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**Special Affect: Special Effects, Sensation, and Pop in Post-Socialist
Bulgaria**

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**Special Affect: Special Effects, Sensation, and Pop in Post-Socialist
Bulgaria**

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Special Affect: Special Effects, Sensation, and Pop in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

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This dissertation is a study of a virtual Bulgaria, a Bulgaria built of ephemeral media images, desires, and structures of feeling. This virtual Bulgaria interacts with the Bulgaria of everyday existence, of everyday struggles and joys in complex ways. Employing the tradition of ethnographic research, I have approached the material of Bulgarian Popular media, its Pop music videos, talk shows, and reality television, as lived spaces, places where personal desires and emotions meet up with larger cultural affects and aspirations.

In particular, I am interested in how Bulgarians are choosing to make not only sense, but also sensation out of the dissonances and resonances of their everyday lives via the virtual images of popular media. The vibrant Pop culture of music videos and commercials are certainly more than simple mimicry of Western media. As Bulgaria struggles with its Post-Socialist realities and its hopes for inclusion in the European Union, its producers and audiences approach the fantastic spaces of Bulgarian Popular media as the literal terrain of Post-Socialist reconstruction.

In approaching this terrain of media, I employ a non-meaning based model of culture, one where affects, sensations, and feelings are treated as the very material of culture. Theoretically speaking, I look to bridge the reception theories of Media Studies and current ideas of affect and virtual publics in Cultural Studies literature. Through stories of shooting music videos, beer commercials in the resort corridor of the Black Sea, and a reality dating show amidst the urban decay of Sofia, Bulgaria, I have sought to show how producers work to create an affective terrain of hope and success. Similarly, I focus on the local use of digital compositing, 3d modeling, and other specials effects as techniques for generating a new Bulgarian public. These technological aesthetics are used to generate a feeling of global connectedness and virtual potential. Ultimately this peculiar topography of Post-Socialist culture, with its interplay of virtual spaces, images, and feelings, is a unique opportunity to better understand the potential of television and other such mass media to create new virtual publics.

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Introduction: Depth of Field

Since the dissolution of the Soviet influence in the early nineteen nineties, much debate has been expended both internally and internationally as to the future of the Balkans. The Post-Socialist agendas of Neo-nationalists, Socialists, and Royalists have all played a part in defining the local political atmosphere. Amidst these local debates, the prospect of inclusion in the European Union has become a defining goal. Excluding Greece, Bulgaria, together with Romania are the first Balkan countries poised to enter the European Union on January 1, 2007. The recent international attention hoisted on Bulgaria as a result of this integration is in contrast to the peripheral position it occupied during the Balkan wars of the nineteen nineties and its earlier absence from Western media due to its tight alliance with the Soviet Union. While over shadowed by these conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria struggled with its own difficult transition to a market economy, suffering along the way hyper inflation, illicit privatization deals, and massive emigration of its professionals and students. This same period also saw the development of private media conglomerates which expanded the media of Bulgaria beyond its prior State run industries. The success of cable television, radio, and locally produced recording artists has greater significance than as merely an economic indicator of the growth of local business. The new terrain of privately produced media is the very site in which Bulgarians' aspirations and desires are articulated.

Amidst the burgeoning development of online communities, commercial radio, and other such media, television remains a predominant mass media in Bulgaria. The National Statistics Institute in Bulgaria (NSI) reports that “nearly one-half of all

households in the country have cable television, or approximately three million people (delivered by over 800 service providers); the ownership of a TV set is about 93 percent” (Boychev 2004). These statistics point to the central role television production plays in expressing and giving shape to the public image of Bulgaria. In approaching Bulgarian television it is tempting to witness the familiar and strange as part of the same story of development towards “Western standards” of mass media production. The images and content of Bulgarian television, however strange or familiar to outside audiences, circulate in Bulgaria in their own unique ways. Tracing something of the affective character of this circuit of viewership and production is the basis of the research that follows.

At this moment in Bulgaria television, different influences and traditions are combining with new technological possibilities to create a unique media terrain. This mixture of traditions and trends is the subject of much internal debate. Writing in one of Bulgaria’s many lifestyle magazines, Todor Peev notes the convergence of two traditions and trends in one evening of programming; “recently, the battle for the highest viewership rating brought together two of our national television stations, who offered in the same night two very popular forms of entertainment for us- the second season of Big Brother against the Plovdiv Concert of the summer Popfolk “Planeta Prima” (Peev 58, 2005). One is a “live soap opera with kitsch folkloric décor,” the other a “grandiose, by Bulgarian standards, concert in the Plovdiv stadium “Botev” with the lighting effects, ballet dancers, and fireworks” (58, 2005). On the surface these two programs would seem to represent very different traditions and directions in Bulgarian television. The reality show seems to point to the trend of importing foreign programming and the concert suggests a continuation of the local tradition of televised musical stage shows. But these two styles of entertainment, one a staged spectacle with roots in Socialist-era

state parades and festivals and the other an imported voyeuristic reality program have more in common than not. They both offer abstract spaces designed specifically for the purpose of being televised. They both invite viewers into virtual spaces, spaces that exist only to be broadcast and consumed. Together with viewers they form the new public of Bulgaria. Rather than escapist, these virtual spaces are all the more real for their fantastic qualities.

From here on in, I will approach these images and industries of popular media not as escapist but rather as sites for the complex interplay of local realities, global aspirations, and public feelings. As the Italian theorist Mario Perniola notes, many “take for granted that virtual realities are not true realities but at best systems of representations of reality that aspire to take its place. This ambition is seen by the apologists as a type of liberation from the anguish and narrowness of reality, and by the critics as a type of guilty escape from it” (Perniola 2005, 67). But if we accept that virtual realities are not mere *systems of representations*, but rather alternate realities as real and possessed of as much complexity as any other; then we can begin to understand how such virtual spaces such as those of television operate as an extension rather than a pastiche of everyday life. Technological means of production in this context are more than mere means of communication, e.g. conduits for meaning. The very technologies themselves have an inseparable affect on audiences. The use of technology, editing techniques, and special effects demand their own attention in these media images. The new programs of Bulgarian television, even though drawing from a variety of aesthetic and cultural traditions, share in a similar reliance on technological means of abstraction, emphasis, and exclamation in creating an affective circuit with their audiences.

And as I noted from the beginning, these images of popular television and music videos are built up against a recent history of political disintegration and current E.U.

aspirations. The virtual character of this imagery is an answer to these concerns. It addresses the time of the future, of that which can be. Still these media images are not a plan, like an architectural scale model that is meant to lead to a larger more real version. No these models and images of a virtual future are successful because they stay removed from the everyday. They remain virtual. The recent success and mainstreaming of the music known locally as Pop Folk is an example of this fixation on the virtual. In spite of its use of Turkish motifs and musical styling it is not the story of growing ethnic sensitivity in Bulgaria; rather it is one of many examples of Bulgarians' fixation on quality and the virtual potential of the pop music video genre. The attention I hoist on this popular genre and other pop imagery in Bulgaria in this dissertation is my own form of mirroring the attention that Bulgarian audiences give to it. The absent peoples, bodies, and traditions, of course, remain even in their absence. These absences are a further reminder of the virtual character of popular media in Bulgaria.

This dissertation is thus a study of a particular moment in contemporary Bulgaria, a moment in which desires for progress and success are manifest in the cultural expressions of television production. Through ethnographic study of specific sites of media production, including music video shoots, commercial, and serial programming, I have sought to locate these desires in the instance of their production. The choice to focus on these sites of production is a strategic move to counter a tradition of viewing such productions as super-structural results of deeper socio-economic factors. In such a rush to interpretation, one can necessarily skip over the back story behind the production of an image. In this back story images reveal themselves to be not only heavy with meaning, but also invested with energies and an excess of potential affects. What follows then is not so much a history of Bulgarian television, its development from State to private production, as it is the story of how such production creates a virtual world in

which possibilities resonant with, bounce off of and bring news of the both the future and the past. So let us begin with one such instance of production and let it carry us into the concerns and possibilities of contemporary Bulgaria.

The police were parked just past the storks on the outskirts of the city, making sure Sofia didn't go anywhere without taking them along for the ride. Birch trees with white trunks blurred past, a scar of black slashes; our high speed travel slowed only by the occasional Lada or Tribant loaded with the spoils of an afternoon in the fields. In the air conditioned security of a Mercedes, these remnants of collective farming and the pot holes of an aging infrastructure pass relatively unnoticed, Bulgaria's history as an agricultural nation, a bread basket to its Communist brothers, a stalwart supporter of big brother Russia but a blur. And continuing along a jumbled timeline, the scenery slips past, the cobble stones of downtown turning into the fields of block apartments and the occasional big box store dotting the road out of town, their walls facing inwards, an architecture of commercialism and exclusivity. Surely, Bulgaria wasn't meant to be run through this quickly.

But such is the pace of commercial production in Bulgaria. Producers are in a hurry to produce a new Bulgaria, one ripe with the spoils of late capitalism and the bounty of possibility. And me, I am busy trying to keep up with this business of commercial production, with its everyday successes and failures. In looking to find a place behind-the-scenes, I am looking not so much for the key to understanding contemporary Bulgarian media as a greater appreciation of its aspirations and potentials. And sure enough, everyone I meet asks me, "sus kakvo se zaminavesh?"(what do you do?). I don't have a short answer, but I've started making them up just to make it easier. I

lie that I'm studying this or that fact; "I'm studying the history of Pravets"¹. If I explain too much of my academic interests, that I'm an anthropologist interested in Bulgarian culture, someone inevitably offers to drive me out of town into the mountains where the real culture is to be found. But I am interested in Sofia, in how she moves and how she has grown. And I am interested in how this built environment has undergone a virtual renovation, how the sets of television talk shows and music videos attach to the material world of Bulgaria. But this is too difficult a story to tell, or perhaps it is just too early to tell this story of Post-Socialist reconstruction. The other stories of the Soviet collapse and the inter-ethnic fighting in the neighboring Balkans are still too fresh. So I busy myself with the business of commercial production in Bulgaria, with its mundane and spectacular moments hoping in them to find a new Bulgarian public.

And back to the car, to one of these moments; we find ourselves heading out to the coast to find the perfect patch of Bulgaria to film a commercial for one of its major beer manufacturers. While the director assured me that the shoot could have taken place at any one of a number of similar spots just outside the capital, the representatives of the beer company insisted that the shoot take place at a national park clear across the country on the Black Sea coast. Refueling with a cup of espresso, we stopped at one of the many new gas stations that now dot the Bulgarian roadways. The many Shell and Russian LUKOIL gas stations that have sprung up across the country sit like beacons of commercialism along roads in the countryside otherwise comprised of small villages. They are designed with cafes that allow and encourage one to linger in their fluorescence. And as we waited for our plastic cups to re-congeal from the heat of our freshly pressed coffee, we discussed whether this was a nostalgic desire to pay homage to one of

¹ Pravets is the first and only Bulgarian computer. The former communist leader Todor Zhivkov located the factory for these computers in his small home town. The first Pravets was reverse engineered from IBM computers.

Bulgaria's unique natural environments, one used to film westerns in the communist era, or simply an excuse to secure an early season trip to the coast. We couldn't settle on a motivation, nor did it seem to matter. Whatever the motivation, the job was clear, to shoot the script. In this case to produce a perfect moment, an ideal moment of consumption, the first sip of beer on a hot day. A dog and female model were thrown into the treatment for good effect, each with accompanied and carefully groomed by their respective handlers. The slogan for the beer company, "What a person needs" (*Kakvo my triyabva na chovek*) seemed to write its own treatment. What more does a person need than a beer, dog, and a little piece of Eden?

Apparently, one also needs commercials, commercials that provide a space for this consumption. Nature, here, appears as a place to be enjoyed, a middle of nowhere that grounds everything around it. Carving out this idyllic space requires throwing other realities out of focus. Just like countryside blurred out of focus from a passing car, so too does the production of certain image economies require blindness to other possibilities. What then remains in focus? It would appear that Bulgarians are focused on new concerns, concerns for economic stability and participation in a global economy. In fact, from a distance, these concerns look much like the old concerns only now the European Union has replaced the Comintern as the foreign body that must be seduced with economic incentives and displays of state bureaucracy. The success of Bulgaria as a nation in relation to distant global politics is still determined by its ability to perform its modernity, its "Europeanness," and civility. Such performance takes shape in the images and narratives of the local media, forming collectively a kind of Pop folklore, full of its own galaxy of stars. At times intensely in focus and at other times diffused, this Pop culture is not just the symbolic capital of a people; it is indeed the very terrain of Post-Socialist life.

Remaining at this level of generalization things soon unravel or tie up too neatly into all encompassing theories of national cultures, global and political pragmatics. If we get back on track and follow the course of our production, we can see a culture built of local contingencies, private desires, and histories. Unlike life, on a film shoot you get more than one chance to get it right. The mantra of the film director is “O.k. yeah that was perfect, let’s do it again.” (*Dobre, Super tova beshe perfectno, neka da poftorim*). In addition to producing a collective sigh of resignation from the rest of the cast and crew, weary of the daily repetitions; such direction shows that there are multiple ways to get things right. The tilt of the actress’ head, the shadow cast on the floor, and the pace of the camera’s movement are all choices made against nearly infinite possibilities. As such, film production is a unique intensification of culture, it represents a condensing of ideals, forms, finances, and desires into a singular moment. This condensation of culture has traditionally been approached through symbolic analysis, the image understood as a complexity that needs to be decoded into significance. Approached from the side of its production, however, the film image becomes a set of practices heavy with insignificances and literal forces. In this context, theories of significance fall apart into all of the contingencies and realities that make up its production. Light, motion, and form become important not just as constituent parts of the representative image, but as real forces, with real impacts. When we begin with the repetitions of a commercial shoot, start from the side of production, we start with the same blindness as the producers; the question not so much how to represent life as how to produce it.

So too this dissertation begins from the side of production. It asks, along with Bulgarian producers, what future to imagine. The ample bodies of Bulgarian Pop stars and the dazzling spaces of special effects that surround them are a resounding answer to these questions of the future. In this dissertation, I will look closely at how these

intensifications of Bulgarian culture are produced, and in turn look to better understand how these intensifications form an affective circuit with audiences to produce something like a collective or public. The virtual character of this public is not to be mistaken with the common association of virtual as synonymous with the digital. The virtual, here, is more a temporal consideration, the prospect of the future that resides in every moment. Digital production techniques, shooting styles, and special effects provide ways for emphasizing this virtual potential. Thus I have chosen to pursue the Bulgarian public via a study of the techniques and aesthetics it uses to regenerate itself.

In my pursuit of Bulgarian Pop culture, a special affect pops up as the best way to describe these oscillating everyday attractions and distractions, the pun an unfortunate necessity. People feel the impact of things that aren't there, just as much as the things that are. New technologies of vision, allow us to see what *isn't* there. The virtual/real dichotomy is importantly not the traditional divide between fantasy and reality, between the real and the fake. It is more of a temporal divide than an ontological one. The virtual here is a whole realm of potential futures, of outcomes and realities that impact the present tense even if they are never materialized. Cultural theory must learn to work in these futures, examining the gap between logistical realities and virtual potentials. As Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding write in the introduction to their recent collection, *Histories of the Future*, "The future is a placeholder, a placebo, a no-place, but it is also a commonplace that we need to investigate in all its cultural and historical density" (Rosenberg and Harding 2005 9). In this work, I am as concerned with what Bulgaria might be as I am with what it has been.

An in the past, Bulgaria has been built on a whole variety of pasts and futures, two things that are never really visible but always, already there. Bulgaria, as well as its roommates in the Balkans, has often been resigned to a history, to a phantom and real

past of ethnic conflict and strife. This mountainous region has become so synonymous with conflict and division that a verb has even been coined from it, “to balkanize,” meaning to literally break apart. Such a fixation on the past and assumption of naturalized violence has more to do with the biases of external observers than with any particular fixations in the Balkans (Todorova, 2000). For all the external negative images of Balkan primitivism, there is also a history of futurism that permeates and informs the present in the Balkans. This is a present of aspiration and leanings, becomings and forgettings. The texture of this future has certainly changed in Bulgaria, shifting from the clean lines of Socialist Realism to the gaudy images of early capitalism; still the force, potential, and weight of the future remains. Here we are not just talking about the possible, possible futures and outcomes of reform; but also the impossible. The future is virtual. It does not need to be actualized to be real much like a dream does not need to come true to exist. So what do these Balkan futures look like now? How are they imagined and imaged?

From afar the future looks built of basic things like public, economic, and cultural policy, but from up close where little details take on extreme importance, the insignificant, material character of life creeps back into the field of view. These details, these minutiae of the everyday, once blurred out of focus, now fill the frame, blocking out all that once seemed important. These minutiae comprise the futurism implicit in the Bulgarian’s commercial culture. This is a marked shift from the futurism of Socialist Realism. As the Russian New Media theorist Lev Manovich points out, “Socialist Realism wanted to show the future in the present by projecting the perfect world of future Socialist society onto a visual reality familiar to the viewer” (Manovich 2003, 203). Western science fiction, on the other hand, is freed from this projection back onto everyday reality. In fact, it succeeds because of the gap between the everyday and the fantastic. Bulgaria’s Post-Socialist imagery is similarly unmoored from a “visual reality

familiar to the viewer”. Its Pop imagery creates a kind of science fiction of success and luxury, of nature and hypermodernity. What this new futurism does share with Socialist Realism is the invisibility of decay within both aesthetics. There is no place for aging and failure. The everyday is cleaned of its dirt. This results in a timeline constructed of only two times, one being an ancient past and the other the soon-to-be realized future.

If the current commercialism has broken with the contextual futurism of Socialist Realism, and if it is not remapped onto the everyday, where is it located? Bulgaria as a natural entity, as a mythic national terrain is one place that Bulgarian commercialism repeated finds itself. In fact, Bulgaria’s agricultural bounty and natural beauty have always been a part of its cultural mythology and national character. This nature was put to work under Socialism. The collective agricultural field provided both work and escape for the Socialist worker. And the aesthetic of Socialist Realism was not all work. It was always also paired with leisure. Films, literature, and the like promoted the rewards of efficient labor, happy fruit picking brigades of students enjoying work as leisure (Holloway 1986). Vacations, dachas, and leisure culture played an equally important part in the aesthetic of Socialist Realism (Lofgren 2003). Bulgaria was and is well positioned for the aesthetic of leisure, located as it is next to the Black Sea, it served as a warm resort for its northern Socialist brothers. And today, the promise of Black Sea tourism is still a lynch pin in the government’s economic hopes and policies. The image of leisure and naturalized beauty continues to play an important in the imagery of Post-Socialism.

Prior work in Post-Socialist contexts has shown the transition from Socialist state to free market economy to involve a unique blend of aesthetics and interests, a combination that has little to do with the terminology of “collapse” so common to descriptions of the “fall” of Communism. The verbiage is better switched to one of negotiation, a transition that takes place on the level of lived experience and not the scale

of total collapse. William Creed's ethnography of the ambivalent transition in rural Bulgaria, along with Bruce Grant's ethnography of a similar such transition amongst the Nivkhi of Sakhalin Island at the extreme other geographic pole of Socialist influence, reveal Post-Socialist citizens to be "exhausted by the macronarratives of the state"(Creed 1998, 4). Such exhaustion with political discourse has characterized Bulgarians' ambivalent transition to democracy and privatization. As the second country in the world to fully collectivize its agriculture, the reluctance of Bulgarians to accept the transition to privatized farming is understandable. The slow political shifts of the early nineteen nineties thus must be understood as driven by a different engine than simple economic pragmatics (1998, 65). It is here that the shifts in the popular imagery of television, print media, and radio programming stand as a significant component in shepardding the political transitions in Bulgaria. Transformations to the image of work so carefully cultivated under Socialism, and the paired images of leisure and natural bounty have played an important part in this political transition. The local Pop music and visual culture employ similar aesthetics to the earlier Socialist motifs but have a different character as they are now freed from the logics of State Socialism.

Make no mistake; work has not somehow disappeared from Bulgaria. It is more so that the work of work, the labor it performed as part of a Socialist image economy has changed. Socialist Realism's brand of idealism was intimately tied to the very site of work, the work place. The factory was the place where the ideal met with the everyday existence of the Socialist worker. As Lisa Rofel points out in her ethnography of Chinese factory life, *Other Modernities*, "the most important product to come off the shop floor was supposed to be political consciousness"(Rofel 1992, 261). In an extension of Marx's anticipations, the shop floor was both the stage of Communist enlightenment and the home of the enlightened worker. Now, in the Post-Socialist imagery of Bulgaria, the

workplace and the factory have disappeared from Pop imagery. It has been replaced by sites of leisure and most significantly a kind of utopic nowhere space. These nowhere spaces are virtual stages, places freed from the strictures of tradition and the everyday. Indeed they are a kind of science fiction, a future that doesn't exist outside of the screen; a fantastical space carved out with light, special effects, and elaborate sets.

The abstract space of nature in this new cosmology of Post-Socialist imagery is not nostalgic, or at least not traditional. This is nature stripped clean of history, in this case, its history of agricultural collectivization and labor. This nature as a pure space runs counter to traditional nationalist aesthetics. As Hamid Naficy has shown in his study of Iranian exile television in L.A. the nostalgic character of the national imagery is often used to evoke a mythic return to the homeland. He notes, "the lost or absent homeland is recovered through over-investment in the signs that stand for it (such as the flag and its colours, the map of the country, dead and tortured bodies and national monuments)" (Naficy 1993). The stress in this community of viewers and Naficy's interpretation of it is on memory, on remembering an absent homeland and community. Symbolism is here a vehicle for this nostalgia. On the contrary, the stress in contemporary Bulgarian iconography is on forgetting, forgetting a recent past of political transition and history of collective labor. The natural environment of Bulgaria provides a clean slate for re-imagining the future and past of the nation. The past that does surface is free of strife and particularity. In this way, nostalgia becomes futurism. It begins from a zero point of possibility and builds from there. The active forgetting of Bulgarians is part of an effort to imagine a new future. And as Augé reminds us; "Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener's work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon,

transform, flower." (Augé 2004, 27). The trimming eliminations of Bulgarian memory are just as significant as that which is ultimately cultivated.

By now I hope that it is apparent that I am not interested in addressing the individual; instead I am aiming for the voids of the public, the negative spaces where bodies meet up and become bodies with organs. Ultimately, my desire is to literalize or at least materialize the public, taking up its visual composition as the site of competing interests and desires in Bulgaria. This involves taking stabs at the public, its elusive body not readily willing to be pinned down. If I cannot get it pinned down, at least I can poke it and witness in its escape something of its character. The particular mixture of attentions, attractions, and distractions that makes up the Bulgarian public is our elusive subject.

What then is the best way to describe such oscillating everyday attractions and distractions? I have chosen to focus on my own attractions and distractions, knowing that this is where I am most likely to meet up with my peers in Bulgaria. It is not a confession to say that I have been attracted to the glitz and glamour of Bulgarian Pop, to the shiny new spaces of the latest cafes and clubs. They are designed to draw the moth to their flame. I am not alone in this attraction; it is this attraction to and distraction of Pop culture that I share with my Bulgarian peers. Of course, this is not to say that our desires and responses are the same. I do not presume to speak for anyone else in this work. My stories of attraction and distraction, of desire and confusion are at best a personal expression, an expression that resonates with the burgeoning desires and distractions that make up contemporary Bulgarian culture.

Even as I emphasize the peculiarity of my distractions, I am still very much interested in a collective, a Bulgaria as nation, culture, and people. Everywhere I've turned in my studies of Bulgaria, I have been confronted with this phantom nationality, a history and future that haunt the lives of citizens that have lived through radical political

transitions and economic difficulties. My methodological decisions, however, have been to pursue these things where they lie and not from an abstracted position of reflection. As others have noted before me, it is not easy, “to write ethnography on such varied spheres of life, yet without relying on connective principles that are based in a logic of spatial contiguity or are purported to reflect a hermetic cultural structure” (Klima 2000, 8). What is to be gained by such avoidance, however, is ethnography that functions as a “method of analysis” rather than as “an object of analysis” (2000, 17). The goal here is not to extract cultural forms, whether from television shows or inconsequential daily routines. My aim is rather to try and keep up with such material, to trace how it interacts with individuals, how structures are formed out of ephemeral desires and temporary distractions. The difficulty is not in trying to abstract the significance of a particular cultural form, to divine its importance, in so far as it is difficult to find a way to express the peculiarities of a particular form, its intricacies and inadequacies.

Sometimes I have found no other technique than simple mimicry to be fitting to this task of articulation. As they say, copying is the sincerest form of flattery. Should not a cultural theory, an ethnography, that looks the most like its subject be considered a success? As Michael Taussig reminds us, "The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power." (Taussig 1998). I hope to draw on something of the power of Bulgarian Pop culture. Of course, mimicking a culture's, a people's attractions also means sharing in their ignorance. It means learning how to forget about histories and theories that one no longer wants or can bear to remember. To a large degree, I feel more free to mirror these ignorances with the knowledge that other literature is specifically addressed to the minority populations and politics regularly overlooked in Bulgarian mass media. The historical work of Maria

Todorova, Mary Neuberger, and others does an invaluable job of extending the picture of life in the Balkans. But here, I pursue not a confrontation with Bulgaria's minority politics, but rather look for ways to better understand the spaces of its mass Pop culture.

To write this virtual Bulgaria requires a kind of writing that speaks all along the way of its wants, a distracted writing that skips from this to that as we are prone to do. Today attentions shift from channel to channel, screen to living room, computer to video game with a ceaseless fluidity. So how can you evoke these shifting attentions? The antecedents for this effort lie in the experimental work of Meghan Morris, Margaret Morse, Michael Taussig, and Kathleen Stewart. Their writing at times not only reflects on the skittish state of our attentions in relation to everyday life in our hectic times, it also attempts to embody something of the character of this distraction. Whether in Taussig reflecting on the repetition of daily life, while picking up his children at school, or Stewart writing on the peculiar negotiations of traffic, these writers find in the shift in everyday attentions a route into larger considerations of our status as individuals in a distracting world. Throughout this work I attempt to invoke this character of distraction, jumping from ethnographic instances to media references with freedom.

Throughout, I also use American television and its visual aesthetic as a foil to the Bulgarian media industry that is the primary subject of this study. The American industry, given its global dissemination and quality of production, is an immediate reference for the local productions at hand. For many audiences outside of the United States, the jump between channels, languages, and cultures is but a click away. Thus to a large degree local Bulgarian media is addressed to American and other foreign media. This relationship is not one of simple mimesis, even if at first glance this is all that one can see from outside. Should we be surprised if the first things we notice are the things that we already know? The relationship between Bulgarian media and its foreign

equivalent is more one of coexistence. They occupy the same virtual public space in Bulgaria. The specter of American media doesn't so much haunt this dissertation or Bulgarian media as it runs alongside, both staying abreast of new technologies and styles.

In fact, these technologies and styles are the other character in this dissertation. All along the way I have tried to develop a kind of technological literalism, tried to materialize the spaces of the virtual. In the end I hope to discover how the abstract spaces of digital effects in Bulgaria, even as their means of production are the same, produce a different public. The open character of the virtual will remain a significant character throughout.

