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Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Memory: from Academic Research to Artistic Practice

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Armed conflicts have always been based not only on the struggle for resources or territorial claims, but also and above all on cultural differences. We are confronted with a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, the obviously negative effects of culture are evident precisely in the current wars; on the other hand, despite this evidence, the concrete impact of cultural diplomacy as (positive effect-generating) political soft power can hardly be proven quantitatively. In view of this dilemma, the impact of cultural diplomacy in foreign policy contexts is constantly underestimated. That is why, my PhD-research, which I combine with artistic practice (as qualitative research method), aims to examine the activities and programmes of German-speaking institutions in Romania as well as their influence on the mutual East-West perception of cultural actors in particular and society in general. The focus lies on the period between 1968 (the year of the Prague Spring and one year after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Socialist Republic of Romania) and 2007 (the year Romania became a EU-member).

It has to be said that Romania was (after the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) the first country in the Eastern bloc with that the Federal Republic of Germany established diplomatic relations in 1967. Furthermore, it was the first country of the Warsaw Pact where a cultural institute of FRG was founded in 1979. It was operated by Goethe-Institute, but the Romanian side didn't accept for the institution to bear this name, so that it was agreed between the two governments on the label: Cultural Institute the Federal Republic of Germany. Only beginning with 1990, the institution uses the official name and logo of Goethe-Institute Bucharest.

These diplomatic, economic and cultural relations even under Ceausescu's regime are to be put undoubtedly in the context of the long history – of around 800 years - of the Romanian-Germans in Romania. Between 1968 and 1989 around 250.000 Romanian-Germans were sold by the communist Romania to the Federal Republic of Germany – one of the biggest human trades of the 20th century, which was followed in the 90s, after Ceaușescu's fall, by another massive migration. But surprisingly, although the German minority in Romania has shrunk today considerably, this history-related decline didn't weakened – as expected - the activity and further development of German-language cultural institutions in Romania: including the number of the state primary schools as well as high schools with German departments (German as mother tongue), the two German state theatres in Romania with relevant and innovative German-language productions, as well as the German-language media (highly relevant in this context is also the long-standing Romanian programme of Deutsche Welle in Bonn).

Based on the specific example of German-Romanian cultural exchange, my research project aims to explore the ways in which cultural diplomacy has generated networks of cultural exchange with a lasting influence upon the civil society. The main questions to address are:

1. What are the immediate effects of cultural diplomacy and what is its lasting impact?
2. How exactly did cultural transfer function in the context of the censorship regime?
3. How were opportunities for exchange created across the closely guarded borders?
4. How can the networking of cultural and academic actors impact civil society?

Since there is not much literature on this specific topic, the research is divided into three major parts: archive research, field research-interviews with witnesses (cultural, cultural-political and academic actors in Romania and Germany, but also visitors of German institutions in Romania before and after 1990), as well as artistic practice, in form of a performative installation. Related to the academic research, the installation aims to explore how the different types of public, belonging to different generations, react to and interact with this topic, and on which extent these approaches are or are not geographically determined by different East-West perspectives.

For both the academic research and the performative installation I have launched this year in March an open call, through the channels of Goethe-Institut Bucharest and with the support of German-speaking media, addressing to all those who had the opportunity to visit the events or the library of the Goethe-Institut in Bucharest before 1990. It was an invitation to tell us in written reports or in conversation about their personal experiences of cultural events and programmes organised by the Goethe-Institut in Romania and to report on the extent to which these events helped to establish communication and informal networks between the two countries, to broaden each other's perspectives and to create a counterpoint to the propaganda of Ceaușescu's regime. I have received not many, but very relevant reports about different experiences.

Regarding the archive research, very relevant for both the academic research, as well as the performative installation was the research in the National Council of the Romanian Securitate Archive (the Romanian Secret Police). I've studied here among others the files of the directors and German employees of Goethe-Institut Bucharest (between 1979 and 1990), based on the assumption that what was of interest for the Securitate was a possible trigger for cultural transfer. And what I've found is highly interesting and exciting. I will just name a few examples:

- Students who were afraid of going to the library of the German institute, for not being observed by the Securitate and suffering repercussions (worst case scenario, even losing their place at the university). In consequence, they send instead their grandmothers with lists of books to be borrowed;
- Other cases of people coming to the library, but being afraid to register;
- Another example is that of the world-famous Romanian composer Miriam Marbe: In 1988 the West German mezzo-soprano Roswitha Sperber was in Bucharest for a concert and for recording an album including pieces by Miriam Marbe. While rehearsing at the institute, Miriam Marbe came by, but in spite of the instances of the director of Goethe Institute and of Roswitha Sperber, the Romanian composer refused to come in, explaining that she didn't have the approval from the Music Academy to enter the building of German institute, so that the discussion took place in the front yard;
- Persistent negotiations, sometimes for over an year, to obtain from the Romanian side approvals to organise some important events like the Paul Celan symposium 1981.

- Support for the two German-speaking theaters in Romania to collaborate with West German directors (since there were no more house directors and the whole ensemble massively shrunk in the context of the sale of Romanian-Germans) or support to obtain the rights for staging texts of important German contemporary playwrights, since it was not longer allowed for Romanians to pay anything in hard currency, which made it impossible to stage German contemporary dramaturgy.

For the moment I'm doing research in the Political Archive of the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, studying documents regarding the cultural transfer between Germany (West, as well as East Germany) and Romania.

