AEROBICS AND SELF-ASSERTING DISCOURSES: MAPPING THE GENDERED BODY IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA

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"The body necessarily plays a significant role in times of social, cultural or political crisis. In a revolution, the established body ideal is one of the first things to be overturned or redefined in favour of a more ideologically appropriate replacement," wrote Reischer and Koo (Reischer and Koo, 2004:308). In Romania, in the years following the demise of communism, freedom was mostly experienced on the site of the body: food, warmth, sexuality,[1] freedom of movement, a new body. Almost immediately, the market was flooded with no longer censored images of the body: sexy, fit, naked bodies, i.e. Western bodies.[2]

While the Romanian editions of well known women's magazines (*Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*) only came in a few years later, in the early nineties the readers could choose among previously existing publications such as *Femeia* (Woman), *Femeia modernă* (Modern Woman) and newly born *Timpul femeilor în țara bărbaților* (The time of women in the land of men) or, later on, *Avantaje* (Advantages). What all these had in common was the urgency of filling a gap in Romanian women's education; "how to" kind of advice in such magazines ranged from dressing up to quitting the job (for a better one, of course) or partner (similar reason). Women had to learn a lot of new things, practises, tips, and strategies of self-management in order to be successful in these novel contexts.

In 2006, passing by a street news stall, one can take a quick glance at Romanian VIPs smiling on the cover of glossy women's magazines (the ultimate model of success seem to be TV moderators and news presenters) and Western movie stars or fashionable singers in the case of local editions of international brands; all are peacefully neighbouring images of naked, tanned, alluring bodies on the cover of sexy publications. The first visual difference among these publications seems to reside in the quality of the paper: low-priced Romanian magazines have poor quality, matte and spongy paper, compared to the glossy, cardboard covers of more expensive publications.

Sixteen years after the revolution, although images of naked bodies (on TV, in the movies, in the ads, on the cover of most publications) have become common, Romanian mentality still preserves soma-phobic undertones and a certain tabooing of the subject; the body is not an issue, not in the public debate, nor in academics. Moreover, it is regarded as a frivolous and superficial topic; certainly not suited for a respectable university lecture, conference or publication. Unlike gender studies, body studies are still to be legitimised in Romanian academe.

Even in established Western socio-cultural disciplines, the body is but a recent acquisition. Still, ever since it entered the stage a few decades ago, it has enjoyed an intense focus. In the seventies, Mary Douglas was pioneering the field of body studies through her famous analogy between the physical and the social body, arguing that "there is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. […]The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society" (Douglas 1996:69).

Douglas envisions the physical body as "a microcosm of society, facing the centre of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures" (Douglas 1996:77). Consequently, the body can be read as a "cultural text, giving material expression to the cultural values, preoccupations and anxieties of a culture."[3]

Moving beyond a static vision on the body, as mere text to be deciphered or imprinted upon, Chris Shilling projects it as a "multidimensional medium for constituting the society: a source, a locus and a way of positioning individuals inside the society" (Shilling 2003:208). The body is to be seen as "a material phenomenon which shapes, as well as being shaped by, its social environment. The body is central to our ability to 'make a difference,' to intervene in, or to exercise agency in the world, and our bodily emotions, preferences, sensory capacities and actions are a fundamental source of 'social forms'" (Shilling 2003:iv). In short, the body is designed as "an active, transformative, and dynamic expression of the self" (Waaler Loland 2000:112).

Congruent with this perspective, Erving Goffman considered the body a mediator between the self-identity of the individual and his/her social identity, acknowledging a degree of independence in the management of one's corporeality. "The management of the body is central to the maintenance of encounters, social roles and social relations, and also mediates the relationship between an individual's self-identity and their social identity." The body is seen as a resource that can be "managed in a variety of ways in order to construct a particular version of the self" (Shilling 2003:66).

In Goffman's approach, the body is the property of the individual who has the capacity of controlling and monitoring his/her own bodily performances in social interactions; individuals perform their identities through the body. As Waaler Loland puts it, "the body represents a personal resource; it reflects self-image through symbols. We can manipulate our bodies according to the norms and values to which we subscribe. Prevailing cultural or sub-cultural norms and values are encoded in bodily conformity and, thus, in ideals for bodily appearance" (Waaler Loland 2000:114).

More recently, Susan Bordo also took up the metaphor of "reading the body;" according to her, the body is "a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (Bordo 1997:91). On the premise that "personal body management is intimately connected with the management of the larger social body through consumer culture," she argued that eating disorders affecting consumer society are just a symptom and constituent part of its functioning (Bordo 1993:199).

In the last decades, social constructionist ideas have become conventional knowledge in most socio-cultural disciplines. According to these, bodies are produced by the prevalent discourse(s) and as such they are created, inscribed and managed according to the norms of this/these discourse(s). Sandra Lee Bartky writes about "disciplinary practises" that are "part of a process by which the ideal body of femininity–and hence the feminine body-subject–is constructed; in doing this, they produce a 'practised and subjected' body, i.e., a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (Lee Bartky 1997:139).

Moreover, "the technologies of femininity are taken up and practised by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency. This accounts for what is often their compulsive or even ritualistic character" (Lee Bartky 1997:139). Many strands of feminism do in fact argue that in contemporary society, "women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is 'structural' […] not accidental, but rather built into a social value system that evaluates the 'real' woman as always in need of bodily change, repair, and improvement" (Waaler Loland 2000:118). As such, physical exercising is not a neutral activity, but can and should be read as "normalizing technique for the embodiment of feminine values" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:134).

