

Mapping the Northwest of Bulgaria (1)

In a few days time we begin work on a project to explore how the events of "1989" are reflected in contemporary discourse in Bulgaria. Below you can read a bit about the project (written by Mariana Assenova) which will run throughout this year in Bulgaria.

In 2009 Bulgarians will face the fact that 20 years have passed since the end of Communism. But does everyone know what happened in 1989? It's hard or even impossible to find any signs of the memory of 1989 in Bulgarian cities. How many young people know that in this year the dramatic change of the political and economic systems started? Can 20 years olds appreciate how these changes affected people's life in their own cities? Which facts still remain half-expressed by our parents?

Due to various reasons the events of 1989, the year of the dramatic changes that ended the Communist era in Bulgaria and in Europe, are still not reflected upon enough and in different geographical regions "1989" is still differently perceived. The Northwestern region of Bulgaria is of special interest. The majority of the population saw "1989" not as the end of the totalitarian regime and a new opportunity for the better, but as a mourning for the old. The greater part saw the changes as shocking, disturbing and upsetting. Traumatic.

This project aims to address the asymmetry in perception and the way it affects at least three generations – our parents, us and the generation born after 1989. It will also ask how they make life choices, about ways of thinking, ways of looking at identity. The project aims to involve young people, together with their teachers, parents and grandparents from the region in a debate and search for the answers and - in an interesting journey with one "simple" mission - to search for their own identity.

The Communist past and the changes in 1989 can't be left any longer without neither reflection nor connection to the present, with everyday life and patterns of behavior. This project is to address the deficit of approaches that activate young people in conversations about the recent past and that bring young people in the centre as history mediators.

As was already mentioned our Bulgarian cities do not keep any memories of what has happened in 1989. One of the important reasons is the general lack of knowledge and qualitative research. Why was Communism so strong in Bulgaria and for its citizens in comparison with Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic? How can the post-Communist elites still manage to force their philosophy and reading of past and present upon the general public?

We see the main goals to be achieved in several stages.

- to identify how young people today (who had not been born in 1989) connect with the recent past.
- to provoke young people to get interested in the "1989" topic and to start asking questions about this recent past.
- to involve young people in a constructive dialogue with their parents so as to identify the emotions of "1989".
- to investigate how recent history is taught in Bulgarian schools.

March 2009

Mapping the North West of Bulgaria (2) 18th March 2009

Apart from along its' enormous coastline, Spain has maintained that feeling of medievalness associated with countries dominated by walled cities. In Spring you can drive for hours through landscapes, be flattened by the beauty of kilometers of unbroken pink and white almond and cherry blossom and, almost without warning, spot a city standing out in the morning haze still half an hour's drive away. Snow capped mountains, bright and warmly painted valleys.

At Barajas airport, Madrid, I need to think about how to manage the heat for the first time this year. My thin woolen sweater and light jacket are suddenly oppressively hot. Once again I have been caught out by this self assured and forthright climate.

In my Easyjet seat to Sofia, Bulgaria, I catch myself being excited for the first time about this trip. So much has been happening in my life in the last three months that while not resenting the project in Bulgaria I have put off thinking about it until this moment. The liminal confusion generated by not knowing the length of the journey is all that is required for my world and I to be on the move again. I have been finally released from the weight of the Earth's surface. Where I land will be somewhere I have never been before; and if the temperature is like that in Madrid all the better.

The pilot dispels the first confusion. The flight will take three hours and ten minutes. And in Sofia winter has returned with forecasts of snow; the second reckoning of the day as I

have no winter clothes with me. What was too hot in Madrid will be too cold in Sofia. I recall this Christmas past when Russia once again cut off gas to Eastern Europe and reports of people unable to heat their homes filtered through from Sofia to those listening from their kitchen tables in the West.

For the last few weeks I have been reading a book by the American Anthropologist Gerald W. Creed called “Domesticating Revolution – From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village”. As we fly over France, Italy, Greece and despite my tired eyes my imagination turns and writhes with pleasure as I catch up with the book again. It is about the precise region in Bulgaria into which I am about to be parachuted - an anthropological study of an agricultural village during the transition from Soviet socialism towards a “free market”. In the weeks before this trip I have wanted to read two books about Bulgaria. Misha Glenny’s book, “McMafia” is the other - which I still have not yet bought. But for now Creed’s firm and piercing stare has gripped me by the throat; “Any attempt” he says,

“to make sense of the transition must revisit socialism through lived experience”. P2

My mind begins to spin back through my own life and my own work. “Lived experiences of socialism”, “The Transition”. My life has been dominated by these two subjects in so many ways. “My childhood in a politicized family” being a phrase I often used to describe an environment in which politics, revolution and the “struggle against the arms race” created the backdrop for decades of disputed family history to be mapped out. My entry into professional theatre as a director and deciding to build a career and vocation in a form of practice which sees theatre as a social art form; one that helps us hold up our lives to some kind of joint or social reflection. There is that bloody word again; “social” popping up with almost indigestible regularity.

“The Transition” is also marked in my family by domestic events. My daughter was born in the early hours of the 10th November 1989. The small and beautiful birth mark on her forehead, which twenty years later has disappeared from sight, led me to welcome her as “Little Gorbachov” for a while. And then within months of her birth I began an intense decade long relationship with what was soon to be ex- East Germany (the DDR). I remember a conversation in March 1992 with my father from his hospital bed shortly before he died. He shared Günter Grass’s fear of what a united Germany might mean. A profound pacifist whose life was ending in so much pain and confusion, who in so many ways had lived the 20th Century, feared the rise of a united Germany again. Everything in transition; me, my family, Europe, Germany, economic systems, the goods in shops, languages people wanted to speak.

