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A Figure of Transgression in Literature, Theatre, and Cinema: Aglaja

Abstract. Ever since the publication of her two books (*Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht*, 1999, and *Das Regal der letzten Atemzüge*, 2002), Aglaja Veteranyi seemed to fall in between the classical divisions of literary systems. As a multilingual (with a Hungarian-Romanian heritage, performing in Switzerland as a circus entertainer, writing in German), she was regarded as a representative of migrant literature in Romanian, Swiss, or German cultures as well, i.e., an epitome of marginality. Her texts were described as fiction, autobiography, or poetry, given their mixture of elements pertaining to each of the genres. Moreover, they were adapted into several pieces of pop art (film, theatre, music), able to showcase, for larger audiences, some of the encounters specific for today's societies: individual vs. authority, migrant vs. native, citizen vs. non-citizen, "West" vs. "East", male vs. female (encounters undermined by superiority / inferiority complexes, scars, guilt, etc.). Giving a feel of freshness and vulnerability, Aglaja has become a compelling figure of transition of our times (between "high" and "low", between cultures and arts). This article looks into some of the strategies used in literature, film, theatre, or music, that helped turn Aglaja into an icon of transgressive art.

Keywords: identity, migrant literature, feminine literature, interart studies, circus.

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Unusual as it is, Aglaja Veteranyi's lifestory¹ has become symbolic of the condition of the migrant artist, striving to make ends meet and achieve recognition in the Western world that he or she has become a part of. The beginning of her winding route in different cultures, with a childhood spent in the circus and a boarding school for refugees, inspired her semi-autobiographical novel *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht*, soon to turn into an international success. The commentators pointed out the (dis-)similarities between the author and the first person narrator², and it is more convenient to elude theoretical aporias

(e.g. real vs. unreal world) and to agree on the ambiguous status of Veteranyi's voice, specific for the aesthetics of autofiction: the reader, obviously, has to deal with a fictional character enriched or enhanced with a biographical load. The situation has become even more complex since new distortions and displacements took place, with the multiplication of cultural products based on the novel: at least one movie, several audiobooks and soundtracks, even more plays produced and performed across the globe. Not only one, but more transfigurations, by different artists, occurred. A figure of interference³, as poignant and elusive as a moving hologram, coalesced in-between the biographical, literary, theatrical, musical, and cinematic spaces. We may simply call her Aglaja, inspired by the title of Deák's movie or Petrică's play, in order to show the closeness to, but also distance from, Veteranyi's biography. It is this hybrid image, with a life of its own, partly true, partly fantasized, that will be shed light on in the pages to follow. However, since Veteranyi's book remains the universal reference for all the other products in the Aglaja series, it is only natural to first look into its strategies and inlaid messages.

1. In literature

To briefly systematize the literary analysis to follow, suffice it to say that an attentive reader of Veteranyi's short novels should look at a quite long list of threads spread into an apparently diluted account of events: the circus, the (reiterating construction of) poetic objects, home, death, femininity, critique of Western societies, bilingualism, migrant art. Such threads, functioning on different levels of the narrative and leading to one another, are so difficult to single out because of the author's art to tightly intertwine them through the text(s), while keeping unadulterated, at the same time, an overall impression of simplicity.

The circus: its promises and discontents

The circus, with its colourful crew of clowns, jugglers, tamers, acrobats and magicians, moving endlessly from one place to another, has often been seen as an epitome of unregimented beauty, subversive to authorities, a world in itself that reverses social hierarchies, where anybody can be laughed at and anything is made possible. By adopting an insider's perspective, Aglaja gives a totally different account: she talks about a place of toil, with slave-like employees who hardly earn their living, under the constant threat of being thrown away, with a strict hierarchy, where femininity is merchandised, childhood is abused, and otherness is exploited. Veteranyi's circus camp becomes more of a labour camp. Seen from the inside, entertainment is ferocious, a paradox which draws the author closer to David Lynch's *Elephant Man* than to Federico Fellini's *La strada*.

