STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVIII, 2, 2023, p. 243 - 264
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2023.2.14

VIŞNIEC'S *HISTORY OF COMMUNISM*: THE "PSYCHOPATHOLOGY" AND THE POLITICAL "TRAUMA" IN SOCIALIST HETEROTOPIES AND ATOPIES

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Article history: Received 27 January 2023; Revised 4 June 2023; Accepted 6 June 2023; Available online 23 June 2023; Available print 30 June 2023.

ABSTRACT. *Vişniec's* History of Communism*: the "Psychopathology" and the Political "Trauma" in Socialist Heterotopies and Atopies.*[2] This contribution is focused on the famous and interesting drama written by the playwright Matei Vişniec and especially on the peculiarities of the communist psychiatric clinics. By the means of anthropology, this contribution hopes to shed a light on the hidden movements that concerns the management of these institutions, and on how the patients/prisoners were able to resist to some of the most disturbing hardships that were common in that period and in those places. This analysis has been conducted scene by scene, and presents therefore some in depth personal observations, accompanied by studies of great solidity directly regarding the drama but also analysing the general situation (like, for instance, some essays of Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman) that allow a bird-eye observation of the anthropological dynamics on stage. The analysis may as well result in new ways of though on this pièce and maybe even in some interesting debates, although the drama itself is not so recent. The primary goal is to demonstrate how the

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[2] Unless stated otherwise, all the in-text quotations have been translated by me from Italian and French. In the Works Cited section the original texts are in their original language.

primigenial vein of the Absurd, present in Vișniec, has become much more bounded to history itself, and to stress out the strong ethicality of the drama.

Keywords**:** communism, psychiatric clinics, Pan-anopticon, alienation, mental resistance, wooden language, anomic patients.

REZUMAT. Istoria comunismului *lui Vișniec: „psihopatologia" și „trauma" politică în heterotopiile și atopiile socialiste.* Această contribuție este axată pe celebra dramă scrisă de către dramaturgul Matei Vișniec și mai ales pe particularitățile clinicilor de psihiatrie comuniste. Prin intermediul antropologiei, articolul acesta speră să pună în lumină mișcările ascunse care privesc conducerea acestor instituții și asupra modului în care pacienții/deținuții au reușit să reziste la unele dintre cele mai tulburătoare greutăți care erau comune în acea perioadă și în acele locuri. Această analiză a fost realizată scenă după scenă și prezintă, prin urmare, câteva observații personale aprofundate, însoțite de studii importante care au legătură directă cu drama dar și de înțelepți care analizează situația generală (ca, de pildă, câteva eseuri de Michel Foucault și Erving Goffman) care permit actualizarea unui punct de vedere general despre dinamicele antropologice puse pe scena. Analiza poate duce, de asemenea, la noi modalități de discuție despre drama această și, poate, la unele dezbateri interesante, deși drama în sine nu este atât de recentă. Totuși, scopul principal al acestui articol este demonstrarea modului în care filonul primordial al Absurdului, prezent în Vișniec, a devenit mult mai legat de istoria însăși, iar scopul ulterior este de de a sublinia etica puternică a dramei.

Cuvinte-cheie: comunism, clinici psihiatrice, Pan-anopticon, alienare, rezistență mentală, limbă de lemn, pacienți anomici.

1. Introduction

Matei Vișniec's *L'histoire du communisme racontée aux malades mentaux* [*How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*] (1998), to which Gerardo Guccini adds the subtitle *Qualche grido nella città ideale* [*A Few Cries in the Ideal City*][3], is a play that vaguely echoes Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade*, and is set in 1953 in Moscow, a few days before Stalin's death, in a psychiatric hospital that hides inside him a political prison. Formally the play readapts "the liturgies of questions and answers of the workers shows of the Twenties and Thirties" (Guccini 2009, 34), therefore "the dialogic schemes of the Agit-Prop [...] (short and extremely simple lines that follow one another with accentuated rhythmic scan)" (Guccini 2018, 18), but through caustic and fulminant syntheses.

[3] This subtitle is present in my sources only in Gerardo Guccini, specifically in Guccini 2009, 34 and Guccini 2018, 17. I have decided to maintain it because it appears to be significant and consistent with the drama's intent.

The drama, which – as Gianpiero Borgia noted – has no moralistic tendencies but only narrative ones (cf. Borgia 2009, p. 30), is part of the authorial ethical-political vein composed by *Spectatorul condamnat la moarte* [*The Spectator Sentenced to Death*], *Caii la fereastră* [*The Horses at the Window*], *Richard III n'aura pas lieu ou scènes de la vie de Meyerhold* [*Richard III is not Going to be Played or Scenes of Meyerhold's Life*], *Le retour à la maison* [*The Coming Home*] and *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsqu'on marche sur des cadavres* [*About the Sensation of Elasticity when We Step on Corpses*] (cf. David 2018, 95). In this regard, inside this work, the public readings of the Russian writer Yuri Petrovski (who imposes himself on the scene as the author's alter ego) will aim to provoke in the prisoners/spectators some outbursts of terror, created for therapeutic purposes, to allow them to understand why they have been locked up, to understand their condition and to suffer for it. Petrovski on this note operates an 'exorcism' of the subjects indoctrinated daily by the staff. Therefore, the text implements both, as Emilia David writes, a scanning of communist utopia and an invective towards those who still do not condemn this form of dictatorship and its crimes, unlike what happened with Nazi-fascism (cf. David 2014, 197-198). The play ultimately shows postmodernist aspirations to eliminate the differences between literature and life as stated, much more in-depth than me, by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*:

> The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences [...]. Only after art has in fact wholly detached itself from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen [...]: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience, i.e., the aesthetic [...]. The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works. (Bürger 1984, 22-27).

