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# Not Quite Bare Life: Ruins of Representation

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My presentation focuses on the implications of political regimes of representation for the cultural realm: how visual representations that once stemmed from the political translate back, having been transformed by the cultural prism. I am particularly concerned with the entangled process by which reciprocal relations between the political and visual/cultural representation are established. It is necessary to unravel the mechanisms at the heart of this process. I would argue that the cultural translation of political regimes of representation into images occurs precisely to conflate and blur the vectors of different power structures and movements. I will also look at the issue of the "participatory" in art; I will consider how political demands to focus on ways of encouraging communities to take part in art projects has given rise to and influenced certain cultural phenomena.

I find it especially important to set all these issues within a delicate landscape of multicultural environments and contexts: my example comes from the Balkans. I want to highlight the fact that visual representation in such environments can produce surprisingly severe disruptions within the fields of contemporary democratic politics, justice and rights. So my text particularly revolves around different interpretations of the recently released, semi-documentary

film “The Shutka Book of Records” (2005) by Aleksandar Manić. The way in which Roma people are represented in the film is questionable for several reasons.

There are about seventeen main stories in the film, in which the recorded individual characters appear under their real names or nicknames, but their personalities are mostly over-written through the commentary of Dr. Koljo, the narrator whose voice is permanently present, whether he himself is onscreen or not. In this context I am aiming not only for a multifaceted critical interpretation of the way in which Roma people’s lives are visually depicted in the film, but I also take into account the audience’s clearly manifested reaction to it.
Here, I stress the importance of considering the significance of the unexpected public “performance” of the collective. I actually refer to the organised expressions of public anger that the film launch on 2.02. 2006 provoked. During the Skopje première at the cinema “Kultura” and for several nights afterwards, around 100 Romany people from the Skopje self-governed Municipality of Šuto Orizari, better known as “Šutka” -- a northern suburb of Skopje which has a population, since the catastrophic earthquake of 1963, of 50 – 65,000 people, and which has been self-governing since 1995 -- protested against the way in which their community and Romani individuals were represented in the film. Most of all, they objected to representations of the Roma as poor, primitive, with exotic expertise in such sensational and absurd fields as ghostbusting, spiritual healing or sex-related “enterprises”; there were no representations of their achievements in any intellectual or educational endeavours. After the first screenings of the film in Skopje, several expressions of discontent were published in Macedonian newspapers and voiced on local and national TV stations.[1]

What I want to highlight in this context is the urgent need to expand the discussion of Agamben's concepts such as "zones of indistinction," "state of emergency," "spaces of exception" and "bare life" to include the field of visual representation in contemporary art and media; we need to re-think the way in which such representations shape culture through politics and vice versa. I suggest that, even though the representations of "bare life" in this film can be interpreted as "not quite bare life", far from the complexity and severity of other more extreme examples of "bare life," they are crucial for our understanding of how culture translates into politics and how biopower works.

When Giorgio Agamben discusses the extreme situation of "camps" in contemporary cities and the distinction between life, "bare life" and death in such contexts, he mostly focuses on the relation between sovereignty, "biopower" and exemption from the rule on those occasions when a "state of emergency" is announced. However, Agamben does not reflect in detail on the issue of different visual regimes of representation, or on the ways in which images of "zones of indistinction" and "state of emergency" persist in contemporary art, film and media.
It is precisely when "bare life" resists such definition that the ambiguity of "inside" and "outside" becomes more distinctive and shows how the structure of the commune resembles a "camp"; it becomes a *'nomos of the political space in which we are still living.'* The issue of "bare life" becomes a symptom of the new global order. Foucault has already emphasised the series of technologies used by the state to monitor and control the nation's biological life through sovereign power. By both excluding "bare life" and capturing it within the political order, the "state of exception" actually constitutes the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rests.

