discourse, “linguistic time”. Should the discourse on which we rely in order to reflect on post-Sovietness be post-Soviet, non-Soviet or something else? It is a bit like the contrast between grocery

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 109.

shopping, then and now. Then, you had to stand in long lines in order to buy the bare necessities (soap, salt, flour, cooking oil, etc.) Now the shelves are filled with delicacies from abroad (French cheese, Spanish olives, Australian butter, Danish ham). Now, instead of having to collect signature after signature allowing you to gain access to a secret room (labeled “special storage”) in the local library, where the works of Nietzsche and Berdyaev, Freud and Jung, were confined like prisoners, one is stunned by the nearly simultaneous arrival and availability of the enigmatic Derrida, the ironic Rorty, the elegant Nancy, and the spicy Bataille. What books to choose, what words to use to dress up the new reflections, which story to follow?

One of the contributors to an interesting book, entitled *The Metaphysics of Saint-Petersburg*, sets his reflections “On the Edge of Eternity” (the title of his paper) and states, in a Bergsonian mode, that

The city is the sum total of the continuing creative activity of each of its dwellers, it is a materialized creative effort...The very last homeless person, deprived of his own corner, is as much a creator of this city as is the well-known architect who built this city by erecting magnificent palaces – the difference is only in the “material” in which the creative effort of their life finds its embodiment.⁴

It is quite understandable why “material” figures in this text as something of a “philosophy of life” metaphor. When one speaks about culture as a mystery that reveals itself only

⁴ Igor Evlampiev, “On the Edge of Eternity. The Metaphysical Foundations of Culture and its Destiny”, in *The Metaphysics of Saint Petersburg*, Saint-Petersburg: Eidos, 1993, p. 7.

to those who are called, when one looks for a link with the origins, one can hardly rely on materialist assumptions, on which Marxist or other social structural models in social sciences are based. Within this context it seems irrelevant to look for particular “social structures” determining culture and beliefs, the structures on which subjectivity and agency are based. Nevertheless, there has been an alternative tradition within social theory, emphasizing experience and attempting to understand society without the aid of the structural models à la Marx or Anthony Giddens. Social phenomenology is an obvious example here, as is the work of Simmel. David Frosby describes Georg Simmel as a sociological *flâneur*, indulging in impressionistic sketches of the fabric of modern urban life, rather than aiming at the construction of a grand theoretical system.⁵ So, I am going to adopt the attitude of the *flâneur* in reflecting on the post-Soviet subject and the place of his/her dwelling – rather than even attempting to come up with one more poetic generalization. I also believe that in generously including the homeless among the creators of the city, one evades the investigation of the causes of this predicament. Shouldn’t one take into consideration the fact of the increasing “capitalization of life in the hands of the few who demand this sacrifice of the many”?⁶ City’s text is impossible to understand fully, even if one imagines to be fully in command of, say, semiotics, or, in this case, of the Bergsonian creative evolution theory, which might appear to make it all clear. Despite the above-mentioned surfeit of new theories, one experiences a lack of theories, and thus, a lack of understanding.

⁵ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 37.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, “Love Between Us”, in Edyardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991, p. 171.

It seems that just as the heavily traumatized city topography gets covered up by face-lifts, we similarly attempt to cover up our lack of understanding by relying on new, or not-so-new theories. The growing ambiguity, outward and inward, is hardly bearable, and this leads to its violent reduction or repression.

It seems that it is not enough to look at the post-Soviet subject and the place of his dwelling phenomenologically, going deep into his psyche. On the other hand, the idea of looking at him as if he were a migrant laborer or a victim of globalizing managerial strategies seems equally odd. Yet there is a certain affinity between the theoretical schemes we need, and those proposed by post-colonial scholars. How come, one might ask, weren't you the citizens of an empire, weren't you, during the Communist-era, colonizing rather than colonized? A possible reply would be that the life world of most Russians was colonized by the ruling elites, by the state socialist discourse, by the politics of truth.

Gayatri Spivak, whose work has been crucial for the advancement of our understanding of post-colonialism, provides an interesting example by combining in her writing a sensitivity towards "psyche" with a close reading of classical philosophical texts, and with her familiarity with questions of technology, economics, and so on.

We cannot ask the economists and the sociologists to attend to our speculations about the subject-constitution of the woman in post-modern neo-colonialism if we do it as *charming primitivists*.⁷

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Political Economy of Women as Seen by a Literary Critic", in Elizabeth Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 228.