In late modernity, the body is spoken of as more and more a phenomenon expressing the personal identity of the individual. Jean Claude Kauffman argues that "the body has become an essential identifying tool which explains the extremely personal character of the decisions regarding it."[4] Personal identity and body come to represent "reflexively organized projects that have to be chosen out of a complex plurality of options, without any moral guidance" (Shilling 2003:157).

In his turn, David Le Breton underlies the link between social and self identity, as mediated by the body, which is considered "a surface of projection where one can put in place the fragments of the sense of personal identity, divided by the social rhythms. By placing in order and in significance of the self, through a body whom he dissociates and transforms into a screen, the individual acts symbolically upon the surrounding universe. He seeks his subject unity, organizing signs, trying to produce an identity and to make himself socially recognizable."[5]

In short, the body has become the hero of post-modernity; in the age of loose, flexible, fluid relations and identities, the body nourishes an illusion of stability, through anchoring the self in the concreteness of its fleshiness. The individual is no longer a body, but the owner of one. There is still an illusion, though. The body itself has become fluid, fragmented, unstable, ever since it has been stamped as "perfectible."

Perfecting one's body has become a moral duty in the post-modern order of things. The messages emanating from the body bear moral connotations. "Developing and displaying an ideal body type thus signals one's cooperative participation in a culturally meaningful system of values" (Reischer and Koo 2004:303). Bordo asserts that "the firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude," expressing "willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'" (Bordo, 1993: 195).

In fact, all these concur at obscuring the blunt truth that the body is fated to age, alter, decay and eventually die. Body-projects may be perfectible, but never perfected. Moreover, consumer culture does not hold a monopoly on the body. Totalitarian regimes also envision the body as a basic tool in managing and controlling their subjects.

Even though the body was in a sense rediscovered in Romania after 1989, it was there during communism also. Communism, like any other totalitarian regime, entailed the enforcement of a special biopolitics. Controlling and monitoring individual bodies (food, warmth, and intimacy were all "rationalized") aimed at managing the social body at large. This biopolitics has also brought about an obsession with eugenics, with young and beautiful bodies, with sport and hygiene as guarantee of a healthy life for the individual, i.e. more efficient and useful. The idea of sports related to health was not foreign to propaganda; as early as 1969, women were recommended to exercise: "women who exercise are healthier and happier, modern woman exercises! Beauty and health are in your own hands!"[6]

During communism, Romania experienced a special kind of "sexual equality:" gender was erased as a socially relevant category, and men and women were to be moulded into "socialist citizens." The *de jure* equality between the sexes denied women *de facto* their sexuality, while transforming their reproductive capacity into a national project. The body, especially the female one, was reified by the communist regime in order to serve the interests of the State, represented by the Party. The communist reading of the feminist command "personal is political" was more than cynical.

Soliciting women's full commitment, energy, labour and reproductive capacity, the real intentions of the Communist Party were in fact to control the private life of individuals, their most intimate behaviours, feelings, affects, and intentions. The reproductive role of women was coded in terms of nationalism; woman-the-mother becomes not only a symbol of the communist hard-working and self-sacrificing hero, but also a symbol of mother-nation. The ideological discourse intermingles with the political one. Woman's body becomes the body of the nation as the sexual reproduction entails reproducing the (socialist) nation. Paradoxically, sexuality itself is expurgated of any hedonistic dimensions.

Femininity was to be strictly circumscribed socially and politically: women should be first and foremost fully committed citizens of the socialist state. But, on the other hand, reminiscences of traditional femininity were preserved and added to the portrait of this "new" woman: besides her duties as worker, mother, wife, and citizen, woman had a special intrinsic duty of being "feminine" and beautiful. This was also translated as a social responsibility: co-workers, colleagues, friends and family should enjoy woman's pleasant appearance.

After 1989 and the downfall of communism, one might as well argue that consumerist slogans such as "Every woman wants and has to be beautiful" (in a largely broadcasted TV commercial for a hair-removing device, in the early nineties) found indeed a fertile soil in Romanian mentality. What did change, however, was, on the one hand, feminine beauty became more body-focused: beauty is not anymore about visiting the hairdresser and the manicurist twice a week, but also about achieving a firm, toned, slim (in a word, sexy) body. On the other hand, in the new consumer society feminine beauty tends to be less and less of a "civic" duty, a commonly shared social asset, but became a personal resource, an end in itself, with hedonist undertones.

Moreover, all those new practises and technologies women have started to embark on can be read, according to Nicolaescu, as "a kind of discipline requisite for women's participation in public life. It can also be understood as a *rite de passage* which marks their movement from the private sphere of the home to public spheres, such as the office," while during communism, this passage requested "the opposite action of suppressing all sexual difference, all traces of feminine sex appeal" (Nicolaescu 2001:78).

How then should we frame the experiences of women—former socialist citizens—in a new world with novel and conflicting values and projections of femininity? What happens to women's bodies after communism and what can the practise of aerobics tell us about this experience?

