Background

In the last couple of years my artistic practice was dealing mainly with the doubtfulness of knowledge and specifically the uncertainty of image-based sources and the unconscious effects of cognitive distortions. Recently my interest has been shifted towards the symptoms of the Post-truth world and the parallelism of alternative facts and beliefs.

The role of spatiality is the key aspect I examine both theoretically and in practice for years now. Hence one of my essential strategy is to confront 2D imagery with the original 3D situations to emphasize the importance of spatial property and to point out the uncertain and manipulatable nature of fixed, perspective views, that can mislead the perception and the following interpretations.

In my proposed project I intended to grasp some of the analogies between the contemporary Post-truth phenomena and similar symptoms of the Cold War era, relying on mostly the archival materials of Blinken OSA. My approach during the research was driven by the concept of artistic research, which means that I was not strictly separating the theoretical and the creative aspects of my praxis and I was not intended using the research process merely as the foundation of new artworks but also through the creation of artworks I was hoping for some new insights, which would otherwise missed or couldn’t really grasped by the toolset of language.

Finally, my research concluded in a case study which simulates the distinct methods of historical disinformation and contemporary fake news creation. By mimicking their toolsets, I was attempting to point out how selective framing and arbitrary linkage can create fake but seemingly plausible narratives in their own context.

Process

In an early stage of my research while I examined the photographs of Gabriel Bodnar, during the 1968 invasion of Kosice [HU OSA 391] I coincidentally found a small detail, which grabbed my attention. Four men were standing on the roof of an unfinished building, looking down on the
crowd and the marching tanks. Seemed like a casual, insignificant detail, but then it turned out, that they are present on other photos as well in a slightly different setup.

For the first sight I felt some strange suspiciousness about them, they seemed a bit odd somehow, inspiring me to look behind their presence. Finally, a hypothetical question appeared in my mind: what would the Soviet intelligence do if they would see these photos? Would it raise their suspicion as well? How would they interpret it? Especially in the light of their then present agenda which was meant to justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia – namely: the CIA has developed a subversive plan, a sabotage in Czechoslovakia, which would end up in a NATO invasion if they don’t intervene in time.

So I thought: let’s try it out as a simulation, as a thought-experiment. Based on these photos and any other materials those intelligence agencies could theoretically use after the invasion, as a fictional “internal investigation”.

**Simulation 1**

Following the basic protocol the first step would be the identification of the members within the group, then separately each member, since some of them had a clear distinguishing mark, like a hat (person B), a suit (person C), a cap with working clothes (person D).

After the reference photos were set and enhanced, the next step was to examine the whole series of the photos Bodnar took that day. While cross-referencing them based on their look and clothing, the “suspects’ would likely appear accidentally in other photos from the series or in any additional material they could find from that certain date.

After thorough scrutiny, it turned out that is possible, that there were other members involved beyond the main group: like a photographer (person E) hiding one level below, or a man with glasses (person F) who appears in several photos – seemingly in personal contact with members of the main group. Also there were possible collaborators: a saboteur (person G), an agitator (person H) and a violent protester (person J). Although it’s not clear that the former ones were whether part of the circle or they were just under influence of the main group.

Based on the photos they could have easily identify the location, the construction site of the later Hotel Slovan, in the nearby of the city center of Kosice.

At that time maybe it was clear for the investigators that the US had gathered information on Czechoslovakia since 1954. They were extensively monitoring every larger city, they could even map out the underground facilities built since 1949, and the military capacities of Czechoslovak troops. But the US intelligence could only achieve that if they have sent covert agents on the ground. So for the imaginary investigators, the “necessary presence” of the American covert agents in town and the 4 suspect above wouldn’t be considered as a coincidence.

With this local knowledge, our main characters could disappear from the Hotel Slovan area easily, first mingled in the crowd, then most likely by using motorbikes. Afterwards they appeared in different parts of the town and seemingly coordinated the civilian protesters. They were possibly
encouraged the locals to stand up against the Soviet army, to attack the soldiers and their tanks with rocks and improvised weapons and to make barricades. Even though their presence is not well documented in the available photos their impact would likely be considered to traceable. As the main instigators of the opposition they were organizing “civilian” marches and demonstrations and they were effectively assisted in the nonviolent resistance as well.

