

IOAN GROȘAN
THE
CINEMATOGRAPHY
CARAVAN

A black comedy set in 1960's Romania: a Stalinist propaganda film truck rumbles into a forgotten Transylvanian village. The occupants of the village believe in the traditional values of Church and God and are in no mood to participate, placing obstacles in the way of the Cinematography Caravan crew. The resultant humour is deliberately provincial as the villagers find their own unique ways of dealing with them while they're in town.

Romanian Writers' Union, Prize for Prose, 1992

Groșan's prose is, however, an indisputable proof of essential engagement, in all its variety: one of the writer's eyes watches the convulsions of being, its eternal dramas, while the other gazes behind literature, scrutinising its past.

Radu G. Țeposu

Founding member of the Association of Professional Romanian Writers - ASPRO

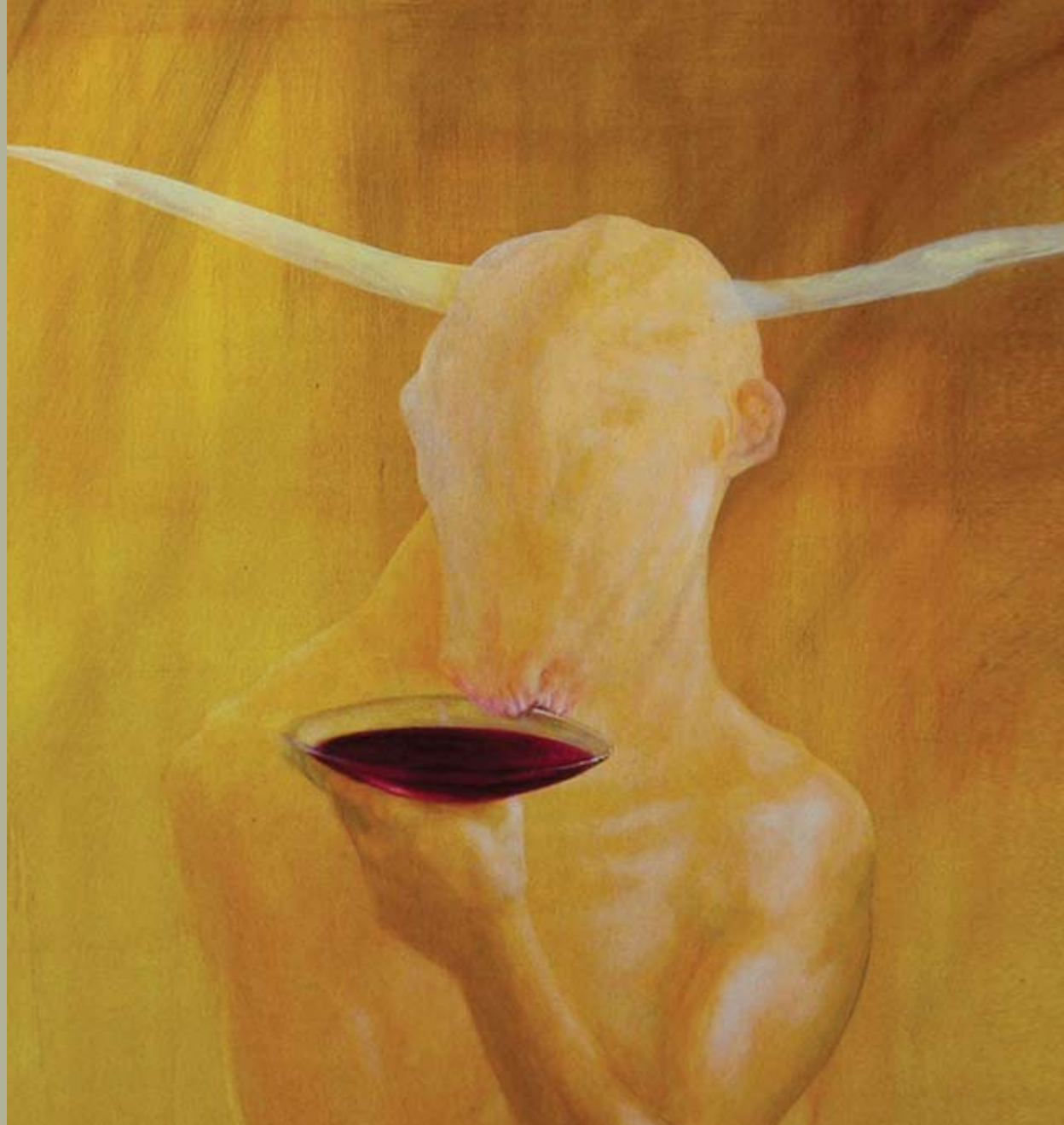
Front cover image: Alexandru Radvan, *Apa pretioasa*.
Back cover image: Alexandru Radvan, *Zeus si Europa*.

