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THE RADICAL AESTHETICS OF THE MOVEMENT FOR SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION INTO THE ABSOLUTE (MISA)

This paper examines the history, worldview, and legal problems of MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru, as a form of radical aesthetics. In the first part, we summarize the development and doctrines of MISA. In the second, we present the legal controversies that accompanied the movement's history. In the third, we introduce five theoretical tools derived from the contemporary sociology of aesthetics. In the fourth, we use these tools to interpret MISA's worldview and societal reactions to it.

Keywords: yoga, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, integration, sociology of aesthetics

MISA: AN OVERVIEW

On 26 February 2016, Gregorian Bivolaru, leader of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), was arrested in France following a request by the Romanian authorities. Media all around the world had a field day about “the sex guru,” or “the yoga guru who tried to bed 1,000 virgins” (a real headline on a Romanian TV channel) (Costache 2016). But who is Gregorian Bivolaru? And what is MISA?

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Gregorian (“Grieg”) Bivolaru was born on 12 March 1952 in Tărtășești, in the Romanian region of Muntenia. His official biographers claim that he started experiencing altered states of consciousness as a young boy. As a young man, Bivolaru developed an interest in Eastern spiritualities and yoga by reading texts by the well-known Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and even corresponding with him (CESNUR 2016; Introvigne 2016a; Introvigne 2016b; Introvigne 2016c; Møldrup Thejls 2015). Not many books on yoga were available in Communist Romania, but Bivolaru somehow managed to read texts by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963) and Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886).

In 1970, at age 18, Bivolaru started teaching yoga in Bucharest. Yoga was regarded with hostility by the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu (1918–1989), and Bivolaru ended up in a psychiatric hospital. When the regime fell in 1989, he was freed and resumed teaching yoga. In 1990, he founded MISA. In the immediate post-Ceausescu years, the yoga taught by Bivolaru, which included a positive appreciation of sexuality as a way to the divine, appeared to many as a symbol of the new freedom. The success was spectacular. In a few years, there were forty ashrams of MISA in Romania, with 750 full-time members, and a total membership of 37,000.

Eventually, from Romania the movement spread internationally, adding, one after the other, chapters in Austria, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Ireland, Bosnia, Slovenia, Norway, Cyprus, the United States, South Africa, Argentina, Uruguay, India, and Thailand. They all belong to ATMAN – The International Federation of Yoga and Meditation, which serves as the global umbrella organization for MISA.

Starting in 1990, the local Romanian media attacked Bivolaru, from 1993 on labeling him as “the sex guru” and publishing lurid stories about his alleged sexual escapades with many female followers. Police and judicial intervention followed, as we will see more in detail in the second part of this paper. It is true that, because of continuing harassment by the police, particularly – but not only – in Romania, MISA lost some members. It is however still very much active, and growing in several countries, with some 20,000 students and 1,000 full-time members. Each year MISA organizes two meetings in Romania, in Herculane in May and in Costinești in August. Each has an average attendance of 5,000. Meetings are also organized in other countries.

What exactly does MISA teach? Its sources are many: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Western Esotericism, and Christianity. MISA does not suggest that its students, most of whom have been raised as Christians, abandon Christianity to embrace an alternative religious worldview. In 1997, a survey by sociologist Carmen Mărcuș revealed that 62.5% of MISA students in Romania continued to regard themselves as “open” to the local Orthodox Church (Mărcuș 1997: 139). In 2009, Bivolaru founded within MISA the Mișcarea Charismatică Teofanică (Theophanic Charismatic Movement), aimed at promoting an opening up to the Divine according to each believer’s individual religious or spiritual beliefs, including Christian ones.

MISA teaches a variety of paths and techniques, from the enneagram to alchemy to communication with angels, as part of an approach of “unity in diversity.” Each teaching is proposed apart from its historical and cultural context, in its essential “esoteric” core, which,

according to MISA, is compatible with very different paths. It is, however, clear that the main source and inspiration of MISA is Tantrism, and that we find in many ideas advanced by the movement echoes of the Kashmiri tantric sage Abhinavagupta (ca. 950–1016). “Vira” and “Shakti” groups impart tantric teachings respectively to men and women.

It is, of course, not true that Tantrism is only about sexuality. In fact, by reducing the complex tantric worldview of the movement to the sole teachings about sexual relationships, media and opponents often offer a somewhat caricatural view of it. We should also remember that there is no scholarly consensus about the definition of Tantrism, with some claiming that “Tantrism” itself is an orientalist concept invented by Western scholars, while the Hindu and Buddhism traditions know only “Tantras,” i.e. books, traditions and techniques that are very different from each other and never formed a unified system. But even in a strict sense, and according to one among several competing definitions, Tantrism is about reaching enlightenment based on material or this-worldly realities, which are regarded as resources rather than obstacles. Sexuality is just one among these resources, but by no means the only one (White 2000).

