

**It Fell from the Stars**  
Alternative Cosmogonies  
from the Second World

DORIN BUDUŞAN







*In memory of my mother Lia and  
my grandmother Maria.*



**IT FELL FROM  
THE STARS**



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# Preamble:

# The path of getting lost

On February 3rd, 1882, at around 4 PM, the citizens of the village of Mócș and its surroundings witnessed the fall of the largest meteorite to be discovered on the territory of Austria-Hungary. I was born in the same village—nowadays in Romania and spelled Mociu—103 years after this event and spent my childhood in my grandmother’s house at the foot of a hill called *Locu’ Popii* (the Priest’s Place) on which the largest piece of meteorite fell. I not only grew up with almost mythical tales of this fall, but as a child I spent countless summer days investigating the site in the hope that I would find some material traces of this fall: a stone, or a small crater. But my research showed me that this type of event also leaves historical, social, philosophical, cultural, mythological, as well as countless other trails that reverberate through time and space. For me, the most predominant implications of this event were cosmic in nature. A meteorite fall acts as a material reminder that we are part of a larger cosmos. It is a reminder of our origins as cosmic beings, reflected in myths and legends collected in the area in the early twentieth century, around the same time of the event.

While studying at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie I became more and more interested in exploring the event of the meteorite fall and conducted both literature research and interviews with several people from my home community. The field research will also be made into a docufiction film which is currently in postproduction. The interviews conducted with some of the locals and their stories of the event showed me that in order to tackle the different layers of the event I would have to base my research on a patchwork of disparate fields of knowledge. The sections that constitute this study mirror the scattering of the meteorite. Even with most of the fragments recovered, the whole can never be fully reconstructed, nor can the event. In the museum collection the fragments are displayed as separate entities; their different shapes, textures, and colors make it hard to believe they were once part of a whole. Although they might seem scattered, the chapters of this thesis are part of a whole. They are a cross-section through the event showing some of its layers. Some blend harmoniously, some were forced to live together through an outside force. The meteorite has become a symbol for me, it takes many guises and meanings, as symbols do, but ultimately it refuses a straightforward definition as its signification is never complete. The process of writing this thesis reminded me of the Romanian sky creation myth that I will mention later, in which the Milky Way is referred to as the Winding Path or the Path of Getting Lost (*Calea întortocheată* or *Calea rătăcită*). But you need to get lost a bit in order to find your way and forge your own path.



Romanian decorated Easter eggs. The egg in the center shows the 'winding path' motif.

Children's playground in Mociu with the *Locu' Popii* hill in the background (from personal archive).



# Introduction

The content of the book that you are holding now might seem like an unusual choice for an art school thesis as it does not directly deal with art history or art theory topics. Instead, this thesis is the result of a process of positioning myself as a queer Eastern European living in the West, finding my own place in the extended field of art, and figuring how my art practice fits into larger historical, sociological, anthropological, and even metaphysical narratives.

The research and the thesis that follows were influenced by two seemingly unconnected events: the meteorite fall that occurred in my home village Mociu, and my move from Romania to the Netherlands in 2015, a move from Eastern to Western Europe. These two events have radically changed my views on my identity, the world, and my place in it, while also shaping my art practice. This thesis establishes a connection between these events by exploring the Eastern European diasporic experience and relating it to the meteorite. Both the immigrant and the meteorite have traveled outside of their homeland and are aliens in the space where they have landed. Their condition is always one of ‘in-betweenness.’ In the years that I have been living in the Netherlands the meteorite has become a driving symbol both for my experience and my art practice. Although it is not the main focus of this study, the meteorite provided the frame for the thesis and the research methodology.

In my research I have drawn from a wide range of theoretical sources: from queer theory, theories of decoloniality and enchanted materialism, to historical, anthropological, ethnographic, and religious studies. Although

the thesis does not deal with queer theory *per se*, it uses queering (generally understood as a method to render something strange) in order to challenge assumed knowledge *about* Eastern Europe, to showcase knowledge *from* Eastern Europe in contrast, and (like queer theory) to advocate for a position of ‘in-betweenness.’ In terms of the methodology used for this study I was particularly inspired by the concept of ‘low theory’ developed by the queer theorist Jack Halberstam in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, who defines it as theory that aims low in order to reach a broader target. This methodology seemed the most appropriate to me as it mirrors the event of a meteorite fall. As they hurl down to Earth, pulled by the Earth’s gravity, meteorites enter our atmosphere where air friction makes them lose most of their mass. If they still have some mass left, they usually explode in several stages before scattering over an area that scientists call a ‘strewn field.’ Their impact is not merely local as they can be seen and heard over an area of several hundreds of kilometers. In the aftermath of such an event, if you want to have a grasp on it, all you can do is follow the traces left by the impact acknowledging at the same time that the picture will never be complete. Since every contact leaves a trace, this thesis is my attempt at following the traces, each section being a new discovery in the conceptual strewn field. The thesis is comprised of four major chapters as follows.

The first part, “Once Upon a Time,” is an investigation of temporality and of several theories of time that are relevant for this project. The aim of this part is, to paraphrase Karen Barad, to ‘trouble’ time, or to trouble the common understanding of time as linear progress. The mechanist understanding of time is at the core of colonialism as it places everyone on the same clock, the rhythm dictated by Western modernity. Consequently, Western societies have come to be understood as ‘ahead of their time’ while the rest of the world lags behind. Time as linear progress also means there is only one way to move forward. As we will see in the next chapter, this Western understanding of time was at the core of anthropology because initially the discipline was meant to provide answers as to why the non-Western world failed to modernize. This chapter starts with showcasing the understanding of time as formulated by the theoretical physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad. By drawing from these apparently unrelated fields of study, Barad formulates a theory of time that is fluid, that can split like a river, circle back to itself, returning



and showing that different times and timelines coexist. Although Barad's understanding of time is based on revelations from quantum field theory, it relates more to decolonial, or actually pre-colonial conceptions of time. 'Time as a river' also shows that there are multiple paths that can lead to improvement, contrary to the progressivist notion of time that insists on imposing a single path that can lead us forward.

Quantum physics has shown that time and space are interrelated. The spatial dimension of time has been conceptualized by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his writings about the 'chronotope.' For Bakhtin the chronotope, or the interrelatedness of time and space, acts as narrative glue. What Bakhtin terms 'time's fullness' can only be experienced through the chronotope in works of literature that weave historical events with human experiences, emotions, and reactions as the characters face historical, political, or societal changes.

The dimensions of temporality discussed in the first chapter also open the door for an investigation of ghosts and how to live with them. Eastern Europe is a space haunted by many ghosts left behind by the disintegration of former empires and of the collective utopia of communism. All these failed futures did not completely die though, and they continue to influence the region. This idea of lost futures that continue to haunt long after they were supposed to die is expressed through the term 'hauntology,' coined by Jacques Derrida and sampled by Mark Fisher, and it is the topic of the last part of the first chapter. This section also includes a case study on the hauntological nature of a particular Eastern European musical genre known in Romania as *manele*. This genre of party music is performed mainly by Romani musicians and consists of an unapologetic blend of influences, from Western pop and electronic music to Eastern and 'Oriental' melodies and rhythms. The genre of manele is unashamed in its mix of the cultural influences that have shaped the region of Eastern Europe.

The second part, "The Other Within Europe," is an exploration of the Eastern European space and it starts with some historical accounts that show how Eastern Europe was conceptualized from the Western perspective. One of the most powerful metaphors for defining Eastern Europe in the Western imaginary was the shadow cast by the Iron Curtain invoked by Winston Churchill in his famous 1946 speech. However, as the historian Larry Wolf argues in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the idea

of Eastern Europe as an Other within Europe is several centuries older than Churchill's proclamation. This idea became particularly prominent in the Enlightenment era, when Western societies started defining themselves as the centers of rationalism, culture, and civilization as opposed to the irrational, uncivilized, and primitive East. Eastern Europe became a paradoxical space, geographically in Europe, but philosophically in the East, closer to the Orient. This view is reflected in several accounts from Western travelers into Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its echoes still linger in the way that Westerners write about the region.

The theories of (de)coloniality, as formulated by Latin American thinkers like Aníbal Quijano, challenge the Western hegemony on the production of knowledge. Although Eastern Europe was not formally colonized by Western powers, it is kept in a relation of coloniality with the West. The Romanian sociologist Manuela Boatcă shows there are several parallels between how coloniality operates in the former Latin American colonies and how it operates in Eastern Europe through its peripheral status. This section of the second chapter takes a closer look at coloniality through the Eastern perspective, focusing on a Romanian case study. Of particular interest is the nineteenth century, when after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire the historical regions that will later become Romania reoriented themselves towards the West and started to adopt modern political, economic, and cultural values. Several intellectuals of the era actually criticized the indiscriminate adoption of these values arguing that Romania did not have the necessary background to sustain them. They advocated instead that the country should follow its own path, based on its local culture and values. The same criticisms of modernity were formulated a century later by several post-colonial and decolonial thinkers.

One of the effects of coloniality is also felt in the field of knowledge production, seeing that Western critical theory lacks any references to Eastern Europe and generally seems uninterested in the knowledge produced in the area. In the First World—Third World divide, the West has largely focused on the Third World, or the former colonies, as the locus of critical theory, to the point that the Second World (i.e. Eastern Europe) is not even part of the picture. Furthermore, with the enlargement of the European Union

which now encompasses several Eastern European countries, from the perspective of critical theory the East has fully gone through the processes of modernization and Europeanization, and therefore aligned itself with the hegemonic Western position. This theoretical position is contradicted by the Eastern European lived experience, like my own. Not only was Western modernization never fully achieved or embraced in the area, but the long transition to neoliberal capitalism has also failed to bring about the promised general prosperity. As a result, post-socialism became an era of precarity and lack of prospects, which led many Eastern Europeans to migrate to the West.

The case study for this chapter is the immaterial work *European Influenza* by Romanian artist Daniel Knorr, who exhibited in the Romanian pavilion of the fifty-first Venice Biennale in 2005, before Romania's admission into the EU. Knorr's decision to leave the pavilion empty while still displaying traces of past exhibitions and with its back door open stirred a lot of controversy in Romanian media, from writers and critics to politicians. The reactions to his work managed to spark debates on the major topics that I chose for the first two parts of this book, hence my choice of including it in the form of a conclusion to this section of the thesis.

The third part, "Decolonial Enchantments," explores enchantment practices that oppose colonialist and capitalist views of the world. A wide range of beliefs and practices such as magic, divination, or healing have been discarded under coloniality as anti-modern superstition. Precisely because of this they have the power to heal what coloniality and capitalism have poisoned, namely our relationship with our extended environment. The first sub-chapter challenges the modern mantra that Western societies have been completely disenchanted as the result of the rise of rationalism, scientific knowledge, and innovation. As the religious study scholar Jason Josephson-Storm shows in his book *The Myth of Disenchantment*, the idea of a disenchanted society is a modern myth in itself which cloaks itself as precisely *not* myth, but as a universal 'Real' against which other myths are shattered. By illustrating the interconnected history of science and magic, Josephson-Storm concludes that, contrary to common belief, science never fully opposes magic or superstition. Even if the public embrace of magic is discouraged, this invites its private embrace; therefore magic can always be turned into a site of resistance as well as a position from which to criticize

modernity and a techno-scientific view of the world.

The section “The Appeal of Magic” presents magic not only as a world-view, but according to Italian philosopher Federico Campagna, it is also a cosmogonic force capable of creating a different type of reality. The current reality system dominated by the techno-scientific position (dubbed ‘Technic’ by Campagna) and driven by the principle of absolute language leads to nihilism and paradoxically to the dissolution of reality. In such a system, things do not exist in themselves, they become positions in series. This leads to a crisis of reality which translates to an inability to act upon or even imagine alternatives. In opposition to the principle of absolute language stands the ineffable, which for Campagna becomes a cosmogonic force that he terms Magic, which is able to create an alternative to the current reality system.

The last section of the third chapter returns to Eastern Europe, and particularly to Romania, to showcase a range of ritual practices from Romanian folklore. These examples point to a pre-Christian Magic-based system of reality that did not completely die out, although it went through significant changes throughout millennia of contact with other cultures and belief systems. The most significant influence on Romanian folklore was Orthodox Christianity. In order to gain popular appeal, especially among the peasant population who still held onto pagan beliefs long into the nineteenth century, the Orthodox church appropriated elements of folklore and blended them with Christian elements. Paradoxically, this might have also helped preserve some of these traditions until the present day, but the Church has also used the connection with folklore in order to promote its own versions of nationalism and even fascism. Because I believe Romanian folklore is a valuable cultural product of the area, it should be reclaimed from the nationalist and fascist discourse and used as practices of resistance against such views.

The last part, “Cosmic Nostalgia,” starts with an exploration of cosmism as it appears in Eastern European folklore, sci-fi literature and film. In these works the cosmos is portrayed as an enchanted, psychedelic space where the fine line between utopia and dystopia is often blurred, but where the nature of the cosmos also offers a way out of dystopia. A prevalent theme in these examples is the (often-failed) search for a lost paradise. The nostalgia that fuels this quest is a manifestation of the discontent

with the current world and is based on the hope that a better, more just society can be achieved.

The last sub-chapters of the thesis circle back to the beginning of our story and investigate the story of the meteorite that fell in the village where I was born in Transylvania. My research on this event is what sparked my interest for all the subjects of this thesis, from the scientific versus the magic views on the event, to Romanian folklore and myths, and an interest for the nineteenth century when Romanian society had its first encounter with modernity. My own encounter with the West forced me to re-evaluate my relationship with my own country, a process that is also reflected in the structure of the thesis.

Dorin Budușan,  
Amsterdam, January 2023

# Acknowledgements

Although it bears only one author, an investigation like this is a product of the interaction of several agents, human and non-human, that I wish to acknowledge here. For all the insights that it brought me the Mócs meteorite deserves special acknowledgment. So do the village of Mociu with its land and community in which I was raised, as well as my ancestors who experienced the event of the fall. Growing up in a small rural community I had the privilege of being surrounded by hills and forests with a wide variety of plants, trees, and animals around me. Although I live in a modern urban environment now, I am grateful that I can still return to these places from time to time.

Besides the authors referenced in this thesis, several other people were crucial in the development of this work. I would especially like to thank my teacher and thesis coordinator, Willem van Weelden, for his constant support and guidance throughout my years at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, for his insights, references, and conversations which encouraged me to go beyond what I thought I was capable of. Even though I am grateful to all my teachers at the Rietveld Academie, several of them were crucial in developing this project. The conversations with Saša Karalić, Klaas Kuitenbrouwer, Geert Mul, Marjolijn Ruyg, Jorinde Seijdel and Sylvie Zijlmans, as well as their feedback and criticism over the years were especially helpful in shaping this thesis, my own art practice and my critical thinking skills.

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Biconical vessel and lid with the 'winding path' (Milky Way) motif. Fired clay, Cucuteni, Ghelăiești-Nedeia, 3700–3500 BC [from David W. Anthony and Jennifer Y. Chi eds., *The Lost World of Old Europe: The Danube Valley, 5000–3500 BC* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 146].

# PART 1:

# Once upon a time...

*A fost odată, ca niciodată, că dacă n-ar fi fost, nu s-ar mai povesti...*  
[Only once and never again, there was... Were it not so, this tale would not be told.]

Time has been shattered, exploded into bits, dispersed by the wind. Moments caught up in turbulent flows forming eddies, circling back around, returning, reconfiguring what might yet have been. — Karen Barad

As the title and the epigraphs suggest, this part is an investigation of time and temporality or the perception of time. The Romanian epigraph that opens this chapter is the standard phrase that opens fairytales and folktales, equivalent to the English ‘once upon a time,’ but in its more convoluted formulation it suggests the temporal indeterminacy that is at the core of this thesis. First, the phrase sets the stage of the story in an undetermined unfixed past (*a fost odată*), then it recognizes the unique nature of the story (*ca niciodată*) and its influence on the present (*dacă n-ar fi fost, nu s-ar mai povesti*). The act of telling the story blurs the lines that separate past from present and future.

One of the most recognizable characteristics that emerges from comparing the Eastern side of Europe with its Western counterpart is an alleged temporal lag between them. Eastern Europe always seems to fall behind the West. Perpetually running late, the East was slow to adopt Christianity, slow to organize into nation states, and even slower to receive modernization and industrialization. In order to explore this perceived lag, we first must delve into some theories about the nature of time. The understanding of temporality that this study employs is largely based on the work of the theoretical physicist turned feminist theorist Karen Barad. In their work, Barad relates concepts from quantum physics with concepts from critical and literary theory in order to challenge linear interpretations of time. From the field of quantum physics the following sections will therefore explore the concepts of ‘diffraction,’ ‘superposition,’ and ‘temporal indeterminacy.’ These concepts are read through the lens of critical theory through Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘hauntology’ and its extension as formulated by Mark Fisher. Eastern European literary theory also formulated critiques of linear time of which we will discuss Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on the ‘chronotope.’

# Spacetime reconfigurings

While the past is never finished and the future is not what will unfold, the world holds the memories of its iterative reconfigurings. —Karen Barad

According to the theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad, it is urgent to trouble time in order to produce imaginaries that undo conceptions of temporality based on inevitable forward progress. The most common understanding of temporality is that of clock time, which Walter Benjamin called ‘homogeneous empty time.’ This is time calibrated to a projected progressive future and is understood as a succession of discrete moments. Each moment represents the thinnest possible slice of time, and each moment replaces the one before it. This is the theory of time that is used as a tool for capitalist, colonialist, and militarist purposes.

Quantum physics not only deconstructs the strict determinism of Newtonian physics, where the future unfolds predictably from the past, but it also blows away the progressivist notion of time – Benjamin’s ‘homogenous and empty’ time – disrupting first-world efforts to harness it as a totalising system on behalf of universalism and its projects, such as imperialism. Quantum physics opens up radical spaces for exploring the possibilities for change from inside hegemonic systems of domination. Its radical political imaginaries might usefully join forces with indigenous and other subjugated knowledge practices rather than being a tool solely in the hands of the National Security Agency, although there is that, too. But tools are never entirely faithful to their masters.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing The Incalculable,” in *New Formations* 92 (September 2017), 61-62.

Quantum theory also shows that a linear view on time lacks a fundamental physical characteristic, namely time's spatial dimension. The spatial dimension of time is particularly significant to "indigenous and other subjugated knowledge practices," as the philosopher Daniel Wildcat, Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma states:

It is of critical practical importance that some cultures express history as primarily temporal and others express history as fundamentally spatial in character. Once history-as-time is universalised and human beings are, so to speak, all put on the same clock, it is inevitable that in the big picture of human history some peoples will be viewed as 'on time,' 'ahead of time,' or 'running late'. It makes little difference that the clock hands rotate in circles, for they are thought of and acted on as if they were wheels moving down a single road called progress. ... American Indian or indigenous traditions resist ideas of universal homogeneous world history; there is no single road per se to human improvement. There are many paths, each situated in the actual places, such as prairies, forests, deserts, and so forth, and environments where our tribal societies and cultures emerged. The experiences of time and history are shaped by places.<sup>2</sup>

For Barad, Quantum Field Theory empirically proves there is no 'one time, at a time,' but rather it is always the new old. This troubling of linear chronology and the common perception of temporality has implications of temporal dis/junction. The past is not something that has passed and is no longer with us, the past is tangible, and leaves marks and material traces that can be felt in our individual and collective bodies.<sup>3</sup>

Quantum physics has empirical evidence for 'temporal indeterminacy.' The famous double-slit experiment showed the indeterminacy of quantum phenomena (see the illustrations on page 6). Light and matter show properties of both particles and waves. Given an apparatus that allows for the possibility, particles can produce diffraction patterns by interacting with each other and even themselves. The same pattern emerges by dropping two stones in a pond: the waves that form cancel or amplify each other through interference.<sup>4</sup> In a variation on the double-slit experiment you take a disk with one or more slits and rotate it on an axle as you shoot a beam of light or particles at it. Since the disk rotates, the slits are not only

2 Daniel Wildcat, "Indigenizing the Future: Why We Must Think Spatially in the Twenty-first Century," in *American Studies* 46, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005), 433-34.