This presupposition is the basis of the performance of the *Histoire du communisme*. In fact, as Borgia writes:

> Visniec creates a possible world, grotesque, deformed and paradoxical, because paradoxical and grotesque are the forms of delirium into which the community of men falls when it falls too much in love with an idea [...]. The intent is to recreate with this show the possible world described by Visniec; to investigate, with authenticity and without judgment, the reasons for the faith of its characters in Stalinist ideology, reconstructing the system of values, beliefs and fears of that world, the life of that community of men [...]. Without expressing any a priori condemnation and no hindsight easy morality. (Borgia 2009, 30)

A scenic representation that must be underlined is precisely the one of Borgia himself, firstly held at Teatro Stabile of Catania in 2008 and then at Teatro Valle of Rome in May 2010. Giuseppe Andolfo's scenography includes a very special hexagonal cage formed by movable walls that the actors move from time to time to transform their prison. Borgia exploits the surrealism present in the play to underline the irony of the staging through a performance reminiscent of musicals but with a strong Soviet imprint, which unfortunately disappears as the story continues (cf. Pocosgnich 2010).

The peculiarities of this scenic representation are interesting firstly because the dramatist was not very known in Italy at the time (and, unfortunately, only in recent years we have started to really discover him; until now his representations are quite scarce) and secondly because the liberty of representation that the author grants to all of his directors is used in this particular case to create an out-of-boundaries kind of theatre, with laughter, music and drama, resembling vaguely – in my opinion – the ancient Greek one. Whilst the critical reception in my Country is very good, the public reception remains relegated to a niche; the general spectators mostly remain oblivious of the existence of the author's dramas. The same cannot be told in France, where the author's pieces are adapted on a yearly basis at the Festival of Avignon, section OFF.

Talking about Borgia's 2008 adaptation, the spectator finds himself immersed in the scene:

> The audience enters the hall [...] passing on the proscenium, on which lie several straitjackets, an immediate reference to the title of the play. A gloomy place, illuminated by glacial light, forms three small scenic spaces [...]. At the center lies a fundamental device to the entire play: some mobile bars, symbol of the asylum-prison but, above all, of the mental and psychological imprisonment of an entire society [...]. It will be precisely these mobile bars [...] to provide the viewer with the impulse to 'peek' through the grates, creating a 'fourth wall' effect. (Ferrauto 2008)

Even if the action is chronologically and geographically placed, Vişniec has written this drama as an act of rebellion against all forms of tyranny that the communist ideology (and others) has perpetrated. The key to his mindset is that through the particularity it is possible to analyse the bigger picture. The author has encountered, in his stay in France, a certainly different opinion on communism than the one in his homeland because, of course, Western Europe has never suffered a leftist dictatorship. This forced him to reevaluate the modalities in which he could denounce the horrors of the Soviet dictatorships. Alongside the analysis of the particular that mirrors History, he finds extremely useful the presence of some comical *boutades* that help us Westerners to "adopt a naif point of view on the works, much more wary to what is said than to the

poeticized knowledge, to perceive what experience of Sovietism is transpired by these works" (Boursier 2015, 200).

The story is roughly this: a writer awarded the Stalin Prize, Yuri Petrovski, visits – invited by the Director – an important nursing home, the Central Hospital for Mental Diseases in Moscow, to reside there for a certain period and write the 'great' history of the Communist Revolution in a way that can also be understood by patients. These, divided by a true "hierarchy of alienation" (Lungu Badea 2013, 39), are suffering from mild, medium, and 'deep' madness (another way of calling political opponents, as the author himself specifies in the Supplementary Notes), interned with what seems to be the intent, desired by the direction of the asylum, to cure them (or eliminate them in case they are 'reactionary criminals', which is equivalent). This seems to recall something Emil Cioran, an author whom Vişniec knows very well, wrote in his *Précis de decomposition* [*Essay of Decomposition*]: "The real criminals are those who establish an orthodoxy on the religious or political level, who distinguish between the faithful and the schismatic" (Cioran 2011, 4).

The insane, the partially crazy and the pseudo-crazy, the three categories of 'hospitalized' patients, are towered by Yuri Petrovski's character, a manipulated manipulator wearing a conflicting mask. He is a mediocre and disengaged writer: "he is nothing but a 'median insane' who, in the Moscow hospice, finds himself at home (as the Director announces to him, scene 4)" (Lungu Badea 2013, 40). But Lungu Badea also recognizes that a clear conscience cannot resist in a situation of such indoctrination and that the author does not give answers, even at the end, on the possible cultural resistance of the writer. The 'reactionary madness' slowly infects Petrovski, who begins to disagree with the members of the institute after encountering some patients (especially the 'deeply maddened' ones, who invite him to the so-called free zone to glorify the true Revolution through a very strong incisiveness and allegory). The staff in turn no longer trusts him because in his narrative sessions the writer does not stay silent about the various injustices of the regime such as the purges and the forced collectivization of the land.

It is by the means of anthropology that I'll try to extend the reader's point of view behind the text to help him recognize some dynamics that pertains directly to clinical anthropology and to underline that the author has not invented any of the psychological mechanisms of the play: all of them are also present in the essays of Michel Foucault and other scholars. The main discoveries that this article will present are the apolitical and non-historical boundaries of the clinics/prisons, that do not pertain (as Vişniec knows) only to the USSR, and a new figure bounded with Bentham's Panopticon that mirrors the general perception of espionage in the Fifties that is present in a certain scene of the drama.

Such as the drama by the same author *Du sexe de la femme comme champ de bataille dans la guerre en Bosnie* [*The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the*

Bosnian War], in this play appears the theme of the, as Guccini calls it, "therapy-that-does-not-cure" (Guccini 2009, 34); in the first play this failing therapy takes place in a Western country, while in this drama the cure happens in the Soviet world. Petrovski's 'therapeutic' readings, which seem to address not only the patients on stage, but also us readers/spectators, are used to force the recollection of the past and the examination of the present without alienating the listener (cf. David 2012, 21).

Matei Vişniec proposes a lucid and grotesque representation of Soviet indoctrination through the metaphor of madness, which afflicts not only patients but also the absurdly idolatrous staff (as it is clearly seen in the figure of Katia Ezova). Stylistically, as David noted, the hypertrophy of repetitions translates both pathological obsessiveness and ideological coercion (cf. David 2012, 14).

