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## **On the Fringes of the Classless Society: Notes on Constantin Stoiciu's Film Scripts**

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**Abstract:** Focusing on the film scripts of the lesser-known, but prominent writer and film official Constantin Stoiciu, this essay assesses his contribution to the shared cinematic imaginary of the late '60s and '70s Romanian cinema and delineates the main strategies he resorted to in order to insert two of his thematic obsessions, class differentiation and class anxiety, into his narratives penned for the big screen.

**Keywords:** Socialist Cinema; *Gegenwartsfilme*; *Alltagsfilme*; *Film de actualitate*; Civic Imaginary; Class Representations; Constantin Stoiciu.

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1.

Oddly, class was hardly a subject treated with ease in Romanian socialist cinema. Of course, historically-themed films, which recreated and to some extent invented the pre-war history of the Communist Party and the struggles of the Romanian working class, had a definite place for negative characters, which were either aristocratic or condescendingly bourgeois. In the plot of a generic socialist historical film, they were supposed to embody everything that was wrong with the previous ruling classes. Films which addressed thematically the issues of contemporary society, on the other hand, were an altogether different matter. In the first decade of socialist cinema in Romania, such films still featured antagonists which were equally depicted as resentful embodiments of the pre-World War II, pre-socialist social order or subversive agents, working for a generic Western power. Starting with the late '50s and the early '60s, such metaphoric conflicts between the old and the new were replaced by a timeless conflict between different approaches to socialism, by a clash between different sets of values which were symbolically competing for hegemony. Such conflicts had a predictable resolution, since films made in the first

decade under the new regime were hardly more than thinly-veiled moral parables, in which values such as solidarity, thrift and industriousness always proved to be more important than individualism, spirit of initiative or reasonableness. On the other hand, these conflicts seemed to occur in a society without any visible divisions of class; even if, in socialist-realist vein, most of the protagonists in these films were belonging to the working class, they were hardly different – in their attitude towards work, in their mores or in their patterns of cultural consumptions – from their hierarchical superiors. Romanian films made in the '50s and the early '60s seem to imply that, despite their many differences, most of their characters belong to one, homogenous, undifferentiated class.

It would be easy to conclude that this representation of contemporary socialist society was nothing more than an imposed version of an idealized, utopian imaginary. The rigid cultural assumptions of socialist realism (whose tenets were mandatory in the first half of the '50s in Romanian cinema too) and institutionalized censorship were, for the most part, responsible for this sanitized and idealized version of a classless and homogenous society. Nevertheless, as film historian Joshua Feinstein argues while assessing socialist contemporary-set films made in the German Democratic Republic during Communist rule, such a view ignores to a large extent what the new socialist state was trying to achieve by means of its cinema and how the message in socialist films was institutionally mediated and negotiated between different actors belonging to the cultural elite. On the one hand, cinema in GDR (and, by extension, in any other socialist country, including Romania) was meant to legitimize the new socialist state,

to embody in its symbolic discourse the adherence of the citizens to the new socialist regime. It was equally meant to project a set of values and ideas which signaled this adherence – in Feinstein's words, it was meant to create a new kind of "civic imaginary"<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, while the main ideas and symbols of this civic imaginary were far from being open to free interpretation or open contestation, in certain periods cultural officials and leaders of the party seemed to be willing to tolerate certain deviations from the party-sanctioned views or – at least in their public stances – even encouraged them. Lastly, the content of this civic imaginary was less predetermined as it seems. In most socialist countries, due to a lack of professional screenwriters, writers were encouraged to translate their literary works into synopses and film screenplays. In many cases, this meant that adherence to socialist ideas and values was not necessarily reinforced by censorship, but was a result of personal self-censorship and compliance with the presumed expectations of the cultural bureaucrats in charge of the respective film industries.

