FILM CRITICISM

Precarious Spaces and Subjects in Transition: Postcommunism and Romanian Moving Image Art

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Volume 43, Issue 2: *Space, Place, and Identities Onscreen*, September 2019

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0043.208

Abstract

This article engages with the work of artist and activist Joanne Richardson within the D-Media Collective. Her films, part of the Commonplaces of Transition project, retrospectively reflect on changes following the fall of communism in Romania. I argue that Richardson makes a significant contribution to critically re-assessing the so-called "postcommunist" period in recent Romanian history. By investigating relations between media, art, gender, and politics, I situate her work as part of the struggle of a small number of artists and theorists to understand the "postcommunist condition." In the current context, when the rise of right-wing political movements in the region demonstrates the continuities of nationalist and fascist undertones traceable to the pre-communist period, Richardson's work proves instrumental in updating and critically assessing notions like "precarity" from a local perspective, in conversation with transnational feminisms, intersectionalities, and local histories of inequality and dispossession.

Introduction

Joanne Richardson's *Commonplaces of Transition* (2006-2008) project calls for a critical examination of the concept of transition in its links to neoliberal ideology and its rejection of the communist past. I argue that the works in the project question what futures were possible after the fall of communism in Romania. I do this by countering the notion of transition as a blanket ideological term with local accounts on gender and precarity. As the idea of "transition" is part of a time and space often covered by another problematic term "postcommunism," I read Richardson's work as a critical response to two aspects that have affected Romania during this period: namely an instrumentalized view of time and space, and a prescribed image of the postcommunist subject as always needing to look ahead to integration into neoliberal economic, political, and military structures. Richardson uses moving images to assess these two aspects and to understand the Romanian context as it presented in 2008, during an unfolding global financial crash. Critically revisiting both transition and postcommunism and their consequences in the recent past is necessary as they have strongly shaped the contemporary imagination.

Richardson approaches the task from a self-critical position, between memory and distant observation, and produces documents which neither vilify nor nostalgically gloss over recent history. This becomes an act of opposition to the dominant blend of anticommunist, neoliberal narratives. Her decision to return to Romania (she was an Austrian and then U.S. immigrant during the Ceaușescu regime) and make these works collectively was

based on her perception of the possibility for radical engagement with the "postcommunist condition". The necessity to investigate recent history in Romania was critical to her nuanced position towards postcommunism often imagined generically as a space-time that occurred "after" communism. With Richardson's personal position as a female-identifying immigrant and her acknowledgement of her role as outsider-insider, these reflexive investigations become worthy of re-reading and recognizing (for their virtues and flaws) in a contemporary context.

In Romania, the violence and urgency of the 1989 revolution was perpetuated through repetition of televised images well into the next decade. At the time, an anxious and threatening state loomed; while not officially a state of emergency anymore, it still acted like one a year later, notably through violent interventions against democratic protesters and targeted racial attacks against Roma during the events of 13–15 June 1990. Against the backdrop of an anticommunist narrative of transition, these threats contributed to the diminishing general trust in activism and eventually to a generalized cynicism of the postcommunist experience. The recuperation of the dark space-times of modernity, shaped by violence and shrouded in elitism and divisive politics (worker vs. intellectual), is a context specific to Romania, and the necessity to address postcommunism critically stemmed from it. Here the idea of suppressing or forgetting the communist past took shape in relation to a right-wing ideology that blended nationalism, anticommunism, and transition as a movement towards development and integration.

Overall, the 1989 revolution and the events of 1990 continue to hold intense power over the Romanian context. Thus, there is a need to investigate these events in key moments: after Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007 and the economic crisis of 2008, but also, I argue, in the present configuration of racism against refugees, rising Christian Orthodox-infused homophobia and heteronormativity, and increasing nationalist and xenophobic discourse and attacks.

Following the revolution, privatization, foreign investment and global capital brought Romania, imagined as sedentary during communism, into "progressive" forward movement, transitioning into economic, political and military structures like NATO and the EU. Local mayors proclaimed the transition officially over. However, no one proclaimed postcommunism over. Few addressed how the transition had affected workers, women, and Roma. Small artistic groups like D-Media and h.arta produced a series of independent projects; they addressed local co-ordinates, opened links between art, media and activism, and also questioned their own position of speech. Richardson's work was one of these necessary responses, aiming to produce compositions with moving images, which help us to rethink the space-time of postcommunist neoliberal Romania. Revisiting these events and histories is an act of interrogating imagination, an attempt to critically assess the postcommunist condition retrospectively, looking for renewed vocabularies for the contemporary moment to emerge.

In Transit

In Transit is one of the three works of the *Commonplaces of Transition* project by Richardson. The project reflects on changes in the two decades prior to their making. I am reading them as part of the struggle to not let the "postcommunist condition" be fixed in recent history solely as an economic transition to democracy and neoliberal capitalism. My interest lies in how these works contribute to decoupling this period of transition from dominant anticommunist views. *Commonplaces of Transition,* I argue, critically assesses Romanian postcommunism and contests the imagination of transition as a forward movement and as a way of instrumentalizing space-time for political purposes.

