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The politics of violence in post-communist films (Mircea Daneliuc, Romania, Lucian Pintilie, Lee Tamahori, New Zealand).

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THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN POST-COMMUNIST FILMS

by

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Abstract

The thesis is centered around two Romanian post-communist films--__The Oak__ and __The Conjugal Bed__--while also addressing other aspects of the contemporary cultural spectrum. The films constitute a (pre)text for analysis and indicators of larger social phenomena. Using an eclectic cultural approach to post-communist phenomena, I position contemporary Romanian artifacts in relation to the communist inheritance, cultural traditions, and regional features. The thesis is structured to permit continuous dialogism among post-communism and post-colonialism, postmodernism, and feminisms. To emphasize the similarities and dissimilarities among these cultural trends, I have used the New Zealand Film __Once Were Warriors__ as a background. The liminality of the post-communist transition is discussed in terms of its aesthetic and theoretical consequences, with emphasis on the fluidity of the critical approach which has to perpetually attune itself to the dynamics of the events. The aspects I have approached--internalized violence, the lack of positive forms of nationalism, the use of the absurd, grotesque imagery, (self-)irony, and laughter--constitute a dynamic, self-generating system of features. The presence of violence on screen is the outcome of a violent external factor of oppression--the imposition of Soviet communism--which has been internalized. The tacit involvement of

the population through passivity led to heightened levels of guilt, national low self-esteem, and even an absence of a positive nationalist feeling. As liminal types of discourse, the absurd, the grotesque and laughter propose subversive alternatives to both the rigidity of the communist discourse and the stiffness of cheap nationalist optimism.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic topics follow the trajectory of design industry items: they go in and out of fashion. When the "post-colonial" is exhausted--not as a reality, but rather as a vogue topic--where will the antennae of the academic world turn? Between what the early 1980's still designated as the First and the Third Worlds, between the previously Manichean black-and-white distinctions that separated the multifaceted realities mentioned above, one can hardly notice the shades of grey designating the former Second World. In order to distinguish these shades my thesis turns towards the post-communist world to analyze the functions of violence in films, not so much for its own sake as for what it reveals for the articulation of a post-communist theory.

The analysis is centered around two Romanian films: The Oak directed by Lucian Pintilie and Mircea Daneliuc's The Conjugal Bed. To place the post-communist films in perspective, I have addressed other aspects of the cultural spectrum, such as published memories, journalism, other films more briefly treated (e.g. Senator of the Snails and Too Late), and essays on different contemporary topics.

The discussion of violence continuously offers ground for

reference to the *Weltanschauungen* that have given birth to these films. The questions I have addressed may initially appear simple, yet they constitute the departure point for a more in-depth analysis of the general Eastern European context and the articulation of a post-communist theoretical discourse. The first question addresses the role of violence on screen. Do the directors use violence with an ethical purpose in mind? Is violence supposed to be cathartic or a mere mirror placed in front of the spectators that would provoke identity questions? Secondly, what determines the directors' choice for violence in the post-communist context? Is violence on screen a mere Western import that satisfies the consumer's need for vicarious experiences, or is it a reflection of the social realities of the former socialist block countries? It is the purpose of this thesis to outline the extent to which the answer for the above-mentioned questions is a composite yet differentiated one. As further outlined, I formulated my answer to these questions as a dynamic, open system of features that characterize not only the world of the screen but the contemporary Romanian society as a whole.

The structure of the thesis permits a continuous dialogism between post-communism and other current cultural phenomena such as post-colonialism, feminism(s), and postmodernism. Thus, as is more obvious in Chapter IV, I have utilized the highly violent New Zealand film <u>Once Were Warriors</u> as a background for the differences and similarities between the post-communist and post-colonial worlds.

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The juxtaposition of two Romanian contemporary films and a New Zealand film may appear intriguing. The purpose of my comparative approach is revealed in chapter I and II, where post-communism is treated as an operational label utilized for the critical analysis of phenomena taking place in Eastern European countries--and in Romania in particular--while contrasting it to other fashionable labels such as post-colonialism, postmodernism, post-structuralism. These labels should not be given ontological status and a coverage independent of the others. On the contrary, the phenomena they refer to lie at the intersection of several cultural trends. My use of a film produced in New Zealand serves two purposes. First, post-communism ans post-colonialism appeal to any comparative mind, and it is imperative to explore the way in which they interact with each other. Secondly, the comparison is a response to the indiscriminate identification of the position of post-colonial and post-communist countries by such critics as Miriam Cooke[1] and Ellen Berry.

I have not chosen the film Once Were Warriors as a prototype of post-colonial films. On the contrary, as argued in chapter II, its quality as a post-colonial film has been contested. Lee Tamahori's production is created in a post-colonial context, with an attempt to signal the more subtle effects of colonialism, but the society presented is not ideologically completely decolonized. Furthermore, there are obvious shortcomings which have led to a largely negative reaction from the Maori public.

One may obviously question why the post-colonial film is not

accompanied by a postmodern film, which would give balance to my comparative structure as revealed in Chapter II. The reasons reside in the difficulty of finding a purely postmodern film and in the far smaller amount of postmodern elements in the Romanian films analysed. Post-communism, as discussed in chapter I, has much more to share with post-colonialism than with postmodernism.

Chapter I and II position my topic in the larger global cultural context. Although the film critic J Hoberman points to the birth of a new film genre, little attention has been paid to post-communist films in general, and Romanian films in particular; the essays mainly consist of brief reviews, plot summaries in online entries, and very few critical approaches to the presence of violence. While raising questions of agency, I also discuss the legitimacy of my position. Chapter II presents the novelty of my approach--that of returning to a cultural analysis[2] of contemporary phenomena, using films as a (pre)text. I intend to demonstrate that features of contemporary Romanian society have not been shaped out of a vacuum after 1989. Without excluding the influence of the concrete economic and political context, I consider these features to be to a great extent the result of cultural legacies, which should not be confused with eternal, inescapable national features.

It is in the nature of things that the people who have participated in a revolution to ban an oppressive totalitarian regime desire to leave the past behind, and insist that the new stage in their history is marked by an unequivocal social,

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economic, and political difference. Irrespective of the sophisticated theories that have marked the latter half of our century with scepticism, people still harbour the naive belief that a crucial event such as a revolution[5] implies a restarting of the history clock from an original zero. Western politicians, political scientists, economists, and journalists have joined the enthusiasm brought about by the collapse of the communist regimes, designing theories about the global triumph of democracy (e.g. Francis Fukuyama). The end of the Cold War and the opening phenomenon that swept over Eastern Europe in 1989 have left everybody dreaming about the possibility of a peaceful new outlook of the global configuration, now that the binary system of opposition between capitalism and communism seems to have been dismissed for good in Europe. In 1989, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who has gained an international reputation with his theory of the "end of history," predicted that the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe had primed the world for a generalized triumph of liberal democracy. Following the Hegelian tradition, Fukuyama conceives of history as having a terminus point: the moment when humanity has reached that stage of political organisation that best satisfies its internal needs (Pavel 104). This perspective, besides proclaiming the supremacy of the political system developed in the West, is contested by the current developments in Eastern Europe. After ten years, not only do these countries not homogeneously evolve towards the model of Western democracy, whether of American or of European origin, but

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some of the countries—such as Romania—seem to be caught in a limbo of indeterminacy, in which the initial desire of the people to completely separate themselves from communism appears insufficient. It becomes obvious that the events in December 1989 have not eradicated all the cultural, economic, and political legacies of the past, a key argument that I have developed in this thesis. The aspects analysed emphasize the fluidity of temporal boundaries, constituting the pre-communist and communist inheritance into important parts of the identity of post-communist countries.

Chapter III offers a summary of previous explanations for the presence of violence and the grotesque in post-communist films, from Hollywood influence, to psychological explanations of repressed expressive means, and to the attribution of violence to deeply ingrained Eastern European characteristics. Without completely dismissing them as inadequate, I discussed their limitations.

Finally, in Chapter IV I present explanations for the presence of violence and grotesque imagery in films, while continually contextualizing them into the larger cultural background. Violence in films is the result of a previous violent act (the forceful imposition of communism) which has been internalized, assumed, and later experienced as a feeling of collective guilt. Moreover, for almost half a century, no negative aspect connected with communism had been publicly expressed, a phenomenon which partly contributed to the eruption of long-

suppressed tabooed language and imagery. Besides a cultural inheritance of a sense of the absurd, the grotesque aspects also stem from a denial of positive nationalist feeling. Sometimes, the violent imagery is tamed by (self)irony, which however, in excess, contains the danger of a disengaged, amoral position. These are only a few aspects which are related to violence in films which sketch a larger cultural perspective, encompassing the different media.

The Romanian films to be discussed belong to a relatively short span of time, roughly the first five years after 1989. A striking similarity of imagery among many of the Romanian post-communist films has been one of the prompters of the present thesis. However, their narrative lines are quite different.

Lucian Pintilie's[3] 1992 film The Oak[4] is a retrospective reflection on what communism forced the Romanian population to become, the way in which it altered our mentality, while sending the message that mental refusal to comply with the system is the means to survive the mayhem. Nela Truica, a rebellious, intellectually mature and sophisticated woman, is the daughter of a former Secret Police officer, who was driven from the center of power and left to die in poverty. Getting a job as a psychologist for specially gifted children in a countryside town, Nela has to travel through the human geography of pre-1989 Romania. A rape, attempted on her by anonymous assailants clad in black, acquaints her with a doctor who later becomes her lover. The two characters are the protagonists of a picaresque journey through the

countryside, a journey that reveals social aspects of the communist regime (poverty, the inefficiency and moral depravity of the clergy, the desensitization of the people). This gloomy atmosphere culminates in the symbolic scene of the massacre of the innocent children traveling on a hijacked bus. Protesting against the communist regime, the hijackers use the innocent children as a shield, believing that the authorities would never endanger the lives of children. Yet, despite the feeble protests of the army officer, the order from "above" is to fire until the dissenters hiding in the bus are "liquidated," regardless of how many children die as a result. The averted faces of the soldiers who, out of sheer horror and guilt, fire without watching problematize the degree to which the entire population of Romania, and of post-communist countries in general, is guilty by consent. The ending of the film apparently brings about a ray of hope, since the protagonists decide to continue their opposition to the brutal system: the scene presents them under an oak tree with a gun defensively pointed at society.

1992 was also the year when Mircea Daneliuc[5] produced The Conjugal Bed, a film that shocks through extreme conjugal violence and a pessimistic and bleak mood that persists to the very end. Vasile, the manager of a cinema theater[6], and his wife Carolina, who is unemployed, struggle with the daily financial difficulties of post-revolutionary Romania. Mother of two children, Carolina is pregnant again with a baby on whom her money-oriented mind pins all her hopes: she has decided to sell the baby for Western

currency and help her family out of financial crisis. Vasile's opposition brings to the foreground the antipathy and hatred between the two spouses. More practical, Carolina rents the cinema theater for the meetings of a recently formed party. Moreover, she rents their apartment for the production of a porn film in which Stela, Vasile's mistress, stars. Along the same line, Stela makes money out of prostitution, with the approval of her husband. Exasperated and repulsed--although he himself is far from being a model character--Vasile tries to kill his wife, in a surrealist scene that is difficult to watch. He repeatedly stabs her and pounds a nail in her skull. Unsuccessful, he attempts to set himself on fire in the University Square, a place highly associated with freedom values, but he is dissuaded by the indifference of the passers-by. He finally commits suicide by hanging himself behind the screen of the cinema theater, during one of the meetings of the newly formed party. In a sort of cinematographic afterword, Daneliuc sketches the future of Romania in the image of the year 2006: the derelict buildings dominate the background along with cranes--the former symbol of socialist construction--while one of Vasile's children, starved and idiotic, is initiated into sex with the prostitute Stela, newly returned from Istanbul. In Chapter III I correlate he bleakness of this story with the gloomy tone of many contemporary Romanian essays.

The New Zealand film Once Were Warriors, directed by Lee Tamahori[7] has served as the background for my comparison between post-communism and post-colonialism. Living in a slum, Jake Heke's

family has become part of a culture that places emphasis on brute male power, a cult of muscles and drunkenness. While Beth, Jake's wife is aware of her ancestors' cultural heritage--she tells stories from Maori mythology--Jake takes delight in emphasizing his low origin as a descendant of slaves. As a result of perpetual feasting and drunkenness, the two parents lose control over the lives of their children: Nig joins a gang, while Boogie is taken away to a state school for reeducation. Grace, a very sensitive teenager, finds her way out of the daily mayhem (her mother is constantly beaten by her father) by immersing herself in writing. The event that precipitates the dismemberment of the family and Beth's awareness of the necessity to save her children is Grace's rape by "uncle" Bully and her subsequent suicide. Beth and her children abandon Jake, identified as the source of violence, to retreat back to the Maori tradition. The analysis is further complicated by the differences between the highly controversial[8] original novel written by Alan Duff and the film.

These films have served as the (pre)text of my exploration of post-communism by signaling features later recognized as integral to the contemporary Romanian society.

Notes:

1) In June 1998 Miriam Cooke conducted a graduate seminar with the MA students in American Civilization, at the University of Bucharest, in which she has overemphasized the similarity of the position of women in post-colonial and post-communist countries.

2) Cultural approaches have grown out of fashion at the end of the 20th century. "Contemporary sociology pays lip-service to its classical founding fathers--among them, Toqueville, Veblen, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel--but it does not take seriously their approach to social phenomena" (Mestrovic 22). Mestrovic explains this disenchantment with traditional cultural approaches--which assumed the existence of permanent, recurrent features--as caused by the contemporary preeminence of postmodern theories of culture; postmodernists view culture as "rootless circulating fictions and signs that do not refer to anything permanent" (18). The postmodern approach to culture fails, for instance, to explain the rebirth of dangerous nationalisms throughout the world.