On another level, as a motif in arts, the circus represents traditionally not only the cultural periphery, but also its absorption into the mainstream. Its exotic mosaic has long been incorporated and converted into "high art", since the 19th c. Romantic

and Decadent movements, with Théodore de Banville, Théophile Gautier, or Charles Baudelaire inspired by the illuminating Pierrot pantomimes of Jean-Gaspard Debureau at the Théâtre des Funambules (see Starobinski, 2004), for instance. One can immediately think further of Toulouse-Lautrec or Edgar Degas's circus canvases, Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Edith Piaf's *Bravo pour le clown*, Heinrich Böll's famous *Ansichten eines Clowns*, Giani Esposito's *Le clown est mort* a.s.o. Veteranyi's choice of the circus as a motif mirrors her identification with marginality, along with her ambition to transcend it and accede to a greater visibility in the social-cultural, if not show-biz, system⁴. On the one hand, her family's wanderings with the circus on three continents, their countless nights spent in crammed second-rate hotel rooms, the father, mother and aunt's promiscuous sex lives, the daughter's reluctance to being educated in a boarding school – all these bits sprinkled around the storyline account for an experience of exclusion and uprootedness. On the other hand, later on, literature will be conceived not only as a sublimation, but literally a way out of the marginal position that the girl's life seems to force her into. However, literature is a late discovery for Aglaja, who remains practically an illiterate until the age of 17. Until she learns to read and write as an escape strategy, she needs an *axis mundi*, in an environment always on the move between countries and cultures. It has been argued that nomadism, with its perpetuation of transitional and provisional behavioral patterns, engenders the difficulty to initiate stable relationships and dramatically raises the rate of social defeat, distress, trauma, dissociative disorders (Mendham, 2017; Cordoş 2012, 151-152). With her troubled family life, Aglaja is not exempt from running all the risks. For a change, she finds shelter in the idea that the trailer is an ersatz of home, though one on wheels:

“Here every country is a foreign country.

The circus is always in a foreign country. But the trailer is home. I open the trailer door as little as possible so that home won't evaporate.” (Veteranyi, 2012, 8)

The nostalgia for the homeland having been effaced, (the substitute of) home can't be but precarious, threatening to vanish into thin air at every door opening. The line drawn between “in” and “out”, between *Zuhause* and *Ausland* becomes frail, as nothing seems to provide a secure environment for the child, who is forced to contemplate the thought of losing her mother every night she performs her scary deadly act of hanging by her hair from the top of the circus tent.

A simple narrative seasoned with poetic objects. Trailer, suitcase, fridge, food, etc. Of home & death

The jury of the Ingeborg Bachmann competition, in 1999, were the first to notice the discrepancy between the apparently childish voice of the narrator and her covert literary strategies, more akin to an adult, professional writer. What the German judges of the show disqualified as a construction flaw in the architecture of the novel is,

actually, one of its strengths: the compelling duality of Aglaja, who is at the same time childish and adultlike, knowing and unknowing, innocent and corrupted, artless and artful, spontaneous and elaborated. Kling was right to point out that she represents an aesthetics of irony, which hints at “a more layered truth” (Veteranyi, 2012, 198) about the inner life of the migrant artist. Actually, the refugee herself is a more ambiguous figure than most of us are used to acknowledge.

One of the characteristic tropes of Veteranyi’s writing is the expanded mechanism of metonyms and metaphors over the whole body of text, which activate an almost permanent double reading, a switch between the literal and the symbolic signifiers: the trailer encapsulates home, in the same manner as *mămăliga* (polenta) encapsulates Romania, or *coliva* (funeral farina cake) encapsulates the Christian Orthodox heritage. In Veteranyi’s books, simple objects come wrapped in a rich semantic aura, casting a tinge of poetry on the text: the circus, the teeth, the language, the uterus are endowed with a double function, they “are” and “symbolize” (something) at the same time, which results in disrupting the straight storyline and filling up the real world with surreal levels of significance. Thus, the suitcase where the mother keeps her china is yet another small home (idem: 131). A more elaborate metaphor is used to imagine the maternal womb: “In her belly it’s like in a house that has a bed or a bathtub with warm water.” (idem, 25). In contrast, the beloved aunt, who could never get pregnant, has a uterus as cold as a refrigerator: “I imagined my aunt’s uterus as a small refrigerator in which lie her little children, frozen. / My aunt’s cold children went to my mother. She got stuck with knitting needles.” (Veteranyi, 2003 [2], 56-57). The text might allude to a voodoo ritual fantasized by the little girl, however, the hint at a grim fact of life is transparent. According to one of the aunt’s stories, Aglaja had been an unwanted child, as her mother intended to abort her with a knitting needle (a notoriously unsafe method used under Ceaușescu’s regime, when abortion was criminalized). The aunt intervened and talked her sister into keeping the baby. Hence, the “family romance” of the fetus being carried by the aunt and only delivered, and in hazardous circumstances, by the mother. Aglaja’s love-hate for *Heimat* has everything to do with her contorted relationship with the mother, the aunt filling in the role of a substitute-mother in most of her fantasies. Dislocation and rejection are the two flips of the same coin, with social anthropology leading the way to infant psychology and *vicerversa*.