Several authors, including Jeff Kripal, David Gordon White, and Hugh Urban, have discussed the multiple interactions between Tantrism, or perhaps the different Tantras, and Western esotericism (Kripal 2001; White 2003; White 2009; Urban 2003; Urban 2006). In some contemporary New Age proposals, Tantra becomes just a slogan, with very little in common with Indian teachings. Countless seminars offer something called “Tantra” as a way to enjoy a better sexual life. Others in the history of Western esotericism actually traveled to the Indian subcontinent and learned about the Tantras there, although they then combined Eastern teachings with different Western traditions and their interpretations were somewhat idiosyncratic. Perhaps a simple mention of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) would be enough to allude to the complicated journey the Tantras undertook when they traveled west.

We would classify MISA as part of a galaxy of groups where Tantras are interpreted within the context of Western esotericism. As mentioned earlier, tantric teachings have a variety of starting points rather than sexuality alone, and a certain exaggerated focus on the sexual aspects is typical of the reconstructions of MISA activities proposed by the anti-cult movement, whose aim is obviously polemical rather than interpretive. However, MISA’s sexual techniques have attracted the attention of both scholars and critics and deserve at least a quick note.

There are several tantric techniques based on sexual continence, which can be quickly defined as orgasm without ejaculation. Several movements within Western esotericism teach similar techniques. One example is the constellation of Gnostic churches and groups that trace their genealogy to the Colombian master Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977) (Zoccatelli 2000; Zoccatelli 2005). Bivolaru’s main tantric technique about sexuality is, in fact, continence. The Romanian master teaches that continence should not be confused with lack of desire or erotic pleasure. On the contrary, continence is strongly euphoric and regenerating. For men, in particular, continence offers the benefit of changing the sperm into energy, although something analogous is experienced by women as well.

This happens, MISA teaches, in two steps. The first is transmutation and the second is sublimation. Transmutation of the semen into sexual energy is not enough to obtain the full benefits of continence. This is only the first step. The second step is sublimation, whereby

sexual energy flows upwards through the chakras. There are various methods to achieve sublimation, but normally the sustained practice of Hatha Yoga postures is necessary. MISA also teaches that the results of this technique are not immediate. The awakening of the Kundalini, i.e. the mobilization of the primal energy located at the base of the spine, is reached approximately after one year of continuous practice of continence and yoga (Bivolaru 2011).

The couple transmutation-sublimation in MISA confirms that the practice of continence, and the teachings about sexuality in general, are not something separated from the general practice of yoga. Retention of the semen should be just a part of a complex of techniques including different yoga techniques and intellectual efforts aimed at mastering an esoteric doctrine.

MISA's sexual practices, illustrated through adult movies (on which we will return later) by some members of the movements, play a central role in the anti-cult narrative depicting the movement as a "sex cult." There have been also accusations that MISA has organized prostitution rings in various countries. These accusations have not been proven and in fact even in the Romanian court cases, biased as they might have been against MISA, Bivolaru and other leaders have finally been judged not guilty with respect to these specific charges.

Although, as mentioned earlier, Bivolaru uses several elements derived from a wide variety of Eastern and Western esoteric teachings, he does not believe that everything that goes under the name of esotericism is positive. In particular, there is a sustained anti-masonic discourse inside of MISA, and books by Bivolaru consistently expose Freemasonry and other organizations such as the Illuminati. They argue that these organizations are the source of the Western World's contemporary decadence and many evils. As the very covers of some MISA books show, traditional religious Roman Catholic and Orthodox criticism of Freemasonry remains a source, along with contemporary testimonies of hostile ex-Freemasons and what critics call "conspiracy theories". As it is stated in a MISA website: "Freemasons consider Gregorian Bivolaru as a JAN VAN HELSING of Romania, who disturbs them more and more with his public disclosures of 'terrifying' secrets that only the top of Freemasons knows" (Yogi Blogger 2012). Freemasonry is portrayed as a satanic and evil group of powerful people who are trying to control the entire earth using diverse sinister methods to keep the rest of humanity in oblivion.

MISA is also interested in the existence of extraterrestrial life. Just as Freemasons supposedly have contact with malefic extraterrestrials, MISA is in touch with benevolent extraterrestrials, working together with the Supreme Galactic Council. Bivolaru suggested in a lecture in 2013 that benevolent extraterrestrials could have intervened to shatter into pieces a huge meteorite before it collapsed over the Russian town of Chelyabinsk, an incident which would have had catastrophic effects for the whole of Planet Earth. In fact, the benevolence of the extraterrestrials may have been related to the practice of the "supreme and efficient method," a special collective meditation that was initiated at the annual retreat in Herculane in 2013 (Matei n.d.).

