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## Fantasies of Liberation. Aesthetic Transgressions and Regressions in the Gender Imaginary of Post-Communism

### **Abstract:**

This study intends to explore the archetypes of the post-communist gender-based imaginary, which was the result of a contradictory alchemic operation. Situated at the intersection of two antagonistic cultural spheres, the globalized imaginary and the archaic counterfeit memory of neo-traditionalism, gender was transformed into a conflictual construct. The article is based on a fundamental assumption which claims that present-day deformations of the imaginary and the creative boycott against gender represent the result of a regressive symbolic operation, determined by the chronic perpetuation of a maleficent type of modernity.

**Keywords:** gender, aesthetic imaginary, post-communism, modernity, cultural regression, invented tradition.

*Sisters, mothers, wives, slaves of labour,  
Of hapless, anguished lives!  
Forward boldly with us. A bright future  
We'll forge amidst our bleak lot.*

S. Dal'niaia "Nash prazdnik", Robotnitsa  
23 February 1914

### **I. The symptomatology of modernity: counterfeit and change in the age of nations**

Nowadays contemporary society is confronted with a major turn in the field of creative imaginary, this essential reconfiguration of the function and effects of cultural consumption evolving in close connection with the theme of modernity. The present-day re-

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conversion of the creative function is related to a general phenomenon of identity reconstruction (Harris 2014, 4). Collective identities are thus recreated under the pressure of two contradictory vectors, the national bodies and the globalized informational medium becoming responsible for a cultural dynamic marked by multiple cleavages and shifts. Tensions between national constructs and new disembodied imagined communities (Anderson 2006, 6) are rising with peculiar intensity in post-colonial landscapes, post-communist societies becoming the source of some provocative symbolic experiments. The collapse of the communist order triggered important renegotiations of collective identities, gender remaining one of the most disputed referential frames.

Rethinking gender under the circumstances of a recent historical shift brings into discussion the complicated subject of collective memory. After the fall of communism, the former totalitarian societies were confronted with a strong representational crisis. The panacea for this acute cultural pathology was a general process of recuperation. The genesis of "invented traditions" (Hobsbawn and Ranger 2012, 237) in the nineteenth century was motivated by the necessity of producing cohesive social identities. Consequently, the resurrection of these initial forms of invented traditions in the post-communist era was motivated by a similar identity deficit and was accompanied by a reinterpretation of pre-modern culture. The consequences for gender identities and representations were critical, the degradation of women's cultural and social status generating unexpected outcomes for the transitional stage. Switching back to past patriarchal stereotypes, feminine identities were trapped once again in a marginal condition.

Many of the foundational paradoxes of the neo-modernization paradigm experienced by transitional societies remain directly connected with the historical heritage of the previous century. The assertion of Soviet patronized regimes in Eastern Europe determined an interruption of the natural dynamic of modernization, inaugurating also an alternative road for the national quest. The symptomatology of modernity towards the post-communist space remains thus marked by the legacy of an incomplete evolution. The subject of modernity was inextricably connected with the emergence of national projects, this major turn in the field of collective identities being accompanied by a subsequent informational revolution.

The short century of nations also hosted a historical process of literacy irradiation, this first stage in the translation of culture through the filter of technology (McLuhan 1962, 40) becoming a starting point for the present reconfiguration of the social functions of the imaginary. In the aftermath of imperial culture, European space was forced to generate new collective identities and new national mythologies. This complex nexus that appeared between the national theme and the dynamic of modernity cannot be isolated in a unique equation. There are still some relevant aspects that need to be emphasized. Various definitions of modernity revolve around a set of interconnected phenomena such as industrialization, secularization, growing political activism, democratization, and not least, increasing literacy (Lerner 1958, 63).

