

VISUAL ETHICS AFTER COMMUNISM

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Introduction. Visual Ethics after Communism

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In the summer of 1989 political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote an essay with a question as its title, "The End of History?" (Fukuyama 1989). Three years later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the question mark had disappeared and the title had been lent to a much-lauded book *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama 1992). In both, Fukuyama's argued that the end of communist rule across Eastern Europe marked the opening of a new horizon where the dominant form of society would be Western style liberal democracy where the interests of capital would be kept in balance with the needs of the people: "The worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands." Societies would "end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society" (Fukuyama 1989: 13, 18). Fukuyama did not mean that events would no longer occur in the "post-historical period" but that the ideological struggles which had shaped the twentieth century would be contained safely in the "museum of human history." While most in Eastern Europe at the time surely welcomed the prospect of joining this extending realm, few felt that history was over. They had just participated in the most dramatic events of

their lifetimes, and the societies in which they lived were undergoing wholesale changes in economic, political and cultural life. And one of the signs of the times was, in fact, the massive production of history, in a literal sense, in the form of new publications, radio and television documentaries and exhibitions dedicated to the task of correcting the distortions and filling in "blank spots" which had blighted official historiography during the years of communist rule (Mark 2010). The recent past was a particularly combustible zone in which events in living memory and their material remains in the form of documents, objects and images had the capacity to stir deep feelings. In fact, this power seems undiminished: one of the most pronounced features of the post-communist societies today is the persistent surfacing of the past in public discourse. Museums and archives—Fukuyama's safe containers—are themselves the subject of considerable controversy.

This special issue of *Martor* was born out of conversations between the three editors within the framework of two European-funded projects. The COST Action Nep4dissent (project no. CA16213) (<https://nep4dissent.eu>), an interdisciplinary research network of scholars with an interest in resistance and dissent in former socialist Europe 1945-1989 and the Hidden Galleries ERC project (project no. 677355) (<http://hiddengalleries.eu>), which



focussed on visual and material aspects of religion in the archives of the secret police in Hungary, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine. It was through the lively exchanges and discussions that took place between these groups of curators, historians, anthropologists and scholars of religions that the critical questions emerged that inspired this special issue. As scholars and practitioners, we share an interest in the afterlives of images, texts and objects created during the period of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the ways that they have since been used to narrate that history and mobilise memory since. In the extensive historiography of Eastern Europe under communist rule, images and things often seem incidental or marginal, at least when compared to the authority that written texts and accounts from the period seem to hold. This issue of *Martor* was conceived as an opportunity to continue our critical self-reflection and to further develop the ideas and conversations we had started on the subject of visual ethics of and after the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe. With this aim in mind, we invited contributions from scholars whose work engages the ethically complex terrain of visual and material cultures of and after communist rule to reflect on the following questions: when does an image or a museum display present itself as problematic and for whom? Under what circumstances is it ethically justifiable to exhibit or publish such images or, conversely, to put images aside, leaving them undisplayed? When do arguments based on “the public good” outweigh the right to personal privacy, individual integrity and cultural patrimony of source communities?



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Museomania

A number of the contributions which resulted from this invitation which appear in this issue of *Martor* take the public setting of the museum as their focus (see Berezina, Cristache,

Ciubotaru and Manolache). The reorganisation, reinvention and new creation of museums has been one of the most striking features of post-communist societies in the last thirty years. After years of being much promoted via compulsory visits organised for factory workers and school children and, at the same time, left to stagnate, museums were given a central place in what is called post-communist transition. In the early 1990s, many reoriented their displays to tell new narratives, with all museums dedicated to what was called socialist but might more accurately be called Soviet history either closing or undergoing a significant overhaul, many becoming national in their orientation. After thirty-five years of operation, for instance, Warsaw's *Muzeum Lenina* (Lenin Museum) became the polonocentric *Muzeum Niepodległości* (Museum of Independence) in January 1990; likewise, the *Lietuvos revoliucijos muziejus* (Lithuanian Museum of Revolutions) in the former Soviet Republic of Lithuania put its collection into storage in 1991 and its costly and handsome home overlooking the Neris river in Vilnius eventually reopened as the National Gallery of Art in 2009 (Rindzevičiūtė 2018, Dovydaitytė 2010).

