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Visual discourses on the recent past: communism in the Romanian post-communist cinema

Visual items have always played an important role in shaping memories and consciousness. Dispersed throughout the environment, fragments of an omnipresent visual culture govern more than ever our daily lives.[1] When agency is involved, the subjects might work through the visual icons and their content, and deconstruct the hidden ideological message. Most of the time, these icons unconsciously model our view of the world and our memories. As Bernard Stigler argues, we tend to become a de-individualized mass which come to share a uniform memory so that one past, "the support of his/her individuality became the same past consciousness as the one who watches."[2]

Memory is an individual feature, and societies can be said to remember "insofar as their institutions and rituals organize, shape, even inspire their constituents' memories."[3] The collective memory unifies a group "through time and over space by providing a narrative frame."[4] This narrative frame can travel in space and time and gives individuals, groups, or communities the opportunity to bond with their past. It plays an important part in shaping collective and national identity, and in surpassing the political and social traumas through commemorations, rituals, and cultural artefacts displayed in public spaces, such as memorials, museums, artistic installations, and films.

Lately, films seem to impose themselves as the privileged way in shaping memories and modelling consciousness inasmuch as their messages and

[1] V. Burgin, *The Remembered Film*, Reaktion Books, London 2004, p. 109

[2] B. Stigler, *Aimer, s'aimer, nous aimer: du 11 septembre au 21 avril*, Galilée, Paris 2003, p. 53.

[3] J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993, p. xi.

[4] R. Eyerman, *The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory*, "Acta Sociologica," 47.2 (June 2004), p. 161.

symbols are also dispersed through posters, trailers, TV clips, newspapers reviews, theoretical articles, photographs, installations, memorabilia, etc. These fragments can be encountered on internet, TV or other media channels, in stores, art gallery, etc. thus sending messages even to viewers who never actually saw the film. These fragmented items themselves create shared memories and opinions on the past, present, and future.

This article deals with forms of sharing and constructing memories through films pertaining to the communist regime in Romania. It focuses on both documentaries and fictional films. A few representative case studies are analyzed, the selection being both subjective and objective. On the one hand, I chose to discuss films which had an important impact in the public space (films we talk about). On the other, these films appeal to me both as witness of the past they described, and as an expert, a "secondary witness" ("témoin de second degré"), as Pierre Nora labelled the memory studies researchers interested in today memorial discourses.

This study aims at deconstructing ideological inputs and collective memories used in the construction of visual discourses on communism in post-communist Romanian cinema. I argue that films played an important role in shaping the public memory of communism in Romania. Furthermore, the movies analyzed in this article illustrate the different trends of collective memories, which gained predominance in public space in the last twenty-five years.

Stories of terror: Dramatic Visual narratives on Romanian Communism

During the first post-communist decade, two perspectives on communism shaped the public memory concerning this regime. The first one, promoted by former political detainees and their offspring, dissidents, and right-wing intellectuals (the self-styled "democrats") denounced communism as a foreign regime imposed by the Soviet Union on the Romanian nation after the allied powers "betrayed" Romania during the peace negotiations at the end of the Second World War. This discourse emphasizes the uniqueness of Romanian communism by pointing to the brutality of repression and the chilling efficiency of the secret police, the notorious Securitate. It depicts the Romanian concentration camp experience as extreme even by the standards of totalitarian regimes, and argues that the repression left deep scars that subsequently discouraged people from rebelling against the communist state. Furthermore, this paradigmatic discourse affirms that despite harsh conditions and heavy persecutions, a genuine anticommunist resistance affirmed itself in the mountains of the country in the 1950s.

The second perspective was put forward by the neo-communists, second-rank economic, social, and cultural elites created by the communist regime, who seized power as early as January 1990. Their public discourse promoted a complete break with communism by condemning Ceausescu and his wife to death, outlawing the Communist Party, and dismantling all the former regime's symbols. Converted to capitalism, the neo-communists were adamant about forgetting the recent past. Ion Iliescu, the first post-communist president of Romania and the iconic figure of the neo-communist elite, stated that any debate on communism was unnecessary as the regime was already condemned by History. He argued that people should forget the past and invited reconciliation in order to rebuild the country.

