

## Post-Colonial Shadows on Post-Socialist Skies

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*It is perfectly possible [for Eastern Europe] to both celebrate the “independence” gained or regained with the collapse of the Soviet system and to recognize that the “freedom” won in 1989 and the years immediately following has not been unqualified. [...] In the post-Soviet contexts, the full implications of the fact that liberation from “actually existing” socialism has been liberation into the world system of “actually existing” capitalism are now having to be confronted. (Neil Lazarus, “Specters Haunting” 121)*

I decided to preface my study with Neil Lazarus’ momentous warning because it captures what I consider the paradox underlying most post-socialist experiences in Eastern Europe. In breaking free from the communist experiment, the countries thus labeled, mainly after the Second World War, have unavoidably, plunged into the global world of the “actually existing capitalism,” for which they were ill prepared, especially in terms of regulatory mechanisms of social protection. As such, post-communism looked less like the much anticipated free-world utopia and more like an epoch in need of its own ethical code and of its own epistemology.

Post-colonialism as an interpretive paradigm, though traditionally applied to colonies of the former British and French empires, was considered a potentially good candidate for the latter. Many Eastern European scholars, like those I review later in my essay, thought that post-colonialism can mostly provide a broad framework able to illuminate post-communist experiences in Eastern Europe. Yet, because so many particularities of these experiences are geo-temporally specific, many Eastern European scholars and artists concluded that they needed to elaborate their own version of post-coloniality and devise their own strategies to escape the colonial logic. Many of the studies I review in the first part of my essay are such contributions. Moreover, artists like

the young Romanian filmmakers belonging to what was called the New Wave<sup>1</sup> have managed to generate discourses exhibiting what postcolonial/postsocialist scholar Madina Tlostanova calls a *decolonial logic*.

To address what many consider the incongruities between the postcolonial and postsocialist paradigms, the first part of my essay examines the ways in which scholars of post-communism grapple with the contiguity between the broad postcolonial paradigm and the specificity of Eastern European history of colonization. There are three specific moments that such studies consider: the broad time period that western scholarship traditionally calls *modernity*, the Soviet era, and the decades following the fall of communism. Scholars like David Chioni Moore, Neil Lazarus, Madina Tlostanova, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Katherine Verdery, and others<sup>2</sup> recognize in Eastern Europe not only a geographically peripheral area of the European continent, but a locale that has been consistently marginalized and *orientalized* by the west, and also economically exploited and silenced by the Soviet Union. After the fall of communism, and most importantly after becoming (second wave) members of the European Union, the Central and Eastern European countries could finally escape their subaltern status and speak back to “the empire,” not only about their past *orientalizing* experiences, but about the continuation of such practices in the present.

The paradox of considering post-communism as a branch of postcolonialism stems from the fact that, when applied to Eastern Europe, despite substantial similarities, the conceptual frame of traditional postcolonialism seems to collapse under the weight of many specific, local and historical differences, to the point where it raises as many epistemological questions as it seems to solve. Nevertheless, this is one point on which

the scholars I review in this essay seem to agree: the coloniality experienced by East and Central European cultures has been quite different from that traditionally exercised in Africa and Asia. Not only that since the Second World War, Eastern Europeans' subaltern status has been the result of the socialist/communist alternative project of modernity (Tlostanova), but before that they were colonized by empires that were themselves rather adversaries of the western project of modernity. The Soviet occupation and colonialism following World War II further complicates the frame inasmuch as it introduces in the postcolonial equation not only a critique of the Soviet occupier, but often a critique of the Marxist ideology, traditionally employed to denounce the colonial logic of the *empire*<sup>3</sup>.

If the first part, my essay engages with the theoretical qualifications brought by scholars of post-communism to the postcolonial paradigm; the second part moves the debate closer to the present and examines how, in positing the existence of a “core” Europe, canonical scholars like Habermas and Derrida reinstated age-old hierarchies. This time, the two sides were, on the one hand, the founding countries of the European Union and, on the other, the Eastern European candidates for admission, with the former “west”/“old Europe” belonging to the core/first tier European Union members, and the “new” (Central and Eastern) Europe to the second/third-tiers. Finally, as a response to these epistemological debates about the place of ex-communist Eastern Europe within the European Union order, the third part of my essay examines movies by Cristian Mungiu and Florin Serban which indirectly, but compellingly attempt to resist a new *orientalization*. Both Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and Serban's *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010) generate complex, culturally-specific, and always problematic

self-representations of local Eastern European culture (i.e., Romanian) and their probing into the malaise affecting communist and post-communist Romania urges both the local and the global audiences to address issues like lack of voice and agency, which relegate them to subalterneity and thus exit the long state of colonization and self-colonization defining communism and the first decades of post-communism for many. I conclude my essay considering these movies possible examples of *decolonial* discourses, especially since they have enjoyed such a wide international recognition.

### **I. Is Postcolonialism an Appropriate Model for Post-Socialist Eastern Europe?**

Based on the long history of marginalization and exclusion from the western paradigm and canon that most Eastern and Central European countries have experienced, and in view of the traumas and imperialist exploitation coming from the USSR after the Second World War, many East and Central European scholars have regarded post-colonialism as a useful interpretive paradigm for the area. In a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*<sup>4</sup>, Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Șandru advance the project of “translat[ing] the specificity of (post)communist life experiences into the theoretical and critical languages [of post-colonialism]” not only because the latter is the model “with most currency in today’s humanistic studies” (Introduction 113), but also because they see post-colonialism as “an enabling theoretical construction that can help illuminate instances of mind-colonization in non-third-world contexts” (Kołodziejczyk and Șandru 114). Furthermore, in their “Introduction” the two editors announce that they explicitly sought to redress an obvious deficit of postcolonial studies, which, as a world-encompassing paradigm, has ignored post-communist experiences.

