Global rhetorics of disaster: media constructions of Bataclan and the "Colectiv Revolution" in the wake of 9/11[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the recent global emergence of a rhetoric of disaster that connects violent events such as terrorist attacks and destructive accidents under an assumption of similarity based on their equally resulting in tragedy and mourning. I will compare discursive constructions of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, often considered the archetypal terrorist act of the new millennium, the Club Colectiv fire in Bucharest (October 30, 2015), followed by the "Colectiv Revolution" that led to a change of government in Romania, and the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris (November 13, 2016). In a dialogue with Noemi Marin's concept of rhetorical space, I argue that, within the horizon of expectation created by 9/11, Bataclan and Colectiv have given rise to a specific rhetoric of mourning and revolt in reaction to disaster, which has an important public dimension, but, through a strong emotional appeal, is directed at every member of the audience in a personal way.

Keywords: Bataclan, Colectiv, 9/11, rhetoric of disaster, mourning

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Rhétorique mondiale du désastre: constructions médiatiques de Bataclan et de la « Révolution Colectiv » au réveil du 11 septembre

Résumé: Cet article examine l'émergence mondiale récente d'une rhétorique du désastre qui relie des événements violents tels que les attentats terroristes et des accidents destructeurs sous l'hypothèse d'une similarité fondée sur le fait qu'ils aboutissent également à la tragédie et au deuil. Je comparerai les constructions discursives des attentats terroristes du 9/11, souvent considérées comme l'acte terroriste archétypal du nouveau millénaire, le feu du Club Colectiv à Bucarest (30 octobre 2015), suivi par la « Révolution Colectiv » qui a conduit à un changement

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de gouvernement en Roumanie et l'attaque terroriste de Bataclan à Paris (13 novembre 2016). Dans un dialogue avec le concept d'espace rhétorique de Noemi Marin, j'ai l'intention de démontrer que, dans l'horizon d'attente créé par 9/11, Bataclan et Colectiv ont donné lieu à une rhétorique spécifique du deuil et de la révolte en réaction à la catastrophe, qui a une dimension publique importante, mais dont la force vient de son fort appel émotionnel, qui touche chaque membre du public de manière personnelle.

Mots-clés: Bataclan, Colectiv, 9/11, rhétorique du désastre, deuil

Introduction

On the night of October 30, 2015, a rock concert at Club Colectiv in Bucharest ended in an accidental fire that killed 63 people and left around 150 with serious injuries. The fire was caused by a fireworks show, performed in a non-fireproof indoors environment, which led to rapid ignition of the sound-proof materials inside the club, then generalized fire and stampede. The event was perceived as massively tragic, with Romania's President Klaus Iohannis announcing three national mourning days. The local authorities were blamed for allowing the club to function and neglecting to make sure that the basic safety measures were properly taken in Bucharest clubs and other public indoors spaces. Some of the seriously injured victims were taken to European hospitals, better equipped than Romanian ones for treating burnt victims. A number of the injured hospitalized in Romania in critical states died from infections acquired in the hospitals, which led to a whole media campaign against the Romanian health system, critically afflicted by insufficient funds, incompetence and corruption.

This was the last straw to a growing wave of discontent with the government then in office, led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta, with a Social Democratic Party (PSD) majority. In a spectacular series of street manifestations ignited by the event – the so-called "Colectiv Revolution" – the government, accused of gross neglect of the needs of the people and lack of proper care for the country's citizens, was asked to resign, which they did within a month after the disaster. The new government was one of technocrats, as President Iohannis repeatedly stressed, led by Prime Minister Dacian Cioloş, with a liberal majority. When a Social Democratic Party majority in Parliament reappeared a year later, following the elections on December 11, 2017 and reflecting the current global return to nationalism (represented in Eastern Europe by the left-wing rather than the right), an important part of the Romanian public sphere, to the extent that it exists now, felt that the Colectiv victims had been betrayed.

Two weeks after Colectiv, on November 13, 2016, in the terrorist attack on club Bataclan in Paris, 90 young people attending the rock concert there died and over 300 were injured. There were replicas in other parts of Paris, including three suicide bombers outside the Stade de France. The attacks immediately triggered a rise in

caution against both French people of Islamic origin and Syrian refugees in France and Europe. This led, as is often the case, to a collapse of all distinction in the public perception of Muslims in France and, by extension, in the world. ISIS claimed the event as part of its series of anti-western crusades. Immediate connections were made in the western press to the refugees, whose confusing resemblance to the potential terrorists, often strategically mixed with them, caused discontent with the ways in which the refugee crisis was being handled and ultimately to visible lack of sympathy towards the refugees and all people of Muslim faith.

