The Odyssey of Communism

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Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture

Edited by
Michaela Praisler
and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu

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In loving memory of our dear friend and colleague,
Gabriela-Iuliana Colipcă-Ciobanu

CONTENTS

Coda: Cyclops

RE(PRESENTING) A LATTER-DAY ODYSSEY

MICHAELA PRAISLER
AND OANA-CELIA GHEORGHIU

With obvious propagandistic aims, the feature films produced in the Eastern Bloc and in China 'rewrite' history in the making, providing their home audiences with the image of a system that should have been perceived as victorious against the evils of the corrupt, capitalist West, and as a blessing for the ones fortunate enough to be under the protection of the Party. Equally worth commenting on are the few cultural products of the age that escaped censorship in their attempt to fight the regime, either by subtle insertion of disruptive elements in the communist visual indoctrination or by 'emigration' to a free world that was more than willing to find out what was going on behind the Iron Curtain.

In the wake of the communist era, cultural memory has been set in motion to 'show and tell' how it really was, in visual(ised) artefacts which have painted 'the age of horrors', 1945-1989, as even darker than it had actually been. With freedom of expression newly guaranteed, art creators have, since then, struggled to re-textualise the imposed narratives of the recent past, thus re-producing a history of communism.

An Odyssean journey of remembrance through visual means and techniques, this collection assembles chapters dedicated to feature films, documentaries and literary texts contributing to the above-mentioned re-textualisation and re-production. Its goal is that of assessing the latter half of the twentieth century from a cultural perspective, since thirty years after the fall of most communist regimes, there are still questions that await an answer. The analyses converge towards the idea that art has always been a powerful propaganda tool. While marginally covering other areas (China), as a means of pointing out the differences from what communism meant in Europe, focus is primarily laid on the impact of the regimes in the former USSR, in some of the signatories of the Warsaw Treaty – namely Romania, Yugoslavia, Poland – and in Orsinia, an avatar of Czechoslovakia.

The Odyssey of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture looks into the ways in which film has contaminated and re-shaped

culture(s) and the collective unconscious, at both local and global levels, arguing that our lives have been impacted by the 'then' that we keep revisiting, lest we forget. Contributors from Hong Kong, Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, the Netherlands and the USA refer to artistic products in/on communism, either emphasising their propagandistic force or bringing forth *ostalgie*, nostophobia, etc. It takes the reader from the Berlin Wall to China, and from the terror of communist political prisons and labour camps to the rosy image promoted by propaganda. A key point is the interdisciplinary nature of the project, which brings together literature and film scholars, directors, sociologists and philosophers, who employ their respective methods and views in studies whose overall conclusion is that communism, lingering in mentalities, still needs interrogation.

Structured along four distinctive parts which trace a Homeric (or rather Joycean) journey to a home metonymysed by the long-awaited freedom, this book sets out from the gloomiest aspects of totalitarianism in the Romanian, Serbian and Soviet 'Hades(es)' of traumatic psychological and physical experiences, as well as of silencing – identifiable throughout the entire communist Bloc. The second part gathers case studies of films illustrating optimistic views of communism as 'spring' (in the USSR) or as a 'golden age' (in Romania), thus narcotising the communist 'subjects' and preventing them from seeing the actual inferno. The third part offers filmic accounts of the aftermaths of communism, engaging the readers in a nostalgic process that attempts to revisit, question, reflect on and remember communism on a larger, world stage. The coda rounds up the volume (and the journey therein) by crossing genre frontiers to written narratives with a cinematic component.

Part I – Hades. The red turns to black

The chapters under this ominous heading focus on the most dramatic representations of the communist inferno. One highlights the repercussions of finding a voice following the interdiction to speak as a sign of paying mournful respects on Stalin's death in the film *Nuntă mută [Silent Wedding]* by Horațiu Mălăele. Another addresses the subversive criticism of repression in the black wave cinema productions popular in the former Yugoslavia, through a case study of films by Dušan Makavejev and Želimir Žilnik. A third is centred around the actual privation of freedom, in what cultural memory has retained as one of the most horrible spaces of confinement, the communist prisons/ labour camps, in a philosophical approach to the cinematic adaptation of a famous Romanian novel of the 1980s, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni [The Most Beloved of Earthlings]* by Marin Preda.

The fourth chapter zooms in on the memorable conceit of the Tarkovskian 'Zone' in *Stalker*, where reality clashes with desire, and where the conditions of the carceral state are prone to disintegration as a result of its subjects' turning inwards. Lastly, the greatest tragedy of women in communist Romania, their deprivation of choice where motherhood was concerned, is tackled from a psychoanalytical-sociological perspective, in the comparative analysis of two films, from then and now: *Ilustrate cu flori de câmp [Postcards with Wild Flowers]* (1975) and *Patru luni, trei săptămâni și două zile [Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days]* (2007).