After a decade of struggle on the battlefield of memory, the "democratic" elite's perspective imposed itself as the mainstream paradigm through constant promotion in the public space and the political arena by the Former Political Detainees Association (AFDPR),[5] private foundations like the Memoria Cultural Foundation[6] and the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anticommunist Resistance in Sighetul Marmaţiei (known as the Sighet Memorial: *Memorialul Sighet*),[7] the Group for Social Dialogue (GDS),[8] the Civic Alliance,[9] *etc*.

[5] Created in January 1990,"The Association of the Former Political Prisoners of Romania" (Asociaţia Foştilor Deţinuţi Politici din România—AFDPR) has militated for the public rehabilitation of the political detainees and anticommunist fighters and the recognition of their merits.

[6] The Memoria Cultural Foundation was created in 1991 as a non-governmental organization meant to promote human rights and civic values and to transmit the memory of political persecutions perpetrated by the communist regime in Romania and abroad. The Foundation publishes the cultural magazine *Memoria* and got involved in a series of activities related to communist repression such as conferences, symposiums, public debates, exhibitions *etc*.

[7] In 1992, Ana Blandiana, a well-known poet and dissident of the last years of Ceausescu's regime, designed a "Memory center" dedicated to the memory of victims of communism. This project became the Sighet Memorial, recognized in 1996 as a "centre of national interest" by the "Democrat" government. The Sighet Memorial includes an International Centre that keeps written, oral, and visual archives pertaining to the communist repression and anticommunist resistance, and a museum. Under the aegis of the Council of Europe, the Sighet Memorial organizes numerous activities related to the memory of political persecution, including conferences and exhibitions. It also collects testimonies, publishes books, and has founded the so-called "Memory Schools" for students.

[8] The GDS organisation was established in 1990 by intellectuals and former communist dissidents of the latest years of Ceaucescu's regime. Its goals are to protect human rights and the environment, to promote the democratic and civic values. It also focuses on the memory of political persecutions in Romania.

[9] The Civic Alliance was founded on November 6, 1990, when a group of 216 founding members mainly Romanian intellectuals from all fields of public life, signed a project-

The democrats' perspective on communism was transmitted through books, memories, exhibitions, monuments, and public discourses. A Memorial was also dedicated to the "victims of communism" and to anticommunist fighters. Created by Ana Blandiana in 1993, this last enterprise played an important role in disseminating the perspective of the political right on communism and political persecutions. This leading role was recognized by the president himself in his official condemnation of the communist regime as "illegal and criminal," in December 2006.

The Memorial of Sighet tells the story of the Communist period according to a holistic perspective that interprets communism from in a Manichean vein. It proposes a simplistic account of the confrontation between Good and Evil during the last half of the twentieth century. The Memorial stages the former detainees' version of the forty-four years of communism in Romania.

This dramatic perspective on Romanian communism was visually fashioned and national transmitted through a TV documentary series. Entitled *Memorialul durerii*, The Memorial of Sorrow, the documentary finds its inspiration in a concept put forward by a team of directors from Switzerland and Italy who came to Romania to make a movie about the Romanian Gulag. Once they arrived in the country in April 1991, they asked the Romanian authorities for help. A former political detainee and member of the Parliament, Radu Ciuceanu, not only helped them with bureaucratic activities but also invited the public television to join this enterprise.

The Swiss-Italian documentary was filmed in a few former communist prisons such as Pitesti, Jilava, Gherla, Aiud as well as in the prison camp of Poarta Alba and in the village of Nucsoara, a well-known anticommunist resistance place. At the end of May 1991, the documentary, *Dentro il Gulag Romeno*, was broadcast by a Swiss TV channel.