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Translated by Kevin McCarthy

20 ROMANIAN WRITERS SERIES

Ioan Groșan *The Cinematography Caravan* is among the first four titles to be published in the series 20 Romanian Writers by the University of Plymouth Press. The series is one aspect of the University of Plymouth's ongoing commitment to bringing Romania's vibrant artistic culture to the West. In addition to the literature, the University of Plymouth will be hosting a series of exhibitions and performances of Romania's visual and musical arts over the next five years.

The following supplement features one of Romania's leading contemporary artists.

Featured Artist

ALEXANDRU RADVAN

We took the Minotaur, this helpless and innocent monster and imprisoned him. Then we invaded with great delight its world and we destroyed it. We skinned it, we crushed it, we burnt it and spread around its ashes. We annihilated it from this earth and from our memory. We remained alone and masters of everything. We have begun to live into a splendid nothingness and we have started to enjoy it. I hope one day we will pay for this.

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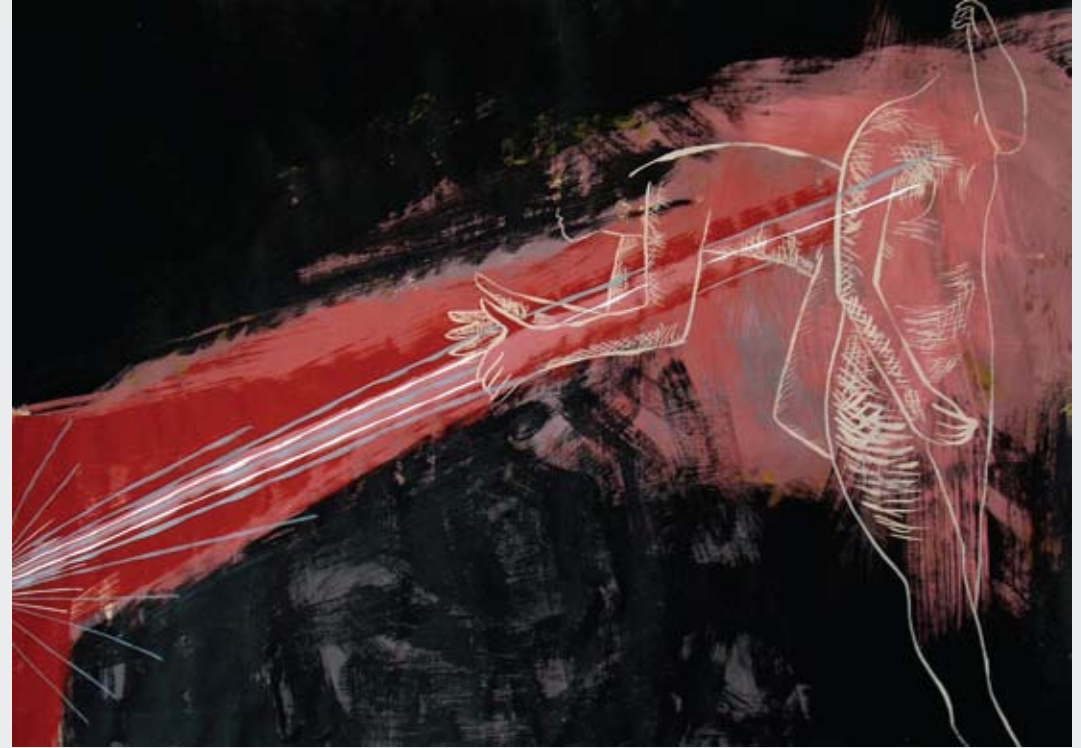
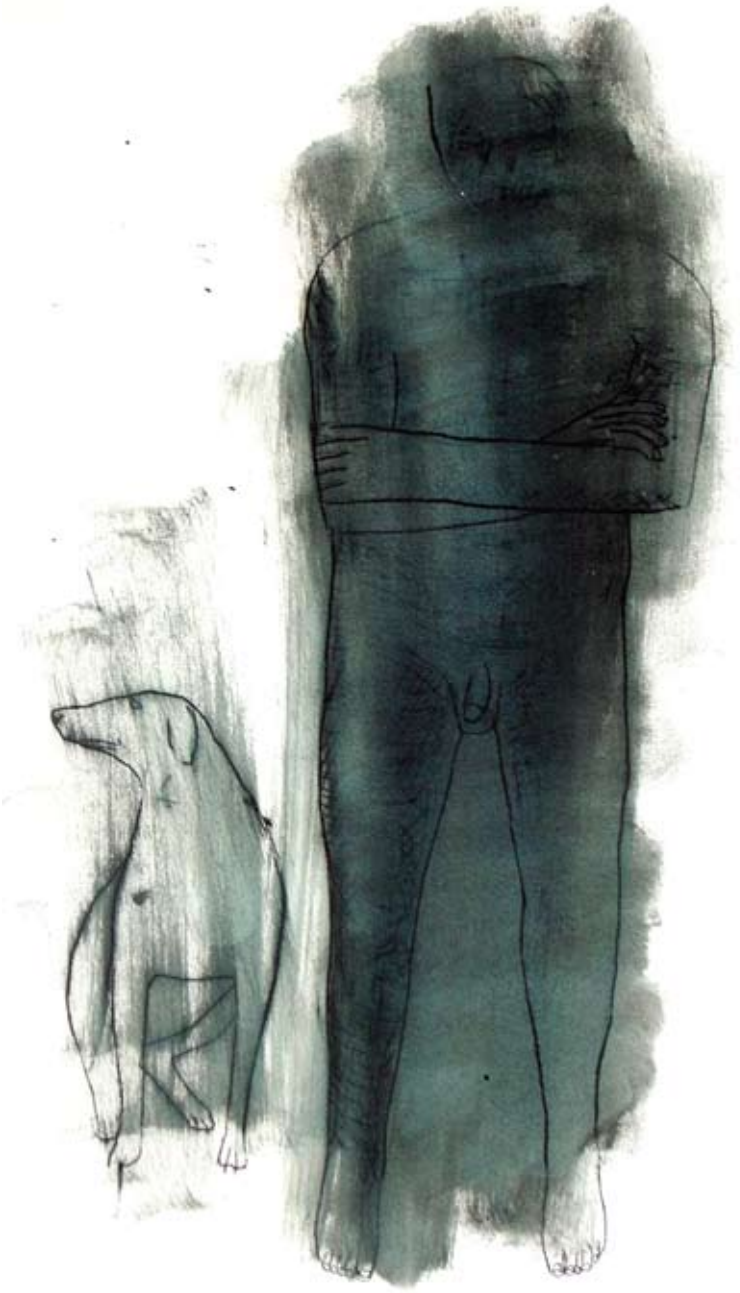
Alexandru Radvan (born 1977) lectures at the National University of the Arts, Bucharest. Awards include 2007 Opera Prima, Prometheus Awards; 2001 Alexandru Țipoia Foundation prize for the best exhibition of the year.