Various deep and long lasting friendships were created with other theatre professionals at the Brandenburg Theatre and elsewhere. In the mid 1990's the relationship with Brandenburg led to me co-writing and directing "Bright Angel" with my colleague Bernd Kessler. The play, based upon the life of a mutual friend and colleague, Wolfgang Rudolf, became the vehicle for an examination of East German socialism and its specific form of paranoia, paternalism and brutality. With a production in England and later another in Germany which I directed the play was one of the ways I was able to be the amateur Gerald Creed I so longed to be; I was able to ask questions and listen to answers about the mundane nature of totalitarian socialism. The answers often took the form of words, sometimes silences, other times long painful looks. Others told me stories of ordinary uncomplicated lives in which socialist values seemed to effortlessly permeate family life. Often truths could only be fleetingly captured by those recounting their stories and experiences by embedding their accounts in the minute detail of ordinary life. Bernd told me that the night the Berlin Wall fell he was with his wife at their flat in East Berlin. They knew something big was happening but when the phone started to ring repeatedly he told his wife not to answer it. It could be the military authorities demanding that he report for duty as every adult male had to do at moments of national emergency. As the phone rang during the night Bernd and his wife became increasingly convinced that an emergency had started. In the morning Angela answered the phone to hear the voice of a West Berlin relative, "where have you been all night? The wall is open!". On the same night as my wife was giving birth to my daughter.

The oscillating connections between the domestic, the mundane and the shifting plates of our social realities and possibilities...are these the forces that what has pushed me into rehearsal rooms and airport lounges over the decades?

On an occasion in the mid 1990's Bernd and I rehearsed a piece together with young actors from Poland, the UK and Germany on the shores of a lake in the land of Brandenburg. "In DDR times"; he told me, "we could only holiday in Eastern European communist countries. You would plan your trip and then submit it to the local police station. They would then send you your prescribed route, the hotels you were to stay in and the date you would need to return. When the wall came down and we all received a cash gift from the West German government I used it to take a holiday in Mexico – at 37 years old my first free trip."

Creed's book makes easy reading on my flight. My work on this Bulgarian project might actually link into where Creed's book finishes and where much of my work in ex East Germany was leading. The project on which I am about to begin work, "Mapping the North West" aims, Mariana Assenova the coordinator of the project has told me, to help

people born after 1989 look for concrete evidence that there was indeed a seismic change in the way Bulgarians lived and were governed. It seems a perverse statement. Is not 1989 a key date for any European? The collapse of the Berlin Wall and shortly after the Soviet Union, later a series of events from the unification of Germany, the redefining of Central and Eastern European nations, war and ethnic cleansing, NATO bombing of a European city. But Assenova is insistent that the “change” has been muddled, forgotten, ignored in Bulgaria. But if so how and why? Purposefully, by design, by necessity? And if so how can we design a cultural project which could address these issues?

I am now desperate to get to Bulgaria, get my feet on the ground, in a car, in a bar or restaurant or house or garden or park or shop or school or hotel or street and simply begin listening and looking.

Creed’s analysis of the changes in North West rural Bulgaria begins in the mid 1980’s and goes on to chart the village over a period of more than a decade. He concentrates on what became one of the emblematic policies of Soviet style communism – the collective farming policy, it’s rise, development and collapse. His scrupulous and humane anthropology allows deep insights to emerge and has led to the book being as important in Bulgaria as elsewhere for anyone interested in an anthropology of socialism. He argues that by simply doing what they could to improve their difficult circumstances, “without any grand design of resistance”, villagers forced concessions from central planners and administrators that eventually transformed an oppressive intrusive system into a tolerable one”. In short villagers domesticated the socialist revolution.

As the plane touches down I finish the book in my hands. Between 1990 and 2005 I worked and directed in ex East Germany and ex Communist Poland. I have directed theatre with companies of ex Czechoslovakians, with Hungarians and with Cubans. In many respects these projects have been about histories and identities in transition and a “theatre anthropology of communism”. But now a new project is underway. I will be with a team working with young people who have no lived memory of 1989 to help them and us connect with the recent past. Provoking young people to get interested in "1989" as a topic and to encourage them to start asking their parents and families questions and identify the emotions of "1989" is also a key aim. But there is also going to be an emphasis on investigating how recent history is taught in Bulgarian schools and how the arts might facilitate the process. At the passport control I give the policeman my passport. Stuck onto his window is a small poster with a symbol of a person handing money to a policeman. The image is overlaid by a red cross – thus clearly indicating that offering money to the border police is not acceptable.

Within a few minutes Mariana and I speeding through the darkened moterway network of Sofia.

Context: The Goat Milk Festival – Bela Rechka (Bulgaria) May 09

The Goat Milk Festival is an evolving organism, both executing a development plan and searching for the way forward. Both direction and intuition play an important role for co-directors Mariana Assenova and Diana Ivanova. And with scarce resources such an approach is healthy and unavoidable

Like many young projects (perhaps this one is now entering late youth) the festival is able to demonstrate certain continuities - regular events to which regular visitors have come to expect and love - but significant ambitious new threads, such as the inclusion of a series of debates and projects with and for young people and teachers entitled, “Mapping the North West of Bulgaria”; proof that the festival is brimming with the self esteem and the surety of purpose which marks it out as a cultural force determining its own future.

These two women have created a jewel in the middle of the Bulgarian North West. The small village of Bela Rechka, situated in the foothills of the Balkan Mountains and the Vračanska natural park, with one bar, 80 residents and more goats than people, the village provides an idyllic rural context for a relaxing and freewheeling festival.

But it would be profound error to see this village as a backdrop to the festival. From the outset the directors have attempted to embed their work in the very people, fabric, history and culture of the village. Locals are encouraged to take part at all levels and in all events. They are also encouraged to take in visitors to their homes and are supported by the organizers in doing so. In a society closed for fifty years this act has profound cultural importance. Locals also have the chance of earning income from their efforts, something which helps mediate the more complex cultural exchange going on at the same time. It was clear from the outset of the Goat Milk Festival 2009 that not just lap tops but multi-cultural competencies were being booted up on all sides.

