Abstract
Nowadays, what Pierre Bourdieu calls social actors – be they individuals, institutions or private companies – prioritise their own ethical, ideological, political and aesthetical ‘identity bubbles’. In doing so, they often overlook the imminent decline of public life, publicity, culture and the arts. Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik, through their theory of the time-complex rather indirectly, and Andreas Reckwitz with his theory on the society of singularities more directly address this contemporary phenomenon, namely, the ‘atomising’ and ‘relativising’ (singularising) of public life and culture, which, paradoxically, blurs not only the ‘traditional’ timelines of the past, present and future but also the boundaries of material and conceptual entities. As complexities and inscrutability increase, the desire for nostalgia grows. The utopias that fulfil a new political – and, let us add, aesthetical – demand are what Zygmunt Bauman calls retrotopias. Retrotopias – whether fictional, theoretical or practical – are vital components of the time-complex, the process of singularisation, and the contemporary ideological and identity policy-related bubbles. As Michael Foucault would put it: they form the episteme of their time. They offer a glimpse of a horizon in a world where horizons have seemingly

1 A shorter version of the essay was originally published under the title “Adalékok a posztművészet problémájához” [On the problems of post-art] in the journal Líger; an extended version was later published in Laokoön (see the Works cited section). The present text is the English translation of the revised, at parts slightly rewritten and condensed version of the longer paper.
vanished. In my philosophical essay – turning Georg Lukács’ Heidelberg Aesthetics on its head – the works of three young, Hungarian ‘post-socialist’ artists will be analysed to support the thesis that if in arts it is possible to break away from the hybrid u- and retrotopias and the trap of the time-complex, then the same should be also true on a global scale.

Key Words. Post-socialism, retrotopia, time-complex, Anna Franciska Legát, Ilka Olajos. Fruzsina Takáts

*Zygmunt Bauman’s Retrotopia*

Cronus devours his offspring. This ancient maxim concisely sums up the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman’s *Retrotopia* published in 2017, shortly after the author’s death. Bauman's philosophical essay is a sort of remake of Thomas More’s 1516 novel *Utopia*, on the 500th anniversary of its publication. The same way that More coined a new word in ‘utopia’, which became frequently used in modernity, Bauman also aims to create a new term that rethinks the original concept of ‘utopia’ in his own time. But whereas the term ‘utopia’, which More formed from ancient Greek words and based on the similarity between ‘no place’ and ‘good place’, had an optimistic implication, the term ‘retrotopia’ carries no positive connotations: it means ‘past place’, or, to further play with words, ‘the place of long lost past’. This is Bauman’s take on the popular opinion, or, if you will, the modern misunderstanding that the place ‘utopia’ refers to is not a ‘no place’ but the future itself.

Whilst in the 20th century modern utopias still wished to define the future, and in fact the attempts to create utopias were happening historically on the largest scale, Bauman observed that the beginning of the 21st century seemed to be, in contrast, an old-new era of aspirations to restore the past. Since the twentieth-century efforts of taking over the future – including the ventures of the Soviet Union as well as the hippie communes – all failed, Bauman argued that nothing else had been left but the past, and of course the belief (utopian in itself) that it can be restored. The “end of history” announced in the euphoric moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall lost its meaning very soon, with 9/11 the latest. Meanwhile, the increasingly specific and therefore increasingly worrying scientific predictions on climate change and the depletion of our planet’s resources truly leave us with a sceptical attitude towards the future.

Bauman, who had been to the Soviet Union as an active communist in his youth, does not address these connections in his essay; however, it is clear that the concept of *Retrotopia* is not only ideological but also cultural anthropological and psychological. One might think that
Bauman – in a fittingly retrospective fashion – falls into the trap of following Hegel’s ideas on the unfolding of spirit in history: Bauman seems to suggest that “the spirit of utopia”, as Ernst Bloch would call it, has returned to itself as idea and is now present as retrotopia. However, this is not what Bauman argues; or he argues this only in a very specific sense – one that has to do with the history of ideas [Ideengesichte] rather than intellectual history [Geistesgesichte]. When Bauman writes about going back to Hobbes, social inequalities, the tribal campfire, or the mother’s womb, he is thinking about social and behavioural forms once thought to have been overcome by modern social development, that is, he is essentially discussing psychological and anthropological issues. Hence, Retrotopia, unlike More’s Utopia, offers not an imaginary island for an ideal society but a deglamourized image of a regressive, late-modern reality that is, practically, present everywhere on the globe.

In the introduction of the work, Bauman writes that “‘retrotopias’ are currently emerging: visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future” (2017: 3). Retrotopias are not only the retrospects of utopias but are also, paradoxically, their invocation revival. This new version of utopias does not have a futuristic aim to restart everything, instead through retrograde visions they wish to restore. Still, they are as much a denial of the present and reality as utopias. Accordingly – this could be the pessimistic interpretation of Bauman’s work –, while mankind might have learnt some from the disillusioning stories of twentieth-century utopias, for some reason the desire in humans for a utopian world is yet ineradicable. Therefore, an effort is now being made to achieve reconstruction: retropias. Hence the question raised is not whether we will ever be able to break away from the lure of the modern u- and retrotopias, because the answer to this is obvious, but whether we will ever be able to tackle the unprecedented global issues of our time, even when these simulacra (a term based on Jean Baudrillard’s concept) constantly hide reality from our eyes.

