Temporal Politics of the Surface: Keeping Pace with the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia

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Abstract: This article proposes a rethinking of the operations of surfaces, using the concept of 'recursion' to explore surfaces as not only spatial, but also temporal objects engaged in the production of continuity and rupture through time. The text engages with the transformation of a specific high relief at the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, which in the past decade has been subjected to a series of material and semiotic modifications. The analysis of interventions on the relief created between 2011-2018 stimulates an engagement with a set of questions pertaining to the way in which surfaces are engaged in the production of temporal continuity and rupture. To achieve a theoretical intervention in monument, visual and urban studies, the article mobilises cultural topology and media theory, alongside scholarship dealing with Bulgarian post-communist urban space and politics.

Keywords: surface, recursion, temporal politics, continuity and rupture, Monument to the Soviet Army, post-communism

Image 1. 'In Pace with the Times', June 2011. (Photograph: Georgi Pavlov)

On the morning of 17 June 2011, a peculiar intervention at one of Bulgaria's most prominent and frequently debated public monuments attracted the attention of Sofia's residents.[1] The sculpted figures, which build up one of the high reliefs at the base of the Monument to the Soviet Army from 1954, were sprayed over by anonymous graffiti artists and transformed into heroes from

American popular culture.[2] What were once Soviet soldiers metamorphosed into well-known fictional and often trademarked characters such as Ronald McDonald, Santa and Superman. The whole ensemble was succinctly captioned with the words: 'In pace with the times' [В крак с времето]. This creative act galvanised public debate on the present-day significance of pre-1989 heritage and inspired a series of journalistic and academic writings dealing with the event. In the few days before the municipality cleaned the graffiti from the monument's high relief, the ensemble was a popular site of attraction for Sofia's residents, who came to be photographed in front of it.

Some commentators celebrated the intervention and read it as a challenge to the continued existence of the memorial; in these accounts it was read as an archaic remnant of the country's pre-1989 socialist past and its no longer desirable allegiance to the former Soviet Union. Others expressed concerns that by ridiculing the soldiers and redressing them as comic figures, the act negated the historical experience of anti-fascist struggle that the Monument itself strives to commemorate; while still others yet offered more nuanced readings, highlighting the incisive character of the intervention in an artistic and political sense. Some analysts, like Nikolay Karkov, quickly recognised that the multiplicity of ways of relating to and assessing the interventions bears not only an aesthetic, but also a political function. It can thus be said that the graffiti intervention politicised the monument by heterogenising and linking it symbolically and materially to significations that were coded as 'foreign' to it.[3] That is, they didn't stem from the complex of meanings which the monument as it was conceived was meant to articulate – anti-fascist resistance; Bulgaria's ties to the Soviet union; celebration of state and military power – but rather from those new 'times' ironically rendered in the arrival of the American pop-cultural heroes, overlaid on the images of Soviet soldiers.

What makes the monument in Sofia a fruitful site for the examination of an interplay between the negotiation of spatio-temporal and semiotic continuity and rupture, is the emergence of a series of interventions on the same high relief since 2011. Indeed, its sporadic modification by different actors has allowed its surface to gradually articulate itself as a privileged space for political expression in the urban milieu. While a mayoral candidate from the Bulgarian Socialist Party used visual motives from the graffiti intervention in an opulent 3D video-mapping spectacle,[4] which took place on the front of the monument a few months after the event depicted above, anonymous interventions have also been abundant. In 2012, the soldiers from the ensemble were re-dressed with Pussy Riot face masks; in 2013, on the 45th anniversary of the Warsaw pact invasion of Prague, the whole ensemble was painted over in pink and captioned with the words 'Bulgaria apologises' written in Czech; in 2014, the central sculpted figure was painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag; on 9 May 2015, the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, a digitally modified image on which the hands of the sculpted soldiers were painted in red circulated on social media. Finally, on the 100th

anniversary of the October Revolution in 2017, the whole ensemble was sprayed in yellow paint.

One way of theoretically approaching the series of interventions would be to read them as a local example of public engagement with an element from Sofia's urban milieu, which can be analysed from the point of view of a distinct post-communist political logic in a country from the former Eastern bloc. Such an approach would emphasise the geographical, historical and socio-political distinctiveness of the Bulgarian post-communist context, focusing specifically on the present-day conflicted relationship to the pre-1989 past in the country, as well as to the remaining monumental vestiges of 'brotherly ties' to the former Soviet Union. A different approach altogether might attempt to situate the act of redressing the monument within a wider and more global succession of interventions on monuments: from Black Lives Matter activists toppling and modifying monuments that attest to Western countries' colonial past and still pervasive racialising matrixes, to acts of destruction or conversion of the meaning of socialist monuments in a post-Yugoslav context.[5] Each of these theoretical routes – the one emphasising the specificity and discreteness of the Bulgarian post-communist context and the one highlighting continuities between social processes across political and geographical divides – would be productive of a different set of questions and reading publics. They would mobilise distinct conceptual resources to understand the interventions on the Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia, each of them situating its reading within different theoretical fields.

5. Gal Kirn, 'Transformation of Memorial Sites in the Post-Yugoslav Context', in Daniel Suber and Slobodan Karaminic (eds) *Retracing Images: Visual Culture after Yugoslavia*, Balkan Studies Library: Volume 4, Brill, 2012, pp251-81, p255.

