Interview - Radu-Mihai Tănasă

1.
Could you talk a bit about your filmic techniques? There is a roboticized voice, and a slightly wobbly or casual first-person camera movement that implies a narrator poking around an urban environment inquisitively but open-endedly. Are you inspired by any filmmakers in particular? How do you develop your cinematography and video editing processes, and how do they function and communicate in your work?

R: It all started with my move to the Netherlands. I couldn't bring my usual paints and brushes, and the only technological thing I was attached to was this Cannon video camera my parents bought in 2004 to document me and my sister growing up. My artistic process always starts from a very personal point and I like to work with simple things. This camera only had a record and replay button, no other tricks. Most of the shots that have no characters I filmed for personal archival purposes as well and afterwards I (re-)stitch shots together based on the narrative I want to convey. I like to think it gives the videos this feeling of reassembled found footage from someone you sort-of knew - or of the way we construct memories, always replaying, remixing and reinterpreting certain moments of our life. The robotic voices were simply an attempt at giving each character a distinct voice and found that the Macbook reading text program had a nice variety of characters.

For "What if you embraced your inner stereotype?" I watched (New Wave) Romanian movies and was deeply inspired by the disregard for classic storytelling in favor of depicting the "reality" of daily life, which is seldom as linear as we'd like to imagine. I started with shorts like "Lampa cu căciulă" (2006), then "Sieranevada" (2016) and then into "Autobiography of Nicolae Ceauşescu" (2010) which among others, best reflects the philosophy I had going into the editing process. With regards to themes and narrative approaches, the two main pillars were "Borat" (2006) and "Les maîtres fous" (1955) with some additional inspiration from Renzo Martens' work. I was specifically drawn to the love-hate relationship I had with the portrayal/ idea of "Borat", with "Les maîtres fous" acting more as a visual example of the complex dynamics that arise behind identity-forming processes (be it through colonialism, ancestry, forms of government, countries etc) that you don't really get to see in our age of binaries, polarization and short form content. Renzo Martens' work deals more with weaponizing the inherent power structures that exist in our world, although he rather exaggerates them to an almost absurdist point.

My special mentions would go to "Black Cat White Cat" (1998), "Underground" (1995) and of course "Stalker" (1979). They haven't directly inspired the making of the videos but are always in the back of my mind.

2.
Could you talk a bit about the sort of relics or fetishes of capitalist production that appear in the film, such as the smashed Fiat, or the Adidas tracksuit? Some of these seem to reference a society where objects of global trade take on particular connotations or value- as a result, for example, in this case of the former Soviet states, of the state becoming isolated from or having limited access to global trade. Given the current impulse toward protectionism and trade war, this form of attention

to objects of global trade seems particularly prescient. Could you talk about some of the connotations or stereotypes around the consumer objects that appear in the film?

R: The post-Soviet world indeed has an entire mythology built upon certain Western goods/ brands that differ from country to country: in Romania a fully packed Marlboro pack was usually considered the go-to luxurious statement piece in someone's home, and in post 1991 Russia the Adidas tracksuit became the uniform for shock-therapy capitalism.

The car in Untitled (Fiat) was a symbol for mainly personal stuff. Beyond the fact that this car stood in the front of my apartment block for years, slowly being destroyed and overrun by nature and squatters, it also reminded me of how car-centric Romanian culture is (compared to the Netherlands) and it intuitively felt like a good metaphor to document it. Owning and driving a car is seen as a very masculine-coded thing and both men and women perpetuate these ideas that a real man drives, is never driven, and that certain cars are sexy, or women magnets. I never understood this. One of the reasons I moved to the Netherlands was in part due to the lack of the Car, either on the street, in daily small talk, or in people's sexual preferences. In a way, the destroyed Fiat felt like liberating myself from this pressure, but somehow also a cowardly move, as if I was emasculating myself by running away from it. It also helped that the brand name is somewhat poetic, I kept thinking of fiat currencies non-stop while filming.

Beyond this context, I must admit I did not overly focus on presenting the current-day relationship between global consumer goods and post-soviet identities, perhaps because it seems to me that already Gen Z and Gen Alpha (in Romania) have quickly caught on and embraced Western global trends. I like your reading and interpretation however, and in the current Romanian political climate of mimicking America's every move it could be that especially American brands will become more polarizing, either seen as symbols of conservative freedom or fascistic dog-whistles.

3.
There is a scene where the narrator is holding up a cross-stitching of Marie Antoinette, and earlier in the piece, you reference the spectral totalitarianism that is felt in former Soviet states. Am I correct in reading the embroidery piece as representing the French aristocracy and Marie Antoinette specifically? How do you think the collective memory of aristocracy and empire operate in relation to the spectre of communism in Eastern Europe? Could you talk about the decision to include the embroidery piece?

R: The embroidery piece is to me firstly a symbol of my complicated relationship with European identity. The Gimp is holding the frame as if to say, this is my family, these are my ancestors, but that is not historical or cultural reality. Romania's history and culture at that time was more intertwined with the Ottoman Empire or the Habsburgs rather than with French aristocracy and Enlightenment ideals, yet we now associate ourselves with this grander European narrative for geo-political reasons. And while I cannot guarantee that the character depicted is precisely Marie Antoinette, it does look awfully similar to someone of high class, power and privilege. There are a considerable number of people in Romania, especially in academia, that want the country to revert to a monarchy in an effort to ally itself with other Western European icons (like the UK or Netherlands). And that political view in a way feels as if having a

ruler-like figure is definitory for this area, as if we are either too dumb or too high-class for (semi-)parliamentary democracy.

