

The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature

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Che cosa avete contro la nostalgia, eh? È l'unico svago che resta per chi è diffidente verso il futuro, l'unico.

Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*¹

Reconciliation is to understand both sides; to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side.

Thich Nhat Hanh

1. *Memory, Identity and Post-Soviet Studies*

Do we have an obligation to remember? Pondering this philosophical problem in *The Ethics of Memory*, Avishai Margalit (2002: 71) argues that from a strictly moral point of view, we have no particular obligation to remember, yet ethically speaking a duty to remember does exist. In his view, memory, or shared history, serves as a constitutive element in the formation of human societies. Indeed, Margalit considers “communities of memory” to be even more significant than nations themselves. A conceptualization of memory as the mortar necessary for cementing human relationships may also be found in Jeffrey Blustein’s *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Blustein 2008), which focuses on memory’s relation to personal and collective identity. The problems of memory and identity that Margalit and Blustein tackle seem particularly crucial in the swiftly changing context of contemporary Russian society, where it is now possible to witness a process of reconstruction and re-creation very similar to that typically occurring in individuals after the experience of trauma or shock – which is exactly what the collapse of the Soviet Union was, in diverse and often contradictory ways, for many of its citizens.

While the Holocaust and World War II have obviously been the inspiration and point of departure for much of trauma theory’s development, we can also use the concept of ‘calamitous historical events’ more generally, extending it even to the collapse of totalitarian regimes². In the last decade, in fact, many

¹ “What do you have against nostalgia, huh? It’s the only fun left for those who have no faith in the future, the only one” (*The Great Beauty*).

² The reports collected by two leading scholars in the field of trauma studies, Jacob D. Lindy and Robert J. Lifton, for example, demonstrate the effects of political violence on the populations of post-Communist Hungary, Germany, Romania, Russia,

scholars addressing issues of post-Soviet identity have described it as the reappropriation – or sometimes misappropriation or even negation – of traumatic memory. In the words of Evgeny Dobrenko and Andrey Shcherbenok, “the notion of trauma has great potential for research into contemporary Russian culture” (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 78).

Still more frequently, scholarly debate on the process of historical change in Russia has emphasized the equivocal character of the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet state. While Dobrenko and Shcherbenok (*Ibidem*) hold that “the analysis of the Soviet legacy can provide invaluable insight into contemporary Russia, political, economic, and cultural transformations notwithstanding”, they also describe the relationship between contemporary Russian culture and the Soviet past as “characterized by profound ambiguity” (*Ivi*: 77). In our view, such ambiguity relates directly to the general sense of trauma that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its ‘great narrative’ arguably provoked as well as to what Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber have called “collective amnesia about the past” and “absent memory” (Mendelson, Gerber 2005: 84)³. Thus, the Soviet legacy cannot be ignored. In the words of Dobrenko and Shcherbenok,

two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian society and culture are still dependent on their Soviet heritage, which is upheld and rejected, often simultaneously, in practically all fields of symbolic production, from state ideology to architecture, from elite literature to mass culture. Russian culture remains suspended between the historical narratives of the emergence of the new nation from the ruins of the USSR and the Soviet cultural legacy, whose models are no longer functional;

Croatia, and Armenia (Lindy, Lifton 2001). While they do not specifically deal with the fall of political regimes, they exploit the German concept of ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’ or ‘coming to terms with the past’ to provide very useful insights on how trauma can be defined. If, as they argue, traumas occur “in great sudden breaks with the past” (*Ivi*: 216), much of history itself can be considered trauma (*Ivi*: 213). In their view, the concept of trauma “operates on many levels and its complexities defy our ordinary categories. It lacks the structure and limits of a discrete disaster, such as an earthquake. Natural disasters have something approaching an end point: the effects reverberate over years or even decades, but the catastrophe itself is over”, while trauma “is on the order of a sustained catastrophe that never goes away, of threats, dangers, and pressures towards betrayal that become perpetual. The pressures are both acute and chronic, both individual and societal. For the individual person caught up in these traumatic historical forces, fear and pained ambivalence to the regime are transmitted from the moment of birth and before and extend throughout the life cycle” (*Ibidem*). For a counter-argument on the application of trauma studies to post-Soviet reality, see Blacker *et al.* 2013; on the connection between trauma studies and post-Soviet studies, see Abbott 2007, Bridger, Pine 2013; on trauma studies, see also Antze, Lambek 1996, Caruth 1996 and 2003, Herman 1997, Minow 1998, Wiesenthal 1998.

³ For a general discussion of collective memory, see Zerubavel 1995, Fridja 1997; on memory and its public absence in contemporary Russia, see also Maier 2001, Zhurchenko 2007, Etkind A. 2012.

the result is the instability of its ideological symbolic order and a palpable traumatic void, which its subjects fill with their incoherent, emotional, and ideologically charged interventions. This suspension between the traumatic experiences of the past, both remote and quite recent, and an underdeveloped and unstable narrative about it, are at the core of contemporary Russian culture, marking it as an inherently post-Soviet culture (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 77)⁴.

Alexander Etkind (2009: 193) has emphasized the difficulty of properly understanding the nature of both memory and trauma associated with the fall of the Soviet Union. According to Etkind (*Ibidem*):

Many speculate about collective nostalgia and cultural amnesia, or notice the ‘cold’ character of the memory of Soviet terror. In my view, surveys reveal the complex attitudes of a people who retain a vivid memory of the Soviet terror but are divided in their interpretation of this memory.