This article will take neither of these two paths. Rather, it aims to contextualise and analyse the political modality of the interventions on the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, in order to understand how temporal continuity and rupture are materially and semiotically constructed through surface transformations. Putting aside Area Studies approaches, which often work as disciplinary straitjackets to a theoretical and political engagement with events and processes unfolding 'elsewhere' (that is, away from the Anglo-American unmarked centre of theoretical production), this text will mobilise media theory and cultural topology alongside an empirical engagement with specific interventions at the surface of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia. Furthermore, the concept of 'recursion' as one that is capable of accounting for different scales of producing continuity and rupture, of negotiating *both* a discursive alignment and departure from established frames of reference, will be put forward as a central theoretical vehicle in the latter course of the article. Hence, while the present analysis takes as its point of departure the engagement with a specific monumental object and its transformations within Bulgaria's socio-temporal milieu, the hope is that this examination offers a methodological and theoretical contribution to the understanding of other contested sites and their complex temporal politics.

Before delving into these questions in more detail, it is worthwhile offering an insight into the specific context that generated these queries: that is, the

construction of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia and the contentious high relief, whose material surface has been repeatedly subjected to mostly anonymous interventions and modifications in the past decade.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE MONUMENT TO THE SOVIET ARMY IN SOFIA

The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia was inaugurated in 1954 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the People's Uprising of the 9 September 1944, which brought about a replacement of the monarchic regime in Bulgaria with a socialist one, lasting until 1989. The memorial was designed by a large collective of over 100 architects, sculptors and artists, and consists of a 37-metre-high truncated pyramid with a figural composition featuring a Soviet soldier, a Bulgarian male worker and a Bulgarian woman holding a child. The plan of the monumental ensemble is organised around a central axis – with the truncated pyramid visually dominating it – and symmetrically arranged lateral elements (see Image 2). Besides two autonomous sculptured groups at both sides of the entrance to the complex, further sculptural elements include three high reliefs at the west, south and east façades of the monument's base. They offer an interpretation of significant moments from Russian and Soviet military history, and each of them was designed by a different collective of Bulgarian artists. All feature dynamic, mostly male figures, either in combative poses or engaged in planning and repair works. Furthermore, large, engraved letters at the front of the Monument's base caption its northern side with the words 'To the Soviet Army Liberator from the grateful Bulgarian people' [*На Съветската армия освободителка от признателния български народ*].

Image 2. Monument to the Soviet Army, view from the north side. (Photograph: Ivan Ivanov/ Wikimedia)

It is on one of the reliefs at the Monument's base, which enacts a moment from Soviet soldiers' preparation for battle during World War Two, that a series of material-semiotic interventions have taken place since the 'In Pace with the Times' episode from 2011. Unlike the central composition, which is elevated high in the air, the relief is accessible and can therefore be mounted, sprayed or otherwise repurposed fairly easily.

Similar to many memorials from the Bulgarian socialist period, the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia functions as a monumental complex. Rather than being an isolated object in spatial and symbolic terms, it includes multiple sculptured elements, distributed in and animating the surrounding

space of the garden. A wide pedestrian alley leads from one of the city's main arteries, Tsarigradsko Chaussee, to the front side of the Monument; the space around it is open and the whole park is situated between the densely populated part of the city centre and another large public garden.

Nikolay Vukov has stated that the construction of the Monument was part of a 'wave of building victory monuments' to the Red Army across the country and the Eastern Bloc as a whole, in the aftermath of World War Two.[6] In Bulgaria, monuments were erected not only in the capital Sofia, but also in cities like Rousse, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Yambol and others. Vukov stresses that, unlike in other countries from the former Soviet Bloc, the construction of similar memorials dedicated to Bulgaria's 'brotherly' ties to Russia continued well into the 1980s and they were rarely subject to scrutiny prior to 1989 (*Brotherly Help*, p269). According to his account, this was chiefly due to the utilisation of a so-called 'double liberation' narrative during socialist times, which sought to create a historical continuity between the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 (after which Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire), and what was dubbed as Bulgaria's 'second liberation' from monarcho-fascism by the Red Army. Discursively, the monuments to the Soviet Army that were inaugurated since World War Two could thus be placed within this historical and ideological narrative, while symbolically and materially contributing to the stabilisation of its continuity. Finally, as authors such as Bozhin Traykov have highlighted, the monument itself is embedded within a space marked by the early socialist regime's modernisation efforts and their material and ideological manifestation in terms of urban planning; even if, as Elitsa Stanoeva states, these efforts were in the first decades of the regime disproportionately privileging the city centre at the expense of the urban periphery.[7]

While the official use of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia during socialist times was for holding annual parades on specific dates, such as 9 May (Victory Day), after the political changes of 1989 it was quickly subjected to public criticism as one of the most visible battlefields of conflicting interpretations of the past and especially of Bulgaria's ties to the Soviet Union. Already in the early post-1989 years, the Monument was often disfigured and subjected to what can be described as 'textual' kinds of interventions: these consist, on the one hand, in the writing of condemnatory slogans on various parts of the monument and, on the other, in the 'crossing out' of the whole of the monument itself. Both types of textual gestures rely on – and construe – an understanding of the spatial object as a sign, holding a distinctive, inherent and unambiguous meaning; in this belief in the immutability and immobility of such an innate meaning they are indeed close to the intentions of its makers. Invariably, these interventions address a chain of equivalences, which seek to correlate the continued existence of a monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia to the lasting influence of Russia on contemporary Bulgarian politics.[8] The Monument is considered to work as

6. Nikolay Vukov, '"Brotherly Help" Representations or "Imperial" Legacy: Monuments of the Soviet Army in Bulgaria before and after 1989' *Ab Imperio*, 1, 2006, pp267-92, p278. (Hereafter *Brotherly Help*).

