

What if you embraced your inner stereotype?

A speculative reflection on the modes of expression for the Eastern European man / A speculative portrait of the Balkan Man

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Word Count: 5535

- - - **Note to the reader:** - - -

(*These paragraphs do not count to the total word count.*)

This piece of writing has a specific style and structure:

1. Some chapters of this text are called (*Prelude*). Their role is to set the mood and to give context to the central idea that is being referenced through the title. A (*Prelude*) chapter and it's non- (*Prelude*) counterpart are therefore linked in theme, discourse and atmosphere.
2. Every chapter of this text begins with a list of defined terms (*definition* paragraphs) that make heavy use of the APA system - this was done for two main reasons:
 - a. I found it tiring and unproductive to have to explain my culture and background in a linear, narrative manner - both for me and for the reader. Learning about someone's background while they try to tell a personal story can sometimes break the immersion. I have therefore decided to separate the important and context-heavy words in a different section.
 - b. Having a separation between the very personal approach and the more academically-inclined text format, typical of a master's thesis, would solve the problem of different tones / styles of writing. The definitions are still highly personal and subjective in nature – but they are more academically grounded.
3. There is specific type formatting present throughout the text:
 - a. **Arial** – a font used to visually represent the factual and the impersonal. Can be found in explanatory texts and the definition paragraphs.
 - b. **Consolas Bold** – a font used to visually represent the subjective and personal. Can be found specifically in the definition paragraphs.
 - c. Consolas – a font used to visually represent the descriptive and personal. Can be found in the non-definition paragraphs.
 - d. Consolas Italic Underline – a font used to visually represent clickable links that direct the reader to my work.

My video works are short, subjective and free-standing in nature. However, self-reference and continuity are big aspects of my artistic practice. Elements of one work transfer over to another, creating a fragmentary, but cohesive non-linear universe.

I wanted the chapters in this Thesis to reflect this structure and attitude too.

Abstract:

This thesis' aim is to sketch a portrait of the (migrant) Eastern European masculine identity through a collection of personal stories, relevant academic sources and a hybrid artistic practice. It takes into account important aspects of locality such as history, tradition, contemporary subcultures and politics.

The urgency of this research is justified by the present diminished popularity and cultural presence in Dutch discourse of identities and perspectives from the former USSR bloc. This is especially important considering the Netherlands' rising popularity as the new migrant (seasonal) work hotspot.

The research method is focused on incorporating stereotypical aspects of said locality, or folklore, linked to relevant artistic techniques that are then mixed together to form a speculative narrative. Every component of the final work is both representative and reflective.

(*The following paragraphs count to the total word count.*)

~ One night, I had a vision in my dreams. It was as if I saw a figure standing atop a hill. A tall figure with a tall head. A head whose face seemed infinitely long. A face that stretched out to puncture the horizon itself. Masks adorned its ever-hidden face. Masks upon masks; masks layered on other masks; masks next to other masks. A face made all out of, and buried in masks. ~

Introduction:

paradox: used here to refer to a statement that cannot be fully comprehended, yet is fully comprehensible – it is an enigma that elucidates, a contradiction that certifies; **an impostor that legitimizes, an actor performing only outside the stage**. In short, a paradox is that which simultaneously defines and defies definition.

Back home, if you wanted to call someone a bigoted, conservative, close-minded, authoritarian or traditionalist, there was one word you could use for that: communist.

This is but one of the many examples of the all-encompassing spectre of paradox that haunts Eastern Europe and the former USSR. With its many appendages, it reaches into the deepest crevices of everyday life and alters social, cultural, and political perspectives. I use the word spectre because of its characteristic difficulty to be noticed or perceived by the untrained eye.

I believe that the source of this paradox is at its core, the internal conflict between being both an oppressor, and an oppressed people.