3 Barad, 56-57.

4 See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

separated in space, but also in time. However, the diffraction pattern still appears on the screen behind the disk. By introducing the time dimension, the experiment shows that “a single particle will coexist in a superposition of multiple places and times.”<sup>5</sup> The diffraction pattern that nevertheless emerges in the variation is a “manifestation of different times bleeding through one another” and “[it] can be accounted for by taking account of *all possible histories (configurings of spacetime)*, understanding that each such possibility coexists with all others.”<sup>6</sup> A superposition of different times means that “a given particle can be in a state of indeterminately coexisting at multiple times—for example, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, given the purpose of troubling linear time, the state of a superposition is in fact based on linearity. But this is “not a linearity of moments or events evenly distributed *in* time, but a linear combination of (different) times.”<sup>8</sup> These quantum physics experiments give us an understanding of time where the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ coexist and do not imply that one should replace the other.<sup>9</sup>

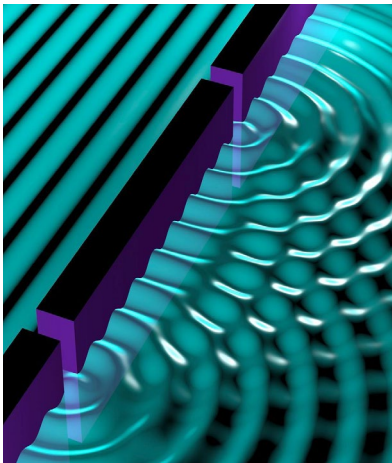
5 Barad, 68.

6 Barad, 68.

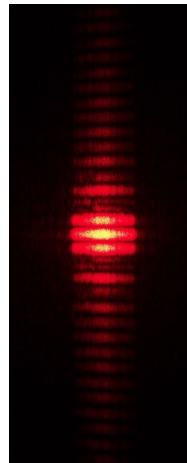
7 Barad, 67.

8 Barad, 68.

9 Barad, 69.



Graphic representation of the double slit experiment. Straight waves (left) encounter an obstacle with two slits cut into it and bend, forming an interference pattern, like ripples on a pond (right). (from Science Photo Library)



On the screen behind the two slits you would expect to see two bands of light. Instead, the interference pattern looks like a series of odd-numbered alternating bright and dark bands. Waves that amplify each other make the bright bands and those who cancel each other the dark ones. (from GIPhotoStock, Getty Images)

# The chronotope

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.  
—Mikhail Bakhtin

Inspired by mathematics and Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin formulated the concept of the chronotope, literally 'timespace,' in the first half of the twentieth century. He defined it as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature"<sup>10</sup> similarly to what Barad would term 'spacetime (re)configurings.' In this understanding, time is spatial, it becomes a dimension of space while space itself becomes a dimension of time. The chronotope represents the elementary unit of literary imagination which must show something, bring an image into the mind's eye: "In Bakhtin's view, chronotopes are the gateway to the specific temporal experiences with which art is concerned in its most elementary form. The aesthetic experiences expressed by artistic chronotopes combine the cultural context with the dynamics of human consciousness."<sup>11</sup> To put it otherwise, it is imagination and affect as the cornerstones of aesthetic experience.<sup>12</sup>

Looking at ancient novels, Bakhtin argued that they were the first attempts at introducing new forms of expressing what he terms 'time's fullness.' By uncovering social contradictions "every uncovering pushes time into the future; the more profoundly they are uncovered, the more authentic and comprehensive becomes time's fullness."<sup>13</sup> The main object of study in Bakhtin's essay is thus the nineteenth century novel. For example, the chronotope is fully expressed in the parlor or salon literary setting, such as in the novels of Stendhal and Balzac, in which characters are subjected to historical and social change to which they react emotionally.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Bart Keunen, "The Chronotopic Imagination in Literature and Film: Bakhtin, Bergson and Deleuze on Forms of Time," in *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, eds. Nele Bemong et al. (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Keunen, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, 146-47.

Bakhtin identifies five ‘minor chronotopes’ that he discusses in his essay: the encounter on the road, the Gothic castle, the parlor or the salon, the provincial town and the threshold. In these novels, for Bakhtin, “most important ... is the weaving of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life, with the secrets of the boudoir.”<sup>14</sup>

14 Bakhtin, 247.

Reflecting on older forms of literature, Bakhtin argued that mythical and artistic thought performs an act of historical inversion in which categories or values like ideal, purpose, justice, perfection, or harmony are always located in the past. Expressions of this inversion can be found in myths about paradise or a heroic or golden age. But by situating these categories in the past, myth manages to turn them into values that need to be recovered rather than achieved in the future. In his own words, “we might say that a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the future is here portrayed as something out of the past, a thing that is in no sense part of the past’s reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation.”<sup>15</sup> Expanding on the interconnected nature of time and space, and of ‘temporal indeterminacy’ Bakhtin adds:

15 Bakhtin, 147.

The present and even more the past are enriched at the expense of the future. The force and persuasiveness of reality of real life, belong to the present and the past alone – to the “is” and the “was” – and to the future belongs a reality of a different sort, one that is more ephemeral, a reality that when placed in the future is deprived of that materiality and density, that real-life weightiness that is essential to the “is” and the “was.” The future is not homogeneous with the present and the past, and no matter how much time it occupies it is denied a basic concreteness, it is somehow empty and fragmented – since everything affirmative, ideal, obligatory, desired has been shifted, via the inversion, into the past (or partly into the present); en route, it has become weightier, more authentic and persuasive.<sup>16</sup>

16 Bakhtin, 147.

Bakhtin’s view on myths shows affinities with Ernst Cassirer’s take on the mythological aspects of human experience, defined as the emotional reaction to the world: “in the mythical attitude, the world appears saturated with emotional qualities. Myths do not belong to a remote past, but constitute an experiential given that informs culture – even modern



culture.”<sup>17</sup> Even if we now like to think that we live in a disenchanted world, myth has by no means lost its affective power. 17 Keunen, 41.

Starting with the eighteenth century English novel, “history is increasingly made concrete in lasting, affectively charged images.”<sup>18</sup> For Bakhtin, the study of the chronotope is in essence concerned with “the problem of assimilating real time, that is, the problem of assimilating historical reality into the poetic image.”<sup>19</sup> Commenting on the novels of Stendhal and Balzac, Bakhtin remarks: 18 Keunen, 41.  
19 Bakhtin, 251.

Here the graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and everyday time are concentrated and condensed; at the same time they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch. The epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time].<sup>20</sup> 20 Bakhtin, 247.

As the concept of the chronotope is concerned with expressing the experience and reaction to change, it can be related to cinema, especially to the philosophy of cinema as theorized by Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, everyday experience is characterized by movement and change, and cinema comes closest to lived experience, or ‘lived time’ in Bakhtin’s terms, as it is fundamentally the art of movement and change. Following C.S. Peirce’s tripartite distinction between semiotic strategies through which reality can be analyzed, Deleuze applied a similar distinction to the cinema shot and the images that it is comprised of, namely images of affection, action and relation:

In all three cases, a specific type of change in the represented image is involved. In the case of an image of affection the change is ‘to be moved’; in the case of images governed by the dual the dynamics of action and reaction ensure change, while the image of relation thematically develops changes of a more abstract nature, because the dynamics of ‘linking up things’ are central to it.<sup>21</sup> 21 Keunen, 40.

# Hauntology

*Ich habe einmal, und vielleicht mit Recht, gesagt: Aus der früheren Kultur wird ein Trümmerhaufen und am Schluß ein Aschenhaufen werden, aber es werden Geister über der Asche schweben. [I once said, perhaps rightly: The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes.]—Ludwig Wittgenstein*

*Hanter ne veut pas dire être présent, et il faut introduire la hantise dans la construction même d'un concept. De tout concept, à commencer par les concepts d'être et de temps. Voilà ce que nous appellerions, ici, une hantologie. L'ontologie ne s'y oppose que dans un mouvement d'exorcisme. L'ontologie est une conjuration. [To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.]—Jacques Derrida*

What makes us human is not our alleged distinctiveness from – the nonhuman, the inhuman, the subhuman, the more-than-human, those who do not matter – but rather our relationship with and responsibility to the dead, to the ghosts of the past and the future. – Karen Barad

Eastern Europe is a space that is haunted by many ghosts, from the specters of former empires and civilizations to the specter of the failed utopia of communism. In Western pop culture imaginary Eastern Europe is the origin of some of the most enduring monsters: Dracula, Nosferatu, vampires, the undead *strigoi* or the story of the Countess Báthory.

In his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida coined the neologism ‘hauntology’ by relating Marx’s proclamation that “a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism” with Hamlet’s remark after first encountering his father’s ghost that “time is out of joint.” Hauntology represents a state of temporal and ontological disjunction, a crisis of presence. For Derrida spectrality and time are closely connected as “at bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come, or come back.”<sup>22</sup>

Karen Barad relates the concept of hauntology to the concept of the void. Quantum physics has shown that the void is not empty, it is constantly bubbling with so called virtual particles that pop in and out of existence forming vacuum fluctuations. For Barad this represents empirical evidence for Derrida’s hauntology. The vacuum is a “spectral domain where life and death are originally entangled,” “the yearning and the imagining of might yet have been.”<sup>23</sup>

The violent overthrow of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in the wake of the 1989 Romanian Revolution left a powerful image behind it: the Romanian red, yellow, and blue flag with the communist emblem imperfectly cut out. For the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek the cut-out emblem — “so that instead of the symbol standing for the organizing principle of the national life, there was nothing but a hole in its center”<sup>24</sup> — represents one of the most sublime images to emerge from the Eastern European upheavals of 1989 that marked the fall of communism. Žižek adds that “it is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the ‘open’ character of a historical situation ‘in its becoming,’ as Kierkegaard would have put it, of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one.”<sup>25</sup> The participants that poured into the squares of the major cities in Romania were experiencing the events “as an open space with an as yet uncontaminated aura.”<sup>26</sup> As significant as this moment was, it did not last for very long. As the Romanian writer Petrică Mogoș remarks,

22 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (NY: Routledge, 1994), 39.

23 Barad, “Troubling Time/s,” 56.

24 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1.

25 Žižek, 1.

26 Petrică Mogoș, “The Age of Nothingness,” in *Kajet 2: On Utopias* (2018), 13.

post-communism became the age of nothingness.<sup>27</sup>

Derrida saw ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. Everything leaves a trace in the world, even attempts at erasure as Barad points out. The double slit experiment showed that particles that pass through a series of slits will behave as waves and form a diffraction pattern on the screen behind the slits. This pattern could only emerge if the particles were in a state of superposition which included the possibility that they pass through both slits. If you decide to measure through which slit each particle goes, you will get a scatter pattern as expected from a classical particle, which indicates that the particle must have gone through only one of the slits. This is rather odd, as “waves and particles are ontologically distinct kinds: waves are extended disturbances that can overlap and move through one another; particles are localised entities that singly occupy a given position in space one moment at a time.”<sup>28</sup> In another variation of the double slit experiment, the information about which slit a particle went through (called ‘which-way information’) is recorded and the expected scattered pattern is observed on the screen. However, if the which-way information is erased after the particle has gone through one of the slits it is the diffraction pattern that remarkably appears on the screen, indicating that the particle would have gone through both slits. The team that conducted the quantum eraser experiment concluded that this is evidence for the possibility of modifying the past, but for Barad the experiment rather shows that the very nature of a particle, “its ontology in the past remains open to future reworkings.”<sup>29</sup> They take the results of the experiment as empirical proof for hauntology as a relational ontology. In other words, nothing exists as an independent, self-contained entity, everything can only exist in relationship with something else, and everything is repetition with a difference, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze.

28 Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” in *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (November 2010), 252.

29 Barad, “Troubling Time/s,” 71.

# Sonic hauntology

The concept of hauntology was sampled by the writer Mark Fisher and applied to the state of modern electronic music. After the year 2000 a series of musicians and producers seemed to embrace the theme and practice of spectrality. By using filtered old samples, rhythms and sounds, these artists manifest a nostalgia for canceled futures, which Fisher terms a ‘sonic hauntology:’

Sonic hauntology is exercised by the problem of memory and its imperfect recovery; a familiar enough theme, but one given an extra piquancy in the context of electronic music, which was for so long treated as a herald and signifier of the future. Here we confront the temporal crisis around which sonic hauntology is continually circling. The problem is that the electronic sounds produced between the 1950s and the 1990s remain sonic signifiers of the future—and, as such, they are signs that the anticipated future never actually arrived.<sup>30</sup>

30 Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” in *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013), 45.

Album cover for the 2014 album *Palm Mall* by 猫シ Corp. Through its use of '80s samples and aesthetics the Internet genre of vaporwave fully embraced sonic hauntology and nostalgia for a future that never happened as core characteristics of the genre.



# Manele as a hauntological art

A spectre is haunting Eastern Europe—it plays the *darbouka*.  
—Ștefan Ionescu-Ambrosie

One of the most popular and also maligned genres of music to arise from Eastern Europe in the last decades is what some researches grouped under the umbrella of the Balkan ethnopop genre. In Serbia it is known as *turbo-folk*, in Bulgaria as *chalga* and in Romania as *manele* (the plural form of *manea*). In Romania the origins of the genre can be traced back to the centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman domination when ‘Oriental’ music, fashion, and customs were the cultural norm among the ruling elites. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, the Romanian principalities reoriented themselves towards the West and soon ‘Oriental’ ways became outdated and obsolete. They were only to resurface in the 1960s in the genre of manele, which appeared “as a form of symbolic opposition by Romani communities from the slums of the cities on the Danube to their exclusion from Romanian society.”<sup>31</sup> In the transition years of the ’90s it quickly gained mainstream popularity especially among the “working class, nouveaux riches of the transitional period, teenagers, and young people, comprising together about one-third of the population.”<sup>32</sup> Even though manele are still mainly the realm of Romani performers, they are enjoyed by people from all ethnic backgrounds, especially in social contexts and events that range from wedding and anniversaries to concerts and performances in restaurants and clubs. The Romanian ethnomusicologists and anthropologists Anca

31 Anca Giurchescu and Speranța Rădulescu, “Music, Dance, Performance: A Descriptive Analysis of Manele,” in *Music, Dance, Performance in Manele in Romania*, eds. Margaret H. Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu and Anca Giurchescu (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 3.

32 Giurchescu and Rădulescu, 3.

Giurchescu and Speranța Rădulescu describe the phenomenon of manele in the following way:

Manele are the cumulative product of Romania's Balkan-Oriental past, the nationalist cultural policies of the former communist regime, Western cultural pressure, accelerated globalization, and the wild capitalism marring the country in the last two decades, including the unclear social relations it has generated. Manele are not simply music but rather a complex, syncretic phenomenon, borne from the fusion of a relatively new vocal and instrumental music on the one hand, and specific lyrical verses, dance, gestures, speeches, clothing, visual symbols, and patterns of behavior during its production on the other. A significant phenomenon is that manele have also become, in their amplitude and dynamism, a pretext for the venting of social tensions whose causes are older and deeper than the apparent ones, that is, sympathy or antipathy toward manele.<sup>33</sup>

33 Giurchescu and Rădulescu, 4.

Though it enjoys large-scale popularity, manele as a musical genre also creates a lot of antagonism and it is still the object of heated debate in intellectual circles. In fact, at the peak of the genre's popularity in the early 2000s, one of the most popular intellectual sports practiced by linguists, philosophers, and analysts was debating manele performers on live TV. Most Romanian intellectuals even went as far as claiming that the genre is responsible for corrupting the moral values of the youth.<sup>34</sup>

34 See Electronic Beats, "Manele Is The Balkans' Most Popular—And Marginalized—Music," and "Combating Racist Stigma in Romania's Manele Music," in *Electronic Beats Magazine* (Fall 2015).

Much of these accusations stem from the wide-spread racism towards Romani people and their culture, but there are also other factors at play. A significant one is the inability of accepting and reconciling with the tumultuous past of the region, a characteristic that some writers apply to Eastern Europe as a whole.<sup>35</sup> For the Romanian writer Ștefan Ionescu-Ambrosie, manele are essentially a hauntological art: "to speak of urban Balkan music is, in fact, to summon spirits, coming at you in waves like liquid history. This is not exactly why the music gets a bad rap, but I cannot help connect the hate of its detractors to the self-Orientalising going on within the subgenre."<sup>36</sup> Manele's Byzantine characteristics of gold leaf, personae, mosaic, and palimpsest represent a genre of music "foregrounding a history that refused to die."<sup>37</sup> By relating manele to hauntology, Ionescu-Ambrosie hopes "to unleash the potential of a post-manele reckoning, one that would

35 Petrică Mogoș, "Nous sommes des barbares!" in *Kajet 2* (2018), 15.

36 Ștefan Ionescu-Ambrosie, "Keep a Drowsy Emperor Awake," in *Kajet 3* (2019), 211.

37 Ionescu-Ambrosie, 211.

38 Ionescu-Ambrosie,  
211.

try to reconcile the historical lag between a *what-if* and a *what-is*.”<sup>38</sup>

While the West drenches itself in the neon-tinged psychedelia of trap, the East’s secret weapon lies quarantined within the vaguely-defined borders of the Balkan peninsula. *Turbo-folk*, *chalga*, *manele* are part of this new (old) world, an Oriental past that was right under our noses this whole time, all of which could hold the key to an already-embedded Easternfuturism.<sup>39</sup>

39 Ionescu-Ambrosie,  
211.



Graffiti from Toplița that reads “Rebeca money boss” (from personal archive).



# The times have overflown their streambed

Returning to Hamlet's "time out of joint" remark as one of the inspirations for Derrida's hauntology, it is important to circle back and relate this concept to Eastern Europe again. Although Shakespeare's works have been translated into Romanian numerous times, one of the most enduring Hamlet translations, which has also become a standard in theater representations, is the 1959 translation by Ion Vinea. Vinea was a former avant-garde poet who was banned from publishing by the communist regime. His historicized and localized translation of Hamlet was a peculiar and risky choice for the era. As the Romanian professor of English literature Mădălina Nicolaescu remarks, "[Vinea's] localizing translations explored the linguistic and cultural possibilities of a remote, 'authentic' Romanian world, imbued with the traditions of Orthodox religion, preceding the rationalist modernity, much vaunted by socialist propaganda."<sup>40</sup> His choice for "a Romanian 'localized' translation of the plays was to use the archaic-sounding language of eighteenth-century poet Ion Budai-Deleanu, abounding in words derived from the old Slavonic language and free from foreign, modernizing influences."<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Vinea chose to translate the famous 'time is out of joint' line as "*timpurile ieșitu-și-au din matcă*" witch rendered back into English literally reads as 'the times have overflown their streambed.' This peculiar choice (a more straightforward modern translation is "*timpul și-a ieșit din țâțâni*" 'time has come out of its hinges') seems to show a different understanding of time than Shakespeare's original. Instead of the mechanical metaphor of a joint or a hinge (that implies the linearity of time and seems to refer to 'clock time'), Vinea uses

40 Mădălina Nicolaescu, "Translations of Shakespeare in Romania: Going from Local to Global?" in Perspectives: Studies in Translatology 20, no. 3 (September 2012), 288.

41 Nicolaescu, 288.

the metaphor of a river that can fork and loop, returning back on itself.

The understanding of time as a river that loops seems much closer to the Eastern European experience of lived time. In a text suggestively titled *Past Utopia in a Loop*, Bosnian-born artist and writer Maisa Imamović muses on a visit to her hometown of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, after having lived in Western Europe. She describes the social ritual of returning home and visiting relatives in the form of a loop:

The rules of the game are quite straightforward: start the walk from below the balcony, collect points by stopping at as many aunts as possible (always aim for as big an amount as possible), and close the imaginary circuit under the same balcony. In doing so, one is not only entertained in times of dullness, but can also consider the whole city walked, and most aunts visited.<sup>42</sup>

42 Maisa Imamović, "Past Utopia in a Loop," in *Kajet 2* (2018), 73.

When returning, one is inevitably confronted with the question 'where did you appear from?' When one of her aunts asks her this very question, Imamović remarks "[it's] a question that—despite its obviousness—I find impossible to answer. My reaction is well-trained and comes out automatically. I tell her that *the scraps of time left from my new busy European life opened the doors of possibility*. Or something along those lines; something which could properly excuse my estrangement."<sup>43</sup>

43 Imamović, 73.

On the matter of returning, Barad writes: "Re-turning is a troubling matter, a matter of troubling. Loop diagrams in Quantum Field Theory are calculational devices representing processes in which there is a re-turn to—a touching of—the self. Loops are the ones that cause the most trouble for ruling conceptions of space, time, matter, causality, and nothingness."<sup>44</sup>

44 Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 81.



Photo from Rimetea  
(from personal archive).

PART 2:

**The Other  
within Europe**

# *Relatively* civilized, *relatively* European

On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022, just one day after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the CBS News reporter Charlie D’Agata stated live from Kyiv:

But this isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European—I have to choose those words carefully too—city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen. So it’s partly human nature, but they’re not in denial.<sup>45</sup>

Western media was quick to criticize D’Agata’s take that implies that the Middle East is uncivilized, and he was also quick to apologize for his choice of words. Commenting on the racism of this statement, Moustafa Bayoumi writing for *The Guardian* asked “by describing Ukraine as ‘civilized,’ isn’t he really telling us that Ukrainians, unlike Afghans and Iraqis, are more deserving of our sympathy than Iraqis or Afghans?”<sup>46</sup> And this is of course true, but even Bayoumi fails to see the three-tier global hierarchy so bluntly expressed by D’Agata’s statements. D’Agata does not describe Ukrainians as ‘civilized’ as Bayoumi says, but as ‘*relatively* civilized’ (my emphasis). Therefore the implication is that only compared to others, i.e. people of color, of different religion, can Ukrainians, and through extension Eastern Europeans, be recognized as acceptable to the West.<sup>47</sup> In the First World–Third World debate, the Second World seems to have no place.

