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## Appropriating the ex-Cold War

**Key words:** post-socialism, public monument, cultural transition.

### INTRODUCTION

My purpose in this paper is to examine readings of the signs of an ideological context now encapsulated in history while the signs themselves, now decontextualised, remain as elements in contemporary visual culture. Examples include statues of Lenin removed to a forest park, sections of the Berlin Wall re-sited in North America, a schematic emblem of the hammer-and-sickle used as a restaurant sign, and the word “revolution” as the name of a chain of bars. I begin by outlining a context in which to reconsider visual traces of the Cold War, and note the contrast between the acceptable re-placement of a section of the Berlin Wall in New York (with graffiti on the West side) and the fear of an underclass evoked by similar, but locally produced, graffiti elsewhere in the city. I then deal with Jean Baudrillard’s idea that an economy of signs has replaced an economy of things, using the hammer-and-sickle emblem, and bars called *Revolution* as an illustration – but note also that Baudrillard’s position is contested in the social sciences. I then look in more detail at the case of the Grūtas sculpture Park (known as Stalin World) in Lithuania, where a number of collected Soviet-period statues are now on public display. I, as a foreigner, am not sure what I think of them: the park may aesthetically be the equivalent of a museum of modern art, or the statues may evoke a nostalgia for an ideology that I think has not yet realised its potential. I am, however, aware that I can think this way only because I did not live under the regime responsible for these signs of control.

### CONTEXT

After 1989 and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and after 1991 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the boundary between an East bloc and a West bloc, each defining itself as not-the-other, has dissolved. These events were sudden, and had not generally been predicted, although the growth of consumerism through the 1970s, followed by an economic downturn and continuing problems of distribution in the 1980s, can in retrospect be seen as contributing factors. Still, the border between the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic no longer exists, and the remaining elements of its security systems are simply reminders of a particular past to those who experienced it, or just a kind of historical curiosity or detritus to those who did not. In either case, they are encapsulated in history. In the meantime, since 1989, many of the states of the former East bloc have become members of the European Community. As Europe becomes an increasingly coherent economic, social, cultural and political force, and as China emerges as the potential rival to the remaining super-power, the category East and the category West no longer have the same ideological load or meaning as they did during the Cold War.

Other categories have dissolved or reformed as well, including in culture. The boundaries between art, media, fashion, architecture, and lifestyle consumption are no longer policed. Since pop art appeared in the 1960s, signs of everyday life and consumption have been merged into the realm of art – hitherto

the preserve of aesthetics and the association of high culture with universal values: the good, the true, and the beautiful. On the one hand, as Sharon Zukin has argued<sup>1</sup>, the immaterial production of intellectual and creative work becomes increasingly central to the symbolic economies of cities, and to prescriptions for economic revival. This puts aesthetic production within a mainstream economic context of global competition for inward investment. On the other hand, the activities of artists and other cultural producers appear more and more subsumed in entertainment and spectacle. In both cases, what is produced is a set of signs.

The signs are abstractions. The artwork or media product becomes, at one level, a representation of a current lifestyle imperative (as it always has been for those who possess sufficient wealth to be connoisseurs and collectors), and at another, the democratisation of the sign Art and associated denotations of non-productive production, which mass media distribution introduces to the field of celebrity: the artist as B-list star.

Do the visual signs and visible traces of cultural production that surround us still carry values and ideals – the aesthetic as promise of another world, a non-material realm which nonetheless informs the imagination of a world indisputably better than present social organisation allows? Or does the evacuation of meaning from visual signs indicate the triumph of commodity ushered in by the trope of consumer choice? I simply pose the question at this stage while maintaining that the realm of cultural signs continues to be a factor in how we live the lives we have. Catherine Belsey writes of culture as “the vocabulary within which we do what we do ... [which] specifies the meanings we set out to inhabit”.<sup>2</sup> And Leonie Sandercock writes that we live “in a culturally structured world, are deeply shaped by it, and necessarily view the world from within a specific culture”.<sup>3</sup> Belsey continues that culture is the vocabulary of “the values we make efforts to live by or protest against”,<sup>4</sup> and claims that the protest, too, is cultural. Hence our encounters with signs may inform our social world and (re)formation, and our interpretation of them might be a site for intervention; i.e. by intervening in the codes and categories



Fig. 1. Sculpture of Lenin, Grūto parkas, Lithuania. Photo by the author, 2006

of visual culture, we might re-inflect the conditions by which we ourselves (and others likewise) are conditioned.

