

## THE UNAWARENESS OF INFLUENCE: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE LITERARY CANON

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*Abstract: This paper examines the conditions in which the Romanian literary canon in its curricular form has the power to shape or construct particular cultural identities. In my view, the body of texts that are taught in the Romanian high-schools and form the raw material for exams and teenagers' first anxieties is cast into a displaced macro-narration. Its elements are extracted from their primary contexts and inserted in a derivative imaginary model where they communicate in a coherent self-contained fashion. The alleged goal of the study of these texts is to develop communication skills. This assumption elevates this set of literary first encounters to a special, unique status. However, most of the time they are transformed into tools meant to develop mechanical skills of apprehending reality. Subsequently I argue that they have a persistent power to shape themselves into minimal scenarios that structure the interpretation of experience and thus set a predetermined cultural identity. Because they form narrative or, in Charles Altieri's terms, grammatical articulations of the imaginary, we can talk about the force of involuntary memory and an inertial identity brought to life over and over again: it is not memory rewriting the past or molding it into a new experience, but the past shaping imagination, in an improbable fusion of horizons. Of course, this is only a tendency, not a deterministic process. Ideally taught, the literary canon can invite "creative forgetting", learning to keep an open mind, but, as it often happens, it can also inhibit creativity. I will offer some particular examples in regard to Romanian literary canon texts taught in school that underwent few changes despite political and ideological shifts. These texts can be grouped thematically in three categories that call upon and reinforce each other: the nostalgic - idyllic, the transcendental place of value (including the human values) and the morally reprehensible quest for money. Variations of this schema appear, for instance, in some of the most appreciated Romanian movies of the '90s produced by a new generation of directors, which prove that despite the contemporary thematic and ideological pressures and challenges, their frame of reference is derivative and pertains to our national identity created in the last decades of the Communist regime.*

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The literary canon is a field of discourse on which memory, politics, national and cultural identity and interpretative frames inevitably cross paths. The interaction among these three dimensions becomes clearer if we see it through its operational correspondent – the curriculum, which is both a validation tool and method for producing and reproducing sets of social, practical and ideal/ideological meanings. This interaction works as a basis for the curriculum, no matter which side of the curriculum debate we stand on, whether we embrace the rhetoric of calling into question and demystifying by turning everything into a struggle for power or we keep believing there still are values and judgments beyond time and the individual, which are worth being handed down and discussed. The school curriculum makes selections, hierarchies and extracts from the flux of history texts that are deemed representative; therefore, it needs in order to function properly coordinated actions and aims carried out by agents promoting educational policies, by mediators who perform the transmission of information, as well as an audience of pupils/students whose memory is required to operate as an active factor in learning and developing skills.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I'm using the term "memory" with its generally accepted meaning: "a wide variety of biological devices by which living organisms acquire, retain and make use of skills and knowledge", as it can be found in Alan E. Kazdin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, vol. V, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 161.

I will offer a practical example: the Romanian high school curriculum of the last forty years and the relationships between the political, mnemonic and individually-reproductive or creative dimensions, which, in my opinion, are relevant in illustrating a particular junction/articulation between memory and institutionalised literature. To simplify things from a theoretical standpoint, I will refer to the concept of “symbolic control” to denote the fundamental curriculum trait. For Basil Bernstein, “essentially and briefly, symbolic control is the means whereby consciousness is given a specialized form and distributed through forms of communication which relay a given distribution of power and dominant cultural categories”<sup>2</sup>. I prefer this definition because, first of all, it lacks the exhaustive determinism often implied by another similar concept – *habitus*, belonging to Bourdieu<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, control does not imply, as Paulo Freire theorized, an oppressive and manipulative factor that dehumanizes and symbolically disturbs natural order by suppressing student individuality, a type of malignant consciousness preventing the development of the social body. The above mentioned definition could be modestly restricted to control over the educational process, ensuring that the latter takes place in a pre-established frame, accepted or known beforehand by all the participants. The symbolic control of the process does not necessarily entail control over the results. In other words, Bernstein’s view allows and encourages, even, the understanding of the way in which curriculum is modified or the fact that educational output phenomena don’t give birth to mechanical batches of individuals who indiscriminately wear the dominant code embedded in their cultural genome.