Bauman, though indirectly, reinforces this one question throughout the whole of his work. For example, when he tries to find the logic behind the self-inflicted frenzy over international arms trade and the United States’ recent question on gun ownership. As a true prophet, he could not live to see the extra stakes his train of thought is given as the Russian-Ukranian war seems to spark an arms race in nation-states. Thus, his work could also be interpreted as an intellectual testament, an adequately sober one considering its topic: either we achieve “the ascent of integration to the level of humanity as a whole” (Bauman 2017: 130) or we will dig each other’s graves. For this reason, the question whether it is better if one puts focus on the utopias or retrotopias, or maybe on an old-new eclectic and hybrid version of these, is essentially false.
Is it a form of apotheosis to be trapped in the vicious circle?

To use an informal expression, there is a little bit of everything in Anna Franciska Legát’s photo series: socialism, party trash photography, parents, Stalinist iconography, a traumatic past awaiting to be processed, insignificant dispensable pictures, phallic symbols, Netflix aesthetic, the style of Gábor Bódy, heroism, double portraits, postmodern irony, veiled religious allusions, modern collage aesthetics, and the list goes on. They do not necessarily appear in this order but in an emphatically chaotic manner.

The photo series invokes Bódy’s bon mot on *Psyche*. As director Bódy once said of his movie *Narcissus and Psyche*, it is just like the Hungarian layered crepe torte: everyone can pick what they like on their plate and what they do not can be simply left on the rim of the plate. Although the photo series is not yet finished, due to its overcomplicated nature (which does remind one of *Psyche*), it can probably never be finished, only abandoned: its torso-like quality is unmistakable. Moreover, it should be pointed out (if I truly wish to raise Franciska Legát to the heights of Gábor Bódy – and this I simply have to) that Legát also seems to have taken inspiration from Bódy’s other cult film *The Dog’s Night Song*, which is most probably the root of the chaotic structure in Legát’s photo series. The reminiscences of Bódy’s films in this photo series makes it a remarkable work for any and every exhibition – paradoxically, it is a highly contemporary and retro photo project at the same time. It is as if she wanted to transfer two essential trends from the Hungarian film history of the 1980s, their themes and aesthetics, into a photo project. Today, the series smoothly synthesises the two movements that were still considered antagonistic to one another in the 1980s: the neo-academism of films from the fifties and postmodern film associated above all with the names of Gábor Bódy and András Jeles. The former trend tried to reveal the phenomenon of the Rákosi era’s exploited world in a form that is easily comprehensible for the public, while the latter depicted the socio-cultural decay of the 1980s and the premonition of the arrival of a new era in a fashion that is directed at the intellectual subculture. If, for the sake of experiment, I deliberately ignore any other possible influences, I notice that these two aesthetic styles encapsulate the photo series with a ratio of roughly 30 to 70 percent, i.e., the photo series is almost 100% (99.999...9%) made of these movements, which makes Legát’s work a kind of – I almost wrote ‘retrotopia’ – a ‘retrotype’.

About 30%: One of the most perplexing pictures taken so far in the series is where the creator stands with her mother, with her head bandaged, in front of a factory building. They raise their arms high, parallel to the factory chimneys, to greet with an optimistic hurray the … what
exactly? The recurring past? Or, what else could this ‘re(tro)production’ game mean? What good does this contemporary resurrection of the totalitarian iconography of Stalinism do? (See Figure 1 in the appendix.) This photo and other similar ones in the series that are mostly based on this scheme (i.e., a seemingly perfect reproduction of the heroic iconography that is subtly subverted) use such a strong poster-like style that they almost entirely suppress the underlying irony hidden in the visual details. In this manner, the creator nearly disregards the unmistakably sharp boundary between pop art and soc art, as she explores the 1990s and 2000s theme of social art in the style of the pop art renaissance of the 1980s. But probably, this is, in fact, the virtue of the series. Pop art goes hand in hand with what is popular momentarily and it thrives to create eternal ambiguity specifically by crossing boundaries, while soc art puts more focus on the distant communist utopia and is, therefore, stuck with an eternal clarity in its style. Thus, pop art is a problematic art form because of its ambiguity, and social art because of its clarity, but Franciska Legát has a good eye for the ratios of both when playing with these two forms, and sometimes even manages to set them in contrast.

About 70%: The strongest image of the series, which stands out autonomously from the other images, grasps the whole idea of the series in itself, and is so powerful that it could not be reproduced, is that of the double portrait: where the artist and her mother sit in front of a window, her mother looking at her and her at the viewer. The visual symbols used in the picture are as persuasive and radiating as the look is on Franciska’s face. (See Figure 2 in the appendix.) The almost identical naked forearms and hands, the thighs and feet in tights, the similar chairs, the view from the window that lacks perspective, above it the cornice and the ceiling moulding, which are as naked as the women’s limbs and enclose the space as a frame at the top, before the corners of the image would cut it off themselves. The other three sides of the composition leave precisely the same amount of space between the corners and the elements of the image as the cornice and the top of the picture did, which creates a double-frame and, thus, a nearly mirrorlike relative-symmetry between the two figures. The bars of the window frame return with a depressing notion as shadows on the floor. The picture as a whole could be described as radically puritan. In the meantime, Franciska is holding a red thread for her mother. The red thread is a metaphor for the thread of life. It is as if the entire composition were intended to burn into the viewer’s unconscious the (at first sight, absurd) idea that the creator is suggesting: “look, after all, I am just like my mother”; in fact, to some extent less than her mother, inferior even. Because her and me – and here is the twist – are one, in the heavens we sit on the throne together, as a single-being, but now we are divided to the substance of two people, with the dove of the holy spirit above us in the abstract form of the cornice – ecce homo!
Nevertheless, she does not put these thoughts into words (even if “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with…” [John 1.1]), instead she puts them into her photography; therefore, her message – open to two interpretations – will always remain ambiguous. Is it possible then, to determine which interpretation is more appealing to the artist, pop art or social art, determinist or absolutist? Of only one thing can we be truly certain: if a response could be found to these questions it would be without artistic credibility.

