

The Museum of the Unknown City Part II

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses various projects (in the real world or on the social media) to do with creating a museum in and about the unknown town of Mizil. The "Museum of the Unknown Town" is the memory of a non-existent town. This is because most museums reconstruct worlds that have ceased to exist. They reinvent them as part of a utopic exercise applied to the past, despite the overwhelming amount of information that they have at their disposal and which they employ. However, knowledge is not the same as storage, but rather, to an extent that differs from case to case, it is also imagination, which enables innovation. The unpredictable connections between images and the texts of different personal experiences have the power not only to sensitise local visitors to the town's history, but also to make them aware that they are a part of that history, that they can enrich it by cultivating and practising memory. The article argues that the communist past of the town and of Romania in general might be viewed in a more nuanced way, as opposed to the use of clichés and a uniform viewpoint. The author makes use of creative writing as his technique, drawing inspiration from hand-picked images.

Without having a local museum or a consistent monograph about the city of Mizil, the city could have been imagined by means of photography/ with the help of photography and of oral history. Architect Cosmin Pavel and myself found this alternative: to collect images and take interviews to all those inhabitants of Mizil that were willing to sustain our initiative of digging/ exploring the past. The photos were bought from the market, were taken from various publications (i.e. Flacara [the Flame]), were donated to us or just borrowed to be scanned. Some images were inserted in thematic/ academic articles or in fiction. Most images were posted on www.miziliada.blogspot.com, or on Facebook (#muzeulorasuluinecunoscut)/ [#TheMuseumoftheUnknownCity] by specifying the name of the donour or the place from where we have found the image. In this article all the images come from people who donated the images to our online platforms.

KEYWORDS

Museum studies; recent history; local memory; history as fiction; subjective history; community project; archive in progress; photo narrative.

À la Recomposition du Temps Perdu: Gone with Facebook

Below we reproduce a number of examples from a series of image and text simulations posted on Facebook over the course of 2018 and 2019. Their aim was primarily to promote the "Museum of the Unknown Town." Likewise, we aimed to test one of the procedures we intend to employ:



Fig. 1. "Vizitad" archive | "Dumitresculoniuc" collection.

How many mysterious places can a town have? A small town . . . Whoever hears the name "Mizil" might be tempted to say, "a godforsaken place!" Or more pretentiously, "a non-place". But it's not quite like that. I started to open my eyes to it when I moved into a housing block in Teilor, a district built in the northern part of town, where there had once been a garden, a boyar estate, handed down from Safta Brâncoveanu to General Mavros, then to the Grand Aga John Cantacuzino, and finally the property of various relatives of the Sturdza-Miclescu family in the twenties. Between the last two housing blocks and the back of Vlad the Impaler Street, where numerous families of Roma barbers, musicians and horse dealers lived, there was a vacant lot, a buffer zone, a transitional space. A natural barrier consisting of emptiness. Which is where we kids, from the housing blocks and the Gypsies' children, would either give each other a wide berth or engage in pitched battles that imitated the movies. Behind the fence of the adjoining textile mill with its mushroom-type water tower there were all kinds of objects we coveted, particularly the coloured plastic tubes on which the combed wool was wound. We'd join the pipes together to make imaginary spears. But when the mill lose its mystery, it was abandoned and we'd venture to the Inn on the east side of the town or the stadium to the south-west. Some of us ventured beyond the stadium, past the railway station, to the small forest that screened off the army tank range. After a lot of firing, they'd sneak onto the range looking for trotyl. We moved to that area at the beginning of the eighties. Between the station and the stadium, with that long strip of trees just perfect for us kids and undergrowth for forts. Then there was the main road to the south, with mulberry trees on either side. And the airstrip, with a few old German gun emplacements. But I found the stream really fascinating. Maybe because I didn't know how to swim. In any event, it would only be swollen for a few days, when there was heavy rain. But at the bridge, a stone one, probably the one that Cilibi Moise was thinking of when he wrote among his Asides, "In Mizil, a large bridge, but no water," two streams, the Budureasca and the Tohăneanca, merged to form the Istău, which on the maps is now marked as the Ghighiu. It was there that you found old pots and German pistols, cartridges and shells. It was rumoured that on 23 December [1989], Uncle Nick's [Ceaușescu's] terrorists hid out there, when everybody was gathered outside the mayor's office to learn how to parley before Parliament was re-established. I'd been there on that spit of land between the two streams before they merge. It was a place dislocated from the town and my usual haunts, with a sort of orchard, what would have to be a secret place for a child. They used to play football there too, they practiced sequences from Bruce Lee films, they played cops and robbers, the girls and boys hid from the eyes of the street there to drink and smoke. I don't know whether they did all those things there, but that's more or less what happens in every place free of adults. Because there, in those places that belonged only to us, we were the victors. Because the adults had no idea what hijinks we got up to. Because there we never heard them calling our names. Because they didn't know we were there. Because there we became grown-ups, teaching ourselves how to grow up, what and how much we were capable of, how far we thought we could push it and what our minds and legs were good for. The first time I went to that spit of land, I was with Edi, my schoolmate, whose house backed onto the bank of the Budureasca stream. It's a mirror image along the NE-SW axis of the town. To the SW was my strip of forest by the tank range, where Edi used to come. Thanks to these two magical realms, we traversed the town. He came to mine, I went to his. True, our school was in his zone, while in my zone was the tavern where my parents were managers. You've no idea how and when friendships are struck up. Maybe because marginal places like that are the real centre. Because you get to know the town on foot, surrendering your childhood to it wholly. Like every love story, which grown-ups forget how to understand.