Among the various characters, towards the end of the drama, Stalin himself appears. His appearance on stage indicates a turning point in the author's dramaturgy: together with the Visnechians Cioran and Meyerhold, Stalin is a theatrical-historical character, a symbol of the abandonment – by the French-Romanian author – of the rejection of mimetic realism, which was widespread under Ceauşescu. The author then comes to elaborate an integrated language, where allegories and metaphors blend with historical characters and realities. Often these real references were removed from the text because they undermined the timelessness of it, as happened in the second version of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (cf. Guccini 2009, 35).

The play aims to recall, through this historically delineated placement, that communism, unlike Nazi-fascism, never had a global condemnation despite the similarities and the weight of "millions of deaths", as the author says:

> What interested me for my play was not so much a historical denunciation, such as an... emotional one [...]. The civilized nations of Europe have not even made the effort to draw inspiration from the process of Nazism to better understand how it is possible that an ideology that led to the death of a hundred million people remains in some countries on the list of doctrines not subject to judgment and public condemnation.[4] (David 2012, 21)

Michael Parenti reconsider the speculative number of victims, but recognises that a certain degree of ethnic 'reshuffle' happened under Stalin (the victims where reactionaries but also Cossacks, Crimean Tartars, and ethnic Germans). The gulag, despite harsh and inhospitable, was not a death camp in the real sense of the word. Despite the large number of deaths, these were ascribed to the hard life in Siberian weather (cf. Parenti 1997, 77-80). The author, however,

[4] Vişniec's note to the program of the performance at the National Theatre in Bucharest, directed by Florin Fătulescu, 2007.

is right in stating that in Europe we haven't perceived the injustices of communism like we've done with fascism. He doesn't want to assimilate completely gulags with lagers, but recognises an ethically unjustifiable difference of general opinion in Western Europeans, at least in the past.

The Visniechian theatre aims to make up for the inadequacies of the mass media, to make the news more personal and therefore, consequently, to provide a broader awareness of modern problems. The *histoire du communisme* is therefore an "atypical narrative, in close proximity to the informative functions of narrative theatre" (David 2012, 21). The internal narrator therefore becomes, as already mentioned, an alter ego of the author, whose intention is to build a collective memory through a narration that deviates from the 'official' and 'unofficial' version of History as described by the media. The restitution of truth passes through a – if I can call it that – 'drama-reportage'. This resembles, of course, Berthold Brecht's theatre, that used the same methods although in a different political light (the reader must remember that the German dramatist was of communist ideology).

The *histoire du communisme*'s form produces a scenario in which Yuri Petrovski, narrating of Stalin's concept of 'New Man' in an ironic and caustic way, awakens in the patients the traumas of the ideology that condemns them to socially disappear. Petrovski is therefore therapist, author and director who also experiments phonically (in the case of the value of the word '*utopia*') with the aim of exorcising the sick by performing the brainwashing technique that they have undergone. In fact, when the patients participate in Yuri's workshop (a term derived from post-20th century theatre) they attend, intervene, and create a sort of metatheatre that exposes the horrors of communism (cf. David 2012, 22-23).

Vişniec exploits in this drama, as Lungu Badea (cf. Lungu Badea 2013, 37) rightly points out, the need for human utopias; two different forms of utopias, endemic to contemporary theatre, appear on stage: heterotopia[5] and atopy[6]. As the scholar illustrates:

> In Visniec's heterotopias, of invented but rebuildable places, of imagined but recognizable situations, is laughter really a solution to save oneself? [...] The heterotopia, a place of experimentation of the heterogeneous, of the hybrid, of the refractory, allows Visniec to juxtapose in the same play more genres, more spaces, more protagonists, whether they are incompatible, and to generate his composite theatre [...]. In Visniec, history is always

[5] Lungu Badea explains the term in this regard by quoting Foucault 1994, 755: "places which are outside all places but are nevertheless actually locatable" (*des lieux qui sont hors tous les lieux bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables*). My translation.

[6] The scholar illustrates by quoting here Barthes 1995, 53: "[an] habitat that is not assigned to any specific place" (*[un] habitat qui n'est assigné à aucun lieu précis*). My translation.

> 'halfway', between the past that tells, related, a theoretically fixed system and the future that it prepares, anticipates, an open system also covered by utopia. (Lungu Badea 2013, 37)

This Visniechian use of heterotopia and atopy is hidden under the precise chronological and geographical collocation of the text; behind this localised environment the author wants us to perceive his intention of speaking about an entire class of events that happened in a lengthy period of time during the Twentieth Century (and, in some cases, still today) and in Eastern Europe (but not only there). It coincides yet again with his will of talking about the general state of the world with the use of 'daily stories'.

In order to conclude this somewhat hefty introduction, this article is interconnected, mainly because similar points of view are expressed, with the one written by Sylwia Kucharuk in 2021 about the same drama. I would like to point out again that my analysis is mainly anthropological rather than being focused entirely on the scenes and theatrical mechanisms of the drama, although they are analysed in order to sustain my reasons. Differently from Kucharuk, I've tried to include an in-depth analysis, with the help of studies by Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, Luigigiovanni Quarta and Helen Lavrestky, of the mechanism of psychiatric clinics, both in the Western world and in the Soviet Union. This action is being taken to stress out an intrinsic similarity (as also Foucault pointed out) between two different societies (cf. Boursier 2015, 204) and to anthropologically contextualize the play in his habitat.

Also, this article presents a personal vision of Bentham's Panopticon mixed with Umberto Eco's Anopticon, that mirrors extremely well, in my opinion, the dynamics of the Cold War that are present deep inside the text. These scenic movements are explicit and have also been noted by many scholars that have studied the play, but it seems that they never associated them with this theory.

