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The Romanian Peasant Museum and the Authentic Man

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Premise: The Romanian Peasant Museum is not a museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Problem: For Romania, any process of (re)thinking the national and identity issues has to go through a “vision” on “the Romanian peasant.” What role does it and may it have in the future the Romanian Peasant Museum, within this process of (re)thinking Romania itself?

Perspective: “In this museum we are experimenting with something old.”

“Your museum displays a polemic vision; it stages a concept of museology that must be explained and defended; most absent are the debates on this concept” (Gerard Althabe, 1997). The French anthropologist who spent much time in our museum and in Romania knew what he was talking about: the Romanian Peasant Museum was accused, protected, and awarded many prizes, but its structure was less debated in the profound sense of this word. But this goes for all Romanian ethnographic museums in general, *whose statute does not pose any problem*, and for those that enjoy this statute since their national foundation: as patrimony curators, museographers have a clear and obvious goal, and all they have to do is fulfill it with devotion. But staging culture is never and nowhere a feat without issues,

as it always illustrates a vision and serves a cause to the loss of other visions and causes – thus always (and also) being an act of power. From this perspective, this presentation paper raises the following question: what vision and what cause are we talking about, where the Romanian Peasant Museum is concerned, and what significance do they bear within the Romanian cultural and political context?

The Romanian Peasant Museum – a museum of the European autochthonous?

We must start our analysis by clarifying a possible misunderstanding regarding the very name of our museum: who is, in fact, the “Romanian peasant” of its name?

“We are starting to set up lists with possible names for the new museum”, Irina Nicolau recalled in her diary, one of Horia Bernea’s main collaborators. “How” should we call it? What would be the appropriate name? God, why didn’t I keep that paper? I know for sure that Horia had numbered those names and that we had reached more than 20. He oversaw **The Romanian Peasant Museum**, but he didn’t like it. A few hours later, this very name was chosen, a name which annoyed many people during the first years. *Peasant?* It’s derogatory, said the French. *Romanian?* It’s limiting and politically

incorrect, said others. Later, we were also sorry not to have called it just *The Peasant's Museum*" (Nicolau and Huruță, 2001:17, the underlined phrases belong to the authors). And, later: "After more than one year, we still struggle to add a subtitle to this name - A National Museum of Crafts and Tradition. We give up. All for the better: we would have entered a European family of museums with which we have nothing in common" (idem). Therefore, whose is this museum, to whom does it refer and who is the "Romanian peasant" of its title?

The trials mentioned above are already suggesting several ideas: a) it's a pity they didn't choose "The Peasant's Museum" and b) anyway, this museum is not part of the museum family of "crafts and tradition." On top of all these come the naming of the Romanian Peasant Museum as "a national museum of anthropology" and the constant rejection of a "purely" ethnographic vision. "It is normal to have a national museum of anthropology," said Horia Bernea during a round table organized by the daily "Cotidianul," of June 18th, 1993. "Understandably, a country which takes so much pride in the only civilization which can effectively protect it in the eyes of Europe (although this image is already starting to be questioned) should have a museum of anthropology in its capital, a national museum about what this traditional man was and is, while also serving as a testimonial for the future. The museum is a basic landmark for anyone who would try to understand this nation." During the same discussion, Gabriel Liiceanu rhetorically asks himself "whether, when Horia Bernea speaks about anthropology, he doesn't refer mainly to the salvation of a human type." Obviously, the answer is affirmative: "The name of the museum (...) casts a precise light upon a new "object," that is **the traditional man,**" explains Irina Nicolau (op.cit.:21, the underlined phrase belongs to the author).

The Archetypal Dimension

So, this is not about an ethnographic museum of the particular species of the Romanian peasant living in Romania, but about a more comprehensive notion of an anthropological museum of the next gender, i.e. traditional man. We therefore must ask ourselves who this "traditional man" is.

Traditional man is placed beyond the variety and historicity of its particular traditions (also called "ethnographic"). As Gerard Althabe remarks, "the placement of objects in the museum marks the exclusion from the exhibition of a dimension pertaining to **historical time**" (Althabe, 1997:164, the underlined phrase belongs to us). In other words, "historical time is crossed in every direction, as here rules the long period of **archetypes**" (Pippidi, 1993:8; the underlined phrase is ours). Therefore, the type of "traditional man" is a-historical. At the same time, he is a matrix, a "model" of all its versions and becoming. As Andrei Pippidi underlines (op.cit.), "the space outlined by the museum does not belong to geography, but to the **primeval unity** (the underlined phrase is ours). "We will study villages, modern man, peasants as they are," says Bernea in his turn, "but we will understand what happened only if we have a **model**" well structured inside the museum—that is, the traditional village." (Bernea, 1996:14, the underlined phrase is ours). Open to changes and to "present time," the Romanian Peasant Museum wants to firmly and constantly stay anchored in this archetypal "model," without which the *purpose* of the "Romanian peasant's" world would wither away and would lose itself in the *significances* of peasants of our days and of the days of yore.

In this respect, the view on the Romanian peasant seen as typology rephrases—or even better, it rebuilds—the dominant view of the period between the two world wars, which today's anthropology would name "essentialist" criticized by Henri Stahl (1983), who called it "a theological idealism"). Therefore, there are some obvi-

ous analogies between this idea of “type” and that of a “stylistic matrix” proposed by Lucian Blaga. The “model of traditional village” is formally not far away from the “village-idea,” proposed by the same Blaga. This vision proves to be closer and directly related to the constant way in which Ernest Bernea (Horia’s father and a brilliant ethnologist of Dimitrie Gusti’s sociological school of Bucharest) imagined “the process of learning the peasant’s way of thinking in traditional rural communities,” aiming at identifying “the fundamental frames of Romanian popular traditional thinking”—that is, the way in which the Romanian peasant imagines time, space and causality (E. Bernea, 1985:10). It is no wonder, therefore, that the museum is sometimes perceived as being “essentialist,” if not plainly “fundamentalist.”