This fear of being merely *charming primitivist* is what haunts me immensely. In her latest book, Gayatri Spivak speaks of post-Soviet globalization, of post-Soviet financialization in the context of the production of the New World Order.⁸ “Post-Soviet” in this context marks the new condition of the world, but what about the “post-Sovietness” of that part of the world that was more Soviet than anywhere else (if something can be more, or less “Soviet”)? Many of the problems surrounding the crisis of the Soviet regime have hardly vanished with the advent of “post-Sovietness”. In the words of Alain Badiou:

What does our era enjoin us to do?... It seems to me too easy to claim that the imperative of the times is one of completion...what is demanded of us is an additional step into the modern, and not a veering towards the limit, be it termed “post-modern”, or whatever. We know, thanks in particular to mathematics, that making an additional step represents a singularly complex task, as the local status of problems is often more difficult and muddled than their global status.⁹

What Alain Badiou seems to insist on is a need for us to become attuned to concrete things and specific places. As has been often said, “postmodernism” is seductive. In spite of its declarations, it forces us “to draw a moral”; its followers all over the world seem to compete with each other in applying a universalizing “moral” in whichever way appears to them as

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason. Toward a History of Vanishing Present*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁹ Alain Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject”, in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, p. 24.

being most persuasive, either by totally neglecting the local in favor of the goods of the cultural imperialism, or by glorifying the local as a protection against the forces of global change. Place is not a scenery where nothing changes. Place is as an event, an ongoing dynamics that calls for our participation. How to divide the post-Soviet city from the Soviet one? Where to draw a line? It is easier to imagine a temporal border as a shift. How to find in my city what makes it post-Soviet? The traces of changes... Where to look for them? In the streets, in the new buildings, in the titles of the shows, in the images of the ads, in the irony of the reviews in the local newspapers? In the faces of the passers-by? What is the face of the city itself? Why should a city have one face, or why should it be a post-Soviet one?

No single event marked the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet reality. Nor is there a single, simple dividing line between them, either in time or in space. Rather, there is a diffusion of boundaries between what constituted respectively Soviet and post-Soviet social realities. Thus, to city dwellers, whether they are crushed by the new reality or proud winners, the city space appears to be in a chaotic flux, because of disjunctured time. This understanding of “post-Soviet” as something that came into being just ten years ago, is a temporal one. Some commentators call this time of reform a return to civilization. They imply that the social upheavals of the past decade called into question the validity of the Soviet experiment and led the Russians to seek grounding in less artificial historical traditions, most notably, in Western, liberal ones. Being accustomed to situating their lives and experiences in relation to broader master narratives of progress and innovation, many people keep this logic by simply replacing what was commonly called a “communist future” with a capitalist one.

It seems that this impulse to go back is emanating from the center and is more intense in the center, in the capitals, as if this country's vast space were swallowing the radical impulses until there is no trace of them left. This is why so many people in my city, provincial and rather remote from the capital, complain, when they look around, that nothing has changed. As if they had a clear understanding of just how it all should have changed. As if having radically changed themselves, they now judge their surroundings and find them humiliatingly ugly, monstrous, eclectic, and provincial. Yes, provincial. If a Muscovite, even in the most dreadful of times, could still take pride in her status of inhabitant of the capital city, I could talk for hours about the chronically wounded pride of the province dweller. If a Muscovite in these new, vibrant times is delighted to find herself in a truly capitalist capital city, what wounds to her pride must the province dweller feel? I listen for hours to the excited stories of my colleagues and friends just back from a visit in Moscow. The popular theaters they've visited; the expensive new coffee houses and sushi bars; the bright, new, well-stocked bookstores. These are not to be found in the provinces, and any newly discovered "capitalist" excitement is safely hidden behind the walls of the banks and the companies of the *nouveau riche*.

Do we visit our future by going West? America and Western Europe are embodied in Moscow's excesses: the enormous aquariums in the new seafood restaurants, for example, and the flamboyant Russians, drunk with new money, attended by their bejeweled, overweight and over-painted wives covered in furs, and by their slender and sophisticated mistresses. Being as yet not quite post-Soviet, seeing Moscow as if in a phantasmatic looking glass, we are like that famous Lacanian child enthusiastically taking an upright position in

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front of the mirror; unable to stand up by ourselves. We seem hypnotized by the obviousness, by the visibility of the free capitalist indulgences of others, by the bliss of the ultra-modern metropolis. To put it in Kantian terms, the visible, and obscene Moscow's wealth functions for many as a sign through which the possibilities of Success appear still available. Through the mundane, tangible and inaccessible, empirical and phenomenal, shines a noumenal dimension, which is Capitalism. According to Slavoj Zizek, today

it seems easier to imagine the "end of the world" than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism were the "real" that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe... ¹⁰

The more or less approachable Moscow, and the still unapproachable for most New York and London, figure as phantasms – projections of desires that everyone brings to the real city streets. Yet it is worthwhile to try to get to the other side of the mirror in order to see the chaos of the simultaneously present different times, the multiplicity of tendencies, the fragmentarity of experiences, the temporal and social disorder behind the pleasing façade of the New Capitalist Order.

