Visual culture produced under communist regimes has nowadays become a contested object. A direction appeared in post-socialist visual culture studies that focuses on communist visuality. Formerly a field dominated by communist and anti-communist propaganda, visualizations of communism nowadays attract a new generation of scholars who see it as “a sphere that illustrates, narrates, debates, questions, confronts, and ultimately remembers the dream of a better future”. The value of communism is in its utopian imagination, the value of the image is in providing communism with a language to get hold of and retain the spirit of utopia. This is a new attempt to awaken the public from the all-embracing nostalgic daydreaming, the neoliberal utopia that Zygmunt Bauman called “retrotopia”: “the global epidemic of nostalgia” that came with the era of neoliberalism to replace “the epidemic of progress frenzy in the relay race of history.”

Bauman’s retrotopia is fundamentally ahistorical and should not be confused with memory only because it is also oriented to the past. It is phantasm, a politically reactionary flight both from history and from the present into the imagined domain “reconciling, in the long term, security with freedom.” The trend is now visible in many former socialist societies where political regimes seek stability by using police violence and enforcing traditional values. In this part of Europe, utopia and belief in historical progress used to be strictly prescribed to every citizen. Visualizations of communism also came into being in the spirit of utopia and historical progress, and were prescribed as its representations and instruments. The question is, how communist visuality is re-appropriated within the framework of retrotopian desires – and if there is a way to use it as a compass out of the mire of nostalgic fetishism back into history.

In order to find out what happens to communist visuality in some cases of its present-day reuses and re-makes, we have to know what it is. At the risk of recapitulating what is known to everyone, I nevertheless intend to start with a brief overview of communist visuality as it was invented by the revolutionary avantgarde and given a second life in the European new wave, followed by the
demise of cinematic representation with the arrival of digital technologies. The question is, what is it that makes visuality “communist” in the original meaning? Then, to illustrate how communist visuality is appropriated in visual culture today, I will present three cases. One is the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, a period production based on historical facts; another is *Dau*, an international project at the crossroad of cinema, immersive theater, and performance art. The third case was chosen for its critical perspective: documentary films by Sergei Loznitsa as examples of historical research and cinema for the critical interpretation of history. Thus, I will be following the itinerary of communist visualization from its invention during the age of communism (the image) to its simulation in post-communist commercial entertainment (the afterimage) and its deconstruction by confrontation with the historical fact (counterimage).

**Visualization of What?**

Communist visuality nowadays is a visuality without an object: communism does not exist any longer, not as global power, not as social utopia, not as a moral code, and, importantly, not as an economic system within which film industries could operate in countries ruled by communist parties. If communism does return from the past, it returns not as a specter but as a memory of the specter, nostalgic dreamwork made of media images and narratives and their new applications. Is the memory of the communist past ultimately colonized by retrotopia? Can it be that the visuality from the recent past still retains a share of communist potential to support “the safety of the planet, democracy, and human solidarity”?

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to instrumentalize, use, misuse, or abuse history. Yet, when historical meaning and value are projected onto artefacts, history becomes objectified and therefore manipulable as far as their content is concerned. A visual image is different from other bearers of historical significance, but it is also a material object, a thing that is made (planned, directed, filmed, developed, montaged, distributed, and so on). As such, the image constitutes an object of value, and as value it can be further invested to produce new value. In-
stead of serving as an ideological instrument of the state, the communist image then acquires value as symbolic capital.

What is it that constitutes a visual image as a communist one? “Communist” means not only time, place, and terms of production, but, importantly, aesthetics and ideology, a poetics of politics (or a politics of poetics). We associate visuality with communism as concrete historical contexts: the black-and-white picture and the dynamic montage of the Soviet avantgarde, or the bleak and blurred, faded color images of the auteur cinema of the 1960–70s. In what follows, I will narrow down all visuality to film images because cinema, due to the mimetic desires it inspires in its audiences, is no less than political repression and communist education responsible for the symbolic constitution of communist subjectivity.