According to Kołodziejczyk and Şandru key concepts of the postcolonial model ranging from structures of othering, representations of difference, resistance, self-colonization, orientalizing, cultural subalterneity, and the dynamics of emigration and resurgent nationalism, capture the *postcolonial sensibility* in which “east-central Europe articulates both its historicity and its present moment vis-à-vis the European Union” (Introduction 115). A post-colonial approach of post-communist realities, however, requires the acknowledgement of many specific differences - starting with what the authors call the *doubly postcolonial* status of this part of Europe, which has been ambivalent towards Eurocentrism and “the west,” and critical not only of Soviet imperialism, but of Marxism, as well.<sup>5</sup>

This double bind ultimately requires specific types of postcolonial approaches, engaging and challenging first the long history of “othering”/*orientalizing* Eastern Europe by the west, which routinely stereotyped “the Balkans” as wild,<sup>6</sup> not-civilized, marginal, and/or peripheric,<sup>7</sup> to the point where these countries internalized such representations. Secondly, to analyze phenomena of *self-orientalization* defined by class-related, ideologically-induced, religious, and ethnic inferiority complexes, and also by mimicry (of the west) and nationalism in response to subjection practices exerted both by the Soviet center and by the “west,” most scholars argue for geo-historically-specific approaches, different from those deployed by traditional postcolonial studies<sup>8</sup>.

Maria Tlostanova<sup>9</sup> calls the manifestations of Russian/Soviet colonialism “global coloniality” (Postsocialist 137) and insists that they are “marked by external imperial difference” (Postsocialist 130) in contrast to historical colonialism, exemplified by the relations between the British Empire and its colonies. The difference between the two

stems from the fact that “modernity in the 20th century was implemented in two forms – the liberal/capitalist and the socialist/statist one” (Postsocialist 137). This translates into the premise that “coloniality is the indispensable underside of modernity” (Postsocialist 131). Given that “both postcolonial and postcommunist discourses are products of modernity/coloniality, emphasizing different elements, yet having a common source and a shared birthmark in the rhetoric of modernity” (Postsocialist 131), Tlostanova argues for a methodological convergence of both approaches, if only for both being analyses of different modern models.

Though underscored by diametrically opposed ideologies, socialism and colonialism were two models of implementing the project of modernization and, as such, led to practices and effects which can be subsumed under the common name of “colonization,” claims the Russian scholar. Whether we are talking about the “remote” colonization (Terian) carried out by the Western powers in the so-called Third-world countries, or the type that Immanuel Wallerstein calls “colonialism by annexation” when referring to the imperialism of the Tsarist, Ottoman, Habsburg empires, of the Germans or the Soviet Union, they all revolve around the project of “modernity.” The salvationist rhetoric of this project is rooted in the well-known theory that acquiescence to the ideology of modernity was the price colonized nations had to pay for technological modernization. When applied to Soviet colonization, many agree that the parallelism holds: with Marxism functioning as the over-powering ideology, and technological modernization being replaced by the communist model of economic development, which allegedly ensured equality through the public ownership of the means of production.

As Neil Lazarus, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Vedrana Velickovic, Hana Cernikova, but also Michael Kemper and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, among others maintain, this *colonialism with a socialist twist* requires its own substantial critical bibliography. Yet, for all the agreement, traditional postcolonial critics have been weary of accepting post-communist studies as a legitimate branch of their field, and they have never taken to examining post-communism themselves.

In “Postcommunism: An Other Postcolonialism?” Bogdan Stefanescu suspects that the reluctance to acknowledge the close connection between the capitalist and socialist versions of what we may assimilate to a “Right” and a “Left”-leaning colonialism might spring from disagreements between postcolonial and postcommunist scholars in interpreting the historical role and potentialities of Marxism, the philosophical panacea of postcolonialism:

Postcommunism turns the postcolonialist merit ribbon into a Moebius strip. Hence the vexation. Marxism is a liberating and emancipatory discourse in the capitalist West where it is meant to curve and counterbalance the triumphalism of the liberal hegemony. In the Moebius twist of history, Marxism turns up in the communist East as the very medium of totalitarian domination. (11)

As “two reluctant siblings,” (Postcommunism 11) postcommunism and postcolonialism are in no relationship of subordination, and according to Stefanescu, the former should not attempt to get under the “umbrella” of the latter. Since postcommunism engages into a radical critique of Marxism, most of its approaches dismantle the very theory at the center of the postcolonial approach. At best, in its stance of “unflattering mirror for most radical discourses [of the west],” postcommunism stands side by side with postcolonialism as “a different branch of the study of cultural identity and discourse” (Postcommunism 11).

Despite its lack of traction and visibility on the international critical arena, postcommunism stands in Stefanescu's interpretation alongside feminism, ethnocriticism, or gay and lesbian studies, "all professing to emancipate their marginalized communities by exposing the way in which the hegemonic discourse and cultural institutions of power colonize subordinate groups" (Postcommunism 11).

