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Radu Dinulescu

Tegument

The story of a screenplay

TRANSLATION FROM
THE ROMANIAN:
Samuel Onn



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Why I'm no Bukowski!?

I turn in early that night, though it's a while before I actually get off to sleep. After eventually managing to nod off, my mobile phone, resting on the bedside table, chimes to announce the arrival of a new message. I put on my glasses and read: "Can you call me?" It's Maria. I note the time stamp at the end of the message: 23:30. "What could she want?" I press the call button, and a few seconds later she picks up.

"Look, you really should write a novel," she tells me, "I just love the screenplay. I haven't read anything like it in years. I simply couldn't put it down! The people, the atmosphere, the mysticism..."

"Happy to hear it!" I say.

She continues: "And it's just so contemporary. You talk about God – by omission. You talk about love. What is it you're trying to say? Are we disintegrating? Please, give a chance to the last inhabitant of the Box."

"What box?"

"What do you mean, what box?! Pandora's Box, of course!"

Dear reader,

Yes, you've guessed it, I've written a screenplay. It's not my first, however. I've written screenplays before and been paid for them. Some were quite successful and got made into films. One was even filmed in America – and it really sucked! But I haven't made a career of it. I write when there's

something on my mind, when there's a break in my daily routine, when I feel an idea has ripened in my mind, and, above all, I don't harbor any illusions. I mention this because in what you're about to read you'll certainly find plenty of illusions!

Maria and I were at university together, and eventually I came so deeply under the spell of her feminine “mystique” that I fell madly in love with her. I'd have given up everything for her – and, believe me, at that time I had a lot to give up! Thirty years passed, and so did the mystique. I've known many different women, in many different countries. I've always been fascinated by meeting different people, people from all over the world, and to fall in love with exotic women who were different from the women of Romania. I was the perfect European citizen: my sex life had become an act of “cultural diversity”!

Dear reader,

*Let me address you directly now in order to set out the rules for reading this perhaps strange “work”, which in its “womb” contains both a novel and a screenplay like *biviteline* or even *Siamese twins*. And to make it easier for you, dear reader, I've written the screenplay in a different color, so if you find my story boring but are gripped by the screenplay, you'll be able to skip past my ramblings, which you may consider pointless and irrelevant, so as to be able to concentrate on the incredibly strange and surreal story of *Peter from Pennsylvania* and *Eva from Transylvania*.*

I should mention that I've also included a few pictures here and there. Like in a scrapbook or an art album. They form part and parcel of the screenplay, but, as you will see, they will also come in very handy when it comes to understanding the whole, and will be especially useful to you, who, however intelligent you might be, can't be expected to know everything! To be honest, I myself also only discovered some of these things while doing the research.

*So, it will be blue... *Voroneț blue*, no less... for the screenplay!*

PART ONE

A TRANSPARENT
WORLD

Voroneț Monastery – Image by Armand Richelet-Kleinberg

1. VORONEȚ MONASTERY. EXTERIOR. DAY

The shot scans the walls of the monastery, which are covered in frescoes depicting biblical scenes and figures from the Last Judgement in the style of Byzantine icons. The background of the paintings is predominantly blue. The ambient sound

is made up of noises from the natural environment interspersed with snippets of conversation. We hear an authoritative voice, as if amplified by a megaphone.

VOICE 1

(off)

A little to the right... easy!

The shot slowly begins moving to the right.

VOICE 1

(off)

OK. Now up a bit. Bring up the jib... up, up... easy...

The shot slowly rises. Various voices are heard. The shot passes over a series of frescoes.

The camera stops at a part of painting that looks to be an Orthodox icon depicting the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus in her arms.

Something is blurring the shot, a flickering object covering a large proportion of the screen.

FEMALE VOICE

(off)

There's something on the lens...

VOICE 1

(off)

Stan, go see what the hell's going on!

A blurred, distorted face appears in shot. We see only a large nose and one eye.

STAN

Boss... it's a butterfly!

