

Representations of the Black Sea Space in Popular Communist Culture of the Post-Stalinist Era

Lecturer PhD Roxana Elena DONCU

Department of Modern Languages
University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Carol Davila”

Bucharest, Romania
roxana.doncu@gmail.com

Abstract

The following paper analyses ways of representing the Black Sea space in popular late Communist culture. Doing this entails seeing the Black Sea space as “lived or living space”, not just a physical and geographical concept, but a network of intersecting socio-political relations. Ideologies influence the representations of this space. Thus, in the poetry of detention written by the political detainees working at the Danube-Black Sea Canal from 1949 to 1953, the Black Sea space is first and foremost characterized by blackness – the word black being both a geographical attribute, and also the colour of pure negativity, referring to the experience of torture. During Ceaușescu’s rule the cultural imaginary of the Black Sea undergoes a metamorphosis. With the Thaw and the re-evaluation of Soviet policy undertaken by Nikita Khrushchev a new cultural aesthetic emerges, one which is more Western-oriented (in the sense that it looks towards the satisfaction of popular taste), even if still having to comply with the demands of the Party. The Black Sea turns into a paradisiacal space perfect for the development of communist romance. With this utopian re-imagining of the space of the Black Sea, the attribute “black” suddenly ceases to appeal, and the sea suddenly becomes blue, as part of the vast campaign of history-rewriting which Nicolae Ceaușescu undertook in his project of building a national brand of socialism.

Keywords: *Black Sea space, popular culture, communism, history-rewriting.*

Introduction

The Black Sea as lived or living space has a long history. Seas and oceans have always been the main routes of international commerce, as well as objects of exploration and discovery. But first of all, what does “lived space” mean, more exactly? Henri Lefebvre (1991) the Marxist philosopher and social theorist who pioneered the spatial turn in the humanities conceived social space as a multi-layered entity, the result of three different modes of production or spatializations:

• Author’s note: The translation of the primary sources in Romanian used in this article is mine.

the perceived space, the conceived mental organization of the space and the lived space as the product of a network of intersecting social relations. For Lefebvre (1991) space was not, like for the ancient philosophers, just a container, but a product of social relations, or, more precisely a set of relations expressed through certain forms. However, my object of research is not the “lived space” of the Black Sea, but its fictionalized form, which is a reflection or a “staging” (inszenierung) of the “lived space” itself. This means that cultural or literary texts will select some aspects or inter-relations of the real “lived” space and critically reflect on them or try to project some imaginary or simply non-existing relations onto the space in question.

The fictionalized “lived space” is, as Jacquelin Klooster and Jo Heirman (2013) argue in “The Ideologies of 'Lived Space', Ancient and Modern”, space as “experienced and valued by the narrator or (one of the) characters in an ideological, emotional, experiential relation to society and power, not as a number of coordinates on a geographical map” (p. 5). In other words, the multiplicity of social, political and cultural relations that make up a certain space is subjectively represented in texts, so that several cultural or literary texts will offer different – and often contrasting representations – of the same space. Another important aspect to be considered is the fact that “lived spaces” are sets of relations which are often subject to change on both a synchronic and diachronic level. Thus, quoting Gerard Hoffman, Klooster and Heirman note that “lived spaces” are not “static but subject to change in the course of a literary text or in relation to the human subjects who experience them: one type of space can be experienced as intimate and reassuring by one character but as threatening by another character, the narrator or the same character later on” (p. 5).

Last but not least, it may be necessary to circumscribe the significance of the phrase “Black Sea space”. By it I will refer not only to the obvious geographical area occupied by the Black Sea, but also to a network of other places, natural, rural or urban, which are closely linked to that of the Black Sea and which participate in the production of a social space characterized by common features such as seafaring, formal and informal trade and exchange, and tourism.

Images and representations of the Black Sea space during the communist period vary greatly, as they are underpinned by different aesthetics. There is of course the poetry of detention, written by the detainees working on the Danube-Black Sea Canal (from 1949 to 1953), a subgenre of memoir literature, where a certain type of realism is prevailing. On the other hand, the short stories of Anatol E. Baconsky, which illustrate the typology of the uncanny, belong to a period of both physical and psychic repression, and would best be characterized as

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expressionist, on account of the elements of fantastic and the subjective distortion of reality. Radu Tudoran's novels were by far the most popular: his epic of nautical adventures *Toate pânzele sus!* [All Sails up!] (1954) enjoyed such a success with the wide public that it was eventually adapted for television in 1976. Finally, the aesthetic of the mass cultural productions envisioned and produced by communist propaganda is radically different both from the early socialist realism and the realism of the poetry of detention: meant to instruct and entertain simultaneously, such productions aimed to satisfy a general taste, while promoting the aspirations of party ideologists.