The following chapters will trace the centuries old Western history of thinking and writing *about*, rather than *from* Eastern Europe.

45 Moustafa Bayoumi, “They Are ‘Civilised’ and ‘Look Like Us’: The Racist Coverage of Ukraine,” in *The Guardian* (March 2, 2022).

46 Bayoumi

47 Ileana Voichița Năchescu, “Ukraine: Beyond the Postsoviet,” in *Boston Review* (March 4, 2022).

# In the shadow of Europe

In the shadow it was possible to imagine vaguely whatever was unhappy or unpleasant, unsettling or alarming, and yet it was also possible not to look too closely, permitted even to look away—for who could see through an iron curtain and discern the shapes enveloped in shadow?—Larry Wolff

On March 5th, 1946, at the invitation of President Truman, Churchill delivered a famous speech in the gymnasium of the Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Officially titled “The Sinews of Peace,” but better known by its informal title, “The Iron Curtain Speech,” it marked the beginning of the Cold War era:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow... A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory.<sup>48</sup>

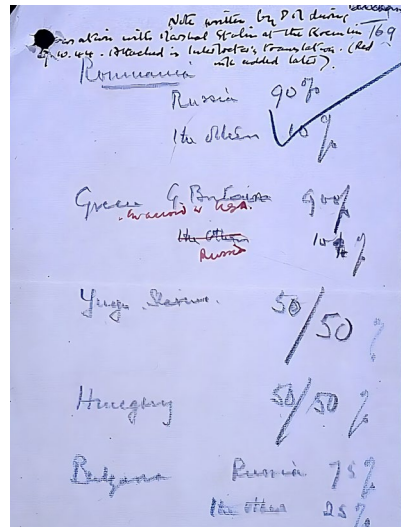
<sup>48</sup> Winston Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace,” Speech (Fulton, Missouri: Westminster College, March 5, 1946).

The Iron Curtain metaphor carved Europe into a very real distinction between East and West. Churchill’s use of the passive voice in his speech (“an iron curtain *has descended*,” “all these famous cities . . . *are subject*,” “a shadow *has fallen*”—my emphasis) casts him as a mere observer of the event,

while hiding his active role in carving Europe's map in two. As Churchill himself admitted in his memoirs, he was no innocent observer of this event. Just a couple of years prior to his speech, he met with Stalin in a secret meeting in Moscow, now infamously known as "The Percentages Agreement," were they negotiated percentages of Soviet and Western influence over Eastern Europe.

The moment was apt for business, so I said [to Stalin], "Let us settle about our affairs in the Balkans. Your armies are in Roumania and Bulgaria. We have interests, missions, and agents there. Don't let us get at cross-purposes in small ways. So far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have ninety percent predominance in Roumania, for us to have ninety per cent of the say in Greece, and go fifty-fifty about Yugoslavia?" While this was being translated I wrote out on a half-sheet of paper:

|                         |  |        |
|-------------------------|--|--------|
| Roumania:               |  |        |
| Russia                  |  | 90%    |
| The others              |  | 10%    |
| Greece:                 |  |        |
| Great Britain           |  | 90%    |
| (in accord with U.S.A.) |  |        |
| Russia                  |  | 10%    |
| Yugoslavia:             |  | 50/50% |
| Hungary:                |  | 50/50% |
| Bulgaria:               |  |        |
| Russia                  |  | 75%    |
| The others              |  | 25%    |



The "Percentages Agreement" note, referred to as "the naughty document" by Churchill.

I pushed this across to Stalin, who had by then heard the translation. There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us. It was all settled in no more time than it takes to set down... After this there was a long silence. The pencilled paper lay in the centre of the table. At length I said, "Might it not be thought rather cynical if it seemed we had disposed of these issues so fateful to millions of people, in such an offhand manner? Let us burn the paper." "No, you keep it," said Stalin.<sup>49</sup>

49 Winston Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Rosetta Books, 2014), 273-74.

# How to invent Eastern Europe

The Iron Curtain metaphor and its East versus West antagonism would dominate international relations for almost half a century. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the '89 revolutions that took over Eastern Europe, the era of division seemed to be over. But the shadow invoked by Churchill still persists, because the idea of a clear East–West distinction in Europe is not just the byproduct of Cold War era politics. As the historian Larry Wolf shows in *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the distinction dates to at least a couple of centuries prior and is in most part the product of a geographical and mental shift that happened in Western Europe in the age of Enlightenment.

One of the first divisions of Europe was between the civilized South and the barbaric North, which can be traced back to Roman times. In the Renaissance, the South's superiority was reinforced from Italian city-states like Florence, Venice or Milan as these were the centers of art, culture, trade and finance. In the seventeenth century with the rise of the Enlightenment, power shifted from the South of the continent to the West. The Western cities of Paris, Amsterdam, and London became the new centers of power. It is this shift to the West that produced the division that is still felt today.

It was not a natural distinction, or even an innocent one, for it was produced as a work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion. Churchill might remove himself to Fulton, Missouri, to produce a semblance of external perspective, discerning from a distance the division of Europe. The original division, however, happened at home.



It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment, with its intellectual centers in Western Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of “civilization,” an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. Such was the invention of Eastern Europe.<sup>50</sup>

50 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 4.

This process required an exercise of mental mapping which was mainly carried out by Western European travelers into Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. The American John Ledyard, who traveled the world with Captain Cook, coined the term ‘philosophic geography’ which referred to a “freely constructed geographical sentiment.”<sup>51</sup> Traveling from Siberia towards the West, through the Russian Empire and then through Poland, Ledyard only considered to be back in Europe at the Prussian border. The idea of ‘philosophic geography’ was so influential that several Enlightenment writers wrote passionately about Eastern Europe without ever traveling to the region (Voltaire about Russia, Rousseau about Poland). There was no need to travel to the East in order to participate in the sport of its intellectual discovery.<sup>52</sup> In the eighteenth century the geographical border between Europe and Asia was still a matter of debate, but even so, Ledyard’s view contradicted the scientific cartography of the era and excluded the East from Europe.

51 Wolff, 6.

52 Wolff, 7.

Up until the twentieth century the main terms for referring to Eastern Europe in French were *l’Europe orientale*, or *l’Orient européen*, Oriental Europe, or the European Orient.<sup>53</sup> These terms reveal how the construction of Eastern Europe was based on a “paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe,”<sup>54</sup> both Orient and an in-between Europe and the Orient. Following Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, Wolff describes the construction of Eastern Europe through the term ‘demi-Orientalism.’ Said explains how in the Western imagination the Orient was culturally constructed as an image of otherness which served as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>55</sup> This image of otherness was particularly used in the nineteenth century European art as represented by the Orientalist Art movement (such as the French painters Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon

53 Wolff, 6.

54 Wolff, 7.

55 Edward Said quoted in Wolff, 6-7.

Gérôme, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres). The Orient was presented as exotic, undeveloped and static, both alluring and a threat to the Western principles of progress and civilization. In Eastern Europe the process of demi-Orientalization was carried out through two core concepts, 'development' and 'civilization,' both products of the Enlightenment. The point of reference for what development and civilization meant was of course Western Europe.

The issues of backwardness and development in Eastern Europe were broached and defined in the eighteenth century, not essentially as economic issues, and they continue to frame our conception of these lands. It was Eastern Europe's ambiguous location, within Europe but not fully European, that called for such notions as backwardness and development to mediate between the poles of civilization and barbarism. In fact, Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century provided Western Europe with its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply all over the globe.<sup>56</sup>

56 Wolff, 9.

The term 'civilization' appeared as a neologism in both French and English in the eighteenth century and its inclusion in the dictionaries was a matter of debate. However, the term became the conceptual focus for thinking a new ordering of Europe into 'more' or 'less civilized' regions. By appropriating the meaning of civilization for itself, Western Europe was not only inventing the East, but it was also inventing itself through opposition. It is through these processes that the West established itself as the center of hegemonic power and knowledge production and the concepts of development and civilization were exported to the entire world. The labels of underdevelopment and barbarism became the most powerful conceptual tools for aiding colonization.

# Coloniality

Economic and political peripheries are accused of being ‘less than,’ ‘not yet,’ or even ‘non-modern.’ The peripheral label attached to all non-Western countries has led in these regions to the development of theories that are critical of modernity and the philosophy of history that modernity was founded upon. As the Romanian-born sociologist Manuela Boată states “modern Europe became the first geo-political location on the globe to englobe all other cultures as its periphery or semiperiphery.”<sup>57</sup> After all, the message is that modernity can only be achieved by way of Westernization and Western Europe holds the patent on modernity. Modernity was conceptualized as originating in Western Europe through a linear historical progression from the Italian Renaissance to the Protestant Reform which led to the Age of Enlightenment’s rationalism which gave us the British Parliament and the French Revolution.<sup>58</sup>

Western colonization led to a classification of the world with respect to its degree of Occidentalism. European ethnocentrism claimed and imposed universal validity in terms of economic and cultural precepts. According to Aníbal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist, the foundational myths at the core of Eurocentrism are evolutionism and dualism. Evolutionism is manifested through the view that linear progress led to Western civilisation, and dualism manifests itself through differentiations such as Europe–non-Europe, center–periphery, primitive–civilized, irrational–rational or modern–traditional.<sup>59</sup>

Allegedly universal knowledge therefore is never neutral or unpositioned, but reproduces the particular epistemological perspective of a local history that it subsequently does or does not manage to establish to the detriment of other local histories. Critical theories attacking modernity from within fail to pinpoint this additional dimension pertaining to coloniality, and thereby become complicitous with the criticized global design, whose premises they unwillingly reproduce.<sup>60</sup>

57 Manuela Boată, “The Eastern Margins of Empire: Coloniality in 19th Century Romania,” in *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (March/May 2007), 370.

58 Boată, 368-69.

59 Boată, 370.

60 Boată, 370.

Quijano coined the term ‘coloniality’ as an expansion of the term ‘colonialism.’ Coloniality refers to the process of classification that started with European colonialist expansion which produced European modernity. This process of classification operates on an economic level through exploitative relations between capital and labor, in relations of economic and cultural domination between central and peripheral regions and not least, in the production of subjectivities and knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

61 Boatcă, 382.

Consequently, the distribution of scientific and cultural production in First, Second, and Third Worlds mandates that someone originating from an economically and technologically underdeveloped country does not have the necessary frame of mind and culture of scholarship which would allow them to study other civilizations, and therefore cannot produce any kind of significant theoretical thinking because theory is defined according to First World standards. In line with this logic, valid knowledge is produced in First World countries where there are no ideological obstructions to scientific and theoretical thinking. Thus, the global design of the ‘civilizing mission’ is still at work in the distribution of scientific labor between the three worlds and continues to shape our understanding of modernity and the modern.<sup>62</sup>

62 Boatcă, 371.

The American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein studied academic scholarship produced between 1850 and 1945. For at least a century most of it originated from and was about just five countries: France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the US. What this essentially says is that “these are the important countries, this is what matters, this is what you should study in order to learn how the world operates.”<sup>63</sup> In the West the main branches of science that generated scholarship were sociology, political science and economy, which were the lenses through which the West was studied. The rest of the world was to be studied through anthropology or ‘Oriental’ studies, disciplines which at their inception were meant to provide explanations as to “why the non-Western countries were not or could not become modern.”<sup>64</sup> This dualist view on the World, typical of coloniality, has deep consequences in the academic world. The validity of a scientific theory becomes inextricably linked to the place of origin of its author. Walter Mignolo states that this view creates a distinction “between knowing *about* and knowing *from*.”<sup>65</sup>

63 Immanuel Wallerstein quoted in Boatcă, 371.

64 Boatcă, 371.

65 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 307.

Critical theoretical accounts produced within these local histories that have, at various moments in history, attempted to unveil the global designs behind the project of modernity from Renaissance Christianity to the contemporary global market have tended to remain silent in the world intellectual community both because of the lack of prestige of their epistemological location and for not having been articulated in a 'modern' language.<sup>66</sup>

66 Boacǎ, 372.

# Modernity and 19th century Romania

In the nineteenth century, what is now Romania was still three distinct principalities, Transylvania, Wallachia, and Moldavia, which for centuries were the object of contention between the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires. During the centuries of Ottoman rule the economic surplus of the principalities was funneled towards Istanbul where it was used to finance Byzantine luxuries. With the decline of the Ottoman empire the Romanian provinces shifted from the former Eastern protocolonial system to the Western neocolonial one and became Western Europe's agrarian backwater. This form of dependency on the West was similar to the one experienced by former colonies of Western nations after gaining political independence.

The shift from East to West was a traumatic experience that has never healed. Even though Romania was never formally colonized, it entered modernity through its back door, i.e. coloniality. Although race was not a major criterion for othering, the negative terms in the dualist pairs of civilized–barbarian, rational–irrational, developed–underdeveloped were nonetheless applied to Eastern Europe.

This was the background against which Romanians had to position themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century: an ambivalent relationship with the West, as its 'other within.'

Yet, unlike in the West, obstacles to cultural, political and economic modernization in the European periphery were, first, imperial military domination, and second, the expansion of international capital. This meant that, once

politically independent, Romania had to resist economic conquest in order to safeguard its national identity.<sup>67</sup>

As the Ottoman empire and its influence in the region started to decline, the so-called ‘Oriental ways’ became outdated, especially as more and more young Romanians were able to study abroad, particularly in France. Romania was starting to reorient itself towards the West. As the Romanian historian Neagu Djuvara points out, the nineteenth century was a particularly important turning point:

To understand some of the issues Romania is confronted with today, we must emphasise the profound mutations that took place at the beginning of that century and spanning several generations, as we generally overlook this momentous change of 150–200 years ago as if it were somehow shameful to admit that back then, we belonged to a different world than the one we are part of now.<sup>68</sup>

68 Neagu Djuvara, *A Brief Illustrated History of Romanians*, trans. Cristian Anton (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2016), 240.

The shame of the Oriental legacy was also becoming manifest in language and vocabulary. The Turkish-language borrowings became outdated: for example, words for Ottoman-derived administrative functions that were no longer necessary, as well as words for Oriental attire which was quickly going out of fashion. Several Turkish loans that are still in use in modern Romanian have acquired a pejorative meaning.

## Border thinking

In 1848 the Romanian principalities were caught in the revolutionary wave that spread all over Europe. Inspired by the French Revolution, the Romanian counterparts laid claim to national independence, serf emancipation, equal civic and political rights, freedom of press and speech, and the foundation of an army. It was stifled through the joint effort of Russian and Ottoman intervention. The revolutionaries would have to wait for a couple of decades to reach their goals.

Most revolutionaries were educated in Western universities and were generally critical of foreign cultural imports. They were very aware of

Romania's peripheral status which invited different critiques of modernity. However, their thinking was still rooted in the Western liberal idea of linear progress and civilization. Only conservative thought advocated against uncritically importing modernity from the West. This type of thought was critical of both the Western and the Eastern traditions, in a "double critique" or what Mignolo terms "border thinking" which implies "thinking from both traditions, and at the same time from neither."<sup>69</sup> In nineteenth century Romania, two of the most influential thinkers that formulated critiques of modernity were the literary critic and politician Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) and the writer and poet Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889).

69 Boacǎ, 373.

## Forms without substance

Titu Maiorescu was born in Craiova in 1840 from a Wallachian mother and a Transylvanian father. His family moved to Vienna when he was 11 and Maiorescu was enrolled in the Theresianum Academy. After graduating first of his class in 1858, Maiorescu furthered his studies in the West and obtained a license in philology and philosophy at Sorbonne, a license in law at the University of Paris and a PhD in philosophy at the University of Giessen, all before he was twenty-one. After his studies, he returned to Romania and started teaching at the University of Iași, where he became rector in 1863. During these years he founded a very influential cultural society called *Junimea* (The Youth).

In 1859 the autonomous principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, still vassals of the Ottoman empire, elected the same prince to rule them, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, effectively reaching unification. Even though the 1848 revolution was suppressed, most of its Western principles were implemented under the newly formed union.

Critical of the process of modernization that Romania was going through, Maiorescu developed an influential critique, known as *teoria formelor fără fond*, 'the theory of forms without substance.'<sup>70</sup> The theory argues that a majority peasant country like Romania could not receive Western forms of civilization, because it had nothing in its history to sustain them. Maiorescu recognized that the Western model of civilization was the result of specific historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions which had no equivalent in Romanian history.<sup>71</sup>

70 In Romanian, *fond* has different connotations compared to 'substance.' It usually means 'background' or 'foundation,' cognate with English 'to found;' *fără fond* can also be translated as 'unfounded.'

71 Boacǎ, 373.

The two major drivers of Western modernity, industrialization and the middle class, were totally absent. Romanian peasants were serfs, exploited and ruled by elites: foreign Phanariots (affluent Greek families from a Greek quarter in Istanbul) in Wallachia and Moldavia, and foreign or local Hungarians in Transylvania. Large-scale industrialization was only to be achieved in the second half of the twentieth century, under the communist regime. Therefore, Maiorescu argued that importing superstructural forms of modernity would not lead to progress, as the liberals claimed, but only hide the exploitative structures at the core of the East–West divide. Romania’s only possibility of preserving its national identity was to provide a specific cultural, economic, and political foundation that could sustain the adopted forms.<sup>72</sup>

72 Boacǎ, 374.

As soon as a higher culture is located in the vicinity of a people, it is bound to have some bearing on it. ... One cannot resist this call: union in terms of cultural principles is the necessary fate of every European people. The question is only whether one can accomplish it as an equal companion or as an obedient slave; whether by preserving and strengthening one’s national independence or by submitting to the foreign power. And this question can only be solved by the vitality of the people’s economic and intellectual life.<sup>73</sup>

73 Titus Maiorescu (1973) quoted in Boacǎ, 375.

About a century after Maiorescu formulated his ‘forms without substance’ theory, Western cultural and evolutionary anthropologists that were studying the ‘primitive’ former colonies reached the same conclusion. Exporting modern values and principles outside of the West was doomed to fail as the rest of the world lacked the cultural, economic, and technological foundations needed in order to sustain them. Even more, the phenomenon of exporting modernity came to be interpreted as the West trying to maintain world dominance even after the process of formal decolonization. The anthropologists that were critical of the American modernization school would also offer a similar solution to Maiorescu: in order to maintain the newly created Western institutions the former colonies had to provide a local, specific foundation.<sup>74</sup>

74 Boacǎ, 374.



# Cosmopolitanism and xenocracy

Mihai Eminescu is the most revered Romanian writer and he is considered Romania's national poet. Mostly known for his poems and short stories which are studied in school as representative of Romanian Romanticism, Eminescu was also a prolific political writer and journalist. Like Titu Maiorescu, he had also been educated in the West. Between 1869–1874 he attended courses in philosophy and law at the University of Vienna and at Humboldt University of Berlin, but he did not receive any degrees. During his studies he became involved in Maiorescu's *Junimea* society and was a contributor to *Convorbiri Literare*, "Literary conversations," *Junimea's* literary magazine. Eminescu was highly influenced by Maiorescu's views and theories and throughout his journalistic career he further expanded on them.

Based on the theory of forms without substance Eminescu would formulate a coherent sociopolitical theory that accounted for Romania's peripheric and dependent status. For him the mechanisms through which modernity operated were not only economic, but also cultural and ideological. He expressed this view through the term 'cosmopolitanism' which he defined as "an unseen power, alien everywhere and at home everywhere, trying to realise the ideal of a universal empire."<sup>75</sup>

75 Mihai Eminescu (1876) quoted in Boatcă, 375.

What he identified as principles of 'cosmopolitanism' were free trade, individualism, rational social order, and egalitarianism. These principles stood in sharp contrast to Romania's economic level, class structure, or social mobility. Even more, their introduction with the 1848 Revolution managed to stifle Romania's organic evolution. The adoption of the 'cosmopolitanist' principles into law had effectively "disintegrated the traditional class system by displacing the indigenous bourgeoisie, destabilized the economy by enhancing consumption levels while diminishing production, and created gaps in the opportunity structure later to be filled by foreign economic agents."<sup>76</sup>

76 Boatcă, 376.

The first Romanian Constitution, adopted in 1866 by the Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, later King Carol I of Romania, was heavily based on the Belgian constitution of 1831. But unlike the Belgian constitution which accounted for its middle-class majority, the Romanian

counterpart “failed to represent precisely the largest segment of the population, the peasantry.”<sup>77</sup> For Eminescu this major oversight was representative of the phenomenon he was criticizing, namely the uncritical adoption of foreign institutions, values and principles which had no equivalent in Romanian history and therefore could not be sustained.

