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INVISIBLE DAILY PROPAGANDA. THE TEMPLATE FOR UNIFORM THOUGHT

PROPAGANDA: FALSE AND PERMANENT CELEBRATION

The communist period abounded in the propaganda text for all occasions. From the daily backdrop of the workplace, adorned with posters and portraits of the communist leaders,⁷ to the carefully planned, rehearsed, and orchestrated events: the obligatory communist rallies. In the latter, the slogans spelled out through a highly elaborate choreography of the participants' bodies represented the pinnacle of the large rallies held to mark the May 1 or August 23 celebrations.

The language of propaganda was visible in the slogans recited at rallies as well as in what was written on the different types of accompanying media: posters, flags, placards. What was written or recited was established in advance and verified by the state. Public space was decorated exclusively with ideological symbols:⁸ photographs of the leader accompanied by revolutionary slogans that seem hilarious today – e.g. *Ceaușescu and the people*, *Ceaușescu and peace*, *Ceaușescu and the Socialist Republic of Romania* or *The 5-year plan achieved in 4 years and 6 months!* and *No to the neutron bomb!*⁹

Joy and enthusiasm were dictated, rehearsed, and scripted: "The hurrahs were orchestrated by union leaders who mixed with the crowds or marched along the right-hand side of the rows of participants. In the final years of the communist regime, they used megaphones to play rounds of applause and hearty hurrahs pre-recorded on audio tape."⁴ The text of the slogans recited at rallies "was handed out on a card to each group leader. The card also indicated the order in which they were to be recited when the appropriate sign was given."⁵

The photography of Andrei Pandele⁶ and Ion Grigorescu⁷ captured the orchestrated nature of the rallies in a series of secret snapshots. Pandele showed the duplicity that resulted from obligatory participation: during rehearsals participants hold up placards in one hand while reading a book with the other.⁸ Grigorescu, in a series of photographs from the 1970s, captures the Secret Service agents responsible for staging a "spontaneous" rally, thus deconstructing the official myth.

The number of rallies increased exponentially during the 1980s, with the most frequent anniversary celebrations being held during the "Golden Age" (name given to Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime), especially following the July Theses (1971), and involved people of all ages: from the kindergarten-aged Falcons of the Fatherland to factory workers. The July Theses⁹ were meant to remotivate the masses through propaganda, culminating in the absurdity of the 1980s, when the "wooden language" of propaganda became the only language, rendered inaudible through repetition. Consequently, all citizens were expected, through their work and participation in events organized by the party or workers' organizations, to contribute both to the "creation of a new man with a higher socialist conscience" inspired by national cultural values and the meeting of production targets.¹⁰

After some time, the continuous repetition of the same message in fact rendered the propaganda futile and inefficient, for the people stopped listening to or absorbing what was being recited or written on the placards and posters. The wooden language of propaganda was inaudible and the writing invisible. The hoardings and posters, like the repetitive texts, are a parable of communism, of a system people had stopped seeing despite living in it. All of these symbols ceased functioning and would only still be visible on the occasion of "work-

ing visits," another obsessive feature of the "Golden Age." Communism's specific cultural model combined the "positive" pattern of the propaganda with a series of interdictions, negations in the form of censorship. This uniform pattern could not exist without banning all other forms of expression. Control was secured by the punishments established for any violation of these rules. Moreover, the excessive centralization of the communist regime was also visible in the propaganda coordinated by the Department for Propaganda and Agitation, and the Department for Propaganda and Culture of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. The role of the Department for Propaganda was to spread the official ideas established by the Congress and the Central Committee plenary session among the people, in schools, in the press, and on every level of the party-state. Also, every factory had its party activist working alongside the party secretary (the representative of the sector party organization responsible to the municipal and county organization respectively), who passed on the messages established by the center – "We did the writing and drawing, and, like in every factory at that time, the propaganda had to be done, too."¹¹

In fact, propaganda became the only language transmitted through all the available channels: the press, school, art, etc. The press was a simple organ of propaganda for reproducing ideological diktats. The arts were similarly transformed through the imposition of a single style – socialist realism – in propaganda works, pure (visual) illustrations of political ideas. At the same time, in the artistic field, the promotion of amateurs was encouraged – the creativity of the masses led to the elimination of professionalism from the cultural fields through support for mass events such as the Song of Romania festival.¹² It was still the artists and art stu-

MINIMAL FORMAL FREEDOM OR ORIGINALITY IN A TEMPLATE

1 After 1974, the image of Nicolae Ceaușescu increasingly came to dominate public space.

2 This kind of public space entirely devoid of advertising can be still seen today by visiting one of the last remaining communist dictatorships, that of Cuba.

