

The Debate Around Postmodernism in Romania in the 1980s

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After more than twenty years now of debates, polemics, numerous books and special issues of magazines from the widest of fields, I suppose almost everybody agrees that postmodernism is probably the most important topic that has aroused the interest of the international cultural milieus since the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. As it is known, this phenomenon should be linked to a larger debate on modernity and modernism, held in practically all domains of theoretical and artistic activity – a debate that brings to the open a probable change in the mental and cultural paradigm (Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ihab Hassan etc.).

From the multitude of themes and perspectives on this undoubtedly fashionable issue, I would try to approach a subject very little tackled so far: Postmodernism in Eastern Europe. For the easiness of communication, under the label “Eastern Europe” I understand here all the European ex-communist countries. My paper could be then subtitled: “Is there something like postmodernism in Eastern Europe?” Or “How was it possible to have something of a postmodern symptomatology under a communist regime?” Or, furthermore, “What could postmodernism mean in a small, marginal and isolated European country?” And so on.

These predictable questions intend to suggest that, from what is generally and vaguely understood by postmodernism in Eastern Europe, it is not obvious at all that this rather mysterious phenomenon could have appeared, even in discreet, modest or minor forms, within this geographical area, only recently liberated from totalitarian political rules. What I want to prove here is quite the contrary.

If one takes into consideration postmodernism only as a „period term” – as it frequently happens because of the prefix that makes it a compound word – it is obviously difficult to assert that postmodernism could have arisen in Eastern Europe as a “superstructure effect”, generated by the socio-economic reality of the “post-industrial” civilization, as it was asserted for the Western world (Toynbee, Daniel Bell, Fredric Jameson). The difference between the “post-technological”, or “post-consumerist” societies of the West and the “post-World War M”, or “post-communist” societies of the East is only too obvious and need not to be demonstrated.

But things become more complicated if one takes into account postmodernism as a “cultural concept” – a perspective beginning to prevail in today’s theoretical discourse. It is not simple to define what a “cultural concept” is but, for our purpose, I will point out here only the fact that in the views of many theorists any accepted cultural concept – like *classicism*, *romanticism* or *modernism* – can be used with three different and complementary meanings. Besides the historical meaning, related to a certain period of time, there functions the typological meaning, stressing the specific structural stylistic dimensions of a cultural phenomenon; and

finally, there is also the axiological meaning, that enlightens the evaluative ways of perceiving and appropriating such a phenomenon. Any cultural concept can be made use of in one of these three specific dimensions, but it is preferable to keep in mind all its meanings when trying to describe and understand a cultural reality.

Since postmodernism as a cultural concept has already been accepted in various academic circles, I will try to use it in a “heuristic” way, in order to capture and explain certain cultural facts that occurred in the cultural space I belong to, during the last decade. I admit that this use of postmodernism may be only a “strategic tool” (Matei Călinescu) for a better focusing of the analysis and a better understanding of the circumscribed phenomenon I wish to bring into attention. But, as Matei Călinescu puts it, the function of this kind of “provisional constructs” is not to reflect an objective, externally existing “reality” better or worse, but to “shape and reshape patterns of significant relations, to separate and recombine them for purposes of understanding and, why not, for intellectual manipulation”.

My claim is that a certain postmodern state of mind and certain cultural facts of a postmodernism type really occurred in Eastern Europe, as an effect of a specific and complex “expectational horizon”. Postmodernism did not have socio-economic causes in this region (as in the West), but it had a similar cultural and psychological motivation. The interest about postmodernism in these small East-European countries should/could represent rather a way in which to overcome mentally and artistically the local difficult socio-political conditions, it was a subtle symptom of a diffuse premonition of change (see Heller, Feher, Jencks).

In this respect, the forms taken by the theoretical arguing around postmodernism, as well as its influence, real or not, in various artistic languages, deserve a thorough analysis. In each of these countries, both the proportion of debates and the specific modes of perceiving postmodernism could supply new points of view to the particular way in which each local culture lived the relationship between the ideological constraints and artistic freedom: it could also provide interesting information about the hopes and chances of these cultures for international cultural integration.

As the analysis of postmodernism should be carried out against the political and cultural background of each country, I will try to briefly present Romania’s particular case and eventually to draw some general conclusions.

My analysis starts again with a central rethorical question: How was it possible to have a public cultural debate around postmodernism, vividly covering several years, in the East-European country with the most restrictive and dictatorial communist regime, in Ceaușescu’s Romania of the 1980s?