It would a mistake to see this small intimate festival as simply a chance for a music and arts encounter between urban artists from a mixture of European countries, although it is that too. At its root is a belief, expressed in the nature of the multi-layered programming, that this quiet reflective place can serve a profound purpose. It can act as a meeting place, away from the centre, slightly out of the glare, where difficult, uneven and possibly taboo subjects can be debated with the calm and care they demand. In a country where

communism came to an end twenty years ago I have learnt that we can still encounter people who are frightened to speak about the past (and thus the present) and people willing and able to use this fear to impose their will upon others. For many the past does not simply haunt their dreams but is present in their todays.

Since the very beginning this festival has focused on “memory and remembering”. This year the festival directors took the leap of their professional lives and decided to concentrate the festival gaze upon the events of 1989 – the year European communist totalitarianism collapsed and was replaced by what Gerald Creed describes as an "ambivalent transition".

Mapping the Northwest of Bulgaria (3)

This year financial support was received from the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe to run a separate yet parallel project to the festival. “Mapping the North West of Bulgaria” was designed to encourage young people and history teachers to look for signs of 1989 in their cities today and to examine how the events of 1989 are taught. So while on the one hand the festival remained a weekend this new initiative began to make an impact upon the cultural horizons of a whole region of Bulgaria.

As in any good festival there was far more on offer than any one person can possibly experience. Events ran concurrently; Turkish drumming workshop and Belly Dancing alongside opportunities to paint the village.

But in this reflection I am going to concentrate on the work that I and Mariana Assenova undertook with general participants, teachers and young people from the four towns and cities across the region running up to the festival; Vidin on the river Danube , Montana, Vraca and Văršec - all located like a string of beads between Vidin and Sofia. Secondly I will describe some of the events in which I participated during the festival, namely the debates, film and artistic presentations concerning the events of 1989 from various historical and geographical perspectives.

On Monday 18th May we met a group of young people from “Foreign Languages School Jordan Radichkov” in North West town of Vidin on the Danube. On the subsequent days similar meetings took place with young people and teachers in Montana, Vraca and Văršec. We began our meeting in the main square of the town accompanied by history teacher Valantina Yoranova. In the following months Valantina demonstrated on numerous occasions what a brilliant teacher and cultural worker can do with a group of young people in a disorientated society.

Over previous weeks Valentina had been using oral history techniques with her students to collect personal stories from their families about the communist times. Students were encouraged to see themselves as proactive researchers rather than passive receptors of lists of dates which, if taught without personal contextualisation, even runs the risk of dehumanising their own history.

After the short introduction from Marianna Assenova in English (these young people speak an exceptionally high level of English) we sat and stood around a bench in the warm sun facing the massive court building across the other side of the square. In subsequent meetings (apart from in Vraca) we spent time in public places in each town in much the same way as I am about to describe below.

In front of the court building in Vidin stood a huge monument depicting soldiers pushing forward under attack dedicated to the 1912/13 wars with Serbia and Turkey. The monument is a powerful piece created in the typical Soviet heroic style one can find across the whole of the ex-Communist world. But the relationship between the date of the historical moment being depicted (1912/13) and the Socialist Realist aesthetic being employed is striking. The sculpting of a “public art” piece (it stands in the centre of the town) depicting an historical moment from the pre-communist era clearly uses Socialist Realist aesthetics. The effect is to turn this chapter of pre communist Bulgarian nationalist history into part of a meta-narrative about the movement towards a Bulgarian communist utopia under Stalinism. Effortlessly, elegantly even, Bulgarian nationalism is thus subliminally associated with the march towards communism - but not primarily through words but rather through the choice of aesthetic. The communists in the 1950’s, looking back over their recent history, picked key moments still in the popular consciousness to iconise and include within a narrative about the logical progression of humanity from late capitalism to communism. Indeed having recently read both Giorgi Dimitrov’s diaries and letters between him and Stalin it is worth noting how he and Stalin applied the persuasive power of nationalistic politics from the late 1930’s To what degree are young people aware of the decisions embedded within such monuments as they walk past them every day?

My first question to the young people was:

(Q = my question A: an answer from any student)

Q: If someone were to walk through this square for the first time in twenty years what would they notice had changed? What would be different?

The responses were immediate;

A: The court would not have had air conditioning machines on the outside

A: There would have been no graffiti

A: There would be no EU flag on the court buildings

A: The building behind us would not have been a disco twenty years ago but part of the reading room complex.

The adults in the group added a few additional perspectives...ones the young people had not mentioned. The adult thus immediately “historicised” the primary observations:

A(adult): The court building. In 1989 it was the Communist Party head quarters

A(adult): The statue is from the Communist times too.

At one level the immediate “historicalisation” of this square by my adult colleagues was a positive and important intervention (we all knew something new as a result) but also I think on reflection that this rush to fill in “missing information” was an interesting error. I think we can learn lots by examining the notion of what leads us to wish to “fill in the gaps”, to historicalise on behalf of young people.

Conscientisation and Dialogue:

The young people had said that the “air conditioning” machines were the new elements placed on the court building after 1989. This was perhaps an observation based on comments by others - older people who remembered the building before the machines or by the young people’s own experience of change (perhaps they also remembered the building before the air conditioning machines). What the young people did not refer to (but the adults did) was about the change of use of the building. The ideas, values and political consequences of this change of use were obviously complex and rich – but ones which need unpicking.

Instead of enabling this to happen I suggest that the precipitative adult intervention (“the building was the CP HQ”) provided an answer to a question which had yet to be asked. Thus the fact that we (the adults) “rushed in” to fill a “hole” in the young people’s knowledge before the young people were conscious of either their lack or need for that knowledge (or the pedagogical processes in motion) meant that the adult intervention was probably not heard by and thus not useful to the young people.

As artists and teachers we should be aiming to generate a “deep need” in those with whom we work. And this is particularly the case in projects which are history based. We can help (in this case young people) by provoking them to enjoy confusion and see it not as something to avoid (something to “fill in”) but as a constant and creative human state. Only the recognition of the presence of confusion can help unsettle previous accepted

truths – ones which may no longer be helpful. Once we are conscious of being confused (good artists and educators always make this enjoyable; bad ones use the presence of confusion to humiliate) artists and teachers can help those with whom they are working begin the process of asking new questions in a conscious manner.

