II. Alternative Memory Practices?

Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos.*

Figure 1. Screenshot of a 2011 clubbing poster promoting a communist themed party. Source: Authors' archive; screenshot retrieved October 11, 2020, from: http://iasifun.ziaruldeiasi.ro/communist-party-in-dublin-pub/21053/.

Recalling Socialism through Clubbing Posters:
A Visual Analysis of Grassroots Alternative Memory Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a particular marketing trend operating online during the 2010s and consisting of promoting clubbing parties using communist-style posters. The first part of the paper is dedicated to the theoretical framework and approaches the study of the posters also as an alternative memory practice that digitally marked the online landscape of leisure promotion, participating in the making of a nostalgia economy. A socio-semiotic analysis is used for a body of 118 communist themed clubbing advertisements posted online between 2009 and 2019, where content analysis provided data that narrowed the duration of the aforementioned marketing practices to a time span of six years. Content analysis also yielded an overview of the most used visual patterns, while the examination of the production techniques showed that most of the posters displayed extensive digital alteration of the ideological insignia, consistent with the conversion of political icons into kitsch practiced elsewhere in Eastern Europe. These findings are put in perspective within the context of a generational change, while the posters could be the basis for future research under the framework of collective and cultural memory.

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Communist themed clubbing as grassroots alternative memory practice

An intriguing clubbing poster posted online for a 2011 themed party conveyed a bizarre composite image. It featured the heads of communist leaders Ceaușescu, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao attached to the bodies of four revelers sitting, drinking, and singing in a rather modern pub setting (*Ziarul de Iași* 2011), as seen in the screenshot presented in Figure 1. The headline, written in English, stated simply "Communist Party," playing on the double meaning of the second word; however, the date, Friday, August 19, and the venue (a pub) narrowed the message to target its intended audience. The structure of the poster shows two distinct sections, both conveying a mixture of communist symbols and visual treatment resulting in the appearance of an old image—a black and white photo, a muted color palette of reds, and special characters recalling the Cyrillic alphabet. Although, at first sight, the poster looks like an old propaganda image, the attitude of each character—Stalin playing the accordion, Mao and Ceaușescu toasting with bottles, and Lenin collapsed

into a drunken man's position—invites an ironic reading of the scene, while the logo of the venue (Dublin Pub) can be seen under the military communist cap, framed by two recognizable commercial logos belonging to the partners of the advertised clubbing event, thus twisting the overall meaning of the visual into a modern promotional display featuring a vintage look.

This poster is one of a rather long series of digital promotional visuals employed by Romanian clubs and bars for leisure events during the 2010s, although it is one of the few using the iconic characters of a bygone world. The large majority of posters and banners, posted mainly on event portals and social media platforms, blended digital graphic design effects with symbols belonging to the propaganda iconography, such as the flag and the coat of arms of socialist Romania, the red flag of the Communist Party, the hammer and sickle, illustrations of Pioneers saluting, etc. A previous study on communist themed clubbing parties (Bardan 2018) questioned whether such events covered elderly or younger Romanians' wishes of reviving communism, or were linked to nostalgic recollections of the past. Findings showed multiple layers of meanings: the parties appeared as a way of engaging with the socialist era by parody and satire, but also as vectors of cultural transmission and mnemonic bridges through a dynamic process of remembering. Focusing solely on the body of promotional visuals, the present article will add to the above an interrogation on the social and cultural context of their production.

A series of preliminary questions will frame the current approach, articulating in the process the interrogations of this special issue of *Martor* journal. A first set of observations come from online public reactions to and reviews of the clubbing events. One of the comments reported on the low engagement of the participants, noting that few followed the rule of a costumed party, while most adopted a casual or club outfit (*Bârfa de Iași* 2011). Other opinions were far more critical, expressing unfavorable judgments about the playful spirit of such parties, viewed rather as a "forced way of remembering the communist period" (Urban 2011). An extensive review of a different event, based on the media coverage of the party, disapproved of the superficial memory frame and outlined several problematic features: the club owner's initiative to additionally proudly display the red flag of the Communist Party, the adult participants who opportunistically embraced cosplay, the Pioneer costumes of the young hostesses revamped into sexy outfits, and, most importantly, the younger partygoers' ignorance of the meaning of the communist regime for older generations. The author of the blog post concluded that "some things aren't worth and shouldn't be fooled with," thus questioning a problematic way of remembering the communist regime (*Bucureștii vechi și noi* 2012). More recently, an event organized on January 26, 2018 by Berăria H, an established beer hall in Bucharest, was re-positioned from a "Pioneers' Party" to a retro "Oldies Party" ("*Șlagăr Party*"), due to negative opinions posted on the social media page of the soirée (Bardan 2018: 58).

The advertisements using communist symbolism can be situated in a chronological context, relevant for the objective of this study, as they signal: (1) a newfound marketing tool adopted around 2010 by bars, pubs, and clubs to promote their events; (2) the growing online visibility of communist themed clubbing advertisements, seizing the marketing potential of online channels; and (3) a broader socio-political and cultural context where manifold types of remembrance emerged in the online virtual space, completing—but not competing with—a main narrative on communism that dominated the public space during the first two decades following the 1989 Revolution, mainly a unified collective negative view of communism that "(self-)censored public

remembrance and marginalized any alternative versions of the past" (Petrescu 2014: 596).