Until such a hierarchy becomes widely acknowledged, however, the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics perceive themselves as a "void" (Tlostanova 130) in the *global coloniality*—ignored by the renowned practitioners of post-colonialism, even as the latter acknowledge the colonial nature of both the Russian empire and the Soviet order. Tlostanova's observation may include Neal Lazarus, a well-respected name in the field who in the same issue of the *Postcolonial Journal* claims that preserving the distinction between post-Soviet studies and the postcolonial model may prevent the postcolonial model from becoming irrelevant due to excessive globalization (or uncritical mimicry). By attempting "to think about colonialism comparatively on this expanded scale," so as to include post-Soviet studies one would prevent a "rigorous historical understanding" (Spectres 120) of this very phenomenon. In this sense, Lazarus notes that

while it is necessary to recognize that the Russian imperium and the Soviet order that succeeded it were clearly colonial in character, there are some good reasons to wonder whether the assimilation of "post-Soviet" criticism to "the postcolonial" is a good idea. Concerning postcolonial studies itself, I argue that the enterprise has hitherto been animated by a species of third worldism that has retarded understanding of the contemporary world-system; in particular, the postcolonialist idea of "the west" as the super-agent of domination in the modern global order strikes me as being deeply misconceived. (Spectres 118)

Lazarus' reserves are worth-considering and, as such, they are shared by anthropologists like Katherine Verdery and Sharad Chari who also contend that the perspective of the



third-world system needs to be challenged. Yet, in contrast to Lazarus, Verdery and Chari maintain that analyzing post-socialism with instruments of postcolonial criticism, and thus “thinking between the *-posts*” (Thinking 10) would enable ethnographers, historians, political scientists, and cultural critics to share comparative insights on “accumulation and empire” (Thinking 12) which affected societies in the shadows of empires, whether capitalist or socialist. In considering socialist experiences as part of a broader colonial paradigm, and in bringing together postcolonialism and post-socialism, Verdery and Chari see the opportunity of rejecting “the Three-Worlds ideology that associates postcoloniality with a bounded space called the Third World and postsocialism with the Second World” (Thinking 12). The advantage of such an approach is that it would provide complementary tools to rethink contemporary imperialisms. In response to what she calls *global coloniality*<sup>10</sup> and associates with the global expansion of the project of modernization, Madina Tlostanova proposes an interesting version of postcolonial analysis in the model of intersectionality which

will shift the emphasis from universalist applications of ready-made discourses and travelling theories, always based on the western cognitive principle of studying the other as an object from some disembodied position which in fact only hides its own contextuality, to pluriversal and pluritopic intersubjectification, paying attention to various local histories marked by colonial and imperial differences (or their combination) within modernity/coloniality. (Postsocialist 132)

Tlostanova dubs this approach “the decolonial option” (Postsocialist 133) and expands its application to the ex-Third-world, ex-socialist, and western subjects alike, inasmuch as they all are affected by global coloniality: “Subordinated to the general logic and structure of power, firmly linked with capital, exploitation and violence,” global coloniality exerts an “implicit control of subjectivity and knowledge-production,”

(Postsocialist 134), which can be deconstructed and destabilized only by a *plurivocal hermeneutics*.

According to Tlostanova, only such a paradigm would be adequately equipped to interpret, for instance, post-socialist artefacts from former Soviet republics defined by “multilingual code-switching; the leitmotif of open and always unfinished metamorphosis of multiple identities, [...] hybridity and tricksterism, and, finally, home and symbolic unhomeliness, all themes and practices with clear parallels in postcolonial fiction.”

(Postsocialist 139-140).

In Eastern Europe and in the reborn, mythical Central Europe (Jaosz Korec), this plurivocality can be encountered in artistic products that incorporate hybrid discourses to reflect the multiethnic identity of the area. To practice such a plurivocal hermeneutics, Tlostanova suggests focusing on “the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge growing out of the local histories, subjectivities and experiences of eastern and south-eastern Europe, central Asia, Caucasus or Russia” (Postsocialist 134).

In many of his substantial contributions to a cultural profile of East and Central Europe,<sup>11</sup> Marcel Cornis-Pope makes the case that “a significant portion of post-1989 literature has [already—my note] challenged not only literary categories, but also traditional definitions of national identity, gender and race, blurring boundaries between high and low culture, politics and literature” (Local 143). As a result, “the multifaceted landscape of the region, punctuated by multicultural and minority discourses, has often been a fertile ground for an intercultural literature that crosses literary and geocultural boundaries” (Local 143).

Along these examples of decolonizing artistic discourses which can be emulated to shape the public discourse within east central Europe and about its countries, my essay discusses one more—developed, among others by Cristian Mungiu’s films. Before looking at those, though, I will close this rather long theoretical detour by examining what Madina Tlostanova’s understands by the *decolonial logic*. In “Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality,” her premise is that, as long as we uncritically accept the existing world hierarchy in which “everyone is assigned a strict and never-questioned place,” (Postsocialism 133) we, as the ex-third world, ex-communist, and western subjects alike, unavoidably become part of the logic of global coloniality best described as afflicted by “mind-colonization.” Tlostanova claims this is a disease common in all parts of our world and all strata of society today:

Global coloniality is subordinated to the general logic and structure of power, firmly linked with capital, exploitation and violence, as well as the idea of race, resulting in the specific control of labour, state and, more importantly, subjectivity (coloniality of being) and knowledge (production and distribution). At the basis of global coloniality stands the idea of classifying humankind in relation to the colonial matrix of power and the ontological marginalization of non-western and not quite western people – a typical tool of modernity easily detected in colonialism of any kind, as well as in socialist discourses. This equates indigenous people in the new world with enemies of the people in the Soviet Union or Muslims as terrorists today. (Tlostanova 133)

Instead of analyzing a cultural space - e.g., the west - and the respective structures of power imposed by it, Tlostanova claims that the focus should be on *the process of mind-colonization* advanced by modernity and reinforced by *actual* colonialism [my emphases] and actual socialism. This change of focus, would amount to what the Russian researcher, in the wake of Walter Mignolo and Annibal Quinjano, called the *decolonial option*. Its aim is not only to expose the logic of coloniality underscoring the global project of modernity, but “to decolonize knowledge, subjectivity, gender and sexuality, from a

multiple border position,” (Postsocialism 133), to ultimately address real world problems, contemporary conflicts emerging as a result of the colonial/modern matrix of power, and its accompanying salvation rhetoric (Postsocialist 134). Tlostanova’s criticism of many postcolonial studies is that they don’t go far enough in their critique, and thus leave unquestioned the fundamental logic of modernity/coloniality, its academic disciplines and the western monopoly of knowledge. The solution is a different starting point, different methods of analysis, a disruption of traditional circuits of inquiry.