Early communist film images produced an alphabet of visualizations of revolution in general as the masses’ effort towards a new beginning of world history. Left-wing cinematography in post-war Europe expressed its revolutionary aspirations by appropriating the politics of the film image invented by the Soviet avantgarde. Nowadays, as during the Cold War era, “communist” rather means visual styles and images from Socialist Realism including its decline in the 1960s–80s. It is an open question whether these new appropriations should be subsumed under “communist visuality” or rather under “post-modern Stalinism” (Jonathan Brent’s term). But it is noticeable that intellectuals’ interest in Stalinist aesthetics appears to grow parallel to the rise of Stalinist sympathies in popular culture, a remarkable coincidence that would be worth discussing in greater detail elsewhere.

The Communist Image: “Comrade, Not Commodity”

At the dawn of communist visual culture and its great cinematic experiments, in the Soviet 1920s, “communist” was attributed to the political economy of the image, and not its effects, its aesthetics being inseparable from its politics. Thus, LEF, the group of leftist artists and critics in the USSR, saw cinema as a constitutive part of socialist economy and film as an instrument of socialist construction. They evaluated all artistic expression in terms of its use value, its ability to satisfy the needs of the proletarian and the proletarian state. Alexander Rodchenko declared that the socialist thing is “not a commodity but a comrade”, and this maxim also applied to the image. Boris Arvatov, the leading LEF theorist, proclaimed that the value of the film image lies in “the methods of its production and reception … not in the properties of the product but in the properties of the collective process of artistic production: by whom, how, and with what practical purpose the film is produced.” A communist visual regime rejected fetishistic pleasures provided by bourgeois entertainment. LEF even suggested eliminating cinema theaters and replacing them with film departments within Soviet administrative bodies for the use of film in “cinematic research, education, propaganda, and information … to socialize the function of the art of cinema.”

Thus, the making of communist visuality started with the remaking of the principles of its production, distribution, and useful application; film for profit was to be replaced by non-surplus-value cinema.

This led LEF to divide film into right-wing and left-wing. On the right, Arvatov placed movies with actors and a fictional “fabula”; this kind of film distorted objective reality. On the left, there was a non-acted film without a “fabula”, therefore, true-to-life. This rather straightforward attempt to formalize and politicize visuality failed to account for the role of the audience and, more broadly, for the politics of seeing that constitutes the regime of visuality. In order to establish cinema as a communist project to be deployed in the achievement of communist goals one needed to develop new skills of reception and appreciation in the proletarian audience. Dziga Vertov was most efficient educating Russian workers and peasants in communist vision. In his earliest film experiments he designed his films as a collective “cinema-eye” for the political class. During the years of the first five-year-plans, he created visual epics filling the cinema-eye with the content of Soviet industrialization. Even at the end of his career, as a newsreel film director, Vertov was still trying to increase the use value of his cinema by making newsreel a vehicle of objective communist knowledge. He proposed, among other things, the method of squeezing the grand time of the Socialist Realist epic into the mini-format of a ninety-second long episode, so that an ultra-short film could cover the immensity of Soviet spaces and projects, experimenting with time-space compression long before it was discovered by post-modern theory.

According to Jean-Luc Godard, the master of film socialisme, cinema lost its grounds to television when the small screen (watched by an individual viewer) came to replace the wide screen (watched by the masses). It was Godard who most radically opened up
the film image towards everyday life when he took his filming onto the streets. Instead of carefully planning and controlling the logic of the gaze of the camera moving inside the constructed set, he preferred to choose just one point of view, “like in a documentary”, and then watch things happen in the field of vision “as if by themselves”. That was his contribution to the general trend of democratization of cinema after the war, against fetishism and towards a greater social and individual awareness. In television, the medium that came to replace film and the subject of filmic vision, “there’s no creation at all anymore, just broadcasting”, the viewer alone with his gadget. Digital technology has no genetic or functional connection with cinema; digitized cinema changes not simply in appearance, but also in its nature as an event. We will also see some examples of how this change in visual regime from “communist film” to “bourgeois television” affected communist visuality.

The Afterimage: Remembering the Trauma

Throughout the history of Soviet modernization, film served as a powerful factor encouraging mimetic desire, the wish to imitate in everyday life the ideal images presented on the screen. The power of cinema as the producer of dream images is tantamount, but, according to André Bazin, even in the dream worlds of its imagination, film invariably acts as “a social documentary”. Even re-medialized with the use of digital technologies, cinema still remains “a social documentary”, even though the structure of this new documentality becomes considerably more complicated, its dream worlds more complex and remote from immediate experience. Streaming services are where communist visuality is located nowadays, and this is where the audiences receive communism as information and sensation: the digital image is an afterimage of communism.