So rather than attempting to “fill in gaps” in student thinking or knowledge (a particular danger when history is often taught as if it was simply a list of dates and not a conceptual approach predicated on problem solving) we need to help them become conscious of their confusions, to enjoy them, provoke them to break their silence and embarrassments and then explore them in order that they might generate some provisional new answers to their questions. As such this form of artistic and pedagogical work is dialogical. It is not based on the notion of teacher/artist as “knower” and student as an “empty receptacle” needing to be filled with pre determined knowledge but on the idea of the teacher/artist as a researcher working within a group of co-researchers (artists/students) bringing different pieces of knowledge and experience to the team. Of course this concept does not negate the idea of teacher as a authority figure as some leading educationalists and politicians have recently suggested. But that is another subject for another occasion. Paulo Freire developed this kind of thinking in the 1960s in various developmental contexts.

By using and celebrating confusion we aim to generate a creative dialogue which is otherwise unattainable. Let’s call this “the art of confusion” for a moment. But of course it is not an end in itself. It is simply a methodology to unsettle accepted given knowledges – to help dispel the notion that knowledge is somehow a fixed and unmovable stratified rock passed down from generation to generation, ever more heavy, and ever more painful to digest and incorporate into everyday life. Rather we should be enjoying and receive energy from the artistic and educational processes involved with of exploring what lays beneath or within “confusion”. Confusions are the entries into helping people make sense of their world and their histories.

So, at first we need to see that we are in the business of unsettling given knowledges. This is because knowledge is never neutral but instead reflects the power structures within which it is being generated. In order to unsettle given knowledges we need to allow confusions, often expressed as silences, to enter into a dialogue with those with whom we work and bring these confusions to the centre of what we do together.

These confusions, if handled with fun and joy, will create a “deep need” to replace them with new provisional answers and new provisional knowledge. This can only occur if the teacher/artist begins by entering into a dialogue with students (seeing them as co-researchers) and not by seeing them as in need of being filled up with given (or accepted)

knowledge. If we can provoke dialogue arising from confusion our students or communities will enter into a spiral-like (never ending) process of conscientisation – ever needing to replace provisional answers with more profound and useful ones, and most importantly ones that help us transform our reality.

Here is how I attempted to develop the dialogue about historical processes through the provoking of confusion. The question was about the memory of life pre 1989:

Q: How many of you remember 1989?

A: None of us. We were all born after.

Q: Do you know people who lived through that period?

A: Parents, grand-parents, family

Q: Are you absolutely sure that you have no memory of either 1989 or the period before? I find it hard to believe.

A: Of course not. We have no memory or experiences of life before we were born.

Q: Sorry but that is difficult to believe. What do you mean you experienced nothing from before you were born?

A: Are you mad?

Q: Maybe! But don't forget my question. We will return to it later. For now I have another question for you. Can you find objects in this square which mark 1989 or come from before 1989?

After some discussion it seemed that the young people were sure that the square contained no objects or even parts of objects from the year 1989. Neither were there objects which commemorated 1989 as a moment of historic change. There seemed to be an absence of some kind or other.

Q: If you have read in your school text books that 1989 was an important year why do you think there is no memory of that year here in the town square? There is a monument commemorating the 1912/13 war. So the square has been used before as a place to remember important events.

A: I don't know. But I have been talking to members of my family and they tell me things. My grandmother said that before 1989 things were better. Everyone had a house, work and food. And now...

From the discussion which then ensued it became clear that the Valantina's work with her students over the weeks before my visit had generated a great deal of information and even useful hesitancy and confusion.

Young people were conscious that for many 1989 was not a problematic date – and it had certainly not been transformed into one of those emblematic and celebratory key moments in popular consciousness and iconised as part of some nationally settled narrative. There was no statue.

Behind us, as mentioned before, was a building described by the young people as a “reading room”, a combination of public library, cultural house and reference centre. I suggested we go inside and have a look around. It was exquisite - with almost no changes to the fittings, furniture, brown paint, polished floors of the Communist period.

Me: OK. I can see that you all have mobiles and they all have cameras. I would like you to work in pairs for five or six minutes. Your task is to return here having taken two photos per pair. You can take shots here inside the building or outside, but only within the square. Your task is to take two contrasting photos. The first is to be a photo which could have been taken before 1989, in other words there must be nothing in the photo which could indicate that it was taken post 89. The second shot a post 1989 view, exclude as much of pre 1989 as you can.

Off the students went. They came back a few minutes later very keen to show the products of their investigations. Lamp posts, shop windows, plaques, pavements, notices, buildings; evidence that much still exists from before 1989 and was indeed not difficult to find. There was also plenty of evidence of change; new flower beds, shops, restaurants and cafes, banks, information centre with PCs.

Q: So if I were to say again to you do you have any memories of life before 1989?

A: Well yes, to some degree. There is still a lot around us from before 1989. We live in 2009 but surrounded by things from before 1989.

Art, History Teaching and the Palimpsest

At this point I showed the group some of the photos I had also taken during those six minutes in the same square. A medieval door, a 19th century sculpture and a plaque (with graffiti) commemorating the opening of a cycle path paid for by the British embassy in the early 1990's. I was hoping to plant the idea that we can “read” our environments, our landscapes as palimpsests – a series of layers being ever added to and, with the addition of each layer, earlier ones being depleted but never completely erased. It is a concept that artists can often elucidate more poetically than historians. But when historians and artists

work together they can help young people explore this concept in very powerful and meaningful ways.

Q: So if we live with the physical remains of communism all around us is it true to say that there is evidence that we live among other periods too?

A: Of course.

Q: So a few minutes ago you were clear: “are you Mad? How can we remember or experience things from before we were born?” you asked me. And now you are saying, “of course we live within the present and past concurrently”.

Student: That is cool!

Performance Art, Oral Research and History Teaching

In the last element of the morning (we only had just over an hour together) we focused upon the communist era public announcement system. Speakers from this era are still fixed into the ground outside of the reading room. The young people were asked what it was;

A: A system to make announcements, send messages to the people of the town. The mayor uses it when there is an official gathering.

