Reflections of a vanished time. The melancholy of objects in Georgi Gospodinov's and Orhan Pamuk's works

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1. Introduction: objects in the individual and collective imaginary

The aim of this paper is to explore the link between objects and melancholy through the works of two writers who have combined them with the question of memory applied to the recent history of their country.

In his novel *Fizika na Tăgata* (*Physics of Melancholy*), Georgi Gospodinov demonstrates great sensitivity and empathy toward all living creatures (including flies and any other form of life), a feeling that is also extended to a variety of elements coming from the apparently inanimate world, such as objects related to the memories of the years of Bulgarian communism. Many pages of this book and of his first novel *Estestven Roman* (*Natural Novel*) are devoted to the memory of specific items representing everyday life during the last three decades of Bulgarian communism. In addition to this, Gospodinov's interest for the role of objects in people's lives is also manifested in his engagement for the creation of a temporary museum on the topic, and to the publication of the book *Inventarna Kniga na Socializma* (*Inventory Book of Socialism*), edited by him and Yana Genova (2006).

The exhibition as well as the book on the material memories of Socialism have attracted the attention of writer and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk who, during his visit to Bulgaria in May 2011, had the opportunity to express his enthusiasm (Zlatarova 2016)[1] for the catalogue that collects images of over 500 items of daily use.

Orhan Pamuk's interest for the soul of objects is pretty manifest in his novel *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*The Museum of Innocence*), where Kemal, the protagonist, falls into the growing obsession of collecting items that belonged to his beloved, in order to get over the pain of having lost her for good. These objects, collected in the '70s and '80s of the last century, bear with them a further temporal dimension, since they are the last material evidence of a vanished world: the multi-ethnic one of the city of Istanbul before the social changes of the mid '50s.

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[1] The article appeared on the 27th of July, 2016: http://azcheta.com/georgi_gospodinov_chete-v-burgas/ (Last access: 6/30/2018).

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This book is strictly linked to Pamuk's museum project, created by him in 2012 and bearing the same name *Masumiyet Müzesi* (*The Museum of Innocence*), which fulfills the aim of giving voice to a particular artistic narrative focused on the close link between objects, loss and the past. By exhibiting the same objects encountered by the reader throughout the course of the novel, this alternative display of material culture is combined with the memory of a lost era of Turkish history.

What is the point of such a fixation on the relics of the past? According to the vision emerging from the works in question, objects are in a certain sense *animated*, experienced, and aware of us. Material things transmit "immaterial" symbols: in the cases I will consider, they correspond to both personal and social values. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the emotions, thoughts and sensations absorbed by these products seem to be waiting for someone to give them back their voice.

When we invest one simple item with a particular meaning, charging it with an aura that is connected to a memory, a person, a particular experience, we confer to it a power transcending the intrinsic value of the object itself. In this way, we maintain that the particular object standing in front of us possesses a soul of its own, which projects and propagates the "images" linked to another (in these cases "lost") temporal dimension. It thus become a sort of "melancholic object" (Yavaro-Nashin 2009: 16). In the case of the fictional works of Gospodinov and Pamuk, the objects in question relate to a moment of the past embodying a specific experience of "commonality" in which social life had still not been so heavily affected by the homogenizing logics of capitalism, in which a specific, local originality was manifested even in objects of daily use and other material artifacts. Both authors express in their works a more or less explicit form of melancholy, which sometimes turns into a longing or the evocation of a form of *imaginary* on the past, in which the personal and the collective merge in the experience of an "affective space". By viewing objects as integral part of social networks, this comparative study expects to uncover the dynamics of melancholia involving both the interior and the exterior world of the fictional and non-fictional subjects, analyzing the ability of material objects to evoke time lost, accompanied by specific forms of empathy. Furthermore, the focus will be on the employment of such items in the emotional process of overcoming feelings of loss, in particular through the creation of museum exhibitions, from a perspective that assesses the role played by objects in the creation of social situations (Yavaro-Nashin 2009: 2) and in the affirmation of a material memory of the past.

2. Material memories in Georgi Gospodinov's Novels

In Gospodinov's novel *Fizika na Tăgata* (The Physics of Sorrow), as well as in his work *Estestven roman* (Natural Novel) and in the collection of short stories *I drugi istorii* (And other stories), the topic of melancholy towards the recent past constitute a significant core. However, it is important to remark that the melancholic sentiment emerging from these books does not translate into forms of regret for the communist regime, but rather embody a specific emotional state directed towards the lost world of childhood.