Beyond that, I found both familiarity and uncanniness in the object itself. I relate to the craft of embroidery as a form of folk art, where patterns and symbols convey specific cultural identities usually made by rural women. But seeing it used to depict monarchic rulers felt alien and somewhat funny or ironic, as if the tradition itself was sanitized or domesticated.

4.
I feel that you're making this interesting gesture to connect gendered ideals of strength and masculinity that are passed from fathers to sons in this patrilineal progression- from the patriarchy to the fratriarchy- with the character and actions of a nation-state. For example, there is perhaps a suggestion that a patriarchy that values toughness, callousness and invulnerability may produce (and simultaneously be reproduced by) a nation-state with comparable values. Would you say that's an accurate read? Could you elaborate on some of these themes and/or elaborate on the connection between familial and state values?

R: Yes, I honestly believe that the political and the psychological are much more intertwined than we are told to believe, and in the individual act of the son to rebel against his father, the whole government apparatus suffers a change as well. To me, the rise of MAGA/ AfD/ PVV conservatism as these icons of real masculinity could only rise from the aftermath of opening up to the global economy, and moving towards a form of politics based in inclusion, cooperation and "economic" war (supposedly) - but also in a generational, psychological shift in relating to gender, as the fathers of these men were most likely hippies, punks, anti-Vietnam protesters or other alternative identities.

In the case of the Post-Soviet state, there are some factors I can think about. On one hand, returning to capitalist-traditional Christian values and the "nuclear" family is antithetical to the imagery of the egalitarian atheistic Communist state and thus new, rebellious. There is also this cultural need to catch-up, to follow Western trends in an effort to not look primitive. On the other hand the American conservative discourse visibly clashes with historical reality where the State banned any alternative manifestations and culture similar to hippies and punks, with these generations growing up very socially conservative. Perhaps in this case it is the lack of real historical alternative communities that makes it so much easier to propagate very similar mentalities. I would say that for my generation, the greater mentality shift is in embracing hustle and hookup culture which was for older generations something either laughed about (with the classic 80's saying "they pretend to pay us, we pretend to work") or highly shamed (in regards to sex in general). Perhaps in this sense social conservatism is the glue that binds the father and the son.

And with regards to machismo, toughness and callousness, I have noticed the biggest influence of the psychosocial into the cultural/ political again, when I moved to the Netherlands and had felt stability and peace for the first time in my life, having at the time confused with signs of a weak society that is too trustful, too open. But I realized soon that those were my past triggers speaking. I have realized just how tense and stressed everyone back home is, how peace feels uncomfortable because having mental peace is a privilege only the wealthy or the naive can have, and that way of life is to me reflected in how the government runs and how policy is created. Another great shift that I am still mentally adapting to is the lack of brute authority in parent-child relations in the Netherlands. Authority, aggression and strictness are

still the norm back home and the number-one quality parents strive for their children to have is obedience. That is not really the case in the Netherlands and the West in general. I remember watching "Bojak Horseman" and seeing how the main character's line of fathers used abuse on their wives or children and found it genuinely weird that there was no physical aggression present, yet still their acts were just as, if not more, painful than simple abuse. It's still sometimes alien but yet comforting to me how open, peaceful and trusting parents and children are to each other here compared to back home, and I can't not think that the way in which we later relate to other forms of power, especially government, is a reflection of how we relate to our first exposure to authority: parents.

5.
The gimp mask evokes a certain toughness or even criminality, as the narrator alludes to in the vignette about the mugging, but the motif is also overlaid with the sexual context of anonymity and humiliation as sexual kinks. The film also introduces us to Bogdan Stefanescu's research on the Romanian mentality as insecure or neurotic as a result of cultural shame from the past. Could you talk a bit about the different masks that appear in the film- their aesthetics and materiality, their connotations, and your creative process in developing the aesthetic language of masking for the different masked scenes in this piece? How much of the costuming was theoretically rigorous (ie, derived from a specific thesis or line of theoretical inquiry) and how much of it was looser or more intuitive?

R: So as the Thesis proposes, the mask acts as a tool for negotiating power relations but it is also a metaphor for the Post-Soviet condition, as labeling and masking are paradoxically both very powerful but also completely meaningless. Performing with masks that actually describe personal vulnerabilities therefore is me playing with the ideas of sincerity and fakeness themselves. I also link this to historical Balkan identities which used to be quite elastic and flexible and have been ever since then a subject of wonder for Western scholars.

