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FACES OF NOSTALGIA. RESTORATIVE AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA IN THE FINE ARTS

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Introduction

Studies about nostalgia have multiplied around the turn of the Millennium. In her enlightening volume dedicated to nostalgia, Svetlana Boym claims: ‘The twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia’ (Boym 2007: 7). Special moments in time – like this turn of the Millennium – have a way of making grounds for a deeper appreciation of the past and the future. Thus, they are highly convenient for the formation of nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym operates with the most concise and simple definition of nostalgia: „a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym 2007: 7).

Nostalgia is a deceptive concept in multiple ways. Even though it carries a significant spatial element in its denomination (the home – *nostos*), it is essentially a modus of temporality:

a way to tackle time. As a tool to approach time nostalgia *prima facie* relates to the past, but its deeper layers speak of the present and prepare the agent for the future.

Nostalgia is often treated as the crippling insistence to the values that would become obsolete in the name of progress. But nostalgia is not necessarily the enemy of progress. Svetlana Boym shows that progress and nostalgia are both the products of modern sensibility are both tied to modernism, moreover – they are tied to each other: ‘Nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress’ (Boym 2001: 10).

The present of nostalgia

In the following pages I will not primarily address the psychological aspects of nostalgia, but the „historical emotion”, which according to Svetlana Boym is a „symptom of our age” (Boym 2007: 8). The newer research mostly tied nostalgia to the collective memory, to its social or cultural structures.

The image of the past nostalgia uses to operate with is not an objective complete one, but a subjective pick, a selective past, in which some aspects are presented in entirety, while others are carefully hidden. The selection obviously follows some values: whatever we remember of the shared past and everything we want to get back from it is determined primarily by our present values and aims, not by the past. In this sense ‘nostalgia may be an attempt to find some higher meaning in our existence’ (Wilson 2005: 26). Thus, nostalgia becomes an important means and mechanism for processing the past for the future in a creative way.

The situation of nostalgia has become particularly intriguing nowadays, when it seems like the grounds for a culturally (or historically) perceived nostalgia are non-existent: firstly due to the collapse of the great narratives (Lyotard 1984), secondly because of the synchronicity of cyber-space.

Nostalgia is actually the reversely directed form of utopia and both are possible only in the frame of historical consciousness. As soon as the belief in the great narratives ceases to exist, the desire for a time we no longer believe in becomes impossible. Nostalgia, however, is not a method to logically confront the past, but a partly cognitive, partly affective way of processing it. Thus, it becomes clear why the task of opening doors for the new nostalgic vague fell upon the postmodernism by giving the opportunity to reevaluate different “pasts” with regional significance.

The digital revolution defining the turn of the century brought significant changes which could also affect the nostalgic perspective. The digital world is characterized by synchronicity, as

Svetlana Boym claims: ‘computer memory (...) has no patina of history’ (Boym 2001: 347). It’s interesting to remark that the computer has a memory, but its memory is not temporal but quantitative and spatial: a quantity of information which is accessible to us in a synchronous way, not in a historical sequence. In the digital world every information is present virtually, they are right in front of us, we do not have to dig back for them into the past. In our “global village” (McLuhan 1962) we are all immediate neighbors, and we can take a look at our backyards from anywhere using our computers. It seems like there is no reason in desiring a locus, which was once our home (since it is there at our fingertips, just a click away), or a passed time (which is not past anymore, it appears on our monitors not as past but as present). Everything we could desire in space or time is right in front of us – but there is still space for nostalgia: we are nostalgic about the lost indirectness, a connection unmediated by computers, with other people or nature.

The internet brought nostalgia to a whole new level. We don’t have to rely on our own memory or own desires anymore: thanks to audio and video reproductions nostalgia ‘can be fed forever by quick access to an infinitely recyclable past’ (Hutcheon 2000). The proximity of the object of nostalgia aggregates a problem that was already present: the prefabricated conserved nostalgia, the always ready and handy nostalgia which feeds off of the past (be that historical, religious, ethnic etc.). If the nostalgic object of desire can be downloaded from the internet, we face the danger of nostalgia becoming something other than a direct and creative intermediary between us and our personal past, but something that is trying to trick us into desiring a prefabricated, alas, manipulated past.