Public debates over the misreading of the communist past are a common theme across Eastern European countries (Mitroiu 2016; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2015; Rekść 2015). In this perspective, the above comments on communist themed clubbing join critiques of practices that contribute to a pop cultural revival concurring to reify a selective memory of communism, thus promoting a collective amnesia over a traumatic past. However, in Romania as elsewhere in the Eastern Europe countries, the commodification of the socialist past became "a stable part of the tourist and commercial landscape" (Bach 2015: 123), providing new keys for exploring the post-communist nostalgia industry.

The Romanian landscape of memory practices reveals a particular evolution of a slower, yet steady shift of perceptions building the public memory of the communist past. The polemic about how the communist past should be remembered was reflected by a polarized reading of the recent history, where mainstream and normative representations disqualified alternative memory practices as unworthy and irrelevant and even more, as a "misinterpretations of 'true' history" (Asavei 2016: 27). In this view, the "nostalgia tainted" popular culture, just like the ironical appropriations illustrated by the communist themed clubbing trend, supply a specific layer of visual discourse that may fall under the latter category of morally questionable memory practices.

The mid-2000s can be seen as a timeframe when a critical mass of grassroots alternative memory practices emerged, both offline and online. Digital records of costume parties titled "The Pioneers' Ball" can be traced back to 2004 (Bardan 2018: 58). Organized in the capital city by the student Club A since the early 1990s on January 26, Nicolae Ceaușescu's birthday, these parody parties functioned from the very beginning

as "a therapeutic experience mocking a semi-traumatic period," according to one of the organizers (Bardan 2018: 58), joining, from this point of view, the model of ironical and humorous approaches to the communist past. The 2010s appears as a timeframe when several competing voices fragmented even more the collective memory of communism.

Interrogations on the uncritical use of the communist visual rhetoric in digital advertisements for the leisure industry acquire a heuristic value once they are translated in a field of research, with a broader sociological and anthropological conceptual framework. This article investigates the clubbing posters, using a comprehensive approach that aims to explore the (in)visible patterns that convey meaning in the virtual space of their display. Along with the comments disapproving of the communist themed parties, the clubbing posters become controversial visuals that reflect a tension between different social actors, one that may be understood in the frames of the complementarity between autobiographical memory and collective memory as outlined by Maurice Halbwachs (1950) and of the tension between collective and cultural memory (Assmann 1995; Tileagă 2018: 59). In this perspective, one should consider not a single memory of communism, but several, intertwined in a cultural memory that adjusts according to the communities, events, or subjects concerned.

Second, my analysis will view the clubbing posters as visual devices that participate in the making of a nostalgia industry. A proper framing of these objects is then needed, in line with Kathleen Stewart's warning that nostalgia should be seen as "a cultural practice, not a given content: its forms, meaning and effects shift within the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present" (1988: 227). In this respect, the communist icons and symbols conveyed by

the clubbing posters may be explored in a wider temporal frame related to narratives that shaped public representations before and after 1989. Moreover, when examining the commodification of objects and images from the past, Jonathan Bach notes, a collective phenomenon may be analyzed, one that "emerges through the effects of commodification" and renders these objects and images "capable of transmitting cultural knowledge" (2015: 124). The number of communist themed party advertisements posted online, and still available at a random keyword search, exceeds one hundred pieces, making them a suitable candidate for an exploration in the dynamics of the local post-communist nostalgia economy.

A last line of questioning comes from the focus on the semiotic charge of the clubbing posters. Therefore, thirdly, and following Gillian Rose's lead, these social media banners will be approached from a different point of view, as visual imagery "is never innocent" (2001: 32). Meaning, considers Rose, is constructed through multiple sites "of production, the image itself, and its audiencing" and "through various practices, technologies and knowledges" (2001: 32). Regarding the clubbing posters as a site of production, and particularly as a communicative practice in the making of the nostalgia industry, one should also stress the differences between the production and the audience of nostalgia (Mihelj 2017; Bolin 2016), or in more technical terms between "retrofitting" (Oushakine 2007) and "retromania" (Reynolds 2011). This calls for a methodological precaution on assigning nostalgia to a body of visual work that in fact should be rather defined as retro marketing. Yet, when questioning the clubbing posters solely as retro marketing practices, there are social and cultural logics that are often overshadowed. I am referencing here Roland Barthes' (1972) semiotic approach to the contemporary myth. Following this line of reasoning, the communist-style posters appear as a cultural phenomenon that can

naturalize an alternative memory practice by means of myth-making, adding a particular type of visual rhetoric to the polarized view of recent history. It does so not by using elements of soft visual memorabilia of the past, but by bluntly displaying propaganda iconography. I argue here that this specific imagery corresponds to what Barthes called an "ideological abuse" (1972: 10). According to him, the myth is defined by the way it delivers a message, not in relation to the subject of the message. Moreover, the myth "does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent" (Barthes 1972: 143). Evacuated abruptly in the turmoil of the 1989 events leading to the fall of the communist regime, the characters and the symbols of the communist past were naturally reinserted into the actual visual Romanian landscape, concealed "in plain sight" through online marketing. This paper aims to study the communist-style design used in clubbing posters, thus filling a gap in the research concerning the role of popular culture and of visual content in (online) memory practices, explored mainly through branding and advertising approaches (Marin 2013; Draşovean 2008) and contemporary art forms (Asavei 2016; Preda 2015).