The European dimension

This is not about going back to “traditional museography,” or to the national and nationalist ethnography of the “popular culture” of the period when the Romanian nation formed and consolidated itself. “We do not want to add another variant to the large gallery of caricatures which, ever since the 18th century, produced almost every fifty years or so one or two different images of the Romanian peasant,” as Irina Nicolau would specify in a dialogue with French anthropologist Gerard Althabe, who would also state:

“An exhibit is often the object of misunderstandings: some see this combination between the traditional peasant world and Orthodox Christianity as a nostalgic remembrance of a lost universe, which may have never existed; these people sense the peril of straying towards the expression of a national identity which closes itself around a specificity that separates it from others. In this case, we are dealing with a “pret-a-porter” interpretation, which reveals the refusal of making the effort to penetrate the exhibit, more precisely the sense that it carries in itself.”

(Althabe, op.cit.:164)

Therefore, there is an important difference: “the human type” of “traditional man” in which and by which the “Romanian peasant” is seen walks out of the patterns of “Romanian apriorism” (Blaga, 1944). It reaches beyond the frontiers of nationalism, without suffering the least estrangement from it. “Traditional man” is seen as being the “real” European man: “European man has really existed through peasants. Our museum will be an integrative view of the European man” – wrote Irina Nicolau in stating their programme (op.cit.:26), echoing Horia Bernea’s deep convictions. “I think the easiest way to unite Europe is to do it on the grounds of traditional man,” Bernea said in his published dialogue in the *Cotidianul* daily newspaper. “I find that, much closer to a Romanian peasant with respect to what is profoundly human and typical to his civilization—is a peasant from Spain or Southern France, than the bourgeois or city dweller of 1800, who was paying a much more solid tribute to certain local habits and ways of life. This is certain.” Gabriel Liiceanu writes in the mentioned dialogue that, in fact, we are dealing with “a human universality represented by peasant.” Beyond these extensions, for Horia Bernea, the basic reference seems to be the European one, in its deepest sense.

Therefore, the entire paradox of the Romanian Peasant Museum comes to life: as a museum of the Romanian peasant, it is a museum of the authentic peasant; as such, it is in fact a museum of traditional man, that is of the authentic traditional man—that is the European autochthonous, while the other “traditional men” from elsewhere do not count: in this sense, there is an illuminating inner but frequent equivalence between the traditional man of Europe and traditional man as a “human type.”⁵

As a museum of the authentic Romanian peasant, the Romanian Peasant Museum defines itself, oddly enough, as a museum of the European eternal autochthonous! Nationalism is

therefore distilled into Eurocentrism, while ethnographic particularities are transgressed, though without reaching universalism.

The Christian dimension

There is a fundamental reason for this geographical confinement: “traditional man” is a “Christian man.” More exactly, he is the “real” Christian, the one before the Great Schism: this is about “a very well circumscribed spirituality, as one before the schism,” Bernea explains. “Europe’s unity must be sought in that period,” that is, in that remote past “when we were united,” he continues. “So, isn’t this about a museum of a human type whose fundamental axis in life is faith?” - Liiceanu asks himself again, as a half-rhetorical question. “Of course,” Andrei Pleșu answers without hesitation. But we must note that this is not about faith in general, but about Christianity: Real Christianity.

Now we can ask ourselves what the common points are between the modern Romanian peasant and the European pre-schismatic autochthonous. From an empirical point of view, there are almost none! For Bernea, their common denominator, their liaison is this “traditional man” whose abstract structure appears to be clearer now. It is not a social or ethnic type, it is not the Romanian or Spanish peasant, nor the one from Southern France, as Bernea claims. In fact, Bernea is not interested in how Spanish or French peasants used to live or how Romanian peasants in Maramures do now. The Romanian Peasant Museum does not “exhibit” any kind of these peasants! “Traditional man” is a kind of ideal type, not an epistemological, but an axiological one: he is the ideal type. The authentic Man.

The patriotic dimension

The Romanian peasant’s authenticity is therefore meeting with the authentic European, while the European vision is transferred without

any contortions on national patriotism. “He who doesn’t believe in the virtues of this nation, in all its best that lies hidden under the miserable crust of vileness and acculturation, he who doesn’t believe in its capacity to exhibit these virtues and make them obvious has no place here,” Horia Bernea once said. There is no trace of patriotic emphasis in this statement and in other similar ones, but only a trustful sense of “love of its kind” which belonged to a forgotten, but not extinct species. This “patriotism” has much deeper roots than the deep abyss of feeling. These roots are to be found in the words mentioned above and might be analyzed as follows: Europe’s future (therefore, the future of us all) depends upon rediscovering its spiritual unity; this can be found in traditional man’s past, in its “local” and specific instance of “Christian man,” the way he existed on the entire territory of our continent, before the Great Schism; “the Romanian peasant,” seen in his human dimension, is closer—especially due to his historical setbacks—to this mutual spiritual fund; he is closer both to original Christianity (by his Orthodox confession, which implicitly or explicitly continues “true Christianity”), and to tradition, by the fragmentary perpetuation of a specific spirituality or, at least, by the wide availability of certain creations, as testimonies of this spirituality: “our traditional man may be the most interesting, as he finds himself at a crossroad on a multitude of historical layers which are almost inexistent in other places, to such a great extent”- claims Bernea in a dialogue of the daily *Cotidianul*.⁶

What kind of a museum for Traditional Man?

In the vision we have traced so far, the Romanian peasant is neither a chauvinist, nor a fanatic—although he can become both at any time... His calling makes him an “authentic man,” who in fact is the original traditional man of Europe. How can this be staged, especially while using the particular and connotative expressions of the Romanian peasant?