Also, if we disregard the degree of generalization and essentialism presupposed by certain approaches that focus exclusively on the notion of interest, we may find that interest is not to be completely ignored, as long as we keep in mind that the interest of the educational agent does not always coincide with that of the institution where he operates or the state who pays him, and that the intensity and persuasion variations of these factors can create adaptations, reformulations or negotiations which portray the educational act as stage for various pressures and representations, rather than as a lifeless ritual, obsessed with self-preservation. From an ideological or egocentric angle, the notion of interest does not exclude the interest of the student, not even at an empathic-representational level. The two dimensions are not necessarily at opposite ends and it could be argued that, in fact, they overlap in a capitalistic system. But regardless of the ideological stance we choose to adopt, the normative or guiding aspect of the school curriculum is undeniable. Where literature is concerned, it functions according to a generative formula (which includes authors and texts that are then organized, based on a set of criteria), aimed at evoking answers from students, be they mimetic or, on the contrary, divergent and creative, depending on the social and historical context we are referring to. In the same line of thought, we may argue that the school

<sup>2</sup> Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control, vol.IV: The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, p. 115, Routledge, 2003. The author’s argument goes further along the lines I am interested in, stating that “the essence and deep structure of symbolic control lie (...) in its transformation of the language of feeling and desiring”. *Ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> While the concept is still debated, I use it with this meaning in mind: „The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’. That part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself the product”. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline for a Theory of Practice*, p. 79.

curriculum is born and kept alive through the convergence of memory, educational policies and interpretative/cognitive schemata of the beneficiaries of the educational act, who must test its validity by achieving the curricular goals. Historically speaking, the emphasis has been placed on one dimension or the other (but we must keep in mind that all of them must be taken into account simultaneously) according to the social encoding of the literary curriculum and the educators' discourse, predominant at the time. However, it must be said, as a word of caution, that it's important to resist the urge to interpret the correlation between the literary canon and the functions of the curriculum in the real life as a form of symbolic violence or other type of dominance. What I am trying to describe in these pages is how things are and how the interpreters of the curriculum shape a body of texts into daily practices. If there is someone to blame (even if this is not what a scientific or at least analytical perspective does) this is not some occult force manipulating hegemonically our innocent conscience, but our own limitations and lack of dedication. I argue that the force of the literary curriculum to create its own patterns of imaginary and a certain type of cultural identity is not the product of a voluntary malevolent action, but an unconscious, maybe even undesired effect of our negligent and careless practices.

For instance, memory, characteristic of traditional educational methods, has usually been emphasised as part of a teleological view of history, in order to create a model of absolute, vectorial coherence that would explain and justify the special and unique features of an ethnic group. According to Pierre Nora, the construct of memory was laid on sacred origins and grounds, and was designed to nurture a "cult of continuity"<sup>4</sup>. The fact that great authors existed and their memory was being kept alive, and, oftentimes counterfactually, turned into cautionary tales acted as proof for national unity and distinctiveness. The regulatory nature of the school curriculum implied, for all intents and purposes, a devotional support, as literature was seen as a token of social cohesion. Going back to a glorious past ennobled the present, and incarnated a better self-image, piously (or ardently) kindled by education. Memory also plays a key part in guiding education in a canonical direction per se, invoking a set of experiences and values with universally human applicability and makes it easier to project an ideal human type. When the political dimension becomes preponderant, it is either about an authoritarian intervention by the state, who not only goes beyond imposing a singular version of memory in reference to exceptional facts, but also excludes any historical alternative, be it vernacular or curricular. Memory becomes law and turns itself into an official act. If the aim focuses on the diversity of educational policies, then the curriculum will reflect the specific features of a minority group, with an emphasis on individuality, and the distinctive characteristics of the group as opposed to the universalist demands of the former canon. Finally, the teaching method centred on the student, in its many forms (such as 'border pedagogy', a term coined by Henry A. Giroux<sup>5</sup>), aims at stimulating creativity, increasing the students' involvement and emphasizing interpretative schemata with an unpredictable array of combinations. In this case, what has to be overcome, continuously renewed and supplied with experiences is memory. The political element also comes into this mix, as an ever moving