7. Bozhin Traykov, 'Transforming Alyosha into Superman: Invented Traditions and Street Art Subversion in Post-Communist Bulgaria', *TranscUlturAl*, 6:1, 2012, pp56-66; Elitza Stanoeva, *София. Идеология, градоустройство и живот през социализма.* [Sofia. Ideology, Urban Planning, and Life during Socialism.] Prosveta, Sofia 2016.

8. For example, when its front was covered with large capital letters stating: 'Monument to Gazprom' in July 2013 (Gazprom is a Russian energy corporation with activities in Bulgaria); or when the inscription: 'To the Soviet Army Liberator by the Grateful Bulgarian People' was crossed out in October 2018.

a univocal sign of Russian imperialism, that repeatedly needs to be 'edited' and 'crossed out' from the present.

Despite the signing of a Contract of Cooperation and Friendship between Bulgaria and Russia in 1991, which stipulated that each country should preserve and maintain monuments related to the culture and history of the other, on 26 February 1993 Sofia's Municipal Council issued a decision to dismantle the Monument. This instance caused not only a vehement protest by a range of actors (from the Bulgarian Socialist Party to the Bulgarian Antifascist Union and various cultural organisations), but also a diplomatic scandal with Russia (see *Brotherly Help*, pp285-6). In following years, and especially after the 2011 anonymous intervention, which put a (provisional) beginning to a 'plastic' series of interventions, this scandal would be repeatedly revived. The starkest and most recent example of this perpetual, yet never final, preoccupation with the memorial happened on 24 February 2022, the first day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine: in Bulgaria, one of the very first public reactions to the war was an announcement by the mayor of Sredets district (which encompasses the park where the monument is located), that he will initiate a procedure for its immediate dismantlement.[9]

9. At the time of submission of this article, the fate of the Monument remained unclear – both due to a lack of consensus concerning its dismantlement amongst government and municipal officials, as well as because of the ambiguity of its legal status and ownership.

In many of the instances in which the high relief's surface was modified, what we see is the 'attachment' of meanings and references that rework different historical and contemporary moments problematising Bulgaria's conflicted ties to the former Soviet Union and Russia. While in some of the more recent cases one can discern a mobilisation of explicitly anti-communist and even anti-Semitic tropes, in others we can observe the articulation of solidarity with subjects of state and military oppression. For example, on 23 February 2014, the central figure of the ensemble was painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, yellow and blue (see Image 3), an act which occurred during anti-government protests in Ukraine and shortly before the annexation of Crimea. At the time, demonstrations against the socialist-led Oresharski government were taking place in Bulgaria as well; this means that the show of support with Ukrainian protesters played a rhetorical function within the local Bulgarian context too.[10] This is because charges directed towards the present-day Bulgarian Socialist Party by liberal and anti-communist spokespersons frequently have less to do with BSP's conservative positions and social policies and more with its historical legacy. There is an assumption of continuity between the pre- and post-1989 political orientation of the party, both at the level of the personal biographies of its members and when it comes to its allegiance to Russia.[11] Hence, the 2014 modification of the high relief of the monument served not only as an articulation of solidarity with Ukrainian protesters, but also as an intervention into and problematisation of this continuity with Bulgaria's post-communist context. While it is important not to erase the semiotic double-sidedness and complexity of this and subsequent surface transformations, there is an undeniable tendency to articulate Russia as a trans-historical villain. This direction is strengthened by the activities of a

10. Apart from the colours of the Ukrainian flag, the words 'Glory to Ukraine' were sprayed on the front of the monument.

11. A thorough engagement with the specificity or validity of these claims is beyond the scope (or theoretical interest) of this article.

vocal citizen-led initiative campaigning for the demolition of the monument on the grounds that it represents a tribute to the Red Army 'occupier' and should hence be removed from the centre of Sofia.[12]

The series of interventions on this particular section of the monument can be seen to function as a peculiar kind of 'extraction' of the surface of the high relief. The repeated interventions articulate it as separate, distinct from the rest of the site (due to its heightened visibility and the enhanced activity occurring on it), while maintaining a dynamic link to it. It is precisely this interplay between continuity and rupture, discernible in the repeated activation of the site, which invites a theoretical engagement with the productivity of surfaces as sites of material-semiotic transformation.

SURFACE TRANSFORMATIONS

As discussed earlier, the primary theoretical concern of this article hinges on an understanding of surfaces as dynamic temporal objects, involved in the formulation of socio-political meaning. In order to grasp the political modality and complexity of surface transformations of the high relief at the Monument to Soviet Army, it is important to develop a conceptual repertoire that is capable of accounting for their communicative character and their openness to a complex spatio-temporal environment. In this, they operate as interfaces, which, in the words of Félix Guattari, grant the machine 'a kind of exterior politics and relations of alterity'.[13]

For instance, when the Soviet soldiers on the western high relief of the Monument were first re-dressed as Santa, Superman, Ronald McDonald and the Joker, this intervention invited an interrogation of an ensemble of significations. These include the visually articulated claim of an ideological substitution of former with present day 'heroes' in contemporary Bulgaria; the stark contrast between the aesthetic modes of the representation and celebration of these heroes; the centrality of anonymous versus easily recognisable trademarked figures in supporting two contrasting social, political and economic orders (state socialist versus capitalist). We can say that the intervention offered an ironic visual commentary on the transition period, with its accompanying shift not of only economic and political objectives, but also of cultural values and points of reference. Moreover, it articulated polemically a point that is often missed from accounts that problematise the hegemonic position of Russia (or the former Soviet Union) vis-a-vis Bulgarian politics: that the geopolitical switch of alliances has installed points of reference in the public realm that are not any less 'foreign', alongside a visual appearance and discursive function that is guided by a set of codes that are not any less fixed.