If we can believe Nietzsche that modernity begins with the death of God, then modernity itself is nothing more than a new, great, human plan that replaces the Divine Plan itself, i.e., a utopia waiting to be manifested. The utopia of modernity is therefore the ‘no-place’ (remember that the word utopia literally means ‘no-place’) where God no longer exists. God is dead, despite his resurrection (and there were those for whom Gábor Bódy was the ‘God’, as it could have been for Franciska’s father, who was once an active participant of the Budapest underground scene), and utopias are alive and exist even though they really do not. Well, if this is so, then modernity (and Franciska’s series) is exactly the dialectic of these two paradoxes. The only paradox in this is that Kierkegaard’s paradoxes are the negations of the Hegelian dialectic of negativity, i.e., they are not paradoxes. Of course, one should note that Bódy himself was not only an enthusiast of Kierkegaard’s masterpiece, Either/Or, but also of Hegel.

Bódy uses the following quotation from The Phenomenology of Spirit as his motto and ars poetica: “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative” (qtd. in Forgách 2006: 4). Franciska Legát immerses herself in her subject with an almost eschatological seriousness. Placing herself in the centre, she plays the dramatised passion role of the only-born son in her pictures in the framework of a spectacular and expressive photographic performance. Let us hope that, unlike Bódy (once more alluding to The Dog’s Night Song\(^2\)), she will escape crucifixion as did one of the thieves.

99.999...9%: The post-apocalyptic title of the series Hellish Eden and the fact that the next series (even though this one is not yet finished) is called Edenic Hell only reinforces this manifold and complex dialectical double play of the work, which is not even surprising at this

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\(^2\) This sentence is a reference to one of the end scenes in Bódy’s movie The Dog’s Night Song, in which Christ and the thieves on the cross can be seen in the gloom of the night from three different camera angles. One of the crucified people is played by Gábor Bódy himself; he takes on the role of the fake priest. However, merely based off the order, it is not evident whether he is one of the thieves or Christ himself. In each camera setting, one of the people gets off the cross and leaves the place. In the meantime, Gábor Bódy provides the following narration: “It was not long ago, in the year of his death, that Jancsi Pilinszky told me his dream. The people of Golgota have gathered around to command the crucified to get off the cross, prove that he is God’s son, perform a miracle! Whilst all eyes are on the Saviour, no one seems to notice that the thief on the left had got off the cross and left the scene.” Incidentally, the name “Jancsi Pilinszky” is an allusion to Hungarian poet János Pilinszky (1921-1981).
point. But of course, there is a subtle, barely noticeable twist around the choice of the title. It is as if the artist wants to invoke the surrealist practice in which an unexpected title, that does not seem to fit the work as a whole, overwrites – in a creative sense, in one’s mind – the autonomous totality of the work in the last moment, when the work was thought to be already finished. But what is more surprising about this choice of title is what it is not: it is not a surrealist take on the work that is surrealist itself. In other words, it is as if Anna Franciska Legát does not want to overwrite anything, because her work seems to perfectly suit the idea of a vicious circle, the eternal return of everything that once was. In this case, the return of the not-so-discreet charm of the socialist Hungarian neo-avant-garde artistic intelligentsia (in other words: the pain of the world).

However, all this is just an appearance, a conspiratorial pretence, a cover-up. There is no doubt that Anna Franciska Legát creates a paradoxical, diabolical dialectic of the negation of negation, but she does it angelically so (referring to Bódy again), but I could also write (referring to the creator herself) that she does it with a divine devilishness. Indeed, she does not pursue the Hegelian phenomenology of the spirit but a combination of a ‘Bódyan-Jelesian’ deconstruction with Kierkegaardian paradoxes. In contrast to Nietzsche, she does not proclaim the eternal return of the same thing, rather she hopes for a religiously meaningful second coming. Because what is bad is also good and what is good is also bad. In this paradoxical dialectic that repeats by negating and negates by repeating – in an accordance with the idea of distancing by nearing and with Bódy’s idea that “The image is not a sign, nor an object, but a process […], which can be compared to an endless and infinite tunnel. […] And [we too] are in this tunnel” (Bódy 2006: 120) – in this dialectic, there is still a 0.000…1% hope that Legát Anna Franciska’s work is not a simulacrum of a specifically Hungarian intellectual retrotopia – an “Infinite image and reflection” (to use the title of that lecture of Gábor Bódy’s which is quoted here).

The time-complex, the post-contemporary and the post-art

Hans Belting’s *The End of the History of Art?* was originally published in 1983. Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition – A Report on Knowledge* four years prior to that introduced the term ‘postmodern’, which subsequently became a term of common knowledge in Continental Europe. His thesis on the great narratives losing credibility provided one of the philosophical foundations for the ‘postmodern’ and has by now become commonplace.
Belting’s essay also reflected on this inasmuch as it systematically examined the grand narratives of art history from Hegel to Marlaux and analysed the universal validity of those in the 20th century. In the 1983 version of the work the idea on the end of art history is merely posed as a question, whereas in the revised 1995 edition the question mark is omitted from the title. Belting does not claim that art history as an academic discipline no longer exists, nor that the great narratives in art history have ceased to exist, nor that art is not fundamentally and essentially dependent on the narratives that construct the history of art, but that the boundaries of the discipline in this field are broader than ever before, and that pluralism in the narratives of art history—with the breakdown of its canons—has become more and more common.

