

Cultural Liminality and Hybridity: The Romanian “Transition”

Monica Popescu, University of Pennsylvania

In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the fascinating image of the Romanian flag with its national emblem cut out as a most “salient index of the ‘open’ character of a historical situation in its becoming,” which is characteristic of “that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one” (1993:1). With this image, Žižek opens up a discussion not only about a brief “intermediate phase” (as his own interpretation would read), but also about an indeterminately long period of cultural, political, and economic ambiguity, a time of hybridity which most Eastern European countries have termed “Transition.”¹

There has to be something inherently appealing about the term and the promises of its semantic configuration since, more than a decade after 1989, most postcommunist countries still admit to be in Transition. In transition to what, one could legitimately ask. The answer seems to have been lost somewhere along the way, or it seems so obvious (to a Western democratic system and a capitalist economy) that it can be easily left implicit. Transition stands for cultural uncertainty, for economic or politic blunders that are easier to forgive because the “true order” has not yet been achieved. This cultural “inbetweenness” is prolific and seductive since Transition also stands for cultural ventures with new expressive vocabularies that include grotesque, violent language or imagery, and nudity. In short, Transition has become a rhetorical strategy, a magic word in postcommunist countries—a word that is hardly expected to explain the 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.” It is as if the signifier of absolute potentiality—the “hole in the flag,” as the title of Andrei Codrescu’s homonymous volume reads—has dilated into a tunnel.

Romania has opened up economically and culturally to Western imports, and globalization is making itself felt throughout the country. From the mushrooming of McDonald’s fast foods and United Colors of Benetton stores to cellular phones and the appetite of the young generation for internet communication, the signs of the self-sufficient, bounded culture of the Ceaușescu regime seem to be slowly but surely washing away. One of the striking signs of opening towards Western cultures is the explosion of violent imagery in movies, with noticeable violence against women. Several of the most successful Romanian movies after 1989 include scenes of real or

attempted rape. What is the significance of this imagery? Is it a result of globalization, a copy of a Hollywood model intended to boost box office success, or a bitter comment about the past and present plight of Romanian women? Has this import of graphic violence found fertile ground in renewed patriarchal values in Romania? Given the perpetual reshaping of social and cultural patterns, gender relations may also be “in transition,” although more difficult to predict. If so, what is the status of feminist agendas in Romania? Western feminists in academia are peeking over the border to see if the much expected gender revolution will take place and if their sisters from Eastern Europe are ready to do away with the patriarchy system. Yet, as with other Transition phenomena, if any change is taking place, it does not follow the script imagined by Western feminists. On the contrary, its forms are convoluted, hybrid, and marked by paradox.

Romanian cultural artifacts after 1989 prove that globalization is not a simple process. Violent imagery (especially against women) has been introduced on the cultural market simultaneously with feminist agendas. Thus contradictions and paradoxes are part and parcel of Transition. Yet these new forms are not the result of an indiscriminate import of Western cultural forms. This curious *mélange* has part of its origins in older metaphors and forms of discourse, as well as in communist propaganda. In order to address some of the riddles of Transition, I start by looking at Mircea Daneliuc’s 1995 film, *The Snails’ Senator*. Although not necessarily representative of contemporary Romanian cinematography, it crystallizes the perspective of several other films on the current position of Romanian women as objects and subjects of culture. However, in order to understand these artifacts as reactions to previous models, one needs to go back and study the position of women in some key national narratives, as well as the reconfiguration of these narratives during the communist regime. Thus, the second stage in my argument will consist of an analysis of the myth of the birth of the Romanian people, of feminine (motherly) representations of Romania, and, most importantly, of the role of these narratives in buttressing the hegemonic discourse of the Communist Party. I will contrast these mythical marriage narratives to rape metaphors that, during the communist regime, were reserved for the “enemies” of Romania. Finally, returning to *The Snails’ Senator*, I will raise questions about the function of the rape scenes in contemporary films. Do they represent the triumph of a misogynist imagery and discourse and therefore mark the transition as a setback in terms of women’s rights? Can Eastern European feminist agendas coexist with films that display rapes and violence against women? And, finally, what do these hybrid forms tell us about Transition?

Transition and Cultural Liminality

Transition is liminal (or “liminoid,” if we are to apply the term denomination introduced by Victor Turner (1974:65) to refer to leisure activities after the Industrial Revolution). To discuss postcommunist Transition in terms of liminality is not just to extend the concept that made Turner famous to another field in the humanities. While

the concept is very apt to serve as a critical tool for postcommunist studies, especially in reference to the period from 1989 to today, it also establishes a connection with post-colonial studies. Actually, in proposing *liminality* and *hybridity* as critical tools—especially in the realm of discourse analysis—I have in mind their politicized uses in post-colonial scholarship, rather than the initial meaning set by Arnold van Gennep (1960:21) and Turner.² For example, throughout *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha has insisted on the necessity of articulating post-colonial discourse in a “third space” and a temporal dimension. The resulting discourse goes beyond a synthesis of the colonial and nationalist positions, avoiding essentializing stances. In the same way, to study postcommunist transitions in terms of hybridity and liminality means to move the spotlight onto the amorphous character of the cultural phenomena, without seeing them as chaotic. By addressing postcommunist studies in terms of liminality and hybridity, one goes beyond oppositions such as nationalism versus globalization, phallogentrism versus feminism, activism versus passivity and moves towards an appreciation of cultural ambivalence and plurivocal tendencies. This enables one to attend to the potentiality of all the ambiguities of Transition and to transcend a rigid Manichean system of understanding social and cultural processes.

