

# **Deciphering the Signs of the Times**

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*Reality does not answer, does not recognize its name.*

Achille Mbembe<sup>1</sup>

*“Communism” (or whatever that was) continued its existence in Romania long after it was officially declared dead. But this is not what I am interested in, it is not “Communism” or the regime but its results, the effects of a failed utopia.*

Șerban Savu<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, a generation of young Romanian painters has emerged into the international spotlight. This global artistic phenomenon has its parallel in the immense international influence of contemporary Romanian cinema. In both film and painting, there is an insistence on a visual language that operates through a certain economy of means. Thematically, many of the works explore the daily realities of life in Romania after the end of the Cold War as both familiar and uncanny.

Șerban Savu is an excellent example of this generation of artists and, I think, quite exceptional within it. Raised and educated on both sides of the Cold War divide, Savu draws with ease from classical European pictorial traditions, which he leverages toward a nuanced investigation of the relationship between mass ideologies and the sentient body. He explores the way in which a failed utopia plays out relentlessly upon the body, shaping an experience of daily life, as well as a choreography and spatial arrangement of work and leisure. His works are characterized by a remarkable acuity of observation, matched by a subtle handling of color and geometrically rigorous composition. The scenes, people, and activities are familiar and strange at the same time, often because recognizable forms have now somehow come unhinged. Painting becomes a kind of code or cipher through which one can re-engage a present in which everything has changed and nothing has changed all at once, a present that we experience as both rupture and inertia.

## From Both Sides, Now

*... just as it seems we can't think anything that our language can't formulate, so it seems we can't see anything that our pictorial tradition does not include or imply.*

Thomas McEvilley<sup>3</sup>

*The way in which I paint now is the result of a continuous preoccupation for painting in this way, even back when I was painting something else.*

Șerban Savu

In conventional historical narratives, the Cold War is described in terms of a spatial division between East and West—corresponding to an ideological and political division between “communist” and “capitalist” regimes. The most recognizable symbol of this spatial divide was the Berlin Wall. The end of the Cold War, often replayed on TV as the fall of the Wall in 1989, was seen as a historical event that erased this divide and signaled the global victory of capitalism. It is as if the spatial/ideological divide (East vs. West and communist vs. capitalist) was replaced by a temporal one (pre-1989 vs. post-1989). But Șerban Savu’s work, taken as a whole discursive corpus, offers another way to grapple with the problem of the present, by understanding the end of the Cold War as a process that is continuously unfolding, that is always under construction.

Not unlike the other artists in his generation, Șerban Savu’s life experience and artistic/intellectual education traverses both sides of the spatial and geopolitical divide. His first experience of living in the former “West” was a 2-year artistic residency in Venice. Although Șerban was by then fully conversant in the dominant languages of contemporary art on the global market, he had little interest for the spectacle of the Biennale. Instead, he focused on deepening his study of classical painting. In several correspondences, both via email and in his studio in Romania, we spoke of the ways in which his personal quest to *paint in a certain way* intersected with a historic desire for Europeaness which many Romanian

critical thinkers see as shaping the national psyche. This national desire for legitimacy in relation to a colonial understanding of Europe is argued in terms of *Latinity*: it produces a strange imaginary geography that situates Romania in proximity to the Latin civilizations (predominately Italy and France) in their classical understanding. For Șerban this manifested in a particular artistic education in Romania, as well as a personal desire to paint in a certain tradition. However, the first dramatic shift in his relationship to his work took place upon his return to Romania after his stay in Italy: “I returned to a very familiar reality, which I now saw in a radically different way than at the moment of my departure.” This estranged way of seeing becomes one of the dominant characteristics of his work.

Șerban’s experience is also shaped from both sides of the temporal divide relative to 1989. His early education was determined by a particular understanding of culture in relation to labor. In Romania, there was a peculiar social distance between the intellectual/cultural class and the working classes, even though (official) culture was seen as being in the service of the great historical project of industrialized modernity in its “communist” utopic form. One of the most significant tropes of pre 1989 Romanian official art was the “New Man” – the symbolic image of the worker as embodying a particular relationship between human, nature and technology in the revolutionary project. The “New Man” was the heroic character who through work would change the world, whose body was a site of sacrifice but also a creative instrument, fusing work and dance. Șerban speaks candidly of by being a fourth generation intellectual, whose uneasy relationship to labor and laborers is largely mediated by ideological and social constructs.

