

***Melencolia Illa Heroica: Françoise Proust, Walter Benjamin and 'Catastrophe in Permanence'*¹**

In Memoriam F.P. 1947-1998

Andrew Gibson

That things "just go on" is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is.
(Benjamin, 'Central Park')²

(i) Alain Badiou has recently repeated his assertion that 'Françoise Proust's essential, "classic" point of reference is without doubt Kant' (Badiou 2008: 164).³ In fact, from her earliest work, she has two such 'points', Kant, and Walter Benjamin. That Badiou ignores the extraordinary and sometimes beautiful dark power of Proust's work on Benjamin tells us more about his thought than hers.⁴ As is clear, however, from both Daniel Bensaïd's interview with Proust and the title of Élisabeth Lemirre and Catherine Perret's memorial volume (*Une philosophie de la résistance: Françoise Proust*), the concept of Proust that is most likely to become the dominant one is not Badiou's, but rather the concept of her as above all a philosopher of 'resistance'.⁵ Yet this, too, is to some extent reductive. Resistance is a theme that fully appears comparatively late in her work. It remains only partly developed and, for all its debt to Foucault, awaits a greater sophistication than Proust's premature death allowed her to give it. It would be misleading to claim that Proust's work as a whole renders all concepts of resistance idle. Indeed, in its own way, her account of Benjamin is quite intransigently founded on one. But it nonetheless cannot clearly be used to endorse the concept of resistance with which Bensaïd and others specifically associate its author. For it cannot immediately and automatically be converted into the reassuring terms of any decisive positivity; or at least, not one available to will.⁶

From the start, Proust is concerned with both Kant and Benjamin. There is a sense in which her thought balances or oscillates between the two, in which they exemplify a double-bind or take the

¹ The Latin phrase alludes to what is by now a miniature tradition that I wish to sustain and pass on. ('Continuons!', as Badiou might say, though hardly with these particular words in mind). They derive from Melanchthon's *De Anima* (1548), appear in Benjamin's 'Central Park', and later become part of the title of Proust's great, sombre meditation on Benjamin, itself entitled '*Melencolia illa heroica*' (Proust 1990a). For some account of the relevance of Melanchthon to 'Central Park', and therefore to Proust's essay and mine, see Spencer (1985): 64-65. The term 'catastrophe in permanence' also notably appears in 'Central Park' (Benjamin 2002b: 164). Except where specified in the text, all translations from French and German are my own.

² I have preferred Spencer's pithy, vivid translation. See Benjamin (1985a): 50.

³ See also Badiou (1993): 101.

⁴ There are at least three reasons why Badiou does not mention Benjamin: firstly, on his own admission, he has no interest in messianisms, including Benjamin's. Secondly, his own extraordinarily coherent mind tends to find coherences in others, but also to overlook the tensions in their thought. Yet from its beginning to a late stage if not the end, Proust's thought holds Kant and Benjamin together in a significant and fruitful tension. Thirdly, whilst there are certainly ways of reading Badiou melancholically, Badiou himself is intellectually impatient with melancholy, as, indeed, he is distrustful of sensibility *tout court*, not least in Proust. For an account of this distrust and its implications, see Gibson (2006a): 16-69, 262-63.

⁵ See Bensaïd (1999); Lemirre and Perret (2001).

⁶ This is not to say that there is no concept of will in Proust's work, just that it is secondary and neatly delimited. See for example Proust (1996): 55.

form of the Moebius-strip within it. Yet, at the same time, though she pays a certain amount of attention to the importance to Benjamin's thought of the German *Kantstreit* of 1915-1920, and links him both to a dispute with the phenomenological and the neo-Kantian interpretations of the Kantian legacy in early twentieth-century Germany and the modern collapse of the Kantian syntheses,⁷ she has never put Kant and Benjamin together at any length. Whilst it is impossible to conceive of her work as giving either Kant or Benjamin priority over the other, one can place Kant 'within' her thought of Benjamin as one cannot exactly do the reverse. To put the point differently, if we start out with Proust's Kant, we end with Proust's Benjamin, the progress being necessarily partly historical. If, on the other hand, we start out with Benjamin, Kant appears to provide, not a historical 'correction', but a version of a theoretical opportunity that is present in Benjamin's thought from the start. This means that, strategically, it is more helpful to consider Proust by beginning with Benjamin; and beginning with Benjamin, in Proust's version of him, means beginning with a concept of 'catastrophe in permanence'. My essay seeks briefly to explicate this concept. I hope elsewhere to place it carefully in relation to Proust's thought as a whole.⁸