3) Lucian Pintilie emigrated from Romania during the communist regime to France where he became internationally appreciated (with numerous nominations at the Cannes Festival). However, after 1989 he longed to return to Romania and explore different social aspects of his native country.

4) The original title of the film is Balanta [The Scales].

5) Mircea Daneliuc (b. 1943) has been one of the most prolific directors after 1989--he has directed five films: The Snails' Senator (1995), Soapte de Amor (1993), The Conjugal Bed (1992), 11th Commandment (1991), and Adam and Eve (1990).

6) The film reflects the fate of Romanian cinematography and film business. Andrew Horton's discussion of the Russian cinema applies very well to the financial difficulties faced by cinema managers in Romania: "Cinemas closed as pirate videos flooded the market, and those that remained pumped in cheap American and European movies, virtually pushing Russian films off the screen" (3).

7) Once Were Warriors is Lee Tamahori's first feature film; he previously worked as a commercial director. "The 43-year old Tamahori describes himself as a 'classic hybrid,' born to a Maori father and a European mother." <http://flf.com/warriors/walfilm.htm/>

8) In an interview, Lee Tamahori explains the reasons that have made Alan Duff's novel highly controversial: "No one had ever written anything like this before. No white person could write a story like this, they would be vilified and run out of town, chased down with guns and knives. It had to come from someone who was Maori and Alan Duff knew this life pretty well, he grew up in it so only he could write about it. Of course it bred a lot of controversy, certainly among the intelligentsia and a radical element who are interested in a revisionist history of Maori whereby only positive images are presented rather than ever showing the downside." <http://flf.com/warriors/walfilm.htm/>

CHAPTER I

"Placing" Post-communism

Just Another "Post-"?

It has become impossible not to notice the fashionable plethora of terms formed with the prefix "post-" which academic journals, studies, and anthologies: postmodernism, post-colonialism/postcolonialism, post-structuralism, more recently post-communism, and other coinages that have not been established (yet) such as post-feminism(s), post-cultural studies, post-Marxism, post-ethnicity, and more. One cannot help wondering about the attraction that characterizes this prefix. Its disadvantages and its reputation as a misnomer have been repeatedly emphasized, as I shall discuss later. It is important, however, to mention that the prefix bears different connotations that become part of the compound: theoretical awareness, the sense of an intellectual process that reached an apparent terminus point but has overcome it, detached disenchantment or even cynicism, connotations of decadence and *fin de siecle*. The decision to append a prefix to an

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already existing term instead of coining a new one bears the suggestion of an epistemological limit. Paradoxically enough, a sense of successful transition is imbedded in the prefix. Humorously addressing this affluence of the "p-word," Gregory Elliott mentions some of the features enumerated above: "*Fin de siecle, aube de siecle*-except that the contours of the new dawn are only dimly discerned, the future invariably being depicted as the eternal repetition of the transitional, untranscendable present: a future of no future, so to speak" (416), and later points to the lack of "innocence" of the prefix. I will go further and state that the prefix makes a strong claim for epistemological, and implicitly theoretical maturity, a predisposition toward the "metanarrative" self-reflexivity. These semantic traces have become part of the inheritance of the term "post-communism," and, later in this thesis, their relevance is discussed in terms of cultural features of the Romanian transition.

Any discussion of post-communism has to refer, at least briefly, to the history of the term, its coinage, usage, and the semantics implicit in its two components. Obviously enough, post-communism refers to what follows communism, inevitably introducing a misleading temporal sequentiality. Thus, the discussion follows the trajectory of the term "postmodernism" (Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale): the term is a misnomer, since it implies an evolutionary sequentiality suspect in the contemporary intellectual climate. At the same time, the term incorporates its own enemy--the cultural

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stage it was supposed to overcome is made part of its identity.

The combined efforts of post-structuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and other "-isms" have ingrained the suspicion that history is far from being a highly organised, structured, teleological sequence of events. On the contrary, cultural history is characterized by extremely fluid and permeable boundaries, and the names of epochs are rather operational labels which should not be given ontological status. The discussion is far more complicated than this space allows, but, briefly, it implies that after 1989 the communist cultural baggage was not safely packed away and deposited in the vast repository of "History." My thesis asserts and demonstrates that cultural legacies, excrescences of the past affect and effect the present. The past is a part of the present, and the communist heritage--as loathsome as it is to the majority of the population in the Eastern European countries--has to be acknowledged as a suppressed "shadow" of a public ego.

Does the "post-" in post-communism simply refer to the span of time following the events in 1989, or does it refer back to any subversive cultural products from 1945 to the present? The second meaning, which converges with the use of the term "post-colonialism" (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, Postcolonial 2), is preferable, since it positions contemporary films in an ongoing discursive movement of cultural resistance and redefinition of norms which started in 1945 in a subdued manner and has become obvious after 1989.

The term "post-communism" is sometimes substituted with

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"post-socialism," "post-Marxism," or placed in the context of "post-history." Do these terms cover the same realities? Whether post-socialism is easy to comprehend and can be substituted for "post-communism," "post-history" is a term coined by Fukuyama, who asserts that the collapse of the communist regimes would bring the whole world together under the umbrella of capitalism, the ultimate destination of humankind. "Post-communism" should also be distinguished from "post-Marxism." The collapse of European communism did not imply the eradication of the ideology that has supported it (Marxism) but constrained its disciples to question and reformulate many of its assumptions.

According to Ellen Berry, the year 1989 marked the post-communist moment of "ideological bankruptcy," in a post-utopian moment of cultural "zero time" (337). To postulate the existence of a "zero time" or of a "post-history" is to conceive of one date (the events in December 1989) as an absolute beginning. Linguistically, the term "post-communism" separates socialism and post-1989 events into a clear-cut opposition. It is self-evident that no arbitrary data can bring a complete reversal of a political, economic, and cultural reality, and that no "revolution" could result in a spontaneous movement; rather, it was the result of the accumulation of tension and the surfacing of an underground subversive movement. Rather than considering the Revolution (I use the term with caution) as an unsurpassable gap in ideological, political, and economic terms, the year 1989 appears as a porous, permeable texture. This representation allows

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for the use of the term "post-communism" as referring back to any movement of subversion or resistance after 1945. At the same time Vladimir Tismaneanu's view of the current political climate in Romania reinforces the view of the post-1989 context as multifaceted and ambivalent: "We live in an epoch of ideological syncretism. The ideological style characteristic to our age is the baroque. Elements that we traditionally associate with the experience of the left merge with elements which, according to the same tradition, we associate with the experience of the modern intellectual right wing politics (Balul 69) [my translation].

From Communism to Post-communism

To explain the legacy of the communist regime it becomes necessary to briefly outline its history in Romania. Between the two World Wars, the Communist Party had an almost invisible presence in the political life, and, for the greatest time, membership in it was illegal. The political turmoil of the late 1930s and 1940s, the abdication of King Charles II in favour of his very young son, King Michael, the military dictatorship of General Antonescu, the attempts of the Nazi-oriented Iron Guard to seize the power, and, most of all, the decision to turn the arms against Germany and join the Allies, made room for the Communist Party to snatch political power. The occupation of Bucharest by the allegedly allied Soviet troops in August 1944 propelled the

Romanian communists to the position of negotiators. Moreover, as everywhere in Europe, their attempts were supported by the Soviet Union, "the international fatherland of socialism" (Memmi 28). It took them only a short time (until 1948) to fraudulently win the elections, force the king to abdicate, completely destroy the democratic parties, and brutally suppress any form of opposition. After that year, the history of Romania became the mayhem of political cleansing and imposed "happiness."

With the forced abdication of King Michael in 1948, Romania was proclaimed a People's Republic, and a new constitution was introduced, based on Soviet ideas about judicial systems, political institutions, economic centralization, and education (Deletant 82). The same year the industrial, banking, insurance, mining, and transport enterprises were nationalised, an educational reform was implemented, introducing Russian, the history of the Soviet Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism as compulsory subjects, while also banning religion from schools. The following year the process of collectivization began, by forcefully snatching the land from private owners and turning it into state property, and with it the eviction and deportation of rich peasants also started (Deletant 82-83). In 1965 Nicolae Ceausescu was chosen to succeed Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej as Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party. Influenced by the uprising in Hungary and the refusal of Ceausescu to join the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the late 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by a wave of liberalization and

increasing independence from the Soviet Union. However, Ceausescu's visits to China and Korea, his admiration for these countries and the cult of personality to which he was introduced, his determination to pay the Romanian international debt as a proof of the country's autonomy produced the most disastrous effects on the economy as well as on the mentality of the people (Deletant 169). Coerced into silence by the terror that the omnipresent Securitate [Secret Police] would retaliate against any protest with torture, imprisonment, or forced labour, the population, living on meagre rations of food (five eggs, one kilo of meat, one kilo of sugar per month), under the constant pressure of power blackouts, and last but not least, under the continuous ideological indoctrination about the "Golden Age" and "the Most Beloved Son of the People," accumulated tension and resentment which exploded in the December 1989 revolution[1].

The Question of Agency

Since post-communism is far from a purely aesthetic trend, its political agenda forces the scholars who approach this topic to identify their position in relation to it. As with post-colonialism, the various feminisms, and African-American studies, the question of agency holds an important position in post-communist writing. In post-colonialism and the various brands of feminism the intellectuals are suspected of not representing the

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voice of the oppressed. They are frequently accused of articulating an elite theoretical position that further reifies the object of the discourse. Thus, Gayatri Spivak is conscious of her inauthentic position in writing about the doubly-subaltern Indian women, colonized both by the British and by the prevalent patriarchal discourse, since she belongs to an intellectual and social elite class. The question of agency is closely related to the success of Marxist criticism with some post-colonialists and feminists, because Marxism enables them to address class oppression that has pushed working class women and low class natives to an extreme margin.

On the other hand, post-communism positions intellectual agency in a different light. For it was the intellectual class that was first exterminated or utterly silenced by the communist regimes as a highly probable dissenter. Thus, the post-communist intellectual, as the survivor of oppression and as the former target of silencing and marginalization, does not raise the question of imperfect agency as acutely as the post-colonial intellectual does. Labeled as "nonproductive" and "reactionary," the Romanian intellectual was coerced into a subdued, silent, brain-washed position, if not completely annihilated. However, my position as a descendant of an intellectual family and as a subject of the socialist regime for sixteen years does not make this thesis representative of a collective Romanian point of view or a collective Romanian intellectual perspective. My project has been born out of what may appear a cliched exilic position, even

if the distancing was self-elected. Yet, this spatial and metaphorical distance has allowed me to articulate considerations on a topic that would not have seemed obvious while I remained in Romania.

CHAPTER II

A Cultural Approach to Post-communism

Against Scientific Rigorousness

So far post-communism has been mainly defined in economic terms; therefore, this thesis implies the concurrent definition of critical tools which would allow for multiple perspectives. The critics that have referred to _The Conjugal Bed_ and _The Oak_ have usually contented themselves with summarizing the plot or with passing hasty judgements on the use of violence and the position of women. Therefore, the necessity of articulating a more general critical discourse on post-communist films, and implicitly on the post-communist condition in general, is obvious.

Interpretation of contemporary Romanian films is closely related to deciding whether they are the reflection of a trend of violence in cinema that Romanian films share with American ones, whether the choice of the directors is motivated by individual aesthetic and ethical decisions, or whether they bear the mark of an "ineffable" national cultural matrix. Cultural identity is one of the concepts difficult to approach, escaping any organized form

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of analysis, mostly because it involves multiple parameters. Thus, any cultural identity bears the imprint of its belonging to a certain nation, ethnic group, class, gender, etc. I have undertaken a cultural approach, being fully aware that the reference to "national spirit," national characteristics, or the distinctive features of the Romanian nation are impregnated with traces of previous cultural approaches. In a study on national mythology, Lucian Boia summarizes the interbellic contributions to cultural anthropology and philosophy, relating them to the surge of national feeling characteristic of that period:

> The myth of the Romanian spirit has been asserted in direct connection with the myth of unity. Having its origin in the 19th century romanticism ("the spirit of peoples"), the idea of a specific and permanent spirituality, differentiating the Romanians from the other national syntheses, was vigorously asserted at the beginning of the 20th century, along with the fight against the abuse of foreign influence. Its most elaborate shape was offered by the nationalist right wing in the 1930s. Lucian Blaga's <u>The Mioritic Space</u> (1936), in an undoubtedly seductive demonstration, defined the features of the Romanian soul as corresponding to a typical geographical space and environment, the central element of which is *plaiul* ("a rather high plateau, on a green mountain top, gently descending into a valley"). The identification of the national spirit with Orthodoxy (Blaga, Nae Ionescu, Mircea Vulcanescu) highlighted the separation from the Occidental

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models invoked by the previous generations....With
considerably less philosophical subtlety, N. Ceausescu used
to enumerate the features--all of them obviously positive--
inherited by the Romanians from either the Dacians or the
Romans. (Boia 21)

keeping in mind this inheritance, I have combined cultural
traditions with the impact of external influences. My thesis
analyses the above films as being affected by the fact that their
directors and producers are part of the post-communist world as a
whole, the Romanian transition with all its cultural inheritances
in particular, and an intellectual elite influenced by current
Western trends.