Richardson's work with the D-Media collective [1] was based on independent audiovisual production, activist actions, and the making of open source content. Richardson believed that the concepts of "transition" and of "postcommunism" needed critical re-assessment, starting with the lived experience of transition in the local Romanian context. The *Commonplaces* project declared its investment in opening up "a critical dialogue about the meaning of transition and other alternatives to simply 'catching up' with the global market" and was dedicated to "represent[ing] postcommunism from the inside." [2] The use of the term "commonplaces" in the title implied its double meaning, as "common places" in the sense of geography or territory, and as "commonplaces," deriving

from an ideological understanding of transition. In its first meaning, it alluded to views in which Romania fell somewhere in the middle in a first, second and third world ordering, dictated by the imperial role of the West and the redistribution of power in the remapped geopolitical territories after the Cold War, as center and periphery. The middle or buffer position was fitting with a longer historical positioning of the Romanian territory between empires (Ottoman, Roman, Austro-Hungarian). Furthermore, this in-between was easily aligned with a commonplace neoliberal idea that if transition was indeed happening, it should be towards the "first world," towards the West as ideal of development. This understanding of transition as integration into the West "hides a monumental neo-colonial transformation of this region [former socialist European countries] into a dependent semi-periphery." [3] Richardson's criticism acts in the same spirit, looking at the intersection of what these ideological views had produced in the Romanian context of cynicism to activism, national and xenophobic politics and gender and racial inequalities. She asks what space and what subjects were produced at these intersections and were expected to be "integrated."

The project explores these meanings in three individual moving image works: *In Transit*, *2 or 3 Things about Activism* and *Precarious Lives*. I will focus here on *In Transit* and *Precarious Lives*, as they deal with notions of space and identities most clearly. I am interested in the formation of precarious spaces and subjects in the context of transition to neoliberalism – as categories useful for critically reviewing recent history via moving images.

In Transit (2008) interrogates transition as an ideology and investigates the intertwining nationalist and consumerist co-ordinates of postcommunist Romania, as they appeared in 2007-2008. Using archive media, still images from her personal collection, and new footage, Richardson challenges the neo-conservative, anticommunist idea that transition is a forward movement. She works with her personal memories and family archive, with the economic conditions of several major cities in Romania, with historical material, interviews with contemporary philosophers, and her own voice (as voiceover but also as her position in relation to the assembled content).

A major thread the work follows is the role of Daco-Roman heritage [4] in supporting a communist ideology specific to the Romanian context, its nationalist right-wing views re-emerging in postcommunism, and the process through which this heritage blended with neoliberal consumerism. These superimpositions are progressively developed throughout the work with the use of montage.

Figure 1. The Romanian city of Cluj, where right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar had street furniture and other objects painted in the colors of the Romanian flag. *In Transit* (2008).

The layers are made visible, for example, in images from Cluj, where right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar had used the city as a canvas to paint in the colors of the Romanian flag.

"All nationalisms are built on myths of origin, but the Romanian one is even more mythical," says Richardson in the film's voiceover. This myth re-emerges across a considerable duration and in a number of spaces across the city. To show its traces, Richardson uses material from an interview with philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, [5] who argues that Romanian communism was not based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology, but on a theory of Daco-Roman continuity. Tamás asserts that calling Romanian communism a form of Soviet totalitarianism is incorrect. In fact, proto-nationalist baggage shaped Romanian communism, and especially Ceaușescu's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. Moreover, Tamás also reminds one of Romania's fascist past, most notably visible in recent history around the Iron Guard and the military dictatorship [6] of Ion Antonescu, under whose rule Romania had been before communism.

Figure 2. Archaeological sites uncovered in Cluj, meant to "prove" the Romanian heritage and its historical legacy. *In Transit* (2008).

In 2007-8, these traces and the politics of urban space were being negotiated: nationalist and xenophobic sentiment re-emerged via aesthetic and archaeological means. First, by painting urban furniture (Figure 1), making the material layers of aesthetics and politics visible in the streets, and secondly, through the exposure of parts of these histories *in situ*, in sight of the city's inhabitants (Figure 2). Funar's interventions excavated these historical layers and set them together with newly built edifices. *In Transit* explains how in the city of Cluj, Funar ordered Daco-Roman archaeological sites to be opened, and the "foundational" ruins to be exposed through glass screens. These sites support the right-wing mayor's view whilst inadvertently acting as evidence of the ongoing xenophobia directed at Cluj's Hungarian population, the largest ethnic minority in the country. This intention is, as Tamás points out, continuous with Ceaușescu's naming the city Cluj-Napoca in 1974, the closest to its Daco-Roman name.

When Funar's mandate ended in 2004, a liberal mayor took turn over Cluj and investments in real estate started pouring in for a short while. The largest shopping mall in the country was built here. During construction, Roman ruins were found in the foundations. The decision was made not to cease building the mall, but to incorporate an archaeological museum within its premises. This leads to an interesting superimposition with Romania's nationalist past and how these archaeological traces allowed this past to resurface during transition. As the camera pans across various outlets in the mall, Richardson argues this view "resembles a parallel city – streets named after heroes, an artificial fountain-lake, a stage for cultural events, and even a subterraneous museum." The archaeological site thus becomes exposed within this *faux* city, whilst in the actual city of Cluj, the paint chips off the urban furniture and reveals the previously painted colors of the Romanian flag.

Figure 3. Paint chipping away from urban furniture revealing layers of the nationalist project of right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar. *In Transit* (2008).