The causes and implications of Bataclan and Colectiv were (or were constructed as) deeply political. Comments on the two disasters have often overlapped in the Romanian media, warning against the serious impact deviant political behaviors such as corruption and fanaticism can have on people's lives. The ad-hoc rhetoric of disaster that developed around them seemed, interestingly enough, to display little variation between descriptions of Colectiv and descriptions of Bataclan. Even though the former was a lot less visible than the latter in the international press, similar tropes were used to describe them, despite their different causes. Their effects on people's emotions were strikingly similar. Also, comments on both cases were quick to fuel already existing radical views on the various kinds of difference that inevitably characterize contemporary societies.

The two disastrous events were often compared to the American terror attacks on 9/11, which gave rise to a whole literature of combined mourning and revolt against terror, and, in the case of 9/11 and Bataclan, to a global atmosphere of disapproval with people originating from Muslim countries (by assimilation with the terrorists who caused the 9/11 and Bataclan disasters). A massacre of enormous proportions, with more than 3000 dead, 9/11 was constructed as the epitome of terror, against which only war (such as the memory of World War II or President George W. Bush's own "war on terror" which ensued) felt like a strong enough term of comparison. Within the wider framework of the construction of violence in the United States as a phenomenon that exceeds proportions everywhere else in the world, comparing acts of violence to 9/11 is a symbolic gesture, as well as a measure of the proportions of other violent events the world has faced ever since.

As was the case with 9/11, the two instances of a night of entertainment ending in massive life loss felt deeply personal to many people who were not even directly involved in them. The Bataclan attack is now associated with a whole young middle class generation aged between 16 and 35, who feel their identity is defined by the possibility "I could have been there" (*j'aurais pu y être*), referred to as the « génération Bataclan », as Cécile Bouanchaud points out in *Le Monde* (Bouanchaud, 2016). But empathy with both events, which, even in hindsight, sound equally troubling, exceeds all generational limits and acquires a human universality, given by some form of spatial or rather emotional proximity felt by most people who heard about them. It is on this deeply individualized emotional proximity that rhetorics of disaster are built.

The aim of this article is to analyze some of the rhetorical constructions of the Colectiv fire and of the Bataclan terror attack in the light of 9/11, in a dialogue with Noemi Marin's concept of rhetorical space – a real or symbolical space where power is constructed and exerted through discourse. Marin uses the concept of rhetorical space to discuss the violent 1989 political change in Romania. Thinking of conflict as positioned within a rhetorical space is highly relevant to today's scene, fraught as it is with power struggle and conflict around difference-related issues, to the detriment of human values and peace.

I argue that, within the horizon of expectation created by 9/11, Bataclan and Colectiv have given rise to a specific rhetoric of mourning and revolt in reaction to disaster, directed at every member of the audience in a personal way through a strong emotional appeal. This rhetoric has contributed to deepening the global upsurge of defensive nationalism, even though Bataclan has been given more space in the international press than Colectiv has. This is due to the global media visibility of the French space as opposed to the Romanian one, but also to the existence, within the current global political climate, of more audience interest in discussing terror attacks than accidents, possibly due to the prestige of 9/11. In both cases, however, this rhetoric, which is all the stronger as its public dimension is informed by a more important private one, has significantly contributed to deepening existing prejudiced public views on difference.

1. Between the Personal and the Public: A Rhetorical Space for Individual Mourning

Looking back to the Romanian political scene at the end of 1989, Noemi Marin signals the need for "a critical rhetorical perspective to understand how totalitarian politics clash with revolutionary changes and how communist space, so ambitiously crafted to cover an entire country's public sphere, influences, if at all, a free(d) discourse on national unity". Relying on Habermas's concept of public sphere, Marin shows that "the concept of rhetorical space along with the enthymematic argument by definition of 'we the nation' capture rhetoric in action, showing complex discursive crossings that legitimize the relationship between rhetoric and history at such times" (Marin, 2015, p. 167). This suggests that if "we the nation" challenges the nation-state through its alleged dissident nature, conflictual positions may share the same terminology, employed, however, with different or even opposite meanings. This goes as far as reversals of political vocabularies, with words such as "democracy", "freedom" and "equality" being understood in entirely different ways.

