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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Andreescu, F. (2011). The changing face of the sacrificial Romanian woman in cinematographic discourses. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 11(4), 661-674. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-446544>

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The Changing Face of the Sacrificial Romanian Woman in Cinematographic Discourses

FLORENTINA ANDREESCU

Overview

This article, using insight from Lacanian psychoanalysis, identifies the Romanian female ideal as it is constructed and positioned within the structure of fantasy in one of the most representative Romanian myths, *Craftsman Manole*, and further traces how the identified ideal persists or changes within the cinematic stories produced within various forms of political, economic and social organizations. My research shows that in the Romanian case, the stability of the social order implies the female's acceptance of a sacrificial role. The female ideal is positioned in the structure of fantasy in such a way that it needs to perform sacrifice in the name of the social authority. This research argues that even though the female ideal changes along with changes in discourse, its position within the national structure of fantasy remains constant. I hold that the national structure of fantasy represents the basic way in which a society understands freedom, pleasure, and its specific connection to the *Other*¹. The main source of this research is film. Film is addressed as a system of signs charged with discursive meaning and as a form of fantasy. Films clearly portray the main discourse of a society, while making evident the specific national structure of fantasy².

It is important to undergo such a study for a better understanding of the present challenges that Romanian women encounter, such as a striking absence of a feminist movement. Furthermore, understanding the present Romanian female identity is only possible if we pay attention to the past, tracing changes and continuities. Even though it uses films as its main arena of investigation, this study is deeply political since the female ideal portrayed in films includes political ideologies and other social constructions, while the process of identification itself is constitutive of socio-political life.

Following the ideas put forward by Benedict Anderson³ and Michael Billig⁴, this research stresses the importance of the process within which ordinary people continue to imagine or represent themselves as an abstract national community. Anderson⁵ holds that all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined, and that communities are to be distinguished solely by the style in which

¹ Florentina ANDREESCU, "The Changing Face of the Other in Romanian Films", *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2011, p. 77.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Benedict R. O'G ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 2006.

⁴ Michael BILLIG, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, London, 1995.

⁵ Benedict R. O'G ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities...cit.*

they are imagined. In line with these ideas, I argue that community belonging is created in part by shared coordinates of fantasy. Similar fantasy coordinates structure national stories such as myths, novels and films¹. There is a co-constituted relationship between the structure of fantasy and the stories present within a national space, where the various stories shape and reinforce the structure of fantasy, while the structure of fantasy functions like a map which guides the organization of the commonplaces of a story vis-à-vis each other. This process produces a similarity in understanding the world, specifically notions of happiness, desire, pain, freedom and the *Other*. In this sense the concept of national borders indicates that the sphere of a personality has found a limit according to the national fantasy coordinates. The boundary in this sense is the crystallization or spatial expression of specific psychological limitation².

In my analysis I engage with the ideas specific to Lacanian psychoanalysis within which the subject is no longer, as in traditional psychology, a unified collection of thoughts and feelings, but is "de-centered", marked by an essential split. Lacan³ refers to the new concept of the subject as: "lacking", "fading", "alienated", marked by an essential "lack of being", "split", and possessed of an "empty center"⁴. Lacan stresses that the split subject is formed within three registers that, he argues, are tangible or that flush in one another: Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. The Imaginary register includes the field of fantasies and images⁵. The Symbolic register is concerned with the function of symbols and symbolic systems, including social and cultural symbolism and is the place of the *Other*⁶. The *Other* represents the locus of truth and meaning, the source of authority. This type of authority is constructed in the name of the symbolic locus, a linguistic source that finds expression in the actual person that embodies this authority⁷. It is the locus where the signifying chain emerges and where the subject is constituted⁸. The authority is manifested through language and in images and marks individuals by their own individuality, attaches them to their own identity, and imposes a law of truth which the individual must recognize and which others must recognize in them⁹. The third Lacanian register, the Real designates everything that exists unbeknownst to the subject, it is that which is impossible to symbolize. The Real when experienced is best described as episodic interruptions into the other two registers, interruptions that are traumatic¹⁰. For Lacan explanation of the Real is always in terms of the impossible, the Real is that which is impossible to

¹ Florentina ANDREESCU, "The Changing Face...cit", p. 77.

² Georg SIMMEL, David FRISBY, Mike FEATHERSTONE, *Simmel on Culture Selected Writings*, Sage Publications, London, 1997, pp. 142-143.

³ Jacques LACAN, Jacques-Alain MILLER, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Norton, New York, 1988 and Jacques LACAN, Bruce Fink BRUCE (eds.), *Ecrits: the First Complete Edition in English*, W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 2006.

⁴ Bice BENVENUTO, Roger KENNEDY, Jacques LACAN, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1986, p. 18.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁷ John BORNEMAN, *Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2004, p. 16.

⁸ Romulo LANDER, Judith FILC, *Subjective Experience and the Logic of the Other*, Other Press, New York, 2006, p. 53.

