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The Romanian Communist Aesthetics of Sexuality

Abstract. Starting from several foreign films that were banned or censored on grounds of obscenity in Romania during the 1960s and the 1970s, this study intends to capture the spirit of totalitarian communist censorship. Undermining the classical dissociation, this censorship placed a ban on erotic art, refusing to differentiate it from pornography. Under charges of obscenity or vulgarity, various films or scenes were prohibited, including some that were ostensibly innocuous and not indictable for this offense. This ideologically sanctioned prudery, voiced from a position that was as conservative as that of (petty) bourgeois primness, may seem paradoxical if we consider that communists used a progressive, revolutionary rhetoric at the political level. In fact, pornography was a metonymic term that designated the generalized degeneration communists associated with the opposing capitalist system. This study contributes to reflections on a contemporary issue situated at the confluence of moral philosophy, criminal legal practice and art theory: the (in) compatibility of art with pornography. Is there a contradiction in terms or, quite on the contrary, can pornography aspire to an artistic status? If the latter is the case, does pornography remain pornographic or can it be elevated to the rank of eroticism (and, hence, to the rank of art), once it has been divested of its aesthetically degrading dimension? Or, more radically still, can pornography become an art while maintaining its pornographic appeal?

Keywords: Romanian Cinematography, Communism, Censorship, Eroticism, Political Surveillance, Socialist Bureaucracy.

In the archives of the censorship institution¹ from communist Romania, there is an internal document which resorts to exclusively political and ideological criteria in its inventory and classification of “imported films proposed for broadcasting in the public network”². The document dates from 1974. Three years earlier, Nicolae Ceaușescu, General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, had attempted to enforce an ideological reindoctrination grafted upon the model of the Chinese cultural (mini) revolution. In the so-called Theses of July 1971, he had demanded, among other things, “an end to the import of decadent foreign films”

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that “poisons the souls of our youth”, namely those films “which are condoning the bourgeois lifestyle, or even extol crime”. This was necessary because: “Art must serve a single purpose: socialist, communist education”³.

Censors and party activists supervised the “transposition into life” of the high-level directives. That explains why, despite the (genuine) liberalization that had taken place during the second half of the previous decade, Censorship leveled at art persisted in a more conservative discourse. Art was essentially regarded as an effective means of propaganda. When it came to Western artistic productions, the tone adopted was even more trenchant, similar to that used by Zhdanov in his speeches, which were considered emblematic of the 1950s and portrayed capitalist society as corrupt, decadent and injurious.

In the same spirit, the aforementioned Censorship document motivated the approval of films produced in the West for broadcasting in Romania in that they enabled the “acquisition of knowledge of new-fangled albeit painful aspects of the human condition in capitalist society”. Approval was granted, therefore, to films that were deemed to document serious political and economic flaws of the capitalist system.⁴ Such cinematic productions served the communist regime because they could be politically instrumentalized. Moreover, it was believed that they confirmed and reinforced, at the same time, the effect of “representative films of the cinema in other socialist countries”, which “reflected a different way of living and thinking, highlighting the auspicious conditions for human achievement socialist society provided”. In the opinion of Censorship and, hence, of the Party, foreign films were supplemented and enhanced, thus, by propaganda films.

What is relevant, however, is the list of films that were flatly rejected or approved with significant excisions of image and text.⁵ This shows that there were only two (related) criteria guiding the activity of Censorship: (i) an overtly political criterion and (ii) the criterion of public morality and of education in the spirit of socialist citizenship.⁶

Under the first criterion, the films that were unequivocally rejected were those imported from the West, as they were considered to espouse anti-communist and/or counter-revolutionary views. The document cites just one example for the year 1974: *The Bloodbath of Momilla*, proposed by the Embassy of Finland.

Several other films, from both “camps” (capitalist and socialist), were censored on account of their “structural deficiencies from a political and ideological perspective”. The objections that were formulated against these films were, of course, different.

As regards the Western film production, the following categories were targeted:

- (i) Films like *Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*/ *Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution* (1965) by Jean-Luc Godard, belonging to the French New Wave, which “mocked, in a more or less covert form, the socialist system, associating it with the systems underpinning totalitarian, dictatorial states”.

- (ii) Films conveying an anarchist message, which appeared to refute the very idea of centralized power, in any and all form, even if this power was legitimate, and which alluded to the very mechanism of Censorship: “films that consider that any political power, including communism, will lead to depriving the individual of the most elementary civil rights (*A King in New York*, directed by Charlie Chaplin, 1957)”.
- (iii) Films that expressed anti-establishment views on a geo-political scale, “questioning the validity of peaceful international negotiations and assuming that absolutely all the great powers are aggressive by nature (*Seven Days in May*, directed by John Frankenheimer, featuring Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, Ava Gardner, 1964)”.
- (iv) Existentialist, defeatist, absurd films that speak about alienation, hopelessness, passivity and resignation. (*O Lucky Man*, directed by Lindsay Anderson, 1973; *Electra Glide in Blue*, directed by James William Guercio, 1973). They “present the human condition in capitalist society as having reached a dead end; in the face of this harsh reality, the individual is completely defenseless, doomed to either compliance or extinction”. While the films in the first categories were accused of committing anti-communist crimes, this time the fault lies in omission: these films, as the censor showed, “undertake a critique of capitalist society from a demobilizing standpoint, inimical to our own political and ideological conceptions”. In other words, such films performed an irreparable denunciation, refusing to see socialism as a viable alternative.
- (v) Films “imbued with mysticism and religion”, most of them Mexican productions: *The Holy Office*, *Rozaria*, *Nazarin*, but also “other cinematographies that rendered the life of Jesus (*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo/ The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964)”. To these were added films that “present the activity of sects, religions and superstitions in expository or even apologetic manner (*Lost Horizon*, directed by Charles Jarrott, 1973; *Ordet/ The Word*, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, Denmark, 1954)”.
- (vi) Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic SF films (in the secular sense), which “are permeated by pessimism and despair, offering viewers a bleak picture of the future of humanity, which they imagine to have been doomed to extinction”. The Censorship document groups them according to the catastrophe they anticipated: a natural cataclysm (*Tidal Wave*, Japan, 1973); “starvation and bestialization because of the overcrowding population” (*Soylent Green*, directed by Richard Fleischer, 1973); “falling prey to strange, exterminating animals” (*Chosen Survivors*, US, 1974), “a dehumanized world, dominated by robots” (*Westworld*, 1973). A special category belonged to films like *Sleeper*, directed by Woody Allen, 1973, in which SF props are a mere scientized camouflage for the idea of the sacred, of the numinous.