It is only commonsensical to note that women's bodies did not transform over night as in fairytales. Even though the slender, young, sexy body quickly became the norm, mature, saggy, tired women could not do much about it. Mădălina Nicolaescu argues that these "residual bodies" came to be associated with the no longer desirable feminine ideal of the past; they were characterized by "their lack of refinement and polish, of the feminine stylization of their bodies, a lack that is further read as a kind of un-gendering. The women's ungainly bodies are scapegoated as

embodiments of the homogenizing and instrumentalizing practises of the previous regime, practises that are thought to have been so invasive as to erase the 'natural' distinctions between the sexes" (Nicolaescu 2001:49).

The decaying bodies of older women came to signify the poor state of the Romanian economy in transition. As Nicolaescu asserts, "the former plump, sagging bodies, aging early with overwork and lack of care are held responsible for women's vulnerable socio-economic position. These bodies are often represented as battered, abused and humiliated. Maternal, aging bodies are read as an epitome of whatever we dislike about post-communist Romania. They signify backwardness, lack of basic skills, inefficiency, disorganization, poverty, squalor and hopelessness" (Nicolaescu 2001:82).

While most women found themselves trapped in a socio-cultural imaginary that blamed them for all possible faults, some categories of women jumped at the opportunity. They saw the unexpected chance lying ahead of them. Their willingness to accept the new challenges was easily translated into the fervour of transforming their bodies to conform to new norms and ideals. This fervour "connotes a departure from the attitudes and practises that have inscribed the socialist body. The practical advice on clothing and cosmetics in women's magazines, the body technologies disseminated are perceived as forms of initiating Romanian women into new social and cultural practises" which hold the promise of a better future (Nicolaescu 2001:52). As Nicolaescu notes, "the perfection of the models' bodies is read as an inscription of the perfection of the Western system, as an effect of the economic and cultural practises of the more advanced countries" (Nicolaescu 2001:76).

Buying into new images of femininity and feminine embodiment also meant registering for a new, Western lifestyle. From the very beginning, conforming to the new norms and models was tantamount to wishing for a better life and displaying the attitude of a winner. In the ever-increasing number of women's magazines on the market, "women are encouraged to be more assertive, self-confident and open to change. The new type of attractive woman combines an incessant concern with the way she looks, a consumerist passion for shopping with an openness to change: women have to be dynamic, get involved in a large number of projects and look upon change as a continuous challenge" (Nicolaescu 2001:58). Whoever was unwilling or unable to put up with the new challenges was out of the game, and women's bodies were the first battleground.

Writing about how consumer society has affected women's bodies in Korea, Kim Taeyon argues that women, formerly projected as "anchors of traditional culture, ideology and self-identity," have turned into "the most visible symbols of foreign influence, their bodies adorned with the emblems of capitalist consumption and altered to more closely resemble the foreign construction of beauty" (Taeyon 2003:97-8). Moreover, with the advent of capitalist society, women "became more important as consumers than as factory workers, shifting the utility of their bodies from national labour production to national consumption, becoming, in effect, what Bryan S. Turner (1996) calls the capitalist body" (Taeyon 2003:102).

This mutation translates into specific practises and strategies with regard to the female body. As Taeyon explains, "women have become extraordinarily visible in Korea, free to be observed and appreciated in any public space. Beauty has become the new standard of a woman's value, and Korean women have gone through great lengths to enhance or create this beauty by reshaping their physical bodies" (Taeyon 2003:103).

While most of these do apply to the Romanian case also, we should nevertheless be aware of the risks of overgeneralization. Not all women choose (if this is a fortunate term at all) to participate in these transformations as actors; some remain mere spectators. As Nicolaescu emphasizes, "the liberating message of the magazines, the encouragement that women should be 'selfish,' should dedicate themselves to the care of their bodies and the pursuit of the narcissistic pleasures can only hold good for a restricted number of women" (Nicolaescu 2001:80-1). In other words, "the new body discourses are at the same time sources of social exclusion. For an increasingly large number of women the prospects of a deliverance from the abject of the past are dwindling day by day" (Nicolaescu 2001:60).

For women in their forties and fifties, there are hardly any models in women's magazines, which only portray young, sexy women, who seem completely unaware of the difficulties of day by day living in Romania. In a collective interview I took in 2003, one of my respondents put it like this: "If you take a look on the street, the great majority of women carry the same bags, lengthening their hands and shuffling their feet." Her own self-image translated roughly the idea of gender inscriptions

on the body: "Without two bags in my hands, I feel naked." In other words, she associated failure to conform to her roles as mother and family provider with the embarrassment of nakedness. Thus, for some women, their responsibilities and duties are much more internalized than the narcissistic pleasure of taking care of one's body; indeed, their gender roles are literally inscribed on their tired, overworked bodies. Moreover, these women usually foster a more traditional type of femininity, centred on motherhood and family, as opposed to the overt sexual reading of femininity in consumer culture.

> *"Presenting an entirely new metaphor for sport, aerobics fits neatly into the shift toward modernity that has distinguished the late twentieth century"* (Spielvogel 2003:49).

Laura Spielvogel, writing about aerobics in Japan, argues that the popularity of this activity in the last two decades "marks out a new age concerning sport, leisure and consume," as symptom of "general social changes associated with economic growth" and as part of a "broader set of practises of consume" (Spielvogel 2003:45). Aerobics, traditionally associated with women, has, nevertheless, a rather ambiguous nature, pertaining to heterogeneous elements, such as discipline, endurance, will (associated with sports), fun, satisfaction, relaxation (as part of leisure) and also pervasive norms of the consumer society (the desire for a slender body).