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In his book *Estestven Roman* (Gospodinov 1999: 62), among the delights of the 1960s, Gospodinov mentions among the many apparently insignificant items examples such as the cigarettes "Sun" without filter (his parents' favorites), contained in a little box with a lid, the first gramophone, the first television *Opera*, the *Snežanka* chocolates with peanuts, the leather mini-skirt, the patent leather shoes... Following this, among the pleasures of the '70s, we find the milk chocolate bar *Krava*, the first and only serious book owned by the grandfathers ("Notes on Bulgarian Insurrections"), the calendar of the magazine *Ženata Dnes* with the images of the apple pickers, the cover of the chocolate box with the shepherds of Vrezovo, the first cigarette *Stuardesa…* All of these items are presented as symbol-objects of everyday life under communism, embodying in a strange but at the same time natural way the soul of the period. Furthermore, in the book *Fizika na Tăgata*, as a significant element for the teenagers of the 1980s, we find out that even the packaging of tights displaying the image of long female legs played a crucial role in the history of the objects of socialism...!

While evoking a feeling of melancholy towards these "delights", representing a constitutive part of his life's environment as a child, Gospodinov transfers to them a specific form of irony. Such items and the way they are described make us think critically about the fact that something was definitely missing in Bulgarian socialist life. In fact, in addition to these, the regime is also remembered for products not directly created by it, but entered in some hidden and illegal way into the country (usually from Yugoslavia). These too acquired a special meaning in people's lives:

> Here is my first cassette tape recorder Hitachi, mono, we bought it from some Vietnamese in exchange for my grandfather's old donkey. My grandpa thought until the end that this exchange was like a little horse for a hen[2] (Gospodinov 2012: 101).

Furthermore, in the section of the book describing the return of the protagonist to the dartboard in the town of T., the author lists a number of other "foreign" objects which played great importance in his childhood and that of his friends:

> The cave of Ali Baba with chewing gum in the form of cigarettes, the colorful stickers of Gojko Mitić, Claudia Cardinale, Brigitte Bardot (...) the pen with a boat inside, the Chinese flavored eraser, the gun-lighter, the revolver with the cartridges, the leather belt with a huge buckle metal badge with Elvis Presley, the key chain with the Eiffel Tower (...). All this empire of kitsch plastic and porcelain, I repeat, at that time to us priceless, now seemed obsolete and thrown-down[3] (Gospodinov 2012: 117).

[2] (My translation). "Ето го първия ми касетофон "Хитачи", моно, купихме го от едни виетнамец срещу старото магаре на дядо ми. Дядо ми докрая си мислеше, че тази размяна е малко кон за кокошка".

[3] (My translation) Тази пещера на Али Баба с цигарени дъвки, цветни картички с Гойко Митич, Клаудия Кардинале, Бриджит Бардо (…) химикал с плуваща лодка в него, ароматизирана китайска гума за моливи, пистолет запалка, пистолет с капси и барабан, кожен колан с огромна метална тока, значка, с Елвис Пресли, ключодържател с Аифеловата кула (…) Цялата тази пластмасово-порцеланова империя на кича, пък казвам, неоценима за нас някога, сега изгледаше вехта и разгромена.

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All the above-mentioned objects were in fact products that accidentally crossed the border from the West, brought in Bulgaria by sailors or truck drivers, and acquired the status of "objects of desire". In those times, in fact, many people collected empty bottles of whiskey, of Greek *Metaxa*, or empty packages of Western cigarettes. Among other items, watches were placed at the peak of any "electronic desire", for the benefit of Vietnamese dealers, from whom these items were bought on the black market (Gospodinov 2012: 123).

Although generally such "obscure objects of desire" were often kitsch and "useless", they still exerted an irresistible fascination and attraction in those who lived immersed in the rigors of gray socialist aesthetics, and contributed to nourish a vivid imaginary on the West, and seem to be now recalled with a specific sort of self-irony...

Towards the end of the book *Fizika na Tăgata*, the narrator expresses the wish to remember, almost in a kind of requiem, some other important, meaningful technological objects of the past which have disappeared forever from the world markets[4] (Gospodinov 2012: 131).

These technological and communication devices and were clearly not an exclusive part of Communism, as some of them belong to the decade of the 1990s, when Bulgaria had entered its post-socialist phase of transition. However, they all form a composite image of a "lost world", preceding the digital era and the one of proper Capitalism expansion in the daily lives of Eastern European citizens. By virtue of the aura of "naivety" surrounding them, these can consequently be made the object of this specific form of "ironic melancholy" pervading Gospodinov's works.

3. Between Empathy and Collectionism

A symbol of a socialist childhood in Gospodinov's novel *Fizika na Tăgata* is the protagonist, a kid abandoned, like a minotaur, in the basement of enormous blocks of flats, in the company of those objects that the author has inventoried with the obsession of a collector. Indeed, the protagonist claims that at a certain point in his life he felt the need to stack and store objects into boxes and notebooks, in lists and enumerations, in order to save both "things and words" (Gospodinov 2012: 144). Previously, he could identify himself in every single thing, he was able to *be* every single thing. But later he began to realize that his ability to empathize was starting to disappear, that he was in a way "disempathizing". Therefore, he resorted to what he defines as a weak surrogate, corresponding to the activity of collecting. Maybe through this practice he could find a successful solution to the dilemma of what he defines as the "Physics of melancholy":

> The physics of melancholy – at the beginning of classical physics – has been a subject of my interest in the course of a few years. Melancholy, as gases and vapors,

[4] Such as videotapes and videocassette players, magnetophones, tapes, telegrams, typewriters, and so on.