A closer look at the body of posters considered for this study reveals not only a spreading practice starting around 2010, but also a broad variety of representations, communist iconic characters and symbols, as well as digital graphic design techniques. In this perspective, what reading should be assigned to this particular visual marketing trend advancing propaganda elements of the communist past? And how does it fit into the larger debate questioning the multiple ways of remembering communism? Scholarly work discussing the commodification of the socialist past brings pertinent explorations from several angles and will be reviewed towards the end of the article.

Our interrogation critically addresses here the ethics of commodification at work,

through the use of communist iconography, within the making of the local nostalgia industry, putting under scrutiny the visual patterns in the production of meaning: Who is working what type of visual elements towards what type of message? At the same time, the subsequent forms of visual production may bring a new understanding of the concept of "nostalgia industry" in the context of Eastern European countries.

Two limitations should frame the investigation of clubbing posters: one of them is the progressive waning of online (nostalgic) memorial narratives. As noted during an empiric observation of local nostalgia websites, Facebook groups and pages in April–May 2018, few were still active and posted editorial content consistent with the site's profile (Bardan and Vasilendiuc 2019). The second limitation weighs all discussion on the nostalgia industry and associated memory practices against the pragmatics embedded in the marketing of leisure. Clubbing is a niche market inside the tourism and leisure industry, with several key features: the central role of the DJ for the dancing and music scene, the emergence of mainstream and indie club venues and new leisure practices, such as clubbing holidays and club hopping. Beyond the hot nighttime mixture of "sensual alterity" (Jackson 2003: 2), during daytime, the clubbing economy deals with the more mundane tasks of management and marketing. The use of social networking sites has improved event promotion, making it the new norm in marketing plans.

My previous work on communist themed parties pointed to the 2010s as a time of an increasingly fragmented and competitive market in large urban centers, where events targeted a heterogeneous public of local millennials, foreign tourists, and expats and where marketing and sales strategies were aimed at optimizing club attendance through a broad variety of special events (Bardan 2018: 63). Therefore, a clubbing poster adorned with communist iconography

may seem to function within the realm of commodification in the (post-communist) nostalgia industry. However, inside a corpus of visuals produced by the same venue, ranged between an advertisement for a "Piano Bar Soirée" and one for a "Speed Dating" evening (*Revista Bulevard* 2014 b, 2014 c), a poster promoting a "Romanian Communist Party" will acquire a totally different meaning *(Revista Bulevard* 2014 a)*. As such, the online marketing reframes the communist imagery into what Jeziński and Wojtkowski (2016: 103) call "a fashionable hipster cultural trend package of 'vintage'" that targets younger consumers—one more reason to shift, in this study, the focus from consumers to producers.

Still, this research on a body of over a hundred communist themed clubbing posters, retrievable with an online keyword search, is informed by David Beer's view on the processes of digital archiving as processes that "reveal the organization, and self-organization, of circulations in popular culture" (2013: 41). As a digital archive of clubbing posters, what type of readings does it offer, beyond the commercial one planned in the first place? How is the message (re)framed? What is the promise of the advertiser? What kind of call to action is used? And how does the visual rhetoric support these claims? When considering a longer time span, what visual patterns emerge across time? And how do these patterns become embedded, over the years, in the social fabric of local popular culture? Can visuals belonging to this type of digital archive contribute to the emergence of a (post)communist nostalgia, while the commodification of communist symbols joins the process of a selective remembrance of the past, decades after the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern European countries?

The communist themed clubbing posters were examined using a twofold approach: (1) first, I explored the main visual patterns that are "naturalized" and "normalized"

within the layouts; (2) and second, I aimed to identify the "hidden messages" that were thus culturally created, in order to place them in the broader question of mediating the (communist) past through grassroots alternative memory practices. Based on this framework, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: Which visual patterns were the most frequent and thus became more prominent in terms of (re)production of myths?

Q2: What were the initial meanings attached to the visual patterns identified in Q1, and what new meanings were subsequently created?

Corpus

Documentation on communist themed parties for my previous study yielded a body of more than seventy digital advertising posters published since 2009, some of which can be seen below, in Figure 2. For the present study, I focused solely on online clubbing posters and banners, an exhaustive

data selection was planned, and several strategies were used.

An online keyword search focused first on combinations of the word "party" (*petrecere*) with specific words of the era: "communist", "pioneer(s)," and "Ceaușescu." Themed parties appeared to be organized in relation to specific anniversaries of the socialist regime: the First of May/ International Workers' Day, August 23/ former National Day, January 26/ birthday of Nicolae Ceaușescu, so these dates were also added as keywords. The final pool of combinations counted sixteen groups of terms.[1]

Four types of online channels were targeted for the keyword search: search engines, digital media outlets, event portals, and social media platforms. For the search engines, Google was used as a primary tool and Microsoft Bing was added for a different search algorithm. The digital media outlets included the online versions of mainstream traditional newspapers: *Adevarul.ro*, *Jurnalul. ro*, *Evenimentul zilei* (evz.ro), *Libertatea. ro*. The event portals were chosen among the ones operating online for a long time

