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Stalin's Boots and the March of History (Post-Communist Memories)

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Roland Végő

Stalin's Boots and the March of History

(Post-Communist Memories)

No doubt, history hurts. But the irreversibility of this proposition immediately relocates its subject beyond what is conceivable within the horizon opened up by its predicate. For if not everything that hurts is actually history, there is an insurmountable gap or an irreducible barrier of alterity between the subject and the predicate. This complication suggests that even if history manifested itself exclusively in the form of suffering, its identity would still remain irreducible to this universal affliction. Thus, we must ask ourselves—without the shadow of the slightest cynicism—whether it would be possible to find some enjoyment in history that is not the sadistic pleasure of the one who inflicts wounds?

The question is difficult both on historical and theoretical grounds. On the one hand, in the wake of the cultural triumph of psychoanalysis in the West, the twentieth century has learned to explain itself to itself in the quasi-theoretical language of therapeutic utopias. The field opened up by Freud (but often in contrast to Freud's own convictions) gave rise to a whole set of ideas that have become the tacit presuppositions of our cultural self-definitions. In its most reductive form, this worldview suggests that the past is by definition the site of suffering, while the future is, if not the site of happiness, at least that of manageable compromises and redemptive reconciliations. On the other hand, in the wake of the historical catastrophes of the century and the seemingly anachronistic persistence of violent barbaric forces, Western thought by its own inclination gravitated towards ethical paradigms. Thus, the category of "trauma" emerged as a

fundamental component of our definitions of history, ethics, and politics as well. We discover here a distant affinity between academic theoretical reflection on the constitution of the subject and popular narratives of selfhood.

In fact, the pervasive presence of this newly-discovered “traumatic subject” did not go unnoticed by critics of the Zeitgeist. By the second half of the 1990s, the term “trauma culture” was coined in order to designate our cultural obsession with traumatic narratives. For example, in 1997 Mark Seltzer argued the following: “The notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology: sociality and the wound have become inseparable” (1997, 24).¹ This transformation of our relation to the public sphere, however, had at least one important consequence. Both in academic and popular accounts of the self, it tended to eliminate the problem of enjoyment from our understanding of the historicity of the subject. This is why, at the same time as the theorization and public performance of traumatic subjectivities was on the rise, the category of “nostalgia” has been redefined as the negative correlate of trauma. Paraphrasing Seltzer, we could even say that we have learned to approach any “collective gathering” around sites of nostalgia with a good deal of political skepticism: sociality and nostalgia have become irreconcilable for us.

This two-fold distribution of theoretical and public narratives is so self-evident for many of us today that it is very difficult to conceive of alternatives to the imaginary matrix that it defines. So the task that I would like to propose here is precisely the invention of a relation to history and the public sphere of sociality that deconstructs the trauma/nostalgia opposition. The theoretical goal is to separate concrete narrative forms from actual political contents. In other words, we need to insist that just because a particular historical narrative is clearly marked by tropes and figures of trauma or nostalgia, we cannot determine its political significance in an *a*

priori fashion. At the same time, the theoretical separation of narrative form from political content needs to be complemented by another strategic argument. It follows from the previous point that it might be possible to conceive of historical moments or concrete rhetorical situations in which we need to rely on nostalgic rather than traumatic narratives in order to imagine progressive political change. In these situations, the political task could be the development of a certain “critical nostalgia” that does not try to replace trauma as a master trope of historical understanding. I would like to show here that the deconstruction of the trauma/nostalgia opposition can make it possible for us to counteract the modernist vision of the future as a therapeutic utopia (by insisting on the fact that the past exceeds our narratives of suffering), to thwart the kind of postmodernist nostalgia that turns the past into a homogenized resource of empty textual surfaces, and to uncover unfulfilled possibilities in the past that might reactivate radically new possibilities in the present.

In order to provide some historical substance to these theoretical observations, I will examine here the opening picture of a book of photographs edited by Reg Gadney, entitled Cry Hungary! Uprising 1956 (published in 1986), which commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution. I will interpret the photograph as an allegory of the birth of the revolutionary subject marked by an indelible gesture. But since the allegory narrates an essentially unnarratable event, my focus will be the catachrestical naming of freedom as it is inscribed by the photograph in different affective economies: the traumatic and the nostalgic. From our post-Communist perspective, the narrative repetitions condensed in the image revolve around four dates: 1956 (the revolution), 1986 (the thirtieth anniversary and the publication of the book), 1989 (the repetition and accomplishment of the failed revolution), and 2006 (the fiftieth anniversary which coincides with a symbolic reenactment).² As we can see, what in 1986

and 1989 were separated by a historical delay (anniversary and reenactment) in 2006 fully coincided: the symbolic repetition of the fiftieth anniversary incited real violence. And this is the crucial point we will have to consider: while 1989 gave us a (“velvet”) revolution without violence, 2006 is the year of violence without a revolution. This delay separating the two extremes could well serve as a definition of post-Communism.

From the perspective of our argument, therefore, the relevance of the “post-Communist subject” can be explained by the fact that the history of post-Communism is very clearly marked by a struggle between traumatic and nostalgic narratives. After the collapse of state socialism in East-Central Europe, the confrontation with the totalitarian past posed an unavoidable ethical and political task. Quite naturally, the historical work on this past produced a great variety of traumatic narratives. At the same time, however, the (re)integration of these post-Communist countries into Western-style capitalism turned out to be a more complicated process than expected. A clear sign of this predicament was the emergence of the cultural phenomenon known as Ostalgie: “Eastern nostalgia” for some of the social structures once guaranteed by these socialist states that manifests itself in the form of the ruthless marketing of socialist kitsch.³ Beyond this theoretical consideration, however, the historical significance of post-Communism today is further underlined by the fact that in the midst of our current global political upheavals, the birth of the post-Communist subject has remained a constant point of reference as a prototype of the contemporary revolutionary subject. As the prevalence of the comparisons between the so-called “Arab Spring” and the fall of the Berlin Wall prove, our imagination of the revolutionary subject today is still tied to collapse of Communism.

Trauma and Nostalgia

As a first step, then, we need to consider the way the terms “trauma” and “nostalgia” have been employed outside the clinical setting. Under the aegis of an often philosophically and politically inspired form of cultural studies, popular versions of “trauma theory” have often equated the historicity of the subject with its “victimization” and, in the same move, deduced an ethical imperative from the psychology of suffering. In this regard, two important corrections have been proposed. On the one hand, psychoanalytic theories have long insisted that the unrepresentability of the traumatic event cannot be defined in terms of a radical exteriority to the symbolic order. The traumatic event is unrepresentable, yet it remains within the symbolic: it manifests itself through topological displacements internal to the symbolic order.⁴ On the other hand, we have to insist that the affective cathexis of these displacements can assume different forms and it cannot be reduced exclusively to the pathos of victimization.⁵ Thus, when this kind of trauma theory (which is not necessarily representative of the whole field) derives an ethical imperative from the suffering caused by an unrepresentable event, what it misses is the simple fact that the Freudian drive is essentially a nostalgic force. As a result, the question of enjoyment is quite often completely eliminated from the problem of repetition. Borrowing an expression from Svetlana Boym, we could say, then, that it was partially the politics of trauma theory that put an ethical “taboo” on the theorization of nostalgia (xiii-xix).

