

'Occupying the Totalitarian Imagination'

Dr Malcolm Quinn

Romanian Cultural Institute

15 July 2008

In the first part of this talk I justify use of the term 'totalitarian' with reference to communism and fascism as expressing different forms of 'the totalitarian imagination'.

The second part discusses artistic activity that attempts to occupy the totalitarian imagination and how the idea that one can occupy the fascist or communist imagination 'from the inside' either as an academic or as an artist, reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways in which the totalitarian imagination operates.

I will conclude with a nod to architecture in the form of a brief discussion of the totalitarian bathroom.

When I decided to call this talk 'Occupying the Totalitarian Imagination', I did not suspect that, as I finished writing it, the London media would be preoccupied with the question of whether Max Mosley's imagination, more specifically his sexual imagination, could be legally defined as totalitarian. Mosley's dispute with the *News of the World* is not really an argument over costumes, décor and characterisation, but rather over whether or not costumes, décor and characterisation provide clues as to the existence of a 'Nazi-themed' psyche. The lineaments of Mosley's mind have become the subject of long-range psychoanalysis and absurd speculation over whether a fascist genealogy results in a 'fascist personality'.

Nonetheless, the Mosley case is interesting because it shows us something that I want to focus on this evening; not how we occupy the totalitarian imagination, but how certain kinds of totalitarian imagination continue to occupy and pre-occupy us. If we take totalitarianism as a whole to be a model of how existing social groups are transformed into 'masses' through the agency of a vanguard party, totalitarianism at the Nazi end of the spectrum is dominated by a 'phylogenetic imagination' emphasising the historical development of a tribe or group through 'Social Darwinist' ideas drawn from a range of cultural sources, whereas the communist end of the spectrum is differentiated by its adherence to a radically 'ontogenetic imagination' in which the individual, deliberately cut off from his environment and from common social bonds by the State, is seen to be infinitely malleable and amenable to development and re-education in the service of a mass society. One of the paradoxes of communist dictatorships is their emphasis and intense interest in the activity of the individual subject, and not the group, as the foundation of mass society; however, this individual subject is always 'in process', or 'under development', being studied and unknowingly 'understudying' for various roles that will be assigned by the state, such as class-enemy, criminal, informer etc.

My borrowing of the terms 'phylogenetic' and 'ontogenetic' from Ernst Haeckel's biology and their application to a discussion of totalitarianism, has been done for three reasons. Firstly, it is intended to pick up on the inherent 'vitalism' of both Nazi and communist forms of the totalitarian imagination. Secondly, it distinguishes them also as active 'ways of enjoying' – in fascist phylogenesis 'enjoying identifying' and in communist ontogenesis 'enjoying processing'. It is also meant to key in to a particular recent debate in 'fascist studies' which has two elements; firstly, the perceived need for an exclusive and minimal definition of fascism which does not accept the term 'totalitarianism', and secondly, the project of reading fascism 'from the inside', that is, according to its own myths and imaginative structure. The UK historian Roger Griffin, who has pioneered this approach¹, uses the term 'Palingenesis' (meaning the exact repetition of ancestral elements) also found in Haeckel's biology, to indicate the

common myths of national rebirth in Italian and German fascism. Griffin uses the notion of ‘Palingenesis’ in order to differentiate fascism from other kinds of mass movements. In contrast to this, yet within the terms of Haeckel’s vitalist lexicon and in the cause of serviceable definitions of ‘the totalitarian imagination’, I am here suggesting a link between a ‘phylogenetic imagination’ in Nazism and an ‘ontogenetic imagination’ in communism, as two routes or methods for attaining the common ‘totalitarian’ goal of the establishment of a mass movement through a vanguard party.

The communist Party in Romania, to quote Vladimir Tismaneanuⁱⁱ, was transformed under Ceausescu from ‘a marginal underground Leninist sect . . . into a mass party and eventually . . . the vehicle for the establishment of a personalistic dictatorship based on nationalist ideology’. Romanian communism, therefore, exhibits the shift between two distinct forms of totalitarian imagination within a single party organisation, albeit that, as Tismaneanu notes, this required the ‘deliberate falsification of the RCP’s history to accommodate the political mythology aimed at legitimizing the cult of the [Leader]’ⁱⁱⁱ. If we take Ernst Haeckel’s famous and contentious thesis, that in biology, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (that is, that the early development of the single organism recapitulates the life of the species) in Romanian communism, arguably, it was the other way around; the staged re-birth of the RCP as a nationalist and anti-Stalinist entity ensured that phylogeny recapitulated ontogeny, in other words that the Leninist project of constructing the ‘New Man’ was renewed and sustained through its apparent opposite, the phylogenetic, ‘tribal’ imagination of Romanian nationalism. Not only does this show the possibilities for deploying distinct imaginative schema across a totalitarian spectrum within a particular social situation, it makes the ‘ghost’ of the vanguard party/mass movement nexus that is the basic ‘hinge’ of totalitarian societies, particularly hard to evict, as it re-establishes itself in the most unlikely forms. The example of Romanian communism should also cause to question Slavoj Žižek’s assumption that ‘totalitarianism’ is merely a handy name for the prohibitive limit of the Western Democratic imagination^{iv}, which, according to Žižek, is magisterially and

