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From Biopolitics to the Lived Body: Maternity, Reproduction and Domestic Space in Socialist Bucharest (1965–89)

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Two major reforms initiated in Romania during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship (1965–89) tied the gendered domestic sphere directly to the urban landscape of socialism. In 1974, one of these reforms envisioned the restructuring of the city based on unprecedented mass housing construction using prefabricated elements. The other had criminalised abortion in 1966 in an attempt to increase the country's population, (re)prescribing the essential role of women's bodies in the social reproduction of socialism, thereby establishing the importance of domesticity in the formation of subjectivities and the (literal) reproduction of subjects. Taking this framework as a point of departure, and enquiring into state policies regulating the body and the home on the one hand and modes of appropriation by these spaces' inhabitants on the other, the article argues that domestic architecture played a fundamental role in constructing and deconstructing women's mythical position within state socialism. At the level of the city, the notion of natality opens peculiar perspectives upon the way in which urban planning responded to the legal framework that regulated the social body. The transition to the scale of the apartment through socialist and post-socialist ethnographic accounts and visual culture (art and film) brings to light a contradictory discourse, whereby women detached themselves from any idealised projection present in the public discourse. Shifting from the scale of the city to that of the apartment, the article builds on these antagonisms, unfolding the gendered (and convoluted) nature of the socialist domestic space.



Introduction

Puia Hortensia Maschievici's etching *New Housing Blocks* of 1959 (Fig. 1) shows a woman contemplating the city from the window of her socialist home. She is depicted alone, within a rich interior. The woman, whose face we cannot see, seems to represent a collective ideal: the strong arms, short hair with no headscarf, and modern clothes all reveal her to be the new woman who can appropriate the new type of modern domesticity. But crucially, the socialist transformation is portrayed through a transition in scale: from inside to outside, from the domestic space of the home to mass urbanism. The curtain, plant, and closed window suggest her care for her home, while her elevated perspective reminds us that she occupies a high-rise, having already appropriated the new way of life. The image thus evokes the encounter between women, domestic architecture, and the socialist state and emphasises the transition to a much larger scale that encompasses both a mass subject and domestic architecture.



Figure 1: Puia Hortensia Maschievici, *New Housing Blocks*. 34 × 48.5 cm, colour linocut, 1959. Courtesy of Nasui Collection.

This image provides a critical point of departure for this enquiry, as it brings to light the question of scale in the socialist project. In response to this question, my article investigates two different scales of socialist domesticity — the city and the home — in order to map the instrumental role of the home in the constitution of women's subjectivity. While studies of the role of infrastructure in shaping not only social relations but also subjectivities in socialist contexts are not new (Buchli 1999; Humphrey 2005; Holbraad 2018), my focus is different: I consider the intersection between the spatialisation of power, especially through mass housing built in Bucharest between 1965 and 1989, and the politics of reproduction. Through an analysis of state policies regulating both the body and home on the one hand, and of modes of appropriation by these spaces' inhabitants on the other, the article emphasises the nuanced practices that shaped women's ambiguous identity within state socialism in Romania. Here, the notion of the appropriation of space refers to the inhabitation and transformation of domestic space through various practices that were not compliant with the ideological intent embedded in the infrastructure. Socialist and post-socialist art and film along with interviews function in ways analogous to ethnographic accounts that, rather than lingering on the overarching project of socialism, bring to the fore the subject who experienced these transformations concretely (see also Humphrey 2005).

The establishment of socialism in Romania in 1947 had put the country on a path that followed Soviet influence. Various, often contradictory positions regarding the status of women and the family complemented this. Following Stalin's model, abortion became illegal in 1948. The key role of women, children, and families in the construction of communism was enshrined in the Family Code ('Law 4', 1953). However, in a significant reversal, abortion was again legalised between 1957 and 1966 in an attempt to emancipate women, assigning them the main role of waged worker and temporarily replacing the primacy of motherhood (Kligman 2000: 25, 55).¹ After Nicolae Ceaușescu took over the leadership of the country from Gheorghiu Dej in 1965, he initiated two major reforms that are crucial for understanding the constitution of women's subjectivities: Decree 770, of 1966, concerning the politics of demography; and the plan for the systematisation of the city of Bucharest, voted into effect in 1974, although it had been anticipated several years before ('Law 58'). The pairing of these reforms is the context that frames my argument in this article. The first reform criminalised abortion again, in an attempt to increase the country's population, thereby (re)redefining the fundamental role of women's bodies in the social reproduction of socialism.² The second envisioned a new structure for the city — uniform, homogeneous, and scientifically organised — in order to sustain the growing population. Aiming to distinguish his politics not only from his predecessor Dej but

also from Soviet power, Ceaușescu launched a legitimization campaign — present in all aspects of his political, social, and cultural agenda — that became the national ideology of Romanian socialism (Kligman 2000: 65).

The question of scale was fundamental to the ambition of the socialist plans, insofar as the standardisation and repeatability of housing construction were key to a new collectivist vision based on large-scale production along with the *new socialist person*. The significance of this for the formation of subjectivities — especially feminine subjects — is undeniable. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that the story is one-sided and that the state's intentions and infrastructure had complete power over its population. Despite increasing scholarly interest in the role of women in social formations before 1989 (Kligman 1998; Gal and Kligman 2000; Penn and Massino 2009; Jinga 2015; Massino 2019) and in articulating a history of socialist housing typologies (Zahariade 2011; Stroe 2015; Tulbure 2016), the use and transformation of domestic infrastructure in women's lived experience during the socialist regime is an area yet to be explored. In bringing to the fore this encounter between women and domestic space, I argue that this relationship manifested in a contradictory way and foregrounded two pairs of notions: natality and urban planning, and maternity and the home. By exploring two different scales of the city, the article exposes the discordance between these narratives: an urban narrative that attempted to construct an ideal mass feminine subject, and a domestic narrative that produced its own wretched subject.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing speaks about scalability in terms of a normalisation of expansion that has the ability to grow without 'rethinking basic elements' (2019: 143). Whatever its precision or aspiration, Tsing observes that no theory of scalability — whether in biological or cultural projects — ever fulfils its promises; she concludes that the diversity and dynamics of the world reside in its non-scalable effects. Similarly, the broader scale of the socialist city functions as a repository of an idealised social construction, while the interior of the apartment — and specifically the kitchen — is the space where processes undermining the state's vision emerge. Shifting from the scale of the city to that of the apartment, this article builds on these antagonisms, unfolding the gendered (and convoluted) nature of domestic space. In doing so, it opens up possibilities both for further theoretical developments and for more specific ethnographies of domestic space.