Richardson mirrors the way in which history is played out in the politics of space with the way she constructs the film. The act of unearthing these long histories of expropriation, abuse and violence in Romania's historical and political past is matched with the unearthing of her personal histories. An account of Richardson's mother and her affiliation with the Romanian Communist Party runs parallel with the city's histories. Her mother's disillusionment with the Party proved unconvincing to the Austrian government who apparently wanted stories of violent coercion in exchange for refugee status.

Equally, the film's investigation into the histories and possibilities for collective action is mirrored by an excavation into the motivations and positions Richardson herself holds. In the feminist tradition of reflecting on how the personal is political, Richardson re-traces these superimpositions and shows how her personal history is tied inextricably to Romania's nationalist communism and its fascist past. These pasts meet for a moment in 2007, when she returns, when transition had been declared over, flows of foreign capital entered the country, an archaeological museum lived inside of a mall, and the national flag appeared behind layers of chipped paint on costly but poorly redecorated urban furniture. Unsurprisingly, just one year later, in 2008, the consequences of one of the most recent crisis of capitalism started to produce ripples all the way into the credit-infused Romanian economy. [7]

On the backdrop of these crises in a "post-postcommunist" Romania, *In Transit* makes visible all the traces of nationalism, postfascism (in Tamás's sense of the term) and the previous insertions of capital. Richardson performs a recursive move to these spaces, to these histories and an excavation – exposing the deep temporalities where one's personal archives cannot but be tied into the histories of post-totalitarian fascism that converse so well with contemporary global capitalism.

Figure 4. Philosopher G.M. Tamás argues that the Ceaușescu era was not a mutation of Soviet totalitarian communism, but a specific blend of local fascism and communism. *In Transit* (2008).

Figure 5. Tamás on the specific ideology during so-called Romanian "communism", *In Transit* (2008).

The 1970s New Left movements in some countries from Eastern Europe (the Hungarian Lukacs School or the Yugoslavian *Praxis* group) had not been possible in the Romanian context because, as Tamás argues in the film "the national-Bolshevik product was just as much fascist (if not more so) than communist." *In Transit* untangles this genealogy and complicates reductive views which imagine 1989 as a break from one state (communism, socialism) and the "free" movement into another (neoliberalism, capitalism). Most commonly encountered as the neoconservative phrasing of Francis Fukuyama, [8] where the end of (blanket termed) socialism became "the end of history," from which point there was only one other conceivable stage: capitalism. In this linear view, temporality and spatiality were subsumed to the progressive accumulation of "forward movements." Where Romania was concerned, the neoconservative Vladimir Tismăneanu wrote that "looking back and thinking forward" [9] needed to become the two types of movements and attitudes to have in postcommunism. "Back" was the communist space, failed and left behind, whilst "forward" was a "thinkable time" and a space imaginable and aspirational, of the future. He read the prefix "post" in postcommunism as if it described a measurable time, which would begin when the transition was over. However, looking back never engaged with the running issues of inequality, racism and fascism. These are precisely the traces that re-emerge in surprising ways on their own.

In Transit engages directly with these omissions pervasive in Romania in the period frequently labeled "the" transition. Richardson narrates the complex political situation and its entanglement with a recent history that left its traces in urban space. The ideas dominating discourse up to when *In Transit* was made (2007-8) shared a teleological character, where a scientifically foreseeable end point of transition into democracy could be determined. These approaches were aligned with technocratic neoliberalism, disregarded specific local, spatial and temporal rhythms of development and foreclosed diversity by offering a "one size fits all" model of transition. But most importantly, as Boris Buden observed, these ideas suggested that "the question of the future in postcommunism [wa]s considered as already answered." [10] Progress, in these anti-Marxist views, was not brought

forward by revolution. Rather, the events of 1989 were re-conceptualized as "rebirths," [11] which allowed building on presumably empty grounds, as if "the transition to democracy start[ed] as a radical reconstruction out of nothing." [12] Understanding the 1989 revolutions as rebirths visualized postcommunist space as a razed ground where building anew was fully legitimated. Consequently, this space became "the landscape after the battle," [13] an exit point from communism, a space ready for the next attack, or, in the most positive liberal versions, a space for "fighting for a public sphere." [14] However, as was seen with the city excavations and how they were instrumentalized, these grounds were never empty.

The aforementioned Vladimir Tismăneanu has played a crucial part in establishing a strong climate of anticommunism in Romania, leading the *Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, and as one the editors of the *Final Report* (on communism) of 2006. This commission and its *Report* have been criticized for their problematic connections to governmental and political structures, the arguments proposed, and the premises – especially about truth – which they rest upon. [15]

Whilst acknowledging Romania's violent fascist past and the specific configurations of what came to be known as Romanian "communism," a critical position *vis-à-vis* the conflation of the two is necessary. Richardson aims to do this with the montage sequence from Cluj, discussed above. With that montage, she wishes to complicate reductive views of both these pasts, and to counter the concept of "transition", especially in how it has been linked to ideology and used for political and economic gain of several right-wing and liberal governments, in postcommunism. In another reflexive note from *In Transit,* Richardson states that "postcommunism is not a new stage of history" and that a limited view of postcommunism demands "a categorical rejection of communism, a purely emotional condemnation, without analysis, without reflection." Key moments in recent Romanian history need to be anchored in a commitment to challenge an imagination of time organized in blocks, which, when internalized, "takes the place of remembering," as Richardson continues to say in the work.