Part II – Lotus Eaters. Propaganda, intoxication and complacency

It is contended here that the totalitarian Hades, whose dramatic representations were analysed in the previous part, could not withstand and thrive without the complacency of its denizens, and that this soporific state could not be maintained through a permanency of terror. Maintaining the illusion that life in communism was much better than that in the putrid and corrupt West was a major aim of communist propaganda, which employed uncouth and unsubtle means of intoxicating people into a peaceful apathy. However, propaganda was, at times, subverted from within, as the chapters in this part try to demonstrate. The first one stops to consider *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (1956), and its representation of/in the Soviet and post-Soviet Ukrainian socio-cultural space. By contrasting two cinematic productions, *Toamna bobocilor [The Freshmen's Autumn]* and *Amintiri din epoca de aur [Tales from the Golden Age]*, the next chapter juxtaposes two opposing views on communism, as an idyllic, Arcadian Utopia or as a genuine topos of life's absurdity. The following one analyses an American production, *Comrade Detective*, decoding its clashing images of communism and capitalism, and exposing the artificiality of the stereotype-based pattern of propaganda film. The last chapter transfers the emphasis to China, providing an extensive account of how the Chinese Communist Party attempted to inculcate a new socialist spirit by replacing Hollywood films with Soviet productions.

Part III – Nostos. Returning to the past as pleasure and pain

This third part addresses the two sides of the cultural memory coin of looking back – either in anger or in sadness. The authors employ the notion of *nostalgia* in their discussions of recent films that have sometimes been

criticised for promoting communist values instead of contesting them. The first chapter in this section approaches the body and the cultural trope of dance as metaphors of the Cold War, in an analysis of two films, *The White Crow* and *The Shape of Water*, informed by the Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of schizophrenic postmodernity. The critically acclaimed German film *The Lives of Others* is surveyed in the next chapter with a view to proving it to be both an "effective antidote to Ostalgie" (*The Guardian* 2007) and a product of reconciliation in the aftermath of the 1990 German reunification. The journey is now full circle, though its echoes are still resounding, disturbingly at times. But the homecoming, the end of the road, the long-awaited Ithaca, is still nowhere in sight, and the transition seems never-ending, as proven by the following chapters. One deals with the struggle of the Polish people as represented in three short documentaries produced by Irena Kamieńska: *Workwomen*, *Day after Day* and *The Fog*. The other, a bird's-eye-view of Romanian filmography from the early 1960s to the present, places the figure of the mayor at its centre, pointing out the old, communist habits preserved in post-communist local administrations.

Coda: Cyclops

Another phenomenon caught under the lens by this collection is the shift from film to the filmic in a literary text which employs video and camera techniques used by television news programmes, thus illustrating patterns of genre crossover in the late 1980s: Ursula K. Le Guin's *Unlocking the Air*. The short story fictionalises the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, adding the imaginary Orsinia state to the Eastern Bloc.

In the texts presented here, the *then* and the *now* merge when what happened to *us* is narrated as if it had happened to *them*. This displacement from the first to the third person can never lead to narratorial objectivity, barely concealing a pained awareness that *them* is *us*, that *they* in fact lived *our* lives, which in turn are still impacted by *'the horror, the horror'* of the *then*. In a similar manner, some authors of the scholarly chapters collected in the following pages turn into 'narrators' who assume the role of storytellers of their countries' totalitarian past: their first-person experience is thus mediated, turned into a third-person objective, scientific discourse, so as to match an alleged external perspective of a detached cultural scholar.

Given the polyphony of this volume (in point of authors' background, age, ethnicity, of their having experienced communism directly or just having been told *stories* about it), agreement with the views expressed could not be always attained. That is also due to the fact that the

imaginary path of this *Odyssey of Communism* collates contributions presented during the international conference *Thirty Years since the Fall of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture*, held in November 2019 in Galati, Romania, and a handful of later submissions from all over the world. In the spirit of the freedom of speech denied us for decades, the editors did not alter in any way the possible ideological implications of the texts submitted. Consequently, the authors are solely responsible for their views, as well as for the scientific accuracy of their research.

Michaela Praisler and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu

HADES. THE RED TURNS TO BLACK

CHAPTER I

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF FINDING A VOICE: *SILENT WEDDING*

ALEXANDRU PRAISLER
AND MICHAELA PRAISLER

The silencing of the voices of otherness is one of the key topics of scholarly investigation in the humanities today, with the focus laid particularly on women, black communities, ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, the poor, formerly colonised populations, etc. The approaches adopted or the reading grids applied bring to the fore explicit political and economic rationales for the reality being interrogated, delve into the mechanisms of representation, and explore the metamorphoses of one actuality into multiple avatars. In so doing, most research tackles artistic techniques, social constructs, stereotyping practices, marketing strategies, and reader response. The works which are generally praised for their content of ideas, as well as for their structural complexity, are those which warrant serious re-consideration of the way of the world, and which swiftly communicate the message while remaining challenging enough to engage. The artistic film *Silent Wedding*[1] may be included in this category of works due to the fact that, content-wise, its subject matter and satirical tone facilitate probing into the past so as to understand the present, and that, form-wise, its elaborate architecture, culture-specific language and (magic) realist mode appropriately outline the apparently simple world selected and reflect the intricacy of its ancestral worldview.