Instigated by Radu Ciuceanu and other former political prisoners and dissidents, the Romanian public television decided to produce its own documentary on political and religious persecutions in communist Romania. Lucia Hossu-Longin became the general producer and director of the series. The series earned her public recognition, Lucia Hossu Longin becoming a public figure of anticommunism in post-communist Romania.

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statement about the principles of a democratic state, the civic rights to be promoted in the public space and political debates. During the early 1990s, the association was involved in protests against the ruling National Salvation Front. In July 1991, a sizeable portion of its members, led by Nicolae Manolescu, a well known literary critic and president of the Union of Romanian Writers, split with the AC over participation in national elections, and founded the Civic Alliance Party. Among the Civic Alliance members was Ana Blandiana, Lucia Hossu-Longin, Emil Constantinescu (president of Romania between 1996–2000).

On 14 August 1991, the first episode of The Memorial of Sorrow was broadcast on the state television channel, TVR1. It featured the beginnings of the Romanian communism and the trial of the authoritarian Leader and ally of Hitler during the Second World War, Marshall Ion Antonescu. The second episode, entitled "Tortured and Persecutors," settled down the message to be transmitted by the documentary. The history of the entire period is described as a confrontation between Good and Evil. This Manichean approach to the past echoes the communist perspective of history, in that it divides the world between "good," meaning the communist themselves, and "bad," the communists' foreign and class enemies. The anticommunist opponents adopted, at least in some discourses, the same Manichean approach after the fall of communist regime.[10]

The Memorial of Sorrow is structured by a voice-over commentary made by the documentary's director, Lucia Hossu-Longin. Her comments interpret the history of the epoch, the experiences of people, the communist leaders' discourses, the archive documents and photos, *etc*.

The series displays interviews with former political detainees visiting the political prisons or the force labour camps. These interviews are mingled with archive images of communist leaders' discourses on different aspects of the country's situation, with old photos of former detainees, archive documents as well as parts of documentaries made during communism to celebrate the achievements of socialism. Furthermore, the series introduced to the audience several persecutors as well as their methods.

At the beginning, the series was broadcast weekly, on "prime time." On 27 June 1996, a retrospective of the first fifty episodes was transmitted by the public channel TVR1. The Memorial of Sorrow was constantly broadcast until the end of 2001, but its transmission hour was changed to midnight. After the end of the series, some episodes were transmitted on different occasions, either on TVR1 or on the other channels of the public television. For instance, the episode on Elisabeta Rizea from Nucşoara was on-air in October 2003, on the occasion of her death.[11]

[10] K. Verdery, *Socialismul, ce a fost şi ce urmează* [Socialism. What was and what follows], Iaşi, Institutul European 2003, p. 171.

[11] Elisabeta Rizea was a peasant and former detainee. Soon after the communists took over the country, they persecuted all the people considered "class ennemies." Elisabeta's husband and other members of her family, fearing persecution for refusing to give up their land and properties, hide in the mountains. Elisabeta remained at home trying to supply the refugees with food, water, clothes and news. Betrayed by neighbors, she was tortured by the Securitate' officers and then imprisoned. Released after 7 years, she kept on helping the refugees in the mountains. When the chief of the „Haiduks of Muscel" (as it was called this movement, Muscel being the name of the department) was caught and tortured, the authorities arrested all people involved in this „partisans' affair." Elisabeta was imprisoned

After December 2006, when the president of Romanian condemned the communist regime as "illegitimate and criminal," the series was once again broadcast on the private and public channels. In 2007, a book of interview transcriptions was published by Humanitas publishing house. In 2013, the revised book was reprinted and packaged with a DVD including most of the episodes of the series. Lately, The Memorial of Sorrow can be also found on internet.[12]

The series enjoyed a large audience as it displayed an hidden part of the history of communism in Romania. "If memory itself is selective and ideological, films of memory redouble this and add further codes of cultural convention."[13] The Memorial of Sorrow provided a visual narrative on communist persecutions that became a standard reference in public culture. Furthermore, the series created its own heroes and symbols such as Elisabeta Rizea from Nucsoara.