- (vii) Films that “cultivate violence, the taste for risk and purposeless adventure, the pathological or the macabre”. These films were inconvenient from several vantage points: some (see the Italian comedy *Anastasia mio fratello/ My brother Anastasia*, directed by Stefano Vanzina and featuring Alberto Sordi, 1973, in which the “hero, the head of a gang of assassins, is presented as the mouthpiece of the New York dockworkers’ class interests”) because of their alleged political endorsement of violence acts; others because they “cultivated violence itself as an intrinsic feature of human nature, with cruel and instinct-driven heroes, dominated by pathological obsessions (*Ana y los lobos/ Ana and the Wolves*, directed by Carlos Saura, 1973; *The Wicker Man*, USA; *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, directed by Sam Peckinpah, 1973)”; finally, another category of films that “present idealized types of adventurers and criminals, demanding the viewer’s compassion, sympathy or even admiration for their qualities or traits of character (*The Sting*, directed by George Roy Hill, 1973, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford; *Hoinar pe colinele înalte, The Last American Hero*, directed by Lamont Johnson, 1973, and so on)”. There is sharp disapproval of a vision that, just like in *Bonnie and Clyde* (directed by Arthur Penn; starring Warren Beatty, Faye Dunaway, 1967), “embellishes violence, giving the protagonists an air of adolescent innocence and bestowing the age with the scent of legend, which arouses nostalgia”⁷.

Viewed from outside, the system of the communist bloc may have appeared to be monolithic. In reality, however, it was organized after a competitive model and evinced various discrepancies, divergences and rivalries. This explains why even films that had been produced in socialist countries ended up being rejected on political criteria in Bucharest.

Some of these films, like *Dawn over the Drava* (1974), a production of the Popular Republic of Bulgaria, were banned for reasons that were somewhat circumstantial, as they contradicted Romania’s new pro-Yugoslav position, predicated on distancing from the USSR, on the political scene. The film “presented the liberation of Yugoslavia in World War II as an achievement primarily of the Soviet and the Bulgarian armies”.

Subject to even harsher disparagement was the category of films that promoted, in either covert or overt terms, a critique of the socialist system from within. Among these, *Baptism* and *The Age of Dreams*, productions of the Hungarian People’s Republic, were banned from broadcasting, for “evoking social issues of high import in this country during the period 1950-1956”⁸. The film *Breathing Freely*, also a Hungarian production, was rejected because it “brings to the fore thorny internal issues [...] that emerged as a result of the very way in which socialist society was organized”, such as “the gap between the working youth and the students”. Social fault lines were, after all, inconceivable for the communist ideology, which aspired to establish, on the completion of its revolutionary project, the classless society. Among the Yugoslav productions that were barred to the public were the films *Let mrtve ptice/ The Dead Bird’s Flight*, 1974 and *Kad budem mrtav i beo/ When I’m Dead and Livid*, 1967 directed by

Z. Pavlovic, because they flaunted “economic hardship and emigration to capitalist countries, the degradation of the moral, social, political climate, etc.”. Finally, *Hori, má panenko/ The Firemen’s Ball*, directed by Milos Forman, 1967, could not be broadcast for an obvious reason: it discussed the “alienation of man under socialism”.

Communist censorship itself evinced a totalitarian impulse, acting at all levels and across the entire range of registers. It should be noted, for now, that although global, its action was selective: it eliminated the films it considered to be politically subversive and, hence, dangerous.

The **second** criterion of operation concerned the (alleged) violation of morals. With a view to molding the “new man”, Romanian communism had developed, in the early 1970s, an inviolable *code of socialist ethics and equity*. Sexuality, pornography and “exacerbated” eroticism seemed to be the most blatant and, therefore, intolerable means of violating this code. The above-mentioned Censorship document states that those Western films that featured sexuality as a priority, central or exclusive theme had been banned: *The Last Picture Show*, *An Affair to Remember*, *Three on a Couch*, USA; *A Married Woman*, France; *A Touch of Class*, *Ooh... You Are Awful*, UK; *Isabelle’s Garden*, Spain; *A Half Man*, Italy. It also emphasizes that “many of the films imported from certain socialist countries have raised problems pertaining to eroticism”. It was on such grounds that the Cuban production *Memories of Underdevelopment* “was dismissed in its entirety” and “scenes from other films were expunged”: *Heart on a Line*, RSC; *Enlightenment* and *The Search*, RPP; *A November Day* and *Lucia*, Cuba.