Alexandru Radvan questions essential problems of meaning and reality, the dominance of Christian belief structures, and so-called European 'civilisation'. Nihilistic in tone, like Groșan, his art questions rhetorics of truth and uncertainty.

Liz Wells

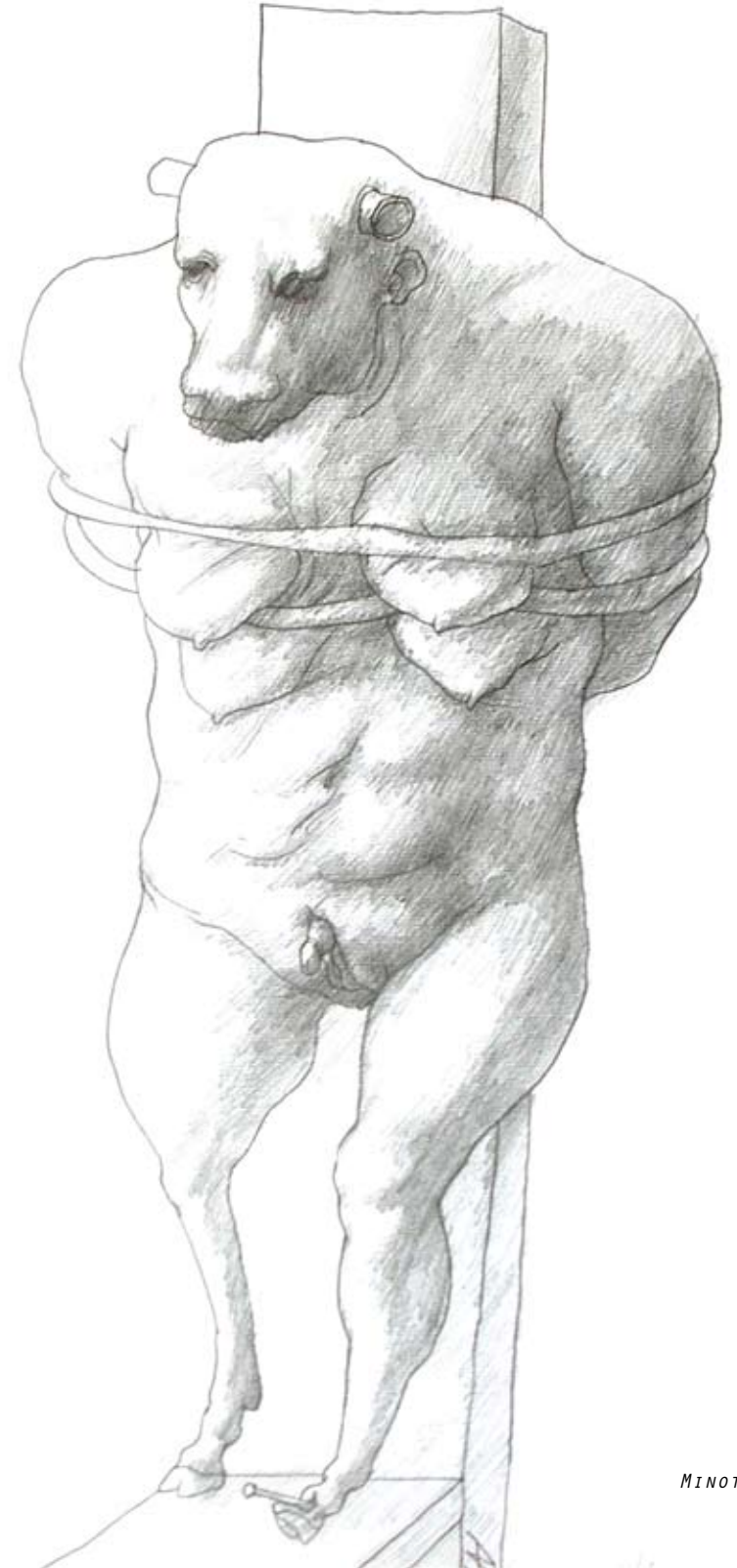








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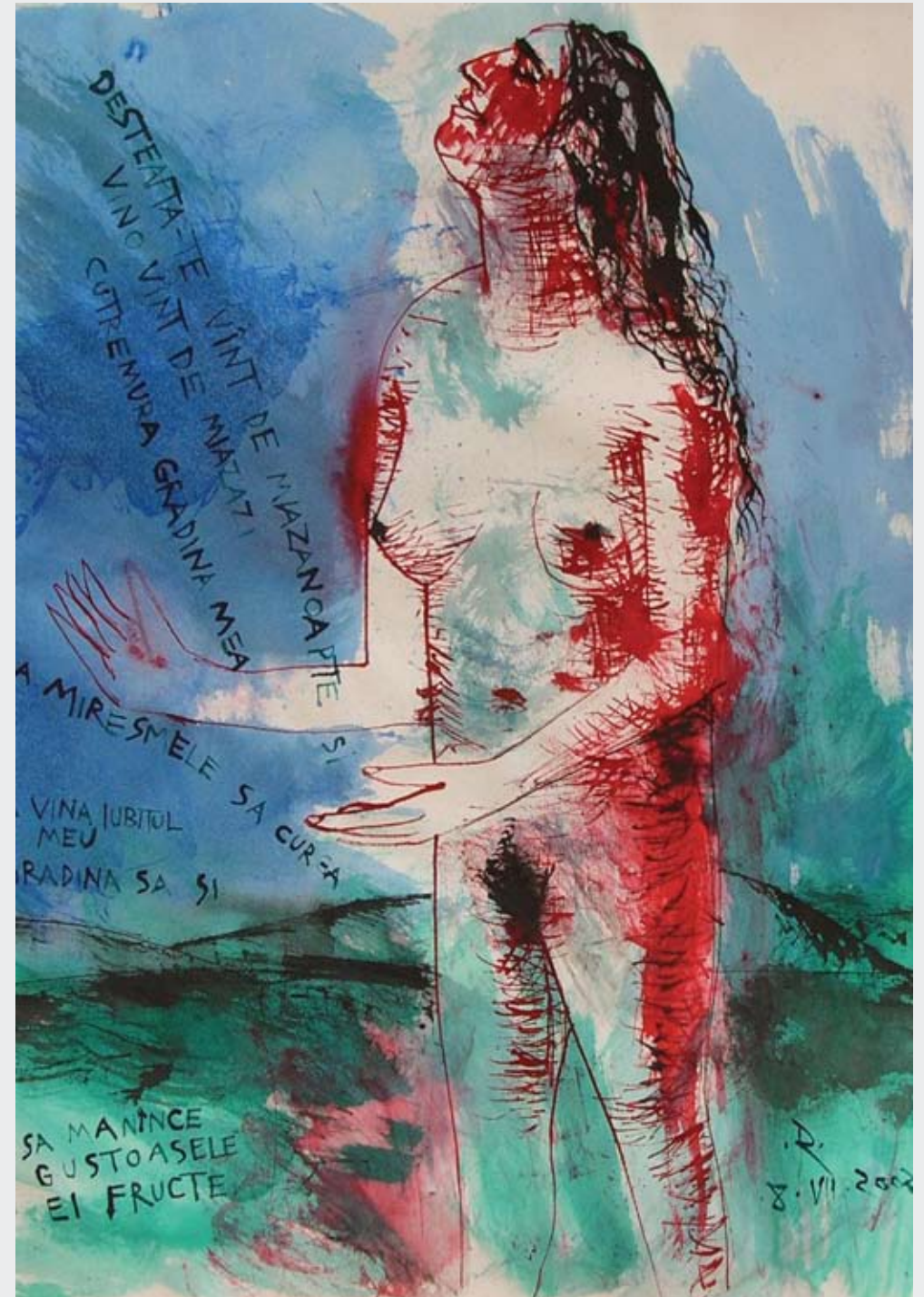