The common link is the body and the desire of altering it. "Aerobics is explicitly linked with cosmetic benefits. It is designed to appeal to people's dissatisfaction with, or concern for, bodily appearance" (Waaler Loland 2000:113). Concern for the body has become a prerequisite of post-modernity, translated into conforming to prevailing norms and rules about the appearance, use and transformation of bodies. Almost always, this entails "internalization of embarrassment about bodies that do not conform to social norms" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:121). Moreover, "the achievement of a slimmer body is an outward sign of self-discipline" in a society which values the correct management of desire (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:113).

In contemporary consumer culture, one of the prevalent cultural images that permeate and structure our sense of identity, 'the body beautiful,' "is status enhancing and brings with it the perception of youth, health, happiness, heterosexual attractiveness and longevity" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:114). As Taeyon, citing Rosenberg, puts it, "a woman's body itself becomes a site of global culture, signifying her elite status as a member of the cosmopolitan—and overwhelmingly Western—global community by participating in the main activity of global culture: consumption of global products" (Taeyon 2003:98). [7]

This article is based on an anthropological research project focused on women who practise aerobics in Cluj and grew out of my general interest with representations of the female body and femininity in post-socialist Romania, as they emerge through women's accounts and narratives. The fieldwork took place between November 2002 and May 2003 and included observation in two aerobics clubs in Cluj (both are medium-price locations, one of them being located in the building of the former Children's Palace during communism), as well as a series of semi-structured interviews with women attending these clubs.[8] Although not intended, the sample proved quite homogenous, most of my respondents being young (24-38), educated (at least faculty level) and belonging to higher socio-economic groups (lawyer, engineer, PR manager, bar owner, doctors, etc.). This could in fact explain the unexpected similarity in their narratives.

The interviews touched upon general details (the history of their experience with aerobics, the frequency of their workout sessions, other related body practises, such as diet, jogging, etc.), as well as personal narratives about aerobics, which all my informants decided to frame as a strongly self-motivating discourse. As it happened, they all had a long experience with practising aerobics, from 3 to 15 years (in one particular case).

The initiation usually follows a common pattern: more often than not, the subjects were strongly "recommended" by a friend, mother or close relative to "do something" about their look. Raluca and Timea both started to work out as teenagers, almost ten years ago. In Raluca's case, it was her aunt who, upon looking very critically at her said: "Raluca, you've started to gain weight, you should do something!, and gave her the advice of starting to exercise. Raluca admits: "It was that period when I started to gain some feminine shapes, to develop large hips, and I was just growing and growing chaotically." Timea recalls being a "normal" teenager, but her friends were much thinner than her and obsessed with diets and losing weight. So she started to practise aerobics quite intensively (four times a week) until she reached their weight, and then just tried to maintain herself at that point.

Another important scenario is having a good-looking friend who practises aerobics and strongly recommends it or invites the subject to join the classes. Dorina used to be "very thin, even skinny, with no muscles whatsoever on my body," so she decided to work out in order to tone her body. Magda is a special case.[9] In her forties, she is a sport-addict: athletics, five years of karate and, on top of it, aerobics. "To maintain myself, I do aerobics four times a week, two times bodybuilding, three times jogging, and also yoga. I have been practising sports all of my life, so I have to sweat somewhere, to work out real hard. But I do enjoy it".

There are a lot of women practising aerobics. There are even more who have started, but soon enough gave it up. It appears that only some women manage to "negotiate" this new practise into the daily schedule made up of all the other duties and activities (quite many and time-consuming, in the case of Romanian women). There is a strong causal relationship between regularizing this practise and the chances of continuing it. All my respondents were very firm about it: you have to stick to it! Moreover, unlike a regular hobby, it is not aerobics that is negotiated with the other activities, but the other way around. For Raluca,

> *it has become a routine: every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday I go to aerobics and everybody knows this. It is something that is part of my life. You just don't go to aerobics according to your schedule, but you do your schedule according to aerobics, otherwise…*

It also requires a lot of strength and will. It is very easy to give in to "I just don't feel like it today, so I'll skip it just this time": "sometimes it is really tough, I have a headache or my stomach aches, or it rains, it is not always nice and sunny." "Will" seems to be a magic word for most of my informants. For Raluca it is always a personal challenge: "I feel like if don't do it, I am a coward and a weak person. What, am I that weak to not be able to stand up and go jogging? So I say to my self: I ate like a pig, I have to go jogging." She is merciless to those women who cannot find the time and will to take care of themselves: "There is no such thing as 'I can't', it is a lousy excuse. If you, as a woman, can't afford to do something for yourself and feel good… well, any normal [sic!] woman…"

I found it extremely interesting that all my informants felt the need to "code" this practise by comparing and associating it with a "legitimate" social institution. None of them was thinking about it as a hobby, as something pertaining to leisure, relaxation, superficiality. A highly educated, bank officer repeatedly told me that she considers aerobics her greatest achievement. Coding aerobics and awarding it a stable, un-negotiable place in their life obviously helps them to hold on to this practise and to construct a legitimising discourse for it. Thus, aerobics seems to gain a new social signification and to be more easily "negotiated" with the other sex roles. "I go to aerobics just as I go to work, it's in my schedule," says Dorina.