<sup>4</sup> In Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1 – *Conflicts and Divisions*, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> For references, see Henry A. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*. Theory, Culture and Schooling, A Critical Reader. Westview Press, 1997.

market in need of adaptable and flexible individuals, who are not attached to a single cultural code or set of schemata and ideals. Memory is replaced by a perpetual availability on the part of the student and the regulatory function becomes a means to ensure that the prospect of a non-closed identity has a firm basis and a set of competences able to sustain such flexibility.

I will focus now on an aspect that is less frequently mentioned in canonical and curricular debates. More precisely, I will analyse the relationship between structure and end goals of the school curriculum and its content, which has been selected in order to reach these goals. Presumably, according to its aim, either the prevalence of memory and the political aspect or the focus on freeing the student's creativity, the principle of content selection is based on the minimum of coherence between the nature of the texts and the objectives of the curricular discourse that they support. Placing these literary texts into a context of pedagogical end goals also implies a change in the level of their discourse, a refraction which, through adjustment and resizing, increases their efficacy. These texts cannot be productive if they are not first turned into instruments for facilitating the assimilation of information through the symbolic control that I mentioned earlier. What are the appropriate types of text, what are the resulting necessary transformations and in what respect are they applied, are important questions<sup>6</sup> which, unfortunately, I will not be able to expand on here, to a satisfactory degree. I will, however, make a note that, since the criterion on which such texts have been chosen is not exclusively aesthetic or specific to the literary field, new relationships must develop among these texts because they become a part of a different system, curricular in this case, even if they are integrated into a vertical or horizontal knowledge pattern<sup>7</sup>. In order to really work, they must be grouped into an articulated syntax that means furthermore the decomposing of a literary work in several patterns and elements. This process is often not consciously acknowledged or consistently followed through by educational agents. The real challenge in order to achieve literary competence (the professed goal of our curriculum) is for the teacher to recompose these elements into a meaningful new whole. And this is where we as teachers fail most of the time. Therefore, another aspect I will consider deals with the theory of content acquisition and the mutations such a content undergoes, both as a subordination to certain end goals and as a necessary, horizontal inter-relational dimension.

One of the paradoxes of teaching literature lies in the often uncomfortable coexistence of a restrictive and an elaborate code<sup>8</sup>. At least the Romanian educational methods make this transition suddenly and unassumingly. The act of teaching implied reproducing information exactly as listed in textbooks, dictating and assimilating such information without processing it, psittacism etc., while curricular objectives require from the student the ability to produce an elaborately constructed discourse. Although, in this case, the discrepancies are obvious and have been cultivated for many generations, the very act of teaching literature encompasses an inherent tension that occurs between the two types of code. Offering the student information in an elaborate, highly personalised code and requiring her to produce such an intellectual discourse usually creates a hiatus which is difficult to manage. It's easier to admire an

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<sup>6</sup> But they do not seem to attract too many answers from the writers concerned with curricular problems.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow Basil Bernstein's concepts as presented in *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research and Critique*, Rowman & Litfield, 2000, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Basil Bernstein defined these terms in *Class, Codes and Control, Vol. I, Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1971.

elaborate performance than to turn it into a teaching instrument.