After almost thirty years, it seems that Belting not only in 1983 but also in 1995 lacked the necessary theoretical concepts with which he could have grasped the real problem at the centre of the thesis about “The End of the History of Art”, i.e., that art and its traditional academic field, art history, paradoxically, since the turn of the millennium at the latest, can only be preserved at the cost of its own conceptual elimination, in its abolished form. The contemporary theoretical discourse owes its progress to the 2016 booklet The Time Complex/Post-Contemporary by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik. The introduction of the book is a panel discussion between Avanessian and Malik about the two concepts that give the book its title. Avanessian takes a similar approach to Bauman’s opening thesis in Retrotopia. Bauman, following Walter Benjamin’s famous analysis of the Klee picture, claims that the angel of history has turned her gaze again, from the direction of the past to the future, and the era’s retrograde thinking is precisely the consequence of this overlap with the past. Avanessian believes that “[w]e are not just living in a new time or accelerated time, but time itself—the direction of time—has changed. We no longer have a linear time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future” (Avanessian and Malik 2016: 7).

According to them, “If the leading conditions of complex societies are systems, infrastructures and networks rather than individual human agents, human experience loses its primacy, as do the semantics and politics based on it” (Avanessian and Malik 2016:7). Looking at this from the perspective of time perception, one of the essential consequences is that the more complex the society is, the more the present loses its precise and privileged primacy for human experience; this creates a form of time that is complex, fraught with paradoxes, and, with regards to what can be conceived by humans, highly speculative. The form of time is described by the concept of the time complex. In the time complex, the space of present is not only obscured by the speculation and the potential risk-aversion of the future but is also extruded by the past, inasmuch as “[t]he present can no longer primarily be deduced from the
past”, the past is trapped by the expectations of the present, by its selective strategy of memories (Avanessian and Malik 2016: 14). To sum up Avanessian and Malik’s thesis by drawing on Bauman’s work: whilst traditional utopias are replaced by a future which exploits the present, the past in its genealogical and heterotopic sense is replaced by the simplified topos of the retrotopies.

If present preconstructions of the future can be best described by the adjective ‘preemptive’, then the attempts to reconstruct the past (from the perspective of the present) should be described by the prefix ‘post’ (Avanessian and Malik 2016:14). Post-contemporary is the state in which everything that is not yet ‘pre-futured’ is already ‘post-pasted’. Thus, what Belting means by the end of art history is roughly what, following the logic of the time-complex and the post-contemporary, can be called ‘post-art history’, the way it is becoming more and more common to refer to contemporary art as ‘post-art’, similarly to how film studies discuss ‘post-cinema’. Undoubtedly, this is not to say that cinema as an institute has ceased to exist (although, according to the news, the world’s largest cinema chain has gone bankrupt during Covid-19); rather, that the concepts associated with the institute of cinema by now have faded away, which creates a nostalgic sense towards them. The contradiction of the post-art era lies in the fact that art is simultaneously destined for eternal agony and late blossoming. The myth of cinema and Hollywood comes to life more and more vividly on the film screen – in retrotopies – as the decay of the film theatre era approaches (e.g. Lovelace, 2013; Hail, Caesar!, 2016; Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, 2019; Licorice Pizza, 2021). Overstepping boundaries seems to lead to, though never really ends in extinction; instead, it constantly modifies the original – to use Michael Foucault’s term – ‘dispositive’.

A concrete retrotopia?

Ilka Olajos is working on a photographic ‘multitasking’ project which runs on several threads simultaneously. In her project, she works on a theme of different thematic directions and formal variations that are created in a virtual space; in fact, in her diploma installation, her work moves across various platforms. The diploma work could be divided into three or four formal variations – but if we consider Instagram as a legitimate peephole into the creator’s workshop, and in the era of post-art, when the creator herself ultimately authorises this possibility by using the forum, then why not consider it – in that case, the project could be broken down into somewhere between five and eight thematic threads. Or, at least, so far it has begun to move in this many clearly distinguishable directions, but in some ways these directions are quite similar.
Hence, it is hard to tell what constitutes the actual piece of art in Ilka’s case. Is it the project as a form of virtuality, with all its aspects, its existing sub-projects, and their contexts? Or is it the materials that had previously been published elsewhere, rooted in the concreteness and topicality of the moment, and were then gathered together on different occasions – of which the thesis is hopefully only the first one of the many more to come? It is already quite difficult to find an adequate answer to this theoretical question in the era of post-photography, but in the case of Ilka’s work, it seems to be downright impossible. To put it more precisely, it is as if the work is somehow both the project and its own adapted series version too, yet at the same time neither this nor that of the two, but their situational contextualization. This may not seem very flattering at first, but is it not true that they are in a connected ‘dialoguelike’ interaction where they practise mutual influence on one another? And do they not only enhance the value of each other? If this is the case, then Ilka Olajos’ work, at least in theory, is no less than, using Ernst Bloch’s term: a ‘concrete utopia’, or, if we want to play with Bloch’s words by the help of Bauman, a concrete retrotopia – which in the praxis of theory and practice continues to check on one another – in this situation, not by looking forwards but backwards – as an open project that is always capable of self-revision. But, if this is the idea, how does Ilka’s concrete retrotopia work in practice? The separate virtual thematic folders within the project and their contents seem to define aspects of the possible interpretations of the multifaceted project, and outline those. It is as if the content and composition aspects of each are to further shade the overall picture of the project with a separate direction at the same time. But how? To understand this, we need to briefly go through, if not all of these imaginary folders, then at least the ones that are the most outstanding.

In one of her thematic selections, the artist embeds some houses in a landscape with a noble pathos, depicting them in an organic and harmonious relationship with their surroundings, and thus elevating them to the status of modernity with the antiques of quiet grandeur – since the antique ‘quiet grandeur’ is a modern idea. (See Figure 3 in the appendix.) Within the same series, it emphasizes those tools of contemporary photography that are taken from classical modernism or, to be more precise, a branch of modernism that comes after the original modernism. This results in – for lack of a better word – neo(modern) classicist torsos. But in general, it can be said about the images of the project that – despite their careful, sort of sterile neutrality – the lyrical voice is sometimes rather quiet, restrained, but at other times it is colourful and lively.