The censors’ attitude towards Western Marxism, which had yielded several radical avant-garde segments, and even towards other socialist countries clearly evinced their cultural retardation. This specific local conservatism also derived from the lack of culture or from the prudery of the Romanian politicians who issued such cultural directives. It may be assumed that some prohibitions were based on aleatory personal preferences, outside explicit doctrinal arguments.

There was a certain degree of consistency in the attitude of Censorship towards films on erotic themes. In a Note issued by this institution in 1968, it is stated that the following films had been banned because they ran “contrary to public morality”⁹: *Le Fate! The Queens (Sex Quartet)*, directed by Mario Monicelli, Mauro Bolognini, Antonio Pietrangeli and Luciano Salce 1966; *Poor Cow*, directed by Ken Loach, 1967; *Sanctuary*, directed by Tony Richardson, 1961; *Mon Amour, mon amour*, directed by Nadine Trintignant, 1967, and *Belle de Jour*, directed by Luis Buñuel, 1967. To these were added *Lásky jedné plavovlásky/ Loves of a Blonde (A Blonde in Love)*, directed by Milos Forman, 1965.

These films were made in an explosive historical period, of utter liberalization of morals, behaviors and art in the West. These were, of course, the well-known revolutionary years of all manner of emancipation, including as regards sexuality. The “liberalization” that occurred somewhat concurrently in Romania had altogether different coordinates and, obviously, a different context. Insofar as the erotic theme was concerned, art did not benefit from a significant liberalization, which explains

why, in Bucharest, films from other socialist countries could also be censored because they approached sexual themes.

The disputes and debates in the Western world¹⁰ were prevented from entering Romania. There was no openness to the libertarian issue and to the sexual revolution, which had been addressed and given expression in works of art in other socialist countries. Thus, in the mid-1980s (and not only), films from this category continued to be censored with the same degree of intolerance. Another document released by the Censorship, in 1975, provides three examples of this kind: *The Clansman* (USA), *Ludwig* (directed by Luchino Visconti, 1972) and *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966).¹¹

The censors' reports are parsimonious. They do not provide much explanation, incriminating terms being preferred instead of arguments (demanded by their own methodology). The most frequent accusations refer to excessive sexualism, obscenity, pornography, "sexual relations presented in a licentious manner", exacerbated eroticism, and naturalism.

It is worth noting that the semantic series of the synonyms used by the censors has deleterious connotations that detract these representations of sexuality, which are deemed to be morally reprehensible.¹² The qualifiers used by the censors are pejorative, focusing on all that is desolate and unhealthy about sexuality, seen as biological degradation. These terms amount, in fact, to linguistic abuse, which camouflaged the real abuse perpetrated by the power holders. We should also point out the *annexionist drive of Censorship*, which included erotic art (aesthetic representations of sexuality) within the sphere of the censurable, refusing to dissociate it from pornography or considering it potentially "dangerous".

The panic experienced by the communist regime before the naked body is evident. At the same time, it seems paradoxical and counterintuitive that a materialistic ideology such as Marxism-Leninism should have repudiated all the expressions of corporeality that suggested pleasure, desire and, all the more so, the act of copulation. In the aesthetics sanctioned by the communist power in Romania, the human body was, in a sense, a towering absence.

In the texts issued by the power holders in order to regulate the ideology of art, there are no rules or instructions as to how the human body can be used in art. The documents of the General Directorate for Press and Prints, the principal institution through which censorship was officially exerted in the period 1949-1977, are no exception in this regard. The rather narrow confines within which representations of the body in art were permitted were somehow presumed and assumed by all art creators and, as they were referred to in that period, by all the "factors" concerned. These limits were implicitly suggested by the *code of socialist ethics and equity*. Compliance with these principles entailed, throughout the duration of the communist regime, the configuration of a somewhat a-sexual existence or, in any case, of concealed forms of sexuality.

While the Censorship documents did not include operational norms concerning representations of the human body in art, they stipulated a wide array of hindrances and prohibitions in this respect. In other words, there was an aesthetics of negativity at work. Writers and artists were not told how they should write, paint or make films, but what they should **not** do. Censorship declared its capacity to recognize deviation, without being able to always define it, but the path towards acceptable art was to be discovered by each and every artist on his own.

In the absence of explicit official texts on this topic, the censors' reasons had to be inferred, starting from the general lines of Marxist-Leninist ideology. As it was applied in Ceaușescu's Romania, this ideology was based on the premise – converted into an axiom – that there existed an opposition between, on the one hand, capitalist society (exploitative, distorted, corrupted, downgraded, perverse, facing decline and degeneration) and on the another hand, communist society (youthful, revolutionary, progressive, moral, honest, just, hopeful). Consequently, the label “perverse” could be applied, *a priori*, to artistic scenes or visions, to images or discourses that evinced an affinity with Western, that is, “decadent” attitudes or aesthetic currents. Especially targeted were naturalism and expressionism, as well as the movements that belonged to the avant-garde: surrealism and experimentalism.

Another ideological component resided in the mythology collective happiness, a desideratum in the name of which the communist regime overtly manifested its intolerance of individuality. Civic values, particularly those that complied with the party directives, were always placed above personal values, including in the private sector. Individual life, in all its registers, had to be placed in the service of the state, of the unique Party. Therefore, the artist's complacent abandon in the fantasies of subjectivity (the narcissistic remolding of one's self-image, as Rorty refers to it), was considered, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, a dangerous diversion from the imperative of building the multilaterally developed socialist society. An underlying opposition was that between passivism and militant, “revolutionary” activism.