It seems that our reluctance to refer to ourselves as "Soviet" citizens (there is a rude colloquial designation of "Sovietness": *sovok*) has something to do with the change of names. We no longer live in the USSR but in Russia; we no longer live in Sverdlovsk but in Ekaterinburg; the regime we live under is no

¹⁰ Slavoj Zizek, "Critique of Ideology, Today?", in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (eds.), *The Zizek Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 55.

longer the Soviet one, but it is still difficult to define it exactly. However reluctant we are to call things by their old names, we know that it is beyond our power to call them what we want. One reason is that it is not only others abroad who continue to use the old names. A more important reason is one ruthlessly described by Lacan: language inevitably eludes our attempts to use it for our own ends. Thus, we do not quite know under which name to subsume ourselves.

II

Last summer the All-Russian Philosophical Congress was held in Ekaterinburg. I happened to be a member of its Editorial Committee. Looking through the hundreds of abstracts of the participants' papers, I was struck by two things: the persistent laments for the loss of a former cultural and spiritual authenticity, colored by self-indulgence, and the distinct *globalism* of many themes. One might have expected that the participants would reflect on the metaphysical consequences of the emergence of new technologies, or, say, on the collapse of boundaries, i.e., on some of the widely discussed features of globalization. In speaking of "globalism", I imply rather the sheer abstractness of their reflections, their striking remoteness from radical recent social and political changes, as if discretely many participants were flying, in their thoughts, above the whole globe, penetrating its essence and winding up with the conclusions about what is lacking below in spiritual terms. One could hardly find among these papers a reflection on something local or mundane or an analysis of a concrete text or an idea of a specific author. As Gertrude Stein once said, there was no *there* there – no sense of the concrete, the tactile, the weighty. At the same time, there were plenty of papers with ambitious and all-encompassing titles, such as *On a New*

Global Consciousness, On a New Philosophical Anthropology, On a New Theory of Culture.

Two months later, the UNESCO Congress was held in our city. Expecting hundreds of foreign guests, the city and the regional authorities had decreed a nice cosmetic lift to the downtown. Agitated officials proudly accompanied the guests everywhere. Nobody paid much attention to the fact that the participants who had come from South America and Africa raised their voices against what they saw as segregation: the guests from what is commonly held here as the “true” West (Western Europe and the USA) were put in a newly-built, fancy hotel, while the guests coming from the not-quite West, so to say, were put, accordingly, in a second rate hotel. Despite these small misunderstandings, the whole thing left many organizers with nice memories of the fancy dinners and parties, with pride of the *level* of the event organized. As a result, the authorities and deputies of the Regional Government keep dreaming since then about turning Ekaterinburg into a world-recognized capital of congresses.

Finally, two years ago, the city celebrated its 275th anniversary, on which occasion the *regional* governor had decreed the erection of a monument to the Soviet marshal Georgy Zhukov, famed for his important role in the WW II. In response, the *city* mayor decided to commemorate the occasion by erecting a monument to the “founding fathers” of the city, Vasily Tatischev and Alexander Gening, Tsar Peter the Great’s representatives, who came to this land in the eighteenth century as organizers of the mining and metallurgical industries. With various emphasis, the region and the city authorities draw on the notions of *locality*, on its rich resources, on its heroes and on a population that always deserves more than it actually gets, and revive a nationalism whose legitimacy rests on claims of continuity with past traditions and military glory.

What these anecdotes have in common is when and where they happened. This was last summer, that is, about ten years since a former regime had ceased to exist. The question I ask concerns the relation between theses or positions that are properly philosophical on the one hand, and, on the other, attitudes or outlooks that are not really subject to philosophical argument or assessment, but typically inform operations of the imagination. This extravagance of the local intellectuals' ideas (or, rather, their dreams about coming up with new, even more inflated ideas) has a strange affinity with the new plans and growing ambitions of the regional and city administration. Specifically, the question is whether one could discern an affinity between the root impulse of *globalistic* thinking combined with indifference toward the mundane, and the local tendency of treating differently various foreign guests in accordance with an imagined geographical hierarchy. My feeling is that the existence of such an affinity might both clarify the nature of that impulse, and suggest an affective or experiential dimension of these philosophical positions and social attitudes. I seem to be particularly sensitive to this kind of *globalism* because one major element of the ideologies of "spirituality" is, paradoxically, to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying their diversity. Inevitably, this kind of global thinking becomes a meta-system, in which there is a controlling ideal, especially in relation to the mundane.

