



V. Book Reviews

Maria Alina Asavei. 2020. *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 309 p.

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This book addresses the question of resistance in communist and post-communist Romania through the lens of religion-inspired art. Focusing on the central importance of Orthodox Christian spirituality and imagination, Asavei charts the careers of a number of Romanian artists who responded to communist ideological control of artistic production. The book goes on to trace their practice into post-communism, as they critique the intrusion or "colonisation" of capitalist consumerism in Romanian society and the return of Orthodoxy to a position of cultural hegemony in Romanian society. Much of the book is dedicated to artists associated with the *Prolog* art collective that at various times has been characterised as Neo-Byzantine, Neo-Orthodox or Neo-Traditionalist. Byzantine and folk-inspired art could, due to the Romanian communist regime's sponsorship of a brand of authentic national culture, function both within the bounds of officially sanctioned art production whilst also maintaining a subversive spiritual potential. As Asavei is keen to stress, the group of artists under discussion are diverse and take very different positions on art as social or political critique, both during the communist-era and in the contemporary context. Their works, which are explored

in this volume using archival collections, exhibition catalogues, interviews, diaries, and the cultural press, were rarely characterised by overt opposition but instead constituted a search for authenticity, redemption and a "self-fashioned self" (p. 16) thereby undermining the communist state's efforts to define the personal identity of citizens. How this group of artists situated themselves as countercultural "drop-outs" is described by Asavei as "twice daring" as their nostalgic attraction to tradition and spirituality placed them as outsiders in relation to both the art world and the Romanian national communism, and continues to do so in the consumerist context of present day Romania (p. 17). As the title suggests, this book is situated at the complex intersection of religion, politics and art and as such engages ideas of cultural resistance, aspects of Orthodox Christian theology and notions of national and political memory in Romania. Scholars working on diverse areas of Romanian historical and cultural studies will find Asavei's insight invaluable.

Asavei's opening argument in Chapter 1 of the book is that the intermingling of art politics and religion in Romania produced "manifold configurations of resistance to the dominant *status quo*" (p. 21) both during communism and in the present and that

these are characterised by a yearning for spiritual renewal or revitalization in the face of the alienation, injustice and the brutality of modernity. Chapter 2 explores the discourses and diverse forms that cultural resistance took in communist Romania focusing especially on the phenomenon of art collecting and religion-inspired art. Art collecting, Asavei notes, due to the atmosphere of repression and fear, took on a clandestine character which interestingly survived into the post-communist context (p. 44). Using the example of Sorin Costina's collection of art dating from 1970-1990, the argument is made that the refusal to accept the regime's visual aesthetic order could be viewed as a form of resistance through cultural consumption rather than through cultural production. A more overt form of resistance, however, could be found amongst the group of artists associated with *Prolog*, whose works Asavei insists should be judged as not only resisting the official canon but reclaiming "a type of religious/political experience meant to disclose the limits of the totalitarian model" (p. 47). Amongst other examples, Asavei points towards the powerful symbolism of Marian Zidaru's sculpture-installation, the *Supper*, which featured 12 chicken heads and a chicken heart. This piece functioned to critique the failure of the state to provide the basic nutritional needs of the Romanian people whilst inspiring the hope of salvation through the symbolism of Christ's Last Supper and the Christian Eucharist. The mobilisation of Christian symbolism as a form of political critique is contrasted in Chapter 3 by the state's adoption of Byzantine artistic heritage into the national-communist canon. During late communism, certain Byzantine-inspired works were accepted, alongside folkloric and naïve motifs and styles, into a state sponsored "national-style", which even facilitated the introduction of Byzantine iconology in the portraiture of Nicolae Ceaușescu. For scholars of religions, the themes presented

in chapters 4, 5 and 6 are particularly illuminating and valuable for cross-cultural comparative research on the relationship between new religious movements, art activism and ecological movements. Chapter 4's focus on the theme of the "return to nature" in the work of Neo-Orthodox artists, is peculiarly in tune with current research agendas in the field. Asavei views the nostalgia for a spiritual bond with nature characteristic of these works as a kind of spiritual awakening from the devastations caused by economic, social and political upheavals. The works discussed in this chapter reveal "both spiritual and eco-poetic concerns" (p. 89) that link ecologies of faith with the broader spirituality of environmentalism as well as illustrating the Neo-Orthodox artists understanding of nature as "impregnated with God's presence" (p. 90). Chapter 6 addresses the prophetic dimension of the work of two artists, Marian and Victoria Zidaru, who are associated with the New Jerusalem movement, which has been declared heretical by the Romanian Orthodox Church. The "artistic prophetic activism" (p. 24) of these two artists places them on the fringes of both the art world and mainstream religion as their work has been judged to be offensively nationalistic and disrespectful towards the Romanian Orthodox Church and yet, Asavei claims, they represent an earnest search for ethical amelioration and social justice in contemporary Romania. The remaining chapters of the book explore themes such as the body in communist and (post-) communist art (Chapter 7) and the use of religious themes, symbols and iconography to challenge the cultural hegemony of institutional Orthodoxy in contemporary political life in Romania (Chapter 9). With the closing chapter, Asavei draws these diverse themes together in a convincing set of conclusions on the nature of the entanglement art, religion and politics in contemporary Romania.

The journey that Asavei takes us on is



interdisciplinary in the extreme employing a richness of analysis that takes the reader in a number competing directions, some developed more deeply than others. Asavei presents the argument a number of times in the book that the brand of “post-traumatic contemporary aesthetic mysticism” (p. 1) characteristic of the artists associated with *Prolog* represents a yearning for social justice, a critical ethical spirit and hope, more so than the dangerous nationalism, backwardness and a nostalgic sense of loss that they are often associated with and critiqued for. Art inspired by Christian faith, so often associated with anti-progressive agendas, we are assured by Asavei,

sometimes has another face. Ultimately, by engaging a number opposing themes, such as spiritual versus political, Neo-Orthodox versus Neo-Avant-Garde, Eastern spirituality versus Western consumerism, tradition versus modernity, Asavei is able to presents a generous and yet compelling portrait of the ethical spirit, motivations and impact of these art outsiders. *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania* will be invaluable for a broad spectrum of scholars interested in the shifting and “elusive” boundaries of religion, politics and art (p. 5) in communist and post-communist societies.