In situations of conflict or crisis, when opposite tendencies meet within the same rhetorical space, there are interesting terminological crossings from one camp to another that create amalgamations and even reversals of meaning. Marin finds in this an opportunity to discuss rhetoric at work in the writing of history, a process that she sees as starting in the rhetorical space of discourse. The only way we

perceive history is through words manipulated by reporting (and reflecting) minds. Hence, in the construction of ambiguous historical events (and when are historical events *not* ambiguous?), the "complex discursive crossings" (Marin, 2015, p. 167) that occur lead to manipulations of meaning that may significantly distort the resulting historical narrative. Manipulation of any sensational events (such as Colectiv and Bataclan were) by the media, through terminological crossings such as the ones described by Marin with reference to 1989, to reflect on bigger political issues that are the topic of the day are a common fact. What happened in the Romanian press in the case of these two events with similar outcomes, yet very different causes was a logical fallacy: the media seemed to repeatedly take it for granted that if the outcomes are the same, then the reasons why they happened must be related to the same present-day picture of global terrorism and apocalyptic disaster. This logical fallacy, which collapsed reports on the significances of Colectiv and Bataclan, was used rhetorically in the Romanian public sphere to host two successive transfers of political power.

In response to collective trauma, two major types of rhetoric can be distinguished, that reflect on disaster, tragedy and mourning in slightly different, even though cognate terms. One is the public rhetoric employed by the media to report on the news aspects of the situation, meant to address a wide audience and to take a political side. The other one, on which I will focus somewhat more, is a personal rhetoric of mourning. This rhetoric is usually related to an already established memoir of mourning genre, which primarily serves to soothe the writer's grief, but also to share their grief with other similarly afflicted mourners who find solace in knowing how other people have dealt with the experience of losing someone dear.

Whereas we tend to think of rhetoric as operating in the public space, being most often a function of public speech, there are also forms of rhetoric that emerge from intimate experiences and target each member of the audience on an individual level. Such rhetorics are often employed in confessive messages and largely make use of the emotional appeal. They are often about experiences that reveal vulnerabilities in the speaking subject, hence such confessions are perceived by both the sender and the receiver of the message as highly sensitive and difficult. This is the case of personal disclosure as depicted by Suzanne Diamond in her edited collection *Compelling Confessions: The Politics of Personal Disclosure* (2011), which reveals the intimate sufferings of the speaking self and, ultimately, "who I am" (Diamond, 2011, p. 23). Personal disclosure largely amounts to opening a personal, intimate rhetorical space, where otherwise hidden vulnerabilities become visible, but may also become a source of newly acquired strength.

As Diamond shows in a chapter suggestively entitled "Scripted Subjectivity: The Politics of Personal Disclosure" (Diamond, 2011, p. 23-55), personal disclosure and collective politics are fundamentally linked, "however the idea that individual disclosure inevitably heralds collective agency remains a questionable and underexamined assumption" (Diamond, 2011, p. 26-27). Despite the existence of an

unexamined prejudice against the term "confession" (Diamond, 2011, p. 28), the "culture of confession" (as in self-help books, therapy groups, and talk shows) has recently spread so widely and has become so popular that it has even penetrated academic discourse (Diamond, 2011, p. 34). The importance of the personal in shaping messages meant to be launched into the public sphere in order to inform public opinion seems to be growing, due to its high potential for credibility. Indeed, nothing seems to be more verifiable than personally lived experience, especially when that experience is a painful one. The message delivered is very convincing and is usually credited as honest, animated by the best intentions for the community addressed.

Personal rhetoric sits comfortably among the tools of literary genres, yet is (allegedly) fundamentally connected to real life. It is particularly appropriate in mourning situations, where it is more direct than other, more formal types of literary expression, even though it sometimes finds itself at a loss for words or in need to apply to particularly complex imagery in order to do justice to the heavily emotional meaning expressed. In her 2015 book *Mourning Women. Post-Mortem Dialogues in Contemporary American Autobiography*, Mihaela Precup shows that

> The memoir of mourning, unlike other autobiographical genres, is expected to undertake a double mnemonic performance and struggle with invisibility, one focused on the person who died, and the other on the mourner. Consequently, writers find themselves pitted against the limitations of verbal and visual representation, as well as against the definitive nature of the loss they are discussing. (21)

The emotional difficulty encountered by the writer when trying to deliver such a message is an important source of audience success. Precup approaches this genre from a trauma studies rather than rhetorical perspective, yet she insists on this particular difficulty with language and imagery, which springs from the struggle to put grief in words. The purpose of writing such texts seems to be precisely to display this linguistic difficulty to express tragedy. The heavy emotional load they carry makes them considerably more effective in influencing public opinion than the professionally cold rhetoric of news announcement or newspaper articles (even when they are sprinkled with heavily emotional and sensational language, as is often the case in the Romanian press). There is also the power of the personal mark, whose deep emotional appeal is stronger than it can be in the case of any form of media text (supposedly representative of the power behind the media). When mourning texts are posted in the social media, the deeply private nature of the message turns public and even viral, as the personal touch of their content multiplies. This was the case with the two personal letters of mourning posted on Facebook that I will discuss below. These letters, like a lot of literature that followed, inspired from the same traumatic events, come in the wake of an established trend that has been around for a while, formed in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States.