Chapter I: Locality (Prelude)

Balkan: used here to refer to an approximate geographical, historical and cultural area in South-Eastern Europe **where the concept of uncanniness was born.** It has been the set piece for far too many empires, wars, trade routes and treaties **that have all benefited only the outsider,** be that the Ottoman Empire, Nazi Germany, the Austro-Hungarians or the USSR. (Hoptman, 1995)

Romania: used here to refer to **the home country of the author.** Somewhere stuck between Far Right and Communist, between Slavic and Latin, between Balkan and Eastern European, **it embraces and rejects both of these identities as it sees fit based on context.** The contemporary Romanian mentality is described by Bogdan Ștefănescu in *Post-Colonialism, Post-Communism* as being insecure, neurotic and even schizophrenic due to the shameful cultural and historical past of the Balkan space.

the Netherlands: used here to refer to **the guest country of the author.** Following Brexit, the Netherlands, with its rich agricultural industry, strong business sector and English-based university curriculums, **became the de-facto UK for every type of Romanian immigrant.**

I remembered what I was told in history class.
Of the Dacian savages and the Romans that conquered them, thus bringing forth civilization.
Of the feral Slavs whose blood was tamed by the Byzantine Holy Cross.
Of the unjust treatment of the Hungarian Empire on our people in the West; and of our children in the East, who were taken to fight for the Sultan.
Of the choices we made after the World Wars.
Of the politicians that changed from nationalist Green to revolutionary Red.
Of the people that the Church treated as property.
Of the people now seen as seasonal labour.

A history built on stereotypes.

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As a kid, I used to see the Netherlands as this political oasis of the EU. Romania to me was a transitional space: like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, every respectable person eventually grows out and moves to a country that truly deserves them.

When the EU held another referendum to decide whether or not Romania should be part of Schengen, the Netherlands, my childhood love, voted against it. Yet again, I felt as if I was not fully welcomed into the greater European family. Issues such as corruption and criminality are brought up by a coalition of states that will still defend member countries that are bordering on fascistic behaviours.

~ It was obvious to me that his façade, this mask the size of a continent, had cracks. Cracks in the shape of whispers that nested in my ear and told me: “You are not like us, you will never be like us!” ~

I felt unwanted.

What did I do to disappoint you, Netherlands?

Chapter II: Masculinity (Prelude)

Man: used here to refer to (mostly) the male of the Homo sapiens sapiens species that inhabits the Balkan peninsula, and its inner struggles and desires.

masculinity: used here to refer to the bio-cultural phenomena that dictates the rules of how Man should act in society. Andrei Şchiop, in his doctoral thesis on Romanian pop-music, “Şmecherie şi lume rea. Manelele, gangsta pop.” dedicates an entire chapter to the representation of post-'89 masculinity in local mainstream media. He describes a masculinity that prides itself on street-smarts, financial power and sexual prowess; one that values family over anything else. As he put it, the gangster of today is the knight of the past, and as the medieval knight was the epitome of masculinity of its days, so is the “golan” (roadman) the current day image of the masculine personified.

My father never said the words “I love you” or “I am proud of you”. He once wrote me a letter, where I am guessing he did not mention those words either. I never opened that letter. I knew what that letter meant, and I was not ready to deal with the revelation. The revelation that throughout this whole time, my dad was actually an entity that possessed real feelings.

~ The relationship between me and my father, him and his father, his father and his father's father, a chain of fathers each looking back at their ancestor - all of them, a line of people so long it punctured history itself. I can see the line myself too. ~

A memory came of a book I read, *Shame and Masculinity*. In a chapter about patriarchy, three Dutch psychoanalysts: De Swaan, Verhaeghe and Koerselman were discussing its origins. I recall them describing the struggle against patriarchy not as a conflict between men and women, but as the struggle of women and sons against a world built by fathers - a fratriarchy. It was the destiny of this fratriarchy to fight its predecessor and thus become the new patriarchy.

That was when I realized: my father was no longer just weird when it came to what a man should be and do. He was a son of Romania's 80's and 90's. The old communist patriarchy of his father was dying and before him the tendrils of Western-ness were seeping in.

I in turn was a son of my father, also struggling with my new masculinity, one gifted to me by Romania, a world that now seemed to be half Western and half Eastern.