As Romanian socialist contemporary-set films are concerned, they can be classified according to the specific terminology used in GDR and discussed by Feinstein. However, instead of two categories, as in GDR – *Gegenwartsfilme* ("films of contemporary life") and *Alltagsfilme* ("films of everyday life")<sup>2</sup> – the Romanian film officials and critics used only one – *film de actualitate* (roughly translated as "everyday film"). Furthermore, the generic transformation of the contemporary-set film in Romanian socialist cinema follows a similar pattern. Until the mid '60s, most contemporary-set dramas and comedies gave a sense

of a socialist society in its infancy – indeed, most films had exemplary protagonists and translated onscreen the often-heroic efforts to establish new socialist institutions. As such, they were the rough equivalents of the GDR *Gegenwartsfilme*. From the mid '60s onwards, a general sense of stasis, of ahistorical existence permeated most contemporary-set Romanian films; as in their East German equivalent, the *Alltagsfilme*, they seemed to depict a socialist society which has reached its symbolic maturity. In no way was this supposed to be a society devoid of any conflict. However, even if most characters in such films were infused with socialist ideals, they were divided by their specific values, by their particular vision concerning the means by which social cohesion should be achieved. It is in this second phase that Romanian films began to obliquely question the so-far pervasive representation of a classless society.

There was a long transition in socialist Romania towards those kinds of films which could accommodate the slightest criticism of the myth of the classless society. The reasons for this delay are first and foremost political. In matters of culture, the death of Stalin was followed, in the words of film historian Josephine Wall, by a “cacophony of ‘thaw’ and ‘freeze’ signals”<sup>3</sup>; cautious measures, meant to signify a break with the Stalinist era, were taken by Romanian cultural officials by the mid '50s, but no later than the spring of 1958 a reinstated climate of control put on hold any genuine critical debate concerning the content of socialist cinema for the next half decade<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, this short-lived transitional period saw the release of two films which, notably, featured bureaucrats or members of the upper echelon of the party which were satirized or

portrayed in an unsympathetic light – Jean Georgescu's *Directorul nostru/ Our Manager* (1955) and Gheorghe Turcu's *O mică întâmplare!/A Little Story* (1957). Equally important, Sinișa Ivetici and Andrei Blai-er's *Ora H/ D-Hour* (1957) had, in some of its sequences, one of the first attempts at portraying the lives of its working-class characters in a neorealist, unadorned manner. As is to be expected, even these slight modifications of the socialist realist formula caused an immediate backlash; conservative or opportunistic film officials and film critics harshly criticized the content of such films, while other well-known names in the Romanian film industry tried to cautiously defend such alterations of the socialist worldview as necessary and more in tune with contemporary realities. As stated earlier, even such debates, which were arguably less concerned with aesthetic matters and more indicative of discreet power struggles in the party, between reformist and conservative cultural officials, were absent from Romanian cultural periodicals in the early '60s; instead, conformist film criticism evaluated a cinema which, under the new „freeze” climate, became equally conformist. Only towards the mid '60s – in the last years of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's regime and during the first years under his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu –, did the cultural climate become favorable for more open debates and towards the occasional dissenting voices. As it is widely known, the newlyfound sense of freedom and optimism, pervasive in the cultural milieu from the mid '60s onwards, lasted less than a decade, until Ceaușescu's 1971 July Theses, which marked, among others, the reinstatement of repressive cultural policies; one Romanian historian suggests that a more

authoritarian backlash was noticeable even as early as 1968<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, as far as cinema is concerned, in the late '60s such films as Lucian Bratu's *Un film cu o fată fermecătoare/ A Charming Girl* (1967) and Lucian Pintilie's *Reconstituirea/ The Reenactment* (1970) were banned, only weeks after they had been released, while, for instance, Savel Stiopul's *Ultima noapte a copilăriei/ The Last Night of Childhood* (1968) was released after long negotiations with displeased film officials, which wanted certain scenes altered or removed. All in all, during a period which was equally characterized by mixed signals, contemporary-set films such as *Un film cu o fată fermecătoare, Reconstituirea* and *Ultima noapte a copilăriei* proved that there were definite limits to what could be said and filmed in socialist Romania. Even if, in their public stances, film officials and party bureaucrats insisted that cinema should address critically the contemporary issues of the socialist society, contemporary-set films such as the ones mentioned above were endlessly scrutinized and made to fit the unpredictable expectations of party dignitaries.