Interviewed in 1992, Elisabeta Rizea quickly became a legendary figure of the anticommunist resistance. A highly charismatic figure, she conquered the hearts of Romanians with her heartbreaking story. A book of interviews and many articles were devoted to her, transforming her into a public figure whom the democratic opposition leaders were quick to instrumentalize. She took part in electoral meetings and even delivered speeches. Highly appreciated, she incarnated the spirit of anticommunist Romania. Her symbolic figure was recognized as such by the former president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu, who paid her a visit in May 2000, as well as by the former king of Romania, who visited her a year later.

The Memorial of Sorrow presents us with a visual interpretation of communism as a criminal regime that wrecked the Romanian nation by incarcerating and torturing its elite and destroying its people. It provides a black-and-white image of communism. Each episode of the series seems to be a visual sequence of the clashes between the communists and the anticommunists. It leaves the impression of a perpetual war with no space for normal life.

This dramatic perspective on communism is displayed in a few other documentaries and fictional movies on different aspects of communist repression. At the beginning of the 1990s, a documentary about the

again and she was sentenced to death. Afterwards, her sentences was established at 25 years. She was liberated in 1964, as the system set free all the political prisoners. She remained in the village and had the chance to survive communism.

[12] http://memorialul-durerii.blogspot.ro/search?updated-max=2010-12-03T19:24:00%2B02:00&max- results=7, last accessed 7th of February, 2014.

[13] D. MacDougall, *Films of Memory*, [in:] L. Taylor, ed., Visualizing Theory, Routledge, London–New York, 1994, p. 261.

communist repression and anticommunist resistance, running one hour and thirty-three minutes, was produced by Mihai Constantinescu. Under the aegis of Vulcanescu's injunction, "Do not avenge us," it displays a series of interviews with former political detainees preceded or explained by the directors' voice-over comments. Concerned more with archiving visual documents than to tell a story, the documentary has never been widely broadcasted being introduced to audience through private sessions. Forgotten now, the documentary's destiny illustrates the neo-communist paradigm of oblivion, of what Paul Ricoeur called "l'oubli intentionnel"[14].

Another documentary pertaining to another kind of communist persecution, namely the deportation of people from one part of Romania into the plain of Baragan was made in 2000 by Jon Gostin, a director working for the public television. Called, *Epifania de la Rubla*, Epiphany of Rubla, it describes the phenomenon of deportation in 1950's Romania. The documentary was reworked in 2011. Released under the title of *Fericita intristare a lui Visky Andras*, The Joyful Sadness of Andras Visky, the documentary won the award of "best TV film" from The Romanian Filmmakers Association in 2011.

The two documentaries just mentioned were produced by directors formed by the public television filming school and encapsulated the same narrative mood as The Memorial of Sorrow. They display the personal vision of directors: dramatic voice-over commentaries, a collage of archive footage combined with interviews of the victims.

A film director whose father, a well-known intellectual, experienced the Romanian Gulag between 1948 and 1964, produced a fictional movie about communist repression. Based on Nicole Valery-Grossu's autobiographic novel *Benie-soit, tu prison* (Bless you, prison) published in France in the 1970s, the film describes the prison experience of a former political detainee. Nicole was a young intellectual arrested in 1949 simply for being an active member of the National Peasants Party. During her three months of exhausting interrogation and isolation, she undergoes a spiritual experience similar to that of the great mystics. Thanks to her renewed faith, Nicole goes through the ordeal of communist prisons managing to provide a heartening example to the other inmates.

Nicolae Margineanu's film accurately depicts the daily prison life as it was described by Nicole in her book. The well-known director scrupulously staged the same characters as the book and recreated the real-life conditions of inmates. Keeping close to the book, he recreated the atmosphere of religious devotion which characterized Nicole's experience.