**Review of Studies Which Favour a Cultural Analysis of
Post-communism**

A cultural evaluation of post-communism is bound to go beyond
the economic and the political. It is always safer to take
recourse to domains that can be "scientifically" analysed in terms
of concrete results and figures. This safety can explain why post-
communism has been mainly addressed in economic and political
terms. However, post-communism is more than the sum of new
economic and political parameters. Its identity is also determined
by what we elusively call culture--the psychology of the people,

the cultural inheritances, the frame of mind prevalent in a certain society which informs any artifact. Only a few books have had the temerity to approach post-communist societies in terms of mentalities and cultural inheritances. In 1993, in <u>Habits of the Balkan Heart</u>, Stjepan G. Mestrovic, Slaven Letica, and Miroslav Goreta boldly undertook the task of explaining the causes of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina by taking recourse to the term "habits of heart"--a set of features characteristic of a group or a nation which explains their historical evolution. Their attempt is doomed to criticism, since it implies a subjective bias and the possibility of chauvinism. By listing violence and the desire for authoritarian forms of ruling as characteristics of the Serbs, they give rise to questions about generalization, essentializing, and othering.

In a collection of essays <u>Post-communism: Four Perspectives</u>, the editor, Michael Mendelbaum, admits the multifaceted identity of the phenomena homogenizingly defined as "post-communism." In one of the essays, Stephen Holmes stresses the inappropriateness of old concepts in operating with this new reality, and the necessity of articulating a "new vocabulary and a new approach" (25). Along the same lines, my thesis warns against the indiscriminate use of old concepts that bear traces of different historical and political contexts. The use of catch-phrases such as "colonialism," "imperialism," "nationalism" is burdened with divergent meanings and definitions which transform them into umbrella terms, with a quasi-ontologic status. There is a danger

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in succumbing to the temptation of analysing the features of a "theoretical" term, its polysemy, rather than the multiple realities it is supposed to (re)present.

In an extensive study of post-communism, Leslie Holmes has researched various theories on the causes of the collapse of communism. Warning readers of the limitations of any general, explanatory theory that elegantly yet in an oversimplifying manner offers solutions for the communist crises and the current situation, he proposes his version of integrating the various data. Advocating a "legitimation crises theory," he concludes that "ultimately, readers must decide for themselves which theories and approaches provide the most convincing explanations of the collapse of communist power. For many, a mixture of several, even all, will be optimal" (61), since the situation is different from one country to another, and, in interpreting it, supremacy has to be given to different factors. This theory has the benefit of leaving the door open for cultural factors, instead of clinging to a strictly economic and political reading. However, later in the book, Holmes structures his analysis of post-communism only in terms of "institutional politics," economic parameters, "social policies and problems," and "civil society." Unfortunately, the chapter dedicated to the civil society leaves untouched anything beyond social movements and the much-debated rebirth of dangerous nationalisms. The frame of mind of the large masses—their optimism or pessimism, their reaction to social change, the reflection of the general atmosphere in cultural artifacts—is not approached.

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For this reason my thesis attempts to illuminate at least some aspects of the cultural climate in one of the post-communist countries, by examining its reflection in contemporary Romanian films.

In a recent article entitled "The Coal Miners and Psychology," referring to the recent violent protests of the miners in Romania, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu introduces a discussion of the role of individual and collective psychology in shaping the current socio-political Romanian landscape. Denouncing the abstract usage of terms such as "the Economic," "the Political Apparatus," "the Financial," she asserts that all these institutions and constituents of the state are in fact supported and determined by individuals who have their own psychology, who react more or less idiosyncratically to events and stimuli. She stresses the reciprocal relation between the society as a collective of individuals and the politico-economic climate in which they live, each influencing and creating the other:

> we should face and forever understand that... "the social" is a dangerous abstraction if, intentionally or not, one forgets that in our everyday existence...it is impossible to work with an abstract concept: "the social," "the society" are concrete realities, made up of individuals, having a psyche which is undoubtedly determined by social factors, by the social context in which we live, but which they constitute. [my translation]
> <http://www.romlit.sfos.ro/texte99/r/905min.htm/>

If after 1989 post-communist countries have been perceived as a whole--a unitary block of nations sharing a common heritage--it has become increasingly obvious that the twenty-seven countries (Holmes S. 25-26) have evolved and will evolve differently. This difference and its causes have become a new focus of research since both signify that the communist inheritance is not crucial to the future development of a country; rather, another factor has been over?ooke.. rnis ineffable factor can and has been defined as national character, cultural inheritance, frame of mind, *Weltanschauung*, etc. It suggests that the economic and political system these countries were forced to accept for almost half a century is not the only crucial factor determining their future trajectory. Studies analysing the post-communist world in economic terms list hierarchies of the development of different Eastern European countries (Madelbaum, Charles Gati), thus implying the existence of a factor that makes some countries more successful than others. This success is usually pinpointed in terms of a more liberal government, an insightful president, the impact of foreign investment, or the successful implementation of economic reforms such as the acceleration of privatization.

Some critics argue that Central and Eastern European countries have never experienced the birth of liberal democracy, since they have not truly experienced the Renaissance. Liberal democracy is based on the individuals' right to equality and freedom. From this perspective, the core ideas of liberal democracy were born with the Renaissance, although they became institutionalized only in the 18th

century. Previously a mere element in the hierarchy of creation, the human being became the centre of attention in the 15th century. The role of the community was de-emphasized in favour of the individual human being. Furthermore, less stress was placed on the duties and more emphasis was placed on the individual's rights. There are other phenomena that accompanied the Renaissance (such as the Reformation and the birth of the printing press) which, in the long run, played a major role in the creation of liberal democracy. The Reformation demoted Latin from the position of sacred and superior language and promoted the equal right and capacity of different forms of vernacular to express profound meaning and carry the Biblical truth, thus attacking the idea of a hierarchy. The concurrent rise of the bourgeoisie undermined the idea of a hierarchy based on genealogy, a process which eventually led to the affirmation of equality.

Although Eastern European writings have been influenced by the ideas of the Renaissance, it was only an elite that absorbed the creeds of humanism while the majority of the population did not have access to them. According to this theory (Mandelbaum 13-15), the closer a country is to the areas that have known a full-fledged Renaissance, the higher the chance of having been positively influenced by the constellation of phenomena that accompanied the Renaissance (mainly the Reformation and the birth of the printing press). Vladimir Tismaneanu explains the difference between Central East European countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary and Eastern European countries (Romania,

Bulgaria, Serbia etc) in terms of geographical position: the closer the country was to the areas where the Renaissance flourished, the more profoundly has its population integrated the humanist philosophy: "I do not mean to imply that in the East the human being has been humiliated by definition, or has been disregarded, but that the form in which the respect towards the human being was institutionalized was different in the East from the West" (Pavel 195). One example that would support the above argument is Transylvania, which, of all the regions of Romania, is best developed from an economic perspective. Having a number of ethnic minorities (Hungarians, Germans) many of whom belong to different churches, it has been more receptive toward the ideas of the Reformation.

Another argument involves the role of the church during the communist regime and after. Both foreign and Romanian scholars have blamed the non-implication tactics practised by the Orthodox church during the communist regime: in 1948 religion was banned from schools, church-going was regarded with hostility, and in the 1980's Ceausescu demolished many churches that were in the way of his urbanism plans. The attitude of the Catholic and Protestant churches in the other countries is offered as a counter-example. However, according to Max Weber, it is Protestantism that is associated with humanism and liberal democracy, while in Poland and Hungary, two of the most advanced Eastern European countries, the majority of the population is Catholic. Although communism has severed many of the ties between the population and the church,

religion still constitutes an important factor in the definition of identities[2]. In the two Romanian films analysed, religion plays no role. On the contrary, in The Oak the priest's role confirms the view of passivity of the Orthodox clergy. The priest profits at the expense of the faithful villagers to lead a life of abundance, organizing boisterous parties with the atheistic local party leaders. He becomes at least a comic character, drunkenly riding a motorcycle, instead of being the pillar of support that he is supposed to be. That men of God are of no help to the population trying to outlive the mayhem of communism is the message that Lucian Pintilie offers in The Oak.

It has become clear that cultural identity is a complex concept that involves several types of discourse: cultural, ethnographic, religious, philosophical, social. Thus, the cultural traditions that I have identified as characteristic for the films analysed are, as Tismaneanu suggests, a sum of "axiological, cultural, anthropological elements" which imply "a discourse of social, religious and political anthropology" (Pavel 196). Theorists have listed numerous factors as determinant of the current configuration of post-communist societies: the revival of nationalism and identity politics, "the subversive role of learned helplessness", "psychological passivity inherited from totalitarian times" (Holmes S. 26), a work ethic different from that of Western workers, etc. The best solution in coping with this amorphous mass of cultural legacies is to take into consideration as many as possible, without excluding the more "technical" and analysable

factors such as economic and political activity.

Post-communism versus Post-colonialism

In this thesis I juxtapose post-communism and post-colonialism based on the numerous similarities they share. As with all terms that, in a fascinating yet baffling manner, carry the prefix "post," the post-communist and post-colonial realities are bound to appeal to any comparative mind——much in the same way in which post-colonialism and postmodernism have been played against each other. Post-communist societies, having borne the burden of Russian imperialism, are temptingly similar to post-colonial ones, so that, when one embarks on a comparative analysis, the differences should be addressed.

My purpose is to point out that there is no identity between the two concepts, but, as with many current cultural trends, a degree of overlapping. Both "post-communism" and "post-colonialism" are operational labels that facilitate the discussion of contemporary phenomena; in discussing the realities that they cover, one has to resist the temptation of giving them ontological status. Nevertheless, these concepts influence the reality in the way any dominant ideology shapes the world, and the current emphasis on post-colonialism has changed the way in which formerly colonized countries have been perceived, has opened the gate for

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overlooked literatures and cultural artifacts, and has stressed the rights of the formerly oppressed. In the same manner, it is necessary to promote the culture of the former communist countries, firstly, for the right of any silenced culture to be heard in a world dominated by the pattern of Western experience, and secondly, for the perpetual mirroring that cultures played against each other perform. This reciprocal mirroring leads to an enriched vision of the other cultures. A fine example of analysing the relevance of studying Eastern European cultures for the Western world is provided by Stepan Mestrovic's _The Balkanization of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Post-communism_ which engages the two types of culture in a dialogue meant to reveal the development and the outcome of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the role of the participants, and the consequences of the implication or lack, thereof, on behalf of the Western world.

Colonialism versus Imperialism

The juxtaposition of post-communism and post-colonialism is grounded on more than their sharing the prefix "post-." It is a common history of domination that makes these two experiences comparable. While colonized countries were under the hegemony of a Western metropolitan centre (Britain, France, etc), the post-communist countries were forced to become the satellites of the

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Soviet Union. It is ironic that Czarist Russia--described as imperialist by the communists--after having become the centre of the USSR gave rise to imperial forms of domination within the very system that initially denounced the domination and exploitation of other people. However, there is a difference between on one hand the experience of countries like New Zealand, Australia, India, etc and, on the other hand, the common fate of Eastern European and some Central European countries. The latter is more often termed "imperialism." According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin,

> in its most general sense, imperialism refers to the formation of an empire, and, as such, has been an aspect of all periods of history in which one nation has extended its domination over one or several neighbouring nations. Edward Said uses imperialism in the general sense to mean "the practice, theory, and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory" (Said 1993: 8), a process distinct from colonialism, which is the "implanting of settlements on a distant territory." (122)

Their argument elucidates the role of ideology in the achievement of hegemony, and its preeminence over the physical occupation in the case of Russia. Referring to the experience of Western European imperialism, they emphasize a feature shared by Russian communist imperialism: "it was the power of imperial discourse rather than military and economic might that confirmed the hegemony of imperialism in the late nineteenth century" (127). What Romania and

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New Zealand share is a history of deleterious inoculation—to use a clinical metaphor--with an ideology that was imposed from the outside. Nowadays, countries fighting to heal the painful experience of external domination emphasize the devastating effects of ideology rather than of economic or political domination. It is the war with words that is the most difficult to win, in an attempt to heal the scars left by the past. Economic and political systems are easy to change, while the ideological inheritance leaves deeper traces. It was ideology that was capable of reproducing the Soviet communist system into the Eastern European countries, without the necessity of territorial occupation.

However, there are major differences in terms of the ideological content and the way it was implemented between Romania and colonized countries. The British rule indoctrinated its subjects with a feeling of inferiority, proclaiming the superiority of its civilization and silencing the local cultural experience. While the cultural experience of the colonized has never been in a position of superiority over that of the white race, communism /socialism has emerged as a doctrinal alternative to a well established political experience--that of liberal democracy. Moreover, colonialism established a hierarchy which proclaimed the political, cultural, economic superiority of the white ruling class, a hierarchy which justified oppression as "civilizing process" conducted with humanitarian motivations.

Secondly, colonialism and Western European imperialism implied interracial relations which led to a binary polarization and the

use of racist symbolism promoting the superiority of the white race. Soviet imperialists did not promote the superiority of the Russian nation, but that of their political system. The Bolsheviks sought to empower and unite the working classes throughout the world; therefore, an ideology supporting the superiority of the Russian nation would have been incompatible with their agenda. However, all the satellite countries were forced to bow in front of the achievements of Soviet scientists, writers, essayists, and politicians as representing the summit of human intellect.

Thirdly, communism was imposed on populations that were already organized into independent states, while most of the colonized countries became independent states concomitant with or after the retreat of the colonizers[3]. Up to this point, I have mainly emphasized the difference between colonialism and imperialism, between post-colonialism and post-communism. However, the rest of the thesis focuses on the similarities between the two cultural phenomena and the benefits of comparing The Oak and The Conjugal Bed with Once Were Warriors.