Later they were most likely traveled forward to Prague, where they continued their covert subversive actions, where they escalated the situations, setting the barricades on fire, and they could even fanaticize the youth to execute violent actions against the Soviet army. The investigators would map out that they were even following the book of sabotage techniques, like changing or destroying the street signs, giving the soldiers wrong directions all over Prague and on the way there. In the next few days, they were continue helping the protesters to create and distribute disinformations opposing the “good-intentioned Soviet help” to prevent the Western-backed coup and possible NATO invasion against the Warsaw Pact countries.

So that’s one probable way how a Soviet internal report would have possibly reveal the role of the subversive 4-member gang and their accomplices based on the photos available back then.

Simulation 2

In the second part I attempted to imagine how a campaign on the Prague Spring would appear in the Russian media today, especially on their online surfaces.

Even though the currently available memes on the Prague Spring are not explicitly indicate the involvement of the US, the overall suspicion around the CIA and it’s “dirty history“ is wildly present, and the topic is regularly appearing in both in official sources and in the alternative media spectrum.

Actually there were two cases when it resulted in political conflict. First in 2015, when a documentary film titled: Warsaw Pact – Pages Declassified was broadcasted on Russia’s state-run TV channel. Using the same narrative I was exploited in the first simulation, that the Soviets were just prevented the Western-backed coup and a possible NATO invasion against a Warsaw Pact country when they were invaded Czechoslovakia. The second time in 2017, TV Zvezda, the Russian Defense Ministry’s official media outlet published an article on their website, claiming basically the same, that they prevented the West from carrying out a coup in Czechoslovakia using the technology of ‘velvet’ revolutions.

This is the first time when “velvet and color revolutions“ came into the greater narrative, especially in the context of Euromaidan in Kiev. Since according to the Russian media the events in Ukraine had a direct connection to the CIA, their involvement became a widespread “knowledge“. With this in mind I chose this belief as a common platform to evaluate the events of the Prague Spring in retrospect. Even though this narrative was never exposed at large in the form of memes, but it can be easily imagined and “reproduced“ prior to it happens. Like what would an employee of the Internet Research Agency, operating in Saint Petersburg would do if he would have received an order to contextualize the Prague Spring now. What kind of instructions or tips he would get from his supervisor to make these memes work?
Regarding the image juxtapositions I created the following “tricks and tips” would arise:

1. To enforce the connection between two separate events, use accidental visual symmetry to enhance the feel of similarity.
2. Focus on the seemingly main characters of the events to generalize their shadiness and suspiciousness.
3. It doesn’t necessarily have to depict the things in the same way, if it shares a common associative layer.
4. The jokes underpin the narrative better if they reduce the seriousness of the original cause. In that way an intense existential situation can easily become a “lazy gathering“.
5. Images as “frozen moments“ cannot contain the causality of events, they can look similar even when they have a completely opposite motivation / emotional background.
6. Shades of violence can be easily mixed up, and labeled as the “same“, even if one was a prepared and armed act and the other a more vulnerable form of resistance. One can say: “if there is no gun present on a picture, it doesn’t mean there weren’t at all“.
7. Use visual jokes based on resemblance to common pop-cultural genres. Like mimicking the cover of a music album of a 4-member rock band.
8. But it always works better if it’s accompanied by another ironic / sarcastic layer (mostly a written one).

Findings

The findings of my research have two main segments: the first refers more to the original question – the analogies and similarities between the contemporary Post-truth phenomena and the Cold War era –, and the other is connected to the images as tools of manipulation.

The shared methods between the classical propaganda and the Post-truth tactics I discovered during my research:
- Mirroring: accusing the opponent with the very same thing what you’ve just done or about to do. They will have to defend themselves first and accuse you back, which is a much weaker position – feels like a “childish attitude“.
- Using fake news as a “Swiss-knife“, since it works in every stage of the process. In the preparation phase: as conditioning, as well as justification or the pretext for a later event. During the act: as a deception / confusion / distraction (classical disinformation). Afterwards: as interpretation / explanation. Also: inwards and outwards, to local and international audiences. You can cherry-pick data, connect the dots as you wish and come to whatever conclusion you desire, since fact-checker sites are way less effective to the public than the original (fake) news.
- False accusation still works. It doesn’t have to be true, because you won’t have to prove it later. In the Post-truth era: objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than the ones appeals to emotion and already existing personal beliefs, so it just has to resonate in the targeted group.
- It’s enough if you win the hearts you don’t necessarily have to win the minds too. Sympathy and antipathy are still key elements: if you are less popular, make your opponent at least as unpopular as you are.
- It’s enough if you raise suspicion and skepticism towards all the possible narratives and the truthfulness of your opponent. If you can’t dominate the narrative by yourself, don’t let anyone
else do. The objective in the post-truth era: is to muddy the waters and cast doubt upon the possibility of “objective truths” in general.