VOICE 1

(off)

Cut! Cut!

The shot fades to black and the inscription appears:

“I counsel thee to buy of me [...] raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness does not appear”

(Revelation of St John the Divine, Chapter 3)

Pulsating music begins to play in the background, at first quietly then rapidly becoming louder. The inscription disappears allowing the next scene to fade in.

Dear reader,

At first sight, this might appear to be a comedy. But I can assure you it's not! Just like in real life, nothing's ever what it seems. And I forgot to mention one very important thing: I wrote this screenplay during the pandemic, in 2020, during the period of lockdown that was imposed all over Europe. This may explain why at some point I began to lose my mind and was able to come up with the things I wrote!

I obediently spent three months at home, going out only every third day to buy essentials from the shop on the corner of the street. Whenever I left the apartment, I'd spray disinfectant on the lift buttons, the doormat, the wheels of the shopping cart, and, once back home again, even the soles of my shoes! Later, when there had begun to be thousands of new cases and hundreds of deaths every day, and various new strains of the virus had emerged that were even more

contagious and lethal, we learned that all these precautions were not particularly effective after all and in some cases even useless.

When I did go out, I'd be gasping like freight train going uphill, as I found it difficult to breathe through one of those so-called surgical masks in a city where there had been a grand total of seven cases of flu during the entire period of lockdown, which lasted from 15 March to 15 May 2020! But the fear – that fear of something new and completely unknown, which came to us from countries where people were dropping dead like flies like during the bubonic plague, despite having modern hospitals and the best epidemiologists and medics from all over the world, including Romania, and where they had well-functioning healthcare systems – completely changed the way we lived our lives and went about even the most mundane of tasks. It erased our most basic habits, replacing them with new ones we found it hard to get used to and against which we would eventually rebel irrationally.

I divided my days into two important halves: working on the theatre projects from which I made my living; and working on the screenplay, which I'd shelved many years ago due to a lack of time. This forced quarantine, which everyone was subject to, brought a sense of order to many aspects of my life.

Some ten years earlier I had submitted the screenplay for “Tegument” to the National Film Center in the hope of obtaining funding. I'd only written the first ten pages plus a summary of what would happen in the rest of the story. I went onto the internet, accessed the Film Center website and somewhat to my surprise discovered that the screenplay itself had scored well. Most points were lost on account of the team proposed by the production company and its lack of a track record. This only made me more determined, especially as I had in the meantime gathered new material that would help develop the plot.

In the evenings, I watched various Netflix shows.

2. OPENING CREDITS. SEQUENCE SHOT.

Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. Luxury office tower. A limousine pulls up in front of the building. The doors on the sidewalk side open and out of the car step DARIAN TRISCH, NIKOS GIORGIOS and DORON KREUTZMAN. Doron and Nikos are wearing smart business suits. Darian Trisch is equally sophisticated, the sophistication of an artist. A colored scarf is wrapped around his neck and hanging nonchalantly down his left shoulder. The loud music continues...

The three men enter the building through a large, grandiose doorway and walk past a porter in a trimmed suit and cap, whom they greet respectfully. All three appear to walk in sync with the music.

They make their way through an immense and extremely elegant lobby, heading for the lifts. On the wall, a corporate logo in relief is illuminated with fancy lighting. They stop in front of a lift and the lift door opens. They enter the lift. The music continues.

Inside the lift, the three men's faces are like those of poker players: impenetrable! The lift climbs rapidly on its way up to the 62nd floor.

The lift door opens at the 62nd floor. The three men make their way down a dimly lit corridor. They are met by a secretary, who shows them the way.

3. THE OFFICE OF OMRI NISSAN. INTERIOR. DAY.

OMRI NISSAN, an important businessman, is sitting at his desk and channel surfing on a giant wall-mounted television. Behind him is the company logo: "OMANUT LTD."

On the television, young people can be seen setting fire to posters for an event: The “Transparencies” exhibition by Darian Trisch.