The first scale — where urban planning responded to the legal framework that regulated the social body — is addressed by drawing theoretically and critically on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics (1991) and Hannah Arendt's notion of natality (1998). In relation to this, archival documents, including aspects of the legal

framework, and architecture magazines provide insights into the official discourse regarding social and urban transformations. The transition to the second scale — that of the apartment, and thus to the space of the home — unfolds through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's writing on the female body (1993), and philosopher Sara Heinämaa's reading of the relationship between the living body and space (2003). For an understanding of the female body as positioned at the centre of the home, this lens is invaluable because it offers an interpretation of corporeality and intersubjectivity that differentiates the constitution of women's subjectivities in the private from that of the collective political sphere. Spatially, and in relation to the scale of the home, the kitchen emerges as the main space of investigation. Imagined from an ideological perspective as a minimal modern space engendering an idealised domesticity, and simultaneously as the primary site for the regulation of private life, when closely analysed, the kitchen assumes a contradictory role. I suggest that focusing on the kitchen enables us to understand not only the limitations of political intent but, more importantly, the resilience of people and the informality of their practices.

Archival documents of the day present the idealised city from the outside, but it is film and clandestine art, as well as ethnographic accounts, that allow insights into the home's lived realities. The use of art and film as media gives us access to renditions of the ways in which female subjectivity and the experience of maternity within the home engaged with or subverted political fantasy in socialist Romania. The artworks that are the focus of my article, produced during the 1970s and 1980s, explicitly thematise the lived body — a gendered body — that is placed within the space of the apartment, bringing to light a critique of the control of private life by the socialist regime. The repressive political framework is implicit not only in the themes these artworks reference but also insofar as the artworks were never made public before 1989 in Romania. Meanwhile, the films from the Romanian New Wave cinema — which refers to films produced after 2000 — tend to portray the kitchen as an essential element of the recollected communist condition, and are a means to visually approximate the experience of socialist domestic space.³ Both artworks and films reveal traces of the intimacy established between the body and the home, and orient the viewer within the domain of the private.

I therefore suggest that it is only from this position — of post-socialism — that we are able to analyse the multilayered relationship between women's bodies and domestic spaces. Despite the lack of access to an 'authentic' socialist experience of space, the value of the proposed approach is that it brings to light the interdependence and intertwined nature of this relationship. The distance implied by the sources employed, and their

simultaneous sedimentation in a shared imaginary, enable us to grasp the relationship between socialist domestic space and the subject as a dynamic of negotiation, going beyond official discourse towards examining everyday life.

The First Scale: From the Ideal City to the Ideal Woman

The decisions made at the 10th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, in August of 1969, and at the National Conference, in June of 1972, formed the basis for a new transformation of the city of Bucharest through the Law of Urban Systematisation, voted into effect in April of 1974 (Figs. 2 and 3). The industrialisation of housing construction expressed the communalisation of dwelling in general, and this law launched the unprecedented and extensive use of prefabricated systems for housing production (Culiciu 2016: 201). As part of a programme for social homogenisation, urban systematisation laid out the efficient use of territory, the construction of higher buildings with minimal distances between them, increased density, and the interconnection between the zones of the city. Housing construction would start from the urban centre and move towards the periphery, while scientific planning would validate extensive demolition of the existing fabric. A re-evaluation of housing districts between the 1950s and the 1960s allowed new housing construction on already built-up terrain, in order to increase the density of the plots.

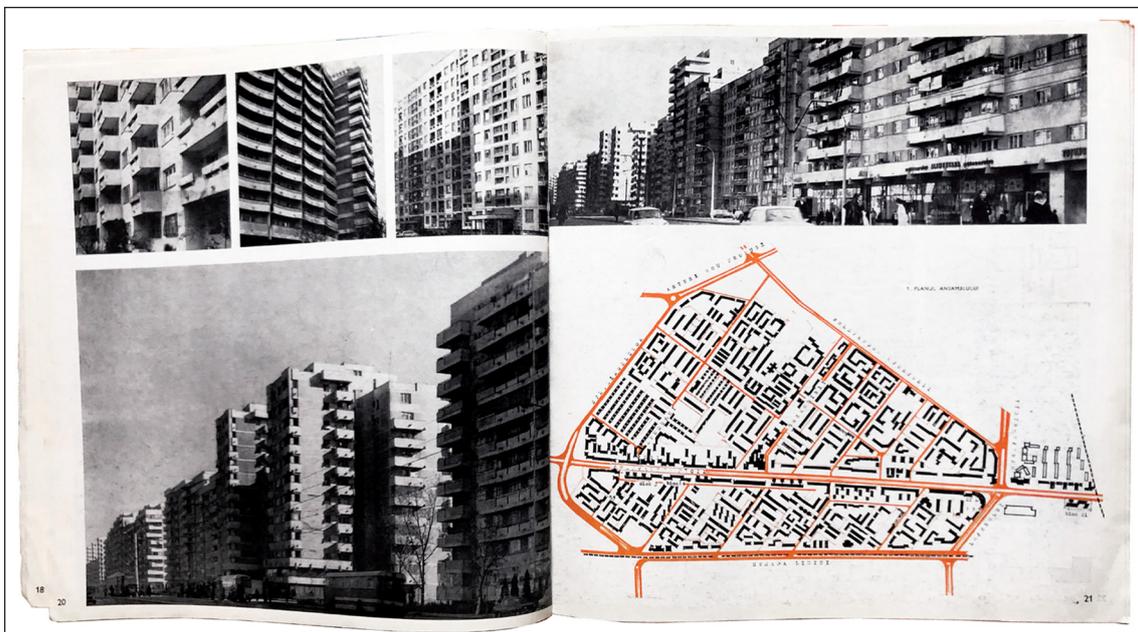


Figure 2: Photos and systematisation plan of Militari district in Bucharest, 1980. From *Arhitectura*, 28(1-2): 20-21. Courtesy of the Union of Romanian Architects (UAR).

