

## **Sisyphus Revisited: Consumption and Collapse in Late Socialist Bulgaria** **Cristofer Scarboro, King's College**

In thinking about the question of modernity—and really nowadays, what other questions do historians talk about?—I like to use the analogy of the myth of Sisyphus. It seems to work both in the classroom, and conversations over beer in the *kruchma*. So when asked to give a paper at the Institute of Ethnographic and Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences—the genesis of what you are now reading—I figured that I would try to sketch some of these thoughts out, and connect the story to my own forays into the history of late communism in Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> Now most of you know the story of Sisyphus, so I will make my retelling of it brief. Sisyphus was a prince, the son of Aeolus of Thessaly, and reportedly, the cleverest of men. He was said to think himself as wise as Zeus. Sisyphus often tricked the gods, most notably when he tied up and incapacitated Hades, the god of death, creating a situation where no one could die (and also, inadvertently, making a world where no sacrifices could be made to the Gods). In response, the Gods developed a punishment so severe that Sisyphus would, at the very least, wish himself dead. While living—and death was impossible—he was forced to roll a boulder up a hill in perpetuity. He always made it almost all the way to the top, but always, the instant before he reached the top of the hill (and presumably the end of his ordeal), the boulder slipped free from his grasp, rolled down the hill, and Sisyphus was forced to start his toil anew.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it is convenient how well Sisyphus' story fits with our own understandings of time. It squares beautifully with Reinhart Koselleck's description of both apocalyptic time (a non-modern, cyclical understanding of time)—that is, the continuity of rolling the boulder again and again to no discernable destination; and progressive time (the modern belief in history as linear and teleological: a means to a purpose)—in this case, the woefully mistaken belief that, this time, at last, the boulder will make it up the hill.<sup>3</sup> It is this tragi-comic belief that caused Kafka to adopt Sisyphus as the embodiment of the absurdity of life—toil in the absence of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Sisyphus thus, lives (eternally) on the boundary between the pre-modern and the modern era (or perhaps in both temporalities simultaneously).

In his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which I have had different friends independently describe to me as the most pessimistic or optimistic book they had ever read, Albert Camus uses the story of

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks go to Ana Luleva and Milena Benovska-Sabkova for their invitation to present an early version of this paper at the Doctoral Seminar for the Section "Ethnology of Socialism and Post-Socialism" at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies at the Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Special thanks also go to the American Research Center in Sofia which, through their post-doctoral fellowship, provided the financial support and space to put this work together while on sabbatical from King's College, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, as translated by Robert Fagles, describes Sisyphus' torment thusly: "And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture, grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working, heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just as it teetered, set to topple over—time and again the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down the plain again—so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up, sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head." Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, reprint edition, 1996, pp. 269. See also, Ovid's, *Metamorphoses*, which describes Sisyphus eternally, "pushing or chasing the rock; which keeps rolling downwards." *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn, Penguin Classics, 2004, pp. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Koselleck, Reinhart, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Studies in Contemporary German Thought Series, Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> At least he did according to Camus, whose appendix to the *Myth of Sisyphus* is entitled "Hope and the Absurd in the Works of Franz Kafka." Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brien, Vintage Press, reissue edition, 1991.

Sisyphus to pose what he claimed was the only important question in philosophy in the absence of god—that is in the modern era. He asks, in a world without meaning, a world where God is dead, is one obligated to commit suicide? Camus' answer, thankfully for us, is to see Sisyphus' story as one of revolt—either the absurd revolt of irrationality against reason, or the noble, doomed revolt of man against fate. In either case, Camus asks us to imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>5</sup>

Every modern political movement—from the Atlantic Revolutions on—have had to deal, on some level or another, with the question of Sisyphus. Fundamentally, to imagine Sisyphus happy, one had to believe in the promise of finally making it up the hill with your boulder. One had to believe in the future glory of the nation, or that colonialism really was bringing about the blessings of civilization and a better world. That the invisible hand of the market worked in a utilitarian fashion bringing the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people. You had to believe that communism would overcome the contradictions of capitalism and bring about a radiant new future. Progressive time demanded a belief in progress—and material evidence of that same progress. It also required that the material progress would, in itself, prove satisfying and meaningful.

The road up the hill, however, (particularly when burdened with a boulder) was not—is not—an easy one; and despite the best intentions of modernist planners, stagnation is as much the story of modernity as are the storming of fortresses. Revolutions age. Material conditions change. New generations are born. One has to demonstrate that the struggle is worth it and to provide some comfort along the way. If not land, bread, and peace, people at least need circuses to go along with their bread.

Much recent scholarship has focused on the question of late socialism and this very phenomenon—on new communist subjectivities and questions of consumption.<sup>6</sup> As the socialist system moved into middle age, the drive to build socialism became replaced with the necessary desire to live in a refined, developed socialism. Sisyphus moved from steaming up the hill, to enjoying the rollercoaster effect of the boulder's aimless meanderings. He was to imagine himself

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<sup>5</sup> Within Koselleck's framework then, Sisyphus is either a non-modern person trapped in the modern era (an irrational man grappling with the rational) or a modern man trapped in the non-modern world (rational in the face of the irrational). Camus concludes: "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity [his struggle in the face of the impossibility that he will ever be successful] that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniia Front*, Institut za isledvane na blizkoto minalo, 2008; Rossitza Guentcheva, "Zvutsite na sotsializma" in *Sotsialisticheski problemi*, issue, 1-2, 2003, pp. 179-195; *Bulgarskiiat komunizm: debati i interpretatsii*, Michail Gruev and Diana Mishkova, eds., CAS/RIVA publishers, 2013; *N.R.B. ot nachaloto do kraia*, ed. By Ivaylo Znepolski, Institut za izsledvane blizkoto minalo, 2011 has impressive sections on the culture of late socialism in Bulgaria; *Tova e moeto minalo: spomeni, dnevnitsi, svidetelstva (1944-1989)*, ed. by Ivaylo Znepolski, vol I and II, Institut za izsledvane za blizkoto minalo, 2010, gives an interesting collection of memories of the period. See also, "*Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*", Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger, eds. Oxford University Press, 2012; Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring*, Cornell University Press, 2010; Fehérváry, Krisztina, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*, Indiana University Press, New Anthropologies of Europe Series, 2013; Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Cornell University Press, 2011; Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War*, Cornell University Press, 2011; and Karin Taylor, *Let's Twist Again: Youth and Leisure in Socialist Bulgaria*, LIT Verlag, Studies on East Europe, 2006;

happy. More to the point, socialism, in the late 1960s and 1970s, seemed to enter its middle class iteration: enjoying the fruits of earlier labor became the order of the day. Work-overalls were replaced by miniskirts; shovels by televisions. The result was a system that, to those looking, seemed permanent, stable, or forever.<sup>7</sup>