It is quite easy to imagine that anti-Masonism and theories about aliens normally do not make spiritual or esoteric movements particularly popular. However, the fact that a large part of Romanian anti-cultism focuses on MISA is also connected with unsolved problems in post-Communist Romanian society about to what degree of deviance from a traditional,

Eastern Orthodox, and morally conservative public image of the country and the culture may be tolerated.

In one of the few scholarly articles on MISA, Sara Møldrup Thejls refers to the discussions among scholars – particularly Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Asprem, Charlotte Ward, and David Voas – on both conspiracy culture and esoteric discourse, in which the point of departure is the term “conspirituality,” the combination of conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality as a new paradoxical phenomenon. In her discussion, Møldrup Thejls argues that “conspiracy theory is inherently esoteric in its epistemology,” so that it is not surprising to find it in esoteric movements (Møldrup Thejls 2015).

MISA’S LEGAL CONTROVERSIES

On December 7, 2012, the main Italian wire agency ANSA reported that a dangerous Romanian group was being investigated by the police for “violent sex, esotericism, and yoga” (ANSA 2012). Several Italian daily newspapers reprinted the news without comments (La Nazione 2012) – and without asking themselves whether “violent sex” (whatever it might be), “esotericism” and “yoga” were indeed crimes worthy of a police investigation.

The incident may appear as trivial, but is not unimportant. It confirms both that groups labeled as “cults” are discussed in the media in a cavalier way, without any serious effort of fact-checking, and that “esotericism,” at least for some reporters, is a word as bad as “cult,” and conjures the image of something mysterious and sinister, perhaps indeed associated with “violent sex.”

The interest of the MISA case, in this respect, lies in the fact that it is not an isolated incident. Other groups labeled as “cults” have experienced similar legal problems, particularly when their discourses and practices involve the delicate sphere of sexuality. The early legal saga of the Children of God, which later changed their name to The Family, included incidents in several different countries and is well-known to scholars of new religious movements (Lewis and Melton 1994).

Bivolaru has faced legal problems since his early career as a yoga teacher. During the Stalinist and immediate post-Stalinist decades, from the late 1940s to the 1960s, all yoga practice was banned in Romania. In the 1970s, it became possible to open yoga centres, although they were closely supervised by the Securitate (the political police). However, as it is typical of non-democratic governments, there were sudden and largely unpredictable changes. Yoga was regarded alternatively as an inoffensive physical exercise, or something dangerous for the regime. Bivolaru was also suspected, wrongly, of being the Romanian leader of Transcendental Meditation.

In 1984, he was arrested and accused by the regime of possessing and spreading pornographic materials, practicing a job without the proper license, and escaping from prison. He was subsequently released but was taken again to the Securitate offices for criminal investigation in 1986. Finally, in 1989, he was confined in the psychiatric hospital of Poiana Mare. Post-communist Romania allows those sentenced by the Ceausescu regime to obtain from the courts a declaration that their convictions were of a political nature. Bivolaru applied for such a declaration in 2010 and obtained it in 2011 (Andreescu 2016).

After the establishment of MISA, almost immediately the Romanian media attacked Bivolaru as part of their campaigns against “cults.” Opposition to “cults” by media and the intelligence services in Romania survived communism. Additionally, the old personnel of Ceausescu’s years often maintained their positions. In a detailed study of the cases against MISA, Romanian scholar Gabriel Andreescu noted that the prosecutor who had sent Bivolaru to the psychiatric hospital in 1989, Vasile Manea Drăgulin, became the General Prosecutor of Romania after the fall of communism, and remained in this position between 1993 and 1996.

MISA was particularly targeted because of its attitude towards sexuality, and Bivolaru was referred to as “the sex guru” in the media. Throughout Romania, MISA yoga sessions were interrupted, yoga practitioners were interrogated by the police, and some were fired from their jobs. Andreescu’s meticulous survey of archival documents evidences that Romanian intelligence has kept MISA under surveillance since 1997, claiming it was a threat to national security.

Official and media hostility towards MISA culminated in the raids of March 18, 2004, nicknamed by the Romanian police “Operation Christ.” Gendarmes and military of the special forces, masked and armed with machine guns and Makarov pistols, accompanied by prosecutors and TV cameramen, smashed the doors and entered 16 MISA ashrams throughout Romania simultaneously at 7 a.m. The main TV channels echoed the official press release, announcing that “today at 7:00 a.m., police conducted the largest operation against drugs and human trafficking in the history of post-Revolution Romania.” Drugs, by the way, had nothing to do with the MISA case. No drugs were found, nor were charges for drug trafficking filed.

Susan Palmer and Stuart Wright in their recent book *Storming Zion* discuss raids against groups labeled as “cults” in various countries (Wright and Palmer 2016). What happened in 2004 in the MISA case in Romania corresponds to a general pattern noted by Palmer and Wright. Raids were invariably carried out by a disproportionate number of heavily armed police and military in the early hours of the morning, not so much because the “cults” were regarded as dangerous, but for the benefit of the invited reporters and cameramen.