⁹ Michel FOUCAULT, "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, p. 781.

¹⁰ Sean HOMER, *Jacques Lacan*, Routledge Critical Thinkers, London, 2005, pp. 83-84.

bear¹. Fantasy is a window to the Real. It permits access to the Real under controlled conditions, conditions that effectively protect us from the Real while allowing access to a colonized, tamed Real². According to Lacan, fantasy tends to follow fix coordinates formed early in life and hard to alter later on. The structure of fantasy predisposes one to a specific connection to the *Other* and to a distinct way of addressing desire within fantasy scenarios.

In my discussion of the female ideal I refer to the logic of the mirror phase, the process in which the individual recognizes himself or herself as a reflection in images and language. This reflection forms an ideal exterior to the individual, but nevertheless accepted as self. This idealized self can never be attained as it will always remain an exterior, a fixed and rigid construct within the Symbolic and Imaginary. However this construct both fascinates and alienates, creating a strong tendency within the individual to embody the ideal³. By accepting an ideal, subjects enter into ideology and become subjects to the constraints of the social order. This process, which Louise Althusser calls the ideological interpellation of the subject, involves concrete individual misrecognizing themselves as subjects by taking up a socially given identity and seeing themselves in this identity. Acting through the ideal and within the symbolic order provides an illusion of completeness in both ourselves and in what we perceive⁴.

The Female Ideal in Myth

The leading Romanian literary critic George Călinescu considers *Craftsman Manole* (*Meșterul Manole*), *The Lamb* (*Miorița*), *Traian and Dochia* (*Traian și Dochia*) and *The One Who Flies* (*Zburătorul*) as most representatives Romanian myths⁵. My analysis focuses on *Craftsman Manole*, more specifically on the version of the myth presented in a ballad form, published by Vasile Alecsandri in *Balade adunate și îndreptate* (1852). The main theme of the ballad, "the walled-up wife" is widely reported throughout the Balkans. In Serbia, it has the title of *The Building of Skadar*, in Hungary, it is often called *Clement Mason*, and in Greece, it is *The Bridge of Arta*. If we were to add the numerous Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian, and Albanian versions to the Greek and Bulgarian texts, we would deal with more than seven hundred versions⁶.

The walled-up wife story clearly reveals the position of the female ideal within the Romanian structure of fantasy. The *Craftsman Manole* myth talks about the building of Curtea de Argeș, a Romanian Orthodox monastery, at the request of the King of

¹ Madan SARUP, *Jacques Lacan, Modern cultural theorists*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1992, p. 104.

² Ed PLUTH, *Signifiers and Acts: Freedom in Lacan's Theory of the Subject*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007, p. 88.

³ Hasmet M. ULUORTA, "Welcome to the 'All-American' Fun House: Hailing the Disciplinary Neo-liberal Non-subject", *Millennium*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2007, p. 58.

⁴ Todd MCGOWAN, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007, pp. 2-3.

⁵ George CĂLINESCU, Al. PIRU, *Istoria literaturii române: de la origini până în prezent*, Minerva, București, 1982, pp. 56-60.

⁶ Alan DUNDES, Simon J. BRONNER, *The Meaning of Folklore: the Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, Utah State University Press, Logan, 2007, pp. 110-111.

Wallachia. In the story the work done by Manole and other nine masons during the day was mysteriously destroyed over night, making the monastery impossible to build. In a dream Manole was advised that if he truly wanted the walls to survive the night, he had to wall in the first wife or sister to arrive next day at dawn bringing food to her husband or brother. The first woman to approach the building site was Manole's wife, Ana. Upon realizing it, Manole falls to his knees and begs God to send waters to fill the river to overflowing and to send a wind that would bend the trees and overturn the mountains, in order for his wife to return from her path. Yet nothing within or without nature's boundaries swayed her from her path¹. Ana's commitment to her role of a wife led to her being entombed alive within the walls of the monastery.

The reading of the ballad can come from at least two distinct perspectives: one that of the victim, the wife who is immured, and the second that of the male builder². I argue that the story of the woman's body buried inside the monastery's walls, as well as the narrative of Ana's suffering, exploitation and sacrificial death, are telling details that emerge as metaphors for the gendered national life³. Ana's body is used to hold together the architectural creation. In this act her body becomes the body of the nation. The woman is trapped in the walls built at the request of the king, embodying here the *Other*, or the source of social authority and morality. By participating within the law and obeying it, Manole shares the power of the social order and wields this power over Ana. The repeated destruction of the monastery alludes to the invasion of the Real within the social order, exposing its inconsistency. Building the grandiose monastery aims at strengthening the power of the social order, as it would stand as a testimony of the power of the king.

The ballad portrays a feminine ideal that women in Romania are encouraged to embody. The ideal is that of a sacrificial being that is expected to experience pleasure in her sacrifice, for it promises her the acceptance of the social authority.