Fig. 2. "Vizitad" archive | "Buiă Cheorghe" collection.

In the place where something increases something else has to decrease. Some arrive for good, others leave for better. There are many places in this world. Then, deaths, births. But the place still increases. The number of trades and tradesmen increases. With each increase, there still has to be a decrease from something or other. Little by little. We even cut our hair. After all we have barbers divided into three barber's shops. The thing with the hair was that it was blown away on the wind or swept away by the brooms when I looked at it in amazement from the trestle on which old man Tuță Buia used to sit me. I knew him to look at, we were neighbours, in Teilor. Every time I used to go to him. I'd find him at the first or second chair on the left as you entered the new barber's shop in the tradesmen's centre. I also used to sit down on Doru's chair, with whom old man Tuță Buia had swapped places by the window. Seldom did I let the others cut my hair. Even though they were Dinamo supporters, I only let Tuță and Doru do it. I would look at the collage-panoplies around their mirrors and try to find in my mind arguments in favour of Steaua, the team I'd begun to support. At the time, Steaua were fashionable. In another four years they'd reach Seville. But I went there, into the lion's mouth, without knowing almost anything about what a conclave of kibitzers meant. Sometimes you had the impression that their aim was to prolong football-watching Sundays, while barbering was just a warm-up for the refutation of arguments that mingled with the cigarette smoke. I liked to wait for my haircut so I could read the Sport and any other newspaper that happened to be on the table. You could find out what transfers our team was planning, whether the next match would be fixed, what deals were going down in our town. There on the chair, swathed in the white cloth tucked under your chin, the town's hardmen were equal with us kids. We all submitted as if before saints who would get us out of a jam. But no, we weren't afflicted by fate. Because there, sitting on those adjustable chairs, like at the dentist's, we could see in the mirror everything that was going on behind us. A kind of tavern, a kind of casino, a waiting room, or a market. A kind of porch. A stadium. We gazed into the mirror as if through a keyhole. The town's hair and stories were trafficked with naturalness and ease, until someone let slip some inept remark that doubled up with laughter the whole barber's shop. I didn't like going back outside relieved of my hair. I would have liked to sit in the chair for hours. So as not to lose touch, until my hair grew back, I used to pop in, maybe two or three times, accompanying my friends. I bumped into old man Tuță last summer. I haven't seen Doru again very often. Mr Necula, the only one in the photograph not wearing a smock, died long ago, at the end of the seventies. I'd come home from the seaside late in the evening and the next morning I was wakened by a deafening noise. Among the Teilor housing blocks resounded a brass band. I'd never seen anything like it. I went outside and I saw the mourners following a horse-drawn hearse, smothered in wreaths and flowers. I accompanied it in amazement until it turned onto Kogălniceanu Street. Barbers and gypsy musicians have really spectacular funerals. People accompany a lifetime's service on its final journey





Fig. 3. "Vizitiad" archive | "Negulescu Atanase" collection.

The collector is suspended between secret watchfulness and unmasking the past. There will always be a temptation to strike a balance between display and composition. Always he will recall and wish to repair that “back when I didn’t think of death” (Cosaşu), although death passed by, and he will not know how to reconcile dignity and duty. The collector is a craftsman of survival, a sorcerer, a magician, a conjurer. Without magic words or prayers, only attention, patience and a consummate sense of time, of limit, he aggregates what is fragmented and scattered, almost lost: grains of sand. Whose death do those people mark? What streets intersect? Whither goes the woman unaffected by the pain that overcame the funeral procession? What beverages were served at the tavern on the corner? What time of day is it? Toward which cardinal point did the hearse head? What make of vehicle was it? Did somebody emerge on a balcony that day? Into what season do they all advance? In a single glance can fit a thousand words—undescribed! In an image fits a town, a literature, a history. You look at it as D’Annunzio’s character looks, accustomed to a blindfold, writing in the dark, tracing signs, learning a new art: “The city is full of ghosts. Men walk soundlessly, wrapped in mist. Vapor rises from the canals. On the footbridges, one sees only the white stone border of each stair. Some drunken singing, some shouting, some sort of row. Blue streetlamps in the mist. The cry of aerial sentries muffled by the fog. A dream city, otherworldly, a city washed by the Lethe or Avernus. Ghosts approach, brush past, vanish.” The truth belongs neither to the photographer, nor the collector, nor the characters. We cross in different directions, bring about an encounter. The truth is slippery, but above all it is a pretext to prolong words and dream: “Their little cosmos is shaken - / their air is alive with that fact. / In their parts of the city / they are played on by the diverse forces / I had over-prepared the event. / *Beauty is so rare a thing . . . / So few drink over my fountain . . .*” (Ezra Pound, “Villanelle: the psychological hour”)