Even in these circumstances, films released from the mid '60s onwards managed to reshape the manner in which contemporary everyday reality was translated upon cinema screens. Certain themes, certain types of characters were considered too risky and were generally avoided. The ban on a specific film, which was usually due to the authoritarian whims of Nicolae Ceaușescu (since official guidelines for what was permissible and what wasn't hardly existed), established in itself a sort of unofficial set of guidelines for future projects. For instance, what banned films of the late '60s had in common was their general

sense of uneasiness with socialist realities and institutions, embodied by their main characters; modeled after their angst-ridden counterparts in modernist Western cinema, they seemed to wonder aimlessly, without a sense of purpose and lacking any visible political convictions. Later contemporary-set films took into account the ambiguous expectations of party officials and tried to cautiously avoid any possible backlash. Hence, contemporary-set films made in the '70s, even when they depicted class hierarchies, made sure to portray their protagonists as principled and idealistic as possible; to some extent, they embodied a vague spirit of socialist optimism, counterpoised to the fatalism and corruption of the previous generation. This is a recurrent theme in the few contemporary-set films which address class issues in the '70s: the class differences are translated onto the film screen as degrees of authenticity and belief in the cohesion of the socialist society. As such, these films, in which corrupt, well-off bureaucrats typified fictional party apparatchiks, can be retrospectively interpreted either as examples of conformist socialist cinema (after all, they mixed thinly-veiled social criticism with standard representations of socialist youth) or as embodiments of the endless negotiations around a shared civic imaginary. Watching these films, one can ascertain to what degree certain themes had to be concealed or adapted to fit very conventional plots in order for the scripts that contained them to be greenlighted for production. Thus, paradoxically, the '70s seem to be, from a cultural point of view, at once a conservative and less restrained period. On the one hand, in cinema, certain new themes, unthinkable one decade earlier, make their appearance; this is why, unlike

in other areas of culture, Romanian cinema has its share of daring contemporary-set narratives from the mid-'70s onwards until the early '80s. On the other hand, most of the preeminent directors and scriptwriters of the period became highly versed at finding the right balance between conformism and thematic innovation; in order to avoid censorship, they strived to tactically deflate any possible objections to their projects by gradually injecting social criticism into a predetermined and conventional narrative mold. Such a cautious character, largely responsible for most films which deal with differences of status and class in Romania in the '70s, was Constantin Stoiciu.

## 2.

One is tempted to label Stoiciu's generic protagonist as *the conformist outsider*. The best-known of them – Vive in *Diminețile unui băiat cumintel* / *The Mornings of a Sensible Lad* (1967) or the main character in *Filip cel bun!* / *Philip the Kind* (1975) –, young and confused as they are, torn apart by unspoken inner conflicts, are nevertheless ardent believers in socialist values. Stoiciu was, in all likelihood, similarly inclined towards socialism. At any rate, his scripts are impregnated with that kind of sympathy towards the working classes which in the mid-'60s was usually (and rhetorically) labeled in Romania “socialist humanism”. Born in 1939, in a modest family (his father was a station master), he was hired, when he was 28, by the main script editorial board of the Buftea Film Studio. In the same year, he published his first book of short stories, *Dimineața!* / *The Morning*; one of them, “Ia-o din loc!”/

“Move Away!”, was the source for his first script, *Diminețile unui băiat cuminte*. It was his first collaboration with director Andrei Blaier; they made another feature film together in 1969, ... *Apoi s-a născut legenda!* / *Then Came the Legend*, while in 1974 a play penned by Stoiciu, *Vilegiatural* / *The Holiday* was adapted for television by Blaier. Until 1981, when he left Romania, Stoiciu worked for various literary journals, published two novels and wrote the scripts for another four films. Most importantly, between 1973 and 1981, he worked as an executive producer (*producător delegat*, as the position was titled in socialist Romanian film industry) at one of the four important film production studios established, in an attempt to reform the film industry, in 1972<sup>6</sup>. As nearly all film officials in charge of the film industry at the time, Stoiciu seems to have been, in turn, bold and cautious; while he wrote the script for Dan Pița's *Filip cel bun!* / *Philip the Kind* – a film which was hailed at the time of its release as a radical departure from the usual contemporary-set dramas of that era –, he is remembered in the diary of director Alexandru Tatos as a rather squeamish character. He supervised, among other films, the infamous *Buzduganul cu trei peceți!* / *The Mace with Three Seals* (1977), a propaganda-infused epic, which rewrote 16<sup>th</sup>-century history by realigning the political views of the Wallachian ruler Michael the Brave with those of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Like his protagonists, Stoiciu seems to have been dissatisfied with the general climate of conformism which characterized the late '60s and early '70, while managing at the same time to find a way through the intricate and often ambiguous demands of the socialist film industry of that era.

