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The Temptation of Paradise

- PhD thesis summary -

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Why Paradise?

The world we are currently living in is disenchanted, void of any transcendental meaning, a world in which we have built our own kitsch Paradises, stupid, vulgar and infantile, in our own image. The themes of Paradise, purity and happiness have been touched by the virus of mawkishness or triviality to such an extent, that you can hardly touch them without stirring ironic smirks. *Hell* and its perspective is so much closer to human kind! Contemporary art is generous to reflect the ugly, the grotesque, pornography, the evil, the absurd etc. – all the attributes of the infernal, as if they were something utterly natural. We do not feel outraged about them; on the contrary, we take pleasure in them and find echo in their *expressivity*.

However, there is in the human being an attraction towards absolute happiness, towards overcoming our own human condition, so full of limitations, an attraction that we could subordinate to the Paradise. An artist's attempt to overcome his limited condition is his striving for cultural survival in history, made possible through his presence in the new *sacred centres* of art: biennales, important collections, museums.

My having chosen this theme for my PhD research thesis was not fortuitous; on the contrary, it has built itself inside me in time, as an interior necessity through a divergent attitude, opposed to the *dark side* in our world and especially in art nowadays. Paradisiacal temptation is not the guilty temptation of an unlimited satisfaction, of plentifulness, or of evading from the present into the safe shell of a sterile dream. It is the temptation to find once again the traces of Paradise in this world, and especially in our hearts, as a *temptation of purity and spiritual happiness*. The interest of my research limited itself to terrestrial Paradise and did comprise neither celestial Paradise, nor Heaven – the promise for an eschatological happiness.

I have been guided through the labyrinth of Paradises by my personal creation, as I have proven a constant affinity for certain themes. Consequently, the proposed itinerary follows a subjective logic in this respect. The rich bibliography consulted has helped me forge my personal opinion on Paradise, with all the new meanings scattered around and new attributes accumulated. The theoretical research has been backed up by my own

artistic creation, in a train of theoretical elucidations, followed by newly inspired explorations and new, figurative suggestions, a winding journey from creation to reading, and vice versa.

The PhD research thesis with the title *The Temptation of the Paradise* proposes a theoretical and figurative journey, coherently organized and structured. My intellectual and emotional involvement in this matter is noticeable, attested by the projects and works elaborated, but especially rendered by my interior spiritual transformation, felt as an increasingly stronger attraction for a *paradisiacal way of feeling*.

The theoretical part is conceived in three parts that correspond to the stages of research, following a circular structure, similar to a possible shape of the Paradise. The chapters in the first part (Paradise as an enchanted place) studied the initial mythological, biblical meanings of the notion of Paradise and the range of representations of paradisiacal imagery. The second part of the research, *Paradise – Reflections in distorting mirrors* makes a journey through a couple of substitute, kitsch Paradises, modern and contemporary utopias; and in the final part of the research, *Paradise – the Temptation of recovery*, we find once again the hope of regaining the paradisiacal state.

In order to shed light on the notions discussed, I have to resort to *linguistic archaeology*. The noun "Paradise" comes from the Persian *pairidaeza* or *apiridaeza*, meaning orchard, fertile garden, enclosed by a wall (*pari* - around, *daeza* - to wall up). The words that used to designate a mere garden in Hebrew accumulated in time, through mechanisms specific to linguistics, a series of new, auxiliary meanings, thus extrapolating the initial meaning through an outlandish dissemination of attributes.

The chapter *The Actor, the Props and the Scenery* analyses the range of representations of paradisiacal imagery. As a theatre of supreme happiness, Paradise requires, in mythical thinking, certain props and heavenly sceneries to describe an ideal, welcoming place, a true natural home filled with all the symbols of intimacy, rendered especially by the presence of a source or a course of water and of the sacred tree. The paradisiacal scene also consists of both fallic, masculine symbols that confer fecundity through the verticality of the central element, and feminine symbols. All the essential elements that

form the scenery of Paradise (tree, snake, goddess, source) converge to the same theme, that of fertility and fecundity.

Paradisiacal happiness is mainly rendered by two elements: a generous, protective edenic scenery and immortality. The protective, intimate and nourishing character of Paradise will be associated to the affective feminine image, around which all paradisiacal attributes are revolving. It is the territory of a hyperbolised, maternal Eve, in which Adam is the perpetual child in her lap. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we could say that Paradise is under the sign of maternal, unconditional, generous love, a love with no questions, no contracts or clauses that should be respected.

The multicoloured space of plenitude, full of harmony, filled with exquisite fragrances, perfumes and melodious sounds cannot be pictured otherwise than spherical, curved, closed or regular. The colour is feminine, seducing, and the polychromy is intrinsically linked to the positive value with which women, nature and fecundity are endowed.