Hence, the action of June 2011 is significant not only because it was the first in a series of plastic enunciations that succeeded it, but also because of its relative ambiguity and openness. In a similar way to the aforementioned

12. See demontirane.org and facebook.com/groups/demontirane. Albeit ostensibly a grass-roots organisation, some of demontirane's central figures have significant political influence and enjoy media visibility due to their professional lives as centre-conservative politicians, financiers and journalists.

13. Félix Guattari, 'On Machines', in Andrew E. Benjamin (ed.), *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, Complexity: Art/Architecture, 6, 1995, pp 8-12, p9. (Hereafter *On Machines*). See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Bloomsbury Academic 2013; and Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, University of Washington Press 2012 (Hereafter *Chaosmosis*), for an elaboration of 'machinic assemblage' that counters an understanding of machines as solely technical artefacts. Their composite and multiple character is instead foregrounded, as well as their achievement of self-consistency as the never-quite-finalised product of dynamic interrelations and ensembles of intellectual, technical, poetic, social and affective elements.

recent intervention that articulated a solidarity with Ukrainian protesters while targeting Bulgaria's government, 'In Pace with the Times' also conjoins visual codes gesturing towards divergent socio-political environments, in order to problematise both of them. In a sense, it is precisely this 'bringing together' of different times and significations, which bears the potential of rupturing the assemblages of meanings and the temporal continuity within which the surface-in-transformation is nested.

I will return to the question of the production of temporal continuity and rupture in the next section, through an engagement with the concept of 'recursion'. However, before moving on, it is worthwhile bringing up a final aspect of the semiotic modality of 'In Pace with the Times': namely, that the intervention contributed to the generation of a novel communicative and social situation, albeit a relatively short-lived one. While people usually hang out on the steps below the relief to watch skateboard tricks being performed on the nearby ramp, in the few days before it was cleaned by the municipality,[14] residents flocked to the monument to be photographed with Santa and Superman. Images taken at the time made rounds on social, local and international media and have thus granted the intervention an afterlife, allowing the imagery to be utilised and modified time and again – be it as illustrations, memes, or the visual material for a 3D mapping spectacle.

My contention is that this and the subsequent interventions at the Monument to the Soviet Army can be defined as a recurring 'activation' of its time-laden surface. Each activation intervenes in the spatio-temporal coordinates intrinsic to the monument, which can be described as constituting a continual surface of relations. By 'intrinsic' I do not mean to suggest that these parameters and meanings are in any way natural or given, but rather that they are produced as such. Moreover, the self-consistency of the monument as a sign with its 'proper' meaning; as one that points towards a distinct historical moment; that articulates and stabilises a particular (geo)political relationship; that appeals to an affective and ideological attachment of city dwellers depends on the constant reiteration of these relations and meanings. Each time its surface is visually 'reactivated', such acts of interventions extract – and thereby heterogenise – time frames that are rendered polemical in a politicised present moment. In a way, these interventions denaturalise the set of material and semiotic relations that the memorial attempts to hold together. Yet, what is the relationship between this seemingly 'given' continuous surface and the individual acts that not only intervene in and alter, but also by returning to it, co-constitute and stabilise it? How does the former gain a degree of consistency, how does 'it' persevere through time and how do certain integral temporal chunks continue their existence across epochal and symbolic shifts? And, finally, what kind of political and temporal continuity does the series of interventions itself produce and maintain through time?

RECURSIVE PRODUCTION OF TEMPORAL CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

In their article, 'The Becoming Topological of Culture', Celia Lury, Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova assert that there is a growing tendency towards a re-ordering of continuity and change which can be recognised in techno-culture today, or rather that 'culture is increasingly organised in terms of its capacities for change', with practices such as 'ordering, modelling, networking and mapping that co-constitute culture, technology and science' becoming prevalent.[15] While this article is not concerned with an appraisal of techno-culture, but rather seeks to mobilise topological concepts for the study of the temporal politics at the surface of the Monument to the Soviet Army, the work of Lury, Parisi and Terranova is valuable here precisely for its theoretical elaboration of the production of continuity and discontinuity in a topological sense. The authors stress the fact that current practices of ordering and mapping lead to the introduction of 'new continuities in a discontinuous world by establishing equivalences or similitudes' and 'make and mark discontinuities through repeated contrasts' (*Becoming Topological*, p4).

For the purposes of this article, it is important to highlight the productivity of these practices – in both epistemological as well as social and political terms. As we shall see shortly when we return to the terrain of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, the fabricated spatial and temporal relations of discontinuity and continuity are never simply given, but are rather artificially and partially construed. Their production and productivity cannot be understood by departing from a notion of separate isolated sets. Significantly, an act of intervention that seeks to modify the surface of the Monument not only narratively, visually and politically 'abducts' a spatial and temporal slice of it, heterogenising and altering it, but also always transforms and works upon, in material and semiotic terms, the continuous surface of relations that it draws from.

The question of continuity and discontinuity is at the core of the conceptualisation of particular kinds of surfaces that Lury, Parisi and Terranova define as 'spaces in themselves', by engaging with work from mathematics, topology and philosophy:

> Put simply, a surface that is a space in itself is not fixed by way of external co-ordinates but is, rather, *organised from within itself*; it has intrinsic rather than extrinsic dimensions (*Becoming Topological*, p7; emphasis mine).