Nikos, Doron and Darian enter Omri’s office, followed by the secretary, who then leaves.

The credits come to an end. The music fades, allowing the sound of the television to become audible in the background. The three men walk over to the television and begin watching.

OMRI

Mr. Trisch... I must congratulate you! It was magnificent! Simply magnificent!!

TRISCH

Thank you!

Omri gestures at the TV screen, which continues to show images from the “Transparencies” event, talk shows, interviews, etc.

OMRI

Excellent! I wasn’t expecting the reaction to be quite so... positive?

DORON

Positive?

OMRI

My friend... Controversy is the best form of promotion in the art business! What would have become of Brâncuși without the legal case of 1917!

Omri points to the corner of his desk, where some bottles of liquor can be seen beside a pile of files.

OMRI

Whiskey?

The three men accept the offer and then sit down in the comfortable armchairs arranged in front of the desk. Omri gently pushes a fancy looking ice bucket towards them.

Doron pours some whiskey into the glasses already arranged on the desk. They three men pick up their drinks, clink glasses, and drink...

OMRI

It was a truly fantastic success... artistically speaking, of course, but also financially. We're going to explode the art market...

DORON

With an investment to match!

Omri sits down in his chair. He gives them an icy stare.

OMRI

Naturally, it will require some investment. Omanut will be entering the game. And to do so, we're going to hold an auction, to test the market... We'll put one of the works from the collection up for sale.

DORON

Which one?

OMRI

“Marine Creature”.

The three men look at each other. Trisch nods his approval.

OMRI

We'd be investing something like... 50 million...

Omri hands them a check that had already been filled out and was waiting for them on the desk. The three men look at him and then nod in agreement. The television continues to show images from the exhibition.

OMRI

On one condition...

DORON

Yes...?

OMRI

That Eva doesn't give birth!

NIKOS

Doesn't give birth!?

DORON

Doesn't give birth!?

TRICH

What do you mean... doesn't give birth?

The three men are in shock at what they have just heard. Doron holds the check up at head height. The sound of dance music slowly increases.

Dear reader,

My intention from the outset was not to provide any explanation of the things I write about in the screenplay. Maybe, just a few words about how I came to write about certain things and in what circumstances. To explain something that normally would be left to germinate in the mind of the reader, spectator, visitor or listener would be futile, idiotic, dangerous, ridiculous, lamentable, and, more than anything, in poor taste. I say this as my screenplay, the part written in Voroneţ blue, is among other things also about art.

Coming back to my story. No, not the story from the screenplay, the story which, out of respect for you, I'm allowing you to skip past whenever you feel the need. I should point out a paradox concerning the mise en abyme: we're both on different sides of the mystery. I know what happens to the characters in my screenplay, and you don't; on the other hand, you may already know what became of my screenplay, whereas I, at the time of writing these lines, clearly don't! In fact, as you will soon find out for yourselves, unfortunately my film is "unmakeable" in Romania!

So, there I was, sitting in front of my computer and typing away. It had already been two weeks since I'd completed the first draft and had sent it off to a few friends to get their feedback. I still didn't know what I was going to do with it, how to end it and above all how to go about promoting it. The feedback people gave me was almost entirely positive. We're talking writers, people who had seen a lot of films in their lives, industry people, theatre directors... my sister:

Radu M., playwright: “You know, I’d really like to see this film made. I really enjoyed the mystical parts, which I think you should develop more!”

Mircea B., former dean of a film and television faculty: “I found the story engaging, if a little too linear. It could do with a bit more conflict...”

Sanda M., set designer: “Man, it’s completely insane. It gave me the goosebumps. It totally freaked me out!”

Dora P., actor: “I simply couldn’t put it down, it’s really good.”

Mihaela H., German language teacher in Washington: “Radu, it’s so American... I say this as someone who has lived here for over 25 years and I know a few people!”

Adriana E., TV producer: “Radu, what you’ve written is amazing! I really enjoyed it.”