This research is driven by the belief that studying how Bulgarians use virtual images to make real changes is also a way to understand how the burgeoning virtual spaces of the internet and cable broadcasting impact other parts of the world. Indeed the focus on the very process of media production is a decided step away from political and development discourses that begin from the perspective of global paradigms and then apply them to local contexts. The intensely local character of Bulgarian television, its game shows and music videos, is relevant to these larger discussions regarding globalization and modernity, in so far as it shows a specific case of life interacting with its virtual counterpart in the media. In a moment when American television audiences are fixated on the transformative power of home improvement shows and extreme makeovers, it is all the more enlightening to see how another nation images itself.

All this talk of futurism and modernity soon begins to give way under foot, leaving us without anything on which to stand. So let us move quickly into the examples of Bulgarian Pop, into the sites where these abstract spaces converge with Post-Socialist everyday life. In chapter one, "Virtual Publics," I explore the convergence of affect and technology within a variety of theoretical traditions. Borrowing from both a Spinozian

tradition of affect and recent trends in Cinema and Cultural Studies, I seek to show how Bulgarian Pop shapes and manifests the Bulgarian public. I derive the idea of a virtual public from this literature as a means for expressing the intricate webs or relations that comprise contemporary publics. In chapter two, “Popfolk(lore),” I look more in depth at specific examples from the pantheon of Bulgarian Pop Stars. Specifically, I retell the development of a genre of Bulgarian Pop known as Pop Folk. These stories of Pop Folk explore the ways in which Post-Socialist futurism interacts with folkloric traditions to create something new. Chapter three, “The Living Room,” uses my participation in a Bulgarian reality dating show to explore the transformation of private and public spaces in Bulgarian television. Game shows and earlier Socialist era programming are presented as a foil and antecedent to reality programming. In chapter four, “Vice City,” I use the design of video game space and its play as another example of the affective terrain of violence and decay that threaten the smooth spaces of Pop culture that are discussed throughout the dissertation. The consideration of game violence also is used as a way to explore the public face of violence in Bulgaria as it struggles with an international image of lawlessness. In the last chapter, “Impossible Reflections,” I look at specific techniques of digital video production and animation in an effort to better understand the nature and potential of the abstract spaces it is capable of generating. In particular, I explore the link between the space of production within digital space and relation to the disseminated products of this labor. Throughout all of these chapters, I am interested in how the image of work and leisure has changed in Bulgaria and also how the daily practices and logistics of labor have or have not changed. As hinted to earlier, the goal in the end is to evoke something of the character of Bulgarian Pop culture.

And if we return for a moment to our beginning, to our crew of filmmakers shooting the beer commercial somewhere on the shore of the Black Sea, we can see that

they have finished for the day. The principal actor buzzing from his repeated sips of beer, the entire crew a little sun drenched by the afternoon. Having packed up the lights and sound equipment, they are floating along a river making their way back upstream to their hotel and to their own beers. The director perched at the bow like a Columbus or Lewis or Clarke floating across America, fires off his camera phone into the woods, sending tiny pictures of wilderness back to someone in Sofia. Perhaps he is scouting for a new shoot and perhaps he is simply trying to capture in these fleeting blurry glances something of a passing nature.

Chapter 1: Virtual Publics

It is hard to talk when your every word is drowned out by the polyphonic experience of Dolby surround sound. Or looked at another way, you don't have to talk when you're drowning in sound. Either way, the experience exceeds the moment, filling it up so you don't have too. At least this is how I remember my first experience of a home theatre system, which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria. More precisely, it was in one of the castle-like villas that have slowly crept up the face of Mount Vitosha, the mountain that overshadows this Balkan capital. The homes in this wealthy suburb, "Boyana," are built big, big enough to hide their youth, to suggest that they were always there. But they are new, part of the new money that has streamed into Bulgaria. Seated in the cavernous resonating living room, I enjoyed the hospitality of my host; while his children streaked through the living room in a desperate attempt to escape the efforts of his wife to ready them for bed. All in all, it was a perfectly normal scene, one that could have played out at the end of any cul-de-sac in America. Even the choice of movie, the international blockbuster, "Saving Private Ryan," seemed fittingly unsurprising.

Having somehow managed to miss the theatrical release of "Saving Private Ryan" in the U.S., my first encounter with the film took place that evening in Sofia. In fact, I've never really finished watching the film as we were never able to make it off the beaches of Normandy. Out of respect for the radical cinematography of Spielberg and the Dolby digital surround sound of my host's newly installed home theatre system, we watched the first 15 minutes over and over again, in a loop, a loop that spun more and more away from 1945 and the terrific tragedy of D-day. The cacophonous pops and whizzing sound

effects of virtual gunfire, instead, formed an endless symphony, history spun into a kind of pure affect.

Pure or messy, affect quickly gets turned into something else, e.g. feelings, emotions, memories. We are meant to follow Tom Hanks through the special effects into a sentimental stroll through the memory lane of World War II tragedy, a consideration of more important things. No one is allowed to seriously linger in sensation, to do so is an indulgence, a brief respite before entering into the real or the social. Films and other such entertainment designed around special effects and the special affects they generate are considered mere distractions, diversions from reality. But that evening, and many since, I have found myself communing in the very affect of the special effects, finding in these effects not so much a diversion from reality as a particular amplification of it.

If this seems a surprising beginning to a story that purports to introduce Bulgarian media, I agree. I too was surprised by this fascination with special effects and special affects. At the beginning of my research into Bulgarian Popular culture I expected to find a fixation on its recent past of Socialism and an endless meta-discourse on the relationships between its various ethnic groups and political parties. Or at least, this is what much of the critical and popular literature on Bulgaria implied. In practice, however, Bulgaria's media space appears built of other things; it is built on abstract music video scenarios, virtual talk show sets, and newsroom graphics. So slick, so abstract are these images that they resist easy interpretation. Instead, they make an appeal to the senses, they beg to be experienced, not interpreted.

I want to be careful here, for I have learned it is best to ease one's way into the world of Bulgarian Pop and television. It is too well endowed with well endowed starlets, special effects, and confusing spectacles to be taken in all at once. From my own introduction, I have learned that it is perhaps best first enjoyed with the sound turned off,

so that only the images play across the screen. The bodies on screen are different than the corpses splayed across Spielberg's historical frames, but they are just as present, just as carefully draped for effect. And these bodies are even less burdened with the weight of narrative significance. At times they beg only to be seen, not to signify. Least this stress is mistaken as a claim to Pop's insignificance, let me say clearly from the beginning that Pop images can signify many things. They signify sexual desire, economic aspirations, and gender ideals, just to name a few. They also exceed such significance, creating not just an excess of meaning, but also an excess of presence, of affect.

What are we to make of this circuit? What are we to do with this affect? Is it enough just to call it out? To say, look, affect! Or perhaps we are meant just to feel it, to experience it. But this seems at best indulgent and at worst irrelevant. This is, of course, if we approach affect as a kind of sensory mediation, as a link between media and individuals. Affect then is but one of many possible interactions between individuals and media. Interpretation, reflection, and even ignorance all then appear as perhaps more significant alternatives. But what happens if we theorize affect not as a conceptual link between subject and object, but as a kind of space or terrain in which such interaction takes place? Affect then becomes not an exclusive category, but an inclusive one. It is a space that changes; a space that takes on different textures, different terrains and topologies; one which is ultimately inescapable. In this spatial metaphor, affect is given the substance that other approaches rob from it.

The questions here on out are not how to move from the subject, the private individual, to the public, but rather how to articulate the virtual/affective character of the public; to learn how others work in this terrain and to discover how might ethnography represent a similar such effort. So slowly, steadily, I hope to draw you into this world of

contemporary Bulgarian media, with a goal not so much to equip you with the ability to understand it as to participate in it, to share the weight of Bulgarians' desire and thereby to gain a greater appreciation for this particular circuit between sensation, affect, and Post-Socialism.

AFFECTS

And yes, I am worried about you, my reader, afraid that you might be turned off by this language of affect. Nonetheless, I hope that you'll trust me, or at least hear me out. I am not trying to ramrod things into a neat theory of affect. I am just trying to lay some ground work, some theories with which we can keep pace with this world of contemporary Bulgarian media. It can be overstated, in fact, it needs to be overstated.

My efforts to articulate affect resonate with a recent trend towards the consideration of the affective register in a variety of disciplines. This has as much to do with shifts in methodological and theoretical approaches as it does with transformations in the affective character of the public. In other words, I do not echo Ballard's infamous claim as to the "death of affect" (Ballard 1995). For Ballard it is as if our deposits of affect have been depleted and must be replenished with instances of shock. It is as if we were so dazzled by the confusion of different media and possibilities that the only possible option is to shut down our nervous systems. His novels read like anecdotes to this modern malaise, car crashes in *Crash* and theft and murder in *Cocaine Nights* the cure for suburban induced affectlessness. Nor do I agree with Fredric Jameson's similar such articulation of the Post-modern condition as constituent of a similar affectlessness (Jameson, 1984). I do not believe that our reserves of feeling have somehow become depleted by a world that is too demanding, by media that are too distracting.

While we have not all of a sudden become more emotional, the techniques and media at work on the affective register have, of course, grown and changed. Commercialism, politics, and entertainment make an appeal to the senses, an appeal that can take on a political, personal, and a variety of other registers. So in order to understand the public we must understand how it feels, itself and its own potential. Speaking specifically of the public's affective character, Lauren Berlant reminds us that the "shift from the notion of rational critical public to an affective public is both conceptual and historical, and does not deny the ongoing operation of cognition" (Berlant 2005, 47). In turn, consideration of the affective register involves all of the political and social spheres of public life. But what is the link between the public and affect?

The intellectual history of affect, including its wide range of Platonian, Darwinian, and Freudian approaches has been laid out elsewhere. Nigel Thrift, a geographer by training, perhaps benefited by this experience in mapping, lays out this history in order to better understand why there is a neglect "of the affective register of cities" in the literature on urban space (Thrift 2004, 57). This absence has to do with the tradition of viewing affect as a subjective terrain, one removed from or at least superficial to the real terrain of the urban environment. When affect is freed from its subjective ghettoization and linked up with the public, it is clear that it plays a vital role in the composition and character of cities. And so again, where do we find this affect that permeates our existence? Thrift leans towards "fugitive work in the social sciences and humanities which can read the little, the messy and the jerry-rigged as a part of politics and not just incidental to it" (Thrift 2004, 75). In other words, affect is in the minutiae and mundane character of daily existence. It is not a top down power or force removed from everyday life.

It is important to keep in mind that the affect we are pursuing here is not the same as its common usage as an emotion. Emotion is but one part, one manifestation of the affect in which I am interested. Theoretically, the affect I am interested in comes directly from Spinoza by way of Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, and more recently Massumi. In this line of theory, affect is synonymous with virtuality. The virtual character of life is its openness to the new, a thing defined as much by what it can be as by what it is. Deleuze describes this essential difference through Spinoza;

“The important thing is to understand life, each living individuality, not as a form, or a development of form, but as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. A composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence” (Deleuze 1988, 123).

The affective character of an event, image, or interaction then is an opening up rather than a narrowing definition. It is part of the peculiar timeline of the immediate, in which potential affects the now. It is a, “something more, a more to come, a life over spilling as it gathers itself up to move on.” (Massumi 2004). It is latent potential, always present and forever out of reach.

If we look for a figure of affect in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, we can find whole zoo-morphologies of becoming-animal, rhizomes, nomads, and schizophrenics. Running rampant and recklessly through their work, these figures are an attempt to avoid strict definition and instead evoke the virtual character of existence. This sense of leaning into the future is there in their frequent use of “becoming,” the gerund referring to an active existence. Specifically, Deleuze uses the figure of the tick as an example of defining “bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected... not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either” (Deleuze 124). The tick is capable of three things; it moves towards the light, it drops to the heat, and smells bodily odor. This works out to an effective technique for piggy backing, as parasites are

designed to do, on other bodies. And while we are not ticks, and only some of us are parasites, we can ask ourselves of what affects are we capable?

Certainly the work of Deleuze and Guattari is not the only possible response to Zeno's Paradox. The dilemma of how to articulate a dynamic body, without simultaneously fixing it to a static definition is equally present in the work of social theorists, system theorists, and economic theorists. The trick to this classic problem may just be to side step it entirely; to say that it is a false question to ask how Zeno's arrow moves from point A to B. Its virtual character means that it is never reducible to either A or B, never stuck hanging in the air.

Likewise it is a mistake to consider the virtual character of Zeno's arrow, or anything or anyone, for that matter, divorced from reality. The temporal character of the virtual, its becoming, becoming on target, is concurrent with a now, with a plane of immanence. This fuzzy ontological relationship between the now and a virtual realm of potential is very different than the distinct relationship implied in some juxtapositions of representation and the real. Likewise, the idea of the virtual is quite different than certain ideas of fantasy or imagination. In the later, the fictive world is radically dissected from reality. It occupies a fantasy world opposed to the real. This opposition still allows for an interaction between the two, but it is one of interpretation and not co-habitation. It would be a mistake to approach affect as a resignation to a subjective, perceptual realm. Affect, necessarily exceeds a Cartesian duality between mind and body and is perhaps better understood as a terrain, one that must be charted and mapped with new tools and instruments.

MULTIPLE PUBLICS

Here I want to try and link this body of theory on affect with theories of the public that have arisen in Cultural Studies literature. This theoretical juxtaposition is a necessary part in developing a further understanding of the affective character of the public. We can say that the public exists in the same virtual realm as affect. Affect is a kind of public, or by the same token, the public is a kind of affect. Both affect and the public are virtual, neither existing as a definitive body. And yet both have force and impacts on other bodies. This linkage between public and affect is not new, but it is one that is more often left implicit rather than made explicit. It also proceeds from a number of different directions. As seen above, the philosophic lineage of Bergson through Massumi, starts from the problematic position of the traditional subject and proceeds to explode such subjectivity into an affected, virtual body. In a tradition of social theory that one can artificially begin with Habermas and extend up to more recent cultural theorists such as Micheal Warner and Meghan Morris, the virtual is approached from the perspective of a generalized public. The public sphere of Habermas is a literal space that has a virtual character. For Habermas, the coffeehouse is not just a coffeehouse, but also a whole intricate web of possible relationships and experiences. Together they form something we might call a “public,” or in Habermas’ decidedly spatial language, a “public sphere” (Habermas 1991).

Of course, Habermas’ public sphere has been sharply criticized for its bourgeois exclusivity (Negt and Kluge 1993). The multiple and overlapping publics of Negt and Kluge are a positive development of Habermas’s theory. Nonetheless, Habermas’ stress on the literalness of the space of the public is important. Here the public is a real entity capable of real impacts. Looking back on the same time period as Habermas’ early public, the more recent work of Micheal Warner is concerned with the formation of the public in print. In 19th century popular literature, e.g. newspapers and magazines, Warner

discovers the birth of what he terms a “we” a public (Warner 2002). Warner points out that just as there is a figural “we” that arises in the formation of the modern public, there is a spatial home for this “we.” This is Habermas’ public sphere, the coffeeshop, or De Certeau’s and Benjamin’s street public. Of course these are all metaphoric, partial publics; spaces that stand in for a larger whole, a more abstract we. The darkened theater and its domestic counterpart the living room sofa are two other *we-spaces*. These spaces are all the more public for their blankness, their uniformity. This public simultaneously gives form to individual opinion and achieves another register of collective existence. As Warner suggests, “the appeal of mass subjectivity..., arises largely from the contradiction in the dialectic of embodiment and negativity in the public space” (2002, 241). In other words, a generative gap opens up between literal bodies and their public or virtual potential.

This virtual public grown out of Habermas’ public sphere and given shape in the literary voice of public media is similar to more recent efforts in the Italian Marxist tradition to theorize a “multitude” separate from the tyranny of the traditional mass subject. This tradition has found its way to United States academics most significantly in the popularization of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s coauthored “Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000). Interestingly, the more lasting concept to emerge from Empire is not the eponymous term “empire,” but rather the “multitude.” Hardt and Negri, in “Empire” and the follow-up “Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire” find this “multitude” on the rise as a result of international migration and shifts in the composition of labor. Much like Marx’s revolution of the proletariat, Hardt and Negri witness an alternative public grown out of the work conditions of the day. And much like the tendency to turn Marx into a prophet, it is all too easy to imagine a definitive correlation between work conditions and a new revolutionary public. In Paolo Virno’s response to

“Empire,” “Multitudes” he puts the stress on the unique character of the multitude as opposed to the labor conditions of Post-Fordism. As he puts it, the “Multitude signifies: plurality- literally:being-many- (and) thus consists of a network of individuals; the many are a singularity” (Virno 2003, 76). This composition of the one as many is an attempt to avoid the tyranny of the masses that has so defined the history of Socialist projects. Aware of the seemingly purely semantic character of this shift from mass public to multitude, Virno is careful to respond; “While one does not wish to sing out-of-tune melodies in the Post-modern style (‘multiplicity is good, unity is the disaster to beware of’), it is necessary, however, to recognize that the multitude does not clash with the One; rather, it redefines it.”(Virno 2003, 25). The one as many; this is the kind of complex singularity that one is addressing when trying to articulate and address a public.

The political import of this shift is significant, if not all together clear. Again in the Marxist tradition Negri, Hardt, and Virno are interested in changes in modes of production and work. The Post-Fordist, read Post Industrial, nature of much contemporary work begs the question if not class consciousness, what does such work produce? And by the same token, to ask what work looks like is also to ask what leisure looks like in this Post-Fordist moment. Shifts in work and leisure raise “the political question of *what we are capable of*” (Lotringer 7, 2004). In a sense, for this school of Italians the contemporary conditions of Post-Fordism are like Bataille’s inverse economy, wherein the central problem is not scarcity but excess (Bataille 1991). Culture, here, is a kind of sacrifice, acts done to expend the great excess of human energy. In our contemporary position leisure and labor are answers to the same question of how to expend human potential. More interesting than the potential revolutionary character of the multitude is its composition as simultaneously a multiplicity and a singularity. What then does such a peculiar entity look like? Would you know one if you saw one?

Or, taken in another direction, how might one maximize the virtual character of an image in order to produce or simply address such a public? From these questions it is a short jump to realize that aesthetics are not just a conduit for power, significance, and the like; rather they are the terrain on which the open character of the virtual is built, as Massumi is fond of saying, “they make not only sense, but also sensation” (Massumi, 2004). In gauging popular media, one must begin to ask not whether an image is simply effective, but rather how it comprises part of the public. This entails a consideration of the mode of address implicit in an image or media.

Much prior work in Cultural Studies has been concerned with a primarily textual archive. Michel Foucault and Michael Warner’s approach to the public is via textual archives, e.g. the public produced and addressed in the pages of popular literature as in the dawn of mass printing. And since this time a whole range of visual media have spread across our field of view, reminding us that the public is also addressed in a visual manner. The cinema, television, and internet technologies have all created new ways of inciting, inducing, and seducing us into a feeling of us-ness, a feeling of public togetherness. The point here is that these media are not so much sinister as they are seductive inviting us into spaces where we sometimes don’t know what to go by ourselves. They create a virtual realm where we are both addressed as members of a public and invited to participate. If the public is conceived as a space, a real but virtual space, affect too becomes a place, a place that must be approached, traversed, and that ultimately is never really escaped.

Critics such as Friedrich Kittler in his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* have started to attempt the same consideration of the public through a treatment of media as literal sites for the creation of a public (Kittler 1999). This materialist approach is also echoed in the work of Margaret Morse in "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the

Mall and Television" (Morse 1990). In both authors, distraction is its own binding web of attraction. Such disparate things as shopping malls, television shows, and interstate highways all function as technologies of vision. They work on "a very different apperceptive mode, the type of flitting and barely conscious crossroads of the city, the capitalist market, and modern technology" (Taussig, 148). It is a struggle to articulate the everydayness, the shifting attentions and distributed character of perception. They function not only via identification, but also by a mode of address, a shared invitation to touch, receive, and feel them. By treating and researching technologies as literal objects, in approaching them as sites for the public to coalesce around, one can find a way into the elusive public.

DISTRACTED VISIONS

"TV draws us into discourse, absorbs us into the network. It colonizes us obliquely, by distraction. It allures us, willy-nilly, into getting connected. We may say of television what Foucault says more generally about Postmodern power: it doesn't constrain us or repress us, so much as "it incites, it induces, it seduces" (Shaviro 1993, 6).

It is fitting that the return of sensation to the theory of culture and media took place with instances of shock. Extreme examples of sensory shock necessarily resist reduction to a theory of cultural significance. Weak kneed rollercoaster riders and the slack jawed response of early cinema goers to the fantastic imagery of the first motion pictures alike necessitate a theory that accounts for their visceral bodily affect. But such extreme examples of shock can also all too quickly turn into a kind of prostitution of affect, a flip the switch theory in which one is either turned on or off. The attraction to, need for, and theorizing of shock and affect in genres such as American horror film are a

positive example of bodily theorizing in Cinema Studies. It is also part of a continued marginalization of affect. Affect, feeling, and sensation, in this literature only arise in certain places, at certain moments, when the lights are turned low.

Many theorists in Cinema Studies and Media Studies have taken up the immediate visceral character of media reception. Susan Moore, Tom Gunning, Steven Shaviro, and Jalal Toufic have all used magical and fantastic imagery as a way to articulate their encounters with the cinematic image. They do this not to explain the duping of audiences but rather to point to the phantasmagoric power of the cinema. It is Gunning, whose research of early audience reactions to the cinema is to be credited with shifting the tradition of viewing audiences as naïve. Against convention, he has shown how the audiences that rushed out of the initial screening of the Lumiere Brothers' "Train Entering the Station," *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat* (1895) were not afraid of being run over in as much as they were shocked by the newness, the radical otherness of the cinematic image (Gunning 1997). The circuit of reception at this dawn of cinema was not yet firmly laid. Early audience did not understand how they were being addressed via this new medium. These early audience have an excuse in their innocence. Later day audiences and theorists do not have the same excuse to explain why some continue to be so shocked by the visceral qualities of cinema and other media.

Some Cultural theorists have pursued theories of embodiment at the expense of erecting sensate bodies as opposed to a norm of desensitized bodies, or at least expending all their words articulating this relationship. Susan Sontag's recovery of kitsch and spectacle via camp, in "Notes on Camp", is an early, positive turn towards an embodied theory of culture and it is also an example of the extreme marginalization of sensate bodies (Sontag 1969). Two extremes appear, one the affected hypersensitive body, often

depicted as effeminate, and the other a desensitized affectless body detached from the world around him or her. Neither is a pretty picture.

Rei Terada goes so far as to equate the traditional affectless rational subject with a mindless zombie. In her language, this literally senseless subject is equivalent to some sort of zombie-like unwavering desire and intention, devoid of complexity and emotion. As she puts it, “A real subject would be really frightening, if I thought I saw one coming, I too would run away.” (Terada 2001, 157). I understand Terada’s fright and wonder then what we must do to transform our subjects back to “normal”. It is not sufficient to merely rename the subject, adopting the latest names of an Academy eager for new names by pillaging the pages of a Haraway, Deleuze and Guattari, or Hardt and Negri. The very design and construction of one’s research model has to be informed by the dynamic connections generated by a living, breathing, desiring subject.

Technologies, such as television and cinema are sites where we become more than a shocked or disembodied subject. They are sites where we meet up in the virtual realms of the public. Special effects are particular amplifications of this technological relationship. Special effects have the potential to depict anything, any space, subject, or character. They also inherently adhere to and mimic the properties of the medium at hand. It is this property that is particularly interesting in this discussion of the virtual character of the public. They provide a way of highlighting the technical nature of technology. In the aesthetics of much of contemporary television production and music videos special effects are explicitly used to amplify and highlight the artificial character of the media. They offer a kind of commune in technology as technology. As we will see later, the sophistication of audiences with this logic is so great as to make it seemingly a non-issue, a mute point. What is to be gained in a consideration of special effects is a

great understand of how media function along an affective register in creating virtual publics.

CONJURING THE PUBLIC

Special effects are images and events meant to be read in terms of their very technicality. Much like magic, special effects are “efficacious not despite the trick but on account of its exposure” (Taussig 1998, 222). Contemporary digital technologies of appearance and disappearance mirror ancient magical rituals in their stress on the actual process of their creation. Bulgaria’s relatively young commercial media provides an interesting opportunity to see how special *effects* are employed to create special *affects*. In other words, to study how technologies are employed to create and nurture publics of affect or feeling. This name is intentionally drawn from Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling”. Unlike many uses of Williams, however, I am more concerned with getting the feeling part right before being concerned with the structures built on its back. For this reason, I have lingered in a discussion of affect, borrowing heavily from the Post-structuralist work of Massumi and Deleuze and film theorists such as Tsivian, Gunning, and Buck-Morss. My goal is not to operationalize affect by turning it into a concept to link together social, political, and emotional theories. My desire is rather to approach affect as a circuit between sensate bodies, between inanimate and animate forms, itself a beginning and an end. The example of special effects in Bulgarian Pop is not a site to apply these theories, in as much as it is an example of how images circulate in an economy of desire and perception.

As I have noted earlier, I hope not to become stuck in a divide between sense and meaning, adding unintentionally to a legacy of mind/body divisions. So I will try to trace feeling, not to its end, but along its path of personal and public trajectories, at times gaining mass and at other times losing it to personal perversions. Through such oscillation I hope to meet up with my peers in Bulgaria, to share in their desires and distractions, to get lost in the details of Pop culture and arise somewhere down the line with a perspective from which to take in the great diversity of feeling at play.

It already sounds too touchy feely. I can hear you, the reader, now asking for some bedrock ideas, some images, or some ethnographic spaces to stand on while I fill up the page with all this talk of feeling and affect. But I must warn you that the examples of Bulgarian Pop culture that I am going to supply are slippery. The shiny hard surfaces of Pop do not provide a very stable ground on which to stand. They are always changing, appearing and disappearing, turning from contemporary to dated, to kitsch with increasing rapidity. Nonetheless it is these images, these events that will provide the links, the narratives, and theories. Sometimes it fits together just right, telling an expected or unexpected story of young capitalism and desire and other times it breaks apart into insignificant details forcing us to wonder what to make of it all.

It should come as a surprise to be approaching Bulgaria through a story of special effects. Special effects are usually considered just an aside, an entertainment, a diversion. The state and its citizens, the traditional subjects of anthropological research, could care less about special effects, right? No. In fact, they work in the gap between the real and the virtual, exploiting peculiarities of perception and expectation to realize affective experiences. A state and its citizenry take advantage of this exploitation. They also work in this circuit between the real and the virtual, articulating the prospective character of culture. Through this study of Pop imagery one can begin to ask how public utopias have

turned into private desires, or whether such a popularly assumed shift from a Socialist to capitalist economy of desire is really at play in contemporary Bulgaria.

Special effects do not always telegraph their presence with fireworks and the like. Sometimes, they sneak into the picture, remaining in the shadows. These special effects are affective precisely because they go unnoticed. The disappearing act of magicians and the green screen vanishings of newscasters both succeed in so far as people do not see the special effect. Or rather they succeed because they successfully refer to a 3rd space, a neither here nor there. Where does the vanished body go? Where can a weatherman float over an animated map? In short, it is a virtual space.

In order to better understand these relationships between virtual space, special effects, and the special affect they generate, it is helpful to look at an early example of an optical special effect and the community of affect generated with its reception. This example is Popper's Ghost, an 18th century technique of using mirrors and light to superimpose a semi-transparent subject on a background. This early optical technique forced audiences to make sense of a virtual combination that they had never before experienced. It is interesting that audiences and practitioners of this technique alike chose to conceive of this layering of subject and space as a ghostly reincarnation. In this theorization the spatial integrity of the scene is not broken. The space doesn't change, nor does the subject. All that changes is time. The deceased, having crossed that infamous River of Styx, takes on a ghostly presence, simultaneously there and not there; the transparency of the ghostly image proof that it straddles two different times.