A religious creation: "testimonial" museography

The interest shown to "traditional man" starts by taking the peasant out of his particular ethnographic context. Thus, what shocks us in the very beginning regarding the exhibits of the museum, as compared to the rest of the ethnographic museums in Romania, is "the explicit refusal of the realistic illusion," a major trait of any other traditional ethnographic exhibition, while the "realistic illusion" consists in a full use of the object according to its function as a witness" (Althabe, 1997:145). A witness to a "social or professional universe" in which any museum of a society wants to introduce its visitors. Therefore, in Bernea's case, this is not about a "restoration" of the pre-Communist national ethnography, but about a true "instauration."

On what can such a "revolutionary" act be based? If the "realistic illusion" that is typical to ethnographic museums is rejected, then what is the approach on which the museum's discourse must be founded?

Horia Bernea has an explicit answer which he repeats any time he can: "we are testifying about a reality which is included in the Eastern spirituality" (Bernea, 1996: 7). More precisely, this is about the iconoclastic experience and about the deep sense which the interdiction of "having a carved image" acquires in this experience. "Our Catholic brothers or Christians of other confessions or even people of different religions must know that, after the great iconoclastic crisis, Orthodoxy became extremely attentive with regard to "images," Bernea recalls (idem:9). In this vision, "the image doesn't represent Christ or the angel. It presents them." Bernea thus evokes "the fear of the ancient Church founders regarding the much too strict rules and their mistrust in excessive formalization" (idem:5). This "fear" gave birth to the Byzantine icon, with its entire particular universe of significance.

This Christian Orthodox foundation is trans-

posed in a museological vision, while Bernea often uses expressions like "Christian museography" or "Orthodox museography." That is, he fights for a "museography based on apophysis, which is 'negative' in the Christian mystical sense (...), and which defines through exclusion and circumscribes its sense by exclusion, and not by explicit statements, which are inevitably maiming" (idem:7). Or, in a totally different language, this fear of the ancient fathers is translated as "an excess of formalization which impoverishes the quantity of information" (idem:5). Therefore, we obtain a principle of a museography as a "trial to know the unknown," "an experiment in the phase of an endless beginning," which implies an "acceptance of the hazard"—while the museum stays, nevertheless, constantly "open" and "alive:" this is what Bernea calls **a testifying museography**. Not an affirmative one - and even less a positivist-explanatory one - but a feat on the verge of the "unknown," which "poses problems" more than suggests or indicates answers.

From this point of view, the kind of knowledge proposed by Bernea's museography is very close to what Lucian Blaga stated as "Luciferian thinking," as opposed by him with "the paradisiacal thinking" (Blaga, 1943). "The crossing line between the two kinds of knowledge" starts with "the very idea of its problems": "to pose a problem in the sphere of Luciferian knowledge is to provoke a Luciferian crisis inside the 'object,' that is to open the way towards a mystery" (idem:180). "The inner phenomenon of paradisiac knowledge is the *determination of the object* (...), or the gathering of adequate concepts regarding the fact that is was sensed, thought or imagined. The inner phenomenon of Luciferian knowledge is totally different: *the crisis of the object* and its various consecutive acts." (idem:161). Unlike "paradisiacal thinking" (which may be roughly identified with what we generally understand by knowledge, at least since Kant, as Blaga suggests), Luciferian thinking is not directed towards the exhaustion of the

“mystery,” but towards its intensification, not towards what Blaga names “plus-knowledge,” but, paradoxically in appearance, as it would seem to a positivist mind, towards “minus-knowledge:” “generally, any cognitive material, when seen from the perspective of Luciferian knowledge, becomes a revealed side of a mystery that is essentially hidden” (idem:179).

A museum “poses some problems”, as Bernea claims in his turn. It supposes “an action which goes way beyond the physical limit of the exposed object” (Bernea, 1996:13). The “testimony” to which Bernea refers does not expose the object in order to have its “definition” planted inside the visitor’s mind, but it somehow hides it from being seen, in order to open it to the inner eye. It shows it as “spirit,” as Bernea would call it—and thus, we might add in our turn, as “mystery.” But this mystery constantly carries the testimony of a deep sense, of a meaning. What Blaga saw as “theory of knowledge,” Bernea interprets as “*mystical aesthetics*.”

Bernea’s “testifying museography” has a second complementary foundation, in Orthodox spirituality: the *organic*. We must consider, he says, “the importance that Orthodoxy gives to the organic and to organicity” (idem:7). “Orthodoxy,” Bernea goes on, “rejects a feeling without a concrete support (...), a feeling that does not ‘heal,’ through which the very matter is not transfigured. Which is the actual result of Incarnation? What is the use in glorifying and praising Incarnation, if not to discover the Spirit which animates and transfigures the object?” (idem:8). Again, this dimension that became a museographic faith comes from a long tradition of modern Romanian thinking, from Eminescu to Mircea Eliade.

This Orthodox cult of organicity results in a certain “immediate trait,” in a “strong material structure” of the museographic discourse. It’s the faith that “it’s good to have a least mediated contact with the object.” From a strictly aesthetic point of view, this goes back to a graphic trait, to the constant care for matters and textures, to

tactile challenges, the most non-mediated of all. Museographic discourse is thus a deeply object-related and visual one, and the exhibits are not covered in words, as words do not occur between them and the visitors.

There where these “principles” meet (even if Bernea stubbornly refused to speak about principles in his activity as a director of the museum), we find the central “solution” of the museum: “I put at the center of this museum ‘the peasant’s icon’”- Bernea said many times (Bernea, 1996:10). “Here, the Romanian peasant is not an idol, he is not idolized. Here we meet with his icon”—this underlines Andrei Pleșu, in his turn, in the dialogue of “*Cotidianul*.” *The icon*, seen in its deeply and complex Orthodox sense, becomes an aesthetic precept. Objects are not “representations” of “a social or professional world,” but “presentations” (presences) of a “spirit” about which they testify beyond their physical limits.