For some observers of the newly democratic societies of Eastern Europe, existing museums and their collections were poorly equipped to undertake the task of narrating the history of the recent past and, as a result, new institutions were needed. Most were initiated by private individuals and organisations, even if they drew upon the support and material resources of the state and local authorities. For instance, the *Okupatsioonide ja vabaduse muuseum Vabamu* (Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom, as it is known today) in Tallinn that opened in 2003 was created by the Kistler-Risto Foundation, an organisation founded by Olga Kistler-Risto, an Estonian with deep pockets who had migrated to the United States in 1949. The Foundation set itself the task of supporting research into Estonian history and in particular the effects of authoritarian rule on Estonian society in the period between 1940 and 1991 (Burch and Zander 2010). These years



Figure 1. The House of Terror Museum at 60 Andrásy út, Budapest remodelled by architect Attila F. Kovács. Photo credit: David Crowley, 2009.

had seen the occupation of the country by the Soviet Union and the Third Reich and then a long period as a Soviet Republic. With its open architectural structure in which tall glass walls containing the galleries frame a small grove of birch trees, the museum took a strikingly fresh approach to exhibition design in the territories of the former Soviet Union when it opened. Since then, its permanent displays have put a strong emphasis on representing the lives of ordinary citizens in cruel times, focusing on the experience of deportation and exile, as well as the mass resistance which broke out across the Baltic during the “Singing Revolution.” Like a number of new museums in the region that set out to measure the combined effects of Fascism and Stalinism, a high premium is placed on individual testimony and memory, typically in audio and video displays in which people recount their own experiences but also in the form of personal objects like suitcases and small firearms (Mark 2008). Kistler-Risto’s own history forms a direct and much invoked parallel with the museum’s narrative themes.

One of the most influential and, at the same time, most controversial museums of the post-communist era, the *Terror Háza Múzeum*, or House of Terror, in central Budapest departs radically from the approach just outlined

above (Figure 1). Located in a building used at different points in the previous century by both the Hungarian Arrow-Cross fascist party and the communist-era secret police, the museum appears to play on the horror and dread associated with the building’s former uses, emphasizing the suffering of the victims of communist rule whilst downplaying the brutality of Hungary’s fascist past and complicity in the Holocaust (see Rév 2005: 293-94); there are 22 rooms dedicated to the communist past whereas only two deal with Fascism. Through the use of highly emotive displays which appear more like brilliantly-lit stage sets dressed with dramatic “props” than the conventional museum gallery populated with vitrines and plinths for the safe display of unique or rare objects, the House of Terror is an instrument for the production of affect. Indeed, it has been accused of turning the exhibited material “into mere illustrative accessories of a dramatised story” (Horváth 2008: 270), decontextualising materials and images in such a way as to obscure the moral complexities of lives lived at the time in order to produce an image of the Hungarian nation as victim (Horváth 2008: 270). The museum in the case of the House of Terror, as historian Dan Stone affirms “is not a memory space, but a propaganda space, where victims are used as rhetorical devices” (Stone 2012: 273).

Figure 2. Cells in the KGB Headquarters at *Pagari tn 1*, Tallinn, Estonia photographed by Vladimir Varfolomeev in 2018. (Source Flickr - reproduced under CC BY-NC 2.0 licence).





The fact that so many museums across the former Eastern Bloc occupy former sites of state violence is noteworthy. They include *Sowjetisches Untersuchungsgefängnis Leistikowstraße Potsdam* (Soviet Remand Prison in Leistikow Strasse in Potsdam), the one-time KGB Headquarters at *Pagari tn 1* in Tallinn (a branch of the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom discussed above) (Figure 2), *Okupacijų ir laisvės kovų muziejus* (Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights) in Vilnius as well as the *Muzeul Memorial Sighet* (Sighet Memorial Museum) in Romania. Such museums are clearly intended as a measure of a victory over injustice. But with their decrepit, unfurnished cells, they are organised to trigger powerful emotional responses in their visitors. One cannot be unmoved by the knowledge that one is standing on an execution ground, even if the spaces seem spartan and distinctly undesigned in comparison with Budapest's spectacular House of Terror.