The shifts in time and political regime are supported by the narrative scaffolding, which takes the viewer from the frame to the embedded story and back (with a tactical descent into the wedding story woven into the embedded one – the ultimate 'Russian doll' hidden inside the filmic text). The reversed symbolism used in connection with the present versus the past and capitalism versus communism – portrayed as

[1] Original title in Romanian: *Nuntă mută*.

bland versus bright – raises questions about truth construction processes, about how memory stores images, and about how nostalgia negotiates facts. Furthermore, it is a classic example not only of activist representation on screen, but also of the straightforward assignment of voice to the supressed, conforming to the definitions of film proposed by specialists in the field, according to whom "on one level film is mimesis, representation, [but] also utterance, an act of contextualised interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers. It is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask: Constructed for whom and in conjunction with which ideologies and discourses? In this sense, art is a representation in not so much a mimetic as a political sense, as a delegation of voice" (Stam 2000, 278-279).

What *Silent Wedding* brings to the set of aspects considered as adding value to a cultural text is an "inventive use of silence"[2] which counteracts "the global dominance of narrative ('noisy') cinema" (O'Rawe 2009, 97). Without announcing a return to film's earlier silent stages (samples of which it only weaves into its fabric for the sake of intensifying the farcical undertones), but investigating "semiotic modes other than language" to represent a space "where censorship prevails"[3] (Anthonissen 2003, 299), it opportunely finds conversational, thematic, textual and situational silence (Kurzon 2007, 1676-1681) to be capable of suggesting obsoleteness and suppression. The Romanian film can thus be seen as part of the European cinema, whose "persistence of silence helped to nurture a culturally heterogeneous and artistically inventive film culture as opposed to one dominated by the technological prowess and industrial sophistication of Hollywood" (O'Rawe, 89). As in the case of other old-world film productions, "rediscovering the spectrum of silence assisted in the creation of new formal possibilities: new ways of configuring alienation and fragmentation, absence and the asynchronicities of Being" (O'Rawe, 94). An outcome of contemporary political cinema, with its insistence on controlling or repressive ideologies, *Silent Wedding* is, according to its director, Horaţiu Mălăele, "intended to speak to the world, sentimentally and romantically, about love in a space capable of perpetuity. [It] is intended to speak to the world about dictatorship and its consequences. It

[2] O'Rawe's list of directors includes names like Cassavetes, Tarkovski, Angelopolous, Rubric, Lynch, Kiarostami, Hou and Kitano. No Romanian names appear, yet Mălăele may also be mentioned in connection with original uses of silence in film.

[3] The perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, with its focus on discourses which are shaped (or erased) in demanding contexts is considered of interest in the analysis of communism in film.

will be a film about life, death and Truth" (*Hotnews*, Gala Premiere, 14 November 2008).

The main function of the diegetic, musical or dialogue silence it 'speaks' in, alongside revealing the inner lives of characters and bridging the gap between temporal and spatial references, is that of representing the moments in which reality exceeds expectations and in which the (historically) real becomes surreal (Théberge 2008, 53-57). Architecturally, these types of silence are observable in the abrupt breaks and transfers to other narrative avenues. Stylistically, they imprint the assertion that voicing opinions is dangerous in certain contexts. Technically, they are simply acoustic interruptions used for dramatic effect. Contributing to the effort of exposing the extra-ordinarily painful communist experience in Mălăele's striking, 'made in Romania' account, silence is all-pervasive, from beginning to end: in the film's title, in its framing narrative, and in its depth structure.

The extended title – *Silent Wedding … and the light came from the East…*[4] – is charged with significance, and open to multiple interpretations. Firstly, the oxymoron in 'Silent Wedding', carried through in 'and the light came from the East', challenges and entices, foregrounding unnaturalness (by depriving the marriage ceremony of sound/voice) while outlining the most natural of perennial beginnings (through the implied image of the rising sun). Secondly, the allusion to the film's political core (the Sovietisation of the Romanians in the wake of the Second World War), achieved by bringing together 'silence' and 'the East', is a caveat which adds a meta-component to the filmic text. The title thus impacts the 'reader' and orients the 'reading' (in the sense of decoder/decoding) towards the absurd and the unexpected (always a successful selling point in screenwriting and filmmaking), to facilitate the plunge into dark representations of conflictual history and the politics shaping it.

The film begins with its framing narrative, as a documentary about the paranormal [00:00:00-00:06:12]. Its protagonists are a group of filmmakers/investigative journalists, and its subject matter is a series of phenomena which have transformed a remote Romanian village into an eerie settlement. In search of sensational, breaking-news material that could potentially make them a fortune, the Paramedia crew[5] arrive on site and enter another dimension, whose appearance is that of a post-nuclear bomb area. From the very beginning, the local mayor, Gogonea[6], jokingly

[4] In the original: *Nuntă mută … şi întunericul a venit de la Răsărit…*

[5] Mirel Băboi – reporter; Creţu 'Donald' – driver; Runcu – operator, photographer; 'Mafalda' – sound assistant, editor and medium.