None of the young people (and in non of the other towns in which the same exercise was repeated) attempted to historicalise the object without prompting. Even then the nature of the prompting had to be step by step suggesting that we were entering into new conceptual territory for them. In this session in Vidin my prompting was under developed;

Q: Was this here in communist times? Who used it and why?

The answers were identical to the answers given about the use of the speakers today. The system was used to make announcements, send messages to the people of the town. The mayor used it when there was an official gathering.

By the session with young people in Montana a few days later I had realised that these tannoy systems held the key for this project as a whole. But also the nature of my questioning held the key to their use as pedagogical and reflective stimuli. If we were going to be able to talk about the nature of the change in 1989 then I needed to see if these young people could unlock how these speakers had been used before 1989 and how and by whom they were used after 1989.



In Montana we stood in front of a set of identical of tannoy speakers in the square. This time the questioning went like this;

Q: Before 1989 who used these speakers?

A: People who wanted to send messages to the town.

Q: Who were they?

A: (after a silence) authority figures

Q: Such as?

A: The mayor?

Q: From whom did the mayor get permission to broadcast to the town?

A: Maybe he did not ask for permission. He was the mayor!

Q: Who made him mayor?

A: (Silence)

Q: Was there some sort of election?

A:No.

Q:So?

A: The Party. He was from the Communist Party

Q: OK, but how did he get to be Mayor?

A: (after a silence) The Communist Party gave him the job

Q: So they gave him permission to use the speaker system, did they?

A: I guess so. Only important people could use them.

Q: And now?

A: Now it is also the mayor or council who use them.

Q: And who gives him or her permission?

A: it is a "him"

A: (silence)

Q: Who made him mayor?

A: He is voted in

Q: By the Communist Party?

A: (pause) No, by people who live here

Q: So can you identify the difference between the way the speaker system was used before 1989 and since 1989?

A: (pause) there is no difference, (pause)

Q: does not the fact that the mayor has been given permission by the people rather than by the Communist Party make a difference?

A: Now the mayor is given permission by the people of the town

Q: He has a mandate from the town?

A: Yes. I had never thought of that before. He has more...right to use the speaker system now.

Q: Is this important do you think?

A: Yes it is (general agreement)

Q: So if some things have changed (like how you decide who uses the speaker system) and others remain (like the speaker system itself) what does this tell us about the nature of change in 1989?

A: We are living in 2009. And now we are free to choose the mayor. But many things stay the same...like the speaker system

Q: And is that OK? Does it matter that some things have changed and others not.

A: I guess not.

Obviously while this discussion took us a long way the young people still remained unconscious of the way in which new freedoms or accountability procedures are “constructs”, the results of new social agreements. The notion that if they want to see this new state nurtured, protected or improved they will need to participate actively to ensure this would need to be returned to in subsequent sessions. If this does not occur then the concept of conscientisation will have not occurred as it places emphasis on helping us use the knowledge we generate to transform our reality.

The session concluded with the following (something similar to this occurred in every town):

“As we all have discussed this tannoy speaker system was used in the pre 1989 period by the communist party to announce things to the town. They were not elected by anyone apart from themselves and therefore could choose what to announce. They could not be held to account by the people of the town.

Every town and most villages had these speaker systems. Many still do. So when you come to Bela Rechka on Saturday we want to invite you to do two things. Firstly please

think about all these discussions you have had with family and friends over these weeks and choose one story or event from everything you have heard. With this material we want you to prepare a one minute story. You can choose to do it in Bulgarian or English or any other language. Because when you arrive in Bela Rechka you will find that we will have prepared a room, a transmission room (РАДИОУРЕДБА). And in that room there will only be a chair, a table and a microphone – all from before 1989. There will be nothing else. You will be invited to enter the room, sit down and read your one minute story into the microphone. And just like we have been talking about today your one minute piece is going to be broadcast through speakers outside of the building- in effect to the whole village. All the festival comers will be able to listen to your stories. The second thing we want you to do is bring an object, photo, article of clothing from before 1989 to leave in the room. At the end of the day we will open the room to the rest of the festival. In effect you will produce a museum of pre 1989. But until the end of the day no one except you will be allowed into this “transmission room”.

The students left the meeting transformed into research performance artists. As mentioned above similar meetings and workshops took place with young people in all the towns participating in the project. In all instances the towns still had the tannoy systems in place and we were thus able to use them as real places from which to explore the concept of mandatory democracy versus single party rule.

Absence:

In all participating towns it became clear that there is an absence of public monuments or other forms of “official recordings” (plaques etc) relating to the changes in 1989. Clearly much physical evidence of the fifty years of communism still exists even after twenty years – the buildings and squares, the tannoy systems and much more. While much has changed during these twenty years the infrastructure of the towns have, in many respects, continued to deteriorate. But little seems to mark “the change” itself.

This is not to say that symbols and monuments of any kind don't exist at all in this region. In fact towns, countryside and public buildings (such as primary and secondary schools) are absolutely saturated with symbols marking the 19th century struggle for independence from the Turkish Ottoman's and early 20th century wars with the Serbians and other neighbours. Indeed the communists actively used latent feelings in support of ethnic nationalism to reinforce their message of national unity and brotherhood with the Soviet Union. Later in this article we will return to this theme.

An understanding of archaeology might help us here. “1989” as a turning point is evidently “commemorated and remembered” by built structures if one includes certain buildings which, as a result of the collapse of the communist regime, were never completed. In Vidin and Văršec huge buildings remain simple concrete shells twenty years after initiation. These are the monuments to 1989. Those who saw the constructions halted know what they embody. But for those who don’t know or have not been told such buildings remain a mystery. Other physical evidence about “1989” also exists, public buildings, hospitals and polyclinics, blocks of flats. Yet even local history museums are not marking 1989 in this special year.