Figure 2. Screenshot on a Google images results page for a search on the topic of "Party First of May International Workers' Day". Source: Author's archive; screenshot retrieved April 9, 2018.
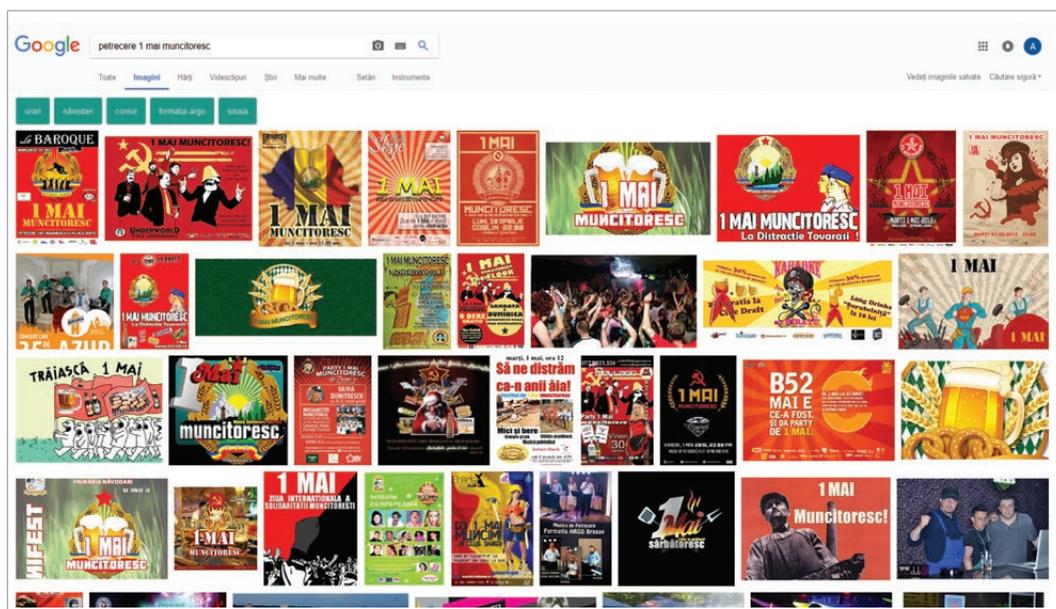
(Metropotam.ro, Vinsieu.ro, Zilesinopti.ro, 24fun.ro, iconcert.ro). Regarding social media, Facebook was chosen for providing the specific events section as advertising display.

The body of images was analyzed using the four criteria of validity recommended by Laurence Bardin (2003: 127–128) for content analysis: exhaustiveness, homogeneity, representativeness, and relevance. In order to comply with the exhaustiveness criteria, a period of ten years was chosen, i.e., posters posted online between 2009 and 2019. A first keyword search yielded 141 posters where elements from the socialist iconography were used. The representativeness, homogeneity, and the relevance criteria were considered for selecting only those images produced to advertise clubbing events; therefore, garden parties, barbecues, or other outdoor events were excluded (cases of events recorded in 2011, 2014, 2017, and 2019), as well as illustrations meant to accompany editorial texts. This step narrowed the results to a final corpus of 118 communist themed clubbing posters published online between 2009 and 2019.

Method

While both my research questions address the cultural meanings attached to the clubbing posters, each required a different methodology. For the first question, content analysis was used, in the light of Gillian Rose's observation on the power of this type of inquiry, which comes from "empirical results that might otherwise be overwhelmed by the sheer bulk of material under analysis" (2001: 55). Next, a series of categories were chosen for coding the images, aiming for an exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening set of codes that should make apparent the visual patterns of a "mythology" of Romanian communism. As such, the coding categories were inspired by the broader cultural context giving meaning to the layout, in reference

to both the past and the present. A set of four main codes were chosen, as follows: "date of the event," "place of the event," "name/ theme of the event," "characters and symbols pictured, both communist and non-communist." A secondary code focused on the "production technique," where three types of layout methods were examined: creation from scratch, i.e., digital illustration, digital composites, and digital desktop publishing. The coded elements were checked randomly by a second coder and discussed to improve coder agreement. A quantitative content analysis was first used to measure the publishing of clubbing posters over time, as well as the frequency of visual patterns used in the construction of the layouts. The secondary code was used to measure the degree of alteration operated on the original elements of communist iconography— radical alteration through means of digital illustration, medium alteration in the case of digital composites, and minimal alteration when desktop publishing methods were used.

For the second research question, a socio-semiotic angle prevailed. At stake here was the tension between collective and cultural memory, explored through the interplay between the initial meanings of the visual patterns identified previously and the new symbolic meanings that were attached to the images. Visual semiologists note that the rhetoric of the image should be taken into account within the context of the message and the text-image relationship (Joly 2011), as well as in relation to the text-image interdependence, calling on Roland Barthes' (1964) observations on anchorage and relay as two functions of the linguistic message. Whenever present, the texts of the posters were considered to narrow down the interpretation of meaning. Analysis of the social inscription of the visual patterns was reviewed in the framework of the nostalgia industry, focused on the complex process of cultural production where elements of communist iconography were reframed within the advertising genre.

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Retrofitted visual patterns

The first objective of the content analysis was to visualize the distribution over time and in space of the 118 images of the corpus, in order to obtain a timeline and geography of the communist themed clubbing posters phenomenon.