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> does not have a texture and a shape of its own, but assumes the shape and texture of the container and the space it occupies[5] (Gospodinov 2012: 294).

We could maintain that this state of melancholy has expanded to encompass a whole collection of artifacts of a bygone era, somehow settling within it and becoming able to communicate meaning. The objects that appear mentioned in the novels of Gospodinov constitute only a small part of what is found in *Inventarna Kniga na Socializma* (*Inventory Book of Socialism*). In a certain sense, the emotions pervading his novel *Fizika na Tăgata* had already found concretization in this book, published in Sofia in 2006 by virtue of the joined efforts of him and culturologist Yana Genova, whose aim was to itemize in an accurate way the objects of the socialist past.

The book appears like a catalogue tracing the development and design of more than 500 items of daily use from the 1956 until 1989, providing an account of the areas of life that were not represented in any archives, recordings, or museums. Collected from basements, attics and warehouses, objects are labeled with short texts that place them within the context of their practical use at the time of Bulgarian communism. We find, for example, socialist brands of TVs and electrical appliances, chocolates and candies with their characteristic wrappers, cigarettes and drinks typical of those times, shoes and soaps, and so on. These objects, only of Bulgarian production (according to the choice of the authors) marked the daily life of Bulgarians during socialism and seem to speak critically, allowing the reader to think, question and remember. As stated in the introduction:

> This book started with an ironic-nostalgic question we posed ourselves a long time ago: when did the lemon chips disappear? And the "Golden Autumn" biscuits, and the children's meals, and the chocolate "Cow", and the "Black Sea" candies?[6] (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 7).

We also read that, even without being consciously articulated, that world of objects and products has become a part of Bulgarian collective memory, even of its unconscious, embodying at the same time a typical "taste of socialism":

> We tried all these items, remember the taste, we can recognize it and recognize it in some of our personal past. The expiry date of these products proved to be longer than expected[7] (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 7–8).

While giving back a voice to the objects made mute by oblivion, the authors dare to evoke the so-called *Prizrakăt na Sozializăm*, the "ghost of Socialism". In this way, a new, somehow legitimized form of remembering is concretized, which can be interpreted in both individual and collective terms. This process is directed

[5] (My translation). "Физика на тъгата – първоначално класическата физика – беше предмет на заниманията ми за няколко години. Тъгата, като газовете и пàрите, няма собствен обем и форма, а заема формата и обема на съда или пространството, което обитава."

[6] (My translation). "Тази книга започна с едно наше иронично-носталгично питане преди известно време: къде изчезнаха лимоновите резанки? А бисквитите "Златна есен", а децките закуски, а шоколадът "Крава", бонбоните "Черноморец"?"

[7] (My translation). (..)Всички сме опитвали тези артикули, помним вкуса им, можем да го разпознаем и да разпознаем през него част от личното си минало. Срокът на годност на тези продукти се оказа по дълъг от очакваното.

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towards an apparently "marginal" section of the country's recent history, that is likely to be hastily removed from collective consciousness, and creates the possibility of developing a serious and necessary process of criticism and social awareness.

As mentioned by the authors in the introduction to this volume (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 7–8), another starting point for the realization of the project was to make up for an obvious lack, since the material culture of everyday socialism (in its national products) had never been stored, described or placed in any museum of the country. Such items appeared to be totally absent from the public debate about the past, neglected by historians and political scientists who considered them too trivial to deserve any kind of attention. Having been unfairly excluded from the great historical narratives and opinions of the experts, this project's aim was to make such objects the core of a new narrative, placing them under a special focus, while creating a kind of visual archive, an assorted catalogue of what was present in the shop shelves and people's houses during socialism.

4. The risk of forgetting and the idea of the museum

With the project cultivated together with Yana Genova he pointed right on the commonality and on the shared memory of those apparently insignificant objects which could help the Bulgarian viewer and reader in coming to terms with a sort of "post-socialist melancholy" deriving from the disappointment of the unfulfilled expectations of the transition phase to capitalism. In that same year (2006), Gospodinov had also been working at the project *Az živiah socializma*[8], aiming at recovering the historical memory of the period in the form of personal memories and stories, deepening a topic he was already addressing through his novels.

The motivation supporting the efforts in keeping a record of the material culture of the previous political era corresponds to the will of providing a prompt response to a situation in which it has become too easy to forget the past. Such a mental attitude has been taking place in more or less a conscious way in Bulgaria, as people started losing their recent memory of the past without taking time to think about what they had experienced in biographical, as well as historical terms.