In his prose, Stoiciu was not an innovator – at least in terms of style. He was mostly appreciated for his subject matters; as his first scripts attest, he managed to create rich and complex characters in a type of prose that was functioning almost like a genre in itself in the '60s: the literature about the trials and tribulations of the nascent, itinerant and/or urbanized working class. He was part of a generation of writers and script writers which were depicting the working class in a more realistic manner; as opposed to the '50s, when most working-class characters seemed to have been created with normative and didactic intentions in mind, writers in the '60s paid more attention to the distinctive features of the Romanian working class. Notably, his first script (as mentioned, an adaptation of one of his short stories) featured as its protagonist a youngster which fails to be admitted to college and has to take a job at a building site. While failing to join the upwardly-mobile class of educated new elites, Vive feels like an outsider among his new fellow workers. As such, he embodies a contradiction which probably struck a chord with Romanian audiences at the time – that between the egalitarian promises of socialism and the prevalent class inequalities of the era. Nevertheless, *Diminețile unui băiat cuminte* can be hardly classified as subversive cinema, since it resolves its underlying contradictions in a predictable and convenient way: in the end, the outsider Vive fully identifies with his assigned employment and, implicitly, with his undesired social status. However, this first script penned by Stoiciu includes most of the characters and themes that would surface again and again in his later projects: the idealist outsider protagonist, the disillusioned, cynical or even corrupt members of the older

generation, the alluded conformism of the upper echelons of the socialist society, the clash between parents and children, the lack of genuine role models. In retrospect, such small alterations of prevalent narratives of that era are almost indistinguishable, lost in the overall conventional plot; they are, nevertheless, features of a slightly different sort of socialist cinema, one that tests the limits of expression established during the '50s and early '60s.

As Josephine Wall notes, one of the characteristics of Soviet cinema made during the “thaw” years was the depiction of intergenerational conflict, which signified, on a symbolic level, the break with the Stalinist past<sup>7</sup>. The same symbolic break with the past was noticeable in the Romanian films made starting with the mid-'60s. This was a convenient way of obliquely criticizing the politics of the previous decade. At the same time, fewer and fewer films contained the almost mandatory figure of the older, principled and morally unobjectionable role model – as it was the case, for instance, with Andrei Blaier's *A fost prietenul meu! He Was My Friend* (1962), in which a young boy befriends an older communist activist and finds in him a surrogate father and a political mentor. In the late '60s, this typical character didn't vanish, but became more nuanced or was invested symbolically with the ambiguous legacy of the past. One such character, present in *Diminețile unui băiat cuminte*, is Vive's foreman, Cioba (played by Ștefan Ciobotărașu), which becomes in the course of the narrative a sort of surrogate parent for the protagonist, but he is also flawed and humane: in one key sequence, he embarrasses himself by showing up drunk at a party thrown by the engineers and officials in charge of the building site. As for

Vive's biological father, he never misses an opportunity to taunt him and remind him his failures. One can sympathize with Vive's rebelliousness and confusion while assessing his frail and deficient relationship with the older generation of characters. But Vive is not rebelling just against his father (and, symbolically, against the first generation living under communist rule). As portrayed by Stoiciu, he seems to be at odds with everyone surrounding him: his complacent best friend, an undignified elderly rival, the condescending and well-off new elites. The scene in which his potential mentor embarrasses himself begins with a long conversation between the few select members of the local intelligentsia. Their word exchange is tedious and superficial; their subsequent obfuscation against the pitiable state of the old foreman is thus staged as a reaction of a rigid and intolerant upper class against the faults of the powerless, but principled low-status classes. Another key scene in the film finds Vive (played by Dan Nuțu, a quasi-icon for rebelliousness in late '60s Romanian socialist cinema) lashing out at some total strangers, which are having a party late in the night; he shouts at them through a window, "It's late, people are sleeping. Don't you have any work to do?" Highly ambiguous, this kind of reprimand matched the anti-intellectualist tone of most socialist cinema made in Romania during the '60s; on the other hand, it functioned as a sort of venting, a reaction of the underprivileged against the overt consumption of the new well-to-do classes.

