

* Mariana Boca

Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava
13 Universităţii Street, 720229 Suceava, Romania
E-mail: mariana_boca_ro@yahoo.com

THE TOWER OF SUCEAVA AND THE DYNAMICS OF ETHICAL IMAGINATION IN POSTMODERN URBAN SPACES

Abstract

In this article we evoke the story and interpret the symbolism of a marginal, anonymous postmodern Romanian tower, but strongly significant through its particular history. The question we raise is how the mental well-being, the inner comfort of the person is influenced by the presence of a contemporary tower, an urban space where we live and work. The history of this tower summarizes in a disturbing way the surprising semiotic continuity between totalitarian, modern societies and postmodern democratic societies. It projects, at the same time, the dynamics of the ethical imagination, which gives content to the connection between the postmodern inhabitant and his urban territories.

Key words: tower, ethical imagination, urban space

Introduction

Towers have a magnetic force, wherever they are placed. They attract, somehow in a hypnotic way, any human being. The verticality of towers defies gravity, promises flight, imagines the transfiguration of motion into levitation. The tower unites heaven and earth, the seen world with the unseen, the concrete and the imagination, the reality and the dream. A tower organizes around itself all the space and dominates it. It is, therefore, seen by both architects and anthropologists as a *genius loci*, since its presence encapsulate and expresses the spirit of a space. A tower can invite to ascend through to heaven and to detach oneself from the oppressive materiality. In our collective memory are many towers as such, mythical and historical, fictional and real. The Tower of Babel. Churches towers. Cathedrals towers. Castles towers, fortresses towers, defense towers.

A closer look shows that these towers belong to the spirit created by the premodern world. Every village of the Eastern Orthodox Christianity - Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, but also Greek, Serbian or Bulgarian –is placed, more or less, in a circle around the church tower, which unquestionably marks its identity. The spiritual and symbolic function of the church tower subordinates its practical functions. The same structure is present in all the cities and towns of Western medieval Christianity - Catholic or Protestant. The person and the communities derive from their communication with this type of tower the feeling of security, the living and stable connection with the memory left by their parents and ancestors. They nourish from it their inner well-being. The tower of the churches is always equal to itself, the content of the meanings is a representational text that is not subject to mutations, operations of resignification. That is why, if we continue on this route the evocation of the tower as the dominant metaphor of our deep imagination, we will identify many generous connections, such as the link between the towers and the tree of life or the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The modern society, however, invented different towers: factory towers, chimneys, entertainment towers, ornamental towers, inhabited towers of skyscrapers or malls. The dominant symbolic meaning of the towers, created by cultures as Christian, Jewish, Greek, Egyptian before modernity, concentrates the interiority and the specific spirituality of a particular culture. They

* Mariana Boca PhD is Associate Professor at *Stefan cel Mare* University of Suceava. Her research interests include: Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies with emphasis on Culture and Conflict in Postwar Europe; the Novel in the 20th Century; Philosophy, Literature and Society. She published the following books: *Modernism between Literature and Philosophy* (2002), *European Mentalities* (2006), *Stories about the Inner Self* (2019), *Memory and Precarity* (2019), *Memory of Texts and Canonical Narration* (2019).

This paper is translated into English by Ioan Boca.

develop a very dense fabric of meanings and messages, which speak primarily about the inner self. The towers of modernity are, by opposition, the product of the social human being, of the outer self, who self legitimizes through technology, through the privilege of utilitarianism and consumerism. In their presence, the inhabitants - the person and the communities - are invited to abandon the need to mark the inner identity and to take from this a new centring, focused on the exterior, another identity content. The feeling of security, continuity and inner well-being are redefined or abandoned. Both the towers of industrial complexes and those of commercial, entertainment or residential complexes offer to the inhabitant in return the satisfaction of primary needs - those related either to survival (work, home, etc.) or to self-indulging. The spiritual and symbolic content of the towers in modern urban spaces is emptied and compromised, because their presence is imposed as a variable form of the economic power, each time with a political color given by the ideology of the historical moment and place.

The tower represents a major projection of axis mundi in archaic, premodern or traditional cultures and societies described by the generation of philosophers and anthropologists born in the first part of the twentieth century, a main example being Mircea Eliade. This generation of theorists insisted on legitimizing the rupture of history in two periods: modernity and premodernity, abruptly placed in a hierarchy of values. Modernity is considered superior to premodernity, which, regardless of nuances, is ultimately qualified as primitive, in relation to modernity. On the other side, in the territory called premodernity, theorists place without distinction, illegitimately, for argumentative or ideological reasons, extremely different communities: tribal societies, the Jewish world, ancient Greek societies, the Christian world, the Roman world, Christian rural societies, Asian and pre-Columbian societies, medieval Christians etc.

