SPACES OF DRIFT: UNRECONSTRUCTED PASTS IN ȘERBAN SAVU'S PAINTINGS[1]

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Abstract – This paper analyses the metaphorical and structural idea of broken filiations and explores the possibilities of representation conveyed by a heterogeneous historical position in post-communist Romania and, more generally, on the globalized scene of transitions. It tries to look at the discontinuous relation with the past from two dimensions: the re-negotiation of cultural identity in a post-industrial setting marked by a modernizing drive, drawn on the metaphor of the 'orphan', and the turn towards a classless world of the masses, generating conflicting forms of memory and representation. This broken cultural geography of linearity and genealogies dismantles the old structures that yielded place-bound identities, generating an interstitial sense of temporality shaped by new forms of cultural mediation. The visual artistic language of Șerban Savu is illustrative for these theoretical ideas that try to comprehend the crisis of the subject at the dawn of a new globalized world, 'fathering' a present in ruins, marked by an underlying sense of inhabiting disinherited spatial and temporal frames.

Keywords: Memory, Post-industrial, Broken Filiations, Past, Ruin, Șerban Savu

The concepts of heritage, genealogy, history, and monument appear to be in opposition to the categories of experience, 'the fleeting moment' (as it was sought out by modern art), the stream of consciousness, Roland Barthes's *punctum*[2], or other concepts related to geographies of discontinuity. I am inclined to believe that the way in which we think about memory and history is usually based on visual metaphors of threads or traces that need to be recovered from the grip of partial forgetfulness (the importance of the concept of nostalgia),

while the modes in which moments and experiences are represented draw on metaphors of disruption and singularity (Proust's involuntary memory, the aesthetics of reception and the unique, creative, individual encounter with the work of art, Barthes's *punctum*, Jean-Luc Marion's "saturated phenomena" etc.). The opposition between forms of genealogy and the isolation of the instant and of subjective experience might, though, be understood in dialectical terms. The complex tension between the fleeting or the ephemeral and the foundational or 'solid' experience of forms of linearity and filiation shapes alternative practices of remembrance at the intersection between global designs and national boundaries. The singularized isolated individual gesture usually resists a defining temporal frame as it breaks with context, yet it simultaneously invokes multiple distinct temporalities that convey its meaning. These ideas will be looked at in relation to visual arts and the dismantled, juxtaposed symbolic frames in the works of Romanian painter Șerban Savu, with a specific focus on the exhibition *The Edge of the Empire*, David Nolan Gallery, New York (2009, solo).

The notion of a unitary and homogeneous historical past, applicable at both the global and the local levels, can no longer stand as a reference point in attempting to make sense of memory practices and emerging possibilities of identifying with a historical past. The unifying and legitimizing force of myths (underlying filiation) is no longer a functional framework for communities and their sense of "opacity" (understood as an attempt to hide from the "transparent universality"[3] of the West). As Glissant observes, filiation, understood as "the power of the principle of linearity"[4] in justifying destinies or history, is at the core of processes of generalization and universalization in Western thought. The links of filiation provide the necessary space of identity and self-negotiation, excluding the other "as an element of relation"[5]. However, in a globalized world, filiation tends to become a network of aggregated things that follow a certain order "in the disorder of Relation"[6] which can only be untangled by recognizing ourselves as part of it. We shall focus on a different model of remembrance and memory construction generated by the discontinuities of the historical and the global self. Or, to put it differently, what kind of broken filiation or disarticulated heritage mark memory practices in a world "in which no projection imposes its line"[7]? If the imaginary of the voyage

through time, which gives shape and structure to the dismantling forc-
es of memory, is no longer tied to a vertical and trans-temporal filia-
tion (such as foundational myths or philosophies of the One), we might
need to analyse other types of schemata that give narratives of the past
their legitimizing force. For instance, I will argue that the foundational
Christian eschatological focus has been replaced by a distinct underly-
ing sense of temporality, marked by 'the time after' that we could easi-
ly associate with the metaphor of disruption that was mentioned. This
time of "after history," "after the subject," or "the aftermath" in general
creates a distinct type of filiation and different ties that are no longer
solely rooted in cultural paternalism, but rather in a milling sense of
orphanity and *déracinement*, with the meaning employed by Simone
Weil, also translated as "uprootedness"[8]. This uprootedness generates
a new medial and intermedial place of representation that articulates
memory from the midst of disarticulated languages of the past. Linear-
ity is no longer the scheme inside which memory is played out, as dif-
ferent relational tropes govern symbolic exchanges in a modern world
of disarticulated heritage.