Liminality and Transition

For centuries, the Western critics have ascribed Eastern Europe to a middle position, a scenario still persistent in contemporary writing: "In practice eastern Europe constituted a transitional zone between the Western tradition of the division of

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power and the Eastern tradition of concentration of power" (Schopflin 63). Repeatedly, Romania has been liminally placed "at the gates of the Orient." The history of Romania has been ascribed to a limbo, a perpetual existence on the threshold, neither Westernized enough to be part of the civilized world, nor "exotic" enough to be part of a "barbaric" Orient. The threshold constitutes a field of political forces, and to be relegated to it implies constantly asking for admittance into the realm that lies beyond the gate. This condition of eternal waiting is discernible in the current political agenda of the Romanian government, frantically attempting to be integrated into the European Community, NATO, or other Western-based organizations.

The very "in-betweenness" of the current position of the post-communist countries, frequently termed "transition," is prolific and seductive. It represents the mixture of a recently implanted Western technology——without the underlying work ethic——with a "Balkan mentality", which interlocks reminiscences of a pre-World War II society and the alterations brought about by the communist regime. "Transition" has become a magic word in post-communist countries, a word that is hardly expected to explain a status quo, but which provides a convenient label that can excuse negative aspects of the society. "Transition" is the term employed to positively connote an evolution, even if the target is vague, and to mask and justify a social, economic, or political "lack." What politicians, intellectuals, and artists usually avoid addressing is the outcome of the transition. The term should normally denote

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the passage from a no-longer-desired, outdated stage to a "goal stage." By insisting on the liminal temporal dimension, the cognitive content, the signified of the final stage becomes empty. Without necessarily having a negative role, this process blurs the outline of the socio-political stage to be reached at the end of the transition.

If everyone is aware of what regime Eastern European countries have evolved out of—a communist society—it is ideologically vague what the final stage of this process will be. Apparently, post-communist countries are moving towards a Western model of democracy. Will this political model imply an aesthetic identification of post-communist films with the Hollywood trends? It is hardly desirable since the goal is not merely copying and transplanting Western artifacts into a different cultural context, but creating original ones. In agreement with Mestrovic et al, I believe that, to a certain extent, there are some "habits of the Balkan heart"—common enough to Eastern European countries, yet different from one to another—a certain frame of mind, that make it impossible for any post-communist country to be identical to a Western country, at any time in the future. By signaling this difference, I am not passing a sceptical judgement; rather, I am emphasizing a positive, enriching feature. This cultural diversity is exactly what makes post-communist films, and post-communist cultural products in general, worth studying. The superimposition of Western technology and of structures of the political apparatus over the countries from the former socialist block merges with a

local mentality, only to create new, unique identities. This hybridization of traditions is positively reflected in the permeability of the cultural mood which is bombarded with different artistic models, while drawing on older ones. Therefore I have approached the liminal, transitional stage, with all its aesthetic porousness (the Greek words *peras,* limit, and *poros,* porous, have a common etymology, according to Gabriel Liiceanu) as a seminal topic for academic research and as a crucial aspect for the interpretation of post-communism.

The transition makes the post-communist position similar, to a certain extent, to the post-colonial situation. Homi K. Bhabha has persistently insisted on the necessity of articulating the post-colonial discourse in a "third space" and temporal dimension. The result is a discourse that goes beyond a synthesis of the colonial and nationalist positions. Much in the same way, the so-called Romanian transition films can reveal both the assimilation of the subtle and subversive techniques necessary in a censorship-dominated communist society, and the influence of current Western aesthetic *topoi.* The two Romanian films I analyse appear to preserve the recourse to symbolism characteristic of earlier productions (prostitution and corruption in The Conjugal Bed represent the decline of a money-oriented society), while also exploring formerly forbidden artistic vocabularies (violence and nudity). From this perspective, the Romanian post-communist cultural transition can be termed liminal. Liminal time is a span in-between, governed by the logic of both/and. It is defined by

features pertaining both to the cultural zone the liminars want to accede to--a tuning of the Romanian cinema to Western trends--and to the zone they have belonged to--the aesthetic inheritance of subversive techniques developed during the communist regime. Following recent aspects outlined by Victor Turner and Mihai Spariosu, my use of the term "liminality" is purged of any religious connotation referring to spiritual initiation. My thesis relies on my earlier research[5] on the necessity of applying the theory of liminality to the post-colonial context. Further, I apply aspects of this theoretical framework to the post-communist context.

The transition is amorphous, without being necessarily chaotic; it is a field of forces with vectors oriented in different directions. If during the communist regime all the underground opposition converged onto the unique purpose of undermining the state organization, nowadays the formerly unique target has been atomized in a multitude of solutions, each of them having a claim to possess the key to the salvation of Romania. As I will discuss later in more detail, this is a consequence of the disappearance of an external enemy which has given direction to the hatred and the subversion movements in communist times.

The Romanian transition is characterized by a limbo temporality, which can lead to opposite results. Unpredictability and a continuously performative character make academic writing about the transition difficult. The transition is not characterized by a definite, fixed set of features, but it constantly develops

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new ones. This dynamic process raises problems for scholars eager to approach post-communism in a traditional, rigorous, and systematized manner: "At this early stage, for one thing, we cannot be sure if what we are looking at are temporary aberrations or long-term trends" (Mendelbaum 65). If during the first year after the revolution the predicted time for Romania's capacity to attain the level of a Western country was measured in years, nowadays it is measured in decades, or according to the more pessimistic, Romania will never reach the level of a Western democracy. The theoretical consequence of this issue for the structure of my thesis is the impossibility to identify a finite, unique set of features of post-communism; thus, I am constrained to operate with an open and flexible system of features, which need reevaluation and attuning to the events[6].

Theoretical Consequences of the Liminality of Transition

The cultural scenario that I am trying to sketch resembles a kaleidoscope: the movement of a grain triggers a change of pattern and perspective. Following Bhabha's line of argument ("DissemiNation" 297), when articulating a theory about a nation one has to take into account the temporal lag that occurs between the attempt at systematizing the data, which inevitably reifies the subject, and the dynamic self-definition that the nation performs in its day-to-day existence. This problem does not require the

utopian bridging of the temporal gap, but its acknowledgement. Once the structuralist enchantment with the residual nineteenth century desire to transform the humanities into "sciences" was over, post-structuralism has opened the gate to the fluidity not only of the "art text" but also of the "critical text," while releasing it from the straightjacket of "accuracy." Moreover, the current developments have given both the "artistic" and the "critical" texts the possibility to be politically involved (Bhabha "Commitment" 19-21) by breaking the boundaries between the two types of discourse. The features analysed in chapter III are not meant to exhaust and systematize the topic but to sketch a far larger cultural phenomena in a post-communist country.

Post-communism and Postmodernism

In the Introduction I emphasized the necessity of mirroring post-communism against other cultural trends, including postmodernism. Postmodernism is by definition a product of Western civilization which has reached an advanced level of industrialization and a disenchantment with its own forms of technological and highly specialized culture. However, postmodern ideas are not strange to post-communist artifacts, not necessarily as an inherent way of perceiving the world, but as a fashionable import. Since the films discussed are the products of directors and producers familiarized with and schooled in Western thinking and

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artistic trends, postmodernism appears as a cultural import which is not grounded on an epistemological experience.

The presence of postmodern elements in contemporary Romanian artifacts leads to the discussion of "forms without foundation," a recurrent theme of Romanian culture since the middle of the 19th century and one which has been employed to point to the unauthenticity of certain cultural phenomena that have been embraced by the Romanians. First approached by Mihail Kogalniceanu after the 1848 Revolution, this thesis discusses the inadequacy of Western institutions to the civilization and mentality of 19th-century Romania. Later, between the two world wars, Eugen Lovinescu promoted the catch phrase *ex Occidente lux* and proved the synchronicity if not the lead of the Romanian Avantgarde (e.g. Tristan Tzara and Dadaism).

Following this line of interrogation, one cannot but wonder whether communism was an experience genuinely attuned to Romanian and Eastern European spirituality, whether there was a cultural feature specific to Eastern Europe that invited this plague. In answering this question one has to take into account that the transition to communism, in the way Karl Marx conceptualized it, was not supposed to take place in Eastern European countries, but in industrial Western countries that have reached a certain level of development (Holmes L. 8), so that later, Lenin had to theoretically accommodate this discrepancy. Nowadays, some critics have claimed that post-communist states cannot possibly be considered fully democratic societies, after the model of Western

liberal democracies, since they have not reached the level of social, economic, and political maturity that a democracy requires, and their exposure to liberalism prior to 1945 has been superficial. They emphasize the inadequacy and temporal gap between the liberal democracy that is being implemented and the resistance of the people, weighed down by the burden of cultural inheritances contrary to Western traditions.

The thesis of "forms without foundation" entitles us to question the authenticity of many cultural and political trends in relation to its contemporary national mentality. It is not my purpose to perpetuate this thesis; on the contrary, I am arguing that contaminations between open cultures are natural, and even the imposition of cultural fashions through the mediation of the elites is to be regarded as a normal phenomenon.

As discussed in more detail in chapter IV, some of the contemporary Romanian films display postmodern features (irony, self-referential undertones). Their presence does not necessarily attest to the postmodernity of the Romanian society, but the artistic choices of an informed intellectual elite.

Thus, one has always to take into account the dialogism between the cultural voices that make the current Romanian cultural context. It is the merit of Sorin Alexandrescu to have discussed the romanticized interbellic Romanian society as atomized and lacking coherence. For Romania between the wars and for present Romania coherence can be offered only discursively, by forcing different facets into a singular, apparently coherent identity. The

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atomized character of different versions of reality, of histories--
-instead of one History in search of the Truth--make the
overlapping of post-communism, postmodernism, and features of post-
colonialism appear confusing. It is this problem that I have
emphasized earlier, when discussing the operational character of
labels such as "post-communism." The use of this operational term
is not to be confused with the presumption that the current
Romanian society can be homogeneously described in an analytical
attempt. A violently unifying discourse should be avoided; rather,
a critical discourse on post-communism can give space to different
types of competing narrations, some of them apparently belonging
to the past, but virtually present in contemporary responses to
them.

Notes:

1) It was outlawed in 1924 (Deletant 147).

2) The term "revolution" has to be used with care, since many sceptical
political scientists contend that the power has been arrested by forces
socialist in training and belief. However, other critics, with whom I
agree, argue that the role of the masses in the popular uprising, and the
selflessness with which they have sacrificed their lives give the events
in December 1989 the status of a revolution. Some journalists and essayists
use the term between inverted commas, which does not necessarily deny the
event, but signals their awareness of the multiple perspectives on the
event, and removes the mythical halo, allowing for a critical response to
it (e.g. Tismaneanu in Pavel 193).

3) The closest example is the war in the former Yugoslavia, where people are categorized into Serbs, Croatians, Albanians (national identities determined by linguistic communities) and Muslims (an identity determined by religion).

4) This argument was suggested by Dr. Rodica Mihaila, Professor of English at the University of Bucharest, during a private conversation.

5) See "Liminal Space in the Post-colonial Context."

6) The extent to which the war in Yugoslavia will affect the neighbouring countries, as well as the fate of the world, is unpredictable. The danger of the degeneration of the conflict into a larger-scale war is a crucial argument in favour of researching the mechanisms of hatred and violence. Once again, simulated violence on screen becomes the starting point for analysing the cultural phenomena that underlie it.

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CHAPTER III

Theories of the Presence of Violence in Post-communist Films

Violent Films for a Violent Population

The presence of violence on screen in post-colonial and post-communist contexts has and will be read in different ways by the various interpreters. The first interpretation is perpetuated by critics who consider that violence on screen reflects reality involuntarily. Its presence is not the rational choice of the directors, but "betrays" a social characteristic. In simpler terms, the imagery of the films is aggressive because the people who have produced them are aesthetically "savage." Most Western critics, addressing the current development of Eastern European cinemas, consider the transition the mark of crudity and immaturity of the aesthetic tools. With neo-colonial sententiousness, Michael Wilmington asserts that "relentless,

chaotic **The Oak** reflects Romania's brutality." The other reading by Western critics of post-communist films stresses the transition as a descending, confusing, and confused period following the glory days of sensitive, symbolically rich Eastern European movies of the 1960s and the 1970s. Barbara Quart patronizingly suggests that the directors' need to redefine their artistic tools resembles the attitude of "rabbits in a dark room...when the lights are turned on, it takes their eyes a while to adjust to the light" (64). Yet, the post-communist transition does not necessarily imply aesthetic chaos. Rather, the resulting hybridity is productive and prolific: it offers the possibility of exploring a variety of artistic means, in which the use of violence and sexual explicitness is part of the process.

Mestrovic, Goreta, and Letica approach the post-communist experience from a sociological perspective in an attempt to explain the success of the communist experiment in Eastern Europe, as well as the current evolution of the socio-political situation, utilizing the concepts of "habits of heart" and "habits of mind." Relying on Durkheim's work, as well as on the essays of an obscure sociologist, Tomasic, their study strikes a different yet colorful note by using a set of defining features and national characteristics. Their reliance on the possibility to explain the contemporary economic and political climate by definitions of national character, however elusive they are, is astonishing at the end of the twentieth century, even with the current distrust of purely "scientific explanations." However, in their

interrogation of the Western position with respect to the current situation in the former Yugoslavia and their explanation of the notion of social character as the foundation for perceiving Eastern European countries as "interesting," they still take recourse to a tradition of binary and romantic oppositions:

Tomasic writes that 'the Russian heart is infinitely pitiful and tender, but at the same time what gross and often completely aimless cruelty and tyranny are to be found in Russian life.' He quotes Tolstoy to the effect that there exist two Russias, one rooted in universal culture and ideas of goodness, honor and freedom, while the other is 'the Russia of dark forests, the animal Russia, the fantastic Russia, the Mongol-Tartar Russia,' Russia as the negation of Europe. Anyone who examines the details of day-to-day social interaction in any Eastern European nation is likely to conclude that Tolstoy's observation can be extended and still applies to some extent. (Mestrovic et al 74)

The fragment cited above is an example of the way in which academics can fall into the trap of authoritarian quotations and surrender to the temptation of *mise en abyme* until the source of the idea is no longer questioned. Their explanation of the existence of a dark, cruel side of the Eastern European as the source and the explanation of the presence of violence in films constitutes a gross oversimplification.