**Skopje as a "camp"**

Historically, the conceptualisation of the city as a disciplinary space enclosed by walls led to the process of inclusion/exclusion. The clear-cut distinction between outsiders and insiders, between outlaws and citizens, has been justified through many different architectural, social and cultural decisions. Agamben claims that contemporary urban life is situated in "zones of indistinction" and that the camp is a prototype of spatial indistinction.. While the camp was originally an exceptional, excluded space, surrounded by secrecy and cordoned off, it has today become *nomos*, a hidden matrix of the modern. Visual distinctions between the inside and the outside disappear; or if any remain, they are much more subtle and entangled. The production of a "bare life" that is stripped of form and value is extended beyond the walls, into society at large. [2]

In the state of exception, order, once localised in the form of houses, streets or towns, has since the days of ancient Greece become delocalised, so that the link between order and localisation is blurred. The camp occurred only as a result of a permanent and visible localisation of the unlocalisable – the state of emergency/ exception. [3]

Skopje's urban development, like Foucault's well-known definition of the space of the mirror, is both utopic and heterotopic.[4] It has been imagined as a fantasy, as a reflection of an ideal modernist beauty that, in reality, has turned into a strange obscure beast. Skopje's centre was completely redeveloped after 1963, when it was largely destroyed by a catastrophic earthquake. The devastation generated an enthusiastic vision in which the city centre would be rebuilt by an architect selected in an international competition. In 1965, the renowned Japanese modernist architect *Kenzo Tange* won

the UN-financed, international contest, the result of unprecedented worldwide solidarity. So it was Tange who designed the Master Plan for the reconstruction of earthquake-stricken Skopje.

Tange imagined a dramatic "City Wall" that, as a continuous, medieval, fort-like housing block, re-defined Skopje's existing city centre, but with little to engage with the already existing city structures. In fact, it did resemble the shape of what remained of the medieval wall ruins; however, what was once imagined only as a form of protection from the enemy and a clear division between the *outside* and the *inside* of the city was now collapsed into an all-embracing, closed structure that excluded its own citizens. The "City Gate" tower blocks still define the pedestrian gateway to Skopje's city centre, as if the centre is the only urban element that counts.[5]

However, Tange's proposal has never been completely realized. It was carried out in a way that left many gaps and undefined aesthetical shapes and functions. Today there are some vacant and undeveloped spaces in the city centre that make the social gaps and conflicts in Macedonian society even more obvious. The predominant architectural difference between the left and right bank of the river Vardar is emphasised by the different ethnic and religious background of the majority community. In this way, it underlines the elitist monstrosity which an uncritical application of international modernism represents in the underdeveloped city that was Skopje before the earthquake.[6]

The conceptual tension which resonates from the phrase "socialist modernism" results from the apparent contrast between the terms "socialist realism" and "modernism". Although modernism brought many different concepts into being, one of its premises -- in art at

least -- prevailed: the reversal of the hierarchies of representation that ended up as anti-representative. [7] This "iconoclasm" stands in direct opposition to the focus on the "real" in "socialist realism". However, it should not be forgotten that modernism had its avant-garde component that connected the aesthetic to the political, the singular to the communitarian. Unfortunately, within the architectural programmatic manifestos such as those proclaimed by Le Corbusier and Tange, the aestheticisation of the political often led to an inevitable alienation. It also ended up reinforcing the difference between political, social and cultural elites living within the "City Wall," and the socially and ethnically marginalised subjects (poor workers or ethnic minorities) left outside the "City Gate".

To return to Agamben's main argument, what he is saying is not that contemporary spaces are equivalent to German Nazi camps, but that the logic of the camp tends to be spread throughout society as a whole. The emergence of camps only signals that the state of exception has become the norm and that it transforms society into an unbounded and dislocated biopolitical place. Therefore the exception explains, in the manner of a vicious circle, both the general situation and the state of exception itself. "What happened in the camps so exceeds the juridical concept of crime", says Agamben, "that the specific juridico-political structure in which those events took place is omitted from consideration." [8] He concludes that the camp is not merely historic fact and a phenomenon developed in 1896 by the Spanish in Cuba. The Nazi camp is the most extreme situation that one can imagine (or perhaps cannot), but Agamben begins his investigation in reverse order by asking *what juridical structure could have allowed such events to take place.*

## Cultural politics

One of my main questions is what "cultural-political" and "juridico-political" structures allow artists to deal with different communities of marginalised people, the homeless, refugees, subaltern ethnic groups, etc. in a way that not only mimics the system of exclusion and isolation already in place but also produces new paradoxes. [9] I actually want to examine certain phenomena that occur when artists neglect the dynamics of the communities and individuals they aim to represent. Though motivated by the best of intentions, such representations often end up running counter to the initial concepts.