When referring to foreign elites, Eminescu used the term ‘xenocracy’ and identified them as the agents responsible for Romania’s transition from a protocolonial to a neocolonial regime that kept Romania in a peripheral and dependent status. He also made an important distinction between a ‘xenocracy of conquest’ employed by the neighboring empires through their need of constant expansion, and a ‘xenocracy by insidiousness’ employed by the neocolonial regime through economic and ideological mechanisms. This important distinction was also made about a century later by thinkers like Quijano and Mignolo. They used the term ‘coloniality of power’ to describe how even after former decolonization Europe managed to maintain influence and control in these regions through its neocolonial elites. This further contributed to the peripheralization of the former colonies.<sup>78</sup>

# Thinking about/ from the periphery

Maiorescu and Eminescu's theories opposed not only liberal ideas, but also socialist ones, which still looked at human history through the lens of linear, evolutionary progress. The Marxist view that the peasant class was incapable of organizing itself to effect change and that the majority was to be incorporated into the proletarian or landlord classes was also not applicable to Romania. Some of the most significant revolts in the region were peasant revolts against the injustices of the feudal lords (the Transylvanian revolts of 1437, 1514, 1784, and the Moldavian and Wallachian revolts of 1907).

Both educated in the West, Maiorescu and Eminescu were not only theorizing *about* the periphery, but also *from* the periphery. They were the first Romanian thinkers to warn about the dangers of uncritically borrowing Western institutions, policies, and ideologies. The theories they formulated remained influential to this day, but their political writings were banned during communism. By advocating for specific local conditions to sustain the adopted institutions, Maiorescu and Eminescu's ideas were at odds with the internationalist orientation of the Communist Party and the emphasis on organic evolution was against the socialist idea of revolutionary transformation. Eminescu was therefore accused of nationalism and proto-fascism.<sup>79</sup> Maiorescu's influential theory of forms without substance couldn't be completely banned so it was stripped of its social and political implications and was relegated to the realm of literary theory, only to be applied to works of literature.<sup>80</sup>

Eminescu and Maiorescu are both still labeled as nationalist, conservative thinkers, but as they both noted, these labels are still viewed through a Western frame of reference. Western conservatism was born as a reactionary movement of the elites trying to cling to former feudal privileges that were disappearing in the transition to capitalism. In the conservative view this loss of privileges would hurt social evolution in the long run. Since such a reactionary movement could not happen in Romania, Romanian

79 Eminescu did express anti-Semitic views in his political writings, but proposed a compromise in the so-called "Jewish question."

80 Boacă, 380-81.

conservatism cannot be fully equated with its Western counterpart.<sup>81</sup>

In present day Romania it is difficult to recover the theoretical tradition of criticizing modernity because the vague promise of full European integration requires a dismissal of any type of approach that questions the processes of Westernization, globalization, or cultural homogenization.

The modernity that Western social sciences were called upon to analyze, but also to imagine, is a Western macronarrative, to be understood against the background of the history, cultural traditions and economic development of its place of origin—Western Europe. A bird's eye view of world modernity in turn requires taking into account the hitherto silent knowledges speaking from coloniality and able to translate between epistemological locations on account of having been trained in modern thought while living under (neo) colonial realities. The resulting picture will probably be neither modern nor colonial, neither postmodern nor postcolonial, but a synthesis incorporating both experiences while presupposing neither.<sup>82</sup>

# Writing from the periphery

This is my generation's doubtful privilege: we've experienced powerlessness in three different societies: socialist, postsocialist, and as immigrants in the West.—Voichița Năchescu

Contemporary Western theoretical thinking has been busy deconstructing the First World—Third World divide, but in the process, it has completely ignored the Second World, Eastern Europe. Even though the countries from the former communist bloc are partly integrated in the EU now, their status is still peripheric. The long transition to capitalism managed to destroy social safety nets and generally failed to bring about much-promised prosperity. As a result, large numbers of Eastern Europeans migrated to the West, especially after some of their countries joined the EU. According

to a 2015 UN report on migration, between 2000 and 2015, Romania and Poland were second and third in terms of outmigration, after war-torn Syria. Eastern Europeans who migrated from behind the Iron Curtain were celebrated as their act reinforced Western views on the socialist bloc. But the immigrants who reached the West because of the traumas of the transition to neoliberalism are still largely ignored.<sup>83</sup>

For the Romanian transnational feminist writer Voichița Năchescu “there are commonalities of experience among Eastern European immigrants” that “have to do less with nationality than with a common regional identity.”<sup>84</sup> Following Chandra Mohanty<sup>85</sup> who advocates for a regional South Asian identity instead of national identities, Năchescu also proposes a regional Eastern European identity which can be a useful category especially for immigrants. She identifies three main coordinates of the Eastern European experience: the communist heritage followed by the painful transition to the capitalist economy, the marginalization experienced in the West, and the racialization as White which comes at the price of denying and erasing the experience of marginalization. Năchescu shows how American nineteenth century debates on immigration positioned Eastern Europeans within the category of whiteness, but nevertheless at the bottom of the white racial order.<sup>86</sup> Simply put, Eastern Europeans are White, but not Western. Katarzyna Marciniak describes this experience through the concept of alienhood which she defined as

a highly radicalized rhetorical and disciplinary apparatus that classifies immigrants, refugees, and border crossers, in relation to the U.S. territory. The notion of alien has a bifold, palimpsestic signification in American culture—meaning both foreigner and extraterrestrial creature. The notion of the alien brands exiles as outsiders: the ones who do not and will not fully belong, and may only aspire to provisional belonging.<sup>87</sup>

The sense of provisional belonging is another Eastern European characteristic according to Petrică Mogos: “Eastern Europeans long to become strangers, ultimately wanting to be something else, anything but what they already are.”<sup>88</sup> This anomalous condition makes many Eastern Europeans believe “they were born ‘in the wrong place,’ ‘at the wrong time,’ and that they exist ‘under the wrong circumstances.’”<sup>89</sup>

83 Voichița Năchescu, “Ukraine: Beyond the Postsoviet.” (2022).

84 Voichița Năchescu, “Unclassifiable Outsiders: Eastern European Women, Transnational Whiteness, and Solidarity,” in *Narratives of Marginalized Identities in Higher Education Inside and Outside the Academy*, ed. Santosh Khadka, Joanna Davis-McElligatt, and Keith Dorwick (Routledge, 2008), 193.

85 See Chandra Mohanty, “Genealogies of Community, Home, and Nation,” in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

86 Năchescu, 189, 195.

87 Katarzyna Marciniak, *Alienhood: Citizenship, Exile, and the Logic of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii.

88 Mogos, “Nous sommes des barbares!” 15.

89 Mogos, 15.

Jennifer Suchland, American professor of Eastern European feminist studies, explains the lack of theoretical interest on Eastern Europe as follows. From the perspective of critical theory, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Eastern Europe was seen as effectively aligned with the West as it underwent processes of Europeanization and democratization. Through its pro-Western stance, the Second World therefore cannot produce critical theory or can no longer be considered critical of the West. The source of critical writing was identified in the Third World, through its association with anti-colonial movements.<sup>90</sup> This skewed view of the Second World fails to acknowledge that the processes of democratization and Europeanisation are still incomplete. The accusation of a lack of critical theory in Eastern Europe does not really hold water as Eastern Europe has produced and continues to produce critical theory. As I showed in the Romanian example, the transplantation of modernity was highly criticized by the most influential local intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Titu Maiorescu and Mihai Eminescu, right from the start of Romania's reorientation towards the West. In fact, their views and conclusions will be mirrored a century later by the very source of critical theory, the Third World anti-colonial thinkers. Another major factor that contributed to the invisibility of Eastern critical theory in the West is the fact that most of it was not written or translated in a 'modern language' therefore becoming 'inaccessible' to the West.

Although the decolonial perspective is a useful lens through which to look at Eastern Europe in order to see how it was constructed in the central-periphery dichotomy, it also has its pitfalls. As the Romanian writer Alexandra Chiriac warns, with the positive framing of the periphery: "There is a real risk that in attempting to beat the centre at their own game we begin appropriating the same oppressive strategies and tactical erasures."<sup>91</sup> After all, "even the periphery has its own peripheries,"<sup>92</sup> and "in the rush to 'make the periphery great again', uncomfortable issues of race, class, gender, and so on, are swept under the carpet."<sup>93</sup> Eastern Europe was not uniformly in a position of weakness and in order "to truly challenge its peripheral condition, the region must face its own difficult histories and acknowledge its own tactics of oppression and erasure."<sup>94</sup> For example Romania has not yet addressed the enslavement of its Roma population, nor its own colonial expansion into Northern Bukovina or

90 Jennifer Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?" in *Signs* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2011), 839.

91 Alexandra Chiriac, "Marginalising the Centre, De-centring the Periphery: Contested Cultural Histories in Eastern Europe," in *Kajet 4: On Periphery* (Fall 2020), 144.

92 Chiriac, 148.

93 Chiriac, 145.

94 Chiriac, 148.

Southern Dobruja in the aftermath of the First World War. Romanianization policies that were put into place in these regions were meant to “strip ethnic minorities of their main cultural outlets.”<sup>95</sup> The work of undoing the center requires self-awareness and not obscuring or discarding the uncomfortable things we encounter along the way, or, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, this type of work requires staying with the trouble.

95 Chiriac, 147.



Anonymous and undated portrait of a Romani family from the Costică Acsinte photo archive. Slobozia, between 1930–1960 (from Costică Acsinte, Flickr).

# European Influenza

At the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005 the Romanian pavilion was represented by the artist Daniel Knorr and curated by Marius Babias. Knorr is a conceptual artist born in Romania who lives and works in Berlin. Since 2001 he had been developing ‘invisible artworks’ that only materialize through documentation and through the discourse they generate in the media. For the Biennale Knorr chose to leave the Romanian pavilion empty and in the state that he found it from the previous edition. The walls of the pavilion displayed scratches and paint peelings – traces left by previous exhibitions. Knorr also chose to open the backdoor of the pavilion which leads directly into the streets of Venice, outside of the Giardini park of the Biennale. The work was titled *European Influenza/Gripa Europeană* and the visitors could get a free publication at the entrance, a 1000-page reader edited by Babias which combined Knorr’s 360° photography with critical texts that discussed the EU’s expansion into Eastern Europe and issues of (re)defining Eastern European identities. Of note is that in 2005 Romania was an EU candidate and it would only join the EU in 2007 (along with Bulgaria).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> See Daniel Knorr, *European Influenza*, ed. Marius Babias (Cluj: Idea and Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2007).

In Romania Knorr’s proposal created controversy in the media from the moment the Ministry of Culture announced it in a press release. Leaving aside the accusations that Knorr was not representative for Romanian art since he lived and worked abroad, the most controversial aspect of Knorr’s proposal was the perceived nothingness that the artist chose to display in the pavilion. Many critics took this to mean that the artist had nothing to say. As the Romanian writer Raluca Voinea puts it:

Even if *European Influenza* was only that – nothingness pure and simple, at an artistic event which suffers anyway from being too full – it would still be worth a bit more consideration. Instead, the international context of conceptual art from the last century, in which nothingness, absence, and the void occupy significant positions, was not even mentioned by the Romanian media. Why?



On the one hand, detractors said that if this concept could find supporters in Western Europe, it was due to their own crisis of identity; on the other, they said Romania, a country with so many values which had been repressed under communism, needed to be able to show them at last a proof of its extraordinary spiritual richness. Marius Babias recognizes in this categorical dismissal of the project a return of the Romanian intellectual elite to primitive thinking structures, an escape from the responsibility of coping with the recent past and with the present context in which Romania has to function.<sup>97</sup>

97 Raluca Voinea, "Nothing," entry in *Atlas of Transformation* (2011).

*European Influenza* managed to reveal what Romanian writer Petrică Mogoș considers to be one of the most distinguishable characteristics of Eastern Europeans, namely their "lack of competence to come to terms with their past and to produce rational explanations concerning their past and present."<sup>98</sup> The work continues to invite reflection on this topic and therefore materializes every time it is referenced. As a mirror to the reader published with the Biennale presentation, Knorr also published a reader after the exhibition. The second reader collects all the mentions of *European Influenza* published in the international media. It also includes several complaints about the work from Romanian politicians and the answers from the Ministry of Culture.

98 Mogoș, "Nous sommes des barbares!" 15.

As we saw in the first part of this study the void is never fully empty and attempts at erasure leave their own marks. By leaving the traces of past exhibitions on the walls of the pavilion Knorr managed to conjure ghosts in the space, transforming it into a hauntological space where different histories and timelines could coexist. The void of the pavilion also echoed the Romanian flag during the '89 Revolution which had a void at its center, with the communist emblem imperfectly cut out.

The fall of communism across the Eastern Bloc triggered the emergence of a new environment marked by commodification, precarity, dread, alienation, and depression. Unable to creep in the paralysing portal toward neoliberal capitalism, the collective utopia of communism was suddenly demystified and fragmented into a myriad of private utopias. The desire called utopia disintegrated. Post-communism became anti-utopian *par excellence*, but also entirely devoid of prospects—a vast and complete emptiness. Post-communism became *the age of nothingness*.<sup>99</sup>

99 Petrică Mogoș, "The Age of Nothingness," in *Kajet 2: On Utopias* (2018), 11.

100 Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 56.

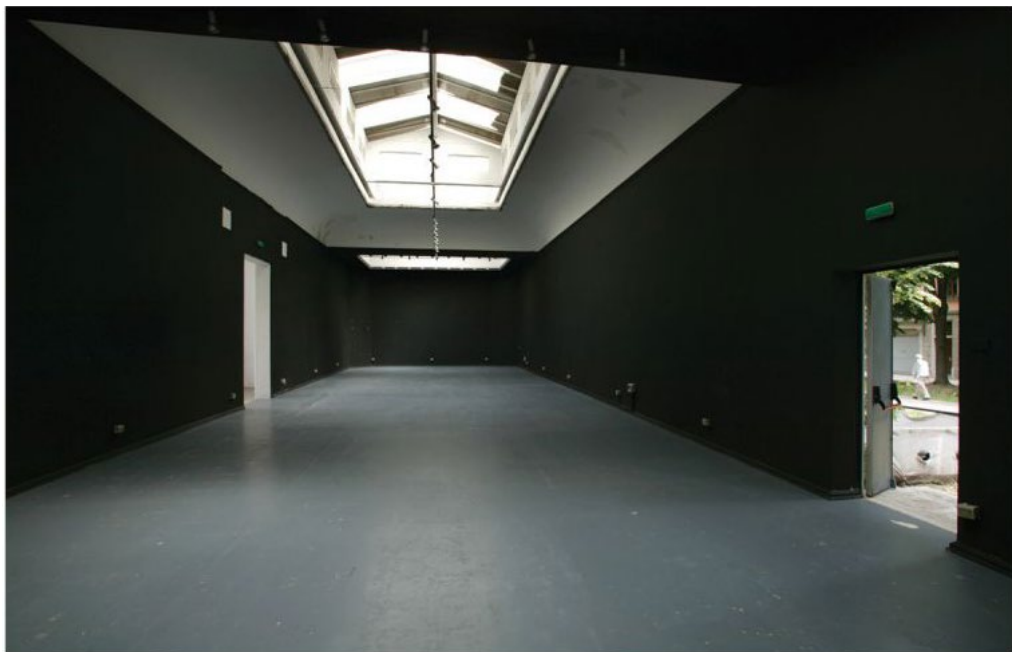
101 Mogoş, "The Age of Nothingness," 22.

At first glance 'the age of nothingness' might sound like a bleak picture, but as Karen Barad points out the void or the vacuum is also "the yearning and the imagining of might yet have been."<sup>100</sup> For Mogoş too the nothingness of post-communism can be a ground from which to imagine new Eastern European futures or Easternfuturisms: "this community of the future should use the act of dreaming as a state of full immersion, a speculative condition where the prospect of a better future can be imagined. The oneiric realm should function as a propellant of the future, where hope itself becomes the fuel for achieving radical subjectivities."<sup>101</sup> At the core of easternfuturist projects therefore lies radical hope, as Mogoş concludes his essay:

Onto the dread of neoliberal capitalism, the post-socialist subject should use hope as a basis for a reorientation of knowledge and praxis. As the subject regains consciousness, hope acts as a new terrain for a struggle of the future, insofar as hope itself is actively sustaining thought into action, discourse into praxis. After all, in this desert of transitioning in-perpetuity, we don't need to wait for an oasis to reveal itself, but to actively pursue it. Easternfuturism, therefore, is a matter of learning how to practice hope. ... it seems that the nothingness of post-communism offers the most appropriate ground for the principle of hope to pierce the depressing void.<sup>102</sup>

102 Mogoş, 22-23.

I chose Daniel Knorr's work *European Influenza* as a case study to end the second part of my thesis as the discourse generated by this work manages to touch on most of the topics that I have discussed so far. From ideas of the void and hauntology to the Eastern European critique of modernism and the peripheral status of the region. The aim of the next chapters of this thesis is to engage with the idea of Easternfuturism by exploring theories of enchantment and magic and how they can be applied to the Eastern European context. As I hope to show, enchantment can act as a 'practice of hope,' which can fuel the creation of 'radical subjectivities.'



Daniel Knorr, *European Influenza* in the Romanian pavilion at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale, 2005.

PART 3:

# Decolonial enchantments

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.—Donna Haraway

The previous part of this study dealt with coloniality and how it functions as a regime regulating truth in peripheral regions like Eastern Europe. Coloniality doesn't only operate on the economic level, but also in the field of knowledge production and the construction of subjectivities. As we saw in the last part, under the regime of coloniality systems of knowledge production that are not based on the Western scientific method are often suppressed. Even if the scientific disciplines of anthropology and ethnology documented and analyzed a series of traditional practices like magic, divination, healing and shamanism, for a long time they were still seen as primitive practices, relics of the past that only seemed to exist in non-Western areas that hadn't fully experienced the progress of modernism. These practices of enchantment became anti-modern by definition. In fact, they were seen as the very reason that kept peripheral regions from modernizing. So much so that the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor famously proclaimed in 2011 that "everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an 'enchanted' world and we do not."<sup>103</sup> The disenchantment of the modern world is one of the tenets of modernity that we are taught to take for granted.

Eastern Europe, through its connection with the 'Orient' and the allure of 'primitivism,' also came to be seen as an enchanted area of the continent. In popular culture the region has become associated with the birthplace of some of the most enduring monster tropes in film and literature. When I introduce myself as coming from Transylvania almost everyone is quick to associate the place with the story of Dracula and with vampires. Although this view of the East as the birthplace of monsters comes from the centuries-long association of the area with 'barbarism' and 'primitivism,'



Romanian goat costume used in the winter ritual of caroling (from the Romanian Peasant Museum, Bucharest).

103 Charles Taylor quoted in Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

Eastern Europe still seems to have an enchanted aura even for Easterners themselves. Many Romanians who get to travel abroad decry the secularism of the West. Several social media posts on this topic have become viral in the last decade and sparked heated debates in the Romanian media. It is no coincidence that this view is also shared by the Romanian Orthodox Church who remains one of the most powerful opponents of Western progressive values, promoting instead the values of conservatism and traditionalism.<sup>104</sup> The Orthodox Church also has its own enchantment agenda that mostly falls into nationalist tropes, sometimes bordering on fascism. In the church's alternate view of history Romanians are considered to be one of the first adopters of Christianity in the area, therefore acting as protectors of unchanged Christian faith and values. In the Orthodox discourse the country is often referred to as "The Garden of Virgin Mary."<sup>105</sup>

Notwithstanding the powerful and influential tropes promoted by the Orthodox Church that remain in the region, the historical, anthropological and ethnographic data evidently paint a much more complex picture. According to several scholars, Romanian folklore, despite containing Christian elements, is fundamentally different from church-approved Christianity. Numerous pagan, archaic, and sometimes only barely Christianized elements are present. The peasant population could not identify with Biblical characters and stories so it created a syncretism of pagan and Christian beliefs. Former gods were conflated with Orthodox saints, while spirits, healers, and witches became associated with the Devil. Old holidays and celebrations overlapped with Christian ones and were appropriated by the church. This is how the church paradoxically became one of the protectors of pagan beliefs. One of the reasons why Eastern Europe keeps an aura of

104 The Romanian organization *Coaliția pentru familie* (The Coalition for Family), advocating for 'traditional family' and 'pro-life' principles, received major support from the Orthodox Church, but also managed to coopt all Christian denominations in Romania. The press uncovered that the organization was also heavily financed by American Evangelical organizations. In 2016 they gathered 3 million signatures for a referendum to change the definition of marriage in the Romanian constitution from 'between spouses' to 'between a man and a woman.' The referendum was held in 2018 but failed due to insufficient turnout.