One should cautiously approach the so-called characteristics of Eastern Europe. What Mestrovic et al have analyzed as "habits

of the Balkan heart" (guilt, violence/savagery, innate totalitarian preferences, etc) are the favorite site of nationalist feeling and an efficient "othering machine." Members of a certain ethnic group will tend to regard their own characteristics with indulgence, while the "other" will always be charged with negative connotations. Another pitfall of labeling resides in its inherent bias towards over-generalization and essentialism. Therefore, I consider it necessary to specify that my use of the term "national/regional feature" lies under the sign of extreme caution, and, if I agree with Mestrovic's term of "habits of mind," it is as a convenient work tool which opens up the discussion for other post-communist characteristics, rather than conveniently reducing the material to a rational Procrustean bed. Although I agree with Mestrovic et al about the existence of some national/regional features which can account for social, political differences, the features listed by them are not always the ones that I consider primary to the discussion. Quoting Tomasic, they argue that

> there exist some Eastern European and other Slavic types of social character that are not conducive to the Western notions of democracy or free-market economy. Moreover, this power-seeking, Slavic type of personality structure may explain why before, during, and, in some cases, following communism age-old patterns of authoritarianism, power-seeking, and autocratic rule have persisted. (Mestrovic et al 50)

However, I am eager to admit that certain East European features do exist, as a result of the historical economic evolution, as well as of the role of the church. These features include a different *Weltanschauung* and work ethic. The majority of Eastern Europe has not embraced the Protestant outlook--especially Calvinism--nor the concurrent work ethic. According to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the Western attitude towards work and financial success can be ultimately traced back to the Calvinist doctrine of the elect: material prosperity is a mark of those whom God has chosen. The Eastern European population seem to indulge in a more contemplative frame of mind, which can be labeled using the Latin term *otium*--an attitude that is often described by Westerners as laziness and lack of productivity. Moreover, the communist regime with its abolition of private property has further encouraged this non-lucrative temperament. Refraining from qualifying this attitude as either positive or negative, and, therefore, escaping the temptation of a convenient binary treatment, it can be rewarding to further investigate aspects of this non-lucrative tendency, without qualifying this attitude as either positive or negative. In chapter IV I will readdress this feature when discussing it in relation to (self-)irony.

In Reaction to Communist Austerity

In exploring the linguistic and visual explicitness prevailing in contemporary Romanian artifacts, from postcards[1] to essays and films, one has to take into account its relationship with the aesthetic climate of the socialist regime. The strict rules of censorship imposed by Ceausescu and the Communist Party and reinforced with the help of the Securitate [the Secret Police] left a major impact on the artistic consciousness of directors. It is obvious that the "naked" truth (even if it implied unnecessarily many naked bodies) is a reaction to the coercion imposed by censorship, but this release could hardly be considered the only reason. Pintilie's 1995 production *Too Late* does not impress the viewer with its artistic qualities, yet it is almost sure to make an impact through the multitude of male and female nudes displayed (miners showering after work, policemen urinating, etc).

For many years, in communist countries the truth was uttered--if ever--under a slanted form, disguised as an affirmation of the state ideology. This imposed mask, painful as it was, has helped to polish the tools of subtlety. Duplicity and ambiguity were the site of subversion, even if the mask of truthfulness looked awkward and imposed to the external spectator: "Like an ailing person, awkwardly smeared by blatant make-up, that is what our cinema looked like" (Popovici 76). Has this powerful inheritance been wasted after 1989? The techniques of ambiguity have remained

part of the directors' aesthetic arsenal--an argument which supports my thesis that post-communism did not start in December 1989--even if the directors have chosen social realism and unmitigated truthfulness as the new expression devices. Does visual explicitness imply that post-1989 productions are less valuable? What freedom of expression has brought about is not only the liberty to have a political stance different from the governmental one, but also the possibility to explore spheres that have been absolute taboos in communist literature and film. Communist propaganda attempted to encroach on private space in order to sanitize and regularize[2] it to fit the purposes of its ideology. The year 1989 has produced a reverse movement which includes an invasion of the private into the public sphere in the form of nudity and exposure of the intimate.

Violence as Western Import

The third reading given to the presence of violence and nudity in post-communist and post-colonial films considers it the mark of Western influence and rebellion against former rules of censorship. Critics have claimed that

> graphic sex and violence have become an inseparable part of post-communist filmmaking... mostly because they were banned from the screen during communist times, but also because East

European filmmakers often believe, keeping in mind the success of American films, that those are features that attract wider audiences. (Iordanova 37)

The assertion appears to be gratuitous since, by 1993, Romanian directors should have realized that extreme violence and realistic sex scenes have feeble chances of attracting a public that refuses to see the sordid aspects of everyday life blown out of proportion on the screen. Yet, violence and sex have remained an integral part of East European filmmaking. Even voices of Western criticism have rejected The Conjugal Bed and The Oak as not only disturbing, but also disgusting: "Few protagonist couples in modern cinema can seem so outrageously nasty and unpleasant as Nela and Mitica" (Wilmington F1). Therefore, the realization that the presence of violence and sex on the screen is not imposed by box office ideals, nor by an innate attraction to violence, makes us consider the alternative that the presence of these ingredients is the result of the mature choice of artistically accomplished directors combined with more subtle sources to be discussed in detail in chapter IV.

Notes:

1) During the last years at the Romanian seaside, there has been an invasion of postcards more or less sexually explicit.

2) The communist government fought any forms of sexuality that escaped the control of the party. Brothels were outlawed--this is the narrative focus of Pita's film _The Stone Cross_--, sexuality was restricted only to marriage (extramarital sex, not to mention the birth of children outside marriage, could result in job loss). At the same time contraceptives disappeared from the market and abortions were outlawed, since Ceausescu needed a numerous work force.

CHAPTER IV

Post-communist Films and Violence

Following the synopsis of critical positions on the presence
of violence, this chapter is focused on my own readings of the
causes of the persistence of violence and grotesque imagery in
Romanian post-communist films. In the Introduction I mentioned
that my argument is organized as a dynamic, performative system of
features which are both pertinent to the films discussed and mark
the current Romanian cultural environment as a whole. The post-
communist films do not represent a terminus point of the analysis;
I have used them as a barometer, an indicator of larger social
phenomena. The features discussed are not permanent either, since
they are continuously influenced and modified by the evolution of
the transition. As previously discussed, the transition--a liminal
temporal dimension--implies a high degree of ambiguity. By
stressing ambiguity I am not sliding into the comfort of a
difficult to refute position; on the contrary, this characteristic
makes post-communism more complicated, intellectually stimulating,
and invites continuous analysis.

Internalized Violence

Without completely neglecting the role of the first three hypotheses, I argue that the presence of violence on screen is not a de-historicized reflection of contemporary violent societies, but mostly the outcome of a violent external factor of oppression and colonization which has been internalized, and which, therefore, has become invisible. This is a process characteristic of formerly colonized countries--even if colonization is more ideological in nature than physical and territorial, as was the imposition of Russian communism on Eastern European countries. The situation is similar to a certain extent to the reaction of the colonized African bourgeoisie struggling to attain a leading position after the colonizer retreats. According to Franz Fanon, after a colony was proclaimed independent, the white ruler class was substituted by a native elite who imitated the habits of the imperial culture. Seeking to "replace the foreigner," the bourgeoisie, which "has totally assimilated colonialist thought in its most corrupt form, takes over from the Europeans and establishes in the continent a racial philosophy which is extremely harmful to the future" (161-62), the first effect of which is the dismemberment of national unity. In similar ways, the Romanian Communist Party elite mimicked and re-produced the Russian communist patterns of indoctrination. Thus, the conflict is internalized. For instance, the beginnings of the political

career of Nicolae Ceausescu as a national leader lie under the sign of the trust conferred on him by the Romanian communists as "one of us" to be preferred to the foreigners, the Russians (Deletant 149).

Having its roots in the process of internalized violence, one of the recurrent elements in political and ethical debates is the issue of guilt. After the retreat of the Russian army in 1958, those who perpetuated communism were citizens of Romania, not external enemies. Under these circumstances, is only a political elite to be blamed, or is the entire population guilty by consent? The Romanian journalist Cristian Tudor Popescu almost manages to touch on the problem of the sublimation of the external cause of violence: "An enemy is a point of reference,...an ordering principle that saves the people from the most fierce fight that a man or a nation can lead: the fight with its tortured and savage soul" (23) [my translation]. Therefore, the reason for the presence of violence becomes complex and obscured when the cause is sublimated.

The process of internalizing the source of violence is more obvious in the post-colonial context, since the form of colonialism practised in New Zealand was explicit and cannot be easily overlooked, as compared to the form of ideological colonialism practised by the "Moscow Center" in its Eastern European satellites, which, in Chapter II, I have discussed as imperialism. Therefore, I will first address the mechanisms of this process in <u>Once Were Warriors</u> and later discuss the more

subtle, yet pervasive phenomenon of violence assimilation in the post-communist films.

The presence of a no longer visible yet powerful violence is obvious in the introductory scene of Once Were Warriors. The camera is initially focused on an almost surreally beautiful landscape, only to zoom out and reveal it to be a billboard on a highway, next to a slum in which most of the inhabitants are Maori[1]. The frame, the *parerga* conveyed by the billboard, redefines the relation of the Maori with the landscape and the tradition from which they have been alienated and transplanted into a culture of the slum. Through the process of colonization, the Maori tradition and the beautiful landscape have been transformed into simulacra.

This is more obvious in Alan Duff's novel which inspired the film. The source of initial violence is still visible--the symbol of the great mansion belonging to a white family is a constant reminder of the colonial history--and there are constant allusions to the world of the white people with whom the Maori intersect in official, power-wielding institutions. From the window of her bedroom Beth meditates on the parallel yet so different faces of the Maori living in a slum, committed to a life of alcoholism and abuse, and the white population whose dreams seem to be easily fulfilled: "Mr fukin white Trambert with the big stately dwelling...and endless green paddocks that backed onto the line of miserable state boxes erected on land he'd once owned but sold to them, the government, so they could house another lot of brown

nobodies" (Duff 8). This perpetual reference to the source of colonial violence perpetuated through institutions is another reason for choosing the novel and the film _Once Were Warriors_ as apt for juxtaposing the post-communist and the post-colonial situations.

The Oak is a fairly explicit reminder of the ideological violence performed on the Romanians after World War II. There is no reference to the initial forceful imposition of the communist structures by the Soviet army, yet, there is a sense of an invisible yet omnipresent power which operates through the mediation of executors. The large majority of the population was subdued into silence and brain-washed to blindly execute any orders coming from "above." In the violent scene of the massacre of children, the mechanisms of oppression and coercion into silence are best exposed. Reluctantly, the soldiers and the army officers execute the impersonal orders received on the phone from "above[2]," knowing that disobedience would cost them their lives or long years to be served in prison and would also jeopardize the lives of their relatives. This was one of the key mechanisms of coercion into submission, which reached a paroxysm in the Pitesti experiment[3]. Forcing the individuals to choose in favour of their own lives and the safety of their families instead of opting for a solution dictated by humanitarianism and morality, the authorities have inextricably involved the innocent population in their crimes.

Blurring the fine demarcation line between colonizer and

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colonized, oppressor and oppressed, this process of internalization of violence has far-reaching consequences in the structure of the nation, introducing mutual suspicion and atomization of the whole. On the other hand, as I shall explore later, it also produces a generalized feeling of guilt. Mestrovic discusses guilt as one of the "habits of the Balkan heart," a distinctive feature of Eastern Europeans:

> In stark contrast with the seemingly guilt-free American, [he quotes "Don't Worry Be Happy"] guilt is thoroughly woven into the cultural fabric of Eastern Europe, and especially the regions of what used to be Yugoslavia. It has been kept alive by both the churches and communism....(89).

This is the place to address the legitimacy of the post-communist theoretical discourse to approach ethical issues such as guilt, the immorality or amorality of violence on screen, etc. Similarly to post-colonialism, feminisms, and African-American studies, post-communism has a political agenda to fulfill, which implicitly promotes a moral stance. To be able to articulate their position as victims of ideological colonialism, brain-washing, and cultural hegemony, the post-communist writers have to promote a discourse which is articulated in ethical terms. As early as 1989, Linda Hutcheon signaled one of the basic differences between post-colonialism and postmodernism:

> I want to underline from the start the major difference, a difference post-colonial art and criticism share with various forms of feminism. Both have distinct political agendas and

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often a theory of agency that allow them to go beyond the post-modern limits of deconstructing existing orthodoxies into realms of social and political action. (130)

What she discussed about post-colonialism holds true about post-communism, as well. The post-communist discourse cannot afford the luxury of playful amorality which informs postmodernism[4]. As I am going to argue later, this is one of the reasons The Conjugal Bed cannot be considered "authentically" post-communist; rather, it is contaminated with postmodern elements.

Nationalism and/or Its Absence

In the previous section I discussed the way in which a population can internalize the violence imposed from the exterior and further perpetuate it. In the long run, this process will lead to the impossibility of distinguishing between the guilty and the innocent.

When, as in December 1989, the social system that has produced such mental mutations is finally discarded, the population may naturally experience guilt as generalized into a feeling of low self-esteem and disgust for having allowed the past to happen. Apparently, in Romania these feelings have developed into a complete lack of confidence and national pride. This

process was further emphasized by a collective distaste for any nationalist discourse, as a consequence of the extreme ideological distortion to which the Ceausescu regime has pushed national feeling.