[14] P. Ricœur, *A l'horizon de la prescription: l'oubli*, [in:] F. Barret-Ducrocq, ed., Pourquoi se souvenir? Forum international Mémoire et Histoire, UNESCO, 25 mars 1998, Grasset, Sorbonne, Paris, p. 93.

Released in 2002, the film was internationally celebrated for displaying the power of faith in domesticating harsh repression. It won the jury award at the Festival of World Films and the special award of the ecumenical jury in Montreal, in 2003. The film also won the award "The Silver Knight" at the International spiritual film festival "Golden Knight," in Irkuțk, Rusia, in 2004, as well as other awards in the United States at different festivals dedicated to spiritual movies. In Romania, the film did not enjoy much of attention despite being broadcasted by public television.

The Memorial of Sorrow and the other documentaries illustrated and transmitted a dramatic image of a nation at war during the communist regime. While realistically depicting the life of female inmates, Bless you, prison focused on the power of faith in surviving persecutions. At the beginning of 2000, another trend started to be artistically expressed. Films started to display the "absurd" normality of communism. The most well-known type of normality drama is to be found in a fictional movie called "Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days."

Directed by Cristian Mungiu, "4, 3, 2" received the "Palm d`or" award at Cannes film festival in 2007. It also won the "European Award" for best film and best director in 2007, and the best film award at the Stockholm film festival in 2007. Besides the international recognition, the film enjoyed a large national audience: 88,684 spectators went to see the movie, a record for a Romanian film.[15]

The fictional movie deals with a tragic issue in the late 1980's in communist Romania, which led to the deaths of more than 10,000 women. In 1966, Ceausescu issued a decree which ban abortion for women under 40 who had fewer than four children. This regulation was endorsed by a punitive legislation which could put in prison women who got an abortion and the doctors who performed it. Furthermore, in the late 1980's, the authorities took control over women's body with compulsory and periodical gynaecological exams in factories and police supervision of gynaecologists' duties.

Mungiu's dramatic film looks more like a documentary as it accurately describes such a situation. A young college student became pregnant and decided to have an illegal abortion. Helped by her roommate, Otilia, she hired an opportunistic abortionist eager to make the most out of this situation. He agreed to perform the abortion only if Otilia had sexual intercourse with him in addition to the promised remuneration. Otilia, willing to help

[15] The largest audience attending a Romanian film, 232 050 persons, went to *Garcea and the people of Oltenia*. Usually the Hollywood movies enjoyed a greater audience success. From 2000 onwards, *The Epoch of Glace*, III was attended by 330 000 spectators. http://www.filmreporter.ro/20-09-2010-ce-au-vazut-romanii-in-10-ani-de-cinema, last accessed on 8th of February, 2014.

her friend, accepted the proposal. After the abortion was performed it was Otilia who had to throw away the foetus.

The film almost ignored the moral issue of abortion focusing on reproducing the atmosphere of the epoch. It realistically depicts the everyday life as well as the strategies and tactics used by ordinary people in order to deal with the communist system. It affords a glance into what it meant to be a woman during Ceausescu's regime.

Its international success reopened the public debate on Ceausescu regime, everyday life during communism, and reproduction practices. It lead to the transmission on the public TV channel of a documentary called Decreteii ("The Decree Children")[16], to research projects and books.[17]

"Out of the present:" Visual Narratives of Communist events and leading figures

In the last twenty-five years, documentaries seem to have been the privileged way to deal with communism. Memoirs, documents, archive images were used to tell stories about the traumatic and haunting past. Sometimes even movies made during communism are seen as primary sources for the post-communist documentaries. For instance, a movie made by Securitate with the supposed burglars of the National Bank of Romania, called *Reconstituirea* (The Re-enactment)[18], served as a source for a documentary made in 2004 by Alexandru Solomon and entitled *Marele jaf communist* (The Great Communist Bank Robbery)[19].