Most raids had meager results in terms of collecting evidence against the “cults,” but that was not their main purpose. Raids are best interpreted as a sort of baroque theater, serving a purpose similar to public executions in other centuries. With their display of special forces and machine guns, all paraded in front of the cameras, the authorities mounted a sideshow with a pedagogical purpose. Powerful forces hostile to “cults,” including the Orthodox Church, were reassured, and those attracted to alternative spiritualities were intimidated by a powerful public statement that “cults” would not be tolerated and would be punished.

As usual in similar cases, the 2004 raid did not find much of significance for prosecuting MISA. In fact, attempts at prosecuting MISA students in subsequent years invariably failed. With one exception: among those taken to the police for interrogation in 2004 was 17-year-old Mădălina Dumitru. Submitted to prolonged interrogations (and, later, also to a forced gynecological examination) the young woman ended up admitting that Bivolaru had had sex with her. Once released from the custody of the police, Mădălina immediately recanted and claimed in several interviews with the media that her “confession” had been extorted under duress. It is also important to note that the legal age of consent for sexual relationships in Romania is 15. The law, however, incriminates teachers who have sex with their students.

Prosecutors constructed the relation between Mădălina and Bivolaru as one between student and teacher, although both denied that this was the case.

Bivolaru was arrested, at first for illegal crossing of the border (even if he was not under any interdiction of crossing the border), and charged with seven different crimes, including human trafficking (based on the charge that members of MISA worked for the movement without adequate salaries), trafficking of minors, and sexual relationships with different minors, including Mădălina. The legal aftermath of the 2004 raid took place in five different jurisdictions: Romania, Sweden, France, Italy, and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

In Romania, the prosecutor's case against Bivolaru with respect to the alleged sexual improprieties quickly collapsed, and he was found not guilty both in first degree and on appeal. The prosecutor, however, appealed to the Supreme Court, which on June 14, 2013 reversed the first- and second-degree verdicts with respect only to the alleged sexual relationship with Mădălina Dumitru. For this offense, Bivolaru received an unusually heavy six-year jail sentence.

Bivolaru, however, was not in Romania in 2013. Freed from jail while awaiting trial, in 2005 he had decided to flee his native country and escape to Sweden, where he was arrested again following a request from the Romanian authorities. However, the Swedish Supreme Court in December 2005 rejected a Romanian request for extradition and ordered the immediate release of Bivolaru, believing that his prosecution was politically motivated. In 2006, Bivolaru obtained the status of political refugee in Sweden.

In 2016, however, Bivolaru was arrested while he was traveling in France, a country not particularly friendly to "cults," after Romania had obtained his inclusion on the list of Europol's most wanted fugitives. On Europol's Web site Bivolaru was described by Romanian authorities as guilty of "sexual exploitation of minors and child pornography," while in fact he was sentenced in 2013 only for the alleged sexual relationship with Mădălina. A legal battle for extradition followed, and French authorities decided in first degree and appeal that Bivolaru should be extradited to Romania, notwithstanding his status of political refugee in Sweden. On July 22, 2016 Bivolaru was brought to Romania. He was freed on parole on September 13, 2017, and left Romania, only to be targeted by a new international arrest warrant, this time from Finland and based on the alleged abuse of female Finnish disciples. At the time of this writing, he is contesting the legitimacy of the Finnish order and has not been arrested. In Romania, Bivolaru is also being investigated for his escape from Romania in 2005. In turn, he applied for a revision of the Supreme Court decision of 2013 in the Mădălina Dumitru case, based on the fact that the court initially agreed to hear him in Sweden through a rogatory commission, then issued its decision without waiting for Sweden to allow him to be interrogated. This request of revision was denied in February 2017.

The Romanian police also continues to feed information, both directly and through the international network of anti-cult movements, to authorities in other countries where MISA is active. Italy established in 2006 a curious police branch, the Anti-Cult Squad (Squadra Anti-Sette, SAS). It was created as the result of lobbying of anti-cult movements and has achieved very limited results. In December 2012, the SAS raided MISA in Italy, while the media promoted a very aggressive campaign. At the dawn of 6 December 2012, the police broke into the private houses of 25 Italian citizens and foreign residents in Italy, some of

them students of MISA while others were just relatives and friends. Hundreds of documents were seized, including yoga course materials, computers, cell phones, videos, and personal journals. The decree authorizing the seizure mentioned possible crimes of criminal conspiracy, prostitution, pornography, enslavement, and sexual violence. To the best of our knowledge, no evidence of these crimes has emerged, although 18 persons are still being investigated.