2. An anthropological collocation/explanation of the events of the drama

It is certainly useful to analyse, with the help of studies on prisons/psychiatric clinics by scholars such as Foucault, Goffman and Quarta, what pertains to the peritext of this play, namely the phenomenon of psychiatric hospitals, which have as their first impulse to remove subjects considered different or dangerous for society but not directly considered criminals. This will serve to place and make more evident some behaviours of the protagonists of the drama, which otherwise could remain in the shadows. It must be said that all of the aforementioned studies are about institutions placed in modern Western Europe and in the USA; I decided to apply these studies to this drama

because they point out the global connections of violence's mechanisms (very subtle), that do not pertain just to one side or another of ideology.

The origin of this institution, which has many similarities with the gulag and the lager, seems paradoxically rooted in the progress of the Enlightenment. As Heiner Müller writes, speaking indirectly of the extermination/labor camps in their literary response:

> Kafka [for Müller in *The Condemnation,* for me also in *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony*] and Faulkner [in his hypertrophied and obscuring style] continued Dostoevsky's work [*Crime and Punishment*]. The underlying theme of the Dostoevsky-Kafka-Faulkner line is selection: Auschwitz as the last stage of the Enlightenment. Towards the end of the Eighteenth Century, a congress of theologians and jurists took place in Petersburg. The problem they faced was knowing what to do with the criminals, because they could no longer finance prisons. The Jacobin French delegation made the proposal to establish labor camps [...]. The Russians alone would never have gotten there because it is not in the Bible [...]. Gulags have existed ever since. (Müller-Raddatz 1991, 5)

It all started with the *cahiers de doléances* of the second half of the Eighteenth Century, in which strong protests were expressed against tortures, which betrayed the tyranny of the prince and the desperation of the victim. The main fear was that the people, becoming accustomed to violence, ran the risk of learning to take revenge with it, merging the excess of armed justice with popular anger (cf. Foucault 2018, 79-80). After the period of Terror arising from the French Revolution, a radical change in the system of punishment begins; from physical it becomes psychological and strongly regulated. Foucault shows how daytime is rigidly marked in the House of Young Detainees in Paris, according to the intentions of Léon Faucher (cf. Faucher 1838, 274-282). The tortures that were in vogue at least until the Revolution disappear within a few years. But only to the sight of the ordinary citizen. Between the end of the Eighteenth Century and the beginning of the Nineteenth Century the public spectacle of the execution disappears. As Foucault writes:

> The punishment ceases, little by little, to be a spectacle. And all that could be exhibition will be marked by a negative index. As if the functions of the penal ceremony gradually ceased to be comprehensible, that rite which 'concluded' the crime is suspected of maintaining with this a shady kinship, [...] of making the executioner resemble a criminal and the judge murderers, [...] of making the tortured an object of piety or admiration. (Foucault 2018, 11)

The effectiveness of punishment also changes; instead of arising from its publicity, it arises from the certainty of punishment. This is no longer

glorified violence, but an intrinsic obligation that passes over in silence and under bureaucratic dissimulation. Physical control over the body of the condemned is also relaxed, even if penalties such as imprisonment, forced labor, penal bathing and deportation remain; but here the body is only an intermediary: the real object that is struck is personal freedom. From a physical punishment we pass to one composed of suspended rights, while maintaining in some cases an additional physical suffering (cf. Foucault 2018, 10-18). The essence of this penal revolution can be summarized by De Mably's formula: "Let the punishment, if I may say so, strike the soul, not the body" (De Mably 1789, 326).

These are the basics of the prison/asylum[7]; is thus created, as Goffman calls it, a total institution, "the place of residence and work of groups of people who – cut off from society for a considerable period of time – find themselves sharing a common situation [...] in a closed and formally administered regime" (Goffman 2019, 29). Of course, Goffman has in mind Western institutions and especially the American ones; at first glance, therefore, there can be no connection between an asylum system valid in the USA with one valid in the USSR. And yet it turns out to be just like that: since the institution of the prison-asylum-lager is the perverted fruit of the Enlightenment, it is not surprising that such a well-tested control mechanism is used by anyone who wants to maintain order, be it a capitalist or a communist government.

For Goffman, total institutions – which are "a social experiment in what can be made of the *self*" (Goffman 2019, 42) – can be divided into five categories:

1. Institutions that protect non-dangerous unable (orphans, blind, old or indigents).
2. Institutions that protect unintentionally dangerous people (tuberculous, mentally ill and lepers).
3. Institutions of imprisonment of subjects dangerous to society (prisons, penitentiaries, lagers/gulags).
4. Institutions that find justification on the instrumental level (colleges, labor camps, colonial plantations).
5. Religious institutions (abbeys, convents, monasteries).

As the scholar always recognizes, this classification is approximative, but allows to point out that each total institution has many elements in common with the others. The main characteristic of total institutions is that they provide for a social life that takes place in the same location and under the same authority; daily activities, rigidly schematized and rhythmic, always concern a large indistinct mass of people forced to do the same things. Crucial is therefore

[7] The Central Hospital of Moscow in which the play unfolds respects all the requirements of the judicial asylum, which blends penal knowledge, which is punitive, with positive science, the cure. For a confirmation of my observation, see Fabio Dei's preface to Quarta (2019, 9).

the manipulation of everyday life and self-concept through bureaucracy, or, in the worst case, through mortification and physical or psychological *contamination* (cf. Goffman 2019, 34-57).

Luigigiovanni Quarta cites, naturally with an eye pointed to Italian psychiatric hospitals, an essay by Ugo Fornari who, while addressing a historical-political situation clearly different from that narrated in the play, can give us important common notions about the prisoner and about the moment of his entry into the total institution:

> Unfortunately, the expertise [...] is a tool at the service of psychiatric prognosis (i.e., the existence or otherwise of the social dangerousness deriving from mental illness and its persistence) and not for the care of the mentally ill in need of social and health interventions [...]. The prognostic judgment is determined by ethical, regulatory, and economic value reference parameters, and […] the expert replaces the judge [...]; all more or less explicitly or consciously and aimed at identifying the 'socially dangerous'. (Fornari 1993, 170 et seq.)[8]

It is obvious, therefore, that the signs of mental illness are sought in the body while the symptoms manifest themselves in the offense of a certain morality; This interference of the regime in the patient's body leads to a distance between the beholder and the one who is looked at (cf. Quarta 2019, 26-27).