The communist version of modernity shaped during the 1960s obvious failed to satisfy some mandatory conditions, socialist modernization remaining in its very essence a hollow construct. Nevertheless, the national question and modernity's project were often situated in a tense relation, the finality of this symbolic dispute proving to determine different trajectories for the Eastern and Western parts of Europe. The incomplete modernity generated by the communist political order increased the conflictual relations with the national subject, preserving at the same time many of the traditional societal structures. Modifying modernity's evolution, the communist decades postponed an authentic resolution of the "women's question". Nourishing a historical border that finds its origins back in the early stages of the nation-states, parallel configurations of modernity inaugurated at the beginning of the twentieth-century exerted a tremendous influence over the future prospects of contemporary culture. The following sections aim to explore the consequences raised by this specific fragmentation of modernity, emphasizing the implications of the cultural propaganda and visual proselytism deployed towards the maintenance of gender-based cultural biases.

## **II. Fatherland: the gender-based aesthetic imaginary during the communist era**

For the turn-of-century moment of the Russian Revolution, the women's question represented a complicated topic, grounded on ambivalent argumentative scaffolding (Wood 2000, 14). The gender subject revealed some essential dilemmas, which were to constrain early Bolsheviks leaders to difficult justification exercises, in order to reconcile the subversive potential of gender emancipation with the liberation imperative of the communist movement. The communist quest for the women's emancipation was motivated mainly by three types of concerns: the stringent necessity to dissolve patriarchal representations of family, the increasing demand for workforce and, not least, the requirement of effective social fabric for the newly emerged working class. Still, despite the first enthusiastic proclamation of women's emancipation from the chains of bourgeois economic relations and culture, gender condition under state socialism remained marginal, subordinate and dependent. The communist reform of gender relations did not operate a genuine annulment of the traditional paradigm of values, concentrating instead on reconfiguring its tension points.

Women's status was thus transferred into an extended dependency equation, the assertion of a new collective vocation concealing the deceitful extractions of gender within the sphere of domestic servitudes. Far from abolishing household exploitation, Marxist ideology promoted a hybrid gender project, combining progressive features like women's participation in waged labor with previous traditional stereotypes, including the dependence of secondary economic branches or the overbidding of the maternal calling (Smith 2014, 448). Combining multiple semiotic frames, the communist aesthetic imaginary concerning gender developed in close correlation with the multiple reconfigurations of the ideological body.

In this context, the representational dimension played a decisive role in the reconstruction of collective identities. At the same time, evolutions encountered within gender aesthetics offered some provocative landmarks for communist attempts of bottom transformation of the previous social world. Concurrently, the blaze of the revolutionary experiment on the ruins of an imperial landscape, deeply marked by a highly visual traditional culture (Bonnell 1998, 4), created a symbolic dominance of image over scriptural artifacts.

This fundamental specificity generated major implications for persuasive and coercive mechanisms, visual propaganda remaining a key point in explaining the dynamic of revolutionary movements. A similar structural legacy was shared by the East European space as a whole. Dominated by an agrarian population and facing important levels of illiteracy (Bonnell 1998, 4), the cultural *oikumene* of communism manifested a strong vulnerability to visual proselytism, which began to exert its influence from the first days of the Russian Civil War.

War culture brought into the first decade of Bolshevik propaganda a collection of visual stereotypes and clichés recuperated from the Tsarist era, their central function and role being to legitimize the new power before a pauperized, isolated rural population, with little political involvement. The penetration of ideological culture at the level of the collective conscience was made possible through the seizure and hybridization of the imagery and visual syntax of the local religious culture. Understanding the crucial relevance of the visual dimension, the political iconography of the 1920s exploited Russian familiarity with a certain type of representations (Bonnell 1998, 4).

The Bolsheviks used the iconography of the *Ancien Régime* and gradually constructed a new symbolic pantheon. This social symbolism was reuniting in a common logic the former religious and imperial portraiture with the new visual culture of the Revolution. The parasitic development of Russian heroic imagery exerted essential influences during subsequent historical stages, this initial deficit of semiotic substance acting as an aggravating factor for the late derailments of the project. Under those circumstances, the Bolshevik ethos can be considered as a *mélange* of various elements, incorporated from different representational dimensions, starting with Orthodox canons and including other cultural benchmarks, such as national mythology or classical leader portraiture. Complex sources of early communist propaganda determined a strong compelling character, which was to become a distinctive mark for the tremendous indoctrination power of the new ideology. Exploiting the classical mechanisms of invented traditions, Russian revolutionary culture succeeded in the assertion of a new identity paradigm that would play a major role in the pacification and legitimation of the post-revolutionary society. In this context, the iconography of gender under the revolution flag remained the genuine expression of a counterfeit culture. Conserving a standardized imaginary imported from religious art and the former patriarchal culture, Bolshevik propaganda proclaimed the liberation of gender without denouncing the previous semiotic frames (*podlinnik*, Bonnell 1998, 7).