The issue of nationalism has to be discussed in more detail. Being charged with different and divergent historic connotations, it has become an umbrella term. Moreover, more and more countries, to avoid marginalization of ethnic groups, constitutionally define themselves multinational. The international press and scholarship have warned against one of the negative features of post-communism, perceived as a source for a potentially explosive political situation: the rebirth of nationalism (S. Holmes, L Holmes, Mestrovic, etc). They have referred to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation in Kosovo, in some of the former republics of the Soviet Union, the instigations of the Russian extremist leader Zhirinovsky, or, in the case of Romania, the aggressively nationalist discourse of the leader of Large Romania Party [Romania Mare]. The question is whether and in what manner these forms of extremism impact the films produced in Romania. At the opposite extreme from these ideologies, the film producers demythify Romanian history. It is the natural reverse effect after the years when Ceausescu distorted nationalist ideology to suit his external policy of autonomy[5].

However, nationalism in moderate degrees is quite a necessary ingredient that can propel the state further, or, in Fukuyama's terms "although, in a certain understanding, nationalism can be

the antithesis, the enemy of democracy, it can also be its catalyst, since it can move people even to give up their lives to destroy tyranny" (Pavel 109) [my translation]. Thus, if extreme forms of nationalism can be potentially dangerous and should be prevented from degenerating into aggression, the complete lack of nationalism can be equally dangerous for the future of the country. Complete distrust in the power of a people to adapt to the current economic demands, derision of traditions that are part of the individuality of a people and which can provide unique solutions can wreak havoc on the possibility of a post-communist state to survive on the contemporary economic market. This distrust characterizes a large majority of the Romanian population, especially the intellectual class, who, more or less aware of the effects of the manipulation of nationalist ideology[6] in communist times, reject any form of nationalism, positive or negative.

Nationalist feelings are difficult to quantify, and deciding which is the right type and degree of nationalism would be a utopian endeavour. However, it is essential to point to the lack of a constructive form of nationalism in the current Romanian culture: in the newspapers, in mass media programs that marginalise most of the Romanian cultural products[7], subordinating them to Western TV programs, especially of American origin, in studies, and, last but not least, in the films analysed in this thesis. This "lack" is what creates the extreme forms of cynicism that characterize the above-mentioned artifacts. Cynicism

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naturally accompanies the rejection of optimistic, all-
encompassing metanarratives, such as the Marxist utopia of a
golden future based on equality, communal possession of means of
production and goods: "If communism involved having an all-
embracing ideology that claimed to have answers to everything,
then, there was bound to be cynicism about any alternative,
putatively omniscient ideology" (Holmes L. 15).

In **New World Disorder** Kenneth Jowitt distinguished between
"ethnically oriented communities" and "civically oriented
communities," two concepts he later refined in an interview with
Dan Pavel (181). According to him, every country has the choice of
being "predominantly" exclusive or inclusive, two types of
attitude which correspond to the above mentioned categories. This
distinction helps differentiate not only between Western
countries, but reveals subtle differences that might mark the
different fates and evolutions of the countries in Eastern Europe.
This concept has to be considered since one of the major sources
of violence in Eastern Europe is ethnic conflict (as in the case
of the former Yugoslavia). Thus, it is important to ask if ethnic
conflict plays any part in the films discussed. There is no
indication of ethnic animosity in **The Oak** or **The Conjugal Bed**,
although a lot has been said and even exaggerated in the Western
press on the position of minorities in Romania. However, Mircea
Daneliuc's more recent production, **The Snails' Senator**[8], presents
the violent conflicts between the Gypsy minority of a village and
the Romanian majority culminating in the burning of the houses of

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the former. Once again, as in _The Conjugal Bed_, Mircea Daneliuc uses the female body to articulate general social metaphors: a Romanian woman is raped by Menix, a young Gypsy man, although previous consensual intercourse between them is suggested. The police authorities as well as the senator on vacation are unable to provide any positive solution to the violent reaction of the Romanian community except for the scapegoating of some of the Romanians--since "they are the majority"--although apparently the arson was started by another minority member, the Hungarian Farcas. Daneliuc is very apt at suggesting that in cases of ethnic conflict it is difficult to separate the population into the innocent and the guilty, and the solution of the mayor ("we will arrest some Romanians because they are the majority") proves what misunderstanding of minority rights can produce. In pursuit of the approval of international organizations, this solution only reverses the centre-margin hierarchy, without benefiting either the majority or the minority, in the long run. The conflict remains unsolved because of the impotence of the legislators and the police forces.

In the Introduction I have mentioned my intention to use the New Zealand film _Once Were Warriors_ not so much as a topic per se, but as a background to compare theoretical aspects of post-colonialism and post-communism. This strategy does not imply that the New Zealand production is in any way the prototype of post-colonial films throughout the world, or that it consists of a collection of representative post-colonial features. There is

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nothing about _Once Were Warriors_ that makes it "more post-colonial" than one of Ousmane Sembene's films, for instance. On the contrary, the film's claim to be a truthful representation of Maori life and an attempt at decolonization has been contested, although to a lesser extent than Alan Duff's novel. The society represented in the novel and the film barely acknowledges that the Maori have been pushed into an existence of violence and alcoholism both by the white government and by their self-complacency.

Following the discussion on nationalism in contemporary Romanian films, it is important to observe that the community in _Once Were Warriors_ is a highly segregated one. The white (Pakeha) and the Maori societies barely intersect, a conflict more obvious in the novel than in the film. This crisis is approached by Jane Kelsey as the coexistence of two nation-states—Aotearoa and New Zealand—over the same territory, since the white colonists refuse to recognise the native population. This conflict, which is deemphasized in the film, is one of the roots of violence which has become self-destructive.

Alan Duff's novel _Once Were Warriors_, the basis of the film's screenplay, is more explicit in terms of ethnic tensions. In the chapter "They Who Have History," Grace and Boogie are introduced to the solemn judging room, whose walls are covered with the pictures of famous white men. The theme of history(ies) haunts the book, emphasizing one of the violent signs of colonization; the history of the colonized is muted, and the occupied population is

forced to study the history of the colonizers that does not communicate anything to them:

> No one taught us this at school. They taught us their history: English history. They forced us to learn, off by heart, dates and names of great Englishmen and battles fought in a country none of us have ever been to nor are likely to go....and they never understood that to remember things of knowledge ya have to have fire in your belly for it, like the great chief there, or just ordinary passion of wanting to remember it because it, well, it's about yourself, historical knowledge most easily remembered. (Duff 179)

From this perspective, Alan Duff's novel is more explicit in endowing the characters with a sense of consciousness of the violence that has been done to them. While not exclusively blaming the whites, it points to them as the catalyst of the Maori collapse. On the other hand, Tamahori's film excludes the whites completely from this equation, and blames only the Maori community for the disasters that befell them. This accounts for the very cold reception of the film in the Maori community.

David Spurr explains the mechanisms of othering that propel the white dominators to erase the history of the dominated:

> The discourse of negation denies history as well as place, constituting the past as absence, but also designating that absence as a negative presence: a people without history is one which exists only in a negative sense; like the bare earth they can be transformed by history, but they cannot

make history their own. The absence of history is a theme in Hegel, who finds that Africa, having no political constituiton, no movement or development to exhibit, is no historical part of the world....This way of defining the African, as without history and without progress, makes way for the moral necessity of cultural transformation. The colonizing powers will create a history where there was none. (Spurr 98-99)

It is the power of hegemony that makes the oppressed populations assume and perpetuate the hierarchy that the colonizers impose. Although differing in degree, both the novel and the film Once Were Warriors represent the journey into awareness of some of the members of the Maori community.

Contrary to the producers' and most of the critics' opinions, I consider that Alan Duff's novel--whether more violent or not--has more to offer in terms of an ethical solution than the film with the same title. In the novel those Pine Blockers who did not want to follow the way to self discovery and understanding of the Maori tradition are left with their choice. In the film, Beth's solution of ousting Jake and his alcoholic companions closes a door on them, and they are the only ones blamed for the decline of the Maori community, a guilt that is succinctly phrased by Beth as having its origin in the slave ancestry of Jake Heke.

Internal Discrimination and Elitism

My discussion of nationalism has shown that among the Romanian films only _The Snails' Senator_ discusses the dangers of ethnic conflict and blaming among ethnic groups. Reciprocal scapegoating is a facile political method; however, its persuasive power and lure for the masses in a state of crisis should not be underestimated. _The Oak_ and _The Conjugal Bed_ do not even allude to this danger. On the other hand, I have pointed out that the novel and the film _Once Were Warriors_ differ in terms of the treatment of Maori-white colonists relations: only the former blames the white colonizers partially for the desperate state in which the Maori population finds itself. Both the Romanian films mentioned above and Lee Tamahori's film confront the spectator with a different type of discrimination. The blame is no longer laid on a factor external to the ethnic community, but on members of the same community.

Lee Tamahori has purposefully stressed Beth's triumph over the violent environment and her retreat into the "true" Maori tradition. This solution, appealing as it may seem, suffers from the shortcoming of elitism. Jake Heke--the movie's source of violence--is identified with the tradition of slaves: "You're still a slave to your fists, to your drink, to yourself." In a facile manner, instead of acknowledging the evil in the society, the film lays the blame on a fraction of the community. In the last scene of the film, Beth explains to Jake her reasons for

starting a new life without him: "Our people once were warriors. Not like you Jake. They were people of mana, people of spirit. If my spirit survived with you for eighteen years, then I can survive anything. Maybe you taught me that."

Post-colonial and post-communist cultures are faced with the lack of an external enemy who has so far directed their subversive energies. The enemy becomes internalized and leads to a hiatus in the perception of the society as a whole: the formerly "us" becomes split into an "us-the-elites" and "they-the-guilty-ones." The same elitist solution confronts the spectator of The Oak. The retreat of the protagonists into their own world of sensitivity, with Mitica defensively pointing a gun at the violent society, does not offer a solution for the other members of the community. The conclusion that haunts not only this film, but also other contemporary Romanian writings (e.g. Patapievici) is that some people are endowed with more sensitivity and political perceptiveness than others, and this justifies their retreat into a "club" of their own. Apparently blaming himself along with the entire Romanian society, the essayist Horia Radu Patapievici pushes this elitist position of "those who are aware" to an extreme. In apocalyptic terms he points to the "abysmal laziness of the Romanian soul" (49), since "we dance blissfully around our own pestilence" (55): "Romanians are already one body with the cancer that devours them. Surgery is powerless, since the incision into the inseparable parts would do nothing but combine amorphous parts of an abnormal the body..." (54). The very act of writing

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the collection of essays marks him as one of the elect, distanced
from the mass through the power of intellectual awareness. I have
previously emphasized the necessity of critical self-inspection,
by removing the aura of myth from our history, purified and re-
written to distortion by the communist ideology. However, the
process of de-mythization should not be confused with self-
destruction. Thus, it becomes obvious that the discussion of post-
colonial and post-communist cultures implicitly leads to ethical
issues.

The solution offered by the directors of _The Oak_ and _Once
Were Warriors_ for the societal crisis is an elitist one, which
separates the community according to class, genealogy, or
intellectual sensitivity. At the same time, the moral message of
the film seems to dissipate itself when the spectator is
confronted with an overwhelming amount of physical and verbal
violence. On the other hand, _The Conjugal Bed_ configures a society
on the edge of moral and intellectual decomposition. The stress
appears to have been moved from a plausible ethical message in _The
Oak_ and _Once Were Warriors_ to a playful delight in gratuitous
violence and grotesque in _The Conjugal Bed_. Is there an
allegorical meaning hiding behind the satirical grimace of
Daneliuc's film?

The vacillation between the two film categories seems to
trace the movement from the belated ethics of a moral awakening to
the cold and ironic gaze of a postmodern eye. Moreover, one should
keep in mind that Lee Tamahori has diverted the stress initially

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placed by Alan Duff on Jake Heke's gratuitous violence to Beth's solution out of the crisis, because "if the book's bleakness remained intact on the screen, it would empty cinemas quicker than you could say Ishtar" (Lewis 6). This movement between the choice for an ethically involved solution—a moral mirror placed in front of the spectators—and the delight in gratuitous violence by blowing up the proportions of negative aspects appears to be characteristic of the post-communist and post-colonial cultural contexts.

Laughter and the Absurd

The shift from violence to its grotesque carnivalization implies looking at the subversive power of laughter as well as connecting it with "habits of the Balkan heart." What is the place of absurd and grotesque imagery in the articulation of a "post-" discourse? According to Andrei Codrescu, the absurd is "an efficient Balkan potion", first used in literature by the Romanian Tristan Tzara (51). The absurd and the grotesque not only articulate the reflection of societies found in a moment of cross-roads, and the *Unheimlichkeit* that such a moment provokes. These artistic means also propose a subversive alternative discourse to both the rigidity of the communist and colonial discourses, and to the stiffness of cheap nationalist optimism. That the impact on

the spectators/readers is that of profound discomfort is not surprising, since the function of any liminal discourse is to raise questions and attack established hierarchies. Along these lines, Lucian Pintilie, the director of _The Oak_, confessed in an interview:

> I also strongly believe in the state of catharsis provoked by laughter. When people laugh, they are liberated of their complexes: they feel empowered. For me this is very important. The passage to humour gives people the force to distance themselves from the past. It is a form of vitality. I am condemned to have a black humour vision....But black humour is revitalizing: it gives the force of passing through the Inferno, and the Inferno crossed with humour leaves behind the infernal experience; from here you can see even further. Black humour is the refusal of the gratuitous, an invitation to lucidity as an existential condition. The capacity to mock yourself reinforces the element of survival. (93)

Pintilie's creed circumscribes his films to the long Romanian tradition of self-humour and black humour. It has been equally praised and disparaged. The rejection of black humour (or _bascalie,_ as Romanians call it) is determined by the very thin line that delimits it from indifference, carelessness, and cynicism. Too much humour can betray lack of seriousness and the impossibility of having an engaged attitude towards a goal[9]. Equally important, too much black humour, instead of alleviating

the mood, can leave room for pessimism. Both extremes are characterized by lack of action, and inert contemplation. However, it is black humour, the capacity to laugh at the inadequate conditions of life, that alleviated the existence of the majority of the Romanian population during the communist regime. Humour presupposes a hierarchy of values and it points to a disturbance of the environment; therefore, it afforded the jesters a position of criticism and disengagement from the ideology promoted by the Communist Party. It saved their lives from falling into the complete incoherence that threatened them.