In a text discussing new forms of establishing connections with-
in the modern mental framework, Bruno Latour observes that, when
we view the modern world as networks, "Western innovations remain
recognizable and important, but they no longer suffice as the stuff of
saga, a vast saga of radical rupture, fatal destiny, irreversible good or
bad fortune"[9]. Latour questions the time scheme underlying moder-
nity's break with the past and proposes a relational perspective that
takes into consideration the socio-political embeddedness and hybrid
nature of discourses. Thus, modernity's concept of broken filiation,
also understood at a macro level as a break with distinct historical pe-
riods or cultural frameworks (that did not draw the necessary distinc-
tions that make scientific claims the ultimate reality), is undermined by
the possibility of looking at macro time-narratives in terms of hybridity
rather than in terms of progress.

I would like to use the term 'broken' filiation in an ambiguous con-
ceptualization that acknowledges both the notion of a break with the
past in the pursuit of progress and an inherent hybridization stem-
ming from the intersection between the symbolic forces of an old sys-
tem of relations and their new function in a distinct context. Periods of

transition (like post-communist Romania) with their interstitial imagi-
naries make it difficult for subjects to build continuities inside the new
narratives of progress, leaving memory discourses with the difficult
task of grounding "life and the imagination in a media and consum-
er society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space"[10].
Moreover, we could argue that the space of heritage no longer dwells
in the subject-position, as networks and commodification transcend
the individual line of appropriation.

In *After What* Jacques Rancière analyses the time of abandonment
that defines our distancing from metanarratives and articulates a dis-
tinct position compared to other theories that emphasize the principle
of uncertainty that characterizes the modern world, as suggested by
Zygmund Bauman[11], for example. On the contrary, Rancière states that
this abandonment (heroic or joyful) "restores a tranquil certainty con-
cerning ties and places: we are now in the end or the after. In all ruins
lies hidden an inhabitable temple which was once inhabited"[12]. The par-
adoxical certainty of this time of "the after" might be explained by the
comfortable separation from the past opened by the commemoration
of a 'lost' world. Even though it may appear that a temporality of 'the
after' denies threads and continuities or affirms an inexistent filiation,
but in fact, it reiterates filiation drawing on the metaphor of 'the orphan'
or the expropriated self. In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben em-
phasizes the "non-translatability into experience" of 'the everyday' as,
in modern times, experiences are mostly "enacted outside the individu-
al"[13]. We might as well analyse broken filiation from the perspective of
the expropriation of the modern man, whose experiences are separat-
ed from the realm of the self through various forms of mediation and
translation. The modern man's links to the world are, thus, also staged
from within disinherited forms of agency, legitimation, and mediated
inwardness. From a Freudian perspective, filiation is fundamental, as
it structures our ties and positioning towards reality through the gen-
erative relation with the existence of the Other (the Father figure). This
essential connection that is played out at the level of the symbolic pro-
vides the necessary leap towards language and representation, which
are inherently shaped by filiation. These new forms of mediation, both
political and global, and mediality (technological) create spaces of bro-
ken filiation and discontinuities that project the topics of cultural and

historical memory at the margins of individual consciousness and at the intersection of complex systems of networks and relations. Possibilities of narrating the self and distinct identities are in a feedback loop with the need to trace back forms of linearity and filiation as legitimizing mechanisms, existing beyond the subject-position.