Paul Ricoeur, commenting on Alfred Shutz's ideas on the experience of the other, claims that for Shutz this experience is as elementary, even primitive, as is one's experience of one's self. The other is thus present in us not cognitively, but practically. In this sense, Ricoeur states:

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Shutz rediscovers Kant's great insight in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: we do not know the other person, but we treat him or her as a person or a thing. The existence of the other is implicitly admitted by the mere fact that we behave with this person in one way or another.¹¹

It seems that there is, again, an affinity between treating others as things, approaching them rather as things than as subjects, and that characteristic flying away from mundane, and from one's self. What is offered to our contemplation is, it would seem, a being able to comprehend and to conceive of an ever greater and unbounded magnitude, to achieve identification by self-transcending the natural order, to exercise philosophical imagination in an attempt to tear itself away from, to withdraw itself from the everyday forms of life and social practice. It is a movement toward the self-transcending of the natural order, a movement whose imaginary completion would result in the condition Kant called "rational raving".¹² There is also a strong Marxist overtone in this sort of attitude, i.e., the inclination to discern potentiality in an actually existing reality, with the corresponding aspirations towards the future.

The utopian impulse, common to many trends of twentieth-century thought, is based on the idea of the subject who knows how to "postulate ethically beyond a bad existence", in the words of Ernst Bloch.¹³ Thus, theoretical power is contested in terms of linearity and universality, and closely linked – by means of theoretical imagination – with

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, p. 301.

¹² Stephen Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

¹³ Ernst Bloch, "Art and Utopia", in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 73, quoted in Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 247.

the idea of magnitude, which is unlimited in principle. Yet, as Gianni Vattimo states, the future turns out to be limited and related to the idea of *return*:

A good deal of twentieth-century philosophy describes the future in a way deeply tinged with the grandiose. Such descriptions range from the early Heidegger's definition of existence as project and transcendence to Sartre's notion of transcendence, to Ernst Bloch's utopianism (which is emblematic of all Hegelian/Marxist philosophy), and to the various ethics which seem ever more insistently to locate the value of an action in the fact of its making possible other choices and other actions, thus opening up a future. This same grandiose vision is the faithful mirror of an era that in a general way can be called "futuristic"... Both in philosophy and in avant-garde poetics, the pathos of the future is still accompanied by an appeal to the authentic, according to a model of thought characteristic of all modern "futurisms": the tension towards the future is seen as a tension aimed towards a renewal and return to a condition of original authenticity.¹⁴

There is a growing tension between the grandeur of grand narratives, the grandeur of projects, and the grandeur of monuments. Ethical claims related to them all draw toward the future, yet it is a future understood as "renewal and return". To affirm its specificity, the nation stripes histories of the past of their original form of temporality, and turns them into a collection of examples, which

¹⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. and intro., John R. Snyder, Cambridge: Polity, 1988, p. 100.

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become merely the occasion for a learning experience that actualizes them in the present. At this price, these examples become information or monuments.¹⁵

If at the time of the existence of a true nation-state the grandeur of the grand narratives and monuments could indeed serve as part of a state's moral education of people as citizens, if they could represent both "the symptom and the reminder of the continuity between past and future", things have radically changed since. Today, contrary to this neutralizing of historical time through the teaching function of *exempla*, the condition of living in new times has, so to speak, "temporalized history". In turn, the past, now deprived of its exemplary status, is cast outside our space of experience into the shadows of what no longer exists.¹⁶ What is exactly that which is missed in the present, and what the present itself is, thus becomes slippery, a present yet unstated, too obvious, too casual, resisting generalizations and analysis.

III

By mentioning "public" and "intellectuals" in conjunction with "city", I wanted to follow the ancient path of the relation polis-psyche, as discussed in Plato's *Republic*. What makes this discussion relevant is that Plato is concerned in this dialogue not only with a healthy polis and psyche, but also with a certain figure of want, of deficiency: Plato discusses a sick polis and a sick psyche.

The sickness, as a metaphor for a certain deficiency or lack, as a recurring image, is a stereotype for certain

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, p. 325.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

relationships between the individual's consciousness and his habitat. The determined nature of these relationships lies in their phobic character, which is manifested in the gap that opens up between opposing ideas (here: that of the sick and the healthy city) and ambivalent relationships. In Plato, the sick city (the only possible one, in reality, as opposed to the ideal city, or the idea of city) is not discarded as an ill-conceived idea, but carefully analyzed. In the *Republic*, according to the helpful account of Jonathan Lear,

The variety of pathologies of the psyche...depends on the person's taking in pathological structures from the culture. Culture penetrates so deeply that a fractured polis will produce a fractured psyche.¹⁷