One of the two clubs I have observed is actually a special case. Being located in the former communist Children's Palace, it is being run by a middle-aged, very demanding and authoritative woman, whom all my informants call "The Missis" (*Doamna*, in Romanian, which is the very same term used by pupils in traditional rural schools for their teacher). This appellative also explains such assertions as: "It is quite like in primary school, you have to motivate your absence."

The atmosphere in this place is very special. Although the clientele is made up of highly educated women (usually doctors or professionals) in their thirties or forties, "women with career and ambition" (in Ioana's words), the Missis treats them roughly, criticising and yelling at them; she demands obedience and discipline. She has to know in advance when her "girls" are going on vacation, if they are ill or are going to miss a class. Also, she doesn't tolerate them being late.

On the other hand, she utters a kind of mobilizing "emancipated" discourse:

> *A woman has to take care of herself, to be beautiful, to look good, and from time to time leave her kids with her husband to come to aerobics. Laundry can wait for an hour, nothing happens. Modern woman has to take care of herself. Leave the kitchen and the kids to your husband. He does however want his wife beautiful, nice, slim… but this requires some sacrifices from him.*

The general environment is a very "feminine" one: after class, in the locker room, the "girls" exchange recipes, diet tricks, buy cosmetics (from Avon sales ladies), clothes, silver jewellery (or any other products that one of them brings in). On Woman's Day (8th of March), they all go out together (the Missis also) and celebrate.

Many women who would like to join her class (for having a good reputation in terms of

"results") give up quickly because they cannot cope with her authoritative style: "I won't let Missis tell me what to do!" Those who can get over it, usually stick to her for years. Magda came to appreciate her methods: "I feel like in high school when she admonishes us like that, for being late, or for mistaking the steps. Sometimes it gets to my nerves, but other times it makes me feel younger. Nobody else does it anymore. It gives you the thrill you had back in school."

After all, aerobics is also about discipline and hard work.

The idea of doing something collectively seems to be very important, too. If she misses a class, Ioana feels guilty for betraying the "team." Timea, on the other hand, values the fact that "everybody is doing the same thing. It is like going to church, when you go in and there are a hundred people and everybody is praying. And it creates a kind of a ritual, a bond; everybody is doing the same thing without knowing each other." She uses this particular comparison because she doesn't develop special relationships with her colleagues, whom she hardly knows: "You go in five minutes in advance, change, jump, exercise, change back and leave, good bye." They seem to take off their "civil" identities along with their clothes, and just relate to each other as women who share a common passion for working out. Dorina underlined this aspect in saying that "here we are all the same, whether outside one may be a doctor, or a professor…"

Doing something collectively also implies other emotions, besides feeling as part of a team, such as the one mentioned by Raluca: embarrassment. "It's like in a choir, where everybody is singing and you're the one silent." You cannot give it up or just rest in the middle of the exercise. "It's a matter of challenge: if she can do it, why couldn't I? You gnash your teeth and keep up." Comparison is always there. Timea compares herself to the trainer: "Every time I want to stop and I feel all sweaty and tired, I look at her and I say to myself: 'God, this woman is forty and she keeps jumping here like this' and I cannot stop."

The discourse about aerobics is not only about the self, but also about the Other. These women, who practise aerobics in rather medium-to-low price locations, compare themselves extensively to "those women" who attend fancier and more expensive clubs. The difference is translated not only in nicer outfits, but also in different motivations:

> *They just go there in order to look good for their partner, to get tanned, because this is the fashion, to go to the sauna, which is also fashionable, and they buy a very expensive subscription and enter the spa at 4 p.m. and get out at 9 p.m. and have everything done to them. They're young girls… and I bet they don't pay with their own money.*

All my respondents despised "those women", not only for not sharing their sport ethos, but also for being dependent upon a man: "I could never understand those women who struggle themselves, go to sports, solarium, massage, all of it, and then get married and put on twenty kilos. 'I already have a husband, I can eat!'"

The "other" clubs are not only extremely expensive, but also superficial in terms of actual training: "Those places where a lot of wealthy women go, dressed up in the latest fashion, and one talks on the mobile phone, the other drinks mineral water, and another just walks around." These are places frequented by wealthy, snobbish people: "There are these individuals who just carry their bag around…They go to fancy clubs just to be seen there, and to be able to say 'I work out,' not necessarily to do it."

Unlike "those" women, for my respondents the very idea of asserting their independence through practising aerobics is highly valued. Being able to subtract a few hours weekly from their duties as mothers and wives is in itself a declaration of independence: "To have one hour just for me." This translates as quality time spent with one's self, but not entirely in a selfish manner. By taking care of themselves, women can perform better outside the class. As Haravon Collins puts it, "aerobics can be a site at which women refuel themselves to better fit into a society in which they need to be 'nice, civilized people,' and have control over their physical and mental selves (Haravon Collins 2002:91).

Even though she doesn't have a family, Raluca still needs a time just for herself, away from daily routine:

> *You can cut yourself loose from all the daily problems and worries. You just focus on exercises and stop thinking about it. When I'm there, for an hour, I do not think of anything else but those movements, what leg should I stretch and things like that. During that hour my mind is emptied of anything else, personal problems, job, anything…and there's also*

that pleasant feeling after working out, a pleasant tiredness, that you still feel after you've finished…

"I can not be without it. My husband respects that. And if it were to be another husband, he would have to respect it, also. And, anyway, what would I do during that hour, if not aerobics, wash some more dishes?" asks rhetorically Magda. "At least I know I do something for me, for my health." This is also symptomatic for women always used to do things for others: the "guilty" pleasure of doing something for one's self.

