

BOOKS

Liviu Malița (ed.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România V. Imaginar și patrimoniu artistic*. General editor: Corin Braga. Iași, Polirom, 2020, 469 p.

Any instance in the course of civilization will be, once picked out, both pregnant with a rich background to legitimize its being and grounded in its stead. Should a needle pierce through a map at random, the puncture point will reveal layers at once minuscule and indispensable to the whole. To borrow a paradox from Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea, the shot arrow will hover, frozen in midair, at every coordinate of its trajectory until reaching the destination. A seminal work for a society at the juncture of authenticity and dissimulation, the fifth and final volume of *Enciclopedia Imaginariilor din România* [*The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*] is an incursion in arguably the most essential building block for the identity of a people, in terms of individuality, personhood, interpersonal relations and belonging within the geography of a nation: the artistic imaginary. The configurations of artistic expression in Romania

follow paths similar to that of Zeno's arrow, claiming spaces of their own, intersecting at will, pulsing intensity into the land of individuals who famously elude definition. Preceding the present volume are four iterations that investigate this cultural heritage through the lens of literature, linguistics, history, and religion, each posing its idiosyncratic difficulties and assessing unique values. The arts engender a compelling contradiction that does not arise elsewhere: their imaginary is simultaneously visible and elusive, weaving on a translucent network as a spider's web. This creational substance does away with hierarchies and trusts that the invested reader will find merit in its dynamics, in a way which echoes Louis MacNeice's intimation of the world in the poem *Snow*: "Incorrigibly plural."

MacNeice's reflection on the multiplicity of experience has little to do with the analyses that comprise the volume,



yet it captures a figment of the ideational energy that the twenty-two articles urge their reader to disseminate. They are, to quote Mikhail Bakhtin, formed in “dialogic interaction.” The reader infers that each common ground is an oasis to revel in, knowing that contrast is also fundamental. Indeed, these intersectional studies validate the prospect of possible worlds in a field which would, at first glance, promise unilateral conclusions, authoritative statements from scholars who are, admittedly, authorities in their fields. Their approaches are methodical, erudite, but not totalizing; aware that too tight a grip on knowledge will smother artistic potentiality, perhaps apprehensive about re-enacting its very history. For this is one of the threads which traverse the work: to delve into the imaginary of a nation, one needs to delve openly into its past.

The collection of *Encyclopaedias* is compiled under the tutelage of Corin Braga, Professor of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Letters at Babeş-Bolyai University, with the fifth volume being edited by Liviu Malița, Professor of Aesthetics at the University’s Faculty of Theatre and Film. The five sections that comprise its corpus focus on theatre, film, music, architecture, and visual arts, with authorship from academics, researchers, art historians, artists, and theoretical frameworks from figures such as Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Durand. Their explorations are mindful of worldly and spiritual spheres, pinpointing the arts as products of history, politics, vernacular religious practices, and continental influx in a panorama that spans centuries and halts in the now. In the interest of linear clarity, it is worth to look at how the Romanian individual *acts* in the acceptation

of these scholars, and tackle their environment thereafter.

Plunging back in “pre-Christian” or “medieval” times (27), Ștefana Pop-Curșeu identifies the Romanian traditional mask as a dual vessel – for theatrical performance and transitory identity – later recuperated in experimental, avant-garde forms in the twentieth century. Picking up at this point, Laura Pavel anatomizes the modern ‘I’ as a psycho-ontologically troubled “histrion” (69), torn at the crossroads of community and personality, while Malița contextualizes this complex being in the coordinates of Communist rule, introducing ideology as a contributing agent to their intellectual expression, something to obey or subvert. More temporally current, Olivia Grecea and Claudiu Turcuș trace the evolution of theatre and film concretely, with focus on alternative creative spaces (136) that employ novel forms which “implode the mechanisms of theatricality” (137), and Europe as the force that both “exploits” and “emancipates” the Romanian working class pursuing chimeric dreams abroad (205). In a similar vein, Bogdan S. Pecican and Horea Avram separately describe the curious inhabitant of a hyper-real world – a decentralized, schizoid being of Baudrillardian or Deleuzian fashion (398) – as well as the craft wherein they repurpose this postmodern tumult: the new media. While some scholars rely on the (inter)textual dimension of the medium to decode its imaginary, others tackle the agents at work – actors, filmmakers, painters, architects – to shed light on how action, rather than *écriture* alone, can herald a rich creative product all the same. There is a separation of the arts in this methodology, yet the imagi-