A postmodern practice? Experimental museography

“The testifying museography” (be it Christian-Orthodox, apophatic, mystical etc...) that we presented above is rather a register of principles, of stating the aesthetic criterion in religion. The “profane” side, so to speak, the “working” aspect of this museographic vision comes as “experimental museography”—an expression used almost to an equal extent by Horia Bernea and by his collaborators, alike. But, as Andrei Pleșu notes in the dialogue of *Cotidianul*, “experiment is one of the key concepts of modernity, but here it acquires a rather bizarre sense. One usually experiments **something new**. Here, we experiment **the old**.” The *apofatic* trait of Christian mystics becomes the horizon of free creation, of a “flickering museography,” as Bernea liked to call it, which ceaselessly approximates exposure which is, after all, game. Game, but not play, as we will see.

“This exhibition builds itself through the

next move,” notes Gerard Althabe, “ethnographic objects are detached from the social and symbolic universe (traditional peasant) in which they were produced and used; the authors do not use them as witnesses of this universe; it releases them of the significance of their origin and it regroups them in aesthetic compositions; this movement turns the exhibit into a ‘work of art.’ Therefore, we assist to the transmutation of these objects that were drawn from the museum’s store.” (Althabe, op.cit.:145).

“A museum”, claims Bernea in his turn, “may and we think it must be an act of *creation* that transmits more than a simple sum of exhibits” (Bernea, 1996:12). The museum must be “a space which does not let the object to vegetate,” as opposed to the widespread conviction that leaving objects to just exist is “a scientific and correct option” (idem:8). In this sense, interestingly enough, Bernea uses comparisons from music to speak about what he wants his visitors to see: he speaks about “themes which couldn’t survive in such a space, if ‘sung’ by objects hidden in the store.” Bernea compares a museum site with a “song” and, of course, he always thought that one needs a good “ear” to hear what the object is saying.” Bernea treated objects like they were musical notes, if we were to borrow his comparison, each with its own sound, but which are subject to our creative imagination to make a symphony. In other words, just like the sounds of a musical scale can combine in endless and various ways in order to make music, the objects of various museum collections are placed relationally, in order to make an exhibit. Here occurs the main difference which separates modern from “classical” museums:

“Objects exposed in a village museum, whichever in the world, are placed in a real light. It is about reconstructing, placing and relating those objects as close to reality as possible. It is a mimetic act, a diorama (...). And we place it in another context. How can we make this object active again? Not in its

original context, as the Village Museum or any other museum tries. So, we are placing the object under “n” instances”, we make it say what it wouldn’t say otherwise, because it is a dead object, for the time being. So this is the reason for all these trials, the entire set of presentations which may make a study for a museum of the future. (Bernea, *Cotidianul*)

This “showing” of the objects in the museum, seen as a “magical, enchanting operation,” was meant to incite the visitor’s “sight,” the true sight that goes beyond “the physical limitation of the exposed object.” Through this, says Bernea, “the visitor is compelled to seize, at a subliminal level, profound truths to which we normally don’t have access” (idem:13). Truths which the authors of the exhibit do not stage or enlighten (maybe because even they do not know them), but which they let transgress. The visitor is therefore invited to be part of the museographic work, also participating, according to his wishes and possibilities, at the process of testifying the sense of the exhibit. He doesn’t keep the external relation of a mere spectator (Althabe, op.cit.:16).

This permanent game of museographs “showing” exhibits and of visitors “seeing them” has a power to mesmerize both actors alike. For the first ones it may mean, among others, the everyday practice of the romantic myth of genius—while running the risk of the sorcerer’s apprentice. For the other ones, it may (also) mean the rare pleasure of their own freedom of interpretation and understanding—even at the risk of being a snob. The refusal to take over or to create formulas, to stage and formulate serious truths, the staging of the “experiment that is in a state of eternal beginning” has the way of charming us all.

The Romanian Peasant Museum’s “open” and systematically non-apodictic feature led to (relatively) numerous instances when it was placed in the context of post modernity. Some have even seen analogies with Vattimo’s “weak

thought.” Many more others saw in the halls of the Romanian Peasant Museum an equal number of “outfits.” Jean Cuisenier, for instance, who has good knowledge of both Romania and the museum, would recently praise the post modernity of the outfits proposed by Horia Bernea and his collaborators, during an international colloquium. But Bernea is utterly explicit in this matter: “The things we did and intend to do in the future at the Romanian Peasant Museum have nothing to do with a void game, with certain borderline phenomena from the contemporary world, as the ‘outfits,’ for example. (...) That which totally differentiates them is the *given* element, the patrimony which is in action, but which we tame” (Bernea, 1996:14).⁷

In his vision, the museum refuses the “recipe, but not the style” (idem:8); moreover, it “follows the *ranging*, not the *order*.” (idem:7, my underlined words). The refusal of any “recipe” and of “order” is not the “void game” of post modernity, even though it is based upon an unfounded character of the game. Of a game which must be played, though, within the “given” limits of a profound vision on the world, of a vision of “traditional man,” of what in Romanian is called “ranging.” A game in the indefinite search of the given *sense*, not one of freely assigning *significances*. The experiment promoted by Bernea as a museographic strategy proves thus to be a free one only within the limits of an original given situation: Andrei Plesu is perfectly right when he says this is also a situation where something old is being experimented!

*Between a museum of a community and an art museum or on the ambiguity of
Traditional Man*

The Romanian Peasant Museum did not want to become (again) an ethnographic museum of peasant in Romania. Logically enough, it did not want to become a “community museum,” without being an “art museum”. But what is it, then?