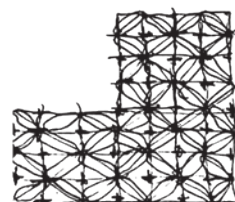




Fig. 4. "Mizilad" archive | "Subțirică Aurel" collection.

To transform a field into half a town. With houses it can be easy. You lay out the plots and the people are transformed into ants. In twenty years, the business is completed. Between a national highway and a railway line there still remains plenty of room, though. There aren't enough people to fill such a large area with houses. Let them build a park, and they did. Let them build a lycée, and they did. Let them build a stadium . . . And the place was cordoned off, poplars were planted around the edges, concrete was laid, kerbs, two sets of goal posts, white lines, and flags in the corners. That was all you needed to be able to play football. But it's not just a game. The factory workers need motivating. You can discover that some of them even have talent. Somebody with discipline is needed to make them walk the wire. And an officer was found. Tase Stoian. He puts together a team with which he qualifies. Then it drops down the league table. Ten years pass, but football is not forgotten. In that yard as big as a cattle mart people come to see the football kicked back and forth and into the goal from time to time. The town has a factory, hooray, my factory! The factory has a team, hooray, my team! The team has supporters, hooray, my supporters! If teams don't come from elsewhere, there are matches between the sections of the factory. Every two or three years, Nicu Constantin, Cristina Stamate and Rică Răducanu come for demonstration matches. And football doesn't die. The children from the nearby streets climb the fence and scatter every which way. ex-footballer Tomescu drives them away as best he can when he waters the grass. You play truant at the stadium, it's a play for forbidden things: poker, smoking, drinking. In the eighties it was a paradise for the lads from that half of town. the team made it to the second division and the town was living a dream. We were equal with Ploiești, Buzău, Suczawa, Constanța, Brăila, Jassy, Piatra Neamț, Focșani, Botoșani. We were the same calibre as Plopeni, Bârlad, Pașcani, Câmpina, Moreni. Most of them went away from here with their tails between their legs, unless there was some order from county level for us to go soft on them.

When at the end of a school year I looked in on the stadium, I was shocked. I climbed up the covered stands and felt like crying. The pitch had been ploughed by two tractors. Thick, black furrows of soil hid the green grass, like zipped-up zippers. What would we do without football, I wondered? Back home, my father reassured me. They were building a drainage system, with drains every five metres, a metre deep, filled with sand and gravel. I spent that summer watching the place being transformed into a genuine stadium. I watched the workers build another stand and paint the concrete and metal parapets with advertisements reading *Sportul, România Liberă* and *Loto Pronosport*. When they even erected an electronic scoreboard, I started to dream we'd entered the first division. What I could do was shout from the stands at the top of my lungs. I was a child of the stands, jumping up and down among the adults, whom I used to see looking so serious as they swarmed through the town after they left work. I adopted their gestures, which made them more likeable, I listened to their stories, their hesitations, their curses, their jokes, their sarcasm. You could see who was friends with whom; you found out which were the fathers of your friends and schoolmates. You could also see girls swarming around to be seen and whistled at. It was there that I saw Dorbin when he played for C.S. Târgoviște and Iordănescu for Steaua. And not only them. I even saw the Flacăra Cenacle, when Păunescu made all the musicians play their own songs at the same time. As an experiment, until it went dark. It was there that we lay down to watch falling stars in the strong scent of well-tended grass. Back then the town was like a family, even though I'm sure things weren't quite like that. But a child's power to believe in images, to connect them into a religion all of his own, is unassailable. On my way to school and back, day after day, I looked in on the stadium. It was like a temple at the edge of an empire. You could feel its power on windy, rainy, sunny days. We were all there, the whole town, by means of a knowledge not learned at school, but acquired every other Sunday. The same as he knows how to gather when his time comes on the other side of the road, in the graveyard.

