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Futures only.

Public Space in the Age of the Fetishism of the Inorganic

Wild or White Capital? The Age of *Perverted Capitalism*

No doubt that the attribute ‘wild’ in the formula ‘wild capital’ implies the fundamental opposition of modernity between *nature* and *culture*. If you like, the formula reminds Thomas Hobbes notion for *state of nature*, or “the state of war of every man against every man”. In my theoretical work I have tried to demonstrate that these two opposite terms are never pure, that they form a true double bind. From that point of view *wild* and *civilized* (the brutal early phase and its late ‘civilized’ phase), or why not *domesticated* or finally ‘white’, capitalism are not opposite terms. On the contrary, they operate in a complex relation – the one is a symptom of the other. They are not ontologically different versions but the two faces of what I risk to call *perverted* capitalism of today. To put them next to each other can only help for revealing its ‘perverted’ truth. For the sake of this task I will introduce here the opposition between two types of logic, which I designate as ‘logic of exception’ and ‘logic of symptom’ (which can be related to the opposition between two different temporal projections over the past and the future: the logic of exception refers to the past and the logic of symptom – to the future; what is more, the symptom points at a new type of temporality, of experience of time).

Logic of Exception vs. Logic of Symptom

What do I mean by the terms *logic of exception* and *logic of symptom*? Let me try to present them through the example of the city of Sofia. The two types of ‘logic’ points at different models of interpretation, which correspond on their turn to different critical intuitions on the ongoing transformations of the city. Regarding the city of Sofia, we face

on the one hand the dominant critical reaction, the one, which stresses upon the *abnormality* of the situation. It presupposes a kind of universal (and of course fictional) norm, the norm of an European urban model. This position, which could be certainly identified with the dominating public view, considers the ongoing transformation of the city as aberrant to its European character, as leading to an 'orientalisation' (that is, to some phantasmal other of the European model). This discourse deplores the absence of regulation of the urban environment, which it naturally relates to the corrupting force of the new capital and market rules. Similar intuition for "deviation" or "exception" is also at the basis of the opposite attitude, that of the emancipatory anti-repressive discourse, making apology of the loose regulation. According to this position the urban space of Sofia is permissive, in opposition to the over-regulated space of the typical European capital, and consequently its actual situation is rather positive than negative. The paradox of this discourse is that it could not avoid to become at the end a tacit apology or at least acceptance of the liberal models of economy, the latter seen often as a manifestation of a postmodern heterogeneity. Even if these two main types of reactions have different orientation, they share a common ground. They both proceed from the *logic of exception*, implying a kind of ontological opposition between the ideal prototype (the "occidental" model) and its peripheral being or deteriorated copy.

The *logic of symptom* is opposed to the described *logic of exception*. *Logic of symptom* designate the logic of interpretation, which considers that the brutal and violent manifestation of the capital in a city in transition like Sofia is not related to an ontologically different version of market but that it is a symptom, revealing its hidden structures. Because the presumed absence of regulation in the city of Sofia doesn't mean absence of violence, in both transgressive and repressive, or restrictive, senses. Indeed, the present visual environment of Sofia is strongly restrictive. This is an outspokenly homogeneous, exclusionist environment, imposing severe role models and in that sense it is a repressive and over-controlled by economic interests space. In other words, this logic resists to the assumption that liberal economy and market diversify social space, open a space of freedom. On the contrary, they are forces of homogenisation, which, at the end of the day, abolishes the public space.

Of course, this transformation has its important visual dimension, which was in the center of the attention of the project Visual Seminar. In a city in tremendous transformation, like the city of Sofia, where neoliberal economy changes the historical, architectural, cultural, social surfaces, intangible political matter acquires visual density: it is intensively visible, tangible. Public space becomes an ultimately visual space. This phenomenon demands a critical reflection on visual environment and certain *visual politics*. If we make a free use of the famous Walter Benjamin's phrase on politicization of esthetics, we can say that our task would be to (re)politicize the visualized politics (or the disguised as vision, as a huge media screen, as a fetishistic space of ideal images of desire, consumption and welfare politics).

Let me quote the French graphical designer Vincent Perrottet programmatic statement, which has a lot to do with the idea of *visual politics*: "The solutions are political, not visual, that's for sure. That would be just too nice. But we can start avoiding the use of images, which are heading towards an abyss. Social standards are inevitably joined by an exclusion of some people. So if the ruling images are proposing this, then making different images already means to resist in some way. However, by this we are already proposing a different type of society." (Vincent Perrottet [Les Graphistes Associés], "Engagement & Graphic" Design Project, 2000).