On 28 July 1959, in Romania, five men and a woman organized a hold-up robbery at the National Bank. After two months of deep and terrifying investigation, the supposed six persons involved in the robbery were arrested. Members of the communist party, related to important figures of

[16] The documentary, Decreteii, *The decree's children*, was filmed in 2004. A co-production of TVR, Arte/ZDF, WDR (Germania), TV Ontario (Canada), the documentary was broadcasted in France, Germany, Luxembourg, Holland, Swizerland, Poland, USA, Canada, Finland, etc. Its creator, Florin Iepan, is a well-known documentary director.

[17] C. Doboș (coord.), L.M. Jinga, F.S. Soare, eds., *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceauşescu. O perspectivă comparativă* (Pro-birth politics of Ceausescu's regime. A comparative perspective), vol. 1, Polirom, 2010. L.M. Jinga, C.Roman, *Politica pronatalista a regimului Ceausescu: Institutii si practici* (Pro-birth politics of Ceausescu's regime: Institutions and practices), vol. 2, Polirom, 2011.

[18] The film was directed by Victor Calotescu.

[19] The film realized in 1960 served as inspiration to another documentary realized in 2001 by Irene Lusztig, called The Reconstruction.

the nomenklatura, e.g., Alexandru Ioanid was married to a sister-in-law of the then Internal Affair minister and head of the repression, Alexandru Draghici, they were tortured in order to confess their guilt. After they confessed their deeds, the state forced them to interpret their own roles in a film which re-enacts the hold up and their arrest by the communist secret police. At the end of their trial, also filmed, they were sentenced to death and were subsequently executed. The lady was sentenced to life prison but was released in 1964 when Ceausescu set free all the political detainees. The film called, The Re-enactment, was released in 1960 becoming a sensation among the leading members of the communist party.

Inspired by this film, director Alexandru Solomon made a documentary which included footage from the communist movie, interviews with former officers of the Securitate, documents, archive photos and interviews with other people involved in the filming of the communist movie. The episode of bank robbery and the film realized by the communist authorities also inspired a fictional movie called Closer to the moon,[20] directed by a Nae Caranfil.[21]

Alexandru Solomon's documentary created a trend of reconstructing the past from archive footage and films made during communism. While Solomon's documentary also displayed witnesses and archival documents, the documentary directed by Andrei Ujica, called The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu, is presented without any commentaries or explanations. Broadcast nationally and internationally in 2010, the film explores during three hours the image of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu using unknown official footage from the Romanian National Television and National Film Archives. The film is made by a collage of images with no narration. It begins with the colour images of Ceausescu couple's trial and continues with black-and-white images of pomp and parades. Ceausescu is shown at the beginning of his political career as a communist leader during Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej rule, followed by colour images of his own rule and finishing with pompous images of huge meetings orchestrated to celebrate Ceausescu's regime and figure. The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu, as international film critics have noticed, "uses the brutal, self-aggrandizing dictator's own self-mythology to draw an improbably candid portrait."[22]

[20] Shot in English with British, American and Romanian actors, the film is a black comedy telling the story of the bank robbery and offering a glimpse of Romanian communism.

[21] Nae Caranfil belongs to the new generation of Romanian directors concerned with the recent past from an ironic perspective.

[22] A. Hornaday, *Autobiography of Ceausescu*, 7 October, 201, „The Washington Post." At http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/movies/autobiography-of-nicolae-ceausescu-autobiografia-lui-nicolae-ceausescu,1216011.html, last accessed 14 of February, 2014.

In 2010, The Autobiography was awarded the Great Prize of the documentary section of the Bergen International Film Festival as well as the Best East European Documentary Award at the 14th edition of the International Documentary Film Festival in Jihlava, the Czech Republic.

Choosing not to make any comments, the director proposed to the audience to interpret the propaganda's images of Ceausescu. Ignoring the fact that any selection is an interpretation, the documentary creates confusions and misunderstanding among viewers. In order to understand it one needs either a broad knowledge of communist propaganda or to effectively experience it.