The book, whose other title could be "Household Articles of Socialism" (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 9), presents a kind of alternative history of Bulgarian socialism going from the late '50s to the end of the '80s through the material and graphic culture of everyday life, which in parallel reflects the widespread penetration of Communist ideology and rhetorics as well as aesthetics in houses and in the private sphere, in this case especially the urban one. The premise of this project is that in order to understand socialism there is the need for a specific "archeology of materiality" that can reconstruct the place of the silent object in the history of the country. This implies a will to give voice to the personal stories as well as the collective memories of a disappeared era, through the visual and emotional impact of such objects, through temporary identifications and recognitions of the "visual subconscious" of socialism.

[8] "I lived Socialism".

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Since the early 1990s, after the democratic changes occurred in the country, several discussions have been held about the possibility of creating a specific museum of socialism in Bulgaria, seen as one of the most effective ways of representing the recent past. One of the most intense debates in this regard was held at the end of 1990 (Vukov 2008: 328) and saw the participation of eminent writers, architects, historians, and artists. However, as both the political and the economical conditions of the moment proved inadequate, the idea was unfortunately doomed to fail. After the 1990s, the debate on the opportunity of instituting a Museum of Socialism took place mainly on online forums and websites, and that is how an early, virtual version of this museum was shaped. This was made possible mainly thanks to the audience's response and participation to the previously mentioned forum *Az živiah socializma* and to the exhibition *Inventaren sklad na socializma* (Inventory depository of Socialism). The *Inventaren sklad na socializma* was symbolically inaugurated on November 10th, 2006, on the 17th anniversary of the dismissal of Todor Živkov's from the Bulgarian Communist Party and the beginning of the democratic changes in the country. Unfortunately, this exhibition didn't manage to become a permanent display in a museum.

The initiative revealed the extent to which «the boundaries between private and public life were confused under socialism, and the high level of uniformity marking the material legacy of those times» (*ibidem*: 230). The objects retain the memories of the past, otherwise condemned to death, providing an open ground for reflection on recent historical, political, social and personal experiences.

For many Bulgarian visitors, and probably also for people coming from other former communist countries, the objects of the exhibition and of the book are easily recognizable as they have personally used them or seen them or have come into contact with them; in some cases they are even still part of their houses. Despite the differences in age and experience among the visitors of the exhibition and readers of the book, and the differences in taste and attitude towards these objects, the inventory book is used to unlock the memories of the material existence that pervaded people's life and created a durable influence on their senses and perceptions.

In an interview of the time, Georgi Gospodinov mentioned among others:

> the bottle of "Coca Cola", but written in Cyrillic – something that was present only in Bulgaria. Another unique thing – the "pepper roaster". The item is an exclusive Bulgarian product[9].

For the generation of people who have seen these objects directly, the inventory was an opportunity of looking at them in a new way, exposed under a glass case; it is a way to make these artifacts visible after many years, and to arouse immediate associations with the socialist era. For visitors of the younger generations, the exhibition was a special chance to see some of these items for the first time, to observe them as part of the recent past. They constitute the «imagined memories» (Vukov 2008: 331) of a past they have not experienced and as such

[9] "(…) бутилка „Кола Кола", само че с надпис на кирилица – нещо, което го има само в България. Другото уникално - чушкопек. Уредът е само българско производство". In: Interview with Georgi Gospodinov, appeared on the 10th of November, 2006. http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=97468 (Last access: 6/30/2018).

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create in the visitor a contact with that period stronger and more effective than any other institutionalized form of historical museum display.

Objects are important because they are part of people's personal stories. Living in a country that, like socialist Bulgaria, did not give much choice to the consumer, a country where everyone was limited to use the same products, had as a consequence for the present the fact of having to deal with a strong collective memory linked to a restricted amount of objects[10]. Among the many objects collected in the "Inventory-Book", one of the most curious and interesting is perhaps the above-mentioned *čuškopek*, a small domestic oven used all over the country, even in industrialized cities, to roast the peppers that would have been stored for the winter. Furthermore, according to the writer, this object embodies a truly unique Bulgarian invention, and in a sense a "ridiculous" one, since this oven in miniature, capable of reaching temperatures up to 700 degrees (Celsius), was used to cook with crazy slowness, one pepper at a time![11] The *čuškopek*, was also the main home tool in the perspective of the winter season: as in that time of the year there were few season vegetables, the basis for any meal was constituted by vegetables, previously prepared and stored in jars:

> The Pepper roaster is a kind of domestic blast furnace in miniature, with asbestos coating inside, extremely heatable electrically. Widespread in almost all Bulgarian households, is found on the terraces of apartment blocks and used extensively in early autumn[12] (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 50).

