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Agalma: The “Objet Petit a,” Alexander the Great, and Other Excesses of Skopje 2014

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She just goes a little mad sometimes. We
all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?
– Norman Bates in *Psycho*

This essay is an *ágalma* dedicated to the Macedonian government's project “Skopje 2014,” which recently turned Skopje, the capital of the Republic, into a memorial park of “false memories.”¹ Over the last five years, a series of unskillfully casted figurative monuments have appeared throughout Skopje, installed over the night, as if brought into public space by the animated hand from the opening credits of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.² Figures from the national past (some relevant, some marginal), buildings with obvious references to Westernized aesthetic regimes (mere imitations of styles from periods atypical for the local architecture), and sexist public sculptures have transformed the once socialist-modernist city square into a theatrical backdrop.

More than ninety years ago, in a kind of a manifesto of anti-monumental architectural and artistic revolution, Vladimir Tatlin challenged both the “bourgeois” Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty with his unbuilt tower *Monument to the Third International* (1919–25). Since then, discourses on contemporary monuments have flourished elsewhere in Europe (“anti-monuments,” “counter-monuments,” “low-budget monuments,” “invisible monuments,” “monument in waiting,” “participatory monuments”³) but this debate has completely bypassed the Macedonian establishment.

The government's promise that the Skopje 2014 project would attract tourists and journalists to Macedonia has been realized, but for all the wrong reasons – in many articles, Skopje's city center is depicted as a kind of “theme park,” and some of the newly built museums are referred to as “chambers of horrors.”⁴ In short, Skopje 2014 has become a laughing stock for the foreign press. According to critics, the city's abundance of public sculptures, monuments, administrative buildings, and museums has surpassed, in terms of *preposterousness* and pompousness, both Las Vegas and the Neutrality Arch, an oversized monument built by Turkmenistan's leader Saparmurat Atayevich *Niyazov* from 1985 to 2006.⁵

The citizens of Macedonia became aware of the scope of this large-scale urban project in 2010, only after it was announced, without any public deliberation, by the state-financed promotional video “Macedonia Timeless.”⁶ When the rudimentary animated video portraying the planned buildings and statues was first broadcast in February 2010, hardly anybody took



Warrior on a Horse, by sculptor Valentina Stevanovska, is cleaned in the Macedonian Sculpture Park Skopje 2014.

it seriously because it resembled a kind of stage set (and was even accompanied by dramatic music). In the midst of this adoration for the imaginary national past, there is hardly any space left for a consideration of the present, and none left for future generations' monuments. How was it possible to carry out such a massive building project in one of the smallest and poorest countries in Europe without ever consulting the public? The project, which was funded by taxpayers, cost over €500 million.⁷

The Name Issue: "State of Exception" and "Rogue State"

Official attempts to explain the purpose behind Skopje 2014 were unconvincing, as when the mayor of Skopje stated that the project was meant to serve as a kind of 3D history textbook that could compensate for the city's lack of history books. This is in complete contrast to Viktor Shklovsky's parable about historical monuments in post-revolutionary Russia; he wrote that they functioned "as a strange alibi for not telling the whole truth" or even "a quarter of the truth."⁸ Skopje's abundance of monuments and public sculptures can be seen as an attempt to use ultranationalism to compensate for the incomplete and faulty national identity of the "rogue" state, an outlaw nation that does not comply with the international laws accepted by most other states.⁹ After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Macedonia – one of the states that was proclaimed independent in 1991 – began having problems with its neighbor Greece.