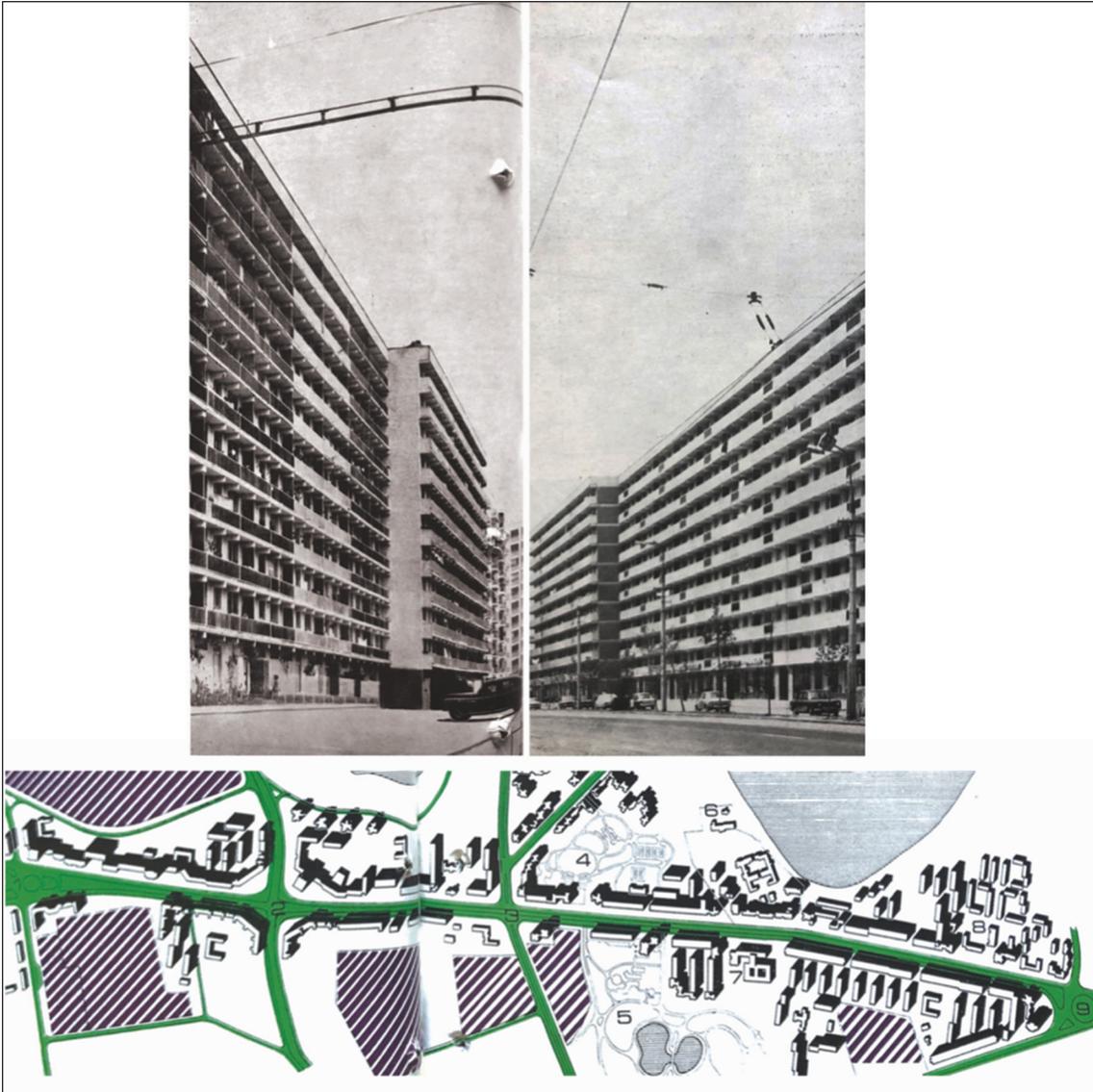


Figure 3: Systematisation plan and photos of Pantelimon District in Bucharest, 1975. From *Arhitectura*, 28(4): 38–39. Courtesy of the Union of Romanian Architects (UAR).

In an article published in 1975 in the journal *Arhitectura*, Cezar Lăzărescu, director of the Union of Romanian Architects and rector of the ‘Ion Mincu’ Institute of Architecture, highlighted the impracticality of the housing districts built in the 1950s and 1960s according to the Soviet microrayon model. Conceived as an independent urban unit, the microrayon was supposed to provide its inhabitants with all necessary facilities, such as schools, canteens, shopping centres, clinics etc., while the organic distribution of the housing blocks would emphasise the importance of nature and

pedestrian routes. Lăzărescu's critique especially targeted the vast green areas and the microrayon's isolation from the rest of the city by wide avenues. With regard to the former, despite the good intentions behind their design, municipalities were generally unable to maintain these green spaces, which could not be properly used by dwellers. Regarding the latter, and in light of the new plans for urban homogenisation, Lăzărescu acknowledged the urgency of connecting these isolated districts both to each other and to the city centre under the 1976–80 five-year plan. In principle, this vision translated into the transformation of the city through two methods: the 'cladding of the large avenues' with high-rise housing blocks, and the densification of existing housing districts (Lăzărescu 1975). The themes that would dominate the city's development from this point onwards were thus economy and homogenisation.

What has received less attention in architectural history is that these new measures in the organisation of the city not only were manifested in extensive housing construction but simultaneously functioned to prescribe specific roles for women. Another article in *Arhitectura* described the directives to organise women's workplaces as close as possible to home: 'The new, unarmful industries, with a high degree of technicality and especially those with a high share of female workforce were to be located within the residential area' (Ciobotaru 1971: 20).⁴ Thus, female workers could easily reach their workplaces from their homes and child-care facilities — efficiently, without spending time commuting. Despite portraying women as emancipated and having equal rights with men in the 1970s, in all public domains, including the rights to perform the same jobs as men and to receive equal pay (Massino 2019: 53), as well as in private life, the plans for urban systematisation marked a shift in the official discourse.

The way the city was envisioned thus translated into a clear reassessment of gender roles and emphasised a new rhetoric about women, who were simultaneously assigned the roles of worker, wife, and mother. The latter had a peculiar significance insofar as the question of population became fundamental under Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The anthropologist Gail Kligman observes a clear relationship between Ceaușescu's demographic politics and Foucault's analysis of the idea of population for the modern state (2000: 20, 83). As Foucault claims,

It is the population itself on which government will act either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of the population into certain regions or activities, etc. (1991:100; Kligman 2000: 20)

In late socialist Romania, the important role of sociology in establishing the rhetoric of care for the population, along with statistical science and demography, emphasised the close collaboration between architecture and the social sciences in the construction of the home (Caffé 1969: 7). Housing design became a privileged space for ‘applied sociology’, managed between 1948 and 1965 by the Laboratory for Urban Sociology from within the state design agency (Proiect Bucureşti) rather than by universities, which had in fact banned the discipline in academic education (Vais 2018: 127).

The demographic regulations that followed, with the specific aim of increasing the population, paralleled these infrastructural changes and marked a biopolitical turn in the socialist project from 1966 onwards. Decree 770 (1966) prohibited contraceptive use and criminalised abortion: all women under 45 had the civic duty to bear at least four children before becoming eligible for legal abortion (see Cazan 2011).⁵ Furthermore, another decree of the same year instituted the exceptional character of divorce, which could be initiated only in rare cases. A ‘spousal reconciliation’ period between six months and one year was mandatory before divorce, and an excessive stamp duty was imposed (‘Decree 779’, 1966).⁶ Obsessive ‘care’ for women’s bodies became a significant part of the propaganda, and all women working in state enterprises were legally required to undergo biannual or annual gynaecological examinations. This was intended not only to prevent diseases that might affect fertility but also to identify early pregnancies and discourage potential abortions (Kligman 2000: 76). Factory physicians had to ensure a monthly birth quota to receive their full salaries, while representatives of the Securitate (secret police) were stationed in hospital obstetrics departments to enforce the abortion regulations (Cazan 2011: 96). Additional measures were implemented to discourage celibacy: all adults over the age of 25 who were unmarried or childless were financially penalised (Arsene 2017: 94).