I actually just recently wrote these explanatory texts that might offer additional info beyond the videos themselves:

Goat
The Goat represents Ancient male flamboyance rooted in mysticism and in its sublime uncanniness presents itself as both the temporal diaspora thus deconstructing the ethno-national myth of permanent identity and the diasporic Other in my situated context of the Balkan as the „enlightened savage" of Europe.
Unicorn
The Unicorn represents the inner-child as the psycho-social Other, a current-day equivalent of the Goat symbol and a personal reminder of the challenges I had in my journey towards forming my identity.
Mannequin
The Mannequin symbolizes the artistic, the uncanny and the boundary between human and animal. Under the stage name of _câine (RO for dog), the Mannequin challenges male performativity by presenting the ancient werewolf protector/ monster archetype as a current-day domesticated identity.
Gimp
The Gimp twists the imagery of the street delinquent archetype by replacing the balaclava with a symbol of cultural self-flagellation. Reflecting on how the political shapes the psychological, being perceived by the West as the Other can create a self-perception rooted in both self-hatred and exaggerated machismo.
Cream
The Cream blends the male psyche with the animalistic and the destructive with the creative, giving shape to various emotions and gestures by continuously covering and removing shaving cream from itself. Beyond the visually Sysphian act, Cream represents the future identity waiting to be formed.

And beyond that, I have some small anecdotes that maybe you'd like. Dancing with the Goat costume was a dream of mine since I was a child, and somehow I managed to make that be part of my artistic practice. The Unicorn started from the idea of having a character with one head and two bodies, and of having a mask that is a body as well. The mannequin is basically a super obvious reference to Shaye Saint John, a figure that haunted and defined my creepypasta teenage years. The Gimp is a visual metaphor of my Thesis' argument of self-flagellating Balkan machismo. And the Cream is also a reference to the work of Olivier de Sagazan whose videos also became creepypastas, but my twist was to use shaving cream as I consider it quite directly linked to masculine experience.

The Goat and the Gimp were characters that I thought of since the beginning of the project, while the Mannequin was a character I already had before this project started. The Unicorn and the Cream came sometime along the way. I would say that the intuitive part came in actually embodying the characters as I did not plan for them to do something specific or have a gimmick from the beginning. I found it valuable to embrace the long process of embodying these characters and to let them grow by themselves. Maybe it is a bit noticeable in the videos, but especially now with recent work, they have evolved quite a bit and now have much stronger personalities.

There was also a big process of me opening up and letting myself be vulnerable with these characters and with certain aesthetic choices I made. I have been told that the work has a bit of a gay coding to it, which was very surprising for me, as my goal was to simply expose my insecurities and my child-like dreams. In this process however I did realize that I have gone through some experiences that were quite particular and for a long time thought that these are things that "normal" men do not go through, and that perhaps I myself am not a real man but something else. I will not trauma-dump but I would say that if you find certain symbolism related to different hardships in life, yes, it is pretty intentional. When I was first told about the gay lens of the work, I was a bit confused because I cannot claim to speak for this community, but I wholeheartedly embrace alternative readings of my work and consider it a big compliment if you relate to it in ways I could not have ever expected.

6.
Did you produce your body of writing and research for this piece while in residence at the Hague in Amsterdam? Which aspects of the work were created in Romania? How did geographic and cultural context influence your perspective as you were working?

R: The work was done all throughout my Master's studies in the Netherlands and the shots depict various spaces I would interact with on a daily basis, from my grandma's house to my year living in den Bosch, to my sporadic trips to Amsterdam and my time in the Hague to the broken Fiat in front of my home in Romania, it is all meant to be intertwined and spatially ambiguous as I myself struggled to call one place definitively home.

I believe the biggest influence and step towards doing this movie was when I had the opportunity to screen both in RO & NL a prequel to "What if you embraced your inner stereotype?", a short movie called "(scape)Goat" which featured shots of the Goat travelling through Amsterdam as a story about my uncle moving to the Netherlands back in 1999 unfolds. For context, I have made the film with the intent of trying to communicate the mixed feelings both me and my uncle had when coming to the West as we bonded over how skewed Dutch people's perceptions of Romanians were back then and to a point still are

today. And while I did not aim to manipulate the viewer into feeling one particular emotion, I think the main sentiment while doing the work was a sort of reflective melancholy. When I showed the work in an exhibition in Romania, I was told that the work was perhaps even scary or uncanny in its portrayal. Yet in Amsterdam, within the first 5 seconds people started laughing, looking at the piece as if it was an exercise in absurdist humor.

At that moment I felt like Tommy Wiseau after his first screening of "The Room". But somehow, in those totally different reactions I felt that there was value and opportunity. I became obsessed with trying to understand what makes the image of oneself either a source of melancholy or of laughter, and how can I use that as a tool for research? "What if you embraced your inner stereotype?" was an attempt to expand on the initial reactions I got from "(scape)Goat" and to play with tone and audience expectations as much as possible.