This scheme of broken filiation becomes particularly interesting when analysed in connection to the post-communist period of transition. A crisis of belonging and disjuncture creates forms of cultural and symbolic expropriation that mark specific attachments to the past or to the commodified or simplified versions of the national past. The post-socialist feelings of loss and disruption are underlined by both David A. Kideckel, who documents the Romanian working class' adaptation to the structures of the new 'private personalism'[14] after 1989, and Maria Todorova, who theorizes the 'post-communist nostalgia' "for a very specific form of sociability"[15]. This period of reconstruction is informed, as Boris Buden shows, by child metaphors that emphasize the new power relations: "Accordingly, Eastern Europe after 1989 resembles a landscape of historical ruins that is inhabited only by children, immature people unable to organize their lives democratically without guidance from another"[16]. The political figure of the child is not only related to immaturity but also to the hopes and promises of a new social beginning. In this case, orphanity and broken filiation not only shape uncertainties but also a social reconstruction drive. Analysing the figure of the orphan in post-1989 Eastern European cinema, Constantin Pârvulescu observes the fact that "the rise-and-fall story of socialist subject production"[17] is deeply linked to the disillusion regarding the emancipated subject of socialism. Therefore, "the post-socialist landscape is populated by subjects perverted by authoritarianism and the corruption of the system, by weak personalities in quest of strong community ties"[18]. In other words, these characters reflect the language of disaffection at the level of personal morality. That means that the consequences of the socialist regime are not registered solely as "collective trauma" but also at the level of a social and moral void created by the late psychologization of distrust. I would like to argue that this craving for strong community ties in post-industrial Romania marks the confusion created by broken social bonds and forms of identification or self-realization. This is also linked to the broader massification

of society, that triggered not only homogenization but also a sense of dis-realization as the individual dimension had to take a step back in the shadow of the collective subject. In post-industrial Romania, social class identity and the underlying sense of belonging to a 'place' were upended inside a distorted language of everyday life (which was still perceived as a disjointed realm of compromise, risk, and uncertainty).

John Kirk points to a de-recognition of class struggle and the "material realities of class"[19] in favour of an all-encompassing focus on notions like personality and personhood: "public selves are effectively and consistently subordinated to the private self of consumption and self-fashioning"[20]. Thus, the notion of internalized 'orphanage' could also be discussed in the context of self-envisioning in post-communist Romania as far as the concept of class and its grip on conceiving the subject are de-legitimized and replaced by the unbridgeable dynamics of mass culture. The importance of social class and the old values associated with the workplace became obsolete, as during the transition period people found themselves compelled to look for individual identities in the classless and dissipated world of the masses.

In order to better comprehend the dynamics of the transition period, we could also briefly look at the broader global context of the late 20th century. Being part of a certain community and a cultural field typically associated with a fixed space is no longer regarded as a dimension that determines, in a way, individual consciousness but mostly as a matter of choice. For example, in trying to analyse local belonging in a globalized world, Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst employ notions such as 'fluid', 'contingent' and 'socially constructed'[21] to refer to the ways in which individuals relate to the fixed physical places where they reside. The sense of 'being at home' has a new transitory and unstable nature in a global environment where places are seen as "sites for performing identities"[22]. I believe that the forms of hybridization created by lost community ties at the intersection with the ideology of individualism and the fragmentary emergence of a global consciousness have left an indelible mark on Romanian consciousness and connected self-envisioning endeavours. The negotiated role of collective memory from the margins of contested memories, a sense of uprootedness, and the perceived dualism of national forms of memory could all be seen in connection with this hybrid social reality. The underly-

ing sense of orphanity, although not always directly expressed, shapes cultural meanings and the relational dimension of memory, meaning the dialectics between a symbolic dimension and a counter-symbolic one. Oana Popescu-Sandu observes that post-communist nostalgia in Romania and its associated directions of remembrance draw on "a realm of events that have an in-between, ghostly existence as their truth is denied and twice veiled"[23]. That means that there is an underlying sense of irreality underlying social memory in post-industrial Romania, which could be associated with strategies of veiling and the *dis-articulated* language surrounding the "father" figure (the image of the dictator). This veiling, in turn, adds a counter-symbolic force to collective memory as new post-soviet experiences of commodification restructure desires and the underlying sense of cohesion and time.