This object is really interesting because it seems to symbolize more than others a rural world many Bulgarians were still connected to, in spite of the sociopolitical and economical changes of the communist time. In this regard, Gospodinov affirms[13] that the *čuškopek* is part both of socialism and of the patriarchal world that preceded it and which influenced its development.

Many of the objects collected in the book are still part of everyday life in Bulgaria: in particular, elements such as furniture, sofas, appliances. These are still fundamental and "ordinary" for those who cannot afford more modern objects. From this point of view, affirms Gospodinov[14], the *Inventarna Kniga na Socializma* as well as the exhibition are in a way shocking, because they penetrate deeply into the life of people who can react by saying, «Wait, we are talking about these objects as

[10] As we can expect, the ideological element is often quite marked in these items. One example in this respect is that of the cigarettes, simple everyday objects which turn into something very different when, on the package that contains them, we find sentences such as: "50 years from Soviet power" (the brand is called *Oktomvri 1917*) or "IX Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party" (Genova & Gospodinov 2006: 78).

[11] Nevertheless, the *čuškopek* was voted "Bulgaria's Household Revolution of the 20th Century" in a 2009 campaign by Bulgarian National Television

[12] (My translation). Чушкопекът е своеобразна домашна доменна пещ в миниатюр, с азбестово покритие отвътре, силно нагряващо се по електрически път. Широко разпространен в почти всички български домакинства, среща се по терасите на жилищни блокове и се употребява усилено в ранна есен

[13] Cfr: Interview with Georgi Gospodinov by Francesco Martino, which appeared on the 8th of January, 2007 on the Italian web portal Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso (http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Bulgaria/Inventario-del-socialismo-35296 – last access: 6/30/2018).

[14] Interview by Francesco Martino, *op. cit*.

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if they were in a museum, but I still use them!» (*ibidem*). This explains how the attempt of collecting small and big objects that have characterized the socialist period in Bulgaria before their disappearance can turn into an unusual means to stimulate the debate on the past regime, which was never fully faced.

As already mentioned, unfortunately such objects did not find a permanent place in a museum, and the exhibition *Inventaren Sklad na Socializma* only lasted twenty days. For years, no trace of Socialism could be found in Bulgarian museums, until in September 2011 a Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia was opened, mainly displaying statues, busts and paintings coming from the previous political era, which partly compensating for this lack.

5. The Analogies with Orhan Pamuk's work

In the years when Gospodinov was busy giving back a voice to the objects from the socialist past in a variety of ways, famous novelist Orhan Pamuk, coming from neighbouring Turkey, manifested his interest in such an idea. He, likewise, was collecting relics of the past for his project *Museum of Innocenc*e. This was at the same time a novel he was writing and a real building he wanted to fill with an extensive collection of artifacts testifying a historical period of the city of Istanbul between the 1960s and the 1980s. The Bulgarian collection of objects coming from similar years seemed close to the project he was working on, to the point that Pamuk even considered including some of the socialist items in his museum.

The *Museum of Innocence* (Masumiyet Müzesi) created by Pumuk in his native Istanbul contains items apparently belonging to the narrator of the novel bearing the same title, which was published in 2008. In the book, the protagonist Kemal accumulates a huge collection of objects linked to his beloved one, and at the same time to the period of their love story, as a way to get over the devastating melancholy deriving from her loss. Kemal shares with the reader his personal story by making constant reference to the objects that will be exhibited in the future museum.

Orhan Pamuk affirmed (Pamuk 2012: 15) that the idea for the museum came to him before starting to write the novel, which was in fact largely written about and for the objects he collected. His original intention in designing the novel was to structure it as a catalogue, and he does not hide his doubts for having written what he calls a "classic novel" instead (*ibidem*: 16–17). While conceiving the museum and the novel, the idea of Pamuk was to exhibit in a museum the "real" objects of a fictional story and to write a novel based on them, in a sort of "postmodern project" in which the borders between fiction and reality become quite blurred.

> I had the sensation that focusing on the objects and telling a story through them I would have made my protagonists different from the ones of Western novels, more realistic and more typical of Istanbul. What I had in mind was a sort of encyclopedic dictionary, whose voices would have been not only objects and places, but also concepts. (*ibidem*: 15)

Since the mid '90s, the author started collecting from Istanbul junk shop owners the objects that the imaginary Keskin family of the novel would have used in every day life. Each time he would find something new (such as a "quince grater", a

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tool perhaps somewhat comparable to the Bulgarian *čuškopek*), he felt a great happiness because he had found a real but unusual element for his novel. This way, he thought he could have built up the novel by combining together the objects exposed in a museum and letting them talk. Here is how this unusual object, the quince grater, makes its appearance in the novel:

> When I saw his eyes light upon the quince grater at my side, I grew nervous. By instinct, or by force of habit, I'd picked up the grater at the Keskins' when no one was looking. It made me so happy that I'd been able to leave early without making too much of an effort, and, just before this, I'd taken the prize out of my coat pocket, like a hunter wishing to cast a proud look over a woodcock he'd just bagged, and I'd left it sitting on the seat beside me. The moment I'd arrived at the Keskins' house that evening, I'd breathed in the lovely fragrance of quince jelly (Pamuk 2010: 234).