Of course, we all understand the problem. Nostalgia is not easy to integrate into the discourse of the kind of historiography that aims to redefine the past as the scene of traumatic oppression rather than the site of nostalgic self-sufficiency. The opposition between the two modes (traumatic and nostalgic), thus, is usually understood to be the following: nostalgia is an escapist, passive, relation to the past which has disturbing political (nationalist and imperialist)

potentials; trauma, on the other hand, requires an active work on history, the excavation of the crimes of the past and thus possesses an emancipatory potential. Almost all recent theoretical attacks on nostalgia were conceived in this spirit. The basic historical paradigm is usually Romanticism which, according to this position, elevated nostalgia to the level of a veritable ideology in itself. So these critics often speak of a “modernist nostalgia” in service of nationalist and imperialist politics and of a “postmodern nostalgia” in service of globalization and commodification. Postmodern nostalgia is often interpreted either as an anachronistic resistance to globalization in the name of an outmoded politics or as a redefinition of the “globe” as the new home of humanity.⁶ This is why “nostalgia” often emerges in these discussions as the most basic paradigm of ideological mystification.⁷

On the other hand, attempts to redefine nostalgia as a potentially positive category were frequently based on two complimentary moves. First, we could speak of a certain “ontologization” of nostalgia, which involves its redefinition as a constitutive category of subjectivity. As a corollary to this ontologization, however, we often encounter an attempt to distinguish between two kinds of nostalgia: authentic and inauthentic nostalgia. In other words, these authors save nostalgia by claiming that it is an inalienable function that can have two different (politically or ethically progressive or conservative) articulations. This reliance on the language of “ontological authenticity” clearly locates these attempts in the onto-phenomenological traditions of the twentieth century in which “authenticity” as such appears to be a nostalgic construction.

In this regard, Vladimir Jankélévitch’s work on nostalgia remains an exemplary case. First, he defines “irreversibility” as the very essence of temporality and, subsequently, derives the idea of human freedom from this ontological determination. It is this irreversibility that

guarantees, for Jankélévitch, that the proper object of ontological nostalgia is finitude (1974, 282). In the course of this argument, nostalgia is progressively emptied out of all concrete determinations (it is irrational, lacks a foundation, etc.) and becomes a “gratitude for the given” (289). Nostalgia, then, necessitates a shift of perspective from the existence of beings to the fact of being itself. This is the foundation of Jankélévitch’s definitions of “closed” and “open” nostalgia. Since the former (exemplified by Ulysses) consists of an effective return to the native land, its essence is a deception that aims to undo the irreversibility of time. Ulysses is not insatiable: he “knows what he wants” and his desire is fulfilled when he returns to Ithaca (284). “Open nostalgia,” on the other hand, is the true form of nostalgia since it is a longing for a metaphysical homeland that is only accessible in the form of an infinite return. In the case of “open nostalgia,” the goal of the journey is the journey itself and not the return (295). Although Jankélévitch does not use this language, we can see that his argument rests on the idea of an ontological difference which holds that Being is the deconstruction of existence. The authentic form of nostalgia can never fully coincide with the concrete objects of nostalgic longing.

More recently, Svetlana Boym turned the philosophical thrust of Jankélévitch’s argument into a form of cultural semiotics when she distinguished “restorative nostalgia” from “reflective nostalgia” (2001, 41-56). According to Boym, restorative nostalgia concentrates more on the nostos, the imaginary home the nostalgic desires to return to. It is essentially a transhistorical recreation of this “home” in the name of truth and tradition. Since it aims to recreate an originary unity, it also implies a reliable memory and manifests itself in the total reconstruction of the monuments of the past. The main narratives of restorative nostalgia are “the return to the origins” and conspiracy theories. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, concentrates more on algia, the longing and the mourning of the nostalgic. This form of nostalgia is predicated upon a more

instable memory and therefore the type of narrative it produces is “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary” (50). Reflexive nostalgia shows that longing and critical thought are possible within the same narrative: “Homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination. A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at the same time.” (50) As Boym argues, however, the two different forms of nostalgia might inhabit the very same images and the very same frame of reference. Thus, what is common to Jankélévitch’s and Boym’s account is the attempt to restore nostalgia based on the assumption that the finitude of the human condition finds its most authentic expression in the infinite regression towards its abysmal foundations.

The fact that a similar set of distinctions also appeared on the side of trauma theory clearly proves that we are dealing here with a general problem of contemporary thought. Similarly to what we have seen in the case of nostalgia, there is a tendency to ontologize trauma (to elevate it to the universal principle of subjectivity) as well as the attempt to distinguish authentic and inauthentic forms of traumatization (for example, the perpetrator’s trauma is not the same as the victim’s). In this regard, we should always remember Dominick LaCapra’s sober rejection of the cliché which holds “that everyone [...] is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a ‘wound culture’” (2001, 64). LaCapra is absolutely right to criticize both structuralist theoreticism (which derives all historical events from transcendental structures) and historicist empiricism (which cannot conceive of anything beyond what can be historicized). But the theoretical basis of this criticism is a questionable distinction between two traumas: “transhistorical” (structural) trauma and “historical” trauma. The problem is that, ultimately, LaCapra can only conceive of the relation of these two traumas as a radical exteriority. In fact, for LaCapra, one of the basic paradigms of ideological

obfuscation is precisely the conflation of these two levels.⁸ But the question I want to raise here concerns the reverse scenario: What if the two levels only exists in a state of mutual “contamination”?

Therefore, in opposition to this double reduplication of categories (which opposes two nostalgias to two traumas), I want to show that we need to speak of two different aspects of the very same instance: the necessity and the impossibility of repetition. We do not need to choose between an originary nostalgia or an originary trauma and their corrupted manifestations. Rather, we have to postulate that the originary moment is the mutual interruption of the nostalgic and traumatic functions. As I will argue here, this is precisely the lesson of the Freudian theory of the drive.