This holds true in her pictures taken in Poland that draw the detailed panel houses into a mist and thus also into a subtle melancholic tone. Ilka Olajos, therefore, appears to be a poet who is
sometimes a classicist of the contemporary renaissance of panel houses, and at other times is a symbolic bard of their lost social potentials as a utopia. To understand the latter point, it is enough to ask ourselves what the iron tube climbers photographed by Ilka, which seem to have survived as relics in Polish playgrounds despite the fact that they were banned in the EU a long time ago, tell us about the fate of those children who have been using them for who knows how many generations? (See Figure 4 in the appendix.) I wonder how the mesh constructions of the brittle iron pipes with worn paint are still able to symbolise the former spirit of panel architecture even today. Special attention should be given to the photographed rocket, which most clearly brings into the picture the tension between the former utopia of socialism and contemporary dirty realism, a phenomenon that is certainly worthy of documentation. At other times, the artist seems to play the role of an archaeologist who is also the ‘archivist’ (who collects not just pictures) of the panel houses – for the purpose of a future reconstruction. (See Figure 5 in the appendix.) In one of the series – which complements the possible floor plans of panel apartments with various spatial details and views of walls and furnitures and other pieces found here and there – a new sort of approach dominates, which almost tries to give the appearance of an academic research, in the framework of which Ilka not only collects assiduously but also organises her findings with an objective attitude to find the requisites of her topic. Although, it is true that the thematic series are catalogue-based while the project as a whole is systematically organised. At other times again, we can get to know the creator as a clerical icon painter, who is the patriarch of the transfigured world of panel houses. (See Figure 6 in the appendix.) Regressive tendencies towards spiritual concepts also shine through in her series which exhibits pieces of plaster as relics and thus reclassifies the adjacent polaroid photos as religious imagery. At the same time, almost all of the images in the project could be classified as, despite the documentary characteristics they tried to preserve with fluctuating success, more like photo icons than documentary photos. Sometimes the artist appears to be a constructivist who acts in her pictures as an architect reconstructing the architectural world of the panels. This is also the case in that series of hers in which she recaptures the visual icons of the historical modernist images that can be extracted from the social realist architectural stylistics of panel houses. At the same instance, it also applies to all the virtual series folders of the project, that they are, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, “structuring structures”, so the project itself is nothing more than a neo-structuralist construction, a re-construction, resurrected from the era of building panel houses. But what happens if we patch some pieces of the model together? What kind of resultant force do we get by adding together the project’s vectorial forces acting in different directions?
At first glance, it is difficult to decide where the creator’s interest lies. Apparently, it is neither the socialist past of panel houses, the previous utopia, nor their post-socialist present, the contemporary’s lack of utopia. Although, as we have seen, the project is sufficiently extensive for this not to be entirely true. It is as if she wants to see into the future, as if what she wanted to see was not the future but the past in the present instead. After all, where are the panel houses and their inhabitants that Ilka Olajos photographed? Maybe in Paris, London or New York? Or in the allegedly ever-progressing communism of China or South-Korea? Or perhaps directly amongst the Platonic ideas, in the heavenly afterlife? Could we say that they are everywhere in the forms of retrotopias nowadays? Is it accurate to claim that Ilka’s project as a whole is not about the utopia of socialism, nor the lack of utopia of post-socialism, but about the nature of retrotopia in the future? The constructivist avant-garde was once exposed as a dogmatic orthodoxy. Boris Groys writes about Russian constructivism in his work Die Erfindung Russland (The Invention of Russia): “The basic meaning of this project was precisely that the creation of form means the birth of form”, but “[the] main procedure of constructivism was not building or constructing, but quite the opposite: the symbolic destruction, erasure, reduction of everything that has already been built or constructed” (Groys 1995:13). If this is so, is Ilka not the most heroic in her series of photographing young people living in panel houses from a delicately low angle and thus making them, virtually, anonymous heroes? (See Figure 7 in the appendix.) At the same time, the project as a whole is characterised by a kind of understated pathos. Is it not as though the panel houses she photographed and their inhabitants were actually in Mariupol? Is the creator not actually a war correspondent who chronicles the panel houses and their inhabitants boldly whilst venturing behind the front line?3

The late modern society of singularities

In understanding the underlying issue of the time-complex and the post-contemporary and, through these, the post-art, Andreas Reckwitz’ The Society of Singularities can be of great help. The book was first published in German in the year 2017. It intends to grasp the epistemology of late modernity from a both socioeconomic and cultural sociological perspective. His thesis statement is based on Kant’s idea that there are only two possible ways to look at the world. Physically or conceptually existing objects can be viewed according to the logic of either generalisation or singularisation. In the course of modernity, both approaches have been

3 This article was written between June and October 2022.
absolutised, one after the other, and extended to all areas of human reality. Reckwitz believes that the approach towards generalisation was characteristic of the Second Industrial Revolution until the shift in the postindustrial economic trend of the 1970s-1980s. Generalisation entailed concepts of reduction, abstraction, homogenisation, and above all, rationalism. Reckwitz, thus, describes industrial modernisation as a process of generalisation and rationalisation.

It reached its historical peak in the decades following World War II. During this time, in the East the socialist, in the West the welfare societies have become more homogeneous than they have ever been before. In the decades following World War II, at the height of ‘organised modernity’, nearly each school provided the same formal training. In the labour market, all papers proving the same qualification were worth about the same; all small towns offered equal living conditions; all housing blocks provided roughly the same standardised housing needs. Accordingly, the strongest social layer absorbing the whole of society was the middle class, with its mass consumption, mass culture, and mass media. Global politics had also been reduced to a cold war between two large political blocs. In the form of art, abstraction, geometric forms and minimalism became highly fashionable, in the intellectual life semiotics and structuralism. The world seemed to be reducible to a few abstract structures, ultimately to a single Einsteinian theory.