7.
Recently the journalists at The Economist have been highlighting the ideological affinity between the Russian political philosopher Alexander Dugan and the MAGA right in the United States, or the illiberal right more broadly, as united by their rejection of Enlightenment-era values, such as individuality, science, and freedom of intellectual inquiry, and their embrace of patriarchal power structures, ranging in scale from the level of the family unit to the patriarchal nation-state. This generally represents a shift away from the idea of individual autonomy and freedom, objective truth, and universal values- emphasizing, instead, collective personhood and clamping down on truths or lines of inquiry that do not suit the motivations and goals of the patriarchal nation-state. The illiberal right says that the world has become too soft, or too feminized, with its emphasis on values such as rules-based order, collaboration, and cooperating in pursuit of mutual goals, and that individual freedom of expression has gone too far (for example, in allowing LGBTQIA+ rights, women's liberation, etc.). I find this quite fascinating in relation to the rise of identity politics on the left, which has also worked to de-emphasize the intellectual and artistic autonomy of the individual in favor of understanding creative production through a lens of collective personhood and embodied perspectives (ie, that an artist is defined by and inherently representative of the power structures they exist within, such as their familial, geographic or cultural context, ethnicity, and/or nation-state). Both ideologies effectively subsume the individual into the identity of the collective. I'm curious to hear your perspective on some of these thoughts, given your depth of inquiry into identity as a question for art to investigate and your prescient meditations on masculine identity and the patriarchy. Is collective personhood a disservice to the soul, or at least, the death of the Cartesian soul? Could you elaborate on your perspective on the nature of individual consciousness, the patriarchy, Enlightenment values, and/or the state of liberalism (and illiberalism) in the world?

R: This is rather both a beautiful and extremely hard question to answer, but I will do my best.

I will start with saying that in a weird way, I am quite fond that political discourse in general is shifting back towards the collective rather than just talking about the individual. Of course, it is all just aesthetics as I feel it would be naive to expect actual change from career politicians, but still. I say I am quite fond because it feels in a way like a re-acknowledgement of our biology as social mammals. The modernist narrative of the rational individual, as nice of an ideal as it is, seems to be much more difficult to uphold than the biological reality of us being a bit of a herd animal. At the same time it seems that psychology,

through therapy, has taken the toll of "solving" the individual, whereas before that was the responsibility of the Church through community-situated traditions and of course confession. So perhaps we are seeing a readjustment of these niches as politics isolates and pushes the problems of the individual towards just the study of psychology alone.

It seems to me that on the internet there is also a discussion of how lonely young men in large quantities can predict whether or not revolts or revolutions take place as their energy cannot be properly used in constructive forms. I do relate in a sense that men are born somewhat worthless and are not taught to find inner value, and when you pair that with a deeply unequal, chaotic society, that spells disaster. I was also born in the first generation where among my peers, I saw a lot of "equality" in daily life, and in art school in NL I was actually outnumbered 1 to 2 by non-male colleagues only to then see that most of the Fine Arts networks were also highly dominated by non-men although some people make the case that the elites are still men. All of this while the popular discourse and the cultural focus is still about bringing more diverse voices. I know that statistically and historically we are actually living in a cultural miracle for certain minorities, but subjectively I don't fully feel like I belong, as if my voice is taking away from someone else who needs it more. This also makes me think of how entire areas of study and research have been almost fully gendered, which helps in polarizing the population even more and makes it so that we cannot even collectively agree on what reality is anymore.

It is either way clear to me that these developments arise from economical and cultural alienation, regardless if it's from leftwing women feeling powerless against patriarchy or rightwing men against corporate globalism. People are too tired and distracted to put in the real effort that is genuine community-building, so they shortcut that through manufactured political movements. The Right is winning now simply because it acknowledges men, which the Left has not done in recent times. And not just that, but the growing populism shows that there is some class awareness in these circles as well, however unconstructively it is being used.

Yet I still somehow believe in the power of the soul, of the individual, just not in this current, exaggerated form. Or rather more precisely that as individuals, we should strive to not have our biological needs and wants be weaponized against us as it is happening now through non-stop Amazon advertising, Instagram gooner pipelines or DoorDash over-reliance. Maybe the legal system integrates more aspects of psychology to use them in constructive forms. One example I could think of is the European Union's Right to be Forgotten and in general the way they have been approaching social media regulation. It shows to me an appreciation for the human psyche and its biology, it doesn't just stay in the realm of the idealistic super rational self interested individual mentality.

Or maybe it could be the case that these are necessary evils that exist as the new survival challenges for the modern human animal. Maybe we are asked by some higher power to fight more and more abstract battles to elevate our souls. Who knows, maybe picking up NoFap is today's version of hunting mammoths.

8.
One moment of particular comedy for me was the slow drip of whipped cream onto the television. I felt it really tapped into a particular self-deprecating sexual pathos and kind of darkly comedic expression of a disenfranchised, alienated male identity. I also felt that it evokes the contrast of

bodily softness and vulnerability with the anonymous and almost inhuman forces and machinations of states. Another comedic moment of bodily dysphoria comes when the narrator begins to grope the breast of the mannequin torso that he is wearing. Could you elaborate on the themes of disenfranchisement, alienation, and pathos?

R: I built the end of the TV scene to show the shaving cream of the Cream as it slowly corrupts the idea of childhood and perceiving oneself. The Cream is a vector for male emotionality that is left unattended, alienated and/or ignored, so your reading of the scene is spot on.