Within the play we find all of this implied, but we notice also – very realistically – a confirmation of the distinction and distrust between the two fundamental groups that populate the institution: the staff, socially integrated with the outside world, and the internees, who can only receive limited contacts from the society that excluded them. Matei Vişniec expertly leaked how "each group tends to imagine the other according to limited and hostile stereotypes: the staff often judges internees malevolent, distrustful and untrustworthy; while internees often believe that personnel concede from above, that they are lean and despicable" (Goffman 2019, 37). Just as communication between the two groups of the institution fails, the same happens for the passage of information concerning the decisions of the staff towards the patients. This is why in the Central Hospital for Mental Illnesses in Moscow is implemented a sort of information network aimed at countering – or at least knowing – the decisions that in this case do not come from within the structure but from national bodies, and which is part of a relationship of espionage/counter espionage that sees the staff in the field against the internees.

Another (very subtle) form of personal violence that Vişniec inserts into the drama is the familiarity and the lack of respect with which the staff and the

[8] Excerpt from Quarta 2019, 25.

internees themselves treat a patient: "this inhibits, in a bourgeois, the right to distance himself from others, by the means of a type of formal relationship" (Goffman 2019, 59-60). We know very well that in a communist dictatorship nothing is worse than a bourgeois; therefore, it can be postulated that this action was even favored by the regime, both on the scene and in the reality. The forms of oppression of the self, however, leave to the internee a certain margin of rebellion which, however (to avoid the staff retaliation), often occurs in situations where submissiveness is not necessary (cf. Goffman 2019, 64). In the play we can see that these forms of rebellion occur during public readings[9] of the history of communism by Yuri Petrovski, where are strengthened by the presence of other internees who create chaos together. This seems to make the immediate punishment avoidable... But staff resentment that results in corporal punishment is only postponed, and perhaps happens offstage. Again, another form of degradation of the adult individual occurs in the obligation to ask permission, as if he were an infant: in the play this is visible, always in the context of public readings, in Ivan's questions: "Does it mean that we will be able to piss standing?" (Vişniec 2012, 110) and Sasha: "Yuri Petrovski, can I ask you a question?" (Vişniec 2012, 110).

In the institutions, however, there are also forms of fraternization, with the creation of more or less extensive groups (as in the cases of the clandestine gambling den in the basement at scenes 9, 15 and 22, and of the so-called free zone of the Soviet Union in scene 18), which, however, often do not lead to high levels of cohesion because, in the patient now anomic, remains always the doubt that the companion is a spy sent by the staff (cf. Goffman 2019, 87). This does not mean that it is a useless phenomenon: the possibility of being able to make bets (or sentence to death, in the case of Gamarovski and company) is equivalent to an autonomous decision-making capacity applied to what the psychiatric hospital offers patients (in the case of the gambling den, this amounts to a few kopecks): the simple gambling or the life and death decision about an exponent of the regime is therefore converted into a resistance to the uniformalising and depersonalizing action of the clinic and of the ideology that carries as a banner.[10]

The study of Helen Lavretsky called *The Russian Concept of Schizophrenia: A Review of the Literature* has also been very useful for an analysis directly bounded to the psychiatric situation in USSR. The 1917 Revolution had seen in

[9] These readings are also part of a scheme provided by total institutions: that of institutional ceremonies, which is often attended by an exponent representing the institution, playing a fraternal and friendly, paternalistic role with the internees. For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon see Goffman 2019, 134-138.

[10] Regarding the underground (or, as Dei defines it, "interstitial") life in psychiatric hospitals, also observed by Erving Goffman, I refer to Goffman 2019, 230-320, and to Dei's preface in Quarta 2019, 11.

the psychiatrists one of the first groups of support. Not long after, the regime started to control and convey ideological diversity in the field operating, of course, a meticulous cleansing of anyone who though differently from Ivan Pavlov. In October 1951 took place the joint session of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR and the Board of the All-Union Neurologic and Psychiatric Association. That session started a tighter political rule in this scientific branch, unleashing a feeling of paranoia and fear among psychologists and psychiatrist (cf. Lavretsky 1998, 539-540). From that point onward, the classification of mental illness had become much more political and much less detailed. As Vişniec let us observe in his drama:

> Treatment is administered on an inpatient and outpatient basis. Psychotherapy in the broadest sense is widely practiced through the established relationships between the regional psychiatrists and nurses and their patients. It is mostly supportive in nature […]. The most frequently used psychotherapeutic techniques include short-term and directive psychotherapy. Collective or group therapy has been used since the second half of the 19th century. Its goals include providing support and education about the illness and improving social and relationship skills. Groups are usually heterogeneous by age, sex, and diagnosis […]. (Lavretsky 1998, 548)

The organization of the treatment of severely mentally ill patients was defined by three stages (cf. Lavretsky 1998, 549):

1) A primary care psychiatrist present in the patient's workplace or in the psychoneurological dispensary serving the district where the patient lives.
2) In case of a new exacerbation, patients were hospitalized at the local psychiatric hospital or inside a psychiatric unit of a general hospital. Sometimes partial hospitalization programs were utilized (in general for the treatment of subacute psychosis). After stabilization, the patient could return to his primary psychiatrist to follow rehabilitative programs.
3) Tertiary referral centres were in medical schools and research institutes who treated resistant cases.

But of course, Lavretsky recognises that in USSR not every patient was effectively ill. The fallacious classification of the disease provided a certain degree of abuse that was present even in capitalistic Countries. As Lavretsky tells us: "Some issues involved in the discussion of abuse of psychiatry include patients' rights violations, criminal concepts of social dangerousness, […] hospitalizing people who are not mentally ill for their expression of political and religious beliefs, and punitive use of psychotropic medications" (Lavretsky 1998, 550).