In The Oak one can read the signs of a distorted system, in which its apparatus no longer function according to their initial definition. The police forces act only to protect the Communist Party from citizens, prevent any disorder or manifestation of discontent. They are quick to take Nela to their headquarters when she writes the taboo word "protest" and "wake her up" to reality with a high pressure jet of water, but they are completely inefficient in discovering the aggressors who have raped her. The hospital follows a strict hierarchy subordinated to a director who pays lip service to the Party, and his incompetent decisions are not to be questioned even when they may cost a human life. Mitica's decision to disobey his superior and perform a surgical intervention on a patient that the others consider a lost cause costs him his job and a preventive visit to the police headquarters. The absurd reaches its climax in the scene of the massacre in the mountains, in which the orders coming from above

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are obeyed without delay, costing the life of innocent children in a bus hijacked by protesters against the regime. In a world like this, it is not romantic love that brings Nela and Mitica together, but the same sense of justice, a shared axiology, and the sense of humour which prevents them from going insane. Thus, humour alleviates a desperate situation.

The absurd has been professed not only in Romanian literature, but it has also been a strong trend marking the international scene after the end of World War II. It is not irrelevant to mention that, along with Kafka and Beckett, the Romanian dramatist Eugen Ionesco has left his signature on the theatre of the absurd. This does not signify that Romanians retain a monopoly on this means of expression, from Tristan Tzara to Ionesco, but that it appears to be a preferred philosophy. After World War II, having witnessed forms of unimagined violence, and after the brutal instauration of the communist regimes in Eastern European countries, the absurd has surfaced as a *Weltanschauung*. People were faced with chaos and extreme violence, which undermined their belief in the existence of a *telos* in humanity's existence. Moreover, in the Romania of the 1970s and 1980s, people were confronted with the absurdity of a society that condemned its citizens to forced happiness and compulsory manifestations of gratitude for the "wonderful conditions of life," as one of the famous cliches read. This feeling of the absurd was enhanced by the divorce of language from the reality it was supposed to represent. The more meager the conditions of living were, the more

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the official lingo praised the achievements of "the golden age" and of "the most beloved son of the people." This hiatus has led to scepticism which surfaces in unexpectedly violent forms today; it is furthermore supported by the delay of a positive solution of the economic crises in which Romania finds itself.

While the official lingo ousted negative imagery, the forms of absurd laughter survived at the periphery of discourse in the form of underground jokes. These jokes, mostly with a political overtone[15], highlighted the absurdity of an existence in which language was no longer allowed to reflect reality. In The Oak, during the party at the priest's house, Mitica is questioned by the mayor on his opinion about the lot of the peasantry in Romania. However, his joke is more forward than regular political jokes, verging onto defiance:

"Doctor, what do you think about the current situation of the peasantry?"

"I will tell you what I think about the lot of the city population, because I haven't lived in the village since I was 10. Those two men over there work with the Secret Police as you well know, although you pretend that you don't. They have been on a secret mission here. It is only they and I who know what mission and we don't have the slightest intention to let you know, do we? Do you see the luggage rack on top of their car? Well, it is fixed there so that, on the way back, they can bring home some grapes, some potatoes, some wine, well, whatever they can find, if there's anything left

to be found. That is, on their way here they came as James Bond, on the way back they turn into a grocery store. This is the situation of the city inhabitant in Romania, that is the most privileged who is the Secret Police agent." (The Oak)

In Chapter III I have discussed *otium*, a contemplative frame of mind, as a possible feature of Romanians and of the population in the Balkan area in general[10]. This contemplative frame of mind induces self-irony and detachment, best achieved as humorous self-deprecation. C. Banc and Alan Dundes (1986), and Charles Eidsvik (1991) have analysed the power of the underground political joke as a weapon against communist seriousness that has helped alleviate the burden of an oppressive political regime and an alienating linguistic experience: "Humor in totalitarian states often functions as, and therefore often gets treated as, an act of rebellion against state-sanctioned values and taboos" (Eidsvik 91).

This liminal function of laughter as a supplanter of an official discourse demonstrates that post-communism has not been initiated in 1989, but refers back to a series of acts of subversion and disruption. According to Victor Turner, laughter, along with games and carnival, introduces a public "subjunctive mood" which proposes an alternative world organization and underpins the stiffness of the official version of history. However, it is difficult to imagine that, after the collapse of communism, this powerful jesting inclination has vanished. The

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humorous overtones of the two satiric films, however grim the reality presented, continue this tradition. The humor, now lacking a visible target (the rulers of the country), since the target has been internalized, is now verging towards self-irony. However, the jokes the two main characters in _The Oak_ exchange and the humorous scenes referring to the priest's immoderate behavior (he hosts boisterous drinking parties and he wildly rides a motorcycle) do not manage to completely alleviate the tragic vision. Nowadays, absurd humour has moved from a periphery (underground jokes) into the centre of the discourse of the arts, shocking through its bleak perspective[12].

There is a level at which absolute tyranny connects with absolute ludicrousness. Films such as Charlie Chaplin's _The Dictator_ or essays like Norman Manea's "On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist" prove the validity of this point of view. Through the power of laughter to create distance, the terrors of supreme violence are subverted. This is the engine that generated the proliferation of an underground current of political jokes during the communist regime. In _The Oak_ the priest organizes dinners to which he invites regional leading figures of the Communist Party and members of the secret police. The tension is broken by means of political jokes addressing the socialist system and the condition of Romania. Most often these jokes are self-ironical. The merging of extremes--violence and laughter--is typical of a liminal situation.

In _The Conjugal Bed_, Vasile stabs his pregnant wife

repeatedly, pounds a nail in her skull, and, when the spectators expect her to be dead, she appears walking in a tight knot of bandages. It is laughter that alleviates the extremely grim mood of _The Conjugal Bed_, but at the same time laughter uproots the claim of the film to an ethically involved position. Laughter alleviates the situation, but also creates a caesura of non-implication. It forces the viewer into a postmodern voyeuristic position. The spectator is confronted with a grim reality, and, at the very moment when his identification with the society is possible and the social commentary reaches its target, laughter creates a distance. This type of liminal experience is representative of the discourse articulated by post-communist productions. The tension accumulated during the socialist regime is never overtly pointed at. Yet, its presence distorts human relationships at the level of the family and the society as a whole. Violence is purged through laughter.

> The Oak finishes in a proper manner with a humorous scene: after the play with the gun around the tree, the couple, now tranquil, talk. The man who is also a doctor says: 'if our baby is normal I will kill him with my hand'... You have to pay attention to the moment or the humour loses its positive nature and becomes a pretext for relativizing and accepting everything. The Romanian _bascalie_, the French _gouaille_....is an extraordinary oxygen for survival, yet there is the danger of uncontrolled humour: it loses all criteria since humour relativizes all moral values. As long as humour exists to

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give vitality, it is all right; when it becomes a pretext for anything, it doesn't work anymore. And the limit between the two of them is so fluid...It might be the reason why _The Oak_ is such a direct film. (Pintilie 93) [my translation].

The Grotesque Body in Post-communist Filmography

Sometimes, the absurd is accompanied by grotesque imagery. An interesting aspect of the grotesque body, in the Bakhtinian tradition, is the image of society as a diseased body. The main characters in _The Oak_ are healers: Mitica is a doctor and Nela is a psychiatrist. Yet, they are unable to offer any cure for the morally diseased society that they have to inhabit. This motif of the grotesque body interlaces with the baroque theme of a decaying, decrepit world, and the sense of belatedness characteristic of end of century mentality. There is an awareness and insistence on the motif of the grotesque body as an extension of the social and political body in contemporary Romanian society, which reflects the longevity of the metaphor of the nation as an organism. In his collection of essays _Children of the Beast_, Cristian Tudor Popescu rewrites this metaphor to map the effects of communism on Romanian consciousness. Thus, communism becomes a part of the host body, indelible and malignant: "We come out of communism as of a disease. There are bio-psychological theories

which interpret cancer--with which communism has a lot in common-- as a failed attempt of the organism to accede to a superior evolutionary level" (24) [my translation]. Throughout his collection of essays, the reader can trace a recurrent obsession with the metaphor of disease: "a people with a malformation," "a sick world," "a tortured country," "the Eastern wind [i.e. coming from Russia] brings the cancer in the babies' blood." This fascination with mapping the body politic and the society as a human organism was explored in the 1970s by Susan Sontag in "Illness as Metaphor" where she exposed the persistence of this motif throughout time. According to her, the notion of a diseased society incorporates an ethical aspect: "Stalinism was called a cholera, a syphilis, and a cancer. To use only fatal diseases for imagery in politics gives the metaphor a much more pointed character. Now, to liken a political event or situation to an illness is to impute guilt, to prescribe punishment" (82).

I have already discussed the way in which the Romanian society copes with the feeling of guilt springing from collective support given to the communist regime through passive behaviour. This consciousness of guilt is internalized, and the need to express it is obvious in the blaming that currently takes place in Romania and the self-deprecatory attitude verging onto moral self-flagellation. In The Conjugal Bed guilt consciousness collides with the postmodern guilt-free frame of mind. Yet, one has to keep in mind that postmodernism, far from being an all-encompassing phenomenon has been assimilated only by the

intellectual elites. To what extent do postmodernism and post-communism overlap? My answer is that, as with post-colonialism, post-communism needs to be ethically involved. Both of them need to have a well defined moral stance in order to be able to construct a political message. The amorality of the postmodern position will never allow the articulation of a coherent narrative of usurped rights to be reclaimed. According to Brian McHale's theorization of postmodernity, the end of the twentieth century trend proclaims a disenchantment with metanarratives and distrust of the existence of a transcendental meaning of any discourse. At the opposite pole, post-colonialism and post-communism need to rewrite the narrative of equality distorted by the Western tradition.

In this context, violence on screen/on paper can be ascribed the role of a mirror for the violence inflicted by the colonial power (be it the British rule in New Zealand or the brutal imposition of a political and economic system in Romania). The journal and autobiography explosion after 1989 in Romania, the prison memories with emphasis on physical and moral torture (e.g. Goma) find an ethical and aesthetic justification as an outburst of the long repressed desire to speak out, to dis-cover the atrocities that have been lying behind the veil of the communist regime. In this sense, the intensity of violence is justified not as cathartic, but as part of a mnemotechnic principle: the public is shocked into awareness.

It is interesting to notice that. if the techniques of

colonial subordination have been subtle, yet extremely violent and powerful, the directors emphasize the need of violence for breaking the spell of the ideologically colonizing power. This process is obvious in _Once Were Warriors_ and _The Oak_, but _The Conjugal Bed_ emphasizes the violent and grotesque aspects of life after 1989 to the point that their use becomes rhizomatic, repetitive, and self-reflexive. In a word, it becomes postmodern. The last scene of the film, functioning as an appendix, is gratuitous in its use of verbal violence and grotesque imagery. Coming from Turkey, the promised land for Balkan prostitutes, Stela's body is prematurely aged and almost caricatured. The extreme poverty of the apocalyptic image of a Romania of the year 2006 is reinforced by the cranes looming on the background--the former symbol of communist construction. Vasile's child--a mentally retarded teenager--persuades Stela to have sex with him in exchange for some cold leftovers. Daneliuc has used almost all the symbols of corruption and decay: the loss of innocence of a child through paid sex and warped language, prostitution, mental diseases, extreme poverty. The film confronts the spectator with a cold grimace, under which, one suspects, there is no ethically involved message. _The Conjugal Bed_ is not only ironical but also self-ironical, pushing skepticism to the extreme.

In _Irony's Edge_, Hutcheon identifies irony as having "transideological" politics (9), being characteristic of more than a single cultural trend. Thus, what so-far has appeared as a postmodern characteristic of _The Conjugal Bed_--and of Romanian

post-revolutionary cinematography in general--is also a recognizable feature of decolonization, since irony implies subversion; therefore, irony is a post-communist and post-colonial marker, as well. These features point once again to the operational character of labels such as "post-communism" which hardly do justice to the heterogeneous realities they are supposed to cover.

Distrust of Language

Communism has worn out a great number of metaphors, by forcing them to fit internal and external policies of the dictator and the Communist Party. It has produced what Francoise Thom has characterized as "a wooden language," a language that revels in unspecific temporalities, evasive metaphors, indeterminate comparatives; to sum up, a language manipulated into submission, the extreme of which was prefigured by Orwell in 1984. This language particularly avoided any negative words in the description of Romania and the Romanians, accumulating a tension between what it represented and the reality it was supposed to represent. The disconnectedness between linguistic or visual signs and their referent, the "airbrushing" of any aspect presented in the media until it bore no resemblance to the original has resulted in the current craving for authenticity, for exploring

the abased and abasing realities that were carefully concealed before 1989.