(ii) In the largest possible terms, 'catastrophe in permanence' might be defined as the unending failure of the human world to prove adequate to, let alone to halt the destruction it unendingly inflicts.⁹ The concept of 'adequacy', here, will not initially seem clear: but, in the first instance, adequacy is not a question of any form of action or even response (like mourning). As Benjamin icily puts the point, in the teeth of his own particular bunch of contemporary progressives, meliorists and left optimists, the 'claim' is not 'to be settled cheaply' (Benjamin 1979: 256). Adequacy would rather have to do with a severely restricted field. To start with, it would perhaps be 'simply' a question of our knowing what we do.

But time always outstrips our power to assume this knowledge. History everywhere sets panoramas of ruined landscapes before us. The 'inevitable catastrophic piling-up [*entassement*] of the past' continues without cease. Yet the human world cannot but continue to recoil indefinitely 'into the future', adding to the ruins as it proceeds (Proust 1994a: 34-35). The most obvious point of reference for this case is the ninth of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', and the justly famous meditation on the Angel of History. This is where any serious thought of catastrophe would logically have to begin, which is why I quote such familiar lines:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. It has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1979: 260).

Those who seek to bring an end to catastrophe in permanence are always both "too early" and "too late" (Benjamin 1991: I, 695). We try to steal a march on history only to find that it has tricked us once more, that, whilst we were looking in another direction, catastrophe has confirmed itself in place yet again, and always already receded into the past. This turns all modern politics 'into a theatrical *bouffonnerie*' (Proust 1994a: 77). The tone of the political and moral discourses surrounding us is always and inimitably that of Pyrrhic victory. The patient is no longer there.

Catastrophe remains, in permanence, because of historicity itself. It is the disappearance or ungraspability of history, its very fugitive and ephemeral character, that deprives the Angel of any hold. This becomes fully apparent, however, only with the onset of modernity. Modernity massively accelerates the production of catastrophe. On the one hand, modern time is the time of the event, without unity, duration or memory: 'events succeed one another with such speed that they cannot be the source either of durable inscriptions or of immutable foundations' (Proust 1996: 48). On the other

⁷ See Proust (1994a): 10-12, 15-18, 129-30.

⁸ Chiefly in *Intermittency: An Anti-Schematics of Historical Reason* (in preparation with Edinburgh University Press).

⁹ Like other recent and contemporary French philosophers (Levinas, Badiou, Jambet) Proust has related this to the Spinozan concept of the *conatus essendi* or 'perseverance in being' as it appears in the *Ethics* III.IV and III.VI. For my own treatment of the theme see Gibson (2006b): 4-5.

hand, modernity discovers the time of the eternal return, in that it witnesses the eternal return of the event itself. Modernity discovers the principle of novelty as repetition. The new incessantly breaks the serial chain. But it does so in a banally repetitive gesture. The eternal return is the dominant time of modernity. Modern time is constituted in the eternal return of the *coup* or shock. Automatically, unmasterably, the new eternally returns as shock, shock after shock, and therefore as the same. If we have learnt anything about modernity by now, it is the Baudelairean lesson, that we confront modernity as a radical paradox in which innovation is inseparable from stasis. Under modernity, the shock of the new, its automatic and immediate disappearance and its premature desuetude have all themselves become ritual. Equally, as Proust suggests, where Marx once thought that, to be modern, one had to be at least a little ahead of one's time, the modern knowledge itself is that, according to the relentless logic by which *avant-garde* becomes *arrière-garde*, to be ahead of one's time is quickly to be behind it again.¹⁰

Nowhere is Benjamin's point better communicated than in his meditation on Baudelaire's meditation on Meryon's engraved views of nineteenth-century Paris.¹¹ In Meryon's engravings of a city convulsed by the onset of modernity, instantaneous and simultaneous construction and destruction hang everywhere, like a storm-cloud, miasma or plague of locusts. The effect is extraordinary. But what is crucial is the doubleness of the logic at stake. Here inconsequence and inexorability join in a single figure. That is what 'catastrophe in permanence' means: it is why the Angel of History stares incredulously, eyes open. Fate does not hold the world in its iron grip as the necessary logic of what must be and cannot be otherwise. Paradoxically, its grip is purely and intrinsically founded in groundlessness. The logic of modern fate is the logic of what does not have to be, can be endlessly otherwise and yet, for that very reason, remains as implacable as the fate of the ancients, if in a different way.