After the first flourish of new institutions in the early years of the new century, museum building continues at a pace in the region today with some countries embarking on ambitious state-led programmes of muzealisation usually with a strong emphasis on close historical events. Poland has the most extensive efforts underway, with many dozens of new institutions recently opened or in construction. They include a number of major museums such as Polin—Museum of the History of Polish-Jews, a public-private partnership, that opened in 2014, and the *Muzeum II Wojny Światowej* (Museum of the Second World War) in Gdańsk launched three years later. Both have faced considerable political pressure from the state since the nationalist-populist *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) party took power in 2015: talented directors have been purged from both. At the same time, the government has aggressively promoted a new “politics of history.” Dubbing critical accounts of Polish actions in the past the “pedagogy of shame” and passing legislation prohibiting public expression or investigation into the complicity of “the Polish Nation” in the Holocaust, the

state has promoted an image of a nation populated only by heroes and martyrs. When, for instance, “Estranged,” a 2018 show at Polin exploring the effects of a campaign against Poland's remaining Jews led by a faction of the communist leadership in March 1968, asked questions about anti-semitism in the present, it drew the ire of conservatives (Gessen 2019).

A contrasting approach is represented by the various museums of everyday life which opened across the region to record a material culture and forms of social existence associated with life under communist rule that then were fast disappearing during the transition years. One of the earliest examples of this phenomenon was the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* (Document Centre of Everyday Life in the GDR) in Eisenhüttenstadt (formerly StalinStadt) in the former East Germany which opened in 1993 to collect the quotidian material culture of a disappeared country (amassing 170,000 items and engaging in a lively exhibition programme) (Kuhn and Ludwig 1997). Today, combined with the Beeskow Art Archive, the Centre has become the *Museum Utopie und Alltag* (Museum of Utopia and Everyday Life) and operates from a former crèche in a model socialist housing development built in the early 1950s. Sometimes dismissed as vessels for the sentimentalism of *ostalgie*, such “socialist heritage” museums set themselves the task of understanding the experience of everyday life in societies under communist rule, treating all forms of mass culture as settings for the penetration of ideology into society (Bach 2017, chapter 2). This accusation of nostalgia is perhaps easily made because of the affinity of such museums with commercial “museum experiences” which present visitors—often tourists—with a brief and spectacular immersion in sights, sounds and even tastes of an exotic “lost world” such as the *Muzeum komunizmu* (Museum of Communism) founded in Prague by American businessman Glenn Spicker at the beginning of the new century (Blaive 2020) (Figure 3), or the tours of the socialist new town of Nowa Huta, on the edge of Kraków in Poland, led by guides kitted out



Figure 3. Display in the Museum of Communism in Prague photographed by James G Milles in 2007. (Source Flickr - reproduced under a CC BY-NC 2.0 license).

as young pioneers in Trabant cars. At their worst, such institutions offer little more than a kitsch approach to history, trading clichés for the price of entry. At their best, museums of everyday life have undertaken important acts of collection and preservation of material objects which might otherwise escape the historical record and provided important fora for the validation of lives which have been dismissed as “worthless” in a system that has been judged by history as a “failure.”