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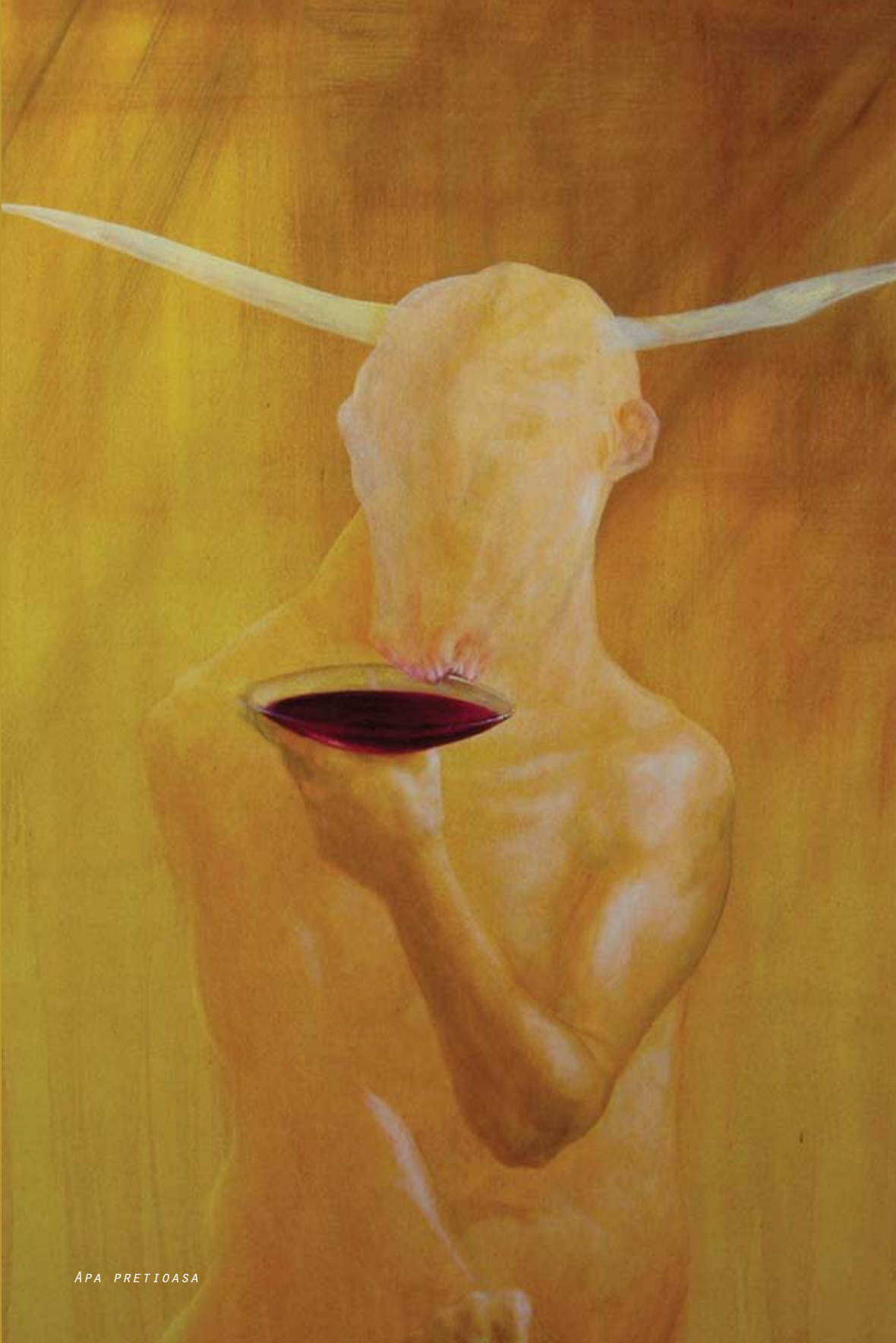
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THE CINEMATOGRAPHY CARAVAN