thrillingly surpassed by the leap into ‘another dimension’ accomplished by ‘Lenin’s unconditional will to intervene into the situation . . . adopting the unequivocal radical position from which it is only possible to intervene in such a way that our intervention changes the coordinates of the situation’^v. In fact, Ceausecu’s example surely shows that ‘changing the coordinates of the situation’ is in fact an exemplary way of sustaining the only social link that really matters in totalitarianism - the link between the party and the mass movement. The communist individual and the nationalist ‘tribe’ provide the requisite armatures for ‘enjoying processing’ or ‘enjoying identifying’, the activities through which the link between party and mass is built. From this perspective, Ceausescu looks rather more radical than either Lenin or Stalin, since the leaders of Russian communism switched co-ordinates and radicalised the social field only within the ‘ontogenetic’, process- obsessed imaginative schema of early communism, an historical schema on which Žižek’s latter day variety of revolutionary vitalism is also strangely fixated.

Slavoj Žižek provides a good example of how one can be captured and occupied by a specific form of totalitarian imagination, outside of the links between the party and the mass movement that articulate this imagination and this form of enjoyment and give it meaning. Where Žižek is captured by the ‘ontogenetic imagination’ in relation to communism, Roger Griffin is in thrall to the ‘phylogenetic imagination’ expressed in Nazism, specifically the theory of ‘Palingenesis’ mentioned earlier. One effect of this mutual imaginative capture is that both these theorists deny the validity of the term ‘totalitarianism’. In his essay ‘The Primacy of Culture: the Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies’^{vi} Griffin approvingly quotes George Mosse’s book *The Fascist Revolution*:

Fascism considered as a cultural movement means seeing fascism as it saw itself and as followers saw it, to attempt to understand the movement in its own terms . . . The cultural interpretation of fascism opens up a means to penetrate fascist self-understanding.^{vii}

In a response to Griffin's essay in the same journal, David D. Roberts, Alexander De Grand, Mark Antliff and Thomas Linehan^{viii} question Griffin's exclusive focus on the fascist mythos:

we must at least consider the possibility that insofar as we take fascism as revolutionary in its own right, we must expand the focus beyond generic fascism to encompass, at the very least, the Soviet experiment through Stalin, and even recasting 'totalitarianism' to get at whatever common historically specific dimensions may have been at work.^{ix}

That phrase 'even recasting 'totalitarianism'' shows what a bad press the term 'totalitarianism' has been getting lately within academia. Nonetheless, these authors open up the possibility that Nazism and communism can be treated as different 'corporations' engaged in what Roberts and co. call a 'mutually reinforcing competition for the space beyond liberal democracy'^x. In 2008, there is no reason to believe that this competition for the space beyond liberal democracy is closed, nor that new forms of the totalitarian imagination, or a Ceausescu-style pluralism of imaginative schemas, could not re-articulate the link between the masses and a vanguard party at any point on the globe. To sum up this section of my talk – it will be evident, I hope, that I have been building a hierarchy of 'maestros' of the totalitarian imagination, with Ceausescu at the top, Stalin and Lenin below him, and Hitler several rungs below them all. Hitler occupies this lowly position for the simple reason that, with no real interest in, or aptitude for, constructing a the social bond between the party and the masses through the re-education of the individual, and therefore with only the phylogenetic 'tribal' imagination at his disposal, Hitler attempted to cement the social link between the party and the masses through the bluntest of instruments, wholesale mass murder. Italian fascism is the odd one out here, because, as the symbol of the Roman *fasces* (bundle of rods) shows, its link between party and mass was based on the historical imagination, rather than on phylogenesis, as shown in the Nazi swastika, or ontogenesis, as demonstrated in the hammer and sickle. Both the hammer and the sickle are icons of process and development which is most fully realised not in factories or fields but through the deracinated individual.