Chapter III: My Method (Prelude)

cultural dysphoria: used here to refer to a feeling usually experienced through: watching the news and hearing you parents complain about thieves and beggars from your country ruining France and Italy; or being taught that your ancestors were the real colonisers, not the colonised. It can be described as the feeling of seeing yourself as a beggar in foreign lands, but a king in your own country.

over-identification: used here to refer to the Slovenian avant-garde group Laibach in the 1980's and their protests against the Communist Party at the time. Done not by promoting the antithesis of the Regime, but by specifically exaggerating the oppressive characteristics of the Party. The authorities were unable to react in a confrontational manner, as that would mean hypocrisy on part of the state ideology. (BAVO, 2007)

This world of half Western, half Eastern, this place was unlike anything else. A world of Ceaușescu's televised execution and the world's longest running sitcom series. Of the hit-single *Mr. Saxobeat* and mafia songs about killing and immolating your enemies. Every fragment of my culture that reached the West created a paradoxical stereotype; an identity shifting between being serious and laid-back, between being consumer-friendly and unrestrictedly raw, between being enthusiastically revolutionary and hopelessly nostalgic.

It made me think of how I never took my history, my religion, or anything for that matter seriously. It made me think of how my father never took my complaints about him seriously. It made me think of how politicians would not take the people seriously, talking about corruption as if it was part of the Constitution. It made me think of the minorities that would call themselves incurable thieves and criminals since birth.

Everything felt ironic. With time, I came to feel comfortable in this altered atmosphere. I embraced it and called it my own. Inspired by the over-identification of Laibach, Zizek and Borat, I came to call this attitude "subversive affirmation".

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~ When I moved out from Romania, an underlying feeling of shame joined. I felt like a local that came from the wrong region. I remember my dad telling me to not dress in the Netherlands the same way I did in Romania, lest they will judge me. Would the Dutch really do that? Would they hate me for who I truly was?

Or would they hate me for what I was representing?

I felt like an impostor. ~

Chapter IV: Five Characters (Prelude)

character: used here to refer to the main driving force of any story. **It is both real and unreal, it affects and has no effect on the space around it, it is me and also not me.** The oppressor puts on a character to perpetuate the system it benefits from - while the oppressed acts in revolutionary authenticity, as it has nothing to lose. **Being Balkan is the essence of being both unapologetically yourself while also embodying a gross caricature - all at the same time, all the time.**

mask: used here to refer to **the tool used every day to negotiate power relations. Only through a mask can the oppressor temporarily look like a victim, and only through a mask is the oppressed capable of exercising power.** In Bakhtin's writings about the European tradition of the Carnival, he describes it as the unique period in medieval life where ritualistic role-play grants the serf temporary absolute power, mirroring that of the divine ruler. (Shepherd, 1993) One cannot think of the Carnival and not envision the symbol of the mask. **Without masks, the world would be an honest place - but it would be oppressively devoid of change.**

1. One

~ I woke up one day to a strange sight: by my bedroom door, a towering figure, with a crude goat head, no hands and fur that could only be described as garish rags - I asked it what it was doing in my room. ~

But it did not speak; it could only click and clack.

2. Two

~ In the basement of my old, communist bloc I met it. A slender, malnourished figure with the head of a mannequin, wearing a mask made out of another, similar mannequin head. Moving awkwardly, it held a hand out front, trying to understand her surroundings - she was completely blind. ~

This one only spoke in tongues.

3. Three

~ In the garden I used to go to as a toddler, a childlike figure with the head of a unicorn appeared behind a tree. He looked joyful and annoyed at the same time - it seemed as if there was something inside of him that he wanted to let out, but was unable to. ~

This one spoke in giggles and sighs.

4. Four

~ A demonic figure appeared in the bathroom mirror in front of me. Every second of its existence spent shifting its appearance - through its eyes, a lifetime of inadequacy. In its gaze I felt pain overwhelming me, filling my every vein and bone. ~

This one only spoke in shouts and cries.