3. Espionage and counter-intelligence: a psychiatric clinic mirror of the Cold War

Within this drama we can find some dynamics that pertain to the geopolitical situation of those years, namely those of espionage and counter-intelligence, as well as those of censorship (sometimes even self-imposed) and Soviet propaganda aimed to indoctrinate and 'purify' those who escaped it. I will therefore analyse from now on all the scenes in which you can see all of this.

In scene 2, we find a speech by the director of the 'nursing home', who exploits, as Steiciuc rightly denotes, the *langue de bois* (cf. Steiciuc 2020, 278) of the USSR to hide the cynical hypocrisy of the rehabilitation project:

> THE DIRECTOR: [...] Our scientific conception of society tells us that the man is the centre of the Party's attention [...]. Socialism is not achievable without the transformation of man. And Art and Literature have a fundamental role in the transformation of man [...]. What about the mentally ill? Aren't they, too, human beings? Shouldn't we transform them too? Should they not also benefit from the privileges of art and literature? As far as possible, of course... (Vişniec 2012, 101)

Also, in this scene we can notice the strong link between identity and social (collective) empathy. In totalitarian regimes, art has always been fundamental in countering ideological alienation; the author knows this better than anyone, having lived to the age of thirty under Ceauşescu. In the drama's case, however, the cultural resistance is distorted in favor of a propaganda aimed at creating the new socialist Man (cf. Lungu Badea 2013, 37).

Already from scene 4 is inserted, in an apparently friendly and normal dialogue, what can be understood as a veiled threat, or at best a warning; when the Director shows Yuri Petrovski his room, he tells him: "We have prepared the room with the best view on the garden, because we know that writers love nature [...]. We know, dear Yuri Petrovski... we know what a writer's soul is made of, we know everything" (Vişniec 2012, 103).

In scene 6, the writer rehearses in his room the speech to be given in front of the mentally ill:

> YURI: Open your mouth well. Say "u". Breathe. Fill your lungs with air. Stronger. Again. Fill your lungs with air. Again. Say "utopia". One more time. "Utopia". Focus, it is a word that makes an upward curve. It's like a horse that rears up. "Utopia". Do you hear how the sounds go up? They rise and dissolve in the air. Everything starts in your mouth and ends nowhere. "Utopiiia". Jolly good. [...] *(He opens a bottle of rum, pours some into a cup of tea, takes a sip of rum straight from the bottle, then drinks the tea)*. (Vişniec 2012, 107)

It is remarkable in my opinion how the phrase "Everything is born in your mouth and ends nowhere" is indicative of utopian uselessness, and how it is subsequently changed to "It is born in your mouth and stops at the stars" (Vişniec 2012, 108, scene 7), a much more poetic and self-censored expression able to, hopefully, get the message across. The scenic note in parentheses disturbingly takes up the questions that Katia had asked the writer (in scene 5): if he wanted a tea, a tea with rum or just a little bit of rum. It is the clear demonstration, in my opinion, that the staff of the clinic knows Petrovski down to the smallest personal tastes and daily details even before he arrived.

After presenting the speech (scene 7) before the 'censorship commission' composed of the staff of the facility, and receiving their approval (but only after the positive reaction of the Director), Petrovski can finally (in scene 8) talk to the inmates; their response to the reading will be "aimed at destabilizing the government theory with concrete and childishly subversive actions: 'I want to piss standing!', will say Ivan, one of the hospitalized" (Marinai 2020, 271). Petrovski, knowing that he is controlled, acts according to a conformist logic, and masks reality under the necessary veil of textual infantilism and under the fake and comic sublimation of the key figures of communism, telling in the meantime the most uncomfortable truths about the regime. Steiciuc notes that, in the eighth scene:

> in front of the slightly mentally ill, guarded by Katia, the writer evokes Felix Dzerjinski's 'scientific method' to identify those who did not want to "go all the way" and the methods through which Stalin and his acolytes practiced the purge, with a very simple conclusion, quintessence of totalitarian practices: "And those who did not want to go all the way were sent to the camp". (Steiciuc 2020, 279)

Thus, we witness the story, narrated by Petrovski, of those who had abandoned themselves unreservedly to socialist utopia discovering, however – because of the scientific method devised by Felix Dzerjinski (founder of the ČEKA) –, that they did not really want to go all the way for it. So, a friend of Felix and Stalin asked to be shot but was answered by Dzerjinski himself: "Wait, you will be shot later, when, with all your heart, you will want to go all the way, because then you will be much more dangerous" (Vişniec 2012, 113).

In scene 10 takes place what can be called the first contact between the writer and the members of the 'free zone', through the mediation of Timofei, an average mentally retarded, who hides inside a gift the invitation of the rebels that are hidden in the medium retarded ward. Emblematic is, when Timofei asks Yuri the time of his future visit, the phrase: "We have been waiting for you for four years" (Vişniec 2012, 116), which seems to be the result of the delirium of a madman, as indeed it is thought to be normal in a psychiatric institution. But the hidden and disturbing meaning of the phrase will be revealed later in

the play. In the end, Timofei leaves the gift to the writer, a pledge of esteem, which is accepted. The package contains a book by Henri Barbusse, as will be discovered in scene 12 after Katia Ezova asks the writer what the average retarded gave him, sign that even at that moment, late at night, Yuri was controlled.

In scene 11 Katia, sneaked into Yuri's room to hear the new chapter of his history of communism, ends up making love to him. We can see how a particular phenomenon occurs. A Pan-anopticon, if I may use the neologism, is developed: while the staff believes to observe (and until now has undoubtedly spied), it is mirrored in turn by the mentally ill, as we read in the stage note: "Thanks to a play of light, one of the walls becomes transparent. You see the chorus of the mentally ill. One gets the impression that the sick observes the scene, that for them the walls do not exist [...]" (Vişniec 2012, 119).