Popular culture in communist Romania followed the different models of communism implemented first by Moscow and then gradually reworked to fit the national project of the Romanian Communist Party and its leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu. Until around 1959 the Stalinist model prevailed, where the dictatorship of the proletariat required artists to comply with the demands of socialist realism. The sixties and the early seventies were a period of cultural relaxation, during which Western influences made themselves felt in all the spheres of life.¹ However, after the “July theses” of 1971, there was a gradual ousting of what Ceaușescu felt were outside corrupting influences, coupled with the effort, on the part of the communist regime, to develop cultural activities which would mobilize the population for revolutionary goals as well as improve the ideological education of the youth” (Stanciu, 2013, p. 1072). To this aim, a host of musical and film productions became centred on the workers, technical progress, and work relations within and among socialist production units. The Black Sea, as a popular destination for workers’ holidays became involved in the propaganda machine, which used it either as the appropriate background for communist romance, or manipulated its symbolism to fit its purposes.

Re-imagining the Black Sea after Stalin’s death

Stalin’s name was connected with one of the most controversial projects in early Communist Romania: the construction of the Danube-Black Sea canal. Stalin had also initiated the construction of the Belomor canal as the first part of his Gulag project. In a stenogram of the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party (May 5, 1949), one of the communist

¹ As Tismăneanu (1991) remarks, the first stage of Ceaușescu’s rule was “characterized by increased political and economic links with the West, ideological relaxation and the endeavour to create a Romanian model of socialism different from the rigid, monolithic pattern” put forward by Brezhnev and his supporters from the Warsaw pact (p. 86).

leaders stated that the objective of the Canal was to become a “laboratory” for the formation of the future communist propaganda personnel (qtd. in Stănescu, 2012, p. 125). Stănescu (2012) claims that the purpose of using political detainees for this type of work was a triple one: forced labour (to compensate for the lack of existing resources), the extermination of the old and weak, and the re-education of the young (p. 126).

In most of the poems composed by the political detainees from the forced labour colonies, the word “black” is obsessively repeated: “everything here is black and impoverished”, “It’s black and dirty, poured in the bowl / the ladle of a tasteless broth”, “The water from the mud is black” (Ciurunga, 2010b, p. 164), “The bread is black inside the famished prison / As if the sky had baked it in its tears.” (Ciurunga, 2010a, p. 183) “The sky never seemed blacker / than when the alarm was sounded in the camp” (Oniga, 2010, p. 451).

Apart from referring to the miserable conditions the detainees had to put up with in the camp and the never-ending torture of the work and the beatings, blackness also worked as a real designation of place, the geographical location of torture symbolically pointing to suffering and death: the Black Water (Kara Su) Valley² leading to the Black Sea. The building of the Danube-Black Sea Canal began along the trajectory of the Kara Su Valley, a valley which crosses Dobrudja from East to West. After the rains, the valley was flooded by muddy waters (often alluded to in the prison poems), which then flowed into the Danube at Cernavodă – the name of the town containing another “black” reference).

After Stalin’s death, the new political regime of Nikita Khrushchev and the Thaw brought about the dismantling of the labour / detention camp system. Giving up Stalinist authoritarianism, Khrushchev sought new ways of exerting political control over the Eastern bloc, ways that were more in tune with Western civilization. Among these was the project of what some historians call the Sovietization of the Black Sea littoral, with a view to develop the industry of tourism and vacations, while redefining it from a staple of bourgeois consumerism to a purposeful holiday with a medical agenda, but also as a way of rising the cultural standards of Soviet consumers (Kroenker, 2013, p. 182).

In 1962, after travelling to the Bulgarian littoral, Khrushchev used the phrase “our Black Sea Coast” to introduce, according to Johanna Conterio (2018),

² The Kara Su Valley was one of the oldest commercial roads in Dobrudja. It connected the Kara Su Lake to the Danube and thus it was often flooded. There was a permanent layer of reed at its bottom. Dams were built along its course to prevent water from flooding the railroad Constanța-Cernavodă built by an English company (The Danube and Black Sea Railway Society), which had obtained the rights from Sultan Abdul-Medjid around the middle of the 19th century.