"There's something about it, you know, like when you were little and you were building a house from blankets, it was something just for you. Perhaps, who knows, going to aerobics when you already have a family is something you do just for yourself," says Raluca. Dorina agrees: "If you go there, you leave everything behind and just take care of yourself. After one hour you feel relaxed and fulfilled that you've done something for yourself."

All my informants have strongly emphasized the idea of an intense satisfaction associated with practising aerobics: "Aerobics is my greatest achievement. Nothing in the world could make me give it up," says Ioana. This feeling is largely explained as harmony between spirit and body, inner peace and calm, constructing a sense of being at ease with one's body. Raluca feels "like you're in heaven, at least that's how I feel. Every time I walk out of the gym, it's like flying, there's no gravity, and I feel so …light." Most of my informants seem to agree to a certain dualistic view on the body: they **have** a body and a soul, and they relate to this body as something outside their inner soul. But, nevertheless, these are strongly interconnected, as Timea puts it: "I say that in order to feel good psychically, you have to look good physically, so it is normal that you have to have some equilibrium between the psyche and the physic to feel as harmonious as possible."

The general idea most of my respondents agreed to was that one has a body and one has to cope with it. As Raluca notes: "A woman should never forget that she has a body and she has to take care of it as much as possible, or at least to get used to the idea that, look, this is what I do for me, for my body." Timea admits to having a certain body-project, but without going into details: "You have a body, and you have an idea of what you like, and this makes you go to aerobics."

It seems that the relationship with one's body usually takes the form of a partnership, which can be enhanced by practising aerobics. Timea argues that: "I like to have a relation of friendship with my body, meaning that I give it what it needs and it helps me to feel good, like a partnership. By practising sports, I think that I take care of my body." Raluca sees it as a symbiosis: "My relationship with my body is a kind of symbiosis, I feel perfectly its reactions, I can feel when I'm catching a cold, getting the fever…We tolerate each other, well, no, we help each other…" Even more, she agrees that practising aerobics has ameliorated this symbiosis: "Since I have been doing aerobics, we get along better…I'm at ease with myself." Harmony is also at stake, as defined by Timea: "I see it as a whole: I have a soul and a body, and so I have to work out my body."

It seems that, at least in subtext, all these discourses about the body come to the same point: women have a naturally "uneasy" relationship with their bodies; they cannot escape it, though. You have to work (out) hard to improve this status quo, to come to make peace with your body, to establish a harmony between body and soul. "Feeling good" about one's self is crucial. Raluca admits:

I used to think that this 'feeling good about yourself' stuff is just American bullshit. But it really is very important to feel good about you. It gives you confidence; if you don't feel good with yourself, you feel good with somebody else, and this is already dependence. It's like I would only feel good if my partner worshipped me and looked at me with admiration. If you feel good with yourself, you have greater chances of living your life in a sane mind.

"Satisfaction with one's bodily appearance is positively related to satisfaction with one's self" writes Waaler Loland (Waaler Loland 2000:113). Most of my informants tended to equate 'feeling good' with 'looking good'. Although they acknowledge the pervasiveness of certain ("Western") norms about how the female body should look, they do however wrap their own subjecting to this norm in the frame of a strong discourse of personal independence.

Asserting independence and a personal goal seems extremely important for these young women. In Timea's words: "As I see it, I do it for me, not to show off because I look good or to find a nice man because I have a great body. And I bet I will do it even after marriage, because otherwise I wouldn't feel good." Raluca says something very similar: "When I go to sport, I feel like I am in

control, independent, I do what I do for me." She also acknowledges this practise to be a feature of urban life:

> *Perhaps a rural woman would never understand and would think of it as something futile, another tiring burden. Not to mention that in the country there isn't such madness about the body, the obsession with looks, with clothes. Down there things are simpler: you've gained some weight, nothing happens.*

Although not openly admitting to having a personal body project, all my respondents were willing to share at least an "impersonal" image of the ideal body. In Timea's vision, "the ideal nowadays is a bit athletic, but not too much, tall, large shoulders, long legs, big breasts. That's it. Of course, you cannot just put on big breasts. What anyone can do is work out one's muscles, to have a fit body, not a loose flesh on it." One also has to be feminine, so the ideal should be a combination of feminine features (slim and delicate) and sporty body (athletic looks). Gender is the limit: "A woman should never be too muscular." We witness the vogue of a body ideal which Morse defines as "condensation of contradictions: thin and muscular, hard and curvaceous, it suggests power and yet a slender boyishness" (Haravon Collins, 2002: 86).

These women also seem to hold on to a rather traditional view on femininity. For Dorina, a woman is feminine by the way she walks; she should have a certain distinction, elegance in gestures and posture, be delicate and thin (*"a neat foot and a nice head"*). As Maguire and Mansfield argue, "slenderness speaks of femininity" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:113).

Magda likes muscles, and has rational arguments for it: "only the muscles can resist in time. A worked out, muscled tummy will be preserved over 30. Otherwise, it tends to get saggy, unfortunately. Especially after you give birth, it is such a satisfaction to see that your tummy looks just as good as before." For mature women, having a nice body might mean also changing their clothing style: "I love looking good in a short dress. It is almost like you get the courage to try on something more modern. You see the others and think: okay, let's try."