I would like to look into post-communist forms of hybridization that rely on both an internalized concealed dimension of the past and the uncertainties of imported identity 'projects' by analysing the works of internationally acclaimed Romanian painter Șerban Savu. In his photographic, realistic works, Savu depicts landscapes, deserted places, spaces of transition and abeyance (such as railways, stations, roads, museums, etc.) or disused spaces of work, creating a sense of incomplete restoration, loose symbolism, and material spectrality in relation to the atmosphere of the 1990s and early 2000s. Șerban Savu was born in 1978 in Sighișoara and attended the Art and Design University in Cluj-Napoca in the 90s. He was influenced by Renaissance Italian artists, and he uses this tension between details and a unitary vision to portray the embedded, scattered utopia in post-socialist Romania. Spatial and temporal peripheries adjoin the silent anonymity of characters in a new regime, and post-Cold War divisions emerge as a prolongation of split present legacies. The artistic vision manages to incorporate these hybridizations into a unified vision as history becomes also a form of mythology. That is why Savu's works are static, and everything in them seems to dwell in a frail balance that abruptly takes the viewer on a journey from the individualized moment to the mythical social.

Coming to terms with the past is a task that no longer dwells on the idea of 'reconciliation', but rather on the possibility of making room for that 'alien' temporality that marks counter-intuitive designs of social

memory. The past is being marketed and reassembled at the intersection between global forms of translation and local designs of traumatic memory. As Huyssen observes, "the form in which we think about the past is increasingly memory without borders rather than national history within borders"[24]. History cannot be inherited as a homogeneous cultural field, but rather as a broken unity and a hybrid construction that creates dissonant and spectral meanings. This idea can be better understood by looking at the solitary subjects within the post-industrial spaces of action depicted in Șerban Savu's paintings and by observing the geographies of disillusion and broken filiation.

Concepts of absence, orphanity, and loss are fundamental to the possibilities of understanding the workings of memory in shaping public space. That is why we might need to look at the production of cultural and symbolic heritage in relation to our discursive relationship to loss, orphanity, and drift. I will briefly consider the way in which the Romanian space makes sense of the estranged dimension of memory as a space of transmission and negotiation. The works of Savu are illustrative for the idea of constructing alienating spaces of heritage that function as spectres of our social reality. The way in which contemporary Romanian art deals with discontinuous time, the boundary between veiled and unveiled historical time, and the individualized genealogy of remembrance will help us observe how visual art makes room for the untranslatable and the non-representable. Most of our possibilities of inheriting a shared history are built on what Richard Terdiman would call a "model of the refractory"[25], or on the principle of a resisting temporal or material outside. The visual geographies of Savu's works paint the picture of an incomplete inner space of inheritance that reflects the gaps of cultural memory and the frailties of our symbolically mapped genealogies. The visual discourse of his work draws a connection between the sense of orphanity and the idea of an unrealized contemporaneity, in between the two layers of time representing both reconstruction and residual time in post-communist Romania.

In one of his most famous paintings, *The Guardian* (2015), Savu plays on the juxtaposition of two distinct temporal layers: one showing a painting by Filippo Lippi (Madonna of Humility) and the other one portraying a man sleeping in a chair, presumably a guardian or a worker at the museum. There is a unified discontinuity between