5. Five

~ One late night, while walking through the neighbourhood alone, I was jumped by a sly and nimble figure. He checked my pockets to find my wallet - and when he did, he laughed and threw it on the ground dismissively. In the light of a streetlight, I could see he wore a simple gimp mask, and a tracksuit. ~

This one spoke the language of the streets.

Chapter V: Locality

post-colonialism: used here to refer to a term that the First and the Third World embraced, **while the Balkans did not**. Referring to the current dynamics between former empires and former colonies, **it appears to lose its original meaning in a space where the same peoples have been both the coloniser, and the colonised**. Bogdan Ştefănescu's book, "*Postcommunism / Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*" makes the case for a unique social, political and cultural state of Romania, one in which its underrepresentation in the West continuously generates shame and insecurity on a social and cultural level.

post-communism: used here to refer to a local version of post-colonialism, more fit for the Balkans. It describes the chaos that came after the Christmas of 1989 in Romania and the collapse of the USSR that contributed to the development of a faux-schizophrenic mentality in the local population. (Ştefănescu, 2013). In *Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe*, Călin Dan describes post-communist Romania as a copy of Western society, but lacking the structures of ideological political correctness and the old infrastructure of the social democracy (Ignatova, 2010). **It was here where the failure of the socialist utopia was paired with the impossibility that was the capitalist dream - it seemed as if every side of the political spectrum was both the saviour, and the oppressor.**

space: used here to refer to the specific spatial-temporal coordinates that have the property of **creating a micro-cosmos in which characters come to grow and die**. Balzac famously used the house in his novels not just as simple architecture, but as a living being that mirrors the lifestyle of the characters inhabiting it. **In the same way a character can wear a mask and suddenly turn into another entity, space can shift identity and purpose based on what entities inhabit it.**

~ Through art, I could perhaps express what my words could not. But before I could start doing that, I would need some inspiration and some guidance. ~

Looking through art history, I found Ion Grigorescu and the artist collective subREAL. The former performing during the rule of the regime, the latter revelling in the chaos of the years that immediately followed the Christmas of 1989. Maybe they could help me deal with the challenge of understanding myself.

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~ Two people speaking to each other - although they never once share a glance. One of them seems puppet-like, unreal; while the other seems almost too human, too sincere.

Two ghastly figures boxing each other in a claustrophobic bedroom. Battling for existence itself, the loser is doomed to slowly fade into nothingness. ~

To me, *Dialogue with Ceaușescu (1978)* is a perfect visual example of fully embracing the mask, the character, and the role-play as a form of intimate negotiation by the individual, for the individual.

In *Box (1977)* I found a certain form of performance that was deeply masculine: Grigorescu is processing his masculinity the only way a man could: through fighting. It was weirdly intimate and eerily sincere.

It seemed to me as if Grigorescu was embodying conflict and opposites in a performative way to allow the contrasting elements to reach some sort of synthesis; not in a pre-planned, cold, "objective" approach, but rather by embracing the material, ephemeral, and deeply personal quality of his lived experience. I could relate to that as an artist.

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~ A fridge stocked full with pickled foods exhibited in a gallery, at a time when food insecurity and prices were at an all-time high. A gallery happening in which the artists cooked "mici" on a barbeque and served them to the visitors. An entire series of works done by a Romanian-Hungarian duo, all aptly called "Draculaland". ~

Composed of artists Călin Dan and Iosif Kiraly, subREAL's practice was a crash course into weaponizing irony, self-critique, local culture, and above all else, the stereotype. All of this while still providing not only a series of artistically valid and critically-acclaimed works, but also a valuable contribution to Eastern European political analysis. Eclectic in style and technique, subREAL's aim was trying to encapsulate the essence of post '89 Romania. They believed that in a post-socialist country, art and culture are no longer in a hierarchal position, but are one and the same.

Călin Dan and Iosif Kiraly together created an early example of over-identification done right, not through one specific work, but through their over-arching attitude towards creating politically-charged art. I could also relate to that politically.

Torn between a critical and a reflective approach, I have thus found the seeds of my artistic, proto-paradoxical, introspective journey.