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General-nostalgia is even more topical, given that our globalized society has made it possible for a great number of people – especially after the ’90s – to leave their homes, their native land, and migration, especially in Europe, has become a general phenomenon. People left their homes behind in masses, they tried to fit in and adapt into new environments, while they still carried the desire for the heat of their good ol’ home, for the hearth of Hestia. The globalized economy, on the other hand, has brought the unknown possibility, and sometimes even pressure, of mobility and travel for a tremendous amount of people. The „home”, as a house, a residence, where one would live for decades or, more commonly, for a lifetime, is becoming a rarity, and these new circumstances make the concept of the „home” more and more problematic. Contemporary nostalgia is not simply a desire for an existent, concrete home, but more for the abstract “homeliness”.

Nostalgia presupposes a comparison between an overrated past and an underachieving present. Thus, nostalgic representation beckons those forms of art, which make possible the

comparison of moments in time and the direct expression of emotions – primarily literature, music, the theatre and film.

In the following I will explore a territory where nostalgic representation is more problematic: the fine arts.

Images of nostalgia

The use of the word „nostalgic” in the context of shared visual representation is only possible within the frame of a collectively owned context. In the following I will narrow down the investigation to representations with a collective relevance, based on shared experience. Starting from these examples I will attempt to demonstrate the difference between restorative and reflective nostalgia, the way Svetlana Boym defines them (2007).

▪ The restorative face of nostalgia

Restorative nostalgia does not simply represent a desire for the past, but presumes a wish to experience it in the same form, to recreate it the way it “used to be”: ‘restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’ (Boym 2007: 13). In this case we can observe the moment of idealization: the past appears to be the golden age, a “prelapsarian” state, characterized by such harmony, peace, happiness, maybe even virtuousness, which far exceeds the current circumstances, but would be pleasant to achieve once again. Restorative nostalgia is not conscious of the idealizing process, it identifies naively (or manipulatively) this deserted image with a realistic historic condition; it doesn’t see itself as nostalgia, but ‘rather as truth and tradition’ (Boym 2007: 13). Restorative nostalgia is often combative, often hides a feeling of superiority, due to the comparison it presents in favor of the more valuable past against the inadequate present. This form of nostalgia can truly be seen as an enemy of progress – in the sense that it interprets progress as a distancing from the desired past, which entails a form of apparently necessary devaluation.

We can see restorative nostalgia lifted to the level of cultural policy in today’s Hungary. The Hungarian artistic scenery is dominated by the right-leaning Hungarian Academy of Arts, while some alternative professional organizations exist. The Hungarian Academy of Arts, or MMA (Magyar Művészeti Akadémia) is a privileged institution, mentioned even in the 2012 Constitution (while its professional counterpart is not), it has power to decide about

governmental funds, its workspace is allocated by the government and its members receive an annual allocation from governmental funds. The new cultural and artistic course is dictated by the president of the MMA, György Fekete and by Imre Kerényi, the Prime Minister's Cultural Commissioner. Their statements and the artistic forms they promote suggest an officially endorsed restorative nostalgic vague, with the following characteristics:

A. The selective use of the past

Highlighted moments of the recaptured past are the Hungarian Settlement (the 10th century) and the Horthy-era (1919-1944). The Settlement of the Hungarians was the era of the heroic beginning: the seven Hungarian leaders' bloodpact symbolizes the unity of the Hungarians, and their power to shape the course of history. One of the main symbols of this era is the Turul (a mythic bird). Sculptures of the Turul bird were common around 1900, when seven monuments depicting it were raised on seven spots of the country. In Budapest there are currently thirteen sculptures of the bird, and there are around 200 spread all around Hungary. Many of them were built or restored in the past few years (1990 – Szikszó, 1992 – Tatabánya, 2005 – Budapest, 2008 - Munkács). The recaptured past can be easily formed according to imagination, because documentation regarding the relevant era is quite scarce.

The latest expression of the Settlement-nostalgia is represented by the Historical Hungary Memento-Parc (2015), which was realized in a township with approximately 700 residents, where the folk-artist Pál Czupp's statue of the seven settler chiefs together with two mythic forefathers Árpád and Attila is carved in wood. The event might not even have been newsworthy if the inauguration was not held by the President of the Parliament. In case we were unsure whether this counts as restorative nostalgia or not, we can be reassured by the words of the President of Parliament during the opening of the park: 'Within the borders of the European Union and Hungary there is a huge battle between European recollection and the powers of forgetting' and 'it is a courageous act to build a memento-park as a way of fighting the zeitgeist of obliviscence'¹.