So what does psychoanalysis contribute to a theorization of nostalgia? For Jean Starobinski, for example, there is a direct line of historical development from the birth of the concept in 1688 in Johannes Hofer’s dissertation to Kant, and from Kant to Freud, who appears to be the last theoretician of nostalgia, since after him Starobinski announces the disappearance of the term from scientific discourse (1966, 81-103). In Starobinski’s well-known formulation, the most important thing that separates the Romantic theory of nostalgia from its predecessors is that this early medical discourse believed that repatriation could cure the nostalgic of his homesickness. But in Rousseau, Starobinski discovers the impossibility of the cure: “This ‘memorative sign’ is related to a partial presence which causes one to experience, with pleasure and pain, the imminence and the impossibility of complete restoration of this universe which emerges fleetingly from oblivion” (93). Let us pay detailed attention to the terms provided by this sentence because they describe the structure of nostalgia with exceptional clarity. First, we can see that a partial object stands in for the totality of the past. Second, this substitutive

representation through the partial object assumes the form of an affective cathexis that can involve both “pleasure and pain.” And finally, the modality of this substitution and affective investment leads us to the “imminence and the impossibility” of repetition.

It is in this context that Starobinski attempts to establish a certain theoretical filiation between Kant and Freud. As he argues, for Kant, “what a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual *place* where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining toward something which he can repossess, but toward an age which is forever beyond his reach. [...] Before Rimbaud said, ‘One does not leave,’ Kant had warned that there is no returning” (94-95). According to this narrative, Freud simply formalized this insight in a new language: “In developing the theories of fixation and regression into technical terminology, Freud simply made the explanation suggested by Kant explicit and precise. The word regression, in its own way, takes up the idea of return. But the neurotic regresses within his own history. The village is interiorized.” (102-103) It appears, then, that Freud’s only achievement was the interiorization (in a personal history) of the Kantian impossibility of nostalgic return. Thus, for Starobinski, both the Kantian and the Freudian subjects are constitutively nostalgic. But in his reading of Freud, Starobinski is only concerned with Freud’s theory of fixation and regression and fails to recognize the three-fold structure of nostalgia (tropological substitution, affective investment, and the simultaneous imminence and impossibility of repetition) in the theory of the drive.

This is precisely the point where we can identify a certain structural similarity between trauma and nostalgia. I will quote here Cathy Caruth’s classic summary of the related literature because her work has remained a constant point of reference in cultural studies:

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but

return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (1996, 91-92)

This general description makes it clear that the theoretical discourse on trauma is structured by two fundamental presuppositions. First, we find here an example of the position renounced by LaCapra according to which there is history only where there is trauma: “History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). In fact, these words suggest that history is nothing but the traumatic structure of the community. At the same time, however, we need to distinguish between two levels of the traumatic experience: on the one hand, we can speak of the “psychological dimension of suffering”; on the other hand, “beyond” the psychological dimension, we can discover the paradoxical structure of historical understanding. At this point, however, a question emerges: even if we accept the proposition that historicity is essentially tied to trauma, it is not clear which level of the traumatic experience is more essential. In other words, we still need to explain why the paradoxical structure of historical understanding can only manifest itself through the psychology of suffering. If we question this automatic connection of historicity with suffering, however, we are left with the suspicion that the ties between the

psychological dimension and the paradox of historicity are merely contingent and, therefore, can be articulated in different ways.

This dissociation of the psychological level from the paradoxical structure allows us to reconsider Caruth's description of trauma from the perspective of Starobinski's definition of nostalgia. Obviously, what is common to both is their concern with repetition. But if we move beyond these epistemological concerns, we can argue that the paradoxical structure of historicity that emerges here is the fact that, even at the time of its occurrence, history lacks a fully formed identity. It is this condition that renders the threefold structure of nostalgia relevant: in place of a fully established identity, we have a repetition of an impossibility that makes it possible for certain partial objects to represent the fullness of the past by way of an affect. But while trauma is concerned with the repetition of an impossibility constitutive of history, nostalgia reproduces the impossibility of repetition itself. As Susan Stewart put it, "Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity" (23). Even if on the level of psychology they are quite distinct, on this structural level trauma and nostalgia appear to have quite a few things in common.

Thus, we can see that the similarity is the compulsive repetition, while the opposing element is the affective charge of the repeated element of the past. Trauma implies the occurrence of a historical event that at the moment of its occurrence could not be fully integrated, so it keeps returning in the mode of dislocated hallucinations. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is often a response to a present that is not fully accepted, so it is replaced (through a desire for repetition) by a particular vision of the past. On the level of psychological dimensions, we find an opposition between the two in that they name two different modes of suffering in the present: one because the past was painful, the other because the past was enjoyable. In more

emphatic terms: one refers to a lack in the past (since the traumatic event is a hole in the narrative of the past), while the other to an excess (since the nostalgic rewriting of the past adds something to it which was not necessarily there). On the structural level, however, the difference can be formulated in relation to repetition: trauma names the impossibility of not repeating that which never happened; while nostalgia names the impossibility of repeating that which did. To be more precise, the content of repetition is in both cases rather paradoxical: in the case of trauma what is repeated is an event that only exists in the form of a non-event; while in the case of nostalgia, it is a non-event that only exists in the form of an event.

This is why we need to clarify the status of traumatic and nostalgic narratives. We often speak of nostalgia in terms of a “mythical” or “fictitious” reconstruction of the past that never existed in that specific form. I agree with this description, but only if by “mythical” and “fictitious” we do not mean that a nostalgic narrative is by definition pure “make-believe” or a bold-faced lie. What is important about nostalgia is that the fictitious story aims to recapture something real. There was some enjoyment in the past that is only available through an excessive representation. Even if the story is fictitious, nostalgia wants to repeat a real enjoyment. And the same is true of traumatic narratives. The claim that the traumatic event “never happened” does not mean that the traumatic narrative is pure fiction. It simply means that the meaning of the event is always a retroactive construction that was not available at the time the event took place. In both cases, therefore, the narrative aims to give form to something real that is never fully exhausted by these belated constructions.

Freud clearly defined this double logic as the very structure of the death drive. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, there are two different types of repetition: on the one hand, we have the repetition of a failure (in Lacanian terms, something “does not stop *not* writing itself”), on the

other hand, some satisfaction is also repeated (something “does not stop writing itself”).⁹ The logic of these two repetitions describes the structural difference between trauma and nostalgia perfectly: trauma is the failure that “does not stop not writing itself” and nostalgia is the satisfaction that “does not stop writing itself.” And it is here that it becomes clear that both trauma and nostalgia can be described in terms of the necessity and impossibility of repetition.

One possible approach would be to say that nostalgia names the necessity, trauma the impossibility of repetition. At least, this is what Freud’s theory of the drive suggests in Beyond the Pleasure Principle: “It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (43, emphasis in original). On the basis of this definition, it appears that the essentially nostalgic goal of the drive (the necessity of repetition) is always disturbed by traumatic interruptions (the impossibility of this repetition). Freud makes it clear that the ultimate goal of the drive is identical repetition: “if conditions remained the same, it would do no more than constantly repeat the same course of life” (45). What we find in reality, however, is that repetition remains operative even if identical repetition is impossible. It is in this sense that the drive is essentially a failed attempt to return to an earlier state of things which provided some enjoyment. In other words, taken in this structural sense, trauma and nostalgia name two aspects of the death drive: the repetition of an impossibility and the impossibility of repetition.