This term that I just used, which is a fusion of the concept of Panopticon (a single overseer can control a plurality of internees without being seen and thus leaving them in doubt of being supervised or not) – postulated by Jeremy Bentham and taken up by Michel Foucault – with that of Umberto Eco's Anopticon (which provides, in its conception expressed in *Secondo diario minimo* [*Second minimal diary*], that conceive that the overseer is the only one who can be controlled without being able to see the detainees himself), seems to me more than suitable to indicate the complex system of espionage and counterespionage that unfolds within the psychiatric hospital, which would also seem to reflect the general situation of the Cold War.

The Panopticon is also a fruit of the Enlightenment, as is the prison/nursing home. Foucault, using the example of city organization in case of plague, taken from the *Archives militaires de Vicennes*, A-I-516-91, sc. Pièce, tells us about the development of the conception of panoptism. Lepers were subject to exile-enclosure by society while plague victims were captured in a very precise pigeonholing. Social separation and jurisdictional division are the sides of the same coin since the Nineteenth Century: the psychiatric asylum, the corrective houses and part of the hospitals work on this double scheme: the 'waste' of society is welcomed within it (this mirrored division is operated according to the crazy-normal, dangerous-harmless categorization) and a rigid pigeonholing coercion is applied to them: "All the mechanisms of power that [...] are arranged around the abnormal, to mark it as to modify it, have been composed those two forms from which they derive from afar" (Foucault 2018, 218). The Panopticon is in practice an inverted dungeon, which allows to avoid the massing of prisons, that lead to multiple exchanges; but the prisoners, divided from each other and unable to know if at that particular moment they are supervised, allow – self-forced to behave – the automatic functioning of power, visible but unverifiable, which can act in a corrective way towards the patient but also towards its employees (cf. Foucault 2018, 213-226).

Returning to the play, the twelfth scene shows a dialogue between Katia and Yuri, where the girl says she is afraid of and for Yuri, afraid of the "dangerous madmen", afraid that sometimes Petrovski's words "will drift away and..." (Vişniec 2012, 120). It therefore shows all its concern for the orthodoxy of the history of communism in the making and the possible behavior of reactionaries.

In scene 13 Petrovski narrates to the seriously ill the chapter concerning the forced collectivization of land imposed by the regime; Steiciuc also notes how "the collectivization of agriculture, [...] had generated three types of attitude in the peasants: namely obedient, mitigated, revolting, which correspond in fact to the three categories of 'fools' in the hospital, who – says the caption – 'react and scream like a herd of animals'" (Steiciuc 2020, 279).

In this scene is presented the narration (always childishly simplified) of how Stalin conceived the kolkhozes. As Lungu Badea notes, the three stages of acceptance of the peasantry correspond to their infantilization, with which the paternalistic Stalin becomes psychologist and guardian of the whole country. For the scholar are recognizable important Nietzschean parallels (Nietzsche, The Gay Science, Book I, 40, Of the absence of noble forms), which are also reflected in the pièce *La machine Tchékov*:

> ("The masses are ready for slavery in all of its forms, provided that he who is above them ceaselessly affirms his superiority, which legitimizes the fact that he was born to rule – for the nobility of form!" [...]), we perceive it in the forms [...]:
> 1) I understand and I'm happy to be able to do what I must do [...].
> 2) I do not understand, but I am happy to be able to do what I must do; [...].
> 3) I do not understand [...] and [...] I do not go to the kolkhoz. [...]
>
> (*La Machine Tchékhov*, scene 3)[11]

In scene 14 the writer seems to run a big risk when Stepan Rozanov, deputy director of the hospital, visits Yuri late at night and under the pretext of a friendly chat begins to carry out an interrogation, also exploiting the classic 'tongue-twister' alcohol card, accusing him of writing anti-revolutionary and subversive stories but fortunately misrepresenting, believing that his is a tactic to bring out the hidden reactionary elements in the hospital. Rozanov also tells him that he was the first to inform the state organs (the term in the text of the play appears in capital letters) of the potentially subversive elements in the clinic, and after waiting for four years, the writer finally arrived (here is revealed the meaning of Timofei's sibylline phrase: it is a further confirmation that the mentally ill spy on the staff).

[11] The text of the quotation can be found in Lungu Badea 2013, 40. For reasons of form, I avoid inserting the French version in the footnote. My translation.

In scene 16 the themes of the Dreamlike and the Absurd, dear to the first Vişniec, finally transpire; until now they had been 'flattened' in the historical and daily reality of the psychiatric hospital. At Yuri's window appears the ghost of Nadejda Alliluyeva – Stalin's wife who committed suicide because of her husband's brutality – who throws oak leaves into his room and tells the writer that she still loves the dictator, and begs to tell him that she is there and that she will watch over him, but that she does not want him to come and visit her (in the afterlife, presumably), and that he must stop drinking (Stalin died of a stroke, due to arterial hypertension whose main cause was, perhaps, alcoholism).

Stalin's mother appears after her, making recommendations to Yuri, because her child "is tired, he no longer kills, he is not well" (Vişniec 2012, 129). Then a third woman appears, who continues to proclaim endlessly the innocence of a certain Sasha (who is one of the ills in the facility). A fourth woman claims that Maria Spiridonova, the first woman sent to a psychiatric hospital under the directives of the regime, does not like piroshki (Russian calzones stuffed with meat). The fifth woman lists the savings of communism due to the efficiency of the deportation of Caucasians to Siberia (from November 1943 to June 1944) thanks to the brilliant idea of amassing 45 people instead of 40 in each wagon: "a considerable number of wagons, or in total 37.548 linear meters of boards, 11.834 buckets and 3.400 wood stoves!" (Vişniec 2012, 130).