Another set of objects recalling home, in both novels, is the abundant semantic field of food. The smell of the eggplants baked by the mother instantly brings the comfortable feeling of home to the little girl, wherever she and her family may roam (Veteranyi, 2012, 8). Digestion is a constant starter for daydreaming, and the key-role of cuisine in imagining the paradise lost of motherland by the migrant writers has been noticed (Binder, see Veteranyi, 2003 [2], 140). Odours and tastes mix up, as in the case of Proust’s *madeleine*, to conjure up subliminal remembrances of home. At Veteranyi, reveries can slip into nightmares, as the roles of the eater and the eaten are

alarmingly reversible. The chicken being cut in the hotel room's bathtub, to be served at the family dinner (Veteranyi 2012: 14), anticipates Aglaja's fantasy of the child being cooked in the polenta. The successive versions of the story add up more and more spicy details. The child hides in the sack of cornmeal that the grandmother will pour into the boiling water (idem: 70); God is a chef who chews open the coffins to eat the dead, or who cooks the child because he is very hungry (idem: 73-74); the child tastes like chicken, is cut in slices, has her eyes popped in the sizzling cornmeal (idem: 88); the polenta sheds tears at the sound of the violin sadly played by the father (idem: 177). The ambivalence of food points at Aglaja's anxiety that she has lost any encircling, securing borders between the inner and the outer, the womb and the world, *Zuhause* and *Ausland*, life and death. The eggplants, the polenta and all traditional dishes are, indeed, a taste of home, but, home being so volatile, also a taste of nothingness. It is so telling to notice the secret parallelism between the childish playful list of cravings

("polenta with salt and butter;
chicken soup;
cotton candy;
roast chicken with garlic;
butter;
dark bread with tomatoes, onions and sunflower oil;
meatballs;
crêpes with jam;
pork in garlic-flavored aspic etc." – idem, 11)

and the recipe of the *coliva* cooked at the aunt's funeral

("Vanilla.
Rum.
Almond essence.
Sugar.
Salt.
Lemon zest.
Raisins. [...]
A pile of wheat grains.
A pile of biscuits with butter" – Veteranyi, 2003 [2], 11).

The dismembered body as an anti-system manifesto

The dislocation of home naturally brings about the dissolution of identity, imagined, more than once, as a body dismemberment. Here, Veteranyi plays on the double meaning of her language, switching between the literal and the metaphorical, especially while depicting some of the characters in *Das Regal der letzten Atemzüge* ("A Shelf of the Last Breaths"). Uncle Petru, the gay artist who lives in Romania, sends