[6] *Gogonea* is *pickle* in Romanian; practically, most of the characters have

outlines the strangeness and the sad, convoluted saga of the place with reference to the 1945 elections, when everybody in Romania voted with the liberals and the communists won, to nothing being normal nowadays, to insufficient EU funds for infrastructure development. Most importantly, he deftly explains the political game and its aftermath.

> *Reporter:* What used to be here, mayor?
> *Gogonea:* A village. The communists tore it down to build a factory for workers[7]. Now, the shrewd capitalists are tearing down the factory to put the village back… *(Laughter)* A holiday camp[8,9] [00:03:36-54].

The tragi-comic vein initiated here not only anticipates the film's overall aesthetic mode; it reinstates the social value of film (quantifying the importance people give to the various changes they witness in their lives) and supports the cultural representation of Romanianness, which it then communicates across spatial and temporal frontiers, indicating the "desire to produce intense, and often political, meanings and effects" (De Valk 2013, 122).

Silent Wedding ends by circularly returning to its opening scenes, retracing the narrative for emphasis, and suggesting the trap of history repeating itself [01:16:24-19:15]. Rounding up the framing story, the film returns to the journalists who, with the aid of the mayor, attempt to obtain valuable information from the only other survivors of the events of March 1953 – old women dressed in black, attending to the graves of the dead men and organising orthodox religious ceremonies to honour their memory and to redeem their souls. Against a backdrop of heavy clouds and pouring rain, in front of a makeshift chapel, the mayor ends his story

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translatable surnames or nicknames: Gogonică = little pickle; Vrabie = sparrow; Aşchie = splinter; Păstaie = pod, Praştie = sling, Răzor = flower bed, Soare = sun, Mutu = mute, etc.

[7] The reference is to the almighty proletariat in the slogan "Working men of all countries, unite!", advanced by Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and overused by the Romanian Communist Party in their propaganda and fight to defeat capitalism.

[8] The Romanian for *village* is *sat*, and for *holiday camp* is *sat de vacanţă*. The word play is significant for the scene, where work is opposed to leisure, and for the film's general atmosphere of hard, impoverished rural life. However, it is lost in translation. It remains to the viewer to decode the message via image and sound, aided along by the unambiguous paradox already inserted.

[9] Most of the translations of film script specimens inserted in this chapter have been provided for subtitling purposes in Alexandru Praisler's doctoral dissertation (2012).

of the disappearance of his native village, while the Paramedia reporter records an interview with an unnamed widow (actually the main character of Gogonea's childhood memory).

To the childhood story, told passively by the adult Gogonea [01:16.21-32], the journalists try to add the testimony of an old woman, identified as Mara when the camera zooms in on the birthmark on her neck, in the form of the post-war map of Romania[10], a 'sign' with well-known historical and cultural implications.

The interview only lasts seconds [01:17.03-42] and goes terribly wrong, but the few words uttered summarise the film's tale of incredible Romanian-style forbearance, having the weight of an open-ended aphorism.

> *Reporter (shouting to make himself heard):* Madam, we'd like you to take an interview[11]…
> *Old woman (incredulous rather than deaf):* What else do you want from us? I can't hear you, dear!
> *Reporter (raising his voice)*: Madam, we'd like you to take an interview…
> *Old woman (together with the other widows)*: What else do you want to take from us? [1:17:24-40]

The old woman's response, which might easily be taken as denotative or as only slightly charged semantically, sounds familiar and extremely bitter in the ears of a nation who have lived through historical adversity and have been subjected to a totalitarian regime. The crew's ensuing laughter on hearing what she has to say is both a form of cathartic release and a relevant way to indicate cultural specificity: the ability of Romanians to use humour in managing conflict and surviving the hardest of times.

The last scenes offer a bird's eye view of the desolation, with the dark silhouettes of the derelict industrial site in the background, snowflakes

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[10] Without the territories which were once part of the Kingdom of Romania (also referred to as Greater Romania) and which were lost to the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.

[11] Romanian has three different forms for the second-person pronoun *you*: *tu* (singular), *voi* (plural), and *dumneavoastră* (official and polite personal pronoun for both the singular and the plural). The latter, although not explicitly used by the reporter, is obvious in the plural form of the verb. In the translation, while no problems were raised by the question asked (the source language pronoun in the dative is absent in the target language), the plural in the answer given, *us*, was deliberately chosen to indicate the fact that the destruction of individual lives is symptomatic for that of entire communities and hence nations.

falling and a ghostly young woman in a white wedding gown wandering through the meandering paths. The final cutline is *It happened in Romania, in 1953* [1:19:12-15] – a pronouncement on the actuality of an otherwise fantastic set of events, and one that carries the weight of a chronicle.

