

## Writing on the Wall

### *Remont, restoration and identity*

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IN THIS ESSAY, I am attempting an analysis of political discourse as an aesthetic phenomenon, with an emphasis on the aesthetics of everyday life. I am trying to understand how the factor of beauty complements the strategies of collective self-identification in Post-Soviet Russia. In postmodern theory, the judgment of taste is believed to underlie political meaning: the process of 'making sense' in terms of political and historical identification cannot be described outside the underlying ideas of beauty, good taste and style. I find Pierre Bourdieu's critique of taste to be of help, with his understanding of social meaning as relying solely and exclusively on the judgment of taste, the differences in how various groups understand what is 'beautiful', 'nice', 'attractive', etc, grouping into a fine network of distinctions that organize people into classes, strata, groups, etc (Bourdieu 1992; 1989).<sup>1</sup> Such an approach to social meaning from the point of view of taste has a tradition in Nietzschean social critique that has recently been taken up by cultural studies. In his *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche made a strong statement (as scandalizing at the time of writing as it is challenging now) to the fact that the existence of the world can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon (Nietzsche 1999). The aesthetic aspect of meaning production is on the agenda of cultural critique today. Lately, cultural studies have suggested dealing with this challenge by accepting that meaning is

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<sup>1</sup> In my analysis below, I also rely on Bourdieu's notion of social capital.

produced in the realm of the Imaginary, that is poetic processes underlying ideologies and superseding the functional logic of political necessities (Anderson 1996).

That this paper specifically focuses on walls, is justified by the Russian everyday philosophy of history. We tend to see our past (and project our future) as a succession of long periods of isolation from the rest of the world community, interspersed by short intervals of relative openness. On the Russian political scene, the Iron Curtain has been going up and down all the time, during the whole period of modern Russian history. Reading history backwards, one can see that the slogan of openness under Gorbachev's Perestroika was preceded by a long period of 'encasement' inside the Breznev patriotic 'stagnation'; this was, in its turn, preceded by a short period of openness during the Chruščev Thaw years, which, again, was preceded by the years of Stalinist pro-Russian isolationism, and that was preceded by the comparative openness towards the West in the ideology of the earlier Soviet State, and so on and so forth, far back into the depths of Russian political history. Such a history invites a vision of itself as a series of partitioning walls that are erected and then pulled down, only to be erected again. This popular version of domestic history even includes a calculation of the approximate cycle: almost every period of relative 'openness' takes about ten years; every interval of 'Russianness', between thirty and forty. Such a vision gives the Russians today a premonition of a new Wall to replace the Berlin Wall in the function of separating us from the world community, a new cycle of isolation inside the newly constructed Russian collective identity.

This paper is an attempt at a Benjaminian reading of Moscow's cityscape. Walter Benjamin was the one who suggested *flaneuring* as a mode of aesthetic interpretation of a modern city in terms of the political, cultural and historical archaeology of its layout, architectural solutions, and designs.<sup>2</sup> This line of interpretation is continued in postmodern cultural critique which sees a city as an aesthetic artifact.<sup>3</sup> The visual landscape of urban life becomes a form of scriptures, an introduction into the syntax of the Imaginary that underlies the

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<sup>2</sup> A useful discussion of Benjamin's method of 'flaneuring' can be found in Buck-Morss 1989. Benjamin's Moscow Diary is a very good example of practical application, documenting 'flaneuring' in the revolutionary Moscow of 1926-27. Benjamin's unwritten chef d'oeuvre, the Arcades project discussed by Buck-Morss, was intended as a theoretical reading of Paris, 'the capital of the 19th century'. The project was interrupted by the Nazi occupation of France and Benjamin's death during an attempt to flee from the Gestapo.

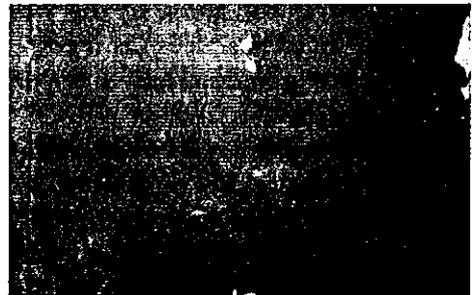
<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Clark 1995; Boym 1994; see also Boym's forthcoming monograph on nostalgia.