Nevertheless, the visual imagery of women in the initial stages of the Russian Revolution contained essential messages about subordination, dependence and domination. Divulging a “predominantly male world,” Bolshevik visual propaganda of the 1920s revealed a gender-based aesthetic imaginary with an interesting allegorical taint (Bonnell 1998, 7). Despite its official internationalist and humanist ideological theses, Russian communism was bearing the traces of nation’s backwardness (*otstalost*) and ailing for authentic progress (*vospitanie*) and modernization (Wood 2000, 21). The women’s question was in this context a sensible subject, communist visual propaganda continuing to practice a cryptic perpetuation of the former gender mythology. Expressing pale contours, with simplified facial features and placed in the background of most political posters, feminine figures reiterated the national rhetoric that had emerged at the end of the Russian imperial era.

The social and cultural vocation of women was thus limited to a compressed semi-otic register, evolving from a maternal vocation to a discrete lucrative function. Still lacking a genuine productive enrolment, women were depicted as secondary actors of a new emergent social paradigm. Penciled mostly as a derived expression of male workers and peasants, the new Bolshevik women were in fact attached to the pre-revolutionary argumentation of symbolic motherhood. Previously mothers of the empire, now mothers of the Revolution, Russian women were confronted, once again, with a marginal status within new revolutionary culture inaugurated in 1917. The paradoxes of the early Bolshevik iconography of gender did not remain without reverberations, the strong involvement of activists such as Alexandra Kollontai or Lenin’s protégée, Inessa Armand, playing a determinant role in making women’s question count on the revolutionary agenda (Bonnell 1998, 30).

In the mid-1920s, the women’s problem was facing a slowly correction of course, having taken some steps towards the modification of the previous traditional culture. The gender imaginary and aesthetic projections appeared more prominently during collectivization campaigns, announcing the creation of a new visual idiom (Bonnell 1998, 10). Thus, the subordinated cultural status of women had been changed to a multivalent argumentative formula, which associated gender with a new social function. In this context, Soviet visual architecture was evolving from a revolutionary dialectic to a new internal structure. Women’s aesthetic imaginary was therefore gliding towards a creationist angle, the gender border experiencing a historical decrease. Political posters of the 1920s depicted women as strong militants or forcible workers, challenging many of the traditional semiotic landmarks. Reformation and deformation of Russian gender imaginary in the early 1930s also involved a restructuration of visual propaganda. Confronted with authentic functional deformations, depicted with genderless facial expressions and masculinized bodies, feminine archetypes inaugurated a new age of the communist imaginary.

The sources of this evolutionary paradox are difficult to isolate into a unique argumentative frame, although some relevant aspects have to be mentioned. One of the

fundamental purposes of Russian communism in the 1930s concerned the emergence of a functional working class, a difficult task in a social landscape marked by a major deficiency in the project of modernization. The cultural construct of the *New Man* was in fact an attempt to legitimize a new collective identity, a semiotic panacea for the inherent instability of the newly emerged political order. Communist leaders intended to attract women as active members of the industrial landscape, operating a deconstruction of patriarchal configurations.

This intermediary stage in the edification of the early communist mythology of gender was marked by some contradictory features (Gutkin 1999, 140). The transformations affecting the economic potential and mobility of gender were justified by the increasing need for new social fabric in nourishing the project of “working class,” but the ideal of complete gender emancipation was facing some invisible borders. Soft limits (Mostov 2008, 57) imposed by communist ideology were justified through complicated argumentative exercises, and provided impulses for a new tournament of aesthetic imaginary.