Including herself among the practitioners of *the decolonial* paradigm, the Russian scholar claims that they “attempt to start not from Lacan, but from Gloria Anzaldua or from the Zapatistas, from Caucasus cosmology or from Sufism” (Postsocialism 134). In short, the decolonial thinking erects and enforces “epistemic borders between European imperial categories,” while consulting and bringing to the forefront “the languages and models that were discarded by modern imperial epistemology, including the local histories which do not fit the black-and-white schemes of west versus east or north versus south today” (Postsocialist 134). As a result, Tlostanova claims that it would be there, in the non-European Russian/Soviet colonies, that postcolonial categories would be best applicable (Postsocialist 135). If only because “creolization, hybridity, bilingualism, the psychology of the returned gaze and the colonialist/colonizer intersection, as well as a stress on transculturation instead of acculturation and assimilation, can already be found in their specific postsocialist forms” (Postsocialist 138) those are the locations most likely to generate *decolonial* discourses.

Nevertheless, ultimately, the task of decolonization anywhere should be performed by original discourses which develop their own categories and concepts.

Tlostanova warns that, “if it wants to avoid the pitfalls of violent resistance and subaltern self-victimization, such a postsocialist discourse should turn to *reexistence*,<sup>12</sup> as a model of positive (re)creating of worlds, lives and subjectivities” (138). The Russian scholar credits artists, film, and theatre directors from the former Soviet republics with the ability to develop such discourses, while observing that most scholars from the same area have unwittingly succumbed to orientalist and progressivist heresies. Because of them, the anticolonial/anti-Soviet discourse is still informed by the rhetoric of modernity which “reduces everything to the primitive opposition between the modern (western by default) and the traditional (sanctioned by the local national neocolonial power)” (Postsocialist 138).

As post-socialist Russia still suffers from the complex of a subaltern empire locked in a relationship of love-hate with the west, Tlostanova believes that it is “in the non-European Russian/Soviet colonies that postcolonial categories would be best applicable” (Postsocialist 135) to analyze both western and Soviet colonialisms. Conversely, she notes that, as it struggled with its own belated modernization and sought to withstand the global domination of the western empires, Russia/USSR has “appropriated and transmuted (not always consciously) the basic aspects of the western empires of modernity, projecting them onto the Russian colonial difference” (Postsocialist 135). Because of these circumstances, Russia/USSR ended up “generating mutant forms of the main vices of modernity – secondary Eurocentrism, secondary orientalism, secondary racism (135) which can be best addressed by the former Soviet colonies and, I would claim, by former Soviet satellites in eastern Europe with post-colonial tools/concepts.

## II. Toward a New European Order or a New Mode of Orientalizing?

In his now famous 2003 response to Jurgen Habermas' and Jacques Derrida's article, emphatically called "February 15 or, What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe," the well-known Hungarian writer, Peter Esterhazy notes quizzically:

Once I was an *Eastern European*; then I was promoted to the rank of *Central European*. Those were great times (even if not necessarily for me personally), there were Central European dreams, visions, and images of the future; in short, everything [...]. Then a few months ago, I became a *New European*. But before I had the chance to get used to this status—even before I could have refused it—I have now become a *non-core* European. (Esterhazy 74)

Esterhazy's witty and succinct summary of becomings captures the chronic shifting of identity policies shaping the profile of what used to be called Eastern Europe during the Cold War years, Central Europe shortly after the fall of the communism, and finally "non-core" Europe in 2003. Habermas' intentional misnomer betrays his irritation at the ex-communist countries which approved the US invasion of Iraq. When it was published, it was also probably meant as a rebuke for the American Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who at the beginning of 2003 had "uplifted" the same countries to the status of "New Europe," (in contrast to the "old" Germany, France, etc.) on account of the former's support of the American decision to go to war with Iraq<sup>13</sup>.

This duel in "re-naming" Eastern Europe, if we agree to call it so, for now, betrays, as Esterhazy astutely notes, an age-long attitude of the world's various (super) powers with respect to this marginalized area of Europe. Holly Case summarizes quite aptly the interventionist policies of major European powers concerning Eastern Europe: "Partitions, buffer states, the 'cordon sanitaire,' the 14 points, Munich, *Lebensraum*, the iron curtain, the European expansion: all bear witness to Great Powers' attempt to

neutralize, parcel off, or make useful the so-called “lands-between” of East-Central Europe.” (Reconstruction 101) Even after the Soviet Union released its control over it, it was the turn of the United States, the alleged new and only hegemonic super-power at the time to adjudicate its support, and the right of Old Europe in Rumsefeld’s terms or “avant-garde, core Europe” in Habermas’ to (again) demote it.

After forgetting its cultural contributions to the very core of European culture and abandoning it to the suffocating embrace of the Soviet communist project, in a move which Milan Kundera famously called “a tragedy<sup>14</sup>,” both Europe and the United States were engaging again in rebranding the region. As David Chioni Moore rather grimly notes<sup>15</sup> in 2001, “Eastern Europe and especially the Balkans—inheritors of centuries of colonizing waves from all directions, often more Ottoman and Hapsburg than Russo-Soviet—have returned to their former status as the West's original Third World, its nearest quasi-oriental space” (Is the Post 122). Remarkably enough, since 2001 when Chioni Moore published this article and 2003 when Habermas made his comments, Eastern European countries with the support of “old,” “core” Europe have challenged this reignited third-worldism by becoming members of the European Union. Yet, considering the recent turn to nationalism encouraged by populist regimes, also favoring laxer regulations on corruption in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and other former east-European countries starting in 2016, the democratic course of these countries and their collaboration in the European Union project do not seem guaranteed and/or irreversible anymore.