In this vein, the revolution of 1989, as a moment in recent history, was part of a longer temporality. Equally, it is important to see "transition", as Ovidiu Țichindeleanu has argued, [16] as a concept emerging and changing *during* communism, alongside its counterpart *in* postcommunism, where it was often seen as just a stage towards integration into democratic, political and economic European structures of governmentality. Thus, a critical approach to postcommunism needs to re-frame how we understand what happened "after" the event. This is a political task, which urges to revisit the so-called "condition" as a lived experience and not as a *malaise* that needed overcoming. Therefore, a critical theory of postcommunism calls for a different understanding of time, space and subjectivity, of what local movements imply and involve. In addition, re-assessing postcommunism also means to ask for a re-evaluation of what can stand for documents of the communist period, as well as for the postcommunist one. [17] *In Transit* becomes the document of *a* present, not as a fixed account of 2008, but as a node in a constellation.

Precarious Lives

Understanding the moving image works of *Commonplaces of Transition* as documents that critically interrogate this period in recent history can help in the ongoing process of countering neo-conservative and nationalist constructions in the contemporary. In *In Transit* the moving images perform these excavations into space and history, yet as Judith Butler points out, "nationalism works in part by producing and sustaining a certain version of the subject." [18]

Often, Romania is narrated as a space that had historically been caught up in-between empires on either side of a fault line, acting as a buffer zone. [19] Krishnan Kumar [20] suggests that the three-world ordering, made obsolete by the end of the Cold War, was replaced by a center-margin or center-periphery spatial composition and worldview. Ultimately, in Eastern and Central Europe, this worldview depicts the postcommunist subject as "caught" or "trapped" in these peripheral or buffer time-spaces; she is forgotten, disillusioned and pessimistic, unprepared and un-emancipated, waiting, on the backdrop of ruined scenery, for foreign investors. [21]

Precarious Lives reflects on how this subjectivity was constructed by discourses of transition, and how it has become unbound. Overall, the work moves towards a much needed re-centering on gender, precarity, and ethnic minorities. As worker or artist, migrant or local, this subject is shaped by past and current violence against her, from all of these co-ordinates. However, she stands at odds with transitologists' ideas of a subject who has the responsibility to develop, to keep up, and to reform. Richardson rejects this image of the postcommunist subject who moves "forward", regardless of their condition.

Precarious Lives (2008) works towards nuancing a pervasive idea increasingly influential at the time, in which "the cultural worker has become the model precariat, the new subject of history". [22] In the Romanian context this meant, firstly, to acknowledge that any conception of a "postcommunist subject" should be deconstructed and reorganized around gender and race. Secondly, to ask how a "postcommunist" female subject is, or better, has always been, precarious, and how can this precarity speak of the long history of gender inequality, which pervades the contemporary Romanian situation.

Precarious Lives tackles the precarious conditions of living and the labor of a number of (cis, white) women, some of them educated, some low skilled migrant workers, some unemployed. Richardson is concerned mostly with producing a response to an increasingly widespread axiom of the time in critical cultural theory, which outlined how "many university-educated experts now work in conditions common to those assigned female gender roles: at home, with unpredictable hours, with periods of inactivity, without contracts, without rights." [23] Her response is that "the idea of a common precarity ignores the inequalities that place some workers in conditions of disadvantage." Richardson found inspiration for the work in the practices and texts of *Precarias a la Deriva,* "an initiative between research and activism, which arose from the feminist social center *La Eskalera Karakola* in Madrid, initially as a response to the General Strike in Spain in June of 2002". [24]

During the strike, some groups of women felt that they had difficulties in adopting the strike format: they did not engage in waged labor, they were not part of unionized labor structures that would allow them the protection and benefits of striking, or they performed care or emotional labor hard to withdraw from. Following the *Precarias a la Deriva's* initiative to run "picket surveys" on the day of the strike and talk to the women who had trouble being represented in that context, Richardson turns to the interview format as a way to engage with the various types and conditions of labor that women have performed in Romania in the mid- to late 2000s. The interviews outline how women's labor conditions have had anchors in the pervasive inequality of recent history, during transition and further back into the lived communist experience.

Precarious Lives produces a set of ten interviews with various Romanian women about their work and working conditions. The women are filmed in their houses and during the interviews they carry out various domestic chores (cooking, caring for children, feeding companion animals). The sound and images are not synchronized, leaving reflective time to take in both these elements on their own. The voices of these women are uncoupled from the images that a camera can produce of them. There is a move here towards aesthetically aiming to refuse representation, refusing to make each of these women an image of postcommunist subjectivity.

Figure 6: One of the interviewees in her home, talking about her work as a schoolteacher. *Precarious Lives* (2008).