Construction of a 'common place', a sum total of ideological inputs *into* collective identifications. It was with this emphasis on Benjaminian *flaneuring*, and with a view to the image of the Wall as a symbol of isolation throughout Russian history, that I looked at the walls and surfaces of Moscow in the summer of 1998. Its facades and billboards invited interpretation as incorporated metaphors of identity. That summer, Moscow was "being beautiful". Its good looks were the result of Mayor Lužkov's ongoing campaign for giving Moscow an appearance that would be proper to the proud name of the capital of the new Russian State. But beyond this proclaimed purpose of beautification for the sake of national feelings, there was also a commodified meaning. In its new market-dominated reality, Moscow's very appearance has become a form of social capital that can be invested and turned into profits. Moscow claims to be an attractive venue of globalized economic exchange, and its image should be a guarantee of its viability. An 'attractive' facade is a representation of status, and status is social capital. The 'beautiful' image of Moscow is intended to convey the idea of stability—something that is entirely absent from Russia's political, social and economic reality. Having no proper justification in 'real life', stability seeks to express itself through an imaginary historical tradition—an entirely invented reality of the Past. The invention of tradition requires a revision of Moscow's two grand narratives. One of them is that of Moscow as the heart of Russianness (a meta-narra-tive invented by the early Slavophiles in the 1840s). The other is that of Moscow as the arena of the world's most progressive political ideas and social practices (as incorporated in the communist state). Both of these grand narratives are important in Moscow's discourse of self-identification today.

The interesting aspect is how these two meta-narratives interact with the globalized semiotics of commercialization. Moscow's facades are for sale—both in the literal sense of the phrase, realty representing Moscow's most popular commodity on the market, and in the metaphorical sense, Moscow's ideologies are trying to adapt to the international market values. This situation of 'trading the Motherland' is reflected in the new role and composition of the public

language whose syntax and semantics include visuality to which is given preference, in terms of expression, over verballity, the predominant media of the Russian cultural and the Soviet political discourse.

It is precisely these numerous allusions to history and tradition in its public language that strikes one as something new about Moscow's public self-representation. The timid ex-Soviet eye is shocked at seeing the amount of liberty that commercial copywriters and exterior designers allow themselves in terms of quoting and misquoting the canonical sources of Russian and Soviet culture. Formerly sacred, meticulously censored images seem to have been opened up for—if not violated by—extensive profane appropriation. Given the questionable commercial efficiency of advertisements among the impoverished domestic consumers, one might be justified in the suspicion that it is not the explicit commercial message that is the point. Rather, it is the subtext creating a new collective image of 'Us' that should be considered a more credible motive for such an outburst of speech. As if to mock the Romantic concept of *die Ursprache*, the originary language of Creation, commercials and billboards do not communicate, but express. What they express, seems to be the urgent need for a new self-identifying meta-narrative and the burning desire, on the part of new power structures, in the absence of ideological censorship, to dominate the process of its elaboration. The scriptural landscape of Moscow suggests an attempt at re-writing history, a Romantic desire that lurks behind the facade of commercial pragmatism. This task is by its nature highly poetic and seems to respond to a deeply and traumatically de-poeticized, aesthetically impoverished Russian post-modernity. The Moscow walls appeal to one to make a private investment into this project of re-writing their surfaces (Fig. 1)



An object that I found in one of Moscow's shop windows seems to illustrate this point (Fig 2). This was a model of a Russian Orthodox cathedral made of Lego pieces. A powerful symbol of Russian na-

tional history with its ideologically important connotations of spiritual superiority, the image of the church, articulated in its meticulously and naively reproduced multicolored domes and crosses, was produced in a medium (Lego bits) that combines the message of commercial reproducibility with that of a useful activity suitable for the development of a pre-school child. Together with the image of the church, Lego seems to appropriate and abridge, in this 'childish'



reproduction, the long and contradictory discourse of national identification. By creating an attractive plaything, Lego seems to be offering an image of 'easy Russia', a history minus its political and ideological complexity. Russian history thus emerges censored in a new way; together with 'nice' Russianness, the Lego object constructs the image of its addressee: a childish individual driven by a mild, purely consumerist interest in cultural history. This appropriation does the double work of cultural translation. On the one hand, it seeks to adapt Russian history to the average ideological landscape of globalized consumer civilization. On the other hand, through the unmistakably ironic attitude that it assumes with respect to real churches and their connotations, it seems to be trying to puncture Russia's inflated self-image as a Third Rome, a claim made as early as

the 16th century but still relevant for today's political and historical debate.