And nothing grows older faster than a special effect. Looking back on the jerry-rigged space ships of early Sci-Fi and the Claymation monsters it is nearly impossible to see them without noting their failures of representation. The not-quite-rightness of

images exceeds the representation they are meant to convey. Our laughter at this slippage of belief is the surest sign of their ineffectiveness.

Indeed much of special effects history is concerned with adding monsters, ghosts, and other such impossible subjects to space. The use of miniatures, Claymation, and animation in these cases all rely on the viewers belief in the integrity of space; the more mundane the space, the more traditional the camerawork, the more believable the impossible special effect. Technological developments have written the story of this relationship between subject and scene as increasingly more seamless. But like all histories it would be a mistake to assume a uni-linear or teleological evolution. Special effects address the public, inviting them into the trick. The history of special effects is also the history of technological fascination. The effects are always already an awareness of craft and technique, much like the grand gestures of the magician, the billowing capes and fog that more highlight than hide, the process of the special effect or magic. Here I am reminded of an instance of my own first encounter with a special effect from another era, namely the jittery hair of King Kong in the Merian Cooper's 1933 original. With each frame of the stop action animation, the hairs on Kong's body were displaced by the animators efforts to prepare Kong for his next move. Played back at the film speed of twenty four frames a second, the result is a coat moving of its own accord, as if blown by some otherwise unseen storm. And of course, one should not mention Kong without mentioning his embodiment of western ideas and ideals of primitive man (Rony 2001). So Kong is many things, one of which is the trace of the animator, the waning glimpse of the slight of hand trick.

So what then is the point of the seamlessly integrated special effect, the new digital techniques that effortlessly match the photographic content? If made too perfect, too real, too seamless, it might as well be real. Even though audiences are still quick to

pick out the real from the fake, if they fail in this game of spot the effect there is a whole new genre of behind-the-scenes reportage ready to reveal the tricks of the trade to them. In DVD extra features, entertainment news magazines, and the like, specific techniques employed are laboriously reviewed. Before a film is even viewed, its special effects are splayed on the table of public examination.

Another thread of special effects history proceeds from the opposite direction, e.g. changing the space and keeping the traditional subject intact. Space in this tradition has often been converted into the technological motifs of science fiction or the tropes of certain historic periods. In both of these traditions, special effects are subordinated to narrative progression.

What happens when the effect exceeds the narrative, when it stops showing something else and shows only itself? The development of the so-called “blockbuster” in the late eighties and nineties marks a resurgence of the special effect as star. Films such as Terminator 2 introduced audiences to digital special effects that took up at least as much screen time as their human colleagues. The mirrored morphing body of the enemy cyborg ran rampant throughout the script. And on screen, its shiny surface reflected back the technological fascination of audiences. The integrity of the spatial logic between subject and space is thrown out the window in this model. Without a classical renaissance perspective or subject/object relationship, the associations become more abstract. In the realm of abstraction, a general leveling takes place. The subject is equivalent to the space. Or at least they are equally different. Background, foreground, can be reshuffled infinitely. It is this general technological leveling of subject and object that characterizes much of Bulgarian Pop.

Let us catch our breath for a second, slow down and ask ourselves where we find ourselves. Perhaps we rushed too quickly into the image, assuming the sharp divisions

between its significance and insignificance. A space that is not trying to sell itself as another, but remains virtual, i.e. full of potentialities. This is a space pleased with its artificiality, with its technical nature. There is also a kitsch character to the use of technology as a leitmotif in various genres. For instance, science fiction often employs technology as a hypermodern background to traditional narrative structures. In this usage, technology is but a superficial gliding for underlying literary models. At first glance, the Pop videos of Bulgaria appear to exploit this same superficial use of technology. But on further review, one can see that there is little behind these videos. There are no major or even minor narratives. Even instances where narrative motifs arise, they are proof of their superfluousness. The digital backgrounds of these videos come to the foreground as stars in their own right. They do not represent technology in so far as they *are* technological. They emphasize the very process of their construction. Or in the language of magic, they are magical, not in the sense that they mimic magical things, like rainbows, pointy hats, and broom sticks. They are magical in the sense that they simultaneously foreground their construction and produce a special affect.

I LOVE CRAZINESS

So let us look, by way of example, at a video clip for one of Bulgaria's prominent female Pop stars. In the video clip for the female Pop star Malina, she floats through the sky of a futuristic city singing the songs title and refrain, "I love craziness" (Obicham Ludosta). The city is comprised of glossy 3d models and futuristic ships. This is not a model for a utopian Bulgarian future; one that is only a few five year plans away. No this futuristic city is meant to remain virtual. In fact, it works because it remains virtual. Its hyper-reality does not allow anyone to mistakenly read it as real. Nor does it ask to be

read as real. It is proud of its virtuality, just as it is proud of its technicality. Malina's video includes a strange mixture of styles and effects; she jumps from virtual city, to lavender field, to plane of abstract geometry (figure 1). It is successful, not because of the invisibility of its techniques but because of their very visibility. It is special because it is full of effects; and affective because it is freed from the weight of representational context.

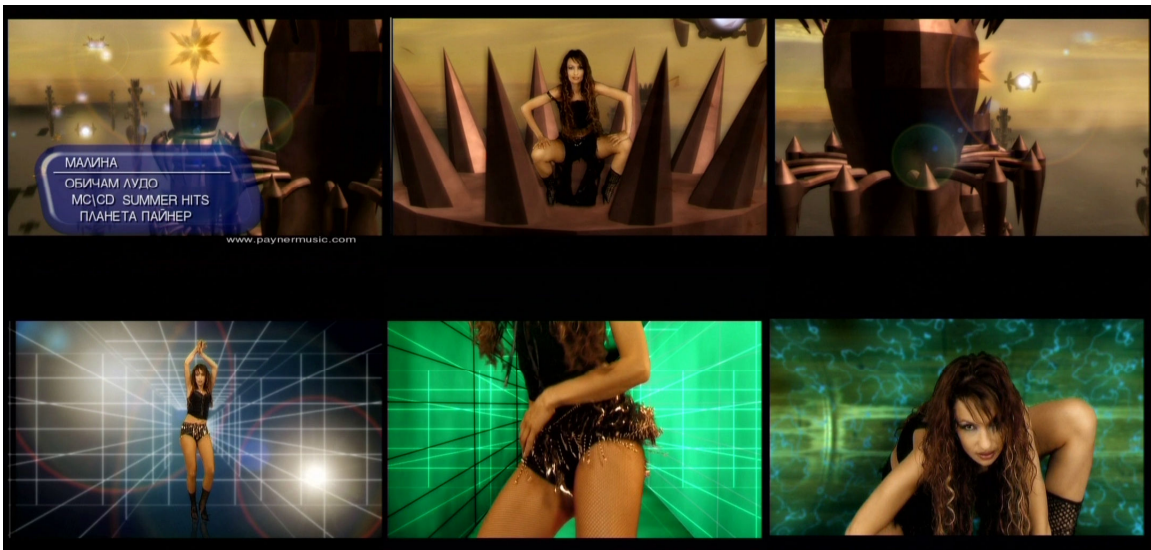


Figure 1: "I Love Craziness"(Obicham Ludosta) Malina, Planta Records 2003.

Malina's "I love craziness" music video is an eclectic mixture of virtual and real backdrops. Malina's curvaceous form wiggles its way through a variety of spaces, from floating a futuristic city to blooming lavender fields. One would be hard pressed to write a narrative that unites these spaces, and would have an even harder time of actually finding one presented in Malina's video. These spaces are used in a purely aesthetic sense. They do not contain Malina's actions but they amplify them, creating a vivid play

of light and motion. By using green screen technology, the video’s producers are able to transport Malina to any space they choose. And they have chosen everywhere and nowhere, a place stripped bare of narrative significance. There is no ecological point here in the juxtaposition of nature and technology. There is, in fact, no juxtaposition. The scenes of nature, of water and fields of blooming lavender are equivalent to the virtual architectures of Malina’s futuristic city. This equivalence is significant not because of what it means but because of what it doesn’t mean. Meaning is beside the point here.

The use of Bulgaria’s natural beauty as a backdrop for performance is employed in a number of Pop Folk music videos (figure 2). The manner in which nature is



Figure 2: “Love Fire” Vesela Planta Records 2003 and “Mystery” Desi Slava Planta Records 2002

abstracted for the sake of this aesthetic both resonates with and runs counter to the Socialist tradition of exploiting nature as a space to ground the alleged naturalism of Marxist and Socialist development. It is indisputable that the agrarian tradition of Bulgaria is a significant part of its national identity and tradition. The development of

Socialism in Bulgaria was shouldered with the paradoxical position of both valorizing this agrarian tradition and promoting the industrialization of the country. The latter was important in tying Bulgaria to the Marxist tradition of Communist development. The state had to be industrialized in order for the worker to realize their all important role in production. In addition to the centralization of Populations in Post-WWII Bulgaria, the collectivization of farming was also a central part of Bulgaria's modernization. This collectivization provided very real change in the structure of Bulgaria's traditional agriculture (Creed 1998). It also created a fantasy space, a field of bounty that, whether real or fake, was always virtually present in the state's portrayal of its progress. In this way the image of natural bounty was and is still subtracted from the realities of its production. Nature became a factory producing both plenty and the image of plenty. It is this abstraction of nature that contemporary Pop Folk shares with its Socialist predecessors. Where the two diverge is in the in the manner in which this abstract nature is woven back into a narrative of modernity. The Socialist narrative of modernity uses natural bounty as a basis for the creation of a Communist utopia of collectivization. The Pop Folk version of modernity uses nature to construct a space of pure affect, a synaesthetic cornucopia of blossoms and beauty.

In this cornucopia, the performers, themselves, are part of the spectacle. Their bodies and movements tie together the disparate imagery of special effects and nature. Bodies, here, are not always identities in as much as they are terrains. They are public bodies not meant to be addressed in so far as they are meant to be traversed. There is a tactility to these visions, texture and surface as important as light and sound. Desire a response to the invitation to traverse the image, going over it, tracing its lines, feeling its forms. The writhing, toned bodies of these carefully crafted Pop stars resist traditional identity construction. In their glistening perfection they become indistinguishable from

the backdrops and objects that surround them. The culmination of this aesthetic is an ecstasy of forms, of bodies and parts. Indeed, it is not a stretch to say that this aesthetic is similar to a porn aesthetic of amplified bodies, womanly hips and breasts, whole landscapes of feminine peaks and valleys in which for the viewer's eyes can get lost.

And it is not just nature and ample bodies that populate the Bulgarian public. Other special effects contribute to this sense of virtual abstraction. For instance another common special effect is fog. Fog is used to create a luminescent volume, a place in which lights can play off of one another. This is the same fog that precedes the disappearing act. It signals the disappearance of the subject, of their blurring into the background. This more traditional amorphous space is mirrored in the use of modern digital compositing techniques. Subjects subtracted from the negative space of the green screen studio are digitally transported to equally abstract, amorphous spaces. If approached in the language of Turner's ritual analysis, this is a liminal space, literally an inbetween. Where Turner's theory becomes inaccurate is in its insistence on the transitory nature of the liminal. The spectacle spaces of Bulgarian Pop remain liminal, never even hinting about reentrance into a more permanent real.

What do you do with this abstract space? Another question to ask of this space of abstraction is whether or not anyone else occupies this space. In other words, is it public? Is it possible to meet others in this space of abstraction? A quick answer is yes. There are roommates all around the world. Pop stars and other such media celebrities appear in the same technologically abstract, cleansed spaces. Success is a transcendence of locality, of nationality, of culture. So what then is particularly Bulgarian about these spaces?

DISAPPEARING ACT

The state spectacles in the Socialist era are an earlier example of affective experience and give us a better appreciation for the special affect involved in contemporary Bulgarian Pop. The political transitions of the turn of the century have given many a new opportunity to speak out against the absurdity of prior forced totalitarian displays of public togetherness. But with time, there has grown a nostalgia for the enthusiasm and mass ecstasy that went along with these public displays. As Benjamin notes in, "In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves" (Benjamin 1968, 251). The joy of marching together, whether mediated or unmediated, should not be underestimated. Even if the ideal to which one is marching is merely a phantom image of progress, the immediate experience is significant. The collective joy of Socialist forms, such as collective farming, and youth brigades was certainly overestimated by a state heavily invested in this reality but it also is equally underestimated by any historian looking to rewrite the Socialist model as a singular history of totalitarian oppression. There is a parallel between the state spectacles of the Socialist era and the contemporary spectacles of Pop music in Bulgaria. Both may be devoid of real plans for the future, but both are ultimately successful in creating a virtual space in which people can revel in affective imagery and sounds. Never have I encountered anyone who critiques Pop folk as a misrepresentation of real life. It makes no claims to reality. It is not an effort to represent the real, in so far as it is an effort to generate another reality, a kind of cultural third space, not historic, public, or personal, but a virtual combination thereof.

Pop folk videos take place outside of the theatrical spaces of the former Socialist state. This state was generous, or at least ambitious, in creating public spaces for its citizens. Even small villages, no more than a few blocks long, benefited from a “House of Culture,” designed to include a cinema, sympathy hall, and venues for other such public performances. The most significant of these buildings is the Palace of Culture, built in Sofia to house the capital’s numerous cultural events. The irony of naming a Socialist institution a “palace” was obviously not enough to deter its founders from using this honorific.

The occasion of the annual music video awards for two major cable television stations is a good chance to note the invisibility of Socialist architecture and aesthetics in contemporary Pop. Like some kind of David Cooperfield trick, these shows made the huge Palace of Culture disappear. In the reportage leading up to these events, there was no live from the “Palace of Culture” wide shot. No *behind-the-scenes* expose on the preparations. All these shows displayed were the spectacle of their staged design. In between the traditional handing out of awards and the projection of winning video clips, performers performed live versions of their songs. These generally involved troupes of dancers amplifying the moves of the stars, forming a galaxy of gyrating bodies (figure 3). With the lights low, the strobes flashing and lasers spinning in time to the music, the National Palace of Culture was nowhere to be seen, vanished in a whirl of stage lights.



Figure 3: Planeta Television 2003 annual awards show at the National Palace of Culture

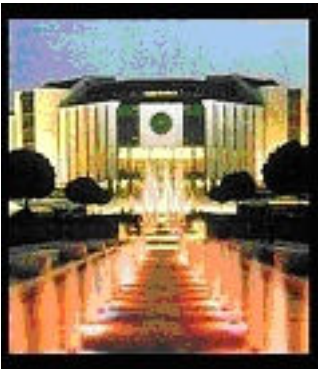


Figure 4: National Palace of Culture Sofia, Bulgaria

Certainly there have been spectacles in the National Palace of Culture before. It was designed to house such cultural performances. But it was also designed to house, in the sense of to bind these performances in a frame of State authority, its imposing silhouette rising above the city and set against Mount Vitosha, is clearly part of a Socialist aesthetic of state grandeur (figure 4). And yet the year end music video awards magically made this behemoth disappear. This is not just a story of the burgeoning capitalism of Pop music winning out against older state run ideas of culture, a narrative in the U.S. No this is more so a story of virtual spaces winning out over real spaces; or more precisely, cultural producers successfully virtualizing real space, taking concrete and stone and turning them into a palace of spectacle and fantasy. At these shows, I was happy to bask in the stardom of the entertainers and enjoy the collective experience of fandom. My enthusiasm only waned with the seemingly endless length of some

performer's full length live performance of their otherwise short and sweet Pop hits. In these instances, I grew weary of the same perspective. I wanted a tight shot, a swooping crane, a radical zoom in on the performers; but all I got was the same seated perspective from somewhere stage left. I have to admit, I felt like turning the channel, my mind lost in a swirl of fog, lasers, and hips.

From here on out, it is not a question of fitting Bulgarian culture and media to this theory of virtuality; it is rather about trying to keep up with the dynamism of Bulgarian culture and media, to try and find a way of articulating this open, virtual character. Luckily for us there are whole genres of media and Pop in Bulgaria designed to exploit, extend, and visualize this virtual/public character of popular media. Commercial producers, musicians, and writers are busy trying to create affective images. With the latest special effects, song stylings, and elaborate virtual sets, Bulgarian Pop exceeds its supposedly troubled position in the wake of Socialism and amidst the economic troubles of the transition from Socialism to capitalism, achieves an affective register. So from here on out, I will try to show the special effects and special affects of Bulgarian Pop, not in order to divine their significance or insignificance, but rather to trace where they may lead.

Chapter 2: Pop Folk(lore)

Throughout my years of traveling back and forth to Bulgaria, responses to Pop-Folk have been consistent, consistently negative. Whether talking with teenagers, university students, professionals, or retired pensioners, all together form a chorus of disgust with the genre known as Pop Folk or Chalga. Such contestation is if nothing else proof of Pop Folk's omnipresence. It is there on the radio dial, in the back seat of the cab, in the café, and on television, a kind of soundtrack to the Post-Socialist everyday. So eager are people to distance themselves from this musical phenomenon that they are quick to attribute the genre to everyone else besides Bulgarians. Some trace its roots to Serbia others to Greece. And still others negatively attribute the music to the "tsigani" or gypsies, a group more accurately referred to as Bulgaria's large Roma minority (Buchanan 1996). For all of this negativity, it would appear hard to explain the near omnipresence of Pop Folk.

In fact, explaining Pop Folk's popularity is nearly as popular as bashing it. I remember quite vividly discussing Pop Folk with a table of young professionals at a friend of a friend's wedding. Nearly everyone at the table had spent years studying and working abroad, finding success, or at least work, in such prominent organizations as the World Bank and Federal Reserve. Some had returned to Bulgaria to work, to live, and others were just simply completing their annual or biennial return to visit friends and family. The later of these two groups showed distain at the mere mention of Pop Folk. This fit with the lowly status its predecessor Chalga occupied in the early nineties, before

their departure from Bulgaria. The former, those who had chosen to return to or stayed in Bulgaria to live and work, were quick to temper this first order reaction. They noted with grudging admiration the “kachetsvo,” (quality) of contemporary Pop Folk. Surely fueled by our hours of drinking, the others combated this positive assessment with the usual stories of the traditional origins of “svatbarska muzika,” (wedding music) that devolved into Chalga and eventually Pop Folk. They reminded us of the kitsch covers of buxom babes poorly photoshopped into the arms of a shirtless Arnold Swartzenager showing off



Figure 5 Sashka Vasela “Make Love not War” album cover

his best pre-governorship physique (figure 1). They reminded us of lines like, “I want your money,” “Make Love not War” and “Tigre, tigre” (Tiger, tiger) by the group Velite Shisharki. They reminded us of the constant hum of bad synthesizers and the kitsch music video scenarios. But none of this fazed this group of seeming converts. It was as if Pop Folk had achieved a quality of production that made it immune to intellectual and aesthetic critique. If not fans, they were most certainly admirers.

Responses to Pop Folk are not just limited to internal debates in Bulgaria; it is also a significant part of the academic literature on Bulgaria produced by foreign researchers (Rice 1980, 1994, Porter 1994, Buchanan 1996, Slobin 1996). A great deal of scholarship on Bulgaria focuses on its musical traditions. Studies of its folkloric and choral traditions occupy a disproportionate percentage of the foreign scholarship on Bulgaria. This stems from a long tradition of ethnomusicological work in the Balkans and in part it is due to the wealth of musical styles and diversity in the region. It is also has to do with the allowances made by the Socialist era Bulgarian state. This state had a vested interest in emphasizing its traditional music instead of supporting research on other aspects of its cultural policy by Western academics. The result of these allowances is a bias in the English literature on Bulgaria towards its folkloric traditions. Of course, taken individually these works of foreign scholarship on Bulgarian music are sensitive to the particularities of Bulgaria's musical traditions; taken as a whole, however, they paint a portrait of an inordinately musical people. Due to the lack of scholarship on other areas of Bulgarian life, this emphasis can result in a primitivist image of Bulgarians as naturally gifted musicians.

The most widely circulated of this body of work on Bulgarian music is the story of Timothy Rice's personal experience learning Bulgarian folk music, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (Rice 1994). Rice's work has been justly praised for his ability to use his own experience to narrate a story of Bulgarian folk music. Rice argues that Bulgarians, regardless of their political and ethnic diversities, all "create and interpret music within symbolic webs of meanings, political struggles for power and influence, and evolving economic structures" (Rice 176). And while Rice does an eloquent job of exploring these "webs of meanings" it is peculiar that he does not include Popular Bulgarian music in his study. Apparently, the long history of Popular Music in

Bulgarian is not involved in these structures. As he states it, his interest is in bridging the “gap between the descriptive, scientific, language-encoded methods used to study music and the vivid, deeply moving, often unarticulated inner experiences we have performing or listening to it”(Rice 1994, 3). Rice’s bias in his exclusion of Pop genres of Bulgarian Music is clearly towards the first hand tradition of folkloric performance. The mass production of music and its popular dissemination through media such as radio and television does not exist in Rice’s Bulgaria. For all his care to suggest the benefits of his own mode of “appropriation” of Bulgarian Folk, he appears reluctant to grant the same agency to his Bulgarian peers. There is no mention of Pop, Pop Folk, Chalga, or Bulgarian Hip Hop, all genres which have evolved from local traditions and include a significant foreign influence. These genres also now form the bulk of musical consumption in Bulgaria. Ignoring Pop’s omnipresence is a privilege only afforded foreign ethnomusicologists and the like. Certainly, there is still much to be discovered in studying Bulgaria’s folkloric tradition, but just as clearly there is much to discover in the cacophonous sampling of different genres and styles that informs contemporary Bulgarian Pop.

Contrary, to how this may read, I am not out to discount the work of Rice and others in the field of ethnomusicology. What I do want to stress here is the vanishing of popular forms of music that has taken place in western and local academic traditions. Why is tradition more important than invention? Why is the popular less important than the folkloric? Perhaps the obvious or not so obvious answer is that contemporary Pop resides in a self sustaining economy of production and consumption. Folkloric traditions, on the other hand, require careful cultivation and excavation by academic and other such interested third parties. The preservationist spirit of a Boasian tradition of ethnography plays a significant part in much of this work in Balkan ethnomusicology.

In pursuing in depth historical analysis of Pop Folk, tracing its origins and offshoots, most researchers end up with something other than Pop Folk. They end up with a discussion of the ethnic, political, and economic factors that they believe underlie this musical genre. As Verdery reflects after her many years of researching first Socialist and later Post-Socialist life in Romania, there is a great pressure exerted on researchers in Post-Socialist contexts;

“Another constraint—one that greatly affected the anthropology of Eastern Europe—was the privileged place accorded the discipline of political science in creating knowledge about the region,... It proved all too easy, in retrospect, to solve the problem of how to find an audience by reacting to the issues posed in political science...nationalism, regime legitimacy, the planning process, development, the nature of power in Socialist systems, and so forth”(Verdery, 7).

As a student of anthropology and ethnographer in Bulgaria, I have certainly felt some of the same pressures. The demands to make one’s research politically relevant and intelligible begin in the numerous forms of international funding agencies and continue on in conference categories, job listings, and the other such segmentations of academia. Luckily, or unluckily depending on how you look at it, these can be avoided even if one does so at the risk of academic suicide. As stated earlier, I primarily feel a need to keep pace with Bulgarian culture, believing as I do, that such pacing is the best that one can hope to do.

These pragmatics of international research are part of a long line of western misrepresentations of the Balkans that the cultural critic and historian Maria Todorova has collectively termed “Balkanism” (Todorova 2001). Balkanism is similar to and derived from Edward Said’s Orientalism but is distinct from it in its formation around the particular relationship between the Balkans and Western Europe as both a literal and

figural boundary. In this relationship, from the Western European perspective, the heavily Slavic peoples of the Balkans have represented a primitive frontier. The British favoritism for the Ottoman Empire suggests the affinity of Empires with Empires. The Balkans have also traditionally represented a buffer zone between Muslim and Christian populations. The relatively peaceful and long history of cohabitation between Christian and Muslim populations in Bulgaria belies the assumption of ethnic and religious fighting that remains a given in a world geopolitics predicated on the pervasiveness and historicism of Muslim and Christian antagonism. The historian Mary Neuberger's work with the Pomak people of Bulgaria is an enlightening example of Bulgaria's unique mixture of religion and ethnic traditions. The Pomaks are ethnic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under the Ottoman occupation. The fact of this conversion and its simultaneous coexistence with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is a sign of the relative peace between diverse populations in the Balkans. The later Socialist Bulgarian state did try to purge the Pomaks of these Islamic traditions as part of a similar effort to make invisible the large Turkish minority in Bulgaria. As late as 1985, Todor Zhikov oversaw the effort to try and change all of their names to Bulgarian endings, e.g. ovs and evs (Neuberger 2005). This forced assimilation is a tragedy of Socialist policy but must as be understood as part of a larger project to purge the Socialist state of difference. The level playing fields of an ideal Communist State depended on the integrity of the population, a work force undivided by ethnic and religious differences.

More interesting than the specifics of these state level campaigns, is the aesthetic of modernization that both Neuberger and Todorova recount in their histories of Bulgarians' efforts to appear modern. The adoption of western suits, the vanishing of the fez, and other such superficial changes show a people looking for modernity and urbanity at the end of the 19th Century. At the end of the 20th Century, the ethnic character of

populations such as the rural Pomaks and urban Romani remain pitted against the modernity of the majority population. This opposition happens on an aesthetic level, in terms of dress, style, and the other material manifestations of Pop culture. Research into the minority and ethnic character of populations in Bulgaria thus always should also interrogate the modern aesthetic of the majority Bulgarian population. So as we continue to witness the world of Pop Folk let us keep in mind that the effort to define the new face of the Balkans is also a strategy for addressing the diversity of populations in the Balkans.

So we can see from the beginning that Pop music is a kind of silent understood in much of the work on Balkan folk and traditional music. But how does one develop this understanding? How can non-Bulgarians bring Bulgarian Pop Music to the table? As a foil to the specificity of folkloric traditions, Pop is considered in many cases as the same everywhere. It just spreads, arriving a little slower in some corners of the world. Research informed by this theory of Pop reads like looking for dye packs, ways to stain and trace the circulation of music in a world market. Samizdat Beatles in the Soviet Union and Elvis records pressed by the Bulgarian state recording company in this way are proof of Pop's slow dissemination from West to East. Or is there another way to approach Bulgarian Pop? Maybe there is an answer in the positive example of Rice's personal engagement with Bulgarian folkloric music. He shows that one must learn one's subject in order to understand one's subject. So how do we learn Pop music. Must we all become stars? Or is Pop's beauty, that we are all equipped with the ability to appreciate it, or at least receive it.

CHALGAGIA

The story of Chalga turned Pop Folk cannot be explained by a history of influences. In fact in many ways, Pop Folk succeeds in Bulgaria *in spite* of its ethnic elements and traditions. The ethnic motifs that do remain in contemporary Pop Folk are more significant as aesthetic styling and ornamentation than as meaningful cultural allusions. The increased use of Oriental aesthetics is further proof of the abstract significance of appropriated ethnic motifs in Pop Folk. To say that such motifs are aesthetic is not, however, to say that they are irrelevant. It is rather to say that their relevancy is in their aesthetic character and not in their ethnic significance. As I hope to reveal, in the following stories, Pop Folk producers, stars, and fans also approach Pop Folk as an aesthetic object. They are more interested in the sensations, spectacles, and affects that it is capable of producing than in debates of cultural significance and ethnic identification. Even if one does not agree with this premise, it is impossible to deny the changes that have taken place in the genre in its transition from Chalga to Pop Folk.

