

Introduction: The Radical Aesthetics of a Romanian Esoteric Movement

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ABSTRACT: MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru, is often denounced in the media as a deviant movement because of its view of sexuality rooted in Westernized Tantric teachings. This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* explores the history, doctrines, and controversies of MISA, arguing that its teachings cannot be reduced to a doctrine of sexuality only and propose a “radical aesthetics” that also explains the reactions by both its religious and secular opponents.

KEYWORDS: Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, Tantra, Siddha Yoga.

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. In the first article, PierLuigi Zoccatelli summarizes the development and doctrines of MISA. In the second, Raffaella Di Marzio presents the legal controversies that accompanied the movement’s history. In the third, I discuss the erotic movies directed by MISA student Carmen Enache and how they came to play a crucial role in controversies about the movement. In the fourth article, J. Gordon Melton places MISA’s approach to sexuality within the larger history of Western esotericism and alternative religious movements.

The articles support the conclusion that MISA is more than a new religious or esoteric movement perceived as deviant by anti-cultists and the media. I 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 argued 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” (Welsch 1997, 1).

Social scientists define as “aestheticization” the process where reality in all fields is socially constructed based (inter alia) on aesthetic taste, and aesthetics is redefined in ways that go well beyond the mere field of the arts (de la Fuente 2000, 235). 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 identify 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 he largely failed to notice it while it was happening (Collins 2004, 371).

For sociologists in the Goffman tradition, sexuality is not defined by evolutionary biology only. 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. I 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 (see Hanegraaff and Kripal 2008).

Modernist art as a third source should not be overlooked. It included 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 (Lloyd 2016). 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 and Hugh McLeod would later note, that the new aesthetics and sexuality would call their role into question and eventually reduce church membership and attendance (Brown 2003; McLeod 2010). 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 worldview may be defined as 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 Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu and Tantric Shivaism of Kashmir is at the center of the movement's spiritual proposal.

Tantrism is based on the correspondence between divine macrocosm and human microcosm. To channel the divine energy into the earthly plane, it uses a variety of techniques. Quite irrespectively from 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, i.e. Tantric diagrams with certain proportions and colors (see her Web site at www.ineshonfi.com). 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” (Stoian n.d.).

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 generate 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 too. MISA claims that, if an artist is not evolving, he or she will not keep the same level of consciousness and, after a first success, the next 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* (Stoian n.d.).

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, whom I interviewed in October 2016, also emphasized 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.

Those who participated in MISA camps report (based on multiple interviews from 2014 to 2017) 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. What for some is a problem derives, again, from undefined boundaries. We can look at certain images on MISA’s Web sites and ask whether they are artistic performances, spiritual rituals, or celebrations of the human body. From MISA’s point of view, they are all these three things together, as there is no separation between daily life, art, and spirituality.

MISA’s radical aesthetics extend to the erotic field. As discussed in one of the articles included in this issue, director Carmen Enache, a member of MISA, produced several erotic movies. Some of them found their way to adult portals, while others, including the more recent *Continuamente amando*, cannot be regarded as pornographic in any sensible meaning of the word. Enache, whom I interviewed repeatedly in 2017, insists, however, that even her early, sexually explicit productions were part of sacred eroticism and “objective art.” 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.

Members of MISA have also created a project including theater, photography, and a Web site called Extasia (www.artextasia.com). This 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.”

Critics call MISA’s erotic productions simply pornographic and obscene. Obviously, the difference is not always easy to tell, but MISA insists 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 (“Incredibil, profund revoltător, dar adevărat: Iată care este ‘arta’ abjectă pe care o promovează francmasonii!” n.d.)

We hope to correct with this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* two deformed views often repeated in the media. The first is that MISA as a movement produces erotic artifacts, including photographs and movies. These are, more precisely, initiatives of students (some of them, admittedly, prominent in the movement), 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 less 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 and 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.

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