The Female Ideal in Communism

In the films produced during communism we can identify the similar positioning of the female ideal within the structure of fantasy. Women are rarely the main character or protagonist, with a few exceptions represented by *The Premiere* (Mihai Constantinescu, 1976), *Angela Keeps Going* (Lucian Bratu, 1981), *The White Lace Dress* (Dan Pița, 1989) as well as the films directed by Malvina Urșianu. The main character is overwhelmingly male while the plot is generally driven forward by a certain request of the social order to which the man must comply. This compliance affects the life of the women he is associated with. Furthermore these women are expected to embrace the changes resulting from the manifestation of males' agency at the request of the socialist state. The cinematic stories show that any attempt to manifest agency by refusing or questioning the role of a sacrificial being renders a woman immoral or an aberration of femininity.

¹ Sharon KING, "Beyond the Pale: Boundaries in the 'Monastirea Argesului'", Alan DUNDES (ed.), *The Walled-up Wife*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, London, 1996, p. 97.

² Alan DUNDES, Simon J. BRONNER, *The Meaning of Folklore...cit*, p. 119.

³ Ileana Alexandra ORLICH, *Silent Bodies: (Re)discovering the Women of Romanian Short Fiction*, East European Monographs, no. 601. Boulder [Colorado], East European Monographs, 2002, p. 14.

During Romanian state-socialism the newly created industrial working class's basic frame of thinking included strictly defined gender roles and a suppression of women's sexuality. The communist ideology tried to change this basic way of thinking through a denigration of women's contribution to the household and an emphasis on the value of paid labor. Women were expected to work full-time outside the home, as differences between men and women were not officially recognized¹. This created the double burdens of work for women. These double burdens became triple ones when childbearing was declared a patriotic duty². Marxism took for granted that the mobilization of all women for productive work outside the home guaranteed their emancipation, as the only oppression it recognized was that of labor by capital, all other forms of oppression being seen as derivative³. For this reason, under socialism gender inequality was considered to have been solved⁴.

The demand for women's full-time employment was motivated by the rapid transformation of the economy into an industrialized one in need of more and more workers. In June 1973 the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party called for more widespread employment of women⁵. Women did enter the labor force in large numbers, by 1989, 40.4% of employees in state enterprises were women⁶. In this context Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, promised to develop the production of home appliances and utensils and ready-cooked foods to alleviate women's housework burdens⁷. Despite the official discourse, when we analyze the specific prioritization of household appliances within communist homes, we identify an order of priorities that speak of the power relationships between men and women. The prioritized appliances were radios and TV sets destined for common use but mainly used and cared for by men, followed by cars that served mostly men's interests, and only lastly came appliances destined for women's work in the house. If we look at statistical data from Romania starting with 1965 until 1979 the number of TV sets per one thousand people increased sevenfold, the number of cars twenty-one fold, while the number of washing machines only fourfold⁸.

¹ Mary Ellen FISCHER, Doina Pasca HARSÁNYI, "From Tradition and Ideology to Elections and Competition the Changing Status of Women in Romanian Politics", in Marilyn RUESCHEMEYER (ed.), *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk, New York, 1998, pp. 202-203.

² Gail KLIGMAN, *The Politics of Duplicity Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p. 25.

³ Alfred G. MEYER, "Feminism, Socialism, and Nationalism in Eastern Europe", in Sharon L. WOLCHIK, Alfred G. MEYER (eds.), *Women, State and Party in Easter Europe*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1985, pp. 17-18.

⁴ Milica G. ANTIĆ, "Politics in Transition", in Joan W. SCOTT, Cora KAPLAN, Debra KEATES (eds.), *Transitions, Environments, Translations Feminism in International Politics*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p. 144.

⁵ Mary Ellen FISCHER, "Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceaușescu, Pronatalism, and the Promotion of Women", in Sharon L. WOLCIK, Alfred G. MEYER (eds.), *Women, State and Party...cit.*, p. 125.

⁶ Gail KLIGMAN, *The Politics of Duplicity...cit.*, p. 26.

⁷ Mary Ellen FISCHER, "Women in Romanian Politics...cit.", p. 125.

⁸ Vladimír PASTI, Mihaela MIROIU, *Ultima inegalitate: relațiile de gen în România*, Polirom, Iași, 2003, pp. 111-112.

Furthermore, the increased demand for labor brought about pronatalist policies aimed at increasing the number of Romanian workers. Nicolae Ceaușescu started a fertility campaign in 1966, one year after he was installed in power. This fertility campaign was pursued throughout the remaining twenty-three years of his rule and entailed the interdiction of abortions¹ while making contraceptives unavailable. The state required that each fertile woman under forty-five give birth to at least four children. Banning abortions has never eradicated the practice of abortion instead it renders this practice invisible in the public sphere and women's lives vulnerable to physical and psychological risks that accompany illegal abortions². Specialists estimate that only 50% of illegal abortions were successful while the other 50% of women required emergency hospital treatment for infections or other complications, or died³. As a result of the restrictive reproductive health policies enforced under the 25-year Ceaușescu dictatorship, Romania ended the 1980s with the highest recorded maternal mortality of any country in Europe – 159 deaths per 100 000 live births in 1989. An estimated 87% of these maternal deaths were caused by illegal and unsafe abortions⁴.