Stressing the inadequacy of communal memorial practices in today’s Russia, “a land where millions remain unburied, the dead return as the undead” (*Ivi*: 182), Etkind avers that:

While the state is led by former KGB officers who avoid giving public apologies, building monuments, or opening archives, the struggling civil society and the intrepid reading public are possessed by the unquiet ghosts of the Soviet era. Haunted by the unburied past, post-Soviet culture has produced perverse memorial practices that are worthy of detailed study (*Ibidem*).

Russia’s failure to fully address collective memory might seem surprising in light of claims that “ecstasy of suffering” and “erotization of the wound”, features that find their ideal representation in Dostoevsky’s Marmeladov, are general characteristics of the Russian cultural system, as Dragan Kujundzic (2000: 905) rightly maintains⁵. Following Kujundzic, we should today be witnessing the performance of multiple autopsies on the corpse of the Soviet past. As will become apparent, Russian culture’s relationship with this ‘object’ (the Soviet past) is still unstable, however, and in evident need of additional ‘negotiation’.

This article will make use of analytical instruments from the field of trauma and memory studies to envision ‘trauma’ not as an isolated event, but as a process of collective reinterpretation – as suggested by the framework of Freudian trauma theory. We will also further explore the contemporary debate on the role

⁴ Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya (2011: 136), reflecting on the intersections of and boundaries between post-Soviet studies and trauma studies, contends that the former “has derived strength from its analyses of diverse and subjective responses to the experience of oppression”, but these “are not the sole focus of post-Soviet scholarship”, since scholars “have instead looked to the interaction between degrees of agency and Foucauldian formulations of self-regulation”.

⁵ On this tendency towards emotive display, see also Boym 1995 and Tröbst 2004.

of memory in post-Soviet culture and society by responding to several crucial questions. Can nostalgia itself be considered a form of reconciliation with a traumatic past? If so, what type of nostalgia – in terms of Svetlana Boym’s distinction between the ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ varieties (Boym 2001: 49-55) – performs this function? And what role do art and literature play in this process? We take as case studies a series of works by Ilya [Il’ja] Kabakov, Sergej Volkov, Evgenij Fiks, and Andrej Astvacaturov, including both installations and literary texts. The installations of Ilya Kabakov function to preserve relics of Soviet material culture as modern ‘Russian (Soviet?) arks’. In the words of Svetlana Boym (1999), his

fragmented ‘total installations’ become a cautious reminder of gaps, compromises, embarrassments, and black holes in the foundation of any utopian and nostalgic edifice. Ambiguous nostalgic longing is linked to the individual experience of history. Through the combination of empathy and estrangement, ironic nostalgia invites us to reflect on the ethics of remembering⁶.

The artistic reflections on Soviet society produced by Sergej Volkov and poignantly expressed in the 1990 installation *Art Warehouse*, demonstrate a similar attempt to come to terms with the Soviet legacy’s influence – as does *Adopt Lenin* (2008), the more recent installation of Evgenij Fiks and, in the field of prose literature, Andrej Astvacaturov’s *Skunskamera* (2011).

2. *What is Nostalgic about Nostalgia? Post-Soviet Identity, Nostalgia, and Art*

Clearly, understandings of the past evolve and can vary widely⁷. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffrey Alexander (2004) suggests that collective trauma is continuously created through discursive (re)interpretation. A recent issue of *Slavonica* edited by Dobrenko and Shcherbenok (2011) variously illuminates the discursive instability that pervades post-Soviet Russia’s visions of the past. An article in that issue by Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko analyzes materials such as private photos from family albums to demonstrate the contradictory quality of Thaw Era visual narratives about the violent suppression of popular unrest in 1962 (cf. Sarkisova, Shevchenko 2011). In particular, they identify an oscillation between the nostalgic and the traumatic, which they take to be a characteristic feature of these narratives. In “This is Not a Pipe: Soviet Historical Reality and Spectatorial Belief in Perestroika and Post-Soviet Cinema”, Shcherbenok (2011: 155) underlines the glaring incongruities found in post-Soviet cinematic representations of the past:

⁶ On Kabakov, see also Boym 2001: 309-326.

⁷ See also Alexander 2003.

as in Magritte's painting, post-Soviet Russian films represent 'the pipe' – Soviet historical reality – and add a contradictory dimension to this representation, which, in the final analysis, only helps sustain its believability.

Paradoxically, cinema's false representations of the past have helped to bridge the gap between pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet attitudes in contemporary Russia through what Shcherbenok (*Ibidem*) calls "sutured belief", a powerful term that refers to the internally divided self of the 'new' Russian, which results from "a split belief that disavows its incompleteness and seems to be the only possible mode of belief in the conditions of the ideological havoc of post-Soviet Russia" (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 82). According to Kevin Platt (2009: 4), the ambivalent and often incoherent character of post-Soviet culture derives from the fact that its very essence is 'constructedness' itself:

the revolutionary termination of the Soviet epoch and inauguration of a new era – whether by means of a momentary leap into the future, an extended passage through a period of "hybridity", or overlap of incommensurate social worlds, or even through a less definite period of incoherent post-Soviet civilizational 'hang-over' as in Oushakine's proposal⁸ – was always as much of an ideological fiction as is any proclaimed revolution in human history.

