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*„Überwindung der  
Diktaturen -  
Dichter, Künstler  
und Schriftsteller in  
der Begegnung“*

*„Overcoming Dictatorships -  
The Encounter of  
Poets, Artists and Writers“*



*5th Project Report  
(December 2007)*

Bucharest – On and under the surface.  
Traces of communism in Romania

Gert Röhrborn, Dresden

The *Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania* (Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului în România, IICCR) invited participants and organisers of the project “Overcoming Dictatorships” to Bucharest in December 2007. They experienced another workshop shaped by the amalgamation of scientific and literary-artistic approaches to 20<sup>th</sup> century European dictatorships before a specific local background.

Science takes a look at arts and dictatorship

Professor Gerhard Besier, Chair of Research on Totalitarianism (Dresden) and Dr. Marius Oprea, President of IICCR (Bucharest), opened the event which at first took the shape of a conference named “Overcoming dictatorships in Europe”. The conference was held at a special venue: the palace of Nicolae Ceaușescu, initially projected as “House of the People” and, among others, today housing the Romanian parliament. The building owner was not to witness the completion of the year-long construction works which by far surpassed beyond 1989. The conference tried to integrate Romanian experiences into the wider picture of research on dictatorships and to combine it with approaches taken from the arts. Debaters dealt with artistic representations of

dictatorships, and also examined the transition towards open societies.

Dominik Trutkowski (Dresden) informed the audience about the ambivalence of the concept of totalitarianism, which lingers beyond the end of the cold war. It represents not only a scientific theory. It is also a battle cry familiar to people in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe in particular. Scientists have not been able to develop the theory further sufficiently. On the other hand the struggle over the political interpretation of history has anything but come to an end.



Bucharest city centre on a contemporary picture postcard. The Palace centre background (Photo: George Avanu).

One of Olga Novikova’s (Brussels/Madrid) major research interests is political memory, and she presented it by portraying alternative forms of remembrance in respect to the intellectual changes in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. The Post-Stalinist period saw writers, scientists and commentators grappling with German denazification and the annihilation of the European Jews. Novikova maintains that this process of understanding is one among the many origins of alternative historical narratives. In her opinion it was the communication between Russian and Central Eastern European intellectuals from the 1960s onwards which ultimately informed the later development towards

Perestroika and the Soviet policy on Germany in particular, as the cases of Georgy Arbatov or Anatoly Chernyaev exemplify.

Monica Cioli (Trento) applied herself to the controversial relationship between fascism and avant-garde in Italy. Futurism in particular was closely connected to fascism. Cioli presented in detail how fascism identified itself with futurism. Nevertheless she pointed out that it would be unjustified to consider all works of modern Italian art as cultural offshoots of fascism.

José M. Faraldo (Dresden/ Potsdam) concluded the panel with the comparative case of Spain, which may offer interesting insights for South Eastern Europe. For Faraldo it is the visual arts which have the most appropriate means at their disposal to break up painful taboos and pave the way towards a democratic culture, both in times of dictatorship and transition. He used the examples of the world famous director Pedro Almodóvar and the comic-strip artist Carlos Giménez, who in *Paracuellos* (Ediciones Amaika, 1977) dealt with his childhood under the regime of Franco, to illustrate what he considers the arts' comparative advantage: the creative mixture of social context, biographical fragments and the respective political imperatives of the time.

#### Arts and literature in the process of overcoming dictatorships

The second day of the workshop began where participants had seen the first end: in Ceaușescu's palace, which they inspected during a guided tour. With its one thousand

rooms this building, second in size to the Pentagon in the world, leaves the visitor with no doubts about its projected function: it was meant to arise rather intimidation than awe. Today it is the most tangible material legacy of communism in Romania. The palace was the manifestation of a megalomaniac project: the city of the ruler was to receive a divine centre. The price to be paid for the regime's insanity was the depletion of economic resources and the unscrupulous sacrifice of both human life and culture. The hidden and subcutaneous aftereffects of communist rule are certainly more vicious for the future of Romanian political culture. Yet its sheer presence defies any reinterpretation of the palace into a memorial site. Even twenty years after the fall of communism the Romanian society has not been able to find sustainable solutions for the costly maintenance and the urgent need of concepts for sensible use. We may find the reasons here why artists repeatedly made the palace a subject of their works.<sup>1</sup>



Inside the marble palace (Photo: TU Dresden).

During a visit to the National Gallery, situated in a wing of the palace, project artists attended a lecture on Ion Grigorescu (born in 1945) by Magda Radu, the Gallery's curator. His private photographs, films and texts form an integral part of the

underground art scene under socialism. Radu dealt with the question whether artists like Grigorescu may be classified as Neoavantgardists. She underlined the intellectual proximity of his oeuvre to the works of the historian Lucian Boia. The historian revealed the detrimental social effects of the mental maps of communist ideology; the artist made the effects visible in public space, for example during rallies and parades.<sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless these art interventions never transformed into political opposition.