The primordial human, the beneficiary and inhabitant of this special setting bares in himself the unmistakable mark of *imago dei*. Androgyny was the initial scheme of this divine project, and thus, the primordial couples were considered to be subsequent versions of the human Genesis. The human couple, endowed with all possible qualities: immortality, beauty, spontaneity, purity, freedom, enjoyed love in a gentle and generous scenery.

The key words for the divine Paradise project are: perfect harmony, happiness, immortality, beauty and purity.

The chapter Paradise was a garden at first analyzes a series of aspects related to the visualization of Paradise as a garden. What could possibly symbolise the spiritual state of paradisiacal beatitude better than a luxuriant and sumptuous garden?

The Bible tells us that the Paradise was first of all a garden. It is interesting to see how the essential elements of the image collection that make up the Paradise mytheme (the garden, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge and its fruits, the goddess, the snake, the water of life in the mythology of the Near East) are taken over by the biblical myth and put in a system of negative clichés. Thus, the Woman-goddess – the one that revealed the secrets of life –

is now seen as diabolic, the snake – the keeper of life - is cursed; the fruits of life – that conferred immortality – bring death, etc.

A part of this chapter is dedicated to the adventure of humans searching for the historical Garden of Eden, quest whose questions are still partially enveloped in mystery.

As far as the definition and localisation of terrestrial Paradise are concerned, they have undergone many *corrections*, thanks to the interpretations given by writers in the first centuries of Christianity, who saw it as an allegory, a spiritual, corporal, or mixed reality, or as an eschatological place.

In evoking Paradise as a Garden, one cannot avoid referring to Persian gardens, which seem to come down straight from the *Arabian Nights*, around which a genuine legend has been weaved.

Another aspect brought up in this chapter refers to the secluded Garden, *hortus conclusus*, as being a condensed, symbolic transfer of the edenic garden. A reference is also made to the figurative tradition of Marial representations and symbols in the paradisiacal spiritual garden.

The new lands discovered by explorers and travellers in the XIVth -XVIIth centuries became a substitute for Eden, as well. In their eyes filled with amazement, the fantastic became real and the grotesque coexisted with the sublime.

The island, another visual representation of Paradise, is analyzed in the chapter Any Paradise is a lost island. Thanks to its archetypal, placental form, the island is a space that has deep roots in our mental structure; it is a circular return to the origins. Like any other form of happiness, the island is comforting, protected and isolated. But the island is also a setting for fabulous events. As a secret place where happiness lies – to which one can reach only after an initiation trip on water – it is, after all, a spiritual centre, where the miraculous is encountered just everywhere. In people's desperate search for paradisiacal happiness, all of the islands nourished the mankind's thirst for fabulous and mystery.

A pilgrimage to all *happy places* must include Greek mythological islands-gardens. In paradisiacal imagery, the theme of the garden became

interconnected with the theme of the island and that of the Golden Age, enriching one another, and bringing into being an idealised scenery, endowed with the best of all possible qualities.

The chapter Figurative proofs of the Paradise examines the Paradise as a figurative theme that has obsessed artists for many centuries. Far from having in mind to make a complete inventory of figurative paradisiacal representations, I have selected a few masters' works (from the Middle Ages up to the XVIIIth century, in the European and oriental space), in order to highlight a structure of paradisiacal imagery, as well as a collection of correlative forms and figurative motifs.

In the IInd part of the thesis, the Paradise –Reflections in deforming mirrors, Contemporary Post-Paradises, Kitsch Paradises and Utopian Paradises are reviewed. Mankind has not abandoned the idea of a Paradise once they made their voluntary exit from under divine protection and entered the modern age, placed under the umbrella of reason. Men have metamorphosed, anamorphosed and pulverised themselves in various substitutes, thus falling into the prosaic, instinctual and consumerism. In my research on illusory Paradises, I resorted to the representative creation of several contemporary artists that have approached this theme. I have noted in their art a series of elements and motifs considered to be *paradisiacal* and have made an analysis of how these artists express the spirit and problems of contemporary world, through a post-modern attitude. The present study does not include all types of artificial Paradises, however. They have been selected according to my own sensitivity and implicitly, to their echo in my personal projects.

The “post” ironically attached to the term “Paradise” in the syntagm used above refers to the representation and reflection of our age, of post-modernism, in the images and dreams of contemporary art. By making a brief incursion into the ideas of post-modernism, I am trying to explain these artistic attitudes.

The chapter Kitsch Paradises makes obvious the mechanisms of kitsch as the art of immediate happiness, as a strategy for a quick access into Paradise - aesthetics of lies, deceit and self-indulging in this deceit. It is under the

umbrella of this idea that I have placed the Infantile Paradise and Romantic Paradise, focusing on the Vulgar Romantic Paradise and on the Asexuate Romantic Paradise. While approaching the themes of the child, youth and love - as landmarks of happiness - I have followed the strategy of the kitsch in contemporary art.