This paper is an investigation of what that forever looked like as it fell apart.

As I conceptualize it, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe can best be understood as a failure of *embourgeoisement*—attempts to legitimize the regimes of Eastern Europe through the creation of a middle-class, consumerist, communist society. A society that, despite its very real material successes, found itself trapped by those very successes. The collapse of the socialist system in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989 was a result most importantly of an underlying deep sense of disappointment in this late socialist good life—the somewhat oxymoronic “middle class socialism.” On important levels, and in the classical accounts of the collapse of communism, this disappointment was fundamentally and unequivocally a reaction to the shoddy nature, and often absence of, the very goods socialism was supposed to deliver. This evidence is compelling. Materially, the 1980s were not a good time in Bulgaria or anywhere else in the Soviet orbit—it was hard to believe then, that the boulder would ever make it up the hill.<sup>8</sup> Scarcity was very much part of the story—and in many ways this scarcity made consumption even more important.<sup>9</sup> But Bulgarian and East European dissatisfaction with Communism was also, and equally importantly, a reflection of the *ennui*, struggle, and boredom of living a life ordered by purely consumerist agendas. The myth of Sisyphus is to be read as a tale of late socialism as a consumerist discourse, and, perhaps, as an object lesson for what may come to be called late capitalism.

Traditionally, the narrative of communism, and explanations for its collapse, follow one of two linked trajectories: one material and one ideological. Or if you prefer: theory and praxis. The first traces the rise and fall of the Eastern European industrial economies built (with all their inefficiencies and terrors) on the ruins left by the Second World War. In this narrative the “epochal days” of building socialism during the late 1940s and 1950s created something of an economic miracle on the ground—a miracle that found Bulgaria ahead of her capitalist neighbors in many measures of economic development by the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup> Full employment, a rapidly developing urban economy and infrastructure, and the promise of even better tomorrows painted the horizon. Building socialism moved into living (and enjoying) developed socialism, with the idea that the emergence of a better, communist world was only a few subway stops down the line.

It was the lived experience of the 1980s that gave lie to the illusion of prosperity of the socialist “good life” of the 1960s and 1970s. The planned industrial economies were unable to adapt to, and adequately compete with, the transformations in capitalism as it moved into its post-

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<sup>7</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, 2005. See also: Cristofer Scarborough, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria: Meaning and Living in a Permanent Present Tense*, Lexington Press, 2011; and Ivaylo Dichev, “The Eros of Identity,” in *Balkan as Metaphor, Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, eds. MIT Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For a fairly traditional understanding of the collapse of communism understood as a result of economic failure see: Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Collapse and Rebirth in Eastern Europe*, second ed., Oxford University Press, 2011; Constantin Pleshakov, *There is no Freedom without Bread: 1989 and the Civil War that Brought Down Communism*, Picador, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> The classic study of the shortage economy under state socialism is János Kornai’s, *Economics of Shortage*, Elsevier Science, Ltd., Contributions to Economic Analysis series, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> John Lampe, *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave MacMillan, 1986. Coincidence or not, written before the full depth of economic collapse in the mid-1980s.

industrial iteration. State socialism was unable to close non-productive factories; to replace workers with machines was ideologically problematic; and most importantly, centralized planning was unable to match the logic of the market in proper allocation of resources and distribution of goods.

Stephen Kotkin and others have persuasively argued that the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was driven primarily by an establishment that felt it had more to gain by jettisoning, than by pursuing, a communist ideology which served as a brake on the development of a fully realized middle class society (measured in purchasing power and standards of living).<sup>11</sup> In short, the economic crisis of the 1980s forced elites to choose either the middle class project—understood as capitalism and (their own) material prosperity—or the promises of ideology—equally distributed abundance (which was never achieved). Throughout Eastern Europe, communist parties surrendered power and—after renaming themselves—entered the democratic process that dismantled the checkered legacy of communism on the path to liberal democratic capitalism. The Warsaw Pact and COMECON became NATO and the European Union. The material triumphed over the ideological, and new ideological visions filled the vacuum. The market over the planned economy, and a straight line, from east to west, directed our understanding of the transition. Reagan’s morning in America began to dawn in Eastern Europe as the man himself passed into senescence.

The point of this essay is not to make war on easy targets and simple, comforting narratives—few reading this, in any case, have bought the goods. Material deprivation and the glitter of capitalism do play a role in what Bulgarian’s wonderfully call not “collapse,” but “the changes.”<sup>12</sup> My point is that the process most destructive to the stability of the late socialist system was the decision to ask people to understand themselves primarily as consumers rather than as producers of goods (talk about your alienation of labor...). This leads to a whole series of questions that I am now in Bulgaria trying to puzzle out: how were the seeming ironies of consumption as a measure of the success of the socialist system squared with an ideology (and history) favoring production as a metric? What were middle class socialists to look like? How was the socialist good life imagined through goods and why was the vision ultimately unconvincing? In the end the Party, and I suppose, the people, chose the material over the ideological—and as a result, ideology was hollowed out.