The main source of conflict emerged when the first post-Yugoslav government in Macedonia decided to keep the name of the previously existing "Republic of Macedonia." More fuel was added to the fire when the Macedonian government decided to use symbols, such as a flag with sixteen sun rays, that were associated with Ancient Macedonia, even though Greece claimed to have the sole historic right to these symbols. Then in 1993, under pressure from the Greek government, the UN officially designated Macedonia as "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." This was later replaced by the unrecognizable acronym "F.Y.R.O.M." Negotiations with internationally appointed mediators ensued. During these negotiations, the Greek government proposed names like "Northern Macedonia" and "New Macedonia" for its neighbor to the north. The territory and culture of Ancient Macedonia, however, does not completely overlap with either contemporary Greece or Macedonia. For more than twenty years, this name dispute put Macedonia in limbo (e.g., waiting to be accessioned into the EU) – an ongoing, normalized "state of exception."¹⁰

The difference between "rogue states," as

discussed by Derrida, and "states of exception," as theorized by Giorgio Agamben, derives from two different interpretations of the "force of law." The concept of a "rogue state" deals with the possibility that one state declares another state unlawful according to international standards and intervenes in its internal affairs. The phenomenon of "states of exception," on the other hand, has more to do with the declaration by a sovereign power that the conditions within that country are so far beyond the possibility of governing according to constitutional law that exceptional rules need to be applied. A "state of exception" must be officially declared.¹¹

In the case of the postponement of a resolution of the "name issue," both the "state of exception" and the "rogue state" enabled a long-term vacuum. The rule of law was bypassed, and Skopje 2014 (one of many questionable projects) became possible, first as an exception and excess, but soon as the norm.

According to Derrida, monuments, like tombs, inevitably announce "the death of the tyrant."¹² But what kind of void is filled by *Warrior on a Horse*, the twenty-five-meter tall *ágalma* that has "adorned" the main Skopje square since 2011? What were the real reasons for building a monument so obviously dedicated to Alexander the Great, yet generically titled *Warrior on a Horse*?¹³

Ágalma and Collective Enjoyment in the Void

To build a monument is by definition to attempt to represent the sublime – that which is incomprehensible, bigger than us. Any monument offers a remembrance of a certain unperceivable and unrepresentable sublime. It commemorates incommensurability and incomprehensibility, as stated by the philosophers who contributed most to our understanding of the sublime, Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke.¹⁴ By definition, a monument is something negative – marking absence, the past, death, and above all a certain loss. In Skopje 2014, the celebration of unrecognized and incomplete identities, marginal heroes, and exaggerated victories from the past were used as strategies for inducing collective enjoyment, and ultimately self-delusion.

One of the most obvious historical interventions in Skopje 2014 is the erection of the monument *Gemidžii*, which celebrates the nationalist organization the Boatmen of Thessaloniki, also known as the Assassins of Salonica. This was an anarchist group active in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. It did not shy away from murder or terrorist attacks. But rather than analyze the stylistic and aesthetic aspects of such built



Crowd protests against high electricity bills at Skopje 2014's triumphal arch *Porta Macedonia*, October 2012. Photo: Saso Stanojkovic



Saso Stanojkovic, *Let them Eat Monuments*, 2014. Participatory project with a chocolate multiple of warrior on a horse. Presented in the framework of the workshop Participatory Monuments, with Chto Delat, Face to Face with Monument, Schwarzenbergplatz, Wiener Festwochen, Vienna.

objects, more insight might be gained by formulating a psychoanalytical interpretation of the ultranationalist cultural policy of the right-wing neoliberal elites. This policy functions as a kind of ongoing election campaign – unfortunately a very successful one.¹⁵

Jacques Lacan used the term *agalma* in his psychoanalytical discussion of the pursuit of truth. The *agalma* was imagined as a certain unconscious truth that we seek and wish to find in analysis, and as a kind of agency, endowed with certain magical powers, intended to please the gods and thus to secure certain favors for its bearer. Lacan used the term *in connection with the object-cause of desire*: “Just as the *agalma* is a precious object hidden in a worthless box, so the *objet petit a* is the object of desire which we seek in the Other.”¹⁶

Likewise, the monuments of Skopje 2014, although expensive, are creatively and aesthetically worthless objects, yet they stand for something much more important: they become the empty signifiers of the sought-after identity that can complete Macedonia’s incomplete contemporary identity. In a compensatory move, they reach back to antiquity, a time when Macedonia was praised and revered.