Within the frame of the current and rather confused debate on post-Soviet identity, the concept of *nostalgia* can be helpful for describing a more general attitude towards the shared re-appropriation of a common (Soviet) past that continues to exert strong influence on constructions of contemporary Russian identity. The concept of nostalgia itself, of course, has multiple shadings that must be taken into account. Ilya [Il'ja] Kalinin (2011), who has written extensively on the rhetorical use of nostalgia in politics, explains how the appeal to the Soviet past contained in Dmitriy Medvedev's modernization program was indispensable for his project – which paradoxically aimed to eliminate the traces of its own political implications. In Kalinin's view, Medvedev exploited both the negative and positive potential of nostalgic attachment. Nostalgia's negative side, he believes, provided the energy necessary to cleave the past from the present. And we can agree that "nostalgia always involves (explicitly or implicitly) drawing a contrast between the present and the past" (Blustein 2008: 10), although, as Theodore Adorno reminds us, "the past one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive" (Adorno 1986: 115). The positive side of Medvedev's nostalgia, Kalinin holds, may be seen in his rhetorical reliance on the relationship between 'fathers' and 'sons' that is so emphasized in Russian culture. Widespread perception of such familial ties as 'natural' helped to remove any lingering sense of political connection with the Soviet epoch – leading to the paradoxical result that the earlier Soviet period was ultimately felt to be politically 'neutral'. In short, this diffusion of familial paradigms assisted in the retrospective erasure of the Soviet Union's political significance:

⁸ Platt makes reference here to the conclusions reached by Serguei Oushakine 2000.

we are no longer dealing with nostalgia and the desire for a return of the lost object, but with a politics whose objective is the positive recoding of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism for which ‘the Soviet’ lacks any historical specificity, but is rather seen as part of a broadly conceived and comically heterogeneous cultural legacy (Kalinin 2011: 157).

More recently, Kalinin (2013: 255-256) has characterized Medvedev’s program as harking back to the past for very specific reasons. By linking the present with the past, Medvedev effectively suggests both that the past should be evaluated positively and that it provides the source of a sense of tradition:

both nostalgic and modernizing drives derive from dissatisfaction with the present [...]. The Soviet past, which [Medvedev’s, I.M.] project claims to overcome, remains a major source of the energy that is necessary for starting the engine of modernization. There is thus a component of nostalgia in this modernization, a particular sense of a break between the present and past that endows the past with a positive value. Add to this a nationalist mindset that valorizes the notion of continuity between an idealized past and an unfulfilled present, and the result is a glorious tradition that invites its heirs to assert their place within it, thus becoming part of the historical nation.

Using somewhat more clinical language, Dobrenko and Shcherbenok (2011: 88) observe that “Medvedev’s rhetoric can be viewed as an attempt to replace the psychoanalytic traumatic fixation upon the irremediable loss of the Soviet Union with the thoroughly discursive and therefore more malleable traumatic structure which, indeed, can be resolved in the future”.

In short, Medvedev and the Russian state have both integrated cultural trauma into the ongoing construction of a national narrative by exploiting the sentiment of nostalgia widely felt among its citizens. Blustein (2008: 10) warns of nostalgia’s possible dangers in such a context: this is a “highly selective form of remembering and forgetting” that “may distort political and personal, public and private life”. At the same time, however, he concedes the value of nostalgia’s “antiquarian sense”, which “lies in the fact that it gives individuals and peoples a sense of rootedness and historical continuity and in this way comforts them with a sort of existential reassurance”, granting life “a meaning and a purpose” (*Ivi*: 8-9). A nostalgic connection with the past is thus essential to the shaping of identity, whether that of a single individual or of an entire nation.

Nostalgia in contemporary Russia is not confined to the political domain alone, of course, but also pervades other social and cultural spheres, including the arts. That art should be understood as particularly germane to political inquiry is nothing new: as Schiller (1989: 6) pointed out, “if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom”. Works of art also provide fecund material for theoretical reflection. In the view of Jill Bennett (2005: 150), art not only “might produce thought”, but is also “engaged in a synchronous development of theory” itself.

What is the nature of the nostalgia that such art-inspired theoretical reflection brings into being? In Russia today, the visual construction of the Soviet past raises a number of pressing issues relating to how we transmit and communicate memory and trauma, transforming these into problems of narrative. Visual art has thus become a privileged site for the creation of social memory and for the study of the same.