That a formerly sacred historical symbol is so easily converted into an object of fun culture, should not surprise one. In an earlier essay, I characterized this situation in the emerging new public language as the transition from a language of repression to a language of seduction (Sandomirskaja 1998, 34f)<sup>4</sup> This transition presupposes new methods of making sense, the factor of desire coming to the forefront and gradually replacing the factor of coercion that is typical of the ideological landscape of the Soviet political language. With desire entering the stage, representations give way to figurations.<sup>5</sup> Figurativity shifts the (loving) attention of the interpreter towards the literal sense of figures of speech, that is to the emotional meaning of a trope *before* it becomes transposed into the dead metaphor of an idiom. I read the facades of my beloved Moscow as de-metaphorized figures of self-identification—de-familiarizing the idiomatic meaning of a wall as a symbol of separateness, isolatedness, partition, as a symbol of a special historical purpose and a unique historical destiny.

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As with every modern city, Moscow responds to political innovations with violent outbursts of demolitions and reconstructions. In the summer of 1998, as I said, my interest was mainly focused on restorations rather than on new construction sites. I thought about the



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<sup>4</sup> I am using the term 'seduction' in Jean Baudrillard's (1990) understanding of it as 'the informal form of politics' (p80) and a mastery supreme to that of power: '...seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe' (p8).

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes postulates the difference between representation and figuration in the fact that the latter includes desire (love) as a constitutive principle. On the semantics and pragmatics of figurativity, see Barthes 1990. I have used a Russian translation in which the discussion of figuration is given on pp8i-88 (Barthes 1999).

everyday practices of *remont* (renovation of old facilities) as a response to the project of political restoration which was manifest in an increased interest, throughout the political and cultural arena, towards national traditions and historical roots. The practices of maintaining and re-decorating those vertical surfaces were symptomatic, in my view, of those new strategies of identification that I witnessed that summer (Fig 3).

The practices of manipulating vertical surfaces have a certain symbolic meaning in terms of Russian traditions of power. I am referring, naturally, to Potemkin villages—those historically renowned vertical surfaces that function as fake facades camouflaging either non-existent realities or quite real but unappealing structures. It is not surprising, therefore, that Russian interpretation is highly aware of such false facades and tends to discover them everywhere. With a view to Potemkin villages, any sign—a unity between the *surface* of expression and the *depth* of meaning—can be subjected to a political deconstruction that would be similar to the dismantling of a Potemkin village.

This attitude of suspicion with regard to surfaces is, as it were, not quite unjustified. The quality of the surface *does* stand in an indirect relation to power. Today, the urge for *remont* (restoration and renovation, repainting, re-papering, etc) is strongest among those who are better established. *Remont* becomes a symbol of status, and only those who possess status can afford a redecoration. In the environment of Moscow's renovated facades, a most violent struggle for power is going on. The toll is exceptionally high, but no less is the thrill of being part of the fight. Nowadays, at the end of the 1990s, the situation looks very much as it did when described by Walter Benjamin in his Moscow Diary in 1926-27; he saw Moscow as 'the Klondike where everyone digs for power'.<sup>6</sup> This 'dig for power' is exactly what gave Moscow its irresistible thrill in 1926, the year immediately preceding the solidification of revolution into the structures of the Stalinist State. Similarly, in our days, the dig for power is Moscow's principal attraction, something that gives a touch of

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<sup>6</sup> It is exactly this transformation of an entire power structure that makes life here so extraordinarily meaningful. It is as insular and as eventful, as impoverished and at the same breath as full of possibilities as gold rush life in the Klondike. The dig for power goes on from early morning to late at night. The entire scheme of existence of the Western European intelligentsia is utterly impoverished in comparison to the countless constellations that offer themselves to an individual here in the space of a month.' (Benjamin 1986, 72)

poignancy to the process of solidification of the 'capitalist revolution' into a new regime regulated by the interests of the state.