The younger respondents seem to be aware of the influence of consumer culture, in terms of body ideal and bodily norms. As Timea puts it very bluntly, femininity in Romania is very much physical, the physic is more and more important." In Raluca's view, "there is a real competition for looking good, which you have to join, willy-nilly. You just cannot go out in the city and everybody is looking good, and you look like an elephant. It's nice to walk on the street in a pretty, wavy dress and to feel good about your looks.

As David Le Breton argues, "body practises are situated at the crossroads where the anthropological necessity of fighting the fragmentation experienced in the self meets with the play of signs (forms, shape, youth, health), that gives a decisive social supplement to any physical activity of choice."[10]

The discourse about body norms tends to attain a highly moralizing tone: "If you don't dress well, if you don't have a proper attitude, you might as well be smart, educated, you can have as many degrees, but you will have a ten times harder job at opening doors. If you look good, you have an advantage upon the person in front of you." In fact, they only give voice to a well known reality, in which, when it comes to women, employers prefer good-looking, young employees, over those more qualified, but less attractive. In the words of Reischer and Koo, "the body and its appearance are a prime site for negotiating women's position in a complex web of social meaning and value" (Reischer and Koo 2004:313).

Leslea Haravon Collins, writing about reconciling feminism with aerobics, suggests that, since the subjects experience a corporeal fragmentation in everyday life, aerobics, through its repetitive character, can be perceived as a means of rediscovering, appropriating and integrating the body: "starting from a place for fragmentation and alienation from the body, as these women do, any form of movement that is enjoyable or even possible is an improvement in and a step toward bodily integration" (Harravon Collins 2002:98).

Emphasizing discursively issues like "feeling good", "spiritual harmony", "the soul", "independence", these women actually avoid openly discussing their corporeal identity and matters pertaining to the body. These seem to remain sensitive topics even for women obviously engaged in a body project.

I suggest that the rhetoric of "having one hour just for myself" that emerges redundantly in their narratives dissimulates in fact the intimate relation with one's body. Subjects of a post-socialist gender regime, women experience this particular bond as something new and not yet internalised, which is denied to them in other social locations. As such, they choose to construct a feminine space–and a discourse–in which experiencing an intimate integration with one's

own body can be "naturalized" and lived un-problematically. This is a space in which exercising a degree of independence, including the relation with the self and the body, is highly valued.

My first temptation, in trying to understand these women's self-mobilizing discourses against the background of feebly renegotiating gender roles and identities in post-socialist Romania, was to contend that these particular discourses can indeed be read as a form of empowerment, of rhetorical exercise of power and agency, undertaken by a category traditionally constructed as passive and undemanding, women. But this optimistic vision would only obscure the fact, pointed out by most critics, that "the sense of agency created by detailing technologies of beauty–how to make up, to diet, to discipline their bodies–is further undermined by the normalizing power that the ideal images have" (Nicolaescu 2001:79).

Theberge argues that in sport, women "can experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination… […] and women's sporting practise can challenge gender inequality by challenging sexual stereotypes and patriarchal control of women's bodies." But aerobics can be quite contradictory; on one hand, it "encourages women to experience their bodies as strong;" on the other hand it does not necessarily "challenge sexual stereotypes" (Haravon Collins 2002:90). One can argue that, more often than not, in aerobics, the female body remains "the site at which women, consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular cultural about ideal beauty… [serving] as a site of inscription, a billboard for the dominant cultural meanings that the female body is to have in postmodernity"[11].

Critics have also argued that "even if the ideal aerobics body is seen as a healthy body, it shares the same discursive framework as the anorexic body. In both 'practises,' the body can be seen as alien, confinement and alienation, out of control, and in need of discipline. Aerobicizers can be seen as subjected to normalizing self-management (Waaler Loland 2000:114). As Moya Loyd puts it, aerobics is "interlocked in the feminine aesthetics. Aerobics is considered to be the one practise of feminization that contributes to women's sense of identity" (Maguire and Mansfield 1998:114).

The preliminary aim of this article was that of "mapping" the gendered female body of postsocialist Romania by means of examining a particular practise, aerobics, that speaks not only about the body and body practises, but also about gender, about consumer culture and, more important, about their intersections. I have started out with Goffman's approach that the body could be understood as a mediator between the self-identity of the individual and his/her social identity, thus being designed as "an active, transformative, and dynamic expression of the self" (Waaler Loland 2000:112). Particularly in consumer culture, the body is more and more employed as "a personal resource" to be manipulated "according to the norms and values to which we subscribe" (Waaler Loland 2000:114).

Moreover, not only can the body be read as an epitome of the desires, values, anxieties of a culture, according to Douglas's capital work, it can also be approached as an insight upon modern individual's moral stance. "Developing and displaying an ideal body type thus signals one's cooperative participation in a culturally meaningful system of values" (Reischer and Koo, 2004: 303), the body becoming, in Bordo's terms "a symbol of correct attitude" (Bordo 1993:195).

In postsocialist Romania, the body–the female one *per excellentiam*–became a powerful signifying tool, marking the break with the communist past and the onset of a new age. The body was not only the locus of enjoying the fresh sense of freedom, but also the symbol of a new, better life, and the marker of the individual's commitment to such a life. The image of the "Western" female body (sexy, tanned, and slim) became, for both Romanian men and women, the epitome of Western culture and of a desirable lifestyle.