#### THE WALL, AND THE HAMMER-AND-SICKLE

The Berlin Wall, officially termed Border Security System West by its makers, was one of the key visual icons of the Cold War, as were the watchtowers and the May Day parades in Moscow. By the time of its dismantling, its West-facing side was covered with graffiti. It was, in fact, the fourth construction constituting the Wall. The first was simply a set of concrete blocks and wire. Successive improvements to the structure led to the use of pre-fabricated concrete sections of the kind utilised in systems that built mass housing, and resulted in a clear flat surface with a rounded protrusion on the top – an excellent “canvas” for graffiti. The latter was, of course, not possible in the East, because the Wall was patrolled there. In the West, Berliners and foreigners contributed their amateur or semi-professional images and slogans. New York graffiti artist Keith Haring

was commissioned to decorate a 400-metre section of the Wall in his own characteristic style. After the Wall was dismantled, people broke off and took away small pieces of the concrete as proof that they had been there, that they were participants in history. For some, it was perhaps also proof, in a kind of re-enactment, that the regime had fallen. Larger pieces, complete sections, were also removed more carefully, and transported to the West. One is now at the University of Texas in Austin, near a pet cemetery. Another is in New York, where it decorates a small urban plaza near the Museum of Modern Art. Here, the East-facing side is close to a wall that borders the plaza, and cannot be seen. The West-facing side, with its graffiti and tags in primary colours, looks out at the spectator from behind neatly placed white garden furniture, where passers-by can enjoy coffee and bagels. This might all be straightforward – it might be the extraction of spoils by the victor, paraded as a sign of victory over a defeated ideology. It makes sense: the graffiti was a sign of freedom – the ideological commodity marketed energetically by the West. I only ask how the graffiti on this Wall compares in style and meaning with that which appeared on New York subway trains at the same time, and was construed as a sign that an underclass living underground in subway tunnels and sewers was about to rise up and destroy the city (or at least threatened its stability, and produced street crime). Graffiti was anti-social behaviour, vandalism of public property – or it was a message of freedom. In some New York galleries, it was also traded as art in the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Haring.

More recently, I was walking to a metro station in Yerevan, Armenia (until 1991 a constituent republic of the Soviet Union). Standing at a street corner was a rusting steel hammer-and-sickle. At first I read it as part of the detritus of the Soviet period, not cleared away when a colossal statue of Stalin was replaced by one of Mother Armenia, and a more life-size Lenin by a large public video screen. This could have been the case, for Armenia has low resources, and many parts of the city are in transition. My second thought was that it might be postmodern ironic art. It was, in fact, the sign for a restaurant called CCCP – the metre-high rusty steel letters were set

into the wall of the restaurant building. Next door to it was the head office for Porsche in Armenia. Much of the city centre is a construction site for new steel-and-glass towers financed by members of the Armenian diaspora in the US and Russia. There is money, and hence lifestyle consumption (but only for some). The restaurant caters to this globalised market – and the derivations of the hammer-and-sickle, CCCP, and Porsche signs are less important than is their function as denoting brands.

I suppose that the meaning I construct for these signs is a personal one, and that it has a veil of nostalgia. But it is also informed by the social and cultural discourses which structure my academic work. As a tourist I buy souvenirs – including a set of vodka glasses with pictures of Lenin and Stalin from Stalin World (Grūtas Park, Lithuania) – which I keep on a shelf in my office at the University as signs of travel, and retain mental images as another kind of souvenir. Some are only imagined, like the statue of Lenin from Yerevan, which I was told is in storage in the basement of the National Museum. I can almost imagine it, assume it to be like so many others – cap in hand or on head, arm outstretched or at the side... Many buildings are also in storage after making way for redevelopment, their grey volcanic stones numbered in white. The official line is that they will be reconstructed elsewhere; no-one believes this. Lenin as well will remain in storage. But the city has other monuments which increase in meaning, as does the extent to which the values they denote acquire mass consent. On April 25, 2006, I joined 750,000 people of all ages and many nationalities walking to the Genocide Memorial on the high ground overlooking Yerevan.