"Living the past behind cheerfully:" Cinematic expression of Urban legends on communism

In the first decade of post-communism, the public memory of communism was dominated by the struggle between "democrats" and "neo-communists" to impose their vision on the former regime. The "democrats" won the battle and imposed their vision of communism as a criminal regime, alien to the nation's soul. This idea got a visual expression through documentaries and fictional films like The Memorial of Sorrow, Bless you, prison, The Epiphany of Rubla, *etc*.

Already mainstream, their view on communism was challenged at the beginning of 2000s by a new generation of artists, scholars, and political leaders, who gained influent positions in the cultural, political, and social fields. They promoted an ironic memory of communism – what I call the "pink" memory, after the book of memories published by a few young artists, writers, and scholars, under the title, *The Pink Book of Communism*.[23] The "Pink Book" reunites memories about youth life during the 1980's and refers to typical situations of the time. The authors, teenagers or young adults, recall their hide-and-seek with the authorities in order to watch a western movie, the experience of mandatory military service or mandatory jobs, the daily or weekly trip from home to the work place, the queues to buy food, *etc*. The type of memory epitomized by the *Pink Book* is illustrated by a series of other memorial books, theatrical comedies, and artistic installations, like the project "Replacing Lenin,"[24] and some fictional movies.

[23] G.H. Decuble, ed., *Cartea roz a comunismului* [The Pink Book of Communism], vol. 1, Iaşi: Editura Versus, 2004.

[24] In March 1990, three months after the fall of communism, Lenin's statue as well as the other statues of communist leaders were dismantled and stored away. The pedestal remained empty until 2010, when a sculptor succeeded in convincing the mayor of Bucharest to let her use the pedestal for a series of artistic installations. The first one was a huge statue

The best known film dealing with communism from a comic-tragic and ironic perspective is *Amintiri din Epoca de aur* (Tales from the Golden Age). Created by Cristian Mungiu, the celebrated director, and directed by a group of "pink memory" artists, it depicts communism as a genuine farce, a tragic-comic and absurd period of Romanian history.

Created in 2009, it was screen at Cannes festival as part of the *Un certain regard* section. It was also broadcast in Romania and abroad enjoying big success. As Cristian Mungiu declared:

> Tales from the Golden Age is an episodic and collective film that combines the points of view of five generation colleagues that were delighted to Recover, Reuse and Recondition the memories of the nights we spent partying, watching video tapes or waiting in rows.[25]

The film consists of five short stories, set in Ceausescu's Romania. Based on urban legends of the 1980's, its title refers to the so-called "Golden Age" as the communist propaganda depicted the last years of Ceausescu regime. The film illustrates the survival strategies of ordinary peoples as well as the tactics of lower-rank activists to impress their bosses, the central bureaucrats and the nomenklatura members.

The first story, called "The Official Visit," depicts the organizing aspects of a promise local visit of a government official. In a banal village of Ceausescu's Romania, everybody got involved in organizing the venue. While attention is paid to the smallest detail in order to please the much awaited guest, a phone call informs the villagers that the party official will take another route. Disappointed people get drunk. A leading party member gave the order that everybody should ride together on the children's carousel, but as the mayor loses conscience, they realize that there is no-one around to switch the machine off and let them down. Legend tells that they were all still trapped there when the government official passes through the village.

The second story called "The Party Photographer" depicts the legend of Ceausescu photo published in the party newspaper, *Scanteia* (The Spark). Taken during the visit of Valery Giscard d'Estaing in Romania, it originally showed Ceausescu small and insignificant comparing to the French president.

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of Lenin made from pearl barley and fruit drops. It was inaugurated in January 2010 and did not stir any interest at the time. In the following years, other installations occupied Lenin's pedestal and enjoyed more success. The irony promoted by these artistic projects is meant to increase awareness about Romania's recent past and to help heal the communist trauma.