3. *Remembering Just After the Fall: Ilya Kabakov and Sergej Volkov*

In recent years, the work of Ilya Kabakov has been widely scrutinized from various points of view. Harriet Murav (2011), for example, tackles the issue of Kabakov's artistic production from the perspective of history – and especially Jewish history – to reveal evidence of trauma in his poetics. Taking as her example the 2004-2005 installation entitled *The Teacher and the Student: Charles Rosenthal and Ilya Kabakov*, she identifies Kabakov's use of blank spots, or lacunae, as symbolic of a Soviet failure to address Jewish history. She also infers from his work the posing of another question, a perhaps still wider and more general interrogative concerning Russia's identity, namely to what extent are we actually able today to tell a story about ourselves and our (Soviet) past? It is precisely by means of reflecting on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001: 324) argues, that we can begin to formulate an answer about our capacity to understand the past. In her view, Kabakov's "total installations reveal a nostalgia for utopia, but they return utopia to its origins – not in life, but in art" (*Ibidem*)⁹. Boym's discussion of Kabakov's most important artworks – *The Toilet*, *The Life of the Flies* and the *Lost Civilization* – addresses both the general link between Kabakov's poetics and nostalgia, and the still more potent sense of nostalgia that emerges when we examine the specific objects which constitute his installations (*Ivi*: 313-322). These objects, together with white (blank) spots representing their absence, function as important nodes in both the overarching structure of the installation and in the narrative it engenders. In her analysis of *The Toilet*, for example, Boym (*Ivi*: 317) observes that "Kabakov took great care in arranging the objects in the inhabited rooms around the toilet", deploying these as "metonymical memory triggers of everyday Soviet life". This use of things to provoke memory is precisely what requires investigation in a study of nostalgia, for objects implicitly produce stories and even though the objects in Kabakov's installations are sometimes mere reproductions, rather than the 'real' things themselves, they tell the stories of past, shared lives and therefore are significant and in some degree 'real'. Their importance lies less in their design, than in their erstwhile function. Spectators' feelings are stirred by remembering the use or simply the former presence of these objects in Soviet-era homes, by the sight of these silent testimonies of

⁹ On the concept of the 'total installation', cf. Kabakov 2008.

the past – a past that is simultaneously both private and collective. The spectators' emotions are thus linked to a particular type of nostalgia: not 'restorative nostalgia' in Boym's terminology, but a more indefinite feeling that has to do with the lure of past experience: "a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams" (*Ivi*: XV). Moreover, it is in these objects themselves that public and private nostalgias blend. Indeed, due to mass production, these objects were uniform and thus identical for all Soviets. At the same time, however, they were also personal because, despite their apparent sameness, they became the 'personal' property of individuals or family units after being purchased. Moreover, as is widely known, if an object broke or did not work properly during the Soviet period, people did not discard it, but instead adjusted it or used it for another purpose. Objects were thus modified to undergo a second, and more profound, process of personalization (or even privatization). Paradoxically, the presence in Kabakov's installations (most notably in *Monument to a Lost Civilization*) of objects from everyday life shows the absence of a past for which the spectator longs – not because he or she wants the return of the Soviet Union, but because this past is intertwined with dimensions of memory, childhood, and youth.

As a specific art form, the installation would seem to overcome many of the difficulties inherent to representing memory, since it gives audiences the concrete possibility to see (and, in some cases, even to touch) physical objects that were part of the Soviet past. As Boym rightly asserts, "[Kabakov's] installations offer an interactive narrative that could not exist without the viewer" (*Ivi*: 313). The rich potential of artistic installations to represent memory is exploited by many contemporary artists in their constructions of the Soviet past. A similar approach to objects and to their significance as potential generators of narrative can be found, for example, in Sergej Volkov's *Art Warehouse*. This installation from 1990 presents the viewer with dozens of objects that directly recall the Soviet past – such as, *Belomorkanal* brand cigarettes (*papirosy*) – all of which are sealed in large glass jars placed on a series of metal shelves. These jars strongly resemble the omnipresent Soviet *banki* that held various homemade preparations, both salty and sweet. As scholar Nancy Ries (1997: 10) recalls, in Soviet homes "in the fall, a line of jars of home-preserved apples and currants ran along the back of the counter, and on the top of the refrigerator sat huge jars full of salted cucumbers and home-stewed whole tomatoes". In the context of Volkov's installation, these jars inevitably radiate a particularly ambivalent aura. Indeed, viewers recognize them as familiar objects, but in an unexpected context of use, insofar as such glass containers were normally employed to preserve and store food, rather than objects. Nonetheless, precisely because they are estranged from their standard use, these jars with their bizarre evocation of the domestic sphere catch the public's attention even more forcefully¹⁰. Making direct reference to a shared, familiar past, these jars stimulate nostalgia in the viewer, again

¹⁰ For further information on the domestic sphere during the Soviet era, see Kelly 2011. On housing as a key object of investigation in the field of 'Everyday Life Studies',

as an indefinite, fleeting feeling. Furthermore, the audience's expectations are twice confounded, since Volkov places his jars in an unusual environment, i.e. not a kitchen, but a structure typical of an industrial warehouse.

In the 1994 installation *Dusty Models* (architectural clay, dust, glass, wood), Volkov takes the discourse of nostalgia even further. This crossroads of metaphysics and conceptualism allows the spectator to admire a series of dusty objects placed for preservation in a vacuum flask of greenish laboratory glass. While some of these items are architectural¹¹, others – such as a sofa – belong mainly to the domestic domain. The ‘dusty technique’ developed by the artist aims to show the viewer something that does not exist – or that will soon disappear – by capturing and fixing the object in the moment before it actually vanishes.

The choice of both Volkov and Kabakov to focus on the domestic environment is more than random coincidence: as Jean Baudrillard argued in *The System of Objects* (1968), it is exactly this specific environment that tends to reflect and structure not only core cultural values, but also political beliefs. Commenting on the semiotic significance of household objects, Baudrillard (1996: 22) even goes so far as to suggest the need for a “sociology of interior design”: insofar as personhood is determined by our interaction with domestic commodities, “‘man the interior designer’ is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere”.