With very little and recent exception, the Romanian high school curriculum for literature consists of a set of authors and texts, which have remained the same throughout the political and social changes of the last sixty years, or the variations within the communist authoritarian regime, and have not been profoundly marked by the slow and ongoing transition toward democracy. I am not interested here in demystifying or contesting these authors. I am solely concerned with the nature of the mutations which the image and works of these authors have produced as they were transferred into a discourse with educational stakes, in order to be used as instruments of symbolic control<sup>9</sup>. Each of the authors I will talk about was partially recovered, after harsh and sustained struggles fought with the ideological apparatus of the communist government. Any reference to interwar literature or the Romanian literary tradition was generally considered an act of deviationism, to name one of the mildest accusations. This violence, which was more than symbolic, was, of course, common to all the nations who had gone through forced Sovietisation after the Second World War. The differences among them are minute and concern the level of devotion of local parties and the activists' zeal, rather than ideological modulations or alternative movements. In this context, recovering authors who didn't subscribe to the doctrinaire agenda of the party was a symbolic victory, an act of resistance by means of which, after several decades of unexpected creative fertility and synchrony with the artistic level of the West, shattered elements of the old canon from the interwar period (which was only beginning to form in the '40s) began to coagulate again. The explicitly proletarian texts coexisted with ideologically naïve ones, with the balance finally tipping in favour of the latter, though not decisively, only around 1970. As a perhaps mirrored response to the hysterical propagandistic rhetoric of the communist regime, the authors who had been recovered came to be idealised. In the beginning, this worked well for the rehabilitation of an authentic literature, freed from the social class constraints of dialectic materialism. But since this argument did not hold against ideological censorship, a more convincing one was used: the exceptional nature and undisputable value of these recovered authors. Protecting these authors often resembled the process of recovering pre-Christian philosophers from medieval rhetoric. Communists *avant la lettre*, they were saved by their own intuition of class conflicts, but they lacked the resources to materialise it in accordance with Marxist-Leninist laws. Therefore, this process of idealising had two major sources: the first was recovery, memory as an alternative and the second, the reification of a set of authors into a pantheon that couldn't be intruded upon by reality or by other disruptive factors; this strategy was initially aimed against the annexationist political approach to literature. It underwent a new wave of refreshment in the 1970s, as Romanian communism entered an extreme nationalist phase dominated by a personality cult for the beloved leader, process which was also reflected in claiming the absolute superiority of Romanian values and inventing a tradition of exceptionality, in which literature played a major part. A specific amount of idealising is, obviously, inherent to the school curriculum. From the very fact that

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<sup>9</sup> For further details, see the study of a Romanian critic, Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism (The Romanian Literature under Communism)*, Ed. Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 2010. A more applied history, which deals with the canonical battles within the Romanian literature, can be found in *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, edited by Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, Theo D'Haen, Rodopi, 2011.



only a few authors are selected, they have a representative quality, because they are packaged as offering sets of unique experiences, which help define a certain theme or illustrate technical solution (for example, of metrics, a literary genre, etc.). In this case, the authors were not idealised naturally, as Charles Altieri suggests<sup>10</sup>, based on the ability of texts to supply a universal grammar for interpreting experiences. According to Altieri, canonical literary texts are considered representative because they are either a typical, generally humanly valid illustration of specific problems, or they express the intensity of an experience, a superlative exploration of an existential situation. None of these two directions is chosen in this form of idealisation, which would be more aptly called ‘iconisation’, *id est* turning literary figures into icons. Furthermore, teaching literature is usually justified by the fact that it cultivates ‘senses’ (of the beautiful), (communication) skills or abilities (of understanding / writing). This ideal vision created a value axis isolated from reality and, at the same time, indisputably, a restrictive code that could only lead to mimetic and falsely emulative responses. Because each of these recoveries was a battle in itself, a case with multiple nuances, pros and cons and compromises, the inclusion of the targeted authors into the school curriculum was achieved individually and gradually, and meant a small victory against the political establishment and series of authors whose texts, promoted by the communist regime, denoted a level of absurdity which is hard to imagine today. They depicted a universe with no correspondent in real life and truly made up the false consciousness of a peaceful, paradisiac world, regenerated by the working class and carefully, parentally monitored by the party comrades. This operation had two obvious consequences. On the one hand, authors were displaced from the original context in which the respective works had been created, the relational dimension between text and other movements / mentalities during that time was sacrificed and the sense of authentic history had been wiped out. On the other hand, there was a lack of coordination and correlation between these texts. They were put on display in a gallery of great authors and texts that enabled an approach using literary instruments; they were subsequently delivered as finite and ideal products, without ever demonstrating or interrogating the mechanisms and techniques used by each particular author. The only permissible correlation was that of a progressive causal logic, which inevitably lead to the true values of communism – in fact, the only accepted/true values. The same argument of exceptionality was used in the opposite direction by those who sought to restore aesthetic values: these were pre-Communist texts and thus a literary oasis exempt from the harsh reality of the Communist era.