The epochal, tumultuous changes in political and social status, which since 2004 granted many Eastern Europeans fresh opportunities<sup>16</sup> for coping with a long and difficult

post-Cold War transition, did little to situate, not to mention, erase the perception that these countries were, indeed “non-core” Europeans. Little did Habermas know at the time when he was hailing the birth of a pan-European public sphere,<sup>17</sup> that in less than a year, the so-called non-core Europeans would be “invading” core Europe once again in waves of economic migration which will cause a backlash culminating in Brexit<sup>18</sup> in 2016. Yet, little did Eastern Europeans themselves know that this “invasion” would also cause serious bruises to their pre-capitalist innocence and would soon overshadow their adamic status of newly liberated states with a post-*fall* conscience. Roughly, a decade after joining the European Union, the prefix post-, which was so un-problematically assumed to simply mean “after the fall of USSR and communist dictatorships,” “after the Cold War,” “after the fall of *all* the walls within Europe,” has come to reflect the *doubly post-colonial* status of Eastern Europe. Whether its people live and work in their own countries or have joined the world as migrant workers and emigrants, most of them still grapple with rejection, stereotypes, and the demons from their own past.

### **III. New Romanian Cinema and the Decolonial Option**

Engaging into what I would call a postcolonial project of *double reclamation* of the right to speak for oneself, Cristian Mungiu’s two highly acclaimed movies: *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* (2007) and *Beyond the Hills* (2012) attempt a simultaneous *decolonization of body and of mind*. Both movies along others belonging to the Romanian New Wave share a somewhat paradoxical status: profoundly local in their choice of themes, they manage to broach the divide between the traditionally marginalized world of Eastern Europe and the globalized world, where the former subalterns attempt to speak in



their own voices. What Mungiu's movies articulate is unavoidably "the other side of the picture," whether the themes are poverty and the dramas of emigrants, the dire consequences of religious bigotry, women's lack of reproductive rights during communism, or mistreatment of women in patriarchal societies and/or on the world-wide work market.

By probing into the absurd practices of birth-rate control, carried out in the name of the national-communist ideology in the pre-1989 Romania, and by exploring the personal tragedies deriving from the lack of efficient social institutions after the fall of socialism, Mungiu openly exposes and implicitly critiques the traumatic, and sometimes tragic, consequences of socialist and post-socialist lack of voice in the subalterns (i.e., low and middle class young women).

As Mungiu's movies together with other internationally acclaimed films of the Romanian New Wave<sup>19</sup> expose instances of mind and body colonization, they become instantiations of what Tlostanova calls a *decolonial* discourse. The remarkable amount of awards and the accolades garnered by many of these movies which depict pre-and post-socialist Romania in starkly realistic tones, also qualifies them as discourses of *reexistence*,<sup>20</sup> self-assertive discourses, which in the very depiction of socialist and post-socialist maladies, eschew complexes of subalterneity. By bringing in front of world audiences the dramas experienced by the most disenfranchised members of Romanian society before and after the fall of communism, in a minimalist manner that resonates locally while also appealing to a global audience, Mungiu manages to enter a dialogue with both sides, and in the process sidesteps and challenges deeply-entrenched cultural stereotypes.

With remarkable courage, his movies tackle some of the most disturbing personal dramas and expose the lack of institutional infrastructure and support. In *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) and Gabita (Laura Vasiliu) are forced to grant sexual favors in exchange for an illegal abortion during Ceausescu's dictatorship.<sup>21</sup> After the fall of communism, Voichita (Cosmina Stratan) and Alina (Cristina Flutur) from *Beyond the Hills* had to relinquish control of their bodies and destinies to the Orthodox church, the orphanage, the grossly inefficient Romanian medical system, or to their pecuniary-motivated foster parents. In all these cases, Mungiu's characters have very little choice, if any, in their destinies. Despite their participation in verbal exchanges, their voices are, in fact, muted, and their agency (almost) nullified by those associated with regulatory institutions.

Granted that Voichita and Alina are marginalized members of a society both ruthless and patriarchal which struggles to keep at bay its own demons of endemic poverty and religious brainwashing, the young women's struggle to find their voice and place in the global economy is nothing short of heroic. Alina and Voichita are representative of two typical paths followed by disenfranchised young and not-so-young Romanians after the fall of communism. The fact that they are both orphans, possibly unwanted children, born due to Ceausescu's draconic anti-abortion policies,<sup>22</sup> only intensifies the powerful metaphor of a dead-end society that Mungiu explores in the movie.

Eighteen or a little over that age, they both had to start earning their living rather early and symptomatically followed two paths popular among the most disenfranchised Romanian citizens. Alina chose to work abroad in Germany, while Voichita became a

nun, being adopted *de facto* by the church community. Appropriately, she calls the Mother Superior (Dana Tapalaga), “Mommy” and the resident priest (Valeriu Andriuta), “Daddy,” and utterly defers to their authority until the tragic end of her friend, Alina, at their hands. Her naivete is not only a symptom of her young age, but of the blind faith, which brainwashed those Romanians who felt abandoned by society in the post-communist world order.

By contrast, Alina, who is regarded by the church authorities as (mentally) disturbed and/or “possessed,” is a rebel without a cause, who repeatedly runs away from the care of various failed systems of social support (the orphanage, the foster family, her job in Germany) and openly refuses the authority of the church and its help. She is the movie’s true, if tragic heroine. Through all her muddled acts of protest she draws the viewer’s attention to the endemic inefficiency and insufficiency of all the institutions that were supposed to protect and take care of her, and points out implicitly to the chronic lack of effective institutional structures of social support in post-socialist Romania. She is also the only one who openly fights the colonizing tendencies of both capitalism and of fanatic religious submission/orthodoxy while attempting to carve her own path in life. Her failure symbolized by the exorcism ritual culminating in her crucifixion and death is only one more indictment of those who made such a horrendous outcome possible.