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“the idea of a shared, socialist space”, a solid proof of “the peace-loving and welfare-centred nature of the socialist countries, which contrasted with the militarism of the NATO-dominated West” (p. 327), for, as he pointed out, “the Black Sea should be a sea of peace and of friendship of peoples” (qtd. in Conterio, 2018, p. 328). This new policy, which sought to promote vacations for workers and their families, based on rising living standards and an awareness of the importance of the cultural mission of socialist governments, together with the ideological imperative of transforming the Black Sea into an international health resort, evidence of the peace and friendship prevalent among communist countries, led to the emergence of a new culture related to the Black Sea as part of a shared socialist space.

The re-imagining of the Black Sea space in Romanian communist pop music and soft propaganda movies sprang from Khrushchev’s idea, but it took a different course, influenced by the specificities of the Communist regime in Romania. Khrushchev’s de-stalinization brought with it certain anxiety for Romanian Communist Party leaders, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu. According to Tismăneanu (1991), Gheorghiu Dej managed to shun de-Stalinization, “keeping Romania a fortress of Communist orthodoxy” (p. 85). Negrici, in his large scale study on Romanian Literature during communism, also notes that after Stalin's death, the leaders of the Romanian Workers' Party and Dej “make a show out of de-stalinisation”, while in reality they continue a “Stalinist politics without Stalin”. Khrushchev’s Thaw will be practised in Romania, too, yet, as Negrici (2010) remarks, “mainly in the cultural-artistic sphere, where a certain propagandistic profit could be made among Romanian intellectuals” (p. 189).

Ceaușescu’s rule, on the other hand, offered “a fascinating example of a neo-Stalinist personal dictatorship” (Tismăneanu, 1991, p. 85). While appearing to follow Moscow's indications faithfully, he only followed them in the letter, not in the spirit. As he had openly criticized the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Russian troops in 1968, Ceaușescu, Tismăneanu (1991) contends, “was not perceived as the Kremlin’s puppet” (p. 85) on the international stage. However, his condemnation of the Soviet-led intervention against the Prague Spring complicated his relations with Brezhnev afterwards. Thus, while outwardly trying to placate him, in reality Ceaușescu sought to implement a nationalistic socialist policy in all fields, and rule the country according to his messianic view of communist history.

There were two stages in Ceaușescu’s autocratic regime. In the sixties, when Ceaușescu’s aim was to gain a certain autonomy from Moscow and the countries of the Warsaw pact, Romanians enjoyed “a relaxation of repression,

increase in standards of living, political amnesties, and liberalization of culture” (Stanciu, 2013, p. 1064). According to Stanciu (2013), “The cultural and ideological restrictions of the Stalinist era had slowly faded away and Romania appeared to be headed for a different version of Communism, one relying on liberalization and openness to the West” (p. 1063).

Starting with July 1971, however, there was a gradual ousting of what Ceaușescu felt were outside “bourgeois” corrupting influences, coupled with the effort, on the part of the communist regime, to develop the political education of the population, and especially to improve the ideological education of the youth (Stanciu, 2013, p. 1072).

During the early years of the Communist regime, representations of the Black Sea in the poetry of detention had emphasized its blackness. Apart from referring to the miserable conditions the detainees had to put up with in the camp and the never-ending torture of the work and the beatings, the word black (which many poets used metonymically, allegorically or symbolically) also worked as a real designation of place, the geography of torture being located along the Black Water (Kara Su) Valley leading to the Black Sea. However, under Ceaușescu, the blackness of the Black Sea will be dismissed in favour of a lighter – and more optimistic – colour: blue.

The Mamaia festival and its songs

While state-paid vacations for Romanian workers had been introduced earlier, after the establishment of the legal right to a holiday in 1951, in the 60s, taking their cue from Moscow, party ideologists not only started creating an infrastructure for tourism, but also thought of ways to properly educate and entertain Romanian tourists while vacationing at the Black Sea. Thus, in 1963, The National Committee for Culture and the Arts decided to organize a music festival meant to promote Romanian pop music. The music and the festival also served as propaganda media for the communist regime, creating the representation of a happy consumer communist society. Initially, The Festival of Pop Music from Mamaia included only a section for creation. Nicknamed “The Sanremo of Romania”, the festival, organized annually in Mamaia, a resort situated to the north of the Romanian littoral, attracted a large number of tourists, both from Romania and Soviet satellite states and launched the hits of the season.