For an archaeologist a “lack of evidence” of the collapse of a political system might be expected – even more so when we come to explore the nature of the change in 1989. Only in the most extreme kinds of violent change, wars or volcanic eruptions for example, are the actual remains of a moment of change left as archaeological evidence. From an archaeological perspective perhaps it is to be expected that there is an absence of evidence as far as 1989 is concerned. Houses were not burnt, city walls were not destroyed.

Absence suggests two things. Firstly “the change” was not as revolutionary as we would at first imagine. It was perhaps a more gradual change. Our walks around the towns certainly suggested this – the past sits within, helps design and shape the present. Many of the physical structures of communism in Bulgaria were far from destroyed. Secondly an absence of statues or “public marks” about 1989 might suggest that an agreed national narrative regard the events (no matter how constructed or unreal) have yet to emerge. It might also mean that the new powers are still not strong enough to impose a disputed narrative upon a population. Or might it be that old power structures are actually still sufficiently powerful to be able to deny the construction of statues or public commemorations marking 1989? So if 20 years after the collapse of communism much of the physical evidence of that period still remains what of the less visible evidence? The way people think, communicate, resolve problems? In this description we have concentrated on physical and concrete signs or commemorations of 1989. Their absence might suggest that in the minds, hearts and souls of Bulgarians in the North West there is much yet to acknowledge and much for young Bulgarians to question. But perhaps young Bulgarians need to also manage a further complexity in their work.

Disturbance, Trauma and Memory

On a number of occasions during the project (in informal discussion, meetings and seminars) students and teachers have described what they perceive as a reluctance or hesitancy from those who told stories (“informants” in anthropology) about the act of

recounting. Some seemed embarrassed or unsure about what was being expected of them. Some refused to participate. Others refused to answer direct questions about the pictures or objects from the communist times.

The reasons for this could be complex. Perhaps people were unaccustomed to being interviewed about this subject. Personal narrative as legitimate history is a relatively new concept in not just ex communist countries, but in others such as Spain. Perhaps they had difficulty seeing their own children undertaking a bone fide research project. For example complaints were received from parents by some schools regarding the validity of children undertaking oral history about communism at all. These complaints was expressed as, “why is the teacher making my child do this kind of thing instead of preparing them for the exams?”

But I wish to raise an altogether different spectre. In many ex communist countries theoretical interest in “narratives of guilt and compliance” has emerged during the last twenty years . Embarrassment and unease regarding ones perceived role in dictatorial societies (passive, active, ambivalent, hostile etc) has been of interest within various academic disciplines since at least the Second World War. We will return to this theme in more depth later in this written account. But I would like to suggest that many of the teachers and young people working on this project may actually be attempting to interview people who are suffering from various levels of social and personal post traumatic disorder.

It is widely recognised that the arts can throw up useful perspectives regarding social and political trauma. As Cathy Caruth remarks,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet.

And if we take the liberty of replacing the word "literature" with the phrase “the arts in general...” it is because the arts in general, like psychoanalysis, are interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the arts meet...

Are the young people in this project encountering various generations in their families in states of unspoken and unrecognised trauma? I suggest that this is likely given accounts

and experiences of other post communist states –especially when the transition over the last twenty years has been so chaotic and illiberal as in Bulgaria. Yet it is also my contention that if this is the case it should be argued that the arts are very advanced tools (more advanced than some forms of pedagogy or forms of politics) when it comes to dealing with painful issues as the processing of traumatic events.

“Mapping the North West of Bulgaria ” comes to Goat Milk Festival

On Friday 22nd students and teachers arrived in Bela Rechka in order to participate in the opening events of the festival. In the evening there was a talk and discussion led by Raycho Stanev and Adem Murat about the expulsion of Turkish minorities from Bulgaria in the 1980’s. The discussion was so important in so many ways, reflecting the importance given to the “subjective voice” by the festival as a whole, that I wish to return to it at the end of this piece in some detail. Albeit to say the young people from the four participating cities were present at this event.

On the Saturday 23rd adult and young participants alike began participating in the various workshops and seminars on offer. In one of the rooms, completely stripped of all furniture, we placed a single table and chair and a coat stand. On the table was placed a microphone connected to a speaker system outside the building. All the furniture was clearly “from before 1989”. On the door to the room a sign was placed which read, “transmission room – no entry”.

Over the following few hours groups of about 6 young people at a time were invited by me to line up outside the room. Most had also responded to our request that they wear clothes from before 1989. My role was one of a serious and formal bureaucratic – ushering people to and from the transmission room, explaining the rules, but not commenting on any aspect of the ritualised procedure.

One at a time a young person was then asked to enter the room, walk to the table, sit down, take the microphone and read aloud their one minute presentation. They were also invited to place the object and photo they had brought from home somewhere in the room. Having done this they were to leave the room.

The tension and excitement in the young people, as they queued to enter the transmission room, was palpable. They clearly took the game extremely seriously – some of them so nervous to actually report feeling sick or giddy!

As each person read aloud their one minute presentations, some in English, most in Bulgarian, the festival participants in the street would stop their conversations and listen

to the tannoy announcements. Themes from the mundane to the profound were covered by the young people (from descriptions of family holidays and broken cars in communist Bulgaria to descriptions of the effects of unemployment in the years after 1989).

And after each one minute presentation each young person placed their photo and object in the transmission room. Over a period of a few hours the transmission room was converted into a living museum – consciously reflecting upon itself, relaying live, incomplete commentary, about itself as it came into existence. There was no curator, telling people where to put (or not put) objects...just a “joker” in the widest sense of the word explaining the rules of the game and inviting people to join in.

At the end of the afternoon the final “act” of making the living museum took place. Balls of coloured wool and blutac were placed on the floor in the transmission room. The young people were asked to re-enter the room, take a close look at all the objects and photos. They were not to touch or move anything as they were to consider the room as a museum – where objects had been placed in relation to one another and the room for a reason. They were asked to suspend their disbelief and to imagine that the room had been given “an overall design” by a curator – someone who had placed all these objects and photos in the given positions for a reason. Their job was to discover or imagine the reasons, to identify connections between objects and objects, objects and photos, photos and photos, and then “reveal these connections” by taking the wool and making a physical connection between two or more objects. The blutac was to be used, if necessary to connect the wool to the object.

