

Imagine, so close

By Viktoria Draganova

No reason to travel to Sunny Beach. Its very name is already so simple so there is no need to even ask „Why“.

Some territories must be crossed.

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In the early days of my childhood, cars drove very slowly when, once a year and at the beginning of summer, families decided to travel there. Cars were slow because there were no highways and because they used gasoline. All day long we would watch fields, and mountains, swam away; towns were only discernible from a distance.

A child would never ask why is industry developing so slowly, how come that less and less people inhabit towns and move to cities instead; why do fields seem more and more neglected and what was the message of the sun-burnt ad by the road? As children, we never asked what were people doing in the places we saw; who where those people selling the peaches and water melons, or the tomatos we gobbled en route. This our first day was unbearably long and boring. To be the first to spy the sea at dusk was the only thing that mattered to us.

Now I understand the sadness that overcame me on *that* journey.

I realise that *that* journey took us past places, which had remain the same.

They had not changed, they had only aged and reached the age of the houses, streets and people around them. People in particular: they had always been part and parcel of those places and had never left them. A kind of presence that can only be descibed as a lack of a present. Once upon a time... invariably once upon a time.

Melancholy descends upon us when we try to get back to the world at large, and to our own world. This does not mean we have to try to get into some very special place, or into our childhood. This means we should obey an urge to understand, to participate; to be present, to be *there*.

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This is a place of indefiniteness.

By inventing the concept of *Balkanism* the historian Maria Todorova has made an attempt to convince us that cultural connotations that are nowadays habitually related to Southeastern Europe, do not stem from any discourse on differences such as the discourse on Orientalism, including the hierarchic relationship of Orient and Occident. On the contrary: *Balkanism* signifies a discourse on the ambivalent elements that have shaped the Balkans: two halves complementing each other; an imperfect unity, and not *Otherness*...

Land, or a community in transition – those are entities of a complex and portentous nature that cannot be identified, or promoted by positive clichés referring to capacity, characteristics or presence. Rather, a Black Hole filled by rhetorics on *what is absent*.

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Later, the land's emptiness is gradually thawing in the rear view mirror. Villas built on bare land, empty and sometimes not even finished, mushroom in the fields. In most cases they are square and pose no claim to elegance yet they are without purpose, even absurd, since they have been built at a fair distance from the coast. Some feature garish ads proclaiming they were „Your dream house/estate“... Yet they look rather uncomfortable next to the withered palm trees bent by the wind in front of their pompous gates. All those villas were built years ago, in the times of the real estate boom, to be sold to Russians, Germans, Brits... nobody bought them.

Then come the hotels, first those of sad facades in garish colours, followed by oppressively looking mammoths. You drive through the centre, human flows getting denser, traffic slowing down. Huge brightly lit billboards in front of small 7-24 shops; there follow tables swamped in hundreds upon hundreds of goods. Stalls reminding one of a supermarket with their chaotic yet impressive mixture of strong colours. And, parallel to the sea-line, the Main Street which simmers in ecstasy at night and is flooded by exhausted-by-heat human bodies at daytime.

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Following a brief market growth period between 2000 and 2008, which in turn followed the hyperinflation of the transition period of the 1990s, in 2009 Bulgaria fell in the clutches of the crisis that had marked the collapse of world economy. Until 2008, Bulgaria boasted numerous foreign investors. Later on, they all left the country. The EU-money also disappeared in the corruption schemes. And, deflation is a continuous threat.

Thus, Bulgaria remains the EU poorest member-state.

In some branch-owned media promoting the most stable companies we can still find assurances that economic leaders remain optimistic. The most profitable company heading the rank-list in this country is *Lukoil*, the energy giant whose refinery is located not far from Sunny Beach. The *Kaufland* German trade chain ranks fifth. *Express Logistika i Distributsia* are rapidly moving up: they are a company distributing cigarettes, newspapers and drinks, and rely on the backing of Delyan Peevski, who caused strongest political controversy in the last couple of years; he also owns the biggest lottery in the country.

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„Sunny Beach caters for every desire and during the summer months this modern resort never sleeps“.

Sunny Beach hayday started after the year 2000. Construction business, tourism and leisure industry have transformed it into a human flow destination and a leisure hub. 800 hotels that can house 200 000. A couple of years ago BBC showed *Booze, Bar Crawls and Bulgaria: Stacey Dooley investigates*, a documentary focusing on extreme cases of alcohol and drug abuse, promiscuity and diverse related offenses.

The stage for temptation: it is set up in architecturally non-descript buildings adorned by lit two-dimensional boards. Experience, materials and information are mere surface. *Architectonic monumental entities and other spaces of architectonic nothingness*, to quote Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in *Learning from Las Vegas*; a place where trade logic reigns supreme and lust lies at the heart of capitalism.

That's precisely what Sunny Beach is: you will find that the *All Inclusive* hotels are striving to meet not only the physical needs of the guests; there, virtually everything can be had for money.