My sister: “Yes, it’s good! I hope you’re not thinking of making it here. Think about it!”

The most interesting feedback I got, however, was from Mihaela C, but I will come back to that in more detail later.

4. PHARAOH’S NIGHT CLUB. INTERIOR. NIGHT.

A fairly large night club located in a basement. Large flat screen displays mounted on the walls are showing images captured by cameras pointing at the dance floor. Crowds of people are dancing to the music: men and women, mostly young, euphoric, sweaty, most holding alcoholic drinks in their hands as they dance.

The colored smoke from the smoke machines, lit up by lasers and colored spotlights, creates a dreamlike atmosphere. Fireworks are lit at regular intervals, creating bursts of multi-color sparks.

Close to the ceiling, on a ventilation duct, a large rat appears out of the smoke. Part of its body is transparent, allowing its internal organs to be seen. It is confused and frightened, moving unsteadily along the duct. It reaches a point above the dance floor.

A jet of colored smoke reaches up to the rat. Frightened, the rat tries to retreat, but loses its balance and falls down onto the dancers below. Bursts of sparks fly off in all directions.

Scuttling between the feet of the dancers, the rat tries to escape to safety. However, it is stamped upon by a man's foot. The rat writhes in pain.

A bare-chested man, his chest, arms, back and forehead all heavily tattooed, kneels down over the rat. His eyes are dilated from alcohol and drugs. He picks the rat up by the tail and holds it up at eye level. He stares at it in fascination.

TATTOOED MAN

So cool... And who might you be? Eh? Mickey Mouse... Another man, bald, with tattooed face and scalp, visibly even more intoxicated, snatches the rat from out of the first man's hand, and, without looking at it, swings it round by the tail and launches it, at random, in the direction of some tables.

TATTOOED MAN

(angry)

No!! No!! You idiot... it was so cool! Mickey...

The TATTOOED MAN sets off in the direction in which the rat had been thrown. The Bald Man laughs at him.

5. NIGHT CLUB. INTERIOR. NIGHT. BAR

The rat lands on a bar table, knocking over some glasses. A few girls dressed in loud, sexy outfits, stare at the peculiar vision on the table. The rat begins to move. The girls start to scream hysterically, climbing onto the leather chairs or recoiling in horror. The rat falls off the edge of the table and scuttles away.

The Tattooed Man is as if possessed, upturning the table full of bottles and glasses in his attempt to crawl under it. He gets down on his hands and knees and begins to search for the rat. He knocks over everything in his path.

His friends, following in his wake, try to pick him up. The Bald Man grabs him by his feet and pulls him out from under the table. The Tattooed Man holds onto the table leg.

TATTOOED MAN

A transparent Mickey Mouse!

BALD MAN

Calm down! You're drunk! You're hallucinating!

TATTOOED MAN

I'm not leaving without Mickey! My little rat...
Mickey!!!

The Tattooed Man pushes the Bald Man, who falls onto another table, smashing everything.

The screams of the girls and the altercation between the boys creates an atmosphere of general hysteria, with people starting to run for the exits in chaos. Some take cover behind the

bar. The music stops and we now hear only the screams of the panicked customers.

AMPLIFIED VOICE

Please, don't panic... Everything is under control!
Nobody is to leave the premises... You are not in any danger!

6. NIGHT CLUB ENTRANCE. EXTERIOR. NIGHT

Young people are leaving the night club in a disorderly manner, some still holding their glasses. A chaotic crowd of people quickly forms in front of the entrance. The security guards try to contain them. Some fall to their knees. A young woman is lying completely flat on the sidewalk, unconscious, and a young man, leaning over her, is trying to bring her round!

SECURITY GUARD

Nobody leaves! Please pay your drinks bills!

7. STREET IN FRONT OF NIGHT CLUB. NIGHT

Interior of a car carrying members of a TV crew. Monica, a news reporter, notices the commotion in front of the night club.

MONICA

What's going on over there... Stop the car! Jeff, bring the camera!

