East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

Why Do Children Play in the Rubble?

Ghosts of History in the Films of Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor

VOL. 127 (SEPTEMBER 2022) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

R*ecent Trends in Eastern Europe*

In his 2006 paper, published in a special issue of the *IDEA art + society* magazine, Romanian philosopher and culture theorist Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu makes a series of statements that might surprise those unfamiliar with Eastern European discourses centered around the notion of transition. Employing Immanuel Wallerstein's double interpretation of the word modernity – as technologic modernity and what he calls the modernity of liberation[1] -, Ţichindeleanu describes the US/USSR relation as a modern brotherhood project and relates the 1990s post-Communist period to an expansionist and neocolonial project which brought about what he coins as "capitalocentric hedonism"[2]. The article was part of *IDEA*'s contribution to the 12th *Documenta* (the Kassel-based exhibition of contemporary art) that was assembled around the question "Is Modernity your Antiquity?". The prefix "post-" (post-communist, post-modern, post-socialist, post-colonial) was ubiquitous in *IDEA*'s issue, attesting to the transitional nature of the East European condition after 1989. For the USSR, transition was a key concept employed to describe both the passage from capitalism to socialism, and the anticipated but never-to-be-realized evolution from socialism to communism. According to Ţichindeleanu, the ultimate transition to communism was an open-ended utopian project whose form was never truly specified. The Soviet Dream of a classless society would have become the communist equivalent of the American Dream of unleashing absolute individual potential.

The year 1989 marked the beginning of another transitory stage, initially welcomed by leftists and Marxists as an opportunity to imagine and construct a new historical system,[3] or to return to a pure socialist ideology beyond state socialism and its mechanisms of repression.[4] Ţichindeleanu argues that these expectations were never fulfilled. Instead, anti-Communist ideology, previously acting as a space of resistance

against the Communist regime, became the foundation to the new establishment in Eastern Europe, as former dissidents set the tone of post-Socialist discourse, often rising to power themselves. This led to the gradual integration of Eastern Europe into Western political, military and financial institutions (like the European Union, NATO, and the World Bank), the birth of a new official cultural industry aimed at creating a new public sphere that is both apolitical and ahistorical, and a rewriting of the past which denies the modernity of the socialist regime and proclaims that any remaining left-wing practices and ideas are an absolute enemy of "freedom", aligning the region in accordance with current neoliberal values.[5] The success of this project was based on the creation of a new official discourse on history. A most noticeable example Ţichindeleanu uses is a state-commissioned research document published in 2005 (the so-called "Final Report") that announced the "end of communism". In the document, pre-Communist Romania is nostalgically evoked as an ideal place whose serene existence was abruptly discontinued by (externally imposed) Communism.[6] The current state of this integration project involves the rise of right-wing nationalist policies coupled with self-discrimination born out of Eastern Europeans comparing themselves with their "superior" Western neighbors. The conviction that the Western way of life and technological progress is a global paradigm one must aspire to is a common mentality shared not only by Eastern European countries, but by any "not-yet-properly-developed" regions such as South America.

To counter the post-Communist project of negating one's own past and identity, Ţichindeleanu argues for a critical theory of post-Communism.[7] Ţichindeleanu envisions an independent cultural sphere, here understood as a mix of intellectual, artistic, and social institutions and practices which would hopefully be able to counteract official narratives and produce different visions of the future that are real alternatives to Eurocentrism. A crucial condition for the success of this project lies at the junction between intellectual thinking and art practices. Ţichindeleanu here echoes a relatively new tendency in late 2000s Romanian art championed by works such as Joanne Richardson's film series *Commonplaces of Transition*, made between 2006-2008, or Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudors's photo series on urban transformation *Obor Cocor. Natural Resistance*, made in 2006, both of which critically reflect on the neoliberal order of post-Communism. Ţichindeleanu's approach also calls to mind the *Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto*, an initiative launched by various thinkers and artists from the "Global South and Eastern Europe"[8] that commits itself to new and diverse artistic, social, and intellectual practices that are capable of imagining possible futures from a decolonial perspective, beyond the capitalist/communist divide. Formed by theorists and artists, the initiative inscribes its activity in both artistic and theoretical fields (as evidenced by its participation in international art events and academic panels), and critically engages the Western tradition of art, calling for a renewed collaboration between artists, thinkers, and curators. An attempted coexistence between art and philosophy can be found in *Omnia Communia Deserta* (2020) and *Gagarin's Tree* (2016), two short films directed by Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor. Framed as interviews, both films follow Ţichindeleanu's visit of two important urban sites, in ruins yet still bearing traces of the socialist past, as the philosopher, drawing from the constructions' ambivalence and contradictions, delivers