(iii) Thus modernity lays bare the permanence of catastrophe. It makes catastrophe blatant. It also threatens us with extreme indifference. For modern time is immobile and circular precisely where it unceasingly confirms our sense of historical opportunity, *and insofar as it does so*. 'The circling [*la ronde*] of time is a dance of the devil or a witches' sabbath': hence the fact that, from Baudelaire to Benjamin to Nietzsche, it induces melancholy (Proust 1994a: 53). It makes modernity melancholic at its root, even when — perhaps especially when — modern culture is at its most glitzy and self-celebrating and is least obviously inclined to melancholy. What is more, modernity bars all the avenues that might seem to promise an exit from our predicament. For 'it has already tried them all' (Proust 1994a: 162). It abandons us to a labyrinth in which we are fated to wander for as long as we believe that we can escape it without paying a price.

This leaves us with three possible relations to the world: firstly, '*bavardage*', the great swell of chatter in a given historical world refusing to think beyond its own limits (Proust 1994a: 140); secondly, the classic form of modern understanding, the sole one adequate to modernity's openness to infinite commentary, literature; and thirdly, the experience of truth. For Benjamin has a concept of truth. Truth exists — but it is rare, shocking, almost unbearable. The condition of truth is, after all, finality. It appears as *parousia*, sudden illumination. Truth occurs as a moment of justice that lays bare the omnipresence of a normative injustice. It appears as an inversion of or break with pervasive falsehood. Of the present, it can tell us only one thing, that it is bad news (Proust, 1994a: 179). It disenchant a situation, shows the dark face of things ('monstrous, deformed, grotesque, grimacing, Luciferian', Proust 1994a: 137). But the movement in which truth appears is also that of its disappearance. The very experience of truth, its revelation, also destroys it.¹² The moment of truth or justice is evanescent, fleeting. It therefore necessarily appears discontinuously, with pauses.

A 'flat universalism' is not the condition of truth (Benjamin 1991: 1.212). Truth is not embodied in particulars: it is itself intrinsically particular. It appears only on the basis of a prior exclusion and silence. It is speech where there was none before. It is available only from the position of the victim of catastrophe. In the figure of the victim, we grasp the truth of the whole, of 'the false, lying totality', as its reverse (Benjamin 1991: 1.181). Here 'language appears as the matrix of justice' (Benjamin 1991: 2.361): not, however, in judgment or a statement of affairs, but as it is heard in

¹⁰ For Proust's argument, see Proust (1995c): 211.

¹¹ In Benjamin (1997a).

¹² See Proust (1994a): 166.

lamentation, prophecy, malediction and benediction.¹³ Justice may also be indicated in the form of the ‘thesis’, which is ‘language at a standstill’, a proposition that is neither dogmatic nor debatable. These are not to be interpreted. They must disabuse us, leave us wide-eyed. Those who ignore them either insist on a fantasy of justice beyond *parousia*, or choose to continue with the general automatism which disregards all questions of justice.

To live in truth is to distrust the ‘excitements’ of the present. By the same token, it is to ignore the calls of the future, or cease to hear them. It is to turn towards the past, not out of any conservative impulse or in the hope of reassurance, but for quite different reasons. The sufferings of the past await our endeavours on their behalf. Each generation hopes against hope for justice of the future. We are haunted by ghosts complaining that we never appear to make sense of their sorrows, but only keep adding to their number. They require us to pay our debt. But our debt to the past is not only to its sufferings, but also to its unfulfilled dreams, to what remained impossible for it, to that which it was prevented from achieving and which therefore fell into oblivion.¹⁴ History bequeaths the question of its justification to future generations: the past asks us for justification. If we are the products of the past, it is our task — it is always the task of the present — to decide the logic that produced us, and in that sense to instruct the continuous catastrophe. At the same time, the future is always ‘situated “behind us”’ (Proust 1996: 46): that is, in better grasping the virtuality of the past, in opening up forgotten, historical possibilities for development that remained, in the end, virtual, we may also grasp the virtuality of a future. It is here if anywhere that we may conceivably divert our destiny.