Hence the seemingly counter-intuitive reversal that Freud introduces: while the drive might appear to be a progressive force (a forward movement), in actuality, it is a conservative force. We could read this argument as Freud’s critique of a certain concept of modernity. Let us recall that for Freud the theory of the death drive was an attack on the idea that history is the

terrain of human progress driven by a biological “instinct toward perfection” (50). Freud’s point is the exact opposite. His goal was to show that “progress” is simply the failure of the conservative forces to effectuate an identical repetition of the past. In this sense, the theory of the death drive is also a theory of the anti-modern foundations of the modern.¹⁰

Thus, we can describe the drive’s relation to the movement of history in the following terms: an impossible return to an earlier state of things forces the drive to move in a number of other directions. This move, however, is not necessarily a progressive move “forward” in the sense that its direction cannot be logically deduced from the failure of the backwards movement. Rather, its logic is simply that of libidinal investments in substitute objects. At the same time, we have to emphasize that the “impossibility” of repetition does not mean that nothing is ever repeated or that the fulfillment of repetition is forever postponed. In fact, the point is that something can always be effectively repeated, but this real repetition also repeats a failure. In other words, the objects of the drive provide real satisfaction; but since they are only substitute (and partial) objects, this satisfaction remains partial as well: “it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is demanded and that which is actually achieved that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained” (51).

Ultimately, these speculations concern the temporality of the drive, which we can now outline with more precision. First, we need to consider the negativity of the death drive from the perspective of the “sexual instinct.” We immediately encounter here a crucial difficulty: the apparent contradiction between Freud’s insistence on the dualism of his theory (Eros vs. Thanatos) and his claim that the aim of every drive is death. How is it possible to assert simultaneously the unity and the duality of the drives? Freud’s point is that the sexual instincts oppose the death drive precisely in order to achieve its goal: “[the sexual instincts] are

conservative in the same sense as the other instincts in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are peculiarly resistant to external influences” (48). This “higher degree” of conservation could be best described as a “negation of negation”: the negativity of the death drive is negated by the “life instincts” in order to reach the goal of the drive on a different level. But if sexuality appears here as the internal negativity of the death drive, we can also see that the point is that the drive is not quite itself. And this difference from itself is precisely the condition of its temporality: “One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey” (49). The temporality of the drive is a result of this internal interruption.

At the same time, let us recall that Freud speaks of the “timeless” status of the unconscious. Therefore, what is of interest to us is that this “timeless” agency is only present in its temporal effects. Freud’s strategic mention of the Kantian transcendental aesthetics in Beyond the Pleasure Principle shows us that the temporality of the drive must be located between the “timelessness” of the unconscious and what Freud calls our “abstract notion of time” (32). Freud calls the latter a function of consciousness whose primary role is to provide a defense against external stimuli. This, however, suggests that our conscious representation of time is a defense mechanism against traumatic incursions. Accordingly, we have a conscious representation of time precisely in order to be able to return to an inorganic state of timelessness. To put it differently, our conscious experience of time is simply the result of the failed return to an originary state of timelessness. The temporality of the drive is only available to us in the form of

the internal torsions of this representation. The psychoanalytic theory of history is, therefore, based on the repetitive disruptions of our conscious representation of time.

Photography as Last Judgment

A similar conception of time and history is articulated in Giorgio Agamben's early writings. In his Infancy and History (first published in 1978), Agamben presents a critique of the metaphysics of the instant that has dominated Western thought ever since its Aristotelian beginnings. Writing against this longstanding tradition, Agamben's goal is to identify the domain of authentic historicity with pleasure in order to liberate history from the Hegelian negation of happiness:

The Western experience of time is split between eternity and continuous linear time. The dividing point through which the two relate is the instant as a discrete, elusive point. Against this conception, which dooms any attempt to master time, there must be opposed one whereby the true site of pleasure, as man's primary dimension, is neither precise, continuous time nor eternity, but history. Contrary to what Hegel stated, it is only as the source and site of happiness that history can have a meaning for man. In this sense, Adam's seven hours in Paradise are the primary core of all authentic historical experience. (2007a, 114-115)

According to this passage, history becomes comprehensible for us only with relation to happiness, since the proper site of historicity is neither linear quantified time (Freud's rational representation of time) nor eternity (a transcendent "beyond" that is never accessible to actually existing historical beings). This radical reversal of our metaphysical presuppositions introduces

here a philosophical theme that is going to be a recurrent element of Agamben's writings: mere chronological empty time must be opposed to the full time of the messianic interruption.

The arguments outlined in Infancy and History are important for us for at least three reasons. First and foremost, we need to highlight the fact that the starting point of the whole project is Walter Benjamin's diagnosis according to which the traumatic experience of WWI led to a definitive "destruction of experience." But Agamben's point is that today "we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice" (15). In other words, if the destruction of experience is the fundamental experience of contemporary modernity, this premise allows us to reformulate the famous Benjaminian thesis at the heart of Agamben's whole project (according to which the exception has become the norm) in slightly different terms: the standard experience of modernity is the generalization of the experience of war-time trauma (in the form of the dissociation of experience), which is no longer the exception but the norm of contemporary existence. In this inverted situation, as Agamben suggests, the negation of experience "can provisionally embody a legitimate defence" against the modern destruction of experience (18). In other words, the only practical way of counteracting this traumatic "expropriation of experience" is another "destruction of experience" which is then recognized as the new abode of humanity (48).

Second, the fundamentally nostalgic philosophical corrective proposed by Agamben to the metaphysics that made this traumatic destruction of experience possible is an attempt to reinvent time. But the reinvention of time, as we have seen, proceeds by reintroducing the ideas of pleasure and happiness into the concept of history. This is the foundation of the true revolution that will allow us to shake off the shackles of our epoch: "The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to

‘change time’” (99). Agamben offers us two classic and two modern examples of this philosophical revolution. On the one hand, Gnosticism and Stoicism represent two missed opportunities in the history of Western thought. Gnosticism’s theory of “broken time” imagined “an incoherent and unhomogeneous time, whose truth is in the moment of abrupt interruption, when man, in a sudden act of consciousness, takes possession of his own condition of being resurrected” (111). Similarly, Stoicism opposed to the notion of homogeneous, infinite time a new liberating experience of time: “Its model is the cairós, the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment” (111). These two examples already indicate what Agamben is going to find attractive in Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s take on time. In Benjamin’s case, Agamben highlights the latter’s rejection of the concept of the “instant” as a transition between the past and the present. Thus, he focuses on Benjamin’s theory of Jetzt-Zeit, which constitutes a “messianic cessation of happening” that initiates a “full time” in opposition to the state of emergency that is now the new rule of the situation (112). Accordingly, then, in Heidegger’s work Agamben concentrates on the conflict between the vulgar experience of time and Dasein’s decision to access a more authentic dimension of historicity through its resoluteness. As we can see, what is common to the four examples is that they all rely on an opposition between an empty, calculable, homogenous time and its interruption by another temporal dimension that involves the subject in the form of an active intervention.