Regarding the themes of alienation, disenfranchisement and pathos, I could perhaps say that the themes came quite naturally as I was deciding on what aspects of my lived experience to bring forth and how to present my relationship with gender and other forms of identity. I have been in many (extremist) political circles in my early online life and have found them to be deeply performative and unsatisfying. I got to experience the Right's chauvinistic, pickup artist, alpha male view of men, the Left's many deconstructions and critiques of the patriarchy and the masculine, and the Center with the classical "be yourself" type of attitude that didn't really feel like helpful advice to navigate the world as myself. I also just happened to grow up without feeling very empowered in my daily life as a man so either side of the political spectrum's discourse felt alienating. The most relatable groups I would find on the internet were usually incels, but even then, the misogyny and weird racism always turned me off. Most men I knew were into less sexier but just as well needed jobs (construction, logistics, garbage disposal, or even IT honestly) which in my experience are not perceived or treated very respectfully by the majority of people. I was also not really taught or encouraged to build a social network that's not work-oriented. So it felt like there was a psycho-political pressure on most men (perhaps just the patriarchy) that made it very easy to feel unworthy, or simply just not needed by society.

In the context of post-Communist Romania especially, I felt that one big rite of passage that my father had access to, but I lost, was the mandatory military service. I don't know why, but in some deep part of myself, I kind of wished that that was still a thing you would have to go through, because finishing the service meant socially that now you were a man. You couldn't even go ask for a woman to marry you without doing that beforehand, it was a big deal. I still struggle even today with the imagery, role and symbolism of the military as it pertains to masculinity - this is maybe one aspect that I haven't explored in the series but it is deep to my heart. It is also quite controversial given the current state of the world.

As I might allude to throughout the other questions, I felt many times that I could not fit into the mold of being a man many times in my life and have sometimes thought of alternatives. I don't think I have that doubt anymore today, but I still have this not-so-healthy belief that masculinity is an identity you work towards, not something that you are born with. In a way, the videos stand as an attempt by me to dissect myself into basal parts to try and better understand the nuts and bolts of who I am (supposed to be).

9.
I love your insight that *ritualistic role play grants the serf temporary absolute power*- it reminds me of the moment in Victor Hugo's novel the Hunchback of Notre Dame, in which Quasimodo is crowned during the La fête des Fous. Also evocative of Victor Hugo for me was the way in which the subjective and theatrical experiences in your film, which are closely tied to a specific location, become larger narratives that probe the nature of (and flaws in) the social structure that the subject

exists within. I am particularly thinking of the chapter *Paris A Vol d'Oiseau* from *Hunchback*, in terms of the close observation of a particular place, although your video work of course has a more open-ended narrative flow compared to Hugo's structured novels. Regarding masks, you say that *without masks the world would be an honest place- but it would be oppressively devoid of change.* Could you elaborate on the concept of ritual masking, and/or of costuming and pretense as a form of power? Regarding literature- do you have an affinity for reading fiction, and if so, who are some of your favorite writers?

R: For me it started with the tradition of Saturnalia, which I believe is also a great example of what I was trying to convey. The fact that during Saturnalia Roman slaves could act as freemen and owners were "encouraged" to act as the slaves commanded, betrayed the underlying power dynamics of that system. We have no need for a Saturnalia today because there are no longer obvious slave and owner classes in most of today's world. The "mistake" the culture at that time made was to indulge the slaves in an act of alternative worldbuilding only one day/ week per year, as a short-term attempt to quelch their ideals for freedom. But in the long run, I believe these repeated rituals eventually gave way for new ways of thinking about society that did not revolve around treating human lives as property. Then in the Middle Ages this tradition evolved into the Carnival, which took many forms, but still carried and evolved the Roman tradition by having the townsfolk choose/ vote for a "Dumb" or "Crazy" King who would be usually of lower socio-economic class and could for a day/ week rule the local community. In hindsight I believe this to be a crude exercise in (secular) democracy during the time of (theocratic) serfdom.

Where it gets interesting for me is in current-day countries that still have the European Tradition of Carnival, such as the Netherlands, and what the rituals of today have to say about current power structures. What I saw in my first years as shocking were, among city wide parties and a few marches/ parades, the multitude of people dressing up in what I perceived as Halloween costumes. Nowadays Dutch people prefer to use (fictional) characters as a way to perhaps manifest or reclaim some power and agency that they lack in real life by embodying stereotypes or larger-than-life figures, which I find fascinating and definitely a good starting point for analyzing what future political forms of government might come in 500-1000 years from now.

And perhaps now the quote about masks making the world an ever-shifting place through lying hopefully makes more sense. It would be more "honest" to just live our lives as we were brought up to, but that would imply succumbing to existing power structures forever as we judge the current-day dynamics as the norm.

Regarding fiction, I am not so sure how directly the books that come to mind are related to ritualistic masking, but since you asked, I am a big fan of Kafka, and especially "The Castle" or "The Trial", the classical "Metamorphosis", but my current favorite is a lesser-known work called "Investigations of a Dog" which surprised me the most. Beyond Kafka, my favorite book remains "Faust" still and I have fond memories of reading Jose Saramago's Essays and "The Gospel According to Jesus Christ" or fantastical/ magical realist writings by Mircea Eliade. Lately I have stopped reading fiction, and that was in part because I found many to be quite boring or not interesting. A few years ago I got into the SCP Wiki rabbit hole and have been listening to [this channel](#) that curates quite nice stories that push the boundaries of what I previously considered fiction. I know it's not classical book-form fiction but I believe this is one future of written media. I have here [one example](#) and [another](#) of these stories that really

made me appreciate the written word, especially done by people who sometimes don't even want the writer's fame. Looking over the recommendations I guess I like things that are quite existential, complicated and/ or atypical. If you have recommendations please let me know, I would like to get back into reading fiction books that scratch these itches.