Finally, MISA students who believed they had been abused during the 2004 raid took their case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. Before their case was decided, ECHR had already rendered a decision favorable to a student of MISA, Dana Ruxandra Atudorei, who at the age of 19 had been forcibly interned in a psychiatric asylum because of her participation in the movement's activities. On September 16, 2014, in the case *Atudorei v. Romania*, ECHR decided that her human rights had been violated (European Court of Human Rights 2014). This was a prelude to the landmark ECHR decision *Amarandei and others v. Romania* of 26 April 2016, where 26 members of MISA who had been mistreated in the 2004 raid obtained € 291,000 in damages from the Romanian government (European Court of Human Rights 2016). The decision was important, since it stated that the raid was based on insufficient evidence and that the excessive use of physical and psychological violence had violated the complainants' human rights and dignity. The decision implicitly called into question the whole system of spectacular raids against the "cults," the more so because it came after a verdict rendered on 11 February 2015 by the Court of Cluj, exonerating 21 MISA members, including Bivolaru, from charges of human trafficking. The Court of Cluj described the 2004 raid as "barbaric" and identified its true aim: "to close this yoga school by discouraging its members to exercise their freedom of conscience."

On October 5, 2016, however, with Bivolaru in jail after the extradition, the Court of Appeal of Cluj quashed the 2015 verdict and ordered his retrial for human trafficking. This case is also pending at the time of this writing, with Bivolaru's lawyers questioning whether trying him for crimes different from those for which he was extradited from France is coherent with international provisions governing extradition. Other religious and spiritual groups are following with concern the accusations of human trafficking, as they revolve around work performed on behalf of a spiritual institution allegedly without adequate remuneration, an accusation that would be easy to direct against many religious communities.

Both the Court of Cluj, i.e. a Romanian court, and the European Court of Human Rights argued that the Romanian police and prosecutors went to extraordinary and unusual lengths to try to wipe MISA out of existence, violating the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, and the human rights of the yoga students in the process. Yet, the judicial fury against Bivolaru continues, and is routinely applauded by most Romanian media.

How can we explain this obstinacy? Of course, an initial explanation could be that Bivolaru is in fact a sexual pervert, and that MISA, under the guise of spirituality and esotericism, traffics in human beings, including minors, who are sexually exploited by the leaders, and photographed and filmed in various stages of nudity. However, decades of police and judicial investigations of MISA in various countries, and thousands of pages filled by prosecutors, have produced only one final decision against a MISA member, the one finding the leader, Bivolaru, guilty of one single crime, the presumed sexual relationship with Mădălina Dumitru. Even in this case, however, a detailed investigation undertaken by the Swedish Supreme Court,

during the proceedings that granted Bivolaru the status of a political refugee, concluded that the charges were trumped up and the decision against MISA's founder was grossly unfair. Clearly, further explanations are needed.

We would suggest three possible explanations of the extreme anti-MISA feelings prevailing among sectors of the Romanian police and media, related respectively to the Romanian context, the campaigns against "cults," and esotericism.

There are two elements peculiar to the Romanian context worth mentioning. The first is the role of the Orthodox Church and the alliance between that church and parts of the Romanian political and administrative establishment. Raids and prosecutions, such as the one against Bivolaru, are "show trials" ritually celebrating this alliance and warning that only a modicum degree of deviation from the moral and cultural standards agreed upon by the church and a non-neutral state would be tolerated. The expression "show trials" is of course reminiscent of the trials of the Stalinist period. The second element to be considered in the Romanian context is, in fact, post-Communism and the presence of persons who had been there in the Ceausescu years in the judiciary, the police, and the media. The role of the media is very important. They are part and parcel of a system that fixes quite strict symbolic boundaries, which should not be transgressed. Transgression has as its consequence immediate punishment, in the shape of media campaigns, raids, and incarceration.

The second explanation concerns the campaigns against the "cults." In 2016 Eugene V. Gallagher edited a volume, *The Cult Wars*, where he concluded that these wars were slowly becoming a thing of the past (Gallagher 2016). In the 21st century, Islamic radicalism is regarded as a more serious threat than "cults" and myths about brainwashing and mind control have been largely debunked by academic scholars. Gallagher's thesis, however, should be qualified geographically. In the United States, the cult wars both started and finished earlier. They continued in Western Europe when they had become marginal in the U.S. While in countries like Italy or France certainly they did not disappear, they somewhat lost momentum and the financial resources that the governments were now devoting to combating Islamic extremism rather than "cults." However, just as it appeared in Western Europe some years after the United States, anti-cultism has become fashionable only recently in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Romania is different from Italy or France in this respect. There are no relevant organized anti-cult movements. Yet, the anti-cult ideology is spread directly by segments of the state and by the Orthodox Church.