This leads us to the second explanation of the collapse of Communism—the absence of belief. If communism (as every modern system) is best understood as a subject-creating discourse, geared towards creating subjects who act in the world according to a set of fixed precepts, late socialism was ideologically undergirded by what Vera Dunham calls a “big deal.”<sup>13</sup> In this story, the Eastern European socialist systems are best understood as a series of bloodless marriages: those in power settled for popular acquiescence demonstrated in the rhetoric of and (to a smaller degree) the practice of communism. This acquiescence was purchased by popular belief in the material benefits that the system would deliver (which it often did), rather than real belief in Communism per se. It was a Kafkaesque (or, if you prefer, Sisyphean) display. The general understanding

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<sup>11</sup> Kotkin, Stephen, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, with a contribution by Jan t. Gross, Modern Library Chronicles Series, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Slavenka Drakulic wonderfully encapsulates this idea in her *Café Europa*, “In my opinion more than anything else, television advertising is to blame for the revolution [the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe]. They create the false expectation of the instant fulfillment of all desires. If only you buy this product, drink this drink, drive this car, you will be as beautiful, rich and successful as the people you see on the TV screen.” Drakulic, *Café Europa: Life after Communism*, Penguin, 1999. pp. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction*, Duke University Press, 1990.

under Communism was, as the old saw goes: “we pretend to work, they pretend to pay us,” (although people really did get paid...) or, more to the point: “We pretend to believe, they leave us alone, and we get an apartment with a rubber tree in it.”<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, people retreated into the private lives, and belief was relegated to May Day parades and the wooden language (and wooden applause) at Communist Party speeches. This applause was purchased through the developing language and practice of consumption and leisure that emerged under late socialism. Communism promised more: a better tomorrow measured in square footage in apartments, cars rolling off assembly lines, and Black Sea vacations.

If, to borrow from Lenin, communism equals all power to the Soviets and electrification of the whole country, communism had arrived (and then some) by the 1970s, one generation after the revolutions in Eastern Europe. The question of the era then necessarily became: in the presence of such abundance—in the face of developed socialism—where were the communists?<sup>15</sup>

Consumption and leisure under late socialism thus became the central pillars of socialist legitimacy, a field of competition with capitalist societies, and an important aspect of socialist subjectivity. And to a large degree, it worked... From the early 1960s until the slowdown of the late 1970s, Bulgarians continued to see their purchasing power and opportunities for leisure advance. The stability, social advancement, expansion of cultural outlets, and relative personal affluence of the era of stagnation were powerful sources of support for the system. For many Bulgarians, even today, the 1960s and 1970s remain a “golden age” of prosperity, evoking nostalgic images of winters in the mountains, summers at the sea, and plenty of sausage.<sup>16</sup> State support of leisure and cultural activities, and the development of the private and idiosyncratic were, from the perspective of Party planners, both vehicles for delivering a version of the socialist “good life,” and means of developing well-rounded, harmonious socialist subjects (the central goal of socialist humanism). From the perspective of those same would-be subjects, the programs represented both the potentials and malfunctions of socialism.<sup>17</sup>

This peculiarity of late socialism was perhaps unavoidable, and it highlighted the central dynamic of the period—Bulgarians were living through two revolutions. One, material: constructing the political economy necessary for the arrival of communism and communists; the second, cultural: entailing the transformation of *mentalité*, where people, freed from exploitation and alienated labor would become “harmoniously developed individuals.”<sup>18</sup> This term (which appears everywhere in official texts of 1970s and 1980s Bulgarian Communism) emerged most prominently in the 1975 Comprehensive Program for National Aesthetic Education, which, along with the concomitant idea of “living in beauty,” provided a model for what these new communist

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Varga Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home During the Khrushchev Era,” in *The Journal of Social History*, 41.3 (2008).

<sup>15</sup> In Bulgaria, the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (1958) declared the “victory of socialism” and proclaimed the beginning of the next task: the building of “developed socialism.” The 1962 Eighth Party Congress called for the completion of developed socialism by 1980 with the subsequent passage into communism to come soon thereafter. Roumen Daskalov, *Debating the Past: Modern Bulgarian History from Stambolov to Zhivkov*, CEU Press, 2011. The 1980s then were spent looking for that future.

<sup>16</sup> This, in part, explains the current interest in “Nostalgia for Communism.” See *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, ed. by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, Berghahn Books, 2010 and *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, ed. by Maria Todorova, Social Science Research Council, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See Scarboro, *The Late Socialist Good Life in Bulgaria: Meaning and Living in a Permanent Present Tense*, Lexington Books, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> The phrase, most prominently appearing in the Comprehensive Program for National Aesthetic Education... Dinev, Mihail, *Socialist Life and Culture*, Sofia Press, 1984, pp. 10.

subjects would look like.<sup>19</sup> Ideally, in the words of Konstantin Popov, a leading contemporary theorist of the socialist culture, in this time: “a feeling for beauty in labor, in everyday life, in relationships with others, and a desire for self-improvement would be developed in everyone.”<sup>20</sup> Sisyphus, freed from his backbreaking labor by the arrival of communism, or at least socialism, would begin to be a different, better, more harmonious person.

Bulgarian communists understood the importance of the Cultural Revolution from the very beginning. (The idea was first put into practice in the revolutionary days of the Soviet Union). As early as 1958, Todor Zhivkov pointed to the potential dangers of succeeding in the material revolution at the expense of developing correct cultural attitudes. Speaking to the Union of Bulgarian Writers—the vanguard of Socialist Realism’s “engineers of the soul”—Zhivkov (after outlining the material successes of the Bulgarian industrial economy) indicated: “The development of the nation’s economy and of its productive forces, no matter how great it may be, does not, and cannot, exhaust the entire problem of the construction of the socialist society. The problem of refashioning the consciousness of the working people, of their communist re-education, comes to the fore. As you know consciousness always lags behind the economy in its development, it is refashioned much more slowly than the latter.”<sup>21</sup> Closing the gap between the material conditions for communism and communist consciousness was the central challenge of late socialism. Consumption—that is correct consumption—was the space where circle was to be squared.