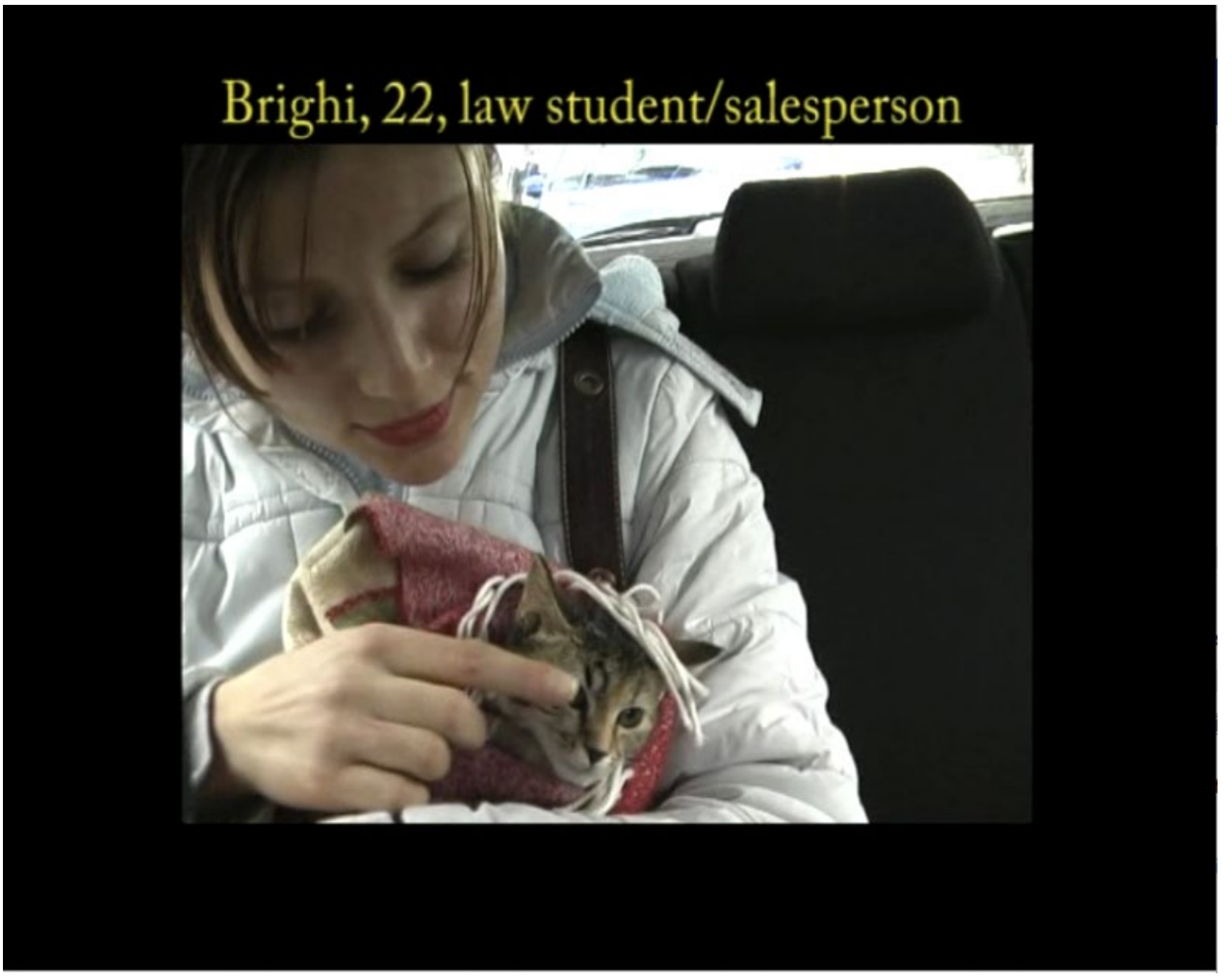

Figure 7. Start of the interview with Brighi, law professional, taking her cat to the vet, *Precarious Lives* (2008).

Figure 8. Domestic space, where interviewees perform various forms of domestic labor. *Precarious Lives* (2008).

Richardson moves into the domestic spaces lived by these women and her questions are always navigating between political organizing and activist solidarity, to recent histories of the domestic space as an oppressive space for women, and returning to spaces like the factory, the shop, the school and the role of women in unionized action and activism. Laura, for example, shares in her interview the story of how she started working part-time for the trade union because she needed waged labor and how this has offered her access to organizing skills and the initial excitement around the prospects that unionizing could bring. She then reflects on how the campaigns she was setting up did not lead to visible results and how this was coupled with a general distrust in the role of unions amongst Romanian workers.

This distrust has had consequences also in independent organizing and activist spaces. A.I. self-identifies as an activist and remains named only by her initials. She is filmed in anonymous silhouette and says her activism focuses on feminism, anti-fascism, and animal rights. She explains that she intended to attend a Masters program on activism abroad but the tuition fee was unaffordable. She recounts how she took up a migrant care worker job in Berlin. Every space these women traverse in their experiences seems to lead to precarity, or is unsafe or harmful.