Finally, in Infancy and History the destruction of experience manifests itself in the general disappearance of bourgeois “gestures” during the nineteenth century. But what is most relevant for us is that the analysis of the loss of gesture leads Agamben to a new theory of the image. To be more precise, the disappearance of gesture is the foundation of Agamben’s theory of cinema. As he puts it, in cinema “a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate

what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss” (151). So when Agamben argues that “gesture rather than image is the cinematic element” (153), he tries to inscribe his theory of the image within the same messianic framework that informed his redefinitions of time and history. To put it differently, the gesture interrupts the static immobility of the image with the force of involuntary memory and liberates the inherent potentialities arrested in the image by referring it to a larger whole of which the image forms an element. This is why cinema needs to be understood primarily in ethical and political (and not exclusively aesthetic terms): cinema liberates the gesture within the image.

The motives introduced in Infancy and History are once again reformulated in a more recent short essay entitled “Judgment Day” published in Agamben’s Profanations (2007b, 23-27). The fundamental objective of the essay is to show that photography is best understood through the logic of the Last Judgment. As Agamben argues, the inherent eschatology of photography can be approached from two perspectives. First, the photograph itself represents a view of the world taken from the perspective of Last Judgment: “photography in some way captures the Last Judgment; it represents the world as it appears on the last day, the Day of Wrath” (23). At the same time, however, the photograph also stares back at its audience from the perspective of Last Judgment: the gaze of the subject represents another judgment, but this time it is the photograph that judges its audience.

The two concepts that Agamben introduces here to discuss this dual structure are “gesture” and “exigency.” Photography simultaneously isolates a singular individual from the crowd and reduces this subject to a fleeting gesture. Thus, photography captures a banal everyday gesture that takes on a new significance and now has to carry the weight of an entire life: “that insignificant or even silly moment collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an

entire existence” (25). The isolated gesture, however, initiates a new temporality, that of eternal repetition: “Here, eternal repetition is the cipher of an apokatastasis, the infinite recapitulation of an existence” (25). In other words, the contingent singularity of the subject surfaces in the logic of repetition here. But the true significance of photography is that it adds an eschatological dimension to the irreducible historicity of the singular subject: “All these photographs contain an unmistakable historical index, an indelible date, and yet, thanks to the special power of the gesture, this index now refers to another time, more actual and more urgent than any chronological time.” (25) We can see now that the logic of the gesture, as defined by Agamben here, evokes a familiar tune: a partial presence (the isolated individual’s isolated gesture) stands in for an absent totality (“the meaning of an entire existence”) and, as such, signals the interruption of our conscious representation of time by introducing the possibility of different kind of time (the time of nostalgic repetition).

“Exigency,” on the other hand, means that “the subject shown in the photo demands something from us [...] they demand not to be forgotten” (25). This is what we could call the “weak” messianic task of the audience: “the photographic exigency that interpellates us has nothing aesthetic about it. It is, rather, a demand for redemption.” (26) The rejection of the aesthetic dimension means that, for Agamben, photography or, in more general terms, the “image” possesses a fundamental ontological function. While the “aesthetic judgment” reduces the photograph to an empty surface for the exercise of subjective taste, the logic of the “Last Judgment” transposes us to the domain of historicity as such. The content of the image is shown to us in its irreducible historical specificity but, through the gesture, the photograph also invokes another notion of time in which this historical contingency is alive with unfulfilled possibilities. Discussing one of Proust’s photographs, Agamben concludes that exigency “grasps the real that

is always in the process of being lost, in order to render it possible once again” (27). Thus, photography (not as an aesthetic practice but as a window onto the historicity of the human being as such) captures the properly historical dimension by splitting our experience of time between the singularity of the contingent gesture and the exigency of messianic time (which is not to be confused with eternity). What needs to be redeemed is precisely the mere existence of the past in its irreducible contingency (which is beyond mere chronological time as well as the idealized time of eternity). This is why the contingency of the past is torn between two extremes: the past is what happened, irrevocably, and irredeemably; but this unsavable past also includes its own possibilities that have remained unfulfilled. Photography saves the past both as that which was, but also as that which could have been.

Even if we had to bypass here much of Agamben’s linguistic ontology and the political theory built on this philosophy, we can highlight two significant points based on these discussions. First, by insisting on the primacy of pleasure over suffering for the properly historical dimension, Agamben indirectly reversed the traditionally accepted hierarchy of nostalgic and traumatic narratives. At the same time, however, this rearticulation of the role of nostalgia is not a simple reversal of the original hierarchy. Agamben’s theory of gesture has demonstrated that, by isolating a partial presence, the photograph produces a gesture that freezes time in a zone of indistinction between traumatic and nostalgic narratives. In other words, gesture designates here the proper domain of a deconstructed “critical” nostalgia: it does not evoke nostalgia for what was, since it is the object of a critical nostalgia for what could have been. In other words, if we can still speak of nostalgia here, we have to emphasize that we are now dealing with a nostalgia for all the possibilities that the past was once pregnant with in its own contingent actuality. Thus, if the photographic gesture functions as the isolation of the past

in its very contingency, we have to also remember that contingency here means that things could have been otherwise. The photographic gesture, therefore, freezes time precisely at the moment when history is about to pass into actuality. In this sense, the goal of critical nostalgia is not to uncover a past as it really existed or to initiate an infinite regression towards an unattainable past, but to grasp the past in its contingency in order to enliven it with the full force of its unrealized possibilities.

Post-Communist Memories

Shortly after the failure of the 1956 revolution, James Michener published a journalistic account of the uprising under the title The Bridge at Andau (1957). I will quote here at length a passage of the book that happens to stumble across the same historical curiosity that will be the focus of our discussions as well. Although the book narrates the “traumatizing” stories of the victims of totalitarianism, in a rather unexpected move, at one point in the story the revolution moves from the tragic to the comic register:

Rumors infected the city, and none was more tragic than the one which claimed that the United Nations would shortly intervene in Hungary’s behalf [...] When time proved that these rumors were false and that no outside agency had any intention of underwriting the apparently successful revolution, a foreboding sense of having been left isolated crept over the city.

This was partially dispelled, however, by the many jokes which the irrepressible Hungarians circulated. For example, Zoltan Pal took his wife to see the remains of the Stalin statue in Stalin Square. There the two boots stood, with a

Hungarian flag jutting out of one of them. “We don’t call it Stalin Square any longer,” Zoltan laughed. “Now it is Boot-maker square.”

Another visitor said, “You know, they didn’t pull the statue down at all. They just dropped a wrist watch in front of it, and like any Russian fool, Stalin bent down to get it.”