But in this turmoil of erecting a new structure of power, we should consider not only the problem of the surface, but also that of the niche—a detail in the wall that, in my perception, is connected with practices of evading, escaping, hiding, etc, that is, all those practices that Michel de Certeau (1984) identified as strategies of survival practised by the everyday individual. The 'dig for power' leaves the everyday subject in a condition close to that of a scorched-soil warfare survivor. Just as happens in devastating wars, so the population of Russia's 'everymen' is left, through the practices of the 'dig for power', with practically no resources for everyday existence. Life becomes a succession of clever tricks the only aim of which is to secure at least some crumbs of social capital—status, prestige, self-respect, dignity—those that happen to remain after the big ones have finished their feast of self-identification. The everyman wants his share of identity, he wants a home and a motherland—all those identities that were formerly distributed to him through the Soviet propaganda machine and nowadays demand an investment of imagination on a private basis. The everyman creates a symbolic home—a niche—for himself by manipulating new collective images of identity and adapting them to his own needs of individual identification. 'Who am I?', is a question that is asked all the time, and an answer should be provided by the everyman himself, since modern ideological machines of collective self-identification are dysfunctional. The restoration of the symbolic home of collective identity goes on along the same path, and represents itself through the same figures and symbols, as do the real practices of re-decorating, upgrading and improving real facilities—homes, offices and public spaces.

Accustomed to the understanding of political restoration as a period of stagnation, one is amazed at how little 'stagnation' there is in Moscow's everyday existence. Moscow is a fascinating place of fervent economic, political, and private life, all boiling with social inventions. The poetics of *remont* are part of its tremendous appeal.

Whether a business office converted out of a Stalin apartment house, or a home-made *remont* in a standard Chruščev apartment,

both seem to seek representation to a greater extent than the function of utility. The glossy expensive facades created by Turkish and Ukrainian *gastarbeiter* for the purposes of prestige, or Electrolux washers installed in a communal apartment as a matter of a do-it-yourself upgrading project, each of them signal intention of identification rather than functionality or comfort. Vertical surfaces—walls and billboards, fake shop windows, facades—are given a modernized look and, thereby, greater appeal in terms of commodification. (Fig 4).



Just as survivors of scorched-soil warfare dig out their ground shelters against the natural elements, so the builders of private niches in Moscow's symbolic vertical surfaces seek to create protection against the hazards of social climbing. A well organized niche is a matter of hierarchy, it represents its owner in a pyramid of lifestyles that is becoming more and more significant. The very design of the niche and its ornamentation are important components of the image. This process is also taken care of by *remont*, especially the so-called cosmetic *remont*, specifically aimed at creating an appealing surface to cover inadequate infrastructures, the proper maintenance of which is far beyond the owner's means. We all know how sometimes a fresh coat of paint can visually transform a leaking pipe or a basement infected by rats, and how a layer of new wallpaper sometimes covers substandard electric wiring that is technically incapable of carrying the load of Western high-tech home appliances.

Hence, the popularity of glossy finishes. From my tentative research on the *remont* market, I have understood that the widely varying prices depend on the amount of work devoted solely to the



finishing of the surface of both exterior and interior walls. Moreover, it is the quality of finish that determines the difference between the ordinary 'Soviet<sup>5</sup> cosmetic *remont* and the highly prestigious but prohibitively expensive *euro-remont*, 'westernized renovation'.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the finishing coat is to produce an ideally smooth plane and an ideally direct angle at the juncture between two planes. The 'westernized' wall is expected to conceal its origin, its age, and morphology: seams and cracks, bumps and depressions, holes left by old nails and screws and the traces of previous *remonts*, as well as 'congenital' defects initially produced by proverbially negligent construction workers. Just as private walls are 'westernized' into ideal glossy surfaces, so old buildings purchased for conversion into new offices are given brand new, polished, sometimes all-glass facades. Gloss and smoothness



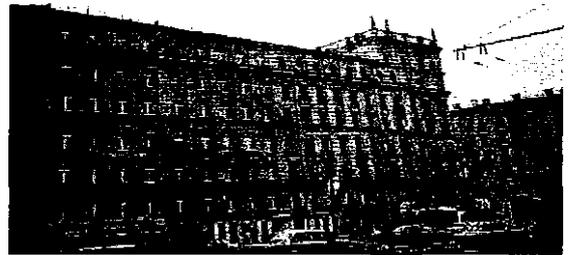
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<sup>7</sup> For the solution of this riddle, I had to turn to an expert. Special thanks go to Vladimir Sokovnin, an artist and expert *remont-maker*, who confirmed my guess about the semantically decisive role of the surface quality in differentiating between *remont* and *euro-remont*.

signal prosperity and luxury. Banks follow the international corporate canon transforming their office buildings into an under-developed likeness of Wall Street. The New Financial Power occupies Moscow's best buildings, which happen to be renovated Stalin apartment houses. With all the quasi-baroque grandeur, Stalinist architectural facades are monuments of Soviet totalitarianism. Ironically, it is exactly this variety of buildings with exactly these connotations of unrestricted violent power that the new capitalist elite is most willing to acquire. After some necessary *remont* both on the inside and on the outside, these buildings become completely appropriated by the

discourse of globalized commercial glamor. Slightly 'edited', to conform to the costs of westernized renovation, Stalinist exterior design acquires a new function of representing 'Russianness' as a factor on the globalized market, as an attractive target of financial investment. A similar result could be achieved if somebody attempted to renovate, let us say, a 'black maria' or a T-34 tank into a Mercedes.