Chapter VI: Masculinity

patriarchy: used here to refer to the current-day system whose oppressive undertones are generated by the toxic aspects of its ruling class, mostly men. (Halberstam, 2005). **For Men, patriarchy is another embodiment of the paradox. With its temptations of unlimited power and brute strength, patriarchy acts just like any other drug would, promising to fulfil your every itch - while eating away at your body and your soul. By living in accordance with the laws and rules of the patriarchy, Man himself engages in sadomasochism of the soul. But who said sadomasochism is a bad thing?**

My parents were not so happy to hear that I was going to be an artist. My father really wanted me to be a doctor or computer scientist. There was always this weird relationship I had with being a male artist. Strong men pursued the trades or the sciences, only the weak and the perverted became artists. The day I became an artist felt like the day I gave up on my masculinity.

And for a while I somewhat did.

I tried to reinvent myself, dressing more androgynously, letting my hair grow, and other such changes. Before that, I was trying to imitate every aspect of classical masculinity I could think of. With every bald patch on my face, with every failed work-out, with each street fight in which I never punched back, I became more and more disillusioned.

I slowly embraced the critique of masculinity, learning about its toxic aspects and how through this toxicity, patriarchy came to be the dominant structural power. *In a Queer Time and Place* showed me the shortcomings of extreme masculinity. In its critique of *Austin Powers*, I learned how the pursuit of virility and sexual conquest would eventually turn you into a glorified sex toy. Through *Full Monty*, I saw a world where men slowly became useless as women entered the workforce and machines were as powerful as an entire army - men had to thus learn how to be feminine.

I would strive as much as possible to distance myself from the masculine, especially the very toxic aspects of it. I was doing my best in trying to build a new form of masculinity, where I would finally feel safe within.

And for a while it worked, I felt free - but at the same time, I felt alone. Online and in mainstream media, the political Left had no role model I could relate to, while the Right's pundits and their visions of masculinity were also unrelatable to me. It seemed there was no stereotype I could relate to.

One thing I did not expect in renouncing my masculinity, was that I would be entirely alone. While participating in it was a challenging and an almost impossible pursuit, the shared sense of community in trying to achieve the

unachievable gave me a strong sense of purpose. I realized that aiming to be a real man was not just my struggle, it was the masculine struggle. The struggle of aiming for the impossible defined the male experience.

Chapter VII: My Method

film: used here to refer to **the genre of Romanian New Wave**. Characterized by minimal editing, long shots, and a narrative that follows political or societal problems reflected in deeply intimate, personal stories. It is the main cultural export of Romania. Among the Westerners, favourite themes include: life in communist times, poverty, inter-generational trauma and the struggles of local ethnic and sexual minorities. It is considered by some locals, **including myself**, as the new Orientalism of the post '89. (Janevski, 2018).

“mersul cu capra”: used here to refer to a local traditional custom usually performed around New Year's Eve, a pagan ritual rooted in ancestral role-play meant to celebrate the Winter Solstice: the end of the longest night of the year marking the opportunity for a new beginning. A band of costumed men sing and perform for the central character and totemic animal, Capra (the Goat). In the most common chant associated with the tradition, **the Goat is an immigrant herself**, brought from Africa, whose colourful hide and rich horns make her the wonder and pride of the group (Pop, 1999). **I see the tradition, as it is practiced today, as a form of escapism from the chains of macho masculinity that is ever-so present in daily life.**

music: used here to refer to **the local (sub)genre of manele**. Deeply tied to the Romani people, it has its origins in 80's live wedding performances, where state-approved pop music (*muzică ușoară*) was mixed with Arabic and Turkish grooves, melodies and tones. It has since evolved to incorporate every mainstream musical genre, from reggaeton to hip-hop to even trap; being widely popular on an international scale. (Breazu, 2020). Its connection to the culture of the local mafia, as well as the macho-ness it has been building and promoting since its inception, made it the most popular local musical genre, even though it is still banned from being played on TV or radio. (Breazu, 2019). **I view manele therefore as the direct artistic and cultural outcome that Romanian machismo creates.**

story: used here to refer to **the merging of different elements of film and music, as they were defined previously.**

I looked back at my work, and then I looked at it again. So much of what I created there spoke an invisible language that I was entirely deaf to. There, in my sketches, in my projects, in my short videos, in my large-scale paintings, my subconscious was trying to talk - and I was just not listening.