Actually, the first object mentioned by the author was the earring that Füsun lost while making love with Kemal for the first time (Pamuk 2010: 6; 2012: 59). While reading the book, the reader becomes more and more involved in Kemal's obsession for the objects belonging to his beloved one. This form of attachment grows even bigger when she marries another man; Kemal continues to see her and her family and to visit her home, but as he cannot have her he starts collecting anything that comes in contact with her, like a saltshaker she had held for a long time or even a half-eaten ice cream cone:

> Füsun cast off this half-eaten cone, which I retrieved from the ground and pocketed in a flash. Returning home, I would gaze drunkenly at these objects; a day or two later, not wishing my mother to see them, I would take them over to the Merhamet Apartments to arrange them among similarly precious artifacts, and as the agonies of love set in, I would conjure my relief with them (Pamuk 2010: 162).

At a certain point, the protagonists tries to justify such peculiar behaviour by resorting to "cultural" motivations: «I get upset to see things thrown away and forgotten, I said. They say the Chinese used to believe that things had souls». (*ibidem*: 233). However, the truth seems to be more complex than this explanation.

6. The fixation on the melancholic object

According to the interpretation by Freud, expressed in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia", (1917)[15] the dynamic mechanism of melancholy borrows its essential characteristics in part from mourning and in part from narcissistic regression. When in grief, libido reacts to the reality of the fact that the loved one has ceased to exist by fixating on every memory and every object the lost person was in a relationship with. For what concerns the state of melancholy, we also find a reaction to the loss of an object of love, to which does not follow, as we might expect, a transfer of the libido to a new object, but rather its withdrawal into the ego, narcissistically identified with the lost object. This implies in consequence the embodiment of the object itself into the ego (Agamben 1977: 24).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Freud was able to speak with regard to melancholy of a "triumph of the object on the ego", stating that the object was, yes,

[15] Original: *Trauer und Melancholie*, 1917.

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suppressed, but proved to be stronger than the ego (Freud 2001: 249). In Freud's vision, the object is not forcedly a material one, but while dealing with melancholy we can apply such interpretation to the case of these novels and to their intrinsic sense of loss and affirm, as Pamuk does, that in the end "man's sentimental attachment to objects is one of life's greatest consolations."

The melancholic person perceives herself/himself permanently living in the past, and in order to be able to mentally turn to the future, he should break away from the lost object and find a new object of passionate attachment, but this is nearly impossible. And as the "fetish" is both a sign of something and of its absence, so the object of the intention of the melancholic person is "at the same time real and unreal, incorporated and lost, affirmed and denied" (Agamben 1977: 26). Throughout Pamuk's novel, we find many examples in which the protagonists deals openly with forms of reflections on the topic of objects and loss:

> I remembered how, after my grandfather died, my grandmother changed not just her bed, but her bedroom in order to withstand her grief. With all my will, I resolved to extract myself from this bed, this room, and these objects that had aged so beautifully, that were so heavy with the fragrance of happy love, each one murmuring, creaking, rustling of its own accord. But I could not help doing the opposite, and embracing these objects. Either I was discovering the astonishing powers of consolation that objects held, or I was much weaker than my grandmother. (Pamuk 2010: 103)

But the border between melancholy and obsession is very feeble: we soon discover how the protagonist's longing for Füsun's objects becomes a totalizing thought and experience, as he starts stealing innumerable objects from her house, such as teacups, hair clips, a comb, little statues, erasers, ballpoint pens, whatever "talisman" he could find of those blissful days when their love was alive and intense. The fact of finding objects which had been touched by her represented thus the possibility of recovering all the memories attached to them (see Yavaro-Nashin 2009: 16). That is how his collection of stolen objects became bigger and bigger:

> There was this wallpaper, of which I tore off a large piece to take with me. And the handle of the door to the small room I assumed had been hers—thinking about her hand grasping this handle for eighteen years, I pried it off and dropped it into my pocket. The porcelain handle of the toilet chain in the bathroom came loose even more easily. From the heap of discarded papers and rubbish in the corner, I extracted the arm of a baby doll that had once been Füsun's. I slipped that into my pocket, along with a large mica marble and a few hairpins that I had no doubt were hers. Imagining the comfort I would eventually extract from these things in privacy, I relaxed (Pamuk 2010: 118).

The protagonist of the novel, while relating to his "lost human object" (Füsun) through the contact with the items which belonged to her loved one (an actual material), appears to be no longer capable of identifying "the borders between his own subjectivity and the existence of the lost object within it" (Ferber 2006: 1). Covering the object with the funeral decorations of mourning, melancholy confers to it a kind of "phantasmagoric" (Agamben 1977) characteristic, corresponding to the element of the *lost*; in this case though, the "lost object", both human and non-

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human, also corresponds to a vanished world of the past, to a period of the city's history that was dissolved for good in its old founding values.