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The cinematography caravan rolled into the village at around five in the afternoon. It was drizzling, and the fuzzy contours of the first houses appeared through the fogged up windscreen. The truck pulled up alongside a large wooden cross upon which was nailed a metallic Christ, peppered with rust and missing an arm. Beside the cross stood a man dressed in a heavy jacket. The truck's door was flung open, and out leaned the curly-haired head of a large young man.

“Hey! Is this Mogoș?”

The man standing beside the cross craned his neck and brought his hand to his ear.

“Mogoș! Is this Mogoș?”

The man dressed in the jacket hastily replied, “Yes, it is, Mogoș!”

“Any idea where we can find the Cultural Hall?”

“Right ahead”, the man replied, “just go right ahead, it's beside the church”.

The door slammed shut and the truck - a dark green, long-nosed Molotov with a wooden compartment covered in posters at the rear - set off down the rutted, water-logged road, swaying from side-to-side. It was warm inside the cab. From the radio, attached to the bottom of the dashboard, near the gear lever, came a song about a new city. The singer, with a reedy, ecstatic voice, urged it to grow and flourish.

“Will you listen to that! Wouldn't mind living there myself!” said the young man. “Wait till you see, there'll be nobody there waiting for us”, he added as he glanced at his friend, who was driving in a rather detached manner, gripping the wheel between his thumb and middle finger, as though he were holding the reins of a horse. Without stopping, he began to sing in a quiet voice, borrowing the melody and rhythm of the increasingly optimistic song: “Waaait till you seeeee, theeeere'll be nooobody waaaaiting...” The driver, a small man with thinning, carefully combed hair and two unusually prominent cheekbones that flanked a flat nose, gave a short groan and then rolled the window down a few inches. Without taking his attention off the road ahead of him, he spat expertly through the narrow opening.

“If you really want to know”, he said, glancing briefly at his companion, “she wasn’t as beautiful as they said she was. Before that whole business with the bathing, I’d take a look at her every now and then, she was always sitting beside me, she didn’t like sitting behind. I’d be thinking to myself, you’re beautiful alright, but you’re worthless too, you’re past your prime and there’s no-one to look after you... Ha! Count Teleki, off in Paris... And that young lad, your cousin Lajos, far away too... Pity your soul, you had to stay here with us peasants...” The driver smiled. “But when she came out in the morning, well, then she was beautiful. I’d be up at the crack of dawn, getting the horses ready, and at seven I’d be outside the door. I’d hold out my hand to help her up, make sure she had a cushion to sit on, then a crack of the whip and we’d be away”.

“There’s the church”, said the young man.

An unhappy look spread across the driver’s face as he stamped on the brake pedal, and he mumbled to himself, as a conclusion to his story, that he had always gotten along well with her. They both leapt from the cab. Standing in front of them, surrounded by a rotting wooden fence, was the tall, grey church. To the right of the church, at the foot of a low hill that was barren except for the occasional patch of grass, was a long, rectangular building. Above the red-painted double door were two plaques. The larger of the two read: “Mogoș Primary School, Classes I – IV”. Upon the other was written: “Cultural Hall”. A steel bar was drawn across the door and fastened to the wall with a gigantic padlock.

“What did I tell you?” said the young man, looking around. “Nobody’s told them yet. Heeeeeeeey!!!” he yelled as loudly as his lungs would permit, “get up, we’ve brought the film!”

One dog, then another, barked hoarsely somewhere in the distance. Then nothing could be heard but the sound of rain falling.

“We’ll get these people moving”, he said as he hauled himself up into the cab.

The driver took shelter under the porch outside the church door and lit a cigarette. A crackle emerged from the megaphone bolted to the bonnet, and this was followed by a long coughing noise and then a sharp screech. A startled dove fluttered out of the bell tower and disappeared over the hill. “The shining light of science and technology has arrived!” spat the megaphone, but then a heavy layer of static descended over the string of words and only occasionally let a few isolated phrases percolate through. “Intensifying the struggle” and “image of a new life” floated around,

disorientated, in the air. Only the word “guarantee” escaped unharmed from a rippling salvo, and then there followed a deafening buzzing noise from which the driver could only make out “wondrous”, “guiding us forth” and “fine”. After “fine” the megaphone gave a final rattle and then died.