Although the perspective of architectural history does not make such connections always visible, both the construction of apartments and the configuration of homes were strongly influenced by the logic of this legal framework. Despite directives to build apartments with more rooms, following the anti-abortion law and in anticipation of an increase in family members, the collectivisation of certain functions traditionally associated with the home, such as food production/consumption or child-rearing, allowed the minimal area of the rooms to be preserved (Vais 2018: 28, 127–28). The housing norm was 10 m² per person, with the minimum remaining at the initial level of 8 m² per person. Starting in the 1980s, a project to build six ‘agro-alimentary complexes’ (*complexuri agroalimentare*) — one for each of the six sectors of Bucharest, which had been established by law in 1978 — was meant to contribute to the idea of replacing

domestic kitchens (Fig. 4). By 1989 only two had been finished; the rest were never completed. Planned as spaces for collectivised food consumption, these complexes were curiously part of an attempt to ease women's domestic chores and move aspects of the private into the public domain at the same time (see Stătică 2019).



Figure 4: Agro-alimentary complex in Pantelimon district (one of the so-called *circuses of hunger*), now a shopping complex. Still from the raw footage of *My Socialist Home* by Iulia Stătică and Adrian Cătu, 2021.

Typologically, the massive ‘agro-alimentary complexes’ were developed around a circular core covered by a large glass dome (Light and Young 2010: 7–8). Insofar as kitchens have historically constituted the centre of the home — and the main space contributing to the creation of gender-based relationships (Puigjaner 2020) — the implementation of socialised activities were thus considered key to women's emancipation from the home and towards their inclusion in the public sphere (see also Buchli 1999). While these measures of socialisation of domestic activities, such as public canteens, children's day care, and hot meals provided in factories, were not new within the context of global socialism, in the Romanian context they acquired increased significance in that they were tied to extreme practices of the control of the population, especially women. The state provided the infrastructure to accommodate the increasing population, but at the same time women, now (ideally) exempted from domestic chores, had to place their bodies at the disposal of the state, both as labour power and for their reproductive ability. Such connections point to a broader question of biopolitics that becomes of key relevance for understanding Romania's specific socialist context between 1966 and 1989, whereby contemporary mass architecture was profoundly intertwined with the administration of life and the production of a socialist subject. In this context, the

centrality to state formation of both reproductive legislation and the management of women's bodies more generally articulates a notion of socialist biopolitics as 'making live', and foregrounds the question of natality (Diprose and Ziarek 2018: 183). As such, the focus on care for the body marks the introduction of biological phenomena and sexuality in relation not only to the disciplining of individual subjectivity but also to the wider domain of the public, including processes of industrialisation and urbanisation (Repo 2015: 17). Foucault (1980) sees the problem of women's reproductivity only in relation to 'the medicalisation of human life in modernity,' while the question of abortion emerges as a site of contestation 'between the institutional normalisation of bodies through disciplinary power and the resulting "counter-attack" of "resistance" by the same bodies' (Diprose and Ziarek 2018: 186). In light of Foucault's neglect of the importance of women's reproductivity, Arendt's question of natality in relation to biopolitics becomes essential. In *The Human Condition* of 1958, Arendt identifies natality — that is, the human 'capacity of beginning something anew' — as 'the central category of political thought', pointing to its essential status in the organisation of the life of the *polis*, where the fact of action is ontologically rooted. Although she thematises natality and birth as fundamental to the social and political imagination, Arendt insists on the distinction between 'things that should be shown and things that should be hidden'. The latter category refers to intimacy and reproduction, which must be protected from the public sphere and government. Precisely because natality marks a 'new beginning inherent to birth' (Arendt 1998: 9, 72), it also implies a certain amount of uncertainty and unpredictability. In relation to this — and two decades before Foucault coined the notion of biopolitics — Arendt underlines the dangers of the transfer of natality to the sphere of the state. Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Ziarek point out that, by doing this, governments assume the right — and the duty — to control human birth, assigning to the process a predictable character that could anticipate large-scale human and social processes (Diprose and Ziarek 2018: 2–3). Arendt's position is valuable for understanding the context of Ceaușescu's Romania insofar as she defends the privacy of the home in opposition to the biopolitics of totalitarian regimes, which, as we will see, 'cannibalised the private space' (Willard 2015: 233).

Natality, and hence maternity, pervaded both the private and public realms, not only through an infrastructure that was meant to accommodate its citizens but also through propaganda that portrayed maternity as a heroic act essential for the constitution of socialism. The rewarding of maternity as a public gesture further emphasised this: the Heroic Mother Medal was awarded to women with 10 or more children; the Medal of Maternity to women with at least six children; the Order of Maternal Glory to women with five children ('Decree 810', 1969). Natality, as a political process linked to the

biopolitical apparatus and reflected in the urban scale and its transformations, is hence translated into the public realm as maternity. The private act of becoming a mother, linked to the subjective body and reflected at the scale of the home, thereby becomes a 'social obligation' (Nişis 2009: 61), integrated into the theatrical parade of socialism. The care for women's bodies becomes a focus not only of the legal framework through the politics of natality but also of the configuration of the city, and of the home.

The Scale of the Home: From the Ideal Woman to the Lived Body

The transition to the scale of the private space offers a far more nuanced picture of the relation between state, domestic architecture, and feminine subjects. In opposition to the choreographed urban scale, the interior appears as a space that allows, within certain limits, a diversity of human relations, asserting the importance of one's own body to negotiate the larger scale of the political. Within the apartment, the state's generalised care is dismantled, and individual experience, mediated through the body, is transformative for understanding significantly more nuanced lives within standardised spaces.

One must recognise the importance of the material world, insofar as our body is sedimented in a material environment, and our relation to the world is not merely instrumental but dialogical. Our 'living body' is thus constituted only by experience and in relation to a certain logic of space (Merleau-Ponty 2018: 144–45). The socialist apartment became a home for the living body not only by the decoration of the blank space received from the state but also by the structuring of that space: negotiating boundaries of intimacy and privacy, subversion and compliance (Heinämaa 2003: 39, 104). Sara Heinämaa shows that, in *Le deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir (1993) extends the notion of the expressive body to sexual difference, pointing towards feminine embodiment. Beauvoir's idea of sexual difference does not relate to the bioscientific conception of the body, but to the body-subject (Heinämaa 2003: 66, 77): it is to be read in direct relation to the living body, and thus to the way the individual body experiences events situated in a specific spatial and temporal context.⁷ The significance of Beauvoir and Heinämaa's approaches here is not so much that they try to capture the authenticity of the phenomenological experience of the body. Rather, they are important because an understanding of socialist domestic space needs to consider — more than it usually does — the body as an essential part of the constitution of socialist domesticity per se. Viewed from this perspective, the question that arises does not refer to the modes of gendering or ungendering embedded in infrastructure, but rather to how one (especially a woman) experienced domesticity insofar as their corporeal existence had to respond

to political constraints, and further, how domesticity was produced as a perverted form of both its (socialist) modern and traditional ideal images.