Consumption presented several problems for Party planners and their would-be communist consumers. By asking for subjects to understand themselves as consumers rather than producers (as they had in early socialism), the Eastern European socialist economies competed with the capitalist economies of Western Europe and the United States on their own terms. The socialist system could not keep up. The televisions, automobiles and apartments constructed in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe could not be manufactured as efficiently and cheaply as they could in regions where the profit motive ruthlessly “cut the fat” (including the producers themselves) from production mechanisms. Thus, Eastern Europeans were never fully satisfied—could never be satisfied—with the goods designed to stand as symbols for the socialist good life. Equally importantly, by moving away from ideology and towards consumer goods as the central legitimizing trope for the communist systems, the leaders of these regimes quickly discovered the impossibility of satisfying those demands. The tyranny of more—the insatiability of consumption—doomed the system to a Sisyphean attempt for new and better diversions (diversions that the west was simply better designed to fulfill). The race towards a satisfying life in late socialist Eastern Europe was run against boredom.

My own thinking about boredom in Eastern Europe was triggered by the opening lines of Patrick McGuinness’ novel on the collapse of Communism in Romania, *The Last Hundred Days*. He writes:

In 1980s Romania, boredom was a state of extremity. There was nothing neutral about it: it strung you out and stretched you; tugged away at the bottom of your day like shingle scraping at a boat’s hull. In the West we’ve always thought of boredom as slack time, life’s lift music sliding off the ear. Totalitarian boredom is different.

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<sup>19</sup> Komitet za kultura, *Kompleksna programa za vsenarodno estetichsko vospitanie*, Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1980.

<sup>20</sup> Konstantin Popov, *The People’s Republic of Bulgaria—Culture and Art: Facts and Figures*, Sofia Press, 1983, pp. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Zhivkov, Todor, “More among the People, Closer to Life: Speech before the Annual Meeting of the Union of Bulgarian Writers April 8, 1958,” in Zhivkov, *The Cultural Policy of Socialism*, Sofia Press, 1986, pp. 25.

It is a state of expectation already heavy with its own disappointment, the event and its anticipation braided together in a continuous loop of tension and anti-climax.<sup>22</sup>

It got me wondering: how exactly was boredom under late socialism different than that experienced in the west? What were the stakes? What was the nature of boredom in late socialist Eastern Europe and what role did it play in the collapse of the system?

In writing about late socialism in Eastern Europe boredom as a trope is fast approaching cliché—an accepted, if understudied, truism. Boredom, illuminated in the dim light of the era stands as shorthand for the general sense of lack amongst late socialist subjects. Generally this lack is understood one of two ways: produced either by Katherine Verdery's *etatization* of time and the concomitant shortages—lining the Victory of Socialism Boulevard to cheer Mobutu's passing motorcade—and then lining up to purchase whatever was on the shelves in the state stores. Or arrived at through Ivaylo Ditchchev's and Alexei Yurchak's cheerful (or surly) assurance of living in a world of ritual and routine—so fully knowable and predictable that traditional notions of tense fade away leaving a feeling of living in a permanent present.<sup>23</sup> One vision prioritizes a lack of goods and time. A boredom born out of being forced to do monotonous and tiresome things: a boredom of deprivation. The other understands boredom as an (almost) pleasant product of certainty: a boredom born of an absence of surprises. Combined, these twin boredoms produced both stability and unrest. Revolutionary rage, and shabby solidity.<sup>24</sup>

Art in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, both official and unofficial has a long and distinguished history of representing this boredom. Venedikt Erofeev makes the dangers and pleasures of living in a permanent present tense appear viscerally in his *Moscow to the End of the Line (Moscow-Petushki)* as early as 1968.<sup>25</sup> Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid present the absurdities of routinized public life hilariously and dangerously in their Ideal Slogan series.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McGuinness' understanding of boredom is entirely related to the inadequate (or absurd) fulfilment of consumer desires. Speaking of boredom and monotony, he writes: "You saw it all day long in the food queues as tins of North Korean pilchards, bottles of rock-bottom Yugoslav Slivovitz, or loaves of potato-dust bread reached the shops. People stood in sub-zero temperatures or unbearable heat, and waited. Eyes blank, bodies numb, the shuffled step-by-step toward's the queue's beginning. No one knew how much there was of anything. Often you didn't know *what* there was. You could wait for four hours only for everything to run out just as you reached the counter. Some forgot what they were waiting for, or couldn't recognize it when they got it. You came for bread and got Yugo rotgut; the alcoholics jittered for their rotgut and got pilchards or shoe polish, and it wasn't by taste that you could tell them apart. Sometimes the object of the queue changed midway through; a meat queue became a queue for Chinese basketball shoes; Israeli oranges segued into disposable cameras from East Germany. It didn't matter—it was just a preliminary; within hours the networks of barter and black marketeering would be vibrating with fresh commodities. It was impossible to predict which staple would suddenly become a scarcity, which humdrum basic would become a luxury. Even the dead felt the pinch." Patrick McGuinness, *The Last Hundred Days*, Bloomsbury, 2011, pp.3-5.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Verdery, "The Etatisation of Time in Ceaușescu's Romania," in *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton University Press, 1996 and Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, 2005 and Ditchchev, Ivaylo, "Erotika na komunizma," in Spasov, Orlin, ed. *Ars Erotica*. Sofia: Institute for Children's Literature and Art, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, Modern Library, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line*, trans. by H. William Tjalsma, Northwestern University Press, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> *Komar and Melamid: Two Soviet Dissident Artists*, Melvyn Nathanson, ed., Southern Illinois University Press, 1979. The ideal slogan series takes the ubiquitous slogans [*lozungi*] from the façades of buildings into gallery space to absurd effect. "We were born to turn fairytales into reality" looks quite different in an art gallery than it does on a factory wall (and once you see the slogans in the gallery, it is impossible to see them in the same manner in their "natural context"). Eventually, they make clear that form matters more than meaning and the ideal slogan is cooked

Writing in Haskovo, Bulgaria—to which we will turn to shortly—Rumen Starkovski presents late socialism as a series of smashed cockroaches, tall glasses of *rakiia*, and harsh cigarettes, painted against a backdrop of nothing meaningful to do, in his short story collection *Summertime (Liatno vreme)*.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps most famously, Milan Kundera paints a picture of Socialist Czechoslovakia as a story of personal regimes of love and sex fought against the repressive monotony, pettiness, and stupidity of the communist system.<sup>28</sup> In each of these cases (and many, many more) the general narrative is more or less the same: with public life devoid of meaning, people retreat into the private sphere to tilt at their own personal windmills.