an in-situ lecture about Romania's political past.

Filming the Ruins of Socialism

At first glance, Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's films are about buildings and their history. Ţichindeleanu wanders around ruins of places with historical and symbolic significance, exposing the buildings' former function during state socialism and their consequent transformation during the 1990s-2000s post-Communist transition. However, throughout the films it becomes clear that Ţichindeleanu and the filmmakers' aim is to investigate the ruined constructions in search for memories and material traces of the past which could be reemployed to serve present-day Romanian political thought and practice. It is not the first occasion on which Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor take notice of the gradual erasure of historical memory in Eastern Europe. Previous projects focused on constructions that were demolished or erased on account of the Communist ambition to symbolically mark the arrival of a new historical time.[9]

Omnia Communia Deserta's title derives from the original name of the place, Omnia Communia Hall, a brutalist building designed in 1967 by Cezar Lăzărescu to house the headquarters of the Communist Party in Bucharest. The rectangular two-floor building included a large conference hall along with an impressive lobby (whose purpose was to host the Party's significant political gatherings), as well as Ceaușescu's Presidential Office. During the post-Communist transition, it became the seat of the new democratic Senate, which in 2003 passed a constitutional amendment that allowed the country's integration into the EU and NATO without previously holding a referendum. Today, the Hall is left abandoned; the film is shot during the initial stages of a large-scale remodeling plan. The film shows the first results of those plans in the gradual dismantling of certain elements of the building, like wall panels, chairs, and wooden decoration, which is a process of obliterating not only architectural shapes, but also the former symbolic function they contributed to.

Ţichindeleanu guides the viewer through the building's past functions, revealing the complex mechanisms of state socialism, since the whole building architecturally and symbolically participated in confirming Ceaușescu's power over party cadres. Ţichindeleanu describes how Ceaușescu's office was internally connected with the conference auditorium, thus enabling him to "magically" appear on and disappear from the stage without having to walk among the party officials and invitees. In that sense, the building bolstered the image of a closed system of power accessible only to a selected few. In the film, images of still-visible elements, like the honeycomb ceiling and the colored lobby, are mixed with black-and-white archival images of past political meetings, reinforcing a sense of absence residing in the now-ruined auditorium. Looking at the building's current naked structure, the performative nature of power and the sheer extent of resources (both material and human) that were mobilized to maintain power during state socialism become apparent. Against the backdrop of present-day discourses on the imminent climate catastrophe, the film ends on a critical

note as it expresses its concern over a foolish world that wastes all that is common, both resources and dreams.

Gagarin's Tree is shot inside the I.A. Gagarin Youth Centre in Chișinău in Moldova, which once housed an 800-seat events hall, a theater, a cinema, sports facilities and even a disco, before being turned into a commercial center during the post-Communist transition. Built in 1972, the center expands around the central theater room. The main façade is decorated with Aurel David's enormous mosaic artwork depicting a spiral, a shape cherished in revolutionary theory.[10] In its center, a plowman who is positioned in outer space prepares the soil for the future seeds (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Ţichindeleanu's semi-academic voiceover navigates the viewer around the now-ruined site and reactivates memories of another time, when the imaginative force of political utopias was aimed at uniting people around the dream of an ecologic coexistence through space conquest. According to him, this vision of a better future that was developed against the background of looming nuclear apocalypse, is now forgotten.