Such a gallery of recovered and idealised texts, frozen in an ideal order, could simultaneously exhibit, with no friction whatsoever, a Romantic poet, Realist or Naturalist novelists and ironic playwrights. Although these are all admirable authors, and their mere enumeration seems promising in opening up a fertile dialogue for the literary sciences, they were brought together only to meet the inclusion criterion. Their entire work had been reduced to those texts that didn’t oppose the communist agenda directly, but were malleable just enough to allow, if the case required, a forced adaptation of their meanings to the values and pressures of the class struggle or other interests of the comrades. In my opinion, however, although no coherent effort was made to create connections between their different contents,

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Altieri, „An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Canons, (Sep. 1983), p. 54.

to adapt and make them communicate with one another through explanation or comparison, the correlation nonetheless existed and created itself. With no explicit action of coordination, based on fragmented meanings and the neglect of a real dialogue between these works, they were artificially homogenised into a single interpretative code. This was, of course, partially achieved by teaching, which is made up of invisible threads that tie one class to another, one semester to the other, into a narrative frame, regardless if the educator relies on them or ignores them<sup>11</sup>.

To offer some examples, I will refer to authors who have been active mainly between 1870 and 1925, their key discourses and sets of values, which were reduced to an efficient minimum that was easy to communicate to students, as long as the school curriculum had been designed to nurture admiration. Firstly, I will talk about the Romanians' national poet, Mihail Eminescu, who has been almost impossible to discard by communist propaganda, as he had already been a renowned author prior to the '40s and acknowledged as a genius poet. His diverse poetry, which suits various Romantic trends, has usually been reduced to a single formula, derived from his best known poem, *Luceafărul*. The standard image extracted from his work was, thus, the rhetoric of transcendental absolute values. This was usually expressed by the means of a minimal scenario describing the impossibility of absolute love and the superiority of the genius in relation to petty society. Ioan Slavici was recovered as one of the first writers of Realist short stories and psychologically intricate novels. What the reductive logic of the school curriculum and literary criticism of the time have retained can be summed up as a rhetoric of punished and, ultimately, impossible transgression. Failure to comply with customs, taking risks, acquisitive behaviour were all demonised and considered agents of a capitalist pathology. This sort of interpretation was also applied to the first important novelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Liviu Rebreanu, given back to the literary circuit with great difficulty. From his vast work, his one generally remembered novel is *Ion*, the chronicle of a pauper peasant, dominated by individualistic impulses, who breaks all social conventions to come into the possession of land. We are dealing with the same image as in Slavici's work, but in a different setting. The ability to make decisions and take a stand against society is, in fact, a moral wrong. Even if society lacks the proper normative tools to keep everything in order, fate is the main agent of moral order. This list is not complete without the most important Romanian playwright, Ion Luca Caragiale. In this case, the idealisation did not follow one single explanatory stereotypical formula, but resulted in a particular feeling and a comic atmosphere, an overall sense of irony and in defusing any type of dramatic conflict. What was kept and codified in the school curriculum was usually a carnival-like vision, a soft relativisation of the moral themes; the characters display only a low-key meanness and cynicism. What remains (literally) is the gay irresponsible immorality of mediocre individuals; nothing is too serious or irreversible. With the risk of repeating myself, I am

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<sup>11</sup> For a proper synthesis of this process, I will refer to Mary Douglas' references to Basil Bernstein's first books on the topic of curriculum and power: "Basil Bernstein says of the curriculum that it is a scheme for fitting together bits of knowledge. As they are connected in the curriculum so they enter the minds of the pupils, and, though the details of the content will fade, the connections are likely to guide their judgements and perpetuate the system of power which the curriculum represents", Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, p.X. The main difference between the process I observe and describe is that this correlation and penetration of the pupils' minds does not necessarily have to reproduce a cosmology or a power configuration in order to function as a stable network of meanings.