A series of politically prohibited themes ensued from here: loneliness, helplessness, the lack of any horizons, social isolation, uniformity, marginalization, the impossibility of communication, the absurd, the perils of freedom, individual exasperation with massification, existential angst, the sense that existence is under siege, the feeling of insecurity, etc. All these dramas of alienation, failure, impossible communication and absurdity (illicitly introduced, like a new Trojan horse, in many works of art) and the attempts to retrieve this usurped individuality via fiction (through theophanies and hierophanies) were stridently opposed to the triumphant optimism of the time and flagrantly contravened the official image cultivated by the propaganda.

The Censorship's approach was derived, thus, from the official ideology, based on collectivist and profoundly anti-human theses, which aimed to regulate the intimacy and sexuality of the so-called “new man”. According to the socialist ethics, pleasure and lust were well-nigh prohibited because they were deemed

to undermine the programmed efficiency of sexuality. "The new man" was, in the view of his programmers, a monolithic personality. He was to be driven by a unique, albeit threefold sentiment: love for the party, love for its leader and love for the homeland/nation. The only way love was permissible was if it was purged of physicality, essentialized, purified. In turn, erotic love was tolerated as an exception and only in non-tumultuous and non-traumatic forms, for reproductive purposes: "normal", "natural", morally "correct" love, not love as a tempestuous, devastating, destabilizing force. It is known that in communist Romania, the official ideology had not surpassed, in aesthetic terms, the rudimentary Zhdanovist conception of socialist realism.

More specifically, love could become a source of art in two ways: (i) if it was counterposed to political and/or civic desiderata and used as a barrier to achieving them by the protagonist or if it was presented as a necessary sacrifice, being therefore politically valorized by outlining the individual's complete devotion to the goals of Power, however obscure or utopian they might have been; (ii) if it was conventionally displayed, so as to confirm the serenity, harmony and sense of (self)fulfillment of the "new man".

Morality or, rather, moralism with conformist outbursts was yet another product of the totalitarian mindset embraced by the communist regime. In Romania, the regime upheld a leftist strand of traditionalism (combined with nationalism), as immorality was invariably associated with modernism. Even if we ignore the fact that this was a morally obtuse and ideologically rudimentary approach, which rejected even those artistic representations of sexuality that conveyed the idea of passion and emotional commitment,¹³ we are still left with the dilemma whether such protection of morality encroached the freedom of artistic expression, since it was, most often than not, ineffective. Moreover, unlike in the West, where dialogue and limit negotiations were not only possible, but very real, in communist Romania it was not the artists who decided and drew these more flexible boundaries, but Power, with its stigmatizing practices.

In light of these precepts, any artistic erotic motif was or could arbitrarily be interpreted as pornography. As regards the aesthetics of sexuality, this was instituted by the very mechanism through which Censorship was exerted and it may be inferred from the prohibitions that this omnipotent institution laid down specifically for each artistic object or, respectively, for each film in part.

Considering the examples listed above, we can identify several levels of rejection.

Homosexuality and prostitution. Perversity

Both were regarded, in communist Romania, as absolute taboos. They also represented, in fact, criminal offenses. There existed a wider consensus concerning homosexuality, as the theme had also prompted, at that time, resistance in the West.¹⁴ In Romania, there was, however, no debate on this topic and Censorship never

invoked any arguments in this respect, rejecting it *de plano*. Belonging to a tradition of repression, this taboo was so sensitive that even a hint or a suggestion could be very disturbing, being considered unacceptable and dooming the work to rejection.

Most likely, Visconti's *Ludwig* obtained the Censorship's consent for public broadcasting because it was considered a film of anti-monarchical propaganda. The story of the decay and self-destruction of a world is mirrored by the dissolution of the personality of an extravagant king, who is artistically rendered as the very engine of this complete disintegration. The personality of Ludwig II of Bavaria is outlined along the lines of a neo-romantic aesthetic. The protagonist (played by Helmut Berger) has a paradoxical personality, concealing, at first, underneath the appearance of a charming youth, an idyllic-gloomy sensitivity, a taste for the new (see his friendship with Wagner) and a boldness that evinces his undeniable instinct of modernity. The Censorship's intervention consisted in the "excision of some scenes in which it is clear that Ludwig II of Bavaria was a homosexual". The three invoked scenes are transparent, but not ostentatious, and they mark the stages in the configuration of the protagonist's self-identity, corresponding to mutations occurring at the level of his deep psyche. None of these scenes was devoid of significance.

The first scene, in which Ludwig comes across a young servant from the castle naked, bathing in the lake at night, occasions his becoming aware about a self-revelation. Visconti builds this scene on the contrast between, on the one hand, the magnificence and opulent refinement of the decadent aristocracy, and on the other hand, the natural uncouthness and the agile health of the innocent teenager. The impression is that of an epiphany¹⁵ (in the Joycean sense), of a revelatory experience, in which otherness erupts: this is not just a chance meeting with a seductive teenager, but an archetypal encounter, surrounded by an entire halo of ideational and affective implications. Each is the incarnation of more than the concrete individuals they really are. Same-sex attraction is presented here in mental rather than in visual terms.