In other words, the guiding line of the VS project was not to struggle for restriction of a space of freedom but to critically resist to the new brutal regulations of public space and the monopoly of economic interests in the living environment of the city. Accordingly, the logic of symptom could be considered as the implicit core of the critical intuition on which the project was based. The main criterion for the selection of the fellows of the VS, artists and theoreticians, was namely the *symptomatic value* of their projects, their potential for critical examination or even *irritation* of the symptoms. The symptoms are not just signs, which can be read with the help of the adequate hermeneutic tool; they are rather the result of a critical intervention, of a manipulation of a resisting to articulation blind spot. The sense of the critical intervention is not to reduce them to a normalized regime of representation but to open a space where blindness becomes an in-sight – to open up the gaze for a new light.

Futures Only

Urban space as a Fashion Stage. The Inorganic Fetishism. Re-Sacralisation of Space

Present day Sofia could be considered as a model city of consumption (indeed, consumption remains the only ‘ideologically’ manifested level, which means in fact the suppression of any kind of ideology). Consumerism visibly dominates the model of life especially of the new urban population (not only in the sense of newcomers but also more generally the part of population, especially young and middle-aged which adopted a new way of life, social-cultural transformation, which was not necessarily only positive), which is one of the main social-cultural players in the public space today, being also related to the new capital in the city. This tendency has of course its social-cultural dimension. It reflects the paradoxical situation, in which the ‘people’ relates to the force of consumerism and capitalism. The paradox of the ‘inverted’ notions for left and right in the early postcommunist situation and the position of the critical elite: how to be critical without becoming conservative?

The title ‘Futures only’ points at the different experience of time and ‘being here’ of the new urban population, dominating the urban space . Sofia is experienced as the place of transition¹, but at the same time this transition has more abstract meaning: it is a symptom of a new type of experience of the public space as *transitivity*, as a space of permanent *transformation* – the same type of permanent transformation, which characterizes fashion stage and the “life style” industry. It is considered as the space for promoting models of transformation and of selling these models. The models in question are of course the models of the promised future, which are translated into images of desire and welfare and which are becoming the ultimate horizon of identification, at least for the newly urbanized population. They construct a perverted utopian space, a utopia without ideology. Indeed, the identification with these images is the way of ‘urbanization’ of the newcomers in the city. One may immediately respond that, paradoxically, this form of ‘urbanization’ in fact destroys urban space. And he will be

¹ See Angel Angelov’s remarkable paper « The Nature in Sofia – asocial desert » in *Leteratura*, Bulgarian Edition of Letera International, 20, 1999.

completely right. The thing is that this phenomenon points also to a more profound transformation, and this is the transformation of the general idea of public space today, transformation, which goes far beyond the concrete example of the city of Sofia.

But let us concentrate for the time being on this privileged example. In the city of Sofia we are surrounded by the images of synthetic bodies: here are the enormous billboards², which are everywhere, filling the air of the city and transforming its living environment in a giant screen, a screen that emits their sacred aura. The inorganic³ or in other words the artificial, the plastic, the synthetic object, virtual reality, cosmetics, plastic surgery, digital cameras, techno music, bio-technologies, clonings, the images of advertising, of the poster and the billboard, the face and body on the screen, they all possess a new aura that replaces the aura of the past, which is pushed out, the divine sacred is ousted. The new sacredness is not transcendent, it is immanent, it is here and now. The inorganic is the new transcendence – trans-immanence – of (post)modernity.

The appealing advertising bodies in fact do not appeal for or against anything, their link with any object of reference is radically broken. But their power – a sacred power – lies precisely in this radical break which apparently is supposed to signal their sacredness, their transcendence in the immanent. They are radically separated from the mortal bodies below them, from the dust, the pot-holed sidewalks with the cars rusting on them, from the petrol vapours and miasma, from the exhausted, withered bodies, from the commodity bodies, bodies crashed by cars whose drivers, fascinated by the fetish on the billboard, have lost their control over the wheels. In the sacred space of the billboard there is no room for the bodies striving for the senseless and fascinated imitation of the fetish beyond reach, bound by its uni-forms. The inorganic fetish is indifferent to the profane crowding underneath it.