Inside the frame [00:06:13-01:16:23], the film tells the story of Mara and Iancu and the rural community they are part of, as well as by the story of the broader Eastern European political situation of the 1950s. The personal relationship unfolds at the centre of the public village life, while the menacing global changes creep in slowly but surely. The rhythm of the stereotypical characters' daily lives is culturally charged, with the viewer being allowed to glimpse into the make ups of the men and women, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and the educated and the illiterate – inside the quintessential space of the Romanian village. These divisions, however, are only formal, since all coexist peacefully, and the otherwise bellicose dependence on the opposing other induces a sense of own identity (usually resulting from at once accepting and fighting back against 'the necessary evil'), and summed up as the inertia of the Romanians that the film foregrounds and criticises.

Basic household chores (with women doing all the cooking, ironing, sweeping, etc.), wedding preparations and parties (overabundant, loud, meant to impress), and funerals with associated wakes and repasts (showing quick transition from grief to joy) are craftily represented on screen, managing to synthesise the core attributes of Romanian culture. Some indicate humility and determination, while some others underline humour and optimism – a paradoxical but healthy recipe for resilience in the face of adversity.

The language used in the first part of the embedded narrative in *Silent Wedding* contributes to foregrounding successive auto-images which open up the cultural debate and facilitate the filmic rewriting of history. The dialect shows the same region, class, age group, and education, with few variations from scene to scene. Word play, however, is omnipresent, with many instances of paronomasia, malapropism, ambiguity, polysemy, irony, phonetic mix-ups, obscure expressions, rhetorical exercises and given names. It exposes ignorance and provides amusement, despite the dark themes covered.

> Gogonea[12] admonishing his younger comrades for not having convinced anyone to join the party:

[12] Gogonea Senior, mayor Gogonea's father, president of the local Agricultural Cooperative.

Gogonea: How many have you convinced to join the party? I'll tell you: none. […]
Troop member: People is mules, they can't be persuaded.
Gogonea: What persuading? Persuade your mother, that's who. Threaten them, scare them, make them join the party or else! [00:19:30-52]

Cultural evening. Education of the masses:

Gogonea: Today we shall execute a cultural activity. What shall we execute?
Troop: Culture! [00:30:38-43]

Father of the bride's opening speech at the wedding:

Father of the bride: Esteemed mob! (instead of 'guests') [00:46:21-23]

Activist/Translator announcing mandatory measures:

Păstaie: You may not know it, but our Father[13], Iosif Vissarionovici Stalin, passed away last night.
Father of the groom: To his health! […]
Păstaie: The national flag shall be lowered to half-mast.
Father of the bride: To what?
Godfather[14]: To half past. […]
Păstaie: No laughter, no football matches, no weddings, and no funerals!
Gogonea: Did you hear that? Everything is forbidden! Funerals too? Aren't they burying comrade Stalin? [00:48:44-51:08]

Beneath the visible cultural layer of spoken language, there lies the 'silent language' of rituals, customs, and styles, together with action, communication, environment, time, space, power structures, and patterns of thought (Hall 1990). It is governed by silence and, in turn, governs "a plot space that may not be visually represented but that the audience must imagine in order to make sense of the story" (De Valk 2013, 86). Here, religion plays an important role, being both used and abused in the remarks characters frequently make about their life and status. It is both revered (especially by older women/mothers) and disrespected (by almost

[13] The Bolshevik Stalin was known as "The Great Helmsman" or "The Father of Nations", but Romanians would 'lovingly' refer to him as *tătucu* – diminutive for *tată* (father), equivalent to the English *dad*/*daddy*. *Father* was preferred in the translation to cancel affection and indicate authority.
[14] The Romanian custom at weddings is to have a married couple as 'godparents' instead of a 'groomsman' and a 'matron of honour' or a 'best man' and a 'best woman'.

everyone else). Religious terminology is sometimes employed to serve manifest political (anti-communist) purposes. For instance, when the troop marches through the village, shouting *Comrades, what are we looking for? We want peace, we don't want war!*, Sile-the-dwarf derisively addresses them with the liturgical: *Peace be with you* [00:11:46-52]. It habitually occurs in informal linguistic structures signifying contempt, hate, anger, despair, and even mockery. Illustrative in this respect is Iancu's father, who ridicules his wife by reporting that she spends her time *praying with icons*[15]*... and they don't listen* [00:13:16-18]. Moreover, as cursing and swearing in Romanian is rarely devoid of religious implications, the language of the film captures that cultural aspect also. Mara's father, for example, greets her with *Your mother's incensor*[16]*!* [00:08:26-28] (from the *Your mother's church!* series), which would translate approximately as 'You and your mother! F… your ridiculous preaching!' and would be perceived as extremely vulgar/rude. Gogonea's reaction to his comrades' incapacity to sign villagers up to the Communist Party is another instance of religious scorn: *Get out! Your mothers' Gods!*, practically meaning 'Go to hell, you idiots!' [00:20:08-12].