An afterimage is an illusion that remains after a period of exposure to the original image, after the object itself is no longer present. We are all familiar with the phenomenon: a negative “imprint” on the retina that lingers floating in the field of vision after we looked for some time at a brightly illuminated object.

Soviet visuals representing the reality of the USSR as a communist society in construction were produced within the framework of the socialist economy. Yet nowadays, inherited by capitalism and capitalist entertainment, they are used as images of dystopia to represent communism’s “better world” doomed from the very beginning. Dystopia is the legacy of the Cold War, when western media and film interpreted Soviet communism as a typically “Russian” thing, the radical Other of the rest of the rational world or, according to Boris Groys, an “unconscious, unpresentable mode of being, alien to any historicity.” This way of alienating communist experience from world history is quite prominent in two of my examples later in this essay, one of them (Chernobyl) promoting itself as a historical narrative with a twist of the present-day apocalypse, the other (Dau) an investigation of dark fantasies about communism in the post-communist collective unconscious. Thus, not only melancholy and sentimental nostalgia, but also much heavier issues are at stake when the present-day media and art subject communist visuality to scrutiny, trying to make out what exactly our time has inherited after the demise of communism, and what potential of expression can be gained from re-medialization of communist visuality.

Chernobyl, an award-winning historical miniseries produced by HBO and Sky UK in 2019, is an interesting case of reuse. It was seen by eight million people across various streaming platforms and highly acclaimed both by critics and the general public. A mixture of reality-based and period productions, Chernobyl recycled quite a lot of Soviet symbolic material, especially narrative and visual devices from (late) Socialist Realism. Such were for instance the tragic episodes based on the historical accounts of Chernobyl’s struggle, the self-sacrifice of the rank-and-file who fought a hopeless fight full of enthusiasm but without any protection whatsoever. In its rendering of facts Chernobyl proved remarkable in the way it borrowed narrative and visual patterns from Soviet war movies and post-war “socialist humanism”, especially the combination of melodrama depicting indi-
individual lives with tragedy in the interpretation of national history.

The way Chernobyl used reconstructed Soviet environments was especially impressive: Those insignificant things that were so recognizable for everyone born in the USSR surrounded the characters tightly and intimately. The property team worked wonders collecting exclusively authentic objects and environments for the set. Due to its high definition technology, Chernobyl could easily serve as a museum of the 1970s – or a museum of 2020s historical fetishism. Added in post-production were also effects simulating the chiaroscuro of Soviet movies, giving Chernobyl an atmosphere of almost otherworldly bleakness, as if seen through a screen of smoke (or tears), and reproducing sovcolor (Soviet color) as a sign of “typically Soviet bloc” cinema.15

Chernobyl locations have nowadays themselves become objects of tourist interest.16 Yet, neither this, nor excellent props helped to fully convince, and even made some people quite angry. The claim to facticity was predictably questioned by Chernobyl veterans, as well as (also predictably) by Russia’s Communist Party and culture ministry who rejected the project as counter-historical and “Russophobic”.17 By progressive critics, Chernobyl was reproached for exploiting anti-communist clichés of the Cold War era, but at the same time positively evaluated for acting out “some of our collective fears about the safety of the planet, democracy, and human solidarity.”18

It is still unclear how exactly the simple idea of shooting a biopic about the Soviet nuclear physicist Lev Landau gradually transformed into Ilya Khrzhanovskii’s opus magnum Dau, described by himself as a “unique, epic, and ever-changing project...[that] combines film, science, performance, spirituality, social and artistic experimentation”.19 Its production was generously financed by private donors and took over ten years. From the outside Dau appears a mixture of hard-core authenticity, historical re-enactment and shamanic journeying therapy – except that both re-enactment and therapy were professionally documented on film throughout the period and later converted into cinema and TV formats for distribution. The theme of this reenaction (or therapy) was everyday life under Stalin, to be reconstructed in every detail, complete with top level classified regime members on the premises, the NKVD in period uniforms, denunciations and psychological violence during night-time interrogations, as well as abundant non-simulated scenes of nudity, sex, violence, etc.