Again, raising these questions about the relationship between domestic space and women's bodies within the given time frame is especially significant from the perspective of maternity. Questions of maternity and birth in relation to communist practice have been raised in post-socialist literature in particular. Mihaela Miroiu and Otilia Dragomir's book *Birth: Lived Histories* brings together the political and the intimate in the visceral experience of childbirth. Focusing on twenty women who share their stories of childbirth during communism and after 1989, the book presents birth as far more than a physical act. It places this intimate experience at the core of larger processes involving medicine, human relations, infrastructures, and institutions, while acknowledging its condition as a taboo both under communism and in its aftermath (2010: 10).⁸ This taboo of childbirth is a peculiar aspect of communist time. Although the woman's position as a mother was a desired status in society, the actual processes of pregnancy and giving birth were concealed from the public imaginary. For example, while the magazine *Femeia* (The Woman) dedicated multiple sections to having, caring for, and educating children, pregnant women were never present in its regular fashion pages. In another example, a book issued by the Political Publishing House (Editura Politică), titled *The Woman: Worker, Wife, Mother* (Poiană 1970), presented the ideal projection of womanhood, with chapters explaining how to be an equal partner in political, social, and economic life, the importance of women's participation in the labour force, developing the personality of a modern socialist woman, and the rights of mothers with multiple children (Fig. 5). More than half of the book's chapters were devoted to the care and education of children;⁹ none of them, however, mentioned the act of childbirth from the point of view of women's experience. The single reference to it was in relation to the sanitary institutions the state provided.

General concepts of infrastructural provision and the instrumentalisation of women in demographic processes almost always lacked a subjective dimension. Despite the presence of the idea of motherhood as a duty, and indeed as a heroic act, maternity remained, as Miroiu and Dragomir (2010) underline, a subjective, intimate act that unfolded primarily within the realm of the home. Nevertheless, whether as care for the family and children (providing, cooking food, etc.) or as an unrealised possibility (clandestine abortion) — as we will see later — maternity was manifested inside the home in peculiar ways, far from the glory assigned to it in the public sphere. The kitchen was the primary space in which these complex stances unfolded: domesticity gained unexpected new meanings through its agency.¹⁰



Figure 5: Covers of *Femeia* [The Woman] magazine, issued in the 1970s.

The Socialist Kitchen

Within the space of the socialist home, the kitchen bears a peculiar significance. In the following, we will look into the role assigned to the space of the kitchen in several instances of socialist and post-socialist Romanian visual culture as well as accounts

from interviews more specifically. The Romanian film critic Mircea Valeriu Deaca emphasises that despite its almost complete absence from the imaginary portrayed in communist films, the kitchen became a fundamental *topos* of realism in Romanian New Wave cinema (Deaca 2017).¹¹ The films pertaining to this genre portray the kitchen as the main space of the domestic realm, which, despite projecting a post-socialist condition, retains its gendered structure and its rudimentary or perverted practices. Although one might contest its ‘authenticity’, New Wave cinema’s obsessive repetition of portraying the kitchen is valuable insofar as it emphasises its presence in a collective imaginary that the socialist cinema disregarded.¹²

The frequent portrayal of the small and cluttered kitchen in post-socialist cinema asserts its importance in mediating notions of care, structuring family relations and hinting at specific gender roles and traits. Through films we get a glimpse into this intimate space of the family, revealing the role of women as still attached to traditional patterns. The feminine presence is a maternal figure, always standing and moving within this space: she knows the topography and logic of the kitchen and is the main character in the room. For example, in *Occident* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2002) and *Marilena from P7* (dir. Cristian Nemescu, 2006), the kitchen becomes an archetypal space. The walls, invariably clad with whiteish glazed rectangular tiles, evoke a hospital room, while the numerous objects, utensils, and simmering pots on the gas stove bespeak a messy, cluttered space. Cabinets, stove, fridge, table, water pipes, all floating in the room, besiege the woman and her interlocutors. The window in the narrow wall is partially hidden behind a white curtain heavily embroidered with plant motifs, while the table (covered with a plastic tablecloth) and the few stools around it always seem to make room for themselves, in spite of the overcrowding. Such an image is almost universal in Romanian New Wave cinema and is the index of a material and ‘psychological realism’ that justifies the behaviour of the fictional characters (Deaca 2017: 12). The almost surreal quality of the communist kitchen becomes anecdotal in *Tales from the Golden Age* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2009), where the kitchen is a space for animal sacrifice: a father slaughters a Christmas pig in the narrow kitchen, using gas from the domestic supply, but as soon as he starts to parch the pig’s skin, there is an explosion caused by the gas the animal has inhaled. It is essential, however, that the kitchen is associated with butchery, albeit in a comical vein (Deaca 2017: 42; Pop 2012: 65).

The richness of the kitchen portrayed in these films contrasts profoundly with the sanitised character and modernising role that was assigned to it in the state plans to regulate domesticity. An analysis of kitchen plans in 1981 in *Arhitectura*, which reveals that the assigned area remains the same (approximately 6 m²) even if the number

of family members occupying the apartment changes, nevertheless anticipates a transition:

We may perhaps assume, as a point of departure, other functional solutions for food consumption at the urban level, ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ the home, and with implications for the organisation of the kitchen. For example, the expansion of the production of precooked meals, or the generalisation of a public network of food consumption such as a communal kitchen [*bucătărie de bloc*] — a self-service express canteen — which could have as consequence the reduction of the time spent in the kitchen, the reduction of the storage volume, of the area of the room and perhaps even the transformation of certain functional relations within the apartment. (Copalaci and Mănciulescu 1981: 26)

Certainly, this position is conflictual. On the one hand, the state, the producer of domestic spaces, presents a future plan to ease the burden of cooking, aiming to transfer the functions of the kitchen to the socialised facilities of the ‘agro-alimentary complexes’, a sort of urban canteen. On the other hand, this ‘modernising’ vision conflicts with the early-1980s reality of food shortages and rationing, which led to daily queues even for basic foods (see Verdery 1996). Along with this, the Programme of Scientific Nourishment,¹³ launched in 1982 by the Ministry of Health, introduced ‘rational eating’ for the entire population, paired with ‘rational living’ through restrictions on basic amenities such as electricity, gas, and water (‘Program’, 1982; see also Massino 2019: 337). These state practices regulated not only consumption but also women’s lives within the household, whose attributes remained, despite official discourse, embedded in traditional gendered patterns. Women were thus expected not only to be emancipated subjects working in industry but also to bear and raise several children, as well as to do all the housework, while food procurement was an adventure and intimacy was controlled by the state (Uricaru 2008: 17). Moreover, food could not be prepared at one’s convenience: women were sometimes forced to get up at four in the morning so as to be able to use the gas, as the supply was turned off during normal waking hours. Magdalena, a retired factory worker who lives in a socialist flat in Bucharest (Fig. 6), recalls that time:

We had neither heat nor hot water. We had about two hours of hot water a day in the afternoon, if only. When the children were babies, I would give them baths in the kitchen. I used to put a blanket on the table, along with the [reusable] nappies, towels. ... I would turn the gas stove on so that the room would get warmer, heat the

water on the gas stove, and then I gave them a bath. It was very difficult. (MM, interview by the author, July 2020)



Figure 6: Magdalena and her daughter in the kitchen of their Bucharest flat. After the 1989 Revolution Magdalena refurbished her kitchen, covering it in new tiles and opening it up to the balcony. Analogue photo by the author, July 2020.