Indifferent and separated, yet also a model, the inorganic fetish imposes a norm, it fascinates; the norm is followed blindly as in a trance: the bodies go out of themselves in

² I will focus my attention here on the billboard images exactly as a symptomatic manifestations of the transformation of urban space into a space of the perverted capitalism. In that perspective the fact that the municipality of Sofia decided recently to prohibit the billboard type of advertisement in the center of the city – an (in)direct success of VS? – is not so important. But this fact is in a way an answer to one of the questions Christiane Mennicke was asking me in our informal preliminary correspondence: what is going to change with the expected entry in the EU? Apparently some kind of ‘normalization’. That is why it is even more urgent to analyse the present symptoms.

order to surrender to the sacredness which will guarantee them in their terrifying and base finitude, which will give them the form of immortality here and now. But this norm is restrictive, repressive in its action. Therefore, the fetish is scandalous not only because of its transgressiveness but much more because of its normativity, its cruel and inevitable uniformity which offers and imposes. Abandoned to the endless and endearing hell of cosmetics and the maddening ecstatic of diets and bodybuilding – fixations reinforcing the sublimate aura of the fetish – these bodies scrape off themselves the saw-dust, the imperfections of organics, the flesh of the living.

The New Media Condition of Urban Space

One may say that images of advertisement are not necessarily related to urban space, at least on a more profound structural level. In fact, I mean precisely that: that they have basic connection to its transformed condition. Of course, at a glimpse the obsessive presence, the intrusion of the highway billboard type of images in the very center of the city is an ‘exception’ for the European standards. It is a manifestation of the ‘wild’ liberal capitalism, which does not respect any regulation or cultural, architectural heritage of the city and even less – the living space of its citizens. In one word, this is a deviation of the European model (although this model always has its ‘dark’ side – see the example of Paris subway) – it is much more ‘American’ or ‘Asian’. But I suggest once again considering this epidemic intrusion of the inorganic fetishes in the visual tissue of the city as symptomatic: it is a symptom of the much deeper structural transformation of the public space of the city.

What transformation exactly do I have in mind? This *profound* transformation consists indeed in the reduction of the urban public space to a pure *superficiality*.

Let me develop this point. An year ago, Patrick Le Lay, the director of one of the biggest French TV channels, TF 1, stated that “Our programmes aim at making the brain more accessible (...) What we sell to Coca Cola is the time when the human brain is

³ The concept of the inorganic in relation to the concept of fetishism that are used here, are close to the ones Walter Benjamin introduced between the two world wars in *Paris, Capital of the 19th c.*

accessible.”⁴ Later, in the context of the last public debate organised by the Visual seminar in November 2004, the media theorist Georgi Lozanov compared the visual environment of the city with a media, with a television in some sense. Regardless of whether I agree or not, I cannot but admit that both statements are insightful with regard to the radical and in a sense substantial transformation of the public space today. It seems to me that their insight is especially poignant if we project them onto each other and as a result we get the statement: *The urban space nowadays is turning into (or tends to turn into) a space that ensures a (total?) accessibility to the ‘conscience’ of its inhabitants.* I would not want this statement to produce cheap propaganda against the aggression of contemporary ‘perverted’ capitalism, although a resistance against its proteic forms is more and more necessary. I would rather use it as a point of departure for a critical analysis with which I would try to shed some light on the radical transformation in question, which concerns the very structure of the public space and therefore the space of the city, which is the very *form* of the public space; let me describe it as the turning of the public space in ‘new media space’, in a giant media screen.

A short historical remark. What we call “public space” is, of course, one of the basic elements of Modernity. It takes place in the universal horizon of secular values: its opening is impossible without the suppression of the inaccessible ontotheological horizon of the sacred and the establishment of the abstract but tangible space of the new secular universality: that of universal human rights, human reason and secular ethics (we can remind here Kant’s definition of Enlightenment, for which was crucial the emphasis put on the *public* use of Reason). Today we witness the ongoing opposite process of ‘resacralization’ of public space, happening through media, which were initially nothing else but the instruments of self-representation of the public space. The moment when they became crucial element of the economical production means equally the beginning of production of new type of objects – visual objects, images, visualized narratives of welfare and success. In other words, public space is transformed in space of commodity and consumption.