Figure 3 illustrates the number of visuals posted online each year, starting from 2009 until 2019. The graphic shows a significant increase in 2010, with a maximum of twenty-five posters, a second lower peak in 2015, and an unexpected drop to zero value the next year. Whereas the numbers should not be taken as absolute figures, the two main peaks are consistent with previous findings. The first one, from 2010, may be related to a particular sociocultural landscape trending around 2009–2010, fueled by the round anniversary marking twenty years since the fall of the communist regime, where products of pop culture and cultural industries were inspired mainly by the social and cultural aspects of life in communism (Simuț 2015; Marin 2013; Danescu 2012; Câmpeanu 2016). The overall understanding of the communist themed clubbing phenomenon may also be correlated with a particular news framing editorial

peak of 2010, where the media coverage of public opinion polls conducted that year made the news with a paradoxical social trend: Romanians' nostalgia for communism (Bardan 2020). Last, but not least, and within a larger time span, the "socialist" aspect of clubbing posters may be related to the spread of (online) alternative memory practices in a new digital and generational context (Bardan and Vasilendiuc 2019; Petrescu 2017; Pohrib 2017). The second weaker wave, which is also signaling a start in the decline of this marketing practice, may be related to similar trends identified for other Eastern European countries in studies accounting for the progressive waning of the nostalgia industry and the marketing of socialist memorabilia (Bach 2015: 125; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2015; 89). Data recorded in our corpus showed, overall, that the communist themed clubbing posters phenomenon stretched over a roughly six-year span.

The unexpected drop in numbers of 2016 did not seem to be related to any other significant moments that could explain its magnitude. The analysis of other coded elements provided a plausible explanation which will be revealed shortly.

The geographical distribution was estimated for the ten-year period chosen for the study. If per year, there are cases when many posters came from parties organized by Bucharest clubs, the overall distribution points to 58 percent of visuals created for events in major cities around the country (such as Cluj, Brașov, Iași, where five events or more were recorded), compared to 42 percent of the posters made for soirées in the capital city.

A correlation between the date of the event and the name/theme was tested. As stated previously, the assumption that communist themed parties were organized in relation to specific anniversaries of the socialist regime proved to be valid. Five types of dates were identified: January 26 (Nicolae Ceaușescu's birthday); First of May;
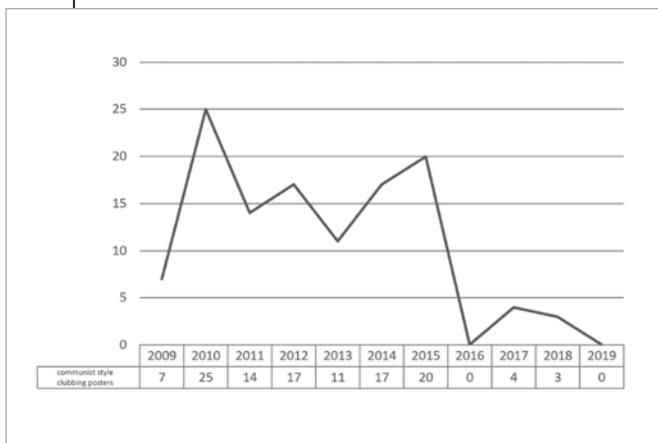
Figure 3. Time frame of 2009-2019: the number of communist style clubbing posters posted each year. Source: Author's archive.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
communist style clubbing posters	7	25	14	17	11	17	20	0	4	3	0

August 23 (the former National Day); First of December (an odd choice, as this is currently the National Day); and one more category consisting of other various dates, apparently randomly chosen. A closer look at this last category linked the characters pictured (Pioneers) to parties organized in September and associated with the return to school. The frequency count pointed to the posters that were advertising parties for the First of May as prevailing over the other dates. The overall configuration of the most frequent dates revealed the following hierarchy: the First of May counted for 65 percent of the posters, followed by 19 percent for August 23 events, then 12 percent for the various/ back to school/ Pioneer parties; finally 2 percent of posters were dedicated to Ceauşescu parties on his birthday, January 26, and another 2 percent to the First of December. The First of May parties support a specific reading that explains the sudden waning of posters recorded for 2016. During our research, we found two banners posted that year, for events organized at the seaside on the First of May, but they were ruled out because the events were not clubbing parties. A comment posted in reference to one of the events (*Webpr.ro* 2016) provided a key feature of the context, since in 2016 the Sunday of the Orthodox Easter fell on the First of May. As such, a deeply rooted religious tradition literally "wiped out" a novel marketing trend, showing the opportunistic nature of the latter by contrast. The few posters recorded for the next two years may also be linked to changes in urban entertainment following the tragedy from October, 2015 at the Colectiv club in Bucharest, when over sixty people lost their lives in a fire and several dozens were injured (Buciu 2019).

When taking into account solely the coded element "name/ theme," there were a few slight differences. A new category emerged, labelled Concerts, for musical events held on dates associated with anniversaries of the former regime. The other themes were related to dates (First of May/ Worker Parties, August 23 Parties), characters (Pioneer Parties, Ceauşescu Parties), and the communist era/ regime, through events titled "Communist Party" (eight posters), "Back to Communism," "Epoca de Aur/ The Golden Era Party," "Romanian Communist Party," etc. Once again, the top in terms of frequency of the events was dominated by the First of May theme (58 percent), followed by events dedicated to August 23 (14 percent). The particular label of "Communist Parties" counted for 12 percent of the visuals and the "Pioneer" theme for 9 percent. Five percent of the visuals promoted concerts and after-parties, while "Ceauşescu parties" counted for 2 percent of the visuals.