In the heated post-factum discussion of Dau’s grandiosity mania, little attention has been given to its director’s profoundly ahistorical philosophy and his almost religious, if not obsessive, belief that authenticity guarantees historical truth and can indeed “activate history”.20 In the spirit of pop-cultural historical reconstructions and motivated by the myth of the Milgram experiment, Dau set out to prove that homo sovieticus could be re-awakened in the present-day individual by meticulous reconstruction of material and social environments. Authenticity, the Holy Grail of the digital image, here replaced historical fact with a “feeling of history”, assuming feeling to be identical with fact. What started as a historical project and a parody of communist visuality, with time and thanks to an uninterrupted flow of money, withdrew into fantasies, into “a cinematographic bubble”, in which the visual and other history of communism under Stalin’s rule got “remixed, circulated, and reproduced”, turning history into a digital affect.21 That all historical memory and not only communist visuality could be “remixed” in such a way is a possibility, given the nature of digital technologies and the tension they produce in general, between symbolism and indexality, or the knowledge and experience of history, on the one hand, and the “feeling” on the other.

The Counter-image: Un-Forgetting Communism

This tension shows itself in the craving for “the real thing”, the authentic and the genuine under the rule of the digital, and this concerns also the “sincere and direct” communist representation, the “truth” of the documentary or media image and the blindness of the audience that cannot discern constructedness in the image, in its constitution as an artefact. Documentary footage fascinates and mystifies the fetishist consumer not less than the spectacle of “the ballerina’s underpants”, as Vertov in the 1920s summarized the fetishism of bourgeois cinema.
On the other hand, the kind of politically aware perception promoted by the Soviet avantgarde with its program of emancipation could not help relying on cinema’s totalizing power, which agreed with the communist ideology but originated in cinema’s own power to produce fascination in the viewer. The image of communism deployed by Vertov in One Sixth of the World made visible the geographic, historical, and ethnic diversity of the territory of the USSR, but such inclusiveness was based on the assumptions of structural homogeneity and visual control. Not only bourgeois, but communist visuality, too, requires a critical deconstruction to mobilize the image against the imperialist potentialities inherent in its technology and aesthetics.

The effects of the film image as total representation are the object of Sergei Loznitsa’s critical intervention in Soviet documentary film from Stalin’s time. By using material that had been for some reason excluded from the final version, he seeks to subvert Stalinist visuality by means of visuality itself – and thus calls into question the ideological and technological criteria of communist aesthetics that allowed images born out of the spirit of revolutionary emancipation to find useful application for themselves in the regime of total terror.

Loznitsa’s Protsess (The Trial, 2018), uses leftovers from Iakov Posel’skii 1930 documentary 13 dnei: protsess po delu “Prompartii” (Thirteen Days: The Trial of the Industrial Party). This was one of the earliest events in the history of Stalin’s show trials, a staged act of mock justice by “socialist legality”. Prompartia was an OGPU falsification used to justify political repression against the technical intelligentsia who could be blamed for the economic failures of Stalin’s regime. One person died during the investigation and another was executed without trial, which probably helped secure the cooperation of the rest of the victims.

Loznitsa reconstructed the story by restoring much of what Posel’skii had left out. He thus made visible the
nature of the Prompartia trial as a theatrical event, a staged production directed according to a script, played by a group of actors on the stage, and supported by audience in the hall and outside the courtroom. In Loznitsa’s version, it turned out that the central position in the scenography of the trial had been given to a film crew; the images revealing their presence had been cut from the original 1930 documentary to give it the appearance of objectivity. Alongside the fragments showing how the event was being documented (by film cameras and stenographers) Loznitsa also restored the close-ups of the procurator’s complete speech and of the accused persons delivering their final statements, as well as fragments showing how the public reacted and the organized demonstration outdoors howled, demanding capital punishment. Thus, Loznitsa’s montage not only completed the factual content but also revealed the anatomy of this major provocation, a historical forgery and a fake act of fake justice that ended “for real”, with death and prison for the innocent victims.23