For Plato, just as each actual city, in consequence of its lack of that unity which would turn it into a true city is, in fact, many cities (422e-423d), so too every pathological psyche is, in truth, many various psychic parts. This seemed to suit perfectly my initial ambition to discern post-Soviet parts, dimensions, directions, and marks in the Soviet city (given the impossibility of describing the city as a whole in its present functioning as a post-Soviet one). But how am I to deal with my task of discerning traces of transition in this city? Should there appear more and more of them, would that mean that my city was getting more and more fragmented, that is, more and more sick, in a Platonic sense? And how to handle the fact that it is a transition from one condition - the Soviet one, to the other - even more vaguely defined as a post-Soviet one? Couldn't one hope that eventually we would gradually get

¹⁷ Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of Soul*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 222.

over the late Communist regime paralysis, and move from deep sickness toward signs of recovery and an increasing flexibility of joints?

Augustin Ioan has coined the metaphor “intoxicated places” for his extensive philosophical-architectural study of the Romanian capital – Bucharest.¹⁸ He discusses the notion of “character” of a built place (as defined by Christian Norberg Schulz, for example) as opposed to natural places (as in Heidegger’s *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*); briefly, Norberg Schulz’s claim is that what an architect does by creating a character is that he makes obvious, dense and concrete the properties of a natural place. In the chapter “Intoxicating a Place”, Augustin Ioan argues instead that it is the lack of stability of character, the lack of unity, of a unified style that makes his city look to him so intoxicated:

[...] in a poisoned place, unrelated stages of the different epochs having come and gone coexist uncomfortably; these stages have continuously replaced one another in part or *in toto*, most often by violence (fire, earthquake, bombing, razing)... it pays dearly for its past – the reality of having undergone the violent reciprocal replacements of so many divergent projects... the poisoned place becomes mute... becomes a wasteland... a topos of chaos...¹⁹

Regarding the possibility of a theoretical interpretation of this kind of place, that has nothing to say to the architect, the author concludes that having ceased to be of any interest to

¹⁸ Augustin Ioan, *Power, Play and National Identity*, Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation Press, 1999.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 177.

phenomenology, this place attracts deconstructivists, “so wallowing in traces, negations, divergent layers, scars inflicted by temporal power”.²⁰ Yet he interestingly recalls a discussion with students of his Phenomenology of Architecture class, who were asked to write about a significant place in their lives, childhood places, grandparents’ houses. Augustin Ioan states that

The affective memory, as it were, shows the data supplied by empirical experience in a favorable light. In these conditions, it becomes obvious why notions such as “utopian architecture” or “typified/standardized buildings” are aberrations that depart from a vision of architecture derived from Heidegger’s philosophy.²¹

I find this remark symptomatic and want to focus on what differentiates my approach from that developed by Augustin Ioan. It is an attention to the discrepancies that arise between one’s tacit awareness of a dwelling and one’s explicit structuring of that awareness in more abstract terms that I find important. Central to my approach is the “participant”’s self-observation of the dynamic of his or her attitude toward one and the same place according to a schema close to that proposed by Reinhart Koselleck, in which “the space of experiences” and “the horizon of expectations” are combined.²² What one finds in Ioan’s book is the outlook and the position of one intellectual, while I wanted to take into consideration, however sketchily, the voices of others, in a

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

²² Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.

way that would allow to consider past experiences and places related to them as connected to the anticipations that constitute what Sartre called the existential project of each of us.²³ The “intoxicated places” Augustin Ioan describes are made too easily, in my opinion, to contaminate the lives of those that inhabit them, as if the metaphor was reaching into the fractured corners of the city’s inhabitants, and was working as a centripetal force, emphasizing the similarities rather than the differences.

I have talked to many different people. Some often travel abroad; others can only harbor a life-long dream to visit Moscow or Saint Petersburg. Some can escape to their *dachas* during hot and dusty summer months; others only have parks and nearby woods to provide some shelter when they are desperate to escape the stifling city. Their voices convinced me that either “contamination” is good for some, or this metaphor is too loose to describe the changes post-Soviet cities undergo. My assumptions, however odd it might seem to those who are lucky enough to inhabit a less ruptured social reality, were transformed by my talks with many people in this city. I wanted to discover commonality, to take into account the effort of others to invest the city with meaning, to include the perspectives of others in order to see just how and where the traces of changes are located. It depends on what one knows, on what one remembers, or on what one is willing to think about, in spite of the daily routine of commuting.