There is a classical antagonism, often formulated in the terms of a simple alternative: should a museum of this kind present its objects as *artifacts* (handcraft objects, as we say), in their specific ethnographic context (which is the ethnographs’ position), or, on the contrary, should it present them in such a way that they wipe out their cultural particularities (the lack of indications about their being part of certain categories, about their functions and significances), in order to spot and highlight their aesthetic quality as art objects?

In order to evaluate the Romanian Peasant Museum in this respect, we must start with an example: a number of ceramic plates, of various ages, size and styles (some of which not of a “patrimonial” value), with no indication on their place of origin or their name, are making a “painting” in itself, when placed on a huge wall, one after the other. Its elements can be replaced at any time with other ceramic plates, without this composition having to suffer any change of sense or value. Moreover: this composition-poem seems to be a permanent incentive for the visitor: play with me, make your own creations with your eyes!

An equivalent of the ceramic halls of any ordinary ethnographic museum, this “composition” raises the following central problem: are the ceramic plates on the wall presented as art or handcraft, or are they staged as art objects or ethnographic objects? The answer seems to be ambiguous: neither one, nor the other. Taken out of their ethnographic context, without any geographical, historical or typological reference, the respective plates are almost explicitly denied their statute of ethnographic object.⁸

Still, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett remarks that, “though multiple in the beginning, while acquiring an ethnographic status, objects become singular and, the more singular they become, the more they are ready to be reclassified and exposed as art” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1991:391). From this perspective, traditional bowls do not become, however, in Bernea’s artis-

tic composition, a disciplined row of singularities - one bowl of Horezu and one of Corund, for instance - but they keep their multiple and anonymous character, thus avoiding their being analyzed as art objects.

And still, there is a certain beauty that is sought and exhibited on scene. According to Horia Patapievicî's remarks in a documentary dedicated to the museum, while expressing Bernea's convictions, "each object must be placed in the light of its own adequacy. If an object was made to bring porridge to one's mouth, its destination - that is, its **beauty!** - lies in its capacity to bring porridge to the mouth of the person eating it" (our underlined expression). Objects are what they are by means of their purpose, that is their original "role," and this is what contributes to their authentic statute. Furthermore, this makes their "beauty;" therefore, authenticity is of an aesthetic nature.

But how can one establish if an object is authentic or not? And, furthermore, against which elements are we to establish its authenticity? These would be only the first questions raised at once by a positivist mind. This is what happened during the last TV show where Horia Bernea was invited and where I and Speranța Rădulescu cornered him, in a delicate, but thorough manner, with such questions and objections. Without any intention to offend us, during a short break, Bernea shrugged his shoulders and snapped at us, obviously annoyed: "*If I look at certain objects, I know if they are authentic or not!*" In other words, if you don't, that's it! But, as Crew and Sims specify: "authenticity does not pertain to factuality or reality. It is a matter of authority" (Crew and Sims, 1991:163). In the Romanian Peasant Museum, the "authority" was Bernea *the artist*, for whom the authentic cannot be measured, but seen, therefore, it depends upon **artistic aperception**, and not upon empirical analysis! When exhibiting it, interest does not fall on the *truth* of peasant society, but on the *beautiful* of peasant culture, a different kind of *beautiful*, though, which lies in the authentic

meaning of objects, which seem to refuse the aesthetic autonomy. Can we therefore talk about an "art museum?"

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett proposes another more nuanced dichotomy: the one between "in situ" and "within context" approaches. "The notion of in situ entails metonymy and mimesis: the object is a past that stands in a contiguous relation with an absent whole that may or may not be recreated" (idem:388). Therefore, seen as approach, in situ museography does not necessarily refer to eco-museums or outdoor museums, as the Skansen Museum, but to the constant practice of metonymy and mimesis, whatever their scale. The challenge is to create a representation "as close to reality as possible" of the exhibited objects. Is the Romanian Peasant Museum such an in situ museum? Obviously not, as its favorite practice belongs rather to *poesis* than *mimesis*. Therefore, are we dealing with an approach "in context" (this means the ordering of objects after a reference system imagined by the curator, and from this point of view there are "that many contexts for an object, as are interpretation strategies?" (idem:390). In a way, yes, but only in a way, for this "context" Bernea proposed— as would be "windows," for instance — is not an elaborate, explicit and clarified theoretical reference frame, but it stays an open reference which the visitor must discover and even create.

The exhibition of a culture always hesitates between *exotisation* and *assimilation* — as Ivan Karp states: "I call exotisation an exhibit strategy in which differences prevail and an assimilation strategy, one which underlines the resemblances" (Karp, 1991:375). To which of these categories does the Romanian Peasant Museum museography belong? Hard to say. In a way, to a small extent, it belongs to both categories: there is a tendency for assimilation, to the extent where we aim for what is common and typical of "traditional man," beyond its particular traits in time and space. However, there is a distance which "exotises" objects, to the extent which it exhibits a different world from our own, maybe

even lost to us. But both dimensions melt in the ambivalence of alterity and of the identity of “traditional man,” as well as in the natural intention of the exposure. But this alternative also fails to help us much, in order to place Bernea’s vision where it belongs, in the world of museums.

So, we can but wonder why does The Romanian Peasant Museum seem to escape all these classifications and definitions? Why is it so hard to place this “traditional man” among the eponymous characters of the museums? Maybe because “traditional man,” as imagined by Bernea, does not actually exist, while the Romanian Peasant Museum isn’t actually a museum! Bernea’s construction does not reproduce any social world and not even evokes it in any way; it only invokes an ideal world in which he believes and which he loves. The museum does not exhibit traditional man, but it produces traditional gestures. It doesn’t refer to the order outside the museum, but it rebuilds it from inside.⁹

Authenticity does not refer to the exhibits, but to the action of exhibiting in itself, as the museum rather exists through the gestures of its creators, gestures that “experiment something old,” that freely arrange objects, within the limits of ranged objects, of the rules themselves. As Gerard Lenclud mentions, “everything happens as if tradition would not lie in ideas, but directly in practices, as if this would be less a thinking system, and more manners to do things” (Lenclud, 1987).