The second scene, with the white-gloved valet (whom Ludwig asks, impersonally, to take them out), who is placing wood logs in the fireplace, is one of erotic seduction by definition. Feeling watched, the valet, a young man, ostentatiously slowed down his movements, so as to enable the other to contemplate him. Visconti uses very subtly the master-servant schema, making obvious references to the Proust understanding of seduction. Social relations of power are reversed and rebuilt as sexual relations between the subject and the dominating object of his pleasure. The scene ends with a suggested kiss of the two, against a chiaroscuro atmosphere. The kiss is, traditionally, the maximum limit of tolerance for artistic representations of sexuality.

Finally, the third scene, placed just before the end of the film, is one of the most emblematic representations of homosexuality. It is the only "scandalous" scene that could have outraged the prudish tastes of the censors because it captures a community of homosexual men engaged in lascivious games and soldierly dances through which they can display their sensual virility. The decadent atmosphere is outlined against

the twilight and the sound of accordion music, permeated by a heartbreaking sadness. In the first frames, Ludwig, now decrepit, with decaying teeth, is at the heart of this outburst of prurience. The end frames, however, show him clad in standard uniform, wearing a tricorne and a mantle, carefully inspecting this gathering. What appears to be a gesture of choosing/recruiting a lover actually marks a distancing at the level of conscience, heralding an attempt at toning down his self-image. The door left wide ajar, showing the waiting carriage, establishes a violent contrast, like in the prose of Thomas Mann, between, on the one hand, the promiscuous, "stable"-like heat in the room that is saturated with sensuality and, on the other hand, the austerity of winter and the majestic cold outside. Ludwig leaves the room.

The three scenes have an artistic, rather than a purely decorative function. Their suppression threatens the coherence of the work, the protagonist's self being thus mutilated and prevented from scouring the entire array of his potentialities.

In another order of ideas, Buñuel's film *Belle de Jour* was banned on charges of immorality. Admittedly, this is the most direct example, with the most explicit images and elaborate fantasies of promiscuous and perverse sensuality, with a complex theme and manifold threats: murder, crime, jealousy, as well as various forms of dissenting sexuality (prostitution, fetishism, paraphilias, sadomasochistic relations). It did not matter, of course, that the film bore the signature of a master and that it starred Catherine Deneuve. The Freudian reading of the transgressions against the morality of that time, the presence of split identities, and the shady background against which sexuality is presented appear to have constituted aggravating circumstances.

I tend to think that it was not only the compulsive image of Evil that censors found terrifying about this film, but also the insinuation that underneath any respectable woman (and, therefore, any communist housewife) a prostitute was hiding. The film is, from this point of view, a reverse reconstitution of the Christian scheme whereby Mary Magdalene converts to holiness. Modernist aesthetics, in which the real becomes an indistinguishable part of the phantasm, further discredited the film in the eyes of the censors. Trapped in the molds of an obsolete realism, they were not prepared to acknowledge the presence of formal innovations at the level of the rhetoric of visuality and of artistic techniques, being always suspicious of the (possible) subversive meanings of this form.

It is worth noting that the Censorship's list does not feature iconic films of the genre produced in the West, which generated great controversies and cultural shocks there: *L'ultimo tango a Parigi* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), seized by the authorities in Bologna on charges of obscenity; *Teorema* (1968), *Arabian Nights* (1974), *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) by Pierre Paolo Pasolini; *Satyricon* (1969) and *Il Casanova* (1976) by Federico Fellini; *Caligola/Caligula* (Producer: Bob Guccione, 1979), or the films of Rainer Fassbinder.

This may be explained by the purchase procedure. Censorship operated on the basis of a list of prior proposals advanced by a special Imported Films committee.

Most likely, during those years of ideological and political “thaw”, its members, who were cultural emissaries of cinematography, selected films for potential imports if they estimated that these films could run, with the Censorship’s consent, in the Romanian cinemas. Films such as those listed above were never even considered for broadcasting, so they were not subjected to Censorship’s watchful eye.

Pornography

This word was abused, being extrapolated, in some cases, to all the scenes of nudity or erotic contact, which were often devoid of explicit sexuality and merely suggested the act of copulation. This excess was, in this case, symptomatic. The incrimination of sexuality in art was taken so far that scenes with sexual connotations were often regarded as pornographic. Nudity itself was repudiated as a gesture of insolence.

It was on such considerations that the film *Mon Amour, mon amour* was banned, being blamed for its “accretion of amorous scenes rendered with many naturalistic details”, as was, in fact, shockingly, the film *Le Fate/Sex Quartet*. This is a comedy with parodic overtones, relying on benign amusement and light hilarity and benefiting from the presence of an exceptional female trio consisting of Monica Vitti, Claudia Cardinale and Raquel Welsh. Censorship claimed to have been vexed by this “exaggerated” eroticism, considering that “the entire film is a series of the most impudent erotic scenes”.

Le Fate speaks in an artistically seductive way about feminine seduction and about the tyranny of female beauty. It valorizes and exploits comically the beauty of the female body, its youth and naturalness. The female body becomes an expression of exuberance and the joy of living, of certain liberties (which Censorship construed as libertinism) that the 1960s discovered and brought into life and art. As it is well known, this was an important moment in the history of cinema also as regards the explosion of female sex symbols. Roger Vadim’s emblematic film *Et Dieu... créa la femme! ...And God Created Woman* (1956) was not broadcast in any of the cinema theaters in communist Romania.

What Censorship often claimed to be pornography was just an expression of the women’s newly acquired freedom to exercise their weapons of seduction over several men who became their partners in light, sportive escapades, devoid of existential commitments. The contradiction with the socialist ethic was self-evident, as the latter prioritized the argument of the family as the basic cell of society. The fear that Western films might corrupt, through the eulogy of hedonism, this ideological monogamy (which, need it be said?, never existed in the practice of everyday life) led Censorship to block the entry of this genre of films into Romania. Attempts were made thus to protect the conservative and (largely) hypocritical morality of the *multilaterally developed socialist society*.