This perspective throws a new light on post-1989 cultural artifacts that are difficult to categorize. Mircea Daneliuc’s 1995 film *The Snails’ Senator* thrives at the expense of the oddities of Transition and keeps a keen ironic eye on the mixture of local culture and Western imports. In a Romanian mountain village the government replaces a huge hydro plant, for the sake of fashion, with an aeolian power plant; however, the new edifice is inaugurated according to the pattern of communist events. The patriotic songs seem to be the same yet, presiding over the inauguration festivities, a senator courting foreign reporters replaces the former communist leaders.

In addition, the film presents the violent conflicts between the Roma minority of the village and its Romanian population, culminating in the burning of the houses of the former.³ Once again, as in *The Conjugal Bed*, Mircea Daneliuc uses the female body to articulate social metaphors belonging to a “collective unconscious.” 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 vacationing senator are unable to provide any positive solution to the violent reaction of the Romanian community except for scapegoating some of the Romanians—since “they are the majority.” Daneliuc is very good 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”) demonstrates what misunderstanding of minority rights can produce. Decided upon in an effort to gain the approval of international organizations, this solution only reverses the center-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. It is the significance of the rape, however, that gives the movie its hybrid undertones and

keeps the spectator wondering whether it should be decoded as a nod to the old nationalist metaphors, an ironic reading of the slogans of the past, or just an instance of (gratuitous) violence imported from American films. Irony, vacillating between detachment and self-flagellating sarcasm, complicates the entire movie and hybridizes its readings.

The centrality of rape in *The Snails' Senator* raises a series of questions about its relation to tabloid and sensation newspapers saturated with daily reports of violent crimes and rapes. Does the high frequency of rape scenes in Transition films reflect a social reality, or is it a fashionable import along with other types of violent imagery and a mere result of globalization? Does it correspond to increased violence against women? Since Susan Brownmiller's 1975 classic *Against Our Will*, rape has been denounced as a weapon used by men to silence women and keep them in check.⁴ Although many Romanian newspapers claim to be engaged in strengthening civil society, their amoral approach to rapes (which are treated as "givens") indicates their neglect of women's issues at all levels of society. Mihaela Miroiu points out that this amoral approach is responsible for the delay in implementing a strong and coherent legislation against sexual harassment and violence against women (1996:27). Although statistics after 1989 show an increase in violence against women, it is difficult to make a comparative assessment with the communist years.⁵ As with any other social issues, communist media cast a veil of silence over cases of rape, with the notable exception of its strategic metaphorical uses discussed below.

Mythical Marriage and Metaphors of Rape

To understand the full significance of the metaphor of the rape in *The Snails' Senator*, one needs to go back to the myth of the birth of the Romanian people. Romanians imagined their coming into history as the result of a tamed relationship, namely marriage. Lyrical nationalism not only manifests itself in metaphors of the Fatherland, but also by metaphorically assimilating the body of the country with that of a woman. The trajectory of the nation is mapped onto the story of a primordial ancestress. In the case of Romanians, the very birth of the people goes back to "the marriage of the Roman soldiers to native Dacian women" or, more specifically, to Emperor Trajan's alleged love for king Decebal's daughter, Dochia. "Marriage" was also the version preferred by the communist regime in its historical vulgates, children's textbooks, or anthologies of Romanian legends. However, this interpretation is just one of the ethnogenesis variants proposed since the eighteenth century.⁶ At a time when "the spirit of the people" was quintessential for the positive evaluation of the Romanians, the marriage narrative blended the advanced culture and noble heritage of the Romans with the bravery and the independent spirit of the Dacians.

The Romanian pre-romantic Gheorghe Asachi professed to have resuscitated this myth from the dormant collective memory.⁷ In a few stanzas, his poem "Dochia

and Trajan” manages to put together all the elements of a gendered nationalist imaginary. When Trajan, “the glorious son of Rome,” “ravaged” Dacia, Dochia, who had no equal in terms of “beauty” and “mind” swore eternal love to the man who would save her country. Disliking this passive attitude, the communist historical vulgates and children’s literature transformed Dochia into a quasi-active principle, an amazon who, dressed up in male clothing, comes to support her father with an army of Dacian warrior maidens. Enamored with brave Dochia, Emperor Trajan desires to “conquer” her. This is the point where older variants of the legend differ in terms of the outcome. According to Dimitrie Bolintineanu’s 1869 *Life of Trajan Augustus, Founder of the Romanian People*, an old chronicle mentions Decebal’s sister as one of the war prisoners taken into slavery by Maxian Levian. However, he is quick to dismiss this hypothesis, on account of “lack of evidence.” Although Bolintineanu seems to dislike the violent implications of this variant, he is forced into the strangest oxymoron when he discusses the fate of the defeated population at the end of the Dacian wars. The Dacian men, who were brave and loved independence, fought the Romans to death. After fortresses were taken, the Romans spared the children and the women whom “they gently took in captivity” (Bolintineanu 1869:29). Thus the “intermarriages” appear as a normal consequence of the demise of the male Dacian population.