Imposing a strict communal schedule for domestic activities through time restrictions on amenities, the state ensured its strong presence within the daily private realm. The anthropologist Katherine Verdery speaks of the conception of time during socialist Romania ‘as a medium of activity that is lodged in and manifested through human bodies’ (1996: 40, see 44). The state was able to control the individual body through techniques for seizing time that manifested within the domain of the home.¹⁴ Restricted access to gas, water, and electricity led to the capture of women’s bodies in the process of providing for the family.¹⁵ Such generalised and normalised practices emerge, however, as specific lived experiences that have the ability to shape subjects, and through an attention to them we derive a deeper understanding of the relationship between the woman and the home. Heinämaa emphasises the essential character of such concrete situations, as the only way to speak about subjectivity, that is, as one’s

bodily experience (1996: 301). This becomes even more significant insofar as, especially after 1966 and until the fall of the communist regime, domestic space was not only a space for pursuing socialist modernity but also a medical laboratory — space for clandestine abortions:

She took me into the kitchen and had me get up on the table while she prepared her syringe and a transparent plastic tube, small in diameter, which was probably used for transfusions. While she was doing that, I took in my surroundings. The room smelled of stew and poverty. It is not by accident that kitchens are the chosen rooms for clandestine abortions. Water and fire for sterilizing are within reach, especially in the small kitchens that were the standard in socialist architecture. It was the one virtue of such kitchens. In this one, the table was in the middle; there was a sink next to it under which the garbage was kept. (MS, interview published in Kligman 1998: 183–84)

This post-socialist account of a clandestine abortion performed in one of the socialist blocks in the early 1980s is not exceptional. Many clandestine abortions, similar to the above account, took place in the kitchens of standardised apartments. The kitchen acted as an opaque cell that isolated the individual, shielding behind its concrete walls a life detached from the ideals of the collective outside. It became a space not only for food consumption but also for the consumption of bodies, and for violence, perpetuating the image of the eternally guilty citizen (Deaca 2017: 59).

In the film *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007) by Cristian Mungiu (b. 1968), domestic architecture is a burial site: hurrying through the night to find a place to bury an aborted foetus, Otilia — a university student and one of the film's protagonists — disposes of it in the refuse chute of a randomly chosen housing block (Maxim 2012: 9–10). Through such acts, clandestine abortions are transformed into a corrupt ritual of collective redemption, and only through the removal of the impure subject can society preserve its apparent order (Deaca 2017: 41). The experiential structure of an event such as a clandestine abortion within the space of the kitchen supersedes the intention embedded in the domestic space by state planning (see Heinämaa 2003: 113). The question then arises: how is domestic space transformed in a woman's understanding if the kitchen is simultaneously a space for the care of the family and an abortorium? I suggest that the methodological problem raised by this question can be addressed only through an attention to lived experience. In the theoretical framework discussed above, the only way we can access women's ways of being in the space of the apartment — as both compliant and subversive subjects — is by turning back to experience and investigating it as formed in the relationship with the female body (Heinämaa 2003). This is also to say that such an approach allows us to describe and analyse specific experiences as

sources of knowledge, bringing to light the ‘nonscalable diversity’ (Tsing 2019: 152) produced in this encounter: between the female body and domestic space.

Ethnography and film certainly provide essential accounts that approximate experiences of the body within specific spaces, but art also has a peculiar value in this process: it introduces a critical, reflexive dimension that can be viewed as a supplement to these ethnographies and simultaneously functions as an ethnographic source in its own right. For example, in 1982 the artist Ana Lupaş (born 1940) designed a postcard showing a foetus in a glass jar, an artistic gesture emphasising the visceral suffering of the body in the attempt to preserve one’s reproductive rights. Titled *My Baby* (Fig. 7), the image brings to light the woman as the subject of a bodily trauma that impacts on both individual and collective experience (Nişis 2009: 62). The postcard, with a return address in Romania on the back, was distributed to the visitors of her exhibition at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne. The objectification of the foetus which becomes a souvenir placed on a postcard could be interpreted as an expectation for action from those who are in its possession. As part of the same series, the poster of the exhibition presents the artist in profile with her eyes covered, behind bars, suggesting a concentration space and pointing to the lack of women’s freedom.¹⁶