Bernea should have confessed to this, probably, while paraphrasing Flaubert: *l’homme traditionnel, c’est moi!*

The policy of authenticity: a healing museum

Therefore, no wonder the Romanian Peasant Museum is hard to place in the alternative: “community museum versus art museum.” Although it uses both dimensions, the Romanian Peasant Museum does stage neither the *truth* of ethnographical museums, nor the *beautiful* of

art museums, but, in a certain sense, the *good*.¹⁰ Therefore, what the museum invokes is ultimately *Authentic Man*, that is, the deep and unseen significance assigned to “traditional man.” This significance expresses the hidden messianic dimension of the museum. It is, in fact, the one which stirred the admiration and adversity with which the museum was seen from its very beginning and we cannot understand its statute in Romanian society, without a detailed analysis of this dimensions.

When wittingly asked by Gabriel Liiceanu if the Romanian Peasant Museum was (...) “not only a gesture of memory, but also one of a fighting spirit,” “a polemic gesture oriented towards the present days,” Bernea admits: “It is. Why not admit so? I see the state we’re in now, so I admit it is true.” It is not by chance that the museum was perceived and presented once too often, both by its creators and by its many admirers, as a “rebirth”. And no one referred only to the strict existence of the old Museum by the avenue: in a secular, material world, which nevertheless needs a rebirth more than ever,” says Horia Bernea at the opening of the museum. In her turn, Irina Nicolau is as explicit as she can be: “In my opinion, Romanian society at the end of this century needs a healing museum dealing with its diseased present (Nicolau, 1997)”.

But what is the disease that affects our modern society?

These scars that the museum was supposed to heal were mainly aiming at communism - which is understandable. The Romanian Peasant Museum was placed, shortly after the fall of communism, in the building which had sheltered for several decades a museum of the Communist Party, our new national identity. The Communist Party exposed in the halls of the Museum by the Avenue its own genealogy. The haste with which the Museum by the Avenue was given back to serve its initial purpose was meant to show a historical recovery against communist usurpation. But Horia Bernea chose the “Christian solution”: “I thought it was good to open

the halls of the museum of the new “peasant’s museum” with a serene exhibit, with an exhaustive message and a balanced style. After two decades of huge destructions caused to the peasants by communism, a “political” tough exhibition would have been in order, a story of horrors suffered by the Romanian village. We didn’t adopt this justified approach, but full of verdicts, an approach full of tensions and adversities. It wouldn’t have been too Christian to give a vengeful answer to our new museum! We would have started our new life with a sad note, under the black light of revenge” (Bernea, 1996:5).

“Our diseased present” does not add up to the Communist heritage, elegantly exorcised in a Christian way. It seems to have roots much deeper in time, even in the French Revolution, a past which is quite similar to that of Communist Romania. “France has never recovered from the Revolution’s purifications”, Bernea and Nicolau remark in an article of the *Dilema* magazine, written “at four hands”. France destroyed the most part of its noblesse and dignity, in favour of Ortega’s “mass-man”. Part of the essence that kept the French spirit from withering was destroyed. (apud Nicolau and Hulață, op.cit.:53). Secularity which became scientific atheism has its origins in those early modern times. Therefore, the evil is much more deeply rooted, in Horia Bernea’s opinion and for many of his competent admirers this can be named simply “**modernity.**” To this and to the “mass-man” it produces one can oppose the **Authentic man.**

Of course, Bernea was not an ideologist and the museum he imagined isn’t a political statement. However, it is an ideology in act, which has had and still has an influence on Romanian society and which can be understood only if it is placed again in the context from which it was born: a sincere and deep critic of late modernity.

Therefore, what does Bernea have against modernity and why does he oppose it?

An important clue in this sense comes from Bernea himself, when he says that “the museum is about ranging, not order.” Or, unlike “order”-

a human creation -”rearranging” is already given, is a cosmic order that existed before man, independent from man. Therefore, “traditional man” would be the inhabitant of this world of “rearranging.”

In the dialogue of the *Cotidianul* daily, Andrei Pleșu adds in his turn something essential in this sense: “the specificity of this type of universe is that it doesn’t have its meaning in itself. It is entirely organized by comparison to a meaning which, while it is not external from a spatial perspective, is separate and has a radiant and ordering function. It is a world which is not self-sufficing, not centered upon itself; it is not centripetal and egolatre. It is a world which accepts to live in a very coherent and serene **dependen-cy** with a higher principle which constitutes its premise, while the modern worlds are living in the euphoria of their sufficiency.” Let’s try to follow this lead of “dependency” which would define “traditional man’s” world which Bernea constantly refers to, a world which is different and opposed to “modern worlds”, which are centripetal and self-sufficient.

Psychology makes a typological distinction, elaborated by Rotter (1966) between that which used to name **external** and **internal locus of control**, respectively: (“He that is born to be hanged shall never be drowned” may prove “externality”, while “what goes around comes around” may show “internality”). More precisely, we are dealing with a projection of the “source of control”, of the **active principle**, so to say, in a correlative, but external instance of the individual (God, an institution, the father etc.) or in an internal instance, typical to the individual himself (personality, reason, will etc.). From this point of view, not only individuals, but entire populations may differ in tendency, while being more or less “externalist” or “internalist”, as a whole. Moreover, we can use this alternative in order to sketch the passage through modern ideology¹¹ from a perspective which is useful to the present discussion.