The female ideal within communism resembles to a great extent the ideal identified in the *Craftsman Manole* myth, where the body of the woman and her sexuality are appropriated by the state and strictly regulated. In order for the industrial society to be built, the socialist state proclaimed that "the fetus is the socialist property of the whole society". At state enterprises compulsory gynecological exams were performed annually to test the reproductive health of the nation's women⁵. Moreover, any woman between ages 16 and 45 who was hospitalized for any reason was given a pregnancy test⁶. Once a pregnancy was officially registered, a woman was unable to rid herself of it without considerable risk. The woman saw her body appropriated by the socialist state and transformed into the body of the nation. It was upon her pain and lack of freedom that the industrial nation was built. The communist woman found herself again trapped within the "walls" built by the "civilized" Romanian men, and performing the part of a sacrificial being.

In a study taking a psychological approach, Adriana Băban finds that the appropriation of women's bodies by the socialist state created deep consequences for women's psyches. By conducting and analyzing a series of interviews with women directly affected by the pronatalist policies, Băban finds that women started to see their bodies as a source of pain, the cause of their lack of freedom as well as representing a cause of danger. The constant struggle against unwanted pregnancies and the stress associated with clandestine abortions prompted some women to recoil

¹ Adriana BĂBAN, "Women Sexuality and Reproductive Behavior in Post-Ceausescu Romania: a Psychological Approach", in Susan GAL, Gail KLIGMAN (eds.), *Reproducing Gender Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2000, p. 227.

² Gail KLIGMAN, *The Politics of Duplicity...cit*, pp. 6-7.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁴ Charlotte HORD, Henry P. DAVID, France DONNAY, Merrill WOLF, "Reproductive Health in Romania: Reversing the Ceausescu Legacy", *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1991, pp. 231-240.

⁵ Adriana BĂBAN, "Women Sexuality...cit", p. 227.

⁶ Gail KLIGMAN, *The Politics of Duplicity...cit*, p. 100.

at the thought of their womanhood and femininity¹. Any attempt by a woman to regain her body and her sexuality was discouraged and sanctioned by the socialist state. Outward manifestations of feminine elegance in style, manner and dress gradually disappeared². The women's identity construction followed the general Bolshevik woman-proletarian model, apparently an embodiment of nonsexuality and nonfemininity, usually identified in Romania with Ana Pauker (one of the first communist women-leaders), Suzana Gâdea (deputy secretary for culture and society under Ceaușescu), and Elena Ceaușescu (Ceaușescu's wife and number two in the communist hierarchy of power)³. A nicely dressed woman was subject to suspicion, sometimes even investigation⁴.

As "heroine workers" women were requested to fit the identity of a male worker. Yet despite the official rejection of gender differences, women were seen as a weaker version of a "male hero worker", and tended to work in sectors where they were deemed to have special competence in fields such as health, education, light industry, retail trade, service and consumer specialties. The planned economy strategy determined a sectors' hierarchy that rendered certain sectors more important than others further creating a political hierarchy of people that occupied the different sectors⁵. The sectors associated with women received less investment and remuneration than the more "masculine" areas, yet men still tended to hold the positions of power in them as managers and directors⁶.

The communist female ideal is reinforced in the films produced during the Ceaușescu regime. These films strive to follow the official discourse and portray a society that doesn't engage in gender discrimination. However, if we pay closer attention to their stories, we find the reality quite different. This means that the materialization of ideology in films reveals inherent antagonisms which the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge. Nevertheless, if an ideological edifice is to function normally, it must articulate its inherent antagonism in the external, material existence⁷. The vast majority of films produced under communism present stories that take place within the work space. The character in charge of the work place and in a position of authority is almost always male. The problems or issues in the film's narrative usually belong to the male. His thoughts and worries take central stage while those of the female characters derive from the male's agency and occupy a peripheral place in the narrative. The female characters are portrayed engaging in domestic endeavors or, if at work, as accompanying or helping male characters, such as preparing coffee or answering phone calls. This scenario is present in films such as: *A Summer with Mara* (George Cornea, 1988), *Some Wonderful Guys* (Cornel Diaconu, 1987), *Love Is Much More Worthy* (Dan Marcoci 1982), *Good Evening*

¹ Adriana BĂBAN, "Women Sexuality...cit", p. 232.

² Mary Ellen FISCHER, Doina Pasca HARSÁNYI, "From Tradition and Ideology...cit.", p. 207.

³ Denise ROMAN, *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2003, p. 98.