However, it is important to state that the *objet petit a* in Lacan’s writing is the cause of desire, not its aim. For Lacan, what one possesses is not necessarily related to what the other lacks. The phallus emerges as “the only signifier that deserves the role of symbol,” sometimes the *agalma*, and sometimes “an operating libidinal reserve that saves the subject from the fascination of the part object. Hence, the importance granted to symbolic castration, a castration at the origin of the law.”¹⁷ Lacan based the concept of the *objet petit a* on Freud’s concept of the “object” and on concepts developed by a number of renowned British psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein and her “partial object,” and Donald Winnicott and his “transitional object.”

For Winnicott, the “transitional object” (a term he coined in 1951) denotes any particular object to which an infant becomes attached and attributes a special value. Transitional objects, such as a piece of cloth or a teddy bear, originate when the infant is four to twelve months old – during the phase of the infant’s development when the first distinctions between inner and outer reality become evident. According to Winnicott, partial objects come to include the entire sphere of culture because they straddle subjective inner reality and shared external reality.¹⁸ For Lacan, the *objet petit a* is the object-cause of desire, the imaginary part-object that, as a kind of leftover or surplus of meaning, is

“the remnant left behind by the introduction of the Symbolic in the Real.” It “becomes the ultimate jouissance.”¹⁹

According to Slavoj Žižek, the *objet petit a* relates to

the lack, the remainder of the Real that sets in motion the symbolic movement of interpretation, a hole at the centre of the symbolic order, the mere appearance of some secret to be explained, interpreted, etc.²⁰

When it comes to Skopje 2014, the introduction of the Symbolic – the identity – in the Real is the secret that needs interpretation through the monuments. This becomes the ultimate truth of the political reason behind the government’s populist posturing, as was profoundly discussed by Ernesto Laclau in his *On Populist Reason*: “But the presence of the Real *within* the Symbolic involves unevenness: *objets petit a* presuppose a differential cathexis, and it is this cathexis that we call affect.”²¹

The Triumph of Excessive Power and Surplus

When the pro-governmental journalists and other supporters of Skopje 2014 praise the project for quantity of built objects (e.g. by saying: “At least they built a lot”) Žižek’s explanation of the constitutive role of neoliberal enjoyment comes to mind:

It is this paradox which defines surplus-enjoyment: it is not a surplus which simply attaches itself to some “normal,” fundamental enjoyment, because enjoyment as such emerges only in this surplus, because it is constitutively an “excess.” If we subtract the surplus, we lose enjoyment itself, just as capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionizing its own material conditions, ceases to exist if it “stays the same,” if it achieves an internal balance. This, then, is the homology between surplus-value – the “cause” which sets in motion the capitalist process of production – and surplus-enjoyment, the object-cause of desire.²²

Žižek’s conclusion wittily draws the connection between the Lacanian *objet petit a*, lack, and surplus in the context of capitalism’s excessive power:

Is not the paradoxical topology of the movement of capital, the fundamental blockage which resolves and reproduces itself through frenetic activity, excessive

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power as the very form of appearance of a fundamental impotence – this immediate passage, this coincidence of limit and excess, of lack and surplus – precisely that of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, of the leftover which embodies the fundamental, constitutive lack?²³

The iconoclastic radicality of such a “void,” a desiring machine that doesn’t produce anything except the absence or lack behind such an emptied-out representation, is particularly important in the context of Macedonia’s inferiority complex. Among many embarrassing diplomatic blunders of late, the most famous was committed by former minister of foreign affairs Antonio Milososki. In a 2010 interview with the *Guardian*, he stated that *Warrior on a Horse* was a way of “saying [up yours] to them!” This statement provoked ridicule from the local press, as well as calls for a new sculpture – of the minister’s middle finger.²⁴