Now for the second part of my talk where I will discuss whether artists can occupy the totalitarian imagination, or whether they get occupied or pre-occupied by it, like the *News of the World*, Slavoj Žižek, or Roger Griffin. The problem for artists and academics is exactly the same – unless you understand how the ‘fascist’ or ‘communist’ imaginary is employed to build the social link between the party and the State, any attempt to inhabit the imagination or the *mythos* is doomed to simply re-describe this *mythos* or ‘give a feel for it’ without showing us what the *mythos* and the imaginative schema is intended to bring about. The *locus classicus* of the tendency towards ‘giving a feel’ for the phylogenetic imagination of fascism while missing its essential totalitarian purpose, is in the work of the artist Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer is worth mentioning because, like Roger Griffin, Kiefer’s early work aimed to get at fascism ‘from the inside’, to ‘occupy the totalitarian imagination’. In 1969, he explicitly used the title ‘Occupations’ (*Besetzungen*) for a series of photographs that feature the artist performing, citing, embodying the ‘Sieg Heil’ gesture in various locations. Kiefer said: ‘I do not identify with Nero or Hitler, but I have to re-enact just a little bit in order to understand the madness.’^{xi} He also subscribed to a phylogenetic idea of the link between personal and cultural memory: ‘Our memory . . . is not just formed when we are being born; it comes from far away, has stored basic experiences and attitudes that have accumulated in thousands of years.’^{xii} While Andreas Huyssen pointed out in 1992, that Kiefer seemed to take no account of the fact that ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a coming to terms with the past, has been the dominant ethos in German intellectual life for the past thirty years’, Huyssen has also praised Kiefer on the following grounds:

Perhaps his project was precisely to counter the by now often hollow litany about the fascist aestheticisation of politics, to counter the merely rational explanations of fascist terror by recreating the aesthetic lure of fascism for the present and thus forcing us to confront the possibility that we ourselves are not immune to what we rationally condemn and dismiss.^{xiii}

Here, Huyssen states a common notion that unfortunately persists in diluted forms to this day, namely that the artist is uniquely equipped to transgress, 'occupy' and view from the inside cultural phenomena that others can only view through the screen of rationalisation, superstition and taboo. Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Director of 'Hitler, a film From Germany' (1977) whose name has been somewhat loosely linked with Kiefer, shows us that the exact opposite is true; the gift of the artist is to show us how the corrosive effect of totalitarianism is to radically 'externalise' our relationship with our own culture, which begins to look as if it belongs to someone else. Syberberg shows that, rather than 'seeing Nazism from the inside', the phylogenetic imagination of Nazism in fact placed him on the outside of his own culture, unable to break back in. Syberberg's film, now often derided for its collageist and fanciful approach to Nazism, begins with a quote from the nineteenth century poet Heinrich Heine, pointing up a nightmarish undertone to Heine's sorrowful poem of exile:

'Thinking of Germany in the night, all my sleep has taken flight'

Syberberg folds Heine's melancholy desire inside his own radical estrangement, suggesting perhaps that, after Hitler, no-one will ever get back to Germany. He then goes on, in his own words:

Everything is freely invented, all historical persons and events; similarities are purely coincidental. This is not a joke, unfortunately. The judicial realism of everyday life forces this declaration. Thirty Hitler heirs have already registered their claims, and they are not all. As Hitler has never been tried, claims are the result, and we live in a lawful state. Freed in this way from similarities in the portrayal of persons and events and without the cramped four walls of the so-called realism of this world, we are thereby free for a law court according to our own rules, in our self-chosen universe, and can send him, that Hitler, at last for trial by us, with the means available to us.

Syberberg makes a revealing statement here about the rigor of invention and the necessity of fabrication – for Syberberg in particular, the problem does not lie with poetry after Auschwitz, but with Germany after Nazism. In the 1980s, Syberberg's pronouncements on this issue led to controversy; they were

grounded in a Quixotic rivalry between Syberberg and the architects of the present German State. It is important, however, to see how Syberberg positions a timely declaration of aesthetic autonomy as the route to a new historical consciousness. If you are alienated from your own culture, the only right that remains is the right to 'freely invent' everything. It is also worth noting that in this case, unlike the artistic exceptionalism of Kiefer, a statement of aesthetic autonomy does not describe an *a priori* right of the artist, distinct from his rights as a citizen, but rather a position Syberberg is obliged to adopt by his role as a citizen of the 'lawful state' of the Federal Republic of Germany.