But once this is stated, another difficulty arises immediately: that I don’t want to be undialectical and rule out a possibility for the culture or the city, or part of the city, society or

²³ See Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of Koselleck’s ideas in the context of existentialist philosophy in *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, pp. 208-216.

individual, of being both Soviet and post-Soviet. Could it be, I wonder, that it is rather me who likes to think of myself as having, among many others, a post-Soviet identity, or is it the whole surrounding social reality, inevitably a post-Soviet one, according to the logic of a label-and-period obsessed social science, which I share? I mean that as only about a decade divides Soviet times and post-Soviet times, wouldn't it be too naïve to expect to find visible traces of "new days" within a city space? And within one's psyche? It depends on how one understands the traces. If I were a social scientist, my methodology would consist of looking for these traces through sampling techniques, telephone surveys, etc. If I were an anthropologist, I would perform fieldwork, being a participant observer who reflects on her visual experiences, and writes texts about them and how others figure in them. If I were an architect, I would perhaps think that it is naïve to expect that the city could radically change architecturally during this period, that architecture is too inert and too expensive, that too short a time has passed. If I were a foreigner who came from "the West", I would notice new consumer pleasures available and, looking at bottles of Coca-Cola served over dinner, say sarcastically "Civilization is coming!" If I were a Muscovite, I would most certainly have that peculiar arrogant look which makes everyone else feel raw and provincial in comparison with me – sophisticated and refined.

It would be indeed naïve to expect that the city could radically change architecturally during this period. But it would be no less naïve to look for the traces of changes in staring at the faces of passers-by: after all, can there be other reasons for people to smile than socio-political ones? In the early 1990s a McDonald's branch newly opened in Moscow had to send staff out to the waiting queue to explain that it

was an American custom for the staff to smile and say “Have a nice day”, because the locals regarded smiles on the faces of shop assistants as an impudent admission of greater wealth or as an indication that they intended to trick the customer. It is early 2000 now, the McDonald’s are still there and their staff manages to smile not only purely formally, but also with a touch of superiority. Smiles, of course, mean different things in different places.

IV

It is tempting to think that terms like “Soviet” or “post-Soviet” have little application to our daily city lives. Political regimes aside, all cities look more attractive in summer. In spite of all the transitions, in a certain sense we all create our own cities, made up of the paths we stroll on, the parks we visit, and the memories we keep. Yet my theorizing was stimulated by an occasion that made me think differently. That occasion was a little essay my son wrote last year at age fourteen. His assignment was to write a paper in English about Russian homes.

“It is not easy to write about Russian homes (even in Russian) because we do not live in a Russian home; we live in a Soviet one. Ours is a neighborhood of monotonous gray boxes. As I grew older, I realized that the way our city looks tells something about the central ideal of socialism: everyone must have the same things as everyone else. So our houses looked the same outside as inside – similar furniture, similar appliances, similar bed linens, similar decor.

Now, the times have changed. Although most of us still live in the same flats, we now have the opportunity to improve our life-style. I take great pleasure in selecting materials for decoration– wallpaper, paint, fabric for drapes and bed covers.

Almost everyone tries to make his or her living space tidier, more attractive, and more comfortable. (We have just finished redecorating my room in a pleasing grayish-blue color-scheme.) Although I wish my home was a bit larger, I love it very much since this is where I have spent most of my life."

Could it be that writing his little essay in English had something to do with its content? As if by learning how to use a proper foreign word, its author appropriated a corresponding point of view. For how else could he possibly know, being as old as *perestroika* is, what is Soviet, except by trying to imagine another, non-Soviet, post-Soviet something?

I sit in my son's room and stare out the window. I wonder, as he stares out this same window, what sense he makes of the view from the eleventh floor of our building. He sees row after row of gray horizontals and verticals, and hundreds of windows. Just beyond, on the horizon, is a narrow strip of forest. Is this why he is so fond of camping, hiking, climbing, kayak-rowing and horseback riding? Certainly part of his fondness comes from the fact that we have been taking him kayak-rowing every year since he was two; I suppose, it is also a part of being a boy of fourteen. But does living where we do in this city, with this view, deprive him of something important? To me, traveling across America was very educational. It helped me realize that both teenagers and grown-ups, from Ohio or Minnesota, may, however much they love their native country, be as hungry for beauty as my son and I are. I am haunted by images of the silver church spires in Cambridge, of the Boston skyline, of the paths along the Charles River where I ran every day, of the suprisingly cozy view of New York from the roof of Chelsea Gallery. He is haunted by the view of the forest he can see after climbing to the top of his favorite mountain near Ekaterinburg.