Everyone was yearning for a clean, neat break from the communist recent past. This break was embodied in the difference between the slack, fleshy, neglected body of the communist woman, wearing a bad perm and a poor make up, and the fit, slender, sexy body of the "modern" woman. "Change" seemed to be the magic word of the new consumer culture, as quintessence of its dynamic nature, as opposed to the inert, congealed status quo of communist period: new things, new clothes, new bodies, and most of all, new identities.

This dynamic interplay of identities set in motion by the transition to consumerism in Romania was thoroughly examined by Mette Nordahl Svendsen in an article based on fieldwork conducted in Bucharest in 1996. There, she sets out to examine "how processes of relocating oneself in a changing world are reflected in body practises and investments in one's looks […] in a society with new possibilities of consumption" (Nordahl

Svendsen 1996:1). She constructs a framework of gender identities available for women in postsocialist Romania: the beautiful independent woman, the young, pretty girl and the sacrificing married woman.

As a Westerner, she is struck by the fact that gender seems to be an overwhelmingly important variable in Romanian social life. Women are at great pains to emphasize gender differences, and their own bodies are a good place to do that. Her respondents "are extremely conscious of being women and of having to behave and think in a specifically feminine way. They believe that different rules apply to them than to men. No matter if explicitly articulated or not, it is inherent in virtually everything they do and say" (Nordahl Svendsen 1996:2-3). One of the strategies of marking off gender difference is through engaging in specific "feminine" activities, where beauty and beauty work is perceived as an essential one. "Beauty operates as a moral imperative, as a defining feature of femininity, as a dream and a necessity" (Nordahl Svendsen 1996:5).

As I have argued in this article, beauty has always belonged to "womanliness" in Romania; even during communism, women were encouraged to display a careful, smart, "feminine' appearance, a task considered part of her sex roles and a kind of civic duty. After communism, we have witnessed a "privatisation" of woman's beauty; women entered the consumer culture both as subjects and objects. They are not only potential buyers/consumers, but have also discovered their own appearance as social capital. As Mette Nordahl Svendsen has noticed, "external qualities are taken as a sign of inner qualities and social position. The body is regarded as a primary marker of social identity. A person's looks are used as an indicator of social position and education and as an instrument for improving one's social position" (Nordahl Svendsen 1996:6).

If acceptance of one's natural body seems to be the norm among Western women, for whom investing time, money and energy in beauty is regarded as a sign of dependency and weakness, the situation is different in postcomunist Romania. As striking as it might sound for any Western feminist, "in a society in which women experience their daily lives as a struggle to accomplish their duties at home and to make ends meet financially, spending money and time on one's body has become a symbol of being a "winner": the supreme woman who masters her own life" (Nordahl Svendsen 1996:8).

As Nordahl Svendsen has pertinently noticed, contemporary Romania witnesses a proliferation of identities and models for women: "the beautiful independent woman," "the good wife," "the responsible mother," and "the hardworking woman in charge of her family" (Nordahl Svendsen 1996:12). The problem for women resides in the difficulty of having to reconcile some or all of these identities at once. Having "one hour just for myself" is a possible strategy in this permanent struggle.

If, and only if, practising aerobics twice a week carries the potential of letting women "off the hook" with regard to their too many responsibilities and duties and allows them to enjoy time with them*selves* (and their *bodies*), my optimistic conclusion is half justified. Alternatively, this practise remains just another instance of the "disciplining" of women and their bodies, menacing to revert to something similar to the communist "triple burden" on women.

Notes

[1]One of the first political decisions of the new government was to get rid of the 1966 abortion-banning law.

[2] As a matter of fact, a few years after the revolution, women's magazines still published only images of foreign women, mostly supermodels and actresses.

[3] Susan Benson, in Kathryn Woodward ed. (1999) *Identity and Difference*, London: The Open University and Sage, p. 128.

[4] Kaufmann, Jean-Claude, *Trupuri de femei – priviri de bărbați. Sociologia sânilor goi* [Women's bodies – men's glances. Sociology of nude breasts], Bucureşti: Nemira, 1998: 11

[5] David Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului şi modernitatea* [Anthropology of the body and modernity], Timişoara: Amarcord, 2002, p. 170.

[6] Olteanu Cristina Liana, Elena-Simona Gheonea, Valentin Gheonea *Femeile în România comunistă. Studii de istorie socială* [Women in communist Romania. Studies in social history], Bucureşti: Politeia – SNSPA, 2003, p. 142.

[7] "A young woman can literally embody signs of global status by buying brand name international goods that affect her 'atmosphere': her appearance, her smell, the feel of her skin. Communication occurs through the adorned body embedded in the international circuit of commodity signs" (Taeyon, 2003: 98).

[8] I have not practised aerobics myself. Nevertheless, my own physical appearance (being young, tall and rather thin) proved an important research tool, since my respondents tended to

assume I was familiar with the experience of working out and/or dieting. In fact, a considerable body of feminist writings draws attention to the importance of embodiment in anthropological research and to the process of mutual labeling between researcher and researched.

[9] She is in fact the only one who practised aerobics during communism, at Hotel Belvedere.

[10] David Le Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

[11] A. Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 78.

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