In contrast, from the shift in the postindustrial economic trend of the 1970s and 1980s, the philosophy of singularisation started to prevail. Hence, in the era of late modernity the society of singularities succeeds the homogenised middle class-based society. The process of singularisation is characterised by opposite features: rationalism is replaced by culture, reduction is changed to complexity, homogeneity is exchanged with heterogeneity. Monolithic, monodimensional blocks and their clearly defined boundaries are replaced by plural and blurred hybrid entities. This can be observed in any area of life in the 21st century, yet the logic behind the methods of singularisation proves to be the most apparent in the market of consumer products. While the mass products of industrial society differed merely in minor additional functions and were fundamentally created to function with a single purpose, on the globally attractive market of the society of singularities each product comes up with something unique, which usually means that it can do more. For instance, the more features are incorporated of the current high-end technology in a product, the greater its value. As a result, the market is determined not only by the rational functions of these products and their value for money, as it was in Industrial Modernity, but also the products’ cultural-aesthetic context and the feelings they generate in the consumers. In late modernity, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical contexts seep
into segments of the market that were earlier regarded as culturally neutral due to modern rationalism, such as the refrigerator industry or products in the financial market.

Reckwitz calls this process – which can be observed not only in consumer products but in nearly every facet of life – culturisation (he sets it in contrast with modern rationalisation). Therefore, the world of late modernity is culturalised on every possible level. Whilst modern art and culture in the 18th and 19th centuries used to serve as an autonomous reservation secluded from the rationalised world of modern civil society – says Reckwitz –, in late modernity it is present in all areas of life. This gives base to the ‘post-culture’, which, following the example of Georg Lukács, we could also call ‘aesthetic culture’. From Reckwitz’ point of view, ‘postmodernism’ seems to be merely the first, rather early intellectual attempt to describe a shift of mindsets happening during modernity.

The art of no-return and no-repetition

The no-return to the European modernist art films

The very first shot of Fruzsina Takács’ short film (see Works cited) lays the foundations for one of her central contradictions in the work. In this shot, the camera glides up the long, golden hair of a fairytale-like princess (played by the creator herself) whilst the title of the film appears and forewarns us that This is No Fairytale. The heroine’s long hair is therefore both a fantastic element and a metaphor for the pragmatism of the adroit heroine as at the end of the movie she pulls herself out of the swamp of the time-complex by her own hair. To reinforce this idea, the very end of the short film features an image where the heroine carries herself up to a viewpoint, a symbol for reaching the top. (See Figure 8 in the appendix.)

This film is, theoretically, not a fairy tale; therefore, its heroine is not a princess but an ‘antihero’, an ‘antiprincess’. Despite this, some of the motifs that appear in the work support the fact that it is still, sort of, a fantasy fiction. Another fantastic element, besides her golden hair, is the occasional doubling or even tripling of the heroine on the screen. All the same, the portrayal of the heroine is reminiscent of a poor girl’s rather than a princess’: she has no make-up and, most of the time, no shoes. The main character wears a leotard or at least workout clothing that would be appropriate for gymnastics; this does not necessarily offer a dramaturgical explanation for the absence of makeup, but – at least in the indoor scenes – it does for the absence of shoes. This costume of the heroine can be regarded both as a fantastic
element and as something that is not fantastic but, rather, a performative abstraction of ‘visual arts’ combined with a sense of naturalness. At any rate, the main character and its surroundings are captured in a crystal-clear image with the style of ‘optical naturalism’. Apart from the duplication and triplication of the heroine, the film image does not use artificial tricks or digital effects, meaning that any other fantastic element is entirely indexical. Hence, this work is characterized as much by ‘magical realism’ as a ‘hyperrealist’ and ‘naturalist’ aesthetic. The stylistic eclecticism of the work is not limited to the combination of these antagonistic aesthetics, as it also incorporates the reminiscences of modernist film aesthetics and the great classics of modern European auteur cinema.

This hybrid style in the short film is not at all a surprising phenomenon in this contemporary sphere; rather, it is an audiovisual expression of the late modern singularization. If we truly wanted to define the style of the short film, then an entirely new term would have to be created, on the basis of a ‘speculative’ method. The speculations regarding the style of this artwork could be explained in such a way: if what we mean by post-classic style in film history is that in the 1970s, the classic, Hollywood film style draws inspiration from the 1960s style of the modernist auteur films, which results in the renewal of the classical film form; then, following a similar direction, in the case of this work, the post-classical and postmodern styles merging together create a contemporary ‘re-modern’ style. This incorporates both naturalism, in the sense of classical bourgeois aesthetics, and modern magical realism. Therefore, the style of this short film is ‘remodernist magical naturalism’, or if it is interpreted differently ‘post-classical modernist magical naturalism’. Yet, what aesthetic and dramaturgical features give this collage style a ‘non-modernist’ flavour, i.e., why does it have a polemical kinship with modernist European art films? Her film is original, and she uses (and on occasions doubles and even triples) a stream-of-consciousness-esque narratorial voice, which, at least in this form, is not employed in either the ‘original’ modern or the ‘original’ postmodern, not to mention the ‘original’ post-classical cinema. This unique narration might remind one of the Nouveau Roman-inspired modernist art films, more specifically, of Alain Resnais’ Last Year at Marienbad and Muriel. These films contain no plot in the traditional sense, only associations recounted by a narratorial voice, which is accompanied by performative scenes. At the level of the narration, the ‘antithoughts’ of the ‘antiprincess’ are doubled or tripled occasionally; at the level of the diegesis, even the ‘anti-image’ is doubled or tripled. In other words, the heroine in a ‘posthuman’ way is present in two or three versions within a single image. The genre of the short film can vaguely remind us of a favourite genre of modernist art film, described as the ‘mental journey’ by András Bálint Kovács (2007:103-110). But in fact, it is also a kind of
revision of what I would call a mental struggle, and I dare call it that because the creator herself
does not hesitate to even transfer this mental struggle as a visualised metaphor onto the screen
in the form of two fencers duelling (struggling, as it were) with each other.