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The philosopher Boyan Manchev writes on pleasure versus excess of post-Communist populations. He believes we are facing not only economic but also political crisis resulting from the events of 1989 and the absence of a constituted state power. Manchev describes the degradation of post-Communist people into a shapeless mass and claims that at the time of transition in 1989 and the following period there had been no constituting power to later transform itself into a constituted power. In that period, no clear line divided triumph from power. Since then, people had stayed ecstatic and excessive in equal measure owing to the fact that their continuous point of reference had been precisely the constitution process that never materialised. The body of people had not lost its political affiliation yet had exclusively treated it as pleasure: „a total body of pleasure“ as Manchev dubbed political life in Bulgaria.

In his essay, Manchev also draws a parallel to market economy which he thinks is also based on production of pleasure. He claims that, unlike market economy in Western democracies which deals in exchange, profit and goods accumulation, economy in the Southeastern part of Europe thrives on senseless waste inadequate to market demands, something that, like post-Communist pleasure, is based on excess.

It is precisely in countries like Bulgaria that the darkest market powers demonstrate themselves. It no longer goes about exchange, it goes about uncontrollable exercise of power and strength. My mind goes to what is popularly called *chalga*, the popfolk that has found widest distribution in this country and that deals with love, sex, consumerism and crime. *Chalga* music, ranging from romantic dreams to vulgar cynicism, mixes yearnings of different brands and displays them in ecstatic abandonment.

Sunny Beach exemplifies precisely that excessive pleasure economy, which also transgresses any national borders.

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Yet we, too, are in Sunny Beach.

At night, we find ourselves lost in the Main Street bars. We drink and sing. Some succumb to the temptation to have a swim at night, some simply bask in the sun in daytime. We embrace, we laugh, we cry together.

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In his latest novel, „Physics of Sadness“ Georgi Gospodinov defines Bulgaria as „the saddest place on Earth“. In his understanding, melancholy can predominantly be explained by the fact that Bulgarians are forced to constantly review their un-lived lives. Land of Sadness born out of Powerlessness.

Land of the undefined, the pleasure and the melancholy.

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On the floor of a public self-service laundry in Frankfurt there is a figure made of cloth, resembling a shattered shadow, with long spidery extremities; sleepy, shapeless, uncouth. It is accompanied by a story of physical contact and dreams materialised. There is also sadness and a yearning for a place to love and desire.

Pathetic, and absolutely unsuitable in a place like a public laundry. Awkward, actually.

Or, amusing perhaps? I remember a hotel in Slunchev Bryag where ceramic vases have been put one upon another to resemble people, rather dull, rather lost people. Clumpy, yet dear. Solitary, yet utterly present.

And then, I heard somebody asking: „Where do they actually come from?“

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Frankfurt seems to meet the general desire for sustainability. Each year thousands of people stream into this city, to take highly paid positions promising them a full and happy life.

Yet Frankfurt is also flat. Smartphones are flat; but also the mirror facades of the city banks and companies. Economy is also flat in that it prevents the physical reality from resurfacing. This is called abstraction; it gives birth to capitalism which in turn allows the approximation of everything to virtual monetary value.

Franco „Biffo“ Berardi speaks of „financial abstraction“ resembling „dark pools“. This is a reference to the eponymous book by the journalist Scott Patterson who writes on the extreme acceleration of global markets, „Value no longer emerges from a physical relationship between work and things, but rather from infinite self-replication of virtual exchanges of nothing with nothing, whose outcome is more money“.

We can probably see similarities between Frankfurt and Sunny Beach. Both places are devoid of meaning, both breathe desire. And, both not present, for both are founded on fictions.

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Back to popfolk. Recently Ivo Dimchev, choreographer and performer, invited Sashka Vassileva, one of the most popular popfolk singers who found popularity as early as the 1990s, and asked to sing her songs as opera arias. This popular cheap art happens to be grotesquely sentimental yet shows transformation as a subversive position.

Does not exaggeration prove that seemingly cheap emotions can also prove to be meaningful?

For, did we not achieve mutual understanding, for the first time ever, precisely that night and on this stage?

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And then, suddenly, everything disappeared. People had anticipated that, yet no one knew for sure. We take nothing back, only sand: sand in our shoes, sand in our hair.

There, on the roof, we see all those confused, lost, dislocated subjects, alternating between dream and psychological traumas. The unconscious, full of debris and light, inviting sadness. One is inclined to believe that this has not happened just now, that it has existed from time immemorial.

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No reason to travel to Sunny Beach. But we strive to nourish imagination, the most contested and the most politically defined field.

And in the unstable relationships of realities we find some of the answers.

* The text relates to works by artists Dardan Zhegrova, Anna Zacharoff, Tore Wallert and Max Brand.

Sources

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This text has been published on occasion of „States of Flux“ (28 August–16 October 2016), curated by Viktoria Draganova and Gergana Todorova and hosted by Swimming Pool.
With the kind support of Goethe-Institut Sofia.

The Sunniest Beach. After the Splash. The Sanguine. The Token.

S W I M M I N G
P O O L