One of the most symptomatic of all the monuments built as a part of this mega-celebration of failed, impotent diplomacy is the triumphal arch titled “the Gate of Macedonia.” Usually, a triumphal arch is intended to both memorialize a past victorious event, and anticipate and enable future victorious events. A triumphal arch is a monument that supposedly has the power to collapse the time before and after the event that it celebrates; in a way, it consists of an open multitude of events – a list that can be endlessly rewritten. But the few events that have been marked by public gatherings at the Gate of Macedonia have not been so glorious: in 2011, the Macedonian national basketball team celebrated its fourth-place finish in the European Championship under the gate, and in 2012 the organization Aman gathered there to protest high electricity bills.

Recently, the triumphal arch and the other monuments in Skopje have been placed in spatial rivalry with a newly installed merry-go-round in the city’s central square. The sculptures on the merry-go-round – of beggars, frivolous women with bare breasts (no female heroes were given monumental representation), bulls, fish, dancers, and trees turned into human beings – sit alongside militaristic historic figures, most of whom are riding horses and holding weapons. As capital investment flows into such problematic projects, art and cultural institutions are deteriorating. Artistic leadership is entirely overridden by the ruling party’s taste, which is driven by political interests, ignorance, and an admiration for traditional values (read: figurative and representational art). Such a hypocritical situation is paralleled by frequent claims of a lack of funds – for example, when it comes to

Macedonia being represented at international contemporary art events such as the Venice Biennale.²⁵

But today’s monument is tomorrow’s ruin. We have already seen so many neglected and destroyed monuments from the socialist past. While Skopje 2014 claimed to address a lack of Macedonian identity in European cultural history, it has compensated for this lack by building the brand new triumphal arch. By adding ornaments and columns in neoclassicist and Baroque styles to existing socialist-modernist and brutalist architectural objects, Skopje 2014 has erased other memory fragments, such as Macedonia’s antifascist past.

The Skopje 2014 project does not bear the signature of one individual artistic or architectural creator or a team. Instead, it feels like it emerged from one of the prime minister’s nightmarish fantasies. In his speeches, he even refers to it as *his* project. The government and the prime minister have thus reimagined themselves as chief “curators” in charge of the *objet petit a*, but the ugly box is still empty, devoid of the ultimate object-cause of desire.

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This text was written during Suzana Milevska’s term as Endowed Professor for Central and South Eastern Art Histories at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, a co-operation between the Academy and ERSTE Foundation.

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1

In ancient Greek, *ágalma* means "ornament" or "gift." It refers to images and statues that were used in temples as votive offerings to gods. "False memories," a well-known phenomenon from psychopathology, refers to trauma-driven, imagined events that show as real in the subject's memory.

2

Monty Python's Flying Circus, opening credits series 1-4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq37WSg9ESg>

3

See, for example, *The Contemporary Art of Trusting Uncertainties and Unfolding Dialogues*, ed. Esther Shalev-Gerz (Stockholm: Art and Theory, 2013); and Katarzyna Murwaska-Muthesius, "Oskar Hansen and the Auschwitz 'Counter Memorial,'" 1958-59," *ARTMargins Online*, May 20, 2002 <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/311-oskar-hansen-and-the-auschwitz-qcountermemorialq-1958-59>

4

See, for example, Adelheid Wölfl, "Im mazedonischen Geschichtsruselkabinett," *Der Standard*, May 14, 2014 <http://derstandard.at/1399507404886/Besuch-im-mazedonischen-Geschichtsruselkabinett>

5

The Neutrality Arch is a seventy-five-meter-tall monument topped with a rotating, gold-plated statue of *Niyazov*. It cost an estimated \$12 million to build. Recently, it was built even taller. See Richard Orange, "Turkmenistan rebuilds giant rotating golden statue," *The Telegraph*, May 24, 2011 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/turkmenistan/8533427/Turkmenistan-rebuilds-giant-rotating-golden-statue.html>

6

See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iybmt-iLysU>

7

The project's finances are far from transparent, so the exact cost is difficult to confirm. But one statue, *Warrior on a Horse*, is estimated to have cost €7.5 million alone. Most of the statues and buildings were claimed to be of local significance, and since it was officially initiated by the municipal government of Skopje, the project could bypass any parliamentary discussion.