3 This last slogan is recalled in "Parade" in *Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* (The 80s and the Inhabitants of Bucharest), by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant – Bucharest: Paideia, 2003, p. 128.

4 "Hurrah!" in *Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* – Bucharest: Paideia, 2003, p. 338.

5 "Slogan" in *Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* – Bucharest: Paideia, 2003, pp. 208–209.

6 Andrei Pandelescu is a Romanian photographer who has become famous for his furtive shots taken during the regime of Ceaușescu and showing "the normal daily life" bereft of any triumphalism.

7 Ion Grigorescu is a Romanian contemporary artist known for his secret photographs and performances. He has been rediscovered recently and presented as a dissenter of the Ceaușescu regime.

8 A citizen recalls in the work of oral history by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant quoted above how participants at rallies carrying different coloured boards were called "board carriers" and were organized at the factory level. See "Parade" in *Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* – Bucharest: Paideia, 2003, p. 168.

9 The actual title of the July Theses is: "Proposals of measures for the enhancement of political-ideological activity, for the Marxist-Leninist education of the members of the party, of all working people, the 6th of July 1971" – Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1971.

10 Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Propuneri de măsuri pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninistă a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii, 6 iulie 1971* (Proposals of measures for the enhancement of political-ideological activity, for the Marxist-Leninist education of the members of the party, of all working people, the 6th of July 1971) – Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1971, p. 18.

11 "Activist" in *Anii '80 și Bucureștenii* – Bucharest: Paideia, 2003, p. 21.

12 The Song of Romania festival (*Cântarea României*) was a massive cultural event in which all citizens (professional and amateur artists) were obliged to participate. It was held annually since 1976.

13 *Modele de firme și scrisuri decorative*, by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Commercial Publicity, 1970.

dents who made the propaganda posters, placards, and banners carried on the shoulders at rallies. The posters, slogans, and flags were made by those in charge of propaganda, while the public symbols were made at a special factory: the Decorativa factory. This is where signboards, flags, and banners with ideological symbols were made.

All the same, the perception persisted of a period of liberalization at the start of the Ceaușescu regime, in the mid-1960s, which even continued into the early years following the July Theses. For some authors as well as artists, this period apparently represented an aesthetic highpoint that was also evident on an utilitarian level (film and theater posters, signage, etc.).

Communist public space was uniform in terms of architecture, design, and signage. The communist cities all had a similar layout through the creation of a "civic center" that included the most important political buildings of the city or county. The intense forced urbanization at the end of the Ceaușescu regime served to further emphasize the communist uniformization, which in many cases destroyed local, traditional characteristics, substituting them for monotonous rows of gray blocks of apartments and buildings. Centralization was at its most excessive during the Ceaușescu regime. By the same token, we can say that both signboards and advertising were also uniform: they repeated the same lettering, same fonts, while imagination and creativity were nowhere to be seen. Paradoxically, however, life itself under communism required creativity and inventiveness in following the golden rule of "getting by" with limited or no resources and circumventing the interdictions. Consequently, we can identify a series of functional solutions. These confirm the minimal freedom of formal innovation, as can also be seen in the labor

safety materials and in a "sketchpad" published by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Commercial Publicity in 1970, which provided templates that could be adapted and extended for publicity purposes,¹³ thus encouraging the cultivation of originality within a prescribed framework. Authors were allowed a minimum of creativity; there was a uniform language with precise rules, but innovation was permitted in their application, at least in terms of color or variations in the design. For example, labor safety signs or placards were made by workers, pupils, etc., who enjoyed greater freedom and therefore personalized their lettering (but not the message).

The disappearance of restrictions — the freedom won in December 1989 — can also be observed in the first graffiti to appear on the walls of buildings. The restrictions on writing disappeared with the first calls for non-compliance: "Down with Communism!" or "Down with Ceaușescu!" Ever since it has been possible to write and rewrite everything in keeping with unwritten but individual rules.

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