In discussions of Pop Folk and other Bulgarian genres of Pop culture, “kachetsvo,” meaning quality, comes up again and again as a key to appreciating and understanding the popularity of a particular genre, song, video, or other such item of Pop culture. “Kachetsvo” isn’t so much an over arching concept for defining Bulgarian Pop culture as it is indicative of a real set of concerns. To be concerned with kachetsvo or quality is to be concerned with color and light, with sound and texture. It is part of a very literal, technological set of concerns. A set of concerns that are not so much a means to an ends as an on going set of concerns and motivations. Certainly, money, fame, and personal vanity all play a big part in the Bulgarian Pop scene, just as they do elsewhere. Identity politics, on the other hand, are notably absent; and appear subservient to a concern with producing quality.

One way to better understand, at least initially, the particular importance of quality in Bulgarian Pop is to define its opposite. Lucky for me, Bulgarians have already come up with this negative foil to quality Pop music; its name is Chalga or Chalgagia. As noted earlier, Chalga is originally the term for wedding music, possibly taken from Turkish and used to refer to the Roma minority famous for playing this style (Buchanan 1996). Here too one can find a link with Serbian wedding music. Throughout the Balkan region, wedding music shares an eclectic mix of styles born of the diversity of peoples that have passed through and lived in this region over the years. But more recently, it has become synonymous with negative ethnic influences on Bulgarian traditions. In order to better understand how Chalga is used as an adjective it is helpful to look at the effort of one the directors of Bulgaria's 24 hour Pop Folk television stations to explain this confusion of Chalga with kitsch. As he puts it;

For me Chalga is sometimes confused with kitsch. There is a difference between these two things. There is Chalga in other types of art and in other genres. Absolutely, it is unprofessional to decide one genre is kitsch in and off itself. Every genre has a right to live and it has to develop under one or another form. But kitsch can be discovered in every genre.

-Interview with director of Veselina TV

This effort to untangle Chalga from kitsch is motivated by a desire to distance Pop Folk from both. Chalga is here divorced from kitsch by also turning it into a concept and not just a musical genre. Chalga is "*in other types of art and genres.*" To help in making this distinction, a new term has arisen to make this point and distinction from the strictly Roma musical tradition clearer. "Chalgagia" is the conceptual form of Chalga. As can be deduced from numerous headlines and newspaper articles, Chalgagia can be found in politics and business too. It is sometimes spoken of as a mentality and as such as one of the number one hindrances to Bulgaria's development. Thus purging Chalga and Chalgagia from Pop Folk takes on national importance.

So how do you get Chalgagia out of Pop Folk? One would think that the easiest way to distance Pop Folk from Chalga would be to remove the ethnic motifs involved in this traditional music. But the continued Orientalist aesthetics of current Pop Folk videos suggest that this is not the favored route. They suggest that ethnicity is simultaneously important and irrelevant. So what is being changed/improved in this transition from Chalga to Pop Folk? The changes are radically superficial. They have to do with advances in lighting and technique. The production values of contemporary Pop Folk distance the genre from its marginal ethnic roots. In other words it has to do with kachetsvo.

A STAR IS BORN

One way to better understand the role of quality in Bulgarian Pop is to follow the career of a rising star of Bulgarian Pop Folk. This story of the rise of one Bulgarian Pop star is indicative of the strange play of Orientalism, aestheticism, and historicism in Bulgarian Pop. This star, Raihan, originally sang as part of a traditional wedding band. Her early videos with this group portray a standard wedding performance juxtaposed with nostalgic scenes of a couple falling in love in a rural Bulgarian village. The performers, including Raihan, are dressed in contemporary fashion, but nothing remarkably fashionable or risqué. Still, these contemporary clothes are clearly meant as a temporal juxtaposition to the nostalgic narrative. The performance footage, itself looks like a typical family wedding video, the videographer restlessly zooming in and out to maintain interest in the dull proceedings. This zoom “acknowledges the presence of the audience in a way that transforms the performance space into a public space rather than simply a privatized, diegetic space” (Willemen 2003). The amateur construction of the video

invites the audience into the same space as the performers. There is no great leap from video to everyday life.



Figure 6: Raihan and the Cristal Orchestra Painer Music 2001.

Here it is also important to note that Raihan is of Turkish decent and sings entirely in Turkish. This fact and not her youthful beauty make her a rarity in the Bulgarian Pop Folk scene. Most of the performers in Pop Folk are of Bulgarian decent and sing in Bulgarian. The success of Raihan as an individual performer has resulted in her separation from the mundane spaces of the wedding genre and catapulted her into the virtual realms more typical of Bulgarian Pop Folk. The follow-up single to this earlier wedding singer work, saw Raihan transformed into a mini-skirt clad Pop star. Not only is the band gone, but so too is the nostalgic narrative. They have been replaced with a hypermodern club environment and a couple of backup dancers. Also present is the Bulgarian Pop Star, Music Video VJ, and video director extraordinaire, Luci. Luci is in many respects the public face of the television channel and production company Planeta Television. As host of numerous video request shows, Luci appears as the spokesman for the station and the stand-in ideal fan. As such Luci ushers in viewers and new performs alike into the peculiar hypermodern spaces of Pop Folk. In addition to this work, Luci has his own career as a Pop star which has more recently transitioned into his role as

director for many of the videos for his fellow Planeta Television Stars. Luci's appearance in Reihan's music video, "I Need You," (Imam nuzhda ot teb), thus marks her official entrance into the pantheon of Bulgarian Pop Folk.

Excluding the loving lyrics exchanged across the 16 year age difference between Luci and Reihan, the most surprising quality of the song, is that Reihan sings in Turkish and Luci in Bulgarian. This simple fact is a huge step towards multiculturalism in a Bulgarian media space dominated by the Bulgarian language. At the same time, the specific lyrical content of the song makes no explicit social or political claims. What is



Figure 7: Reihan Painer

Music 2003

of particular interest here is the lack of Orientalist motifs and the Arabesque in the styling of Reihan and Luci. As fans note in the online fan appreciation forum, the style is "modern". The absence of the arabesque is all the more striking when one considers its prevalence in the work of Planeta's other ethnically Bulgarian stars. It is thus logical to presume that, once Reihan achieves a firm position in the abstract universe of Bulgarian Pop she too will be able to re-appropriate Orientalist stylings as purely aesthetic additions to her total package. Until then, she is

bound to a "modern" aesthetic.

The arabesque motifs of Bulgarian Pop are hard to miss. And considering the proximity of Bulgaria to the Middle East, it is not surprising. This is a country and people that were part of the expansive Ottoman Empire for five hundred years, up until as recent as 1890. What is surprising is the freedom with which ethnic Bulgarians mime Arab styles of dress and movement. It is done with the same kind of flair for fashion and form that marked the Orientalism of turn-of-the-century Paris and Sofia (Garinova 2002).

The use of Arab aesthetics thus marks both the proximity of Bulgarian culture to its Ottoman past and its distance from contemporary Arab politics and cultural economies. Watching the gyrating hips of the latest Pop star, it is easy to assume that it is the sexual allure of the arabesque that takes precedent over any kind of historical authenticity.

Reihan's career trajectory also marks an important shift in the marketing strategy of Bulgarian Pop. Notably, its producers have begun to heavily invest in expanding the international market for Bulgarian Pop. The ranking of Planeta Television in neighboring Greece, Serbia, and Turkey has continued to grow. The same cannot be said of any music programming coming into Bulgaria from its roommates. So what makes Bulgarian Pop attractive to these foreign audiences, capable of leaping cultural boundaries so otherwise tightly sealed? Surely it is not the text, as few and far between are the Bulgarian speakers outside of Bulgaria. Then it must be on an aesthetic/affective level that Bulgarian Pop appeals to foreign audiences. These music videos do not so much reflect Bulgarian life as they provide a new space for audiences to reside, one free of historical animosities, and full of special effects and special affects. They represent a new Bulgaria public, one eager to stand on a world stage and to include its roommates in its quality productions.

PUTTING THE POP IN POP FOLK

The career paths of Pop Folk producers behind the scenes are just as varied as the stars in front of the camera. A brief history of one of the major music video directors for the Planeta Television Station is another way into the peculiar aesthetic of quality at play in Bulgarian Pop. Mr. Gospodinov's career is typical in Bulgaria with regards to his strange combination of career moves. Originally trained and employed as an engineer in

Socialist Bulgaria, with the political transitions of the early nineteen-nineties, he became a national distributor/representative for Sony electronics. This commercial position somewhere along the way turned into a position in the media department of the Parliament and a regular position as a director of Pop Folk videos. Such an oscillating career trajectory is typical in Bulgaria, where a highly educated population has had to adapt to the limited, or rather shifting opportunities that have followed the dismantling of the Socialist state. The illogic of such transitions is most famously visible in the meteoric rise in the large number of Olympic wrestlers that have become body guards and subsequently security company owners in the transition period following the early nineteen-nineties. Initially, jokingly referred to as “thick necks,” since this time, many of these muscle bound individuals have migrated in surprisingly large numbers into high ranking government positions and prominent positions in the business world. Rather than a sign of the radical transformations of the shift from Socialism to capitalism, these stories of success are perhaps best viewed as in keeping with the elaborate tradition of “Bratovchdi,” or “cousin” networks (Creed 1996). The favoritism of State officials under Socialism have continued through to the business of late capitalism in Bulgaria.

On our first meeting, I joined him in his office. In the mode of ethnographic confession, I want to point out that I never learned how to turn down a drink, even though the generous hospitality of Bulgarians has at times left me wishing otherwise. This time the treat was rakiya (Bulgarian Brandy) in Dixie cups. My host took it from a bureau that looked more like a file than a liquor cabinet. I couldn't tell whether his methodical removal of the bottle was a sign of reverence for this particular home brew or an indication of his meticulously secretive at-work drinking. After a toast to our health, he switched from the official news broadcast he had been monitoring to the 24 hour music station. The cut from the parliament's drab interior to the flashy gyrating hips of a music

video seemed familiar, a logical choice, an anecdote often taken against afternoon boredom. It is one of the perks of having an office with cable television and a door that closed. The transition was also eased by the lack of sound. I initially read this silence as respect for our conversation or at least respect for his neighboring co-workers. But he proceeded to explain that, “It’s better this way. It’s good for looking and not for listening”. Indeed, the amplified synthesizers of Pop Folk can be hard on even its biggest fans. Its stars, however, were easy on the eyes, curves carved out of centuries of Mediterranean genetic code, glitz, glamour, and make-up liberally applied. One woman followed the next, each seemingly interchangeable, yet each equally important, each a different persona in the pantheon of Pop Folk divinity. This parade of females was only occasionally interrupted by a male performer transported to some kind of ancient folkloric past, where the hills were alive with music. This was the easily read “folk” in Pop Folk.

It’s the “Pop” part of Pop Folk that’s harder to get a grasp on. It is “Pop” in the sense of Popular; a “Pop” composed of new styles and ever-changing aesthetics. As I have noted, much has been written about Bulgarian folk music and its hodge-podge of traditions. What has not been addressed is the futurism present in the Pop Folk aesthetic. What separates Pop Folk from its folkloric roots is its fixation on the new, on aesthetics divorced of context. The aggressive modernity of Pop stakes a claim to newness. Even the eternal return of styles and genres somehow manages to reinforce and not contradict this presentation of the new, the modern. Pop Folk points in two directions, one to a distant mythic past, the other to an equally virtual bright future. The shape of this future and the shape of this past combine in the dissonant present of Bulgarian everyday life.

Obviously, my new friend did not think the key to untangling such dissonance lay in the music or lyrics of the muted television. All that was left to discuss were the

saturated colors of music video production. It was all about the *kachestvo* (quality) of the image. It was quality lighting, with quality cameras, edited in a quality studio, all of it quality. Again, this is a term that I heard throughout my time around the music video shoots, editing room sessions, and photo shots of Pop Folk producers. “Kachestvo” was the script and goal. Such a concern for quality can certainly be viewed as in part a reaction to the marginal traditions from which contemporary Pop Folk draws its roots. It is part of an effort to legitimate this increasingly popular genre. By placing the stress on quality, the implication is that the fault of earlier Pop Folk was not its ethnic associations, but rather the very quality of its production. As I have already belabored, the point here is not to turn “kachestvo” into an operative concept, an all encompassing cause and category for Pop Folk. Rather the emphasis on quality, both my own and that of Pop Folk producers and fans, has to do with *qualities*, or in other words, sensitivity to the affective character of Pop.

DIGITAL UTOPIAS

As noted earlier in Malina’s “I love craziness” video, there is a peculiar space constructed in Bulgarian Pop Folk. It is a kind of nowhere, often devoid of clear cultural antecedents and geographic markers. It is literally a nowhere space, a non-space from which stars arrive and in which they reside. Pop stars live in a galaxy far, far away. They appear instantaneously popping on and off screen without any story of their arrival. It is a space comprised of dizzying displays of color and sound, texture and light. A space befitting the pantheon of gods and goddesses that makes up the expanding cosmos of Bulgarian Pop. And of course, by definition, the near omnipresence of this nowhere means that everywhere else is eliminated, invisible. The everyday, the mundane only

occasionally manages to creep into televisual space through the filters of the news media. The anchor man and woman, themselves privileged enough to occupy the abstract space of the news studio with its digitized backdrops and hypermodern furnishings, are there to form a buffer between the real and the virtual spaces of television.

And if this sounds utopic, that is because it is utopic. In the literal sense in which Thomas More first derived utopia, from the original Greek words for "not" (ou) and "place" (topos) thus meaning literally "nowhere." Utopia is a *nowhere space*. Strange that More would choose a seeming oxymoron to refer to his seminal concept. Or maybe a nowhere space is not so oxymoronic. The nowhere-ness, the blankness of utopia is more than just a base for building one's utopic dreams. It rather suggests the virtual character of the utopic, a distinction that can be easily forgotten. Theoretists have traditionally been uneasy in dealing with this utopic nowhere space. They get lost in this space, looking unsuccessfully for images on which to hang their theories of representation. They are uneasy with a de-locality, a non-space. What do you do there? Where do you go from there? Do you have to go anywhere else? These are the questions to ask of a non-space, a utopia.

Theorists such as Pascal Augé, with his concept of "*l'espace quelconque*" (any space whatsoever) theorize modern utopias as inherently inhospitable spaces. Augé's "any space whatsoever" is a space such as a metro stop, a doctor's waiting room, or an airport terminal. It is an anonymous modern space designed to be passed through, a point of transit between places of importance, e.g. between home and work. It is the depersonalization of individuals in such spaces that interested the anthropologist Augé. In these spaces no one "concerns themselves with one another. The place is crowded but everyone is alone. It is... a homogenous, de-singularizing space." (Bell 1997). Deleuze and Guattari take up where Augé leaves off. But they feel at home in this constantly

shifting, anonymous space. They extend Augé's "any space whatsoever" into a nomadic space that is not in-between but rather an everywhere. The shizo out for a walk in Deleuze and Guattari's "Anti-Oedipus," or Benjamin's flâneur window shopping the arcades of Paris are the theoretical antecedents to the abstract dancers of modern Pop. The abstract spaces of studio sets and special effects are utopic, not in the sense that they provide a model for how to live, but in the sense that they embody the virtual character of existence.

The utopic character of Communism and capitalism has elsewhere been eloquently explored by Susan Buck-Morss. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, many have said that either a dream or a nightmare came to an end. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Buck-Morss reminds us that, "If the collective imaginaries of both capitalism and Socialism are virtual worlds, making them real becomes the social project" (BuckMorss 2000, 149). In order to make the workers' or consumers' paradise a reality, one must also maintain a virtual world of possibility. Nowhere space, or utopia, is this figure of possibility and virtuality. As we have seen through recent history, certain capitalist modes of production proved more efficient in re-imagining and imaging new virtual worlds than Socialism. The appeal of Pop Folk runs parallel to the appeal of Socialist Realism in the Socialist Era. Following Susan Buck-Morss' lead, I should like to paraphrase Alla Efimova, as she makes the point that given:

"the daily-life context of extreme cold, dark days, epidemics of disease, and wartime suffering in the Soviet Union... the sun-drenched canvases typical of Socialist realist paintings were effective not because of what they depicted, but how. Their visual style of representing bodily comfort-life over death, health over illness, plenty over want-appealed to the viewer on a somatic level that had little to do with the ideologically contrived content" (BuckMorss 2000, 119).

Much the same could be said of the effectiveness of Bulgarian Pop Folk. The dreamy imagery of Pop divas is effective because of its bright colors, glittering designs, and dazzling special effects not because of their ideological import. Consumption, sexual promiscuity, and any other such ideological interpretation of this imagery is at best a side-effect, a by-product of other attractions.

There is a tradition in western scholarship to portray eastern, read soviet audiences as more naïve than their western peers. Paradoxically by the same token, Soviet propaganda is depicted as more effective than capitalism's advertising. This distinction is clearly present in early accounts of the entrance of advertising into Post-Socialist contexts. Coca-cola signs and McDonald's arches are shown in this period as glistening guide posts to the cornucopia of capitalism. And how we feared for our newly liberated brethren, knowing how easily they would get lost in the waves of Coca Cola and the seductive saddle of Marlboro. Aesthetic seduction in the West is always sinister, always leading to other things. In the abstract spaces of Pop Folk, aesthetic seduction is an invitation to participate in a new virtual public.

BECOMING PUBLIC

In contrast, to the example of Planeta Television and other Pop Folk regional it is interesting to look at the efforts of some Bulgarian Pop groups to appeal to a larger European audience. This effort can most generally and specifically be referred to as the attempt to bring Bulgarian artists to Mtv's utopic version of multi-culturalism. This station, begun in the US, has spread throughout the globe and taken on local variations in many regions. To date, there is no Balkan Mtv. Balkan viewers are left watching the Scandinavian or even Israeli version of Mtv, whichever one their cable provider decides

to distribute. For all the regional differences, there is a universal public that Mtv addresses. As outlined in the advertising imagery for cell-phones, soft drinks, and birth control that make up its financial backing, this public is the international youth market, a consumer public.

In this public, English is the great uniter/divider. On the Bulgarian stage, Karizma is the one of the only groups that most clearly expresses its international aspirations through its efforts to sing in English. A duo comprised of an androgynous man and woman, Karizma is the perfect Pop package, giving the best of both worlds. Having swept the Bulgarian music video awards and topped the charts with their hit single, *Shte iz byagish li ot men*, “Will you run away from me,” in 2002 the duo set their sights on transitioning to the international market with their follow-up single. In the video for this song, a fuzzy narrative of domestic violence runs throughout. A sinister character is inexplicably played by the current minister of the interior, whose hard-nosed image is a significant part of his approach to combating criminality in Bulgaria. In a Schwarzenegger-type move, he was appointed as someone who could physically stand up to the image of criminal muscle in Bulgaria. The domestic part of this parable of domestic violence, is interesting because it tries to depict a decidedly American domestic space. The house that features prominently in the video is from a housing development on the outskirts of Sofia that was built on the model of an American suburb. The wood-frame house and manicured front lawn cannot be found anywhere else in Bulgaria, much less the rest of the Balkans. Karizma, could and has been faulted, for trying to misrepresent themselves, for ignoring their immediate surroundings and trying to portray a world that they do not otherwise know. But this critique misses what the domestic spaces of American suburbs mean in the virtual realm of Pop. The desire here is not to

inhabit an American space per se, as it is to participate in an international space, an Mtv public built of certain motifs and images.

The duo Tatu, with their hit “I chase you”, is perhaps the most successful example of a Pop group from Eastern Europe making it onto the international Mtv stage. What is telling about this example, is the invisibility of Russia and even more specifically Russian space in their videos. What does appear are two schoolgirls caught in the throws of their illicit attraction. The body-centeredness of Tatu’s playful lesbian innuendo is so strong as to even excuse the duo’s otherwise unmarketable use of Russian. The failure of their follow-up work to achieve the same popularity may be attributed to the same fate that has befallen Britney Spears in the American context. Neither of these acts has been able to preserve the youthful tabooed sexuality of the school girl. They grow up too fast.

Another example of Bulgarian Pop shows how mimicry of other international Pop aesthetics is a baseline for addressing one’s own local publics. In this case, the Bulgarian Hip Hop group Upsurt’s “Tri v Edno” (There in One) is a shot for shot a riff on Snoop Dog’s “Drop it if It’s Hot”. Both use a black and white aesthetic to show the performers in an abstract studio space, the studio walls blown out to create a purely white space. The blankness of this stage puts extra emphasis on the objects and performers that are present. Snoop Dog populates his screen with low-riders, diamonds, and other such status objects from his life in southern California. In the Upsurt version, these items are replaced with Bulgarian brand items. In place of the vintage Cadillac is a Soviet Era Skoda. In place of the pit-bull an actual pig. In place of the Harley Davidson, the Bulgarian produced Balkan Car brand motorcycle. These objects do not have the patina of value afforded the antiques in Snoop’s video. Rather they are tainted objects, tainted with their Bulgarianness. The irony here is that everyone knows Bulgarian Pop is not able to support such mundane objects.

The song title, 3 in 1, comes from a brand of instant coffee that sponsored the single is also principally about a three way, or at least the ambitious proposal of one. And it is about the contemporary status of excess in the Bulgarian Pop scene, “30 euro up the nose,” a reference to coke fed Pop stars. For all its political and social commentary, its great success is in its comfort with the abstract spaces of Pop. It strives not to be street, i.e. grounded in the everyday, but is free to dance in the abstraction of the studio.



Figure 8: Absurd “Three in One”(Trima v Edno) Free Agents 2005.

These stories of various Pop stars’ rise and fall are more than simple gossip. Or more precisely, such simple gossip is part of constructing and participating in an international public, a public resistant to the instability of political movements and

economic reform, an affective public. In tagging along on music video shoots and in entangling myself with the networks of producers and performers, I was impressed with the professionalism and seriousness with which these producers approached their work. The project of producing quality Bulgarian Pop is taken up with all the greatest sense of urgency and concern. And these concerns are echoed in a Bulgarian public eager to have a public sphere glisten with all the extended possibilities of capitalism and digital special effects. In the ignorance of ethnic and religious differences, these differences are threatened but they are also invited to participate in the space of virtual abstraction. Such is Pop.

Chapter 3: The Living Room: Reality, Television, and the Post-Socialist Home

Somewhere along the way the living room was severed from the home. It traveled to world's fairs and expos, the subject of debate between world leaders. Nixon showed Khrushchev his. It appeared on game shows, behind door number one, two, or three. And it showed up on sound stages and television screens, conveniently missing a wall so that we could peek in and see what was happening. In its perfect geometry of domesticity it alternately compensated for, distracted us from, or reminded us of the space in which we were living. *Cosby's* couches and *Seinfeld's* sofa all gave a comfortable shape to a virtual American home. And on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain, clean lines and modern styling invited workers home from the factory. Whole villages stacked themselves vertically into their new high-rise apartments.

The Post World War II period marked a significant urbanization of the Socialist states and the suburbanization of the United States. In both cases, the home was newly constructed, as both a material and imaginary home. And in both, the home played a different, but no less significant part, in the construction of a public/private divide; the virtual homes and living rooms of movies, television, and print media giving a material shape to the abstract notions of privacy and publicity. As Susan Buck-Morss points out in her Benjaminian approach to Communist and Capitalist utopias there existed a basic rift between the trajectories of public life in these two competing narratives of modernity. In the Communist version, "there was no need for a retreat into a private domain" as "public life was personal fulfillment" (Buck-Morss 2000, 201). By contrast, "capitalist industrialization was grounded on a duality of work life and domestic life." (Buck-Morss,

201). In this capitalist split, the home became a retreat from work, a place as opaque and personal as the work place was transparent and impersonal. In Benjamin's own words:

“The 19th Century like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and encased him with all his apportions so deeply in the dwellings interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet”(Benjamin 1999, 220).

Coffin or compass case, both a luxurious capsule sealed off from social life. Clearly, whether in capitalism's private publics or communism's public privates the home remains a significant playing field between the public and private.

In these competing architectures of the home certain designs stay the same. The various rooms, the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom remain in each. And in each, these rooms retain their purpose; the kitchen for putting things in the body, the bathroom for putting things out, and the bedroom for what have you. The living room remains for everything else. It is where you do everything and nothing. It is a place of leisure, where you consume and entertain. As its name suggests, it is where you live. And for this it is the public face of the home, even more so than the architectural façade. The living room is the site of dreams, the place where success and equality are measured.

Given the ubiquity of the home in both soviet and capitalist imagery, it is interesting to note its relative disappearance within the Post-Socialist media of Bulgaria. As we have seen in the earlier discussions of Pop Folk and other such Pop imagery in Post-Socialist Bulgaria, real space appears to have been disappeared by the shiny presence of virtual sets and special effects. And as I have belabored to express, this virtual explosion is parallel to and yet divergent from the televisual aesthetics in the U.S. and other late capitalist countries. The relative absence of the home, of real spaces most generally, in Bulgarian television runs counter to the Popularity of reality programming, sitcoms, and the like in US markets. There are no Bulgarian sitcoms, no home makeover

shows, and no local versions of “This Old House.” Given these absences, when does the home appear in the Bulgarian media space? What does this Post-Socialist home look like? Is it a continuation of Socialist Era aesthetics or a byproduct of the factors peculiar to Post-Socialism? Does it mirror Bulgarian’s desire for a home in the European Union? What better way to answer these questions than via the relatively young reality television programming industry in Bulgaria?

What follows is the story of one such show, its germination, production, and reception as told through my ethnographic experience as a participant and observer, or participant observer, as Anthropologists like to say. This particular show, “Love Roommates,” provides a window into the domestic spaces of Post-Socialist Bulgaria and a better understanding of the shift in the visualization of the public sphere. In the show, a contestant enters the vacated apartments/homes of three other contestants and decides from an interpretation of their possessions which one they would like to take on a date. This is an archaeological version of the blind-date. You literally have to do a stratigraphy of their dirty laundry before you can go on a date with one of them. The rational desire to find a reason to choose or exclude a particular person is thwarted by the sheer insignificance of things. Following the production of this early form of reality programming in Bulgaria, is an opportunity to study shifting ideas of privacy and the role of television in expressing and forming these notions.

But before delving into the spaces of Bulgarian Reality television, we need to take a detour. In fact, we need to make two detours, one through the development of this genre in the U.S. and the other through the domestic spaces of Socialist era Bulgaria. Only then can we appreciate the odd convergence of these two histories in Bulgarian reality television and the Post-Socialist reality it expresses.

REAL SPACE IN REAL TIME

In the U.S. and other Western markets, so-called “reality television” has taken over a larger and larger percentage of airtime. On seemingly every channel, groups of eager participants struggle to maintain their right to participate in these mediated spaces. Aspiring actors, washed-up celebrities, and “Average Joe’s” compete for your attention. They bare if not their breasts, certainly their bodies, exposing themselves to the hot lights of television cameras and crews. For the most part, this prominence has led its critics and supporters alike to take reality television as a known entity, a clearly identifiable genre. By the same token, television is often treated as a known object. It is so everyday, so mundane; it is just another appliance, designed to channel content into the home. Taking for granted the technology of television, public discourse centers more on explaining its attraction, its inexplicable draw, rather than defining its distinct properties. The end result of these debates is often a car wreck theory of attraction, e.g. “you just can’t help but watch,” a theory of viral infectiousness. As tempting as such Pop reception theory is, it does little to articulate the real attraction and significance of reality television. Surely there is something else at play, some other desires fulfilled or at least titillated.