#### INTERMEDIATE REFLECTIONS

I never lived under a system of state socialism. As a Left academic from the West, I regard the philosophy on which it was partly based (and which did not for the most part inform its oppressive measures) as being open to further evolution, with Karl Marx (the potential of whose work is yet to be fully understood), along with Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin, being one of the key thinkers of the 19th



century. That understanding involves critical reflection, and no doubt revision in our postmodern world. Nonetheless, I believe in social justice, and dispute the claims of consumerism. As Theodor Adorno said of mass culture: “The dream industry does not so much fabricate the dreams of the customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people”.<sup>5</sup> He also argued that, “advertising becomes information when... the recognition of brand names has taken the place of choice”.<sup>6</sup> Within the context of brand-culture, the word *Revolution* is the name of a chain of bars. One is located in the Castlefield district of Manchester, next door to another bar called *Fat Cat*. There have been many revolutions, but the bar is specific in its reference. It sells vodka cocktails, and the letter “e” in its name is reversed to suggest another alphabet. It would have been more predictable had the letter “R” been reversed to resemble (though not in sound) a letter in Cyrillic. But the “e” serves to give an exotic feeling, and draws on modern history for its marketing edge. How do I read this?

Baudrillard proposes a concept of sign-exchange as replacing the value previously invested in exchanges of goods, in an environment now composed of

Simulacra. Mike Gane summarises that the simulacra introduced in the industrial revolution have given way to “the implosive advent of the consumer society to sign-exchange and the emergence of a ‘system of objects’”.<sup>7</sup> Gary Bridge cites Baudrillard’s *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), and observes that sign-value heralds “a proliferation of signs and simulacra that collapse the distinction between the original and its copies”, in the consumption of images.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Maussian anthropology, Baudrillard himself is sceptical regarding the prospect for empowerment through commodity consumption, and sees the triumph of consumption as sweeping away alternatives to its power – a view not entirely unlike Adorno’s. Thus, through the triumph of the sign, the desire and intention of the consuming subject are subsumed in a more or less total system, and the system is denoted by an array of signs for brands, furthermore denoting as a whole the supremacy of the branded experience. I can accept this idea, and am reminded that intentionality is in any case a problematic idea when the subject is seen not as the unified self of liberal humanism, but as contingent on complex conditions and interactions within those conditions.



Fig. 2. Restaurant Revolution in Manchester, UK. Photo by the author, 2006

Signs, like words in a verbal language, are, however, mutable. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's observation of an arbitrary relation between a verbal sign and that which it signifies, there is no authentic meaning, received as it were from ancestral beginnings to be reiterated timelessly. But there may be a possibility, if signs are completed in reception (like text) so that completion itself is always in the future – inevitably unfinished and only ever provisional – of finding an exit from the situation. The bar appropriates a history of revolution and an ideology now encapsulated in history (the more so by its use as the name of a bar – which possibly is partly the point), but the term “appropriation” has another meaning in religious hermeneutics – as an act of interpretation through which to achieve “an intimate communion of sense” in reading.<sup>9</sup> The reference is perhaps anachronistic, but it points to an intervention in the re-reading of text – and thereby the possibility for a re-reading also of signs – and a re-contextualisation of the de-contextualised. Everything in language is mediated, and the authentic as unmediated representation of experience is an idea viable only in terms of the pre-verbal. But this does not mean that everything is fake. Following on this idea, Vincent Mosco outlines two ways in which political economists take issue with Baudrillard:

“First... the argument for the emergence of commodification suggests one-dimensionalism, essentialism, and... fatalism... Second, it is not clear what the victory of commodity actually means because the sense of the term changes... in Baudrillard's analysis. ... But to the extent that it holds a specific meaning, sign value is limited to the needs of capital to produce a dense, hierarchical system of meanings, of status identifications, in order to cement its power.”<sup>10</sup>

In any event, Baudrillard does not see consumers as hapless dupes of a system, but as subjects who are able to engage with it. I question a tendency in the 1990s of the social sciences to see consumers as knowing manipulators of the system, and incline more to the idea that such subversion as might be achieved within consumption – as distinct from anti-consumption movements – is likely to be quick-

ly subsumed by the market. But there does appear to be a possibility to withdraw from the power exerted by lifestyle consumption, as evidenced by the formation of new social movements. For Ian Angus, members of such movements engage in identity formation “in a manner that transforms a drop-out rejection into a political project demanding social change.”<sup>11</sup> Such a project requires a vocabulary re-invested with meanings. This is not a simple reclamation of previously valid meanings – the validity being common circulation – for signs appropriated by the market. The idea denoted by *Revolution* is now historical, since the model of a proletarian uprising is no longer credible. In a similar fashion, the hammer-and-sickle is a historical emblem open to appropriation by the tourist trade in former East bloc countries.

#### STALIN WORLD

Stalin World is a case of such appropriation – the badges, T-shirts, and other (newly produced) detritus of the Soviet period are consumed as souvenirs of a past world equivalent in its distance to the exotic. The acquired sign shows the tourist to have been there, as the branded goods denote that one has visited the mall. But I would argue that these signs are never entirely evacuated of meaning in the way the market might require, and that in the resulting ambivalences and complexities of response to what is still recent history, there is a space between the branded meaning and the personal interpretation that arises from past associations. In that space is the potential to re-produce (rather than reproduce) meaning.

As commentators on the cultural legacies of the former East bloc, Laura Mulvey argues that the monuments of the former Soviet Union should be preserved, and Renata Salecl that they should not. In 1991 Mulvey went to Russia with Mark Lewis to make the film *Disgraced Monuments* (1992). She cites Walter Benjamin's observation from the 1920s regarding a shop selling figures of Lenin in all sizes, and adds her own experience:

“The poses had become fixed and stereotyped: Lenin with one arm outstretched,

with both arms outstretched, standing still, walking forward, sometimes holding a cap ... One favourite anecdote was of a statue which had got muddled, and appeared with Lenin both holding and wearing a cap”.<sup>12</sup>

Mulvey adds that the problem of what to do with such statues is a problem of historical memory, and says that the people she interviewed in Russia felt that an ability to live with them may herald an ability to live with the past. Susan Buck-Morss, however, argues that if revolutions are legitimated by the histories they appropriate, then “the suturing of history’s narrative discourse transforms the violent rupture of the present into a continuity of meaning”.<sup>13</sup> A similar debate took place in Bucharest in 2005 over the future of the People’s Palace, built by Nicolae Ceaușescu after a visit to Phenian in North Korea, as the centrepiece of a New Bucharest (for which old buildings, including churches, were demolished). Salecl recalls that “some people insisted that the palace had to be demolished, others proposed that it become a museum of the communist terror, still others suggested that it be transformed into a casino”.<sup>14</sup> For Salecl herself, the building spoke of psychotic delirium under the previous regime. She argues that to keep statues in place after a shift of power assumes that “the current and former rulers do not differ in how they deal with historical memory”.<sup>15</sup> With some incisiveness she notes that one would not have expected to find images of the Fuhrer in public places in Germany after 1945. I take her point. The removal of monuments dedicated to a past regime is probably necessary at least as a re-enactment of the shift of power, and as evidence that it has been effected.