The heroes of modernist films usually have to face an inner anxiety that stems from their
freedom of choice, since they might reproduce their mental struggles, but they cannot undo the
mistakes they have made in the past. As modernist heroes usually just follow whatever comes
their way, every decision of theirs makes them face their missed opportunities. Is this not what
Fruzsina’s ‘antiprincess’ also weeps over? Over the fact that life is not a fairy tale, nor is it a
video game where a replay is always possible and we always get an extra life? In this case,
however, the modernist hero’s abstract and general anxiety is replaced by the multiplication of
specific and tangible fears (and for this reason Fruzsina’s work has a resemblance to
Expressionist Doppelgänger dramas). In this sense, the dramaturgy in the short film echoes the
modernism that came before the Second World War, not the one that came after. For the heroine
to become more successful than before, she would need at least two more (anti)lives, but what
she has instead is at least two more (anti)voices raising new insecurities and criticising herself
and what she has already accomplished. These self-reflexive voices reveal the gap between the
seemingly successful self-actualisation that secures her external status and true inner
satisfaction.

At the climax of the non-dramatic, rather only dramatised tension, the short film
unconsciously invokes four or five classics of the modern European auteur film and brings forth
their reminiscences for a few seconds on the film image. An example for this is the fencing in
the forest, which alludes to the birch tree scene in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Ivan’s Childhood*. Like
in *Ivan’s Childhood*, one of the concepts Fruzsina explores is that of childhood slipping away.
Then, as the antiprincess marches up to the top of the hill, she is accompanied by the visualised
symbols of the antivoices, in a manner that recalls the danse macabre in the ending scene of
Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal* (see Figure 9 in the appendix). Although the antihero
in Fruzsina’s film is not trying to play chess with death, she also wishes to escape the
unstoppable passing of time. When the agitated antiprincess on the couch practically blends
into the green wall, the viewer may recall the flat frames in Jean-Luc Godard’s *My Life to Live.*
For instance, the one where the heroine sits against a wall full of posters, smoking. In Godard’s
and Fruzsina’s work the question is the same: how to trick the ways of life? Finally, when the
princess steps closer to the antiprincess to then magically carry herself up to the viewpoint, in
that second, it is as if an image of the iconic work of modernism, *Last Year at Marienbad*,
would flash before our eyes. In the narration of the Resnais film, the contradictions between the
versions of the story supplied by the different characters signifies that nothing is, indeed, for sure – whatever has happened, could have happened differently; therefore, nothing really happened as it should have. Fruzsina Takáts’ heroine feels exactly the same – or, it would be more accurate to say that this is how she tries not to feel.

The no-return to the childhood

There is a chapter in Bauman’s *Retrotopia* titled *Back to the Womb*. Bauman calls it the symptom of the era that individualism, something that once meant the liberation from the repression of social conventions, is now contributing to the decreasing levels of solidarity in society and, instead of assisting in the search for consensus, is leading to the reign of individualistic interests. Bauman believes that the original individualism has greatly grown out its initial idea on taking care of the self, it has become narcissistic and selfish. Bauman points out that this type of individualism can backfire: in the huge market of unique individuals those who draw the short straw are left to be entirely alone, and their loneliness, in radical cases, can result in total isolation. In this moment the desire to achieve the imaginary state once again only grows stronger. This is also a central issue in Fruzsina Takáts’ work. Growing up, and everything that comes with that – including stress and frustration – understandably creates a nostalgic feeling in the heroine towards her childhood. Even though the title of the short film indicates that this is no fairytale, the entire work seems to express a secret desire that it be a fairytale. Childhood is portrayed in an idealised, optimistic light in the monologues of the heroine even though the suppression of the true self in childhood is what probably lies behind the depression she experiences, as it has been discovered in Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child*.

“I don’t know what I should do with my life.” Another voice in the heroine’s mind: “I kept trying to delay the moment where I decide who I want to become.” The third voice: “You are a fully developed individual now.” Maybe it is the second, or the fourth voice (but there are so many): “I don’t know how the others do it,”, “Well, at least I always knew that I wouldn’t be a firefighter nor a shepherd.” Her true self in the film, if it has developed at all, is lost in uncertainty. Nevertheless, the heroine pays close attention to not wanting to return to childhood. Her energies are focused on not the restoring of the lost childhood, but on the breakaway from the spiralling of negative thoughts and depression. It is hard to tell which one is worse: never realising the absence of the true self, which predestines one to a Quixotic fight against negative thought spirals, or having a naive faith in finding the true self. The latter is, however, a trap of
the time-complex; since, the heroine cannot go back to her childhood to explore who she had been back then with her current adult knowledge, this can only be attempted in the present, but this brings the past into the picture of the present, the past that loses its connection when in a speculative way we try to make a future of it.

Fruzsina Takáts’ self/hero seeks to avoid this option, viz: to search for the true self, although this would be the most evident, the most recommended solution by psychologists. But she feels that this road – at least in the short term – would not lead her out but instead right into the trap of the time-complex. This is why the film does not use elements of retrospectives, or uses them only in moderation: the heroine of our story does not know yet that she has to find her true self – once – but knows that she is in the trap of the time-complex – and she is not alone, yet she feels lonely, because her position in itself is singular.