The use of characters and symbols had to be correlated with the secondary code "production technique," given that several representations of past figures were created long after the demise of state socialism, and not for propaganda purposes. Because a layout could include one or more symbols, all graphic elements recalling communist imagery were accounted for. Besides, symbols appeared also in layouts that pictured characters. Two main categories were thus identified, "genuine" and "false" characters and symbols respectively. Under the "genuine" category were selected visuals where minimal alteration was done, while the "false" group included digitally created or visibly altered elements inspired by communist propaganda. An intermediary category was considered, where both "genuine" and "false" elements coexisted in the layout, yet the digital graphic effects prevailed so this group was eventually attached to the "false" one (as seen in Figure 4). Therefore, a significant difference was recorded between the two main categories, with 87 percent of the posters falling into the "false" and "mixed" categories and 13 percent in the "genuine characters and symbols" one. The frequency count for this code also made visible the major patterns at work in terms of production techniques, which will be discussed shortly. When

Figure 4. Categories of "genuine characters and symbols" and of "mixed and false characters and symbols" used in clubbing posters promoting communist themed parties. Source: Author's archive.

focusing on the type of character, two models stood out: the "Pioneer figure" (seventeen cases) was conveyed mainly through genuine images, old photos, or illustrations, integrated in a digitally enhanced setting, followed by the "Communist Party" meme (ten cases) based on a viral design by Tom Burns (Beale 2017). When considering the symbols, analysis showed the frequent use of the coat of arms of socialist Romania, in a genuine or digitally altered form (twenty-six cases), and of a digital graphic effect of two-color rays (an element borrowed from the coat of arms), more or less prominent in the background (thirty-two cases). The hammer and sickle were counted in twenty-five posters, but as small and less prominent elements. The "false" category appeared also as the space for a two-color palette, with red, the dominant color and yellow, the minor color.

Overall, the above analysis answered Q1 with a series of data and observations: the large majority of advertisements was produced and posted in the rather short time span of six years. In terms of temporal associations, the posters were related mainly to the First of May and August 23 events. The study of visual patterns emphasized the figure of the Pioneer and the use of the coat of arms of socialist Romania, along with the two-color effect of the halcyon rays. Most of the digital illustrations and composite images correspond to a visual treatment of retrofitting, as the main elements of propaganda imagery were digitally transformed and enhanced towards a contemporary style. Although they retained the aura of communist imagery, the posters were visually updated according to principles of advertising graphics and layout: the use of visual hierarchy, meaning "the arrangement of all graphic elements according to emphasis," echoing the meaning of the textual content (Landa 2001: 28). Still, the transformation may not be one-sided, as design specialists commented on the growing influence of Soviet-style propaganda in graphic design and advertising (Stokoe 2010), apparently inspired by the works of

Dmitry Moor and Shepard Fairey (BlackDog Advertising 2012). A second factor that may have influenced the propaganda imagery trend comes from "royalty-free" stock websites. The development since the 2000s of the micro-stock model based on the mass commodification of imagery and user-generated content, Johannes Glücker notes, allowed "the first fully-fledged e-commerce trading to emerge" (2008: 3). In this respect, a few clicks away, designers can rely on several online sources for acquiring communist-style illustrations and vector elements (Dreamstime n.d.) or vintage posters in specific communist style (Depositphotos 2019).

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Visual patterns, then and now

For the second question, Q2, the main patterns identified previously (the "First of May," the "Pioneers," and the "coat of arms of socialist Romania") were questioned to determine the dynamics of change in (visual) meaning.

The First of May, then and now

The First of May posters are related to anniversaries celebrated both during the socialist regime and at present. It was—and still is—an official public holiday, where the "daycation" provided an occasion to spend the free time relaxing with friends and family at a picnic or garden party, where popular refreshments were served. The "genuine characters and symbols" category discussed previously provides a suggestive example of what a First of May poster looked like: a dominant yellow, shiny color, adorned with positive iconic drawings such as the earth, flowers, and a white dove flying, accompanied by illustrations referencing the subway, hydropower plants, and cranes (i.e., mastery over the underground, the

water, and the sky). The visual rhetoric was congruent with the propaganda parades organized during the communist regime. Back in the day, the linguistic message provided a redundant reading of the visual rhetoric in place.

Inside the clubbing posters, the linguistic message has a double role: first, it performs the anchoring function of narrowing the understanding of the event as a themed party. There were cases where the verbal rhetoric played on a code similar to the "wooden language," so a subsequent note anchored the marketing argument: "Warning: This party is a PAMPHLET!" The second role of the linguistic message is the "call to action" specific to the advertising genre. Sometimes, the "call to action" was doubled by potential benefits (cheap alcohol, free entrance for ladies, a special DJ program), in addition to the implicit promise to offer you a good time. In few cases, the "call to action" conveyed a memory practice, such as consuming refreshment brands from the communist past (Rom and Făgăraș chocolate bars, Eugenia biscuits, Mentosan tablets, and Ci-Co soda) or enjoying some unforgettable oldies. When May 1 fell during the weekend, the posters used the argument of the themed party as an alternative fun way of spending the holiday for those who did not travel to the seaside, as the day also marked an informal start of the summer season in local Black Sea resorts. If May 1 fell during the week, the clubbing posters acted as a visual lure to choose to spend that time off in a typically Romanian style, as promoted by 2013 posters, which fits into a broader trend of glocalized marketing.

The Pioneers, then and now

The clubbing advertisements were aimed at a relatively large but nonetheless "targeted" audience. Its members shared roughly the same cultural references shaped by the belonging to a liminal generation, i.e., cohorts living their childhood and teenage

years during the last decade of the former regime and coming of age during the 1990s.