Today, Șerban’s studio—and those of most other painters in this new wave—is housed in a former paintbrush factory. This small detail is significant but it is no accident. Rather, it is symptomatic of the condition of industrial labor under global capital. Shortly after 1989, Romania experienced an accelerated and wholesale privatization and market deregulation. Formerly state-owned industries were sold off for pennies on the dollar and cheap labor virtually guaranteed enormous short-term profits. After a few years of speculative frenzy, and with the opening of the cheap labor markets in China, much of Romanian industry has been left in ruins. This accelerated history—from the mechanization of labor, the flexibility of

labor and the emergence of cognitive capital—is often referred to as a shock therapy.

Șerban self-critically and strategically turns his attention to the emerging “New New Man”. He works and receives visitors—foreign gallerists, agents and impresarios—in a light-filled studio in the former paint brush factory, a building still maintained by several former workers, overlooking a series of de-industrialized sites in the midst of an increasingly impoverished residential neighborhood. It is perhaps inevitable that the painting confronts not only the image or ideological, mythical character that might be the New New Man, but also the problem of how ideological processes settle upon the sentient body, of the sensorial experience of the present.

## Time and The New New Man

*Under conditions of modern technology, the aesthetic system undergoes a dialectical reversal. The human sensorium changes from a mode of being “in touch” with reality into a means of blocking out reality. Aesthetics sensory perception becomes anaesthetics, a numbing of the senses’ cognitive capacity that destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.*

Susan Buck-Morss<sup>4</sup>

*... it is a national state, a lagging and sluggishness, a state often preferred to any kind of action, a mixture between meditation and idleness. Not the Italian *bel far niente*, but somehow like the laziness of *Oblomov* unfolding in a more unfortunate historical context...*

Șerban Savu

Șerban Savu’s characters function as composite signs, as visual codes for overlapping human types rather than as portraits of familiar or existing individuals. As he paints, this overlapping works not through addition but, paradoxically, through subtraction and reduction. The spaces depicted are sometimes based on real spaces, carefully observed and rendered with sufficient veracity, but they too are composites and function as signs for certain types of spatial configurations. They are often excerpted spaces, whose framing suggests a staging—

courtyards, city lots, in-between spaces that become visually and geographically “extracted” from the larger whole through a voyeuristic perspective (a three-quarter view from above). Their social complexity is suggested from a minimal number of visual elements: each space is a code deciphering a social geography, that is to say a physical and social arrangement, an expression of relations corresponding to the triad work—leisure—home. This process of close scrutiny, observation, abstraction, reduction, re-composition, produces a certain kind of detachment or distance in the work, which I find counterbalanced by an unexpected opening towards the possibility for empathy. Even as the characters take on a sense of strangeness and bleakness, we search for the meaning of their presence. We do not ask why they are there, how did they arrive there, and what precisely are they doing, but we wonder instead at the quality of their experience.

This simultaneous distancing and closeness operates especially through Savu’s engagement with the temporality of the pause, the interval, the break. Over and over again, the paintings explore three distinct but interrelated dimensions of the interval or the pause, which together address the experience of the present after the disappearance of mass utopia in its “communist” form.

The first dimension is the “work break,” the break between different basic motions in the choreography of the working process (work referring in most cases literally to industrialized labor, which Șerban calls the “ugly, repetitive work, the impoverished work”). This is not a departure from labor; it is not an escape from the relentless discipline of industrial labor or the overcoming of industrialized labor under conditions of global capitalism. These in-between moments are part of the condition of the working process itself, which has been rationalized, industrialized, broken down into basic motions, rendering the human body as a kind of machine. Before 1989, the revolutionary project in the former East was in many ways a temporal project, a project of historical advancement rather than territorial expansion. Thus, through work, the New Man does not conquer territory but rather gains or *advances* time. Savu’s paintings ask what happens to work after the end of the revolutionary dream... as the motions and forms of work become unhinged from work, or at least unhinged from the understanding of work that was intrinsic to a worldview. When the worldview is shattered, the forms continue as

spectral forms, now floating in a world where everything has changed and everything has stayed the same.

The second dimension of the pause or “break” in Savu’s work refers to the absence of a reaction, or of the inability to respond (to events, to history...?), and which Susan Buck-Morss might discuss as an expression of a certain sensorial devastation, producing as a result an *anesthetized* existence. This corresponds to the experience of shock (the temporality of shock experience) that is characteristic of industrialized modernity and the dominance of technology in daily life, of mass utopias under the sign of the machine. The third dimension of the pause is connected to a specific cultural rhythm, which Savu calls a “national state” of laziness, of idleness. Images of “leisure” suggest a temporality attuned to the rhythms of preindustrial life, a collective sense of time that seems to have escaped the internalization of industrial discipline and imperative for activity.