I looked back at my past too. At the films my parents watched and praised, and at the music they deemed too criminal and too kitschy. With each year passing, the streets would suddenly go back to a time when reality and myth were one and the same.

It was moments like this that I carried with me to adulthood, and now, to the Netherlands.

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~ I have been recently visited on and off by five characters. In our infrequent meetings, they sat down with me and told me stories. Stories of how they came to be, what they did, how they felt, what they want to be. ~

Today, here with you, I am willing to share some of the stories they told me in confidence:

1.

(scape)Goat (2022)

~ Through the rhythmic clicks and clacks, I was taken back to my childhood: ancient traditions reminded me of how truly sublime the end of each year was. I would look at the men on the streets and awe at their primordial dances and songs. ~

Now that I have found myself in foreign lands, holding onto traditions was my cure for homesickness. I kept thinking of how I used to see the Netherlands through my uncle, and how fast or slow I would integrate into this new culture. Despite all my efforts, I realized that I was not as Western as I thought. Everywhere I went, I felt as if everyone saw me ever so slightly different than how I saw myself.

2.

Gallery Show at the Contemporary Art Museum (2021)

~ The one adorning a mannequin mask told me of this exhibition it organized. It boasted of how successful the event was, how professional everyone working there was, how the public could barely fit in the enormous gallery and of course, how good her work ended up being. Through her story I could feel the addiction that was the artistic life. ~

But when I look back at it now, all I remember was an empty construction site in place of a gallery, a public that consisted only of her presence, and an entire event that never actually happened.

3.

BehoLd, a Man! (2021)

~ At first, I had difficulties in understanding the unicorn-head's story. I don't remember ever shaving a unicorn. But then, it hit me. That dinosaur toy I had was the unicorn-head. It was just in its infancy, and like every infant, it grew and changed. ~

In a deep moment of self-dysphoria, I thought of shaving a toy - shaving myself already felt like that. Through this simple act, I accidentally gave birth to a small, boy-like character. Behold, a (future) Man!

4.

shaving.mp4 (2021)

~ In my bathroom mirror, a demon appeared before me. Hearing the screams and the cries of this one, I pictured a story full of pain and struggle. A story of a being so powerful it had to be cursed with perpetual metamorphosis. Not truly a man, but not truly a beast either, every moment of its life is spent in hellish indecision and confusion. ~

Each time I would face myself in the mirror, the shaving foam I applied on my face taunted me of what I could look like, had I had good genetics and an impeccable work-out routine. Having to shave hair that almost alluded to masculinity and seeing the man(child) that stared at me in the mirror after the act was deeply dysphoric.

5.

untitled(I Love my culture) (2022)

~ I was very familiar with the language of the streets, and this story brought back very shameful memories. The gimp-masked one told me of how he felt when he left the country, of how safe the streets were. He yearned for the chaos and the thrill of Romania, but he knew very well that back home he was no one, the lowest of the low, the punching bag. ~

I realized how much I came to love the “bad” aspects of the homeland. In this new, “safe” and inclusive environment I previously yearned to move to, I now paradoxically find myself aching for the struggles and the pain I endured in the past.

Chapter VIII: Five Characters

performance: used here to refer to a time-based type of artistic event, **performativity is the defining activity of the Balkans. When being genuine is considered a luxury or privilege, performance becomes a part of everyday life. After 1989, the Carnival of Bakhtin was no longer a singular, yearly event - it became everyday reality.**

speculative: used here to refer to the act of building an alternative micro-universe of new laws to question the current system. Speculation is best used not in isolation with the outside world, but as a partner to reality, both influenced and inspired by each other into the everyday spectacle of life. **A vision of reality and unreality being both different and identical at the same time is a perspective that would only be natural to the Balkan mind.**

I wanted to know how these five characters interacted with each other, it was obvious to me that they all shared a common past. I wanted more.