In their contributions to this issue of *Martor*, Cosmin Manolache and Maria Cristache contribute to our critical understanding of the representation of everyday life under communist rule in Romania. Cristache addresses the topic squarely by examining four different Romanian museums that each adopt domestic life as a museological framework. Outlining the different professional credentials of each institution and their diverse approaches to visitor engagement from the “look, don’t touch” ethos of *Casa Ceaușescu* (The Ceaușescu Mansion) in the former luxurious residence of the president in Bucharest to the *Muzeul Traiului în Comunism* (The Museum of Living in Communism) in Brașov where visitors can stay overnight, she mounts a careful analysis of the ways in which reconstructions of homes

from the communist era open highly current questions of consumerism and identity, as well as ethical concerns relating to the attempt to engage the human senses to secure historical understanding. In his two-part essay on “The Museum of the Unknown City,” Manolache reports his own attempts, with architect Cosmin Pavel, to imagine a new museum for the ordinary town of Mizil in Muntenia, Romania. What could be more unremarkable than an “unknown” town? he asks. Manolache proposes a museum for the town that would offer the possibility of channelling all voices including those of authority, of citizens and of the ever-expanding media. His project seems well aligned with what Bakhtin described as heteroglossia. This is less a matter of testimony, the mode favoured by museums of victimhood, than one of polyphony with all the risks of dissonance that this entails. A thought-exercise and a generative method, Manolache presents his approach in the second part of the essay a catalogue of images with short texts relaying experience of various Mizil residents pasted on Facebook in 2018 and 2019.

In her contribution to this theme issue, Smaranda Ciubotaru explores another kind of museum which does not “fit” with either the totalitarian paradigm represented by the House of Terror or the emphasis on everyday life found in other institutions. She focuses on the *Muzeul de Artă Recentă* (Museum of Recent Art) that opened in Bucharest in 2018. Occupying a site which once was home to foreign minister Ana Pauker in the 1950s in a section of the city that was largely reserved for the Communist elite, the Museum of Recent Art takes the form of an early twentieth century villa which seems to be floating on a glass-walled box. Its brickwork is stained flat grey and the windows appear to be bricked over. A facsimile of Pauker’s former home, the original structure (a villa that predates her residency there) was demolished to make way for the ghostly structure that is there now. Historic buildings, as noted above, can evoke the past in ways that can be powerfully affecting for post-communist societies. But, for Ciubotaru, demolition and reinvention—alongside the museum’s exhibition programme



which seems to eschew political art from the communist era—make the new museum a space of forgetting rather than one of remembering.

Alongside museums, a host of other specialised institutions have been established such truth commissions, institutes of memory, and special archives, whose role has been to define the nature of communist regimes and determine how they should be remembered. The archives of the former secret police, in particular, have played a peculiarly powerful role in shaping how post-communist societies relate to the past. Vast swathes of records generated by conducting surveillance on millions of individuals and thousands of communities across the former Eastern Bloc formed new “public” archives. Some opened within months of the end of the old order and others many years later. Ukraine passed a law granting extensive access to KGB and its predecessor’s archives in the country only in 2015. If secrecy was a sign of a bankrupt and paranoid ideology, then transparency, it is believed, is required to create and sustain robust democracy. In those states which had been most committed to the task of using surveillance to control behaviour like the GDR and Romania in the 1980s, the volume of the material was, and remains, daunting—the Stasi records form 111 km of linear archives and almost 1.95 million images and continues to grow as inventive ways are found to reconstitute the records that were torn-up and shredded by Stasi officers in the final days of communist rule in East Germany. The task of preserving such documents as well as of managing access has been laid down in legal frameworks articulated by acts of parliament or by presidential decree. In Germany the Stasi Files Act (*Stasi-Unterlagengesetz*) published in 1991 guided the activities of the Stasi Records Archive which operated in Berlin and a number of regional offices until 2021, its collections now absorbed into Germany’s National Archives. In Poland, the *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej—Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu* (Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish

Nation / IPN) was created by act of parliament in 1998. This arrangement puts the records of the *Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego* (Ministry of Public Security, 1945-1990) in a wider historical framework from 8 November 1917, the date of the Bolshevik Revolution, and throughout the Second World War to 31 July 1990. As one of the central platforms of transitional justice programmes that aimed at overcoming the legacy of the communist past and working towards justice and reconciliation in society, the opening of such archives generated numerous ethical controversies and epistemological debates. In several countries, perhaps most notably in Romania, this became a long, drawn out process of contestation between rival political forces that wished to deal with the past in radically opposing ways.