From the perspective of Man (and not of the

individual!) there are two basic possibilities: that the origin of control lies either outside Man (it is of an external, previous and higher nature, *heteronomy*, or it is placed within Man itself, having him as origin, *autonomy*). In other words, the “reason” is projected either in the World, or within Man. In the first case, we can talk about a given order of the World (or *cosmocentrism*, which in Romanian is defined by the beautiful word “rânduială,” or “ranging”). In the second case we speak about an order that was instated by Man - *anthropocentrism*. This is precisely the intuitive difference which Bernea identified between “ranging” and “order”: “ranging” is given to man who will thus be able to do “what is in order”, while “order” is Man’s creation, who thus becomes the measure of his freedom to order his own life.

These two fundamental ideological types involve two different types of rationality. In the case of a cosmocentric order of the World, built before and independently of Man, the latter can but ceaselessly guide himself according to the requirements of this order. He can only do what was “settled”, in conformity with the “ranging” of the World, as this was conceived from its origins. It is therefore rational for us to direct our understanding efforts towards the origin of this order and to be guided by the deeds of others in the past, who were as “dependent” on the ranging of the world as us. Therefore, having its foundation in the past, as sole source and guarantee of knowledge, rationality is *retrospective*. On the contrary, in the case of an anthropocentric rule of the game, of Man’s autonomy in the World, it is rational for us to choose those appropriate means in order to attain—in a more or less distant future—Man’s autonomous aims and the order that he tries to impose upon himself. We can talk in this case about a *prospective* rationality (*forward looking*, as G. Becker would say). Correspondingly, the behavioral rule will be that of *habit*, in the first case, and of *project*, in the second.

From this perspective, the “modern worlds”

about which Pleșu talks when he opposes them to “traditional man” are the result of this great passage - from being dependent upon cosmocentric ranging and from heteronomy to an anthropocentric and egotistic understanding of Man’s autonomy. Does this mean that, by opposition, “traditional man’s” world is the pre-modern world of heteronomy and habit? No. And this is the source of many a great confusion: this is the world of *habitual communities*! Tradition - and, with it, “traditional man” - is an invention of modernity, precisely one of its versions. The peasant, especially if and to the extent which he is “authentic,” is not “traditional,” but just... peasant, the member of a habitual peasant community. The tradition which we assign to the peasant world is a compensatory construction of the modern worlds, as habitual worlds tend to disappear and as they lose the “dependency” that these worlds have in common. According to Hobsbawm, at the beginning of his book which he dedicated to inventing traditions, “in this sense, ‘tradition’ must be clearly distinguished from ‘habit,’ which rules over the so-called ‘traditional’ societies.” (Hobsbawm, 1983). Tradition is a selection and, at the same time, its result, while it operates from present to past, in order to transform the past into a reference of the present.

“In order to define a tradition, we must go from the present towards the past, and not the other way round, in order to understand it not as a *vis a targo*, whose effect will be perceived by us all, but as a point of view that we have today on what was before us. I don’t want to say that to recognize a tradition is to invent it. The past must endure, so that we may take what was good from it. We can’t do whatever we want with it. But the past sets only the interior limits, upon which depend only our interpretations of the present.” (Pouillon, 1975)

That which opposes a “diseased” modernity is not a pre-modern factual state - particularly,

the habitual world of peasant societies - but a critical modern perspective, an alternative modernity to which its own rationality pattern can be applied, one which we could name a *prospective-retrospective* pattern (Mihăilescu, 2003): as would say “the friends of the museum”, this *sui generis* rationality “makes experiments with the past” in a “polemic gesture concerning the present,” which aims at “healing” this present. It is a critical modernity for which a paradoxical name was found: a conservative revolution - or, more simply, conservative thought, which, outside and beyond the subjective area, wants to be a well-tempered rationality, a “compromise” between the habitual fixed structure of retrospective rationality and the perilous enthusiastic acts of prospective rationality: “Between the rigid lack of horizon and the macabre passion of hasty modernity,” argues Ioan Stanomir, reiterating Virgil Nemoianu’s thought about conservatism—the policy of delay brings to the horizon of the community’s behavior a caution which offers the necessary lapse of time for discovering the valid elements of secular heritage. Retrospection is a shortcut to the heart of today’s world. The conscience of the existence of a patrimony reorders contextually the dilemmas of the globalization fin-de-siecle.” (Stanomir, 2004:114).

The symptoms of the “disease” identified in this contemporary world, which wants to be healed by such a conservative ideology bear different names, from the *artificialism* invoked by Tonnies, to the *relativism* blamed by “the friends of the Romanian Peasant Museum.”¹² Its etiology seems to be governed by (relative) consensus: the drift of in-dependent modern man, detached from the heteronomy that kept him bound to an exterior and “active principle,” while feeding him these higher and mutual senses. It is the theme of “tradition” and of continuity, seen as opposed to “revolution,” which is central for conservative thought, in general, expressed in Romanian conservative thought by the recurrent theme of “organic development.”

About this theme, Horia Patapievici stated the following: “obviously, the model of synchronization through imitation (Lovinescu, n.n.) is inferior to that proposed by Titu Maiorescu in his “theory of shapes without content” (Patapievici, 2004:89).

Where does the Romanian Peasant Museum place itself in this ideological landscape?

On the one hand, Bernea’s founding act deeply affected the conservatism (and not the conservative thought!) of the “priests” of our ethnographic patrimony, while his gesture was unconsciously perceived as treason—therefore, even harder to forgive. With their deep knowledge and love of and for the peasant world, Bernea and his team at the museum were in a way, “of them;” they only assigned their knowledge and love a different significance, therefore ruining the very legitimate character of knowledge and love practiced by the “priests” of the patrimony. The authenticity of Bernea’s gesture aims at the *norm* of “traditional” life, and not at the *reality* of habitual life, often mistaken by ethnographers. As we have seen, Bernea’s exhibition was founded neither on an empirical-ethnographic knowledge of the “peasant”, nor on a national dimension of the “Romanian people,” which is precisely the foundation of the legitimate national ethnography and of its adjacent museography. However, it was not foreign matter, it wasn’t something different, an imported notion of post-modernist anthropology, for instance. It wasn’t a case of ignorance or lack of patriotism, either. It was the worst of it: heresy! Therefore, right after Bernea’s death (followed by that of Irina Nicolau), there followed, almost naturally, a restoration period, which had almost nothing to do with communism and its resentments: it was only the annulment of the heresy itself and a forceful come-back of the prodigal son within the true, eternal national ethnology, which is still at the heart of the Romanian national identity. This restoration tendency which still goes on and will do so is not (only) a problem of petty individual games, but a fundamen-

tally strategic one, pertaining to the nation's identity - therefore, to the legitimate nature of its defenders!