Another film from Loznitsa’s series of archival restorations is Gosudartvennye pokhorony (The State Funeral, 2019). Here, Loznitsa again worked with found material left after another earlier film production, Velikoe proshchanie (Great Mourning, 1953), a detailed chronicle of the three days after Stalin’s death, crowds marching to see Stalin’s body, and public mourning ceremonies all over the USSR. Great Mourning was commissioned on the day of Stalin’s death to be distributed all over the USSR, which never happened; historically, it is the last in a whole series of Stalinist documentaries filmed by dozens of cameramen all over the country and put together using the principles of Vertov’s montage to represent the USSR on screen as a temporal and spatial totality. The 10,000 meters of footage were produced in the project out of which only a fraction was usable in the final version. Such a gigantic over-expenditure or time, money, and effort would in itself already be a massive monument suitable to commemorate Stalin’s greatness. Then unexpectedly Great Mourning was not interesting anymore and all materials were sent to the archives where they remained until found out by Loznitsa.24

Here again, just like he did in The Trial, Loznitsa wishes to follow the process closely and to allow national grief to be visible in all its detail, face after face, group after group, site after site. He found a way of re-using critically the way original camera work captured the event: In the same location where the Prompartia trial had taken place twenty years earlier, crowded by the grieving masses and security forces, the camera could only capture the events from one and the same angle, the same monotonous movement of endless processions, people wearing the same expressions on their faces, of either sorrow, or boredom, or curiosity. Due to this emphasis on the ceaseless and meaningless repetition – in fact, the mystery behind the effectiveness of Stalin’s version of communism – Loznitsa’s image in The State Funeral became a counter-image of its prototype, Great Mourning. The original film shows the loss of the genius leader in allegorical tableaux, groups of citizens expressively frozen in sculptural poses of motionless grief. In Loznitsa’s remix, instead of frozen images, society appears to scatter and melt and flow in formless and aimless fluxes. “Everything that is solid melts into air”, and the uncomfortable monumental memory starts dissolving. However, Stalin’s burial can signify the end of Stalinism and by the same token the beginning of its forgetting. To undo the forgetting is the critical intention here: in order to un-forget the inconvenient heritage of communist visuality, Loznitsa brings it back into the field of vision to counter the nostalgic imagination of the present day and to challenge its uncritical memory.

What Is Left of Communism?

Together with communism’s claim to be the end of all human history, communist visual symbols have lost their pretensions of totality – but then, in what sense do they remain communist, if at all?

For present-day political philosophy, the idea of communism is relevant not as a “system”, nor as an “era”, but merely as “a communist moment” (Alain Badiou) or “the communist hypothesis” (Jacques Rancière): “Communism is thinkable to us as the tradition created around a number of moments, famous or obscure, when simple workers and ordinary men and women proved their capacity to struggle for their rights and for the rights of everybody, or to run factories, companies, administrations, armies, schools, etc., by collectivizing the power of the equality of anyone with everyone.”25 “Communists without...
proper communism” nowadays find communism usable as “a dream of a better future” and hope to find a way of reinvesting “the forgotten aspects of communism ... the expanse and effectiveness of communist cultural work.”26

Communism is no longer politics but cultural value; communist visuality, consequently, a cultural asset.

It cannot be denied that “emancipation and equality of anyone with everyone” is needed more than ever before in the present-day world of global disproportions. The age of the omniscient and all-powerful digital technologies has brought with itself an entirely new kind of unfreedom. The user of the digital commons can use but not govern the resources, and the capitalist subject, to quote Gilles Deleuze, is constructed in such a way that “the more he obeys, the more he commands, since he obeys only himself.”27 A return of communist visuality in digital forms might be a signal of Bauman’s retrotopia, of visualizing communism, both historical and imaginary, as “a dream of a better future” and hope to find a way of realizing “the forgotten aspects of communism … the expanse and efectiveness of communist cultural work.”26

References

3. Bauman, Retrotopia, 8; emphasis by Bauman.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. Jean-Luc Godard in conversation with Fritz Lang, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEzvyHC6e2o
20. The purpose of historical re-enactment is literally to “activate history and make the past come alive” with the use of authentic objects that are “deeply bound up with the way history might feel.” Stephen Gapps, “Mobile Monuments: A View of Historical Reenactment and Authenticity from Inside the Costume Cupboard of History”, Rethinking History, vol. 13 no. 3 (2009): 397–8.