Comparing a pair of twin Stalin buildings in the center of Moscow (Figs 5-8, p 122 f), one already renovated, the other still waiting for a new owner to start *remont*, one can see exactly how the editing that re-inscribes a Stalinist symbol into the discourse of global commercialism is performed. Windows become larger and fewer—a sure sign that the interior is no longer designed to house as many people as it used to. 'Rarification' is also suggested by the elaboration of the exterior. The notorious amount of exterior decorations—colons and semicolons, reliefs, conches, niches and



other debris of all possible architectural styles that Stalinist eclecticism was so fond of exhibiting on its facades—is visibly reduced. The price of maintaining such tiny details is nowadays much higher as compared to the times of their original construction, when architectural beautification was created by slave labor and did not cost anything at all (Fig 9). Nowadays, it is cheaper to cleanse this profusion of unnecessary ornaments and reduce it to



an entirely smooth surface. The extension of smoothed-out surfaces on the new facades, as compared to the dotted, uneven, finely relieved, chaotic surfaces of the old one, creates a solid look that the old Stalinist architecture has lost long ago, during the decades of socialist maintenance (read, neglect). However, it is not in their entirety that these little unnecessary 'beautifications' are eradicated from the outer surfaces of Stalinist walls. To preserve a likeness to its historical past, some 'architectural excesses' are saved in the process of restoration and even carefully accentuated by the design of renovation, as if re-framing the wild fantasy of a totalitarian architect into a sober and

solid background of the international style. The elements of Stalinist style, with all their pomposity of representations of unrestricted power, are thus reduced into an ethnographic curiosity, a mere attraction of touristic, ethnographically-oriented interest. History becomes an adventure park, where one can come and play with the relics of Stalinism, or maybe invest money in their maintenance.

In the poetics of renovated facades, the impeccable quality of the surface is also an interesting psychoanalytic symptom. I am referring here to Jean Baudrillard's (1995) analysis of commercial bodies with

their obsessive smoothness—soft skin without a single hair, mole, or blemish.<sup>8</sup> The consumer value of smooth skin—as well as any other smooth surface—is, according to Baudrillard, a representation of an Œdipal fear, a fear of cavities and bulges that can be interpreted as sexual symbols. Evening out a bulge or a hole, one eradicates any trace of repressed desire. Breaches of smoothness are loathsome, cavities and bulges disrupting the easy, uninterrupted, internally non-contradictory continuum of the outer form. It is this Œdipal loathing of interrupted surfaces that seems to bring about the desire of a cosmetic *remont*. Smooth skin conceals internal dysfunction in the same way as a coat of enamel conceals a rusty, rotten, wet spot below a leaking pipe juncture. A superficial defect in a coat of finish would signalize a disruption of the continuity of form from within, it would create a contradiction that would threaten the smooth fusion of the inner and the outer, a happy marriage of form and content. An uninterrupted surface without any traces of past conflicts is a commercial utopia with a high marketing potential. It is due to its claim of being able to heal the trauma that a glossy facade to history sells well : history without such a facade is too ugly and too full of conflict to be a marketable commodity.

On the contrary, from a well-finished surface, real history seems to be streaming down like water from the leaves of trees after rain: since the vertical surface is ideally smooth, there is not a single possibility for history to be arrested in its downstreaming movement and thus to come through, to leave a trace, a spot, a memory, a signal. A glossy facade is a surface insured against the ageing and traumatizing effects of memory. A glossy facade is a weapon against the devastating presence of death in everyday life—a presence that history is only too eager to testify to, and the collective subconscious is only too eager to know nothing about.