10.
In addition to the bibliographic materials associated with your film- who are some of the artists, filmmakers, or literary figures whose work you might recommend for our readers?

R: If I could make one recommendation it would definitely be [the theater play adaptation of "Iona" by Marin Sorescu](). It is mostly inspired by the biblical story of Jonah but it has a deep existential twist to it. It didn't influence any of the works directly although it inspired me to make video works featuring just one actor.

Beyond that I would recommend any film made by Radu Jude, "Investigations of a dog" by Franz Kafka, "[The Galaxy]()" (1973) by Sabin Bălașa, any work by Abbas Zahedi, [Guido van der Werve's early video works]() and any episode from "[Hungarian Folk Tales]()". Beware as none of these are (too) directly linked with the general themes discussed in "What if you embraced your inner stereotype?".

(Oh and "In defense of the poor image" by Hito Steyerl if it was not in the original bibliography)

11.
Could you talk about the concept of being a citizen, or being a family member? Are these power structures and formations of collective personhood inherently oppressive to the individual?

R: They are in a sense oppressive to the individual as much as the collective force seems to always want you to assimilate, but I see it as a sort of needed oppression, or like good stress. I do believe that the "pure rational individual" is a myth that clashes with actual reality, but I also see the history and the aftermath of having a political society based simply on the collective need. Romania feels like it is still negotiating the percentages of having a society run by ego and/ or superego, from the 80's culture of the apartment block and the neighbourhood (and then the Party itself) being the main actors in one's life, to today's neo-liberal, American-dream attitude of having your own home, your own car, your own brand, your own business while trusting no one, especially the state.

Finding family as oppressive is an experience I have seen shared not only among fellow Romanians or Balkans, but even in so-called 1st gen or 2nd gen migrant families, where the social bonds and attitudes of the homeland clash with the overwhelming individualism of the West. I say that this type of oppression could be good in a hero's-journey kind of way, where the idea is to reach a certain synthesis, or mediation between these two forces (the individual vs the collective). This is something that is particular to each human, to say something else would feel like falling into the trap of polarized discourse, or classical political dynamics of "us vs them".

In the same way, I think of citizenship in the same manner. It is important to be able to critically look at your cultural legacy and form your own, individual and complex perception of it. Romania for example is as much of a victim as it is a perpetrator of violence in many forms (cultural, political, social, economical), so seeing it as either one or the other does justice to no one. This is by far not an easy task,

as Ștefănescu and other scholars in the field have argued, it can easily create mental incongruence (culturally).

12.
Do you feel there is a need for gendered 'stereotypes' (as a sort of placeholder for a role model), in order for a person to have a model for who they should develop into, to step fully into a role as a man, woman, or person in society? Or are these 'stereotypes' (or, 'archetypes' or 'ideals'), a damaging social construct that needs to be dismantled?

R: I think gendered ideals or stereotypes have been guiding principles for humans ever since we started civilization, if not even earlier with the Venus statuettes. They also act as mirrors for what a culture considers moral. In my experience, it has been very hard to find relatable gender stereotypes, and I could also see a big difference in how gender itself is being approached by people of my age or younger. There is a lot of variety and discourse over goth girls, hello kitty girls, cottagecore girls, brat girls, cleancore girls, anarcho-bimbo girls and all that - basically ways in which identity is sold and communicated to women. I don't think the equivalent is the case for men. You are either an alpha, a sigma or a beta; a chad, tyrone or virgin - as in there seems to be a way in which male identity is communicated and sold through a very binary system of winner / loser.

I am thinking sometimes if we could aim for a sort of equal treatment in how these (micro-) identities are formed. Should we invent cleancore boys or Ben 10 boys? Perhaps this is somewhat already happening with the recent "safe sleazy" meme and its variants of portraying stereotypical subcultures of men. Supposedly in the Medieval/ Renaissance times, young clerics would have had to read the texts of the Saints and pick one of them to base their holy practice on. If that was indeed the case, it seems like a much better way to approach gender identity as it leaves room for diversity of expression to shine through. But then again this was a valid mode of creating identity at that time as the Church offered the grand meta-narrative, a luxury that we no longer have today.

But I am not so sure about dismantling these ideals, as it seems that even though people cannot explain concepts like masculinity or femininity, they are still very attached to them, and it seems to be part of human nature as we have seen the emergence of gender in both history but also today, from major cities like New York to the communal tribes of the Amazon Rainforest. I believe the current chaos and limited diversity in expressing gendered identity (especially for men) is pretty directly linked to the current recession we are facing and the insane standards we feel we have to push through by social media and also the current economic recession.

How can you think about the way you want to express yourself daily if you are either unemployed or working 12hr shifts daily for almost nothing?

13.
The soundtrack seems almost self-parodical, managing to be at the same time both bonkers and cool. Could you talk a bit about the music in the film?