The Horthy-era nostalgia mostly refers to the period of the Second World War when Hungary's territories lost as a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon were given back with the help of Nazi Germany. This is a great example of the selective aspects of restorative nostalgia: there is no mention of an allegiance to the Nazis, the persecution of the Jewish minorities, the soldiers' lives that were lost in this period; the process concentrates discriminately on the recovery of Transylvania.

¹ <http://www.hirado.hu/2015/06/07/tortenelmi-magyarorszag-emlekpark-ketpon/>

One of the more controversial works about the Horthy-era is the Monument for the Victims of the German Occupation raised in Budapest. It suggests less commemoration for the individual victims of the period, but alludes to the idea that the country was actually the real victim – the atrocities, like the persecution of the Jews, were supposedly only committed by the German occupants, and the responsibility is theirs and not the Hungarians'. In contrast with other nations – for example the Germans – in this case there is no confrontation with the past in any symbolic way, nor do they try to take responsibility for the events.

B. The rejection of modernity and the abdication of progress and experiment

The Hungarian official restorative nostalgia attempts to skip the socialist era of the past, however, it was exactly this period that produced modernist experiments (e.g. abstraction or conceptualism) in an attempt to counter socialist realism. Current cultural discourse handles the question similarly to a conspiracy theory: the „mafia” of the modernist artworld (Párkányi Raab 2014) kept talented artists from entering the field for decades, while being unable to present any kind of relevant results. Péter Párkányi Raab, one of the favorite artists of the current system (the creator of the „Monument for The Victims of The German Occupation”) had the following harsh words about the followers of modernism: 'theirs is the art of destruction, of nothing' (Párkányi Raab 2014). He believes that there are two separate camps in the artworld: „artists, who create objects” and those, who deny the *raison d'être* of objects of art – and there is an uneven battle between the “creators of objects” and the “producers of ideology”. As the closing argument for his case, he demands the restoration of a situation which is the continuation of the past: 'Let those artists back into the exhibition spaces, who believe in the art of the past two or three millennia, and those who would proceed by applying the values of the great past eras of art history, building upon these and not denying them' (Párkányi Raab 2014).

C. In form, there is a return to figurativity and to a grandiose historic style

The politically supported restorative nostalgia succeeds to implement Hegel's *Aufhebung* in a very proper way: it returns to the past by selectively wiping out modernistic parts of the more immediate past (the second part of the 20th century), and continues with the same figurativity („creation of objects”), which resembles socialist realism in its form and sometimes even through its patriotic theme. Endeavours open to novelty and worldly ideas are regarded with suspicion, while the local, nostalgic projects are praised and supported widely.

The same principles govern the Mucsarnok (Kunsthalle) since 2014 – the director of the institute, György Szegő, announced that the “so called” contemporary art is really a soap bubble that is about to burst – the institution to be led by him would distance itself from art forms defined by „technical mediums” with a past of only 20-25 years. He would concentrate on traditional art forms – especially focusing on painting – that have a longer, 8-10 thousand years’ of tradition behind them.

Raising restorative nostalgia to the level of cultural politics is dangerous because it does not turn back to an existing or imagined past in a reflective way and treats the recent past with overall negativity and suspicion – thus, it becomes doubtful whether it could enrich the present. Since restorative nostalgia is an oversimplifying attitude, the artworks are artistically questionable.

▪ **Reflective nostalgia in the fine arts**

Reflective nostalgia recalls the past as well, but the desire for the past is followed by a reflexive, critical attitude. Reflective nostalgia is aware of the selective and transformative mechanisms of memory (including collective memory) and distrusts the image it produces of the past. The idealizing moment is not present in reflective nostalgia, it is much more an infusion of desire with irony and humor. According to Linda Hutcheon (2000) ‘Our contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic; some parts of it—postmodern parts—are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony’. The reflective nostalgia is aware of the irreversibility of time – the past cannot be brought back. Time acts as a hopeless Heracleitic stream, which makes restoration a failing endeavor.

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The subject-matter of reflective nostalgia is not the glorified historic past, but the individual resonances of the past, and the passing itself: ‘reflective nostalgia is concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude’ (Boym 2007: 15).

The descriptions above clarify that reflective nostalgia is a more conscious, complex attitude toward the past, and in the same time, it suggests a more successful interpretation of the past as a resource. Some of the artworks representing the past can be evaluated specifically because of this complexity.

To illustrate reflective nostalgia I have selected works from two artists, who have been born and raised in post-socialist countries: Ai Wei Wei and Mircea Cantor.