Thus, more coherent stories were told this time.

untitled(my boy) (2022)

~ From the start, it seemed as if the mannequin, the unicorn and the gimp had a strong bond with each other. Even more than that, the mannequin and the gimp seemed to share a common locality, the basement. From the way they talked about each other, it felt as if these two were almost related. They also had a complicated relationship with the unicorn-head. ~

As I was grappling with my masculinity, I looked back at my childhood. I imagined myself sitting on the shore of a lake with my child self. What would make young me happy? How could I help him grow? Could I be my own father figure?

untitled(the street) (2022)

~ To my surprise, the gimp and the demon had history. It seemed that at one point in the past, the gimp was searching for the demon in hopes of taming it and harnessing its power. But with one simple touch, the gimp would find out how wrong he was. Forever tainted by madness, it now made sense to me why the gimp revelled in chaos and violence. ~

I foolishly thought that by imitating the brute masculinity I saw in others I could perhaps one day be a full man too. But what ended up happening is that I assimilated only the superficial and the self-destructive.

untitled(fiat) (2023)

~ Although the gimp-mask's speech was the one I understood the most, he was a complete enigma. The first story he ever told me was already from the time he left the country. But I wanted to know more details of his life before that. At first, he would only talk about the usuals: cars, drinks, family, the streets and so on. I sighed in frustration, but I then realised: the cars, they were all broken; the drinks, all drunk out of desperation; the family, all turned to faint memories; the streets, haunting traumas of the past. ~

Under the surface of this masculine performance, the cracks were hidden almost in plain sight. I was a victim of my past, everything I did was following life's arbitrary order - or fiat, if you will.

untitled(conflict) (2023)

~ It seemed that the gimp-mask had a deep hatred for the others, especially for the mannequin and the unicorn. In the absence of real power in the streets, he would try to impose his dominance over the other four. For what reason, I did not know. Perhaps he saw himself as the necessary evil of this group? ~

Realizing that as a man, I could not assert my dominance over anything, made me self-destructive. With every punch I would get from someone else, I would punch myself twice.

untitled(apartment) (2022)

~ The mannequin, the gimp and the unicorn opened up more about their common past. They talked about a space they used to share, one that was very dear to them. Somewhere where they felt free, unchained from the expectations of the outside world. But something happened, and that place turned from architecture to memory. I got the feeling that from that point onwards, their lives changed forever. ~

I remember how, from a young age, I yearned for a safe space I thought I never had. Only now do I realise how blind I was.

- To be continued -

Epilogue

definition: no definition required;

Someone once asked me if the uncanny factor of these stories is meant to “scare” away the Westerner. In the moment I might have perhaps laughed at the idea, but now, looking back, there has to be a spectre of anxiety that haunts the European continent, that casts upon Eastern Europe and the Balkans an image of the wildcard, the unexpected, and thus, the dangerous.

I am unsure whether my characters are uncanny, so as to scare away the Westerner; or if I myself project a Western gaze upon them. I am reminded of my parents in that sense, as they wanted so much to have a “German” work ethic and an “Italian” sensibility while complaining about their “Balkan” shortcomings like hot-headedness or an angry predisposition. All a manufactured Western “gaze” they made up to justify their own inherent “inferior” Eastern attitude and mentality.

Looking back at the stories now, I see that I was subconsciously capturing again and again the male struggle against patriarchy: the conflict between father and son, a war whose prize is masculinity itself. And yet another war was fought, between Eastern-ness and Western-ness, a game of back-and-forth between accepting and rejecting my cultural identity.

What Europe, my country and my father were doing to me, I was mirroring back by telling myself stories - all in hopes of trying to make sense of it all.

I thought that by the end of it, I would figure out whether I was fully Balkan, fully Eastern European, or just an “ethnic” Western.

What I can now confidentially say is that I’m all of these things and yet none of them. I have never once in my life been any of these things, and yet I will forever be all of them until the day I die.

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