R: Originally I never thought of a musical side to the project because I was overly focused on the visuals. As the Thesis research started taking more and more shape, I realized that I would either have to act as a

music curator on the side, pay someone to make music for me, or do it myself. Eventually I chose the latter as I was unable to find the exact type of music I wanted. In my head I was mixing noise albums with Arca, manele, Death Grips and 1800 PAIN.

The thought process behind the music was combining the diasporic with the stereotypical and the dysphoric. I eventually narrowed the sound down when I decided to use a very stereotypical reggaeton beat that you would encounter in most manele songs with noise and other electronic sounds/ instruments. It felt like the noise part perfectly captured dysphoria while some inspirations from techno and gabber gave the sound that little spark of outsideness, along with some samples here and there from Eastern music, although not implemented as a local would. These limitations were actually a blessing in disguise as it made the process of me learning how to make music from 0 very fun and approachable. I also thought of the sounds in the context of an album and how I would structure the songs such that the reggaeton beat I chose would not feel too annoying. "I Did It All For You" by Murderer actually was a great inspiration and example on how to work with one rhythm and what that does in an album context. In the end I decided I would do 2 interludes which basically just repeated a groove twice, 2 longer songs that would twist the normally catchy beat to make for more atmospheric/ impending songs, 3 songs that would have a very particular instrument, 2 songs with an Eastern vibe to them, 3 techno-inspired songs, with all of these qualities mixing and matching so that the final album would have quite a cohesive sound.

With some videos, the music actually came first and the videos were made to wrap around the sounds nicely, but most of the time I would create the songs while having notes written for each video and what I want to capture (vaguely) with said song. It was a bit like controlled chaos to work on both of these aspects at the same time, but it really helped to have had interviews with Andrei Șchiop and Paul Breazu on the history, sounds and context of manele and its larger cultural ramifications, as part of the research.

All in all I am quite proud of the songs that came out and I think that for a first-time musician the album turned out quite nicely, although I have heard complaints about the mixing not being the best sometimes. I knew from the start that mixing seems to be harder than rocket science so I also decided to not think about it at all during the process.

Now that I think about it, I should be actually starting on working and posting my premade sets I am using in my performances and also work on a new album.

14.
Could you elaborate on the concept of Romanian New Wave as the post-1989 Orientalism?

R: What I was trying to convey was that following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Western interest in the post-Soviet states was through the roof. In that political climate a lot of cultural material that spoke about the terrors and quirks of Communism was seen as new, refreshing and "real". But after a while these stories started becoming cliches for native audiences. In its effort to critique and liberate itself from Communism, Romania became even more linked to it, only now the image of the country is that of one continuously stuck trying to recover from its trauma. It is in a way Orientalism to me because it narrows down the complex history and culture of the country to one single pont: 1989; and through the cultural material, it seems as if even today, we are not "real" Europeans.

I am however torn as on one hand, the criticism from inland is valid, Romanians are much more than just Ceauşescu, and we want to be seen by the wide world as more than that; but on the other hand, I fully believe that Romania has not really processed the trauma of Communism, and in its movies about the suffering pre, during and post 1989 there is still something missing. Perhaps it is the grieving.

15.
The dance party scene to the mantra "in my coffin I have pockets so my enemies see that I'm taking my money with me" is hysterical. I feel like you've built up through the discourse at this point an ideological framework where we are able to appreciate the zany unassailability of the narrator as they reach a peak in their ironic embrace of the absurd. Could you talk about the conception and production of this scene? Do you think your work has an element of the comedic and self-parodical in its embrace of the strategy of subversive affirmation?

R: Yes there is a lot of being creepy but also critical as well as comical. This scene is directly based on this song. I was trying to explain the lyrics to my girlfriend at the time and realized how morbid it sounds when translated to English. Everything from the lyrics to the editing was taken from this song and it is visually the most manele-like scene in the whole series. (the video description has the lyrics, if you have time, please put them through google translate, it's a whole experience)

As I have written a bit in the Thesis/ videos, manele is considered a very low-brow genre that is still not considered "real" music even though sonically it is quite a complex and somewhat rebellious genre which deals with very real topics: breakups, money problems, racism, addictions and hardships. I also find that the editing of these videos, especially in the 2010's is quite iconic and not as appreciated as it should be.

In regards to comedy and self-parody, beyond the strategy of subversive affirmation, it was also activating my inner Tommy Wisseau as I have alluded to in another question/ answer. Part of showing some vulnerabilities meant also embracing the inherent tone that would bring to the work. Meaning that in some way, the work reflects how my actual personality is. I did want the work to be perhaps just scary in the beginning, but the more I researched and the more I performed and edited, it became quite clear that there was an aspect of being ironic, bombastic, delusional that was so specific to either the theory or the art I was being inspired by.

I think the need to also be a bit funny as well came from me watching Romanian New Wave films that had built-in EN subtitles and seeing how the translations missed a lot of fine details like street jargon and untranslatable figures of speech that added this extra layer of irony or cheekiness in the face of the absurd. Romanian has this very particular gift as a language to make anything sound like a curse by using the right grammar. So a lot of the time you don't really default to just one word or one phrase to verbalize annoyance, anger or disgust, but you kind of create something original on the spot, or pick from a myriad of entire phrases. Most of these sayings have no actual rime or reason and something like "te ia mama lu' proces verbal" (roughly "may the mother of minutes take you" with minutes as in the word for writing down things) is being translated to "screw you" which erases the whimsy and the absurd qualities of the language. This is also the case with just informal street talk that uses various figures of speech to refer to quite banal concepts, similar to what you find linguistically in Mexican Spanish.