The most striking aspect of these variants is that neither the looming rape nor the marriage is consummated in the case of the archetypal characters. Dochia invokes the spirits of the place to save her from her pursuer and is turned into a stone figure. This “freezing” of the paradigmatic moment makes it atemporal and therefore easy to be repeated and reenacted throughout time (for ceremonial purposes). Although the Romanian population was born out of “the marriage of the Dacian women with Roman colonists,” the legend leaves the paradigmatic pair suspended in an unconsummated, *virgin marriage*. This tactic strategically removes the tainting aspects of sexuality and, of course, the danger of being criticized for historical inaccuracy. There is no documentary attestation of a romance between Emperor Trajan and the daughter of his enemy.

At the height of the nationalist movements throughout Europe, the Romanian Romantics made the legend popular since it highlighted a noble heritage (the Roman lineage) as well as the mystery of lesser-known ancestors (the Dacians). In the twentieth century, in his 1941 *History of Romanian Literature*, George Călinescu legitimized the story of Trajan and Dochia as one of the fundamental myths of the Romanian people. By this time, the image of the two main characters had crystallized into rather fixed forms. Dochia, the Dacian ancestress, had won out over the homonymous meteorological legend of Baba Dochia.⁸ According to scholars of collective memory, once formed, an image tends to proliferate into many variants, but if it becomes identified with an ideological agenda, the variants finally “coalesce into an ideal type” (Hutton 1993:3).

The myth of Trajan and Dochia also held a special appeal to nationalist communists. Therefore, it could be used as a diagnostic test for the type of nationalist consciousness forged by the communist regime, particularly the role of state apparatuses (especially educational systems and media) in building an “imagined community” by means of a hegemonic discourse. This myth highlights one of the crucial paradoxes of nationalism, as summarized by Benedict Anderson; “the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of the nationalists” (1998:5). Although the Romanian countries were first united in 1600, only to be torn apart again until the union of Moldavia and Muntenia in 1859 (Transylvania was retrieved only at the end of World War I in 1918), the communist regime was close to proclaiming the existence of a national consciousness and unity as early as the end of the first century A.D.

Several studies have been published in Romania in recent years (see Boia 1997; Tismăneanu 1999) focusing on the way in which the communist regime blended “history” and myth to manipulate the past into serving its hegemonic discourse. Its subjects were left with an ideological imprint that is harder to erase than the economic legacy of the system. While Western scholarship was exploding its grand narratives, revealing that its knowledge systems are constructed and advocating pluralism and multiculturalism, most of the socialist countries were weaving monoglossic discourses to legitimize their political agenda. By reducing the element of play that allows for a plurality of worldviews, the communist state constructed, imposed, and legitimized its narratives about the social world. The myth of Trajan and Dochia as the parents of the Romanian nation constructed a narrative of peaceful cohabitation and togetherness, which deftly wrote out the presence of any ethnic minorities. On the other hand, when starting from 1968 Ceaușescu removed Romania from Soviet hegemony, the legend of Trajan and Dochia came in handy for asserting the Latin ancestry of the Romanian people as well as the legacy of independence handed over by the Dacians, emphasizing the Romanians’ status as the only non-Slavic nation in the area (with the exception of the Hungarians).

The Column, a 1968 film with an international cast, rewrites this myth as the love story between a famous Roman general and Decebal’s daughter, Andrada. Their son marks the birth of the new people, the Romanians. In this key myth, Dochia/Andrada as Dacians are equated to spirits of the place, married to the virile Roman culture. Marriage is a tame, regulated form of sexuality which concords with the communist ideology of the family as the “basic cell of society.” Long forgotten were versions of the same myth that emphasized a more brutal form of desire on the Roman side. Rape during the communist regime was preserved only for metaphors directed against perpetrators of assault and invaders of the country.

This is not to say that rape imagery vanished completely during the communist regime. *La langue de bois* (to use Françoise Thom’s term) is heavily polarized in a Manichean economy. Thus all negative imagery migrated towards the

capitalist, bourgeois, and revisionist pole. Although Hungary and the USSR belonged to the communist camp, former or potential territorial friction justified their occasional casting in the role of the rapist (although the language was ever so cautious). Katherine Verdery has discussed several of the clichéd uses of the rape trope:

In Romanian historiography where national victimization is a central theme, this victimization often has a spatial dimension: the barbarian violates Romania's borders, rapes her, mutilates her. The Soviet annexation of Bessarabia is widely referred to as the rape of Bessarabia, and the temporary annexation of Transylvania by Hungary in 1940-44 is seen as bodily mutilation. Similarly, when Hungary lost Transylvania after 1918, images of this showed the beloved motherland's 'white and virginal but mutilated and bleeding body.' [1996: 79]

The result is a bilateral conflation between "the feminine" and national territory; the former lends procreative and nurturing features to the national land. This also marks a regressive move in terms of female empowerment by reconfiguring gender to signify endangered entities on which the cultural and economic reproduction of the nation depends.