Even when theorists admiringly identify the deep spirituality of premodern societies, their ability to internalize existence and the cosmos, ends up by calling them primitive. This is the case of Mircea Eliade. We do not agree at all with this ideological position, but we cannot engage in a debate here either. On the other hand, for methodological reasons and to situate ourselves in a discursive logic familiar to the western academic discourse, we undertake on a minimal scale the theoretical language and that analytical part that integrates the so-called premodern cultures. Mircea Eliade, for example, in the essay *Myth of the Eternal Return*, assumed by the western canon of cultural analysis and the history of religions, says:

"If we study the general behavior of the archaic human being, a fact astonishes us: like solely human acts, the objects of the external world have no autonomous intrinsic value. An object or an action acquires a value and at the same time becomes real, only because it participates in one way or another in a reality that transcends them [...] The object appears as a receptacle of an external force that differentiates it from its environment and gives it meaning and value. [...] In his conscious behavior, the "primitive", the archaic human being, does not know of acts that were not previously fulfilled and lived by another, another that was not of human nature. What he does has been done before. His life is the uninterrupted repetition of gestures inaugurated by others. This conscious repetition of the determined paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology. The product of nature, the object shaped by human skill, finds its reality, its identity only insofar as it participates in a transcendent reality. The gesture acquires meaning, reality only insofar as it resumes a primordial action." (Eliade, 1999: 12-13)

From this perspective, the tower created by premodern cultures, regardless of shape, whether a pyramid or the tower of a small church in the plains of Russia or the Greek islands, is perhaps the object created by the archaic human being who best expresses the axis of the world, the three-dimensional connection between paradise, the earthly world and hell. In modern art, Constantin Brâncuși consecrates and essentializes through the Column of Infinity this type of axis mundi, taken from the memory of traditional societies. The Column of Infinity recalls the ideal transcendent horizon in which the premodern inner self lives. Therefore, the tower of the archaic worlds evokes the participation of the inner self in the transcendent reality to which he belongs, which gives him a unique identity and meaning.

The tower of modern society is no longer an axis mundi. They either deny, cancel, or parody, or simply ignore the order of the world in which premodern man lives. There is a dynamic of ethical imagination that always accompanies the birth and life of a modern, famous or anonymous tower. In it, we recognize the accelerated protoplasm of postmodern urban spaces, which is only the expression of

the inner disaggregation of postmodern self, dominated by authoritarian historical mutations. The tower of a factory, a skyscraper, an entertainment tower or the tower of a mall, affirms a different kind of humanity than the premodern one, which lives one-dimensional, focused only on itself, broken to the transcendent realities. Therefore, we can say that the towers of modernity are an axis of power - social, political, economic or military. The Eiffel Tower, from this point of view, is the anti-thesis of Brâncuși's Infinity Column and a symbol of the modern world: it entertains, produces money, centers space, but, above all, gives external content to the power claimed by the world that assumes it as a dominant symbol.

In this analyses we will evoke the story and interpret the symbolism of a marginal, anonymous postmodern Romanian tower, but strongly significant through its particular history. The question we raise is how the mental well-being, the inner comfort of the person is influenced by the presence of a contemporary tower, an urban space where we live and work. The history of the tower we will talk about summarizes in a disturbing way the surprising semiotic continuity between totalitarian modern societies and (post) modern democratic societies. It projects, at the same time, the migrant dynamics of the ethical imagination, which gives content to the connection between the postmodern inhabitant and his urban territories.

Historical Contexts

Somewhere on the edge of the European Union, in a city called Suceava, in Romania, only 30 km from the border with Ukraine and 2000 km from the center of the Union, Brussels, there is a 230 meters' tower, in the middle of a shopping center, consisting of several buildings placed largely horizontally. The tower is the tallest building in the area and dominates both the valley of the Suceava River and the architectural landscape of the city, seen from afar. For a young generation, the first encounters with the tower are innocent. The tower painted in three colors - yellow at the base, orange in the center and blue at the top - seems to be a cardboard presence, in a strangely expensive scenography of the patronage to which it belongs - Iulius Mall, with a playful and conformist scent, inspired by the common rules recommended by psychologists, in choosing colors, on large surfaces, to calm the spirit. But the tower invites as well the young inhabitant to look up at the sky and come closer to meet it.