Here is some necessary information. The term «postmodernism» appeared in the cultural press in 1980, as a “period term”, but it was hardly noticed. In 1983-1984, the term started to be increasingly used; in 1984-1985, several translations of foreign articles on this issue were published; and in 1985-1986, postmodernism became a „hot” cultural matter, intensely discussed in the literary circles and cenacles. A special issue of *Caiete critice* (“Critical Papers”), devoted to this topic and published at the beginning of 1986, was the starting point of a vivid debate displayed in the Romanian cultural press in the interval 1986-1988. That is to say that towards the end of the 1980s, in the last years of Ceaușescu’s aberrant regime, postmodernism can be considered to have been the main challenging issue of the cultural milieu.

This is probably one of the many paradoxes that characterized and still characterize Romania when seen from abroad

Anyway, it is certain that in those years (up to now), a rather large part of the Romanian cultural community was drawn to the perception of an important cultural change that pushed many of the most prominent writers and critics to involve themselves in public disputes. As was noticed at that time, the issue of postmodernism became the most serious and important debate in the Romanian culture of the post-war period – of course, if one leaves aside the precautionary campaign for the autonomy of aesthetics at the beginning of the 1960s.

The numerous commentaries published in those years throw light upon two general types of reactions or attitudes. Among those who manifested a positive attitude of acceptance, postmodernism was understood in two different but finally complementary ways. On the one hand, postmodernism was perceived as a new and welcome attempt at “completing” modernity – as a crowning of modernism rather than as its critique, as the latest offshoot of the modernist aesthetic principles rather than as their defeater. It is significant to notice that this position was sustained by the most important names of the cultural generation which made its debut at the beginning of the 1960s.

In order to understand this position, one should not forget that the normal assimilation of artistic modernism in this country (and region) was interrupted from its sane development by the post-war political situation: abhorred in the 1950s, slowly/cautiously rediscovered in the 1960s, rapidly assimilated in the 1970s. Such a specific historical situation helped modernism remain a central cultural theme (battle) for the post-war generation, a kind of aesthetic “victory” upon political constraints, that had to be preserved, continued, accomplished at some time. In accepting postmodernism, the representatives of this generation laid stress upon unity, continuity, solidarity between generations, opposing the “spirit of recuperation” and the “tolerance” of postmodernism towards the “intolerance” of proletcultism, for example. For this reason, they gave a “soft” version and a “weak” meaning to the issue (maybe out of political precautions as well).

On the other hand, postmodernism was understood by another part of those who acknowledged it in a more radical sense – as a new literary/cultural paradigm appearing for the first time in Romanian culture. The sustainers of this “hard” version were obviously representatives of the younger generation that made its appearance on the cultural field just at the beginning of the 1980s – therefore they named themselves “eighty-ists”.

In the views of these young critics, writers and artists, Romanian modernism – after being artificially interrupted during the 1950s – was revived in apparently fresh forms in the 1960s, but became completely exhausted of its creative disponibilities in the 1970s. For them, modernism was a closed cultural structure, on the way of historicization at the beginning of the 1980s, when a new literary/cultural paradigm was just emerging.

This new „structure”, as they often named it after Hugo Friedrich’s *Structures of Modern Lyrics*, had new, distinctive characteristics. I will recall here only a few: the refusal of the “high”, pure, abstract modernist forms; a new opening towards the surrounding reality, towards the “authenticity” of the real human person; the striving to regain and express all the levels (biological, biographical, sexual, social, cultural, spiritual etc.) of the human existence; a new,

“realistic” style stating the democratization of the language of art; but at the same time, an appropriation of a large cultural storage of styles, themes and techniques, taken from the national and international tradition, used in an eclectic manner in order to better convey the new synthesis envisaged by the new sensibility and creativity etc.

It is important to notice here that these ambitious theoretical assertions were in fact accompanied by a young artistic production largely perceived as really featuring new aesthetic characteristics: narrativism and multistylishness – in poetry, biographism and irony – in criticism, textualism and intertextuality – in prose, savage figurativism and neo-expressionism – in the visual arts etc. The theorists of this new generation even produced such new critical concepts as “textualist engineering”, “fictional sociography”, “new anthropocentrism” etc.

Furthermore, it is highly significant to notice that inside this new artistic generation two different attitudes appeared towards the notion of postmodernism. Some young critics asserted that this new artistic production was to be named postmodernist, not due to a fashionable synchronization with the Western trend, but by virtue of its internal evolution and characteristics that made it similar to the international postmodernism. The fact that the term entered their scope only towards the mid 1980s – that is, after their first books and exhibitions – was an argument in this sense. Although acknowledging the influence of the American “beat” generation and other more recent currents upon their own education, they argued the existence of specific aspects in their own creation that should pretend to elaborate the concept of a “Romanian postmodernism” (I.B. Lefter).