In paradisiacal imagery, childhood and purity overlap over the happiness of the origins, as *ratified stamps* of Paradise. Infantilism is a perverted way to relate to childhood, it is a parody of childhood, of the regression of the embarrassing adult to consumerism and entertainment. Contemporary figurative approaches that resort to a discourse containing elements that bring back the nostalgia of childhood are rather ironical, sarcastic, making use of the seduction of kitsch, while criticising consumer society (J. Koons, A. Messager, P. McCarthy, A. Séchas).

Through its specific structure, in which the earthly and profane is lifted up to the spheres of the eternal, Romanticism has a nostalgic character. Romantic attitude encounters the promise of kitsch to nourish this nostalgia. Romanticism, without being kitschy in itself, has it absorbed in itself in a latent, *genetic* way. I have analysed here the works of artists that make use of romantic seduction: Jeff Koons (through vulgarity and pornography) and the Pierre & Gilles group (through brushed up, counterfeit images – sexlessly sweet, a dream of eternal, teenage youth and of paradisiacal androgyny). In a theological sense, these artificial Paradises are an *aesthetic form of the Evil*.

The chapter with the title Utopian Paradises investigates the etymology of the term “utopia”, its connotations, favourite themes, as well as the mechanisms of utopian imagery. Sir Thomas Morus has the *Copyright* over utopia. He is the one who invented the word *outopia* (*ou-no, eu-well, topos*-place, *ia*-suffix,) in his book “Utopia” (1516). The essence of utopia resides in the fact that this perfectly happy, carefree country that he imagines has only one flaw: it is *impossible*.

The chapter on The ingredients dear to utopia presents the themes of paradisiacal imagery and their assimilation within the utopia. Constitutive elements of utopian imagery can be found in two utopian themes:

Millenarianism (which is a refurbished Paradise) and *The Ideal Fortress* (whose origins are the ancient myths of the *Golden Age*).

The chapter on Political-social utopias develops just two contemporary utopias: The Red Utopia (Communist utopia) and The American Dream (the American illusion utopia), both having a strong impact over Romanian culture. The *Paradise* dreamed by the Communist Utopia (egalitarianism, millenarianism, gradual planning, a rational systematization of the life of the individual and of society, the transformation of man, the promise of a society of welfare and of abundance, the reign of peace and reason) could only be maintained through terror and misshapen a beautiful project into its exact opposite: the inferno. America has had and still has an exceptional status and destiny, that of a new *Promised Land* for the *chosen people*; a blessed realm, where the elements of modern utopia (democracy, material abundance, high technology, political freedom and civil rights, etc.) have nourished the *American dream*. However, its downside is also a face, a real one, of America: the lack of personality and of history, inequality, ferocity of money, exaggerated pragmatism, etc.

The chapter on Contemporary Neo-utopias comprises brief presentations of new utopias (*accredited* or in the process of being accredited) such as: sexual, feminist, ecologic, genetic utopia, the utopia of the internet, high-tech utopia, EuroUtopia etc. Two representative attitudes in art nowadays are mentioned in this context: that of Mariko Mori (*Utopia high-tech* – for the tendency of over-tehnicising, like a hallucinating cybernetic dream) and that of the Jake and Dinos Chapman group. The latter are suggesting an infinite *biology-art*, like a genetic experience of an obscene absurd (*hybrid utopian Paradise*).

In order to close the circle and give a meaning to my doctoral research, in the third part of the thesis, *The Temptation of Paradise* I thought about recovering Paradise by the means of love. The Myth of the androgyny has a privileged place in these attempts.

We have always been seduced by two of the most splendid gifts with which we have played happily in Paradise: playing *the Immortality Game* and the *Game of Love*. The first gift was taken away from us once and for all

after the Fall, and we have been dreaming of immortality above all, ever since. Nowadays, science, medicine and genetics are making desperate efforts to break the codes of *immortality* and of *youth*, which have proved to be quite well protected so far. However, we have been allowed to keep and enjoy the second game: the game of love. It is only through love that a man and a woman allow themselves to yield to the temptation of the Mystery of the androgynous One, the mystery of perfection, even though everything seems to have been degraded between them in the most miserable vulgarity. It is true, however, that to post-modern, *anti-paradisiacal* sensitivity, the Myth of the androgyny seems slightly *old fashioned*, dusty and sentimental. Nevertheless, with or without our consent, we are baring in our souls the nostalgia of perfection. Through love and sex, the human being can reach gateways beyond the conditionings of his selfish individual existence, and a transcendence actually experienced, be it only for a moment, but sufficient so that he could intuit Paradise.