Certainly, the assertion of a prevalence of intrinsic dimensions over extrinsic ones does not mean that surfaces considered this way are to be understood as completely uncoupled from environments, other surfaces and forces working upon them. This would arguably render them closed in on themselves as sets or units and would undermine the claim of a constitutive relationality. It is

16. See Manuel De Landa, who considers different characteristics of topological space (such as rapidity or slowness), not as extra qualities impinging upon an otherwise uniform and metric space, but rather as immanent of the field itself: 'In all cases the multiplicity is intrinsically defined'. Manuel DeLanda, 'Space: Extensive and Intensive, Actual and Virtual', I. Buchanan and G. Lambert (eds), *Deleuze and Space*, Edinburgh University Press 2005, pp80-88, p84.

rather a question of making intelligible a certain kind of production of dis/continuity. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of a surface as 'organised from within itself ' sheds light onto the problematic of environments and forces that enter into a relationship with a relatively delimited surface: this relationship is a matter of different scales and not of extra dimensions.[16]

What does this mean for the study of the transformations of the high relief on the Monument to the Soviet Army? It seems that it brings us to one of the crucial points in considering surfaces as productive and composite sites – that is, the refusal to think of them as either passive receptors of external forces that wish to act on them, or as expressive of some qualities contained within an innate essence. We can examine the various relationships between the surface-in-transformation of the high relief and differently constituted environments: such as the whole of the object (the monumental complex); the surrounding park and the city; the historical time organised around and through the Monument; the present-day political situation in Bulgaria with some of its prevalent concerns, in particular during times of unrest. All of these at times intersecting spheres are not to be understood as 'embedding spaces'. Rather, we need to consider the way in which certain relevant elements of these environments ingress onto or are articulated onto the surface.

The exploration of the Monument can furthermore invite a reconfiguration of this issue in terms of the production of a temporal continuum and the generation of discontinuities. If Lury, Parisi and Terranova ask, 'What does it mean to think the space between two points as a continual surface of relations?' (*Becoming Topological*, p20), can we transport this query to the terrain of temporality, to ask what it means to think of the time between two moments as a continual surface of relations?

17. Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, 'Digital Infrastructures and the Machinery of Topological Abstraction', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 29:4/5, 2012, pp311-33, p322. (Hereafter *Digital Infrastructures*); Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, Rowman and Littlefield 2019. (Hereafter *Recursivity and Contingency*).

Here, the notion of 'recursion' as formulated by Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey can become useful for the description of modes of production of 'temporal invariance' through the organisation of 'heterogeneous material into a continuous, self-consistent pattern' (see also Yuk Hui).[17] Each act that intervenes in and transforms the high relief 's outlook and signification produces a partial discontinuity within an ideologically charged temporal continuum. At the same time, this rupture is itself involved in the composition of an invariance through time – contributing to the formation of a series or a pattern that reaches towards moments future and past, by extracting, ordering and weaving together semiotic ingredients in mixtures that can be both playful and sinister. Each act in the series, each recurring modification of the monument's surface, mobilises a different set of references from its own position within the temporal continuum, whereby this position is inflected by political perspectives and concerns that are themselves formed in relation to an 'exterior', that is to a wider and complex environment. As such, an intervention can be understood as a 'recursive event', which is 'different, in terms of scale, location in time, in the complications it may entail, and in terms of its place in relation to its nesting within other recursions or to those

in which it is in turn nested' (*Digital Infrastructures*, p322).

It is important to note that recursions can exhibit different degrees of alterity towards each other and within the whole of the loop regarding their scale or temporal location, but at the same time to insist that the fact that some recursions are 'nested' within other recursions does not imply that they are contained within a temporal continuum of a higher dimension. Asserting that there is 'no upper layer' (*Digital Infrastructures*, p322) also means that the search for that single moment in which the recursion was originated is futile, as explained by Hui: 'Where does recursion begin? The search for the beginning is a search for the first cause. While in a circular loop, the beginning is only temporal, but not necessarily a cause. The cause is the totality of the loop. The prime mover … does not intervene from without, but rather the cause is immanent' (*Recursivity and Contingency*, p7).

A useful insight when thinking about the production of temporal continuity by and through surfaces, and when mobilising the notion of recursion, is that different scales of continuity and discontinuity can be rendered intelligible. To acknowledge this multi-scalar character of the production of dis/continuity it is necessary to develop an understanding of how different layers gain consistency by drawing from heterogeneous material-semiotic-temporal elements that might or might not be partaking in the constitutions of other layers. For example, as I will argue in the next section, the 'In Pace with the Times' intervention in 2011 introduced a novel type of engagement with the plasticity and materiality of the monument. This meant that subsequent plastic modifications of the same relief not only aligned themselves with it, but also contributed to the construing of this technique (which targets a delimited part of the monument with specific means) as constitutive for the formation of one type of loop. A different, intersecting loop would be formed by the totality of anonymous and authored interventions at this and other monuments in Bulgaria since 1989; a third, by the repeated mobilisation of tropes and visual motives relating to the socialist past in times of political protest; while yet another by the invocation of the 'West' as a counterpoint to all that is considered to be corrupt, dysfunctional or backward in the country today. Indeed, as Fuller and Goffey point out, recursion is a technique that 'draws on particular kinds of patterning that already exist in things, people, processes, organisations themselves' (*Digital Infrastructures*, p323), and could be understood as operating by means of abstraction in the Guattarian sense of 'extracting' (*Chaosmosis*, p35). As such, the selection it engages in is always partial and can exhibit a varying degree of affinity or oppositionality towards the pre-existing patterns it is drawing from.