Finally, MISA is not a "cult." It is an esoteric movement. Wouter Hanegraaff, in his 2012 book *Esotericism and the Academy*, proposed a history of cultural movements that marginalized esotericism, from Protestantism to the Enlightenment to a contemporary progressive culture that regards esotericism as reactionary and often connected with right-wing political movements (Hanegraaff 2012). The attack on MISA shows a combination of different elements. Romanian society is undergoing a difficult process of modernization, complicated by a demographic, economic, and social crisis. The saga of MISA confirms that it has not completely come to terms with its communist past. There are, of course, competing projects for governing this transition. The Orthodox Church believes in its ability to maintain its traditional role through an alliance with the state. In turn, the state mediates between different notions of rationality, science, and progress, and different forces. Few of them seem to welcome the

ambitious project of MISA, a very visible group that does not accept remaining marginal and offers remedies to the Romanian crisis based on an esoteric vision of knowledge, the body, and sexuality, and the ancient wisdom of tantric yoga.

AESTHETICS AND AESTHETICIZATION: SOME THEORETICAL TOOLS

MISA is more than a new religious or esoteric movement perceived as deviant by anti-cultists and the media. We believe that it is a manifestation of what we would call radical aesthetics. To situate this category, some theoretical premises are in order. Postmodernist German philosopher Wolfgang Iser argues that “we are without doubt currently experiencing an aesthetics boom. It extends from individual styling, urban design and the economy through to theory. More and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled, and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction to us” (Iser 1997).

Social scientists define as “aestheticization” the process where reality in all fields is socially constructed based on (inter alia) aesthetic taste, and aesthetics is redefined in ways that go well beyond the mere field of the arts (de la Fuente 2000). It is now widely recognized that aestheticization was already noticed and theorized by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) at the end of the 19th century. Based on Simmel, we can argue that a group’s aesthetics is not restricted to its idea of art, but determining what ideas it has about art is crucial to identifying its aesthetics (de la Fuente 2008).

Influential American sociologist Randal Collins connected aestheticization with the theory of ritual interaction first proposed by Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). He argued that our aesthetics is largely driven by the experience of emotional energy we derive from successful rituals, a notion that Durkheim and Collins did not restrict to religion but extended to everyday life. Collins (and others) noticed that in the 1960s, daily rituals connected with politeness, class relations, gender relations, and everyday religion changed quite dramatically, determining a change of aesthetic paradigm. Collins called this the “Goffmanian revolution,” arguing that Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) provided all the tools for interpreting it, although paradoxically Goffman largely failed to notice it while it was happening (Collins 2004).

For sociologists in the Goffman tradition, sexuality is not defined by evolutionary biology alone. In a large part, it is socially constructed. It also creates the most important daily interaction rituals. A new aesthetics of sexuality largely defined the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s, and ended up extending its influence to many fields. We would argue that those engaged in redefining the aesthetics of sexuality in the 1960s and beyond found their sources in three traditions outside of the religious and cultural mainstream. The first was Eastern spirituality, particularly from India. The second was modern Western Esotericism, with its rich traditions of sacred sexuality and sexual magic, of which Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875) and the OTO are just two among many examples (Hanegraaff and Kripal 2008).

Modernist art as a third source should not be overlooked. It includes a reservoir of subversive sexual images. It is quite significant that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981),

who was instrumental in defining the new aesthetics, became the owner of *L'origine du monde* (now at Musée d'Orsay, Paris), painted by Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) in 1866 and featuring a close-up view of the genitals of a naked woman. Drawing on Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art, the revolution of the 1960s built a radical aesthetics, where the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and sexuality started to collapse.

This revolution generated reactionary counter-movements, led by two strange bedfellows, both with a vested interest in maintaining the boundaries. Mainstream churches saw the writing on the wall and perceived, as social historians such as Callum Brown (Brown 2003) and Hugh McLeod (McLeod 2010) would later note, that the new aesthetics and sexuality would call their role into question and eventually reduce church membership and attendance. Defenders of secularism, including Marxists, resented that everyday life, culture, art, and sexuality were not socially constructed in purely secular terms but increasingly invested with spiritual (although “alternative” and unorthodox) meanings.

MISA'S RADICAL AESTHETICS

MISA's worldview may be defined as a radical aesthetics, based on the very sources of the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s: Eastern spiritualities (particularly Tantrism), Western esotericism, and a certain tradition in modernist art (interpreted selectively). MISA's new aesthetic was derived from multiple sources. There is, however, little doubt that a tantric form of yoga, mainly derived from the Tantric Shivaism of Kashmir and the Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu, is at the center of the movement's spiritual proposal.

Tantrism is based on the correspondence between the divine macrocosm and the human microcosm. To channel divine energy into the earthly plane, it uses a variety of techniques. Quite irrespective of the philological question whether MISA's reinterpretation of Tantra is faithful to its Indian sources, what is important here is that Tantra is used as a tool for collapsing the boundaries between religion, art, and daily life. Microcosmic realities are regarded as a resource rather than as an obstacle for spirituality. These realities include sexuality and the human body, but also the visual arts, music, dance, geometrical forms, colors, certain foods, and dreams.