The no-return to repetition

Could we say that Søren Kierkegaard was the first philosopher of the modern time-complex? Kierkegaard takes the chance to explore the reasons behind his failed relationship with Regine Olsen – before he would have formulated his Dialectical Stage Theory in his major work Either/Or with which he wished to achieve the Religious State – he first turned to the philosophical problem of repetition. In his 1843 work Repetition (which he had published, much like he did with Either/Or, under a pseudonym) the narrator learns the story of a Young Man, who is in love with a girl who reciprocates his feelings; nevertheless, this relationship still falls out of synch. This is because the Young Man’s love has transcended physical desires and is now merely platonic, ideal. The Young Man has objectified the girl, and for this reason his love – in Kierkegaard’s brilliant interpretation – is nothing more than a memory. Plato believes that learning is simply the recalling of archetypes, which is why the boy’s love is melancholic: it is only a recall. The problem could seemingly have been easily resolved if the girl also reached the level of ideal love, as at that point, instead of the seduction of desire, they could have reunited in the Ethical stage in an idealised manner. This option is never considered, probably due to Kierkegaard’s distrust of women. Supposing that this scenario would have actually worked, the Young Man would have also needed some patience, of which he seems to not have much in the work.

Though only a theoretical solution, this could have been a possible answer to Kierkegaard’s first sentence in his work, “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in
opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (1983: 131). Instead, the Young Man insists on seeing this impossible love through, or rather makes the girl do that. This is achieved with the help of the narrator, who comes up with a plan that is as cunning as it is unnecessarily painful for both lovers, and which is rooted in repetition, or at least in what the author calls repetition.

The plan is to make the girl believe that the Young Man is a rogue. If he succeeds in doing this, the girl will fall out of love entirely and with that liberate the Young Man from this feeling of guilt. To achieve this, however, the Young Man with a heart heavy with guilt should first create a guilty feeling in the girl as well. When the girl reaches the point of utter exhaustion and is devastated in this psychological game, that is what Kierkegaard calls – well before Freud – the moment of repetition.

Nothing comes of the plan eventually. The Young Man vanishes, and the girl, after an unspecified amount of time and help, gets over the past events. And this is how the recalling of ideas proves to be an obsessive repetition of traumas. This questions the meaning of repetition at its core. Kierkegaard believes that the authentic form of repetition is the one moving from the present to the future. As to what it is like when the recalling proceeds not back to the past but forward into the future, this seems to remain a Heraclitan mystery in the work. Kierkegaard does not attempt to explain why, not even with the most obvious reason that there is, instead he excuses himself from answering the question. Originally, he planned to make the Young Man commit suicide at the end of the story; however, he never finished this version of the text, and instead he completes his slightly rewritten work when he receives the news of Regina Olsen’s new engagement. At this point, Kierkegaard turns his head towards faith to find answers. After having examined all possible types of repetition and having established on every occasion that this method was not productive, he, instead of letting go of the idea, carries on, this time by trying to solve the problem of repetition through the Biblical story of Job and the framework of the theoretical existence of an infinite number of multiverses. This framework is chosen because it allows for the existence of a universe in which the Young Man and the girl’s love is entirely fulfilled. This is how Schrödinger’s cat turns into Job’s children.

Thus, Kierkegaard believes that the paradox of repetition can only be resolved on the level of faith, in any other case it remains a philosophical speculation, a trap of the time-complex. Fruzsina Takáts’ self/hero in the short film ventures upon finding the way out of this trap of the time-complex, whilst preserving status quo by essentially eliminating it.

To do this she first tries to come to terms with past events: “But maybe it’s better if you just accept that, yes, it was you who got yourself into this situation. You made the decisions that led
here, and that is okay.” She then reconsiders them: “To look back on these – to revise them – yes, this is truly how I thought it was.” Finally, she accepts what happened: “And sometimes we need to stop for a moment and be satisfied with how things had happened.” The only option left out is that of repetition. This is no coincidence, since all she did before was: repeat. Takáts’ self/hero refutes Kierkegaard’s distrust of ‘women’s intuition’ when she instinctively knows what the right choice for herself is, namely, leaving behind constant repetition. Consequently, Fruzsina Takáts’ heroine becomes conscious of the issue of the time-complex and the society of singularities, or, to put it a better way, in her conscious knowledge of the issue she finds her true self.

Appendix

Figure 1. Anna Franciska Legát: Hellish Eden, 2021–2022. Used with the permission of Anna Franciska Legát.
Figure 2. Anna Franciska Legát: *Hellish Eden*, 2021–2022. Used with the permission of Anna Franciska Legát.
Figure 3. Ilka Olajos: Lakótelep másképp [Housing Estate Differently], 2022. Used with the permission of Ilka Olajos.
Figure 4. Ilka Olajos: Panel, 2021–2022. Used with the permission of Ilka Olajos.
Figure 5. Ilka Olajos: Lakótelep másképp [Housing Estate Differently], 2022. Used with the permission of Ilka Olajos.
Figure 6. Ilka Olajos: Lakótelep másképp [Housing Estate Differently], 2022. Used with the permission of Ilka Olajos.
Figure 7. Ilka Olajos: Lakótelep másképp [Housing Estate Differently], 2022. Used with the permission of Ilka Olajos.

Figure 8. Still from the short film Nincs Mese [This Is No Fairytale], dir. Fruzsina Takáts, 2022. Used with the permission of Fruzsina Takáts.
Figure 9. Still from the short film Nincs Mese [This Is No Fairytale], dir. Fruzsina Takáts, 2022. Used with the permission of Fruzsina Takáts.

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