During the communist era, the Pioneers were part of an elaborate propaganda mythology that framed several generations as both constructors and recipients of the future communist society. Most of the visual representations of Pioneers used in the clubbing posters rely on cut fragments from old genuine propaganda illustrations or photos. Therefore, the pose, the gaze, and the attitude of the characters reflect this particular rhetoric. However, in most cases, the setting and the background of the posters receive another type of digital treatment of the image. The resulting composite images convey a rather anachronistic "look and feel," similar to the one of adult cosplay participants (dressed as Pioneers) captured in photos documenting themed parties (*Bucurestii vechi si noi* 2012).

An interrogation on the generational change can add a complementary reading on the dynamics of meaning. On the one hand, the generational change may be approached from a sociological perspective, when considering the 2010s decade as a timeframe when clubbing attendance was no longer addressing the liminal generation coming of age during the 1990s, but young people born around or after 1989, who had no direct memories of the communist past (Bardan 2018: 58). In a similar vein, Jonathan Bach examined how through consumption practices "the symbols, slogans and styles of the old regime are dislodged and recombined in ways that make them effectively contemporary" (Bach 2015: 124-125), explaining the success of the nostalgia industry in the context of the coming of age of the first post-unification generation in Germany. On the other hand, the same generational change may be examined through the socio-professional profile of graphic designers entering the labor market during the 2010s. We advance here the hypothesis that while club owners belong to the transitional generation coming of age

around 1989, most digital graphic artists who were crafting clubbing poster layouts belong to a millennial generation with little to no memory of the communist past. Within the site of visual production, the dynamics of the semantic change may be understood also as the transition from a nostalgia industry approach to the specs of retro marketing.

The coat of arms of socialist Romania, then and now

The last symbol inspected is quite a complex accumulation of elements, as the coat of arms of socialist Romania proposed a visual representation featuring the variety of landforms and natural resources of the country. The frequent use of this symbol in clubbing posters came with heavy digital alterations procedures, where a particular case of retrofitting was adapted for the leisure industry. The new symbol kept only the exterior elements, the wheat wreath, and the tricolor band, while inside, on a background of halcyon rays, the silhouettes of a DJ mixing on turntables and five dancers were inserted. Other types of image editing may be identified, from the application of filters turning all colors to pink, to the electronic redesign of the shapes and the chromatic reinterpretation of the elements in green. These visual alterations that abruptly empty out the coat of arms (and not only) of its former meaning also stand for ironic posturing towards the official insignia of the old regime. In this case, the cultural practices involved in the commodification of symbols from the socialist past also imply a conversion of political icons into kitsch that establishes a "necessary break between past and present," as noted by Nadkarni and Shevchenko, by "mocking and ridiculing the ideological symbols associated with the socialist past" (2015: 71), recalling the subversive iconographic clichés of soviet Sotsart under late socialism.

Still, the adapted coat of arms, as well as other graphical elements and compositional

patterns, showed up in several frequency counts, opening the space for a different type of ethical questioning. The remediation of the same symbols in different posters for different parties brings about another type of abuse—either by the overuse of the same "royalty-free" item, or through plagiarism and the abusive use of copyrighted images.

A wider framing of the visual patterns is also needed as a response to Q2. The above findings point to a weak presence of Ceaușescu's figure amongst the visuals of the corpus and thus downplay the permanence of the "Ceaușescu myth" or the "Ceaușescu nostalgia" previously identified in mainstream commercial advertising and public references during the 2000 decade (Drașovean 2008; Georgescu 2010). The timeframe of the next decade provides a possible correlation with changes in media (mainly video) consumption, when millennials shifted gradually from TV towards tablets, laptops, and PCs (Obae 2020). While online assessments of the posters are scarce, previous observations on the organization of communist themed parties (Bardan 2018) can highlight features of the leisure environment calling to produce such posters. Two models of events were identified: the first one is set towards the end of the 1990s decade, when parties drew on a parodic reframing of the past. Starting around the 2000s, the emergence of a nostalgic phenomenon was linked to a plurality of discourses on communism, while digital platforms and social media became privileged spaces for personal (alternative) narratives of the communist past. The two years that recorded the highest number of communist themed parties (see Figure 3) reveal an ambivalent dynamic: on the one hand, the year 2010 points to a broader context, the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Romanian communist regime, prompting numerous remembrance events. Within this span, communist themed clubbing proved its commercial potential, with costumes, songs, and other accessories,

while posters played on references to personal and collective biographies, which may also explain the prevalence of the "Pioneers" visual pattern. In 2015, my fieldwork showed that visuals promoting the parties were inconsistent with most of the previously identified features of the events, acting as empty shells for usual clubbing activities.

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The commodification of the socialist past: the (online) nostalgia economy

My study interrogated the main visual patterns that recall socialist symbols through a series of clubbing posters, reflecting a marketing trend on the rise around the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the communist regime. These posters were created with the specific purpose of promoting communist themed parties organized by clubs, pubs, and bars.