All the positive and negative arguments need to be discussed in the context of the impact that art projects have on reality, taking into account issues such as "bare life", "biopower" and "state of emergency." On the one hand, these phenomena are often neglected by those who produce art and culture or they are taken in a purely aesthetic direction, as if they do not concern art or as if artists are not responsible for the consequences of their social experiments. On the other hand, while a more detailed theory of "spaces of exception" might have been conceptually satisfying, this aspect is downplayed in Agamben's work the better to convey a more general theory of insecurity, and concludes with some vague ethical gestures. If the problem were merely the prioritising of "citizens' rights" over "human rights", this could be remedied by enforcing international human rights treaties, or extending anti-discrimination obligations in constitutional law.

The situation of non-citizens and refugees actually reveals the underlying situation of all political subjects. [10] When, in a state of exception, politics becomes indistinguishable from the logic of

war, we are all objects of a "decision" and our rights are irrelevant. Agamben repeats this claim often, but focuses mainly on the theme of common insecurity so that his project offers an ethical sensibility rather than a normative constitutional theory. It is, therefore, crucial from an ethical point of view to remember that "we must abandon the expectation that security can be achieved by making others insecure."[11] The Romany people from Šutka, in a state of permanent existential crisis and living literally "on the edge", have also had some success stories, but somehow these never reach the media.

**Ruins of Representation**

While artists, by their involvement in most art projects dealing with "zones of indistinction" and the "bare life" in them, in no way intend to make others insecure, different or exceptional, the insecurities and exceptionalities which already exist are in effect reinforced, as in the case of "The Shutka Book of Records". I think, therefore, that it is important to examine the dominant production of projects that are aimed at and that succeed in establishing the context for a relation with subalternity.
Šutka is a space where the state of exception has acquired a permanent spatial arrangement. It is a district in Skopje where the state of exception started to become "the rule and where public and private, political life and economical life, the good life of *polis* and the bare life of *oikos*, become inseparable", [12] and where it "is not only the inclusion of *zoê* in the *polis* nor simply the fact that life as such has become the principal object of the calculations of power. What is decisive instead is that the realm of life begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoê*, fact and what is good enters into a zone of irreducible indistinction."[13] Agamben characterizes such a

situation where the factitious existence of people is turned into *a task* as the *oikonomia of bare life*. [14]

I will continue my argument with a discussion of the philosophical concept of *'being singular plural'* as formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy [15] in order to put forward the concept of *participation* as one of the crucial societal tendencies needed today to control an all-embracing neo-liberalism driven by the consumerisation of human relations and the resultant "bare life." Nancy's concept of *being* always implies *being with*. According to him, *being* always entails *"with"* as
an inevitable conjunction that links different singularities. [16] Nancy is a philosopher of the *coessentiality of being-with* because he does not believe in any philosophical solipsism or in any *'philosophy of the subject in the sense of the final [infinite] closure in itself of a for-itself.'* [17] He goes so far as to say that *'there is no "self" except by virtue of a "with," which, in fact, structures it.'* [18] He finds the Heideggerian existential analysis incomplete because, according to him, even though *Mitsein* is coessential with *Dasein,* it still has a subordinate position. [19]

When Nancy claims that the sharing of the world is a co-implication of existence, he refers to the fact that, at the moment, we cannot truly say "we," that we have forgotten the importance of *being-together, being-in-common* and *belonging,* and that we live *without relations*. In order to familiarize ourselves with the concept and the praxis of "we", it is important, according to Nancy, to understand that "we" is not a subject in terms of self-identification, nor is the "we" composed of subjects. [20] Here Nancy reminds us that the aporia of the "we" is actually the main aporia of intersubjectivity and he points out the impossibility of pinning down some universal "we" that always consists of the same

components. [21] Whatever participation is to be discussed in the context of art, it always necessarily refers to a certain "we," to a certain identification with a particular community within which different members of selected communities (the members of an audience, professional groups, homeless people, or children) are to become co-existing parts of a certain "we." Even when the conditions of participation of the audience or a selected group or community of people are clearly marked, it is always the "we" that needs to be created in order to allow a project to start functioning as a participatory one. The other part of this "we" is the artist, the curator, the art institution, or even the state (in some public art projects) that supposedly *cares* for the invisible, marginalised or neglected "other" as the counterpart of the very same "we." The usual problem with this imaginary "we" is that it mostly exists only during the period of the particular art event, with rare examples where the artists create self-sustainable projects that continue even after the circus has left town.