nary abounds at their confluence, permeating the theatre with correspondences in musicology, revisiting architectural vestiges at the conflux with literature, questioning whether visual arts and religious zeal are akin, or whether, in effect, Christian faith precedes a sense of national belonging.

In this respect, all authors provide diachronic observations in order to elucidate the imaginary. The chief recollection is that the Romanian people have long lived in the shadow of *colossi* like key events – the Great Union, the outbreak of the World Wars, the rise of the Socialist Republic, the Revolution of 1989 – or the dark authority of the Communist regime. Their interest is not in a foregone conclusion, namely that oppression pushed the Romanian people to situate themselves differently betwixt social, political, and cultural planes, but precisely how this came into being. Ada Hajdu posits that a (re)discovery of local traditions and “vestiges” (271) may represent the catalyst for culturally valuable architecture and the birth of a national style in the mode of Ion Mincu. Elsewhere, Daniel Iftene reveals the dangers of drawing too much from tradition, showing that many historical films of the time echoed the state’s discourse, turning folklore and regional specificity into the substance of propaganda, and drained these ‘inexhaustible’ springs until they became simulations of themselves. Moreover, both Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Iftene prove that the Romanian peasant came to act as a stereotype-turned-synecdoche for the entire nation: “The discourse of unity, of common traits . . . is one of the most powerful within the great national epic in the age of Communism” (172). In the meantime, estranged creators, in their

battle with an imposed order, either flee or devise solutions for the proliferation of their art. As the Communist monolith topples over and the market develops inside the borders, the opening to the West widens, but also the anxiety for the Europeanisation of Romania, most apparent through the processes of mediatization and distortion of folklore into entertainment that Corina Iosif and Adrian T. Sirbu examine: “If the meanings of the former . . . can only be decoded within the logic of local sociocultural dynamics, its media depictions find their meanings, codes and significance exclusively in their performative character” (266). To varying degrees, each chapter paves a common road to the present moment so as to make sense of our course in time. Recalling Ștefana Pop-Curșeu’s exploration of masks as a means to convey transposable selves, the endmost articles touch a familiar chord: how much of our ontological matter is still shared with our ancestors? Dissecting the digital-minded, technocentric society of today as the homestead of a pulverized communal identity stored in a virtual repository, it seems that our prime prospect, as it was practised in ancient times, is to reassemble new masks from old matter. Whereas Rada Niță approaches folklore as the foremost decanter from which contemporary visual arts ‘pour,’ thus maintaining a permanent connection to their *fons et origo*, we may appropriate the image and state that the artistic imaginary flourishes only in retrospective flow, circularly, and will continue to find new configurations and fulfil its potentiality. To land on Horea Avram’s study once more, “this imaginary should not be understood restrictively, in definitive terms, but rather as a moving reality, ever negotiated” (435).

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Ultimately, this mechanism essentially enables the collection to fulfil its resolution. This system of dialogic cogs and wheels functions with the awareness that its ultimate object, the artistic *gestalt* of the Romanian people, is impossible to chart in terms at once accessible, minutely satisfactory, and historically immovable. Therefore, the work has no claim at a watertight, *sui generis* encyclopaedia on 'the Imaginary,' but readily looks forward to the existence of diverse,

even contradictory *imaginaries* in the plural. While providing a panorama by means of a holistic approach to critical cartography, the volume ensures that its analyses are not mutually exclusive or self-contained, thus facilitating the renewal of knowledge and the crystallization of novel modes of expression to occur, having already left a distinguished mark behind, a puncture point on the map, expertly so.

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