The contestation of paternal symbolic dominance was in fact just an intermediary stage in the renegotiation of the communist ideological pantheon. By suppressing the gender border and asserting a fraternal revolutionary culture, communism tried to dissolve the difficult legacy of traditionalism. Without this deconstructing stage, the revolution could not obtain the social mobilization necessary in order to create new economic and cultural structures. The consequences of this short interlude between the imperial paternalistic formula and the new imagery of communism’s founding fathers were important for understanding the regression and transgressions of the gender-based aesthetic imaginary. The feminine visual propaganda of the 1930s was slowly gliding back to the traditional cultural cartography of the patriarchal family (Mostov 2008, 140). Trough counterfeit gender liberation, Russian communism embarked on a peculiar trajectory towards modernity. This specific configuration of lacunar modernity, combining progressive features with archaic representations, was to disperse gradually in the East European space. The sedimentation of Russian communist culture in the interwar period represented the central element in the creation of a parallel path towards modernity. Consequently, the effects generated by the appearance of this specific historical paradigm were to exert tremendous influences during the transitional period, the communist cultural legacy proving to be a burden that would be difficult to manage at the collective level.

One of the defining themes of the communist gender-based imaginary during the 1930s concerned the recovery of family as a nuclear element in structuring feminine identity. Projected back into the domestic universe, new Soviet Women were depicted in colorful political posters, revolving around a few essential elements – motherhood, the productive vocation, heroic sacrifice in favor of the collective achievement of a communist paradisiac future. The contours and shades of gender archetypes reiterated the allegoric and simplified approach of the revolutionary stages, bringing women’s question into an inverted dynamic.

The masculinized female workers of the 1920s were slowly disappearing as a temporary experiment of the Bolshevik creationist attempt. Through the reinforcement of male tutelage, the boycott against gender was becoming more and more transparent. However, reactions of female activists tended to remain modest. In the 1930s, visual propaganda reached an equilibrium point which foreshadowed the main semiotic course of the communist aesthetic imaginary (Mostov 2008, 140). The symbolic dimensions of femininity created in Soviet culture during the 1930s reflected the new dualistic vocation of women: motherhood and productivity (Mostov 2008, 140).

Apparently extracted from the traditional social order through the paid labor revolution, Soviet women were still far from finding an authentic road to liberation. The 1940s represented a crucial moment in the solidification of a certain gender representational dimension, fostered also by the intervention of an interesting cultural cleavage. In the late 1930s, Soviet culture experienced a provocative symbolic phenomenon, regarding the emergence of a heroic propaganda. Visual gender-based proselytism was thus segregated into two divergent frames: a tradition of de-personalized, working mothers, embodied as “dispositives of silence” (Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2014, 72) and a new pantheon of Soviet Heroines. The intersection point between these two divergent universes of discourse was very often obscure, abandoning female workers at the door of a forbidden paradise. The Stakhanovist cult (Bown, Taylor 1993, 43) of production generated a subsidiary exacerbation of many traditional roles, women becoming once again defined by the maternal function, which was required to be satisfied against all odds (Gutkin 1999, 141). The violent assertion of a deformed maternal and productive vocation was doubled by a symbolic offensive of visual propaganda. Political posters used after 1939 were rediscovering the coercive vocation of the maternal cult, feminine archetypes being obsessively connected with a double activity of production and re-production.

The visual identity of Soviet Women was thus transferred into a hybrid formula, the individuality being annulled in favor of a new form of mechanical oppression. Women were lucrative artifacts, envisioned in industrial landscapes or rural seclusion, surrounded by children, slowly detached from the nuclear equation of traditional family. The loneliness of Soviet Heroines was this way accompanied by a mass solitude of anonymous women. Colors faded away under the pressure of a cult of separation and isolation. Through the reinforcement of an oppressive secular religion, gender was projected into an infantilized stage, the shadow of the Father creating a generalized alienation process. During the 1940s and 1950s, the visual rhetoric of communism propagated in coherent waves in the entire space of socialist sisterhood. Women’s ideology was thus transferred into the newly born socialist democracies, encompassing a partial leap towards modernization. In the new Soviet culture, women were depicted as genuine Amazons (Corrin 2014, 68), engaged in a transformative march towards an idealized classless society. An interesting aspect of this contamination movement concerned the appearance of a discrete phasing between the homeland of revolution

and the new post-war communist experiments. The feminine imaginary promoted in the new ideological colonies reinforced some obsolete stages of the Russian ideology of gender. Nonetheless, this step was necessary in order to create the space for a genuine economic and cultural revolution.