Like the Angel of History, we might therefore begin to recognize that it is in fact the past that lies in front of us. We can hope to prove adequate to the catastrophic accumulation of history only by refusing any longer to recoil indefinitely into the future. The mantra of innovation is weary and stale. Rather than advancing hungrily upon the future, we should explore means of reining time back, even bringing it to a halt, ‘now’ (Proust 1994a: 35). In other words, we should work in counter-time [*à contretemps*].¹⁵ If the melancholy in my title is ‘heroic’, it is because melancholy is a thought of counter-time. It puts the future under a taboo. We should not dismiss the idea of the mechanization, disenchantment or indeed the end of history. We should rather radicalise it, pursue it all the way down. For it is thus that we may stand a chance of finally outwitting progress and declaring the future at an end. The logic of catastrophe is unending so long as we do not direct ourselves towards the past; but it is crucial that we make the right kind of turn. We must not choose to dream too soon. For the “too soon” of the dream’ all too easily reverses into the “too late” of the nightmare’ (Proust 1994a: 116).

Truth is possible because the event has two faces. Modern events keep piling up, catastrophically. But there is also a history which revives events smothered by official history. For past events are immemorial and remain virtually present. Time is not linear, progressive or cumulative. It loops back on itself, is composed of ‘interlacings’ [*entrelacs*] and ‘arabesques’ (Proust 1994a: 27).¹⁶ Within a ‘history in arabesques’ one historical line may intersect with another (Benjamin 1978: 479). (Marcel-)Proustian involuntary memory is a trope (though not an example) of this. In the intersection of lines, a second event coincides with the first. Thus, in Benjamin’s work, the condition of the Weimar Republic unexpectedly opens up a route to the seventeenth century and the *Trauerspiel*. Germany after 1918 seems to promise ways out of a nightmare that it incessantly confirms in place, and thus awakens

¹³ Cf Benjamin on the relation between language and truth in translation, notably in ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin (1979): 69-82; and Proust’s commentary on the theme, notably in Proust (1998b), especially at 44.

¹⁴ See Proust (1994a): 29.

¹⁵ An instance of which would be Luther: risking archaism in an affirmation of a pristine, original faith, he also radicalises Christianity and makes its destruction possible, and with it that of Church and State, which cease to have any transcendent authority, become empty shells without a foundation in belief. See Proust (1995c): 224.

¹⁶ A more extensive account would explain this in more detail. Interestingly, Proust’s own most effective explanation of it comes in an essay on Deleuze, suggesting, not just that Deleuze is clear where Benjamin is obscure and that therefore the first can supplement the second, but that Deleuze can help us protect accounts of Benjamin from any tendency towards a numinous thought. See Proust (1998a): 41.

the historical world of baroque drama. The ghosts claiming justice through the *Trauerspiel* find it in the present of a new event; the *Trauerspiel* haunts Brecht, German Expressionism.¹⁷

This is as well: for 'einmal ist keinmal' (Benjamin 1991: 4, 369). Ours is in fact a spectral experience of history, because justice is almost always at once expelled from it. The first time is no time at all. The fugitive character of historical time means that the first event is therefore known as such only in the second event. It is the second event which alone counters the habit of erasing catastrophe. It is only from the second event that we can hope to witness a brief conflagration of the 'phantasmagoric landscapes elaborated by all the many, successive forms of domination' (Proust 1994a: 36). The time of the second event is the time of justice, the right time, at any time. If justice is rare and evanescent, it is nonetheless always possible that a door that seemed forever closed will open. In the second event lies the possibility of arrival at the 'strait gate', the apparently mundane and unremarkable exit from the labyrinth (Proust 1994a: 119). But justice achieves only small-scale victories. It suspends all questions of will, choice, goal, end, punishment and recompense. It is thus that it avoids reversing liberation into domination and resists all temptation to apocalyptic hope. Yet, paradoxically, justice also appeals to a teleology. In this teleology, however, the second event expresses a residual or minimal utopianism which short-circuits time. Finality is apparent all at once. The last judgment is always here and now.