All this information will be integrated in a performative installation, on which I'm working together with the interdisciplinary trilingual artists' collective I'm part of: the Postnational Theatre Interfonic. The concept is created by Vlaicu Golcea, Alex Halka and myself, the main partners being Goethe-Institute Bucharest and kinema ikon (multimedia atelier founded in 1970, pioneers in Romania in the field of experimental film, mixed media and video installations).

The performative installation should be first presented in September 2024, in the Pavilion of Goethe-Institute Bucharest.

To make it more relevant to a contemporary public, we've decided to widen a little the topic of the installation: Like the academic research, the performative installation aims to analyse the development of mutual perception in Eastern and Western Europe, and to explore the historical and contemporary dynamics of communication between Eastern and Western societies, but dealing in addition also with the question of how facts can be distinguished from fake news (in times of censorship and propaganda, but also in the current situation of information overload generated mainly by social media).

Through a series of multi-sensory experiences, the project aims to engage audiences in critical reflections on the impact of political divides on cultural exchange and identity formation, as

well as to spark meaningful conversations about the intersections of history, politics, and cultural exchange. By engaging audiences in immersive experiences, interactive storytelling and contemporary artistic approaches, the project seeks to foster empathy, understanding, and critical thinking about the complexities of East-West communication, as well as about the impact of extremist forms of populist politics.

1. The main piece of the installation will integrate the results of archive research, interviews and witness' reports.

The exhibition space will be divided into two parts by a kind of tennis net (made of mosquito net), representing the Iron Curtain, but suggesting also any type of borders. A selection of witness reports and research materials will be written/printed on paper cones, which will hang in the net, but will also lie through the whole space, exactly as if a match has ended, but the remains of it are still there.

The paper cones represent for the generation of the 70s and 80s in Romania a well-known children game, in which opponents could "fight" against each other. The paper cones stay for the bullets at the wired borders between East and West, but they are also the message carriers, which sometimes succeeded to cross the borders, generating cultural transfer, other times were captured with terrible repercussions.

The rest of the witness reports and some of the archive materials will be available online, on Interfonic.de (the home-base of the project) and will be accessible through QR codes in the space.

2. Rare footage from the archive of kinema ikon, recorded before 1990 and never shown before (like the visit of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Arad) will be used on two different ways:
 - Stills from the recordings will be chosen and printed on glass slides, on which the artists will intervene in different ways, including the fact that they will be depicted in Instagram frames, transforming them from documentary materials into social media type materials, in the same way in which facts can be easily transformed into fake news, by adding some elements, which can totally change the way in which they are perceived and understood, according to the habits of the contemporary society of

perceiving media. This mixed technique of manually altering vintage artifacts, combined with digital-style manipulation executed in a traditional collage style, aims to offer a fresh perspective on critically analyzing and understanding the past. 80 slides of this type will be created and they will be shown with an old Kodak slide projector.

- Fragments of the footage will be presented also in the original form on a retro CRT TV.
3. With the help of an overhead projector the visitors will be able to compose and to project on the wall their own written or visual stories. Like in a puzzle, written fragments of the witness reports, as well as stills from the footage of kinema ikon will be printed on slices of transparent foils, so that the visitors can create their own „fake“ stories, out of fragments of hard facts. In the end they will be able to take a photo of their own created stories.
 4. Jars with „pickled“ wire will be presented in the space, emphasizing the idea that these wired borders, which cut the communication between East and West, influenced the way in which the Eastern society developed in the last 30 years, with a serious impact especially on the millennials. Additionally, they can evoke various sensations or create metaphors for the encapsulated history or the grim history of the challenges women had to face due to the extremely strict birth control policies under communist regimes.
 5. Two performers coming from the Generation Z – one from the West (Germany), one from the East (Romania) – will write a text about the way they perceive themselves and they communicate to the world who they are – how much authenticity is there, how much pressure coming from the society and from the social media stories of success and happiness. The performances will be recorded and shown within the exhibition on two retro TVs, placed with the face to a mirror on the wall. The visitors will be able to see the performances reflected in the mirror, in the same time seeing themselves, placed between these two East-West perceptions, as well as between two life narratives of representatives of Generation Z.

With the occasion of the first opening at Goethe-Institut, the performances will take place also live.

6. Outside the exhibition space will be placed microphones - which will be everywhere announced. At the entering into the exhibition space, on a retro telephone, visitors will be able to hear live the sound and voices captured with the microphones. Another manipulative track will be heard simultaneously in the receiver of the phone. The idea is to recreate the feeling and the fear of being constantly observed and listened by the Securitate, during the Communist regime, when you had to be very attentive what, where and to whom you were saying something, because any facts could be interpreted in a way that could have repercussions for you.

7. Also at the entering of the exhibition space, the East-West perception will be approached as seen in the unique situation of Germany. The video artist Oscar Loeser asked himself, how did the Fall of the Berlin Wall articulated itself 20 years later. In 2009 he went along the former inner German border, passing by small villages and listening to the stories of the people who faced the border. The documentary movie will be shown as part of the installation, creating an unexpected "mirror", yet full of valuable insights into the relativity of things and facts, which make them vulnerable to the possibility of being easily shaped by any kind of propaganda

Creation of an online questionnaire for visitors, accessible within each exhibition via QR codes, as well as through the online platform. The results of the questionnaire will be integrated in the academic research. We are very interested here on two aspects:

- The way in which the answers differs according to the generations the visitors belong to;
- The way in which the answers differs from the Eastern and Western perspective.

For each presentation of the performative installation is planned at least one debate / artist talk with members of the artistic team, representatives of Goethe-Institute and/or the NARDIV-project, contemporary witnesses, journalists etc. The first debate in Bucharest will be organized in partnership with Radio France Internationale (RFI) – Romania.

Thank you!