2. The Specter of 9/11: A Rhetoric of Disaster and Mourning

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, of which the destruction of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, New York, is remembered as the most emblematic, were represented, analyzed and discussed in mass media all around the world for a long time after they occurred. The apocalyptic effect of the Twin Towers collapsing under the impact of crashing planes hijacked by Islamic terrorists gave rise to a whole trend of 9/11 literature. In a book dedicated to it, Magali Cornier Michael points out that:

> The large volume of published literary texts touching upon the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States reveals an imperative to tell the story of what happened on that fateful day, focusing almost exclusively on the World Trade Center New York City. (…) Within the specific context of the United States, many novelists appeared to feel that writing about 9/11 was simply unavoidable" (Cornier Michael, 2014, p. 1).

As Cornier Michael shows, the literary pieces inspired by 9/11 do not always focus on the terrorist attacks themselves, but very often just use the events on that day as a kind of inevitable background, to which reference was "unavoidable". American author Don DeLillo, whose 2007 novel *Falling Man* is part of this trend, states in an article published in December 2001 that the inflation of stories about 9/11 reflect a general need to create a "counter-narrative" to the narratives of terrorism and of terror (DeLillo, 2001, p. 39). Yet, as Cornier Michael shows, there is an inherent contradiction at the heart of all these narratives: even though the impulse to produce 9/11 literature comes from the need to re-establish a normality that was dramatically shattered by the attacks and also to understand an event of such proportions, the good intentions of all this literature are thwarted by the lack of access to unmediated reality. Filtered through waves upon waves of press reports, mostly delivered in a panicky tone in line with the widely spread propensity of most mass media for sensational effects, 9/11 tends to be perceived more as a highly mediated, discursively constructed event than as a shockingly real one.

Novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Jess Walter's *The Zero* or Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) ponder on the human impact of 9/11. There are narrative responses outside the UD: in the French literary space (Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World,* 2005) and in the English one (Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, 2005). Such novels set themselves in opposition to the public discourse and challenge (often unsuccessfully, hence the disapproval they encountered) the "inevitable layers of mediation that accompany all attempts to represent a specific historical referent" (Cornier Michael, 2014, p. 3). Such mediations lead to rhetorical manipulations of the event for political purposes (as was the case specifically with the Iraq war, whose start may have been delayed had it not been for the anti-Muslim atmosphere created by 9/11 in the United States).

Despite its topicality, 9/11 literature was chronically perceived as falling short of the seriousness of its historical referent and being blatantly unaccomplished aesthetically. While Cornier Michael's explanation to this is the difficulty to penetrate through the many layers of mediation in the public discourse around 9/11, John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec put this down to a contamination with the government's forging of a "Patriotic Correctness" meant to justify the Iraq and Afghanistan war. Duvall and Marzec insist on the difficulty encountered by this literature in conceptualizing a trauma as big as that of 9/11 (Duvall and Marzec, 2011, pp. 381-82). Trauma, known for its refusal of words, is so overwhelming that it refuses verbal expression. Even though deeply contested and often even censored, however, there has been an inflation of 9/11 literature and cultural products building up a strong literary response to what was perceived as a global disaster of unprecedented proportions since the Holocaust.

Comparisons between the terror attacks at the Bataclan theatre and 9/11 were commonplace in many media responses to the Paris massacre. One understandable similarity is the unjustified sacrifice of innocent human lives for a cause independent of the reason they were there, conveying what seemed to be the same Islamic crusade against western civilization and the human right to joy and entertainment. One year after Bataclan, in a series of opinion articles published in *The New York Times,* reflecting on the event and its aftermath, Alissa J. Rubin focuses on both the event's mass dimension and its individual one. In a November 12, 2016 article, she tells the story of the Paris attacks through the survivor's voices and ponders on the American perception, bound to make connections to 9/11: "Many Americans who had visited Paris knew the neighborhoods, if not the streets, where the attacks had taken place. For New Yorkers, the destruction of daily life bore echoes of Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Center on a bright Tuesday morning" (Rubin, 2016a). A second article, published the next day (on the very anniversary of the attacks), builds a journalistic history of survivors' testimonies in a way that parallels the press responses to 9/11:

> The New York Times interviewed 27 people who witnessed parts of those events and asked them to recount what they experienced: suicide bombs, gunfire, the terror of near death. Two of the people interviewed, the Paris fire chief and the brigade's chief medical doctor, had a uniquely comprehensive view as they helped oversee the response, shuttling back and forth between the attack sites and their headquarters. The chronology here is taken from an official report on the attacks that was published by a French parliamentary inquiry. These accounts have been edited and condensed. This is the story of the attacks by those who lived through them. (Rubin, 2016b)

Among the people interviewed, some were French, others were foreign visitors. Rubin records heartbreaking testimonies, such as "I will always live with the fact that I saw ringing cellphones that said 'Papa,' 'Maman,' on the dead" (General Boutinaud of the emergency services, in Rubin, 2016b). It is this intimate dimension of the tragedy and the rhetoric of personal mourning built around it that touched the audience more deeply than any public discourse.

3. Bataclan and Colectiv: From Media Responses to a Disaster Writing Trend

If 9/11 gave rise to a whole responding novel trend, a similar imperative to construct a healing and, to a certain extent, restorative counter-narrative was also felt in relation to Bataclan and to Colectiv – although in the latter case the follow-up was not so much literature as political reflection and even political action.

Immediate reactions to Bataclan were explosive in the international press. The daily *Le Monde* documented every single detail of the events themselves and their aftermath. At the time, Jacques Follorou described the Paris terror attacks as "une attaque « complexe » inédite sur le sol français," of an unusual, even original nature. Follorou depicts the attack with a precision which borders on black humor through its focus on strategy and less on the human loss factor:

> C'est une première en France en matière d'attentat. Plusieurs kamikazes se sont fait exploser, dans la soirée du vendredi 13 novembre au terme d'assauts meurtriers menés aux abords du Stade de France, à Saint-Denis, et dans cinq lieux à Paris, rue de la Fontaine-au-Roi, rue Bichat, boulevard Voltaire, rue de Charonne et dans la salle de spectacle du Bataclan, après la prise en otage du public. Ces attaques, dites «complexes», au regard de modus operandi en plusieurs étapes, sont inspirées d'une forme de violence ayant cours depuis plusieurs années dans des zones de conflit telles que l'Afghanistan, l'Irak ou la Syrie, où règne une forme de violence dont la France se croyait jusqu'alors protégée. (Follorou, 2015).

This great attention to small detail, to the precise genealogy and mechanisms of the respective acts of violence and to the geography of the attack is one strategy to transcend the pain and panic that go with the rememoration of the events, which greatly affected French public sphere, generating a pan-European state of alert. Enhanced security measures were taken at French and other European airports for months afterwards, police patrols were intensified and the general atmosphere of fear lasted for a while. It is to a certain extent still present, considering the fact that terror attacks have continued to happen ever since in France and neighboring countries such as Germany and the UK (with a very recent one at a concert in Manchester, on May 22, 2017, which reminded of the Bataclan in many details).

Whereas all three events have had serious political implications, what singles out the Romanian accident from the terrorist attacks in the US and France is that the accident was attributed to deeper local (as opposed to external terrorist) causes, revealing some serious faults in the political system in the country. Romanian newspapers such as *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Adevărul*, or online news sites such as Realitatea.net reflected on both events in very similar terms. On November 15, 2015, *Evenimentul Zilei* even compares the two in the following headline, followed by an article that gives more details on the matter: "Terror in Paris. Horrific scenes, resembling the ones at "Colectiv". Strange coincidence between the two nightmare nights. At Bataclan, the Eagles of Death were performing. Two rock concerts, two similar tunes, the same time (22:30) when Hell broke free" (Pădure, 2015; translation mine). Some of the striking details of the two events were similar: the apparently festive initial effect of fireworks that took a tragic turn, pieces of broken

bodies lying all over the place, hell broken loose, people mourning, all reported in the typical sensationalist, panic provoking tone that characterizes the Romanian media in general.