Then (s)he suddenly discovers that, despite the richly painted orange walls one an artesian well, despite an ice rink opened during the winter, it cannot be a giant toy, but a rather strange concrete creature, domesticated by the three colors that mark the entire architectural complex of the mall. The explanation is simple. The tower, doubled to the top by a metal staircase, with a round, massive, but slender entrance at the base, with a surprisingly small diameter, immediately invites to be climbed by the young traveler, although the ratio between its suppleness and height does not induce the idea of safety, but of extreme adventure. Therefore, the first approach of the tower could trigger in the mind of the young traveler quick promises of unusual urban experiences: an ascension into the sky; a dinner at the top of the tower, in a supposed restaurant that should exist there; a coffee on a terrace over 200 meters high. Otherwise, why would the tower exist there? What is its purpose?

Nevertheless, when the young resident wants to climb the tower through an interior staircase, the mall employees will tell him that it is impossible. Climbing is only possible on the outside staircase and is only allowed for mountaineering professionals, who specialize in forays into very tall buildings. There is no restaurant, no cafe, no terrace at the top of the tower. All the supposed promises of the tower are mere fictions in the mind of the traveler. The promised spontaneous closeness to the warm colors of the tower is not honored. The tower repositioned just as quickly, becoming airtight and inaccessible. An awkward construction in fact, without any clear and pragmatic connection with the rest of the architectural ensemble, which acts as a flag bearer of a mall, no more no less. The young inhabitant begins to weave in his mind the text of his own representations of this bizarre tower, oscillating between interrogation, amazement, distrust and frustration. He chooses, however, from the attempt to approach the tower with a fixed gaze on the meeting point between the top of the tower and the sky. The journey to heaven is postponed. The hermetic turn inevitably diminishes in the mind of the young inhabitant of Suceava or the occasional traveler, because it is dumb, seemingly harmless, emitting a lethargic passivity, despite its impressive dimensions. Its presence does not seem to make any clear sense, especially since it puts in difficulty, during foggy weather, the planes that come and

go from the international airport, located only 10 km away. In all probability, the inhabitant's mind ends up by distancing from it, and not by embracing it, because he does not know what to do with a representational text whose content is doubtful and invertebrate in a minimal logic of meanings.

There is, however, another type of inhabitant travelling through the space of the multicolored tower, the one who was born before 1975 and grew up in the Suceava area. This traveler is no longer innocent, but in all probability a connoisseur of the history of the tower at Iulius mall. In his mind there is already a text of representations about the tower, there are memories, emotions, pieces of information. Such a person remembers that the tower which plays the role of a silent, immobile and clumsy jester for the consumers of Iulius mall was, in fact, erected in 1984, in the last years of the communist Romania, in a very different geopolitical Europe. Then, the town of Suceava was also a border town, closed in the space of the communist East, a world apart from Western Europe. Located 30 km off the border with the Soviet Union and 1200 km from Moscow, then the center of the communist world, Suceava was in the 1970s a small town, although being a former glorious medieval fortress. Nevertheless, it was chosen by the communists to be the center of the region in order to falsify the geopolitics of Bukovina region, which was torn in two during the Second World War, occupied in its northern half by Stalin, on July 4th, 1940, abusively integrated into Ukraine, including the capital Chernivtsi, Romania's second city in 1940.

The harmless and decorative tower in the shopping center of 2020 is, in fact, the former chimney of the Artificial Fiber Enterprise (hereafter AFE) built by the Ceausescu regime in order to turn Suceava into an industrial city, a competing replica of Chernivtsi, a lost and long forgotten town in (ex)Soviet territory.

AFE, together with its tower, had to show a heroic history, as seen by communism. It had the mission to participate in the victory of communism in the Romanian version, which competed with the soviet one. AFE belonged to a vast industrial field. More than 10,000 employees worked there, in only five years of operation (1984- January 1990). In those years, the AFE tower became one of the centers of Suceava region, a place raising eyebrows and lots of concerns not only across Suceava, but in the entire county. It emitted smoke with toxic gases around the clock, which had an immediate and serious impact on the environment, on people and buildings, over an area with a radius of at least 40 km. The communist leaders slept no longer in the city of Suceava, but 50-70 km away. The mural paintings of medieval monasteries, which had lasted for hundreds of years, had begun to deteriorate. During its five years of production, work-related accidents in the AFE were a daily, and sometimes deadly, occurrence. AFE was called the "factory of death."

The AFE tower was the representation of the very mouth of hell: the white-yellow smoke coming out of it fed a compact fog in which people, animals and plants lived together, in a sour smell. Through the gases discharged into the atmosphere by the 230 meters' tower, all the inhabitants of the region were involved in the production process. The AFE tower, with its poisonous smoke, thus entered people's houses, gardens, orchards, forests.