4. *Contemporary Nostalgia for a Soviet Past (I): Yevgeniy Fiks and “Critical” Nostalgia*

Yevgeniy [Evgenij] Fiks's *Adopt Lenin* (2008) generally follows the direction taken by the works of Kabakov and Volkov in the 1990s, with the addition of some new elements. For this project, Fiks purchased a large quantity of Lenin memorabilia, spending roughly \$5000 on busts, statuettes, posters and photographs of Lenin that he bought both online and in Moscow shops. All of these items were part of an installation on display in September and October 2008 at Winkleman Gallery in New York. As was the case for Kabakov, the audience was indispensable for *Adopt Lenin* to function: indeed, the public was even invited to ‘adopt’ one of the exhibited objects and to take it home for free. In order to seal this transaction, the participants signed a legal contract preventing them from putting these memorabilia back on the market. These contracts themselves became part of the installation as well, thus ostensibly precluding the future circulation of the same objects.

see Goffman 1978; Certeau 1984; Low, Chambers 1989; Gupta, Ferguson 2001; Miller 2001; Highmore 2002a and 2002b; Lefebvre 2002; Shove 2003; García-Mira *et al.* 2005.

¹¹ The exhibit includes, for example, a wooden tower and a pedestal.

Fiks's work and the modalities of interaction that it provoked raise several questions about the interrelationship between the Soviet past, Russian identity, and nostalgia. First of all, why Lenin? In a 2010 interview, Fiks claimed that

Lenin is a “no-no” of contemporary Russian discourse. After Komar and Melamid and perestroika, the name Lenin enters post-Soviet discourse only ironically or with humorous connotations. In the post-Soviet era, Lenin is a clown, maybe a revolutionary clown. The word “Lenin” since perestroika could have only been read as a joke. So “Lenin” is another way of saying the “post-Soviet trauma” (Fiks 2010).

Hence, here and in other installations dedicated to Lenin¹², Fiks probes the legacy of the Soviet past in shaping contemporary Russian identity, focusing on aspects of history that are often neglected or otherwise considered to be secondary. In his programmatic essay *Responsibilities of the Post-Soviet Artist*, Fiks (2007) explains the importance of salvaging the neglected sides of Russian (and Soviet) identity:

the post-Soviet artist must assume responsibility for the Soviet history. An overwhelming sense of denial of Soviet history as a way of dealing with the (post) Soviet trauma is perhaps one of the most striking symptoms of the post-Soviet condition. While the pre-Revolutionary history is being discussed at length and with much interest, the Soviet history is almost totally repressed. As the last ten years have shown, however, this repression and denial have not served the post-Soviet subject well. Reclaiming and activist engagement with Soviet history can be a much more effective way of dealing with the (post) Soviet trauma. In no way, however, am I suggesting that the post-Soviet artist should have a rosy nostalgic view of Soviet times and be affirmative of the excesses of that period. The post-Soviet artist should also be careful to avoid exploitation and commodification of the Soviet past. I'm advocating quite the opposite – a critical nostalgia, where work of memory becomes a tool for exposing excesses of both the past and present indiscriminately.

Fiks's very emphasis on Lenin undoubtedly represents a move away from the general post-Soviet trend that focuses on Stalin. As Dobrenko and Shcherbenok note,

the person who creates history becomes the ‘father of the nation’ – so the father of the Soviet nation was Stalin (not Lenin!), which is why post-Soviet culture, with its narratively nonenveloped pain, is so enduringly interested in Stalinism (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 78).

Moreover, we might argue that Fiks examines precisely such “commodification” itself by concentrating on material objects and, through them, political aspects of the Soviet past that are manifest in these diverse representations of one

¹² An earlier installation by Fiks was *Lenin for Your Library?* (2005), a display of replies received from the world's major corporations upon receiving a copy of *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism* by V.I. Lenin as a donation to their corporate libraries.

of its political leaders. Although politically charged, Lenin memorabilia is nonetheless comprised of objects from standard daily life that were easy to find in Soviet homes and thus recall not only political history, but also a bygone dimension of domesticity that inevitably arouses feelings of nostalgia in the viewer.

5. *Contemporary Nostalgia for a Soviet Past (II): Andrej Astvacaturov and “Sensory” Nostalgia*

Nostalgia relating to the Soviet home and household can also be found in contemporary Russian literature, a case in point being Andrej Astvacaturov’s fictionalized autobiography *Skunskamera* (2011)¹³, permeated with references to objects whose poignant effect on the sensory system is stressed. Such passages provoke an immediate emotional reaction in the reader, the five senses being memory triggers *par excellence*. Particularly striking is the capacity of cold beer to cause nostalgic reflection:

всякий раз, когда я подношу к губам холодную бутылку пива или огромный запотевший бокал с золотистым напитком, резкий запах бродильни ударяет мне в ноздри. И я с горечью понимаю, что весь этот веселый пивной мир исчез навсегда. Золотые кольца, потерявшие над людьми власть, унесены яростной лавой 1990-х (Astvacaturov 2011: 11-12)¹⁴.

The same image – a cold bottle of beer – is reiterated throughout the entire book, reappearing, for example in the vignette entitled *Scents of Memory (Zapaxi vospominanij)*, where, again,

всякий раз, когда я подношу к губам холодную бутылку пива или огромный запотевший бокал с золотистым напитком, резкий запах бродильни ударяет мне в ноздри” (*Ivi*: 19-20)¹⁵.