During the simulations my primary focus was on the role of images. We all know that even if they are intact, they can be unreliable in some cases and they can be exploited easily along with our intentions. Also they can be easily modified and forged with manual and digital techniques – in which Russian were traditionally really good at.

But what I would like to point out here is referring to the nature of imagery: the framing. Not just in a sense that an image necessarily has a border, and it creates a fragment of reality, isolating and decontextualizing that fragment. But in a sense it always has an angle, it’s not neutral at all, since anything can be photographed in literally thousand different ways, resulting in a primary bias which we cannot by-pass. In addition to that, an image not just contains information but at the same time, it conceals others due to overlappings and the distortions of perspective.

Framing is to control attention, shaping perception. Especially in case of multiple images (an implicit or explicit) narrative is always formed automatically. What really matters is how you connect the dots, what you choose and what you neglect from the accessible materials – which is the field of cognitive biases. Which is deeply exploited by both the advertisement industry, the classical propaganda and also in the current fake news creation.

And of course, framing in a sense of accusation works seamlessly with images, since images and videos still act like “evidence“ or “proof“ for a lot a people. Especially graphic content can affect us more deeply and viscerally, we cannot really keep the critical distance if it’s presented in a large amount in the same time. Maybe this is why Russia choose this unusual way of influence a travel photo-exhibition titled: Material evidence. Which was toured in Brussels and Berlin twice, and it was also exhibited in New York – besides Moscow of course.

In the context of political communication and propaganda: it has a theatrical aspect. It works as a scenery, due to its fixed viewpoint we cannot “look behind the scenes“, we can only rely on that frontal view. It’s always taken into consideration what will be shown to the public and what kind of effect will it trigger – it’s composed alongside the grater agenda or intention.

Since images cannot really “win over“ each other for good, they will always remain competing parallel narratives. I personally believe the solution lies in spatiality, in particular spatial analysis, the one which is used by the group named Forensic Architecture (based in London, at Goldsmith University). Their practice relies on the reconstruction of events in question by integrating back the image-based sources to their original 3D situation and timeframe. This results a greater clarity and can provide answers which none of the images can offer on their own. Their practice shows that puzzling the pieces in an ordinary way only ends up in a useful manner if the “big picture“ is not a picture at all, but a spatial model, which can be analyzed from all the possible viewpoints and aspects.
Appendix
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Part 1
HU OSA 391 Photographs of Gabriel Bodnar on the 1968 invasion of Kosice

More information: HU OSA 391
Narrative I.

1968
Identification of the members
person A

male
cca. 185cm
30-40 year old
possibly blond
person B

male
170-180 cm
cca. 40 year old
dm: hat
person C

male
cca. 180cm
30-40 year old
dm: dark suit
person D

male
cca. 185cm
40-50 year old
dm: working clothes + cap
person F
civilian collaborator (messenger)
person G
civilian collaborator (saboteur)
person H

civilian collaborator (agitator)
person J
civilian collaborator (protester)
1. Kosice is located near the Hungarian frontier. It had 70,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 80% were Slovak and 20% Hungarian. Seventy per cent of the population spoke Hungarian.

2. The names of the streets

   The names of the streets were correct as of 1949. However, they were changed often according to the political requirements of the moment. For example, immediately following World War II, Kosice had Churchill and Roosevelt Avenues, both of which have since been renamed.

3. The Hlava ulica, Pestianska triada, Majzrov ulica, Legiorarske namestie, and Kollasova ulica were the main streets and therefore the widest. They were approximately 20 to 30 meters wide. Some of the streets were paved with asphalt and most of the others with cubical stone blocks.

4. The streetcar system of Kosice operated only on the main streets. It was in very bad operating shape with old reconditioned cars. The USSR removed what the Germans left, including repair facilities and replacement equipment.