Inside the environment outlined, an important locus, exploited with a view to shedding light on cultural specificity and to allowing voices to be heard, is the pub, which is pretentiously called *Buffet*[17] *and Cooperative*[18] in the film. The fact that the enforced collectivisation is linked to the place where villagers socialise and temporarily put their worries aside makes a powerful, though paradoxical, statement, indicating how lightly most Romanians take impositions which over time erode their values and way of life. The pub brings together peasants and local gentry, but also the odd character adding flavour to the rural atmosphere (a prostitute, a mad scientist, a war veteran, an errand boy, etc.). In the pub's filthy setting and stifling ambience, the motley crowd stirs to life, and the place is suddenly resonant of the clamour of heated arguments fuelled by

[15] Icons represent holy images of God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints, and are present in almost all Orthodox households.

[16] An incensor is a mobile incense burner, suspended on three chains that come with little bells, and is ritually swung by Orthodox priests during religious ceremonies.

[17] Commonly, village pubs are known as *cârciumi* (argot; near equivalent in English: *boozers*); *bufet* [*buffet*] is a formal variant.

[18] Cooperatives, resulting from the agricultural collectivisation process initiated in 1949, were inspired by the Soviet kolkhoz. The implementation of collectivization in Romania was slow and was still lagging behind other countries of the Soviet Bloc in the early 1950s. It was completed in 1962 and remained in force until 1989.

the waft of cigarette smoke [00:13:19-16:38]. Stimulated by intoxicated cheerfulness, the conversations are mainly structured around laughing the present hardships off or devising idealistic plans. The sobering interventions/politicised intrusions from the landlord and the standing joke of all present as *servant to the Russians* [00:16:28-30] are further ominous clues aiding the immanent tragedy focused upon by Mălăele's film. A memorable one in this sense is *Comrade Coriolan, the light comes from the East!* [00:14:00-05] – indicative of the reversed symbolism with political overtones pervading *Silent Wedding* and asserted in its very title. The tragi-comic portrayal of the state of the nation which ensues from Gogonea Senior's newly found philosophy, brazenly expressed at the pub, and contradicted by Mardare, formerly a representative of the privileged class of money and estates, also contributes to the overall negative evaluation of popular apathy:

> *Gogonea*: Our time has finally come; the time of the uneducated! Enough fetching and carrying for you!
> *Mardare*: You and your old man weren't even good at that!
> *Gogonea*: You think that you're an intellectual just 'cause you can read 'em playing cards you gambled your land away with? I'm not educated but I'm someone!
> *Mardare*: I'm educated and you're someone! [00:14:54-15:20]

The clash between the metonymical characters and their corresponding antithetical discourses reflects the downfall of the bourgeoisie and the rise in power of the proletariat, revealing deeply-rooted Romanian socio-cultural realities and the consequences of historical change in connection with personal lives and collective development. The juxtaposition of Gogonea's radical bluster to Mardare's drunken banter condenses the film's gist and serves artistic purposes related to character drawing, building tension, and allowing comic relief.

The fissures are further displayed in the film's narrative structure. The bucolic scenery, the couple's love making, and the snapshots of traditional family and community life are disrupted by ominous images, sounds and happenings which announce the shift in mode, tone, genre, as well as the film's terrible ending: silhouettes of the crosses marking the graves in the local cemetery and Russian tanks involved in military drills nearby [00:10:08-54]; a small troop of communist agitators marching, waving red flags, blowing whistles, pounding drums, and proudly spouting slogans despite the scorn of the locals [00:11:29-52]; the Saturday night at the movies organised by a cultural instructor coming from town to spread 'ideological education' (newsreel plus politicised wartime romance;

images showing Russian demonstration of force; Russian proletarian music playing) [00:31:30-31:44]; the villagers being force-fed communist propaganda and receiving threats from Gogonea [31.45-32.15]; the Russian officer announcing Stalin's death and ordering a total shutdown [00:48:35-51:00]; Russian tanks entering the village, Russian soldiers looting, killing, and taking prisoners [01:11:45-01:15:20]; dilapidated buildings on abandoned factory sites [01:18:34-01:19:15/01:23:16].

Fantastic scenes are woven into the filmic narrative for reasons which, although not made explicit, support the popular belief in the Fates[19] and their ability to predict a person's destiny from birth, reinforce the fascination with superstition and premonition, and draw special attention to the uncanny metamorphosis of the Romanian unspoiled rural self into its disfigured, urban, communist avatar. They mostly revolve around Smaranda, Iancu's former love, who wanders through the woods holding flowers and chanting, a disturbing apparition. She predicts a sombre future for Iancu and curses Mara. He is told that 'the night has eaten his head and soul, leaving him a bodiless drifter', and seems to accept his fate. Mara, on the other hand, shouts back in protest while warned about 'angels of the night coming to steal her knees and belly' [00:17:56-19:15]. In a tragic section with proleptic force, Smaranda's lifeless body is found tied to a tree, seemingly raped, clasping a Russian military medal, engraved with a sickle and a hammer [00:38:32-00:39:04]. Smaranda appears once again, at her own repast, where wine is spilled on her wedding gown. When they all go to the cemetery to dig her out of her grave and coffin, the wine stains immediately catch Mara's eye. [00:42:14-00:43:15] Here and there, now and then, Smaranda is ubiquitous, as is the inexplicable fear her presence instils.