¹³ The novel’s title is a play on the name *Kunstkamera*, a Petersburg anthropological and ethnographical museum that was founded by Peter the Great in 1727 to house his collection of curiosities. Astvacaturov substitutes ‘*kunst*’ with ‘*skuns*’, the Russian word for ‘*skunk*’, thereby suggesting that an olfactory dimension be added to the other types of memory (visual and tactile) engaged by this institution’s collection. For a very different example of personal history from the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras, see Sergej Šargunov’s *Kniga bez fotografij (Book Without Photographs)*, (2011). Although stylistically and formally dissimilar to Astvacaturov’s text, this book, too, demonstrates the overwhelming presence of nostalgia as a motif in contemporary Russian literature.

¹⁴ “Each time I raise to my lips a cold bottle of beer or a huge sweaty goblet holding a golden drink, the sharp odor of fermentation strikes my nostrils. And I understand with bitterness that that entire jolly, beery world has disappeared forever. The golden rings, having lost their power over people, were carried off by the furious lava of the 1990s”.

¹⁵ “Each time I raise to my lips a cold bottle of beer or a huge misty goblet holding a goldfish drink, the sharp odor of fermentation strikes my nostrils”.

As a result,

в теплой глубине памяти его продолжением из ленивого марева проступают дома [...], становясь явственными, будто многие месяцы, а то и годы, они ждали своего часа вырваться на свободу. Смутные постройку напрягаются, уплотняются каменной тяжестью, выпрямляются во весь рост (*Ivi*: 19-20)¹⁶.

Throughout the novel, sensory channels perform a prominent function in activating memory. But instead of “snivelling nostalgia” (to quote Astvacaturov), we are confronted here with a feeling that differs from the connection to childhood that can be represented by general, blurred archetypes, or primordial imagery. Instead, Astvacaturov’s writing emphasizes the specific and concrete ‘ingredients’ of a culture that is distinctly Soviet, such as buildings, food, and drink (especially beer). Indeed, his reference to “golden rings” implicitly collapses the circle of prestigious medieval towns forming the so-called ‘Golden Ring’ around Moscow, sites of bygone princely power and great historical significance, into alcoholic beverages in glass bottles – the circular form, the liquid’s color, the marks left by these on tabletops. The slippage between these two images becomes more explicit in a subsequent celebration of Soviet-era objects:

кому-то детство возвращается благоуханной сиренью в тихом саду, дачным домом с мезонином, поварами, готовящими на летней кухне жирных голубей, старыми качелями, голубым крымским Артеком, круизом по Волге вместе с семьей, с мамой, папой и сестрой, непременно, чтоб в ситцевом платье, наконец, автобусной экскурсией по Золотому кольцу. А вот меня пивная река памяти уносит мыслями к теснящим друг друга зданиям возле станции метро и золотому кольцу пивных ларьков, последнему форпосту угасающей империи (*Ivi*: 20)¹⁷.

Like Kabakov, Volkov, and Fiks, Astvacaturov bears witness to the ambivalent blending of past and present as post-Soviets make sense of the Soviet legacy. His awareness of Petersburg’s shifting position in the popular imaginary has been noted by Catriona Kelly (2014b: 61): the city’s residents are growing “used now to actually living in ‘St Petersburg’ rather than dreaming about the place”, she writes, nonetheless, “in the words of the writer Andrei Astvacaturov,

¹⁶ “In the warm depths of this memory, like the extension of a lazy mirage, apartment buildings become visible [...], and grow distinct as if they had waited many months or even years for their moment to burst into freedom. These dim constructions tense and thicken with the heaviness of stone, they straighten up to full height”.

¹⁷ “To some childhood returns as fragrant lilacs in a quiet garden, a dacha home with a mezzanine, cooks preparing fat squabs in the summer kitchen, old swings, the Crimea’s azure Pioneer camp, a family cruise on the Volga, with Mama, Papa, and Sister (in the obligatory chintz dress), and, lastly, in the form of a bus trip around the Golden Ring. As far as I’m concerned, the beery river of memory carries my thoughts off towards buildings that are crowded up against one another beside the metro station and towards the golden ring of beer stalls, the last outpost of a dying empire”.

‘The city’s shinier now and better-groomed but it hasn’t become the old Petersburg and at the same time we’ve kind of lost touch with the Leningrad side’¹⁸.

Within late Soviet culture, nostalgia had been expressed in literature by the *derevenščiki*, or writers of ‘village prose’, advocates of rural life who enjoyed great popularity in the 1970s. Philippa Lewis (1976: 568) has linked the sentiment of nostalgia embodied in village prose directly to the drastic changes occurring around them, suggesting that their “nostalgia and desire to pause to evaluate what has been left behind may be particularly acute in Soviet society since the changes have been so rapid and drastic”. Astvacaturov’s writing illustrates a similar response to surrounding reality: it, too, reflects on the way that Russians, especially those who belonged to the last Soviet generations, relate to the past that abruptly crashed to a halt. As Astvacaturov himself put it at the Edinburgh World Writers’ Conference (2012), “literature is a membrane resonating with public opinion and culture”.

6. *Conclusions. Nostalgia as a Form of Reconciliation?*

In coming to terms with trauma, not only does history itself perform an anesthetic function, but political authority, manipulating history for its own ends in order to shape Russian post-Soviet identity, follows suit. As Dobrenko and Shcherbenok put it:

The past is the experience of pain, the trauma of experience; history is anesthesia, the narrative that is produced by power and envelops this pain, thereby creating a nation that can be defined as a community of people united by shared pain and the contract with the power that plays the role of anesthesiologist (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 77-78).