⁴ Slavenka DRAKULIĆ, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, Hutchinson, London, 1992, p. 23.

⁵ Vladimir PASTI, Mihaela MIROIU, *Ultima Inegalitate...cit.*, p. 106.

⁶ Mary Ellen FISCHER, Doina Pasca HARSÁNYI, "From Tradition and Ideology ...cit", p. 205.

⁷ Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *The Plague of Fantasies (Wo Es War)*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 4.

Irina (Tudor Mărăscu, 1980), *Hot Days* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1975), *The Power and the Truth* (Manole Marcus, 1971), *Red Apples* (Mircea Diaconu, 1976), and *The Explosion* (Mircea Drăgan, 1973). Besides the films directed by Malvina Urșianu, which I shall address separately, there are only a few exceptions to this rule, such as in *The Premiere* and *Ducklings' Spring* (Mircea Molodovan, 1985). These two films portray female characters as the source of authority within the work place, yet the unusual situation is rendered a comedy while the female in charge of production is ridiculed. *Ducklings' Spring* tells the story of Varvara, a president of the village's communist agricultural cooperative. The conflict in this film is determined by the fact that Varvara, although a woman, embodies the power of the socialist system. This film is a comedy that derives its humor from the reversal of traditional gender roles within the family as well as within society. Varvara replaces her husband Toderăș as the president of the Agricultural Production Cooperative and becomes the person with the most power in the village as well as in her own family, portrayed as the subject of humor. The story highlights all the ostensible conflicts created because a woman instead of a man controls production. It also stresses that Varvara disagrees with innovative changes, positioning the female character as backward-looking and rejecting progress, in contrast with the male worker who is forward-looking and embraces progress.

Another film that deals with a woman holding a position of power is *The Premiere*. A female theatre director, Alexandra, becomes absorbed in her work and neglects her family. Her intense focus on work brings tragedy in her private life. Her husband is bored and starts courting a very young woman who displays an interest in traditional female domestic activities. The film emphasizes what makes the young woman appealing: her passion for traditional work such as cooking and cleaning. Meanwhile, Alexandra's son, due to a lack of parental guidance, gets into a car accident and almost loses his life. Problems appear not only in her private life, but also at her workplace. A theatre play put together under Alexandra's supervision is a flop, because the public doesn't understand it. This alludes to the myth that women possess an odd logic and strange ideas. Alexandra is not to be taken seriously. Her pain does not attract sympathy, but only a cynical remark that this is the result of a woman neglecting her main role, that of a wife and a mother.

A common theme in the films produced during communism is that of a woman's sacrifice for the sake of a man's duty. The accomplishment of such a duty creates significant changes in the life of a woman, who has to accept these changes without questioning them. This specific situation is present in *Angela Keeps Going*. It is the story of a woman taxi driver, Angela who meets in her taxi Gyuri, a petroleum worker who is in training in Bucharest for a year in order to prepare for three years of work in India. Angela and Gyuri fall in love and get married. The time comes when Gyuri has to respond to the duty demanded by the socialist state and leave his new bride for three years. The narrative stresses the difficulty Angela has in accepting her husband's leaving, but she learns to do so by embracing the communist female ideal. Her action confers the acceptance of the *Other*, and transforms the character into a heroine. This sacrificial attitude is presented in a romantic light.

A number of films present heroines that oppose the acceptance of a sacrificial role. This resistance makes the woman dangerous and irrational. The stories show the efforts men put into rehabilitating the female attitudes aimed at bringing the woman to acknowledge the righteousness of following the social set ways. In *Good Evening Irina* the female character decides to divorce her husband who chooses to prioritize his duty to the state over his responsibilities as a husband. While in *The Bride in the*

Train (Lucian Bratu, 1980) the young female character finds herself bored with the worker lifestyle who is complying with the socialist way of life instead of choosing more exciting ways of living.

The films discussed until this point have been directed by male directors. The female director Malvina Urșianu produced during communism, eight films with female characters that differ from the communist heroines analyzed so far. Urșianu's heroines are powerful women that are found at the center of her cinematic stories, for example in *The Extras* (1987), *A Light at the 10th Floor* (1984), *On the Left Shore of the Blue Danube* (1983), *The Silence of the Depth* (1982), *Transient Love Stories* (1974), and *Monalisa without Smile* (1967). Most of her heroines are engineers with significant success in their profession. They portray the perfect embodiment of the communist worker ideal. This situation is specific to *Monalisa without Smile*, *Transient Love Stories* (1974), and *A Light at the 10th Floor*. Even though they are professionally accomplished, these female characters lack a personal life and their faces never portray a smile. The lack of smile is marked by the title *Monalisa without Smile*. In an interview Malvina Urșianu explains that the lack of smile reflects "the drama of the woman in the époque of the socialist construction's triumph"¹. The absence of smile which escapes the strict censorship of the communist system represents the point at which the communist ideology breaks down. Urșianu's female characters acquire the symbol of power of the communist system, more specifically the knowledge and strength to build within the venerated communist heavy industry. Once the woman assumes the position of power, usually associated with men, she painfully realizes that the *Other*, in this case the communist state, did not hold the secret to accomplishing desire. The promise of achieving happiness through the *Other* turns out to be a false one. Furthermore the mystery and strength, which males portrayed as the exclusive occupants of the position of power, vanish and because of this male-female relationships are deeply affected. In *Monalisa without Smile* one of the characters, referring to the successful chemist engineer Irina, states: "When such women exist, poets have no place". Irina on the other hand confesses that her life experience took away uncertainties and the belief that people can hold mysteries. She finds she deals with both life and feelings as calmly and precisely as she deals with chemical reactions. A similar message is encountered in *Transient Love Stories* in which Andrei, a former lover and colleague, writes to engineer Lena:

"Poor Lena, to which man could you dedicate your life, you who builds alone cities, airports and interplanetary ships? Who can defend you from dangers which you alone can eliminate? I am next to you, a poor work comrade without mystery".

The Female Ideal in Post-revolutionary Discourse

The films produced after the December 1989 revolution portray a somewhat changed female ideal, but with an unchanged position within the structure of fantasy. During this postcommunist period, male workers aggressively demand the

¹ Magda MIHĂILESCU, Malvina URȘIANU, *Aceste Gioconde fără surâs. Convorbiri cu Malvina Urșianu*, Curtea Veche, București, 2006, p. 52.

protection of their rights, while there is a striking absence of a feminist movement¹. A non-demanding female attitude is encouraged by the Orthodox Church that regained social influence after communism. The Orthodox Church advocates a return to the traditional and "pure" values of the past. In this sense it promotes a patriarchal model of female servility and self-sacrifice towards husbands and children². The postsocialists ignore the problem of gender inequality³. As a result, Romanian women have a very low presence in politics, and traditional gender roles are hard to challenge⁴.

The communist ideology shaped to a large extent social identities and its sudden collapse led to the invalidation and the dismissal of these identities, an action that proved to be traumatic for the society⁵. The sudden collapse of the communist regime was rapid, sharp and brought about a change that was truly systemic and multidimensional, embracing politics, economics, culture as well as everyday life. These changes were experienced by the whole population and reached the foundation of the earlier system signifying a complete reversal of the deep premises of social life: from autocracy to democracy in the domain of politics; from central planning to the market in the domain of economics; from censorship to open, pluralistic thought in the domain of culture; and from the society of shortages to a society of consumerism. The clash of the two distinct discourses meant that for most people their internalized, trained way of life lost effectiveness and even became counterproductive or negatively sanctioned in the new system, while the new cultural rules appeared to them as alien, imposed and coercive⁶.

The female ideal as portrayed in postcommunist films seems to present two variants. There is the traditional woman under patriarchal protection in the role of wife or daughter, or of prostitute. The female prostitute is the one who poses demands and challenges. But in fact this form of challenge does not create freedom, as it remains under the patriarchal authority. After 1989 prostitution became a widespread phenomenon within the Romanian society. As a country that recently emerged from a repressive regime that imposed social identities and drastically regulated sexual behavior, once repressive control was suddenly removed social identities needed to be renegotiated. This led to a certain misinterpretation of personal freedoms. The Romanian press was awash in images portraying a pronounced aggressive sexual content. The repeated display of "successful" couples comprised of a rich man and a young "accessory"

¹ Mihaela MIROIU, Liliana POPESCU, "Post-totalitarian Pre-feminism", in Henry F. CAREY (ed.), *Romania Since 1989: Politics, Economics, and Society*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2004, p. 301; Mihaela MIROIU, "'Not the Right Moment!' Women and the Politics of Endless Delay in Romania", *Women's History Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2010, pp. 575-593.

² Vlad OPRICA, "Gender Equality and Conflicting Attitudes Toward Women in Post-communist Romania", *Human Rights Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2008, pp. 29-40.

³ Renata SALECL, "The Postsocialist Moral Majority", in Joan W. SCOTT, Cora KAPLAN, Debra KEATES (eds.), *Environments, Translations Feminism in International Politics*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p. 85.

⁴ Livia POPESCU, "Child Care, Family and State in Post-socialist Romania", in Maria MESNER, Gudrun WOLFGRUBER (eds.), *The Policies of Reproduction at the Turn of the 21st Century: the Cases of Finland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Austria, and the US*, StudienVerlag, Innsbruck, 2006, p. 114.

⁵ Florentina ANDREESCU, "The Changing Face...cit.", p. 87.

⁶ Piotr SZTOMPKA, "The Trauma of Social Change a Case of Postcommunist Societies", in Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, California, 2004, p. 172.

woman led to the internalization of these models as life patterns. Nascent prostitution rings exploited the situation of the fascination with media-constructed role models¹. The other facet of the female ideal is that of a traditional woman who occupies the role of a wife or daughter. Within Romanian society the stereotypical career woman remains primarily a sexual object and site of reproduction; being recognized as an intelligent individual depends first upon fulfillment of the feminine ideal².