If Ţichindeleanu's tone is somewhat didactic, both films include moments when his discourse on history is interrupted and the viewers' attention is turned to something different. In *Omnia Communia Deserta,* Ţichindeleanu references Better Gyorgy's (seemingly unrelated) interpretation of the Icarus myth, which understands the act of flying away from the labyrinth and towards the sun not as a metaphor for youthful (and ultimately suicidal) hubris, but as the symbol of a courageous act of radical difference that defies the established order. *Gagarin's Tree* includes a lengthy sequence showing

drawings from Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's *Album of Space Travel*, which features images depicting a pure childlike desire for outer space. Drawn in 1933, Tsiolkovsky's sketches envision different phases of space travel, like spacewalks, cosmonauts looking through space windows back at Earth or towards new planets, and even designs for space rockets. Like the Center, the film also conveys the dream of space conquest through its myths and symbols, including by way of a story about Yuri Gagarin, who allegedly visited the place and planted a single tree there. As Ţichindeleanu relates to the viewer, nobody really knows which tree – if any – was planted there by Gagarin. Depending on who you ask, the same story has different endings. In similar fashion, Ţichindeleanu guides the viewer through different views of history, each one having a different point of focus, while he displays a special interest in the unfulfilled potential of the Soviet dream of space travel and in radical visions helping resist and eventually reverse systems previously considered immutable.

Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's fascination for tour guides is also visible in their previous work, notably their portraits of tours around the Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest.[11] Guides are mediators who are capable of enhancing visitors' experiences. They can help access off-limits areas and reveal previously hidden elements. While broadly telling the same story, different guides have different attitudes that, according to the artists,[12] are representative of broader disagreements regarding Romania's collective memory. Influenced by personal traumas or ideology, people remember the same historical events differently. The possibility of multiple narratives about the same events coexisting is also reflected in the form of the two films. Unlike typical interviews, where a static frame tends to highlight the interviewee's authority, Vatamanu and Tudor's camera often drifts away, lingers on details, or shows wide-angle images of the building. In *Gagarin's Tree*, Ţichindeleanu mostly appears as an obscure silhouette. When he finally becomes visible in a close-up, the camera still focuses on details behind him, formally challenging the authority of his discourse.

By opting for a slight discordance between the guide's narration and the visual elements of the film, the filmmakers allow the viewers to freely shift their attention between Ţichindeleanu's tangled intellectual discourse on history, the present-day image of the building itself, or the poetic aspect of the Soviet imaginary in relation to outer space (introduced through Tsiolkovsky's drawings). In addition, a third element also invades the ruined site. Sounds of everyday life, like children playing and cars passing, appear on the film's audio track, disturbing Ţichindeleanu's lecture. The ruined building is shown to be open to interactions with the surrounding inhabitants, who may see it as an unofficial memorial or even a playground. After all, children playing in the rubble are part of our filmic and literary imagery. Children and ruins are associated with different temporalities (with the former being thought to point to the future and the latter being products of the past) and thus their cohabitation oscillates between death and renewal. Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948) illustrates this friction through the character of Edmund, a child who wanders through a ruined Berlin filled with rubble. Another reference can be found in early Soviet literature. In *The Knight's Move* (1919–21), Viktor Shklovsky describes a post-revolutionary Petrograd, where a ruined monument dedicated to Tsar Alexander III (which is soon to

be remade into the new “Monument to Liberty”) becomes both a shelter and a playground to insubordinate Petrograd street kids.[13] Henri Cartier-Bresson’s visit to Seville in 1933 resulted in his iconic photograph of a group of children playing around crumbling walls.[14] It is hardly surprising that the ruined site of Omnia Communia Hall was a popular destination for improvised urban games. For instance, it featured as a site in the urban treasure hunting game called “geocaching”[15], in which city dwellers are asked to search their built environment for hidden signs and objects. One could argue that Ţichindeleanu adopts a similarly playful attitude, if from the perspective of a political archeologist investigating the socialist past. *Omnia Communia Deserta* and *Gagarin’s Tree* are examples of the temporal ambivalence of the ruins that Svetlana Boym refers to as reminiscent of a labyrinth of prepositions, as they are “no longer”, “not yet,” “nevertheless”, and “albeit”.[16]