In this context, the role of the artist assumes a quite different form: rather than offering sedatives to numb trauma ‘patients’, the artist goes to the heart of the problem, both literally and figuratively. He or she¹⁹ stimulates in the post-Soviet viewer conflicting and contradictory sentiments towards the experienced

¹⁸ On Astvacaturov’s relationship to the city, see also Kelly 2014a, especially p. 117.

¹⁹ A female artist of relevance is Irina Naxova, awarded the 2013 Kandinskij Prize for the work *Untitled*, which uses photographs from her family archive to preserve personal memories of the Soviet past – and particularly of the harsh Stalinist repression that caused her grandfather’s death. The artist printed an old black and white photograph on vinyl, and then removed all the faces of the men, and replaced them with red parachute silk. The work is accompanied by the following statement: “‘Untitled’ is my reckoning with history as comprehended through the history of my family — my grandma, executed grandpa, mom, dad and my past self. This is my attempt to understand the inexplicable state of affairs that has reigned in my country for the last century, and to understand through private imagery how millions of people were erased from history

trauma and towards the viewer's own 'sutured belief' in a reality that, however crude, nonetheless constituted the cradle of national identity. Fiks (2007) has aptly described his own relationship to the legacy of the Soviet bloc as "a love-hate relationship",

where sentimentalism (including for the promise of the Revolution) is clashing with a sobering coming to terms with the brutal realities of the Soviet era. The legacy of the Soviet bloc is a trauma, which I'm trying to address through compulsive remembering rather than via [the] repressing of those memories. So my relationship to the legacy of the Soviet bloc is about the disruption of historical amnesia which has affected all of us – the self-hating post-Soviets²⁰.

It is precisely in these contradictory feelings about the harsh past that nostalgia enters the picture. The passage of time has to a certain degree succeeded in removing the sense of suffering connected with several Soviet-era experiences. What remains are memories, both good and bad, which constitute the most important legacy of a past that is both personal and shared, ultimately comprising the identity of both individuals and, consequently, of the community.

Both Margalit (2002: 62) and Blustein (2008: 10) warn of the possible 'risks' connected with nostalgic feeling: sentimentality, a crucial feature of nostalgia, is also morally troubling insofar as it tends to distort reality, usually by idealizing it. Blustein even asserts that "nostalgia is a defect of memory or of memory accuracy: nostalgic memory is not faithful to the past because it distorts it" (*Ibidem*). In his view, nostalgia

is a kind of escapism, typically escape from the complications and disappointments of the present into an imagined golden past of unalloyed happiness. The past is frozen in time and the nostalgic person either seeks to restore that ideal, usually with disastrous consequences, or broods over the impossibility of doing so (*Ibidem*).

The installations of Kabakov, Volkov and Fiks, and the prose of Astvaturov belie the assumptions of Blustein and Margalit, however, countering the motives advanced by these scholars for discrediting a nostalgic vision of the past. In point of fact, sentimentality does not necessarily imply desire for the restoration of a past ideal, nor does nostalgia automatically entail diffidence towards the present. These works cause audiences to feel not restorative nostalgia, but a vaguer sense of longing connected to issues of identity, stimulating two interrelated questions: 'who were we (back in the USSR)?' and 'who are

and happily forgotten; how people have been blinded and their souls destroyed so that they can live without memory and history" (Naxova 2013).

²⁰ Further exploration of such 'self-hatred', which illustrates a striking affinity with the notion of the 'self-hating Jew', would be particularly interesting. Eliot Borenstein, who considers the 1990s to have seen a momentary loss of national identity (2005; 2008), addressed this topic in a talk given at the University of Virginia in April 2012 (*Soviet Self-Hatred: Sovok, Kitsch, and the Empire of Yokels*).

we (today)?' We can thus isolate a general tendency in both these installations and Astvacaturov's novel: each connects post-Soviet nostalgia primarily to the experience of everyday life, which is in turn made visible and concrete through the presence of tangible objects. These objects function both structurally and semantically: if the viewer can appreciate the aesthetic value of these objects as part of the work, they also serve as 'memory triggers', activating several different feelings, including nostalgia – understood here as an indefinite longing for a past that is not going to return.

This more reflective variety of nostalgia also opens up a possibility of reconciliation with the traumatic past²¹, a process that restorative nostalgia does not permit. Indeed, in the case of restorative nostalgia, the clash between past and present necessarily implies a (moral) choice between the two, while the nostalgia found in the works of the artists examined here – and which, we suggest, may be taken to characterize nostalgia in post-Soviet Russia – seems open to compromise and rapprochement with the past. According to Scheper-Hughes (2002: 374),

reconciliation has emerged as one of the master narratives of the late twentieth century, as individuals and entire nations struggle to overcome the legacies of suffering ranging from rape and domestic violence to collective atrocities of state-sponsored dirty wars, genocides, and ethnic conflicts.

Is the same process taking place in Russia today? It is impossible to answer this question yet, as Russian identity is currently undergoing a serious process of self-evaluation that will probably last for decades. How exactly the contemporary sense of 'suspension' that results from this process might be concluded is unclear: as Dobrenko and Shcherbenok maintain, the very nature of this process

does not allow for a cutting of the umbilical cord between the Soviet nation of yesterday and the still problematic post-Soviet nation. This is why all strategies of post-Soviet nation-building have stumbled upon the impossibility of creating a coherent historical narrative and the formation of a new national consensus (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok 2011: 77).