⁴ Announced by the France Press news agency (AFP) on 9 July 2004, commented on by *Libération* (10-11/07/04) : “Patrick Le Lay: the brainwasher” [“Patrick Le Lay, décerveleur”].

The new media space provides (or masks) the public space as availability, as availability that could be appropriated or absorbed, in other words as a *private* space – a space which is subjected to the control of the privileged private access. Firstly, *the new media space* makes the universal network of public space superficial, reducing it to an accessible, neutral, efficient and reactive surface. From the perspective of the philosopher Mario Perniola's concept of the sex appeal of the inorganic⁵, which fits in with Benjamin's line of discussion and at the same time offers a vantage point for considering contemporary situation as a situation of an essential transformation of the cultural-anthropological dimensions of the western socium and subject, the superficial active model of public space, *the new media space*, could be described as a super-eroticised surface offering pure access to the neutral sexuality of the inorganic. According to Perniola, the neutral inorganic sexuality functions as a privileged name for the transformed situation of social existence today. The peculiar formula 'neutral sexuality' is an intensive designation of the cultural space in which the dispositions of the subject and the object in their classical dimensions are suspended, and in which an infinite exchange and functional efficiency of impersonal agents takes place, which, unlike the deterministic and finite framework of the organic, is endlessly reversible and in this sense it is essentially non-hierarchised, superficial. The neutral and inorganic space of pure sexuality means achieving maximum effect after a minimal contact confirming Benjamin's argument that "in comparison to the inorganic, the potential of the organic as an instrument, is very limited".

The *Perverted* Capitalism and the Potential for Resistance

I will try here, in conclusion to this theoretical analysis, to define the notion of 'perverted capitalism', which I used until now *ad hoc*. My hypothesis, concerning the broad political dimension of the problem, is that in the last decades, especially after the end of the bipolar world followed by the war in Iraq, a fundamental transformation of the social structure took place, introducing the image of the global capitalism. (If the

⁵ See Mario Perniola. *Il Sex appeal dell'inorganico*. Giulio Einaudi Editore, Torino, 1994.

“postrevolutionary” era between 1968 and 1989 radicalised the tendencies of what Guy Debord was calling “société du spectacle”, then today we are witnessing on the one hand the radicalisation of this model, but, on the other hand this radicalisation touches upon the very limits of the model, and thus becomes its own destruction.) I suggest to call precisely this new model emerging out of the radical transformation, corresponding to the transition from “industrial society” to “communication society”, a society of the *pervverted capitalism*. *Pervverted capitalism* is the capitalism pretending to step beyond the conventional roles and agencies, beyond the oppositions concerning labor force and power, beyond the rigid frames of economical, social, and cultural production etc. This is a situation, in which the subject – object opposition of producer and agent of the producing process is replaced by the proliferating heterogeneity of universal production-consumption, including and not excluding all traditionally considered as playing liberating role fields such as art, hedonistic autonomy of body etc. To sum up, *transformation* appears as the main quality of contemporary condition. The pervverted capitalism appropriates the potential for transformation, the potentiality itself. (It is probably time to formulate, at the end, the crucial question: Do we still have to speak of *capitalism*? Isn’t this term part of the same rigid ideological rhetorics, which lost the game against its fluid force? It is very difficult to give a simple answer. No doubt that with the radical transformation in question – transformation of the ways of economical and technological production, of social and cultural structure, the structure of public space, we are facing completely different condition in comparison to the traditional idea of capitalism. In this sense, using the same term is a risky endeavor: it can simplify the situation and thus leave aside the necessity of radical critical analysis of the new situation, which only can lead to a critical resistance and formulation of an alternative. But on the other hand, the reference to capital, that is to capitalism remains crucial, because we should not at any rate lose from sight the fact that the flexibility and the potentialities open for us are *goods* – commodities, merchandise – to sell. It’s about an economic production, even if it is a production of potentiality.)

But if the main feature of the pervverted capitalism is the permanent change, the appropriation of potentiality; if, with every new season it pretends to propose the ultimate alternative, then not only the potential for resistance to it is radically reduced, but we are

facing a radically transformed condition of the very possibility to resist. Can we still resist, can we suggest an alternative? And what is more – alternative, which is not conservative, which does not oppose to the dynamics of transformation the return to the stable grounds – identities, homogeneous communities, historical and cultural ‘roots’?

This is the ultimate political question today.