

BOOK REVIEW

Maria Alina Asavei: Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-) Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost
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Alexandru STANESCU*

Maria Asavei's *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-) Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost* book, courageously ventures on uncharted territory, or say territory less explored by historians, political scientists, art theoreticians and critics. That may be due to the intricateness, peculiarities and topicality of this subject matter: the relation between art, politics, and religion in Romanian national communism and post-communist Romania. This book is an important contribution in the effort to further clarifying the recent past, a past that is still very much alive and imbricated in the present.

The research doesn't focus exclusively on the communist era, arguing that "spiritual and religion-inspired contemporary art can function as a form of resistance, directed against both the dictatorship of Romanian national communism and against the dictatorship of the consumerist society and its global market, dependent on a capitalist economy of images" (p. 2). This introductory phrase sets the tone of the study, which brings the Romanian national communism and the 'savage' capitalism that followed it, after a brutal rupture (the 1989 Revolution), to the same denomination as totalitarianism in relation to the artist. Asavei follows how segments of Romanian visual arts, like many other cultural sectors, have negotiated their survival subtly capitalizing on their Orthodox Christian affiliation, as evidence for the ancientness and resilience of the Romanian ethos, throughout an impossible history of invasions and destructions - where we might add the Soviet occupation, that imposed communism after 1945. A part of this ethos, transposed in the arts of the era under the umbrella term of 'Neo-Byzantinism', was important for the communist nationalist propaganda, that took shape in the second half of the 70s, synchronous with the rise of Nicolae Ceausescu's personality cult. Asavei poignantly argues that "What communists did not expect to encounter, in their attempt to engineer national folk culture, is that the Byzantine aesthetics is painstakingly in the service of theology as well" (p. 6).

* Alexandru STANESCU is Ph.D. Researcher at the CESI, University of Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: alexandru.stanescu@drd.unibuc.ro.

Asavei's approach is significant not only because it fathoms, through interdisciplinary methodology (drawn from history, political theology, memory studies, art theory, critical visual analysis), the endurance of the Romanian spirit (Romanians are the only ethnic group that has never completely lost self-government in the Balkans - although we can nuance this statement in the case of the Phanariotes¹), but also because it is a testimony of this people's ability to undermine ideologies foreign to their being, even if this undermining is not blatant and violent, but rather masked and persistent. The approach is, I dare to say, novel, as it puts forth the idea of religious art as a special form of cultural resistance against the "totalizing amnesia of the "New Man" ideal, imposed by the communist ideology" (p. 15).

The expression 'cultural resistance' has been widely debated in Romanian intellectual circles for the last thirty years. It is a controversial subject, as, in many cases, that meant no more than intellectuals' complicity and subjection to the communist socio-political agenda. Having said that, seeing things in perspective can reveal multiple nuances and can raise ethical questions of judging people that lived under a strong repressive system, such as Romanian communism. Maria Asavei's study illuminates a delicate line between the concepts of *resistance* and *ambivalence*, in the diligent attempt of grasping the mixture of the two, while keeping an ethical distance from the act of indictment. As far as ambivalence is concerned, Asavei details how Orthodox Christian icons (coined 'Byzantine art') could be produced and traded with special permission, although religious art was officially outlawed in communist Romania. In the same vein, neo-orthodox and neo-avantgarde artist Ion Grigorescu is quoted saying that "in Romania there has always been painting activity in the churches even in the socialist times. But that was not the case in Russia or Serbia, where it was forbidden" (p. 7). The Romanian exceptionalism is substantiated by a rich urban folklore (yet to be fully disclosed and analyzed) that shows how people continued ancestral Orthodox rituals even if they were discouraged by official socialist ideology, albeit not completely banned (e.g. they baptized their children at home, thus avoiding being seen in the church). Asavei further expands this research in the paper titled *Indexical Realism during Socialism* (Asavei, 2020).

Returning to the present book, the scope of the research is far-reaching, from the fascinating study of dictator Ceausescu represented by painters as a demi-god, in the chapter titled "Godless Religious Art of Romanian National Communism," to the mystical and mysterious music of composer Octavian Nemescu (father of awarded film director Cristian Nemescu), whose 'prophetic activism' is linked with

¹ "Members of one of the principal Greek families of the Phanar, the Greek quarter of Constantinople (Istanbul), who, as administrators in the civil bureaucracy, exercised great influence in the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century hospodars (rulers) of the Danubian principalities, Moldavia and Walachia, vassal states of the Ottoman Empire during the period 1711–1821, which is, therefore, known as the Phanariote period in Romanian history." (www.britannica.com).

ecologies of transfiguration (elaborating a theory by Block, 2014), “spiritual awakening towards the enhancement of humanity’s bond to nature, where nature is understood as a materialization of the spiritual in our lives” (p. 128). Under the term ‘prophetic activism’, there is also analyzed the provocative body of spiritual art by Marian and Victoria Zidaru. I have discovered here Zidaru’s *Blood-Stained Christmas* exhibition, installed in 1985, interpreted by Asavei as “an excruciating *lieu de mémoire* of Christian sacrifice and, at the same time, as a preemptive memory about the violence of future political developments” (p. 141). The future political events aim at the 1989 Revolution that, 4 years after the Zidaru exhibition, at Christmas time, claimed more than 1000 lives on the streets of Bucharest - the bloodiest regime change in a former communist European country.