The first song about the sea which won a special award at the Mamaia festival in 1965 was “Seri la malul mării” [Evenings by the sea shore], performed by Margareta Pâslaru. A sentimental evocation of summer romance, the song

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introduces the theme of colour change, as the evenings spent with the lover by the sea are called “late blue symphonies” (Dinicu, 1965, 0:33-0:65). Pâslaru, a popular singer and actress until her defection to the United States in 1983, specialized in songs about the sea – maybe also because of her famous big blue eyes. In 1959, she had launched another song about the sea, “Chemarea mării” [The Call of the sea], soon to become a hit on the national radio, breaking all sales records in 1961 and 1962. In 1979, she released another song “Ce frumos zâmbește marea!” [How beautifully the sea smiles!], this time celebrating the sea as a protective divinity of love, bringing the two lovers together: “When from the shore with happiness we look / We give thanks to the sea” (Dragomir, 1979, 2:04-2:11), a theme which will be echoed by almost all Mamaia songs from the 80s. Human love is integrated into the cosmos, in the manner of traditional folk ballads, as the sea only smiles when kissed by the sun. The song will also feature seagull cries, a prop that will turn into a staple of the Mamaia festival sea songs.

However, her most interesting song about the sea was performed in 1970, at the International pop music festival in Athens. The song, composed by Ion Cristinoiu to fit the theme of the Athens festival and initially called “Mediterrana” [The Mediterranean], was later used by director Mircea Drăgan as a theme song for the second part of his movie *BD la munte și la mare* [BD at the mountains and at the seashore], under a different name, though: “La Marea Neagră” [By the Black Sea]. Thus the song released in 1970, only one year before the July theses, turned into a song about the national sea in a movie released in December 1971, detailing the activity of a militia brigade on the tracks of international criminals and drug-dealers.

This symbolic transfer from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea may be indicative of the policy of autochtonism initiated as a result of Ceaușescu’s July theses, and of his switch from an international to a national communist ideology. What strikes one when listening to the song is its versatility: it seems that the writer may have anticipated the conversion, and so the lyrics fit both the image of the Mediterranean and that of the Black Sea. In the first version, the song begins with the lyrics:

*Mediterranean
blue paradise,
Mediterranean
beautiful as a dream,
you wrap me up
with waters and sky
without clouds.* (Cristinoiu, 1970, 0:16-0:35)

The second stanza, however, seems to be more appropriate for a depiction of the Black Sea:

But the sea

Now changes its colour [...]

Huge waves rose terribly

And then there were dispelled. (Cristinoiu, 1970, 0:57-1:23)

When the song gets re-named in Mircea Drăgan's movie, the contrasting description will now refer to the Black Sea. While the first stanza, more resonant with the image of the Mediterranean, sounds a bit out of place, the second (which is rendered in the movie) certainly rings true. Moreover, the statement about the sea changing its colour, referring to the topos of the stormy Black Sea, will take on a new meaning: the lyrics offer a strange foreboding of what was to come.

Though there seems to be little connection between the blackness of the Black Sea space as experienced by labour camp detainees and the blueness of the same sea in late communist pop songs, yet, paradoxically, what separates them also unites them: the Canal. Work at the Canal, which had been officially stopped after Stalin's death, was resumed in 1975 by Ceaușescu, who managed to complete it. In 1984, when Nicolae Ceaușescu inaugurated the Danube-Black Sea Canal, the song which won the Mamaia festival was "Magistrala albastră" [The Blue Thoroughfare]. It was performed by Mirabela Dauer and Dan Spătaru, two Romanian pop music stars at the time. Interestingly, in the video, where the Canal is first shown from the perspective of the ship working its way along the still blue waters, Dan Spătaru is wearing the black leather jacket that had become the hallmark of the undercover state security agents, while Mihaela Dauer dons a brown jacket with epaulettes: a reference, perhaps, to the army forces used by Ceaușescu to complete the construction of the Canal. In the song, what had been the death canal is addressed as a "road of waters and dreams" (Vasilache, 1984, 0:38-0:42) carrying the Romanian soul, "a song without words" (Vasilache, 1984, 0:42-0:46), towards the sea. The building of the canal is described as a work of love, "lifting the skies above the earth" (Vasilache, 1984, 1:38-1:40), for one's country. The chorus is a typical propaganda text from the late years of Ceaușescu's rule, designed to symbolically manipulate popular consciousness:

The blue thoroughfare, a road built by the people

Which speaks, you know, of present and future

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*And great construction works*³

As a sign that they will be on this land forever

That they were and they will be. (Vasilache, 1984, 0:58-1:11)

The Black Sea rewritten as blue: this is one of many re-writings⁴ that Ceaușescu and his propaganda apparatus undertook. His project of building a national brand of socialism implied rewriting history,⁵ even from its earliest stages, as a series of steps leading to the progress of a great people, the Romanians,⁶ towards the golden age of socialism that was to come under his leadership. A messianic project which made sacred everything it touched: the land, the sea, the Canal. Even the age-old blackness of the Black Sea had to be transfigured: from a space of blackness, exile and death it suddenly, yet consistently, turned into the blue sea of communist love dedicated to building a happy future for Romania.

In 1986 and 1987, three songs won the heart of the public at the Mamaia festival, all of them having the sea as a main character. These were “Doar marea”

³ In Romanian, the word used to denote “construction works” is “ctitorii”, an old word extensively used for the founders of the Orthodox churches and cathedrals. Its usage put the construction of the Canal on the same level with the sacred spaces celebrating the rule of local princes and boyars in mediaeval and early modern Wallachia and Moldavia. Tismăneanu (1991) speaks of “the Byzantine rites” used to conceal Ceaușescu's neo-Stalinist personal dictatorship (p. 85).

⁴ Rewriting history seems to have been a regular strategy during Ceaușescu's regime. When, in 1989, a few months before the Revolution, he accused the Romanian Church of being Bulgarophile (on account of worshipping a Bulgarian-born saint, Dimitrie Basarabov), the Romanian patriarch Teoctist used the same strategy to resist the demolition of the Cathedral. According to Mihai Hău, a counsellor at the Patriarchy, a professor of theology was entrusted with re-writing of the life of the saint, who was fittingly renamed, echoing of the “new man” of socialism, Saint Dimitrie the New (Rădulescu, 2017).

⁵ In an interview with Pavel Chihaia for Radio Free Europe, historian Șerban Papacostea (1991) noted that the process of falsifying history went through two stages: first, during the stalinist period, the interpretation of Romanian history was subordinated to “the objectives of a foreign power”, and so the Romanian historical specificities were downplayed. In the second stage (the 70s and the 80s), occurring as a reaction to the first, “the national feeling was exacerbated “with the aim of turning it into an instrument of a new kind of totalitarianism” (p. 13).

⁶ Famous for his protochronism, Ceaușescu (1982) reinterpreted local ancient history, in an effort to demonstrate the continuity and autonomy of the Romanians on their land. In a speech delivered in the Plenum of the Central Committee, he stated that: “As known, the Dacians' civilization flourished vigorously for centuries on end. Two years ago, we celebrated the 2050th anniversary of the foundations of the first centralized Dacian state, although the organization of the Dacians' community life had started many centuries before. [...] The long duration of the wars between the Dacians and the Romans is an evidence itself of the force and endurance of the Dacians' state and people. [...] As documented by writings dating back to those times, by archeological research and scientific data, that was the period when the Daco-Roman symbiosis was achieved and the making of a new people started, built on the highest virtues of the Dacians and the Romans. And it was thus that the Romanian people was born” (pp. 598-599).