Faithful to its tantric roots, MISA promotes what it calls “objective” art as yet another way of channeling divine energies through microcosmic material elements such as forms and colors. MISA also promotes music, dance and theater. According to Mihai Stoian, one of MISA's leading yoga teachers, art is a direct method to awaken the soul (Stoian n.d.). True art comes from awareness and generates transformation by expressing general laws. Stoian teaches that art works through resonance, i.e. transmission of vibrations from the source to the receiver. For resonance to work, there is, however, a condition: a certain resemblance between the source and the receiver. Symmetrical figures are particularly easy to “resemble.” Artists connected with MISA such as Ines Honfi often produce yantras, tantric diagrams with certain proportions and colors (Honfi 2016). They believe we resonate easily with these works of art and our mind slowly takes the shape of yantra in meditation.

Subjective art for MISA is an expression of the ego and communicates an unimportant “point of view,” no more interesting than a CV or passport. Objective art comes from divine consciousness. The higher the level of consciousness, the better the art. Subjective art is horizontal. Objective art is vertical and becomes a form of initiation. But initiated art can be produced only by initiated artists and audiences also need to be educated to be receptive to initiation. MISA indicates that art is a part of the yoga teaching, because without art we would remain “people who know” rather than becoming “people who are.”

Technique is important, but consciousness is more important. Stoian explains that the Russian painter and esoteric teacher Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) was probably less technically gifted than other artists, yet his work generates high resonance because of his high level of consciousness. Stoian adds that people genuinely in love, whose level of consciousness is high, may become “temporary artists” quite independently from their technical skills. Professional artists need yoga training as well. MISA claims that, if an artist is not evolving, he or she will not maintain the same level of consciousness and, after a first success, the following works will become repetitious or not of the same level. Stoian gives the example of the less successful sequels of Michael Flatley’s famous dance show *Lord of the Dance*.

MISA’s radical aesthetics also includes a practical aspect. MISA leading teacher Nicolae Catrina developed a “Yoga of Beauty” as a path to enlightenment through the contemplation of beauty. All genuine (objective) art can serve as the starting point for the Yoga of Beauty, whether it is explicitly “esoteric” or not. Catrina also emphasizes the importance of collective contemplation of art. When a group of initiates contemplate a work of art in a state of unison, each individual aesthetic experience is mirrored in the consciousness of all the others, generating a new field of global energy (Introvigne 2016c).

Those who participated in MISA camps report the intense emotional experiences they derive from both the public rituals and the smaller daily rituals they learn to perform in their daily life. It is a new gaze on life, which by no means is limited to sexuality but certainly includes a relationship with the body and nudity some may regard as subversive (Di Marzio 2014). What for some is a problem derives, again, from undefined boundaries. We can look at certain images on MISA’s websites and ask whether they are artistic performances, spiritual rituals, or celebrations of the human body. From MISA’s point of view, they are all those three things together, as there is no separation between daily life, art, and spirituality.

MISA also has larger public rituals. One of the most spectacular is the Yang Yogic Spiral, where thousands of people hold hands and meditate in the open air. They are arranged according to their astrological signs and the spiral is believed to enhance the beneficial effects of their respective ruling planets.

MISA’s radical aesthetics extend to the erotic field. Director Carmen Enache, a member of MISA, has produced several erotic movies. Some of them found their way to adult portals, while others, including the recent *Continuamente amando*, cannot be regarded as pornographic in any sensible meaning of the word. Enache insists, however, that even her early, sexually explicit productions were part of sacred eroticism and “objective art” (Bella Maestrina 2003). Unlike common adult movies, they taught tantric practices such as continence, i.e. orgasm without emission of semen, and other forms of sexual magic, including some centered on the ritual use of urine.

Individual members of MISA, inspired by their new perspective on art and eroticism, have created several projects, including theater, photography, and a website called Extasia. This perspective has also been presented at international erotic festivals and salons but, when one reads all the material, it becomes clear that the center of the project is a very explicit denunciation of the separation of body and spirit, and of eroticism and spirituality, as a dramatic “wound” that needs to be healed, allowing women to get in touch again with their “inner goddess” (Extasia 2016).

Critics call these erotic productions simply pornographic and obscene. Obviously, the difference is not always easy to tell, but MISA’s members insist that objective criteria exist. While legitimate erotic art celebrates the beauty of the body and sexuality, “obscene art” shows the disgusting and the revolting. In some articles, MISA suggest that there is a connection between obscene or lower forms of art and concepts promoted by the Illuminati and Freemasonry, which the movement regards as sinister groups working today against spirituality (Yogaesoteric.net n.d.).