Let us take as an example the whole of the Monument to the Soviet Army, having examined its conditions of production and of gaining socio-material and semiotic consistency in a previous section. As a self-consistent object, organised according to intrinsic coordinates, the Monument stands at odds with more general traits of Bulgarian post-communism, in particular with

18. For writing on the sustained anti-communist discourse in former socialist countries see, for example, Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* [Zone of Transition. On the End of Post-communism], Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2009. (Hereafter *Zone of Transition*); Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks (eds), *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*. Verso 2015; Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, 'Vampires in the Living Room. A View of What Happened to Eastern Europe After 1989, and Why Real Socialism Still Matters', C. Kumar (ed.), *Asking We Walk. The South as New Political Imaginary* 3, Streelekha Publications 2011.

19. Gabor Somorjai and Yimin Li, 'Impact of Surface Chemistry', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108:3, 2011, pp917-24, p920. (Hereafter *Impact of Surface Chemistry*).

20. Gabor Somorjai, 'Surface Science: An Old Field Rejuvenated, Demands Attention and People', *Science*, 201:4355, 1978, pp489-97, p490.

21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum International Publishing Group 2004.

its prevalent anti-communist character.[18] It introduces a political, but also significantly a temporal, incongruity within its order. Often reproached for constituting an anachronism at the very centre of Sofia, this is arguably precisely due to the Monument's discrepancy with post-communism's temporal and political order – which has a fixation with 'catching up' with Western Europe, described by Boris Buden as complying to a 'logic of belatedness' (*Zone of Transition*) – and to its tendency to constantly place passers-by in another time, a time supposedly sealed off from the present, leading to a heightened engagement with its materiality and meaning. Here, we can speculatively draw from the fascinating work in chemistry of surface scientist Gabor Somorjai, who has asserted that an increased chemical activity occurs at surfaces' 'defect sites'.[19] By modelling the topography of the surface of a solid, Somorjai has shown that it is 'heterogeneous on the atomic scale' where it builds various 'sites', to which he gives names such as 'steps', 'terraces' and 'kinks'.[20] The claim that 'surface defect sites (steps and kinks) are more chemically active' (*Impact of Surface Chemistry*, p920), can in fact be useful for the understanding of the increased engagement with the Monument, which could be speculatively read as one particularly fractious 'defect site' in relation to something that can be described as post-communism's social or 'recording' surface.[21]

On a different scale, the memorial itself strives to build a continuous surface by mobilising its own coordinates and intrinsic relations. As outlined above and in the same way as many other monuments to the Soviet army in Bulgaria, it attempts to create a historical and ideological continuity by utilising the narrative of a double liberation by Russia, thus short-circuiting otherwise discontinuous and irreducible moments of the histories of both countries. From the point of view of urban planning, it has been shown that socialist architects and town planners were pursuing a holistic approach to the built environment, whereby the communication and continuity between different sites was bestowed with great importance.[22] Furthermore, the Monument is congruent with a tradition of socialist realism in monumental art, whose early examples, as discussed by Veneta Ivanova, were overly committed to historical representation – a shared feature of almost all monuments from the same period.[23] Ivanova points out that one of the defining characteristics of post-1944 monuments is that their visual realisation tends to be subjugated to a narrative principle and 'truthful' historical representation (*Bulgarian Monumental Sculpture*, p128). She reads the repeated implementation of this principle – which arguably presupposes a continuity between historical authenticity and visual representation in monumental art – across the whole country in the post-war period as a weakness, as it often led to a rigid, stereotypical depiction of common subjects and tropes (such as partisan fighters or Soviet soldiers) and had a limited impact on the viewer.

These are only some examples of continuities that intersect at the Monument and which it was actively involved in holding together in pre-

1989 Bulgaria. Far from being cleansed of the post-communist present once and for all, its social, spatial and temporal productivity persists 30 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, albeit in ways that are no longer aligned with dominant ideological and political narratives of the present day. The material and semiotic modifications of the Monument can then be understood as intervening in the produced continuity of its surface. In these recursive acts of intervention, the surface is presupposed not only as a space in itself, but also as a continuous surface of temporal relations, which draw on and challenge some of its intrinsic coordinates in ways that are aligned or at odds with the dominant logic of post-communism to a different extent. Questions of subversion and complicity with prevailing characteristics of contemporary post-communism are hence complicated and should be understood as a function of a complex interplay between different layers of political signification.

CONCEPTUALISING THE SERIES OF INTERVENTIONS AT THE MONUMENT TO THE SOVIET ARMY

Until the present day, by far the most prominent of these acts has been the 'In Pace with the Times' intervention to which I have returned throughout this article. As previously signalled, it constitutes a watershed moment in the public engagement with the spatial object – not only because it gained an unprecedented amount of media attention and provoked a discussion on the significance of socialist heritage post-1989, but also because it became exemplary for a different kind of interference with the Monument's materiality. As indicated above, previously most interventions on its surface could be described as textual, in so far as they primarily used writing to either cross out or 'rephrase' the meaning of the memorial.