7. From personal to collective memory

The accumulation of objects present at the *Museum of Innocence* in Istanbul can appear to the disoriented visitor as a mere exposition of the personal history of an individual. However, it soon becomes clear how the whole intention lying beneath the project is linked to the memory of a common world which has disappeared together with the "object of love" of the protagonist. The aim of the Museum was in a way to transform time into space, connecting a series of lost dimensions, the personal as well as the collective, the city and its context, to a visible and manifest narrative. Pamuk talks about how it has helped him a lot to imagine that Kemal, the protagonist of the novel, could tell his love story but also the culture of an entire nation, drawing inspiration from some specific objects:

> We don't need more museums that try to construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species. We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful. (Pamuk 2012: 55)

The historical period in which the novel is set corresponds mainly to the early '70s until the late '80s. In the novel, Füsun and her family lived in the neighborhood of *Çukurcuma* in Istanbul between 1974 and 1984 and it is in their house that Kemal was stealing objects with growing melancholic obsession, in which it appears rather clear that the loss experienced was not only related to a specific person or imaginary of the past, but also involved that of the ego (Ferbert 2006: 4).

As Pamuk recalls, in those years some local shops began to classify and sort abandoned goods, getting rid of bottomless piles of dusty objects that were once the common denominator of all the junk shops of Istanbul. Some objects in particular had a symbolic importance and evoked many memories in those who wanted to remember details from the past. For example, referring to the big wall clock hanging next to the entrance door in the house of his beloved's family, the protagonist says that its function was not to measure time but to let the whole family perceive the stability of home, of life, and to remember the "official" world beyond that door. But this object had in turn also another function, that of bringing back to life a past already lost:

> There was a clock like this in my own home when I was a child, and all the other houses that were then part of my life had identical or even larger ones, with even more exquisite woodwork, and by and large you would find them in the entryway or the hall, though people hardly looked at them, since by the 1950s "everyone," even children, had wristwatches, and each house had a radio that was always playing. Until television sets came to dominate the sound track of domesticity, changing the way people ate, drank, and sat—until the mid-1970s, when our story begins—these wall clocks continued to tick away, as they had done for so long, even though the householders scarcely paid them any attention. (Pamuk 2010: 177)

While collecting all of these items, Pamuk was increasingly discovering their meaning beyond the material one, as well as important clues for reconstructing the

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history of his city and of his country. In the '70s and '80s in fact, the back room of the shops and the small rooms used as storerooms of the first stores at the flea market of the *Çukurcuma* neighbourhood in Istanbul were packed with things left by non-Muslims, who were forced to leave Istanbul in the 1950s (Pamuk 2012: 43, and Vryonis 2005). Objects such as old Greek and Armenian history books, photographs, expired identity cards, glasses were of little interest for the new, Westernized middle class, equally indifferent to the old Ottoman culture.

Thus, between the second half of the 1950s until the 1980s, while the city was growing, almost all that was left from the Ottoman past and the non-Muslim minorities was either incinerated or destroyed: only some lucky objects survived the massacre, as for example ashtrays, pitchers, nutcrackers, coffee grinders. Pamuk affirms that, together with these objects, an entire civilization and its sophisticated traditions were destroyed, and regrets not to have had the knowledge or the strength to stop such "massacre of objects" (Pamuk 2012: 46). According to the writer, it was the new generations who had to follow the task of reconstructing the lives and stories of those people of the past through the objects they had left.

The idea of the museum came after that: the mission the writer imposed himself was to put these strange photographs and forgotten items on his desk and conceive them, imagine them as pieces of the life of the people who had lived in those streets. And the more he was looking at those objects – rusty keys, framed pictures, candies' wrappings, pincers, coffee cups or lighters – the more he felt like they were communicating between them (Pamuk 2012: 52). If those objects were not deprived of their environment and their streets, but rather arranged with care in their "natural homes", they would have been able to tell their stories with intensity, depth and strength, even in the setting of a museum. The *Museum of Innocence*, Pamuk says, was created by those who believe in the magic of objects: "It was Kemal's faith in the objects to inspire us: contrarily to collectors, we are not being pushed by fetishist desire to possess objects, but rather to the longing for knowing their secrets!" (Pamuk 2012: 51–52). And again on the theme of the power of objects:

> What I found most enthralling was the way in which objects removed from the kitchens, bedrooms, and dinner tables where they had once been utilized would come together to form a new texture, an unintentionally striking web of relationships. (...) Their ending up in this place after being uprooted from the places they used to belong to and separated from the people whose lives they were once part of – their loneliness, in a word – aroused in me the shamanic belief that objects too have a spirit. (Pamuk 2012: 52)

Both in his novel and in the museum, Pamuk's melancholy for the city of his childhood combines to a special and productive obsession with the past. For Pamuk, the museum does not represent only a time capsule, as it is still evolving in its temporal dimension. An example for this is the fact that *The Museum of Innocence* is open to welcome donations from its visitors.[16] As we read on the website: "If you

[16] Similary to the initiative of the "Museums of Broken Relationships" around the world (https://brokenships.com/).