some of his teeth to his sisters abroad, enclosed in envelopes, pretending that he lost them during the violent encounters with the communist Securitate (“I didn’t keep my mouth shut, they broke all my teeth” – idem, 98). One can read here not only a poetics, but also a politics of the body, as the teeth connote the human dignity that Romanian citizens were deprived of by the regime’s criminal acts. The image of the teeth falling out is the organic imprint of a toxic national history on the faces of Ceaușescu’s victims who, like uncle Petru, cover their smiles in shame, so as to conceal a physical impairment. The aunt’s deadly disease manifests itself through the necrosis of the body parts, so that she painfully witnesses her own gradual shrinking to a corpse. Her portrayal becomes an instantiation of Bakhtin’s “grotesque body”, transgressing the abstract rules imposed by the “classical body” (“indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a collectivity” – Stallybrass and White, 1986, 21) to dissolve into the irregular lines of the disease. The striking contrast between the putrefying body of the aunt (“First died a toe. Then, the leg./ [...] There is nothing we can do here. The toe falls out alone./ A little boil turns into a wound, then into a hole [...] / The doctor, she said./ He put his rubber gloves on, anesthetized her leg, scraped the hole with the curette, and stuck some ointments and gases inside./ The toe’s colour turned dark, then black./ OK, he said. This one will dry out now” – Veteranyi, 2003 [2], 22-23) and the aseptic environment of the clinic, packed with neutral messages or mobilizing catchphrases reading on the corridors (“Waking up at 6.30./ Work makes life beautiful./ Mr Anton Engele./ Cleaning material./ If life gets complicated, laughter helps you live on./ Ms. Klara Frischknecht./ Many hands make light work” etc. – idem: 108) stands for the incompatibility between the refugee and the authorities, between the organic language of death and the wooden language of the state. Her decaying body is the manifesto of a misfit into the Western world. The corporalization of the discourse is as clear in the case of Aglaja herself, whose identity is pictured as a puzzle of fragments scattered around Europe, which fail to coagulate into a stable image of the self:

“I was conceived in Krakow, says my mother. Conceived in Krakow and born in Bucharest. I am Wallachian. What is a Wallachian?

My nanny’s hands came from Germany.

My appendix remained in Czechoslovakia, in a military hospital. [...]

My tonsils remained in Madrid.” (idem, 67)

Despite the autobiographical background, the characters of the novels have the joints of mannequins, and the similarities with the avant-garde prose of Urmuz or Daniil Kharms (Gieser, 2006, 9) should be extended beyond the realm of language experiments. Veteranyi’s mechanomorphic human being is dismountable like a plastic doll, and so is her identity. Aglaja is a citizen of the world, whose fragmented self is the outcome of a trauma.

Bilingualism

Veteranyi's position in-between cultures is reflected on the linguistic level as well. The displacement of home, the dismemberment of identity, and the loss of the mother tongue are all facets of the same complex of dislocation that she experiences dramatically. Her choice of German as the vehicle of her literature is endowed with an existential, if not metaphysical significance, as can be seen in one of her interviews: "Though I write in German, it still is 'fremd', it is foreign to me, but Romanian is a foreign language too, this is my inner problem. But I think that we are all in a 'foreign land' in this world" (Veteranyi, 2003 [1], 193). Laura Gieser commented on the conceptual switch from the mother language (*Muttersprache*) to the foreign (*Fremdsprache*), as one of the typical mechanisms of estrangement at migrant writers. Words are perceived as fresh and brand-new (Leonard Foster, apud Gieser, 2006, 4), but also as parts of the neutral, artificial *lingua franca* of the authorities (Gieser, 2006, 3-4). Veteranyi's case is even more intriguing for the researchers in German studies, as she works with the *Schweizerdeutsch* dialect, still enriched with hues borrowed from the other idioms that the multilingual artist has collected on her way, and, chiefly, from her *Muttersprache*. Thus, structures carefully polished in written German may resound with Romanian semantic reminiscences. (Gieser provides the example of a hyperbolization mechanism whose ironic dimension can be perceived only after confronting the German with the Romanian phrase that it sprang from – idem, 6, 7, 16). Such bilingual tropes, playing on the edge between *Fremdsprache* and *Muttersprache*, add an extra flavour to Veteranyi's poetic imagery, which strikes the reader by constantly pushing the limits of language to new potential horizons of meaning. The transnational expressiveness of her literature draws Veteranyi closer to Herta Müller, who confessed her indebtedness to Romanian, in spite of her choice of German as the vehicle of writing: "I think that the Romanian language writes with me, even if I don't write a sentence in Romanian. But Romanian takes part in the German I write in." (apud Cordoş, 2012, 125). An inbuilt Romanian idiomatic pattern may be perceived, every now and then, in the crystal-cut German syntax of the two authors.

Migrant literature

Recent developments in German studies place Aglaja Veteranyi in the field of *Migrationsliteratur*, which has gained new momentum with the "eastward shift" since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening to writers coming from the ex-communist block or from other continents, together with their stories and their heritage (Gieser, 2006, 13; Kling, in Veteranyi, 2012, 186). With the process of globalization and the reversal of hierarchies between centre and periphery, the concept of deterritorialization engendered more fruitful debates around "minor literature" ("A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" – Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 16). The Swiss-Romanian-Hungarian author had the chance, among many others, to finally transcend her marginal status and accede to

a better position in the cultural field, as the borders of the “national literature histories” have become more permeable. Her literary ascension, though meteoric, has been compared to that of the Albanian-Italian-Swiss Francesco Micieli (Gieser, 2006, 9), another winner of various honoured prizes for migration literature written in *Schweizerdeutsch*⁵.