Nonetheless, art gives important signals that should not be ignored. Kabakov and Volkov have taken significant steps towards a reevaluation of the 'traumatic' Soviet past as personal and collective memory. Moreover, by focusing on objects themselves, both artists 'force' viewers to think about their own pasts, identities, and feelings. The more recent work of Fiks has gone still further. Indeed, the audience's taking of memorabilia from the *Adopt Lenin* installation could be interpreted as an act of appropriation – that implies in turn a form of reconciliation. The adoption of a Lenin statuette marks the 'return home' of that

²¹ Other artistic events on the theme of such reconciliation include brilliant performances such as *Underground Wedding*, staged by Valera and Natasha Cherkashin in the early 1990s in Moscow's Revolutionary Square metro station.

object, which then ceases to be bereft, displaced, and debased into a spectacle aimed at attracting tourists. The concept of “adoption” featured in the installation’s English-language title derives from the Latin *ād* and *optāre* (*‘optāre’* signifying ‘to opt’ or ‘to choose’). Reconciliation with the past thus becomes a choice, an active choice for (partial) closure that enables an individual to ‘move on’.

Nostalgia is a symptom of our age, as Boym (2001: XVI) rightly asserts. Nostalgia is also an integral part of contemporary Russian society, particularly for those who once lived in the Soviet Union, and who now live in its aftermath, in the aftermath of what might even be considered a morally unacceptable past. The appeal of reflective nostalgia seems to emphasize the uniqueness of the Soviet character, now irremediably lost²². One consequence of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a sentiment of bewilderment, particularly in cultural terms, that has given birth to the ‘mythologization of a vanished identity’ and now seems to constitute the single most salient trait of post-Soviet society. The problem of defining Russian national identity, which is almost as old as Russia itself, has become particularly agonizing in the last twenty years. In the words of Muscovite novelist Zinovy Zinik (2005: 18): “Russians don’t know any longer who and what they are and therefore they are resentful of any attempt to define them”. The loss of Soviet national identity issues from the disappearance of the great Leviathan that was the USSR:

During the last decade the entire Communist universe, like a Soviet Atlantis, disappeared from the map of the world and sank into oblivion. We are no longer sure what country under the name of Russia we are dealing with. It is still a fictitious entity, even its geographical borders are still questionable, its durability as a state in doubt... Even its language was switched to the foreign Volapuk, embracing its marketink, kholdink and body-bildink as part of the modern Russian vocabulary (*Ibidem*).

The sharp contrast between clear Soviet-era perceptions of identity and post-Soviet uncertainty about the same becomes even more dramatic if we consider how the Politburo controlled and cultivated Soviet national identity through an emphasis on conflict with Western countries and the importance and superiority of the Soviet state. The return to similar values, now seen as an alternative to a globalized and depersonalized world, is particularly noticeable today. Interestingly, these feelings often involve nostalgic youth, a generation lacking direct familiarity with the Soviet era. A study by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser illustrates the younger generation’s interest in the Soviet past by quoting a teenager named Tanya:

When [Tanya’s teacher, I.M.] divided her students into sections and asked for opinions on the revolution and bloody civil war that had followed, Tanya huddled

²² On the question of Russian identity, see also Chubais 1998 and Franklin, Wid-dis 2004; on the crisis of post-Soviet identity, see Fedotova 2003, Piontkovsky 2006, Berezkin 2012, Urjutova 2012.

with one group of girls to pronounce the Bolsheviks a success. The results were positive,” she said. “The Bolsheviks concentrated the entire country in their hands. They had concrete ideas, concrete goals, and concrete plans for the development of this society” (Baker, Glasser 2005: 355).

It would be fascinating to further investigate if – and how – nostalgia is present in younger generations, i.e. those who were born from 1991 on, who never came into contact with the Soviet Union, but who have experienced it through the various filters represented by their families, by society, and by its institutions – mediators who tell very diverse stories about the past depending upon their own points of view. Is it possible to be nostalgic towards an idea or an ideal, or even someone else’s ideal, towards a (past) reality that one never actually experienced? Research on this problem – and on the problem of (post-traumatic) identity in general – will perhaps be furthered by provocative new studies conducted at the University of Zurich’s Brain Research Institute that demonstrate a startling fact: the behavioural and metabolic alterations produced by trauma affect subjects’ progeny up to the second generation (cf. Mansuy *et al.* 2014)²³.

Резюме

Ирина Маркезини

Присутствие отсутствия. Тоска и ностальгия в искусстве и литературе постсоветского периода

Целью данного исследования является изучение ‘явления’ ностальгии по советской эпохе в современном российском обществе. С целью оценки различных форм, посредством которых проявляется тоска, анализ касается как особого жанра современного искусства – инсталляции (в частности произведений Ильи Кабакова, и Сергея Волкова, Евгения Фикса), так и современной литературы (в основном прозы Андрея Аствацатурова). С помощью таких средств, как визуальные исследования (*visual studies*) и теория травмы (*trauma studies*), рассматривается связь между визуальной составляющей произведения искусства и репрезентацией тоски, памяти, материальной культуры. Сопоставление с художественной литературой выявляет значительную роль, которую чувство “задумчивой” тоски-ностальгии (в понимании С. Бойм, 2001) играло и играет в формировании постсоветского самосознания россиян.

²³ In her recent book on Holocaust testimonies, Raffaella Di Castro (2008: 21 ff.) argues that trauma produces effects up to the *third* generation.