Two deformed views often repeated in the media should be corrected. The first is that MISA as a movement produces erotic artifacts, including photographs and movies. These are private initiatives of students, who express MISA’s worldview in different individual ways. The second is that sexuality is the main subject of MISA’s courses. In fact, courses on sexuality represent a very small percentage of MISA’s total activities, teachings, and publications. MISA’s complete curriculum includes 2,100 courses, of which fewer than 100 refer to sexuality. Even the Tantra curriculum includes 600 courses, of which some 70 refer to sexuality, intimacy, or couple relationships.

Its radical aesthetics is a key for understanding reactions against MISA, culminating in the repeated incarcerations of its founder. One of the main arguments of counter-movements against “cults” has always been that “cults” are sexually deviant. MISA’s celebration of body, eroticism, nudity, and sexuality is rhetorically separated from its tantric roots and context, and used as an allegedly typical example of “cultic sexual abuse.” MISA’s doctrines about sexuality, however, are only part of the story. Its radical aesthetics and transgression of the boundaries between religion, daily life (included, but not limited to, sexuality), generated a reaction by those interested in reaffirming these boundaries. In Romania, one component was the very conservative local Orthodox Church. Another leading role in counter-movements against MISA was, however, played by the Communist Party, which reacted very early against Bivolaru, and its post-1989 relics in Romania, secular media, and secular international movements hostile to “cults.” For them, collapsing the boundaries between religion, culture, daily life, and sexuality was a sin not against the Christian view of religion and morality but against secularism.

IN CONCLUSION

As the movement continues to expand internationally, it is perhaps time for scholars to pass to a second phase of the study of MISA, focusing not only on Bivolaru’s court cases or on the teachings about sexuality, as interesting as they may be, but on the group’s radical aesthetics and how it is the expression of a larger aesthetics revolution.

We would like to suggest four main themes in the esotericism of MISA, all deserving further study. The first is the role and charisma of the leader, which makes MISA similar to new religious movements. Although Bivolaru is presented as a scholar who has studied many different traditions, he also appears to some as a quasi-messianic figure, to whom certain students attribute very special abilities and a unique role in human history. If he is confined in jail in Romania for several years, it remains to be seen how the perception of his charisma will evolve, and what role would be played by other respected yoga teachers in the movement such as Nicolae Catrina and Mihai Stoian.

The second theme is eclecticism. As mentioned earlier, we can consider MISA one of several neo-tantric or Western tantric movements. However, Tantrism is interpreted, to paraphrase the subtitle of a famous book by Wouter Hanegraaff, in the mirror of Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996). How this may happen, and how Tantrism is transformed by this Western gaze, is a central question for studying the movement.

The third theme is ritual. We can ask the question to what extent the practices of MISA may be read as rituals, and in the affirmative what is a ritual in this particular tradition and what role it performs. A sub-question in this field is whether practices in the tradition of sexual magic such as continence are also, in their own way, readable as rituals.

The fourth theme is eschatology, and the view of a cosmic battle between good and evil, involving inter alia Freemasonry, the Illuminati, and both good and bad extraterrestrials. We can ask whether this battle is final and whether “conspirituality” is affirmed and constructed by MISA within a millennialist context.

What we have proposed here is a very preliminary approach to MISA. It is a list of questions much more than a series of answers. If we regard MISA as an esoteric movement, it is today one of the largest in the world regarding number of members. And a comparative approach would also be needed, for instance by comparing MISA to the movements originating from Samael Aun Weor or from Gilbert Bourdin (1923–1998), who founded both Aumism and the Holy City of the Mandarom in France (Introvigne 1996; Introvigne 1999; Introvigne 2001; Zoccatelli 2004; Zoccatelli 2003). Both Weor and Bourdin integrated yoga and Tantras with Western esotericism, and both generated widespread criticism and controversies. Why some esoteric groups seem to particularly disturb contemporary society, while others are more or less tolerated, is another theme to which the study of MISA may offer a significant contribution.

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RADYKALNA ESTETYKA RUCHU NA RZECZ DUCHOWEJ INTEGRACJI Z ABSOLUTEM
(MISA, THE MOVEMENT FOR SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION INTO THE ABSOLUTE)

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje historię, światopogląd i prawne problemy Ruchu na Rzecz Duchowej Integracji z Absolutem (MISA), założonego przez rumuńskiego nauczyciela jogi Gregoriasza Bivolaru, którą analizujemy jako formę radykalnej estetyki. Artykuł został podzielony na cztery części. Pierwsza zawiera podsumowanie dotyczące rozwoju ruchu i jego doktryny, druga zaś przedstawia prawne kontrowersje towarzyszące historii tej organizacji. W części trzeciej zostało omówionych pięć narzędzi teoretycznych, wywodzących się ze współczesnej socjologii estetyki, których w części ostatniej artykułu używamy do interpretacji światopoglądu MISA i społecznych reakcji na ten ruch.

Słowa kluczowe: joga, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, integracja, socjologia estetyki