Preserve, Destroy, Remodel

Eventually, the two films go beyond the specificities of each building and emphasize the need to revisit history to better understand the present and lay out a plan for a politically alternative future. The films’ discourse on ruins could thus be divided into two main proposals. The first proposal is related to the use of memory as a political weapon. The possibility of multiple readings of history contrasts with the one-dimensional normative interpretation of the Communist period as simply being characterized by repression and control. The past, like the Icarus myth or Gagarin’s tree story, is open to different interpretations, and the films imply that all are potentially valid. Their value should be seen in the contribution they make to present-day political thinking. Gagarin’s Youth Center reactivates the cosmic dream of the Soviet space program for a different ecological world balance, reasserting the need for political utopias that are missing from present-day politics. Omnia Communia Hall and the Icarus myth remind the viewer of the diachronic need to break the closed system of power and nurture radical alternatives from within minoritarian cultural spheres. Both ideas contribute to Ţichindeleanu’s objective of establishing a critical theory of post-Communism in Romania, which departs from an observation of the past in all its contradictions to further scrutinize the post-1989 condition of Eastern Europe. Even though his lecture-like discourse would probably remain unchanged if repeated in a non-filmic context, the films allow viewers to be immersed in the depicted buildings, thus complementing the theoretical discussion with direct aesthetic representations. More importantly, their interaction with the ruined building leaves the viewer thinking that these alternative readings are only possible as long as these sites remain in ruins and thus outside the confines of hegemonic discourses on history.

The film’s second proposal, linked with the use of socialist ruins as memorial sites, is the notion that preserving ruins in their current state might fulfill a social purpose. Indeed, academic discussions on ruined building and monuments focus on their transitory character and multiple temporalities. As a “remainder”, a ruined site is a physical presence that can immediately be perceived and that attests to the fact that a specific past life once dwelled there. As a “reminder”, it evokes a future that never

took place. For instance, George Simmel sees the ruin as a peaceful "coming together of all contradictory strivings" (resolving a conflict between nature and the human spirit),[17] while Boym describes the "ruin gaze" as a relationship to ruins that is colored with longing, nostalgia, and conflicted temporalities.[18] Siding with Boym, Ţichindeleanu is less concerned with "peace" and more with the friction between alternative political timelines and the ruins' power to stimulate utopian imagination.

In contemporary societies, ancient ruins can often take the form of carefully managed, quasi-sacred areas of historical and cultural significance. In contrast, ruins of latter urban constructions tend to be destroyed or remodeled to obtain a financial or cultural function for the surrounding communities, since, in practical terms, ruined buildings are considered to have a negative impact on the neighborhood's market value and to present risks for the safety of unsupervised visitors. However, in the case of ruins charged with (often uncomfortable) political memories, different solutions have been proposed, recognizing the close ties between national history, collective memory, and urban space. Specifically, Germany's so-called "denazification" was coupled with proposals to spectacularly destroy Nazi architectural remnants in order to create large urban voids to signify loss and absence, or to produce "countermonuments"[19] that would avoid normalizing the past and instead require people's active participation during remembrance.[20] Soviet-era architectural heritage was often left abandoned or was demolished and replaced with constructions that refer to a previous time before the "communist intervention". For instance, the "Palace of the Republic", a building that hosted the parliament of East Germany between 1976 and 1990 in Berlin, was readily unbuilt in 2008. In its place, an almost identical replica of the "Berlin Palace" (an emblematic building of Prussian Baroque architecture, thought to represent Prussian militarism and royalty, and demolished by the East Germany authorities in 1950) was erected in 2020 with the addition of a single "modern" façade that differs from the Prussian original. In Moscow, an exact replica of the "Cathedral of Christ the Savior" (originally constructed in the late 19th century and blown up in 1931 to create space for the "Palace of Soviets") was erected in the exact same spot in the 2000s, thus confirming a desire to "restore time" and remake historical monuments of the past in their unity and wholeness.