Nothing could escape its evil touch. The AFE and the industrial complex were a labor camp, where the tower had been turned into a living murderous object, no one could fight against, not even local communist leaders. The tower took the place of the man-eating dragon, the dragon of fairy tales. He was the essence of evil and seemed invincible. On another note, at AFE, the 10,000 employees were paid impressive salaries and rewarded with housing. The silence of the relatives of those killed in accidents was quickly bought with monetary compensation.

Interpretation

We understand that the tower belongs to a complex history – that places memory-making practices related to urban spaces – in three stages.

During the first period, a traumatic historical time, from 1984 to January 1990, the AFE tower comes across as a bad place, a demonic node of a communist industrial space with obvious labour camp content. The tower then simultaneously marked the collective trauma and the false heroic face of the communist project, the false national dignity, the falsification of history. The self of the inhabitant of this space has an intense struggling communication with the tower. It is known to be a victim of the killer tower. The tower is alive, it is all-present and it acts in a demonic manner on the

Self. The fog it feeds hour by hour cancels out the sky, the light, the sight of the sun, the day, and the stars, the night itself. It keeps the mind of the inhabitant closed into a powerful space similar to hell .

The second stage is an intermediate one, between 1990 - 2006. Then the industrial center slowly washes out. The tower is no longer working. It becomes a bad, asleep, place, a space for ghosts. But a threatening gray presence remains. The traumatic memory is blocked by the inhabitants of the city. There is no study or investigation into AFE, most eye witnesses do not want to talk about the "death camp". People self-distance themselves from the tower and from his traumatic past. The symbolic content of the tower enters an accelerated mutation.

During the third stage, after 2006, the tower gains new symbolic meanings. In 2006, Iulius Mall bought 130,000 square meters, a large part of the former industrial real-estate, already dead. It rebuilds and redefines space. The premises where artificial fibers were produced, in an infernal bath of poisonous sulfides, now house shops, restaurants and cinemas of the mall. The tower is therefore morphed into a "good place". Iulius Mall rewrites the entire identity of the tower. The tower is presented as a giant dumb jester, a fabulous friend, a promise of extreme adventures. The self of the knowing inhabitant satisfactorily accepts the new script, the new symbolic content, chooses to forget the script from the first stage, blocks the memories and refuses to transmit it to the young inhabitant - innocent, ignorant. The inhabitant who chooses oblivion knowingly participates in the tragic game: a playful scenario, set on a memory of trauma.

Conclusions

The anonymous and marginal tower of Suceava is part of the huge army of modern towers that populate today's urban spaces on all continents. Its silent history, which has not entered either contemporary literature or film, which has not attracted the interest of historians, architects or anthropologists, is narrating. The tower of Suceava is not an *axis mundi* and never will be. It is a *non-axis mundi*, a denial of transcendent realities and of the premodern inner self. However, both the communist totalitarian society that created this urban landscape and present-day Suceava use the tower to assert forms of external power. Despite its anonymity, the tower of Suceava has the memory of the axes of power through which postmodern humanity legitimizes its existence and identity. The history of this tower speaks of the helplessness of modern human beings and the vulnerability of personal and social minds. Its history carries the violence of history that has reigned supreme over the last century and the mental protoplasm to which the citizens of the modern world have been subjected to. At the same time, the history of the tower of Suceava, together with all modern towers, conveys the typical instability of meanings and symbols - specific to modern urban humanity.

Then, the demonic tower, that quickly transforms into the playful tower, speaks of the shifting dynamics of meanings in the mainstream of postmodernity. The apparent change of evil into good is only the translation of the confusion between good and evil, the expression of the de-structuring to which good is subjected to, in the urban spaces of the XX-XXI century. The unique transcendent reality of the archaic human being, of which Eliade speaks about, no longer gives eternal meanings to notions of good and evil. The semiotic content of towers (and all other major objects in postmodern urban territories) is written, rewritten, used, reused, erased, reinvented. Basically, such meanings are re-purposed by operators who have the economic and political means to do so. Ethical imagination is no longer an expression of a moral and spiritual vision, but simply transforms into a strategy of manipulation and control, both of the person and of the communities. Towers become useful agents in expressing forms of power that the producers of influential ideological and social meanings charge them with.

Yet, in the urban space where the orange tower of Iulius Mall sits silently, and in the whole region to which it belongs, there are many premodern towers - of the Orthodox Christian monasteries and churches, not to mention the Catholic ones. On a daily basis, the people of Suceava live in-between premodernity and modernity; they are essentially free to choose between the *axis mundi* and the *axes of power*. In the cultural overlap between current history and the postmodern mind, Eliade's so-called archaic human is alive and well in Suceava.

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