News coverages on Romanian TV channels varied in tone as they usually do, from Digi's attempt at objectivity to PRO TV's sensationalism, the Antena 1, Antena 2 and Antena 3 TV channels) pro-Social-Democratic Party allegiance and TVR's allegedly objective orientation that is however meant to reflect the official position. Yet, beyond the Romanian press's comparatively pronounced tendency to exaggerate, descriptions of the two events and their aftermaths, with a strong emphasis on the sensitive individual mourning dimension, have been integrated within the same framework of terror in Europe and have been constructed rhetorically in rather similar terms.

One trend in the global media depiction of the events insists on the visual detail. The BBC website listed the photographs and short bio-blurbs of the Bataclan victims, with the note "Tributes have been paid to the 130 people who lost their lives in the Paris terror attacks. This page lists all the victims for whom the BBC has details; further photographs and information will be added as they become available" (BBC, 2015). Later on, Romanian media companies such as Mediafax and ProTV did the same with Colectiv victims (Mediafax and ProTV, 2016). Individualized pictures of the victims, shown in happy, relaxed postures that contrast dramatically with the shocking details of their violent deaths, have moved various audiences to tears, as repeatedly shown by their reactions in the social media.

It was this personal emotional impact that was invoked in Facebook comments one year later, when the Social Democratic Party, at the time accused of improper running of the country that led to an accident such as the one at Colectiv, came back to power through popular vote in Romania. On the evening of the election day, November 11, 2016, the so-called "Colectiv Revolution" (the popular rise against the government in Bucharest that followed the fire in Club "Colectiv") was invoked once again in Facebook comments that showed disappointment with the short-lived effect of popular revolutionary determination arising from the post-Colectiv wave of emotions: "The emotion lasted for a short while, then what was left of it was stupidity" (Mihaela Precup, Facebook post, November 11, 2016),[2] or, in response "Do you really think so? I mean, procentually, don't you think that the protesters then translated into the percentages we got now? (...) I don't see much of a discrepancy here" (Codruta Pohrib, Facebook post, November 11, 2016).[3] The anti-climactic feel of the elections in November 2016 as compared to the genuine anti-corruption street protests that followed the Club Colectiv tragedy, led to further street protests outside the Romanian government headquarters in Victoria Square in Bucharest in January-February 2017. This rise of a civic spirit that had been slow to

2 "A ținut puțin emoția, a rămas însă prostia" (translation mine).
3 "Chiar crezi? Adică, procentual, nu crezi că protestatarii de-atunci s-au tradus în procentele de-acum? (...) Eu nu văd o discrepanță aici" (translation mine).

form in Romania after the fall of communism corrected some of the abuses of the new government and seemed to have been successful in warning them that such abuses could no longer pass unnoticed. The spirit of the post-Colectiv protests was invoked by the large masses who protested again in early 2017, showing that the public opinion had been prompted into an awareness that hadn't existed before.

To return to the strong emotional appeal of individual confession, both Bataclan and Colectiv elicited letters of personal disclosure of the pain experienced by the victims' family members. It was precisely a letter on Facebook, posted on November 16, 2016, that remained in the public memory as the most famous and emotionally touching reaction to the Bataclan attack: French journalist Antoine Leiris's "Vous n'aurez pas ma haine," written right after he had identified his dead wife's body at the Paris police morturary. Composed from the perspective of the mourning husband, but, even more touchingly, of the father left alone to bring up his seventeen-month-old son, Antoine Leiris's elegiac essay touches the deepest chords of the personal dimension of collective trauma. The main point Leiris makes – which projects onto the public sphere as a very strong invitation to an effort to make peace – is his refusal to hate his wife's murderers and thus allow them to ruin his life and his son's any further, or to touch his convictions in any way:

> Vendredi soir vous avez volé la vie d'un être d'exception, l'amour de ma vie, la mère de mon fils mais vous n'aurez pas ma haine. Je ne sais pas qui vous êtes et je ne veux pas le savoir, vous êtes des âmes mortes. Si ce Dieu pour lequel vous tuez aveuglément nous a fait à son image, chaque balle dans le corps de ma femme aura été une blessure dans son coeur. (Leiris, 2016, p. 63)

The letter, addressed to the terrorists and brazenly proclaiming the energy of life against any religious extremism leading to terror, quickly got 232,715 Facebook shares, was mediatized worldwide and later gave its title to the book that followed the next year (*Vous n'aurez pas ma haine* (Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2016). *Vous n'aurez pas ma haine* became the best sold book in France in 2016 and was rapidly translated into many languages (English and Romanian included). It was invoked a year after the attack as the most fitting tribute to the victims of the Bataclan terrorist attack. One such instance was a commemoration of the Bataclan event and a launching of the Romanian translation of Leiris's book at the French Institute in Bucharest, with Romanian French journalist Nicolas Don and representatives of the Nemira Publishing House (where the Romanian translation of the book came out), on November 9, 2016.