Each block of two-three interviews is followed by an interjection of theoretical questions Richardson raises. For instance, she brings into focus the long history of precarity as a lived experience, and questions how the guarantees of work security really worked in the period of lived Romanian communism, particularly for women? As she voices these questions, they are superimposed with archival images of women performing administrative and secretarial duties. These fragments are recycled occupational films from the Prelinger Archives, CC Mixter, Mum, Photek, Paul Schutze, and Migrant, Subdued. It is unclear whether Richardson's questions match each woman's

experience. However, these questions then act as guides through a new set of interviews, with older women who have experienced both the working conditions under state socialism and in the early and mid-1990s, when Romania's economy was riddled by inflation, Ponzi schemes and privatization. These women raise issues around the ageist policies of restructuring, re-training, and re-specialization that women had to go through once factories were privatized or closed. Furthermore, after 1989 some of the women interviewed had started or took over small capitalist ventures of their own and soon experienced the initial stages of economic crises and inflation. Amongst them, gender studies professor Eniko describes the unemployment of that period being continuous to circumstances of unemployment women faced during state socialism. She states that "unemployment during state socialism as non-existent is a myth" and that often highly skilled university educated women were unemployed or offered un-skilled labor. As a Philosophy graduate in 1984, Eniko says: "The system offered security and stability, *the promise of a job for life,* a pension, a flat etc." (...) "I thought I was preparing myself for a different kind of job, not that I knew for what exactly; *in the 1980s, people couldn't really plan their future*" (my emphasis).

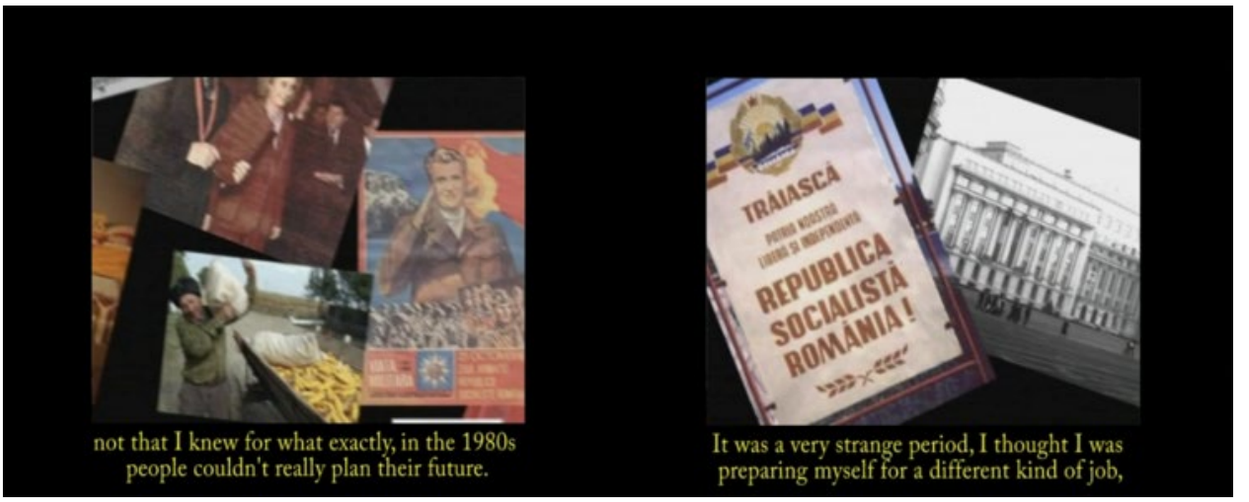

Figure 9. Pans over Socialist pamphlets and images of lived communist conditions, as Eniko is interviewed. *Precarious Lives* (2008).

Figure 10. Eniko explaining the subjects she was assigned to teach. *Precarious Lives* (2008).

Figure 11. Pans over photographs of women, including one of Elena Ceaușescu, with the voices of women talking about reproductive labor and discrimination.

At this point, the images alternating with the interviews are pamphlets, books, propaganda from the Romanian communist period and a focus on cultural and educational materials, showing socialist imagery of those promises

of stability and those futures imagined, generically, as egalitarian-shared grounds. If one starts from the reality of inequality and its history (including unpaid domestic and care labor), I argue that *Precarious Lives* ultimately asks two essential questions, which need to be asked as the core of any research or political engagement with the space that is Romania and Eastern Europe more generally. Firstly, what does it mean to be a precarious subject in the "given context" of Romanian postcommunism? Secondly, what kinds of futures were imagined but more importantly, foreclosed during postcommunism as a condition?

The interviews with Romanian women comprising *Precarious Lives* remind one of the gender inequalities pervasive in the recent communist past, like criminalized abortion and the unequal division of domestic labor, as much as they reflect the condition of women in postcommunism. Richardson considers that, "as a noun, 'precarity' does not exist. It is an adjective, modifying subjects, changing through circumstance. To understand what it means to be precarious, we must invert the theory, starting from our lives." [25] This position invites us to revisit conversations and theories about precarity from the local, specific and heterogeneous spaces of the lived experience of communism, and of postcommunism. Thus, these specific conditions of her time and these spaces, Richardson suggests, have shaped the Romanian postcommunist subject. Her memory of these inequalities was not erased with passing into postcommunism, she was not "catching-up". Nor has the lived experience of Romanian communism been, for women and those identifying as women, a future they were travelling back from, into postcommunism. Instead, this subject of postcommunism lived a herstory of inequality and precariousness in the time leading up to the radical break imagined as "the end of history", and then, into the recent periods, riddled with unequal migrant labor and more precarity. Her precarious condition has remained the constant in this flow of temporalities.