The work began in haste. The participants automatically proceeded in a hushed, ceremonial way and within ten minutes the room had been transformed into a three dimensional web of wool, objects and photos. Participants, with great care and delicacy, maneuvered their bodies through the web in order to add additional lines or simply to retreat to the periphery of the room.

After ten minutes of work the space had been transformed once again; from a room with four objects at the beginning of the day to a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional instillation where competing narratives seemed to co-exist in an act of collective reflection.

For the last ten minutes of the day the young people were asked to talk about the connections they had made, unearthed, generated. The talk was in both Bulgarian and English but above all, the conversation was poetic. Young people spoke of the woolen link between a pre 1989 television set and the window. “Both were windows onto the world”, said one young person, “but you could only trust the one you saw with your own eyes”.

The Bulgarian Turks in the late 1980's

To complete this piece I wish to return to the Friday night talk and discussion which took place around an open fire and under the stars of North West Bulgaria. Young and mature alike were present.

And so the story goes. In 1989 Bulgarian communism faced its nemesis. Over a period of weeks what had seemed like a solid social structure began to disintegrate. From the young people reports of their talks with families to Gerald Creed's descriptions in his book "Domesticating Revolution – From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village" it seems clear that the transition over the last twenty years has met with deeply ambivalent responses from many sectors of Bulgarian society in the North West, especially from the old and those who have lost jobs or perceived security.

On the first night of the Goat Milk Festival another aspect to 1989 was discussed in open forum; the forced migration of Bulgarian Turks in 1989. Such are the importance of these events it is worth taking some time to discuss them in detail. It is also important to outline related events and policies in the 20th Century (albeit briefly) as by doing so we can define and respond to two important questions:

- How can we use the arts to talk about traumatic histories?
- What is the role and function of the subjective voice in history teaching and how do the arts reinforce the validity of this voice?

Artists Raycho Stanev and Adem Murat talked about their work on the expulsion of Bulgarian Turks from Bulgaria in the summer of 1989. Adem's own story as a Bulgarian Turk was particularly powerful as he talked of how families had been given only hours to pack and leave their country, how in previous years Bulgarian Turks had been forced to change their names, to "de-Muslimise" their identities in effect, in a horrific precursor of events which were to occur in neighboring ex Yugoslavia some years later.

In many respects this discussion (around an outdoor camp-fire) was evidence of the importance that Mariana Assenova and Diana Ivanova give to the festival being a means by which personal memory and the subjective voice can be heard, valued and celebrated. At the heart of this commitment to listening to the subjective voice is the concept of "witness" rooted within a psychoanalytic tradition yet finding ever greater resonance within humanities contexts .

Rather like the support being given to the young people in the “Mapping the North West” project, the two directors of this festival have clearly decided it necessary and valid to place emphasis on oral recounting of these historical events. But, by placing emphasis on the subjective voice at important stages in such a process can participants be helped to become more agile citizens, transformers of their realities?

The pressure Bulgarian authorities placed upon ethnic groups to either integrate or migrate is a theme still under explored in public forums - indeed this discussion was described by the organisers as virtually unique in Bulgarian public discourse to date. In this paper the importance of the subjective and personal voice both within the construction of historical narrative and the creation of artistic activity is not disputed. In particular the arts place significant emphasis on both the subjective voice and the importance of “bearing witness” from two different angles: art which bears witness as a social process, that exposes the reality of evil and suffering, and art as witness as a distinct function within a curative and dialogical function.

But I suggest that the importance of the subjective narrative as witness is only made even more useful when located within a wider socio-political context. If we came together in Bela Rechka to listen and reflect upon the importance of 1989 then in doing so we asserted the importance of listening and acknowledging. But by coming together we also provoked the need for further reflectivity and conscientisation. By first bearing witness and then by moving towards conscientisation we can help us transform our understanding of our world and transform the world itself.

The importance of Raycho and Adem’s talk needs to be placed within this context. Their accounts of the expulsion of the Turks in 1989 were those of witnesses. But these events were not simply events that took place in the tumultuous year of 1989. The expulsion of the Turks was linked to a wider and older political strategy. The following question was asked,

“was the expulsion of the Bulgarian Turks in 1989 an isolated incident? Had there been other examples of physical or cultural oppression of Turks on previous occasions? ”

There was no detailed reply to this question on the night of the forum. It was by now dark and people were needing to talk in smaller groups. It was the following day that I received a personal reply from two directions. Firstly Mariana Assenova told me that anti Turkish measures had been enacted on a number of occasions throughout the communist period. Secondly, by turning to R.J. Crampton’s book “A Concise History of Bulgaria” I learned that repeated waves of de-Muslimisation had occurred throughout the 20th Century.

In the 14th Century the two major powers in the Balkans were Serbia and the Ottoman Turks. In the 1360's the Ottoman's took Adrianople and then began to move up the Maritsa valley. In 1389 Serbia fell and soon after Bulgaria - although Vidin (where I had my first meeting with young people) resisted for three more years until 1396. Bulgaria as a state was not to exist for almost half a millennium.

Any country which perceives itself as having been occupied for 500 years is likely to construct much of its "post occupation identity" on a counter proposition. I have written elsewhere about how Spanish politicians from the 17th Century to present day have used the 700 year Arabic presence in the Iberian Peninsula to reinforce populist nationalist notions of identity. Crampton suggests that much the same happened in Bulgaria with the formation of the modern state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Only in post Communist times have Bulgarian school children been taught to refer to the "Ottoman presence" rather than to the "Ottoman Yolk" around their necks.

At the collapse of the Ottoman Empire about a third of the population of what was to become Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia were ethnic Turks, almost all of whom were Muslim. In the last years of the Turkish Ottoman Empire massacres and expulsion of ethnic minorities were regularly used as tools for nation building by many of the countries in the region. Ottoman atrocities in 1876 created amongst Christian Bulgarians an urge to take revenge – to some degree gratified during and immediately after the war of 1877-8. A number of Muslims fled and Muslim buildings and libraries destroyed. Sofia, which one Russian soldier described as "a forest of minarets", lost most of its mosques when thunderstorms masked the noise of the Russian military blowing them up.