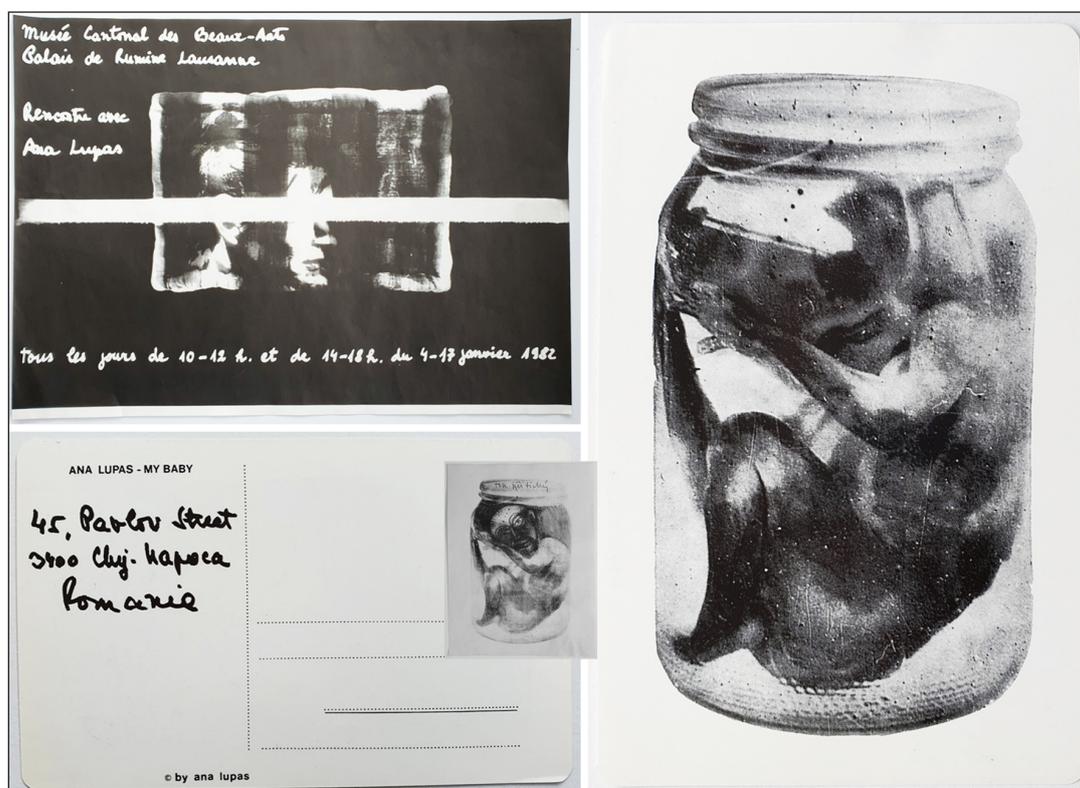


Figure 7: Ana Lupaş, *My Baby*, 1982. Courtesy of the artist.

Although clandestinely, other artists of the same generation manifest a specific interest in exploring such issues through an introspective, intimate approach. In his series of photographs titled *Delivery/Birth* (1977), Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu (born 1945) presents himself in the maternal birthing position: ‘He sits on a chair in a dark room; the camera shows parts of his naked body from various perspectives. A baked pastry, braided into something resembling a knot, functions as a prop that stands in for ovaries, the umbilical cord, even the newborn baby’ (Wolfert 2015: 17; see Czirak 2019: 141). This type of bread, which in Romania is often used in religious ceremonies commemorating the dead, anticipates the imminent abortion that is placed at the core of the home. His works are significant in questioning gender roles within the private realm, as well as in relation to the broader public discourse of the emancipation of women. In other works, Grigorescu (1977) deals even more specifically with issues relating to domestic space, attempting to reveal the rhythms of everyday life in a ‘review of an interior’, juxtaposing the body as object with the space of the apartment, which is itself a result of sociopolitical circumstances. The object of his enquiry — his own body — mediates between subjective processes and the external environment. Everyday interactions with domestic space become fundamental in the articulation of the self. A series of photographs titled *The Kitchen* (1976) shows the artist in his own apartment, in a small room filled with domestic objects, performing an ordinary household activity: ironing. The banality of such activities, as well as of the surroundings, that Grigorescu portrays in his art bear no trace of the scientific ideals of the Communist Party, while his intimate performances also mark a common but largely unacknowledged understanding of domestic space as a place where alternative cultures, economies, and praxes developed during communism (Țichindeleanu 2016).

The work of Marilena Preda-Sânc (born 1955) tackles further the question of the body and its relation to space and intimacy. The series *Body-Space* (Fig. 8), realised in the 1980s, overlaps images of the artist’s body with a series of graphical elements suggesting spatial captivity. She uses her body as a subject while exploiting the domestic confines of the home. Her series *My Body Is Space in Space, Time in Time and Memory of All* (1983–85) portrays the body wrapped in a three-dimensional grid that, despite its restrictive dimensions, seems to soften in contact with the woman’s body. Both series point to self-referential exploration as an expression of subjective experience that is very much embedded in a specific social and political context (Nițis 2011). The backgrounds, which are either blank or filled with repetitive, concrete-like shapes (and also linked to her *Serialism* from 1981), seem to reference the abstraction of standardised housing blocks.

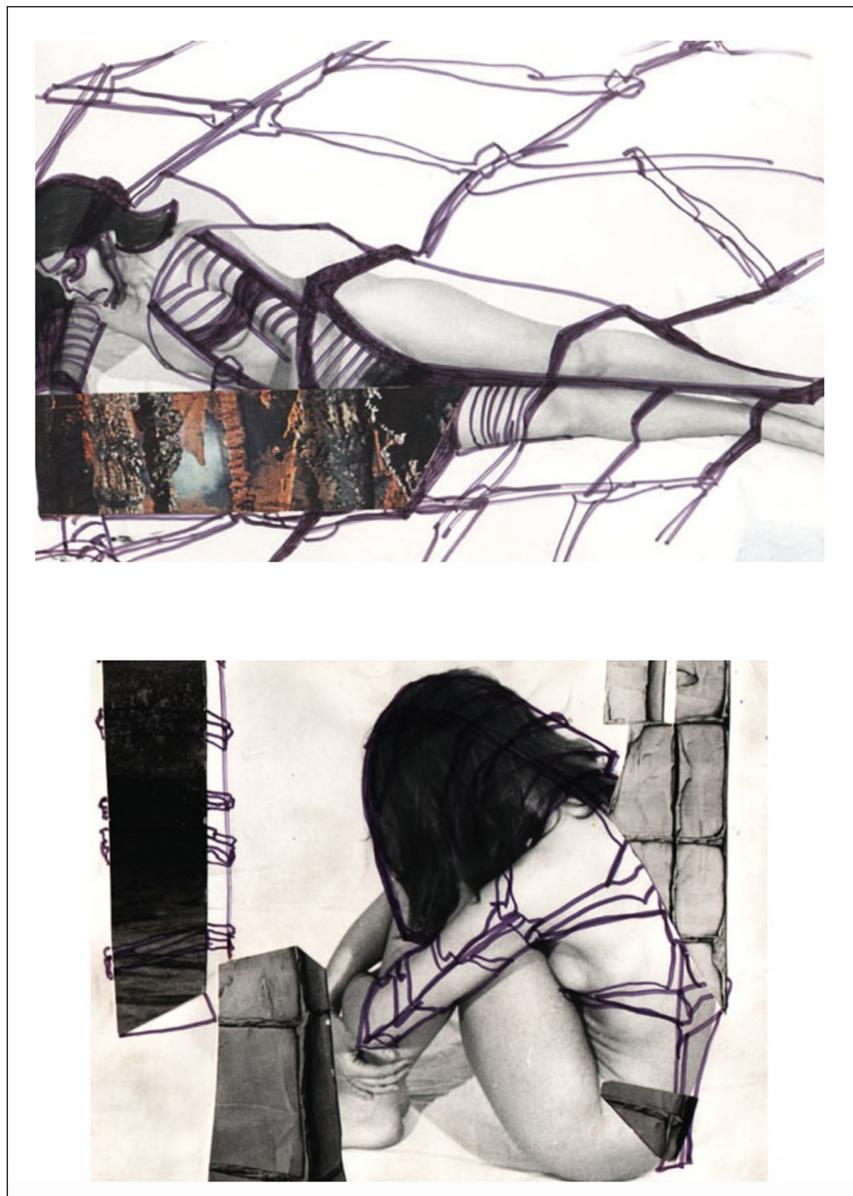


Figure 8: Marilena Preda-Sânc, *My Body Is Space in Space, Time in Time and Memory of All*, 1983–85. Courtesy of the artist.