Nevertheless, the conflict in the scripts penned by Stoiciu remains unsolved in its most problematic aspects. This is, to some extent, one of the unwritten rules of contemporary-set films made during the late '60s and the '70s in socialist Romania: a

certain degree of social criticism (at times, directed at the political elites) is permitted or even encouraged, but, in what could be called a reflex of self-censorship, it remains somewhat vague, while the issues raised by the film seem to be conveniently overlooked by the end of the plot. Take, for instance, *Filip cel bun*, released in 1975. In Stoiciu's usual vein, it features an opulent chief of enterprise, Atanasiu, harsh and highly suspicious of anyone originating from the lower classes – in one scene, he insists on returning an expensive gift, brought by the protagonist, Filip, for an anniversary party honoring Atanasiu's son, and openly accuses Filip of stealing it. It equally features an extensive party scene, meant to emphasize the pretentiousness and superficiality of the well-off class. There are hints in the script that the acerbic and mistrustful Atanasiu actually gained his position undeservedly. Nevertheless, while he is in the film one of Filip's main antagonists, he is not punished in any way in the course of the narrative; rather, the end of the film sees a disappointed Filip leaving the enterprise managed by Atanasiu and trying his luck in another city, while the fate of his former boss is left to the imagination of the viewer. As other script writers of that era which inserted hints of social criticism into their work, Stoiciu seemed to be satisfied with the generic description of a type – the corrupt member of the upward elites, the well-versed bureaucrat which seems to be understood better than anyone else the realpolitik of socialist hierarchies. By the time *Filip cel bun* was released, Stoiciu was himself a member of the select group of cultural officials which determined, to some extent, the fate of the Romanian film industry. Nevertheless, he maintained, through his scripts,

a defiant public stance, penning characters which are equally revolted and embittered as a consequence of their failed integration into socialist institutions. His scripts are themselves bitter in tone and leave their protagonists, no better than they were at the beginning of the film, before the same choices which put them in conflict with socialist hierarchies in the first place.

The last script penned by Stoiciu before leaving the country, adapted into the film *E atât de aproape fericirea* *Happiness Is So Near* (1978), directed by Andrei Cătălin Băleanu, is notably one of the few romance films of the socialist era set against the dividing lines of class. It is not, by any standards, a very good film, but serves in retrospect as a very good document for interpreting the hidden tensions and the negotiated civic imaginary of that era. It features, as usual, a somewhat confused, but ambitious young worker, Paul, which spends most nights studying, in order to earn an engineering degree. His love interest, Cristina, is the daughter of an important and affluent apparatchik. In contrast with Paul, Cristina seems less aware of her future prospects, but she's continuously reminded by her parents that she should aim for a career that matches the social status of her family. Paul and Cristina are both very aware of their class differences; when Paul proposes, Cristina retorts ironically, parodying the financial expectations of her milieu, "But you don't have a car, you don't have a mansion". *E atât de aproape fericirea* is set as a romance against all odds; as many films of the same era do, it puts in opposition two ideals – professional satisfaction and personal gratification, the latter being subsumed by the ideologically charged notion of "happiness". In contemporary-set