*Beyond the Hills* has been interpreted by many scholars as a scathing criticism of religious brainwashing, but Mungiu’s critique goes deeper than exposing the limitations of a profoundly patriarchal institution,<sup>23</sup> clearly unable to efficiently tackle the challenges of post-socialist institutional chaos and chronic lack of resources. While Mungiu’s movie intimates that the religious brainwashing in post-1989 Romanian society reaches deep

into the social fabric, the movie makes it clear that this is not the result of any institutional effort on the part of the Romanian church, but of people's own, desperate search for help and hope. The resort to religious solace and support is almost universal among the film's character. The doctor (Costache Babii) who sees Alina and fails to reach a diagnosis on her psychological condition has religious icons on the wall of his office and suggests that she would receive better care in a monastery where the nuns could read her the Scriptures than in his overcrowded hospital.

The nuns and the priest don't have to make any special efforts to reach new proselytes; young people (mostly women) without jobs and homes would gladly join the ranks of the nuns, as we see when the nuns travel to town to provide food for the orphans. Religious-deliverance seems the universally-embraced solution as Mungiu bitterly intimates at the end of his movie. In a subtle long-shot, the spectators see how the police van carrying the priest and the nuns responsible for literally crucifying Alina during the failed exorcism, stops to wait in front of a fork in the road. The policemen in charge need to check if the judge is available to receive them then or later. As they wait, the deep screen captures a road sign: to the left it reads "Saint Nicholas Monastery" and to the right, "Virgin Mary's Dormition," both names of churches in the vicinity. As the judge seems unavailable for a while, all they can do is wait, contemplating the road sign. Quite subtly, this is Mungiu's way of saying that for the characters, but also for the doctor, the police, and maybe even the judge, religion is the sole existing alternative.

The only character rejecting the authority of this patriarchal system of coping with a world-out-of-hinges seems to be the second doctor (Alina Berzunteanu) in the movie, a woman who ascertains Alina's death at the hospital. In an emotionally-charged rant she

bursts against the nuns: “I would rather go to Hell than to be cared of by you.” Yet, the viewer is bound to acknowledge that hers is just another extreme fringe take on a situation for which nobody has a reasonable solution. Voichita’s rhetorical appeal to the priest’s compassion throughout the movie: “Where should she [Alina] go if you send her away from here? We have nowhere to go,” succinctly captures the dimensions of their predicament.

The abrupt ending of the movie, in a black close-out, after a few minutes of watching the police van waiting at the crossroad, reinforces this reading. More than a critique of cruel and anachronistic church practices, the movie asks a very stringent question that many socially and economically-vulnerable Eastern Europeans had to ask themselves “after the Fall:” “where can we go from here?” The question resonates with the dramas of Romanian children who are left behind, in Romanian villages and small cities, in the care of distant relatives or grandparents by their migrant-working parents. The phenomenon is documented in another highly acclaimed Romanian movie, Florin Serban’s *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010) in which the young convict, Silviu (George Pistereanu) compromises his chance of imminent parole in order to prevent his mother from taking his younger brother away with her, to work, in Italy.

By forcing his way out of prison only weeks before his scheduled release, Silviu displays yet another case of what may seem incomprehensible, self-defeating behavior, similar to Alina’s. To explore his possible motivation, the movie focuses on Silviu’s desperate attempt to shelter his younger brother from a potential life of neglect in the company of a mother who might not have the time and inclination to cater a minor’s needs. To Silviu, at least, who is already deprived of freedom, and most probably has a

history of parental neglect which might have led him to a life of crime and subsequently to prison, protecting his younger brother from a similar fate is paramount, and he must do it at all costs.

His attitude of selfless devotion to a family member and/or a friend resonates with Voichita's and Otilia's from Mungiu's *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days*. In all these instances, the only real (if, often insufficient) support the characters have is from their friends and/or family members, who risk their own freedom like Silviu, their livelihood and shelter, like Voichita, or, more dramatically, accept rape as a payment to help a friend, like Otilia.

Such shocking decisions are the response of family and friends to abusive practices of what Mignolo, Tlostanova and other theoreticians call *mind control* and *control of being*, which were consistently enforced on Romanian citizens during the communist dictatorship and continue to be so, in subtler forms after 1989. Tragically, heroic attempts to salvation as those exhibited by the characters of those movies usually end up in failure, destroying both people involved. The system is always stronger, even if only in its indifferent ineptitude. The movie as a critical meta-discourse may draw attention to such predicaments and provoke local and international responses and, hopefully, change.

In *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days*, Mungiu zooms in onto Otilia's and Gabita's lives, as the two women try to navigate the murky waters of obtaining an illegal abortion (for the latter). In a painstakingly detailed account of the day leading to the abortion procedure, Mungiu forces the reader to witness the abominable abuses carried out in the name of state-controlled reproduction and of the policies intended to increase the birth-

rate of Romanians. Lack of control over one's body, and lack of choice for women are metaphors that send the viewer to predicaments overwhelmingly shared by most Romanians during the years of communist dictatorship. Rape as the extorted payment for an illegal abortion is only its most extreme case.

In one of the most haunting scenes in the movie, Mr. Bebe (Vlad Ivanov), the paramedic who agreed to induce Gabita the illegal abortion (though not to fully carry it through) announces that his fee for the procedure is sex with both girls. "Do you think I would risk prison for 3,000 lei?" he bluntly asks, making it obvious that he's in the business for what some may call "fun," but in his case, it is clearly the surge of pleasure which comes from absolute power over another human being. Despite its bestiality, the rape (never showed on the screen) does not only consist in the physical act of abuse. More troublesome is the premeditated blackmailing of the two girls, which Bebe carries out by ruthlessly demanding that **all** his terms and conditions for doing the "job" be satisfied.