Another aspect which is relevant to the kaleidoscopic rendering of Romanian country life in the 1950s is the metaphor of the circus. When it comes to the village (notably suspending the 'cultural evening' organised) [00:33:40-34:46], the circus adds the kitsch and the grotesque to the existing absurd situation the locals are trapped in. The funfair that everyone attends the next day [00:34:47-38:14] is a welcome break from the reality of gradual Sovietisation, but the gypsy music, the corridors of mirrors, the puppet shows, the swings, the kites, the lollipops, and the barbeques cannot efface the oppression and ingrained sorrow. The circus makes the transition to the pantomime which begins with various silent

[19] The Romanian equivalent for the Fates is *Ursitoare*. Feared and worshipped, they appear frequently in Romanian folklore, and are usually portrayed as young, beautiful, winged creatures with golden hair, wearing garments made of fine white linen.

movie sequences inserted at the heart of the sections which have a pronounced political content, or which are intended to communicate terror [00:31:49-32:24], [00:42:14-43:15], [00:51:28-30], [00:51:35-37], [00:52:35-53:40], and culminates in the actual silent wedding covering more than 25% of the film [00:53:41-01:10:35]. Memorable images associated with the latter include gagged children, musical instruments blocked from making noises, glassware wrapped in cloth and woollen socks, cutlery removed from table (forcing people to eat with their bare hands), mimicked toasts, dances, and conversations.

The wedding, which starts normally, with all customs observed (except, maybe, for the day it was scheduled for due to the ongoing political agenda of the local communist faction – a Thursday) [00:44:46-47:02] is abruptly interrupted by the news of [their] Father's passing and seven days of international mourning being decreed by the Great Council of the United and Free Soviets, during which all popular manifestations, with the exception of mourning gatherings, were strictly forbidden. In order that the sausages, mincemeat-stuffed cabbage, meat jelly and the rest do not go to waste, the wedding is held clandestinely, under the cover of darkness, and with props meant to deceive the authorities into thinking that everyone is at home and not in the improvised 'banquet hall'. The new version, staged and silent, farcical and pathetic, is the epitome of debasement, allowing the comic to dissolve into the tragic [00:47:03-01:10:35]. Re-entry into language and sound during the sudden outbreak of heavy rain and thunderstorm – invalidating compliance to strict orders – only lasts for a very short time [01:10:36-01:11:40], the very last minutes in the life of a whole community, decimated by tanks crashing into walls, machine guns mowing people down, and prisoners being taken away [01:11:41-01:16:20] as the sun rises and the light comes from the East.

The recently discovered voices, amplifying the ones blurred by the first Russian interference, are eventually smothered by the final Russian assault on the wedding party. Highlighting the price paid for the attempted freedom of speech, the example set has long term repercussions, with silence hovering over the village and its (predominantly female) surviving inhabitants for decades – well into the twenty-first century. The only voice finally making itself heard is male, yet devoid of credibility or authority. It simply tells the story of the innocent determination of a small community to find a voice (and make wedding noises) on Stalin's death, an act of 'bravery' which triggers the annihilation of the local male population and brings about the demise of a way of life.

Via the silent 'Russian doll', the film constructs a subject/text which is "embedded in a social matrix, [and which has] consequences in

the world" (Stam 2000, 225). Though hyperbolised, the resulting image is used to raise awareness regarding terrific historical truths that have impacted the status quo, being mediated through cinematic tools designed to "immerse the spectator within the illusion of 'reality'" (De Valk 2013, 86). The mise-en-scène brings all the adult Romanian characters together around the table, somewhat separated from the children and the gypsies in the overcrowded room. It thus sets the bittersweet mood and expresses the film's vision in relation to informing, criticising and entertaining. It also suggests various characters' states of mind read into their body language, posture, facial expression, etc. Music is absent altogether, as are any other sounds. The accidental blunders making the smallest of noises are immediately hushed and the silence resumed. The selective focus technique (depth-of-field) is used to control the frames so that the viewer is drawn to the significant details. Emphasising dark corners and shadows, the low-key lighting builds suspense, while the side lighting, used for contrast, calls to attention objects and characters that reflect the general restrained atmosphere. "The absence of sound gives the images, and all their subtleties, a new priority in the viewer's consciousness, and allows them to speak with their own unique, music-like rhythms" (Camper 1985, 387). In other words, paraphrasing Mark O'Rawe, an absence is replaced by the aesthetically important presence of filmic silence (2009, 88) to complete the puzzle created and propagated not only by this morality tale, but by the entire film.