dramas (which by that time were generally labeled *filme de actualitate* "everyday films" by Romanian film critics and industry professionals), the ambiguous notion of happiness equally meant an adaptation to the intricacies of socialist reality and a fulfillment of one's personal desires. It is one of the key words in the "everyday film" genre and it charges contemporary-set dramas with a fair amount of utopian longing and politically-driven romanticism. Nevertheless, while in other films of that era the longing for happiness meant usually compliance to an already established behavior – enthusiastic involvement in one's work, marriage, moral decency and a sense of respectability –, in *E atât de aproape fericirea* this longing is equated with a desired effacement of class differences. Representations of class, as in other scripts penned by Stoiciu, are subtly and allusively disseminated throughout the film. Cristina's friends are vague caricatures of how hippies were perceived in the '70s in socialist Romania: careless, superficial, defined almost solely in terms of their leisure habits. One of them, Cristina's best friend, more richly nuanced as a character in the script, turns out to be cynical and somewhat resigned to her meager future prospects; she seems to accept uncomplainingly the contemporary lack of social mobility. Space in the film is divided in a way which takes into account conventional class representations of that era: on the one hand, the spacious mansion where Cristina and her parents live, filled with heavy, classical furniture, on the other, the cramped room where the two lovers eventually move together. There are subtle hints of an underlying working-class ethics which permeates the texture of the film. Even the well-off characters seem to

believe that in life one has to start from scratch – a meritocratic ideal almost commonplace in contemporary-set films of the '70s. Stoiciu inserts this ideologically-charged, conformist idea in the script of the film; self-conscious about class differences as it is, *E atât de aproape fericirea* depicts the upper classes as pragmatic and entitled, but fair. On the other hand, this conventional view of a meritocratic socialist hierarchy is short-circuited by other ambiguous statements about class. Typical for Stoiciu's writing, there are instances in the dialogue when the protagonist has to question his class identity – for instance, in one scene, one of his former work mates reproaches him that he no longer keeps in touch with his former milieu. Conventional scenes which depict ambitious workers, enthusiastically engaged in improving the output of the plant, are followed by more mundane depictions of a resigned, spiritless working class – asked by her mother how is she doing at her new job at the plant, Cristina answers placidly: “Not good, not bad”. The film thus opens itself to antithetical readings: it is both a subtle indictment of upper-class entitlement and a vehicle for conformist socialist values, it depicts a self-assured working class, proud of its identity, but fundamentally skeptical about its chances at social mobility.

Writing scripts which were highly ambiguous in their content and open to multiple interpretations was one of the prevalent strategies used by writers in the '60s and '70s in order to see their works adapted for the big screen. Constantin Stoiciu is just one example among many; other preeminent literary figures of that era used their influence and gained cultural capital in order to gain entrance into

the select circles of the Romanian film industry. In retrospect, their scripts seem to be equally bold and aware of the inherent limitations of expression characteristic for those years. However, among all these writers, none seems to have been more aware of the contradiction between the privileged status of the writer and his/hers claims of representing in a more genuine manner the main issues of the contemporary socialist society. Apart from Blaier and Băleanu, Stoiciu worked with several other directors, both as a script writer and executive producers. Nevertheless, the films he penned the script for seem to share common themes and a common view of the socialist contemporary society. He was, arguably, as responsible for the content of the civic imaginary negotiated through the medium of cinema in the late '60s and '70s as were many of the directors he worked with. He certainly wasn't the only one to present himself as an outsider, while being in effect an influent figure in the industry. Nevertheless, he was one of the few writers of that era which transfigured his ambiguous status and his class anxieties into his work. Uneven as they are, certainly marked by a reflex of auto-censorship so pervasive in that era, these scripts question socialist class identities in a manner in which the generally more conventional Romanian cinema of the '80s, with very few exceptions, would not be able to.

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## NOTES

1. See Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949-1989*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. Josephine Wall, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2000, p. 64
4. See, on this topic, my essay “The Slow Break from Socialist Realism: Romanian Cinema in the Late ‘50s and Early ‘60s”, in Irina Trocan (ed.), *Romanian Cinema Inside Out: Insights on Film Culture, Industry and Politics, 1912-2019*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House, 2019, p. 39-57.
5. See Cristian Vasile, *Viața intelectuală și artistică în primul deceniu al regimului Ceaușescu. 1965-1974*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2015, p. 146.
6. For a profile of his literary career, see Mircea Zăciu, Marian Papahagi, Aurel Sasu (eds.), *Dicționarul scriitorilor români*, Vol. 4, R-Z, Bucharest, Albatros, 2002, p. 401-402.
7. See, for instance, Josephine Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 154-158.