Research focusing specifically on this type of clubbing practices is rather scarce, yet it may be framed by two phenomena concerned with the commodification of the past. Historical re-enactments that use distant references in time and space, where costume parties revive fashionable eras such as the Louis XV Rococo style, the glamour of the American Fifties, or even the glitter of the Pop Eighties, are leisure events that rely on a "vintage" or "retro" concept both in the Western world and in the countries of Eastern Europe. While the use of a communist themed party, such as the "The Soviet Factory" soirée organized in Paris, in 2016 (J. 2016), may fall under the same aura of exotic styled entertainment, in Eastern Europe this type of event was also acknowledged as part of an ongoing post-communist nostalgia industry.

Up to a point, the nostalgia industry in Eastern Europe, understood here as the commodification of former communist

iconography can be discussed via the dynamics of reappropriation and production of new symbolic meanings by consumers. I recall here Jonathan Bach's use of the concept of "secondary production" coined by Michel de Certeau (1984), when considering that through consumption "nostalgia objects are kept alive and gradually turned into a 'normal' part of the landscape" (Bach 2015: 124–125). Yet, both Berdahl and Bach paid particular attention to physical objects of the past, so my interrogation had to be extended to include the specific features of online communication.

The digital circulation of objects is explored here in line with David Beer's (2013) analysis of the intersections between popular culture and new media. Beer argues for a global understanding based on the digital archiving potential of the Internet, influenced by algorithms and data play embedded in the infrastructure of social networking sites. Memory and meaning are thus reshaped in the new digital environment, where several remediation processes occur through the social and collective practices of online sharing. In this framework, a particular generational span is put under scrutiny in Romanian scholarly literature, namely (still) young people who came of age around the 1990s, in a context marked by acute changes, both socio-political and technological. The multi-layered online memory discourse of this liminal generation found its place rather in the growing body of alternative remembrance practices, whether it reflected the harmonization of the "latchkey" generation's identity (Pohrib 2017) or conveyed a complementary view of the past, triggered by the digital memories of an analog childhood (Petrescu 2017; 2014). A more extensive look into how online social networks (re)mediate post-socialist memories showed that different digital communities participate in shaping polarized narratives of the past (Bardan and Vasilendiuc 2019). Yet, the binary discourse on the communist period takes the form of a parallel communication, recalling Pariser's understanding of the "filter bubble" (2011), as content analysis proved little to no intersection between the two types of digital communities investigated. This observation points to a certain limitation when examining the digital circulation of communist themed clubbing posters, the one of a narrowed (urban) audience.

The body of posters analyzed in this article adds a new layer of meaning to the notion of "post-communist nostalgia industry" and prompts an alternative reading of its negative framing as a reified and selective memory of communism. The process of iconographic commodification revealed a broad range of digital editing techniques that may be catalogued as an (un)intended iconoclast production. In this respect, the play on the two meanings of the English word *party*, the caricature representations, the absurd juxtapositions of past and present artefacts join the parodic discourse of other forms of contemporary popular culture products mocking once powerful icons. A second trait revealed by the analysis is the abundance of a rhetoric of kitsch, conveyed by flashy colors and composite insertions of elements reminiscent of the everyday past, largely corresponding to the features of a retro marketing that embraces the forgone days not with mockery, but as an invitation to collective remembrance of personal memories.

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Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore the semiotic charge of a set of 118 communist themed clubbing posters posted online between 2009 and 2019, questioned under the angle of a marketing trend, but also as an alternative memory practice that digitally marked the online landscape of leisure promotion.

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The analysis configured an apparent timeframe of roughly six years—from 2010 to 2015—when propaganda imagery was used to advertise clubbing events. Through frequency count, three main patterns were identified: the "First of May" theme, the "Pioneer" figure, and the "coat of arms of socialist Romania" symbol. The vast majority of posters also displayed extensive digital alteration of the visual patterns, as a retrofitting technique that also disrupted the old meanings inscribed in the elements used in the layouts. The use of this technique shows in a different light the "second life" of ideological insignia made visible in online channels through marketing practices.

The digital graphical treatment of the posters thus informs the abundant altered historical citations resulting in a visual rhetoric of kitsch, and is consistent with the generational reading associated to what Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2015: 77) labelled a type of nostalgia "without melancholy" that "adheres to nostalgic forms while emptying them of their emotional content." The sudden decline of communist-style clubbing posters in Romania (and elsewhere) may also be correlated, within a broader timeframe, with a generational change in the nostalgia economy, among both producers and consumers, opening the space for an interrogation of the posters as visual objects belonging to Jan Assmann's model of "communicative memory" (1995: 130).

The clubbing posters frame a reading of the representation of the communist past that openly ridicules symbols of the former establishment. In this perspective, the Barthesian reading of the myth may be applied to the communist-style clubbing posters phenomenon under the assumption that one's retro culture is constructed against another one's historical memory. Following Jonathan Bach's lead, I will refrain from judging the value of this body of contentious semantic visual representations and opt instead for considering the clubbing posters digital objects capable of signaling a generational change in the polarized landscape of memory practices, two decades after the fall of the communist regime in Romania.

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NOTES

1. The groups of terms that were used are the following: "Petrecere tematica comunista," "Petrecere comunista," "Petrecerea pionierilor," "Petrecere pionieri," "Petrecere muncitoreasca," "Petrecere 1 mai muncitoresc," "1 mai muncitoresc," "Communist party petrecere," "Communist petrecere," "Petrecere 23 august," "Petrecere 23 august communist," "Petrecere tematica 23 august," "Petrecere comunista 23 august," "Petrecere comunista 26 ianuarie," "Petrecere Ceaușescu," "Ceaușescu party."

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