105 As we will see with the fascist movement The Iron Guard, in the sub-chapter "Defining Terms."

enchantment is probably because it still engages in pagan ritual and magic practices that Western societies seem to have lost. The following sections will explore some of the rituals that are still practiced mainly in rural areas in Romania and the changes that transformed these practices. We will see some of the myths that they are based on and explore the decolonial power that they hold.



The Romani witch Danusia photographed in Romania in 2007 by the Slovakian photographer Lucia Sekerková Bláhová for her project *Vrājitoare*.

# Modernity and disenchantment

*L'absence de mythe est aussi un mythe : le plus froid, le plus pur, le seul vrai.*

The absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only true myth. — Georges Bataille

What I am saying is that not only is myth myth; not only is the opposition to myth myth; *but the recognition of the opposition to myth as myth* is itself myth. — Jason Josephson-Storm

Numerous critiques of modernity identify the rise of instrumental reason as the main factor responsible for the disenchantment of the world. Since the Age of Enlightenment, modernized societies have become gradually alienated from nature. The production of the bureaucratic and technological life has supposedly left the world stripped of magic, mystery, and wonder. This idea is usually traced back to the German sociologist Max Weber who borrowed the term *Entzauberung* (disenchantment)<sup>106</sup> from the Romantic poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller in order to describe this modern phenomenon.

In *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity and the Birth of Human Sciences*, the religious studies

<sup>106</sup> Literally, 'de-magic-ing.' As Josephson-Storm also notes the German *Entzauberung* has a continuous connotation from the *-ung* termination, equivalent to the English *-ing*. The English translation of 'disenchantment,' or the adjective 'disenchanted' have the connotation of a process that already ended. This suggests that Weber was referring to an ongoing process that he observed in modern society, not one that was already achieved.



scholar Jason Josephson-Storm traces back the concept of disenchantment to the German Romantic era. Philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), Friedrich Jacobi (1743–1819), and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) came to believe they were living in a unique era that fundamentally lacked myth. The idea that myth was disappearing sparked an interest in the German Romantics for collecting and documenting German folklore, folk tales, and myths. The famous Grimm Brothers' collection of fairytales was the product of the Romantic myth of a mythless age. The 'myth-of-the-end-of-myth' managed to become *the* foundational myth of modernity. Besides the mythless age motif, the Romantic era also produced the mythemes of the de-divination of nature, nihilism, and the death of God. These mythemes were passed on to later generations of thinkers—from Nietzsche to philosophers of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse—and they continue to be influential to this day. At the same time, the Romantics were also projecting the mythless age myth back to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment while producing the historiography of those eras.

In his book, Jason Josephson-Storm challenges the entrenched idea that modern Western societies have been disenchanting by the rise of science and rationalism:

The single most familiar story in the history of science is the tale of disenchantment—of magic's exit from the henceforth law-governed world. I am here to tell you that as broad cultural history, this narrative is wrong. Attempts to suppress magic have historically failed more often than they've succeeded. It is unclear to me that science necessarily deanimates nature. In fact, I will argue à la Bruno Latour that we have never been disenchanting.<sup>107</sup>

107 Josephson-Storm, 3.

According to Josephson-Storm numerous anthropological and sociological studies have found that Western societies are not as disenchanting as it would seem. Although it is true that modern institutions are more secular than their equivalents from previous eras, modern people's personal beliefs have not become more rational as a result. On the contrary, enchanted and magical beliefs seem to proliferate in the contemporary world. The vast majority of Westerners hold at least one type of belief connected to

the paranormal, such as beliefs in spirits or ghosts, communication with the dead, ESP, premonitions, or witches and magic. Even more surprisingly studies show that secular education does not necessarily lead to a disenchanting view of the world. For example, several sociological studies have found that people who self-identify as witches or magicians are generally more educated than the average population and often hold a university degree. Anthropologists have even argued that belief in spirits or the paranormal seems to be the contemporary global norm, not the exception.

If one looks at America and Europe through the eyes of an outsider—with the same sort of gaze often leveled at non-Europeans—it seems hard to assert that we live in a straightforwardly disenchanting world. The equivalent forms of evidence anthropologists have been bringing back from the far reaches of the globe regarding indigenous belief in spirits, witchcraft, folktales, and popular depictions of the supernatural can be found in the West. Moreover ... evidence for this sort of belief is not merely anecdotal but seems to be borne out on an empirical level.<sup>108</sup>

108 Josephson-Storm,  
34.

With all this in mind it looks like the West has created a society in which magic is both repressed and in which it proliferates. This happened through a process that Josephson-Storm calls ‘occult disavowal.’ The myth of disenchantment has a regulating function which manifests as the public rejection of enchantment narratives but invites instead the private embrace of enchantment. In the logic of occult disavowal “belief in one form of enchantment often comes at the cost of another, such that supernatural beliefs can actively function in the service of disenchantment.”<sup>109</sup>

109 Josephson-Storm,  
18.

# Science and séance

I am particularly interested in the formation of the old-fashioned but entrenched narrative that describes the history of the modern scientific paradigm in terms of the rise of mathematical physics and the construction of an influential model of a ‘clockwork universe’ that no longer needed spirits or a deity to drive the motor of the cosmos. . . . From my perspective, this particular world picture is a myth insofar as it has taken on its own narrative force and bears little relationship to the status of physics at any given moment. Yet, some version of this world picture was often presented exactly *not* as a myth, but as an ahistorical and universal ‘Real’ against which other myths were shattered.—Jason Josephson-Storm

Contrary to the popular belief that the fields of science and magic are fundamentally opposed, Josephson-Storm’s research reveals their historical entanglements. By projecting the myth of a mythless society in the past, contemporary scientific discourse has glorified numerous Renaissance and Enlightenment figures as singular beacons of rationality that shone their light on societies ruled by superstition. One such figure is Francis Bacon, who is credited with conceiving the scientific method. Most accounts of Bacon’s legacy tend to ignore that his famous experimental method was explicitly formulated in terms of magic. Bacon saw himself as an alchemist with a mission to recover the lost knowledge of Adam which was meant to prepare humanity for an impending apocalypse. Bacon did not formulate his theories in order to eliminate magic from the world, but to restore it. He saw magic “as the science which applies the knowledge of hidden forms to the production of wonderful operations; and by uniting (as they say) actives with passives [magic] displays the wonderful works of nature.”<sup>110</sup> His experimental method was meant to open up magic, strip it away from secrecy and falsehoods, and subject it to public scrutiny. In Bacon’s own words “magic aims to recall natural philosophy from a miscellany of speculation to a greatness of works.”<sup>111</sup> Magic is to this day associated

<sup>110</sup> Bacon quoted in Josephson-Storm, 46.

<sup>111</sup> Bacon in Josephson-Storm, 46.

112 'Esoteric' from the Ancient Greek ἐσωτερικός, *esōterikós*, 'belonging to an inner circle.'

113 *Mechanism* is the belief that living things are similar to complicated machines or artifacts, composed of parts lacking any intrinsic relationship to each other.

114 *Vitalism* believes that there is a fundamental difference between living and non-living entities because living things contain some non-physical element that inanimate things do not, such as a soul.

115 Josephson-Storm, 3.

116 Josephson-Storm, 61.

117 Josephson-Storm, 15.

with esoteric<sup>112</sup> or occult knowledge that can only be transmitted to a few, chosen initiates. Bacon's work was about disassociating magic from the esoteric element.

This and other famous examples—from Isaac Newton's writings on alchemy and astrology to Descartes' mystical visions and dreams, and the Curies' interest in spiritism—lead Josephson-Storm to assert that "reason does not eliminate 'superstition' but piggybacks upon it; that mechanism<sup>113</sup> often produces vitalism;<sup>114</sup> and that often, in a single room, we can find both séance and science."<sup>115</sup> However, scientific discourse still does not know how to deal with its enchanted heritage and it is rather ashamed of this side of its history. This shame might come from rationalism's indebtedness to the Enlightenment and its supposed opposition to religion. But for the French *philosophes* of the *Encyclopédie* the Enlightenment project was initially articulated not in terms of a conflict between religion and science, or faith and reason, but as a divine science opposed to superstition or paganism, categories that were understood to mean non-Christian beliefs. The terms 'magic' and 'superstition' were applied to a mixed bag of beliefs and practices originally seen as dangerous and pagan. With the Enlightenment this collection of practices also gained the labels of 'ineffective,' 'primitive' or 'savage.'<sup>116</sup> Even so, their opposition to science always remained incomplete:

Overlaps between 'religion' and 'science' were often described as 'superstition' or pseudosciences. Policing 'superstitions' became part of the way that the categories of 'religion' and 'science' were formed in differentiation. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the rejection of 'superstition' was necessarily incomplete, and hence it was always possible to partially transform it into a site of resistance.<sup>117</sup>

The incomplete opposition to superstition is precisely what makes magic such an enduring practice. In contemporary religious studies magic, esoteric and occult practices often come under the term of 'rejected knowledge,' popularized by the Dutch scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff. Treating magic as rejected knowledge explains how "categories like 'superstition' were produced to exclude certain beliefs or knowledges, but it doesn't explain what makes those forms of knowledge appealing in the first place."<sup>118</sup> The appeal comes precisely from the incomplete rejection of magic, which makes it a perfect site from which to formulate critiques of the techno-scientific view of the world:

118 Josephson-Storm,  
15.

Restated in broad terms, once 'religion' and 'science' are formulated as opposing discursive terrains, religion-science hybrids become both threatening and appealing. They are threatening because they risk destabilizing the system's points of closure and because they suggest pre-hybrid and therefore supposedly premodern systems. But also they are appealing because they promise to heal the split between the two notionally opposed terrains. Moreover, the more 'magic' becomes marked as antimodern, the more it becomes potentially attractive as a site from which to criticize 'modernity.' Finally, for all the polemical attacks against superstition and magic, disenchanting efforts were only sporadically enforced within the disciplines, such that notions of magic and spirits keep resurfacing as redemptive possibilities.<sup>119</sup>

119 Josephson-Storm,  
15-16.

The myth of disenchantment has two divergent effects. On the one hand it functions as a regime of truth represented by science that aims to eliminate superstition. On the other hand, it is self-refuting, which creates a fertile ground for magical revivals and attempts to (re)spiritualize science.

# The appeal of magic

We can say that where the scientific mode works through analysis, the other mode works through analogy and synthesis. Elements of the world are linked for it not by mechanical cause and effect, but by similarity, by resemblance, by a kind of poetry, by what we call living metaphors. Plants, colors, sounds, scents, shapes, patterns, the position of the stars, the times of day, different gods and goddesses, angels and spirits were woven together into subtle webs of relations, where each echoed the other in some mysterious way. ... We can say that instead of wanting to take things apart in order to see what makes them tick—and the machine analogy here is telling—the rejected tradition wants to link them together to see how they live. And where the new way of knowing worked with facts and formulae, the other way worked with images and symbols.— Gary Lachman

Considering magic's appeal as a site for criticizing the mechanist view of the world popularized by science, it is no wonder that a series of contemporary philosophers, writers, and artists have turned to (re)enchantment narratives as sites of resistance against colonial and capitalist views of the world. Thinkers that I have already mentioned in this study like Karen Barad or Donna Haraway—but also others like Jane Bennett, Eduardo Kohn, or Elizabeth Povinelli—have been advocating for recovering animating ontologies that oppose the despiritualization of matter that the scientific view of the world promotes. These thinkers are associated with a branch of philosophy that is sometimes called “enchanted materialism” or “agential realism” which often describes the entanglements of matter and meaning, being and non-being, human and non-human in order to challenge anthropocentric takes on the world.

If we look at contemporary art, in the last decades there seems to have been a resurgence of the magical or spiritual in art, sometimes sparked by the writings of the aforementioned thinkers.<sup>120</sup> Although the spiritual has always been entangled with art, it has stayed mainly on the fringes

<sup>120</sup> See J.J. Charlesworth, “The Return of Magic in Art,” in *ArtReview* (May 30, 2022).

of art history. But now it has seeped into the mainstream. Perhaps one of the most significant moments of this resurgence was the reappraisal of the Swedish spiritualist painter Hilma af Klint. Highly influenced by the teachings of the Theosophical Society, af Klint's art was produced as the result of séances, medium sessions or sessions of automatic drawing. Her abstract paintings predate the ones of the so-called fathers of abstraction, Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondriaan, who also showed an interest in spiritualism and were influenced by spiritualist movements such as the Theosophical Society.

# Technic

The Italian philosopher Federico Campagna is also one of the contemporary thinkers who make use of the appeal of magic as a site for the emergence of a radically different system of reality. In his book *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality*, Campagna describes contemporary society as characterized by a particular reality system he terms 'Technic.' The technic regime is not only a world view shaped by scientific and technological thought, but a cosmogonic force in itself that creates a specific type of reality which essentially leads to nihilism. Because paradoxically one of the main characteristics of technic is that aims to disintegrate reality as such.<sup>121</sup>

For Campagna the main driving force of Technic is that of 'absolute language.' When describing the cosmogonic forces that create a specific type of world the role of language is fundamental. Through this lens language is important for what it *does*, that is what its usage *produces*. Every time we use language "we are suggesting to our interlocutors that a certain figure (an object, property or relation) be admitted as legitimately present in the world."<sup>122</sup> However, under technic's regime language becomes an absolute principle: anything that can't be expressed through language cannot exist in this reality system, it is ontologically void. As Campagna puts it, "language creates the world in its own image, and when it becomes absolute, suddenly there is no longer anything outside the world."<sup>123</sup> The incarnation of the principle of absolute language thus becomes the equivalence between truth and representation: "truth is representation and representation is truth."<sup>124</sup> The truthfulness of a statement can therefore

121 Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 5-6.

122 Campagna, 65.

123 Campagna, 66.

124 Campagna, 67.

be boiled down to claiming that something ‘is the case’ or ‘is not the case,’ which is fundamentally different from something ‘being’ or ‘not being’ in itself. The fact of something ‘being the case’ or ‘not being the case’ relies entirely upon an external authority which ultimately gets to decide what is and what is not the case. In metaphysical terms the switch from ‘being’ to ‘being the case’ is, “a passage from a world of ‘things,’ to one made up of ‘states of affairs.’”<sup>125</sup> Even more, ‘being or not being’ are definitions that do not fully capture the object of their signification, they are “symbolic utterances.” Instead, ‘being or not the case’ fully captures and conveys the object of its signification. One of the best examples of this is the 1–0 binary series used in computation, where 1 is the position of ‘being the case’ and 0 of ‘not being the case’. Although commonly understood as the presence or absence (‘being’ or ‘not being’) of electrical activity, in reality, the 1–0 binary makes use of a threshold (“an external sanction”): activity over the threshold is registered as 1 (“being the case”) and below the threshold as 0 (“not being the case”).

125 Campagna, 67.

Within Technic’s equivalence between truth and representation, truth stands for the essence of language’s fundamental process of signification; what used to be the autonomous existence of things, is here degraded to a state of affairs that is entirely dependent on the sanction given to it by the series in which it is inserted. At the same time, truth indicates how the precarious and subordinate state of things reduced to states of affairs, is nonetheless the only possible form of presence in Technic’s world; the 1–0 series is a functional series, on the basis of the metaphysical axiom that there is indeed nothing else apart from that which can be reduced to its ‘being the case’ or ‘not being the case.’<sup>126</sup>

126 Campagna, 68-69.

The principle of absolute language manifests itself through the mathematical series. In its essence a series is a pattern of infinite positions. For example, in the series of natural numbers each number corresponds to a position in the series. The number two does not have any particular characteristics that distinguishes it from the number five, all numbers in a series carry the same ontological weight. Campagna calls this a “positional ontology, in which the activation of a possible position is ontologically equivalent to the activation of any other position.”<sup>127</sup> The numbers have no meaning outside of the series and the only thing that is important is the

127 Campagna, 73.



position they occupy, or they ‘activate’ in the series. In the world created by Technic things cannot exist in themselves; they are reduced to states of affairs that represent activations of positions in a series. Nothing can exist outside of a series, there is no outside: “Only the position exists, and yet it too doesn’t truly exist in itself.”<sup>128</sup> For example, if we look at finance as a series, “it is of little or no importance whether one dollar comes from child slave labour or from the increase in the estimated value of a property; the ‘thing’ that occupies the position of a dollar is ontologically void, and in any case entirely equivalent in each of its infinite possible manifestations.”<sup>129</sup>

128 Campagna, 74.

129 Campagna, 73.

The world that Technic creates ultimately leads to a disintegration of reality which manifests itself in the inability to act or imagine alternatives for the future, what the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino would diagnose as a ‘crisis of presence:’

Within Technic, what is truly present is only the series system itself, and, through participation to it, the specific series through which it actualizes itself; positions only act as gatekeepers to the series, and specific units activating those positions are, even more remotely from existence, simply mere occurrences. Such a system does not allow for any of the necessary, basic conditions that would allow subjects or objects to exist, and thus, to unfold their existence in the world through action of any kind. It is on this basis that the crisis of reality, unleashed by Technic, ultimately translates into a crisis of action and imagination.<sup>130</sup>

130 Campagna, 51.

# Magic

The alternative to Technic as proposed by Campagna is the complete opposite reality system that he terms ‘Magic.’ Campagna himself admits that in our world the word ‘magic’ has a cheap connotation and might not sound like a serious consideration for a philosophical proposal. Pop culture has reduced the idea of magic to a set of technical skills that are usually understood as technological advancements yet to be discovered by science, as illustrated in the famous Arthur C. Clarke quote “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” This view sees magic as another world resource to be exploited by the knowledge and power of the magician. But this new understanding of magic is the exact

opposite of how it was understood from late antiquity to the Renaissance era, in the tradition of the so-called ‘true magic.’ As Jason Josephson-Storm showed, magic has always acted as a shadow to philosophy, theology, and modern science.

In many ways the shadow status of magic echoes the peripheral status of Eastern Europe. Not only in the sense that both categories have been labeled as primitive or even anti-modern, but also in that the process of othering is at the core of both magic and Eastern Europe. As we saw in the second part, Eastern Europe was constructed by the West as an image of the other within. Similarly, if we look at the origins of the word ‘magic,’ we see the same othering process right from the inception of the term. “The very origin of the word magic, points towards a form of ‘otherness’ that is constructed purely through a negative relation to what is already known and familiar.”<sup>131</sup> The term ‘magic’ first appeared in Greek as *magiké tékhnē* – μαγική τέχνη, “the art of magic” – and referred to the art (*tékhnē*) of the Persian Magi, the cast of priests in the Zoroastrian religion. The hostility between Zoroastrian Persia and the Greeks before Alexander is well known. For the classical Greeks, Persians were the ultimate Other, their own troubling shadow (in the same way barbarians were conceptualized by the Romans), so the Zoroastrian Magi came to represent a “shadowy otherness.”<sup>132</sup> The connotation of otherness has remained an important characteristic of magic as “magic has always been something disquieting to the hegemonic community of a certain age.”<sup>133</sup> As we saw in the first part of this chapter, this characteristic of magic makes it appealing as a place from which to criticize hegemony, coloniality, or modernism. But Campagna does not use the category of magic just to critique modernity or the regime of Technic. In the same way that Technic works as a cosmogonic force that creates a brutal reality, Magic is offered as an alternative cosmogonic force that can work as a form of therapy against Technic’s regime. The logic of Technic ultimately leads to an annihilation of reality which manifests as a permanent state of crisis and an inability to act and imagine. Ernesto de Martino would describe this as a ‘crisis of presence’ defined as “a situation in which everything turns into everything, and nothingness emerges.”<sup>134</sup> Magic as a cosmogonic force offers an alternative to the permanent state of crisis created by Technic and aims at changing the reality-conditions that created the state of crisis in the first place:

131 Campagna, 114.

132 Campagna, 115.

133 Campagna, 116.

134 Campagna, 116.

Shamans or magicians employ their magic powers with the primary aim of overcoming this state of crisis. While tracing back the symptoms of the malaise to their originating cause, they seek to offer an immediately workable alternative to the reality-conditions that produced them in the first place. In other words, a magician can be understood as a reality-therapist, acting not merely on the symptoms of an individual's illness, but also on the reality conditions that allowed the state of illness to take place.<sup>135</sup>

135 Campagna, 117.

A crisis marks a turning point in a situation and therefore requires a judgment or a decision. Magic acts as an intervention in the metaphysically nihilist world of Technic that resolves the crisis of presence by "aiming to restore the conditions in which both the individual and his/her world can regain their presence, and thus can continue in their mutually active and imaginative relationship."<sup>136</sup>

136 Campagna, 116.

As we saw, the driving force at the core of Technic is the principle of absolute language: "Technic's founding movement consists in making a thing's legitimate claim to existence entirely dependent on its detectability and classification by the system of seriality and by absolute language – to the point that a thing is liquefied into its very classification."<sup>137</sup> The polar opposite of absolute language is the principle of the 'ineffable' which becomes the driving force of the reality-system created by Magic. The ineffable can only be captured through a negative description as "that which cannot be captured by language in any form,"<sup>138</sup> a definition that is necessarily always incomplete. Under Magic the ineffable becomes the driving force of life: "Existence cannot be reduced to any of its dimensions, not even to the mere sum of its dimensions – yet, somehow existents still exist! The manifest mystery of existence, glares like a blinding light within each and every existent."<sup>139</sup> By placing the ineffable at the core of Magic's world, Campagna continues a long tradition of magic thinking and practice that stretches back to antiquity. The tradition of 'true magic,' although it is sometimes referred to as "Western esotericism," was highly influenced by Ancient Egyptian religious thought, Greek Orphism and Pythagoreanism, Hebrew and Islamic alchemy and philosophy, and Indian philosophy.<sup>140</sup>

137 Campagna, 118.

138 Campagna, 121.

139 Campagna, 124.

140 Campagna, 119.

The world of Magic operates through symbols. The symbol stands for a particular system of structuring language according to the principle

of the ineffable. The symbol does not fully capture its object, it rather points to it. A symbol lives in a paradoxical condition both as “a semiotic sign, existing within linguistic reality, and something that exceeds both semiosis (since it is impossible to fully communicate the object of its signification) and productive language (since it resists any absolute reduction to instrumentality).”<sup>141</sup> In what the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade described as a “dialectic of the sacred,” a sacred object, such as for example a sacred stone, can exist both as an object and as a “manifestation of ineffable forces”<sup>142</sup> as “any object ... may paradoxically become a hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in its own cosmic environment (a sacred stone, e.g., remains nevertheless a stone along with other stones).”<sup>143</sup>

A world created by the cosmogonic force of the ineffable would be a “reality in the form of a paradox.”<sup>144</sup> Magic’s world is “at the same time a world and no world at all, it is both language and silence, unmeasurable existence and limited presence, indistinctness and essence. It is unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, where the two terms are simultaneously fused and irreducible to each other.”<sup>145</sup>

141 Campagna, 150.

142 Campagna, 150.

143 Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton University Press, 1991), 84-85.