On the other hand, without wanting it or knowing it, Bernea offered a conservative vision which is *beautiful*, if we may say so. It's not a faithful representation of the social life we have here or elsewhere, but a presentation of what Ioan Stanomir calls in his paper dedicated to

conservative consciousness, "the marks of traditional normality" (Stanomir, op.cit.203). Therefore, it is no wonder that a large group of intellectual elites in Romania, who are very sensitive to conservative values, have gladly found themselves inside Bernea's museum, while this museum was actually foreshadowing that which couldn't manifest itself as solid contemporary conservative thought.¹³

Notes

⁵ Irina Nicolau has a much wider representation of this „traditional man“. „Conceived as a version of European medieval civilization, the Romanian peasant, seen as traditional man, is also formed as an extension of certain ancient cultures, and he is organically linked to the Mediterranean world, to civilizations which can be followed from India to Bretagne“, she says (Nicolau and Huluiță, op.cit.:21)

⁶ During the same round table of *Cotidianul*, priest Coman shared another vision on this subject: „As a priest and theologian, I thought about the existence of a peasant's museum and, especially, about what the peasant represents, in this instance of making the subject of a museum. I see him as a positive challenge to the world of the city, in general, and to the cultural world, in particular. In this sense, I would propose a parallel between what represents the village spirituality and what represents our modern spirituality - which you seem to blame in some sort. We should discuss the terms of this meeting and the dialogue between authenticity-truth and straying-falsity. (...) The image of the world, as revealed to us here, in the museum, is the one proposed by Orthodox theology. If you want, this image is in antagonism with Western theology, which produced a menacing civilization (...). Still, I believe in the peasant spirituality, as it is presented here. (...) This peasant's museum proposes a life centered on Christ, as perceived by the Orthodox spirit, and not otherwise.“ The internal or external „ideologists“ of the museum did never develop, to my knowledge, such a discourse based on the opposition between truth and straying, having Orthodoxy as the only way to authenticity, but they didn't publicly reject it, either...

⁷ In a dialogue with Irina Nicolau, published in the third number of *Martor* magazine, 1998, Bernea gives a nuance to his unwillingness to use „outfits“: „I cannot but admit that the outfit, as a genre, produced very in-

teresting works. I think it may have a future in the world of museums (p. 225). A few pages further on, Bernea states that „these must not become a temptation, (...) it must not break the dams towards a random subjectivity“. (p. 228).

⁸ We should not mistake „the peasant's object“ which belongs to a peasant community with the „ethnographic object.“ a result of a selection which is justified in one sense or another, made by an expert among the objects of the peasants' world. We should also mention the horror Bernea had in front of those „mannequins“ seen as realistic objects, frequently used by ethnographic museums.

⁹ Horia Patapievici guesses a part of this dimension when, in a documentary dedicated to the museum, he states that such a museum „would prevail or fall according to its capacity to gather around it, at certain dates, people able to reproduce objects in it.“ Patapievici was actually referring to the craftsmen's fairs, but he was intending to state much more. The museum is what it is through the authenticity of its exhibits—in other words, through the conformity with the traditional origin and function of the peasant objects of its collections. But this authenticity must be reproduced outside the museum, in the real world, so that the museum may last and preserve its sense and function. Therefore, should the museum give life (and probably revive) and maintain „an authentic world,“ beyond its museographic world?

¹⁰ Relevantly enough, Andrei Pleșu ends the film dedicated to the Romanian Peasant Museum, confessing that, to him, entering the Museum evokes every time the embodiment of the laws of the city, from Plato's dialogue.

¹¹ We use the term *ideology* in the sense in which Mary Douglas (1986/2002) speaks about „the cognitive dimension of institutions“ or in which André Petitat

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(1998) speaks about ideology as „transcendence of the conventional“; in other words, as the last reason to support a given society or social life, in general.

¹² Anca Manolescu - another important collaborator of the Romanian Peasant Museum team, embraces this perspective when she writes in a recent issue of the cultural journal *Dilema veche*: „Postmodern thinkers are cautious when thinking about Plato and the tradition he created. They resent the conviction that there is an essence of realities that is superior to concrete manifestations, that founds them. Seen as ‘essentialism,’ this view is accused of metaphysical authoritarianism, of lack of respect towards the living diversity of the world which seem humiliated on the field of ideas. They also resent Plato’s ‘axiological monism,’ which regroups values in a transcendent unity; they resent his political elitism, seen as an enemy of democracy, of an open society, which would legitimate, who knows, even the to-

talitarian state“ . We can easily read between the lines the „disease“ of which post-modernity suffers in this respect.

¹³ Such a political thought and opinion seem to take shape, lately. In a recent article in *Dilema Veche*, for instance, Sever Voinescu would round them up: „I don’t want to elude the meaning of this article (...). I want to transmit to all those who share conservative values that they are more than they imagine and that Romania needs them and their abilities, and, most of all, their moral sense.“ Obviously, we are dealing with the „true conservatives,“ not those of Voiculescu’s; party, we are talking about „people of the conservative electing group“ who „have their favorite authors, as Mr Baconski and Patapievici, as well as a political project that I look upon with some hope.“