The fact that the two young, college women have no alternative but to accept his demand is a clear instance of the *colonization of body* carried out by Ceausescu's tyrannical policies meant to increase the birth-rate among Romanians. Mr. Bebe's abusive demand is only the personalized version of Ceausescu's 1966-1989 horrendous legislation, which sanctioned abortion by heavy prison terms while forbidding the commercialization of any means of birth-control. The goal of this policy implemented for more than two decades was to support the socialist-order through rapid population growth, but according to recent statistics and studies, during those 43 years, it led to the death of 10,000 women (Neagu).

Mungiu's movie doesn't necessarily take a stand in the debate about abortion rights. Rather it exposes the immorality of a political system that abuses its citizens by strictly controlling their lives: from their reproductive rights to their right to seek justice against those running the underground abortion clinics, and/or any number of corrupt businesses that were tied into the all-prevailing underground economy. The critics who awarded Mungiu's the *Palme D'Or* for *4months, 3weeks, 2days* in 2007, and the Best Screenplay for *Beyond the Hills* in 2012 clearly resonated with the director's scathing critique of abusive practices, whether carried out in the name of the state or the church, and in so doing, acknowledged the *decolonial* ethics underlying both films.

All these notwithstanding, *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* did not make it on the list for the Best Foreign Film at the 2007 Oscars and neither did *Beyond the Hills* in 2012,<sup>24</sup> though both movies push aesthetic boundaries and open up discussions about brutal realities and cultural taboos. This could mean that their radical discourses have not yet penetrated the walls of each and every empire. As more movies like these are being produced and others have already gained international recognition, there is hope that the *decolonial discourse* will triumph at least in the world of art and culture. Of all the possible worlds in which we live, the latter is the one which has already acknowledged that the problematic and messages of such movies as *universally* haunting.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Andrew Ricca in *Taste of Cinema*, the Romanian New Wave "is a blanket term denoting the majority of contemporary Romanian films welcomed with generous receptions at award ceremonies in Cannes, Berlin and Locarno. It is arguably the most significant development in world cinema over the past years" characterized by "formal rigor, writerly dialogues, bleak sense of humor, and the legacy of a long communist excursion to serve as common denominators. In their austere aesthetic, films by the already more established directors, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristian Mungiu and Cristi Puiu nod, perhaps above all else, to the Dardenne brothers' brand of realism." The beginnings of the movement are identified with Cristi Puiu's road movie *Stuff and Dough* (2001) and Cătălin Mitulescu's short-film *Trafic* (2004). A more



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comprehensive list of titles, authors, and awards are in note 14. <http://www.tasteofcinema.com/2014/15-essential-films-for-an-introduction-to-the-romanian-new-wave/#ixzz51eCSm9JF>

<sup>2</sup> There are a lot of collections tracing the relationship between Eastern Europe and post-colonialism. Among them, *Postcommunism, Postmodernism, and the Global Imaginary*. Editors Christian Moraru and Aaron Chandler. East European Monographs. New York: Columbia UP, 2009; Zarycki, Tomasz: *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. London/New York: Routledge, 2014; *Postcolonial Europe?: Essays on Post-communist Literatures and Cultures*. Edited by Dobrota Pucherová; Robert Gáfrik, Rodopi, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Canonical scholars of postcolonialism like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Mahashweta Devi, Achille Mbembe are among those who employ Marxism to critique colonialist practices (Chari and Verdery 8).

<sup>4</sup> “Introduction: On Colonialism, Communism and east-central Europe –some reflections.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. Vol. 48, No. 2, May 2012, pp. 113–116.

<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, Kołodziejczyk and Şandru note: “In addressing the former colonizers/occupants, eastern Europe ventures a postcolonial project of reclamation (of its own history and voice) targeting the former imperial power; at the same time, however, it addresses the west in a most ambivalent postcolonial mode, in which the west is both historically complicit with the political subjugation of the region behind the Iron Curtain and at the same time functioning at present as a peripheralizing metropolis” (Introduction 115).

<sup>6</sup> See Kovacevic, Natasa. "Orientalizing Post/Communism: Europe's 'Wild East' in Literature and Film." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, Vol. 8, no. 4, 2008, pp. 54-59.

<sup>7</sup> Among recent studies engaging these topics: *Reassessing Orientalism: interlocking Orientologies during the Cold War*, edited by Michael Kemper and Artemy M. Kalinovsky (Routledge, 2015); *Postcolonial Europe?: essays on post-communist literatures and cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherová; Robert Gáfrik (Rodopi, 2015); Zarycki, Tomasz: *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2014); “The Self-Colonizing Metaphor” by Alexander Kiossev (in *Atlas of Transformation*); *Through a glass darkly: cultural representations in the dialogue between Central, Eastern and Western Europe*, edited by Fiona Björling (Slaviska institutionen, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> The extensive study *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, coordinated by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (2004), is among those engaging such a nuanced paradigm.

<sup>9</sup> Her article “Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality” (p. 130-142) is part of the special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, coordinated by Kołodziejczyk and Sandru.

<sup>10</sup> This concept advanced by the Peruvian sociologist Annibal Quinjano and by the Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo in their approach to modernity comprises of at least two sub-branches: coloniality of power and of coloniality of being which have been exercised continuously, in different forms, throughout the world wherever the project of modernity has been implemented.