Eroticism

In the maelstrom of prohibition, the Censorship's rhetoric mixed, to the point of confusing them, ethically reprehensible pornography (with its deviant or excessive variants of sexuality, deemed to gnaw the moral fiber away) and eroticism (compatible with art).

Undoubtedly, sexuality caused anxiety at the political level, as it was an anarchic, expansive element, difficult to detect. Nowhere does the libidinal economy voluntarily enroll in the social order: it is a "remainder" that escapes classification and tabulation attempts. It is, perhaps, the "foreign" domain par excellence, the realm of the Other, resistant to conquest attempts, unruly, difficult to contain, with a high anarchic and subversive potential, posing threats to the ideological and political system.

However, what the censors did in rejecting these films *de plano*, without making any distinction between erotic art and pornography, represented a clear abuse. The category of erotic films that were prohibited or censored on the grounds of "obscenity" included some productions that did not even have erotic themes. In their case, erotic scenes are used in artistic constructions where the emphasis is laid on great moral themes in order to highlight, as it were, certain existential and psychological benchmarks in the protagonist's biography. Far from containing any obscenity, these allegedly offending scenes serve and are well integrated in the artistic approach.

Thus, the film *Poor Cow* was rejected on the grounds that "its ideas are illustrated on the screen by numerous obscene and vulgar scenes". Belonging to the English *Free Cinema*, the film evinces, in fact, the aesthetic of social realism, refusing to make concessions to Western society and protesting against it. The erotic scenes in the film do not exceed nudity (which is never full) and do not go beyond the level of suggestion when erotic acts are presented. At most, the censors could have found bothersome the association between motherhood and eroticism, if we consider that two of the erotic scenes in the film take place in the child's presence, or the foray into the promiscuous atmosphere of clubs and sexy studios (the heroine's aunt is a former prostitute, the heroine herself becoming, provisionally, a model for such a studio).

In fact, the film had a certain potential for being exploited along the ideological lines of propaganda against the unjust imperialist society: the action is set on the outskirts of a big Western city and features characters whose biographies bear the brunt of their precarious material condition. The fact that the film was not allowed for reasons related to sexuality proves that the censors' personal taste also mattered, even when they did not express themselves directly but used political phrases as a stigma, regardless of whether they reflected the reality of not. In the absence of explicit evidence, it would be difficult to determine today to what extent the prohibition imposed by these censors was motivated by a sheer prudery, which automatically made them cringe when it came to sex, or/and a "Victorian" prudery, ideologically anchored in the political doctrine they served.

Milos Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* seems to have been a victim of the atmosphere of political and social openness anticipating the Prague Spring, against which the film was set. Forman stated that he had intended to "establish a democracy of personal life" in a totalitarian regime that, it goes without saying, oppressed individuality. Using the distinctive style of the New Wave, Forman combined fine humor with crude details. The film cannot be accused, as the Censorship in Bucharest abusively did, either of exaggerated eroticism (practically, there is just one erotic scene) or of frivolity. Clearly, what the censors were truly frightened by was its contestatory spirit of "dangerous" and rebellious emancipation, of openness to "corrupting" cultural, existential and aesthetic patterns.¹⁶

What remains inexplicable, albeit emblematic for the conservatism of communist Censorship in Bucharest is, however, the rejection of an art film of outstanding force such as *Sanctuary* (1961). Prohibited, as the censors claimed, because of the "numerous scenes imbued with excessive sexualism", the film is actually a moral drama of the magnitude of ancient tragedy. By adapting W. Faulkner's novel, Tony Richardson brought under the spotlight several of art's major themes of all time: the relations between parents and children, friendship, infanticide, the irrationality of love, moral guilt, as well as several themes that prevailed in America during the first half of the twentieth century: the prohibition, the bootleggers' underworld, women's illusory freedom, the status of black people, the stylish, charming, romantic gangster (played by Yves Montand), etc. In fact, the second motivational source of Censorship is "decadence presented as an attractive way of life".

The problematizing attitude, the formal rigor of the film (black and white) and the actors' meritorious performance ensure the film's positional complexity, which exonerates it from the delictual charges formulated against it. Of course, what Censorship found reprehensible was the presence of the brothel as a *topos*, but this was depicted not as a sordid space, through licentious scenes, but in the light of its social dimension as a peripheral place bereft of all hope. In fact, there are no salacious sexual images in the film, suggesting that it was not the rhetoric of visibility, but the conception of love that the censors deemed truly disturbing. The film reveals the disruptive component of love and its huge potential for subverting the moral and social order.

Finally, in the last example of Censorship's intrusiveness, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, the censors' intervention was no less surprising. Even though, in this film, the poetics of shock is primarily targeted at image, they reacted, this time, to the script.

The first censorship imposed on the film *Persona* resided in the fact that it was rejected both from the network of public cinemas and from the Cinematheque, which functioned in a close circuit, based on a special schedule, and was addressed to a limited, cinephile audience. Nearly a decade after the premiere, permission was granted for only one representation, "as part of an Ingmar Bergman cameo". The censor's report states that the film is "one of the few achievements of the great director that could have been approved by the General Directorate for Press and Prints"¹⁷.