Some other young theorists, fewer than the first ones, took position against the use of this term. From their point of view, postmodernism would label only a strictly aesthetic project of Western provenance, that could rightly cover only some marginal products of the new generation: namely those artworks in which imaginary comfort, *livresque* seduction and intertextual fantasy would prevail. In their views, postmodernism represented in fact a hedonistic and reactionary attitude, mostly conservative, even conformist with respect to the rough reality around. They even claimed that this postmodernism would represent a kind of “nice diversion”, by shifting the cultural attention from the real aspects artworks should focus their attention on towards illusory worlds. Instead of postmodernism, they suggested the term “new anthropocentrism”, better fit, in their opinion, for the new existential engagement and the “total” human synthesis that this new art had to pursue (Alexandru Mușina).

This special interpretation of postmodernism, inside the camp of its real supporters, seemed to meet in a strange manner the position of its active detractors. In fact, the negative, unfavorable attitude against postmodernism was defended by the representatives of the official culture, mostly by the theorists of “protochronism” (a bizarre nationalist theory asserting that the Romanians had previously discovered many western scientific innovations and cultural achievements). In their opinion, postmodernism was only a “*ail turai import*”, a decadent evasion, noxious for the local socialist culture. This attitude was sustained by important names of the older generation too, representatives of a “classical” modernism, artists already officialized and rewarded with high political or social positions.

During 1989, as the socio-political situation grew much worse, only a few echoes, mostly negative, of this cultural debate managed to appear in the media. After 1989, the general

confusion of the so-called “period of transition”, in which the intellectuals paid attention mostly to political issues, made the relaunching of the debate equally difficult. But during the years 1992 and 1993, several articles published in the cultural magazines showed a renewed interest for the postmodern topic.

After this short historical review meant also to point out some structural–stylistic characteristics of evaluative positions related to our issue, I would like to draw some general conclusions, by setting it in relationship with the western postmodern condition. As one can see, many of the questionable aspects related to postmodernism have been touched in the Romanian debate. But regardless of the right or wrong meanings it was given, let me stress again that this debate *could* actually occur in a communist country (Romania) towards the mid 1980s – that is to say only very few years later than in the West, where postmodernism reached its real peak with the public opinion at the begin-ing of the 1980s and during the same decade.

The possible causes of this phenomenon can be divided into general and particular. One should obviously take into account the “external influence”, the circulation of ideas and information between West and East, made possible through mass-media, books, magazines and individuals. This cultural interaction/interchange could “sublime” the political frontiers of an apparently very closed and isolated cultural space. But the necessary condition was a local cultural evolution, as well as a state of mind, an “expectation horizon” that made its occurrence desirable and possible.

This state of mind, this diffuse atmosphere meant in the East, as in the West, a kind of “awakening” or refusal of all kinds of theoretical monolithisms, intellectual fanaticisms and all sorts of cultural and political absolutisms. “The decline of the meta-narratives”, as Lyotard put it, has become a generalized phenomenon towards the end of this century. In the East, as in the West, the theoretical and practical bankruptcy of some major postulates of modernity, related to “its pretence to found its legitimacy on the project of emancipation of humankind”, has become a live reality. It is not fortuitous that the interest for postmodernism coincided with the last, decadent phase of state communism in Eastern Europe. Marxism scored a theoretical defeat in the West, but practically underwent a catastrophe in the East. During the 1980s, the economic and social disaster of the communist regimes became visible even for their rulers, not to mention the populations, once and for all discrediting in this way any revolutionary theory based on Utopia and authoritarianism, not on economic and social efficiency.

Postmodernism has been generally interpreted as a cultural phenomenon typical for the post-industrial countries, but for some analysts the beginnings of the postmodern period coincide with the downfall of marxist politics and planned economy in the socialist countries. For Charles Jencks, post-socialism may be considered one of the most striking symptoms of postmodernism. And for Heller and Feher, the reality of post-revolutionary societies may be regarded as a proof of a new, postmodern political condition, characterized by theoretical minimalism, regional pragmatism and historical relativism.

In the same way, postmodernism has been perceived in the East, as in the West, as an abandoning of the modernist cultural project, already ossified in “classical”, consumerist or authoritarian formulas, which have made obvious the depletion of such concepts as avant-garde, progress, innovation etc. As it was frequently asserted, in the West this

situation was generated by such phenomena as “generalized design”, “institutionalized avant-garde” or cultural industry, while in the East it was induced by a reaction against “politically integrated” forms of classical modernism, as well as by contamination with the western experiments. But these are two complementary facets of a unique process of degradation.