But I would also argue that complete erasure does, as Mulvey indicates, lead to forgetting. However, in the case of Stalin World at Grūtas Park in Lithuania, removal leads to both retention and forgetting. To me, the dark green of the forest seems, in a way, to be the de-contextualising equivalent of the white walls of a typical museum of modern art. The extent to which the park, with its restaurant and play area, and even a small zoo in plain sight of the signs of power (including a deportation train parked at the site entrance), offers a full day of family entertain-

ment, denotes appropriation to the tourist industry. And yet most of the visitors are Lithuanians, who, if they are an adult, lived through a period which they regard not only as one of communist oppression, but also as a period of foreign occupation and imposition of a foreign language. I see the park as the suture suggested by Buck-Morss (above) – it closes the argument between rival ideologies – but I maintain that the specific forms of each remain mutable. Reading signs such as the statues of Lenin at Grūtas Park from a viewpoint aligned with the successive efforts, since the 1960s, at forming a New Left, I have to say that the project is not yet finished.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Leonie Sandercock, ‘Cosmopolitan Urbanism: A Love Song for Our Mongrel Cities’, in: Jon Binnie, Julian Holloway, Steve Millington, Craig Young (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Urbanism*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Belsey, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Gane, *French Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2003, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Bridge, *Reason in the City of Difference: Pragmatism, Communicative Action and Contemporary Urbanism*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hermeneutics*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communications*, London: Sage, 1996, p. 156.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Angus, *Primal Scenes of Communication: Communication, Consumerism and Social Movements*, Albany (NY): SUNY Press, 2000, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Reflections on Disgraced Monuments’, in: Neil Leach (ed.), *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2002, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Renata Salecl, ‘The State as a Work of Art: The Trauma of Ceaușescu’s Disneyland’, in: Neil Leach (ed.), *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

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## Savinantis buvusį Šaltąjį karą

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** postsocializmas, visuomeninis paminklas, pereinamasis kultūros laikotarpis.

### Santrauka

Griuvus Berlyno sienai ir iširus Sovietų Sąjungai, keletą Šaltojo karo laikotarpį primenančių kultūros ženklų vėl atgaivina naujoji mada. Pavyzdžiai: plieninis pjautuvas ir kūjis šalia restorano (kuris vadinasi SSSR) Jerevane (Armėnija); Berlyno sienos fragmentas, perkeltas į nedidelę aikštę prie Niujorko Modernaus meno muziejaus; barų tinklas *Revoliucija* („R“ rašoma atvirkščiai, kad būtų panaši į kirilicos raidę, kuri, tiesą sakant, tariama kitaip) Jungtinėje Karalystėje; sovietinės skulptūros parkai Budapešte ir Grūte. Ši, dažnai su vartojimu ir laisvalaikiu susijusi pozicija – iš naujo panaudoti ženklus kitu tikslu – yra priešingybė tam, ką 1871 m. padarė Paryžiaus komunarai, pašalindami iš viešosios erdvės Napoleono erelius ir Vendomo koloną ar airių respublikonai, XX a. nugriovę Anglijos karaliaus Jurgio statulas Dubline ir Korke. Kontrastą šiems pavyzdžiams sudaro ir ant Žaliojo tilto Vilniuje tebe laikomos socialistinio realizmo skulptūros.

Remiantis aukščiau įvardytais savinimosi atvejais, straipsnyje klausiama, kaip iš naujo interpretuojami ir ar gali būti interpretuojami pasisavinti senieji ženklai. Ar jie, pavyzdžiui, dekontekstualizuojami taip, kaip paveikslai modernaus meno muziejuje? Ar kavinių dizainas arba Grūto miško laukymė yra estetinis baltų modernistinio meno erdvės sienų atitikmuo? O gal tie ženklai kelia nostalgiją? Bet ženklai nesklando laisvai kaip signifikantai, be sąsajų su akivaizdžiais signifikatais, tad jų tuštuma, kaip bendra ženklų klasė, žymi kapitalo triumfą. Tačiau šis, taip pat neadekvatus, paaiškinimas kelia kitus klausimus apie tai, kaip galima žvelgti į senojo režimo ženklus: jie išsaugomi kaip kultūra, paliekami lyg seni baldai gatvėje ar veikia kaip ištrinta arba iš naujo kontekstualizuota istorija?

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