The other type of intervention that I describe here as plastic makes an active use of the plasticity and materiality of the spatial object, rather than being textual in its means and approach to the memorial. As with 'In Pace with the Times' and subsequent interventions, writing is rarely the central, and never the sole, element in these interventions: when words are sprayed at all, they serve as a kind of captioning of the work. For the most part, those graffiti artists who seek to interfere with the materiality and meaning of the monument plastically, make use of colour or add objects like face masks in order to re-dress the sculptural figures on the surface. Furthermore, ever since the intervention of 2011, these acts tend to target just one specific element of the monumental ensemble – that is, the high relief composition titled 'The Great Patriotic War' on the west side of the monument's base – rather than arbitrarily covering different sites, as is frequently the case with textual additions. While they tend to presuppose an unequivocal meaning of the monument to then 'cross it out', plastic interventions work primarily by means of overlaying. Adding paint or other materials to the relief, the

references accrued on it heterogenise and partially reroute its surface of
relations. While the examination of some of the interventions, such as the
'In Pace with the Times' act or the articulation of solidarity with Ukrainian
protesters, demonstrated that the constitution of the plastically operating loop
is more complex semiotically vis-a-vis textual interventions, it is important to
acknowledge that the repeated targeting of the most politically charged part
of the monument – the high relief depicting Russian soldiers preparing to
confront Nazi troops – is not a neutral choice. Indeed, this patterning draws
from and resonates with a longer series of interventions on other socialist
monuments commemorating the fight against fascism in Bulgaria.[24] It is
itself nested within a wider tendency of reappraising the country's pre-1944

24. For example, in
November 2013 a
memorial depicting
partisan fighters
in front of BSP's
headquarters in
Sofia was vandalised,
while four years
later an anti-fascist
monument from the
1950s (the Alyosha
memorial in Plovdiv)
was covered with
anti-Semitic and
Holocaust-denying
inscriptions.

25. Both in terms
of parliamentary
representation
as well as when
it comes to the
public consensus
in relation to issues
such as migration,
homophobia, social
benefits, taxation or
domestic violence.

monarchic regime (including its allegiance to Germany during both world
wars), on par with a contemporary rise of the far-right.[25]

The serial character of the interventions builds on the discussion of
recursion from the previous section. While these recursive operations
draw from pre-existing patterns and tendencies present both in the post-
communist imaginary and its dominant tropes, and amongst the elements
through which the Monument itself has constructed a semiotic, temporal
and social consistency, they also establish another kind of continuity: that
of the series of interventions itself. In this series, 'In Pace with the Times' is
one, particularly semiotically powerful, yet decisively *not* originary moment.
These interventions do not aim to retrieve some lost origin or to offer a
mere repetition of an act provisionally placed at the beginning of the 'plastic'
series. As explained by Yuk Hui, if a cause is to be searched for at all, it would
be found in 'the totality of the loop' (*Recursivity and Contingency*, p7). The
layering of the interventions, apart from creating a novel kind of consistency,
also goes on to pull and disorganise the produced temporal, semiotic and
material continuity of the Monument. By challenging this continuity, each new
layer articulates a critique towards it. It makes the political character of the
Monument's continuity apparent, while drawing from it and appropriating

some of its 'intrinsic' qualities. However, we should be careful not to equate the operations of heterogenisation with subversion or emancipation, as Félix Guattari shrewdly warns in *Chaosmosis* (p2). As argued above, in many ways the vocabulary of the interventions suggests a consolidation of meaning along the anti-communist axis, which in fact aligns them with the dominant logic of post-communism. Each new act occurs in response to the series that precedes it, while anticipating, even summoning, interventions that *might* succeed it in the future, partially inflecting them with previously actualised meanings.[26] In light of this assertion, what does it mean for a monument to be 'in pace with the times'? We could state that the Monument, rather than being immutably anchored to a singular moment in time, has gone out for

26. For a Lacanian-inspired reading of the temporal economy of the joke, see Mina Ivanova, 'The Bulgarian Monument to the Soviet Army: Visual Burlesque, Epic, and the Emergence of Comic Subjectivity', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 100:3, 2014, pp273-302, p285.

Image 4: 'Bulgaria apologises', 20 August 2013. (Photograph: Asen Genov)

a stroll. However, adding some caution to this blithe reading, we would also need to add that 'the times' it strides briskly alongside and whose paths it crosses, are not always moving in emancipatory, revolutionary directions.

Before concluding, I will briefly outline some of the other instances when the monument's surface was repurposed, in order to shed light on the types of significations attached to it. For example, in what is one of the more prominent interventions, during the anti-government protests that shook Bulgaria in 2013-2014, the high relief was covered in pink paint and captioned with the words 'Bulgaria apologises', written in Czech (see Image 4). This happened on 20 August 2013, the 45th anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia,[27] while the colour of the paint referenced David Černý's 1991 act of intervention when he painted the Monument to the Soviet Tank Crews in Prague pink. The apology refers to the fact that, unlike countries such as Albania, which left the Pact to protest the invasion, Bulgaria sent troops to help stifle the 1968 revolution in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, in its modality the intervention is akin to Foucault's description of the commentary

27. The Warsaw pact was a military defence treaty between the Soviet Union and Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

28. Further study would be necessary to examine the curious intersections between Foucault's description of the discursive operation of the commentary and recursion – in particular vis-a-vis the question of contingency, novelty and ordering.

29. Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in R. Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981, pp51-78, p58.

30. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books 1984, pp76-100, p94.

31. This occasion deserves to be analysed more carefully by considering the relationship between digital and urban environments, and what kinds of practices and semiotic enunciations become available in their convergence.

as an *internal* operation, through which discourse organises itself. It holds in check the elements of contingency and chance[28] by 'tirelessly repeat[ing] what had, however, never been said' by discourse itself.[29] Referring back to the 'primary text', that is the Monument with its most explicit signification being an ideological tool of the former regime that positioned the Soviet army as 'Liberator', the activated surface seeks to articulate what was kept silent by this original text. It makes use of some of the memorial's intrinsic coordinates to turn them against it and subvert its unequivocal meaning. However, this can only happen on the condition that the monument itself is repeated. Similarly to the occasion when the central figure of the ensemble was painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, the 'pink' intervention was meant to not simply problematise an event unfolding elsewhere and at another time but, by virtue of its execution during the anti-government protests, it performs a political function for the present as well. It is involved in the rhetorical formulation of a direct link, a continuity, between former and current oppressors or political elites.