Reading his words I was struck, first by how naturally this juxtaposition – Russian/Soviet/something-different-from-Soviet – was expressed in his writing. As each of us, he certainly has some vague idea of an imagined or symbolic space he would like to inhabit, yet it is interesting how prominently the physical, tangible space appears in his descriptions, as well as in the sensations of most people I have talked to. The “Soviet” stands for what is outside; “something different from the Soviet” designates what is inside. Then I realized that most people I know here in this city, well off or hardly scraping by, would strike an observer with the contrast between the care and love with which they polish and decorate their private settings, and the disgust or indifference they show once they leave their apartment.²⁴ For most people the border between Soviet and post-Soviet is the door to their apartment, which is usually fancily decorated on the inside and heavily armored from the outside.

The owners of small and not-so-small shops mark this boundary by the way they decorate the entrances to their shops. As many ground floor apartments have been converted to retail use, the shop owners have arranged entrances facing the street, not the back yard, where entrances to residences are usually located. So you see common, faded buildings with bright patches of freshly painted entrances and gold and silver banisters. I know it is most probably naïve, but somehow many of my reflections on this city have been clinging to those old Khrushchev-era apartment buildings, with fancy shops inserted.

²⁴ I am grateful to Richard Read for his help in locating my “post-Soviet” reflections on high-rise buildings in a broader context. He recalls that there is an American ditty of the period when tower blocks were being erected, “Little boxes, little boxes, and they are all made out of ticky-tacky, // And the boxes, little boxes, they all look just the same”.

As if by looking at this kind of building, I encountered a modal form of the Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit: in one *gestalt*, one becomes aware that there are some traces of another. As the *gestalt* shifts, one comes to see that there is no genuine possibility of having radically different ways of changing.

Commenting on the place of this duck-rabbit effect in what he calls “region” in his *Investigations*, Stanley Cavell states:

It is a beautiful and clear example; but of what? Not of psychological subtleties; not of *all* cases of interpretation; in particular, not of all aesthetic experience. It is one case in which a figure can be read in alternative ways. The beauty of the thing lies, first, in the fact that the figure is so patently *all* in front of your eyes, it is nothing but outline, not even surface; second, that there are just two distinct possibilities of reading it, and they compete with one another; third, that no background of context is required (no imagination) against which to read it one way or the other; fourth, that you can see, as patiently as you can see the figure itself, that the flip from one reading to another is due solely to you, the change is in you; fifth, that the flip is reversible, and, in particular, subject to will; sixth, that the expression of its flipping for you is an expression of being struck by something, each time taken by surprise, though obviously not unawares; seventh, that you can understand the flip may not take place at all, that someone just may not see both possibilities.²⁵

Most apartment doors are of reinforced steel and have at least two sturdy locks. Why not just have a doorman or a

²⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason; Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 354.

common locked door? Some have this, if they are lucky enough to have reasonable, dependable neighbors. But if you are surrounded by unemployed drunkards or retired people with barely enough to survive, chances are high that a newly installed lock would be traded the next morning for a bottle of vodka or a few loaves of bread. So it is only inside that you can cherish your newly obtained middle-class illusions; it is outside that these illusions are destroyed each time you leave home. With or without a common lock, you have to leave your precious home to go elsewhere to work or to shop. You find yourself surrounded by fellow passengers on a bus, by passers-by on the street, and you look around you. What do you see? Monotonous blocks of buildings and monotonous crowds of people, and you wonder why, with all this space, people live such crammed lives. Your view is blocked wherever you look. Once you leave home, your mood darkens. And even in your 12-story building, standing in the lobby or riding the elevator, you wonder if it is only a year since the walls were painted and the mailboxes repaired. What makes these people, your neighbors, turn it back into a slum? But to be really fair, most of your friends are luckier in this regard. They have more room (and rooms), higher ceilings, and tolerable elevators. But you have a gorgeous pine forest just five minutes away on foot, and that is some consolation. There you can find things to notice, enjoy, and discuss; a place where to walk your dog and restore your energy, to find the patience and power to go on living and working here.

V

How is it possible to change these walls, these building, this heavy thing – our city – to make it more suitable, more inviting to live in? It seems that the changes in those who inhabit

it are indeed more radical than those their physical environment undergoes. *Constantly* living in this rapidly *changing* reality, equally skeptical toward those eager to include Russia in the West, and therefore ready to tolerate all the paternalistic overtones of the language of inclusion, and those obsessed with its mystical spiritual authenticity and opposing changes blindly, reluctant to define otherness, difference as purely cultural, they want it to be explicitly examined as the product of structural inequalities and asymmetrical social relations. This city, like any other, certainly provides an *object* of study, which enables the observation of ideological and cultural practices. There is a lot that can be said about Ekaterinburg's buildings, gardens, crafts, and archaeological excavations. Those who know a lot about it divide the locals' or the visitors' experience into the separate disciplines represented by their professional specialties: architectural history, decorative arts, history of technology, archaeology and preservation, political history. All this scarcely helps to understand the people who made this city, to understand how the city space gets more and more dominated and appropriated. Where is there room, then, for the possibility of contradiction and resistance?