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would like to donate those objects of yours that are valuable with the memories they carry to be displayed in our temporary exhibition vitrine, please contact us"[17].

Pamuk began collecting items for the museum in the mid-1990s, when he decided he wanted to collect and display the "real" objects of a fantasy story in a museum and write a novel based on them. Some of the exhibits in the Museum of Innocence come from the houses of his family and friends, while others from the antique shops of Istanbul. In addition to this, there also many others which have been collected from all over the world. However, Pamuk specified that the objects are not directly related to his life, arguing that the narrative of the museum should reflect that of the novel and not his own, because that was not "the museum of Orhan Pamuk".

After the novel was published in 2008, the museum's collection was finalized, and it now includes more than a thousand different objects. The museum was officially opened in April 2012 and is structured according to a series of exposures, each corresponding to one of the 83 chapters of the novel.

7. Conclusions: objects, symbols and the present

We now live in an era where a huge variety of assorted objects permeate our daily lives. However, contrarily to the epochs recalled by Gospodinov and Pamuk in their works, the items we use are characterized by their being highly disposable and easily substitutable, as they wear out much faster than their "predecessors", and contrarily to them, will hardly survive us.

Nowadays objects are produced, traded, consumed in an ever increasing way and with unprecedented global reach; can we still affirm they are part of the intimate histories of individuals and communities as they were before? Do they still incorporate memories, expectations, feelings and passions, suffering and desire? Unsurprisingly, it is only the objects coming from a "less homogenized past" which seem to be waiting to be understood, deciphered, interpreted.

Both Pamuk and Gospodinov write as novelists interested in the social history of their country, charging objects with a variety of associations and memories, in a vision that connects the personal to the collective, the "micro-history" to the macro-one. This also explains the writers' commitment to museums and their interest in the collections or catalogues of objects from the past. In fact, to save such items from their insignificance, or from their purely instrumental use implies a better understanding of human life and of the events individuals and communities are involved with, emotionally. Objects establish synapses of sense both among the various segments of personal and collective stories, and between societies and nature (Bodei 2009: 117). The greatest danger in relation to this is constituted by easy forgetfulness, and as a possible consequence not only things, but history itself is largely reduced to a mere petrified objectivity, with stored data and objects that are not mediated by consciousness and not enlightened by receptive deciphering and further contextualization of their meaning. In this we can undoubtedly maintain that mass production has reduced the quality and duration of things, obstructing their

[17] http://www.masumiyetmuzesi.org/?Language=ENG.

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more stable location in the frames of memory[18]. From all these objects, considered with sympathetic attention, different paths of curiosity and research can branch out: while unlocking the personal feeling of belonging emanated by a certain object we proceed further and place it mentally in the history of a nation, of a city, of a collectivity. Both Pamuk and Gospodinov share the opinion that history should deal not only with big events but also with simple and trivial things; but most of all the awareness of one's past must help to illuminate critically our vision of the present.

The transformation of objects into symbols (as custodians of other meanings) implies an ability to evoke memories, stories and practice a kind of "creative empathy" capable of positively turning feelings of melancholy into something else. In this way, objects are no longer exposed to an unsatisfiable desire to return to a irrecoverable past, do not adhere to the dream of changing the irreversibility of time, but rather become vehicles for a journey into the discovery of a past filled also with the seeds of a possible future (Bodei 2009: 55).

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[18] Cfr. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (or Reproducibility)*. According to Benjamin, reproduction recreates the artwork subtracting the authenticity that constituted in the past its fundamental characteristic, the essence from the point of view of the usage, which is transformed into consumption. From unrepeatable, unique event, the work is transformed through the multiplication of the replicas. This phenomenon is closely connected with the advent of mass society.

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Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the role played by material objects in the evocation of a specific imaginary of the recent past (mainly the 1970s and 1980s) in the literary works of Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov (in the novels "The Physics of Sorrow" and "Natural Novel") and of Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (in "The Museum of Innocence"). I analyze the presence of feelings of melancholy and loss accompanied by a fixation on objects in the fictional works and describe their possible overcoming through an externalization in the form of museum exhibitions in the city of Sofia and Istanbul such as the "Inventory depository of Socialism" and the "Museum of Innocence". By viewing objects as actors capable of creating meaningful social networks, I consider their use in the narration of personal and collective histories and their transformation as powerful symbols of a bygone era.

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