The characters' polymorphous sexuality and split identity, leading inevitably to their moral ambiguity, the theme and also the prevalent artistic technique of madness rendered the film, in the eyes of the censors, as inopportune. Bergman's indulgence in formal games, which give his films a hermetic appeal, triggered the censors' suspicion or even repressive hostility.

Persona is, in turn, a psychological drama and a modernist horror film on a controversial topic: mental illness, death, madness, various ways in which the self may deviate from its normal course.

The film contains scenes of film within a film, shocking frames with the subliminal exposure of an erect penis, the skinning and butchering of a lamb, reminiscent of the mystic and orgiastic performances of the Viennese actionists, or gestures of crucifixion. The longest frame maintained on the screen, to which the protagonist, Elizabeth (played by Liv Ullman), who is in hospital in a near catatonic state, reacts with extreme panic, is the self-immolation of a famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk as a gesture of political protest. In other words, this is an ideologically provocative image, with a high potential for destabilization. However, the Censorship's castrating intervention targeted, this time, the discourse (logos), which was considered, it seems, much more dangerous. Demands were made only for the removal, in translation, of the monologue-confession delivered by the nurse, a complementary character (played by Bibi Anderson), about an ecstatic, real or imagined, erotic experience. The cause appears to have been the sensorial and sensual quality of the description.

Censorship confirmed, willy-nilly, subtler theories about eroticism, seen as a phantasmal operation that was at least equally, if not more damaging ideologically than the fleeting, albeit explicit and provocative image of an erect penis. The subversive potential of the discourse was correctly identified.¹⁸

Once again, we see that, from Censorship's standpoint, words were just as serious as images and received excessive attention from the censors, who feared these words and the perils they encapsulated. Censorship hunted for words, ravaged or simply eliminated them, making them explosive through the very act of removing them.

Censorship's interventions attested, in their turn, the vision of an exacerbated eroticism,¹⁹ of a pan-sexualism. The censors' hyper-vigilance projected some phantasms that they then attempted to fight against through a persecutory strategy.

We could not say, however, that Censorship in Romania gave the full measure of its political intransigence in relation to those Western films. Undoubtedly, some of them were artistic products that represented a genuine challenge for the communist propaganda and we must not forget that they generated public debates and were occasionally contested even in their Western countries of origin or destination. In watching these films, the Romanian censors often faced, in some cases, actual episodes of libertinage, which they banned, from their conservative position, without any scruples. In fact, their degree of tolerance in relation to autochthonous artistic products was much lower, the obtuseness of Censorship revealing its deleterious

impact here. This is why eroticism was rendered in rather pale or diffused form in Romanian art during communism. Censorship frequently condemned and prohibited here, under the accusation of “pornography”, images, scenes or sequences of simple body exposure in highly artistic terms. Moreover, after a long period of cohabitation with Censorship, Romanian artists came to internalize it as self-censorship.

Conclusion

In communist Romania, sexuality was a prohibited theme, regardless of the (artistic) manner in which it was approached or of the form its cultural representation took. In fact, there was truly no place for artistic approaches to sexuality. All the films that focused on sexuality as a central or relevant theme were considered reprehensible. Incapable or unwilling to distinguish between sexuality, pornography and eroticism, the censors did not allow for the possibility that sexuality might be celebrated in potentially artistic forms. In other words, they would not concede that scenes considered shocking and unacceptable from an ideological standpoint might have an aesthetic role, that they could be justified within the artistic economy of the film, appearing as indispensable for the veracity of the composition.²⁰ Often, they performed the function of the “reality effect”²¹ or marked a change in the protagonist’s psychological profile, capturing him at the confluence of contrasting lights. The Censorship’s castrating interventions denoted a philistine appreciation of the works of art, whose complexity they abusively reduced. Purged of these dilemmatic points, which also served as sources of fertile tension, the creative potential of the film was also implicitly destroyed.

There is, no doubt, a tradition of hostility between sex and censorship.²² That is why what is surprising is not the fact that the totalitarian communist ideology chose sexuality as its adversary, even though, in the case of the French avant-garde left, for instance, the revolution resonated with the aesthetic mutations (which were often extreme). The Surrealists were leftists themselves, but their progressivism also encompassed, in literary and biographical terms, morality and sexuality. The self-discreditation of the Romanian communist censorship was the result of its obtuseness and of the reactionarism with which it unilaterally identified the artistically valid theme of eroticism with the morally and aesthetically questionable theme of pornography, implying that when it came to erotic literature, any claim to artistry was illegitimate. There was a voluntary defilement of Eros, precisely because it was (rightly) perceived as a possible universe of refuge, both in social-existential and in literary-artistic terms, from the violent intrusion of politics and ideology. By degrading eroticism to the level of pornography, the censors hoped to dismantle an important stronghold, in which the self could have replenished itself. However, by narrowing the thematic and expressive spectrum of art, cinematography was inadvertently also condemned to aesthetic retardation. The sexual revolution in art went hand in hand with a formal revolution.