The Story of the Mysterious Androgyny illustrates the androgyny archetype in the Platonist myth and the human obsession of searching for perfection. Although it does not stand in the gravity of the biological sphere, (in other words, that of necessity perpetuation), human love lives under the mark of the *lacking* (according to Plato) and therefore, the Eros is constantly unaccomplished (according to the absolute meaning of the Being). The mechanisms of human love have only one reason - an *irrational* one. A possible explanation would reside in a certain magic or magnetism, which emerges inside of the human being, and comes from of the yin-yang tension between the two principles: the feminine and the masculine one.

The chapter The Eternal Masculine and the Eternal Feminine is an attempt to shed light on sexual duality from a metaphysical perspective; the two genders being approached as transcendental and cosmic archetypes. The study emphasises the comparative relation between the data provided by contemporary biology and the traditional metaphysical paradigm. We can find the justification of the two principles reflected in the mirror of the unconscious, under the form of Anima and Animus, the two Jungian notions, as images complementary to masculine and feminine nature.

The chapter Sacralizations of sexual union analyzes hierogamy, ancient, sacred marriages that were complex operative rituals marking the union of the masculine principle with the feminine one, in view of re-establishing cosmic order. The Christian Church's vision of the sexual union within the blessed family is also mentioned, seen as an androgynous restoration; as well as the relation between bodily love and the *agappè*- divine love.

If the *Christian body* receives strong, negative values, being the source of sin, of temptation and of the fall, and if one can reach sanctity only *by fighting against it*, in the Far East the *erotica*, which is bodily love, combined with *spiritual love* is seen as a path leading to redemption and ultimately to the final beatitude.

Even though it did not manage to finally produce gold, the story of alchemy continues to be enveloped in a mysterious poetic-occult halo, in which a series of Christian mystic terms are dissolved. We might say that the painter, the artist is also a *visual alchemist* in search of *immortality*, of his own philosophal stone, of that *Gold* represented by his work and made of humble, rough matter. The chapter Poetic Al-kimiya actually presents the magic temptation of the One, of primordial unity, of the hermetic Androgyny, of the Rebis, of the *Opus alchemicum* – which is practically a synonym of the restoration of the paradisiacal state.

After having investigated Paradise for a couple of years, I felt the need to see to what extent my theme is of interest to the artistic environment – and I have carried out a sociological survey (*A Sociological Research of Paradise*) focused on a couple of the theme's key notions, which ended up highlighting *an actual interest* for the issues discussed in the present doctoral thesis. Paradise is associated to a mental state, to a spiritual communion, but first and foremost to a state of love, which can be lived at present as a *possible recovery of a paradisiacal state*. The diversity of the answers received concerning the imaginary territory of Paradise confirms, to a certain extent, that this archetype of perfection is far from having exhausted its meanings.

My personal vision of Paradise comes from the perspective of a man and artist living in a society in perpetual transition, a post-modern consumerist society craving for pleasure, full of tensions and contrasts. I consider my

personal contribution to be the spiritual, intellectual and visual answer to the various aspects of our anti-paradisiacal world. The multiple meanings of the inexhaustible paradisiacal themes have been emphasised in my creation by the use of several means and environments in the artistic expression. My artistic attitude regarding certain socio-political mentalities and their ironical association to Paradise was expressed by the means of actions and installations, the desired outcome being a direct communication with the public. The classical means used by art: painting, drawing, collage, graphic, etc., means to which I am attached have been reserved to intimate, poetical, sensitive expressions in relation to Paradise. In spite of my receptivity to other means, I consider that a return to painting is a return to memory, to personal history, to the pleasure and joy of playing with figurative matter – a joy – why not? – which brings to mind paradisiacal joy. The figurative paradises that I am suggesting are a part of a post-modern, poetic, sensitive and ironical universe. And the spontaneity, the playful side and the humour in my personal works and projects also make up an attempt to reopen the gate of communication with the *paradisiacal feeling*.

My own *spiritual* option concerning art follows a road going the opposite way from most contemporary art productions, which reflect the deep spiritual crises our world is going through: the despair, loneliness, cynicism, nihilism, the evil. On the contrary, reasoning with paradisiacal feeling induces a state of harmony, beauty, joy of living, desire to transcend what is real, to overcome the limitations of the individual and of the ephemeral, the continuous aspiration for purity and spiritual completion and therefore, the big reward for this approach, theoretically and figuratively is indeed interior purification.

We cannot put an end to Paradise, because it covers a pretty complex reality which keeps escaping from a single, simplifying definition. We may believe in it, we may be attracted in its orbit, without really completely possess it. But it exists and allows people to discover it more or less, according to the desire and interior image of he/she who searches for it – and from here emerges the eternal temptation...