8

Viktor Shklovsky, *The Knight's Move* (1919-21), written in Petrograd, Moscow, and Berlin, quoted in Svetlana Boym, "Tatlin, or Ruinophilia," *Cabinet* 28 (Winter 2007-08) <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/28/boym2>.

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9

Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 97. Derrida cites several authors who have examined the use of the expression "rogue state" in foreign policy, including Noam Chomsky, Robert S. Litwak, and William Blum.

10

For a discussion of the theoretical and philosophical interpretations of this dispute, see *The Renaming Machine: The Book*, ed. Suzana Milevska (Ljubljana: P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Institute, 2010). This book is based on a cross-disciplinary curatorial project comprised of ten different events (exhibitions, conferences, and seminars) that took place in Ljubljana, Skopje, Pristina, Zagreb, and Vienna in 2008-2010. The book examines the arbitrariness of names, the problematic issue of equating names with identity, and the implications of the erasure of memory through renaming. In addition, for extensive research into the political arguments involved in the dispute between Macedonia and Greece, see Zlatko Kovach, "Macedonia: Reaching Out To Win L. American Hearts," *Scoop World*, Feb. 26, 2008 <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/W00802/S00363.htm>

11

Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 23. According to Agamben, the emergence of camps in the Nazi period signaled that the state of exception had become the rule, transforming society into an unbounded and dislocated biopolitical space. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 166.

12

Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Prentice Hall, 1982), 4.

13

See Jasna Koteska, "Troubles with History: Skopje 2014," *ARTMargins Online*, Dec. 29, 2011 <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/655-troubles-with-history-skopje-2014>

14

In his "Analytic of the Sublime" (1790) from *The Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant locates examples of the sublime not only in nature but also in the human condition. He famously argued that the sublime, unlike the beautiful, "cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Walter S. Pluhar (Indiana: Hackett

Publishing, 1987), 99.

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The ruling coalition that has been in power since 2008 (and that was recently reelected in parliamentary and presidential elections in April 2014) is formed by two major right-wing parties, the VMRO-DPMNE (consisting primarily of officials of Christian-Macedonian descent) and DUI (consisting primarily of officials from the Muslim-Albanian minority).

16

The concept of *agalma* was introduced by Lacan in the context of his writing about Socrates's "Symposium" in his Seminar VIII (1960–1961). See Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VIII: Le transfert* (Paris: Seuil, 1991) <http://lacan.com/seminars2.htm> Lacan always insisted that the term *objet petit a* should remain untranslated because the "a" in *objet petit a* stands for "autre" (other).

17

Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre X: L'angoisse* [1962–1963] (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

18

Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: A study of the first not-me possession," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (1953): 89–97. See also Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

19

Lacan, quoted in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2006), 129.

20

Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 54.

21

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 118–119. For a complex discussion of names, empty signifiers, and populist rule, see the chapter entitled "The People and the Production of Emptiness," 67–124.

22

Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 54.

23

Ibid.

24

Helena Smith, "Macedonian statue: Alexander the Great or a warrior on a horse?," *The Guardian*, August 14, 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse>

25

See Suzana Milevska, "The Internalisation of

the Discourse of Institutional Critique and the 'Unhappy Consciousness,'" in *Evaluating and Formative Goals of Art Criticism in Recent (De)territorialized Contexts* (Paris: AICA Press, 2009), 2–6 <http://www.aica-int.org/IMG/pdf/SKOPJEcomplet.pdf> [PDF]

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