In rural areas a number of Turkish villages were burned and there were many instances of ethnic Turks being driven from land which was coveted by local Bulgarians. After 1878 however Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia strictly abided to the treaty of Berlin's insistence to uphold freedom of worship for all faiths, the outlawing of discrimination on religious grounds and the protection of property rights for Muslims. But nothing could prevent Muslim emigration partially as a result of severe social and cultural pressure placed upon them during the following decades .

Vülko Chervenkov (Prime Minister 1950 to 1956) constructed not only a Stalinist approach to education, culture, economy, architecture and the military but also continued to practice purges within the communist party and towards various religions including roman Catholics. He also encouraged the emigration of Turks on a massive scale. He terrified the Turkish government in 1950 by announcing that 250,000 Turks would be

allowed to leave. By 1952, when the border was finally closed, 162,000 Turks were had left in this new round of emigration .

Crampton makes the point that during the 1960's standards of living rose sharply in Bulgaria. However as in other Balkan communist states,

Bulgaria was not devoid of a nationalist tinge. This was useful because as ideological commitment declined the party needed greater legitimacy at home, particularly after the post-1968 tightening of the reins. There were, it seems in the late 1960s, two easy roads to enhanced legitimacy: consumerism and a greater assertion of national identity....After the 1971 party programme had called for the creation of a unified socialist nation the assimilationist pressures on the Roma and other minorities increased. In the early 1970's Pomaks who had become Turkified were required to adopt Slav names, and those who did not were punished; in 1974 five hundred of the thirteen hundred inmates of the notorious Belene labour camp were Pomaks who had resisted pressure to change their names. The Turks were not yet put under pressure but increased emigration was encouraged. In 1968 an agreement was signed allowing for the reunification in Turkey of families separated by the exodus of the early 1950's. (page 198-9)

In the ten years during which this agreement remained in force a further 130,000 Turks left Bulgaria.

The decision to enforce the assimilation of the Turks was taken in the highest echelons of the party late in 1984. A year later Turks were told to choose from a list of Slav names. If they delayed or refused names were chosen for them. In many cases, Crampton recounts, Turkish Bulgarians resisted and troops with tanks were deployed in the largest Bulgarian operation undertaken by the Bulgarian army since the end of the Second World War. Turkish radio stations and newspapers were closed down and it was declared unlawful to speak Turkish in public.

The attack was not merely against the Turks. The taking of an Islamic name is an integral part of the maturation of a Muslim and the new prohibition on taking Islamic names was a continuation of a quiet assault begun some years previously on Islam itself. The washing of the dead had already been prohibited as a danger to public health; circumcision had been outlawed; and for years it had been all but impossible to make pilgrimages to Mecca or the other holy places, whilst inside Bulgaria itself many treasures of Islamic architecture had been destroyed. (p205)

Beating the populist drum in times of economic or political hardship or during periods of political drift seems to be the most likely explanation for such developments.

By 1989 the crisis at the heart of the Marxist world was apparent on every television screen across the globe. Prime Minister Zhivkov was facing unprecedented challenges. The Turkish minority linked up with the Bulgarian intelligentsia and a number of leading Turks began a hunger strike. The Turkish areas of the north east were in a state of revolt. Zhivkov went onto national television to announce that if the minority really preferred capitalist Turkey to Bulgarian socialism they were free to go. By August, when the Turkish border was closed, yet a further 344,000 ethnic Turks had left Bulgaria.

From the subjective to conscientisation. With a combination of the two we know about the pain and confusion, how personal, physical trauma creates disorientation and vulnerability. With contextualization we can see how the implementation of such policies could be almost predicted. Conscientisation helps us begin to resist these inhuman strategies – to become more agile citizens.

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The Book (4):

I am delighted to announce that the book *1989 – Mapping the Northwest of Bulgaria - Applied Theatre and the Teaching of Disputed Histories* is now available.

ISBN 978-954-698-011-3

Edited: Chris Baldwin and Mariana Assenova

Pub: October 2010

This book offers a detailed analysis of a yearlong applied theatre project which took place in Bulgaria during 2009. Descriptions of rehearsals, workshops, artistic and educational outcomes are included as well as chapters on the teaching of history, the paradoxes of memory, the ambivalent transition from Communism to a free market democracy. The book is punctuated throughout by reflections by young people.

Throughout this book we have been obsessed with communicating two central ideas. The way we teach history is of utmost importance not just to teachers of history but to all of us. History is about our understanding of ourselves, where we come from, what has influenced our journeys as individuals, communities, ethnic groups, nations and Europeans. But too often young people leave school believing that history is simply to do with memorizing dates or imbibing semi folk tales about the origins of our nations.

The book also aims to show how the applied arts (and in particular theatre and drama) can be a means to explore history, story, and experience from both subjective and objective standpoints - both vital components within the construction of historical narrative. The arts place significant emphasis on the subjective and poetic, metaphoric voice as well as the importance of “bearing witness” from different angles: art which bears witness as a social process, that exposes the reality of suffering, and art as witness with a curative and reflective process.

The subjective narrative as witness is only made more important when located within a wider socio-political context. If we came together in 2009 to listen and reflect upon the

importance of 1989 then in doing so we asserted the importance of listening and acknowledging. This book attempts to describe how the arts were used to generate research, reflections, the ability to value the subjective and the objective. It goes out of its way to describe the value of artistic activity which searches out the metaphors and similes that can help us (adults and young people alike) transcend the apparent meaningless of objective detail.

In all the Bulgarian towns which participated in the project there was an absence of public monuments or other forms of “official recordings” (plaques etc) relating to the changes in 1989. Much physical evidence of the fifty years of communism still exists, even after twenty years after its collapse – the buildings and squares, the tannoy systems and much, much more. Yet while much has changed the infrastructure of the towns have, in many respects, simply deteriorated. But still, little seems to mark “the change” itself.

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