The Chinese Ai Wei Wei was incarcerated in his home country in 2011, after which he had his passport recalled – as a consequence he can only exhibit his pieces all over the world by giving orders through Skype. Though he has been famous for years, his first exhibition in Beijing

was in 2015, where he was invited by two galleries. The exhibition named *Ai Wei Wei* is the reconstruction of an ancient family hall, a wooden building in the two galleries. He bought the wooden building from an art dealer, he deconstructed it, numbered the more than 1500 pieces and exposed the two halves of the re-constructed building in the two galleries: a half of the whole piece each. There might probably be no better embodiment of reflective nostalgia than this piece, which represents the desire to put back together something united in the past, while knowing that the rupture cannot be mended. The piece has historic and personal roots, as well. The building was originally located near the birth town of Ai Wei Wei's father, tying the piece to the artist's family in a very personal way. He used an ancient construction technique, completing the missing pieces and repainting some elements. The reconstruction strives for complete exactity, while staying perfectly contemporary: the past is present in all the cracks on the pillars and wooden timbers, but the ready-made style painted ladder or the mirror surface "disturbed" by brushstrokes brings us back into the now. The patterns for the wooden pillars are made mostly of precisely wrought wood or stone, with only a few exceptions. One of these exceptions is a crystal cube, which, though a valuable resource, serves only foundational purposes for the wooden pillar – thus reversing the obvious and familiar order. One of the other pillars is placed on a box filled with excerpts from the book of 'The Twenty-Four Histories' – the official Chinese historiography. The idea of continuity is obvious; the present is founded on thousands of years of past – it is the intellectual processing, the cultural form of the same past itself. At the same time, the contents of the box are inaccessible – its contents are only mentioned in the inscription on the box, but we will never be able to read the stories because there was a building built on it. It is safe to guess that these inaccessible "true" historic facts are metaphors for the past which will never return.

Another complex meaning can be tied to the 10.000 spouts broken off from antique teapots, from Song to Qing dynasties. Big numbers often refer to the big population of China in Ai Wei Wei's works, and the teapots and the consumption of tea is very representative of the Eastern traditions. The idea of only using broken pieces in the installation suggests that tradition, the past and the past cultures can't be restored again. On the other hand, this installation is also seen as the metaphor for the selling off of cultural treasures (Qin 2015).

The whole installation questions the idea of 'totality' as a central principle in Chinese culture. The two halves exposed on the half-exhibitions in the two galleries makes the simultaneous appreciation impossible – this can be interpreted as a lost unity, the irreversibility of the rupture. All the broken spouts become imprinted onto your retina. The unity we crave can only be restored with the help of the viewers' imagination. The division into two parts is

a conscious rebellion against the idea of totality: 'That is the way to completely destroy the original feeling, because totality is the core idea of the Chinese culture' (Nelson 2015).

In a recent interview Ai Wei Wei distances himself from the standpoint of restorative nostalgia. His aim is : 'to be creative and use that [old culture], but at the same time not too much of it' (Nelson 2015), and this was achieved by a neither-nor state, the setting up of the impossible single unity.

Reflective nostalgia also gains voice in some works of Romanian artist, Mircea Cantor. One of his most interesting pieces is the *Threshold Resigned*, exhibited in 2012. The piece is a life-size wooden house Cantor saw in Maramures, where he was mesmerized by the talents of the traditional craftsmen and the fate of the houses: 'In Maramures I was impressed by the Romanian savoir faire, the woodworks. In reality these are moribund houses that are usually bought by foreigners and disassembled, making space for new palaces. This gives the title for my installation, *Threshold Resigned*. The dismemberment is stronger than the resisting force' – claimed the artist (Hermeziu 2012).

The house was carved by a local craftsman and is assembled similarly by local craftsmen in every location (in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris, in the marvel halls of the Casa Poporului in Bucharest, on the ground floor of an office-building in Cluj-Napoca). In a way, the house is always a ready-made, a part of Duchamp's heritage. What makes it truly interesting is the engraved rope-yarn, which is an aesthetically dominant motif and gives way for a multitude of interpretations: the house becomes a wrapped gift, but it could also symbolize the life-line in palm-reading, it could function as a belt that keeps one back. My personal interpretation was that it suggests the force necessary for the elevation, for the mobility of the house, which became engraved in the "flesh" of the house itself. The artist himself talks about the motif of the rope in the following way: 'The motif of the rope I used on the golden gate is reproduced on the wood churches of Maramures, but not only there, they were found in Bihor too, the county where I was born. The symbol is an allusion to some sort of a unity, solidarity and consolidation of a community.' (Hermeziu 2012). The wrapping of the house for the sake of moving it somewhere else is also explained by the artist: it's as if you threw a package out on the street (Pavel 2013: 4'40"). The rope-motif is nostalgic in itself, it relates to a childhood experience: he would follow the rope pattern on the local wooden church with his fingers, as if following an infinite circle. At the same time, the rope gains new meaning as well: 'the packing, the abandoned, the hidden, because things wrapped with a rope is always meant to hide something' (Ulmeanu 2015: 102).