It is not only by its smoothness, but also by the optical properties of its shiny material that a glossy facade creates an oasis of a-historic-ity inside. The old walls of the totalitarian period were impenetrable in their properties of solid physical bodies. The Berlin Wall, for instance, was a five meter high, quite blind concrete construction with spirals of barbed wire on top. All over the former USSR territory,

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<sup>8</sup> A detailed discussion is given in Chapter 4, 'The Body, or the Mass Grave of Signs', pp 101-124.

such physically impenetrable walls were doing the semiotic work of delineating social territories, dividing their inhabitants into the categories of more important and less important, more privileged and less privileged, more free and less free. The glossy glass-finished walls of the present-day post-USSR establishment are transparent, they look easy to get through. Such walls make use of a different, and much more sophisticated, technology of exclusion: it is the exclusion of the gaze. By means of their mirror-like planes, the new walls obstruct the gaze of the observer, their luxurious brilliance hurting the eye that attempts penetration by reflecting the gaze back, together with the blinding shine of refracted light. Had one attempted observing power in the former days, one would have confronted a solid block of concrete without a single opening for light, sound or smell to get through. Nowadays, one confronts a mirror-like plane in which one can see nothing but one's own reflection in an expensively finished surface. A social critic, formerly a repressed Œdipal personality in revolt against her own repression, becomes nowadays a Narcissus watching her own reflection in the glassy surface of power. Which raises the question of new techniques of observation and new methods of critique.

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I began working on the first version of this paper in November 1998, when the Russian Duma was considering a suggestion of restoring the monument to Dzerzinskij in its original place in front of the former KGB building. Needless to say, the restoration of such an emblematic image of the Soviet era (the video documentation of its demolition in 1991 was greeted all over the world as the symbolic end of totalitarianism) would constitute important evidence in favor of the political connotation of *remont*. It should be added, for the sake of fairness, that this decision was not adopted by the people's deputies. However, even though not performed, the intended gesture was frightening enough.

During the summer of 1998 I saw the monument at the Museum of Sculpture in Moscow, in a new park adjacent to the huge exhibition areas of the House of Artists. The monument was standing on a temporary pedestal —no longer lying on the ground, as it had done for some time after it had been disassembled— and now supposedly rep-

resenting a piece of art, and not a piece of historical scrap (Fig 10). By an anonymous act of aesthetic evaluation,<sup>9</sup> this remnant of the old political regime was elevated into an object of historical and cultural interest, an aesthetically valuable piece, a museum exhibit. It was through a judgment of taste that the relic was given a new, artistic value which it obviously lacked when it stood in the center of Moscow's most ominous square and served as a warning



against any attempt at political resistance. From the debris of history, the statue was gradually returning into the arena of political life, and it was none other than a fine arts museum that happened to provide a temporary shelter for this return from the 'political exile' of oblivion via the backyards of the House of Artists into the reality of active political symbolism.

This illustrates an important connection between history, politics and taste. Our post-ideological collective identities rely on ideas of beauty more than on those of truth or function. From an aesthetic point of view, political projects which are historically doomed receive a rehabilitation and a post-factum justification. This post-factum rehabilitation is exactly what one means when one speaks about political reaction. Re-definition of identities triggers an active process of 'aestheticization of politics', a process that Walter Benjamin described in 1935 as directly conducive to the acceptance of, and support for, militarist and violently repressive regimes (Benjamin 1978, 217-251).

## SÖDERTÖRN

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<sup>9</sup> Svetlana Boym tried and failed to find out from the museum managers, when, by whom and how exactly this act of 'aesthetic rehabilitation' had been performed.

## Legends

1. An attempt at seduction coming from a Moscow wall. This graffiti found in an apartment house in Moscow can be translated as: 'I want you, my sweetheart'.
2. The Lego cathedral.
3. The originary condition of the wall: status quo.
4. What one can see in this picture was originally one facade, not two. The 'international' glassy surface on the left is renovated, the Stalinist surface on the right more or less preserves its original look. The Stalinist half, however, is already infiltrated by the message of commercialism coming from occasional Western logotypes that intersperse the architectural rhetoric of the grand style. This seems to provide a good illustration of how Stalinism is gradually re-written into globalism.
- 5-8. The reconstruction of a Stalinist building and a comparative condition of its twin that still preserves its original look.
9. Decorating a facade. Cheap manual labor in the creation of Stalinist exterior design. (From: *The USSR in Construction*, 6 (1949), 5 — by courtesy of Lars Erik Blomqvist).
10. Museumification of repression. The monument to Feliks Dzerzhinskij exhibited as an aesthetically valuable work of art in the Park of Sculpture.

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