<sup>11</sup> See Cornis-Pope, Marcel. “Narrative Hybridity and the Politics/Poetics of Dream Worlds in Mircea Cărtărescu’s Nostalgia.” *Colocvium* 1–2 (2007): 5–13; “Shifting Paradigms: East European Literatures at the Turn of the Millennium.” *Postcommunism, Postmodernism, and the Global Imaginary*. Ed. Christian Moraru. East European Monographs. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. 25–46; Cornis-Pope, Marcel, and John Neubauer, eds. *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Century*. 4 vols. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004–10.

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<sup>12</sup> The term was coined by the Columbian cultural theorist and artist Adolfo Alban Achinte (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Baker. Radio Free Europe. "Rumsfeld's 'Old' And 'New' Europe Touches on Uneasy Divide"  
<http://www.rferl.org/a/1102012.html>

<sup>14</sup> In his well-known and much cited essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe." *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 31; issue 7, April 26, 1984, p.33

<sup>15</sup> In his 2001 study "Is the Post- in Postcolonial, the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique." *PMLA*, Vol. 116, no. 1, 2001, pp. 111–128. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/463645](http://www.jstor.org/stable/463645)

<sup>16</sup> The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia became members of the EU in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

<sup>17</sup> According to social critic and philosopher Jürgen Habermas "public sphere" first of all means "... a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. They are then acting neither as business or professional people conducting their private affairs, nor as legal associates subject to the legal regulations of a state bureaucracy and obligated to obedience. Citizens act as a public **when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion** (my emphasis); thus, with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely."  
<http://world-information.org/wio/infostructure/100437611795/100438658445>

<sup>18</sup> For Brexit see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brexit>

<sup>19</sup> The names, titles, and awards associated with this post-socialist Romanian phenomenon are: *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu (Moartea Domnului Lăzărescu)* by Cristi Puiu (2005) — (Won the Un Certain Regard at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival); *12:08 East of Bucharest (A fost sau n-a fost?)* by Corneliu Porumboiu (2006) — (Won the Caméra d'Or at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival); *The Way I Spent the End of the World (Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii)* by Cătălin Mitulescu (2006); *The Paper Will Be Blue (Hârtia va fi albastră)* by Radu Muntean (2006); *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile)* by Cristian Mungiu (2007) — (Won the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival); *California Dreamin'* by Cristian Nemescu (2007) — (Won the Un Certain Regard at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival); *Boogie* by Radu Muntean (2008); *Police, Adjective (Polițist, Adjectiv)* by Corneliu Porumboiu (2009) — (Won the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival); *Tuesday, After Christmas (Marți, după Crăciun)* by Radu Muntean (2010); *Aurora* by Cristi Puiu (2010); *Beyond the Hills (După dealuri)* by Cristian Mungiu (2012) — (Won the Best Screenplay Award at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, and won the Golden Ástorat the 2012 Mar del Plata International Film Festival); *Everybody in Our Family (Toată lumea din familia noastră)* by Radu Jude (2012); *Child's Pose (Poziția copilului)* by Călin Peter Netzer (2013) — (Won the Golden Bear at the 2013 Berlin International Film Festival); *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism (Când se lasa seara peste București sau metabolism)* by Corneliu Porumboiu (2013); *One Floor Below (Un etaj mai jos)* by Radu Muntean (2015); *The Treasure (Comoara)* by Corneliu Porumboiu (2015) — (Won the Un Certain Talent in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival); *Aferim!* by Radu Jude (2015) — (Won the Silver Bear for Best Director at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival); *Sieranevada* by Cristi Puiu (2016); *Graduation (Bacalaureat)* by Cristian Mungiu (2016) — (Won the Best Director Award at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival); *Scarred Hearts (Inimi cicatrizate)* by Radu Jude (2016) — (Won the Best Director Award at the 2016 Mar del Plata International Film Festival).

<sup>20</sup> According to Tlostanova, who credits the Columbian cultural theorist and artist Adolfo Alban Achinte with the creation of this concept, defined as a discourse which would develop its own categories and concepts despite its points of contingency with the postcolonial discourses and the decolonial option, the

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discourse of *reexistence* launches a model of positive (re)creating of worlds, lives and subjectivities. Such an impulse is based not on negation or self-victimization, nor on violence, but on the creation of something different, other than modern/colonial/socialist, taking its own path, superseding the contradictions inherent in these categories. (Postsocialist 138). See Adolfo Alban Achinte, "Conocimiento y lugar: más allá de la razón hay un mundo de colores." [Knowledge and Place: Beyond the Reason there is a World of Colors] *Textiendo textos y saberes. Cinco hijos para pensar los estudios culturales, la colonialidad y la interculturalidad*. Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, Colección Estudios (Inter)culturales, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Alina Neagu mentions that "Between 1966-1989, approximately 10.000 women died in Romania due to self-provoked abortions or abortions carried out clandestinely by medically unqualified people" (my translation). <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-6229169-1-octombrie-43-ani-emiterea-decretului-privind-interzicerea-avorturilor.htm>

<sup>22</sup> As Denisa-Adriana Oprea states in "Between the heroine mother and the absent woman: Motherhood and womanhood in the communist magazine *Femeia*:" "In October 1966, the State Council of the Socialist Republic of Romania put into effect a law that prohibited abortion, declaring it a crime against women's health and against the natural growth of the country's population (281). Decree 770, issued on 1 October 1966; exempted from the law were women aged over 45, those who already had four children and those whose life would be endangered by giving birth. Until 1989 the decree underwent several modifications, as the results of its implementation fell short of fulfilling its main objective: to reduce the number of abortions and contribute to a significant increase of the country's population (note 1, 294).

<sup>23</sup> In Chahine, Joumane. "In the Name of Love. Father Knows best in Cristian Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills*" *Film Comment*, vol. 48, no. 4, Jul/Aug2012, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> <http://ew.com/article/2012/12/14/prize-fighter-oscar-romania-foreign-film-cristian-mungiu-beyond-the-hills/>

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