Through numerous discussions I gathered the impression that local intellectuals (myself included, if one considers the results of our efforts, which are practically nil) tend rather to pacify public opinion by displaying a "why fight it" attitude about the monuments erected and the historic landmarks demolished, rather than even think of resisting the ever-increasing domination of the city space by local authorities. While the monuments being erected by the authorities are presented as symbols of social cohesion, there has not appeared anything even remotely resembling a

counter-movement capable of disclosing the social inequalities and differences that exist. As a rule, authorities invite intellectuals to justify and legitimize already “embodied” decisions. It seems that many intellectuals are quite content with this role. Many of the approaches intellectuals rely on (highbrow, traditional aesthetic snobbery, conservative, or post-modern methodologies) remain divorced and segregated from each other. Enthusiasts in certain fields barely know, much less debate other perspectives. The history of almost any city now incorporates a diversity of cultures: commercial, community, criminal, ethnic, leisure, political, popular, regional, youth, etc.²⁶ On the one hand, these subcultures are what makes the city a city. On the other hand (we have five fingers), the question that arises is how negotiations among these cultures are possible for there to be a common city space. It seems to me and to kids of Gleb’s age, in presenting the past and reflecting on how it gets embodied in works of art, that the diversity of experience is of paramount importance. Gleb’s teachers, however, and most scholars and curators, stress a desperate need for a common set of values. It is necessary, but it seems almost impossible, to understand the intricacies and fluidity of the power relations that lead to the situation where inhabitants of a city find this space less and less expressive of their needs and interests. Ah, how I used to enjoy reflecting in my lectures on Heidegger, “Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on earth”, on the two-foldedness of space, on what

²⁶ On the shortcomings of the proliferation of the urban cultures and subcultures in the urban discourse resulting from “over-using ‘culture’ as an explanatory tool” by urban historians, see an important overview by Timothy Gilfoyle, “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History”, in *Reviews in American History*, 26.1 (1998), p. 192.

it is and how it is perceived. I never paid much attention to *these* walls as my own, and many others' dwellings place. I am afraid I am no longer among those who pretend that it is only fancy names and popular titles that identify them (or that they identify with). Exciting new ideas, and the gloomy, heavy, incoherent, and traumatized city and its dwellers.

REZUMAT

Întreaga problemă a spațiului public (în relația sa cu „sfera publică”, „domeniul public”, „publicitatea”) necesită o atenție deosebită în lumina situației prezente din Europa de Est și Rusia. După cum a arătat convingător Hannah Arendt, ceea ce s-a întâmplat sub totalitarism a fost că spațiul public a fost distrus forțat și eliminat. Care sunt atunci posibilitățile lui de reabilitare și care model de spațiu public sau sferă publică este mai relevant în această situație: cel normativ, dezvoltat de Jürgen Habermas, sau cel fenomenologic, dezvoltat de Michel Foucauld, Hannah Arendt, Selya Benhabib și Nancy Fraser? Ce poate servi ca o mai bună orientare în mai sus menționata regiune: o căutare a consensului universal sau crearea și susținerea spațiului public agonizând?

Aceste interogări sunt relevante pentru problemele memoriei istorice și strategiile comemorării. Acest lucru este cu atât mai evident cu cât sunt puse următoarele probleme: a contribuit constructiv procesul de memorie istorică (precum și cea culturală și publică) la solidaritatea națională sau istoria a fost distorsionată și chiar ascunsă din motive mai puțin benigne?

Accentuez în mod special ideea că rememorarea culturală este ceva ce se petrece în realitate. Cred că acest lucru este

3. Public Place – Private Spaces / Loc public – Spații private

important, pentru că în Rusia și Europa de Est este încă dominantă ideea memoriei ca moștenire, povară și cauză a suferinței. Deși comemorările, narațiunile istorice, dezbaterile politice sau alte forme culturale sunt puse la zid, cetățenii și profesioniștii pot deveni mai capabili de a modifica și redescrie trecutul pentru a menține un echilibru optim între trecut și viitor în cultura noastră. Trecutul, întrupat în situri istorice și muzee, existând într-o ramă care îl separă de prezent, este în întregime produsul practicilor prezente, care organizează și mențin această ramă. Totuși, „sfera publică istorică” (termen propus de istoricii britanici Michael Bommes și Patrick Wright), de exemplu instituțiile implicate în producerea și răspândirea înțelegerii trecutului – de la muzee până la documentarele și dramele istorice televizate – rămâne în mare măsură neglijată într-un discurs teoretic în această zonă.