The most appreciated jokes were those which ridiculed the stupidity of the communist government, which had actually broadcast the following plea:

“Persons serving prison sentences for murder, willful manslaughter, robbery, burglary, larceny or theft and who have left prison since 23rd October for any reason without having served at least two-thirds of their sentence should report back immediately to the nearest criminal police headquarters.”

Once Zoltan pointed to destroyed machine guns and said, “Those Russian guitars won’t play anymore music.” And the most common joke had in it a large grain of truth: “Imre Nagy says he wasn’t really a communist. Janos Kadar says he isn’t a communist. In fact, the only communist in Hungary is Nikita Khrushchev.”

In this light spirit several profound changes were made in Hungarian life.

(68-69)

We can see that all these revolutionary jokes revolve around the same problem: the stupidity of power. One of the most immediate effects of the revolution appears to have been that it revealed this stupidity. But, then, the most surprising thing for the totalitarian subject is that it could ever submit to such brutish stupidity. How was it possible that Hungary was a communist country if there was not one communist left in it apart from Nikita Khrushchev?

The opening photograph of Reg Gadney's Cry Hungary! happens to depict the very same moment of the revolution. The book narrates the events of the thirteen days of the ill-fated uprising in a strict chronological order. Quite interestingly, the most shocking pictures of the collection are the public massacres and lynching of members of the hated secret police perpetrated by the "ordinary" subjects of the totalitarian regime and not acts of violence committed by the oppressive regime or the Soviet troops. In fact, we do not really get to see the invading forces until the very last pages of the book.

The first photograph of the book captures the destruction of the gigantic Stalin statue that was also mentioned by Michener. As predictable, the first wave of rage unleashed by the events was directed at the symbols of the hated regime. All icons and monuments of the Rákosi regime were open targets and the elimination of the collaborators went hand in hand with the destruction of red stars. Stalin's symbolic body suffered the same fate as the real bodies of the collaborators: it was subjected to a ritual lynching. The statue was torn down; the head was separated from the rest of the body; and the pieces were left lying in the middle of the street along with a number of other dead bodies.

In the center of the photograph, we find the remnants of the statue: a pair of man-sized boots. In the picture, these boots are incorporated into a perfectly triangular composition. The bottom of the picture is lined by the pedestal from which a Hungarian flag is hanging. About half a dozen men are standing around the boots involved in some unspecified activity. Most likely, they are trying to remove the boots from their foundations. On the left, we can see a large steel rod protruding from one of the boots, which has already been bent down towards the ground. Marking the apex of the triangle, a young man is kneeling on the top of one of the boots, deeply absorbed in his revolutionary task, his right hand dynamically poised high in the air holding a

hammer. Finally, in the upper left corner of the page, we find the title of the book printed on a pure white background.

The image, therefore, captures a crucial moment of the destruction of the Stalin statue: the moment when the impetus of the revolutionary destruction of a symbolic order founders on something real. All of a sudden the revolution comes to a halt—its original impetus is suspended—and it becomes a dirty technical problem: the question is no longer how to fight totalitarianism, but how to fight matter. It simply turned out to be impossible to remove Stalin's boots from the pedestal. The revolutionaries, either out of frustration or simply for practical reasons, abandoned the project after a while and satisfied themselves with sticking a Hungarian flag in one of the boots. What the revolutionaries have come to realize, therefore, is that Stalin's boots (forming the actual material basis of symbolic representation) are not just one part of the statue—they are altogether of a different order from the rest of the statue. And the totalitarianism of matter proved to be stronger than Stalin himself.

We could then evaluate Gadney's project in two steps. First, the framing of the image shows that the book represents an anti-Communist politics that appeals to the rhetoric of victimization ("Cry Hungary!"). Second, the anti-Communist politics of victimization is based on a symbolic gesture: by framing this photograph in a particular way, Gadney erects a monument to anti-totalitarian revolt. This new monument is intended to be a substitute monument for the Stalin statue: instead of the total eradication of the old monument, however, the historical event (which is the destruction of a historical monument) is re-monumentalized around an ineradicable residue of history. So this is how the paradoxical project of Cry Hungary! can be defined: what, on the level of the represented, is an attempt at the destruction of a symbolic order is reinscribed, on the level of representation, into the symbolic. However, insofar

as the photograph narrates on the thematic level a certain failure (the failure of the destruction of the master), we can expect a similar failure to return within the representation of this failure as well.

Fortunately, we can locate this secondary failure in the photograph with exceptional clarity. It is to be found in the exact center of the picture, the point of gravity upon which the searching gaze of the audience zooms in automatically. Apparently, someone chalked the words “CSIZMA TÉR 1.” quite legibly on at least two sides of the indomitable boot: “Number 1 Boot Square”—a peerless parody of the authoritarian power of naming as well as of the zeal of renaming that accompanies all major political changes. Inasmuch as the destruction of the symbolic founders on the resistance of matter, the much-hated history does not allow itself to be deleted without a trace. The final act of destruction is the renaming of the residue: it is nothing but a pair of boots; a statue of “The Boot” as such that from now on gives its name to the whole square. As “Stalin square” becomes “Boot square,” the revolution ends in a parodistic gesture that deprives the signifier of its ideological significance and reduces it to its naked reality.

As the reader’s gaze wanders from the boot to the upper left corner (where we read in somber italics the imperative “CRY HUNGARY!”), all of a sudden, the tension between the pathos of suffering inscribed in the title and the absurd comedy presented in the picture becomes apparent. While the title bids us to cry, the picture commands: “Laugh Hungary!” As the tragic imperative of the title is undercut by the unexpected interference in the middle of the picture, this laugh shows us that the picture itself resists a simplistic inscription in a traumatic historical narrative—just as Stalin’s boots resisted the narrative of the revolution.

It is precisely the conflict between these two interpretations that allows us to treat the photograph as an allegory, since it highlights the presence of two separate narrative moments in

the picture. The point of this allegorical reading of the photograph is to show that the logic of repetition that we have uncovered in our discussions of trauma and nostalgia is fully operational in the historical predicament captured by this image. Accordingly, then, I will show here that the three-fold structure that we have identified based on Starobinski's definition of nostalgia provides the fundamental structure of this allegory as well: the photograph presents the story of the rhetorical substitution of a partial object for an absent totality; it invites mutually exclusive affective cathexes of this "memorative sign" (in this case, the conflict is first between the comic and the tragic registers, which is then reformulated in terms of the traumatic and the nostalgic); and, finally, the image forces us to consider the simultaneous imminence and impossibility of repetition as the mutual interruption of nostalgic and traumatic repetitions.