The films produced after the revolution, portray in their stories the lack of morality at the base of the social order. Distrust in the happiness offered by the two female ideals can be identified. In this sense what it is questioned is the social order that constructed the two ideals. Even though a woman still occupies the sacrificial role, her sacrifice is now seen in a different light. The male who asks for the sacrifice is portrayed as acting out of selfish reasons. This is in sharp contrast to the communist films where the women's sacrifice was performed in the name of the moral, rightful state. The films produced after the revolution, make clear the fact that the male's ability to request sacrifice comes from his occupying a position of power, a privileged position in the social order. The woman's sacrifice is no longer seen as a heroic act, but as an act that needs to be questioned.

An important aspect of post-revolution films is their focus on portraying the rigidity of the two versions of the female ideal. This focus exposes the oppression inherent within the social order. The wife or prostitute ideals limit painfully the female forms of existence and being. This pain is expressed clearly by the female characters who have a hard time identifying with either ideal. The characters search for new forms of expression and existence. This search is expressed in films such as: *Boogie* (Radu Munteanu, 2008), *The Famous Paparazzo* (Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2003), *The Conjugal Bed* (Mircea Danieluc, 1993), *Maria* (Petre Netzer, 2003), *Margo* (Ioan Cărmăzan, 2006), *Marilena from P7* (Cristian Nemescu, 2006), and *Currency Exchange* (Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2008). They make bluntly clear the pain of the women trapped in one of the two female ideals and forced to interact with the world through these ideals. The ideal is presented as a tightly crafted prison built by a demented social order that demands the woman's sacrifice in the name of its law. For example in *Boogie* we are presented with the problems faced by a couple in their thirties when they realize that the promise of family life satisfying their desires is untrue. The film's narrative presents the frustration of Smaranda, a woman who tries to fit the role of a wife. She finds this role to be limiting, even impeding a more profound connection with her own husband. Smaranda finds that being addressed as "wife" by her husband is insulting and asks him to stop calling her by that term. Conversely, *Marilena from P7* tells the story of a young prostitute who falls in love with one of her clients and desires a meaningful relationship with him. When she realizes that such a relationship is impossible because her interactions with the world are dictated by the prostitute female ideal she embodies, Marilena's suffering becomes so intense that it generates an electrical short-circuit in her neighborhood. The short-circuit scene speaks loudly about the pain of a woman trapped in the walls built around her by the social order.

¹ Dan Alexandru DRAGOMIRESCU, Carmen NECULA, Raluca SIMION, "Romania: Emerging Market for Trafficking? Clients and Trafficked Women in Romania", in Andrea DI NICOLA (ed.), *Prostitution and Human Trafficking Focus on Clients*, Springer, New York, 2009, p. 155.

² Shannon WOODCOCK, "Romanian Women's Discourse of Sexual Violence Othered Ethnicities, Gendering Spaces", in Janet Elise JOHNSON, Jean C. ROBIN (eds.), *Living Gender after Communism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2007, p. 156.

The short-circuit is an event that does not fit within the cinematic story, it represents the Real that intrudes into the fantasmatic realm and completely disrupts it, ripping apart the fantasy structure, as well as the consistency of the ideology within which it was constructed¹.

A large number of the films produced after the revolution cast the woman in the role of prostitute, as I have noted. Just a few examples of such films are: *Marilena from P7*, *Margo*, *Maria*, *The Famous Paparazzo* (Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2003), *The Italian Girls* (Napoleon Helmis, 2004), *Asfalt Tango* (Nae Caranfil, 1996), *Currency Exchange* and *Pepe and Fifi* (Dan Pița, 2004). Unlike during the communist period, the body of a woman no longer represents that of the nation, but is seen as a commodity whose value is determined by the market. Instead of repossessing her body after the revolution, we see the female accepting a new type of alienation. The female body becomes a commodity, more specifically a sexual object for men.

Recent Romanian films do not idealize the portrayal of the woman as a sex object, but expose her pain when hailed as such an object. In this sense the films destroy the pleasure of looking and create modes of solidarity between the characters and the audience. This approach to female representation in film is encouraged by Laura Mulvey². The films do not slow or freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation of the woman's body. Instead the action halts to contemplate the pain of the woman trapped in a strict ideal. This contemplation of suffering is an important part of the film *Marilena from P7*, a film in which the overbearing pain of the female character produces a power outage. Likewise, in a number of films the camera focuses on the physical abuse endured by the heroines, such as in *Margo* and *Maria*, or on the alienation from one's own existence as requested by the social law, a situation present in *Pepe and Fifi* and *Boogie*.