If we have any chance of destroying destruction,¹⁸ it will mean neither accepting nor rejecting it, but pushing it to extremes, immersing ourselves in it, miming and ironizing it, in the hope of giving it a different twist and propelling it in a new direction.¹⁹ Some of the most significant art and literature of the last two centuries has sought to do this, notably, perhaps, the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. From Baudelaire to Derrida, the significant tradition has understood that there is no way out of modern 'equivocation' (Proust 1994a: 87).²⁰ It has therefore produced a quintessentially modern form of irony which both alternately yields and protests. Here justice retains its imminence in doing violence only to itself. The corollary of this is a nihilistic, even a satanic politics, 'a politics of despair', of blunt refusal and universal curse (Proust 1994a: 110).

Proust's Benjamin is therefore very unlike those dominant in the Anglo-American world at the current time (which are largely not those promoted by philosophers). He is not the Benjamin recruited for Marxism, postmodernism, cultural studies or academicism, and certainly not the Benjamin recruited for theology.²¹ Nor does Proust exclaim, as have many others, at Benjamin's tendency to fragmentation and incompleteness. Her Benjamin is a severe, austere and in one sense minimalist but rigorously coherent thinker.²² If he is able to work in ways that seem to endanger or nullify coherence, this is because he is gifted with an almost preternatural lucidity which everywhere underwrites his project. Benjaminian lucidity is searing: Proust's Benjamin is a thinker of the shockingly lucid thought, where other Benjamins are finally consoling.

For our times at least, the shocking thought in all I have described is this: *contra* our present superstitions, catastrophe is not a question of the singular outrage. Nothing could be less Benjaminian than equating the two. The equation is a function of a world that has come to believe that '[e]vil prowls on the extreme edges of things [*aux extrêmes*]. The extreme is evil.... Such is the credo of [an epoch] bursting with good conscience but poor in thought' (Proust 1995b: 168). Catastrophe is not a question of extraordinary and haphazard breaks with the supposedly familiar world: acts of terror, natural disasters, epidemics and so on. These have no bearing on any serious thought of catastrophe. For they

¹⁷ See Proust (1996): 55.

¹⁸ In the spirit of Marxian critique — as specifically in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* — whose object is 'to make justice reign' (Proust 1995c: 209).

¹⁹ See Proust (1994a): 39.

²⁰ Proust's great essay on this theme is 'Duplication, duplicité' (Proust 1996), the power and complexity of which I despair of communicating here. Cf also Proust 1993.

²¹ The significant theology, as Benjamin and Bataille understood, is 'a theology without theology'. True theology knows that 'God is dead and the Messiah will not arrive'. It knows that the question, forever, is survival after the Fall, in a nature definitively 'deprived of grace'. See Proust (1995d): 55.

²² For Proust's own political minimalism — resistance as a work whose chances of success are feeble and whose forces slight — see Proust (1997b): 103.

appear as exceptions whose function is to demonstrate the validity of an eminently non-catastrophic rule. Benjamin and Proust both repeatedly insist that, to the contrary, if anything marks out our world, it is precisely the fact that, in it, the exception has visibly “*become the rule*” (Proust 1994a: 76, italics mine).

As Agamben very well understands, then, the truly fatal assumption is that monstrous historical occurrences are isolable historical ‘traumas’. To the contrary: Auschwitz remains the ‘hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living’ and of ‘the bloody mystification of a new planetary order’ (Agamben 1998: 12, 175). Insofar as any kind of historical trust is possible, it cannot be in progress (or the treatment of ‘traumas’). But ‘rules always suffer exceptions’ (Proust 1995a: 99), including the rule of the exception. One can trust only in this, the exception to the exception, that is, an altogether different image of the exception, which is justice. The chance of justice does not lie in modernity. It rather lies in the faint hope that, here and there, at least, modernity may be prevented from everywhere becoming the rule.

The radical heresy of our times that must nonetheless be baldly stated is this: what our culture calls catastrophes have no significance for thought save insofar as they are grasped as mirror-images of the culture’s own practices. It is unlikely that they will be grasped as such. The culture is pleased with itself.²³

(iv) To end with a fable: in Cristian Mungiu’s *Four Months, Three Weeks, Two Days* (2007), a young woman, Otilia, embarks on a busy schedule. She helps her room-mate Gabita pack, then scurries up and down the corridor of their student hostel, exhorting friends, making little arrangements, doing her (unsuccessful) best to obtain a packet of Kent cigarettes (strategically, a useful luxury). These are the first small elements in what will be the unfolding drama of the day. Gabita is having an abortion; Otilia is organizing it. We are in Romania in the late 80s. In Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania, every little detail counts. Most frequently, it counts against one.