Endnotes

- 1 From 1949 until 1975, this functioned as the General Directorate for Press and Prints, while from 1975 until 1977, its name was changed to the Committee for Press and Prints. After the dissolution of this institution, censorship was carried out in communist Romania, until 1989, in a more diffuse way, with several overlapping decision-making centers.
- 2 ANIC, Fund: CPT, Note on the problems arising from watching the imported films that are proposed for broadcasting in the public network, in the year 1974, File 18/1975, ff. 39-41v.
- 3 "The exposure of comrade Nicolae Ceausescu in the conference of the Party about the ideology, political and cultural-educational activity", in *Teatrul*, Year XVI (1971), No. 7 (July), pp. 14-15.
- 4 This category is illustrated by: *Rappresaglia/ Massacre in Rome* (1973), directed by George P. Cosmatos, starring Marcelo Mastroiani and Richard Burton; *Politia incrimina, la legge asolve/ High Crime* (1973), directed by Enzo G. Castellari, starring Franco Nero; *La politia sta a guardare/ The Great Kidnapping* (1973), directed by Roberto Infascelli; *Delitto d'amore* (1974), directed by Luigi Comencini, starring Giuliano Gemma; *L'affaire Dominici* (directed by Claude Bernard-Aubert, 1973), *Les assassins de l'ordre* (directed by Marcel Carné, 1971), *Duel* (directed by S. Spielberg, 1972), *Conrack* (directed by Martin Ritt, 1974).
- 5 The censor himself considered that the number of these films was significant: 38 of the 284 films watched for the network of public cinemas and 39 of the 360 destined for the repertoire of the Cinematheque.
- 6 The moral criterion became a priority after 1964, during a stage of relative liberalization in communist Romania. Because the official discourse of Power was more flexible, Censorship could not maintain its obtuse intransigence of the 1950s, with which it hunted down, for example, the offense of revealing state secrets in literary works.
- 7 Cristina Corciovescu, Bujor T. Rîpeanu (eds.), *Secolul cinematografului. Mică enciclopedie a cinematografeiei universale*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989, p. 331.
- 8 Hungarian Revolution against the dictatorship of the Bolshevik and Soviet occupation – held in 1956 (October, 23 rd. - November 11th.) was completed a massacre committed by the Red Army together with the forces of Hungarian Security (AVH).
- 9 Note on some films whose distribution was stopped because they contravened public morality and would have been harmful for the moral education of the spectators (1 January - 1 June 1968), d. 14/1968, ff. 39-44, in *Instituția cenzurii în România. 1949-1977*, vol. I, edition, foreword and notes by Liliana Corobca, Oradea, Ed. Ratio et Revelatio, 2014, p. 352.
- 10 The filmography of the 1960s-1970s, with sexually explicit images, triggered moral debates and introduced the problem of representing sexuality in the antithesis art v. pornography. For a succinct overview of the problem, see Sthéphane du Mesnildot, "Retrouver l'intensité érotique", *Cahiers du Cinema. Érotisme (encore)*, no. 713 (juillet/août) 2015, pp. 7-9.
- 11 ANIC, Fund: CPT, Literature-Arts Directorate, Report on the workload, the situation of the controlled work and production, the most important interventions and alerts from the month of December 1974, File 18/1975, ff. 26-27.
- 12 For a current redefinition of the terms "erotic", "pornographic", "obscene", see John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions. Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature*, London - Sterling, Virginia, Pluto Press, 2012 (princeps ed.: 1991), pp. 8-25.
- 13 In *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction* (McFarland & Company Publishers, 2014, pp. 187-189), Doru Pop shows that "the Communist propaganda was using the prescribed gender role of the woman as the 'caretaker Mother,' and in the center of [Romanian movies

- made until 1989] there was always a positive feminine figure...." "Some women in these Communist movies were 'dark women'", but "in this representation of women as objects, the good and the evil woman were never compatible...".
- 14 For a reinterrogation of the problem, see, for instance, Alan Soble (ed.), *The Philosophy of Sex. Contemporary Readings*, part II: Homosexuality, ed. IV, New York, Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 97-177.
- 15 It is interesting to note that Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, a Benedictine monk, who compared the five senses with as many degrees of love, found sight to be the equivalent of the highest form of love: divine love. Indeed, for there to be an epiphany, what is necessary is the presence of something visible. xxx, *Amours plurrielles. Doctrines médiévales du rapport amoureux de Bernard de Clairvaux à Boccace*, présentation et commentaires par Ruedi Imbach et Inigo Atucha, Paris, Seuil, 2006, pp. 16; 44-47.
- 16 The film was the subject of a diplomatic scandal. Purchased by Romania, it was not distributed through the public cinema network, being banned by censorship. Following the intervention of the Embassy of Czechoslovakia, it was scheduled, with great public success, for a few screenings solely in cinemas in peripheral cinemas from Bucharest, and was then withdrawn.
- 17 ANIC, Fund: CPT, Literature-Arts Directorate, Report on the workload, the situation of the controlled work and production, the most important interventions and alerts from the month of December 1974, File 18/1975, ff. 26-27.
- 18 As an example of a film that raised ideational challenges, even without using visually shocking images, which recovered ideologically the element that was (perceived to be) subversive, we could mention Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*. An adaptation of Diderot's homonymous novel, the film appeared on screens on 26 July 1967, after having been completely prohibited for a year.
- 19 Even when the censored texts textually invoked eroticism, mentally it was assimilated, in fact, with pornography.
- 20 Stéphanie du Mesnildot (art. cit., p. 8) speaks, for example, about the fact that the insertion of explicit sexual images in a film allows for the use of the "dark energies of sexuality."
- 21 Apud Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel," in *Communications*, no. 11, Mars 1968, pp. 84-89.
- 22 Stéphanie Delorme ("Femen: érotiques et politiques," in *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 713/2015, p. 41) states that competition against politics stems from the fact that "eroticism represents yet another vain form of occupying the whole (public) space." Being connected to the vital élan itself, eroticism is but another totalizing project, with certain expansive and colonizing potential. It thus enters into competition with the totalizing discourses of Power, except when Power expresses itself through eroticism and seduction.

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