At the end of the 1950s, the changing ideological environment stimulated some changes within the official gender ideology and visual propaganda. The denunciation of Stalin's cult determined important adaptations inside the communist core ideological structures (Sawka 1998, 54). The national germ was inserted in communist culture in the 1930s, but as an irony, its maleficent or progressive fruits appeared at the beginning of the 1960s. The nationalization of communist projects and especially the limitations of the Soviet imperial policies gave birth to a constellation of models. Also, the national stage of communism triggered some interesting transformations of the gender-based imaginary, which unexpectedly operated an inverted road to pre-modernity. National conscience appeared in Eastern Europe as result of a late laicization process.

In this context, the structural tensions that appeared between the modernization quest and the national subject were often solved in favor of term. This silent dominance of a pre-modern national cultural background stimulated a regression of the gender emancipation process, through the intervention of two relevant conditions: the reopening of ideological interest concerning reproductive politics and the revival of segregationist economic models, mostly as a result of the failure of industrialization (Corrin 2014, 68).

Reconfirming the symbolic bond between the maternal vocation of women and the edification of idealized nation, communist regimes were imposing supplementary gender exploitation. The pre-modern rhetoric of the feminine implied an allegory of interiority, retreat and purity (Corrin 2014, 68). Women were the privileged source of the future substance of nation and under those circumstances they required to be protected from external corruptive influences. The re-emergence of national agendas in most of East European regimes nourished a contradictory gender-based aesthetic imaginary. The maternal cult was gaining more and more influence, but the past productive and assertive vocation of women was conserved. Nonetheless, the sources of these multiple feminine burdens were complex, but the fragmentation of modernity was certainly acting as an aggravating factor for gender inequality within the socialist world.

Depicted as bearers of "nativeness", women became the incarnation of nation-state collective ideals (Corrin 2014, 68). Despite the multiple refinement stages of communist ideologies, gender aesthetic imaginary was captive in bucolic and allegoric frescoes, very similar with ones used during revolutionary epoch of the 1920s. Through the presence of monolithic structure of imagery, gender was experiencing a separated historical road. National rhetoric of gender was limiting feminine identities in a restrictive corpus of maternal and subordinated functions. The marginalization of gender was perceptible especially in the visual propaganda, where women remained at-

tached by a rural iconography, enhancing an invented ideological tradition, claiming village generative and regenerative functions. In this manner, women were gradually separated from the general visual propaganda of industrialized communism.

The regressive march of the communist gender-based imaginary supported a relevant correction of course during the 1970s. Entitled the “feminine decade,” the 1970s provided a slow relaxation of the nationalist propaganda, gender identity frames becoming more complex and hosting new sophisticated shades. The re-humanization of the feminine visual propaganda was in fact the outcome of a systemic evolution (Gill 2011, 189). Against an apparent diminution of ideological pressure, the 1970s announced the unavoidable systemic crisis of the 1980s. The authentic debut of transitional experiments can be located in the grounded attempt of the reforming Gorbachev doctrine. From this historical point, the gender cultural imaginary was divided into two substantially different trajectories. The reformed communist societies were exploiting the reformist wave as a tool for the integration of alternative or marginal identities, including gender, while the enclaved forms of communism were continuing a pre-modern cultural regression. Promises of gender liberation proved to be, in both cases, deceitful, post-communist culture remaining, in its profound substance, the expression of a neo-patriarchal cultural paradigm.