Televisual theory concerned with the concept of flow, or how television’s unique pace of visual content mixes with life in real-time, offers an alternative to the symbolic analysis and genre based theories of television (Dienst 1994, Williams 1974, McCarthy 1993). The introduction of “flow” by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* is central to this cultural studies tradition of television theory. It brings a materiality to the nonstop stream of interlaced imagery that is television. This materiality is just as heavy with the weight of insignificance as significance. Theorists such as

Richard Dienst and Anna McCarthy have extended Williams concept into the spaces of spectatorship, the everyday spaces and moments in which television is consumed. For some, the disrupt between screen life and real life becomes the source and means of analysis. This is certainly a handy approach. It enables one to use one world to make the points of the other; the realtime of televisual flow, a funhouse mirror of the world, the other more beautiful, more successful model of life. But things aren't this simple. The relationship between televisual flow and the real space is not one of simple juxtaposition. It is messy. They spill over into each other muddying any clear distinction.

Given this murky relationship, it is no wonder that real space has traditionally been aggressively framed when it is presented in the frames of television. News reports literally frame reportage with a layer of journalistic authority in the form of the newsroom studio backdrop (Tobias 2005). Scenes of catastrophe, war, and crime float just over the shoulder of the well dressed newsroom anchor. Similarly, graphics gild mundane footage with shiny bits of televisuality. The world isn't ready for its close-up. Or the world doesn't want to see itself in close-up. And now camera crews and television producers are equipped with prize packages and renovation crews able to transform your life into something presentable for television. A team of specialists is at the ready to bring you up-to-date, to fix you or bring out your inner beauty, whichever you prefer. Didn't this used to involve someone arriving at your door with a giant check? Slowly, and just as surely contestants are brought into the nether regions of televisual space. This is the space of talk shows, news magazines, and interviews most generally. It is a space entirely vital to portraying the success and importance of a subject; a space interwoven into their very significance and at the same time a space that must be separated from the subject, a space that carves them out of everyday space. Technically speaking, this task is accomplished both by placing the subject in a fictive abstract space

and by using light to literally carve the subject out of his or her context. This is the light that we do not see because it is always there. In other words, production techniques remove individuals from everyday spaces and reinsert them into uniquely televisual spaces, uniquely public spaces.

The explosion of self improvement, home improvement/renovation shows address viewers in a new mode. Instead of presenting an already existent space, a life and lifestyle lived by televisions starry inhabitants, these shows focus on bringing the average into the extraordinary; or in bringing the below average into the paradise of late capitalism. Backed by the deep pockets of corporate sponsorship, these shows can afford to give families and individuals home makeovers beyond their means. Reality programming has learned to exploit this Cinderella narrative to its fullest potential. In a myriad of different contexts and formats, individuals compete to win the lifestyle of success and leisure. It is an extension of the game show model. Individuals win a chance to see and live in what is behind “door number one”.

What I propose here is tracing a history that is rarely drawn between the sitcom, game shows, and reality programming, in order to show how each constructs a different televisual space and how all combine to create a uniquely televisual flow. Sitcom and game show space is a kind of event space that is an unacknowledged precedent for reality programming. Yes, the move towards reality programming is a move away from the studio. This is an easy point to make. The locations shift from studios to homes, from sets to streets. But the tools of the studio have not been left behind. The lights, crews, and cameras of the studio have simply become more mobile or at least unmoored from the grounds of the traditional studio.

At times, this move from studio to the real locations of reality programming seems like a positive move in accord with the cinematic tradition of early filmmakers

such as Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty. Didn't they call for a cinema of the people, of everyday lives? Isn't this the same escape that Vertov envisioned when he said, "Cinema is not I see, but I fly?" There is a similar call for reality programming buried amidst Benjamin's oft-cited predictions in his *the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. It is his call for a cinema of everyday people. In marking a distinction between Russian and Western European cinema, Benjamin sets up the impossibility of a capitalist cinema of everyday workers, or what we might call today "reality television". In his own words,

"Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves- primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion promoting spectacles and dubious speculations." (Benjamin 1969, 232).

Could Benjamin have predicted reality TV shows? Should he have predicted them? These are two, ultimately, not so interesting questions. The more interesting question is whether or not he would have enjoyed reality television in all its myriad forms. To this one need only look to Benjamin's fascination with the phantasmagoria of capitalist progress to find an answer. Combining the spectacular elements of consumer culture with the everyday mundane is exactly the sort of recipe that Benjamin himself tried to get right in his voluminous Arcades Project (*Pasen Work*).

And indeed, Benjamin's excited fetishistic engagement with early capitalism stands as a precedent for many critics writing on contemporary television today. Anna Evertt's obsession with HGTV (Home and Garden Television) is a prime example of this excited mode of research. In addition to embodying the desires of an ideal viewer, Evertt's research helps to bring a genealogy to reality programming (Evertt

2004). She traces a distinct line from early renovation programs, such as “*This Old House*,” through to the contemporary programs focused on renovating bodies and spaces alike, as in BBC’s “*Changing Rooms*” and the Discovery Channel’s “*Trading Spaces*”. In fact, this recent history needs to be written even if it does so at the risk of setting an arbitrary start date and ignoring antecedents. In Evertt’s case, she ignores the do-it-yourself literature of the early capitalism. The self-improvement literature of the twentieth century is clearly an antecedent to these latter day televised renovations of aging homes and bodies. As the filmmaker Haroun Farouki, puts it, “Instructions manuals are perhaps the only capitalist form of literature” (Farouki 1997). Nonetheless, Evertt’s coinage of “Transformation Television” to refer to the genre of reality programming that focuses on transforming the mundane into a presumably better version of itself is a helpful jumping off point for considering the appeal of such programming.

Why show transformation? Is the process, the showing of the process just some sort of ritual in order to conjure up the final transformation? Why don’t the television gods just wave their magic wand and let the task of transformation happen off camera? Isn’t this the way they used to do it on game shows. Didn’t you just win? Didn’t the product just magically appear behind door number one or two? In renovation reality programming, the actual renovation is both the site of the show and something to be sped through. It is done in a flurry, in 24 or 48 hours. Living is vanished or rather irrelevant in this transformation. The mundane is removed from the public event space of renovation and reveal. The home or new and improved body is presented as a finished product, something possessed more than lived.

It used to be that you had to at least play a game to win a chance at the prize. You had to guess whether or not a celebrity was right in a huge game of tic-tac-toe, as in “*Hollywood Squares*.” You had to travel to Burbank or you had to guess the appropriate

price of the prize, as in "*The Price is Right*." Now participation guarantees the prize, or participation is the prize. It seems competition has been thrown out the window. Everyone is a winner, or at least everyone visible. If you are an avid enough viewer of reality programming, you may be throwing up your virtual hand to remind me of all the competitions and challenges that structure many reality shows. These competitions are certainly there, and are just as clearly about pacing, giving some sort of script to the unscripted cast, as they are about winning. The prize is simply continued participation. What has changed in the move from "*Let's Make a Deal*" to "*Fear Factor*" is the terrain of the game. What used to take place in the clear abstraction of the studio sound stage, now takes place in the real world. This escape from the studio has most generally been theorized as a return to the real. It may also be about the *studiofication* of reality. In other words, the world is turned into a stage via the apparatus of lights and cameras.

BEHIND-THE-SCENES

So given this studiofication of reality or if you prefer explosion of reality programming, what method of research is appropriate to it. A first order critical instinct is to expose the apparatus of production, to show the everyday tasks and bureaucratic work behind the creation of the media image. And indeed, there is much to be gained by such an exposure of the means of media production. The labor and dynamics of such labor involved in mass media creation have all too often been overlooked. The labor behind the scenes of film and television production is disappeared in equal degree to which television and film are treated as known objects. In other words, television and film are most often pursued from the level of content, as if the process of producing this content were irrelevant. Critical studies of alternative media production are the exception

to this tendency. Anthropological and critical attention has been paid to the production of indigenous and alternative media, often with a view towards preservation and aiding self-representation. Production practices are the focus here, but again are not so much an ends as a means to achieve such things as representation, communication, and information. Faye Ginsburg's studies of indigenous media and Hamid Naficy's work with the Iranian Diaspora are examples of this kind of work (Ginsburg 2002, Naficy 2003). Such studies of western, read Popular, media production are rarely seen. In part this is due to the inability of researchers to secure funding for such work. It is also due to researchers' inability to define a critical position opposite these sites of production. Researchers are quickly turned into collaborators or consultants (Ong and Collier 2005). In my own research into Bulgarian television, I have benefited by the financial independence afforded an international researcher in the second poorest nation in Europe. I also have actively sought out opportunities for collaboration, approaching Bulgarians in these industries as peers. For me, this is a problematic that doesn't need to be avoided; it needs to be answered collaboratively.

Another problem that must be addressed by researchers of media production is the degree to which, increasingly, this kind of splaying open of a production is self generated by producers in the form of behind the scenes footage. These "making-of" documentaries have found a ready home in the extra features functionality of dvd's, alongside directors' commentaries and actors' bios. Major studios and directors are also starting to use web distribution as a way to publish documentaries prior to the release of the film. In the case of the upcoming superman movie, the last of the Stars Wars Films, and Peter Jackson's remake of *King Kong*, weekly or monthly videos of the on going production have been Posted for public viewing. These videos and their accompanying "weblogs" or "blogs" focus on the process of movie making, the very technical minutiae

of filmmaking. While certainly controlled, brief, and cut to create excitement about the upcoming film, there is remarkably little fear of dispelling the movie magic they are endeavoring to make. In addition to these officially sanctioned exposures of the cinematic apparatus, huge amounts of time and internet space are filled up with chatter and gossip on these productions. Meanwhile on television, reality programs focus on the mundane lives of celebrities and the entertainment industry in general.

Anthropologists are either cheering or jeering this new found self-reflexivity in the entertainment industry. This mass of self-reflexive media poses new questions for anthropologists and others interested in the practice of television and film production. From where does one witness this industry? How does ethnographic research function in a field that is always already mediated? What do Anthropologists do differently? Do we note the crews just to cry “Artifice?” Look, look there is a boom mic, see it’s not real. Or look an edit, a jump cut, it is all contrived. These are all questions that confronted me as I approached the burgeoning scene of Bulgarian commercial television and flash through my mind again as I try to make sense of my participation in a Popular Bulgarian Dating Show.

In the wake of late nineteen nineties reality television programming, the traditional television studio has been rumored to be on the decline. This demise of the studio appears a necessary part of the equation as more and more shows move into the real world. Perhaps this juxtaposition is too hasty. Perhaps the studio is not disappearing, but rather spreading out into the world. The mode of address has changed. Or more precisely, a mode of address once reserved to studio productions has moved out into the field, so to speak. The direct address of the television viewer, a common aspect of talk shows, game shows, and other such studio productions, has now extended into all of the far reaches of reality programming.

Another claim to the studiofication of reality can be made in the lighting used in location productions. In part, a byproduct of advances in the portability of lighting technology, location lighting schemes now, more than ever can mimic the extravagances of studio productions. Light is used not just to see, but also to hide, to outline, and generally to amplify reality. Even in the most basic of location lighting packages, that of a location news reporter, light is used to create a visual detachment between the reporter and the reality they are reporting. This is a bit paradoxical, as the entire point of the location reporter is to speak from the place of the action. With a single light mounted on the camera, these crews create an image in which the reporters appear in the same light as their studio counterparts. The absurdity of this separation and equivalence has been amplified to comedic effect in the work of the Daily Show. In this program the liveness, and thereness of reporters is often spoofed, with the reporter obviously speaking from a studio location, with a “live shot” digitally superimposed behind them. While the comedy of this may be derived from its apparent absurdity, it is important to note the logic behind such a chosen separation. The play between background and foreground forms an important dialectic of authority and critical distance from reality.

SOCIALIST INTERIORS

Before getting into this show, let us take that second detour that I mentioned earlier. This one starts back in the material reality of Socialist Bulgaria and hopefully will spit us out somewhere close to the confusion of different interests and desires that is contemporary Bulgarian television. Materially speaking little has changed between the Socialist and Post-Socialist home. No radical shift in the material wealth and goods of

Post-Socialist citizens has taken place in Bulgaria.² The same chairs, tables, and walls invite Bulgarians home. And yes, the cabinets that once housed collections of Czech glass and seldom used plates now are a little more crowded with souvenirs from the early days of free trade, the hat from the beer promotion, the wristband from the political rally. These new colors of plastic and products stick out in the color coded schemes of Socialist interior design; but they don't change the overall weight of things. They are additions, not transformations. Here too, I am reminded of the floor to ceiling photo mosaic wallpaper scenes of landscapes that are common to living rooms across Bulgaria. In more than one occasion, I saw these fall forest scenes and the like, pasted over with collages made of clippings from fashion magazines. Only in this case, the colorful collage of bodies blended into the wall to ceiling wallpaper of a fall forest scene, each fashion model disappearing into the forest foliage. Such collections of bodies from fashion magazines are certainly not peculiar to Bulgaria. And so the material sameness of Socialism encompasses the superficial changes of Post-Socialism.

Others, who have grown up in a Socialist home, have written eloquently on the unique qualities of this mass housing. The public character of the Socialist home is most famously present in the uniformity of furnishings and design. And as Svetlana Boym and others have noted, the soviet home was also full of kitsch, a kind of material excess that can not be explained by modernist theories of efficiency. For her, this kitsch calcifies in the form of the rubber plant, a nearly ubiquitous part of the soviet communal apartment (Boym 1998). This tropical transplant sticks out as an exotic, excessive addition to the home, its spindly branches made weak by dark Russian winters. For me, the Bulgarian equivalent of the rubber plant is the brightly colored fake fur that shows up on sofas,

² The exception to this continuation of material sameness is the extreme wealth of some individuals involved whom, most often, illegally benefited from the slow privatization of properties in Bulgaria. The material wealth of these individuals is all the more visible due to the material sameness of the majority of Bulgarian citizens.

chairs, beds, and even in cars throughout Bulgaria. This fake fur is modeled on the goat skins that have traditionally been part of life in the region. The purely aesthetic and traditional character of this fake fur runs against a logic of modern efficiency and embodies the decorative character of Socialist kitsch.



Figure 9 Nash Dom (Our House) magazine interior (1984).

Even given this tradition of kitsch, one does not see a partial approach to the Socialist home. In other words, domestic interiors are presented as a whole, a space, not a collection of different products. Bulgarian periodicals, such as *Nash Dom*, from the Socialist 1980s show the home as an already constructed space. It appears ready to be moved into, its bookshelves full of books, its cabinets full of the necessary cook wear. What you don't see in this literature are objects divided apart as individual products. Such a catalog style of presenting a product in abstract space is a capitalist form of literature. It puts emphasis on the object as commodity, more something brought into one's life than lived with, purchased rather than possessed. *Nash Dom* survived the political and economic transitions of the early nineties and has resurfaced with the benefit of advertising. This advertising sells part of the solution, this or that product, verses the totality of the Socialist imagery. Another important distinction that is apparent in a comparison of these two manifestations of the magazine is the absence of people in the imagery of Socialist era *Nash Dom*. Every room, the kitchen, bathroom, and living room, is meticulously prepared but no one is in sight. The

contemporary *Nash Dom*, on the other hand, features the homeowner prominently in their homes. Local celebrities lounge around in frame, addressing the reader with smiles of wealth and contentment.

As we have seen in the videos of Pop Folk Stars, the blank spaces of Socialist era design have been replaced by bodies. Bodies replete with curves and craters are the new terrain of Post-Socialist Bulgaria. Magazines on the newsstand beside *Nash Dom* are full of young bodies, posing in the abstract spaces of photography studios and exotic locales. Their bodies fill up the frame so that context becomes nothing more than an edge, a highlight around their form. So when then does living room appear in Post-Socialist imagery? When, or rather where, do domestic interiors become public?

POST-SOCIALIST GAME SHOWS “WHO WANTS TO BE A ...”



Figure 10 Stani Bogat (Get Rich) Bulgarian Version of Who Wants to be a Millionaire (copyright SIA Advertising 2002).

There are no communist game shows. How would they work when everyone has to win? For this very fact it is interesting to look at the entrance of game shows into the Post-Socialist Bulgarian television scene. Two Popular shows are variations on American game shows. “*Stani Bogat*,” literally “get rich” is the Bulgarian version of “*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*”, an American game show now in syndication all across the globe. In this show players answer common knowledge questions for a chance at a million dollars. The Bulgarian jackpot is notably smaller but the staging and set are identical. In fact these factors are regulated according to a strict contract signed between the local producers and the American parent company. So what’s different about this space in Bulgaria verses the U.S.? Rather than jarring the Bulgarian television audience this studio setting is quite familiar. It is an anonymous public space, modern, stripped of historic kitsch and knickknacks. It looks in form, like a debate between party officials. It looks like parliament with a better set of house lighting. In other words, the abstract studio space of game shows is not foreign to a Post-Socialist audience. It is an aesthetic that works equally well in Socialism and Post-Socialism.

The earlier version of “Who wants to be a Millionaire,” would have had to have been “Who wants to be a Party Official.” The inane questions of “WWBM” address the public. They involve not so much common sense, as common knowledge. In other words, they are answered not so much with intuition as with simple anecdotal memory. The audience thus always wins. The public always wins. Actual success on the show requires participation. Participation is the hardest part. of celebrity, success, and publicness.

What has not yet taken off in Bulgaria is the kind of competitive reality television that has spread across American television screens. In this construction, players are forced through menial, extreme, or embarrassing tasks that force them to deal with the

group. Whether it be the social experiment of housing twenty-somethings together in Mtv's the Real World or the psychological study of forcing players to publicly confront their fears in Fox's Fear Factor, these shows depend on the individuality, read privacy, of their players to create an interesting conflict with the group dynamic, in one word drama. While the kind of back-stabbing, infighting and other such drama that befalls American contestants would surely take place if a Bulgarian version was produced, it is debatable how enthralled audiences would be with such everyday sociality. Socialist subjects are too intimately familiar with the tight confines of communal living to find its portrayal on television interesting.

LOVE ROOMMATES

So how would such a combination of game show and reality television work in Bulgaria? *Love Roommates* is one effort to introduce this form into the contemporary landscape of Bulgarian television. Much like "Get Rich," *Love Roommates* is similar in form to an American production, Mtv's "Room Raiders." Nearly identical in form, these shows highlight very real spatial differences and equally real cultural differences. As mentioned earlier, the show involves a contestant who judges the homes of three other contestants in order to decide which of them he or she would like to take on a date. Both shows offer a rare instance in which the unadorned material of everyday domestic life is thrust under the bright lights of Popular television. Differences in the Bulgarian and American version of the show highlight very real differences in the public/private divide in these two nations.



Figure 11: Love Roommates Reality Dating Show Guest Hosts and author excavating the homes of three anonymous contestants (copyright SIA Advertising 2002).

In the Bulgarian version of the show, this insignificance is combated by the expertise of the co-host “Anna,” who is the resident “Psycho-Archo-ologist.” This academic babble of a title is at once tongue-in-cheek self-mockery and hyper-justification of her expertise. Her presence and commentary assures that there are answers to be found in the detritus of everyday living. For the same purpose, in the American version, contestants are equipped with a “detective kit” to aid them in their task of deducing the most perfect match. The most recurrent item in this bag of tricks is a black light which is used to detect biological residue on sheets, floors, and clothing; the splattered excretions found glowing in the dark are left implicit, their luminescent presence proof of otherwise unmentionable activities. These two approaches to the material reality of single twenty-somethings appear at first similar, but will soon reveal very real differences in attention to detail and the divide between public and private.

I would like to first tell how my research of the show turned into my participation as a contestant. I do this not so much for the sake of confession or academic honesty, but rather in the hopes of contextualizing *Love Roommates* as part of a larger set of commercial production. The very fact of my participation grew out of a couple of strange contacts and at least one evening of heavy drinking. As part of my ever changing research, I made contact with SIA advertising. This agency is really more like a

production house than an advertising agency, responsible as they are for everything from the Bulgarian versions of *Family Feud* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* to commercials for vodka and beer. A couple of weeks before my involvement in *Love Roommates*, I had gone with them to the coast to shoot a beer commercial for Zagorka Beer, one of the two or three major brands in Bulgaria. The slogans for these brands have stayed pretty consistent through the early years of advertising in Bulgaria. Zagorka's "Kakvo my triyabva na chovek" *What a person needs*, competed with the rival Kamenitza's "Muzete znayat zashto" *Men know why*. Zagorka's campaign at least on the surface appealed to a wider range, including women in the local ritual that is beer drinking.

The new ad involved the short story of a fisherman lazily fishing, while his dog wanders around and returns with a woman's shoe and eventually her in tow. Struck by the cuteness of the moment, the couple shares a cold one. This relatively conservative script, by Bulgarian standards, was made a little more edgy by having the fisherman played by a young actor, recognizable from a recently successful film, *the Emigrants*. The girl was chosen from the Elite Modeling agency for her smile, hips, etc... Besides a few stray clouds, a couple of debates about how best to drink a beer, and the constant battle to spray the beer can with just the right amount of perspiration, the shoot went smoothly. Afterwards, during the wrap party dinner, more decisions were made than while shooting. Over whiskey and ouzo, a lot of deals are made and unmade. The show, *Loubovni Kavartiri* or "Love Roommates," was one of these deals.

Somewhere in my expression of interest in this reality dating show, I agreed to become a contestant. This is a collaborative choice that turned my behind-the-scenes ethnography into an in-front-of-the-camera participation. I didn't agree to participate in this dating show so as to have a forum for presenting myself. Or better put, I forgot that

this was a part of the deal, you have to show yourself to be shown something. To start, the host, “Deo,” asked me some questions about what I liked in women, why I was in Bulgaria; I guess the usual. I stuttered out some half truths and clichés to reassure myself as much as the viewers. Our excavations took us around the city from Studenski Grad, the student housing complex, to a family apartment on the outskirts of the city. All the while the female host tried to read the women’s personalities back into their carefully arranged clothes and closets. A task she accomplished by a cryptic reading of the estrogen and testosterone levels of the female contestants (see appendix). Deo’s color commentary on these observations sought to turn everything into sexual innuendo at every opportunity. Of course, this combination of the sexual tension of a dating show with the practical interest of a home improvement show is made all the more difficult in Bulgaria, as most of Sofia’s eligible bachelors and bachelorettes live with their parents or at least a roommate or two.

And for all of these excavations there were only a couple of instances that exceeded the simple motivations of the shows premise. One took place as the host scavenged the closets of one of the contestants. In an effort to judge her size he placed a pair of jeans in front of me. Only later did he catch that he had done so backward. This image of backward jeans conjured up the mid 1990s teenage rap group Kris Kros whose style and name were based on the idea that they wore everything backward. The host took a moment to explain this to the “younger listeners” as we communed in this pop cultural reference. Beyond this communion in shared pop culture, this reference marked a shared sense of the passage of Pop culture, the speed with which it fades from contemporary to kitsch.

The other instance of dissonance in my pre-date archaeology came on encounter with a pencil holder. There is little more mundane than a pencil holder but this one

caught my attention for its strange combination of stock photography. It was one of those cups, like a mug that you could put your own pictures in, kind of like a picture frame that comes with a photo already mounted. The already mounted photo, in this case, included the 1989 collection of Daewoo cars, the “Prince”, “Espero”, and “Tico” and the phrase “It’s the right choice.” Alone this could have made sense, a simple advertisement. Even if it does take a little bit of a leap to accept that a pencil holder is a good way to advertise your new line of cars. What threw it off was the addition of a photograph of a boy pulling off the skirt of a woman walking on a city street, revealing her butt and wonderfully white underwear. It read as innocent, an update on the Popular coopertone ad, the boy too young to make the action sinister. But the montage, together with the cars was not so innocent. Someone had consciously decided to put these two images together on a pencil holder. It was perverse without being clearly part of any of the pre-established perversions, making it just disturbing. These juxtapositions of western advertising imagery, re- or misappropriated were a common occurrence in Bulgaria’s early opening to western markets. The advertising image became divorced from its consumerist logic as no one was able to actually buy the item. So advertise became artifact, an aesthetic object to be possessed in its own right. This Daewoo mug, turned pencil holder, was one of these artifacts now discarded or at least less visible amidst the new noise of consumer imagery in Bulgaria

But these two instances, these two objects of pop culture passed under the radar of the camera. It, the phantom public eye, was looking for clues. Moving from apartment to apartment, the show’s camera is a floating third presence zooming in and out on the details of domestic living. Unlike the Mtv version, there are no establishing shots of the buildings exteriors. The camera moves from interior to interior, the suburban façades of the American participants doing more work than the monolithic facades of the block

housing in which most Bulgarians live. The absence of exteriors is not unique to Love Roommates. Indeed, throughout the Bulgarian media space urban exteriors only appear as sites of problems, e.g. crime scenes, or as mass event spaces, as in the case of political rallies and rock concerts. This said the everyday mundane character of life in urban Bulgaria remains a prominent, if invisible character in Bulgaria media. It is the understood, the common denominator that weds together Bulgarians as Bulgarian. The everyday struggles of negotiating Sofias aging bus system, dealing with aging central heating systems, and other such utilities bend Bulgarians in a shared material existence. It is a material existence that Love Roommates and other shows on television feel no pressure to represent. Whether it is portrayed or it, it will still be there for you at the bus stop in the morning.

The detective approach that both shows employ runs parallel with the tradition of detective shows in American pulp and crime fiction. At first glance, they add nothing new to this genre. The three part structure of problem, detection, and resolution fit readily into the television format. Again, where these shows differ is in their visual approach to detection. The Mtv version looks for individual items on which to hang the choice of the contestant. And in fact so does the Bulgarian version. Where they differ is in the display of the items chosen. Mtv uses wire-frame 3d graphics to highlight the objects, subtracting them out of context and placing them in a motif of science and significance. This is much like the aesthetic in the Jerry Bruckheimer produced Crime Scene Investigation (CSI). This show is a contemporary version of the police detective drama and shares with Room Raiders a fixation on visualizing the materiality of the clue. The climax of the show takes the form of animated sequences of crime scene investigators at work in the lab; the camera creeping in closer and closer on the truth. It is at the level of the microscopic and scientific, these two are the same here, that the truth

is revealed; the truth a question of scale. Concurrent in this shift in scale is the disappearance of context as the camera creeps closer and closer to the object. The Vegas series and C.S.I. Miami are set in the two strangest cities in America, but take no advantage whatever of their “bizarre ecologies” (Ballard 2005). The show remains perpetually inside, inside the safety and authority of the lab. Visually, this is also accomplished through the photographic technique of narrowing the depth of field. In other words, the range of space in focus is reduced in order to direct attention to where it is determined necessary.