Otilia goes off to meet her boyfriend (begging her bus ticket along the way). They kiss, bicker mildly; he gives her a little money and extracts a promise to attend his mother’s birthday party in the evening. From there, the day descends into appalling nightmare. The (controlled but pathetically hapless) Gabita has failed to book a room in the right hotel. The error cannot be corrected. By dint of lies and bribes, Otilia gets hold of another room in a more expensive and less suitable hotel. The atmosphere is edgy, the situation risky. Otilia takes a taxi, finds the abortionist, brings him to the hotel. After some tense, evasive, oblique negotiation with reception, the two of them go up to the room, where Gabita has finally settled in. Everything is wrong: the hotel is wrong, Gabita has lied about the length of her pregnancy, she has not brought the necessary plastic sheet, the price goes shooting up beyond their range. Eventually, the abortionist turns vile. Otilia herself knows it at once: the added cost will be her body. Brusquely, immediately, she undresses.

Afterwards, she douches furiously, tearless but aghast. The camera holds on her rigid back and bent head. The abortionist performs an apparently simple insertion and departs. Otilia leaves Gabita with the long slow wait for the foetus to emerge, and sets off for the birthday party. The guests sit round a small table: the camera stays fixed on her face, holding steadily on her glazed politeness. In private with the boyfriend, she can bear no physical affection. She tells him about the abortion, but nothing else; they bicker in some anguish over responsibilities, the future, the possible consequence of their own sexual relations. Back in the hotel, Gabita is drained but calm: the foetus, she says, is in the bathroom. Otilia goes in, and there, on the floor, it lies, half-wrapped in a towel: a giant, ragged, raw, red tadpole with a small baby’s face. She kneels and stares at it, transfixed.

From that point, the already hectic pace of the film accelerates, mirroring Otilia’s desperation and emotional chaos. The foetus must disappear: Gabita wants her to bury it. Otilia bundles it into a bag and hurries through the streets. Hoping to dump her burden, she fears discovery. It is too late at night: there are no buses, no taxis. She scuttles madly through desolate, dingy streets, past towering blocks of infinitely depressing flats. Eventually, up, a dark, deserted staircase, she finds the rubbish-chute she needs. Back at the hotel, the door of the room is locked, and no-one answers. But Gabita is not dead, nor in trouble; she has not taken the expected two or three days to recover. She is down in the restaurant: she is hungry. Otilia sits down, facing her. They agree that they will never speak of the affair again.

Reviewers have applauded Mungiu’s evocation of a vanished era and the consequences of its repressions for ordinary people. Here, it would seem, is historical horror, now dead. But this would-be serious reflection is in fact trivial and sentimental, where Mungiu’s film is, uncompromisingly, not.

²³ ‘Self-satisfied’ (Proust 1995c: 207), and therefore in need of a ‘diagnostics’, like Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* or Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (Proust 1995c: 207).

The reviewers at once obscure the point. But the film's point is not decisively made clear until the closing shot. For, finally, Otilia turns and briefly stares at the camera. Her face is blank, with perhaps a trace of perplexity or incredulity on it. This last image tells us that it is not to be fobbed off in the name of progress, or deemed 'traumatic' and healed, that it belongs with the viewer, any viewer, in his or her present, but is also as dramatically apart from him or her as any world onscreen.

Mungiu's film is on one level a simple moral parable with two main themes: goodness, and the price it must pay; and injustice. The last shot expresses a historical demand, the demand of a past that has yet to be resolved. It says: contemplate injustice. This is how it unfolds. This is both the opposite side and the ineluctable double of where you are. This is the sheer, brute, indifferent fact of an absurd injustice. It sets Otilia apart from the abortionist, Gabita, the boyfriend, Ceausescu's Romania, but also places her at their centre. It sets her apart from the world outside her, from any future that fondly imagines it has moved beyond her; from us, worrying that our fastness is never quite as secure as we would ideally like it to be; from a culture preening itself on its special-offer goodness (no hidden costs). Yet at the same time, simply and exactly, it insists that we regard her, that we have regard for her, that we accept her presence in(to) our world. The expression of radical injustice on Otilia's face is not eradicable. This is not just catastrophe Romanian-, late-80s-style. Mungiu's achievement is to offer us a compelling image of catastrophe in permanence.

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