Tropes of dismemberment, tearing, or rape of the body of the Mother Country do not only comment on the regime's political anxieties but also reflect an anxiety about female sexuality—a sexuality that could become uncontainable. If, according to Luce Irigaray, woman as mother is the first figure of space, since womanhood is traditionally delineated as a container, an "envelope," man is also trying to "envelop" and contain the feminine (1991:169). Pushing one step further Irigaray's discussion of the feminine as passive envelope in need of being controlled, we will notice the versatility of this feminine "skin"; it is a container (of national landscape and culture), yet susceptible to being penetrated from the exterior (by perpetually plotting enemies). This porousness of the woman-country boundary makes the metaphor extremely useful; the boundary can be solidified in order to refute territorial demands or turned permeable to solicit the defense of the country. According to Verdery, the feminization of space "naturalizes/genders the question of territorial boundaries" and makes "these boundaries like the skin of the female body, fixed yet violable, in need of armed defense by inevitably masculine militaries" (1996:78).

Communist discourse represented sexuality in two polarized forms: rape, which was linguistically restricted to the enemies of the nation; and the sanctified form of marriage, such that every family came to repeat indefinitely the gesture of the primordial pairs of Dacian women and Roman men, thereby perpetuating the Romanian nation. Romanian women were confined to the positions of exemplary workers and mothers. When motherhood and fatherhood are frozen into clichéd

representations of country and Party, it is no wonder that political jokes dreamed of releasing the subjects of these oppressive metaphors:

Little Ion is asked in class:

‘Who is your mother?’

‘The Socialist Republic of Romania.’

‘And who is your father?’

‘The glorious Communist Party.’

‘And what would you like to become when you grow up?’

‘An orphan.’ [Banc and Dundes 1986:141]

Mother Country, Father Party

What are the origins of this spatial imaginary perceived in terms of a feminine model? And how does it work along with communist ideology? In her thought-provoking book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss discusses two social and political paradigms—“the nation-state” and “the class warfare”—which roughly overlap with the twentieth-century capitalist and communist regimes, respectively. While the communist class warfare political imaginary is dominated by time imagery, the nation-state imaginary relies on space metaphors. Land possession is quintessential to the understanding of the nation-state, while “space is merely tactical, not the political goal” for class warfare. Following her thesis that the Cold War relied on a superficial split, while the underlying social and political thinking unified them, Buck-Morss does not exclude the possibility of an unconscious overlap of the two political imaginaries; however, she fails to discuss cases when legitimation depended specifically on the ability to successfully combine the nation-state and the class warfare imaginary.⁹ This was the case of communist Romania after 1968, when Ceaușescu proceeded to build a special brand of communism, relying on the Stalinist model, yet unaccountable to Moscow. Since the major consequence of this move could have been an invasion of Romania by the Warsaw Pact countries, as happened in August 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the Romanian state needed to buttress a national consciousness and keep the population alert. This was accomplished via a rhetoric that rendered the territory of the country as an endangered mother in need of defense. Yet Romania did not own the absolute patent on communist nationalism. Harriet Murav (1995) and Ewa Houser (1994) document the stubbornness of the mother-country metaphor in Russian and Polish cultures.

Earlier in this essay I have discussed issues of representation of the Romanian “feminine” and the subsequent gendering of the social body and territory of the country. Representation inevitably implies an essentialist perspective, by assimilating the various types of Romanian womanhood to a prototype to be manipulated for political purposes. What is the effect of this imaginary on those it (mis)represents? According to Irigaray, “If, traditionally, in the role of the mother, woman represents a

sense of *place* for man, such a limit means that she becomes a *thing*, undergoing certain optional changes from one historical period to another” (1991:169). Furthermore, the myth of the birth of the Romanian nation is clearly part of a masculinist signifying system, which objectifies the female body and integrates it in narratives that ultimately reinforce the phallogocentric perspective. Although it appeared to empower women, the communist regime further solidified the old metaphor of the Mother Country in need of defense from acts of rape and dismemberment.

The early years of communist rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had inflamed the imagination of Western feminists as hopes of women’s empowerment resulting from much-publicized egalitarian discourse were quite high. Communist regimes encouraged their female citizens to become politically active and to assume jobs and public offices previously reserved only for males. However, socialist countries did not do away completely with the double standards; inequality persisted in the family sphere. This oversight has become a perpetual grievance of feminists against communist theory and practice. The first works in women’s studies on Eastern Europe published after 1989 (Harsanyi 1993; Hausleitner 1993) insist on the discrepancy between pseudo-feminist discourse and the difficulties women faced when coping with a double work load—at the workplace and at home. As a true totalitarian regime, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s rule in Romania led to the state’s gradual encroachment on private space and time. Katherine Verdery describes this as the “etatization of time” under the communist regime.¹⁰ The scrutinizing eye of power and complicated surveillance networks enmeshed female bodies. Controlled motherhood and outlawed abortions did not only reflect the reproductive policies meant to increase the workforce, but also enforced a prescriptive heterosexuality confined to the “cellular family” model. Thus, it is no wonder that the regime favored the myth of Trajan and Dochia, considering that it fell perfectly within the normative heterosexuality the regime prescribed.