As these texts were understood in the west, they were testimonials to the impoverishment of the Eastern European systems, where people longed for Sony Walkmans, Kent cigarettes and Levis. The narrative was compelling: once boredom in the private sphere fully matched that in the public sphere, the system disappeared. When approaching the history of the 1980s, the historian is tempted to seek visions of deprivation and disgust with (or fantasy and escape from) a denuded present.<sup>29</sup>

Part of this is surely a question of translation and availability. Limitations of language often leave those of us working in the west using translations of Eastern European texts suited to the market. Sad to say, I've yet to read Kundera in Czech or French. Dissidents sold in the west, and got rewritten into English. As a result, during the cold war, the satire and resistance of unofficial, or ironically official, texts were more suited to the tenor of the era (and told those of us in the west what we wanted to hear). Wit won an audience in the face of the technical precision and solidity of official socialist realist art (which, ironically or not, became understood as the work of middle brow, conformist artists for their middle class conformist audience: mass produced pap. Socialist Disneyland on canvas).<sup>30</sup>

Gloomy, brilliantly intelligent, doomed writers (often in exile) became the face of Eastern European culture as it was understood in the New York and Paris. The tens of thousands of Americans who traveled to Eastern Europe in the 1990s (and full disclosure: I was one of them) went there to meet Vaclav Havel, or at least Zheliu Zhelev. These writers' job was to point out the gray monotony and inhumanness of the Communist system in Eastern Europe. They became the embodiment of the "Tragedy of Central Europe"—again Kundera's phrase. Tragedy being the death of a multi-lingual, highly cultured, highly European (whatever that means) transnational world of high culture and ideas. Left unsaid, but understood, this world's replacement by row upon row of *panelki*.

Understanding Eastern Europe and communism through the dissident lens of tragedy and irony this is what we saw: dearth, brutality, but most importantly banality (and I want to take this idea seriously). This problem has only become more pronounced since the collapse of Communism and the proclaimed victory of liberal democratic capitalism. As a result, we are

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down to white blocks on a red background (complete with exclamation point). Ritual replaces belief, and the medium becomes the message.

<sup>27</sup> Rumen Starkovski, *Liatno vreme*, Opponent Press (Haskovo, Bulgaria), 2000.

<sup>28</sup> See pretty much anything by Kundera but particularly *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Harper Perennial, 2009, and *The Joke*, Harper Perennial, 1993

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent investigation of the place of artists in the post-cold war context see: Svetla Kazalarska, "Re-drawing the Art Map of 'New Europe,'" European Cultural Foundation: New Narratives Series, www.<http://www.narratives.eu/reading-room/svetla-kazalarska>, accessed 4/2/2014.

<sup>30</sup> The idea being that both of these "happiest places on earth" were gross illusions, each masking (and carrying) deep sadness, born of their artificiality and unceasing sunniness.

predisposed to understand the collapse of communism as a natural result of a boring, poor, and vaguely tyrannical system.<sup>31</sup>

It is possible, however, to read these pieces, the vestiges of socialist culture, another way. To take socialist realism seriously on its (not quite human) face. To see dissidence *as* dissidence. People, after all, were, most of the time, quite pleased to get their *panelki* (as much as complaining about them became a national sport after people were safely in them). Consumer desires were fulfilled at least as often as they were found wanting. In short, it is too simple and neat—it is too comforting and dangerous—to understand the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe as solely the result of dearth and repression. Displeasure with late socialism was absolutely born of these parents: the inadequate fulfilment of the promises of modernity measured in consumer goods. But this displeasure also carried within it the current of dissatisfaction with those very promises.<sup>32</sup> In this, it shares in a worldwide generational reaction against the foundational premises of modernity—the last third of 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period where children refused to inherit the world of their parents. An “age of panic” dawned as the first post-war generation came of age across the globe: this generation saw the promises of modernity met and found themselves underwhelmed.<sup>33</sup>

One can readily see this age of panic—produced, in large part, by meeting the goals set for the modern good life—in Bulgarian art of the socialist period. Bulgarian painting during the 1980s—socialist realist and otherwise—is indeed dark, featuring paintings redolent in an almost palpable boredom, one based not so much on a lack, but rather, a surfeit of goods. The paintings themselves make goods a defining subject of their work—they are still-lives with people. Ultimately, they are genre pieces built around the consumption of boredom—an understanding that toaster ovens are not a good way to envision the life well lived.<sup>34</sup> Despite the lower standards of living (again, measured in goods and purchasing power) vis-à-vis their Cold War competition, the Eastern European systems were remarkably good at producing stuff by almost any other historical measure. Bulgarian art of the era reveals the emptiness of that stuff.

The first (and to my knowledge, the last) attempt to catalogue these images in the visual arts of the 1980s in Bulgaria was a 2002 retrospective at the National Gallery of Foreign Art in Sofia entitled, “A Decade in the Depots: The 80s: Known, Unknown, and Forgotten Paintings,

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<sup>31</sup> Those of us in the west, however, missed Havel’s criticism of consumption under “post-totalitarian regimes.” Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. by John Keane, trans by Paul Wilson, M. E. Sharpe, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> And it is very important to keep in mind that repression is foundational payment for any modern project. See Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, W. W. Norton, Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud series, 2010; and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, Vintage 1995.