Interestingly enough, the "we" that is forever created afresh contains different parts and counterparts each time as required, but what has happened to the previous parts/participants or what will happen when the project has exhausted its sources is never stated. [22] The Roma protestors seem to have reacted to this breach of contract regarding "we", since they felt betrayed and excluded from the "we" promised them by the film director who allegedly lived among them during the shooting of his film, but never thought to show his final product to the main protagonists, before it went on the international festival circuit. [23]

Often the lack of a feeling of belonging to a common group, the lack of a common identity with the artist-initiator prevents an authentic participatory effect. However, a true participatory effect actually occurs precisely when the conditions of participation are

not based on strict commonality and predictable decisions for participation, or on a clear identification with the artist or the concept in terms of social, cultural or political commonalities. In addition, the clearly distinct *inoperative communities* that refuse to be state "accomplices" can always be more easily seduced by means of artistic methods and practices which are less embedded in high politics. [24]

However, to return to the paradox of the Roma people's protests against the film "The Shutka Book of Records", the main reason for these protests is that, what was for the film director a community that shared the common feature of setting records in strange (and, we could say, funny) activities, was for the community itself not a qualification that all individuals could share and identify with. On the one hand, it can be argued that the self-governing municipality and the Romany inhabitants of Šutka actually achieved a state of community, marked their "becoming" in a Deleuzean sense, at the very moment when they articulated their protest at being represented as a community sharing something in common. On the other hand, one can readily agree that the protests were misdirected, that the main reasons for the permanently extreme situation of Romany communities in Europe and particularly in the Balkans lie elsewhere, and not in the film or in representation in general.[25] Nevertheless, my argument is that the impossibility of representing "bare life," the impossibility of translating it into any "appropriate" representation is related to the paradoxality of community.

Nancy remarks that community happens within interruption, fragmentation, suspension: *'Community is made of interruption of singularities…community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works…'* [26] The interpretation of community as intrinsically inoperative and fragmentary helps us to understand

how participatory art projects function or fail to function in practice, especially when they are to be controlled by institutions. This is in a way linked to Agamben's warning that *'what the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition.'* [27] Like Nancy, Agamben thinks of *being-in-common* as distinct from community. In fact, the most frightening community for the State, according to him, is the one that rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, one that is based on a singularity that does not want to belong, but that wants to appropriate the belonging itself. [28] Participatory art projects are distinct from communitarian projects, which are sociologically highly evaluated, and they differ precisely because they are able to circumvent the conditions of belonging to a certain pre-existing and socially defined community. In line with Debord's critique of representation and its mediation of the world, Nicolas Bourriaud asks: "*is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field of art-history traditionally earmarked for their "representation"?'* [29] For him, the answer to this question lies exactly in the direct relations that artists can establish through their artistic activities as *social interstices* and this, according to Bourriaud, comes as a kind of result of urbanisation. By referring to Althusser's notion of *'state of encounter imposed on people',* Bourriaud interprets this system of intensive encounters as a direct source for linked artistic practices, as *'an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes "being-together" as a central theme.'* [30]

*A*ccording to Marie Gee, Arza Churchman defines participation as " decision-making by unelected, nonappointed citizens, or the incorporation of community members in planning and design.

Without that decision-making element in participation, or if decisions are made by elected or appointed representatives, she will not even call it 'participation' but rather 'involvement.' " *[31] It is obvious that this gap between "participation" and "involvement", between the expectation on the part of the Roma community in Skopje of a critique of the existing problems and the film director's objective of a mere 'representation of a condition of happiness, passion and total freedom recognisable for this magic place'* [32] *is the very gap that gave rise to the confusion and ultimately the protests. The vicious circle drawn between the inhuman social, economic and political condition of Roma people and the representation of this condition as "total freedom" calls for an urgent disruption. Instead of moralising about various artists' choices of different means and regimes of artistic representation, the far more pressing question is rather how to rid ourselves of the problematic politics of representation and its translation into culture, a process that allows readily available stereotypes to circulate and persist.*

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[1] *"The documentary film "The Shutka Book of Records" ridicules individuals who are members of the Romany community, stated Erduan Iseni, the mayor of the Municipality of Suto Orizari. He sent his protest to the Government and to other institutions in the country. He has not seen the film, and as he and the member of the [Macedonian] Parliament, Dzevad Mustafa, said, they would not see it, but they had received this impression from the film's protagonists."* [translated by S. Milevska]
"The mayor of Šutka asserts: The Shutka Book of Records Discriminates against Roma People." *Dnevnik*, 02.02.2006, 07.09.2006 <http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/?pBroj=2978&stID=72604>.