144 Campagna, 187.

145 Campagna, 187.



Photo from Rimetea  
(from personal archive).

# Enchanted Eastern Europe

In May 2022 the pair of historical chemists Gleb and Svetlana Zilberstein traveled to Transylvania in order to collect sweat, saliva, and fingerprint samples from a letter written by the Wallachian Voivode Vlad the Impaler, the famous historical ruler who inspired Bram Stoker's character of Dracula. By analyzing the protein molecules in the samples, the scientists wanted to determine the ruler's physical makeup as well as the environmental conditions in which he lived. The biochemical traces left by Vlad Dracula were collected on May 26<sup>th</sup>, exactly 125 years after the publication of Bram Stoker's novel. Even hard scientists cannot abstain from noticing the enchanted aspect of this coincidence:

'It was mystical that we were extracting Dracula's molecules on the day that Bram Stoker's novel was published 125 years ago,' said Gleb Zilberstein. 'We did not specifically plan this date. All night, after the extraction of Dracula's molecules, it rained, dogs howled and lightning flashed. It was really a very magical atmosphere. Count Dracula blessed his release from the Romanian archive.'<sup>146</sup>

As we saw in the second part of this study there is a centuries long tradition of writing about Eastern Europe in enchanted or mystical terms, but always with at least a tinge of evil thrown in. This seems to be such a powerful trope for othering the region that it is still very much in use today. Referencing several major travel publication sections (from *Time Out*, to *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*) the author Lily Lynch sums it up as follows:

Begin with some dramatic, vaguely dangerous-sounding scenery. For instance, 'steep cliffs plunging directly into the sea,' 'a vampiric maw of limestone peaks,' or 'beauty infused by danger.' Even in this era of enhanced Euro-Atlantic integration, descriptions of the Balkans should retain a sense of foreboding, or

<sup>146</sup> David Barnett, "What Was Dracula Really Like? 550-Year-Old Clue to Life of Vlad the Impaler Emerges," in *The Guardian* (December 11, 2022).

147 Lily Lynch, "How to Write About the Balkans," in *The Balkanist* (August 27, 2013).

better yet, evil. The region's mountains are 'accursed.' The geography appears as if 'God gouged its surface with his fingernails.' Its topography looks like 'the devil's work.'<sup>147</sup>

But leaving aside the colonialist implications of the enchanted view on Eastern Europe, what if there is also some truth to this assertion? After all, even Eastern Europeans see themselves as more 'spiritual' than Westerners. This view might stem from an Eastern European spiritual paradox. On the one hand Eastern Europeans connect their spirituality to the Christian Orthodox religion and on the other hand to a pagan spirituality, as the area has still kept some ancient rituals and practices.

## Defining terms

In this study I use the terms 'Romanian folklore' or 'Romanian mythology' as a shorthand for a wide variety of practices and myths from the area. As it has become apparent over the decades of studies by historians of religion and anthropologists, the mythology of a people is rarely a coherent whole. A mythology is often a patchwork of beliefs and practices that draw from a variety of influences; therefore, they can contradict each other or differ between regions from the same area. For example, if we look at the Romanian cosmogonic myth of the creation of the world (which will be described in the following sections) several variants have been collected from the historical regions of Transylvania, Wallachia, Moldova, Bukovina, or Dobruja. There are similarities between them, but also significant differences, to the point where a variant from Moldova is completely different from the Transylvanian story. The observation that there are regional differences in folk practices and customs might be common sense, but I think it is important to keep in mind, for several reasons that I will explain further on.

In present-day Romania, folklore is mainly caught in a dangerous triangle together with nationalism and the Orthodox Church. The fueling of Romanian nationalist discourse by the Orthodox church is historically documented:

When national consciousness emerged in Eastern Europe the Church joined the bandwagon by positioning itself as pivotal for the very definition of 'Romanianism', a shared identity supposedly superseding Moldovan, Wallachian and Transylvanian regional allegiances. In doing so, the Church borrowed, and eventually monopolised, the Transylvanian Greek Catholics' nationalist discourse centred on the Latin character of the Romanian language and descent. This discourse appropriation gave the Orthodox Church growing moral and political legitimacy in the eyes of the Romanians, and more recognition from the state. Before communism took over the country the constitutional arrangements of the modern Romanian state recognised the Church as the national church, a privileged position which still fell short of full autonomy from the secular power.<sup>148</sup>

148 Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, "The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-communist Democratisation," in *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, issue 8 (July 2000), 1468.

The Orthodox Church is also responsible for creating its own historical mythology, which the Romanian historian Lucian Boia terms 'Orthodoxism,' and defines as "a political ideology which makes the Orthodox faith a mark of national identity."<sup>149</sup> In this particular mythology the main axiom is that Romanians were born Christian. As we will see in the next section, historical and archaeological evidence contradicts this claim and shows that the role of the church was less significant before the modern era than it claims. The equating of Orthodoxy with Romanian national identity was also highly influential in fueling the fascist movement known as *Garda de Fier* (The Iron Guard) or *Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail* (The Legion of the Archangel Michael). The movement and paramilitary group was active between 1927–1941 and was responsible for inciting pogroms and assassinating political figures that opposed them. The Bucharest pogrom of 1941 perpetrated by the Iron Guard killed 125 Jews and 30 soldiers. The Iron Guard was a peculiar strand of clerical fascism in which the Orthodox faith as a marker of national identity was at the core of the movement's ideology, with many Orthodox theology students, priests, and clerics being involved with the movement. One of the movement's most prominent leaders, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, often presented himself in public dressed in traditional folk costume, appropriating Romanian folklore for ultranationalist and antisemitic purposes. He is still revered by the church and some of its followers, and his figure painted as an Orthodox saint is often displayed in protests by right-wing

149 Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001), 11.

Romanian parties. Iron Guard symbolism has also surfaced outside of Romania in recent years, connected to Western neo-nazi movements, such as the 2017 Charlottesville rally, the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings, and the 2022 Buffalo shooting.

Although Romanian folklore retained several pagan beliefs and practices, it also went through some significant changes, especially under the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Up until the first half of the twentieth century folklore still played a major community role in Romanian society, from life events to holiday celebrations or community rituals. During communism everything, including folklore, was subject to censorship if it did not align with the party's agenda. In order to promote a 'pure' national identity, folklore had to be cleaned of any 'Oriental' or Romani influences, lewd or 'immoral' lyrics, or even improvisational and spontaneous elements. In this process the regional differences were also leveled out and a state-approved 'national folklore' was created.<sup>150</sup> Folklore's community role was also diminished by transforming it into a stage performance. The community could no longer participate in performances and was relegated to the role of a passive audience. As only trained musicians were encouraged to perform, folklore was also professionalized.

As we saw, folklore can easily get coopted into (ultra)nationalist and fascist ideologies, a tendency that is not specific only to Romania.<sup>151</sup> This is precisely why I believe folklore needs to be reclaimed from these movements, reevaluated and reconnected with the contemporary world. As the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers explains, the act of reclaiming is not about going back to an idealized or glorified pre-modern past, but about healing:

Reclaiming means recovering what we have been separated from, but not in the sense that we can just get it back. Recovering means recovering from the very separation itself, regenerating what this separation has poisoned. The need to struggle and the need to heal, in order to avoid resembling those we have to struggle against, are thus irreducibly allied. A poisoned milieu must be reclaimed, and so must many of our words, those that—like “animism” and “magic”—carry with them the power to take us hostage: do you “really” believe in...?<sup>152</sup>

150 See Beissinger et al., *Manele in Romania*.

151 See for example the appropriation of Nordic mythology by American right-wing movements

152 Isabelle Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism,” in *E-flux Journal* 36 (July 2012).



# Romanian folklore

In 1904, after obtaining his diploma as a pianist and composer from the Budapest Music Academy, Béla Bartók went to a retreat in a village in present-day Slovakia. His hosts had a young nanny from Transylvania, a Hungarian girl from Székely Land, Lidi Dósa. Bartók overheard the young nanny singing an old Hungarian folk song that sounded like nothing he had heard before, and during his stay he proceeded to notate several of Lidi Dósa's songs. He identified this moment as opening up a whole new musical dimension for him and sparking his interest in folklore in general and Transylvanian folklore in particular.<sup>153</sup> Over the course of the next decade, up until the beginning of the First World War, Bartók visited numerous Transylvanian villages with a phonograph and collected thousands of folk songs from the Hungarian, Romanian and Romani communities. He became particularly interested in Romanian folklore as he identified it as virtually untouched by modern influences, as he explains in an interview in a Transylvanian newspaper from 1922:

153 Agnes Kory, "Kodály, Bartók, and Fiddle Music in Bartók's Compositions," on the *Béla Bartók Centre for Musicianship* website (October 2007).

'In the Hungarian villages,' he said, 'only old women know and sing the old songs. The young folk may not even know them or have distorted them by the rhythm of 'new music'. What they mostly sing are art songs recently composed. The Rumanians know no other songs but those (that are) centuries old. They have remained unaffected by the cultural changes since then.'<sup>154</sup>

154 Viktor Bator in "Foreword" to Béla Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, vol. 1, *Instrumental Melodies*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), vii-viii.

Bartók saw his work of collecting folklore as vital, as he feared it would become lost under the pressure of modernization. Over the course of his career, he collected and classified about 7000 Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Arab, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian and Ruthenian songs. For this work he is now considered one of the founders of ethnomusicology. Besides collecting melodies, Bartók also described folk instruments, their tuning and playing technique, and the dances or rituals associated with specific songs.

Fortunately, Romanian folklore did not become lost and still plays a major role in many communities, especially in rural areas. For example, the village of Mociu in Central Transylvania, where I was born, holds a

yearly folklore festival with performances by several singers and dance troupes from the area. Alongside Romanians, the Hungarian and Romani communities are also represented in the festival. But the fact that folklore did not disappear does not mean that it did not go through some significant changes, as we will see in the next section in which we will explore how Romanian folklore managed to survive until the present day.

## How folklore survived

Struggles aiming to re-ruralize the world are crucial to our survival. These are the condition not only of our physical survival but of a 're-enchantment' of the earth, for they reconnect what capitalism has divided: our relation with nature, with others, and with our bodies, enabling us not only to escape the gravitational pull of capitalism but to regain a sense of wholeness in our lives. — Silvia Federici

According to several folklore and religious studies scholars (such as Mircea Eliade, Romulus Vulcănescu, or Andrei Oișteanu) Romanian folklore, despite containing Christian elements, fundamentally differs from church-approved Christianity. Numerous pagan, archaic, and sometimes only barely Christianized elements are present.<sup>155</sup> Even though Christianity was technically brought to the territory of present day Romania by the Roman conquest of Dacia, following the 101–102 and 105–106 wars, the more consistent evidence of Christian communities comes only from the fourth century onwards from urban communities. In the following centuries it slowly spread to villages.<sup>156</sup>

Following the East-West Schism of 1054, the Eastern Orthodox Church became prominent in the region, but up until the middle of the nineteenth century it remained subordinated to a foreign patriarch, most of its wealth being directed to the Constantinople patriarchate and Mount Athos. The hierarchy of the church was filled by poorly educated clergy.<sup>157</sup> The pastoral population of the region was very slow in adopting Christianity and even slower in abandoning ancient beliefs. The church had to constantly fight against an influx of 'pagan' elements, a process that is still ongoing. Because it could not eradicate such entrenched beliefs, and in order to become more popular, the church had to adapt and co-opt pagan gods,

155 Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie Română*, 251.

156 Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, 11.

157 Stan and Turcescu, "The Romanian Orthodox Church," 1467–68.

practices, and rituals and adapt them to fit the new religion. Former gods were conflated with Christian saints, evil spirits become the minions of Satan, or even Judas, old wizards, priests, or healers fell under the patronage of the biblical king Solomon (*solomonari*). Even today the folklore and religious practices of the region still reflect ancient and protohistorical beliefs, rituals, and practices.<sup>158</sup> Since the disappearance of village healers in the beginning of the twentieth century, some Orthodox priests had to assume the former pagan roles, mainly because people still needed these types of magical interventions. Although pagan practices are forbidden according to Orthodox dogma, even to this day there are priests who still perform a wide range of folk magic practices ranging from binding rituals, to curses and exorcisms. Some of these priests (mainly monks) amassed cult-like followings in the last decades. It has also been documented that even ethnic Hungarians, who are mainly Catholic or Protestant, sometimes make use of the magical services of these monk-priests.<sup>159</sup>

Healing practices have been documented since the beginning of written records. Only at the turn of the twentieth century did they begin to be regarded as irrational superstitions. This coincided with the birth of anthropology and folklore studies, which although recorded and documented these village practices in detail, also labeled them as superstition, as primitive remnants that don't belong to the modern era or the modern city. After all, anthropology was originally meant to explain why non-Western societies were not yet modernized. This however did not stop the continuation of such practices, as they are still a "vital mode of relating and caring for village lifeworlds," as Christina Novakov-Ritchey writes about her own encounter with a Romanian ethnic healer from Serbia. The nineteenth century classification of these practices as 'primitive' was also part of a larger colonialist project of marking the space of the Eastern European village as dead and belonging to the past.

158 Andrei Oişteanu, *Motive și semnificații mito-simbolice în cultura tradițională românească* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1989), 63-64.

159 See Valer Simion Cosma, "Magie și religie în context liturgic în lumea țărănească a românilor ardeleni din secolul al XIX-lea," in *Magie și văjitorie: Perspective istorice, antropologice și artistice/Magic and Witchcraft: Historical, Anthropological and Artistic Perspectives*, eds. Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Valer Simion Cosma (Cluj-Napoca: Mega Publishing, 2020.) 105-128.

The representation of peasants and the 'folk' as remnants of the past is a critical dimension of how coloniality has been configured in the Balkans. ... Just as the discipline of anthropology produced 'scientific evidence' on the temporal deviation of the colonised world from European modern time, the emergent discipline of folklore temporally segregated the rural from the urban—the peasant from the industrial worker. The temporal segregation of the rural

from the urban was not just about gaining control of the land, but also about eliminating—or attempting to eliminate non-capitalist worldviews.<sup>160</sup>

160 Christina Novakov-Ritchey, "Decolonial Incantations Or Listen to Your Baba," in *Kajet 4: On Periphery* (2020), 20.

When I was a child, my religious imaginary consisted of a mix of pagan and Christian beliefs and practices. We would go to church every Sunday and at Christian holidays, but we would also celebrate pagan holidays at home. Midsummer's eve was one of the most magically charged nights for me. According to folk belief it is one of the few nights a year when the skies open and gods, angels, spirits, and ghosts can roam the Earth freely. In Romania Midsummer is called *Sânzâiene*<sup>161</sup> and it is a celebration of a type of fairies named *iele*. We would climb the hill behind my grandma's house and pick a range of wildflowers which had to include the plant *sânzâiană*,<sup>162</sup> bearing the same name as the holiday. The flowers were then braided into wreaths and worn as crowns on the way back home where they would be thrown on the roof, so that the fairies saw them and blessed the home. The last memories I have of this practice are from the late '90s after which we stopped celebrating Midsummer for unknown reasons.

161 Plural form with the singular *Sânzâiană*, from Latin *San(cta) Diana*.

162 Lady's bedstraw, *Gallium verum*.

The figure of the witch was and still remains a powerful non-capitalist symbol, as Silvia Federici showed in *Caliban and the Witch*. We can see these elements even in the stereotypical pop-culture image of the witch usually depicted as an older unmarried woman who lives self-sufficiently in a forest outside of society. She is therefore a woman who refuses to participate in patriarchy, or in reproductive or capitalist labor. Moreover, her abilities of treading between worlds, talking to spirits or the dead, gazing into the past or future are all fundamentally opposed to the colonialist understanding of time as linear progress.<sup>163</sup> As we saw in the section about Magic as a cosmogonic force, healers and shamans use their skills not only to cure the disease, but, more importantly, to intervene in the conditions that made the disease possible in the first place:

163 See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

Healing practices serve as critical examples of decolonial praxis. Employing a combined theory and practice, these healers put forth a critique of the colonial capitalist world-system while also physically taking care of the people most vulnerable to violence and exploitation within that world-system. [Healers] recognise sickness and health not as a relationship between a disease and an afflicted body, but as a more expansive analytic that connects the physical body

to social, discursive, historical and political bodies. Or, rather than connecting, these healers reveal the already-embeddedness of the sick guest within larger worlds. By recognising this condition of material embeddedness, the healing process is not confined to fixing the ailments of the physical body (leg pain, nervousness, impotency, etc.). Rather, those physical ailments form part of a larger sensible network, in which the healing of physical and mental pain depend upon the healing of historical and epistemic violences.<sup>164</sup>

164 Novakov-Ritchey, "Decolonial Incantations," 22.

## Romanian cosmogonic myths

Creation myths are poetic tales that relate how the world and the things in it came to be, how something was created out of nothing, how the line between order and chaos must be constantly negotiated and balance maintained. According to Mircea Eliade all myths are cosmological variations on an archetypal creation myth. Myths not only explain how the world came into being, but they also offer us the opportunity to access what Eliade calls "a time before time." Gaining access to this time brings "a revelation of the holy that creates order in the pre-world universe," or a hierophany,<sup>165</sup> and can only be done through re-enacting the myth in the form of rituals. A ritual is therefore a re-experiencing of the myth.

165 From Greek *hierós*, ἱερός, 'sacred, holy' and *phatnein*, φαίνειν, 'to reveal, to bring to light'.

While the ritual is being performed, the participants cast off their mundane identities and everyday concerns and come into contact with the gods, heroes, and mythical ancestors. The original creation takes place again and the cosmos is born anew. More than a reconfirmation of the cosmic order, specific ritual acts mark a return to the 'eternal time', a re-experiencing of the original creative act and an actual rebirth, the recreation of life, again and again.<sup>166</sup>

166 Marcel Feil, "Seer Believer: Some Notes on Myths, Rituals and Art," in *Foam 51: Seer/Believer* (Amsterdam, 2018), 24.

The following sections reproduce two versions of the cosmogonic myth collected from the regions of Moldova and Transylvania, as referenced by Mircea Eliade in his exploration of Romanian mythology, *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God*.