referring to clichés that have been reproduced for entire generations. If it's rather obvious that this reproduction excluded multiculturalism (the only acceptable form being the solidarity of the proletariat from all the Communist countries) it represented a sui-generis form of *endocultural* reification of difference through reiterative means and identical images and correlations<sup>12</sup>. These can usually be located at the primary level of encoding, in other words, the primary level access to literary texts. Due to the political context summed up earlier, these interpretations worked as ways of validating an irrefutable aesthetic value. Prior to 1990, their differences and sometimes incompatibilities were left unquestioned. Instead of structuring the information, what actually results is the superimposition of interpretative schemata that are validated as superlative products. This does not mean that a certain structure is not achieved at the level of acquiring content, one that is inherently presupposed by the education process. This body of texts taught in high-school creates a displaced macro-narration. Its elements are subtracted from their original contexts and inserted in a derivative imaginary model where they communicate with one another in a coherent self-contained fashion. The interpretative schemata described above occur simultaneously in an unlikely, yet efficient combination. Although their homogenous nature is artificial and wouldn't pass a thorough analysis, it is functional (for example, it works as a warranty for passing exams).

My view, based on the answers of high school students to different types of tests (for instance, writing essays on a given theme), is that a disassociation occurs between their value system(s) and socialisation codes, and what they must say, or feel, that is strictly reserved for the literary field, seen as a parallel, artificial world, one which requires and validates only certain types of responses. In other words, literature is severed from real experience, and the core composed of/by the melange of interpretations described above: impossible love, geniality, the sanctions applied to individual initiative by a collective consciousness, all coated with a shine of trivial mockery, are only suited in literature, in their natural environment, as it were. The result is nonetheless an interpretative paradigm, despite their association by a solely institutional action and despite the lack of authentic communication between them. The purpose of this pedagogical act is neither to foster “a distant gaze” of the student, nor to attempt to cultivate a curious gaze, capable of discernment, comparison and objective (self-) analysis. What we get out of this equation is rather a hard and compact core of ideas and structures that give rise to a formulaic interpretation combining various, heterogeneous, yet uncorrelated sources. It is a gaze through the eyes of a hybrid who never existed as such but who comes into life in the consciousness of those exposed to the discourse that artificially created it. This frame has a high degree of persistence, but, since no sociological studies have been conducted on former students of various ages, I will choose another field of the arts, cinema, where the distance from the literature taught in high school is, theoretically, larger and more suited to demonstrate the arguments listed above.

This core of representation and values surfaces, deliberately or unawares, in a series of movies between 1997 and 2002, a large enough period of time for the post-communist reform

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<sup>12</sup> I must stress that I find the opposition multiculturalism vs. literary canon meaningless. If we subscribe to the view that the works of art selected in the canon encapsulate universal(izing) experiences and existential solutions or alternatives, and I do not find any reasons not to subscribe to it, the value of the canonical work of art resides also in its ability to talk to different generations and people disregarding the artificial borders imposed by genre, ethnicity or social status.



of the school curriculum. My choice relies on two factors. Firstly, they wish to present and explore the post-communist Romanian reality, that is to answer new stakes and challenges, and, secondly, they were produced by young directors at the time. The common feature of these movies is a burden that they are not necessarily aware of, a displaced, free-floating and highly-cohesive literary ghost-identity, one that is not adapted to the reality they are supposed to be investigating. In this respect, we can talk about the force of involuntary memory and about an inertial imagination: not memory rewriting and containing the past, but the past forming memory in an improbable fusion of horizons.