Though having benefited from a warm reception by the local reviewers, Aglaja Veteranyi had a more difficult access in the Romanian culture. The last prestigious literary history, published in 2008 by Nicolae Manolescu, still preserves language as “the most important criterion” of national literature (Manolescu, 2008, 27), and a well-known panorama of contemporary fiction doesn’t take into account any of the authors writing in foreign languages (Ștefănescu, 2005, 7). However, a recent research on the representations of identity conducted by the critic Sanda Cordoș enumerates Veteranyi among other representatives of the diaspora (Hans Bergel, Herta Müller, Richard Wagner, Eginald Schlattner, Cătălin Dorian Florescu), and this could mark the beginning of a reassessment of migration literature, in line with the new developments of the theoretical framework, which emphasize multicultural practices (Cordoș, 2012, 120-130, 146-160). In spite – or because? – of the reluctance of the national cultural establishment, Veteranyi has acquired a higher notoriety in the circles of *indie* artists, for whom she embodies a cosmopolitan self, vulnerable and creative, stranded at the margins of society, i.e. a standard-bearer of their own cause. Translated in Romanian by the avant-garde poet Nora Iuga and promoted by the reputed Deutsche Welle cultural journalist and writer Rodica Binder, she was associated with a concoction of trends such as surrealism, dadaism, impressionism, expressionism, or pointillism, gave rise to extended debates on the blogosphere, resulting in interpretations from various standpoints, from the psychoanalytical to the Christian-existentialist. Today’s young feminine literature finds inspiration in some of her artistic devices (mixing autobiographical with fictional, using a child’s perspective, switching realist with surrealist levels). So are a few novels by Cecilia Ștefănescu, Ana Maria Sandu, Corina Sabău, Ioana Nicolaie, or plays by Vera Ion and Mihaela Michailov. One of the key features that they share is the narrative voice, resounding with the awakened consciousness of a traumatic identity, be it personal or national.

2. In theatre and cinema

With their easy to grasp narrative set in a carnivalesque world, Veteranyi’s novels gave way to numerous adaptations in various arts. The first to convey her messages into ad lib theatrical acts was the author herself, who used to turn her reading sessions organized in libraries, bookshops, or book fairs into live performances of considerable impact upon the audience (Binder, in Veteranyi, 2003 [1], 192-193). Though it is difficult to map all the productions based on her writings, at least two films, two soundtracks, and eleven plays (apart from the numerous art student projects conducted in various European universities) could be counted until 2017. Except for Krisztina Deák’s movie, the resulting products were the work of small, indepen-

dent groups or companies in Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, or Romania⁶. Most of the plays were experimental and laid great stress on intermediality, playing on the limits of subgenres such as the musical, dance theatre, or one woman show, often featuring multinational casts and crews.

In Romania, the theatrical career of Veteranyi's books started with the dramatization of her novel *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta* by the avant-garde stage director Radu Afrim (2003), an undoubted success with the critics, despite the rebuttal by some conservatives on grounds of obscenity. So was the show's soundtrack composed by Ada Milea, soon turned into the CD *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă* ("Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta"), whose surrealist lyrics attach to the dark atmosphere of the book a few overtones in the critique of the orthodox church. Both experimental artists referred to Veteranyi's autofiction as a platform to take a stand against cultural and social taboos in present Romania. It is arguable that due to their popularity with young intellectual audiences, a trend of up-and-coming artists followed in their footsteps to engage in guerilla charges against the inequities of the local system, starting from Veteranyi. The political messages encapsulated in the books were localized and updated in the productions from other countries as well (see, for instance, the 2016 production in Munich, financed by the Municipal Department of Arts and Culture, in a symbolic moment of the "refugee crisis").