The communist regime did not bring a radical change in terms of women’s position, because it only pretended to do away with the hierarchized gender binary. Although the Party preached the equality of sexes, even a powerful figure like Elena Ceaușescu appeared as a downsized replica of her husband. State propaganda and servile “artists” still described her in terms of the nurturing model: “mother of the children of the nation” and trustworthy life companion for Nicolae Ceaușescu, who stood by him in times of trial. The binary opposition was still very much at the heart of the Romanian communist ideology; the female model could be defined only via the masculine one. Luce Irigaray discusses the superimposition of other crucial dichotomies (such as space versus time, soul versus spirit, body versus mind) over the conceptualization of the female versus male binary. Although communist ideology allowed its female citizens to assume certain features otherwise placed at the “masculine” pole of these pairs (such as “rationality,” “intellect,” “leadership,” “force”), this development led only to a false erasure of the dichotomy.

False neutralization of the male-female binary coated communist discourse with a gloss of feminism. Yet, the much trumpeted “revolutionary” construction of the “new man” was still based on the male model of citizenship. The reconfiguration of gender roles consisted of an *incorporation*, at least in the public sector. Masculinity, along with its attributes and attributions, was stretched like a blanket to cover the female citizens as well. The topoi of the seductress and the femme fatale were ousted from official culture to be replaced by the asexual female. Female gender attributes were preserved mostly in the private sphere, especially in their maternal, nurturing aspect. Sex, on the other hand, was not an end in itself but a necessity for the reproduction of the work force.¹¹ At this point, the communist agenda came full circle back to the bourgeois mentality it was trying to overcome, confirming Michel Foucault’s thesis that sexual and gender liberation does not place subjects outside discourse, in a realm of absolute freedom (1978:7).

Furthermore, the same erasure of the feminine presence is obvious in a variant rendering of the Romanian ethnogenesis. Rather than emphasizing the marriage between Dacian women and Roman male colonists, the stress could conveniently move on two male progenitors, the idea being that the Romanians originated from Decebal and Trajan. This approach was in keeping with the patriarchal vision that the historical timeline of the nation is set in motion by male characters. While communist ideology was keen on orthodox straightforward readings, it is from misreading these very assertions that the destabilizing effect started. Many of the political jokes produced during the communist period relied on quoting the dogma in order to misread it, supplementing it with a piece of unbalancing information, or re-contextualizing it to displace its meaning: for example, “Do you know why the Romanians are the only homosexual people in the world? Because we originate from Decebal and Trajan.” This joke indirectly signals the ability of official discourse to write out the female presence when necessary.

The communist state claimed to offer equal rights and protect its female citizens. To avoid “offensive” imagery and to hide social problems, the media was purged of images that commented on violence against women and rapes. Like any other negative concept in the highly polarized communist diction, rape was used only to refer symbolically to the actions of the enemies of the nation. The image of the vulnerable female exposed to masculine threats survived in metaphors and clichés referring to the political history of Romania. Romanian women, according to the blissful reports of the media, lived in happy family units as downsized replicas of the primordial couple Trajan and Dochia.¹²

The post-1989 cultural climate seems to break away from the old ideology and dismiss the nationalist communist discourse. Does this rupture imply that the male perspective is also washing away? The frequent images of rapes in postcommunist films may point to a reconfiguration of the old narratives, but not for the better! After enduring the psychological coercion and mental rape perpetrated by

the communist regime, women now come to be represented in movies and the media, as victims subjected to repeated violence.

The (Mis)represented

This incursion into the past served as the background for understanding the ambiguous discursive constructions that mark the post-1989 cultural “transition.” If communist ideology was prompt in making use of the female body and its sexuality, inscribing it with a monoglossic “national narrative,” nowadays the discourse is more complicated since it combines ironic readings of communist propaganda with reminiscences of the old patriotic diction. Marriage—the former basic cell of society—seems to have lost its meaning in Mircea Daneliuc’s *The Snails’ Senator*, and is replaced by rape. 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 starting 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, introduced as the young woman’s brother, might have been her child with Menix. Also, the young woman was previously raped by police forces during the coal miner 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 impose himself on 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.” Almost unnoticeably, the fate of the young woman becomes symbolic of the political destiny of Romania; the miners’ riot of 1990 violated the political authority of the government; the body politic “takes profit” of the country; and, as an old adage went, foreigners always seemed to have had an interest in forcing themselves on Romania.¹³

This chain of assertions plays out through the political symbolism of rape, which enacts xenophobic suspicions of ethnic impurity. It also allows a reevaluation of the fury of the Romanian villagers in the movie, as directed not so much towards a woman as towards the threat of ethnic hybridisation. The film reinforces the feminist assertion that rape is a statement of power and the basic symbol of male domination and ownership of women; it also 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 of the Bosnian wars, where both sides used rape as an instrument of ethnic cleaning and humiliation. *The Snails’ Senator* does not present the Roma minority as the aggressor. Rather, the film lays the blame on the entire population of Romania for its inability to cope with its current situation, and for falling back on ethnic conflict as a resource for scapegoating. Moreover, Daneliuc’s message is intentionally ironic, playing with old metaphors and revealing their nationalist allegiance while at the same time acknowledging their power over the collective psyche.