5. The railroad station was the center of a network servicing Eastern Slovakia; Presov and Zilina to the north, and Michalany and Cop to the south. Cop was the connecting point between Slovakia and Sub-Carpathia. The railroad station in Kosice also had garage yards with numerous repair shops at the southern edge. A very large warehouse lined the tracks to the north of the yard. There was always a great number of locomotives stationed both in the repair yards and in the coal supply yards.
1. Underground post office, under construction at Spy 1971. The work was carried out by Posame Starzy, Branch 01. Kosice, the construction had a secret designation, O55 Kosice, and it was directed by the architect, Bunovery (Ref). The post office is in the center of the town near the old town gate and the eastern slope of Hereby. The building is to serve as an underground communication center for local and intercity connections. It is organized to have been built to withstand atomic explosions. A similar installation is to be constructed at Loma and in the Kaduna area.

2. The production of this underground post office is as follows:

   - Production of a section of the underground post office frontage on the road, which runs along the north end of the building, which leads to a group of offices from the Kosice telegraph office, on the corner of Ruzomberok and Komenskyho streets. The offices, and other equipment, are to be as an underground management center. The building is to serve as an underground communication center for local and intercity connections. It is organized to have been built to withstand atomic explosions. A similar installation is to be constructed in Ruzomberok, Kosice, and assigned construction O55.
The following troops have been identified in Košice:

1. An army corps command (ZNV) in Mészáros Gasse, in the building formerly occupied by the Hungarian corps command.

2. A rifle regiment, in the barracks bounded by Postava, Moiseasova and Kszmira streets. The men wear red shoulder boards with a dark red rim. One battalion of this regiment is in barracks in the Kszmira-Orkuna. It has about 700 men.

3. An AAA regiment in barracks in the southern part of the town.

4. A mountain artillery regiment in the artillery barracks on Kukucinova Gasse. The regiment is horse and mule-drawn.

5. A motorized artillery section stationed in the former Hungarian Bem Jozsef barracks. It has about 750 men, and belongs to a new artillery regiment.

6. A horse-drawn train section in the former Hungarian Thokoly barracks, about 700 to 750 men strong.

7. A parachute regiment, whose command and staff are in the army corps barracks on Mészáros Gasse.

8. The 1st Battalion of this regiment is in the former artillery barracks at the corner of Kukucinova and Djelostreika streets. It has about 550 men. They are young, 18 to 20 years old. Some of the cadres and members of the staff are not above 20. There are two jumping towers in the courtyard of the barracks, and basic training is conducted there.
Prague
Prague
(7) Transportation: Automotive

(a) Roads. Damage to roads [(3) below] is slow, and therefore impractical as a D-day or near D-day activity.

(1) Change sign posts at intersections and forks; the enemy will go the wrong way and it may be miles before he discovers his mistakes. In areas where traffic is composed primarily of enemy autos, trucks, and motor convoys of various kinds, remove danger signals from curves and intersections.

(2) When the enemy asks for directions, give him wrong information. Especially when enemy convoys are in the neighborhood, truck drivers can spread rumors and give false information about bridges being out, ferries closed, and detours lying ahead.
Part 2
THIS IS SOCIALISM
WITH A HUMAN FACE

What did Brezhnev say to Dubček when he started the Prague Spring?

TANKS A LOT!

Weird Photo Of The Day
A Soviet soldier chases man who had thrown stones at a tank, 1968.
Narrative II.

2018
IT TOOK THEM 45 YEARS TO LEARN HOW TO THROW A SMASHING PARTY
PRAGUE, 1968

KIEV, 2013

“THEY ARE JUST CIVILIAN PROTESTERS FIGHTING FOR THEIR COUNTRY” ...YEAH, SURE
sending some ‘vacation photos’ to the guys back in the office (langley, virginia)
ENJOY, WHEN THE CIA ORGANISES YOU A DAY OFF
CIA ADVISORY TEAM ON TOUR IN EASTERN EUROPE
PEACEFUL PROTEST  ...SUPPORTED BY THE CIA
THE CZECHOSLOVAK UNIT
UNKNOWN B-SIDE SINGLES FROM THE SIXTIES
EASTERN BREEZE
A SPRING IN PRAGUE

IMPROVISED PIECES FROM THE CIA ORCHESTRA
REMASTERED IN 2013, UKRAINE