Conclusion

Commonplaces of Transition depicts the dynamic of a relationship between a so-called postcommunist subject, seen most clearly in *Precarious Lives*, as vulnerable and expected to offer her physical and emotional labor in all of the historical periods and the spaces she traverses and negotiates between. The notion of transition became the transactional currency, which offered this subject a closed imagination of what a future can be: a version of the multiple pasts, where oppression and inequality were only folded in and never questioned. Moreover, the subject of postcommunist Romania remained relatively unsure when this transition started, but she was informed it had ended around 2007, with Romania's integration into the structures of the European Union. [26] *In Transit* mentions how this event was announced and celebrated officially, in the public square of the city of Timișoara. From that point, the constructed Romanian postcommunist subject has had a somewhat recognized experience within migrant, moving, or fixed co-ordinates in this space of "the unresolved political problem" [27] which is Europe. Privileged in comparison with migrants from the Global South, who die at Europe's shores in Lampedusa or Calais, the (white) Romanian postcommunist subject was no longer in transition, she was told. As we see in the interviews in *Precarious Lives*, she was relatively free to move, to work, and to travel. At the same time, the arguable integration was precisely into this unresolved problem, a time-space of violent flows of European modernity, and its more recent fascist pasts. Romania, too, has had these histories of violence, and Richardson discussed some of these traces in the work *In Transit*. Violence also partially legitimated political and economic structures throughout the period of transition. Racism, dispossession, gender inequality, precarity, and the nationalist recuperations of a Daco-Roman past are not divorced from, but continuous with the communist period and were equally present in postcommunism, as much as they are present in the contemporary. [28] Joanne Richardson intended to make these connections and continuities visible through the entire *Commonplaces of Transition* project, as well as to question the specific inequalities and abuses produced in the period of Romanian postcommunism.

Neverthess, despite short reflexive moments, Richardson does not address how these concerns on inequality and precarity stand at the intersection of gender and race. In Romania's case, Roma women have not only suffered the same conditions of oppression as white Romanian women, but have also been the subjects of a long history of

slavery and racism. [29] Centering Roma women's experience in accounts of inequality is essential, starting from the history of slavery in Romania and extending to the European Union, the migrant and reproductive labor of Roma women has been extracted, un- or underpaid. In Romania, Roma actress and performer Mihaela Drăgan has been popularizing the term "giuvlipen," which is a newly formed word in Romani vocabulary meaning feminism. This term is aimed at opening up and making clear, in a similar yet essentially different vein to the work carried by black and brown feminism in the U.S and also across Latin America and South Asia, that a feminist discourse of gender equality in Romania needs to start from race and ethnicity and that Romania needs to engage with its history of slavery and oppression of Roma women. In the contemporary, this would imply re-engaging with these long histories of oppression and abuse starting from Roma women's experiences as enslaved subjects, their experiences of state violence during lived communism, and under the prescriptions of the postcommunist condition that followed.

The Ceaușescu regime and Romanian communism were legitimated by a reading of Marxism-Leninism through a problematic turn to the Daco-Roman ancestral heritage of Romania, which has resurfaced in recent years as xenophobic and racist myths of origins. At times, this revival in nationalist narratives was coupled with anticommunism and the Christian Orthodox religion, validated by its oppression during communism, and state supported. This was further complemented by fierce neoliberalism and racism and thus, what has been settling in is a form of generalized cynicism and distrust in political action. Departing from Richardson's work, I have explored the possibility of formulating a critical position towards the postcommunist condition and the postcommunist subject as they have been imagined in liberal ideology. Accordingly, any contemporary project of critical theory and artistic production should be to critically assess this long history of recuperative narratives, be they around economic, ethnic, or national regeneration.

Author Biography

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Notes

1. "D-Media began in 2002 as an informal group and since 2003 had functioned as an NGO for the production and dissemination of digital culture." http://dmedia.ro/ last accessed April 25, 2015.
2. Joanne Richardson, "Commonplaces of Transition," last accessed April 25, 2015, http://dmedia.ro/04video-commonplaces-e.html. n.p.
3. Srecko Horvat and Igor Stiks, eds., "Radical Politics in the Desert of Transition" in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics After Yugoslavia* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015), p.16.
4. The Romanian origin myth is founded on the Dacian people, who faced the sieges of the Roman Empire, the "founding fathers" of the nation, often imagined as techno-pagans or mystics. This myth supported Ceaușescu's convictions about Daco-Roman continuity, was a point of return for right-wing nationalists before 1945, and is a trope reoccurring in contemporary neo-conservative, nationalist narratives.
5. Tamás grew up in Cluj, in the region called Transylvania, which has been transferred and historically disputed between Hungary and Romania, since the Treaty of Trianon, in 1920. It was under Hungarian occupation again in 1940, when it was "given back" to Romania, by Hitler. Tamás has reflected extensively on the lineages of entwined Romanian foundational myths and nationalism, the fascist pasts of both Hungary and Romania, and the more recent form of what he calls the "postfascism" of both countries. See G. M. Tamás, "Words from Budapest," *New Left Review*, II, no. 80 (April 2013): 5–26; G. M. Tamás, "On Post-Fascism," *Boston Review* , June 1, 2000, http://bostonreview.net/world/g-m-tam%C3%A1s-post-fascism, or the recent publication on postfascism and anticommunism. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, *Postfascism și*

anticomunism. Intervenții filosofico-politice [Postfascism and Anticommunism. Philosophic and Political Interventions], trans. Teodora Dumitru and Attila Szigeti (Cluj: TACT, 2014).