The first narrative moment of the allegory of the birth of the revolutionary subject, therefore, consists of the impossible destruction of the totalitarian master, which leaves behind a historical residue the ontological status of which oscillates between matter and signifier. What becomes visible through Stalin's boots is the resistance of pure matter. But pure matter does not appear here without a form, so it is after all Stalin's boots and not mere matter that resisted the revolution. The second narrative moment (the inscription of the joke) is the realization that this ambiguous residue of history is a site of inscription. But the essence of the joke is that it identifies a signifier in pure matter.¹¹ This is why it is a joke about naming: the name of the master ("Stalin square") which provided the foundation of the totalitarian subject is here replaced by a random name ("Boot square"), which is now the foundation of the post-Communist subject, as it highlights the contingency of naming. By calling attention to the ambiguous zone of indistinction between matter and signifier as well as the subsequent contingency of naming, the

joke manifests the material conditions of signification. This is why in Cry Hungary! it is the very surfacing of the condition of signification that interrupts the narrative of victimization.¹²

Thus, the story narrated by the photograph is essentially an “allegory of tropes.” On one level, the narrative is constituted by the move from a totalitarian (“Stalin Square”) to a revolutionary subjectivity (“Boot Square”). But, as we can see, both of these positions are defined by tropes: the two names of the square indicate two catachrestical attempts to name the foundations of the given symbolic order. Thus, the story narrates the move from one tropological naming to the other (the substitution of one trope for the other). The essential difference between the two tropes, however, is that the first is fully immersed in the “stupidity of power,” while the second displays a crucial dimension of self-consciousness. By the “stupidity of power,” I simply mean here that the signifier “Stalin Square” is unaware of its contingency (and its power is actually predicated upon the denial of this contingency). At the same time, the absurdity of the name, “Boot Square,” also designates its consciousness of its own contingency. In the second case, therefore, it is not the “content” of the name but the contingent form of the catachrestic act of naming that defines the subject.

We can speak here of the catachrestical naming of freedom precisely because the seemingly illogical move from “Stalin square” to “Boot square” reveals something essential about the nature of contingency. As we have seen, the story shows that the negation of the totalitarian subject does not immediately lead to a logically determined new identity. To put it in a slightly different language, the composition of the story does not follow the logic of “determinate negation.” The only thing we know is that the new subject is going to be based on the negation of totalitarian power. But apart from this fact, we cannot deduce the actual content of this identity from the mere fact of negation. In fact, what we see in the picture is the random

emergence of a new signifier which offers itself almost in spite of the negation as the site of a new inscription. Since the new signifier of freedom cannot be derived from the negation of the lack freedom, the unpredictable emergence of this signifier highlights the essential connections between contingency and the catachrestical nature of the act of naming.

This is why we need to emphasize the fact that the photograph offers us two different representations of the revolutionary subject. On the one hand, we have the young man kneeling on the boot. He is the revolutionary subject as negation. He fully appears in the field of representation as our imaginary semblant. But we cannot be sure that he is aware of the fact that he is involved in an impossible exercise. On the other hand, however, there is another subject who is strictly speaking absent from the picture. In fact, this other revolutionary subject is only present through the written trace he or she left behind. And this other subject is not the subject of negation but the subject of inscription. While the first subject is fully present but has no other identity apart from the negation it performs; the other is almost completely absent and has no other identity apart from the act of naming it performs. In a certain sense, the allegory seems to suggest that there will always be an irreducible distance between these two subjects. One is caught forever in the traumatic yet incomplete negation of oppressive power; the other is nothing but the joyful act of naming creating a new foundation.

At the same time, we have also seen that the image stages the mutual interruption of two different registers. The narrative of this allegory of tropes cannot be exclusively restricted to either the tragic or the comic modes. As a result, the narrative of victimization that frames the image breaks down but without fully giving way to the comic intrusion. In other words, the photograph provides us a representation that can simultaneously convey the suffering and enjoyment of the revolutionary subject. In fact, it is precisely the mutual interruption of the two

registers that shows us that we are once again dealing with the problem of repetition. This is why the photograph can function as the vehicle of both traumatic and nostalgic repetitions. As we stare at the photograph, it is really difficult to decide whether it speaks about the suffering or the enjoyment of history.

Thus, we could also describe the two narrative moments of the allegory in terms of trauma and nostalgia. The first moment is that of a traumatic repetition. It is the uncanny return of Stalin's ghost in a place where there should not be anything at all. The second moment, however, initiates a nostalgic repetition in that it introduces (in a displaced form) a certain form of enjoyment where there should not be enjoyment at all. The theoretical point is that "the objectivity of the social" and the "subject" are both structured by the same impossible and necessary repetition. To be more precise, both subjectivity and objectivity are constituted on a terrain of ontological inconsistency which hands over their being to this repetition. That is, the subject of politics is constituted by a catachrestical act of naming which condemns it to be torn between the traumatic and nostalgic repetitions of its very own foundations.

The photograph, therefore, teaches us an important lesson about history and repetition. Let us recall Marx's famous sentence here: "Hegel observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur twice, so to speak. He forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce" (32). Our photograph, however, showed us something slightly different. The problem is not that due to its incomplete nature historical repetition corrupts tragedy and turns it into farce. Rather, the point is that this failure (the possibility of corruption) was already present in tragedy itself: even at the very moments of its occurrence, the tragedy of history was already farce. In other words, the possibility of farce has to be internal to tragedy. The two modes are not external to each other but contain the other's possibility in

themselves. It is the lack of identity of history at the moment of its very occurrence that establishes the necessity as well as the impossibility of its repetition.

Seen from the perspective of the Agambenian Last Judgment, it is clear that the photograph records a contingent gesture. The most important problem that we encounter here is that the picture makes it quite easy to reduce this significant gesture to that of negation: the young man's theatrical dynamism as he lifts his hammer high in the air seems to dominate the whole field. But if we stop here, we miss an essential dimension of the picture. The point is to read the young man's failure together with the other gesture recorded in the picture. For the image tells us that even if the act of negation fails, there is still the parodic gesture of renaming. It is the joke that helps us understand Agamben's claim that "[g]esture is the display of mediation, the making visible of a means as such" (2007a, 155, emphasis in original). What counts for Agamben in the logic of the gesture is that it brings to the fore the very means of communication (without a determinate end): "gesture is the communication of a potential to be communicated" (156). This is the ontological dimension opened up by our photograph as well: on the one hand, by explicitly thematizing the very conditions of signification, the photograph displays the contingency of naming (as well as the contingent foundation of the symbolic law); on the other hand, this self-reflexive thematization of its own means of communication also highlights the contingency of the historical event recorded in the picture (which is now impossible to reduce to the explanatory narrative woven around it by the book and shows itself to us in its mere existence). The demand for redemption, therefore, emerges from this clearing away of the different layers of symbolic determinations: the event wants to speak to us in its irreducible singularity. Quoting Agamben once again, we could truly say that the photograph

“grasps the real that is always in the process of being lost, in order to render it possible once again” (27).