16.
Can a man be his own father figure?

R: Yes.

17.
What is the role of the mother in a patriarchy? What is the role of the sister?

R: This is a heavy question. Unfortunately I have purposely avoided talking about women because firstly I did not have the necessary lived experience, and because I wanted to talk about masculinity as if it were something important enough to stand on its own without linking it to other identities. Women and other folx are already trying to define that and I would rather they speak on this subject.

I therefore cannot answer this question at this time.

18.
Do you have an interest in psychoanalysis? What are some of the theories or who are some of the theorists whose work you are drawn to?

R: A lot of the work has been influenced by the personal experience I had with therapy and now I am seeing how that has been influencing the way I relate to the world. I would say I am interested in the field of psychology and the writings of Bogdan Ștefănescu and Mark Fisher have allowed me to be more aware of the psychological dimension of politics and society as an entity. I am slowly immersing myself in Jungian writing and have been relating to it in a slightly woo-woo way especially with the ideas of the Shadow Self and the Collective Unconscious. I have also been reading "The Denial of Death" so now I kind of hate Freud, or at least what the book describes as his obsession with reducing everything to sex.

I do believe we should be focusing more on the psychology of groups, institutions, politics and culture rather than just the individual itself.

19.
Expressions of dominance in the absence of real power are a topic you touch on, which I think taps into the vein of contemporary discourse on male identity and patriarchy arising as the result of social and economic frustrations of men in a postindustrial society. How can men adapt constructively to life in a postindustrial society that has shifting (ie, contemporary) social mores and economic needs?

R: Firstly I believe in integrating our feminine better in the way we perform our gender. We have seen that women are not only just as capable, but even more so in intellectual pursuits or positions of power than men currently. One reason why men fall behind today is precisely in this failure to adapt to a more flexible way of navigating your gender identity. However this is not as easy as patriarchal structures still promote high competition among men and I also believe it is the framework (patriarchy) that can be blamed for the so-called "female hypergamy". One specific way to incorporate the female in a healthy way is by building a social support network, also commonly known as having good friends. Socializing and building relationships outside just professional contexts is a must. Ideally I would strive for a healthy form of patriarchy / masculinity and not simply abolish it to leave an identity void.

Culturally we must also shift towards either having deep appreciation and thus equivalent remuneration for "not sexy" jobs that actually matter a lot, like janitors, truck drivers, sewer & warehouse workers, construction and so on - or put the AI that's currently doing half-assed paintings and coding to actual work that would liberate men from doing the most grueling jobs that exist. Elon Musk has finally proved that no amount of money or power can make one human happy or content, and that money and power never directly translate to actual success in the real world. I talked about social groups previously. This act must also come with the expectation of not shaming men's interests. I have noticed this trend of infantilizing men's interests like video games or merch collecting (and also on a larger cultural scale, the flanderization of the male head of the family as a bumbling fat idiot through various forms of media) which only tends to alienate people further.

Lastly, I will redirect people to this video, as I feel that it touches on how alienation, capitalism, sex and incels are all linked and symptoms of current day power structures while also being pretty constructive and giving some pieces of actual advice. Maybe also reading an English translation of "The Capitalism of Seduction" would help.

20.
I love this literary vignette you create, of something like group therapy for a subject's better (and worse) angels - for a subject's multifaceted poetic alter egos- where the characters of the gimp, unicorn, goat and mannequin meet and hash out their traumas and their pasts. How do you feel magical realism works in your creative practice, and what was your creative process like in developing the meeting of these characters?

R: I draw a big part of my ideas and approach from works that are (inspired by) magical realism and I consider it to be a good framework as it allows the viewer to situate internal feelings onto a physical, familiar space. It has been quite abstract and difficult for me to understand how to do shadow work properly until I started reading the "Purple Haze Feedback" manga in which the protagonist's inner rage manifests as a spectral entity he fails to control properly. That is before he is backed into a corner and forced to admit and work in tandem with his rage to gain full control of his spirit entity. I think if an approach like that made it easier for me to visualize therapeutic work, perhaps I can do the same through my art.

Beyond that, the characters and their various meeting are to me extensions of the psychological inner child (the Unicorn), thus the inner ancestor (the Goat), the inner feminine (the Mannequin), the inner man (the Gimp) and the inner animal (the Cream), although other interpretations are welcome and valid. One other aspect that guided the process was the idea of unlearning as opposed to forgetting or suppressing. This unlearning manifested in the way of the characters not being fully protagonists or antagonists, but also in the way in which they themselves and the narrative is built: not to reflect pure reality but rather reconstructing an identity from different starting points.

One very particular example is the Goat costume. If you look up "capra de Anul Nou" you will see the actual tradition the costume is based on, but you can see that my rendition is slightly off and uncanny as I crafted this whole thing out of materials I found in the Netherlands and using very different techniques and materials for the whole assemblage: from muted colours to safety pin stitching to the abstracted goat head, it is all supposed to be a mirror of the Self and the Other at the same time.