The invitation to a panel discussion at the Bucharest House of Writers offered the opportunity to learn more about the role of literature under dictatorships as well. Coen Stork, nick-named “ambassador on bicycle” due to his support for dissenting intellectuals while serving as representative of the Dutch government in Bucharest in the late 1980s, draw a serious but not entirely discouraging picture of the transformation: he ascribed the power to overcome the antagonisms between nations and social groups much more to the arts than to the realm of politics. In his retrospective evaluation of the last fifty



Marius Oprea, Gerhard Besier, Coen Stork, Eugen Negrici, Denisa Mirena Pişcu (from left) during the panel discussion (Photo: TU Dresden).

years of Romanian literature Professor Eugen Negrici emphasized the importance of the 1960s for the further development of

the country. Ceauşescu’s arbitrary dissociation from Soviet hegemony allowed national literature to flourish. It also influenced a Sixties Generation no longer susceptible to rule by mere intimidation. Negrici seemed satisfied that the mini Cultural Revolution staged during the 1970s reached a self-inflicted deadlock twenty years later, but he could not conceal his uneasiness with the country’s history: “at some point something always must go wrong in Romania.” Panelist Denisa Mirena Pişcu struck a note somewhat different from her recent accounts in Cracow.<sup>iii</sup> She ascribes herself to a Generation 2000 (see the anthology *Generatia 2000*, Pontica 2004) characterized by a double identity: according to her opinion Romanians increasingly use and enjoy artistic and individual permissiveness, but in politics they submit themselves to the old fears and vices. Pişcu aims to create a unified identity of freedom. “Overcoming Dictatorships” has given her the opportunity to progress on this path. She could access and appropriate the submerged history of her childhood under communism. Now it is time to use this new experience in action.

It is by their own performance that project artists put alternative forms of action into practice. Guests and participants of the working session witnessed and experienced a debate which was partially characterized by familiar patterns of exchange between people with different rhetoric abilities and personal interests. The dispute over the interpretation of the term overcoming as a catch word, metaphor or concept saw yet another turn. It is a vicarious struggle over the relationship between politics and the arts, between society and the individual after

all. A different spirit filled the room when, after ninety minutes of talk on title and form of the exhibition catalogue, a graphic idea arose from among participants, which incorporated the project mission in a



Artists debating about the touring exhibition (Photo: TU Dresden).

simple but evident and creative way. What distinguishes “Overcoming Dictatorships” from other cultural projects is the stimulating dialogue between science, arts and literature and the layout of the workshops. Artists do not only communicate across demarcations of countries, generations and genres. They actively shape the process, in particular by their participation in the selection and presentation of the artworks. Dr. Dr. Jutta Vinzent, author of the exhibition catalogue, is fascinated by the fact that workshops do not only mirror a specific form of communal work, but are also methodologically informed by oral history.<sup>iv</sup> Following an argument by Homi K. Bhabha she interprets artists’ contributions as “signifiers of dislocation”. In Vinzent’s view the artists stride ahead in an integrated process of mourning, remembering and overcoming of the past, without losing the ability to critically evaluate the problems of the present.

The past in the present. The case of Romania

Being inside the marble palace some might have been tempted to contemplate whether Ceaușescu’s Romania really was subject to a sultanistic form of rule. Who is to ascertain that this established concept of transformation science is not yet just another manifestation of Western orientalism? The remaining items of the workshop programme brought the participants back to the hard realities of repression in dictatorships.



Nicolae Manolescu, President of the Writers’ Union of Romania welcomes participants and partners during his dinner speech (Photo: TU Dresden).

The screening of the movie “Off the map. Bucharest” by Ioana Marinescu and Robert Fearn revealed the extent of the destruction which happened to be an integral part of the erection of the palace. To provide sufficient space for a boulevard of splendid houses thousands of meters long Ceaușescu had a whole historical district of the capital demolished and a hill flattened. Former inhabitants were forcefully resettled in precipitately erected blocks of flats in the suburbs.

Thoughtfully, but not without critical evaluation the directors try to lift the veil of oblivion from this lost world by combining historical documentation with contemporary eyewitness accounts. Shock had already been the reaction viewers showed after the early presentation of a documentary on the work of IICCR. Film material presented under the title “The Dead” gave evidence of archeological excavations at the cemetery of the poor in Sighetu Marmăției. During the early years of Romanian communism important representatives of bourgeois society were buried there after they had died in a nearby prison. The search for the human



Facing a rotten history. The former prison at Râmnicu Sărat (Photo: TU Dresden).

remains of public figures like the former Prime Minister Iuliu Maniu or the historian Gheorghe Brătianu, partially broadcasted on television, is of considerable importance for overcoming the legacies of communist rule in Romania. The concluding visit to the former prison of Râmnicu Sărat accentuated the lasting impression participants gained from the difficult Romanian past and the admirable work of IICCR. Its experts work towards the future use of Râmnicu Sărat as a memorial site, a goal already achieved in Sighet.

#### Upcoming events:

- 9 May 2008, Hall of Frescos, Municipal Library Trent, Italy: Presentation of the literary anthology *Present tensions. European writers on overcoming dictatorships* (CEU Press 2008)
- 10 May 2008, University of Trent, Italy: Conference *Intellectuals and Dictatorship: A Comparative Perspective 1922-1990*
- 9 October 2008, University Gallery Collections Birmingham, Great Britain: Opening of the touring exhibition *Overcoming Dictatorships* (with stations in Cracow, Bucharest, Budapest, Trent, Dečín and Dresden until April 2009)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.mnac.ro/previous2004.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.kontakt-collection.net/artists/Grigorescu+Ion/>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2/b13\\_1.pdf](http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2/b13_1.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2/Vinzent\\_Blog.pdf](http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2/Vinzent_Blog.pdf)