The young man jumped from the cab and approached the driver.

“D’you think they heard it?”

“They heard it alright... you put it on a bit loud”.

“Great, at least that way they’ll all know. If you don’t give ‘em a bit of a fright, you’ll never get ‘em out of their houses. What d’you think, maybe it was a bit too much?” He looked around him. “Give me a cigarette”.

The driver held out his pack, the young man took one, lit it, took one long drag and then, tilting his head back, puffed out a series of smoke rings.

“Can you do that?” he asked.

“Do what?”

“This, look”. He released two more rings of smoke.

“I can”, replied the driver.

He puckered up his lips and exhaled the smoke.

“Not bad, I suppose”, conceded the young man as his eyes followed the smoke rings.

He squeezed into the porch beside the driver. They smoked in silence. The rain continued to fall evenly, rustling through the leaves.

“You know what was interesting?” said the driver, suddenly. “Nobody cared. I was afraid something would get out, not even father suspected, even though he knew I was going out at night. He thought it was some servant girl, he was seeing one himself. When I told him about it later on, he laughed. He never believed me”.

The young man suddenly twirled around and motioned him to be quiet.

“You hear that?”

“What?”

“Someone’s coming!”

The driver stuck his head out from under the porch and listened. From down the road, he could hear a low murmur emanating from the darkness, the muffled sound of footfalls.

“A lot of them, the peasants are on the march!” chuckled the young man. “The megaphone put the fear of God into them!”

He jumped the ditch and stood impatiently in the middle of the road under the flickering cone of light given off by a bulb attached to the bell tower.

“Can you see them?” the driver asked.

“No”, the young man replied, tying the top buttons of his shirt and then straightening his hair. “Come on, comrades, faster, it’ll be winter by the time you get here if you don’t get a move on!” he shouted cheerily, but he suddenly froze and took a step back. The driver saw him back up against the truck. The mass of cows sauntered into the light and stopped suddenly, confused, their tails up in the air, when they reached the truck. The first few attempted to skirt it, but they were soon hit by the crush of those behind and pushed along towards the dark silhouette of the caravan. There was a dull thud, followed by a short lowing, and the Molotov began to roll backwards. One of the posters on the side came loose and fluttered in the air like a white banner. The mass of cows did an about turn, smashed through the church fence, and flowed around the bell tower before disappearing. The truck stopped for a brief second, shook hesitatingly, raised its nose and then, finally, with its rear wheels groaning, came to rest askew in the ditch. The last few cows wandered past. In their wake came a small individual wearing a long, crumpled coat and with a nylon bag thrown over his shoulder. A straw hat hid his face. On his feet were two huge boots that seemed to dictate the pace of his two short, stocky legs. When they arrived alongside the truck, the boots slowed their pace, left the road, stood for a while alongside the ditch, and then circled the vehicle. A quiet, admiring whistle came from under the straw hat, followed by a sort of gurgling laughter. Suddenly coming to his senses, the driver darted from under the porch and out onto the road.

“Tavi!” he screamed. “Are you alright?! Where the hell are you?”

The sound of loud swearing emanated from behind the Molotov, and a silhouette clambered up the side of the ditch. The diminutive individual in the hat moved to offer assistance, but the young man was already on his feet and walked past him without so much as casting a glance in his direction. The little man looked at the driver, then looked at the truck, pushed his hat back against his neck with his middle finger and, somewhat hesitatingly, moved slowly away, muttering: “Evenin”.

“Piss off”, hissed the young man as he brushed the mud from his clothes.

2

“Tanasie, get up! D’you hear me, get up!”

“What?”

“Get up, they’ve come with the film!”

The Chairman of the People’s Council turned over to one side in his bed and raised his head off the pillow. “What film?”

“The caravan. Get up. They’re over at the church, can’t you hear the speaker?”

“How’d they get through?”

“Plopu took them across with the ferry”.

“Oh, right...” muttered Tanasie.

Sitting upright, he froze for a moment before beginning to wriggle his toes.

“Go on, what’re you waiting for?”

“Still raining?”

“Of course it’s still raining, it’s pouring down and there they are, standing out in the middle of the road”.

Tanasie stood up, paced barefoot across the room and went outside, ducking so as to avoid banging his head against the metal bars that held up grape vines outside his front door. Moving to the corner of his house, he directed his gaze down towards the river and at the solitary pylon where the bridge had once been. A foggy, yellow light reflected against the expanse of water. It had risen a bit, you couldn’t see the pump anymore... if you had a boat these days you’d have no shortage of uses for it... and there’d be fish too, God knows, maybe they’re confused by the amount of water, all you’d have to do is reach in and grab ‘em... look at that water, Lord, will you look at it, he thought, overcome with admiration.