In *Filantropica* (2002), written and directed by Nae Caranfil, Ovidiu, a meagre Romanian literature teacher becomes involved in all sorts of illicit combinations with help from a highly suspicious individual, who writes lines for beggars and is an artisan of other scams. Teacher Ovidiu pretends to be in a relationship with a female acolyte in order to skip paying the restaurant bill, which they manage to do by the generosity of other customers who offer to pay their bill. The scam works, spreading nationwide, as the two characters are featured on TV, while the real master of puppets pulls their strings from behind the curtain. The substructure is not disclosed, the audience doesn't squint, and the teacher is left no way out of the immoral dead end he got himself into for money. His only option is, therefore, to keep playing. In *Occident* (2002), the first film of reputed director Cristian Mungiu, the only chance for Romanian adolescent girls to survive is to marry a foreigner. True love is not possible. The father of one of the girls is a former employee of Securitate, but is otherwise a good, mediocre soul, who eventually resigns to the fact that his daughter is better off with a foreigner, despite the racism he proves as the film unravels. The main character, Luci, is a sour loser, who tries to convince his girlfriend that true love saves the day despite the miserable life they are forced to live. In the end he resigns too, accepting that his girlfriend is better off without him. In *Marfa și banii* (2001), the debut film of Cristi Puiu, two young men attempt to win some money to help them start their own business – opening a boutique – by carrying suspicious medicine (a cover for drugs probably) for a local small time mobster who, in spite of his apparent harshness, is driven by paternal impulses, which turns him into a blend of thug and uncle. His seemingly authoritative figure is incapable of creating an authentic type of resistance. The law is, indeed, broken, but along pre-established lines, as small thefts. The desire to climb the social ladder by any means necessary, be it violent or not, seems to be the only possible type of social dynamics. Love is not possible, and women are manipulation tools; all that matters is getting through. The atmosphere in each of these films, the final brushstrokes replace the dramatic element with a sweetened form of reserved, dark or wise-resigned humour. All of them filter reality by using in a more or less obvious manner the paradigm of conjoined images and interpretations exhibited and imprinted by the curriculum. These operators call and reinforce each, creating variations of curricular schemata. Dismissing these themes and conjoined interpretations will blur out any trace of meaning. It is true, though, that, as these directors have produced new films, they have deviated from this primary formula. In all of these cases, imagination has won against memory. However, such cases are probably exceptions to the rule, because they are strongly dependent on the directors' talent and resources. All this suggests that, the fact that the pressure of the curriculum is not a matter of trauma or fate, but of a kind of conditioning that can be overcome. In the meantime, however, the school curriculum functions undisturbed, following the same structure and

mainly using the same authors and texts. This lack of flexibility is the more intriguing as the communist system that supported it has been extinct for 25 years. Curricular objectives have been adapted to European standards and promise to keep in mind the development of communication skills and the stimulation of creativity, but the hiatus between a restrictive code that simply organises the study content, and the elaborate code required from students, doesn't seem to have been consciously assimilated, let alone surpassed.

The examples given are succinct and still only hypotheses, but I believe they can illustrate a different, less conventional function of cultural identity. Memory works not only as a way of reconstructing connections to a fragment of the past through epiphanies, like the Madeleine incident, by creating the revelation of double temporality. Or, as psychoanalysis taught us, as a mechanical repetition of behaviours meant to hide a painful memory, but also as a hermeneutical reflex, a non-critical, facile putting into practice of sets of interpretations that have worked in the past, and were authorised and validated as institutional evaluation criteria. The 'presentification' of embedded imaginative structures configures identities on a pre-established network of meanings and associations. I don't wish to suggest that this elevation of involuntary memory to the status of imaginative pattern is a specifically Romanian phenomenon. For example, a connection can also be made between the commercial success of American TV series, characterised by an inflation of marginal characters, and the values fostered supra- and paratextually by the American school curriculum in the works of Mark Twain, J.D. Salinger or Scott Fitzgerald. However, these marginal individuals belong to a (health, government, police) system from which they come out as remarkable and eccentric, but a system that they also validate through their actions. The long term effects of the worldview *volens-nolens* contained by school curricula have yet to be thoroughly investigated, from the standpoint of their shaping power. I tried to argue that their memory is silently running in the background of our minds. Curriculum is a realm of memory and its exchanges with the everyday life act as a filter for arranging our present and inscribing it with meaning, creating and defining our cultural and national identity.

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