We can then provide a quick definition of “post-Communism” that goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of the closure of a historical period. Post-Communism names the anachronistic era after the collapse of state socialism, when freedom is still only imaginable in the framework of anti-Communist politics. That is, post-Communism is the politics of “anti-Communism after Communism.” On Monday, October 23, 2006, at 9:37 PM, an exact replica of Stalin’s boots was restored as part of a new memorial project (in the so-called “Memento Park”) to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution.¹³ But we now know what is wrong with this monument: the joke is missing from the boot. The new monument is an attempt to negate the possibility of inscription and to delete the traces of contingency. We know that it will not be complete until an insolent revolutionary realizes that it is a mere site of inscription. When the destruction of a monument is monumentalized, the possibility of an ideological reversal opens up. What the new monument tries to hide is precisely that it is *not* a fragment of a totalitarian monument but the complete monument of a new kind of power. While in 1956 Stalin’s boots had the status of a fragment, the replica of these boots in 2006 is fully accomplished work of art in support of a specific post-Communist politics. And let us not forget: even a pair of boots can become a monument to the stupidity of power.

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¹ Apart from Seltzer's work on "wound culture," we could also mention Wendy Brown's States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity (from 1995) and Elaine Showalter's Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media (from 1997) as early representatives of this genre. More recently, the concept of "trauma culture" has been explored in detail by Roger Luckhurst and Anne Kaplan. In her Popular Trauma Culture, Anne Rothe argues that "[m]ass media emplotments of the pain of others are thus not only unethical because they transform traumatic experiences into entertainment commodities but also because they are politically acquiescing and covertly reinforce the oppressive hegemonies of late-modern capitalism that have generated, or at least enabled, the victimization experiences." (2011, 5) For a brief overview of the rise and theoretical critiques of "trauma studies," see the first chapter of E. Anne Kaplan's Trauma Culture, entitled "'Why Trauma Now?'" (2005, 24-41).

² The 50th anniversary of the revolution was immediately followed by a month of violent mass demonstrations and riots in Budapest incited by the Socialist Prime Minister's leaked confession that his party lied "day and night" in order to win the 2006 elections. After a politically tumultuous four years, in the 2010 elections the Socialist party was ousted from power by the landslide victory of its rival, the center-right FIDESZ. In what is often referred to as a "voting booth revolution" (fülkéforradalom) FIDESZ won 53% of the votes which translated into 68% of the seats in the parliament. This election made the news all over Europe because the recently emerged nationalist party Jobbik took 17% of the votes, thereby initiating an international discussion about the rise of the radical right in Hungary and Europe. For more detailed discussions of 1956 revolution, see Rév (2005) and Esbenschade's (1995).

³ Probably the best known example of the conflicting dynamics of traumatic and nostalgic narratives can be found in Wolfgang Becker's 2003 film Goodbye Lenin! In the film, the traumatic event of the collapse of the system has to be masqueraded by an obsessive nostalgic recreation of the bygone world of otherwise hated totalitarianism.

⁴ For an overview of the difference between Lacanian and deconstructive theories of trauma, see Belau (2001).

⁵ For critiques of the ethics of victimization, see Badiou (2001, 10-16); Dean (2009, 5-8); Hardt and Negri (2009, 330).

⁶ See, for example, the following arguments: Turner, Staught and Turner, Rosaldo, Robertson, Hutcheon.

⁷ For example, Vladimir Jankélévitch highlighted a potential ideological reversal at the heart of nostalgia. As he argues, we must see through the claim “that there is nostalgia because the past was beautiful” and perceive that “the past is beautiful because there is nostalgia” (288). Similarly, Boym argues that “Nostalgia works as a double edged sword: it seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool” (58).

⁸ The basic coordinates of this exteriority can be defined by saying that structural trauma can never be a historical event, while historical trauma is always a historical event: “The traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined (for example, the events of the Shoah), while structural trauma (like absence) is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization. When structural trauma is reduced to, or figured as, an event, one has the genesis of a myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive [...]” (82).

⁹ In Seminar XVII, for example, Lacan argues the following: “As everything in the facts, in clinical experience, indicates to us, repetition is based on the return of jouissance. And what, in this connection, is well spelled out by Freud himself is that, in this very repetition, something is produced that is a defect, a failure” (2007, 46). In Seminar XX, we find the following: “The necessary [...] is that which does not stop (ne cesse pas) what?—being written. [...] ‘What does not stop not being written’ is a modal category, and it’s not the one you might have expected to be opposed to the necessary, which would have been the contingent. Can you imagine? The necessary is linked (conjugé) to the impossible, and this ‘doesn’t stop not being written’ is the articulation thereof. What is produced is the jouissance that shouldn’t be/could never fail (qu’il ne faudrait pas). That is the correlate of the fact that there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship, and it is the substantial aspect (le substantial) of the phallic function.” (59) For a discussion of two different repetitions, see also Copjec (1994, 182).

¹⁰ Boym’s psychological diagnosis of progress is, no doubt, correct: “Thus nostalgia, as a historical emotion, is a longing for that shrinking ‘space of experience’ that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations. Nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress” (10). Freud, however, argues the opposite: for him, it is not nostalgia which is the side-effect of progress, but progress which is the side-effect of nostalgia.

¹¹ On the basis of this discussion, then, we can finally complete the general definitions of “the materiality of the signifier” which exclusively concentrate on one aspect of the problem: the failure of signification. On the one hand, the materiality of the signifier means that signification can never constitute a fully consistent totality of meaning. In this sense, the way we have access to this materiality is the mere internal torsion of signification: something of matter reveals itself to us when signification fails. On the other hand, however, we have to reverse this formula and we also have to argue that materiality cannot constitute itself without signification. The possibility of signification must be internal to matter if signification has an irreducible material dimension. But this possibility which is supposedly internal to matter, then, has to be the internal inconsistency of matter: that matter is never “mere matter,” but rather matter to the degree that it can give rise to the excessive dimension of signification.

¹² These two moments could also be defined in reference to two distinct psychoanalytical moments: alienation and separation. The moment of alienation in the analyzed photograph is the first realization of the resistance of the boots: the revolutionary subjects need to realize that the projective discourse of the revolution does not fully dominate the actual events. The moment of separation becomes legible in the inscription of the joke: all of a sudden, as the master signifier of the authoritarian regime is deprived of its special aura, we realize that the materiality of the signifier “poked our eyes out” and we could not see that the monument was “only” a statue. (To put it differently, the joke points out that to call a square Stalin square because there is a statue of Stalin in it is the same thing as calling a square Boot square because there is a statue of a pair of boots in it). In Gadney’s project, however, both of the moments are condensed in the joke: the joke is the moment of alienation since the project of traumatization founders on it (it is the joke that resist Gadney’s reading the way the boots resisted the revolution) and the moment of separation is the realization of the constitutive impossibility of symbolization. In a certain sense, the traumatic narrative works in Cry Hungary! as the fantasy that is trying to close off this constitutive lack within the Other. Gadney himself becomes much like the young man on top of the boot, only he wants to keep the boot and erase the joke.

¹³ For more information about this project, visit the following website: <http://www.mementopark.hu>.