“Hey, Ilica”, he shouted as he buttoned up his trousers, “come out here and take a look at how beautiful it is”.

A groan came from inside the house. The chairman went back indoors, pulled on his boots, placed his cap on his head and then, as if suddenly remembering something, paused near the stove.

“What is it now?” his wife asked, a smile on her face.

“Give me something so I don’t go there empty-handed”. He felt her staring at him, and hastily added: “Who knows when they’ll come?”

Still smiling, she opened the cupboard and took out a package wrapped

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in newspaper. Tanasie took it, shoved it into his jacket pocket, and left.

The megaphone could be heard clearly from the country lane. The village resounded with the melody extolling the virtues of the flourishing, progressive city. Bent forward as he walked and shivering from the cold, he avoided the many puddles in his path. He took a detour as he came upon a small, thatched cottage with a light shining from the window facing the road, leapt over the ditch and entered the garden through the open gate. Looking carefully around, he crept up to the window. He stood on the tips of his toes and looked in. He remained like this for some time, barely breathing as he imperceptibly raised and lowered his head. Afterwards, he returned to the garden, passed through the gate and stopped by the ditch. He looked around. No-one. Slowly, methodically, he wiped his boots on the grass and then moved out into the middle of the lane. Turning to face the lighted window, he shouted: "Miss!"

A shadow stirred inside, the window opened without a sound, and a concerned voice asked: "Who's there?"

"It's me", Tanasie replied, coughing lightly.

"Oh, it's you! What're you doing out there?" There was a gentle laugh. "Why are you standing out in the rain? Come on in".

"Thanks, but I haven't come to stay. I saw the light on and thought that you'd be awake, I didn't want to bother you or anything..."

"No problem, I was reading".

Tanasie could make out her face, shoulders, and an arm leaning against the window ledge. She's wearing that red blouse, he thought.

"Well", he spluttered, "they've come with the film".

"The caravan is here? In this weather? Is that where all the music's coming from? I thought it was Darcelu... Well, then, why don't you come inside? I'll change and come along".

She's going to change, he thought.

"No, thanks very much, but they'll be waiting for me".

"Ok, then I'll be along a bit later. Are they at the church?"

"That's right". Now he could see her white neck as it plunged, plunged into the shadowy opening over her breasts. He coughed. "Right, I'll be off then". He turned and hurried off. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't hear the window closing behind him. A rain-drenched dog ran across the path in front of him, steam rising from its wet coat.

Shit, he thought. She's going to change.

When she was alone at night she would burrow in under the quilt she had brought from home. She warmed herself up using either her own breath or by slowly moving her relaxed body. It was then that the memories came. Each time this happened, she was struck by the realisation that, whether she was relating them to someone else or keeping them locked inside her, her memories took the form of a story, calming her and taking her miles away. She remembered boarding the filthy, smoky train bound for the north amongst demijohns and shoulder bags and chattering Hungarian women who attempted to drag her into conversation, sympathising with her in chorus, yoi, yoi, so young and so far from home... She stayed with her forehead pressed against the cold glass of the window as the night flowed past the train, the other passengers – commuters and peasants returning from the market – sleeping in odd positions. No ticket inspector came to check the ticket she was holding tightly in her hand, wrapped in a handkerchief she had bought that spring from Stavros, Fine Lace. Silks. Etcetera. Every now and then the train would, with a screech and a whistle, stop at some halt and, with perfect timing, a commuter would open an eye, peer out the window and rapidly disappear through the heavy carriage door, letting a trace of fresh air seep in. Towards morning, when the train was almost empty, she came to a sudden realisation: she had been drying her eyes so much that her ticket was wringing wet and therefore completely useless. She was gripped by terror. What if the inspector came? The ticket inspector did indeed come, but strode past, tall and sleepy, not bothering to look left or right. In her confused state she wondered if this was one of those trains she'd heard about, proletarian trains, free, where nobody asked for your ticket and where it was enough just to be a member of the working class for you to travel as far as you wanted. But she'd seen people queuing at the ticket office. Or maybe they weren't tickets, maybe they'd been given something else? Then why did they give her a ticket? Once again tears began to flow onto the damp piece of paper, and she felt betrayed and abandoned. Why had they given her a ticket? A thick forest passed by the window, some children waved at the train, and she waved back, forgetting for a second where she was. The sun was up, and it followed the train as