[25] http://www.cinematograph.ro/en/news/romanian-premiere/memories-of-the-golden-age-by-cristian-mungiu-to-open-tiff/, last accessed on 29 of January 2014.

The party officials and the newspaper's editors intensively and long debated how to make the photo suitable for Ceausescu. Finally, they decided to make Ceausescu taller than Valery Giscard d'Estaing and carrying a hat. Unfortunately for the photographer, they noticed too late that Ceausescu already wore a hat, leaving the image of him comically carrying one hat while wearing another.

The third film displays "The Legend of the Greedy Policeman." The episode tells the story of a policeman who takes delivery of a pig as an illegal Christmas present from a country cousin. Although he hoped for an already dead pig, it had the surprise to get the pig alive. After debates on how to slaughter the pig so that the neighbors would notice nothing, the family decided to gas it in their apartment's kitchen. Believing the gas to have completely dissipated, they try to burn the hairs from its corpse with a blow lamp ending by blowing up their apartment.

The fourth legend cinematically represented was called the "Air's sellers." It alludes to an urban practice of recycling bottles for money. In the last years of his regime, Ceausescu hardly encouraged recycling. People would receive good money for their recycled glass bottles. A young couple decided to take advantage of this situation and earn some money. They decided to go from door to door in the entire neighbourhood to collect bottles by telling people they will take air samples. After a few days of success, they were stopped by the policemen alerted by some unpleased neighbors. The young man was arrested while the girl succeeded to escape.

Tales from the Golden Age offers a visual version to the many legends about the last years of communism in Romania. They successfully crowned a decade of publicly displayed ironic memory of communism. Their manner of dealing with a traumatic past, through comic representation of authoritarian figures and experiences play a cathartic role both for the directors and many spectators who experienced this period of communism. It appeals to younger generation that can approach the epoch from a comic perspective. This perspective contradicts the official paradigm of a terrifying regime and leave space for a sometimes absurd normality.

Concluding remarks

Fictional films and documentaries play an important role in shaping consciousness and creating memory. Furthermore, scenes and images from the films tend to became "lieux de memoire" as defined by Pierre Nora. They are virtual places we shared with others even if their meaning may vary according to the personal experiences of individuals' life.

The Memorial of Sorrow can be seen as a "lieu de memoire" as it became a visual reference of narratives pertaining to communism in post-communist Romania. It created a new mythology and contributed to the transmission of a selected collective memory, which depicts communism as a terrifying and criminal regime, imposed by the Soviet Union.

4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days, although a fictional movie, became the focus point of any debates on reproduction politics during Ceausescu's regime, while Tales from the Golden Age visually appeals to people who have experienced communism, but also to younger generations that learned about communism in school. Both films, displaying their directors' vision of communism, created a new visual trend and promoted new narratives on Romanian communism.

"Reconstruction" documentaries such as the The Great Communist Bank Robbery and The Autobiography of Ceausescu introduce to the audience unseen images and figures secretly preserved by the communist system. Actually, both of them reflect less the reality of communism, than their directors' perspective on communist events and leading figures.

Visual Discourses on the Recent Past: Communism in the Romanian Post-communist Cinema

By Claudia-Florentina Dobre

Abstract

Visual items have always played an important role in the shaping of memories and consciousness. Among them, films seem to impose themselves as the privileged way of shaping memories and modelling consciousness, inasmuch as their messages and symbols are also dispersed through posters, trailers, TV clips, newspaper reviews, theoretical articles, photographs, installations, memorabilia, *etc*.

The article deals with the forms of sharing and constructing memories through films pertaining to the communist regime in Romania. It focuses on both documentaries and feature films. My study aims at deconstructing ideological inputs and collective memories used in the construction of visual discourses on communism in the post-communist Romanian cinema. I argue that films played an important role in shaping the public memory of communism in Romania. Furthermore, the movies analysed in this article illustrate the different trends of collective memories which gained predominance in public space in the last twenty-five years.

Keywords: Visual items, cinema, films, collective memory, communism, post-communism.