The flipside of these precise close-ups is the out of focus fields in which such details float. The technical term for this out of focus imagery is Bokeh (pronounced “boh-kay”). Bokeh is the shape light takes when thrown out of focus by a lens. The quality of this blurring is what separates different qualities of lenses, longer focal length lenses capable of narrower depths of field. And while only professional camera operators and cinematographers are likely to note the subtle qualities of different lenses and bokeh, viewers are equally aware of these abstract fields of light. So aware are audiences that the prevalence of bokeh has become associated with feature films. Where sitcoms and most television drama used to employ an aesthetic of deep depth of field, where nearly everything is in focus, many sitcoms recently have adopted a more cinematic style. Shows like the Fox hit the O.C., short for Orange County, set in its namesake, is a good example of this shift. Employing both a narrow depth of field freeing the camera from a traditional three camera studio setup. The show follows in the tradition of Baywatch, Beverly Hills 90210 in setting its action in the sunny hills and coast line of southern California. But this is not the same southern California as Baywatch or even Beverly Hills 90210. They do indeed share a fixation on nubile bodies, on high school students played by 20-somethings. But the O.C. cast floats along in a sea of bokeh, suburban

sprawl disappeared into a pleasant play of light, whereas the casts of the earlier shows were more firmly grounded in the fixed spaces of studio sets and beach bungalows.

What does this aesthetic have to do with Bulgaria? It is clear that the aesthetic of Pop abstraction in Pop Folk and Chalga has much in common with the narrow spaces of contemporary American sitcoms. The techniques of green screen subtraction and narrow deep of field, both isolate bodies in a purely aesthetic space. Such linkages between different genres and styles of production are rarely drawn in a field of television and media theory more bent on marking distinctions in genres and discussing flows of imagery.



Figure 12: Love Roommates Studio Set (copyright SIA advertising 2002).

In addition to possessing different approaches to objects and spaces, the shows also differ in their conclusion. The Mtv version ends with a meeting in the room of the contestant. In other words, the three would-be-dates, turn the table on the contestant by looking through his or her room. In *Love Roommates*, after jumping from interior to interior, everyone meets back up at a studio set. This set is the same space of abstraction seen in other game shows. In fact, it is the very same sound stage used for shooting “Get Rich.” The *Love Roommates* set, decked out in bright colors and banks of fluorescent lighting, invites viewers back into a purely televisual space (figure 12). This space is

stripped clean of domestic clutter and the weight of a Socialist past. It is a kind of purely public space, within which Bulgarian audiences are just learning to be comfortable.

There is a parallelism between the way the economic world order and television have recently been theorized as flows. They are seen as things like rivers not so easily damned or diverted from their natural flows. All things swept up in these flows are considered a lamentable, but nonetheless inevitable loss. Culture is one of these things; a home swept away in the rush of economic progress, a cultural peculiarity vanished in the flood of television images, the flotsam and jetsam continuing on down stream. And indeed it is easy to get swept up in this imagery; there are truths as well as affects that overwhelm us.

All metaphors aside, the images of domestic life and everydayness that make their way into television are carefully couched in the abstraction of the televisual aesthetic. In talk shows, game shows, and recent reality television a space is constructed to house the public. It is a space that carves them out of everyday space and then reinserts them with the halo of televisual spectacle. The presences and absences of contemporary Bulgarian television represent not so much the failure of a Socialist documentary tradition as an invitation to participate in the new shiny publics of popular culture and television.

Chapter 4: Vice City: Violence, Modernity, and Gaming in Sofia, Bulgaria

“the city splits into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room” (Benjamin 1999, 417)

These days, the only thing that keeps Sofia's millions out in the mid-day sun are the lines at the Mobi-Tel offices. The old lines for bread have turned into lines to pay GSM phone bills. But people still squeeze together, looking for a gap to slip ahead of the others. Meanwhile, Alexander Nevsky³ has been under going reconstruction. Workers are working to reapply the gold coating that caps the orthodox crowns. This has nothing to do with authenticity and everything to do with building a metaphor. This is part of an elaborate return to opulence. Sofia is looking for her former beauty. She is having an operation to restore her figure, the curves of her cupolas. She is also having a little internal work done. A new metro and Mercedes-Benz buses help circuit the lifeblood of the city. Nonetheless, these are superficial successes, a kind of urban cosmetic surgery soon covered, like the new trash cans and bus stops, with an urban patina of dust and grime. And rumor has it that Pristina and Belgrade have nicer buses, Sofia not having benefited to the same degree from the international attention America and the United Nation Development Funds. Meanwhile Edi Rama, the painter turned mayor of Tirana, Albania is praised in the pages of *The New Yorker* for overseeing the painting of Tirana, Albania's tired Socialist buildings in “Caribbean” colors (Kramer 2005). Superficial successes take place amid the continued harsh economic realities of the Balkans and the aspirations of these nations to join the European Union.

³ Alexander Nevsky is the central Orthodox Church in downtown Sofia.

And politically, the same face-lift has been taking place. The Tsar's royal features replaced Kostov and a Union of Democratic Forces fatigued by corruption and the responsibility for stewarding Bulgaria's transition to democracy.⁴ "Bulgaria must become a part of the European Union," "Bulgaria is the Switzerland of the Balkan;" are phrases chanted repeatedly in the press as if their mere mention would eventual make them so. The son of the former Tsar, Simeon Saxe-CoburgGotski, has lent his face, his lineage to this campaign for the new. Paradoxically, the success of his coalition is the promise of the new and not the old. The return, if a return at all, is a return to a Bulgarian modern formed before the World Wars and the failures of the Socialist projects of the 20th Century. The promise of modern living is wrapped⁵ up in every new issue of *Nash Dom*⁵, and shown on television in elaborate Technicolor. As we have seen, the special effects of Pop Folk and other local media are a kind of virtual renovation, their superficial character designed to support a new political position for Bulgaria. Given the slow pace of infrastructural development, these virtual renovations are all the more important. They are not escapist in so far as they are part of an entrance into Europe in the form of the European Union.

In this chapter I want to explore another instance of the link between labor, space, and affect that comprises life in Bulgaria. Here, I take up the spaces of modern video games and the mode of their production as examples of this interaction between screen space and everyday affects. As earlier, I want to explore screened space not so much as representation but rather as a material extension of the world, a kind of neighborhood with its own properties, pathways, and residents. All the while, I want to resist the need

⁴ The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) is the liberal party Popular since the transitions begun to realize the dream of a liberal market economy. Primarily it is the pace of transition that is source of dissatisfaction with this party. Ten years of transition starts to look like ten years of the same state.

⁵ *Nash Dom*, "Our House", is an interior design and architectural lifestyle magazine that began in the midst of the Socialist Realist aesthetics of 1950's Bulgarian and that now caters to the novo riche.

to turn images, spaces, and affects into something else, something like community, power, or politics. I, nonetheless, want to show how these things circulate in spaces larger than themselves forming something like a public. Along the way, I want to ask with Lauren Berlant, “What does it mean to measure the scale of a scene through an emotional epistemology?” (Berlant 54, 2005).

Ultimately, the goal in examining screened space in this way is to develop a better understanding of how this process is involved in the re-imagining of Sofia, Bulgaria’s future. In choosing the virtual terrain of video games, I am responding to the call for new studies of Post-Fordist spaces in the Italian school of Post-Marxism. As Shaviro puts it, echoing Virno, “it is only by delineating the new grounds of affect and subjectivity that characterize the Post-Fordist, network society, that we can even begin to think about tactics of political transformation” (Shaviro 2004). These “new grounds” are shifting spaces, comprised of affects, technologies and everyday practices that are as demanding as they are inviting. They demand that we learn how to enter, know where to insert the key and how to turn the door knob to enter this virtual realm. As impressive as this virtual potential is, it is important not to lose sight of the motivation and effort extended by individuals to participate in these spaces. Video games, like other media, demand that audiences develop new skills and sensibilities in order to take advantage of their communicative and generative potential.

Video games in Bulgaria resonate with the local economy of emotion and politics of affect. This is an affective terrain that includes the violence associated with the political transitions of the last decade and the rise of a significant criminal presence in Bulgaria. The position of everyday Bulgarians vis-à-vis the violence associated with the shifting power plays of the Bulgarian Mafia and the economic instability of a transitional state suggests the complex circuit between violence and the everyday realities of Post-

Socialism. My goal here is not to call this violence out, to put it up to a court of public judgment, as is often the case in international debates regarding such violence. Instead, I will show how the local reception of this violence and criminality circulates differently than it does in an international discourse of development and European integration. Similarly, the popular theoretical discourse surrounding depictions of violence in the media and its links to anti-social behavior will form a counter example to the complex ways violence circulates as one of many possible affects in the terrain of contemporary Sofia, Bulgaria.

As Bulgaria sits on the edge of its entrance into the European Union and struggles with its own image of criminality and corruption, the debates surrounding video game violence offer an interesting parallel and opportunity to better understand the circulation of public violence. This isn't a story of certain gamers, of players playing the right or wrong way, whatever that might be. Nor is it a story where such things as sociality or community are the prize at the end. The idea here is to explore the ways in which the virtual worlds of video games extend and interact with Bulgarians' efforts to re-imagine their own Post-Socialist future. Through a technological focus on the very art of game design and game space, the intent is to end up with a more sophisticated understanding of the potential of mixing game space and real space and in charting something like the affective terrain of Sofia, Bulgaria. What better way then, than to begin with an instance of play turned into something else? What follows is the story of game play as it falls into and out of a known circuit between screened and real-life violence.

(UN)JUST GAMING

Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City is one in a series of controversial video games produced by Rockstar Games. In the game, players are thrown into miniature versions of major cities, in this case Miami Vice, circa 1985, and set free to rampage through the streets, robbing, carjacking and murdering at will. This freedom to wreak havoc on innocent bystanders and its graphic portrayal has proven hugely popular, making the ongoing series a perennial number one selling game in the billion dollar video game industry. The same content has also sparked outrage from parental groups and politicians concerned with the effect of such screened violence on players (Frasca 2003). These criticisms are underpinned with the assumption that the game players are impressionable, presumably unable to draw appropriate lines between game play and real life.

But what do the sharp corners of polygonal Miami Beach have to do with Sofia, Bulgaria? At first glance, Sofia would appear the more typical video game space. The decaying modernism and desolate government housing projects of Sofia more closely mirror the Post-apocalyptic spaces of science fiction so typical of video games. These spaces, like the barren zones of dystopic pulp fiction represent a kind of free space, where anything goes. Nonetheless, the period kitsch of nineteen eighties Miami in Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* remains immensely popular. The unique degree of outrage directed at the GTA series of games in contrast to other games suggests that violence in games is most threatening when it takes place in spaces that resemble the everyday. In other words, space monsters, aliens, and Nazis are free fodder for video games. Citizens of Miami Beach are not. This geography of violence, of course, relies on a whole series of moralities, theories of affect, and other such un-interrogated presumptions. The naturalized locations of violence are as much driven by politics as they are a byproduct of it. Inner cities, urban decay, and Third World-ness are markers of a violent potential. The point here is not to call out for more accurate or at least more

peaceful depictions of these spaces, but rather to interrogate the reality of their linkage with violence. How can we imagine an alternative geography of violence?

My own first encounter with Vice City involved a number of lost evenings, evenings lost in the labyrinth streets of this virtual Miami. One of the first things you realize playing the game is that it need not ever end. It takes place in another time where even one's death is but a pause before reentering the game. Only the setting sun bouncing off the neighboring block and onto my computer screen reminded me of myself, the grumble in my stomach, the blurriness of my eyes. I knew I should have eaten something before. My levels are low. No problem, I'll just type in the cheat, "A-S-P-I-R-I-N-E." And I am off again, recklessly running through the city. Every static object an obstacle, every moving object a potential target. After a few nights of playing *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, I was getting pretty good at it, pretty good at avoiding the cops, stealing cars, and sniping off innocent bystanders. I had long since given up on the mission based system of advancement, preferring to run rampant through this virtual version of Miami Beach. And yeah, I kept tempting fate and suffering gruesome deaths at the hands of police helicopters and multi-car accidents. But video game characters are blessed with immortality, even if it's sometimes hard for us, the players, to keep up with an infinite life cycle. The instant death and rebirth don't allow for any sort of recovery or reflection. You immediately get sent back to try and correct your mistakes from the past life. The games of the future are going to have to have naps programmed into them. If our polygonal counterparts don't take breaks, how will we?

On one such break from my virtual looting and pillaging, I went to refuel at the local 24 hour grocer. Returning in the late summer evening, loaded down with bags full of chicken and beer, I marveled at the realism of the moonlight, its perfectly mapped shadows hinting at the future realism of gaming. And, I breathed deep the fresh air

feeling myself the most dangerous thing in a neighborhood through which I had previously hurried, a foreign researcher struggling to adjust to the micro-politics of his new home. On return, opening the door to my fourth floor walk up apartment, I noticed a strange flushing sound, as if the neighbor's toilet was running or something of the kind. Thinking nothing of it, I made my way upstairs. As I turned past the third floor, I was confronted with the source of the sound, the sound of running water. A man lay on the landing above me. Staring at me, gasping for air, he bled from his head, the red dripping down the stairs.

At first, struck with this startling image, I imagined myself confronted with real life retribution for the thousands of murders I had been committing in Vice City's virtual Miami. Surely, some sort of cosmic or divine law had been leveled on my illicit activities; this man the mistaken recipient of punishment that was meant for me. Only after calling for an ambulance and talking with my roommates did I learn that his injuries were simply, but no less unfortunately, due to a fall resulting from an epileptic seizure. After the commotion, I settled back into a long night of murder and mayhem.

This brief story of game play suggests that the linkage between video game space and the real time of everyday existence does not necessarily follow predetermined logics. The relationship is often simply one of endurance, of the struggle to keep up with virtual characters that are not hindered by our bodily limitations.



Figure 13: Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Screen Shots Rock Star Games copyright 2002.

RUNNING AROUND WITH A GUN IN YOUR HAND

“In Dostoyevsky, there are always characters caught up in very urgent situations that require immediate answers. Then, all of a sudden, the character stops and seems to waste time for no reason: he or she has the impression that they have not yet found the hidden “problem” that is more urgent than the situation.”(Deleuze Cinema I, Premiere) Interview with Serge Daney, Liberation, October 3, 1983, p.30

While the motifs of modern video games readily change from Post-apocalyptic dystopias to historical epics, the sense of urgency behind the game-play remains little changed. At every turn a trap, a problem, or an enemy appears. Paradoxically, this very urgency, this pacing in video games often becomes something like its opposite. As Deleuze points out above, it is a Dostoyevskian situation in which the urgency of a situation breaks apart into a new search for “the hidden problem.” Video game play is punctuated by this rift between urgency and an aimless search for purpose. Such distracted squandering of time is where video game characters meet up with Benjamin’s flâneur and Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo. All wander around in the city, skimming over

its surfaces. In the work of these authors, aimless wandering is a counter move to the actualized theories of labor and cultural practice. As Benjamin puts it succinctly; “The idleness of the flâneur is a demonstration against the division of labor” (Benjamin 1999, 427). Similarly, the skittish attention of Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo-subject explodes the purpose driven narratives of psychiatry, capitalism, and Marxism. The construction of video game space and game play mirrors the situation of Post-Socialist subjects. And it is not only teenagers logged onto the latest FPS⁶ game for which this comparison holds true. It is also an expression of the Post-Industrial employment situation and stark economic reality in Bulgaria. Daily economic choices and routines are underpinned with questions as to the point and effectiveness of these choices; a kind of urgent distraction the normal state of mind. The work of the shop floor, or at least the image of the work of the shop floor, as it operated in the older Socialist system of state progress is no longer a effective guarantor of social and economic well being. In this search for the underlying “hidden problem,” the answer is remains elusive.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the terrain of Post-Socialist media is a smooth space comprised of images and aesthetics too slick, too flat to contain anything other than itself. In this aesthetic there is no inside, or rather inside and outside are the same, a surface built to be traversed. Much like the space of video games, in which everything is comprised of the same polygons, there is no place for repose, only places in which to hide for a moment, from which to plot one’s next move; space here more a maze than a map. The player runs through a labyrinth of possible choices. At least in the video game scenario one is equipped with a means of interacting with this hard surface. In the game, you are given a gun, a violent instrument for interacting with the world. This turns every game into a wild-west story, every street a showdown. In this world violence is

⁶ FPS is the acronym for First Person Shooter, a popular style of video game wherein the player sees the game through a first person perspective, his or her body only manifested by an extended arm.

agency, literally a line of sight and flight, one's vision marked by the cross hairs of a gun's sight. There is no moral choice involved; to shoot or not, the gun is an operator, a line of sight, and a constant pointer forward.

In the discourse around video games, violence is the affect that carries over from game space to everyday space. In a paternalistic fear of transference, it makes the jump from intergalactic battles to the high school. Indeed, such fears of transference have accompanied the introduction of many new technologies and media. Like cinema and television before it, critics fear the slippage between video game worlds and the real world (Thompson 2005). The virtual and real here are unnecessarily divided and then clumsily reunited via a language of behaviorism. This is a cause and effect theory of media reception. Even supporters of video games in the relatively young, but burgeoning field of Game Studies, take the basic division between fantasy and real space as a starting point for theorizing games (Jules 2005). But what happens if we start not with the division between the virtual game space and the real, and instead focus on the affects that permeate both? Playing games can be understood as part of the structure of feeling and not its generator. The point then becomes not so much to call these critics wrong but to recognize their outrage and concern as but two possible responses, two possible affects. There are many other possible affects. Danger, fear, joy, and terror are all possible affects. They are like ambient emotions, floating around, settling on the surface of things like snow, or rather soot from some unseen fire.

As we have seen, finding something more than the perfect metaphor for affect has become increasing a site of convergence between varieties of disciplines. Fear and its generator violence occupy a disproportionate amount of space in these discussions of affect. And perhaps there is good reason for this. Apocalyptic discussions of fear and terror permeate the contemporary United States, as elsewhere, in a shifted continuation of

Cold War era fears of a nuclear apocalypse. Collections such as the Brian Massumi edited *The Politics of Everyday Fear* are prime examples of the efforts of many to understand affect as a real force. The cultural geographer Nigel Thrift's conception of cities, "as roiling maelstroms of affect" is another example of affect approached not as a byproduct of media, but as the very terrain of urban existence (Thrift 57, 2004). Similarly, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "ambient fear" is a stab at articulating the pervasiveness of affect (Bauman 1999). And it is here too, in the Italian tradition of Post-Marxism, with Virno's belief "that fear is a diffuse feeling, characteristic of our epoch." (Virno 2004). . Taken at face value, much of this writing can begin to sound like a rudimentary physics course or like a weather report replete with zones of high and low pressure, "roiling maelstroms." And well it should, for we are talking about real forces and pressures. Still the instruments for gauging affect, its texture and substance, are not as precise or refined as their meteorological cousins. It appears the best we can hope to do is stand in the storm and speak, sometimes shouting over top the howl of the wind.

BALKANIZING

All extended metaphors aside; the relation of game players to video game violence is an interesting parallel to the affective terrain of contemporary Sofia, Bulgaria. This contemporary terrain of modernist decay, produced by the failures of a totalitarian model of state Socialism, is punctuated by moments of violence. In addition to the everyday pressures referred to earlier, Bulgarians are often confronted with shocking displays of violence. Since the early nineteen nineties, a number of high profile assassinations have taken place. Executed with elaborate precision, involving snipers,

radio triggered bombs, and other such scenarios straight off the pages of international espionage thrillers, they are full of mysterious intrigue. The slow transition of the Bulgarian state from Socialism to a private market saw a small group of individuals monopolizing business interests in Bulgaria. These instances of violence are reminders that many of those who illegally profited by the economics of this transition are still operating illegally and successfully in Bulgaria. In fact, this recent history of assassinations and mafia murders is so prevalent as to make managing it a major obstacle in Bulgaria's official ascension into the European Union in 2007 (Kapital 2004, 24 Chasa 2005). There are, of course, two types of management involved here. There is the actual solving of murders and crime, a task that presents its own set of logistical tasks and investigative struggles. And there is the management of the public perception of these crimes and the appearance of Balkan criminality most generally. The later of these two takes place on a larger scale than the local realities of criminality. It takes place on the stage of international perception, the stage of European Union integration.

The reality of organized crime is compounded from a West European perspective. This perspective is filtered through an association of Bulgaria with the conflicts in the neighboring former Yugoslavia and the assumption of endemic inter-ethnic violence in the region. This violence is often naturalized, imagined as part of the very texture of life in the Balkans. The root of this assumption lies in a long history of contact between Balkan and West European nations. It is a contact that in the case of the British in the 19th Century meant sympathy with Ottoman officials in the region and a relative disdain for the perceived primitivism of the local Slavic populations (Todorova 2001). More recently, the prospect of the Balkan other has taken on a new form in West European media as an economic threat of cheap labor and immigration from the soon to be member states of the Balkans. The specter of Eastern European immigration and competition is

given a face in the form of the Mafia. Each nation is called out, the naming of the Albanian, the Serbian, and the Bulgarian Mafia gives a distinct face, however shadowy, to this more generalized fear.

The internationally perceived power of the Mafia also borrows on the traditional image of ultra secretive, ultra powerful Cold War era espionage. Fears of the subterranean networks of the Balkans infiltrating international trade are born of the same stuff as the fear of a Red menace spreading from East to West in Europe. Films such as Florent Emilio Siri's 2002 film "Nid de guepes" (Nest of Wasps) embody this new fear. The film depicts the, in this case Albanian, Mafia as an inhuman swarm of covert warriors. In the film, average western criminals and law enforcement must unite to repel an attack by a ceaseless wave of Albanian Mafia seeking to free their boss from authorities trying to take him to the Hague for trial at the international war crimes tribunal. Further proof of the inhumanity of this force is given in the very movement of the Albanians. They leap about with a faceless bestiality, moving with inhuman speed and resilience. Their bodies also disappear after being shot, as if they were some real life manifestation of video game enemies, their remains vanishing without a trace. Their bodies are only significant as a threat and not as a material existence. The filmmaker's intentional exaggeration of the Mafia's inhumanity trades on the fact of a similar exaggeration outside the confines of the film world. Whether or not Siri's treatment functions as critique or mirror of Western European fears of the threat of Eastern European mass is really irrelevant. The spectral threat remains.

Such bias and fear are predicated on a timeline of capitalist development that divide Post-Socialist states off from Western Europe. Bulgaria and other Post-Socialist states are often treated as naïve inductees into the crazy world of Late Capitalism. Much like the growing pain language used by the Bush Administration to account for the

violence in Iraq, the Balkan states are treated as adolescents, not yet able to handle their own wants and desires, struggling with the bad skin and the other unfortunate imbalances of adolescence. Clearly, such metaphors are at best weak ways to refer to the problems of transition and at worst part of an insulting paternalism. At the scale of international publics, crime and violence are seen as manifestations of a premature state, one not yet fully grown into the global free market economy. By the same token, “Liberal arguments for free-market principles are seen as the nonviolent successors to a separate, discrete, violent past, to which they are radically opposed” (Klima 2002). Thus the removal of violence is at the heart of modernization and globalization discourse. With the State a stern warden of violence, the free market will set you free, or so the story goes.

The violence and crime that do take place in Sofia are real. But make no mistake; Sofia is not some Wild West town where everyone walks around with a gun in their hand looking for a fight. The affective terrain that results from this violence is not a simple story of barbarism or the growing pains of a young free-market. I will not go into the specifics of Bulgaria’s criminal history other than to reiterate that; “It does not have the ethnic flavor common to the Chechen and Georgian mafias, nor is it structured around kinship networks, as is Albanian organized crime. What is special about organized crime in Bulgaria is the way it was created by the ‘transitional state.’” (Nikolov 1997). Thus the economic success of much Post-Socialist Bulgaria is wedded to the success of organized crime networks. I have seen the occasional hand gun disgorged along with the cell phone and cigarettes to make room in the pants for the settling expansion of a late business lunch. And I have noticed the caravans of tinted Mercedes and the entourages of bodyguards that follow in the wake of some of Sofia’s wealthiest citizens. These daily manifestations of power are meant to be deterrents to violence, a preemptive approach. They also circulate the image of criminality and violence, its possibility.

I do want to show how these instances of violence are interwoven into the texture of everyday existence and how they affect the aspirations and desires of Bulgarians. The regular assassinations, remote controlled bombs, and drive-by hits are certainly the stuff of pulp fiction. Theories and gossip as to the motive for these murders abound, full of tales of drugs, old debts, and rivalries. They suggest exotic secret networks, clandestine meetings, and hidden forces. And the occasional moments of rupture, when violence springs to the fore are just that occasional. But as they take place on the stage of E.U. integration, they puncture the Potemkin City of economic reform and stability that Bulgarians' are actively erecting along the path to the European Union integration. In 1898, Adolf Loos critiqued Vienna for being "The Potemkin City," a city built on the false facades of neoclassicism and affluence. At the turn of the subsequent century, the play of surfaces in international politics remains just as important. Bulgaria's management of its violence and criminality are at the center of its success in this international realm of politics.



Figure 14: Chinimport Chemical Company Advertisement in Sofia 2003.

"GROWS, BUT DOES NOT AGE"

Sofia's motto, a city that "grows, but does not age," is born from an earlier era of Communist aspirations. The smooth surface of success that covered the proletarian projects of Socialism, however, has not fared well in the years since its dramatic fall. The housing complexes that once stood as rectangular testaments to the efficiency of Communist humanitarianism are literally falling apart at the seams. Their modular concrete construction showing through the civic reminders and industrial slogans that once plastered their sides (figure 6). The state of housing in Bulgaria is a particular problem in Bulgaria. In contrast to other Post-Socialist states, Bulgarian workers bought their apartments from the state in the nineteen eighties. This ownership model has left buildings without an overall landlord capable of maintaining the building as a whole. The state has absolved itself of responsibility for the buildings that it built to house the mass urbanization of its population.

These crumpling testaments to modern architecture have long out lived the “end of architectural modernity” that Charles Jencks famously dated “at precisely 3:32 pm on July 15, 1972,” when “a housing complex was demolished in Saint Louis, Missouri that had been built twenty years before but was rapidly deemed inapt” (Ardenne 2004, 103). But unlike this infamous failure of modern architecture in Missouri, Bulgaria’s experiments in modern housing have not been demolished. They remain less as monuments to the success or failure of any one theory or style than as real spaces, lived with and within. What do we see in this decaying modernity, a chance or the loss of one, a future or a past? Or do we even ever see it. Is it too far away for a “we” that lives in a world which constantly recycles itself? And is it equally invisible to a population that lives with and within in it everyday. In a world in which there is not time for things to age as they are replaced by the next, the new, what does remain, what does age takes on a rarified value. The thing turned antique; modernity, itself, vulnerable to the temptation to become a nostalgic memory, kitsch.

This lingering modernity, buildings that stick around longer than their intended use, can be found elsewhere too. It is there in the ghosts of fortress Europe cemented into the Normandy coast (Virilio 1994). It is there in the Japanese fascination with “haikyo”⁷. And it is there in every city, every city haunted by its past, a phantom presence that Rem Koolhaas chronicles in his retroactive manifesto for New York (Koolhaas 1997). The phantom presences in Bulgaria, of course, are directly related to the projects of Socialism and the current geography of European development. They are there in once grand state theatres converted and parceled out into markets and cafes. And they are there in a new generation of unfinished ruins, apartment blocks begun and never finished. These were built on investment schemes not unlike pyramid schemes, both designed to ultimately

⁷ Haikyo is a genre of photography and writing that centers on the ruins of industrial Japan. These images of abandoned factories and machinery are valued as beautiful Post-industrial landscapes.

collapse. But unlike the ephemeral networks of investors these buildings, these unfinished ruins remain. They are a kind of material reminder of the difficulties of renovating the material landscape of Bulgaria.