In scene 18, the writer reaches the free territory of the Soviet Union inside the clinic and is given an honorary straitjacket: in this scene the word pertains mostly to the 'sick', who, under the leadership of Ivan Mikadoi Gamarovski, are trying the traitors of the truth, from the condemned to death (and already deceased for decades) Maxim Gorki, to the not yet deceased Semion Babaievski, Mikhail Bubienov and Vassilij Ajaiev: in short, all those who received the Stalin Prize. Afterwards, two mentally ill patients speak about how they knew the dictator: the first, a soldier under Sergo Ordjonikidze (one of the organizers/executors of the carnage in Georgia in 1921), recounts the atrocities against the kulaks and Stalin's anger due not to the killing of innocents, but because they had been crucified, an unacceptable and anti-revolutionary ecclesiastical method. The second patient was Stalin's official photographer, who had erased from official photos those who had fallen from the dictator's good graces. Still below Kukin, an actor, recites the chapter, written very comically, on Operation Barbarossa. He then recites Stalin's words, which Petrovski wrote in his history of communism, and which sanctioned the socialist agricultural disaster in favor of terror:

> KUKIN [...]: And then, a great friend and comrade of Stalin, whose name was Molotov, said to Stalin: "Comrade Joseph Vissarionovich, are the peasants who do not want to be in kolkhozes those who do not want to go all the way?" And Stalin replied: "No, Comrade Molotov, the peasants

> who do not want to be in kolkhozes are people who believe that they do not want to go all the way, but deep in their hearts, in fact, they do. It is in their open hearts that we will make the socialist collectivization of agriculture [...]." (Vişniec 2012, 138-139)

Two very interesting characters are the stranger and the professor; the first continues to say incessantly "Ribbentrop-Molotov", the name of the pact that sanctioned the bloody and criminal partition of Poland in 1939 between Nazis and Communists. The second uses the metaphor/onomatopoeia of the plane that makes the sounds *clic, clac, pluf* to explain the communist utopia, where everything seems perfect and then it fails and it is not clear who is to blame, if the plane or the ones who pilots it; also because all those who had come on board are dead. At the end of the scene, the spectator learns that Dekanozov is relentlessly searching for Petrovski, and Gamarovski tries to dissuade him from going back, because the deputy director is a man of Beria, head of the Stalinist secret service.

In scene 19 we have further confirmation of Katia's nymphomaniac madness when the Director reveals that the girl sleeps with anyone who claims to have met Stalin. Katia's advances to the writer (scenes 5, 11 and 12) are therefore dictated only by her mad idolatry for the regime, and the objects of her sexual desire – be they the writer or the sick who claim to have known Stalin – become only substitute fetishes of the dictator.

Scene 20 sees the staff's burst of hysteria at the news of Stalin's death. Once again, we can see how Katia's control is relentless, even reaching the territory of the dreamlike; picking up the dry oak leaves scattered on the ground that Alliluyeva's ghost had thrown, she desperately asks Petrovski: "Yuri... Yuri... Why did you burn her leaves? Why did you do it?" (Vişniec 2012, 144). Meanwhile, Rozanov asks Petrovski to tell the patients to calm down, to tell them that Stalin is not dead, which the writer will eventually do. The thematic chaos of the finale carries within itself the impossibility of judging who is the real traitor of revolutionary ideals (cf. David 2012, 20).

In scene 22, the ghost of Stalin appears in front of the basement grate where the mentally ill bet, and "before disappearing from sight, [...] he turns and looks at the sick with the expression of a serene and generous father" (Vişniec 2012, 148). In this ending, in my opinion, two possible positions can be understood: one, more optimistic and unlikely, is that death makes innocent even the one who was in life a monster; the other is that Stalin looks benevolently at the mentally ill to symbolize that his death has not destroyed at all the hypocritical humanitarianism of Soviet clinics, a vision also supported by Steiciuc (Steiciuc 2020, 281), and is also sanctioned by Petrovski's final triple cry in scene 21: "Stalin is not dead! Stalin is not dead! Stalin is not dead!" (Vişniec 2012, 145).

4. Conclusions

In this article I wanted to stress out the peculiarities of Vişniec's point of view about Soviet clinics; this must be intended not only as a private story, but also as a public *'j'accuse'* against all forms of political oppression and limitation of free speech masquerading as legal institutions by the means of heterotopia and atopy. In this idea lies the focal point of his thought: by narrating a story precisely defined in time and space, he can still talk about a generic situation that, in some cases, still happens today. This kind of clinics – in fact – functioned in the same way on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and the hidden movements that happens on stage can be recognised quite easily in many essays that do not depict a pinpoint view of psychiatric clinics in USSR (just like the essays of Foucault, Goffman and Quarta) but also, of course, in the ones that do so (like the extremely interesting article of the psychiatrist Helen Lavretsky).

By analysing a wide range of phenomena bounded in various degrees to philosophy, but also to anthropology and psychology, I wanted to define and underline the importance, like I said, of heterotopies and atopies in Visniechian speech. I also tried to analyse the Italian reception of the play; unfortunately, only a few Italian representations that were made at least 13 years ago are of some importance, and the public reception of the drama (and of dramas in general) is, in Italy, scarce to use a euphemism. On the contrary, the life of the play in France is still active and object of interest all throughout the Country.

Finally, I have conducted my study with the obvious help of a consistent corpus of articles directly imputable to the play, that formed a solid background for my anthropological and philosophical speech (strongly inspired by Foucault and Goffman alike) to be supported by critical evidence.

The results of this article are an anthropological reading of the text that underlines the hidden movements that are present on the scene but that maybe are not quite obvious to an untrained eye. This has taken me to conclude that the psychiatric institution as a sort of prison is not a communist invention, but a fruit of the Enlightenment perfected in modern Western Europe, an interesting conclusion that brings up the idea of freedom's sanitary limitation as global and not circumscribed in time nor space. A vision that is totally coherent with Vişniec's perception of history.

Maybe the most original conclusion that I've drawn is the scenic application of both of the 'Opticon' ideas (Bentham's and Eco's), which has led to the creation of an hybrid: the Pan-anopticon. This is naturally intertwined with the perception of espionage and counter espionage endemic of that historical period and that is mirrored by the attempts of the staff and the one's of the 'sick' to spy on each other.

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