### **III. Cenotaphs of forgotten daughters. Heroines and identities after communism**

At the beginning of the 1980s, the communist world was confronted with influential structural contradictions. The chronic failure of the planned economy and the decline of hybrid nationalist discourses generated a critical tension, which required major reconsiderations of the argumentative and cultural scaffolding of communism. The epicenter of this essential course correction was to remain Soviet Russia, the appearance of Gorbachev’s doctrine at the middle of the 1980s encompassing a set of critical consequences. Built around two key concepts, *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* (Gibbs 1999, 14), the Gorbachev doctrine triggered a systemic change that would culminate with revolutionary waves of the 1990s. The cultural and political implications raised by the propagation of the Gorbachev doctrine during the 1980s were essential in decrypting further configurations of transitional experiments.

The major change announced by Gorbachev concerned the balancing of the functional rapports between the cultural and economic peripheries of the communist universe and their core spaces. By changing the previous industrialization quest and by moderating the nationalist and collectivist discourses, the Soviet cultural nucleus was nourishing a slow reconversion of previous representational culture. The consequences induced in space of feminine identities were relevant, especially through effects generated by the new born consumerist culture. Before the 1980s, gender referential frames had been deeply connected with a productive and reproductive vocation, which excluded cultural consumerism, leisure or even individuality.

By defining gender as a productive artifact, a mechanic element of a grandiose social machine, communist cultural propaganda annihilated feminine singularity and the capacity of self-expression (Corrin 2014, 87). The slow cultural and political relaxation determined by the Gorbachev doctrine stimulated a silent revolution of the aesthetic imaginary dedicated to gender. The decreasing influence of the official propaganda created the context for a double recovery mechanism, involving a regaining of feminine self-expression, but at the same time, reinforcing some hidden traditional stereotypes. Issuing a reformatory doctrine, Soviet communism announced a gradual decline of the public sphere, accompanied by the extinction of some ideological and cultural regulatory mechanisms.

Apparently liberated from violent aesthetic proselytism, gender identities were experiencing interesting adaptations. In this context, during the 1980s, the gender-based aesthetic imaginary recovered the dimension of femininity, long repudiated by the communist propaganda, interested in toning down women's frivolous and unproductive beauty. Even in the specific cases of enclaved communism, this mutation was producing effects in the sphere of gender culture. The Romanian late-Stalinist regime was thus surprisingly hosting a discrete moderation of women's aesthetic archetypes. Motherhood still functioned as a cultural commodity, governing women's social, cultural and political roles, but gratuitous beauty was not the subject of official prohibition anymore. Paradoxically, the naturalization of gender roles and the refinement of manifest cultural propaganda intervened in an economic landscape marked dramatic common goods shortages (Massino 2009, 23). The reconversion of the communist ideological body gave birth in this context to a feminine iconography marked by contradictory tensions lines.

Depicted as elegant, sophisticated and emancipated working-mothers, socialist women were oscillating between former bucolic landscapes and a more modern, consumerist vision. Feminine propaganda irradiated a set of idealized and utopian archetypes, dominated ironically by the same allegorical and infantilized nuances of early Bolshevik propaganda. Women were envisioned in prosperous pictures, surrounded by domestic and technical abundance, but still discretely accompanied by shadows of their maternal function. Embodied as a supreme achievement of gender liberation, communist woman was in fact just a butaforic construct. The symbolic cleavages installed between feminine propaganda and the social and cultural roles of women, living in real communism, acted as aggravating factors for further transitional evolutions. The 1980s remained, in their essence, the starting point for a burial rite which culminated with historical collapse of the communist regimes at the beginning of the 1990s. During the 1980s, Communist Heroines entered an obsolete stage, the increasing force of feminine oblivion announcing an interesting inversion.

Cenotaphs of the forgotten mothers and daughters of Revolution continued to influence the collective imaginary of gender, even if their presence was obscured by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1990s. The historical domino which put an end to the

communist cultural experiment was in fact an unavoidable result of the silent transformations that had occurred in the 1980s. The different paths to modernity experienced by the communist regimes after Gorbachev's schismatic move were reflected in multiple transitional scenarios. Still, despite the strong differences encountered between the reformed species of communism and the enclaved forms of late Stalinism or sultanism (Chehab and Linz 1998, 15), the post-communist era generated a surprisingly unitary gender-based cultural cartography.