[Only the sea] in 1986, composed by Cornel Fugaru and performed by him and Mirela Voiculescu, and in 1987 “Vorbește marea” [The sea is speaking], performed by Cătălin Crișan, and “Mă-ntorc la tine iar și iar mare albastră” [I come back to you, again and again, blue sea], performed by Daniel Iordăchioaie. There is nothing black about the Black Sea any longer; on the contrary, like Mirela Voiculescu’s pale blue dress emphasized on stage, The Black Sea had turned blue, a metamorphosis supported by Iordăchioaie’s song the following year. It is still feminine, but what is added is a touch of sun, pleasure and a love as infinite as the sea itself. It provides the perfect setting for the eternal love story. Seagulls and albatrosses now become a staple of the sea’s imaginary: before the couple Cornel Fugaru – Mirela Voiculescu performed the song on stage, the scenic effects included one minute of real amorous seagull cries, a romantic prop with sexual undertones. “Only the sea carries us, like a faithful friend, / towards love’s threshold” (Fugaru, 1986, 1:25-1:37). The sea is both the background and the divinity protecting the eternal union of souls. In contrast to the archetype of the treacherous Hegelian sea⁷, it becomes the very symbol of steadfastness: “Only the sea waits for us, / constant throughout the years, only the sea” (Fugaru, 1986, 2:12-2:25), “The moment broke its wing while flying / and in dying gave us an eternity of love” (Fugaru, 1986, 3:19-3:31).

Love is also the topic of Iordăchioaie’s hit “Mă-ntorc la tine, iar și iar, mare albastră” [I come back to you, again and again, blue sea], yet this time it is not mortal, but elemental love. The Sea is the “eternal woman” to which one returns, again and again, drawn by her cosmic song – for the sea also becomes musical, and sings. The love for the sea is described in similar terms to that for a woman “I am yours / you are mine” (Lupu, 1987, 1:14-1:18), “You are the great love of my life” (Lupu, 1987, 2:16-2:20). “I would like to be, forever, your only wave” (Lupu, 1987, 1:09-1:11). Healing (this time spiritual, presumably) is also part of the sea-man relation “Like an albatross with a broken wing / I am now returning to your shore” (Lupu, 1987, 0:32-0:42), an echo of the physical healing, which was often included in the state-paid holidays at seaside resorts.

But the best-known remains the song performed by Cătălin Crișan at the Mamaia Festival in 1987 and the winner of the first prize, “Vorbește marea” [The

⁷ In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel viewed the sea as a fickle and treacherous element: “For the daring who encounter the sea must at the same time embrace wariness — cunning — since they have to do with the treacherous, the most unreliable and deceitful element. This boundless plain is absolutely yielding — withstanding no pressure, not even a breath of wind. It looks boundlessly innocent, submissive, friendly, and insinuating; and it is exactly this submissiveness which changes the sea into the most dangerous and violent element” (2001, p. 108).

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sea is speaking]. If until then quite a number of Romanian popular songs and movies had copied famous Soviet songs and movies, with “The sea is speaking” we can speak of the visible intrusion of Western music into the Romanian pop cannon. The first part of the song is quite a faithful rendering of the first chords from the theme song of *The Phantom of the Opera* (with music composed by Andrew Lloyd Weber), which had premiered the year before in London. It somehow managed to bypass the communist censorship system, and the song enjoyed a great success in the following years. A favourite of the TV channel and radio, Crișan’s first hit combined the theme of love with that of the sea as its patron divinity. In contradistinction to the previous songs about the sea, “The sea is speaking” promotes a more balanced, integrating image of the sea as both a punitive and rewarding divinity, raising in revolt to punish the infidelity of lovers, yet also acting as a counsellor for those who seek its advice. Its four stanzas alternate contrasting images of the sea. Thus, the first and third stanzas, set to the music of *The Phantom of the Opera* (with a few sonorous intrusions which imitate the calls of seagulls) describes the turbulences the sea is capable of, whereas the second and the fourth, against a more playful rhythm, paint the paradisiacal picture of the sea as the most appropriate setting for love.

The Black Sea in popular movies from the Communist period

Romance at the seaside remains the favourite topic of movies about the sea as well. Koenker (2013) remarks in *Club red: vacation travel and the Soviet dream* that Soviet vacations could occasion both legitimate and illegitimate (sexually promiscuous) forms of romance (p. 203). Of course, officially released movies promoted only socially healthy forms of romance (leading to marriage), along with officially sanctioned models of behaviour. The most popular movies about the Black Sea during the communist period were the musicals *Cântecele mării/Pesni moria* [Songs of the sea] (1971) and *Eu, tu și... Ovidiu* [I, You and... Ovid] (1977).