In cultural texts (films included), "there is a role distribution among the different semiotics, a role distribution in which some semiotics are given a great deal of social power, but at the cost of being subjected to greater institutional (and technological) control, while others are allowed relative freedom from control, but pay for this with diminished power. […] Today, we seem to move towards a decrease of control over language […], and towards an increase in codification and control over the visual" (Kress and Van Leeuven 1996, 28-29). In *Silent Wedding*, image (silence) and language (sound) coexist, sustaining the production of meaning and complying with controlling devices to varying degrees. The control exercised over images, carefully encoded for interpretative purposes, is more evident (mostly due to the novelty of silently telling stories) than the choices operated with regard to language (implying more traditionalist, recognisable matrices). The social power of that which goes unuttered (film language) is greater and more noteworthy than that of the dialogues, even if the latter represent a more common form of manifestation for language (by contrast, interior monologue or voice-over narration are relatively rare). Cultural history, politics and society are therefore brought

to the fore once again, placing the representation in the mirror of the real, and the film producer's art on the film consumer's plate, with *Silent Wedding* emerging as the perfect vehicle for meditating on the sacrifices which had to be made on the way towards finding a voice to overthrow the silence.

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CHAPTER II

HIDDEN MESSAGES IN THE YUGOSLAV BLACK WAVE FILM MOVEMENT

SRĐAN RADAKOVIĆ

Viewed from today's perspective, it is astonishing how quickly Yugoslavia disintegrated in the horrible civil war that followed the 1989 revolutions and the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, in the mid-sixties, major problems in the communist system of a country made up of different, even opposing, national and religious populations had already arisen, and this emergence was particularly evident in the cinematic achievements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This unique cinematographic movement, which was called "the black wave", spoke openly about the various problems of the communist, one-party organisation of Yugoslavia, a country composed of six republics, two autonomous provinces, and numerous ethnic groups, under the rule of Josip Broz Tito. The main problem in the country was the economic inequality between the republics and provinces within the federation, and this inequality caused nationalist aspirations and confederal tendencies in some circles within the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. In the western part of Yugoslavia, the Socialist Republic of Slovenia was the most economically developed, in stark contrast to the republics in the east, especially the southern Serbian autonomous province Kosovo, which was on the verge of poverty, and inhabited mainly by Albanians. Therefore, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia constantly cultivated the strong political leadership of Josip Broz Tito and practised economic reforms with the aim of reducing social disparities between republics. But those reforms never produced the expected results and serious differences remained.

Although the Yugoslav communist model became unique after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, and citizens enjoyed far greater life standards and civil liberties than did citizens from Eastern Bloc states under the direct control of the Soviet Union (especially if they were loyal communist

party members), the younger, educated Yugoslav postwar generation in the mid-sixties became deeply dissatisfied with the state and started to question ideological dogmatism, economically irrational decisions, and, above all, the authoritarian side of the Yugoslav communist system.

Some of the most prominent filmmakers at the time were Dušan Makavejev and Želimir Žilnik, and their feature films and documentaries, criticising the above-mentioned modus operandi, garnered some of the most prestigious awards at leading European film festivals, such as Berlin, Cannes, and Oberhausen.

Contemporary film historians have often described the black wave film movement as a subversive attack on the repressive nature of the Yugoslav communist system, one which took a neutral position in the tense political climate of the cold war and, for many years, balanced successfully between East and West. Dušan Makavejev's feature film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (*WR: Misterije organizma*, 1971) is often regarded as the most scandalous achievement of the era, with its specific collage construction that included a combination of newsreel footage, extracts from older fiction and documentary films, and a quite bizarre story of a young Yugoslav woman, Milena, who died by the hand of a Russian skater, Vladimir Ilyich (Lenin's first and middle names). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson emphasised that by mixing the biography of Wilhelm Reich, a psychoanalyst and radical sex theorist, footage of erotic practices in the United States, newsreels of the Chinese revolution, and a grotesque story about a woman who believed that a communist revolution without free love was a path to perdition, Makavejev successfully created a critically aimed network of cross-references and, in some scenes, even outrageous juxtapositions. In suggesting that erotic freedom would revitalise Marxism, Makavejev was attacking Communist prudery head-on (Bordwell and Thompson 2003, 554).

Similarly, in the feature film *Early Works* (*Rani radovi*, 1969) Želimir Žilnik exposed the unsuccessful realisation of revolution in the rural parts of Yugoslavia after the student demonstrations of June 1968, led by three men and a young woman named Yugoslava. Unlike Makavejev's film, that expressed its critical attitude through shocking montage cuts, Žilnik's used allegory within a cinematic style close to documentary. Towards the end of the film, the three young men decide to eliminate Yugoslava, because the planned revolution has not been realised and she is the only witness of their failure. In the ending scene, they shoot her, cover her body with the party flag, and ritually burn the remains. The metaphor is blatantly evident here, as the burning of Yugoslav(i)a after the unsuccessful revolution speaks for itself.