<sup>33</sup> This is Ivaylo Ditchchev’s phrase, which I love. Tony Judt’s great *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, Vintage, 2010, asks us to see, to take one example, the student revolts of 1968 in Prague, Warsaw, Paris (and for that matter Mexico and the United States) as part of a similar phenomenon ( a theme interestingly followed through on in the Center for Advanced Studies, Sofia’s, “Prazhka prolet—Sofiisko liato 1968 project, [www. http://1968bg.org/](http://1968bg.org/) accessed 4/2/2014. See also: Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Basic Books, 2014. In this sense 1989 is merely one in a series of anti-modern or post-modern trends that emerge in the period, including but not limited to: the rise of religion as a (anti) modern discourse; the move towards the post-colonial; the rejection of consumerism; revulsion against bureaucratization; and the general jettisoning the idea of progress.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Kotkin puts it well in his *Armageddon Averted*: “Was life simply a question of washing machines, refrigerators, private cars, TVs popular music, and jeans, and if so, what did that portend for socialism’s struggle against capitalism?” Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000*, Oxford University Press, 2008,43.

Sculptures, and Etchings,” curated by Vessela Nozharova and Svetlana Kuyumdzhieva.<sup>35</sup> To me, this study sums up the typical narrative of late socialism waiting to collapse in Bulgaria. Nozharova understands the period as one dominated by “melancholy, poetic loneliness, alienation and existentialism,” inclined towards “darker monochromatic colors, so different that today’s [read liberal democratic capitalist] ‘decorative’ function of art.”<sup>36</sup> Artists included in the exhibition are described as spending the 1980s “living in a parallel world between visions of socialist ideology and the true, important for art, issues.”<sup>37</sup> The images they produce focus on “the self, they reveal an innate introversion and, a strong interest toward the intimate world,” and search for the “place of man in the micro-space of the human existence, that look into the simple things in life.”<sup>38</sup> That is, socialism was an inhuman system: people survived by splitting themselves in two, living by what Gail Kligman calls the “politics of duplicity.” Art—particularly unofficial art—demonstrated what people were *really* thinking. What they were searching for was personal *meaning* in their world. Now, for both philosophical and political reasons, I find the idea of a bifurcated-self problematic, but let’s ignore that for a moment, and assume that these paintings do reveal a hidden story about how people lived and found meaning under socialism.

The images themselves reflect the generally understood tenor of the times. Depressing industrial interiors<sup>39</sup>—turning industrial landscapes inside out—dance with images of violence and psychosis.<sup>40</sup>

Paintings center on escape: either into the pleasures of (presumably) pre-socialist village life—painted in a naïve style that violates the precepts of traditional Socialist Realism—or into an airy fantasia of sex and pleasure.<sup>41</sup> The paintings take the viewer inside a “dream theater” of dark, heavily furnished rooms where people sit and wait.<sup>42</sup>

Paintings are always centered around the principle of frozen movement—these paintings evoke the sense that movement is possible, but not worth very much. In Kalia Zografova’s *A Small Break*, a knitter allows her ball of yarn to roll aimlessly from her lap while she stares blankly into the distance.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *80-te godini—Poznati—nepoznati—zabraveni: Desetiletie v depata: Zhivopis, skulptura, grafika*, curators, Vessela Nozharova and Svetlana Kuyumdzhieva, Natsionalna galeriia za chuzhdostranno izkustvo, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Vessela Nozharova, “Introduction,” *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Svetlana Kuyumdzhieva, “Introduction,” *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Mirchev, Ivailo, *Industrial Interior, 80-te godini*, here the industrialni peizazhi of socialist realism—factories belching smoke as a sign of progress, reveal themselves to be Potemkin villages—all façade with only garbage inside, illuminated in sickly light.

<sup>40</sup> Maystorov, Nikolay, *My Dream or an Escape Attempt*, *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Neshovski, Spas, *Village Life* and Bouiukliysky, *Spring*, *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Voukadinov, Ivan, *Interior*, *Ibid.* Holz, Wolfgang, “Allegory and Iconography in Socialist Realist Painting,” in *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992*, Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., Manchester University Press, 1993.

<sup>43</sup> Zografova, Kalia, *A Small Break, 80-te godini*.