Leiris's book, a true memoir of mourning, abounds in details of his life as a single father. Banal domestic scenes, in which we see him desperately trying to cope with minor parental duties such as feeding his child, bathing him or cutting his fingernails, which his wife had been in charge of, or receiving lots of unrequired help from Melvil's day care mates' parents, are charged with the gravity of the context in which they are told. At the end, the most difficult task, that of explaining to Melvil that his mother is dead, leads to the most wonderful scene of innocence as the best weapon against all the evil in the world. Leiris takes his son to his mother's

tomb in the Montmartre cemetery and places a photo of hers in the middle of the white flowers, saying to him "Maman est là." Melvil's reaction is a healing gesture for a whole world damaged by terrorism:

> Melvil me lâche soudainement la main. Il grimpe sur la pierre. Écrase les roses et les lys qui ne resistent pas à sa détermination. J'ai peur qu'il la cherche. Il continue son chemin dans la jungle des regrets. Agrippe la photo. La prend avec lui. Puis revient vers moi, et me prend la main. Je sais qu'il la trouvé.
>
> Il veut partir. Tout de suite, ne pas attendre, ramener maman à la maison avec nous. Je ne résiste pas. Il veut les bras. Je le serre contre moi. Elle est avec nous. Nous sommes trois. Nous serons toujours trois.
>
> En partant je croise la flaque d'eau. Y saute à cloche-pied. Il rit. (Leiris, 2016, p.138-39)

Leiris constructs a private rhetorical space inhabited by himself and his son, from within which he speaks out his pain. His sober, yet deeply emotional personal rhetoric of mourning, sprinkled with observations made through the innocent eyes of the suddenly motherless seventeen month-old child, has reached an audience of impressive proportions, who identified especially with his experience as parent. Falling within an already established post-9/11 writing about disaster, *Vous n'aurez pas ma haine* seems to have been the starting point of a whole trend of post-Bataclan mourning confessions, documenting equally touching individual experiences. *Nos 14 novembre* by Aurélie Silvestre's (whose partner was also killed at Bataclan, leaving her with a three year-old child and a second one on the way) is yet another confession of recovering from the loss and stubbornly trying to build a happy life (Silvestre, 2016). On a further theorizing level, Alain Badiou's philosophical essay *Notre mal vient de plus loin* aims to identify the deep mentality patterns behind the attacks, as well as a kind of poetics of disaster as a poetics of the overwhelming par excellence: "Rien ne sufit au désastre; ce qui veut dire que, de même que la destruction dans sa pureté de ruine ne lui convient pas, de même l'idée de totalité ne saurait marquer ses limites : toutes choses atteintes et détruites, les dieux et les hommes reconduits à l'absence, le néant à la place de tout, c'est trop et trop peu" (Badiou, 2016, p. 9). Too much and too little to describe the formidable proportions of the human loss, the memory of Bataclan has informed almost every comment on subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe ever since. The proportions of the 9/11 and Bataclan tragedies, as well as the world prestige of the two national spaces associated with them – the American one and the French one – contributed to the rapidly growing popularity of this rhetoric of mourning and/or disaster.

This was not, to the same extent, the case with the Club Colectiv disaster, which was massively documented in the Romanian press, but was left comparatively echo-less in the international one. Apart from the relative lack of visibility of the Romanian space as compared to the other two spaces, since 9/11 the public opinion has been prepared to listen to reports of yet another terrorist attack. Yet there is little rhetorical space available for accidents such as the Colectiv one, even though the human life loss amounts to similar numbers. The second letter I will focus on (possibly inspired by Leiris's widely famous text) emerged in this less visible

Romanian rhetorical space informed by the Colectiv tragedy. It is a letter posted by the mother of a Turkish Romanian Colectiv victim, Serian Mavi, from Constanta, on her dead daughter's Facebook page on what would have been her 26th birthday, June 27, 2016. The Muslim religion of the victim somewhat singled her out among the Colectiv dead, being one more factor in the media tendencies to integrate the Colectiv accident within the European refugee crisis. The strong emotional impact of the post was increased by a message coming from a dead person's Facebook page (which is what I felt that day, when I received a Facebook prompt on my phone from Serian Mavi, who was my former student). Her mother spoke of her grief but, like most people in Romania at the time, and blamed the authorities and the eternally faulty and corrupted Romanian politics for allowing her daughter's excruciating suffering and death to happen:

> You would have turned 26 today if we hadn't been living in Romania, if this criminal state hadn't burnt you and, with the complicity of doctors in hospitals, hadn't infected you. If things had been different, you would have been alive today and we would have been celebrating this day, as we did every year. But it wasn't to be so, today I am counting 233 days since you were gone, 233 days of nightmare, meaningless days, endless days, and tears keep filling up our eyes. (Facebook post on Serian Mavi's page, 27 June 2016; translation mine)

The letter got only 74 likes and 23 shared on Facebook, but was mentioned as an example of the "good Muslim" on Romanian television, thus helping nuance Romanian public opinion on minorities and the global fear of Muslim terrorism. This reminder that we are all equal before our grief was also fueled by the fact that Serian Mavi, an English graduate with a Hungarian minor, whose MA dissertation (which I had supervised) had focused on the enlightened legacy of Islam in Salman Rushdie's novels. She was interested in minority rights and religion and had written in press about the positive cultural legacy of Islam and the importance to make the difference between Islamic terrorism and Islam in general. Yet little, if anything, of this was ever made known to the public.

Major newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *London Express* or *The Daily Telegraph* published only short notes about Colectiv the day following the accident, and there was little else beside that. The feeble reaction in the international media projects the Colectiv tragedy into some kind of even more private space of individual mourning, difficult to integrate within a wider world framework other than that of corruption and mismanagement in Romania.

Conclusion

One reason I decided to write this article is that each of the three disasters analyzed had effects in my life, as they did in the lives of so many other people. When the 9/11 attacks occurred, my husband had only just been hired by United Airlines, to whom two of the four airlines involved in the attacks belonged. For over a year, he was the last person to be employed by the company, which went through a

time of significant crisis, and would not have been employed had his employment papers taken longer to come through. Serian Mavi, one of the victims of the Colectiv fire, was a graduate of the British Studies MA program at the University of Bucharest, whose MA thesis I had supervised. On November 13, 2015, I was flying from Paris to Chicago, having spent a good part of the previous day walking around Paris city center. When I landed in Chicago, my husband showed me the monitors displaying Bataclan news and said, "Look what you've just passed by!" The next evening we went to the Lyric Opera of Chicago to see *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, which is set in Paris. Before the start of the show, general director Anthony Freud asked the audience to stand up and sing *La Marseillaise* in honor of the Paris victims, which they did passionately, with tears in their eyes, the more so as there were quite a few French people among them. The intensity of the event was such that, as in the case of the 9/11 terrorist attack, it felt like a personal loss and a personal threat to everybody. Many such commemorative moments were held in memory of the victims of all of the three disasters.

The strong emotional appeal of the above-mentioned two letters, as well as of Leiris's book and of all the 9/11 and Bataclan literature, is addressed not to masses of people, as public speeches are (even though Facebook does reach masses of people), but to each and every one of them individually. It is from the tension between the impossibility of language to capture the seriousness of the trauma and the imperative need to tell the world about the atrocious pain experienced by the speaking subject that this personal rhetoric of confession gathers its strength. Yet for both the public and the private rhetorics of mourning and disaster to have an effect, there needs to exist a horizon of expectation for the respective type of rhetoric so that the audience can identify it. If Bataclan fell within the framework already created by 9/11 rhetoric, Colectiv did not.

However, there are easily available rhetorical connections between violent events such as terrorist attacks and massively destructive accidents that led to massive life loss. They both match an apocalyptic mode that seems to be governing most recent comments on the current global political picture, with its worrying returns to right-wing extreme nationalist positions. Parallels have increasingly been made between the violence created by the refugee crisis in Europe with situations in the United States (long interpreted as the paradigmatic site of violence), the more so as the American press has forged a discourse on violence with a fully established rhetoric of its own. Within the global rhetorical space, certain discursive tropes are transmitted across the Atlantic in interpretations of violent events (such as the two mentioned above), leading to a generalization of a certain US-inspired global discourse on violence. Media messages informed by these public rhetorics of disaster can lead to confusion and panic, maintaining a counter-productive atmosphere of suspicion and fear all around the world. They fuel already existing prejudiced views about people of different races and religions, undermining human rights discourses about equality and supporting nationalist trends in the current global politics. Yet the private dimension of such rhetorics, as expressed in personal

letters of mourning or confessive accounts of the experience of losing dear ones in disasters, of whatever nature they may be, warns against the perpetuation of this violence and raises public awareness with respect to the need for promoting tolerance and peace.

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