## The Moldavian version:

Before the world was created there was only an unending mass of water, on which God and Satan walked about. When God had decided to create the Earth he sent Satan 'to the bottom of the sea to take, in God's name, some of the seed of Earth (*sămânța de pământ*) and bring it back to him on the surface of the water.' Twice Satan dived to the bottom of the sea, but, instead of taking the seed of Earth in God's name, as he had been commanded to do, he took it in his own name. While he was rising to the surface all the seed slipped through his fingers. On a third descent to the bottom of the Waters he took the seed in his own name and in God's. When he returned to the surface, a little mud—that is, the amount he had taken in God's name—remained under his fingernails; all the rest of it had slipped through his fingers. With the mud that was left under the Devil's fingernails God made a mound of earth, on which he lay down to rest. Thinking that God was asleep, Satan decided to throw him into the water and drown him, so that he should be left sole lord of the Earth. But the farther Satan rolled God, the more the Earth grew and spread out under him. And so the Earth kept spreading out until there was no more room for the water. ... When he woke, God saw that the Earth had spread out so far that there was no more room for the Waters. Not knowing how to deal with this emergency, he sent the bee to the hedgehog—the most knowing of animals—to ask its advice. But the hedgehog refused to help, giving the excuse that God is omniscient. However, the bee knew that the hedgehog was in the habit of talking to itself and sure enough, it soon murmured; 'Obviously God doesn't know that he must make mountains and valleys, to leave room for the Waters.' The bee flew off to God, and the hedgehog put a curse on it that it should eat only ordure. But God blessed the bee; the filth that it ate would become honey.<sup>167</sup>

167 Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God: Comparative Studies in the Religions and Folklore of Dacia and Eastern Europe*, trans. Willard R. Trask (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 76-77, 84-85.

## The Romani Transylvanian version:

In the beginning there were only the Waters. God thought of making the world, but he knew neither how nor why to do it. And he was angry because he had neither brother nor friend. In a rage he threw his stick onto the Waters. It changed into a great tree, and under the tree God saw the Devil, who laughed and said: 'Good day, my good brother! You have neither brother nor friend, I

will be your brother and your friend!' God was glad and answered: 'You shall not be my brother but my friend. I must not have a brother.' They traveled for nine days on the surface of the Waters, and God understood that the Devil did not love him. Once the Devil said to him: 'My good brother, alone we live badly, we must create other beings!' 'Then create,' God answered. 'But I do not know how, dear brother!' 'Very well,' God answered, 'then I will create the World. Dive into the great Waters and bring me some sand; with the sand I will make the World.' Astonished, the Devil asked him: 'You mean to make the World from sand? I do not understand!' God explained to him: 'I will speak my name over the sand, and the Earth will be born. Go, and bring back sand!' The Devil dived, but he too wanted to make a World, and since he now had sand he spoke his own name. But the sand burned him, and he had to drop it; then he told God that he had found nothing. God sent him again. For nine days the Devil held the sand, all the while speaking his own name, and the sand burned him more and more, so that he became all black and finally had to drop it. When God saw him he cried: 'You have turned black, you are a bad friend; go, bring sand, but do not speak your name again, or you will be burned to nothing.' The Devil dived again and this time brought back sand. God made the World, and the Devil was very glad. 'I will live here under this great tree,' he said. 'As for you, my dear brother, find somewhere else to live.' God became angry. 'You are a very bad friend,' he cried. 'I will have nothing more to do with you. Go away!' Then a great bull appeared and carried away the Devil. From the great tree flesh fell to the ground, and men sprang from its leaves.<sup>168</sup>

168 Eliade, 79-80.

It should be noted that older names for the creator couple were *Fărtatul* and *Nefărtatul* (from the Latin *frāter* 'brother') which meant 'brother' and 'not-brother.' The myth of a creator couple (usually brothers) seems to be an old Proto-Indo-European motif. Even if in Romanian myths they are conflated with God and the Devil (probably due to the Christian influence), these characters should not be confused with their Christian counterparts, as Eliade stresses:

It is needless to repeat that this God has nothing in common with the Creator-God and Cosmocrator of Judeo-Christianity. And though the religious life of all these southeastern European peoples is inspired by the Christian faith and

has its source in belief in a triune God, in the cosmogonic legends with which we are concerned, as well as in some other folklore themes, we are confronted with a different type of God – suffering from his solitude, feeling the need for a companion to make the World, absentminded, weary, and, ... unable to complete the creation without help.<sup>169</sup>

169 Eliade, 88.

The cosmogonic myth is reenacted under the form of the *colindat* ritual. In Romanian, *colindat* is the past participle of the verb *a colinda*, ‘to carol.’ *Colinde* (plural form of the noun *colindă*, ‘carol’), according to the Romanian historian of religions and cultural anthropologist Andrei Oișteanu are “ritualistic poems recited around the turn of the year, when humans, nature, and the entire Cosmos are renewed. This renewal comprises two essential moments: (1) the previous Cosmos, that is now ‘old,’ ‘used-up,’ ‘drained of vitality,’ reverts to Chaos; (2) a new Cosmos comes into being, with the purpose of perpetuating existence.”<sup>170</sup> The turning of the year is a crucial time span represented by the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany. These twelve days are both symbolic of the twelve months of the year, and of the time in between years which doesn’t belong to neither the old, nor the new year. According to some beliefs the ritual of *colindat* wards off evil spirits, the twelve days being the only time when they can’t roam the earth freely. Mixed groups of carolers (*colindători*) go from house to house to recite or sing ritualistic poems to the hosts and bless their homes. Traditionally the hosts gift the carolers *colaci* (braided wreath-shaped breads), cakes, apples, walnuts, and dried fruit. Nowadays, the main gift to carolers is money.

170 Oișteanu, *Motive și semnificații mito-simbolice*, 16-17. Translated by Vlad Ferariu.

This pagan celebration has been co-opted by the Orthodox Church as it overlaps with Christmas and resembles the Christian ritual of caroling. From all the aspects of Romanian folklore, *colinde* and the rituals associated with them were appropriated the most by the church. In some cases, new Christian songs were created by the church, in others the lyrics were adapted to the Christian faith, or even modified to instigate antisemitism.<sup>171</sup> The Orthodox Church’s own mythology of *colinde* has even made it into the English Wikipedia entry of the term: “They are inspired by the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, by the religious services and by the iconography. *Colinde* have had a role in preserving and defending the Orthodox faith when heterodox proselytizing tried to break the unity of

171 In December 2013 the Romanian national TV station TVR broadcasted a *colinde* concert in which one of the carols contained antisemitic lyrics, creating a national scandal. The origin of the lyrics is unclear.



the Orthodox faith, and to dismantle, at the same time, national unity.” This quote is a direct translation from an article written by a celebrity Orthodox priest in a Christian publication that promotes ‘traditional Orthodox values’ such as nationalism, antisemitism, homophobia and queerphobia, ‘traditional family,’ and so on. For religious historians like Oişteanu only a handful of rituals were the actual product of Christian Orthodoxy:

The only exceptions are so-called ‘star’ songs, Nativity scenes (*Vîfleim*) and a few other rituals of Christian provenance. Celebrations relating to the birth of Jesus were superimposed over a complex and archaic mythological ritual about the birth of the Cosmos. However, this happened at a late stage of Christian development in the area and quite arbitrarily, hence the amalgamation of customs and traditions that led to the birth of a specific type of syncretism, whose specific circumstances and consequences we have yet to fully untangle.<sup>172</sup>

172 Oişteanu, 18.  
Translated by Vlad  
Ferariu.

In contrast with the Orthodox definition, Oişteanu describes the ritual of colinde as a reaction to the state of cosmic crisis that requires the participation of the whole community.

[The] carol is a reenactment of a colossal cosmical drama. However, this is not to be understood as the retelling of events long past (‘once upon a time’) or from a mythical past (‘*in illo tempore*’). This drama is taking place here and now, at the very moment and place of its reenactment. The village community in its entirety takes part in it, whether as carolers or listeners, and they do not merely remember it, but relive it. It is not by chance that, in some parts of the country, the hero of the story who finally restores order to the Cosmos is not Archangel Michael or St. Elijah, but the listener himself.<sup>173</sup>

173 Oişteanu, 17.  
Translated by Vlad  
Ferariu.

Going back to Federico Campagna, Magic as a cosmogonic force can overcome the crisis of reality generated by Technic’s brutal regime through ritual, but Magic also goes through its own crisis. As we see in the Romanian winter ritual of colinde the world is in danger of regressing into chaos every year, and it requires intervention or saving. Contrary to Joseph Campbell’s famous theory of a single hero’s journey, the ritual

of colinde requires everyone, including the creator, to participate in the salvation of the world:

The Earth sits on two pillars [...]. The devil keeps chewing on them, but, while he's distracted by Christmas carols and ornate ritual staffs, God mends the chewed part with iron, so the devil keeps chewing until Easter, when he's distracted again by red Easter eggs, and God mends the pillars with iron again, so the devil never finishes chewing the pillars and that's why the Earth doesn't sink.<sup>174</sup>

174 Oişteanu, 18.  
Translated by Vlad  
Ferariu.

For Campagna, instead of the 'safety' offered by Technic, Magic's world offers 'salvation' which has a therapeutic effect:

Salvation operates 'therapeutically' in that it is built around a notion of 'health'. A 'saved' entity in Magic's world, is an entity that is made 'healthy' – where a thing's 'health' consists in its assuming the paradoxical form of existing at the same time ineffably and linguistically, eternally and within becoming, actually and potentially. Magic's therapy consists precisely in helping the inhabitants of its world to exist at once inside and outside of the world, like its cosmogony created a universe that is at once in and out of language. Salvation thus takes place first of all as the opening of the world of becoming to a dimension that transcends its temporality, and equally as the interweaving of unmeasurable temporality and the worldly spectacle of becoming.<sup>175</sup>

175 Campagna, *Technic and Magic*, 230.

The salvation itself is paradoxical, because "at the very heart of Magic's cosmogony lies the tenet that the world and all its inhabitants take place as paradoxes of ineffability and language, eternity and becoming. Thus, Magic's world comes to presence as already 'healthy,' already saved."<sup>176</sup>

176 Campagna, 231.

Even though the world, as it emerges through Magic's reality-frame, is already saved in itself, yet such character might not be immediately apparent to the existential experience of an individual inhabiting it. On the one hand, this is because Magic's cosmogony requires a process of constant recreation of its world. ... And from this angle, salvation consists exactly in the continuous process of structuring the linguistic dimension of the world (and of oneself) in a symbolic form. On the other, the same world acquires different appearances

if seen from the angle of its cosmogonic force, or from the perspective of its populations. ... [An individual living in such a world], although already cosmologically 'saved' in themselves might require salvation at the level of their perception of life in the world.<sup>177</sup>

177 Campagna, 230-32.

The Romanian ritual of colinde, together with its cosmogonic myth, is meant to remind us of a different, paradoxical perception of life in the world. This type of world requires continuous effort and participation by the community in order to be maintained, and although it has its own moments of crisis it also offers solutions on how to handle or even avert the crisis.

## Becoming nonhuman

In Béla Bartók's collection of Romanian folk songs an entire volume is dedicated to colinde. One particular song in this collection inspired Bartók's *Cantata Profana*, subtitled *A kilenc csodaszarvas*, 'The Nine Enchanted Stags.' The Christmas carol from Transylvania that served as Bartók's inspiration tells the following story. An old man had nine sons who were only taught how to hunt. One day the sons go hunting in the mountains. They follow the tracks of a large stag until they get lost and eventually become stags themselves. The father goes searching for his sons and finds nine stags. As he prepares to shoot them, the largest stag starts talking and reveals to the man that they are his sons. Their father tries to convince the stags to go back home with him to their mother who was waiting for them. But the stags ultimately refuse and explain to their father how their new life as stags would not fit with human society anymore.

The stag hunt motif is quite popular in colinde, and there are several variations on it, but this example seems to be unique. The other motif of transforming into an animal is also well known from fairytales. But usually in fairytales the main protagonist is cursed by someone, usually a witch, to transform into an animal and the main plot point becomes searching for a cure or reversing the curse. None of this is the case in our example, as the sons turned into stags embrace their new form and refuse to go back to civilization. This story points to an animist idea of the world, that is similar to what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro observed in Amerindian cultures:

In some respects, the Amerindian separation between humans and animals may be seen as an analogue of our ‘nature/culture’ distinction; there is, however, at least one crucial difference between the Amerindian and modern, popular Western versions. In the former case, the separation was not brought about by a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist ‘scientific’ mythology. For Amazonian peoples, *the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity*. The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. Humans are those who continue as they have always been. *Animals are ex-humans (rather than humans, ex-animals)*.<sup>178</sup>

178 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies,” in *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004), 464-465



*Pădurea Lată* (The Wide Forest) in Mociu (from personal archive).

# The carol of the nine enchanted stags

*Cel unt'eș bătrînă  
El că și-o d-avută,*

(Behold,) that old man,  
He (at one time) had

*El că și-o d-avută,  
Nouă știșori.  
El nu i-o 'nvățată*

He (at one time) had  
Nine sons (of his own);  
Even taught them not

*Nice văcărăș,  
Făr' el i-o 'nvățat  
Munții la vînat.  
Atita și-au vînat,  
P'unde și-au d-aflat  
Urmă de cerb mare;  
Atît' au urmărit  
Pîn' s'au rătăcit  
Și s'au neftinat  
'N nouă cerbi de munte.  
Drag tăicuțu' lor  
Nu și-au mai răbdat  
Și el s'o luat,  
Pușca ș-au 'nșăglat  
Și 'n munți au vînat,  
P'unde și-au d-aflat  
Nouă cerbi de munte;  
'Ntr'on genunche-o stat,  
Tras-au să-i săgete.  
Cerbul cel mai mare  
Din grai și-o strîgat:  
— Drag tăicuțul nostru,  
Nu ne săgeta,*

Cowherds (how to be);  
(Only) taught them how  
In the hills to hunt.  
They hunted so much,  
Wherever they found  
Spoor of a large stag,  
Followed it so far,  
Till they lost their way,  
And until they changed  
To nine mountain stags.  
Their beloved father  
Could hold out no more,  
And he started out:  
He spitted his gun,  
Hunted in the hills,  
Where he came upon  
Nine (fine) mountain stags.  
On one knee he went,  
Arrow set to loose.  
Of the stags the largest  
Called aloud to say:  
Father dear of ours,  
Do not shoot at us,

*Că noi te-om lua  
În ăști coarne razi  
Și noi te-om țipa  
Tăt din munte 'n munte,  
Și din plai în plai,  
Și din pt'eatră 'n pt'eatră,  
Tăt țira te-i face.  
Tăicușorul lor  
Din grai și-o strîgat  
— Dragi șiuții mnei,  
Haidați voi acasă  
La măicuța voastră!  
Cu dor vă așteaptă,  
Cu măsuta 'ntinsă,  
Cu făclii aprinse,  
Cu pahare pline.  
Cerbul cel mai mare  
Din grai și-o grăit:  
— Drag tăicuțul nostru,  
Du-te tu acasă  
La măicuța noastră,  
Că cornile noaște  
Nu intră pe ușă,  
Făr' numai pin munte;  
Picioarile noaște  
Nu calcă 'n cenușă,  
Căci calcă prin frunză;  
Buzuțile noaște  
Nu-și beau din pahare,  
Căci beau din izvoare.<sup>179</sup>*

For we'll pick you up  
With these pointed antlers  
And we'll toss you down,  
From mountain to mountain,  
From meadow to meadow,  
And from stone to boulder,  
You'll be torn to shreds.  
Their (dear) father (then)  
Loudly called (to them):  
Oh, dear sons of mine,  
Come along (back) home  
To your little mother!  
Longing she awaits you  
With the decked-out table,  
With the candles burning,  
With the glasses filled.  
Of the stags the largest  
Spoke and said (to him):  
Our beloved father,  
Go back home (without us)  
To our little mother,  
Because our antlers  
Can't go through the doorway,  
Only through the mountains;  
(And) these feet of ours  
Do not step on ashes,  
For they step through leafage;  
(And) these lips of ours  
Do not drink from glasses,  
For they drink from wellsprings.

179 Béla Bartók,  
*Rumanian Folk Music, Vol.  
IV, Carols and Christmas  
Songs (Colinde)*, ed.  
Benjamin Suchoff, trans.  
by E.C. Teodorescu  
(The Hague: Martinus  
Nijhoff, 1975), 229-231.



Goat mask and costumes  
(from Romulus Vulcănescu,  
*Măștile populare*, Bucharest: 1970).

# PART 4:

# **Cosmic nostalgia**

Cosmologies also imply ways of knowing and being that cannot be simply rejected because they don't comply with modern scientific theories. Of course, some superstitious and illusory elements have to be let go, but cosmologies are far richer than such obsolete beliefs. Rather than seeing them as succeeded or replaced, another way to approach them is by forcing thinking to individuate in the face of such incompatibilities. This is what we may call the task of thinking today.—Yuk Hui



In a version of the Romanian creation myth, people were created before the sky and in the beginning the sky was close to earth. For several practical reasons the creator progressively moved it higher and higher, while also moving his throne further and further away from his and his brother's creation. In this myth people are the latest in a series of creation experiments performed by the creator couple. Before creating people, the creators experimented individually with several other classes of beings (such as giants, or a class of holy beings) which were mostly wiped out, either by their own demise, or by God's intervention through a great flood, as the beings became greedy and violent. Only when the creators joined their forces did they create people, who inherited characteristics from both God and the Devil.<sup>180</sup>

In another cosmogonic myth about the creation of the constellations and the Milky Way<sup>181</sup> a man decides to travel to the Creator and complain about the sky being moved so far away from people:

180 Vulcănescu, *Mitologie Română*, 238-47, 254-56.

181 Also called *Calea rătăcită*, or *Calea întortocheată*, "The Straying Path," or "The Winding Path."

A man who was unsatisfied with the creator's decision to move the sky decided to go and complain in person. In his journey to the sky, he took with him several people and animals to keep him company and tools to work the land and provide food for the group on the long journey. On his way he met the Devil (the Creator's partner/brother) who wanted to fight and stop him. The man proved victorious over the Devil, but during the fight ended up spilling milk from his buckets all over the road that he had walked. This winding road is now known as the Milky Way. The oxen got scared and broke the yoke, scattering all the tools across the sky. The fantastic beasts the Devil summoned to aid him in the fight were petrified in the sky. This is how we see them to this day, as constellations. The man hasn't reached the Creator yet, he's still on his way, but he hopes that he will someday get there, and the Creator will listen to his plea to bring back the sky closer to earth.<sup>182</sup>

182 Vulcănescu, 352-53. Translated by Vlad Ferariu.

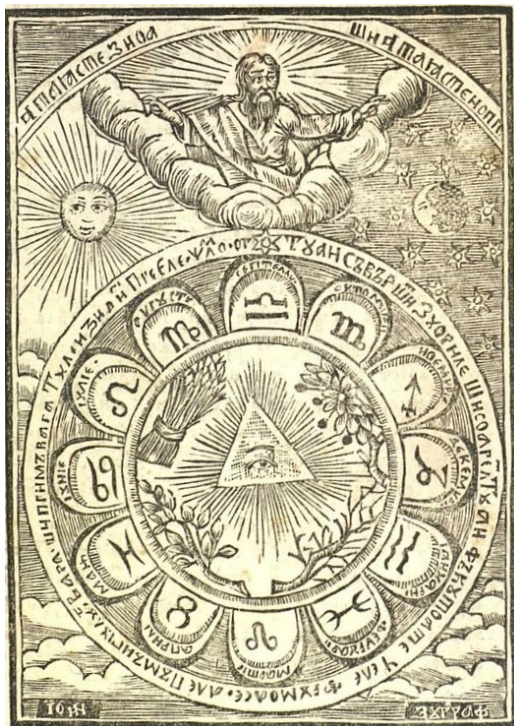
The things that the man takes with him on his journey reflect a pastoral, agrarian way of life that up until the twentieth century had not gone through significant changes since centuries. Daily life was still going on according to agricultural and seasonal cycles. In the modern era this way of life became a shameful fact and many still believe it to be the reason why the region is late in terms of 'modernization' and 'economic progress.'

We might see the man who traveled to God as riddled with nostalgia for a holier time when the sky was close and God himself would walk among people. But as the Romanian art critic Sabin Borș reminds us, nostalgia is also a “pragmatic practice of remembering.” Nostalgia is not only about reshaping the past to fit our hopes and expectations, but also a way of manifesting discontent towards current injustices, towards the distortions and manipulations of history or collective memory:

the struggle of memory against forgetting does not resume to the pains of remembering, but calls forth the fantasies of the future, the virtues of the forthcoming. Such attributes are those of an open future, beyond the horizon of expectations. It is what Jacques Derrida called *l’avenir*, that which is *to come*, *to approach*, or *to be on the way*—an absolute hospitality that we can only accept and conform to.<sup>183</sup>

183 Sabin Borș,  
“The Fortunes of  
Expectations,” in *Kajet 2*  
(2018), 198.

Illustration from an 1823 *gromovnic* know as *Cumuna anului* (the Wreath of the Year). God is at the top with the Sun to his right and the Moon and the stars to his left. Below is the zodiac circle with its corresponding months and the four seasons.