Furthermore, in the West, the debate around postmodernism appeared on the field of literary and artistic (architectural) theory and extended later on to the most diverse theoretical domains and intellectual or social movements. It may be so because, as it was noticed, the aesthetic beliefs have always been naturally tolerant, dialogic and spontaneously pluralistic. In a similar way, in the East (for example, in Romania) the concept of postmodernism occurred on the literary and artistic field, but did not have (yet) the political chance and the necessary historical time to spread over a larger cultural or social area.

One has to admit that in this region the discussions around postmodernism did not seem to take into account the possible political subversiveness of the issue. But here one should remember an East-European specificity: due to the political restrictive conditions, culture has always had a political stake in this area. In Eastern Europe, the cultural field was the unique public room where the exercising of free thinking and moral courage was permitted: as it was subtly noticed, the most important battles were fought here around not political, but literary (aesthetic) notions. And it is not by chance that in this region most dissidents were writers and artists.

From this perspective, the debate around postmodernism could be perceived as not only a cultural issue but as a hinting symptom for a “subversive” change in a more general and profound state of mind. As Boris Groys, among others, put it, in the East hearts change first and then the social and political situation. First, there are changes in the style of the poems and artworks, conveying new but still invisible truths about the deep modifications in the collective psychism and in the intra-human and inter-social relationships. In the last 50 years, the most important social or political moments that occurred in this region were almost always preceded by tensions and debates in the literary community. In this respect, it is highly interesting to remind that two important politologists, Heller and Feher, have written, in a book published in 1988, that “there are unmistakable signs of postmodernism in the discourse of Eastern dissidents”.

One last remark. Considering Romanian postmodernism, it is striking to notice that its young supporters have occupied only marginal social positions. Due to Ceaușescu’s aberrant decisions of the last years, these young intellectuals have not been permitted to join the unions of creation or to ascend on the social scale. This situation pushed the young artistic generation to a function-free condition, that obliged but also helped them not to become “integrated” too early into the system. It is interesting to notice, even in this respect, the similarities of their social position with what some sociologists called the “pre-functional” condition of the youth in today’s functional structured societies of the West (Baumann, Heller). This term defines an increasingly longer “non-integrated-into-the-system condition” of each new generation, that allows new forms of life and art, of thinking and acting to develop faster. After the first post-war generation of the 1950s and 1960s, and the second one of the 1960s and 1970s, the pluralization

of the cultural universe of modernity has been continuous and made obvious by a third generation, the postmodernist one, which I consider myself to belong to.

The comparison between Western and Eastern determinations of postmodernism could continue on other levels, but I will stop here. In the end, what I would like to infer out of these few remarks is that maybe we should give up the idea of an irreducible “ideological difference” between the cultural evolutions of the two sides of Europe divided after World War II. As my example of Romanian postmodernism would like to illustrate, in spite of numerous limitations and risks, a certain cultural liberty did function to some extent in Eastern Europe nevertheless: there has always been a certain autonomy of the cultural facts from the political conditionings – sometimes even to a higher degree than one might have expected or the communist rulers would have been ready to accept. The study of the Eastern European art created after 1956-1960 could easily prove a continuous tendency towards lining up with the major trends of the Western artistic evolution, despite all political and ideological constraints. Cultural concepts prove to be more fluent and insidious than the political ones, and the cultural dynamics has a different rhythm than the political development, that is actually influenced and modified due to this very difference. In this respect, postmodernism could be interpreted as a significant symptom for a larger transformation in the collective state of mind of the region. This kind of cultural symptom should be taken into account, in my opinion, by the new historiography when it comes to better understanding the East-European rapid evolution of the last decade, concluded by the revolutions of 1989.

One could argue that this interpretation of postmodernism in Eastern Europe is a kind of “fiction”, stressing common similarities but overlooking specific differences. I may accept such an objection, with one single correction: maybe it is a “necessary fiction”. That is to say, maybe we should give up the idea that recent history can be understood only in terms of political, social and economic development: maybe we should give up the “hard” sense of history in favor of a “softer” one, in which cultural and psycho-social changes are equally important. Maybe this interpretation of postmodernism in Eastern Europe is a kind of “intellectual manipulation”, built on a “provisional concept”, as it was said at the beginning, in order to taste and better evaluate our recent cultural heritage, and to articulate a significant understanding of our recent history in a creative manner. After all, isn't it a truly postmodernist attitude?

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