Yet another baffling aspect of communism and its legacy is tackled in Chapter 7 - “The Body in (Post-) Communist Art: A Site of Salvation and Resistance”. The human body was used as collective set piece for megalomaniac mass parades, organized on various occasions (the cultural festival *Song to Romania*, the August 23 parades and so on). In these Asian-inspired shows (i.e. North Korean communism), people painted with their bodies the name of the dictator, slogans and other giant compositions. Asavei revisits these practices through the lens of artist Cristian Pogăcean, in his video-installation entitled *The Actors of Subliminal History*, where bodies form Ceausescu's death portrait (which circulated around the world in the 90s), instead of his living stance. I was struck by this artistic vision, which recalled in my mind a painting by Adrian Ghenie – “The Trial” (2010), that also commented on the fall of a once demigod, totemic figure (Volkan, 1995). The “De-sexualized Bodies” of the communist ideology is a topic which again links, and still very strangely, the communist ideology to certain features of monastic life, which rejects all that is worldly. Can we metaphorically view the ‘Ceausescu communism’ (a.k.a. *ceausism*) of the 1980s as imposing a distorted form of secular, ‘atheist monasticism,’ that extended to the whole society? Communism has been studied in comparison with Christian teachings (cf., *inter alia*, Scrima, 2008), and this paradoxical and disturbing parallel would deserve further study. As would the argument that, after the regime fall in 1989, the treatment of the womanly body fell to the other extreme, from not belonging to individuals, but to the state, to becoming “a commodity whose value is determined by the market” (p. 190) – this invites expansion in future research from the author.

Furthermore, Asavei traces a history of the group *Prolog*, bringing unique details about the resources and inspiration of these Romanian artists. A prominent figure of the group - Ion Grigorescu, emerged on the international art scene in the 90s, due to his politically loaded art, that made him an exponent of “cultural resistance” to dictatorship. Commenting on a Grigorescu interview, taken by Simona Iordache (2018, Trinitas TV), Asavei states that “although individual artists who tackle religious topics in their work may be accepted by the art world, their faith-inspired art is not homologated by the most significant art institutions, biennales and

acclaimed curators of the moment” (p. 226). In the case of Grigorescu, important galleries from all over the world expressed interest only in his critical political art, completely ignoring his “fascinating corpus of religion-inspired art.” This attitude recalls the opacity of the communist era towards the artistic expression of faith.

Turning to the art and religion in post-communist Romania, the author observes a contextual (local) theological interpretation of the massive economic migration to the west (dubbed ‘exodus’ by the local press) as “a way of regaining human dignity after dehumanizing deprivations and the precarious status of Romanians” (p. 254). This phenomenon can be seen as triggered by objective, economic reasons and also by subjective ones, pertaining to the collective trauma that was inherited by the last generation born under communism. The shadow of Ceausescu’s austerity program (from the 80s) lingered throughout the 90s – a decade of further austerity and deprivations, following the dissolution of The Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (1991). During the harsh years of transition, the Romanian society witnessed the sacralization of the market, “idolatry of money” and “an overwhelming revival of religious practices” (p. 262). In this deep conflictual context, Asavei detects an additional complication brought about by the incompatibility of neoliberal thinking with general religious devotement “to themes that do not fit well with neoliberalism— cooperation, community, reciprocity, love” (Hackworth, 2018, p.323). The author continues with a series of Romanian artists that challenged the Romanian Orthodox Church’s ability to tackle social exclusion and poverty, and who also criticized the new ‘consumerist religion’ developed during the prolonged transition. Maybe there would be room for nuances and additions here, regarding the Church’s image and activity, considering that Romanian people seek refuge in faith, away from the hardships of life (many of the hardships being caused by high levels of corruption), and also considering the feeble public promotion of church charity and social actions, that may cause misinformed positions on the matter.

Overall, *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-) Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost* sheds light on the role that faith and religious-inspired art played in communist Romania. The study also renders justice to the artists and intellectuals that actively resisted communist ‘terraformation,’ in spite of the common conception that Romanians were less courageous than other nations left behind the Iron Curtain. The book’s subtitle, *Nostalgia for Paradise Lost*, suggests that nostalgia for humans’ spiritual bond to nature and other forgotten values, can be regarded as a form of spiritual awakening from political, social and economic devastations, valid both before and after the fall of communism. And last but not least, this book restores the artist’s portrait as a sensitive extremity of the world, ever longing for freedom, a being that cannot be told who she/he is or who she/he can believe in.

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