Cântecele mării/Pesni moria [Songs of the sea], a Romanian-Soviet co-production, directed by Francisc Munteanu and starring Dan Spătaru and Natalia Fateeva, a Russian actress, in the leading roles enjoyed a great success in the USSR as well, largely due to the songs composed by Temistocle Popa, and rendered in Russian by Robert Rozhdestvensky. The iconic “Tu, eu și-o umbrelă” [You, I and an umbrella], performed by both leading actors and shot alongside the quay of the port of Constanța, reinforces, through the rather cliché love of the two protagonists, Mihai and Nina, both the healthy, sunny qualities of the Black Sea littoral (the video is almost exclusively filmed in hues of blue and yellow) and

the international friendship of peoples (in this case, the Soviet and the Romanian) which had been the aspiration of Nikita Khrushchev. The Communist international atmosphere of the Black Sea littoral is suggested by the plot, mainly revolving around the complications arising from mistaking the identity of the Russian delegate from the Music Festival of Sochi. The movie features several dream journeys, one in which Mihai drives Nina through Bucharest in an old Chevrolet (pour imiter la bourgeoisie), another one in which they ride through a snowy forest in a Russian troika, while in the background one can hear fragments from the staple Russian song Katiusha, and also one in which Mihai, dressed as a cowboy (in a parody of Western cowboy movies, quite popular in Romania at the time) follows Nina in the train and jokingly threatens to catch her with the lasso. This latter scene is evidence of the Western influence that was gradually making itself felt in Romania beginning with the 60s, which brought “a relaxation period” in the communist regime (Rodat, 2020, p. 122). As Rodat (2020) notes, Western culture became accessible to the Romanian population “via mass media, especially music and cinema”⁸ (p. 122).

The most popular movie about the sea and one of the greatest box-office successes in the communist period was *Eu, tu și... Ovidiu* [I, you and... Ovid], directed by Geo Saizescu, produced in 1977 and released in 1978. The title alludes to the famous “You, I and an umbrella”, as the musical belonged to the genre of romance as well. The statue of Ovid, located in the centre of Constanța’s largest square, serves as a meeting place for the two lovers, Alecu and Ioana, competitors in the communist race for technical-scientific progress. Ioana and another four colleagues criticize Alecu’s plant (he is the manager of *Prometheus*, an iron and steel plant) for an allegedly outdated view of the standards of production. When the criticism becomes public, an inspector and a journalist are sent to investigate the case. Going from Bucharest (where Ioana’s plant, *Drum nou* [New Road], was located) to Constanța and back, Alecu falls in love with Ioana, simultaneously trying to defend his plant’s policy. While Ioana is superficially sketched – a beautiful and lively woman, with a fresh voice and a healthy enthusiasm, Alecu’s character is more rounded, and his being played by Florin Piersic (a sex symbol of the 70s and 80s) probably helped a lot in ensuring the box-office success of the movie. Ioana sometimes sees things too simplistically in black and white, while Alecu has a more complex personality, allowing him to both love Ioana for who

⁸ In her article, Rodat (2020) also discusses the major influence that Western music and cinema had on the general lifestyle of the people, noting that these Western art forms managed “to set the tone and trends of ways of getting dressed, shoe wear, haircuts, dance, social activities” (p. 22).

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she is, and stick to his principles. At the end, when the protagonists finally kiss by the sea, in response to Ioana's question about what their future life will look like, Alecu says: "I will work, and you will criticize me... lovingly" (Saizescu, 1978, 1: 44). Apart from evidencing Alecu's more complex personality, this sentence also puts an official end to the long years of fierce Communist public critique, when lives and reputations were ruined in the name of progress. The sea, together with Ovid's statue, become symbols of integration and mediation, which promote love as the solution to all conflicts.

Though quoting the earlier box-office success *Cântecele mării/Pesni moria* [Songs of the sea], *Eu, tu și... Ovidiu* [I, you and... Ovid] differs in many ways from the light romantic comedy which won the hearts of both Romanian and Soviet citizens. It draws on the work relations and the communist ethos as reflected in both the public and the private lives of Romanian citizens. The film was produced following Ceaușescu's cultural revolution, when, in June-July 1971, he presented a series of proposals to the Executive Committee of PCR. As Stanciu (2013) remarks, the proposals stressed that the Party should play a more active part in political and educational activities, increase the role of ideological propaganda in the education of the youth, and demanded that all existing media (radio, television, publishing houses) contribute to ideological propaganda through their editorial content (pp. 1067-1068). Ceaușescu's main objective, by putting forward these theses to the Executive Committee, was to reform the Communist party and its relation to the masses – he was particularly eager to increase the role of workers in managing enterprises (Stanciu, 2013, p. 1071). The movie incorporates this ideological prerequisite in its intricate plot around the competing work ethos of the two protagonists.