Given the variety of products in the international series, in terms of visibility and artistic value, we will take into account only two of them, in part validated as nominees or winners of noteworthy prizes, to look at their continuities and discontinuities with the threads present in the literary texts: the Hungarian-Romanian-Polish film *Aglaja* (2012, directed by Krisztina Deák) and the Romanian dance-theatre play *Aglaja* (2016, written and played by Alina Petrică, directed by Ștefan Lupu).

Poetic objects, reloaded

What a reader of Veteranyi's books may guess even before watching any movie or play of the above is that several themes will inevitably get lost in translation to other arts. For instance, bilingual tropes can hardly be pushed in the spotlight in performing arts, so that language trauma, which is topical to the book's protagonist, can't be but downplayed. Part of the linguistic flavour of the texts will fade away in the theatre and cinema adaptations. This is the sharp edge that the artists have to cross in any adaptation. Consonantly, the art critics see themselves challenged by the difficulty to „compare the incomparable” (to use the phrase coined by historian Marcel Detienne), i.e., in our case, to cut across the borders of semiotic systems in order to engage in practices common in interart studies. As it happens, the transfer of cultural content goes beyond the specificities of *l'écriture* in literature, cinema, or theatre, in that directors, cinematographers, set-designers, actors etc. endeavour to construct visual correlatives of literary devices. In the process, travelling images are displaced, strings of signifiers are restructured, messages are diverted, emotions are refreshed, i.e. new works of art are being built.

Some of the poetic objects displayed in Veteranyi's narratives gain substantiality with the adaptations. This empowerment through visualization is perceivable more than once in Krisztina Deák or Alina Petrică's productions. In the film, the trailer as a weak substitute of home witnesses, from the background, Aglaja being forcefully taken away and sent to the refugee school by the state authorities. In another memorable snapshot, we can see the little girl literally nestling in a refrigerator as in an inhospitable womb, while her mother is trying to buy some media attention by offering sexual services to a journalist, in another room (Figure 1). In Petrică's play, the protagonist gets out of a big family suitcase before throwing herself, suitcase in hand, in



Figure 1. Aglaja sitting in the fridge. From the film *Aglaja* (2012, written and directed by Krisztina Deák) Snapshot from the official trailer.

a complex choreography. The audience has a strong sense that she is dancing around not only with a valise, but with her own home, inseparable from her childish mind, for the time being. The physicality of the metaphor is enhanced even more in the image of death, represented in the play as a plague doctor on stilts, wearing a beak mask, alluding to the sinister medical costumes represented in 17th c. engravings (Figure 2). Whether they are visual "translations" (the trailer, the refrigerator, the suitcase) or innovations (the doctor dressed in black), the poetic objects may be loaded with more weight in theatre and cinema than in literature.



Figure 2. Image of death in the play *Aglaja* (2016, written by Alina Petrică, directed by Ștefan Lupu). From the trailer available on: <https://centrulculturalnrb.ro/aglaja/>

Displacements in adaptations

Of all the themes explored in Veteranyi's narratives, there is one dramatically under-represented in adaptations: the thorny, ambiguous relationship between the daughter and the mother, whose parenting neighbors irresponsibility and worse. The notable exception is Deák's movie. One may already perceive in its official poster the fading, overbearing silhouette of Sabina, arms wide open, as if about to give little Aglaja a big motherly hug that could turn strangling any time at all (Figure 3). Sabina's tenderness-ferociousness, her emotional outbursts converted into unpredictable fits of temper will follow through the movie. The mother-daughter connection is weaker in Petrică's play, as they are no longer featured as the abuser and the abused, but both as victims to the men's world, as objects of desire. Pepita, the nightclub owner who hires Sabina and Aglaja as dirty dancers, is the common perpetrator: her agency enables male authority to subdue women. The libidinal nature of power reveals in Pepita's animalized body, of a sow with huge breasts springing from under her leather menswear: an agent of violence and sex, she is (Figure 4). In



Figure 3. *Aglaja* (2012, written and directed by Krisztina Deák). Official poster



Figure 4. Pepita and Aglaja. From the play *Aglaja* (2016, written by Alina Petrică, directed by Ștefan Lupu). From the trailer available on: <https://centrulculturalnb.ro/aglaja/>