# Cosmisms and cosmotechnics

According to the Romanian ethnologist Romulus Vulcănescu cosmism in Romanian mythology, as we saw in the myth of the Milky Way, is at the same time a philosophical view on the relationship between cosmos and humans, an ethics resulting from this view, and a set of ethno-cultural behaviors. In this view the cosmos is a sacred reality. Cosmic objects and phenomena are referred to as the Holy Sky, the Sacred Sun or the Sacred Moon. The cosmos is represented through allegories, metaphors and sacred symbols where human, non-human and cosmic destiny are intertwined. In this mythological cosmism, humans, although considered superior to other creatures, in ontological order have the same rights and cosmic duties as other creatures.<sup>184</sup> Romanian folklore, songs and tales show a kinship between humans and forests, waters, animals and insects. Nature is never inanimate or passive in these stories and it is never entirely good or evil. It has its own logic and agency, sometimes at cross purposes with human ones.

184 Vulcănescu,  
*Mitologie Română*, 249.

Russian cosmism, a particular branch of Eastern European cosmist thought, has become quite popular in the contemporary art world in the last decade or so, especially popularized by the artist and writer Anton Vidokle and the philosopher Boris Groys. It is arguable if Russian cosmism can be characterized as a movement, as only a handful of thinkers are associated with it, but nevertheless it seems to have had a big impact on the Eastern European conceptualization of the cosmos. Based on the speculative writings of the nineteenth century Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Fyodorovich Fyodorov, Russian cosmism blends scientific thought with Orthodox spirituality in an esoteric futurism. Fyodorov saw injustice as rooted in the mortality of all beings, therefore scientific advancement should be dedicated to the goal of offering immortality to all. Museums, as repositories of dead things, would also play a crucial role in achieving

185 See Anton Vidokle, *Institute of the Cosmos*, a website repository of sources on Russian Cosmism; Boris Groys, ed., *Russian Cosmism*, e-flux, MIT Press, (2018); and “#cosmism” in *Idea: art + society* 51 (Cluj: Idea, 2017).

this goal. Such an ambitious project would soon manage to overpopulate the planet, which meant that people would have to take over the cosmos. Although Fyodorov’s cosmism was based on Christian Orthodox values, his writing would become highly heretical as in this view people would ultimately take the place of God in the cosmos.<sup>185</sup> Russian cosmism is a whole topic in itself and even though a detailed account of it is not the object of this thesis, I considered it important to mention as an example of an alternative to the sterile Western futurism that has become the default view of the cosmos. This homogeneous view of the future ultimately excludes a lot of categories, like people of color, queers or Eastern Europeans, which makes it necessary to look to alternatives such as Afrofuturisms or Easternfuturisms. The Romanian queer artist duo Claude&Dersch refer to this bleak version of the future in a text titled *Vă rugăm, nu veniți pe Marte!*, ‘Please, don’t Come to Mars!’

Please don’t come to Mars! There are no jobs for Eastern European women, no rooms for the unchristian, nor are there any opportunities for the hybrids of Lambda Be. You all come looking for work and, if by miracle you aren’t caught upon landing, you end up making art in the Martian slums until the government stops you from juggling radiating canisters in front of the astonished gaze of Mars’ many tourists. Until they manage to contain you, close off the slums and make next year’s bag out of you.

Please don’t come to Mars, not even to visit, we don’t want anything of yours, not even your bodies, not even your money, not even if you decide to spend your life’s earnings on that one luivuitton bag made from lunar weed and the skin of still born babies – you know, the one standing in the front window of the most luxurious shop of ours, has been standing there since the first wave of colonists, like a monument of expensiveness and of the new world: we will still not want you.

Never, never: the word is pouring from the plasma TVs facing the streets back on Earth, like rain, sometimes instead of rain. Never, never come to Mars. We are so beautiful, so perfect, in such social harmony without you. If we were to see you in that shuttle, we would have to revert to skinning you alive upon landing, you unwanted soul, out of mercy: it would be subhuman to let you

set foot on our sweet Mars only to watch you grow unadjusted, disintegrated, solitary, shunned from all of us. It would be such a pity to see you drag your body from the slums each day and walk, unwashed and diminished, among us. Sad, really.

So perhaps it would be for the better for you not to come, because we will find you hidden in that heavy shuttle, heavy from the bodies of others like you – who got skinned during previous voyages. We never take the time to remove the bodies; the only thing of use from you is your skin, in various colours, from ivory white, like the skin on the thighs of Russian devushkas, to pearly brown, like the foreheads of some boys from Aleppo. And we have plenty of skin already – its market is falling freely – because although we beg you not to come, for your own good, you keep coming, pouring in from all the cracks and corners of every shuttle.

Look, we are crying rivers of tears, please, understand our suffering, reach deep into our souls where we pray for peace and for our lives, understand our beauty and never disrupt it with your presence. And if, despite it all, you still want to come, start using our one of a kind allergen-free moisturizing cream at least six months prior to your arrival.<sup>186</sup>

The insurmountable task of resurrection for all proposed by Fyodorov also echoes the insurmountable task of the man that went to complain to God in the Romanian myth of the Milky Way. Even though he hasn't reached his destination, the man still hopes he will someday. The theme of the often-failed task of looking for a perfect world is a recurring motif in Eastern European culture and folklore: “the line between utopia and dystopia is blurred or crossed over and back again, and in a particularly Eastern fascination with the biomorphic or living land, the paradise of the Garden of Eden is rediscovered in new and unsettling ways.”<sup>187</sup> Even when there's no utopia, such as in the books *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* and *Voices from Chernobyl*<sup>188</sup> by the Belarusian Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich, this theme still persists “as both a political and nostalgic paradise that was shattered and, paradoxically, crystallised at the epicentre of the explosion.”<sup>189</sup>

In the novel *Bro*, part of *The Ice Trilogy* by the Russian novelist Vladimir

186 Simona&Ramona (AKA Claude&Dersch), “Vă rugăm, nu veniți pe Marte!”/“Please, don't Come to Mars!” trans. Alexandru Polgár, in *Idea* 51 (Cluj: 2017): 91.

187 India Lewis, “Meteorites and Meat Machines,” in *Kajet 2: On Utopias* (2018), 35.

188 On which the acclaimed 2019 HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* was based (created and written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck).

189 Lewis, 35-36.

190 Based on the famous Tunguska event, an approximately 12-megaton explosion that occurred near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River, Russia, on the morning of June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1908. Although the most plausible explanation would be a meteorite strike, the cause of the explosion remains unknown, as no meteorites or craters were found in the 2,150 km<sup>2</sup> impact area.

191 Lewis, 35.

Sorokin, the fall of an icy meteorite over the Siberian taiga<sup>190</sup> triggers a scenario that treads between utopia and dystopia. The beings had made a mistake by creating water on Earth and their light became trapped in the reflection of the water they created. Once Bro, the titular character of the novel, is awakened by the ice of the meteorite as one of the light beings, he sets on a mission to awaken his other brothers and sisters of light so together they can correct their mistake of creating water and therefore life, destroy the Earth, and reestablish the cosmic order that life disrupted. In *Bro*, utopia takes the material form of an ice meteorite that holds the power to awaken souls. In this form, it can be collected and distributed in the human world.<sup>191</sup>

In Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (loosely based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky) another meteorite seems to have created an uninhabited but dangerous paradise referred to as the 'Zone,' where supposedly there is a room that can grant people their deepest desires. The theme of recovering a lost Paradise is about yearning for something that is both beyond our reach and intrinsic to humanity. In Eastern European sci-fi the cosmos is usually portrayed as a place of wonder, magic and mysteries. Even in more dystopian settings where technology is used as a tool of oppression, liberation comes through psychedelic experiences where the feeling of being one with the cosmos offers the possibility of freedom. In the Polish-Czechoslovak film co-production, *Pan Kleks w Kosmosie* (*Mr. Kleks in Space*, dir. Krzysztof Gradkowski, 1988) the children's fictional character of Mr. Kleks experiences outer space as a gloomy dystopian place, filled with robot graveyards and completely computerized schools which are used as a means of controlling society. In this Eastern European techno-noir film technology fails to liberate people and becomes either obsolete or just another tool for oppression. In this bleak picture of the future the film also offers liberation:

Instead [of technology], it is the Cosmos that offers one last possibility of freedom—a trippy escape into psychedelia. In a world where all technological achievements are used to serve the privileged, the movie manifests both frustration with oppressive political systems and disillusionment towards positive social change and an improved human future. The only way out, the movie tells us, is through the radical rebellion of youth, where dance and

liberation are granted through psychedelic experiences. It closely follows the emancipatory prerequisite of anarchist political activist Emma Goldman: *If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.*<sup>192</sup>

192 Stanisław Welbel, "The Sputnik Western," in *Kajet 2* (2018), 87-88.

The Hong Kong philosopher of technology Yuk Hui (許煜) coined the term cosmotechnics as a conceptual tool for questioning assumptions of technology that contemporary (Western) society have taken for granted. At the core of cosmotechnics there is a paradox: technology as "externalization of memory" and "liberation of organs" is both universal and not universal "since it is also enabled and limited by cosmologies."<sup>193</sup> As Hui himself explains:

193 Ana María Guzmán Olmos and Hugo Esquinca Villafuerte, "¿Cosmotécnica Latinoamericana?/ Latin American Cosmotechnics? Interview with Yuk Hui," *Technophany 1* (December 2021).

I developed the concept of cosmotechnics to suggest that there is not one universal and homogenous technology, but rather that it is necessary to re-discover and articulate how there are multiple cosmotechnics historically and philosophically. I gave a preliminary definition to cosmotechnics as the unification of moral order and cosmic order through technical activities.<sup>194</sup>

194 Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, 41.

Also important for the project of this thesis and my own art practice is the fact that the concept of cosmotechnics can be used as a decolonial tool to envision a multiplicity of different paths towards the future. Although originally applied to Chinese society and civilization, the concept of cosmotechnics can be adapted to map onto other regions.

The project of cosmotechnics is a project of decolonization. Modernization brought forward two temporal dimensions: on the one hand, a simultaneity, characterized by the synchronization and homogenization of knowledge through technological means; on the other hand, consequently, the development of knowledge according to an internal necessity, namely progress. Modernization qua globalization is a process of synchronization which converges different historical times to a single global axis of time and prioritizes specific kinds of knowledge as major productive force. Today, we have accepted all these concepts as if they are the only truth. In order to proceed, we need to fragment the present, not to go back to the past since this is not possible, but rather to develop different trajectories towards the future.<sup>195</sup>

195 Hui in "Latin American Cosmotechnics?"

# The case of the Mociu meteorite

Man is not only a terrestrial being, but a cosmic one, connected by all his biology, all molecules, particles of the body, with the cosmos, with its cosmic rays, its flows and fields.  
—Alexander Chizhevsky



# Meteorites as angels in love

Meteorites are leftovers from the creation of our Solar System, accumulations of matter that did not aggregate into larger bodies like planets. They most likely originate from the Asteroid Belt between Mars and Jupiter where they broke off from larger bodies, as a result of collisions. These rocks wander through space for millions of years until they happen to get too close to Earth's gravitational field which pulls them into the atmosphere. Most of them do not survive the friction and completely burn up in our atmosphere leaving behind brief glowing trails. Scientifically these are called meteors, but they are commonly known as "shooting stars." The ones that survive the journey and fall on the Earth's surface are called meteorites. While approaching their fall they explode in the atmosphere in several stages and scatter over an area in a specific distribution called a "strewn field." Smaller stones are scattered at its start and larger ones at its end, with the medium pieces falling in between. The explosions in the atmosphere and the impact of the larger falling stones create sound and shockwaves that can propagate over hundreds of kilometers.

Seen from the human scale of time the fall of a cosmic body down to earth is quite a rare event. It is not only an event of scientific importance, but also a symbolic event that disrupts human-made order. Throughout the millennia comets were seen as bad omens—warning signs from the gods. Recovered meteorite fragments, however, were often treated as messages from the gods. They were carved as sacred objects or displayed as offerings in temples.<sup>196</sup> As we saw in earlier sections, many of these beliefs about sky omens were kept by local communities in Eastern Europe, at least until the middle of the twentieth century, if not until the present day. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Romanians still used to consult a type of almanac called a *gromovnic* to plan farmwork and housework according to the seasons, zodiac signs, and solar, lunar, and planetary cycles. They also offered guides on how to predict the weather based on

196 Famous ancient artifacts made of meteorites include the Tibetan Iron Man statue representing the Buddhist deity Vaiśravaṇa, dating from 1000 AD, or Tutankhamen's meteoric iron dagger from the fourteenth century BC. The temple dedicated to the mother goddess Cybele in Rome hosted a meteoric stone brought from Greek Asia Minor in 204 BC.

197 See *Calendariu pe 140 de ani, alcătuit pe șapte planete* [140 years calendar, arranged according to the seven planets], Bucharest, 1823.

signs like cloud patterns, earthquakes and thunder.<sup>197</sup> These almanacs combined Christian beliefs with pagan ones, observational and natural science with astrology, myths, superstitions and legends, mirroring the interconnected nature of all these phenomena. In a similar way, a beautiful cosmological legend collected from Transylvania in 1900 combines in this case the origin of meteorites with the origin of fireflies.

God came down to Earth one day to show a group of angels how people live. The angels were so pleased with the earthly world that one of them started crying when it was time to leave. When God asked him why he was crying, the angel confessed: he had fallen in love with a beautiful shepherd girl guarding her flock of white sheep in a green field. God became concerned. When they reached the edge of heaven he stopped the angels in their place. He worried they would share their earthly knowledge with the other angels in heaven so he transformed them into bright stars. The angels shined brightly, happy that their gaze would always be upon the earthly world. But the angel who fell in love was not happy and his star was constantly flickering, throwing fiery sparks at the other stars. God knew this could stir trouble among the stars so he ripped the crying star from heaven and threw it down to Earth so hard that it left a trail of sparks which rained over the entire field where the shepherd girl was guarding her flock. The sparks did not die out, instead they became fireflies, forever showing the girl the way to her angel lover.<sup>198</sup>

198 S.F. Marian, "Licuriciul (din datinile și credințele Românilor despre insecte.), in *Familia* 20 (Oradea, May 19, 1902), 231-33. Translated by Vlad Ferariu.

# Falling down to earth

The first scientist to investigate the Mócs meteorite fall was the Hungarian professor Antal Koch. He taught geology, mineralogy and paleontology at the Royal Hungarian Franz Joseph University in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and was a member of the Transylvanian Museum Society. A couple of days after the fall, together with his assistant and students, he set on to collect not only the fallen fragments, but also witness accounts of sightings of the meteor. In its path the meteor crossed present day Hungary until it reached the center of Transylvania where it exploded, its fragments scattering

over the lands of ten villages. In their initial visit to the fall sites, Koch and his team managed to recover hundreds of fragments, some collected by themselves, others purchased from the locals. Many of the stones were used in exchanges with museums and mineralogy collections from Europe, thus establishing the foundations of the present-day collection of the Mineralogy Museum of the Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj.<sup>199</sup> The museum can still make similar exchanges with the Mócs meteorite fragments, albeit more rarely.

Stories from the area say that some peasants got rich, and they could afford to buy land after selling collected stones. However, there are also accounts of several people who wanted to keep recovered fragments, for reasons ranging from curiosity to beliefs that they might bring good luck or have magic powers. But good fortune is not the only effect associated with the stones. One particularly tragic account tells the story of a wealthy family in Mociu who kept a piece of meteorite in their home. Several members of the family died after a while and the peasant servants blamed the series of tragedies on the meteorite fragment that the family kept in spite of their warnings.<sup>200</sup>

According to Federico Campagna, we can see in these stories that the event of the meteorite fall was seen both through the lens of Technic and of Magic. The samples were collected, analyzed and exchanged by the scientific community of the day. What I found striking in Antal Koch's original study, published just several months after the fall, is that besides the scientific investigation of the samples it also includes vivid witness accounts of the event. When compared to recent studies of the same meteorite it is hard not to see Technic's primacy as a cosmogonic force in contemporary society. These recent studies are more concerned with establishing detailed facts about the meteorite, such as its origins, age or exact chemical composition. Seen through Magic's world, that is through the eyes of the peasants that experienced the event, the meteorite is cosmic paradox, both an object and a symbol that can take wide range of different meanings, therefore also leading to contradictions.

199 See Antal Koch, "Jelentés az 1882. febr. 3-iki mocsí meteoritkőhullásról" [Report on the meteorite fall of February 3rd, 1882 in Mociu], trans. Tímea Ferencz, in *Kolozsvári Orvos-Természettudományi Értesítő* [The Bulletin of Medicine and Natural Sciences Cluj], year 7, vol. 4, no. 1 (Cluj: 1882), 89-105.

200 Based on my interviews with Traian Sălăgean and Mariana Peştean.

# Hope piercing the void

The terrace bar in the center of Mociu is called *Meteor*, and so is the local football team, both older attempts from the locals to capitalize on the event. But the meteorite is not only a connection to the past; in recent years it has also become more present and is even involved in plans for the future of the village. The mayor hopes to promote the meteor as part of the commune's image and branding, so it now features on the official seal and there is a reference to it in the newly composed folk anthem. A scale replica of the largest piece of meteorite recovered is now exhibited in the town hall. Another replica is supposed to be installed on the *Locu' Popii* hill where the fragment was discovered, in a park dedicated to the event. Locals want to develop rural tourism and they hope these plans will spark tourists' interest in the village and bring a more prosperous future. But, to quote the mayor, "this will take time and depend on financial possibilities."

My version of the future for the village might not coincide with the one the mayor wants to build. In my view the local myths and stories related to the meteorite are far more valuable than any attempts to capitalize on the event. But the future should not be used in the singular, we should talk more about possible, alternative futures that can coexist. As an attempt at imagining an Eastern

European version future, Petrică Mogoș coined the term Easternfuturism which he defines broadly as “a matter of learning how to practice hope.”<sup>201</sup> It seems that for the villagers of Mociu the meteorite has become a symbol learning the practice of hope.

201 Mogoș, “The Age of Nothingness,” 22.

Many of the theorists of enchanted materialism stress the importance of learning from native and indigenous practices as ways of engaging differently with nonhumans. This mental ecology is essential for both imagining alternative futures and avoiding environmental collapse. Eastern Europe is very rarely mentioned or involved in these discussions, but I hope this study shows that the area also has valuable lessons and insights that can contribute to the cause. The Mócș meteorite might be seen as nothing more than a local event, but I hope I have shown that its implications go beyond the local. When Mogoș writes about Easternfuturism he stresses that the Eastern perspective should also be important for the West, as “in order to surpass the boundaries of capitalism” in this version of the future “the West needs also to be liberated.”<sup>202</sup>

202 Mogoș, 22.

Detail of the largest stone recovered from the Mociu meteorite in the Mineralogy Museum of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (from personal archive).



# Conclusions



Myth must break through the crust, scatter a thousand new comets in the void, illuminate the black sky with Bengal lights, decorate the sky with vaporous plumes.  
— Ithell Colquhoun

The meteorite as a symbol guiding this thesis takes many guises and opens multiple doors to subjects that deserve further investigation. It also gives valuable insights to use in my future art practice. As a symbol of in-betweenness, the meteorite relates to migration and border thinking, a position that does not advocate for a dual ‘either this, or that’ but rather for a spectrum of possible choices, a coexistence of different timelines, past and future. A sense of time as a flow is essential to this position, as well as the interconnectedness of space and time, as in Bakhtin’s chronotope.

By decentering the center in its relationship with the periphery I hope this study challenges assumed knowledge about Eastern Europe. The decolonial lens is a valuable tool in this endeavor, but it is not without flaws as even peripheries have their own peripheries. A purely positive reframing of the periphery comes with the danger of using the same oppressive strategies as the center. I have tried to be mindful of this insight and

point, when necessary, to the pitfalls of the views I am advocating for in this thesis.

I believe that some of the most useful decolonial tools that Eastern Europe has to offer can be found in its folklore and myths as well as their associated rituals. As we saw, a world created by the cosmogonic force of magic can heal the permanent state of crisis of and restore presence in our world. For me, magic and art are closely related practices. They both make use of mundane materials and imbue them with ineffable qualities that cannot be fully captured into words. I also believe that art is the perfect vantage point from which to imagine and practice based on what magic has to offer as a tool.

A discussion of folklore cannot ignore folklore's appeal on Orthodoxist, nationalist and fascist agendas. I argue for reclaiming folklore from these toxic agendas and using it as a tool for healing, remembering, returning, imagining, and practicing more just and meaningful futures. Even though most of the examples I give in this thesis come from Romanian culture they are not entirely specific to Romania. As shown by the historians of religion, folklorists, and ethnographers I referenced, Romanian folklore has many parallels and similarities not only to other Eastern European cultures, but also to some South and North American indigenous cultures. Therefore, I believe that even if my examples are local, the insights that can be derived from them can be applied to other contexts as well.







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