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 communist nationalist propaganda) and whom he carelessly wants to abuse. 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 Daneliuc used the rape symbolism to emphasise the cliched nation tropes inherited from communism. On the other hand, this imagery highlights its past and present power over the collective unconscious. After watching *The Snails' Senator*, it is difficult to figure out whether you need to frown apprehensively, realizing that old nationalist metaphors lie dormant under the seemingly cosmopolitan surface, or to laugh with detachment, conceding that irony is the best weapon to keep at distance the old *forma mentis*. The liminality of transition also shapes the undecidability of these new narratives.

Along with other post-1989 artifacts, *The Snails' Senator* sets in motion a new type of signifying system that breaks with the domesticated image of sexuality. The heterosexual couple model was challenged in the heatedly debated film version of Marin Preda's *The Earth's Most Beloved Son*.¹⁴ In the 1993 cinematic rendering of the novel, director Tmerban Marinescu inserted a homosexual prison scene that outraged and alienated a large majority of his spectators. Films, especially, have introduced an avalanche of "other" sexualities, which undermine the stability of heterosexual marriage: prostitution, extra-marital affairs, child sexuality, and rape. By 1995, Romanian cinematography seemed to have become fixated on dark atmosphere and cynicism, which contrasted dramatically with the prescribed optimistic ending of communist movies. *The Oak, The Conjugal Bed, Luxury Hotel, Too Late, and The Stone Cross*, to name only a few, abound in grotesque imagery and display a dark carnival of sexuality, worlds *à l'envers*, and cynical dispositions. Critics (such as Dina Iordanova) have explained this string of dark films as a normal movement of liberation from the hard-line optimism and cleansed vocabulary of communist movies. Telling the "naked" truth (even if this implies, unnecessarily, many naked bodies) is a reaction to the coercion imposed by communist censorship, but this release could hardly be considered the only reason. A reaction to communist austerity, especially in the cases of sophisticated directors (such as Pintilie, Daneliuc, Pita) could last a couple of years, but not a decade. It is highly improbable that this recurrent feature of Romanian postcommunist cinematography can be explained only by a desire to rebel.

In the context of globalization, one also needs to ask the most obvious question. Could violent imagery, including rape scenes, be a Western import, adopted in pursuit of the box office success of Hollywood movies? Critics have claimed that: "Graphic sex and violence have become an inseparable part of postcommunist filmmaking...mostly because they were banned from the screen during communist times, but also because Eastern European filmmakers often believe, keeping in mind the success of American films that those are features that attract wider audiences"

(Jordanova 1996:37). This explanation might be partly accurate; however, by 1993 at the latest, Romanian directors should have realized that extreme violence held little appeal for a public that refuses to see the sordid aspects of everyday life blown out of proportion on the screen.

What type of dialogue then does the violent representations of sexuality (especially rape) in post-1989 films initiate with the tame form of sex-within-marriage advertised by various key communist narratives? Graphic violence and rape do constitute a new and intriguing vocabulary. It liberates the arts from the old clichés and fights the old metaphors with irony, but it is hardly good news for a feminist agenda. Rape imagery, old or new, objectifies the body of the woman and renders her a passive recipient of a patriarchal script. The communist nationalist lingo which mapped the territorial body of Romania as a female body in need of defense has tapered off after 1989 into a barely noticeable allusive discourse; besides, that discourse is so imbued with ironic overtones that it is often difficult to read as a reminiscence of the old jargon. On the other hand, communist propaganda that claimed to empower women and give them a culturally privileged position has not changed into a strong and vocal feminist presence.

Feminism in Trousers or in Miniskirts?

However attractive the impulse to read the female character in Daneliuc's film as an embodiment of Romania and its social and political trajectory, the identification per se does not offer much for a feminist agenda. To observe tendencies is not enough. Although at the beginning of the twenty-first century nobody still believes that the overturn of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe could ever produce a complete split with the past, there was and still is some degree of expectation that things will take a "normal turn." But, as if to spite the eager academics, events and social tides refuse to take this long wished-for "normal turn." At first sight, globalization and the interest of Western feminist scholarship should lead to a generalized involvement of Romanian women in gender studies and feminist activism. Yet, on the gender front, many Romanian women are still reluctant to speak up for their social needs.¹⁵ Western feminists still peep towards Eastern Europe waiting to spot the first stirring of a widespread feminist consciousness or at least to report dejectedly, as Despina Dumitrică does in a recent report on Romania (2000:1), that "Romanian Women Don't Wear the Trousers."

The implications of Dumitrică's assertion are quite vast. Metaphorically, her article reflects on the social position of women in Romania who embrace traditionalist roles, sometimes finding refuge in "family life" and mothering as a fulfillment of their lives, to the general consternation of Western feminists. They are slow at embracing stereotypical masculine and assertive roles, or if they do, they mask these attempts under a facade of extreme "femininity." There is also an implicit conflation here

between gender roles and their external manifestation (the metaphorical “trousers”), precluding the understanding of a layered subjectivity.