Petrică's production, the male or father figure is upscaled as the main source of trauma, whereas the literary narrative constructs the mother as the ultimate aggressor, whose impairing influence is placed under a taboo by the child herself. Laura Gieser argued convincingly that at the core of Veteranyi's trama lies the Medea myth. It was inferred that the core metaphor of the book activates a semantic pattern in Romanian: according to a folk etymology, *mămăligă* (polenta) comes from *mamă*, which implies construing the mother herself as the cook who literally eats her child or offers it for eating (Gieser, 2006, 5; Kling, in Veteranyi, 2012, 196-197). From book to play, the accent shifts from the Medea complex to the more accessible and „visual” Lolita complex. The sexualized attention paid by males to the girl is underlined to point at an archetypal evil easier to map in today's societies. However, the spectacular stress on a feminist stand overshadows a subtler thread interwoven by Veteranyi in her text.

The major displacement utilized in Deák's scriptwriting is relocation: some of the most emotionally disturbing scenes are moved from Western to Eastern Europe, as the protagonists, mother and daughter, come back to Romania immediately after the fall of Ceaușescu's regime. The civilization gap lies wide open from the very first scene of the comeback, with the shiny convertible Mercedes S-Class stopping by the rusty equipment of Constanța shipyard, in a grey, puddly landscape that starkly contrasts with the lively colours of Switzerland seen before. Tibor Máthé's cinematography abruptly turns a few hues darker. Sabina's accident during her ultimate stunt (hanging by her hair, from a crane, over the sea) is set in the same Romanian port, under the eyes of the indifferent or incompetent workers operating on out-of-date machinery which unexpectedly stops in the middle of the act. Aglaja is seduced and / or raped in the same rundown industrial site, out of which mother and daughter, abused and humiliated, manage their narrow escape to return to the West. The Eastern interlude, in Deák's film, comes packed with a bend in the ideological content, as the film-maker misses or deliberately leaves out one of the most challenging messages of the book: the critique of the Western system from the viewpoint of the otherness / paria. Instead of looking at the problematic case migrant vs. state, the film gets stuck in just another stereotypical satire of postcommunism. The final scene follows Aglaja back in Alexanderplatz, Berlin, having got rid of her mother's looming presence, having left behind the Romanian nightmare, just melting in the merry crowd of passers-by, in what seems to be the beginning of a happy social integration. It couldn't get farther away from Veteranyi's critical, pessimistic outlook.

Conclusions.

A transgressive figure on the cultural market.

It is noticeable how some core traits of Aglaja persist in all the products of the series (vulnerability, naivety, and, in general, anything pertaining to childishness and femininity), while some others change with the audiences and *milieux* they address. For the artists involved in the adaptations of Veteranyi's books, it is a mat-

ter of opportunity to tackle issues topical for their respective societies (critique of orthodoxism or postcommunism in the Eastern states, of refugee policies in Germany, etc.), to tone down the esoteric and scale up the commercial, in order to provide a larger public with customized and simplified versions of the image. With her “thousand faces” spread around countries, Aglaja has become a contemporary figure of transgression⁷ between arts, between high and low, girlhood and womanhood, East and West, etc. Rejected by the cultural canon(s), she was promoted by the *indie* productions as a marginal consistently denied the access to any position of power, due to her multiple vulnerabilities (as a young, non-professional, female migrant) and targeted intelligently to a growing transnational market of “alternative” intellectual consumers who identify themselves with the “underground” (teenagers, students, fresh graduates, aspiring artists, low rank corporate employees, etc.). Her archetypal “weakness” successfully converted into a competitive “strength”. It is a paradox that Aglaja could use in her favour: periphery is the only credible position to challenge the centre in terms of sincerity (vs. the falsehood, hypocrisy, philistinism of the “civilized” societies), and to claim humanity as an unalienable value. If arts provide a reservoir of images that question societies, then Aglaja is an authentic figure of our glocal times.