The communist epoch constituted a grandiose attempt in the landscape of creative imaginary, the authentic outcomes of this primary industrialization of culture being located in a collection of symbolic communities. Exploiting the potential of "imagined creative communities" (Harris 2014, 161), communism tried to establish new power bases for social relations (*Idem*, 161). In this context, the millennialism of communist ideology generated interesting cultural pathologies during transitional stages. Liberated from the oppression of totalitarian regimes, the newly emerged societal structures were ailing for coherence, identity and symbolic order.

The violent interruption of the communist march towards the future generated confusion and cultural dissonance. The dynamic fever of the paradisiac classless world was hereby replaced with a collection of new social narratives, reuniting a pre-modern cultural background with leftovers of a hybrid nationalist discourse. The evolution of post-communist space was nonetheless deeply influenced by the counterfeit of modernity. The edification of imagined communities was grounded on a falsified memory. The invention of communist founding mythology was directly dependent on the recovery of many traditional cultural paradigms, one of the most relevant themes remaining gender. The communist formula of modernity acted in a fragmentary manner, in order to induce a controlled equilibrium within the patriarchal societies of Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that in its early stages communist ideology imposed a virulent progressive discourse regarding gender emancipation, its further evolution reconfirmed many traditional feminine servitudes: extensive motherhood, domestic exploitation, twofold productive and reproductive quotas.

The burial rites of communism crossing Eastern European space were diverse, oscillating from enraged denunciation of socialist past to reinterpretation and recuperation of communist legacy. Still, the gender-based experience of transition remains marked by two essential cultural dilemmas: the incapacity of detaching the socialist experience of gender from the general project of women's liberation and the failure to surmount the maleficent articulations between pre-modern culture and the new invented national tradition (Verdery 1996, 61).

Certainly, socialism did not fulfill its promises concerning women's question, but the embalmed memories of communist culture continue to exert an obscure fascination. The communist march of gender emancipation stopped in the 1970s, when the gradual reinforcement of the nationalist theme created an inverted dynamic for the women's liberation project. The traditionalist potential of the national theme was for a

long time hidden behind the ideological corpse of communist ideology (Verdery 2013, 33), but in the aftermath of the system it revealed its argumentative power.

Through the re-emergence of the modernization process at the end of the communist period, Eastern Europe was exposed to a double informational and cultural revolution. The incomplete modernity inherited from the socialist past was transformed and adapted under the pressure of a new wave of modernization, multivalent, contradictory, with both vernacular and global expression (Appadurai 1996, 10). Late national conscience, created after the symbolic abjuration of communist memory, determined a major turn in the space of collective identities. Nationhood, gender, neighborhood, cultural borders became imagination-triggered constructs, perpetually reshaped micro-narratives and placed under the omen a conflictual tradition (Appadurai 1996, 10). The recollection of coherence in Eastern European societies was thus dependent by a cultural and semiotic shift. Communism fostered a deformation of the Guttenberg Revolution, the prevalence of the visual culture giving birth to a hybrid project of modernity.

The formulation of a global *oikumene* at the beginning of the 1990s induced a “domestication of modernity,” through the intervention of two hermeneutic mechanisms: the appearance of micro-narratives, bounding former invented traditions with new symbolic frames of the global culture and the reformation of the national semantic, under the influence of subversive cultural borders (Appadurai 1996, 19). The dissolution of the Manicheist ideological structure of the Cold War left the East European space in a spatial and temporal crisis. Multiple layers of feminine identity, articulated during five decades of the industrialization of the imaginary, gave birth to a Leviathan-like construct. Living gender after state socialism became, in this context, a process of re-inventing identities, strongly connected with the tense problematic of the *Other* (Appadurai 1996, 39).