The car pulls up and out of it rush MONICA and JEFF carrying filming equipment.

Sirens are heard and a police car can be seen approaching followed by an ambulance.

8. ENTRANCE TO EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT. HOSPITAL. EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR. NIGHT
Reception area of an emergency hospital. We see the back of an ambulance out of which is being lowered a gurney to which the Tattooed Man is cuffed. A team of doctors take charge of the man and a number of TV reporters chase after them. The Tattooed Man writhes violently on the gurney, shouting and screaming.

TATTOOED MAN

My little rat... my little rat... It's in there! I saw it... Mickey...

The paramedics hand over the gurney to a team of doctors. A porter stops the reporters from entering the building.

PARAMEDIC

Incident at a night club... No serious injuries... He's delirious and violent... Probably on drugs!

DOCTOR

Take him to Floor 3! He'll be seen by a psychiatrist tomorrow.

Two stretcher bearers transfer the Tattooed Man, who puts up a struggle, to a hospital gurney, and then push it towards the lifts.

TATTOOED MAN

Mickey! Mickey! What do these people what from us?

Dear reader,

I hope that by now you've become somewhat accustomed to the style of this novel. I hope I've been able to hold your attention, both with the parts written in black and those in blue. There's one more thing I should mention, however: the blue part is written according to the rules for creating a literary screenplay and therefore may also include directions intended for the film set. I could have removed these, but by keeping them in I'm hoping to recreate the experience of sitting in front of the television set or the unique feeling you only get at the cinema. Let's see if I can pull this off.

I didn't do any more writing for a few days. But then I remembered the feedback I'd received from friends and colleagues, as well as my sister, and decided [go](#) on the attack again. I'd already written 80 pages. If you do the math, a literary screenplay, written in the correct format for a film of around 90-100 minutes, will need around 120 pages.

It's coming up to mid-May and almost the entire world is now suffering enormously under the pandemic, with thousands of deaths being recorded every day, lockdowns in place everywhere, the economy shutting down in almost every country and the prospect of an economic crisis affecting the entire planet. Not to mention the constant stream of fake news and apocalyptic scenarios. I felt a need for human companionship, someone to stay with me a while until the lockdown was over. And I thought of Neli.

Neli was a simple, divorced young woman with two relatively big kids for her 32 years of age. That's the way things are in Ferentari: the girls marry young, to get it over with, to get away from their parents, to have kids, to be able to scrape a living for themselves. The hardship comes later, when they realize they're unable to make ends meet. But they keep on at it regardless, producing more kids, scrambling to earn

a living by almost any means possible. They eat, have sex and sleep. Life is all about sex and money. Those who have money pay for sex, those who don't... sell it.

It proved pretty difficult to bring Neli to Baia Mare. The lockdown rules meant you had to carry various documents with you demonstrating the reason for your travel. We chose the fourth option on the self-declaration form: "justifiable grounds, including caring for/accompanying a minor/child, assisting elderly, sick or disabled people, or death in the family". I booked her a ticket on the sleeper train, as the planes had stopped flying, transferred some money to her account, something to leave for her kids and something for the journey, and waited impatiently for her to arrive.

It was a Saturday. The night train took 13 hours to wend its way from Baia Mare to Bucharest, arriving at 9:30 the next morning. I filled out my own self-declaration form to cover my journey to the station and took a taxi from the corner. And I was shocked by what I saw. There were no checks at all, not anywhere, not even at the station, and the people getting out of the trains were not even wearing their masks properly. Indeed, most wore their masks merely symbolically, in order to be able to go into shops and use public transport. It made sense: people didn't have the money! Most wore a cloth mask, which is all but useless, or used a surgical-style mask for weeks on end, ironing them between uses to kill the virus! And to think I had spent the last two and half months scrupulously following all the rules and guidance!

The first wave of the pandemic nonetheless turned out to be extremely benign. Compared with the rest of the world, Romania saw only very few Covid-related deaths. No one had any logical explanation for this, they could only speculate.