6. A fascist legionary movement, which began in 1927, the Iron Guard became part of the Romanian government, until 1941, when most of its members were sent to political prisons. The military dictatorship which followed in Romania started an alliance with Nazi Germany, leading to anti-Semitism, pogroms and extra-territorial concentration camps, most of them run by the Romanian army.
7. See Gareth Dale, ed., *First the Transition, Then the Crash: Eastern Europe in the 2000s* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).
8. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: H. Hamilton, 1992).
9. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismăneanu, eds., *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000).
10. Boris Buden, "Children of Postcommunism," *Radical Philosophy*, The Postcommunist Condition, no.159 (February 2010): 18–25, p.22.
11. Jacques Rupnik, "On the Two Models of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans," in *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, ed. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 14–25.
12. Buden, "Children of Postcommunism."
13. Rupnik, "On the Two Models of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans," 14.
14. Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Fighting for the Public Sphere: Democratic Intellectuals under Postcommunism," in *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, ed. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 153–75.
15. Vasile Ernu et al., eds., *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale Raportului Tismăneanu / The Illusion of Anticommunism. Critical Readings of the Tismăneanu Report* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2008).
16. Țichindeleanu, Ovidiu. "Decolonial AestheSis in Eastern Europe: Potential Paths of Liberation." *Periscope/ The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier*. July 15, 2013. Accessed July 27, 2015. http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-in-eastern-europe-potential-paths-of-liberation/. See also: Țichindeleanu, Ovidiu. "Pentru O Teorie Critica a Postcomunismului I (For a Critical Theory of Postcommunism I)." *IDEA Arts + Society*, no. 39 (2012): 158–61.
17. At times, critical forms of inquiry into the "postcommunist condition" have combined the art exhibition and conference formats. See *Interpol* and the associated publication Eda Čufer and Viktor Miziano, eds., *Interpol: The Art Show Which Divided East and West*, trans. Neil Davenport and Jasna Hrastnik (Ljubljana : Moscow: IRWIN ; Moscow Art Magazin, 2000). See *The Postcommunist Condition* (2004) project, led by Boris Groys, which explored the "different conditions for the functioning of art" created in an Eastern socialist space, arguably characterized by the absence of an art market (Boris Groys and Anne Von der Heiden, "The Postcommunist Condition," Research Project and Exhibition, 2004, www.postcommunist.de.)
    On the other hand, the long-term project *Former West* (2008-2016) proposes to reflect upon the changes brought in contemporary art and theory by the landmark event of 1989, also by engaging "in rethinking the global histories of the last two decades in dialogue with post-communist and postcolonial thought", following a more open-ended ethos. Concerns with a renewed conception of postcommunism come across clearly in the books, readers and catalogues, which respond to conversations started by art exhibitions or biennials. Examples include *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005) and IRWIN and Saint Martins College of Art and Design, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Afterall ; distribution by MIT Press, 2006) – a survey of artistic works in Eastern Europe and a wide collection of essays. See also Adrian T. Sârbu and Alexandru Polgár, eds., *Genealogies of Postcommunism*, Refracții (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2009), initially an *IDEA Arts + Society* magazine dossier.
18. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Reprint edition (London New York: Verso Books, 2016), 47.

19. Romania, for example, has been considered, in the socialist period, a buffer zone between the U.S.S.R. and Western Europe. Previously, in the time of the Ottoman Empire, it held the image of a space in-between Christianity and Islam. See, for instance, this view supported in the influential work of Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster hardcover ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
20. Krishan Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals*, Contradictions 12 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 240.
21. On the question of (dis)illusionment in post-1989 Romania, see Anca Mihaela Pușcă's treatment of subjectivity produced in times of transition as "lagging-behind", coupled sometimes with nostalgic fascination with positive memories of communism, and a pessimistic approach to the future in Anca Pușcă, *Revolution, Democratic Transition and Disillusionment: The Case of Romania*, Perspectives on Democratic Practice (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). See also Anca Pușcă, "Industrial and Human Ruins of Postcommunist Europe," *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2010): 239–55; Anca Pușcă, "The Aesthetics of Change: Exploring Post-Communist Spaces," *Global Society* 22, no. 3 (July 2008): 369–86.
22. Joanne Richardson, *Precarious Lives*, 2008, https://archive.org/details/PrecariousLivesDMedia.
23. Richardson, *Precarious Lives*.
24. "Precarias a La Deriva: Adrift through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work | Eipcp.Net," accessed February 28, 2018, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/precarias1/en.
25. Richardson, *Precarious Lives*.
26. The mayor of Timișoara announced publicly the end of transition in 2007 in a celebratory moment, in the public square where the revolution of 1989 had its beginnings. Cited in Joanne Richardson, *In Transit* (D-Media, 2008), https://archive.org/details/InTransitDMedia.
27. Étienne Balibar, "World Borders, Political Borders," *PMLA*, no. 117 (2002): 13.
28. Richardson notes that Romanian communism, based on a blend on Marxism-Leninism and proto-nationalism, saw Romanian man (sic) as the sole subject of history (Richardson, *In Transit* (2008).)
29. See Mihai Lukacs, "The Critical Ones: Another Tale of Slavery," *Analize Journal* 21, no. 7 (2016): 167–80.