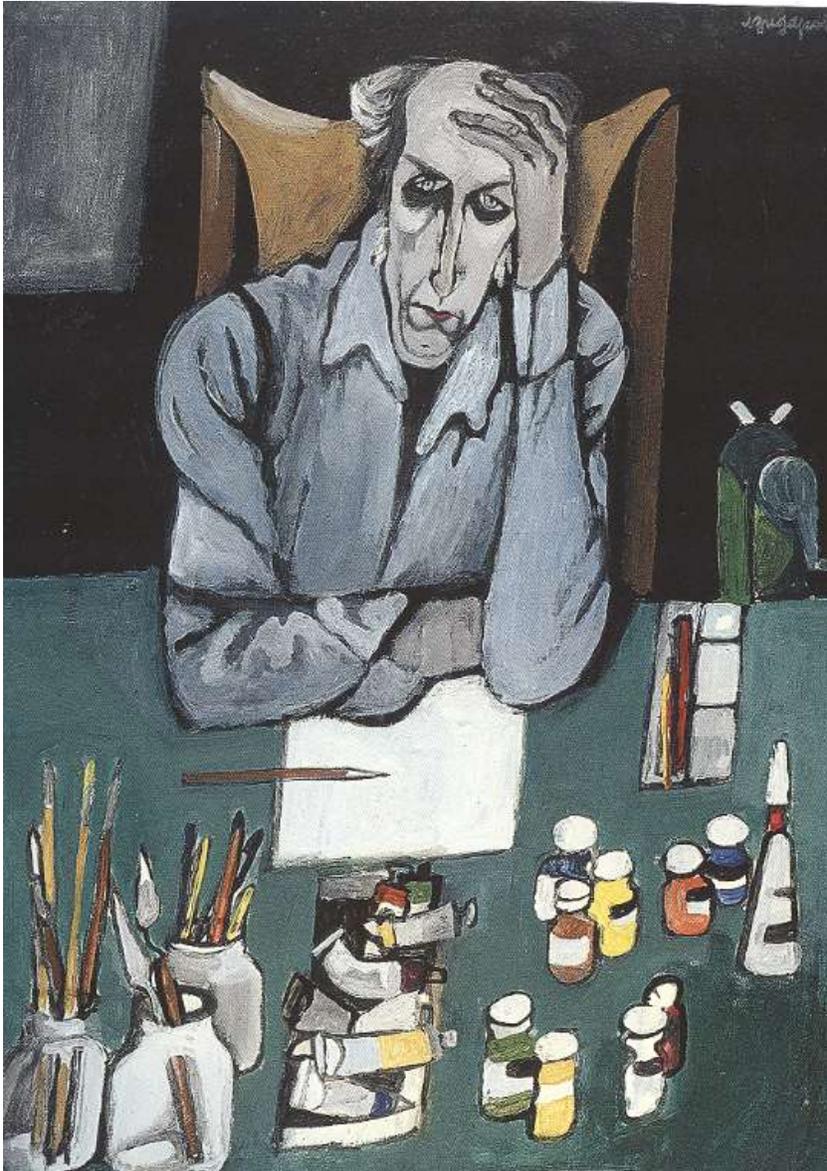
Break from what? From work? From knitting? Knitting itself does not seem to be providing any real pleasure—one can imagine the sitter taking out her stitches and starting her project over as soon as she finishes—rather it fills the time between, or while, the subject sits for portraits.

Self-portraits of artists filled the exhibition—in each case an air of melancholy fills the canvas. Bisera Praxova stares back at the viewer, luxuriating in what appears to be a velvet painting smock, posing for herself.<sup>44</sup> Liuben Zidarov and Liliana Ruseva are painters not painting.<sup>45</sup> Zidarov constructs a dark image of painter's block (as pure a reflection of boredom as I can imagine).

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<sup>44</sup> Praxova, Bisera, *Self Portrait*, Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Zidarov, Liuben, *Self Portrait*, and Ruseva, Liliana *Self Portrait*, Ibid.



Ruseva idles a coffee cup as she waits (for how long?) to begin, or renew, her day.

These are portraits of the boring, of a world with nothing meaningful to do. They are not, however, portraits of deprivation. Praxova paints in velvet; Zidarov sits in a studio littered by the tools of his trade (a trade that, in a strictly materialist sense, is dealing in luxury goods); and Ruseva sits in a relatively well apportioned kitchen in what, one assumes, is her apartment. All have the time to sit. To sit and paint (or not as the case may be) and/or have their portraits painted. Tellingly, all have a conflicted relationship to the goods that mark their prosperity. Coffee to drink before it gets cold, yarn to knit as it aimlessly rolls away, paint to turn into painting. None of these things seem to offer any release.

Within the context of the Cold War, subjects presented are indistinguishable from those in Western Europe or the United States of the era. Goods mask the individual—Toma Varbanov's *Lady Guest*, approximating a 1970s Hollywood starlet, may as well be a mannequin, identity cooked down to oversized sunglasses and stylish wrap.<sup>46</sup> When movement is arrived at in the

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<sup>46</sup> Varbanov, *Lady Guest*

paintings it continues as a commentary on goods as a measure of the good life. Ivan Dimov's wonderfully titled *Movement*, in case the viewer missed the possibility amongst the genre, could take place in any shopping mall in Detroit (at least Detroit before the fall) as a young mother takes her son out shopping for shoes.<sup>47</sup> Yordan Marinov plays with the idea of movement—a movement that his possessions anchor him against.<sup>48</sup>

Tekla Aleksieva understands her era as one of movement—an era at a crossroads—a junction both defined and clogged by the art of consumption.<sup>49</sup>

Imaginary cars promise an escape from boredom, but provide merely traffic...

The true “important for art issues,” the struggles within the “intimate world of the artist,” the questions the art asks, are: how to live in a world defined by commodities (and, of course, under state socialism—and I would argue capitalism—the subject him or herself is the commodity *par excellence*). This realization gives the paintings a special tragic resonance and power.

For the historian, the paintings collected in the exhibition are illustrative but problematic. They combine official, unofficial, and semi-official art. Equally importantly, the collection was created after the collapse of communism—which reveals hidden voices, but also distorts those it includes, altering their meaning. The narrative of the exhibition is, in effect, more a commentary on the decade after the collapse of communism than it is on the 1980s themselves.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time that Nozharova and Kuyumdzhieva were bringing “Known, Unknown, and Forgotten” artists from the Bulgarian 1980s to audiences in Sofia, I was putting together my own collection of art and artists working under communism in Bulgaria as displayed in the Haskovo Regional Art Gallery. Over the course of three months, the gallery and its archive was opened to me and I was allowed to photograph and document each piece added to the gallery since its inception in 1962 until 2002. This included close to 3,000 paintings, prints and sculptures. Since my own work focused on the 1960s and 1970s those works of late and post Communism more or less sat in files on my desktop, tugging at my conscience, and waiting for a second project. The collection of paintings from the 1980s at the Haskovo Gallery have the advantage of working fully with official art and the (shifting genre) of Socialist Realism. The gallery in Haskovski okrug was the central location for contact between the state, artists and the public. Within this space, meaning and value were assigned to art works, narratives for action and understanding were produced and ritualized, ways of viewing were privileged, and publics were created. They were paintings that people saw and thought about, and they limn the perimeter of what was possible in public discourse on the streets of southeastern Bulgaria of the time.