On 17 August 2012, when members of the Russian group Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in prison over hooliganism charges for their performance of an anti-Putin 'sermon' in an Orthodox cathedral, the faces of the Soviet soldiers were covered with face masks in solidarity with activists Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina and Samutsevich. Like the act in support of Ukrainian demonstrators which occurred two years later, this intervention was meant as an expression of solidarity in a situation of urgency, prompted by the exertion of state and military power in or by Russia. On other occasions, however, modifications on the relief proceed differently from the point of view of both the temporal strategies they adopt and the political content put forward. Some of the more recent interventions increasingly anchor themselves in the past by commemorating anniversaries of historic events, 're-establishing the high points of historical development and [maintaining them] in perpetual presence'.[30] For example, on the anniversary of Victory Day (9 May 2015) and following unsuccessful attempts to physically vandalise the monument, the hands of the sculpted soldiers were painted in red. Significantly, this was done via a digitally modified image that was widely circulated on the web.[31] Two years later, on the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution in 2017, the whole ensemble was sprayed over in yellow paint. We can observe that in these latter two sequences the attempt to articulate solidarity with oppressed subjects or voice a critique in the context of political unrest in Bulgaria itself, has been replaced by much more sinister layers of signification. While the addition of the colour red is meant to suggest that the soldiers' hands are covered in blood, turning the anti-fascist fighters into plain murderers, the spraying of the ensemble in yellow was accompanied by writings on other parts of the monument reading '100 Years of Zionist occupation', thus forcing us to acknowledge the disconcerting proximity of anti-communist discourse with overt anti-Semitism.

CONCLUSION

On 15 November 2018, a 22-year-old biology student was apprehended by police officers in the vicinity of the monument and arrested for hooliganism. He had just written on the front of the monument's base the words, 'Refugees Welcome Le Pen Go Home' (see Image 5). This was one of the very few cases in which the Bulgarian prosecution pressed charges for hooliganism with aggravating circumstances, which, had they been admitted by the court, would have meant a sentence of five years in prison for the person found guilty of the act.

Image 5: Textual intervention at the Monument from November 2018. (Photograph: Julian Popov)

What is striking about this case is not only the unprecedented ferocity of law enforcement officers and prosecution alike, but also the fact that the political modality of the gesture itself stands in contrast to the pre-established, anti-monument pattern of the textual enunciations that usually target the site. Instead of attempting to 'cross out' or 'edit' the monument, it seems that the choice of location for the anti-Le Pen inscription was motivated primarily by the visibility of the Monument and the fact that it has established itself as a privileged site of political protest. The act simultaneously inserted itself in the series of interventions and broke with their conventions. Thus, it introduced a discontinuity with their logic, but also created continuity with the anti-fascist character of the Monument itself – an aspect, which had come to be increasingly 'crossed out' and negated in recent times. It reactualised the anti-fascist struggles vis-a-vis arguably the most pressing question that haunts not only Bulgaria, but also global politics as a whole: that of migration and the nationalist backlash it has encountered worldwide, which also increasingly

exhibits fascist traits. Whereas this issue had been consistently absent from sites and times that could be seen as more directly inviting such political and conceptual linkage,[32] the November 2018 act ended the complicit silence around migration and posed a challenge to the use of the site as a vehicle for comfortable anti-communism.

The recognition of the political character of this production is at stake when engaging with the modes of temporal continuities and discontinuities, and when confronted with distinct cases of transformation of the Monument's surface. It would be unduly optimistic to claim that the anti-Semitic and pro-refugee acts of mobilising the monument's surface place us at a crossroads – for this would imply a symmetry and parity, which are in fact not present. Yet, they both attempt to formulate a relation to, and a reading of, the past that suggest different ways of inhabiting the present. The re-dressing of the ensemble's sculpted figures in yellow and the claim of '100 Years of Zionist occupation' engaged in historical revisionism and targeted both the October revolution of 1917 and the legitimacy of the struggle against Nazism, which the Monument and in particular the western high relief, strive to commemorate. It strove to enact a violent kind of historical erasure, albeit by adding material traces on the monument's surface. In contrast, the inscription against French nationalist leader Marine Le Pen that welcomes refugees, extracted an element of the monument's historical and political conditions to render it operative in the present.

Through the exploration of the modifications of the surface of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, I wanted to shed light on the ways in which surfaces can be conceptualised as dynamic spatio-temporal objects and show how such an understanding allows for a discussion of their semiotic modalities and political productivity. Enunciations at – and of – surfaces are characterised by an interplay between subversion and alignment with dominant significations, they are engaged in a perpetual construction of continuity and discontinuity on different scales and in different registers. The politically situated ways in which surfaces actively enter into relationships with other times, spaces and meanings can propel them both in the direction of emancipatory, subversive and critical politics, but also towards overtly conservative and destructive ones. Hence, the adoption of a topological approach vis-a-vis their dynamism and transformation, on a par with an exploration of surfaces' semiotic modality attending to their recursive operations of looping and patterning, of heterogenisation and stratification of meaning, contributing to the construction of accounts that can hold together complexity, consistency and discrepancy.

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32. As in the case of the building and dismantling of fictitious 'Berlin Walls' in Sofia at the peak of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2013. For a discussion of this, see Neda Genova, 'Material-Semiotic Transformations of the Berlin Wall in Post-Communist Bulgaria', *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 16:1-2, 2019, pp78-90.