The films and the literature produced during the communist regime--with some slight exceptions in the thawing period of the late 1960s and early 1970s--were confronted with the rigors of an austere censorship and were prevented from displaying the slightest negative aspects of Romanian society, unless they referred to the much denigrated bourgeois rule preceding the instauration of communism. The result was a set of predetermined plots which invariably ended with the triumph of the progressive forces of the working class, at the expense of some rebel negative forces. This straightjacket applied to the Romanian arts explains the need for liberation, exploration of new means during the post-communist times. The distrust of the language and visual symbolism used during the communist regime also accounts for the presence of verbal and visual violence in post-communist films. The search for new means of expression includes the exploration of formerly tabooed words, violent language and imagery, which would also allow to reflect the existence of unpleasant, painful aspects, whether retrospectively in the communist society, or in the post-communist one.

Post-communism and Feminist Issues: Violence Against Women

Having investigated the relationships among post-communist films, post-colonialism, and postmodernism, I intend to discuss how the films present gender relations. Is violence directed more towards women than towards men? Are there special forms of violence directed towards women? As stated in chapter II, any comparison of "-isms" in contemporary critical discourse is bound to investigate the relationship between post-communism and feminist discourse. It is rather obvious that post-communism does not share many issues on its agenda with feminism(s). The situation has its roots in communist ideology, which, while ostensibly promoting feminist issues, dressed them in a wooden, rigid language, rendering them invisible. Moreover, after the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, women refused to be involved in politics fearing they might be associated with the dictator's wife[13].

The position of women offers a common ground for the analysis of the films. Women are confronted with violence in both the public and private spheres of their lives. Beth and Grace endure the abuses of Jake Heke in Once Were Warriors. Vasile stabs Carolina during her sixth month of pregnancy, in an outrageously violent scene that has disgusted many spectators of The Conjugal Bed. In The Oak, Nela has to bear the daily aggression of the money-oriented, vulgar society in pre-1989 Romania, which

culminates in her rape by several anonymous figures clad in black.

An issue to be discussed is the symbolic meaning of the rape scenes in _The Oak_ versus _Once Were Warriors_, since critics have noticed that Pintilie's use of the scene is only marginal to the plot, rather than the exploration of a strong feminist issue (Iordanova, 32). Political statements are frequently organized at a symbolic level around the female body. The metaphor of the "mother country" assaulted by external aggressors or the myth of the raped woman giving birth to a new nation are not only Romanian obsessions, but common symbolism in nationalist discourses. In _The Oak_ the rape is a symbol of an aggressive society and the rapists are more representative of a negative social force than characters in a personalized story. The physical rape is perpetuated at a linguistic level during the statement Nela has to make in front of the police officer.

The symbol of rape is complicated in Mircea Daneliuc's _The Snails' Senator_. The young Romanian woman acting as a translator for a group of Swiss journalists is raped by Menix, a Gypsy, and this incident constitutes the staring point of a violent ethnic conflict. However, as the senator on vacation presumes, the rape was not the first sexual intercourse between the two, and Anton, presented as the brother of the woman, might have been her child with Menix. The metaphor of the inter-ethnic rape is extremely old and lies at the basis of some origin myths. According to Romanian mythology, after the wars with the Dacians (the inhabitants of the present territory of Romania), the Roman emperor Trajan fell in

love with Dochia, the daughter of Decebal, the king of the Dacians. He chased her through the mountains as a much desired war trophy, but before he was able to grab her she changed into a stone statue. Another version, enacted in a film with an international cast, emphasizes the consensual relation between Trajan and Andrada (the daughter of Decebal). Their child was to mark the birth of the Romanian population. This vacillation between rape and consensual intercourse maps the different versions on the origins of the Romanian people, which, since the 17th century, have emphasized the importance of either the Dacians, the Romans, or both populations, according to the ideology best fitting the internal or external politics of Romania. In all these stories the female body is utilized to map ideological statements.

In The Snails' Senator the young woman was previously raped by police forces during the coal miners' riots in 1990, which makes the senator state that "probably this [rape] is your fate, your sexual life." As if to prove his statement, he later attempts to rape her. Moreover, he regards her sexual relationship with one of the Swiss journalists as a form of rape: "He took profit of you. You didn't even notice. You'll make him too an international bastard. That's why he came." This assertion proves the political symbolism of the rape which enacts xenophobic suspicions of ethnic impurity. It also reevaluates the fury of the Romanian villagers as directed not so much towards the violence against a woman as towards the threat of ethnic hybridization. The film reinforces the feminist assertion that rape is a statement of power and "the

basic symbol of male domination and ownership of women" (Hite 22);
however, contrary to the Western feminist position, it
demonstrates that rape is not a random phenomenon but can be used
as a political weapon in ethnic conflicts. It reiterates on a
smaller scale the situation in the former Yugoslavian states where
"rape was used by the Serbs in the Balkan War as an instrument of
ethnic cleansing, to degrade and humiliate the women and children
so much that they would never want to return to their homes"
(Mestrovic 96). I am not arguing that *The Snails' Senator* presents
the Gypsy minority as the aggressor, as equivalent to the Serb war
criminals. The film lays the blame on the entire population of
Romania for the impossibility of coping with its current
situation, falling back into ethnic conflicts as a resource for
scapegoating.

Linguistically, the metaphor of the country as a body is
reiterated throughout the film. In the eyes of the senator the
body of the young woman becomes the equivalent of the Romanian
nation "threatened," assaulted by external and internal enemies—a
vocabulary reminiscent of the communist nationalist propaganda—
and of whom he carelessly wants to "take profit." The police
forces and authorities are linguistically invested with masculine
physical attributes since they are repeatedly referred to as
"organs." A highly sophisticated director, Mircea Danelic used the
rape symbolism to emphasize the cliched nation tropes we have
inherited from communism. It is amazing that following this
metaphorical suite the director did not use the symbol of

impotence to render the inability of the Romanian government and legislature to cope with any malfunction and disorder. The opening scene, presenting the training for an inauguration show, is the painful attempt of a man to stand on his hands supported on the face of another person. The scene is an obvious metaphor for the current Romanian socio-political context in which people attempt the most contortionist and abnormal situations.

The comparative structure of my thesis invites a parallel discussion of violence against women in the post-communist and post-colonial contexts. While, as argued above, post-communist discourse refrains from feminist statements, post-colonialist and feminist discourses have been efficiently combined to support the position of women in formerly colonised countries forced to bear the double burden of white colonialism and patriarchy.

The symbol of rape in _Once Were Warriors_ is more insidious than in the two Romanian films analysed, since the aggressor is the so-called "uncle Bully." However, Lee Tamahori has attempted to tame the violence originally present in Alan Duff's novel, in which Grace did not know whether the aggressor had been her father or one of his drunken friends. However, both the film and the novel _Once Were Warriors_ present violence and rape as random, without any political statement attached, a chaotic act of aggression taking place in a society that perpetuates (self)destruction. To rape Grace/grace is to symbolically turn violence against yourself and against your possibility to transcend your current condition. While the novel suggests that

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the process of (self)destruction originates in the colonizing force that has pushed the Maori to a periphery, limiting their life to an existence of drinking, the film places the blame on a part of the Maori society, a phenomenon discussed in this thesis as internal discrimination.

It becomes obvious that, as with the other features discussed, violence against women in the post-colonial world differs from its forms in the post-communist countries, although there are certain similarities. It was the purpose of this thesis to discuss post-communism as a cultural trend with independent identity(ies), yet placed at the intersection of other cultural phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Initially, it appeared imperative to identify the defining features of post-communism in relation to other theoretical constructs such as "post-colonialism" and "postmodernism." No matter how insistently we claim post-structuralist awareness of the intellectual bankruptcy of rigorous "scientific" theorizations, we still attempt to homogenize a diverse mass of phenomena taking place in Eastern European countries and render them submissive for dissection and labeling. Highly ambiguous features, shared by other cultural trends, seem to be characteristic of this nascent theoretical discourse (violence, the absurd, grotesque imagery, irony). Post-communism is articulated under the sign of "transition," ambiguity, and liminality, which make it a theoretical and cultural in-between. As shown by the differences between two Romanian films produced in the same year, 1992, it is the place to reemphasize that post-communism is not a homogeneous cultural trend but a sum of multifaceted features, and a trend born at the intersection of other cultural trends. However, the exploration of the reality to which it refers is always necessary, since it is in continuous change, and it perpetually interacts with the cultures of the world.

Notes:

1) In an interview published online by Fine Line Features, Lee Tamahori points to the position the Maori occupy in today's New Zealand: "Their place now is one of an industrialized society, and one of a kind of alienation, which is what our film is about. There's a growing number of disenfranchised Maori who are losing touch with their own culture and society in general. Maori now constitute a large portion of the prison population and there's a lot of anti-social problems creeping in—welfare dependency, unemployment, alcoholism."
<http://www.flf.com/warriors/waintv.htm/>

2) Referring to totalitarian regimes as "politics of organized insanity" Brzezinski describes the impersonal manner in which Bolshevik leaders and their counterparts in Eastern European countries "liquidated" their enemies: "Documents unearthed from the Soviet archives (following the collapse of the Soviet Union) reveal an attitude toward killing on the part of the Soviet leaders which was pathologically deprived of any humane feelings, not to speak of the fundamental contravention of any civilized notions of judicial procedures. Killing simply became a bureaucratic function, both for the leaders commanding it and for the executioners performing it" (12).

3) In _The Pitesti Phenomenon_ Virgil Ierunca describes the system of "reeducation" to which the students detained on political grounds in the Pitesti jail were subjected. To make sure that there would be no distinction between innocents and guilty, anti-communists and communists, through exhausting, elaborate physical and moral torture, the students were forced to verbally abuse what they held most sacred. Every session was accompanied by merciless beatings. The "reeducation" ended with the most morally trying phase: the "reeducated" was forced to become the "reeducator" and torturer of his best prison friend and use the secrets that the friend had imparted as the key note for his torture. Most of the prisoners who physically survived the experiment had been morally perverted for life.

4) By postmodern amorality I refer to the self-reflexive, metanarrative texts of American writers like Barth, Coover, Pyncheon, etc. Playfulness characterizes their writings, without any ethic telos.

5) Ceausescu manipulated nationalism to suit his external politics of autonomy. History was re-written such as to emphasize every triumph of the oppressed lower class as prefiguring the victory of the working class in communism. The myth of Romania as a besieged fortress was reworked and stressed when Ceausescu feared that his opposition to the Warsaw Pact countries' invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968) made him the next target.

6) _The Oak_ exploits the comic effect of nationalist indoctrination. Thus, during a drunken party, the mayor rambles about the historic role of the Romanians as "the shield of Europe," protecting the Western world from the invasion of the Ottomans. According to him, this Romanian sacrifice "allowed the Occident to raise its cathedrals." This argument is based on the success of the Romanian countries in not being occupied by the Turks, and it was used to explain the belatedness of the Romanian culture. Lucian Boia comments on this aspect: "The image of a Western world defended by

the Romanians...is strongly imbedded in the national consciousness. It starts from the reality of an efficient resistence, which is amplified and generalized by means of a myth-making process" (Boia 22).

7) Tourists in search of "authentically Romanian" experiences complain about the difficulty of getting Romanian dishes and drinks in restaurants. Their place has been taken by Western imports.

8) The title of the film refers to more than the senator's craving for snails and the subsequent search organized by the mayor with the help of the villagers; it is a metaphor for the Romanian population. The film is highly charged with symbols of inefficiency and uselessness. A senator on vacation comes to a (probably Transylvanian) village for the inauguration of an eolian power station, while the adjacent hydraulic power plant is left to ruin. The senator has a desire to have snails for dinner, especially since there is a group of Swiss journalists in the area whom he wants to impress. The search for the snails leads to the rape of a young woman. The officials and the senator do their best to settle the matter without a trial, but the infuriated villagers set fire to the Gypsy houses, a minority to which Menix, the rapist, belongs. The inability of the officials or the senator to pacify the villagers is enhanced by the ludicrous understanding of "minority laws." The senator ends by fleeing the village when the situation gets out of control.

9) There is an anecdote about a trusted German servant of King Charles I of Romania, who, after many years of service, requested to be allowed to return to Germany. Asked by the King about his reasons to leave his second country, the man blamed it on the Romanian habit of laughing off any misfortune, which, in his opinion, betrayed a careless approach to life.

10) Banc and Dundes quote a self-reflexive political joke, which reveals the position of underground humour in relation to communist state policy:
    "A competition for the best political joke was announced."
    "Do you know what the first prize was?"
    "No."
    "Fifteen years."

11) This leads the discussion to another so-called Romanian (and Balkan) characteristic best described by the French term lassitude. One of my friends, Mihai Patrascu, confessed in his published journal his desire to analyse this typically Romanian attitude, not necessarily as a negative feature. This refusal to be active and the preference for contemplation and ironic distancing can be both a plague and a blessing in disguise. Obviously, from an economic point of view it is a negative feature, wreaking disaster on the development of the country.

12) This cynical-ludic perspective is extremely common in contemporary Romanian newspapers and magazines which seriously discuss the current political events. Vlad Nistor argues that "Political games have become a way of life for the political class, the ludic spirit replacing the agonal spirit..." (Dilema online). This statement proves the disappointment that the new political class has produced to the Romanian population. However, magazines like **Academia Catavencu** regard the politcal life in Romania through the prism of the comic, even if laughter has a bitter edge.

13)In 1992, the Parliament included only 10 women in the Chamber of Deputies, out of 328 members, and 3 women in the Senate, out of 143

members (Harsanyi 49-50). The situation is no better today. Also, the wives of the presidents keep as low a profile as possible since they want to avoid being compared to Elena Ceausescu.

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