the grace of the Italian painting and the ordinary clothes and sneakers of the exhausted, oblivious worker. This orients the viewer's attention to the embedded nature of both representation and reality and to the unexpected ways in which distinct symbolic codes communicate with and inform each other's contemporaneities. This painting also points to what Michel Foucault called the void of representation or the absence in each representation, analysing *Las Meninas* by Velasquez[26]. The guardian is sleeping, and the absence of his gaze is conjured in the painting, referencing an absent witness at the centre of the composition. In *The Tempest* (2016), two young people, holding hands, are depicted running across a field towards the viewer, situated across the river that separates them from an industrial city emerging in the background from beneath thick rising smoke. The composition is dynamic, as the destination and trajectory of the subjects describe a divergent temporality compared to the urban time represented by the concrete buildings in the background. Another painting, *The Thorn* (2020) illustrates a young man sitting on a tree trunk that has been pulled down, apparently looking for a thorn in his foot. In the background, there lies a devastated concrete building waiting to be demolished. This other temporal layer, characterized by the presence of the concrete ruins in the vicinity of subjects belonging to a post-industrial temporal frame, is recurrent in Savu's paintings. The presence of these cement relics, often covered by vegetation, in the composition of the painting is not symbolic but rather silent and anti-monumental. They also look partially domesticated and integrated into deserted natural landscapes that have grown out of history at the border of a culturally mapped territory. *Blocks and Gardens* (2012) shows distant silhouettes planting seeds and gardening in a square piece of land, mirroring a block of flats with no balconies. Prostitutes on bridges, blue-collar workers, disused pipes that have been incompletely refashioned (*Heavy Light,* 2008), various forms of open air trade in winter (*Oser* 2, 2008), children playing on the rooftop of apartment blocks, silent gatherings to witness demolitions, and individuals sleeping or sitting in train/airport stations, waiting for a time to come or dreaming of the long-forgotten epoch of the new man (*The City is Being Built and Flourishes* 2, 2017) – these are all themes and scenes that Savu captures. The painter uses them to sharply describe social life in its interstitial dynamic, with no preconceived thesis or political commentary.

The exhibition *The Edge of the Empire*, hosted by the David Nolan Gallery in 2009, deserves our special attention as it specifically deals with topics of reconstruction overlapping with the traces of an externally inherited temporality. The characters of these paintings carry out their activities inside a loose space where their suspended individual action is not perceived in unity with the New Man ideology, as it becomes mythical, transcending historical mirrors and effects. Their gestures appear to run parallel with the environments in which they are staged, suggesting that these frozen movements, whether work-related or leisure-related, replicate a lost social reality in a newly appropriated world. These glimpses of social life are usually situated on the outskirts of industrial or post-industrial cities, creating a visual distance that makes room for marginal revelation as peripheral view. The temporal configuration of an "aftermath" is staged in these paintings, marking an expropriated historical position that *re-writes* genealogies outside the story of urban spaces. In *They Cannot Hear Us* (2008), two figures can be spotted in the distance, bathing in the waters that lie beyond the city. They are facing each other as if engaged in a dialogue, with the fumes of the city floating in the distance. *In the Shadow of the Dam* (2008) and *The Guardian of the Valley* (2008) also portray similar liminal spaces situated at the borders of both geographical and historical worlds. These liminal spaces, with their expropriated activities and points of encounter, assemble representations of the post-traumatic and post-historical conditions of cultural heritage and linearity. The broken spatial and historical filiation in Șerban Savu's works also suggests a counter-monumental space of revelation oriented by peripheral views. There are no bridges connecting the city and the outskirts in Savu's paintings, which makes us think about disjointed temporalities that recuperate the shape and human design of individual will at the margins of post-social realities.

In conclusion, the Romanian painter Șerban Savu illustrates the distance and discontinuities between subjects and the places that they inhabit, pointing to a *dis-articulate* language of filiation: one that is not constructed through mourning, celebration, or the recognition of a legitimizing power of the past. Orphanity and drift mark a temporal logic of the spectral and the outcast, at the intersection of distinct social orders that can only be reconciled at the level of a new mythology of revisionist utopia. Savu's

paintings make us bear witness to the past and to the present as hybrid assemblages within a broader network connecting history, myth, and outgrown ideologies. Cultural geographies of linearity are dismantled using the archaeological vocabulary of visual arts which unfolds 'residual' meanings, suggesting that the cultural mediation and translation of conflicting identities is interstitial.

[1]   This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1234.

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[5]   Ivi, p. 50.

[6]   Ivi, p. 55.

[7]   Ivi, p. 61.

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