Although in individual paintings the emphasis may be more on one rather than the other, we see all three of these dimensions operating at all times. Taken together, these three understandings of the pause form a kind of tripartite temporality, in which each is determined in relation to the others, and none can be understood in isolation. In searching for the New New Man as both an ideological image and a sentient body shaped by historical experience, Savu’s tripartite temporality is ultimately the time of death and dying. His painting, as distant as it is mindful, as objective as it is strangely tender, is a counter monument to the people whose bodies bear the experience of—and are the material vehicles for—the dying moments of modernity.

## On Foreclosure and Urgency

*Commodities have not ceased to crowd people’s private dreamworlds; they still have a utopian function on a personal level. But the abandonment of the larger social project connects this personal utopianism with political cynicism, because it is no longer thought necessary to guarantee to the collective that which is pursued by the individual. Mass utopia, once considered the logical correlate of personal utopia, is now a rusty idea.*

Susan Buck-Morss

*Class as an economic reality exists, and it is as fundamental as ever, although it is culturally and politically almost extinct. This is a triumph of capitalism.*

G. M. Tamas<sup>5</sup>

This essay is written at a moment when a new generation of Romanian painters, already a phenomenon in Europe, is gaining visibility and prominence in the United States. If we return to thinking about Șerban Savu's work in the context of this new cultural phenomenon, of the fascination of world audiences with representations of "post-communist" Romania, we might ask: why this fascination? And why *now*? It seems important to end the essay by explicitly addressing the politics of reception.

Just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the emergence on the global market of contemporary art from the former "East" took place in the context of a voracious appetite for narratives of the failure of communism and the planetary victory of *our way of life*. Twenty years later, is there something different at stake in this new wave? Are the artists portraying something different—and just as importantly, are we viewing this work differently, given our current sensibility, which has been radically re-tuned since the early 90's? How are we encountering this work in 2011? This general question has, I think, particular implications for audiences in the former West, the great supposed victors of the Cold War, as we awaken from the dream of market democracy into ecological devastation, permanent war, increased immigration and the erosion of all aspects of social life under the pressures of capitalist restructuring.

I want to suggest that our own experience demands to be urgently interrogated. Our present is a time of crisis, of

epistemological breakdown. Looking at the end of the Cold War from our side of the divide, Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that mass utopias in the former East and West might have differed violently in their forms, but were in fact both constructions of the same project, that of industrial modernity. The end of the Cold War was not simply the replacement of one utopia (communism) by another (capitalism), but marks instead the abandonment of the larger social project: the moment of the dissolution of mass utopia itself.

We can look at Șerban Savu's paintings for a glimpse at our own eviscerated choreographies, our own shattered utopias, the residue of which plays out through our bodies and shapes the geographies of our lives. Although the works seem to refer to Romania, to a distant *here and now*, I invite the viewer to consider how they are relevant to their own experience: to think of them as an estranged optic through which to decipher our own present. From this perspective, we ourselves are in a state of shock, caught in an impossibility to react, to respond and shape history, even while we rehearse—zombie-like—the spectral forms and choreographies of capitalist democracy. If deciphering the present also implies, as Achille Mbembe has stated, "making a judgment, a verdict on being our own contemporaries", we see that the history of our encounter with "post-communism" *under the sign of the global victory of capitalism* is a process that has very specific effects, foreclosing the possibilities for critical thinking and delegitimizing the search for alternatives. Twenty years after the fall of the Wall, we can re-imagine our encounter under the sign of possibility and urgency; from here, we can see the glaring coincidences of history; from here we can see that something is calling, and we cannot afford to wait.

#### Endnotes

- 1 All quotes from Achille Mbembe from "Theorizing the Present, Notes from South Africa", presented at AUETSA/SAACLALS/SAVAL Conference "Forging the Local and the Global," Stellenbosch University, South Africa, July 10 2006, unpublished.
- 2 All quotes from Șerban Savu from unpublished correspondence with the author, November 2010.

- 3 McEvelley, Thomas. *Art and Discontent. Theory at the Millennium.*, New York: McPherson, 1991
- 4 All quotes from Susan Buck-Morss from *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West.* Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2000
- 5 G. M. Tamas, "Telling the Truth About Class" in *Socialist Register*, Vol 42, 2006; also distributed extensively and freely online.