Since both the Youth Center and Omnia Communia Hall are today waiting to be replaced by constructions that will have a more practical function (plans include the construction of a housing complex and the new National Center of Dance respectively), the films are haunted by their pending disappearance. However, plans to erase the past, similar to the ones employed to mark the passage to a new historical time in revolutionary USSR or Nazi Germany, are often met with strong resistance.[21] The plans for the Center of Dance thus include integrating architectural remnants from Omnia Hall, which, one imagines, will be coupled with signs and texts providing some commentary for the future visitor that would make explicit the political context of the original construction. Still, this type of solution runs the risk of removing historical controversy for the sake of utility or "national unity", ultimately framing a normalized reading of the past. In other terms, when a place of historical importance becomes part of an official cultural institution, it risks losing most of its ambivalence.

Instead, one could argue that allowing certain places to continue existing in their ruined state, without demolishing them or assigning a commemorative or functional mission, could be useful for a society still struggling to "come to terms" with its recent past. In that sense, ruins become documents whose existence reflects historical change. If Omnia Hall was created to house the headquarters of the Communist Party and later adjusted to become the Romanian Senate, its present-day purpose could be that of an alternative memorial, materially preserving traces of the past as a site unmanaged by official discourse. Based on the recently theorized architectural concept of "speech of objects"[22], one could even suggest that Ţichindeleanu's discourse in reality belongs to the building itself.[23] Since the planned remodeling threatens the ruined sites' mnemonic function and its unique voice, the films may mark the final chapter of their existence. In that sense, the films substitute the sites' current role as "reminders and remainders" of the cultural and historical past. The films will survive the buildings' remodeling, thus becoming a different type of historical document, persevering the memory of those places in an audiovisual form while simultaneously pointing to their disappearance.

Eventually, after watching Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's work, one cannot help but ask if it is simply too soon for demolishing or remodeling. As shown in the films, both ruined sites are physical manifestations of political transitions and ideologies that shaped the recent past and still concern Romanian society today. Preserving the unique voice of those places, as remainders of what was and reminders of what could have been, is a third way, one Boym associates with a "transitional architecture" and an "off-modern perspective".[24] Perhaps, for now and as long as Romania actively struggles to come to terms with its political past (a period in which the concept of transition will likely remain an active artistic and social reference point), certain significant ruins should be preserved in their current form. Ruins of socialist phantasms could serve as playgrounds for any visitor sensitive to their imaginative force, and as material vessels for collective memory. Because these buildings are not simply degraded architectural forms, remnants of a criminal past, or sites for financial exploitation, any architectural intervention or further contextualization would need to carefully enable remembrance without negating the sites' current contradictions and instead treat them as fruitful and poetic ghosts of history.

References

1. Ţichindeleanu elaborates on the double meaning in the following way: "There was in addition, however, a second major connotation to the concept of modern. One could characterize this other connotation less as forward-looking than as militant […] This modernity was not the modernity of technology, of Prometheus unbound, of boundless wealth; it was rather the modernity of liberation, of substantive democracy (the rule of the people as opposed to that of the aristocracy, the rule

of the best) of human fulfillment, and yes of moderation. This modernity of liberation was not a fleeting modernity, but an eternal modernity. Once achieved, it was never to be yielded.'', in: Immanuel Wallerstein. "The end of what modernity?'', Theory and Society, Aug., 1995, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Aug., 1995), 472.

2. Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu "Towards a critical Theory of Postcommunism'' Radical Philosophy, Issue159 Jan/Feb 2010.
3. Immanuel Wallerstein. "The World System After the Cold War'', Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1993, 1-6.
4. Noam Chomsky. What Uncle Sam Really Wants, Tuscon, Odonian Press, 1992.
5. Ţichindeleanu 2006, 183.
6. Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu. "The Modernity of Postcommunism'', IDEA, arte+societate, issue 24, 2006.
7. Details on the photo series can be found on Vatamanu and Tudor's website: https://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/oborcocor.htm. For more examples of Romanian artists critically approaching the post-Communist condition, see: Brebenel, Mihaela. "Precarious Spaces and Subjects in Transition: Postcommunism and Romanina Moving Image Art'', Film Critisism;Ann Arbor, vol 43, Iss. 2, Sep 2019.
8. The manifesto was signed by Ţichindeleanu himself, alongside several Eastern European and South American scholars and artists like Walter Mignolo, Marina Grzinic and Tanja Ostojić. It is currently available on: www.transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
9. For instance, their 2003 project revisits the place where Vacaresti Monastery used to exist, demolished by Communists in 1985, as happened with many religious symbols of the past. See more on the project's website https://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/vacaresti.htm [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
10. According to Svetlana Boym, spirals are "a favorite Marxist-Hegelian form''. See "Tatlin, or, Ruinophilia'', Cabinet Magazine, Issue 28, winter 2007-2008.
11. For more, see the project's description on http://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/palatul.htm [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
12. Moritz Pfeifer/ "Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor on their Work'', East European Film Bulletin, 2011, https://eefb.org/country/romania/on-their-work/ [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
13. See Svetlana Boym's description of the story in: Boym 2007-2008.
14. The photograph is part of Bresson's "Spain'' series. For details see https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56129 [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
15. See Omnia Hall as described on the game's website on https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC5K1TW_omnia-hall?guid=9507f545-4c45-425d-a7af-00a271b5a804 [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
16. Boym 2007-2008.
17. Georg Simmel. "The Ruin,'' in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics (NY: Harper and Row, 1965), 266.
18. "Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never

took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time'' in: Boym 2007-2008.

19. The term was first proposed by James E. Young in connection with the Holocaust memorials to describe "antiheroic, often ironic and self-effacing conceptual installations that mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty''. See for instance his "Memory and Counter-Memory'', Harvard Design Magazine, No 9, Fall 1999. http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
20. Many "interactive countermonuments'' were built in Germany to reflect on the country's Nazi past. For instance, Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz's "Monument against Fascism'' in Hamburg (a 12–metre high lead column built in 1986), was meant to progressively vanish if enough residents carved their names on the column, thus accepting their part in collectively memory. And so it happened. See: https://www.shalev-gerz.net/portfolio/monument-against-fascism [Accessed on 5 October 2022].
21. A recent example can be found in Albania. Plans to demolish the "Pyramid of Tirana'', a large pyramid-shape construction with a base of 11835 m2, first a socialist Museum, then NATO's headquarters and today in ruins, were opposed by the majority of Tirana's citizens and eventually dropped in 2017. New plans include the construction of a technological center.
22. Used by forensic architects and artists when referring to a construction, the "speech of objects'' points to architecture's potential of producing a discourse based on transformations that are to be found in a building's structure. The building is consequently seen as a sensor constantly recording changes happening in its interior and surrounding environment. It only needs a specialist's mediation to translate its language and reveal what it "knows''. See: Eyal Weizman, Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability, Princeton University Press, 2017.
23. This is further supported in the films. There is as similar shot in both films where the philosopher remains silent, seemingly observing – or listening to – the ruins while his voiceover still produces echoes around him.
24. Specifically, Svetlana Boym calls for a careful architectural intervention that "collaborates with the modern ruins'' and redefines their utilitarian and poetic functions without disregarding or demolishing the ruins. Instead, this perspective allows to "frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins'', in: Boym 2007-2008.