And as we have seen in the burgeoning Pop music and television scenes, there is a new aesthetic designed against the instability of recent history and current events, everything built with permanence and quality in mind. Wealthy business men, flashing about with armed guards and shiny black Mercedes have the same effect. They remain hidden behind the tinted glass; but their masked presence is still a visible assurance of wealth. They are physical signs that there is money changing hands. This visual economy is echoed in other Post-Socialist literature. In studying the visual economy of Post-Soviet Russia, Aliana Lemon has shown that “currency is a sensual substance” (Lemon 39). The materiality of cash embodies the very desires and possibilities that its abstract value represents. Post-Socialist Bulgaria also works with this kind of visual economy, one where money flows outside of a banking industry that is still recovering from the catastrophic collapses of the early nineteen nineties. It is an economy built on the assurances of appearance, business a play of appearances. Of course, businesses everywhere bank on the appearance of success, selling their customers, stockholders, and workers an image of integrity and potential. In the smaller, developing networks of Bulgaria, quality and appearance more clearly equal a guarantee of integrity. The cut of one’s suit, the brand of one’s cigarettes, and the mark of one’s car testify to the quality of one’s business (Yurchak 2001). Thus investments in appearances are money in the bank, the prevalence of tinted black Mercedes the surest economic indicators of success. In the same way, corruption is both a source of outrage and proof that there is power still to be had.

The 2002 election of the Prime Minister is another example of this visual economy in action. His wealth and aristocratic lifestyle were literally imported into Bulgaria twice, once under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and secondly in the name of democracy. A diverse electorate elected Simeon Saxe Cobourg-Gotha, son of the former Pre WWII Tsar of Bulgaria, as much for his image of stability and integrity as for his alleged ability to solve Bulgaria's economic problems or his historic ties to Bulgarian Royalty. Bulgarians elected the wealth of an aristocratic image and not its royal legacy. The success of his coalition is the promise of the new not the old.

The patinas of decay and wealth that texture the surfaces of Post-Socialist Sofia rival each other; each trying to cover the other, one glossing over the surface of things, the other eating away at it with time. Rather than merely superficial asides, this play of surfaces is the material embodiment of Bulgaria's political, cultural, and affective terrain.

ANXIOUS SPACE



Figure 15: Half-Life Screen Shots Valve Software copyright 2004

So what if Sofia, Bulgaria was a video game? What would it look like? What would you do in it? In fact, Sofia, Bulgaria is already a video game. In *Half-Life 2*, the company Valve Software has created a futuristic dystopia, a city modeled on contemporary Balkan Post-Socialism. Only in the game version, the apocalypse comes in the shape of blood sucking aliens and not in the collapse of the Soviet Union. While no explicit reference is made to Sofia or any other Post-Socialist city, for that matter; the same unique mix of Austro-Hungarian architecture, Soviet style block housing, and cobblestone streets signal the ancestry of this virtual city. The game's designers, the lead designer notably of Bulgarian decent, have mimicked the decay and age of the material world. Every stain, every crumbling wall, and graffitied street corner has been meticulously designed and detailed by hand. And while the surfaces of this Post-apocalyptic city are different than the gloss of GTA's Miami, the same time of urgent delay is present in both. In both, players stroll around the city repelling occasional attacks and generally reaping destruction on the world around them.

For most players, this post-apocalyptic world with its artificially produced grime puts the player in a position of freedom vis-à-vis cultural and moral expectations. After the apocalypse anything goes. These predominant motifs of destruction and decay in video games echo the aesthetic that Deleuze noted in his study of neo-realist cinema. He notes, "In the city which is being demolished or rebuilt, neo-Realism makes any-space-whatever's proliferate -urban cancer, undifferentiated fabrics, pieces of waste ground-which are opposed to the determined spaces of the old Realism" (Deleuze, 212). Deleuze accredits the term *any-space-whatever's* or "espace quelconque" to the French anthropologist "Pascal Augé." This accreditation has lead to great confusion as neither Pascal Augé nor "espace quelconque," exist as such. Apparently, what Deleuze's fictive citation references is the "non-lieux" or "non-space" of Marc Augé (Stivale, 2005). In

Deleuze's usage, the supermodern, clean spaces of Augé meet up with the excessive decay of the failed city to create a virtual terrain for the modern flâneur. Video game players and producers take advantage of the same motif of decay to create an open space for play and mobility in their games.

As noted earlier, Augé makes a move in his theory of supermodernity and non-space that veers off from the direction taken by Deleuze and the throngs of video game players. Augé argues that individuals become depersonalized in such "homogenous, de-singularizing space" (Bell 1997, 10). On the contrary, Deleuze and his teenage peers view such space as a playing field, a space in which to meet up with their peers, a place to explore, a place to play. Fortunately, Deleuze picks up where Augé leaves off. Deleuze rescues the hypermodern, the non-space of the Augé's hypermodernity by avoiding the temptation to define the negative space as merely the adverse of space. Instead he sees non-space as a generative space, one full of virtual potential. Everywhere is an in-between in Deleuze's work. Here space is a circuit, one that relays energies back and forth without end. In his theory, "...every point is a relay and exists only as a relay...a path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The question of what something becomes is thus supplanted with the question of how it is becoming.

In Augé's theorization of supermodern spaces, such as the modern airport and waiting room, Augé confronts the meaninglessness of space. These spaces are built for no other purpose but to be traversed. They are designed, as in the case of the moving sidewalk, to most expediently move you along. For Augé these hyperspaces are but in-betweens, momentary lapses in the gaps of culture mapped closely to a highly organized social world. They are a kind of temporary escape from the grid of sociality, an escape

that is ultimately inhospitable, the lowly businessman's mobile lifestyle the recurrent example of the inhumanity of life lived in such spaces. But does the hypermodern have to be so grim? The apocalyptic imagery of Baudrillard's simulacra and the nihilism of Jameson's Postmodern condition, seem to offer no other choice than a return to a social grounded in tradition or a profoundly alienated Postmodern ennui.

This theory of non-space is made explicit in the design of video game space. This mobility can be over valorized as a site of agency. Much work in New Media Studies stops at this instance of valorization of game play. As Manovich notes, "the designer of the virtual world is thus a cinematographer as well as an architect" (Manovich 2001, 82). And as if reiterating Manovich, Gabe Newell, the founder of Valve, states, "all content is distance based, not time based, and no activities are started outside the player's control. If the players are in the mood for more action, all they need to do is move forward and within a few seconds something will happen" (Newell 2005). Taken together, these two quotes echo each other's concern with the space of agency in new media. Together they mark a shift in the concept of producer and the production of space, a shift that is collapsing the traditional divide between consumer and producer. While the New Media theorist Lev Manovich praises Gabe Newell for the ingenuity of his designs, Newell reminds us that it is the player that determines the direction and pacing of their game. This is a moment of convergence, when theorists and academics, game designers and artists are rushing together into a virtual space. It is a space where things have not yet been labeled; a space where possibility has not yet been written in stone. It goes by many names, a hyper, cyber, virtual, pure, negative space. Nonetheless all seem to agree that it is very much a space. With all these cases, space is the anchor, the common denominator grounding the latest adjective. The adjective, here, is suggestive of a meta-level

reflection on the nature of space. It is this concern with the production of space that unites game players and theorists alike. They meet together in a space of production.

Many have already eloquently shown how a transparent idea of space is used to ground ideological abstractions (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Feld and Basso 1996, Rofel 1992, Low 2003). Benedict Anderson's famous formulation of "imaginary space" gives us a name for this process of using space as a ground for imagination, a way of stressing how space is always, already imagined. For all of the subsequent critical histories of colonial mappings (Winichakul 1994, Schmid 2002), and modern inscriptions of power (Robertson 1991), there is something missing from these accounts. The very materiality of space, its extensiveness, its exteriority is subsumed by its ideological import. Indeed it is as if space were not susceptible to the critique of representation that has taken place elsewhere. The necessary blankness of the signifier in the Saussurean equation of signifier over signified, carries over to space. Space must be blank in order to support the weight of meaning. Even if not a pure space, a blank slate, it is dirty with history and not materiality. Also the space of production, of critique in this case, is not explored in these accounts. In other words, the position of the critic, the space of critique is removed from the subject at hand. In Lefebvre's terms an, "illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret place" (Lefebvre 1991, 28). What might it look like to write of space in a manner that takes its materiality as a starting point, to theorize a new place for space in human interaction?

In *The Language of New Media* Manovich talks about the "navigable space" of the computer game where "narrative and time itself are equated with movement through 3-D space, progression through rooms, levels, or words" (Manovich 2001: 245). This is a spatializing of temporal forms. This space of design does not just concern design professionals. Indeed what is most striking about this space of production is its steady

creep into the realm of consumption. The modern consumer is increasingly asked to participate in the production of the product. A striking example of this comes from our initial example of video game players as producers of their game experience. The player is a cinematographer, shooting their own original script. And increasingly players are also the architects of the worlds in which they play. The three hour long take of an fps (first person shooter) video game is infinitely longer than the longest take in the modernist cinema of duration. The wide angle of view and near total mobility of players gives them a kind of situated omniscience. The goal is to traverse the entire level, to see everything, to become a kind of earthbound deity.

A recent phenomenon known as “modding” has even further blurred the lines between the producer and consumer of video games. In this practice, players make modifications to the game’s original characters and environments. In some cases this results in entirely new games with the base physics engine and player a.i. used as a way to turn intergalactic battles into Vietnam skirmishes or vice versa. In fact game developers have come to realize the importance of such modding, with one developer noting that, “modding extends the life of our games and it helps build community around our games” and that “it also helps us find terrific talent which we hire from the modding community. At one time, half the people who worked for us were chosen because of their modding work -- level designers, artists, programmers, everything” (O’hanluain 2004). The point here for our discussion is that the play of video games embodies the active character of media reception. It shows that play in these virtual realms invite players to participate. It creates playing fields where once there was only urban decay.

So what has happened to our violence? It has disappeared, turned into a marker of force. In international politics, violence circulates as both a sign of state immaturity and as proof of progress. Is outrage the only imaginable response to instances of

violence? Do emotions always need to be greater than or equal to their instigator? Or might we begin to think along with video game players of violence as a sensor, a blindman's cane, skimming over the surface of things. Violence is also the manifestation of a desire to participate in publics comprised of an affective terrain. The real world violence of Mafia assassinations and the virtual violence of video games stand at opposite poles. One a positive generator of publicness carved out against political instability and the other the negative result of such instability. The anxious desire of Post-Socialist citizens for a "normal" life finds expression in the virtual realms of video games. And here the skittish ducking and weaving of video game players joins with the movements of Pop stars as actions taken up against the confusion of everyday choices. These virtual actions allow traction in the real world, creating a sense of possibility where there was not one. Now that I've told this relatively predictable story of modernity and decay, of the real built spaces of Sofia, Bulgaria, I want to make the alluded to jump into the abstract space of the screen.

Chapter 5: Impossible Reflections: light, labor, and the space of digital production

Light, like culture, is often viewed as a conduit for other more substantial things. Both run around everywhere, bouncing off things, eventually finding their way back to us with news of their encounters. Both are immediately understood, or by the same token, misunderstood. We know that our eyes do not want to deceive us; they are not nearly as sinister as our mind and other less mentionable parts. Seeing is believing, light the earnest messenger. And yet, we know from the cinema that light is also full of velocities and intensities, that it is capable of shock and confusion. Some light helps you see and other light blinds or at least illuminates only itself. Like a lighthouse, it signals to stay away, warning us of some unseen edge. What might happen if we trace light, retreating back from our eyes to shiny surfaces and back farther still to the source of this light to the artificial projectors and the sun light of other days? Would we just be performing some kind of mental gymnastics, involving physics and equations that would surely strain even the most agile among us? Or might we find in such travel a new appreciation for the images at hand, a new respect for the route they have endured and for the force that they carry? This chapter is an effort to do such a literal act of tracing, by following the artificial light of 3d rendering programs through to its eventual arrive to the virtual space of the public.

And while we are rarely, if ever, asked to trace light back to its source, we do increasingly find ourselves in the glow of screened space. The migration of artificial light from the street to the cinema and on to the home and office is a technological story of development, from cinema to television and computers. And indeed it is often also considered a teleological story. It is a story that we have begun to take for granted as if it

represented some inevitable progress, the end result the simulated perfection of human vision. For all the failures of other modernist projects, it is impressive the degree to which the ever expanding resolution of television and simulation potential of computer generated imagery remains something in which the consumer can have undying faith. Whatever one's belief in or enthusiasm for this advance, it is certain that the public is basking in a nearly constant display of images.

And I am not the first to notice or attempt to explain this escape of the screen from the darkened theatre and public spaces of the cinema to our homes, offices, and now the very palms of our hands. Such work as Schivelbusch's study of the illumination of the city at the turn of the last century through to Anna McCarthy's study of television's spread into public venues tells this same story. The crude early electric light that illuminated our cities is the start of the networked infrastructures that now send images, text, and sounds coursing over the globe (Schivelbusch 1995). The slow drift of technology into all spheres of public and private life leaves us nearly constantly basking in its glow (McCarthy 2001). For all of this migration of screens into every nook and cranny of our lives and its resultant theorization, the light of the screen is rarely taken up as an object of research and not just a conduit for other more important things. Light, media, and culture appear together as some kind of frictionless network, flashing neurons and synapses, microcosms of streaming ideas. What happens when we think of media such as television and networked computing as more than just a delivery system, a system for delivering content, meanings, and affects? It also delivers light as light, culture as culture.

The visual culture of Bulgarian Pop and television is a particular approach to light. As we have seen, at times it presents a kind of total light, a sometimes dizzying display of colors and forms. These graphics don't so much represent anything, as they

present themselves as explosions, special effects designed to create special affects. There certainly are graphics that represent data, like the stock market ticker-tape and the weather maps. There are also graphics that don't turn into anything; they just turn. They twitch and stutter in pure 3d space. This is animation for the sake of animation, moving not forwards or backward, just moving. The logos of television stations occupy this space. They both represent the network, branding all of the content as they sit in wait in the lower right hand of the screen, and they gleam with a graphic perfection that refers to their virtual character. Increasingly the ubiquitous presence of the network logo has spread from its peripheral position to fill the entire frame, the space of design expanding over representational space. What is this space of the logo, that place where NBC, CBS, Fox, and Mtv hang out? It is the space of the brand, a commercial space. A sign and symbol yes, but also something more, something more like a mark, a register of the stream of the content. This space is increasingly spreading over the photographic content of television shows and internet content. Interstitial graphics that once marked the beginning and end of shows have moved into the frame. This between is also traditionally the space of commercials, e.g. the market space between shows. It is the same space that Benjamin recognized in the shop windows of the early Arcades, the same space that the early products capitalism occupied.

Now this interstitial space is selling not only products, it is also selling itself as a site of virtual abstraction. No longer in between anything, it is everywhere. Sometimes the flimsy walls of virtual sets and real studios are burdened with the weight of representation. This wall must look like the wall of an 18th century farmhouse, or the kitchen of a contemporary home. Still other times, sets are asked to avoid representation, to remain virtual, to look like somewhere and nowhere at the same time. This is the space of the newsroom, the studio soundstage, the green screen backdrop (Tobias 2005).

The shiny surfaces of these spaces reflect nothing but the glimmer of pure light. These mirrored surfaces don't reflect, in as much as they scatter light into abstraction, presenting a kind of pure materiality. The glossy logos and graphics of shows can be seen a kitschy mimicry of precious metals and jewels or they are perhaps better understood as prisms that deflect and defract light, decimating representation. They flash in the eye, demanding attention, not understanding. This aesthetic is the closest thing to a mirror of the vacant spaces of the public. In its abstraction, it mirrors the absences of the public sphere. And even more significantly, in forming this circuit with the public, it creates the public, providing a visual home for it.

The point as to the potential of considering light as more than simply a common denominator in visual media can be made better here if we consider light in terms of color. Our response to the various wave lengths of light is what we call color, e.g. red, blue, and green. Bergson explains that there are two ways of determining what colors have in common. One approach is to extract the abstract and general idea of color, and we do so by “effacing from red what makes it red, from blue what makes it blue, and from green what makes it green” (Deleuze 2004, 43). The other option is to “send the colors through a convergent lens that concentrates them on the same point: what we have then is “pure white light,” the very light that “makes the differences come out between the shades” (2004, 43). And as Deleuze continues, “the different colors are no longer objects under a concept, but nuances or degrees of the concept itself; degrees of difference itself, and not differences of degree” (2004, 43). Light is not a discreet set of properties. It is rather a continuum of different velocities that arrive to us with news of a bright colorful world.

Given the significance and prominence of such abstraction, it is surprising that there is not more critical work done studying the production of screened space from the

side of the screen. While much work is done in the genres of film and television production, little is done with the interstitial spaces, the abstract non-spaces that populate the screened spaces of everyday life. The screens of television, office and home computers are full of abstract terrains. These spaces are most often considered from a position of design and aesthetics. In other words, they are judged by their efficiency, their ability to deliver such things as information and beauty in an affective manner, “light the earnest messenger.”

INVISIBLE LABOR

“the entertainment industry is likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affect. This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 292).

As we have seen in the story of Bulgarian Pop, its stars reside in a bright world, one that is laboriously and expensively created. It is a place of total light, a place designed to draw viewers like moths to a flame. And while I have tried to tell the story of its production, of the minutiae of commercial production, its everydayness and boredom; I have yet to tell the story from the other side of production. This side begins not out in the field, but back in the dimly lit studio, in front of the computer screen. Compositors, animators, and editors that work within the frame, add and subtract elements at will, starting from the virtual space of the screen. This space of digital production is decidedly Post-Fordist, or what has been termed “affective labor” (Hardt and Negri 2000). These expert groups of digital artists all too often have been over looked as transparent operators of digital processes, processes, themselves, treated like some kind of unknowable behind-the-scenes magic. It is as if such work was decidedly Fordist, part of

an assembly line churning out the next animation or virtual stage. Work, in this sense is understood as maintenance, e.g. maintaining the pipelines that stream content from producer to viewer.

If and when special effects and animation work does arise it is in reference to the international character of such labor, e.g. animators in India, colorists in Korea supplying cheap/expert labor for Hollywood productions. Rarely do local variations of technological advancement surface. And if they do, as in the case of Bollywood and Japanese Anime, a genre is aggressively fixed to them. As these genres circulate in global networks, the circuit of their influence is often imagined as one way. Their integrity is a question of authenticity, a question of authenticity that US productions rarely face in their sampling of other filmic and animation traditions. For example the Matrix trilogy borrows from Baudrillard and Hong Kong action cinema with a confidence that only comes from misunderstanding. In fact, it feels odd to write of American special effects as they are rarely considered as part of a national aesthetic. At face value they are extraterrestrial, concerned with aliens and monsters.

A precedent for the production study of digital production that I am pursuing here is to be found in “production studies” that have looked at the social factors involved in producing older media, such as television. Examples here might include Tom Burn's study of the professional culture of the BBC (Burn 1977), Philip Schlesinger's study of "The News" (Schlesinger 1978) and more recently Mankekar on Television and Womanhood in Postcolonial India (Mankekar 2005). Also more recent ethnographic work on elites and the practice of science provide a model and impetus for the examination of digital work that I am proposing here. Such collections as *Global Assemblages* are a prime example of this effort to study the otherwise overlooked spaces of modern business and Academia with an eye towards interrogating the assumptions of

what comprises labor in these contexts (Ong, et al 2004). Recent Science Studies literature has also gone a long way in confronting the degree to which visual technologies and methodologies inform the assumptions and predictions of modern science. Sharon Traweek's account of Engineers and Catherine Waldby's study of the The Visible Human Project and its use of MRI machines are prime examples (Traweek 1988, Waldy). Similarly, the explosion of publishing in the field of New Media Studies has fostered work on the digital art and practices, with a focus on the radical potential of these digital processes (Manovich, Lovnik, Burnet 2005, Johnson 1997). Intentionally or not, this focus on abstract technologies has ignored the very sites of its production and left behind the individuals that actually labor in these fields. Unfortunately, the labor behind effects work has remained outside the scope of these studies. The proximity of STS researchers to their subjects, roommates on the campuses of the academic scene, partly accounts for this. Sites of business labor remain remarkably resistant or invisible to researchers. While not presaged by Marx, these workers equally deserve critical attention, an attention to their exploitation, their efforts, and potentials. This critical work has yet to really catch up with the shifting demands of contemporary productions.

There is no center to this scene, like a plant or factory, where all of its workers come and do the work. No, it is comprised of converted apartments, of hidden humming computers sequestered away in darkened rooms, avoiding the competing light and heat of the sun. This labor looks a lot like the play of video games; it involves the same smoky rooms, the same faces bathed in the bluish green glow of the screen, the same timelessness, the computer a ready and endless partner. This time of work, as well as space of work, is significant as a generator of the subsequent abstractions on two levels. It is both the necessary labor for producing such imagery and a generator for the need of such imagery. In the bounded space of the screen one needs to be able to carve out a

space of abstraction, a place of aesthetic appreciation, a place of non-work, if not leisure. You must build the pause.

These digital labors play a significant part in giving shape to the Post-Socialist public. They are shouldered with carving out new spaces for the public, designing a new image for the virtual. The degree to which this labor is integrally woven into politics, advertising, and all public facets of Post-Socialism is elaborately portrayed in the literature of Victor Pelevin. In his *Generation P*, the reader follows an up and coming copy writer as he moves up through the ranks of Russia's new advertising industry. With enough successful campaigns selling Pepsi and the like, and a few well placed handshakes, the lead character is initiated into a secret society of image workers. These workers are shouldered with the weight of animating the whole of Russia's political and media scene. In this fantasy world, Yeltsin and all his colleagues in the Duma are animations, computer generated automatons. Every drunken misstep, every vacation at the Black Sea is a preprogrammed sequence of vectors and keyframes. You might ask, why not make the Russian President, more presidential, less prone to mishap. The answer, it just wouldn't be as real as having him stumble through his responsibilities.

This behind the scenes rigging of politics could be read as a nihilistic metaphor for the sinister motivations of image politics and the secret ties of politicians and corporate sponsorship. But this implies a conductor, a group of people orchestrating this spectacle of realism. Pelevin is careful to introduce and explain the workers that produce these images of reality; and he is equally careful to show that there is no logic behind their animations other than the goal of realism. Yelstin falls, not because there is trouble in the Caspian Sea, but because it would be more believable.

In the Bulgarian context, its community of animators and effects artists is equally unconcerned with the specter of sinister motivations behind their work. Their digital

labor is comprised and evaluated in terms of its realism and effectiveness. The work of animation is so full of microscopic concerns with texture and form that discussions of why occupy another realm. In most cases, detail is in fact the answer. My own inquiries as to the special character of Bulgarian productions have fallen on deaf ears. These digital workers view their work in technical and aesthetic terms. This point is more explicit if one considers the situation of Chaos Group. Chaos Group is a Sofia based software company that is responsible for one of the most popular rendering programs known as “V-Ray.” This program is used to render images for everything from major Hollywood special effects to local television logos. And is there anything particularly Bulgarian about this program? No. The artificial photons that it uses to visualize such diverse content are thrown from a purely abstract space of math and programming. This malleability of the program makes the point as to the peculiarity of what is rendered all the more clear.

Given the infinite possibility of artificially pure space, the choices that people make within it are obviously significant. These choices signify desires and aspirations, prejudices and predispositions. The only thing that is perhaps more significant than what is imaged in these pure spaces is what is not imaged. The ignored reality, the never envisioned fantasy is a powerful figure in the significance of these images. So what are these images? To know what they are and where they come from it is best to look at a few specific examples. But first let us take a moment to further consider the space of abstraction from which they are derived.

Here it is necessary to move away from the subject of digital labors and move into the very frame in which they work. While this frame does draw on the traditions of photographic and cinematographic framing, the digital frame has a virtual potential that provides previously impossible perspectives. The camera can now proceed from the big

to the small, shifting scale from the molar to the molecular, slipping through a key hole, as in the Panic Room, or coursing along with the firing of neurological synapses, as in Fight Club. What previously appeared to be impenetrable surfaces now reveal themselves to be new dimensions of activity. The skin becomes porous. This is tantamount to Benjamin's discovery of the Optical Unconscious in photography. A new unexpected field of activity opens up to the viewer. This is a field that includes the viewer. It involves a collapse of the critical distance between subject and object, viewer and image. There is no separate, third space from which the viewer observes the action.

GREYSPACE: THE SPACE OF DESIGN

As design professionals and casual computer users wake up and boot up their computers around the world's staggered morning they are faced with the same space of the screen. Whatever the personalized wallpaper and rows of program icons, the sameness of the screen exists in its potential to be any number of different spaces. It can be a game space, a work space, a 2d or 3d space. From afar, or over the shoulder of this anonymous computer user, these varied spaces appear too diverse to have much in common. What does a player running around on the battlefields of WWII have to do with a student laboring over their next word for their final term paper? The answer lies in the fact that both are spaces of production. They are venues in which people can create the world around them. In order to better appreciate this character of screen space it is helpful to cut through the programmed symbolic imagery of icons and sprites to the pure space of the screen. The blank screen is the emblem of this virtual space of production. It is the blank space of the page and the grey space of the animation package that

embodies the virtual potential of space. This is the space of production, a meta-space, reflective of its own construction, a space designed for design.

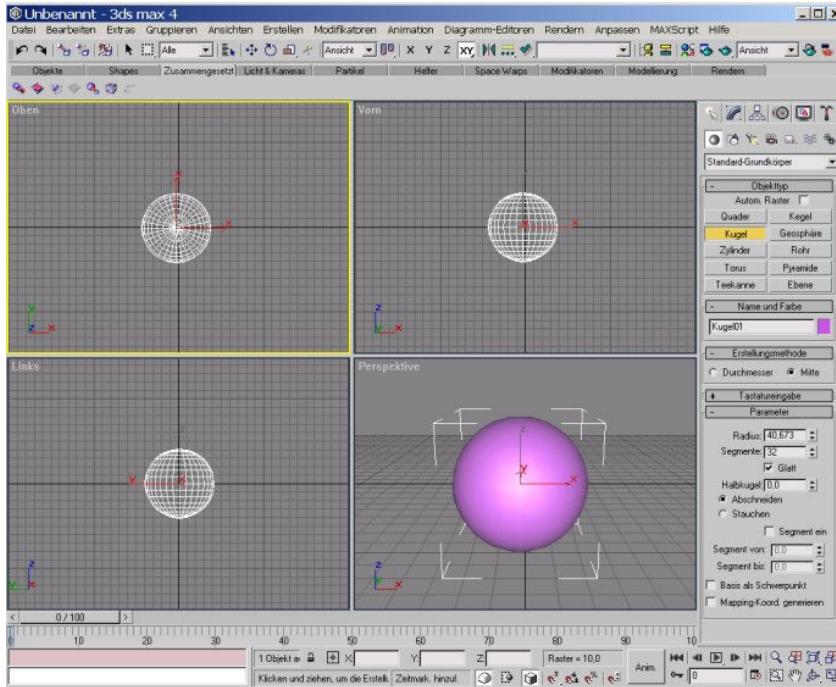


Figure 16: screen grab 3d studio max animation software interface

In order to make this point about the implications of rethinking screened space in terms of its production, I want to here narrow the subject down to the practices, technologies, and concerns that make up the 3d design profession. Through an adoption of its terminology and theories it is possible to envision a critical theory of virtual space adapted to realities of its production. Design professionals in the commercial, video game, and film industries are shouldered with the responsibility for replicating reality for the space of the screen. There is only but so much too to be gained from peeking over the shoulder of the designer, peering into the screen. It is not my intent here to repeat these moves, the rhythmical clicks and drags of the mouse, crafting something like a tutorial on

how to create such imagery. No, the goal is to take up the same concerns as these design professionals, to proceed from the side of production to better understand the nature of the imagery that is increasingly present in the media.