Notes:

- 1 Born in Bucharest in 1962, Aglaja Veteranyi fled together with her family in 1967. Because both her mother and father worked as circus artists, she travelled around the world and reached South America or Africa, before settling in Switzerland, in 1979. Though her intense multicultural experience turned her into a multilingual in her early childhood, she was poorly educated until her teenage years, due to her peripheral social-cultural status, both as an immigrant and as an itinerant member of a circus crew. She cut her way into Swiss culture as the co-founder of the experimental theatrical groups *Die Wortpumpe* (1993 – “The Word Pump”) and *Die Engelmaschine* (1996 – “The Angel Factory”), as a poet and a writer whose most acclaimed work was the novel *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* (1999 – “Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta”). In 1999-2000, she was awarded several prestigious prizes, among which the *Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis* for migrant literature in German: a situation similar to that of another Romanian-Swiss author with a rich non-intellectual background, “the truck-driver / writer” Marius Daniel Popescu, who won *Le prix Robert Walser* for his experimental novel *La symphonie du loup* (2007 – “The Symphony of the Wolf”). Veteranyi committed suicide in 2002, by drowning in lake Zürich.
- 2 Vincent Kling showcases a resemblance and a difference between the narrator and the author: “As with the narrator in *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*, Veteranyi’s stepfather was a clown and her mother an acrobat, but while the novel depicts its protagonist as initially somehow sheltered by her mother, Veteranyi was actually forced even as a little girl to juggle and perform dance routines” (Veteranyi, 2012, 183). However, Kling states the almost complete identification between the two, by noting that “narrator and author [are] so closely interrelated that I will for now refer to them interchangeably” (idem, 184).
- 3 We use the word “figure” not with the narrow, rhetorical meaning from Gérard Genette (see chapter *Figures* in Genette, 1966), but rather in the letter and spirit of Antoine Com-

pagnon, who, without providing a strict definition of the term, uses it extensively in *Les antimodernes* (see *Première Partie: Les idées*, in Compagnon, 2005), as well as in a series of conferences (e. g.: *Autour de 1914, nouvelles figures de la pensée: sciences, arts, lettres*, Collège de France – see Compagnon, 2014) and lectures (e. g.: *De la littérature comme sport de combat*, Collège de France – see Compagnon, 2016). Partly ideological, political, historical, artistic, literary, and / or media, the figure enters social imagination, on a path or another, to stand out as a sign of its times.

- 4 For Veteranyi's real artistic success within the Swiss cultural system, "against all odds", see Vincent Kling's afterword to *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta* (Veteranyi, 2012, 186).
- 5 Vincent Kling affiliates Veteranyi to a longer list of migrant writers of Eastern origins who contributed to "the eastward shift of recent literature in German", along with Radek Knapp (from Poland), Dmitre Dinev (from Bulgaria), Ibrahim Amir (from Kurdistan), Astrit Alihadjaraj (from Kosovo), and Vladimir Vertlib (from Russia) – Veteranyi, 2012, 187.
- 6 I've taken into account the theatrical shows produced by Teatrul Odeon Bucharest (2003, directed by Radu Afrim); Teatr Tetraedr, Racibórz (2006, directed by Grażyna Tabor); Kosmos Theater, Vienna (2009, directed by Asli Kışlal); Hessisches Staatstheater, Wiesbaden (2010, directed by Rainer Kühn); Theatergroep Mămăligă, Amsterdam (2011, directed by Dorothea Nikiporczyk, with Ioana Tudor); Theater Unikate von Gilla Cremer, Hamburg (2013, directed by Nik Günther); makemake produktionen, Vienna (2014, directed by Sara Ostertag); Munich Center of Community Arts (2016, directed by Dana Paraschiv, with Edith Alibec); Teatr Witkacego, Zakopane (2016, adapted and directed by Justyna Kowalska); The Frankfurt Ensemble 9 (2016, directed by Helen Körte, turned into a film version by Jörg Langhorst in 2017); Centrul Cultural European pentru UNESCO „Nicolae Bălcescu”, Bucharest (2016, written by Alina Petrică, directed by Ștefan Lupu). Musical scores based on Veteranyi's writings were composed by the Romanian Ada Milea (2003) and the Albanian-Serbian-Austrian Jelena Poprzan (2014). The list is, naturally, incomplete.
- 7 We use the word "transgression" with the widely used meaning of going beyond boundaries, be they national, social, political, genre, artistic, etc., giving way to norm- or taboo-breaking practices that destabilize the establishment (see, in this respect, for instance, chapter III "A Typology of Transgressions" from Julius, 2003, 100-185). Transmediality is, in this logic, a particular case of transgression, resulting in polymorphing new art objects that address simultaneously more media representations and, consequently, subvert any "closed" art system.

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