There is of course a gap between the actual experiences of women in their homes and the theatricality of these artistic process that engage the body. Nevertheless, the gap itself is valuable, as it does not so much critique the state's bioscientific attitude towards the female body as thematise it — in Beauvoir's terms — as a living subject. Through this shift the artist is no longer a person who reveals a manifesto, but rather someone who acts as his/her own self — the socialist citizen — who literally has to live through this.

Conclusion

While the transition in scale — from the urban to the home, from the collective to the female body — may suggest a topic too large and overwhelming to be debated within the limits of a single article, I argue that the attempt to do so is essential if we are to understand the conflictual relation between public and private spheres, and between the legal, administrative, and material arrangements of the state's regulatory framework and people's actual everyday lives. One might say that the numerous ways in which women had to compensate for flawed state programmes are an index of the fact that a significant part of their lives had to function outside of the socially accepted feminine ideal.¹⁷ A focus on women's bodies and their experiences of interior space reveals not only ways of negotiating and renegotiating the role of domestic space but also the visceral nature of the process, suggesting that it was *the only way* to get through. The case of Romanian socialism is unprecedented in this regard, especially in light of women's precarious domestic and intimate condition, despite the aggressive programs of emancipation. Domestic infrastructure became essential not only in the constitution of the socialist state but more significantly of women's bodies and subjectivities. My enquiry into different scales sought to bring to light the deviations that the ideal of scalability enables: the resilience of one's body within the experience of precarious survival. To gain access to these divergent scales, we need different methods and conceptual frameworks by which to enquire into their various layers. Archival work gives us only a glimpse of the biopolitics of an urban scale. Ethnographic and artistic gestures point not only towards the repressive character of the environment but also to forms of survival that make everyday life possible: they emphasise the role of one's body as mediator and as transformative ground for the understanding of the self and the home.

Notes

- ¹ Abortion was legalised in the USSR in 1955. Stalin's death was not the only trigger for legalising abortion in Romania in 1957. A series of geopolitical factors also contributed to the decision, including the 1956 Soviet socialist crisis in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic. The liberalisation of abortion was one of the stimuli offered to people in order to modify the regime's image (Kligman 2000: 60).
- ² Romania became the only country in the Eastern Bloc to criminalise abortion, against the recommendation of the Soviet Union, while the latter claimed that it would have little impact in terms of population increase.
- ³ I thank Tao DuFour for pointing this out in one of our discussions.
- ⁴ All translations from Romanian are by the author unless otherwise noted.
- ⁵ A later decree amended this law and established that women needed to give birth to at least five children before being allowed an abortion ('Decree 411', 1985).
- ⁶ The stamp duty was set between 3000 and 6000 lei; the net average salary in 1966 was 1083 lei (CNPP 2001).
- ⁷ Contrary to the debates around binary distinctions between sex and gender constructed through historical and epistemological practices, Heinämaa argues for an understanding of bodies, sexes and genders, and the relations that exist between them, through the phenomenology of the body developed by Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir. Heinämaa considers *The Second Sex* as 'a phenomenological inquiry into the constitution of the meaning of sexual difference' (2003: xiii). She proposes a philosophical reading of Beauvoir's book in which the idea of *becoming* a woman opposes the understanding of *gender* as a sociocultural construct organised around hierarchies and dualistic thinking. In doing so, Heinämaa takes a step back from Foucauldian feminism, where understandings of sex and gender are dependent on historical and social circumstances (2011: 8), and instead develops Beauvoir's proposal that sexual difference can only be understood in the context of existentialist philosophy and phenomenology. While Beauvoir refers to three analytical systems – biological, psychoanalytical, and historical (1993: 109) – Heinämaa argues that none of these are appropriate for speaking about relations between men and women, concluding that the body is our 'framework of meaning and truth' (1996: 291). This view of bodily human existence is referred to through the writings of Merleau-Ponty, but we must understand that the body is not an object, and everything around it exists only in relation to it: 'The body is the condition of all objects and all our knowledge of them' (Heinämaa 1996: 300). The identity of the body is not dependent on this or that attribute, but rather by a netting of expressions, gestures, or experiences – of 'styles of being'. Sexual difference is deeply embedded in our existence but cannot be 'understood by analysing objects, events or their causal relations'; the only way to get its sense is to experience it concretely (Heinämaa 1996: 301; see Beauvoir 1993: 43).
- ⁸ In a similar manner, but not exclusively focused on the experience of childbirth, the book *Road Comrades: The Feminine Experience in Communism* (Gheo and Lungu 2008) also takes an interest in women's subjective experience.
- ⁹ 'Raising and Caring for a Baby', 'Training and Educating Preschool Children', 'Both Parents' Responsibility for Their Children's Education', 'Preparing Adolescent Girls for Life'.
- ¹⁰ The kitchen, which was ripe for modernisation, constituted a heated battleground for the two ideologies during the Cold War, as witnessed also in the 'kitchen debate' between Nixon and Khrushchev in 1959 (see Oldenziel and Zachmann 2008).
- ¹¹ Romanian New Wave is a genre of films, made in Romania, that began in the 2000s. For example, *The Apartment* (dir. Constantin Popescu Jnr, 2004), *Aurora* (dir. Cristi Puiu, 2010), *Adalbert's Dream* (dir. Gabriel Achim, 2011), and *When Evening Falls on Bucharest, or Metabolism* (dir. Corneliu Porumboiu, 2013).
- ¹² Socialist cinema usually replaced the intimate space of the kitchen with spaces for socialisation that were always collective or institutional (factory, restaurant, transit spaces) and able to indicate the idea of a collective subject (Deaca 2017: 13). Although we can find a few examples where domestic space was portrayed (e.g. *Serenade for the 12th Floor*, dir. Carol Corfanta, 1976), this was in relation to the mainstream rhetoric of modernisation.
- ¹³ The programme included medical recommendations regarding the ratio between height and weight. For instance, a woman 157 cm tall and aged between 30 and 39 should weigh around 56.6 kg. The programme also set out scientific limits on basic annual food consumption per person.
- ¹⁴ This also extended to the scale of the city through food queues, propaganda parades, bus stop queues, etc. (Verdery 1996).

¹⁵ For a discussion of ‘temporal politics’ and specifically the ‘etatization of time’ that is, ‘a struggle between the state and the people for the claims upon time’; see Verdery (1996: 40).

¹⁶ I thank Ana Lupaş and Marina Lupaş for kindly sharing their reflections with me.

¹⁷ See how anthropologist Martin Holbraad discusses the question of the ‘outside’ of socialist infrastructures in the case of post-revolutionary Cuba (2018: 489).

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