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Art criticism of consensus, opposition and subversion. Criticism of the 70ies and 80ies

The one month research at the OSA Archive focused on the Radio Free Europe' Romanian section cultural programs. The aim of this research was to understand the role, function and discourse of art criticism in a period of limited freedom.

Criticism lies in the basic nature of RFE, it is part of its existence and ontology. The topic of my research was theater criticism of consensus, opposition and subversion; I planned to study the form of speech, and discourse of RFE cultural programs. The starting point of this research was that in a period of political control, lack or restricted artistic freedom neither art, nor art criticism can be neutral. Theater of *opposition*, *consensus* and *subversion* are basic categories to describe forms of theater – or any other form of art – and the discourse about it in such a political context. Everything, what is not *in opposition* to the given order or it is not aimed to abolish it is considered to be a form of consensus. This would mean that there is no “neutral” form of art, and thus theoretically no neutral criticism.

Criticism of consensus and opposition are those forms and discourses which one can trace in the media of a certain country lacking absolute freedom. But subversive criticism was not something – at least in Romania – could pass the eyes of the censors and published in the official media. Such a discourse presently can only be found in two files: in the one of the RFE's and in the files of Securitate; the difference is that the later was not aimed to be public and have such an impact.

I have chosen to research the Romanian section's art, especially theater programs for many reasons. The RFE Romanian section was one of the most powerful radio programs of RFE. It had several reasons to be so popular in the country, being sometimes called Romania 4 (the first three radio stations being the national ones): strong editorial board with professional journalists who had already a reputation in Romania before they had left the country; very poor media in the country – little access to information and also a reduced, short tv program; continuous attacks on RFE in the official Romanian media could also contribute to its high popularity. Audience is estimated to be higher than 55% of the whole population. RFE program had a special position amongst the Romanian intellectuals: they were very influential in the country. Also the importance of Romanian theater in the period of the 70ies and 80ies is enormous: theater becomes in this period the only real (not symbolic) place of meeting and of dialogue, while it is also a tool of ideological propaganda.

The period I have chosen is a turning point: after a short period of relative liberalization in the 60ies, the year 1971 marks the strengthening of censorship: the so called July Thesis (or Theses of Mangalia) in 1971 starts the cultural revolution in Romania. The period is also called re-stalinization of Romania.

But why is problematic art criticism of the past or criticism of any period of limited freedom (accepting the subjective nature of art criticism)? Is it possible to understand the impact of art

on the basis of criticism? This question is emphatically important and more obviously visible in the case of theater performances, where the performance is not available anymore.

Criticism of consensus (very often published in the major party newspaper or some other influential media) expresses agreement with the actual regime's cultural policy, sometimes denounces a work of art, artists etc. on ideological or formal bases. Criticism of consensus is often ideologically prescriptive, expresses expectations with works of art.

Criticism of opposition (often written by big influential critics, intellectuals of a country) is characterized by its language which is typically not a direct speech, but one has to read between the lines, tries to defend works, but has to adopt an indirect speech; such criticism tries to defend certain values, artists, institutions, works of art. This form of criticism would not be able to discuss the socio-political implications and impact of the work; it is focused on the work itself.

Criticism of subversion are those forms of art discourse which one can find in the RFE files. This is the only direct form of speech on art and is conditioned by an opposite attitude toward the concrete political regime. This position is always made visible. Its aim is to unmask the political power's (often hidden) strategies and institutions of censorship. This form of criticism gives interpretation of certain cultural policy strategies – of ideological propaganda and expectations of certain types of form of art and artistic expression. Criticism of subversion often has the role to defend certain values (often the ones which are banned, like religious expression, avant-garde forms, real – not propagandistic – national values, dissident works or works which express criticism and opposition toward a regime), it also defends certain works of art (which are in danger or even banned); to defend certain authors (dissidents) is also very important. Very little criticism of subversion can avoid this pro and contra discourse, to defend or accuse something/somebody.

Discourse of art criticism of RFE is a direct speech. It is also a very personalized speech in the case of the Romanian section – for journalists is important to name things; very often by putting names the critic denounces censors or critics of consensus. Sometimes this form of criticism becomes a personal fight between the RFE journalists on one hand, and artists, critics and ideologist in the country on the other. RFE art criticism is moving from discussing the work of art to discuss or even more often to defend the author – attitudes, values, position in the country. RFE art criticism it is often more trustful than in any other form of criticism, but it has its serious limits.

“Of course I am not going to write what I think”, or “I am not going to give them arguments” – wrote Monica Lovinescu, the major cultural journalist of RFE in her diaries. Real evaluation of certain authors and works becomes impossible even for RFE journalist, especially in the case of dissident authors. How could such a criticism give a negative evaluation of a work created by a dissident author? Or how could “denounce” a theater performance's political context? Such an attitude would put in danger the author or the work or the work itself. So called negative and positive criticism depends more and more on the author, not on the work, because the work of art in its immanent being cannot be “objectively” evaluated. Every piece of criticism of RFE becomes then a subject of serious balance: what would not endanger

artists or works of art? What is harmful and what would be useful? (The specific of the art criticism of the Romanian section is its intolerance toward any leftist value or author, like Brecht or Gorki, which could be called an ideological perspective.)

My conclusion would be that in a period of limited freedom, art criticism cannot be fully free in expressing views, subjective tastes or opinion about works of art. Understanding art criticism of the past is not possible on the basis of these different forms of art discourses only. Especially the socio-political context of a work of art will be absent, but also the attempt to evaluate the work as an immanent value. Art criticism of opposition, consensus and subversion are sometimes very exclusive, pro and contra, black and white discourses.