This lesson was ignored in the recent film *Downfall* (2005) in which Bruno Ganz does his best to sound just like Hitler. Using available evidence and good historical research, *Downfall* strives to put you inside the bunker and inside Hitler's head – Syberberg's title, on the other hand, immediately suggests a kind of phantasmagoric projection, the phylogenetic imagination of Nazism, which erases or changes our reading of its contexts, as it also changes our reading of Heinrich Heine's poem. The direct progeny of 'Downfall' is the recently decapitated (on 5 July 2008) figure of Adolf Hitler at the Berlin franchise of Madame Tussauds. The decapitation occurred despite assurances from Tussauds that visitors would not be able to touch, photograph or pose with the wax Hitler – 'buddying up' to the Führer being forbidden, presumably, on the grounds that, in Berlin above all, this would imply kinship rather than detached spectatorship. However, against Andreas Huyssen's assertion that 'merely rational explanations of fascist terror' distance us from the dark heart of it, a dark heart that only the artist dares to occupy, what these rationalist explanations and *trompe de l'oeil tableaux* actually do is distance us comfortably from the horrifying externality, the freezing distance from our own culture, that totalitarianism initiates.

In my conclusion of this talk, I want to take this idea of 'freezing distance' and apply it to a spatial and architectural metaphor – that of the totalitarian bathroom. In her essay 'Arresting Biographies: the Secret Police File in the

Soviet Union and Romania''^{xiv} Christina Vatulescu makes the following observation about how, even in its decline, the Ceausescu regime continued to bear down on the individual, if only at the level of obsessive data gathering:

As a child, I once eavesdropped on a friend of my father's who confessed that every night he went home, locked all the doors and windows, hid in the bathroom, and ranted against the regime. Growing up in the 1980s in Romania . . . His rants were most likely carefully recorded, but his precautions probably convinced those who listened that he was harmless.^{xv}

Vatulescu goes on to speculate that if everyone who screamed in the bathroom in Romania in the 1980s had been arrested, the apartment blocks would have been empty. She offers an intriguing spectrum analysis of techniques for interrogation, accusation and data gathering in communist regimes, offering the thesis that at the height of Stalinism, there was little need for surveillance but an enormous emphasis on the narrativisation and characterisation of those accused of crimes against the State. In contrast, as communist regimes declined, surveillance came to the fore while the mass of data gathered on individuals actively prevented effective narrative profiling. Nonetheless, it could be argued that even in its entropy, what persists in the 'ontogenetic imagination' of communism, even through the meaningless accumulation of data, is the activity of 'enjoying processing' on which Lenin founded his link between party and state. As Yannis Stavrakakis has pointed out in his recent book *The Lacanian Left*, 'when things stick it is because, apart from offering a hegemonic symbolic crystallisation, they effectively manipulate an affective, libidinal dimension . . . Symbolic power and authority finds its real support in the emotional dynamics of fantasy and (partial) enjoyment.'^{xvi} While artists, and more recently academics, may become justifiably interested in investigating the 'sticky' characteristics of totalitarian forms of enjoyment, it is necessary to recognise, as Hans Jürgen Syberberg does and Anselm Kiefer unfortunately does not, that this same 'stickiness' of communist 'enjoying processing' or fascist 'enjoying identifying', places us not on the 'inside' of totalitarianism, but rather on the outside of ourselves as social subjects, that is, on the outside of ourselves as people with a home, or even just a bathroom, to go to. The

ultimate effect of forms of the totalitarian imagination, therefore, is to make people homeless within their own home, their own city and within their own culture. There is no 'inside' of homelessness, and there is no means of occupying it.

Malcolm Quinn 15 July 2008

ⁱ Griffin Roger. *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Hitler and Mussolini* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave 2007), p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Tismaneanu, Vladimir. *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (California: University of California Press 2003), pp.12-13.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.12.

^{iv} Žižek, Slavoj. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso 2001), p. 3: 'The contention of this book is thus that the notion of 'totalitarianism', far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap* . . . it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking.'

^v Žižek, Slavoj. *On Belief* (London: Routledge 2001), p. 3.

^{vi} Griffin, Roger. 'The Primacy of Culture: the Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies' *Journal of Contemporary History* 37: 1 (Jan 2002), 21-43.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 43.

^{viii} Roberts, David D. et.al. 'Comments on Roger Griffin, "The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies' *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 37, No. 2 (April 2002), pp. 259-274.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.262.

^x *Ibid.*, p.262.

^{xi} Hall, James. 'Anselm Kiefer: The Generalized Image of Authority' *Apollo* 130 (October 1989), 269-270, p. 270.

^{xii} Huyssen, Andreas 'Kiefer in Berlin' *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), 84-101, p. 89.

^{xiii} Huyssen, Andreas. 'Anselm Kiefer The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth' Andreas Huyssen *October* 48 (Spring 1989), 25-45, p. 39.

^{xiv} Vatulescu, Christina. 'Arresting Biographies: the Secret Police File in the Soviet Union and Romania' *Comparative Literature* 56: 3 (Summer 2004) 243-261.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 259.

^{xvi} Stavrakakis, Yannis. *The Lacanian Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007) p. 21.