The most popular movie – or rather series – about the sea was by far the TV adaptation of Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!* [All Sails up!]. The novel, first published in 1954, was reprinted several times and its huge market success with young and adult audiences alike was further confirmed in 1976, by Mircea Mureșan's adaptation of the book in 12 episodes for television. Although, as Romilă (2015) argues, the principal reason for the success of the book was the "escapist thrill of the sea voyage, on an old ship, at the time of an extreme ideological closure" (p. 117), the film series capitalized on several aspects of the book to make it fit the demands of party propaganda and youth education.

First of all, for ideological reasons – Darwin's theory was of particular interest to the creator of the theory of historical and dialectical materialism – Lupan's Darwinism was exaggerated in the movie adaptation of the novel: at the

end of the series, on returning to Romania (the novel ends before the return), Lupan has a meeting with the famous Romanian naturalist Grigore Antipa,⁹ donating dozens of rare specimens for the collection of the Museum of Natural History. Secondly, in the movie series, educational aspects are emphasized: young Miha, a poor boy from a mountain village (the perfect representative of the subaltern oppressed classes) is personally tutored by the Captain, Anton Lupan, who invests a lot of effort into teaching him the essential three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), and further initiates him into the secrets of maps and navigation. Lupan also takes pains to explain to the representative of the harbour administration in Sulina that reading is an essential skill – and even buys him a spelling book.

Thirdly, while the book ends with Lupan and his crew thinking nostalgically about returning to their homeland, the movie series inserts a final episode where Spânu, the Levantine pirate who had terrorized trade ships on the Black Sea, is exemplarily punished: his underwater hiding place in the Delta is spotted by the ever-vigilant Lupan, who, together with the Delta patrol, captures the remaining members of Spânu's crew, while Spânu himself is strangled by a peasant girl whom he had kidnapped from a nearby village. Justice, especially this kind of exemplary justice, was extremely important for the communist authorities. Like in the *Brigada Diverse* movie series, international criminals and drug-dealers stood no chance when confronted with the police force: the Romanian government was thus shown to both defend its citizens and successfully neutralize outside enemy forces. Furthermore, as Cristina Vatulescu (2010) contends in *Police Aesthetics*, in communist states – which were essentially police states – one of the main means of strengthening police control was through the use of media and film-making: it was just another way of showing-off and scaring potential rule-breakers.

Conclusion

Thus, while in the early period of the Communist regime, the Black Sea space is reflected in the poetry of detention written by the political detainees working at the Danube-Black Sea Canal through the symbolism of its own designation – black being both a geographical attribute, and also the colour of pure negativity, expressing the terror and deprivations endured by prisoners, during

⁹ Antipa had been Ernst Haeckel's student in Jena, and as his mentor had been very active in popularizing Darwin in Germany, he was a strong supporter of Darwinism as well. Antipa was also the first to study the fauna of the Danube; Delta and the Black Sea in great detail, founding the Bio-Oceanographic Institute in Constanța in 1932, with two reservations and research stations: one in Agigea (present day Romania) and the other at cape Caliacra (present day Bulgaria).

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Ceaușescu's rule the cultural imaginary of the Black Sea undergoes a metamorphosis. With the Thaw and the re-evaluation of Soviet policy undertaken by Nikita Khrushchev, we witness the emergence of a new aesthetic, more Western-oriented (in the sense that it looks towards the satisfaction of popular taste), even if still retaining the drive towards social change in conformity with the demands of the Party. The Black Sea takes on the qualities of a mediator or turns into a paradisiacal space perfect for the development of communist romance. With this utopian re-imagining of the space of the Black Sea, the attribute 'black' suddenly ceases to appeal, and the sea turns into the staple blue sea of exotic and far-away lands. However, its newly acquired blueness is not so much an exoticization of the Black Sea as part of the vast campaign of history-rewriting which Ceaușescu undertook in his project of building a national brand of socialism. At the heart of this transformation is again the Canal: in 1984, under the pressure of official propaganda, it turns from a space of forced labour and death into one of dreams and national pride: it becomes the Blue Thoroughfare, carrying the newly reimagined Romanian soul towards the sea.

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