A prevalent theme in the films produced after the revolution is the violence directed against women. Violence is usually performed by men who use their position in the social order to control, inflict pain, and force women into prostitution, a situation present in *Marilena from P7*, *Margo*, *The Italian Girls*, *Pepe and Fifi*, *A Case of Disappearance* (Dan Păduraru, 2005), and *Love and Warm Water* (Dan Mironescu, 1992). The familiar discourse regarding female violence in Romanian society is that women, who are outside their "natural" boundaries or traditional roles of wife or daughter, invite sexual violence from men. Social discourses of sex crime create public space as the sphere in which women (especially those who inhabit the feminine ideal) face the perpetual danger of sexual violence. By this logic it is within the private sphere of marriage that the Romanian feminine ideal is safe³. This basic discourse is contradicted and exposed as false in films such as *Maria* and *Weekend with My Mother* (Stere Gulea, 2009) which portray the family as a place where the woman is physically abused by the patriarch. A 2003 study⁴ on violence against women in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, shows that half of the surveyed women experienced verbal or emotional abuse within their family, while 21% experienced physical threats and intimidation. Moreover, 21% of women have experienced physical abuse, and 8%

¹ Todd MCGOWAN, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan...cit.*, p. 165.

² Laura MULVEY, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

³ Shannon WOODCOCK, "Romanian Women's Discourse...cit.", p. 160.

⁴ Gallup Poll Organization, "Survey on Violence Against Women in Bucharest" (27 May 2003), cited by Vlad OPRICA, "Gender Equality...cit.", pp. 29-40.

have experienced sexual abuse. Victims of excessive control and isolation behaviors by husbands represent 31% of the surveyed women¹.

One form of overcoming the social trauma produced by the stringent communist order is to express the traumatic event in narratives, monuments, art, or public commemorations. In this sense, the films produced after the revolution that portray communist life, aim at healing the traumatic scars of the Romanian psyche. I refer here to films such as: *The Oak* (Lucian Pintilie, 1992), *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006), and *The Paper Will Be Blue* (Radu Munteanu, 2006).

The film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* specifically deals with the agonizing condition of a young woman whose body and sexuality were strictly regulated by the socialist state. The film follows Otilia and Gabriela (Găbița), two university students in a Romanian town. Găbița becomes pregnant and wishes to have an abortion. In order to get rid of the unwanted pregnancy, the two friends meet with Mr. Bebe in a hotel where he is to perform an illegal abortion. The pronatalist policy subjugates the two women to the demands of Mr. Bebe, who has the knowledge to perform an abortion, and who demands to have sex with the two girls in exchange for his services. The exchange of services is disturbing, for it makes overtly evident that the pronatalist policies force women to accept degrading privation of liberty and empowers the patriarch who obscenely² enjoys his position of power and uses the state law to force the two girls into serving him as sex objects. This traumatic experience induces Otilia to question her relationship with her boyfriend, and further question in general the inequality in power between men and women. At the same time the film emphasizes the bond which develops between the two young women, a bond that will allow Otilia, for her friend's benefit, to accept and participate in the exchange which Mr. Bebe proposes. Otilia acknowledges and expresses to her boyfriend that women have only each other to rely on when it comes to situations such as abortions. There is a recognition of the common pain and oppression that awakens a gender group conscience strongly affirmed in Otilia's words.

Final Remarks

This article investigated the position of the female ideal in the Romanian structure of fantasy, as well as its specifics and changes over time. The female ideal is subordinated to the *Other* and to the patriarchal order. In order for a woman to be accepted within the social order she needs to perform the role of a sacrificial being as requested by the male and also by the *Other*. With the change of discourse in the Romanian society, we witness a transformation of the female ideal from a worker and mother heroine to that of a traditional woman or a prostitute.

An important aspect noted in this research is that changes in the prevailing discourse within a society do not affect the basic structure of fantasy, nor the position occupied by the female ideal in the structure of fantasy. Within this structure the

¹ Vlad OPRICA, "Gender Equality...cit.", pp. 29-40.

² Using "obscene" in this context accentuates the fact that the patriarchal authority overtly breaks the law that it officially enforces. This situation differs from the films produced during communism where the authority was portrayed as a stern but a rightful one.

woman remains a sacrificial being. The only change is that the sacrifice is now seen as fulfilling the request of a social order that lacks a sense of morality. This transforms the woman's sacrifice from a heroic act conferring upon her acceptance from within the social order, into a traumatic event performed at the request of an obscene authority.

The new awareness that Romanian women gain regarding the constraining role they are attributed within the social order speaks about the weakening power the social order holds. It also creates a momentum for change as women as dissatisfied subjects are incipient revolutionary subjects. The absence created by the dislocation of the social, in this case by the crumbling of the communist social order and the identities it constructed, brought an encounter with the Real. What one can appreciate in the Romanian case is that the lack created by the dislocation does not cause desire for a new discursive articulation, but instead of being covered with a new fantasy formation, the lack is encircled again and again within the films analyzed. The traces of trauma are preserved and exposed.