Although intricately tied up in discussions of film theory, 3d animation proceeds from an opposite direction, owing more to the history of sculpture and scientific and architectural modeling than to advances in the storage of light. The difference can be exaggerated but should not be forgotten; film and its digital cousins, dv, hdtv, receive and record light, while 3d animators and designers produce lights and subjects in a timeless virtual space. In other words, if a traditional photograph always points to a past event, a synthetic 3d image points to a future event. (Manovich 2001, 203). This is the future anterior, an action that will have been completed before a reference point in the future. Artificial light, geometry, and textures combine to create an image that refers to a virtual time, a moment that will have been.

Or to say the same thing with Barthes, the virtual image strips the photograph of the *this has been* quality. This is the quality that haunted Barthes with the horror of an “anterior future of which death is the stake” (Barthes 1981, 96). In every photograph, whether looking at his own mother or the image of a condemned man, Barthes is confronted with the image of death; “I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (1981, 96). This haunting quality is tied to photography's immediacy. At every instance it records a passing, an ephemeral character that is ultimately human, all too human in the frailty of its life. The virtual image, on the other hand, and the virtual world in which it resides escape the immediacy of the photographic image. Computer graphics present an inhuman face, one with the waxy skin, lifeless stares, and jerky movements that are not burdened with the threat of death. The

immediacy of computer graphics, their immediacy is perpetual and not ephemeral. They reside comfortably in the virtual realm of the future anterior. Even in their capacity to perfectly mimic older photographic and cinematic aesthetics, they refer primarily to themselves, to a future; a possibility not weighted by the passage of time that Barthes so feared.

Where the artificial images of Computer Graphics most resemble traditional photography is in the space of the studio. This artificial space, with its blank backdrops and artificial lighting, mirrors the pure space of 3d animation packages. And just like the variety of hand-painted backdrops that populate a photographic studio, e.g. the requisite bookshelves for school pictures and landscapes for portraits, a set of standard spaces inhabit the space of CG. There are skies to fit every season and solar systems to fill out any sci-fi scene. There are seemingly endless variations on the modernist living room, Eames chairs, and Mies lines populate room after room. The infinite malleability of 3d space resonates with the passage of real life in strange ways. The dissonance of this relationship is magnified when 3d objects and spaces most closely mirror realtime. As we have seen in the case of video game space, the threat of slippage between real and virtual is most immediately felt when game space mimic real world scenarios and locales.

This point as to the peculiar time of computer graphics can be made also through a consideration of Bob Shaw's short story "Slow Glass." This story takes place in a world where a kind of glass has been developed that records light. For example, if you leave a pane of slow glass in a field for four years it will record all the light over those four years, every late afternoon thunder shower, every shooting star, every night and day. Then when it is moved to a new spot this plane of glass emits this history of light, a perfect record played back in real time. Why is this science fiction? Isn't slow glass simply an elaborate form of video recording, a simple advance on our current technology? Its time

is different. It plays back a loop of the immediate, creating a kind of dissonance with the everyday.

The extreme other times of television programming does not have this effect. Even “liveness” does something else as it is so firmly divided off from the everyday. Think of the hordes of tourists that make their way to the Today Show windows and wave, hoping to appear. This is not a normal, or should I say everyday activity, we do not everyday wave and cheer in a search for the affirmation of our existence. Shaw’s Slow Glass is bit like the early video installation work of Dan Graham. As others in the early era of video art busied themselves with miming their own existence on magnetic tape, Graham caught onto the odd resonance of a slight slippage in the liveness of video playback. By recording and then projecting a “live” image with a five second delay, Graham opened up a gap between audience’s actions and their witnessing of these actions. The rupture is confusing. Computer Graphics opens up a similar gap, in its infinite potential to image. The now, the immediate is always a little behind, waiting with the instance to arrive. Thus the Sisyphus task of rendering the real, there is always more to add, more to detail, the unending task of the perfect reflection. It lags behind.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIGHT

The story of the early development of 3d rendering highlights the unique time and space of virtual space. It is a story that as with many technological stories begins in the lab. But in contrast to some technologies it does not eventually find a home in the real world. Instead it has evolved as an extension of the abstract spaces of the lab out in other media. One of the classic images of early 3d images is the Cornell Box. Named after its development at Cornell University, the Cornell box was an actual box designed in 1984

as a model for testing the veracity of global illumination algorithms. These algorithms function by calculating the paths of artificial photons as they ricochet around the 3d geometry of the virtual space. In composition, it looks like a room without any windows with a couple of boxes in it (figure 16). As programs have improved, they have gotten better at efficiently mimicking the bounces that actual light makes as it moves around a room.

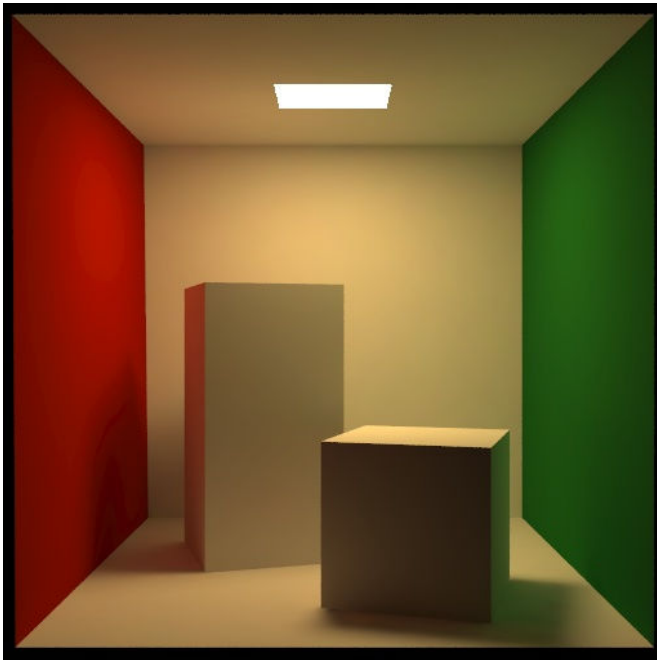


Figure 17: Cornell Box courtesy Cornell University Program of Computer Graphics

Interestingly, this development of ray tracing is tied up with Cold War History. The technology that produced the Cornell box image derived from a group originally established in 1966 to study nuclear radiation exposure. This group, the Mathematical Applications Group (MAGI), “developed software based on the concept of ray-casting that could trace radiation from its source to its surroundings” (Morrison 1994). The software, known as *SynthaVision*, was later adapted for use in CGI to trace light instead

of radiation. That Cold War era funding concerns over radiation lead to the birth of ray tracing is not a benign, nor a simple genealogy. It suggests the degree to which imaging technologies are tied up with bureaucratic funding concerns. These concerns themselves have been motivated more by imagined apocalyptic scenarios than any pure sense of invention.

So if the dawn of computer imaging is a peculiar wedding of sciences and researchers it only becomes more intricate a web when one looks at the early entrance of these virtual imaging techniques into mass media. Two early examples of computer graphics in television advertising suggest the degree to which the virtual space of their production is carried over to the final image. In a 1984 ad for the Norelco Electric Shaver, raytracing is used to produce a bright shiny product. In figure 17, one can see both the texture map and the mapped texture on a Norelco Shaver and a pair of spheres. The virtual objects, once designed and given their surface characteristics of roughness and reflectivity, need something to reflect. Sunsets were added to a surface model of a Norelco Shaver to give it a chrome-like shine. The Norelco shaver and the scrubbling bubbles of the Soft Scrub Bubbles commercial reflect back the abstract potential of virtual space. As such, both advertisements sell a kind of pure space more so than the individual characteristics of these commodities.

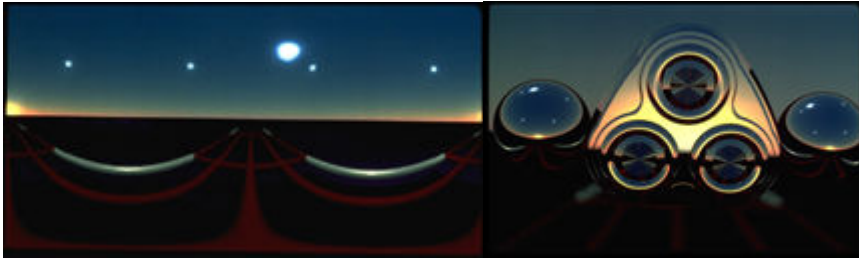


Figure 18: Norelco Electric Shaver texture map and mapped 3d image

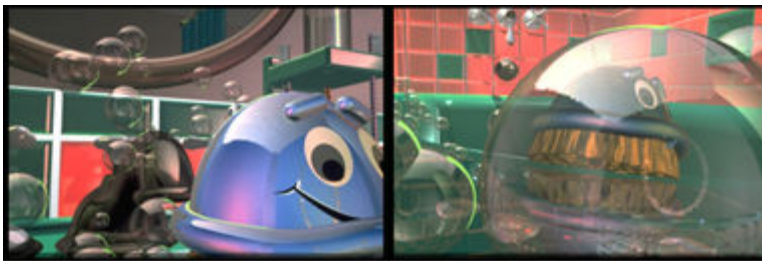


Figure 19: Soft Scrub Bubbles commercial employing texture mapping

Such glimmer was all the more impressive in the advertising world of 1984 and remains a popular aesthetic of near surgical quality today. As developments in hardware have caught up with the processing intensive demands of ray tracing algorithms, a paradoxical problem has arisen. The images produced through ray-tracing are too perfect. The reflections and luminance that they map onto the surface of CG models ignore the microscopic bumps and imperfection of objects and the undulating volumetric qualities of air heavy with particles. To combat this imperfect perfection, designers have added nicks and scratches, rust and all kinds of decay to the textures applied to their models. Some models emerge so beaten and battered from this manipulation that it appears as if they really have lived through the apocalypse. In practice there remain two poles of clean and dirty.

This early history of computer graphics is all well and good in the self referential space of technological development, but such production does not take place in a cultural vacuum. To get at this cultural component of raytraced images it is helpful to talk backwards from what is not included in an image. This method is really a process of addition, adding back to the reality around an image. The point here is not to call out an image for not including the infinitesimal detail of reality. It is rather to learn of what a particular image is built. What exists in its world? For whom does it exist? How are we able to inhabit it?

VIRTUAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Along these lines, I should like to return to the subject of Bulgarian Computer Graphics. For most this subject sounds obscure. And indeed, even for Bulgarians it comes as something of a shock. Is there Bulgarian Computer Graphics? Where is it? Admittedly, Computer Graphics is not on the tip of everyone's tongue in this Post-Socialist nation. Conversations run more along the lines of the next step towards European Union integration and the cost of tomatoes. Nonetheless amidst these discussions of economy and international relations, there is a popular discourse on the quality of Bulgarian production. Whether discussing the level of debate in parliament or the quality of this year's produce, Bulgarians are particularly concerned with weighing their productions against an international standard. These debates on quality do not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in a nation struggling to reposition itself in a shifting geopolitical climate. The most favored nation status that it enjoyed during the Soviet Era, has turned into a reality in which Bulgaria ranks regularly as the second poorest nation in

Europe and is treated as a literal backdoor to Europe, a future problem for immigration and the like.

For this gloomy picture of Bulgaria, Computer Graphics and the other spectacular spaces of Pop music appear as bright spots. In the virtual spaces of its Post-Socialist reconstruction, we can find more examples of 3d imagery that remains virtual, reflecting a space of pure abstraction rather than a specific cultural history. The speculative housing boom and developments of the resort corridor along the Black Sea are the most significant material transformations of Post-Socialist Bulgaria. But these virtual renovations are even more pervasive. They depict the futuristic space of an anterior future when Bulgaria will be filled of hypermodern cities. In the music video, Dessi Tenekedzhieva "Dark" music video we can see a whole utopian city of flying cars and skyscrapers. Amidst these golden horizons, if one looks closely one can see the baroque arches of Alexander Nevsky Church. Presumably, only this gold capped church has survived these virtual reconstructions of Sofia.

The time of construction, the time it takes to make and render such a massive city is not part of the circuit between Post-Socialist audiences and these virtual spaces. It vanishes behind the abstract geometry and a world of total light. It is a reality for the digital labors that toil behind the scenes. This invisible labor chooses to vanish itself, it works not create an image of work, as its Socialist past, but to create a new world. This world is a kind of life size version of the Cornell Box. It is an abstract space, removed from the everyday all the more influential for it. These digital special effects are a timely anecdote to the slow pace of economic and political reform of Post-Socialism. The space of its anterior future not so much escape as a venue for forming a new virtual public.



Figure 20: Dessi Tenekedzhieva "Dark" music video stills courtesy 5th Degree

Conclusion: Bright Future

So we have seen a whole range of peculiar and particular affects arise in this recollection of Bulgaria popular media. They appear not as over arching regimes of feeling, a propaganda that tricks its subjects into feeling one way or the other. No, these affects are more diffuse. They are successful for their openness, for their willingness to provide terrains in which viewers can become lost and entangled. And in the blankness of their significance, we find not the tyranny of abstraction but the questions of potential. What can this be? What can I be? What kind of public can we be together?

And it appears that the flatness of a Pop aesthetic is a stable surface from which to ask and answer these questions. It offers up in its abstract spaces and digital trickery a site for reconstructing a new Bulgarian public. And in this abstraction it meets up with other contemporary cultures saying simultaneously that we are part of an international public and distinct from it. And while the politics of representation have not disappeared, it would appear that the new politics of affect are the venue for addresses individual desires as well as social realities. Taken at face value the abstract space of digital labor, 3d space, and Pop music are removed form or at least superficial to larger or more significant questions as to the political and social life in Bulgarian. But consumed as part of popular culture these abstract spaces embody the greatest aspirations of a people eager to realize a new place in the world.

And if I look back for a moment, I can see that I have lingered in the abstract spaces, the hidden spaces of special effects work. In taking such a literal approach to

these instances of production, I have necessarily missed some of the less public affects that course through life amidst Bulgaria's transitioning economy and politics. Individual stories of personal struggle and triumph have found no space in these technological stories of building a new virtual public. But as I said at the start, my aim has been to write close to the concerns and attentions of the producers of this new Bulgarian public. As such my ignorances are part of the process, just one of the steps in imaging the new role of media in forming this public. So I feel comfortable echoing the technological fascinations of producers and consumers, in pointing to their interest in "katchesvo" and the latest special effect. I personally relate to this amazement with and desire for a dazzling public sphere. I expect to meet up with my peers in Bulgaria and elsewhere in these fantastic spaces, these spaces that we may never occupy but with which we always live.

And even as Post-Socialist development has increasingly fallen out of popular discourse in the U.S. media, the question of European Unification grows more and more. This can be attributed to the success of development in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics. Or perhaps more realistically, it can be attributed to its failure. Even as Post-Socialist reconstruction has fallen out of popular debate, the question of how to develop a democratic state remains. Development discourse remains a linchpin in US and international foreign policy and the rhetoric of modernity forms the basis behind the European Union. Private media and free market economies are imagined as resources for this modernization effort. It is my hope that the examples of Bulgarian popular media stand as something like an answer to the questions of the new expanded Europe. They suggest the great role popular culture plays in creating modern democratic publics. The superficial work of constructing virtual realms is a vital part of creating a new public sphere. The flashy aesthetics of new digital techniques provide an opportunity to design

sites where different people can commune in a virtual public. The aesthetics of Pop in Bulgaria offer a return to science fiction, to the question of the future. It is of course a future, like all futures, that remains to be seen.

And like the begrudging admirers of Pop Folk, we sometimes must find this future in the most unlikely of places. The forces behind the bright and shiny spaces of commercialism and Pop culture may not be motivated by anything more than commercial gain; but in the spaces they produce we can find new venues for defining ourselves. As our homes and everyday lives come increasingly under the surveillance of reality programming and we bask more and more in the glow of our computers, it is all the more important that we are able to find in these screened space an aura of virtuality. This aura is the promise, or possibility of a virtual togetherness. We must, even if just on occasion, trace the artificial light of Soap Scrubble bubble commercials and Pop music videos, trace it back to chance we have to visualize whatever we want.

And before closing, let us pull back from the screens that have had us so transfixed from the beginning. If we return to the street, that earlier era's place of the public, the street of de Certeau, Benjamin, and Habermas we can see a public comprised of all the diversities of age and position, the diversities that Pop makes invisible. In the market, we can see Lolitas fresh from the boredom of morning classes stroll in packs hunting entertainment. Tight skirts and mini shirts hang a little looser than intended on flesh just beginning to take shape. And their delicate limbs flutter with the hum of sexuality, of gestures tried and failed. Just like models on the runway, everyone appears to be striding to the future. They are walking with a purpose learned from the Fashion TV that plays as an endless loop in cafes around town. And on the bus, we can see grandmothers and pensioners weighted down with the spoils of their afternoon shopping.

And as night falls, we can see the kids spill back out into the city. The afternoon's coffee and beer turning into vodka and beer, whiskey and peanuts as the cellular phone signals rain down on the city. Radios and TVs interrupted just before the phone rings with the hum of radioactivity giving people time to run outside to catch the words before they fall and splatter on the ground. But rather than go back out into the city, I decide to stay in and bask in the glow of Bulgarian television. In the latest videos, bodies glisten under the artificial light, hoping to see in them something of the future.

Appendix

JYBOX “LOVE ROOMMATES” TRANSCRIPT TRANSLATION BY BENJAMIN K. HODGES 2005

The show is presented with the support of Kamenitsa Light.

(studio interior)

-Come on viewers, come on show. Again it is Saturday late in the afternoon. And we are again “Jybox Love Roommates”, the show with a purpose, our purpose is simply clear to bring together one boy and one girl and to live them together to love each other,... not exactly like that. We have one boy, he is a cool guy, with a very interesting story, this will become clear after a little while. He will choose one woman, they are three women and one boy, this means one who chooses and three girls with three houses. He will visit the houses and look at the pictures on the walls, the books in the library, the disks in the disk-holder, the shoes in the shoe place, in this way, from every detail he will decide which of the girls to ask into his life. To help us in this hard task, in front of us will now come one woman whoone very strong opinion. Here is our Anna Maria, our expert in details, the person who, when they see something, like we said a little bit before, knows what you are, where you're from, and why... What is the situation today?

-Today is a little different. You are not going to see which woman lives in whichever apartment. Stay with us to the end, then you will see.

-Exactly.

-And the other new thing is that ... the woman has been asked to leave three objects which to a large degree characterize them, in their opinion.

-They have one ...especially for them,....not exactly like that.

-Now let's see

-Again this part of the show. His name is Ben and he is from America, let's watch.

(house interior)

-I was born in the state Virginia in the U.S.

-Ben normally lives in Texas.

-Ben, why do you want to participate in our show?

-Because I am perverse in this way.

-What "perverse"?

-Perverse?

- Oh, perverse, not...

-You have to help me still with my Bulgarian.

-We will work together.

-I am curious in the rooms of strangers and this is a big chance to enter and already, I mean also to get to know the people.

-To look around in strange rooms.

-His former girlfriend was a Bulgarian girl, he knows our country and this is his forth time here.

-I want to live more simply.

-At the moment he is preparing a media presentation of our experience on the theme, certainly his participation in "Love Roommates" from the inside will be a part of this.

-This thing, does it mean that you plan to put a telephone with a change machine here?

-At the moment he is on an English wave and listens to music like “radiohead” and “cold play.” His favorite film is “Mystery Train” by Jim Jarmusch. When he was young, he didn’t have any dreams of a concrete profession, only that he wouldn’t become a fireman.

-O.k. already the older system has already disappeared, and I found this on the street. And this, is with a modern style and this is not trash, isn’t that so.

-Because remains are a part of his work.

-Tell me in a few words the women that you like.

-Oh, open women, if you can that.

-Where?

-What do you first take notice of in a woman?

-We are people and we always look at..

-the eyes...

-No, the face. When you speak with someone...

-He isn’t afraid because in general he doesn’t scare easily. Once he jumped off of a tall bridge without a bungee.

-Three women are taking part who want something new in their lives and it could be me.

-And clearly it wasn’t enough because again he is preparing to do it again.

-Is there a possibility that there will be a house that you don’t like?

-Yes, of course.

-Why?

-If there is, for example, a picture of George Bush, or other such stupid things.

(driving in convertible)

-Ben, meet our psychologist. She will help us with the details today.

-Hi, Ben it is very nice to meet you.

-Hi, it is very nice to meet you.

-Do you want to change our plains and to go to the sea for example?

-Good, after awhile, things are starting to get interesting now.

-We are going towards the first house.

(first apartment)

-The contestants have been required to leave three things which, in her opinion, to a large degree characterize her. O.K. these three things are her calling card.

-Ben you said immediately, what is this exactly?

-No, she said it.

-I thought you

-I flet...

-What is this exactly?

-This is put in the wind. This girl is very sensitive and has a need for very little outside air to affect her...with this angel, my theory is that she lives like a guardian angel, ...surely she is very thankful and loves to help, disposed towards health work, towards an organization like the red cross or a hotline.

-What do you think of the angel?

-This woman hides a lot of secrets but I don't know how easy it would be to discover them.

-This book, you have read another

-Yes, I've read another. She could think of herself as an angel mesiya

-mesia?

-These birds are very aggressive.

-whether she is afraid, waiting for something bad to happen, for this to fall

-It could be like that. If she has a fantasy, she could spit three times at the doorway before entering a test and if she sees a black cat, these things, she could put salt on four chairs in order to stop the black magic.

These books give questions, these are books for people who travel

She is a student and works with the hard sciences, with numbers, women who works with numbers have a good sense of space, shuffle cards well. You love to travel, right? It would be O.K. after this, because she works with hard sciences it means that she has a high level of testosterone. Testosterone is a male hormone. The women are very aggressive

More of here notes are...

-These are notes? Why are they so small?

-These are crib sheets, they help you during the time of the test.

-Isn't it against the rules?

-What?

-You don't have a right.

-Yes, you don't have a right, if they find it, it isn't great.

These tickets mean that she loves to go to concerts, she loves group life, a lot of people in one place.

-O.k. this group they are "Ostava." They are very good and in general are a little underground. They are... Here is the poster. They play very well and remind one of "Suede." They will get mad at me if I say the vocalist looks like the guy in suede

-Memories, here she saves the tickets

-Let's go to house number two.

(driving in convertible)

-We finished with the first house, what are your impressions Ben?

-Ben what are your impressions of the girl from the first house?

-Oh, from the objects or the things, she could be a nice woman, she could care for a person, there is a chance, what can I tell you? I'm pleased, there was something designer-like in her style. I hope that she likes me.

-In a little bit, we will look around the second house.

(second apartment)

-These are the three things which the girl has left for us to know her

This men's necktie and two books, one book of psychology by Freud, Father Freud, the other is...She is a student of psychology or something related to psychology, or she is very curious in the human mind. I think this necktie is something like a sign. She could love to manipulate people and to...this woman could be very different.

-Do you understand from these things whether she has a high level of testosterone?

-Here, in my opinion, there is another hormone, because there are a lot of stuffed animals in the room. Estrogen is a female hormone that unlocks the motherly instinct and when a woman sees a little baby, her body starts to put out more estrogen.

Women with a high level of estrogen like another type of man, not like you, thin, those who look like a baby.

-I don't look like a baby?

-Absolutely not.

This person loves to confuse people and has a lot of questions, loves to analyze.

-This means that she loves answers. If you have questions, you are looking for answers.

-Exactly.

-O.k, but I don't have answers, this is a problem.

-I suggest trying the pants, in order to see.

-if they are like your structure.

-I think you have them backward.

-at the moment she is entering college.

-in what specialty?

-She wants to learn psychology or pedagogy. She loves attractive clothes, children's clothes.

-These are hip-hop. Isn't it so

-Kris-Kros dress a little like that, backward

-Kris-Kros was a group, back in the day, two African American kids who...

-Before the new era..

-Their jeans pockets were in the front and all their clothes were backward

-She loves see-thru clothes, she isn't concerned with her body...here is a very interesting...the tie is a men's accessory. I feel like there is a double thing, on one side these clothes that are very female and delicate forms, stuffed animals, and the neckties which are absolutely...

most of these blue, very attractive. She loves to make an impression, which is tied with the desire to manipulate. She can be very different; it depends on the situation, lots of changes...

she is around a kilometer and a half tall and up to fifty kilograms, pale skin, from the clothes she could have blue eyes, she is very curious, changeable, very easily changes emotions in my opinion.

-O.K. to go to the third house, the last.

-Let's go.

(driving in convertible)

-We're already on our way to the last house. What does he have to say?

Something for Sigmund Freud, maybe?

-Yes, Ben after this do you have a choice?

-I can't make a comparison between the two, but one connection is that the second lives with her parents. I know this is typical for here, but...

-This concerns you

-Yes, I...

-You want her to have already left her parents.

-And I don't want to participate in this separation.

-You don't want to be the reason for the separation.

-Thanks for the translation.

-You're welcome, I am always ready. Let's continue on to the last house.

(third apartment)

-We've arrived at the last house today, with a great joy, its hot, directly the hot weather.

These are the three things, one ski, I hope that she is not with one foot...

-This book, she is tied with the lead character in the book, Bridget Jones. She sees herself, something in herself in this character, Jones. She is in her thirties, has problems with her weight, with her boss, and is a journalist. Our girl is a journalist, this is in a big radio station, not a music radio station, in which the djs are always in the second place after the music. In a talk radio station, the reports and hosts are in the first place.

-What?

-She is a person who is used to be at the center of attention and to be the focus of it, and like a reporter she likes to ask questions.

She has a problem with her weight and surely because of this exercises a lot. She finished the American University with a specialty in journalism and communication, she works in her field. She knows English very well, outside of this I see her books in German, Turkish, and Spanish. She is poly-lingual. She has an interest in foreign cultures and loves to travel.

This is a collection of her favorite films. Is there something here that you like also?

-Of course, "Snatch", the first "Matrix," all are quality films

-Humphrey Bogart. Alive.

-to put a classic on the ground

-its just like putting...

you, who would you put on the floor?

-Bill Clinton

-You from the beginning.

-I am a big fan of American politics.

-Most of her clothes are bland, colors..

-Why, I see lots of colors

-They aren't bright colors

She is shorter than me. Do you like to do sports Ben?

-Yes, sometimes.

-How do you enjoy your time?

-Here in Bulgaria it has to mostly to do with drinks. Before I came here, I was very healthy, I trained.

-You could say from the colors that she is a blond. They have a high level of estrogen. When you are a kid and have blond hair it starts to turn dark as you lose estrogen. It is a female hormone.

-Deo has a lot

-Yes, I have a lot.

-I think she has big wet lips, because she only has one lipstick.

What do you think of the fact that the bed is on the floor, she lives alone.

-You need space

-when you sleep.

-maybe she likes to have sex in her own territory.

-I don't understand.

-She wants to say that she could be an aggressive type who catches a man and brings him home and afterwards kicks him out.

(studio)

-Ben, are you ready to make your choice?

-I am fifty percent ready.

-Are you afraid to write down your choice?

-No, that which will be, will be

-That which life presents, the opposite will happen. In one moment, a very important moment for Ben, and for us, and for you valuable viewers. Let us present our beautiful girls here in our studio...and now they are coming in. Ben, in your opinion, who is from which apartment?

-Let's remember the portraits for the three girls...

-O.k. Let's see. What is that, it's a one, number one.

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