It is my belief that if a movement of female empowerment is to be identified in Romania, its form is far more unorthodox than expected. Most of the women’s studies essays on Eastern Europe demand to see palpable transformations in terms of political involvement and equal opportunity policies, which should fit within the activist models “exported” by Western scholarship. Yet the desire to see concrete evidence might prevent one from noticing the less obvious transformations—those that occur in hybrid forms. It is unrealistic to expect that Romanian (and for that matter Eastern European) feminism will take an explicit activist form very soon.

Activist lingo is usually centripetal and tends towards essentialism, while an ironic discourse is centrifugal and displaces its mass in a spectacular scattering. Activist language and solemn, heartrending dedication are what Eastern European women and men alike want to leave behind. A clear feminist agenda is rendered inefficient by the language in which it needs to be couched, a language which for the Romanian ear has the overtones of propaganda. As a “post” culture, the Romania of the 1990s experiences a skeptical detachment from an involved, activist lingo. The Transition seems to lack the dedication necessary for militant feminism, or at least certain brands of feminism. If feminism or any women-empowering strategies are to be identified in Eastern Europe, then they arise in hybrid forms, sometimes self-conscious and most of the time with an ironic twist. In the ex-socialist countries, a successful political agenda still cannot put on the “serious face” of a totalizing discourse. It needs a slanted smile and (self)ironies.

This story is not new and it involves questions of agency and representation; Western feminists have often wagged their finger disapprovingly at their “sisters” from the third and now also from the second worlds, scripting for them the best way out of patriarchy, warning them about the pitfalls of various backlashes, and predicting the same trajectory that Western feminisms have undergone. Why should Eastern European women thank Western feminists for the advice to wipe off their make-up, lengthen their mini skirts, and remove their high-heeled shoes?

If there is a pervasive Romanian feminism, it is *feminism in masquerade*, a feminism that consciously or unconsciously disguises itself as a step backward. The combination of “masculine” assertiveness and “feminine” coquetry is usually regarded as half-empowering, since it follows the pattern of behavior described by Joan Riviere (1986) as “masquerade.” Yet masquerade does not only point to an involuntary feeling of guilt for usurping the male privilege, as Riviere claimed. Most importantly, as Judith Butler’s work has shown (1990:137-40), it points to a layering of sexuality and gender roles. To claim that feminism can take place only in certain forms means to freeze this volatility and identify a core substance for both femininity and feminism.

I claim, to the contrary, that feminist subversion of patriarchal values can and do emerge in Eastern Europe in hybrid forms. As with many other cultural phenomena, the transition is riddled with confusing movements and self-ironic gestures in the “feminist” arena as well. In “Bug Inspectors and Beauty Queens: The Problem of Translating Feminism into Russian,” Beth Holmgren considers that “the integration of gender studies into Slavic studies involved complicated acts of translation and adaptation” (1995:17). I think that positioning Western feminism in relation to representations of Eastern European women does not only necessitate a well thought-out mechanism of translation and adaptation; rather, this new subject and collective subjectivity should lead to the rethinking of the frames and strategies of feminisms.

The potentially explosive character of female subjectivity in ex-socialist countries for Western feminisms does not only arise from cultural distance, but also out of women’s relationship to the pseudo-feminist communist discourse. Eastern European women were not only immersed in a phallogocentric system longer than their Western counterparts, but also have been exposed to a state-controlled discourse that demanded their emancipation in more radical terms than in the West. What traditional feminism faces in Central and Eastern Europe is skepticism and even a counter-movement. The communist regime preferred a heavy militant diction and reduced that diction to an inflexible *langue de bois*, so that neither “female scientist,” nor “inspired politician,” nor “work-hero,” nor simply “loving mother” (terms used to refer to Elena Ceaușescu) was left with any trace of meaning in them. In this light, it is difficult for Romanian women to react positively to any of these words, even when couched in terms of Western feminist agendas. For quite some time to come, feminism in Romania and in Eastern Europe in general needs to embrace a meandering, self-reflexive, self-ironic tone in order to escape derision. This is why the images of women in contemporary cultural artifacts (such as *The Snails’ Senator*) should not be read straightforwardly either as reinventing the same nationalist and phallogocentric imagery in new and more subtle terms, or as liberating women by means of a taboo-breaking imagery. Rather, this new artistic vocabulary embraces both and neither. The vacillation between opening and closure, between the spirit of cultural globalization and reminiscences of the old *forma mentis* seems to be a characteristic of transition.

Many contemporary artifacts prove that between globalization and the old nationalist cultural forms and between feminism and phallogocentrism, there is a whole spectrum of hybrid and liminal phenomena. Liminality (as a processual dimension) and hybridity account for the mixture, dialogue, mutual contestation, but also coexistence of old and new forms. They can explain apparently paradoxical phenomena, such as the simultaneous advent and coexistence of graphic violence against women and feminist agendas on the Romanian cultural market. These concepts also explain why the not-so-vocal feminist movements do not react energetically to negative representations of women in the media. The answer resides

in the complicated forms in which the two phenomena appear during the transition years. On screen, the representation of violence against women is not merely a patriarchal backlash; it is complicated by ironic readings and a process of supplanting, subverting, and dialoging with older forms of discourse (the nationalist myths which used the tropes of marriage and rape to buttress the community). These films (such as *The Snails' Senator*) take over the trope of rape of the Mother Country and rework it in such a way as to resonate with old and new representations of women. Feminisms, on the other hand, take different shapes than their Western counterparts. They are not a simple effect of globalization. Romanian feminisms seem less radical and their discourse is more self-reflexive. They respond to the false neutralization of gender inequality preached by the communist regime. They may appear as feminisms in masquerade. Most importantly, as I have suggested above, these new feminist agendas can lead to the rethinking of the frames and strategies of gender studies at large.