[2] Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen. “Zones of Indistinction. Security, Terror, and Bare Life” *airspace & culture* vol. 5 no. 3, august 2002, 291. 10 Oct. 2006 <http://www.purselipsquarejaw.org/papers/zones_indistinction.pdf>.

[3] Diken and Laustsen 291.

[4] Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces" *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27, 20 March 2006 <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

[5] For his project which drew both praise and criticism, Tange was highly influenced by Le Corbusier’s central planning and by his autocratic top-down approach.

[6] *Lydia Merenik. “The Yugoslav Experience or What Happened to Socialist Realism,”* Moscow Art Magazine *No. 22, 1998, 10 Oct. 2003 <http://www.guelman.ru/xz/english/XX22/X2218.HTM>. Merenik quotes Marshall Berman’s phrase “A modernism of underdevelopment."*

[7] Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics.* New York: Continuum, 2004, 24.

[8] Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, 166.

[9] Most of the recent calls for projects by the European Union and , for instance, the European Cultural Foundation have as their main objectives cultural diversity and mobility, so the proliferation of art projects focusing on the rights of various ethnic minorities or their marginalised groups of citizens comes as no surprise. Article 151 of the Amsterdam Treaty which established the European

Community can become a caricature when it is exemplified and applied in a direct and unsophisticated manner.

[10] Agamben's argument is influenced by Hannah Arendt's article "We Refugees", published in *The Menorah Journal*, January 1943, XXXI and he developed it in his text using the same title. 15 Oct. 2006 <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/399>.

[11] Vik Kanwar, "Book Review," Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, 02. Sep. 2006 <http://kanwar.info/other.html>.

[12] Akseli Virtanen, "Oikonomia of Bare Life: Agamben vs. Foucault on the possibility of good life in the biopolitical order," 2003, 15 Sept. 2006 <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/abstracts/managementgoodness/Vertanen.pdf> 2.

[13] Virtanen, "Oikonomia of Bare Life" 2.

[14] Virtanen "Oikonomia of Bare Life" 2.

[15] Jean-Luc Nancy. *Being Singular Plural.* Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. Giorgio Agamben. *The Coming Community.* Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993.

[16] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 13.

[17] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 29.

[18] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 94.

[19] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 93.

[20] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 75.

[21] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 75.

[22] Irit Rogoff. "We - Collectivities, Mutualities, Participations," 1 Sep. 2006 <http://theater.kein.org/node/95>.

[23] Ironically, Aleksandar Manić's film *"The Shutka Book of Records"* won the Amnesty International Film Festival Award at the Ljubljana International Film Festival in 2005.

[24] Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Peter Connor. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991, 80-81. Nancy writes about the inscription of "infinite resistance."

[25] I would like to thank Hito Steyerl and Simon Sheikh for their comments made during the eipcp workshop "Polture and Culitics" (14 Oct. Maison de L'Europe). They both questioned the possibility of representation, asking whether there can be appropriate representation today and whether it is possible to circumvent the representation altogether.

[26] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 31.

[27] Agamben, *The Coming Community* 86.

[28] Agamben, *The Coming Community* 87.

[29] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic* 9.

[30] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic* 15.

[31] Marie Gee Yes in My Front Yard: Participation and the Public Art Process, High Performance #69/70, Spring/Summer 1995, 31 Jan. 2006, <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/1999/12/yes_in_my_front.php>.

[32] N. B. “Exciting documentary in front of the Macedonian audience. The Magic Realism of “The Shutka Book of Records” in the cinema Kultura, *Vreme,* 620, 02.02.2006, 05. Sep. 2006 <http://www.vreme.com.mk/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabindex=9&tabid=1&EditionID=641&ArticleID=40701>.