It is telling how clearly the works of official socialist realist painters—those painting with state approval and for public consumption—align with those paintings detailing the hidden desires of the unknown and forgotten painters. The paintings in the Haskovo gallery trace many of the themes from Nozharova and Kuyumdzhieva's exhibit—fantasia, the private and personal, visions of alternative worlds and boredom. Within both Bulgarian galleries, in Sofia and Haskovo, Socialist Realism as a window to a happy present and glorious (near) future became increasingly rare as the 1980s unfold. Abstract art, or at least art that defies and easy collective meaning, began

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<sup>47</sup> Dimov, *Movement*

<sup>48</sup> Marinov, *Painting*

<sup>49</sup> Aleksieva, *Crossroads...* In the Haskovo gallery Zdravko Iunchev, takes this to phenomenon to its absurd conclusion: A Greenish giant tears down a street using cars as roller-skates. It is a tour de force... Iunchev, *No Comment* [Bez dumi], f. 851 added to the Haskovo gallery in 1980.

<sup>50</sup> Making the exhibition an interesting commentary on the question of consumption in post-socialist Bulgaria. How to live with and through goods is a vexed question in both regimes.

to appear, casting itself loose from the traditional goals of socialist realism. Escaping from “the real” in Socialist Realism is a central theme in the paintings in the Haskovo Gallery.<sup>51</sup>

Portraits reflect a general sense of timelessness and aimlessness amid relative plenty. Boredom leeches out the erotic charge of private guitar lessons.<sup>52</sup> People sit in interminable silence (here the silence of the genre and the physical act of sitting for a portrait become a powerful metaphor for the boredom implicit within the system).<sup>53</sup> Interiors remain dark and well furnished—overstuffed chairs compete with wicker chairs on balconies as places for people to sit and lounge their days away.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Escape from Weber’s “disenchanted world” was a central conceit of modernism (which as a rather too broad category collects a whole series of art movements wrestling with the “hyper reality” and rationalization of modernism (as a historical term) entailing the growth of the state bureaucratization, mass produced publics, the reign of science and rationalism, and the growth (and sublimation) of the individual. For a good broad survey of Modernism as an art movement see: Peter Gay, *Modernism: the Lure of Heresy*, W. W. Norton, 2010. In the Haskovo gallery, Emil Stoichev’s, *Memory* [Spomen], f. 910, demonstrates escape to fantastical, necessarily idiosyncratic memories; Daniel Emilianov’s *Summer* [Liato] f. 912 defies gravity as oddly shaped figures hunt for berries in a field of blue space; Rusev Doichen’s, *Strict* [Strogi] f. 1190, is a fairytale pleasure palace nightmare of goblins, lightning and a central figure with either a bottle or a gun. All of these were added to the gallery in the middle of the 1980s.

<sup>52</sup> Bisera Prahova, *Couple* [Dvama] f. 873, added to the gallery in 1982.

<sup>53</sup> Just a few explicit examples: Bisera Prahova, *Zoia*, f. 1019 added in 1984; Mihailov, *Portrait of a Child*, f. 973, added in 1984; Emin Stoichev, *The Surgeon Georgi Shtepov*, f. 856 added 1981; Toma Trifonski, *Portrait*, f. 875, added 1982; Rumen Gargov, *Bai Zoran*, f. 898 added 1982. All are painted in richly apportioned settings, emphasis the seeming absence of productive pressure, and a general sense of melancholy.

<sup>54</sup> Vasilka Toneva, *Interior*, f. 1054 added 1984. Dimitur Filipov’s, *Still Life*, f. 9131 added 1983 paints a room completely bleached of color to a degree that is almost painful to look at.



**Jordan Katzaminski, *Waiting*, added to the Haskovo Gallery in 1984**

Everyone is waiting but rather than in a state of expectation (what, after all, are they waiting for?) an expectation already heavy with its own disappointment. It is a boredom built of having desires fulfilled and finding them wanting.

Cities are, without exception, void of people, absent color and any sense of movement or vitality.<sup>55</sup>

Villagescapes reflect a romantic vision for a past outside of the modern, industrial, consumer society.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Ivanov, *Landscape*, f. 908 added 1983; Rumen Gargov, *Landscape*, f. 892, added 1982; and Dimitur Hinkov, *Landscape on the Danube*, f. 1123 added 1986 are prime examples—nature in each of these places is well tended and orderly (a modernist fantasy) but devoid of growth and life—Hinkov's piece is a set piece for the severe pruning of trees.

<sup>56</sup> Aleksandrov, *Landscape of the Village Devin*, f. 866 added 1982; Stoian Veney, *Fruitpickers*, f. 874, added 1982 and Tonev, *Mummers* [Kukeri], f. added 1987.

These paintings engage in a worldwide critique of the modern that is shared across the iron curtain. They take their cue from that motto of Paris in 1968: “underneath the cobblestones: the beach!” They trace their origins to Camus’ Sisyphean question—how can one find meaning in a modern world? Consumption seemed, at best, a cursed answer. Komar and Melamid named their art movement Sotz Art—self-consciously in dialogue with the anti-consumerist love affair with consumption: Pop Art. Their first exhibition in New York City after leaving the Soviet Union was entitled: “Nostalgia for Socialist Realism.” And the paintings in both galleries, in Sofia and Haskovo, are written in a nostalgic genre. They are commentary for good or ill on the difficulties in replacing ideology with consumption: belief with boredom. In its most grotesque form it looked something like this:



**Vasiliev, *Breakfast on the Grass*<sup>57</sup>**

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<sup>57</sup> Ivan Vasiliev, *Breakfast on the Grass*, f. 1265 added 1989. Vasiliev is clearly in dialogue with Manet’s famous *Breakfast on the Grass*—in many ways the quintessential embodiment of bourgeois pleasure in the age of its triumph. Both are a commentary on the good life separated by 100 years of lived experience in the age of modernity...

In part this boredom was born of people getting what they wanted. Breakfast on the grass (strewn with the leftover detritus of consumption). The revenge of the more was expressed with a yawn. Diversions failed to divert, and Sisyphus' boulder rolled back down the hill.

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