Just as transition feminisms could reshape gender studies, an understanding of transition can bring about an extensive dialogue with other contemporary “post” phenomena. If one comes to understand that liminality and ambiguity are productive and bursting with new cultural trends, one also realizes that transition studies offer a very rich field for academic work. Ultimately, to engage in postcommunist studies does not only mean to do a favor for Eastern European countries by researching and revealing important elements of their socio-political background. On the contrary, Transition studies can and will mirror back to the Western world and engage them in a dialogue and enrich their critical apparatus.

Notes

¹Katherine Verdery (1999) speaks about “fuzzy land property” in Transylvania as one of the economic oddities of Transition.

²Although liminality and hybridity are related concepts; post-colonial scholarship differentiates liminality as a processual dimension. Liminality can also include chaotic features, which makes it more adequate for rendering the phenomena of Transition.

³Throughout the film, the members of the Roma community are addressed as Gypsies. Although some of the Roma people refer to themselves as Gypsies, the term is usually charged with pejorative connotations.

⁴Other rape studies (S. Jed, G. Vigarello) have emphasized the triadic relation in which the raped woman becomes one man's (group's) message of intimidation to another man (group) who “owns” the respective woman.

⁵If assessing the yearly number of rapes during the communist regime is impossible (because of the absence of reliable data), there is not much interest nowadays in pursuing the causes, evolution, and statistics of violence against women. However a program (Stop the Violence and Discrimination against Women) has been recently initiated in order to offer services to women who are victims of domestic violence and gender discrimination. The program includes the creation of crisis centers, networks of safe houses, twenty-four hour crisis lines, free legal assistance to victims, and community education. However, a high number of the victims of rape and domestic violence do not press charges against the aggressors, since the victims either do not trust the police forces or are influenced by the mentality that such “shameful things” should not be made public. Thus only 4.27% cases of domestic violence are known, and only 2.25% are reported to the police. (Many thanks for this data go to Ms. Raluca Mircea, from the Stop the Violence and Discrimination against Women program.)

⁶According to Romulus Vulcnăescu, the first thoroughly researched and supported thesis on the origin of the Romanian people was the Latinist one, proposed in the late eighteenth century. The Latinist theory emphasized the continuity of the Roman colonists on the territory of Romania, sometimes to the extermination of the local inhabitants (the Dacians). This variant highlighted the Romanians’ need for independence, their noble heritage, and their kinship to more prosperous Latin nations, such as the French. Later on, many of the Romantics preferred to emphasize the Dacian element in the Romanian ancestry, a mysterious, almost forgotten yet proud and independent culture. The marriage variant presents the advantage of favorably combining the two cultural traditions.

⁷Although Asachi (1997) claims that the legend was still circulating in the 1780s in Moldavia, George Calinescu assumes that the myth is apocryphal.

⁸The legend of Baba Dochia coexisted with the legend of Dochia the daughter of Decebal. According to the former, Baba Dochia’s moody disposition accounts for the changing weather of the first nine days of March.

⁹Her oversight may be due to her focus on the USSR, as well as her concentration on the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁰Derived from the French term *état*, the “etatization of time” refers to the state’s encroachment on the free time of the citizens, by devising “patriotic duties” and civic activities to be performed after the regular work hours (see Verdery 1996).

¹¹After two decades of successive laws meant to increase the birth rate, in 1986 Ceaușescu declared that the fetus is the socialist property of the whole society. Giving birth was a patriotic duty and those who refused to have children were considered deserters from the social norm.

¹²Folklore preserves ballads and Christmas carols that feature Trajan and Dochia as a primordial couple whose yearly activities (sowing, tending crops, reaping the wheat, and making bread) were to be repeated by each household.

¹³Nationalist narratives in smaller countries often cast their people in the role of the eternal victims of history and greedy neighbours.

¹⁴Marin Preda earned a well-known position as a dissident writer, creator of a series of characters who deride and dismantle the communist regime, which culminated with the above-mentioned novel.

¹⁵Although there are several feminist NGOs in Romania (such as AnA—The Romanian Society for Feminist Analyses, Ariadna—Association of Art, Press and Business Women, The National Association of University Women of Romania, Network of East-West Women, Women’s Association from Romania, etc), their presence in the mass media is hardly noticeable. According to Mariana Celac, one of the problems of feminist activism in Romania and elsewhere is the use of “prepackaged” methods and plans, imported from the West, which do not fit the specific social and economic context of transition (see *Femei si Feminisme*). Other NGOs, such as The Gender Centre for Feminist Studies, rely on the high specialization and intellectual sophistication of feminists in the academia, such as Mădălina Nicolaescu or Mihaela Miroiu. However, the problem of their visibility, or rather invisibility, in the mass media remains at the core of the “feminist problem” in Romania.

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