Another characteristic is the missing roof – or rather the token of a roof with a few boards, joining in an empty triangle at the top of the building. The roof would be a necessary

element for our house-image consisting of the square and the triangle (triangle-roof). However, this is a moribund house, a no longer functional lodge, and this superfluous condition is symbolized by the lack of a roof.

Mircea Cantor does not only exhibit a traditional house as a ready-made, he recreates the atmosphere surrounding the house by reviving the Maramures cultural environment. In his „guestroom” he invites celebrities, for example chorister Ioan Opris, who, at the request of the artist, composed a psalm for the melody of a funeral song about the life and fate of the house; a photographer, who has been documenting the life of the village for twenty years; and a lady, who has introduced him to traditional Maramures folkweaves.

Cantor recalls a moment in the past, he raises a monument to the traditional talent of the Romanian craftsmen, while mobilizing a great number of contemporary associations. First of all, the 20th century ready-made conception is present – he does not pick out an everyday object of personal use from its context, but a house. As in the case of the ready-made, the title of the piece is relevant here as well: the Romanian translation for „resigned” can be deconstructed to mean „signed again”. I am not certain whether this double-meaning was intended by the artist but on the side of the house we can find the name of the artist himself and the name of the craftsman (Ioan Codrea), too. This is how Mircea Cantor evokes another celebrated topic of the last half century: the questionability of authorship. On the other hand, by building a whole house in the garden of a palace, in a grandiose marvel hall or the ground floor of an ultramodern office building – in other words: in completely unnatural surroundings – he raises the question of de-contextualization, he could also allude to the destructive effects of cultural consumerism, which are both very important topics in the discourse about art. I find this a great example for reflective nostalgia because the evident desire for an evocation of the past (and its evaluative conservation) meets a very conscious, clear and contemporary investigation.

Conclusions

It appears that nostalgia thrives in some periods, and ours is one of them.

The above presented examples were meant to illustrate the presence of the two types of nostalgia. The restorative nostalgia officially propagated in Hungary strives to repeat without criticizing a constructed past, while the reflective nostalgia of Ai Wei Wei and Mircea Cantor nurtures a more complex relationship towards the past. Because restorative nostalgia believes in a linear historical process and sees itself as the right path, it demands blind compliance and enthusiasm. Restorative nostalgia can be dangerous, since ‘it tends to confuse the actual home

and the imaginary one' (Boym 2001: XVI). This restorative, uncritical nostalgia makes us relate emotionally to an ideal home, for which we are supposed to be ready to give up our critical attitude.

Reflective nostalgia does not suggest a universal cure, it requires more of a personal interpretation from the viewer, giving us the possibility to live the past in an emotional manner, while using this creatively in the future. It might be due to exactly this layered approach, that pieces depicting reflective nostalgia are more significant aesthetically and from the perspective of art history.

Nostalgia can be damaging and it can be useful. Since nostalgia is a determinative feature of our culture, differentiating between its forms, its analysis can be of great use to us. The unreflected nostalgia 'breeds monsters' (Boym 2001: XVI), but the reflective nostalgia can help us gather strength in a constructive way for the future, from the past.

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SUMMARY

Faces of Nostalgia. Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in the Fine Arts

In the present article I use the terminology introduced by Svetlana Boym of restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia regarding works of contemporary fine art.

Restorative nostalgia implies an effort to revive the past – but without acknowledging that the desired and idealized past never existed, therefore it cannot be restored, either. I illustrate the application of this concept through the "new-academic" direction in today's contemporary Hungarian fine arts. The reflective nostalgia is aware of the idealizing momentum of the desired past, it reflects critically upon its own desires, and it highlights possibilities in the past regarding

the present – often playfully or with irony. I illustrate the latter through the works of the Chinese Ai Wei Wei and the Romanian Mircea Cantor. I argue that reflective nostalgia is not a fruitless burial into the past, but a resource for processing the passing of time in a creative manner.

KEYWORDS

Restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia, contemporary fine arts, Hungarian „new academism”

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