Women’s lives after communism were influenced by the resurrection of a cultural traditionalism, very often imitated after a counterfeit collective memory. The reinvention of nationhood also implied a double split of post-totalitarian perception. Trapped between the illusion of “normalization” (Corrin 2014, 87) and the lure of an idealized and timeless national project, gender identities were supporting a tense reconversion. Constantly perceived as an image of problematic Alterity, women’s cultural status experienced a general degradation. The dissolution of the semiotic construct of working-mothers and the appearance of a retrograde discourse projected women back into the functional relations of interwar societies. Ironically, the return to national purity and patriarchal discourses, which portrayed women as fragile mothers, keepers of traditions and guardians of reignited religious normativity, was continuing some of the communist cultural stereotypes in a cryptic manner.

The backwardness and marginality of gender status within socialist democracies represented a reality poorly disguised by the fervid propaganda. The vanishing social structures of the communist state created cultural paradoxes, the privatization of ma-

ternal function throwing women into a de-regulated social universe. Depicted now in strong vibrant colors, liberated from abusive maternity and forced to deal with a dual survival competition, gender identity entered in a contradictory stage. New cultural micro-narratives and advertising paradigms slowly induced an identity fragmentation. The different shades of modernity accumulated by post-communist societies were revealed in contact with the cultural dimension of globalization. The peripheries of the communist world and its marginal spaces were slowly gliding towards neo-traditionalism, while nuclear urban culture was confronted with an accelerated process of deconstruction. Economic hardship and social pressure modified women's perception and imposed a new visual rhetoric (Carilli and Campbell 2012, 113).

If many of the official political and cultural discourses concerning gender were promoting the pedagogical and normative functions of women in regaining social coherence and harmony, the new cultural waves were enhancing a substantially different approach. Through the rejection of the "babushka" of the communist past and by exacerbating a new form of feminine sensuality, the transition transformed women's bodies into a new form of cultural commodity (*Idem*, 113). By crowding the visual rhetoric of post-communism with images of sensual and commodified womanhood, culture of transition not genuinely challenge the condition of gender marginality.

These two contradictory images, traditionalist argumentation and the new persuasive sensual approach, were hiding an unexpected complementarity. In both cases, gender benchmarks were defined in an infantilized equation, lacking cultural autonomy, functioning only as the dependent element of a new form of patriarchal consensus. Rites of passage from parental-state to new forms of patriarchal confreries (Verdery 1996, 63) were thus excluding the outburst of a genuine change of the gender order. Political posters and classical aesthetic propaganda were replaced by a kaleidoscopic visual rhetoric, gender identities revolving around different semiotic trajectories. Compelled to perform multiple and sometimes antagonistic social roles, such as practicing motherhood and traditionalism within family and exhaling gender-blind competitiveness and sensual emancipation in the public sphere, women's condition within the post-socialist world was ambiguous.

Struggling to detach themselves from the morbid memory of communist ethnonationalism, women began to practice ethnoscape exercises (Appadurai 1996, 33), defining themselves as an imagined community of cultural refugees. Building shifting landscapes, where classical identity point marks can be avoided, gender exploited the new global communication market as a privileged dimension of subjectivity. Confronted with divergent invented traditions, often distrusted because of cultural corruption, feminine identities tried to accommodate themselves inside the new cultural diversity. In this specific context, the increasing relevance of the gender-based aesthetic imaginary in explaining the contemporary crisis of collective identities can be correlated with a silent informational revolution. The neo-modernization processes triggered by the internet era contain, in their very essence, the germs of a revival of visual arche-

types. The decadence of the previous written culture and the presence of a maleficent formula of modernity nourished paradoxically evolutions for contemporary gender culture. Through the appearance of a collection of micro- and metanarratives concerning post-colonial gender identities, the counterfeit project of modernity remains cast in shadows. The Eastern European space represents, in its profound cultural substance, a space dominated by a patriarchal culture, the fantasies of a genuine gender liberation facing a chronic adjournment of modernity. Constantly constructing symbolic cenotaphs for their forgotten daughters, contemporary nationalist discourses try to regain the unity and coherence of an obsolete historical stage, while the new virtual cultures continue to dissolve and recreate a multivalent set of feminine archetypes.

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