Based on the model of denazification after World War Two, secret police archives have been utilized, amongst other things, for the vetting of individuals seeking public office, known as lustration, and the public exposure of former agents and collaborators as well as the somewhat unique initiative to post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, of granting of free access by individuals to their own personal secret police files. This privilege awarded to “victims” as compensation in the form of information whilst contributing arguably to the democratisation of information has also become the cause of numerous political controversies as revelations from the archives have been continually “leaked” into the public domain, often as part of what Lavinia Stan refers to as “vigilante justice” initiatives (Stan 2011).

The numerous controversies that have arisen over their use highlight the paradoxical hold that the archives continue to have today, the result of an “enduring belief in the authority of their holdings” (Vatulescu 2010: 13) which persists despite the recognition that the materials they contain are the product of regimes whose methods have been condemned as illegal and immoral. Commentators have often asked: How complete are the records? What has been hidden or destroyed to preserve reputations or ongoing interests? What kind of trust can be placed in

records which were often solicited by means of coercion? Some individuals expressed genuine surprise at finding their names on lists of informants (particularly those who had strong opposition pedigrees), but were unable to prove that they had not provided the security services with information. The use of the archives in the search for justice and truth has also shown the inadequacy of the categories of “perpetrators” and “victims,” “dissidents” and “collaborators,” “informers” and so on (see Apor et al. 2017), which fail to capture the complexity of the moral choices and ethical dilemmas that large numbers of citizens faced in their everyday dealings with the state and with each other. In this context, historical memory and justice and truth seeking have become “shackled to the fate of and uses of the secret police archives” (Kapaló and Povedák 2021: 25).

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Photo Ethics

Although the textual holdings of secret police archives have been the main focus of the search for truth and justice, increasingly the visual materials produced and collected by the secret police are being published, exhibited and publicly displayed, whether in museums and galleries or even in urban public spaces. The use of these diverse visual materials, which come in many forms as articles in this issue illustrate, including surveillance images (see Povedák), mugshots (see Vagrameńko and Nicolescu) and crime scene photographs (see Bódi and Huhák), as well as confiscated photographs and possessions, all pose their own distinct ethical challenges both as objects of research and as aspects of lost cultural or religious patrimony. As a number of contributions in this special issue suggest, photography presents particular ethical concerns which, arguably, other kinds of exhibits in museums and temporary exhibitions relaying the history of the communist rule do not. While, for instance, a bleak cell in a former KGB prison converted into permanent museum

might well function as a powerful measure of the violence and injustice done to those once incarcerated in the building, the experience is always marked by an absence, namely of those who once occupied or guarded such benighted places. Careful efforts to accurately reproduce the conditions of imprisonment or even to “fill in” experience with various forms of testimony are attempts to compensate for that lack. And that absence, of course, is a product of time. In this regard, photography possesses a particular relationship to time that other material records do not. Photographs of the conventional kind are, as many photo theorists have explained, “traces of the real.” A photograph is not just a representation but an “event.” Their force lies in the fact that what is depicted appears to be frozen in time at the moment of the shutter’s click, yet this an illusion of the most poignant kind: time moves on. In his brilliant study of the medium, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes, looking at a photograph of two girls taken many years earlier, writes “how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then already dead (yesterday)” (Barthes 1981: 96).

For many theorists of photography, the taking of an image of another person is itself an act of violence. Famously Susan Sontag in *On Photography* writes “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time” (Sontag 1977: 14). Ariella Azoulay in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* observes that even when a subject consents to being photographed, injustice is perpetuated when their image (in the photograph) is understood to belong entirely to the photographer (Azoulay 2008). She “challenge(s) the assumption that the photographed individual has no right over the image made of him or her and that this right is ‘naturally’ given to the person holding the photograph’s means of production” (94).

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Ownership determines who has not only the rights to reproduce the image but often the generation of meaning too. Captions or voice overs in documentary film do much to fix the meaning of what might otherwise be illegible images. (In this issue, Cristea offers her own critical self-reflection on this matter as an anthropologist undertaking fieldwork in Cuba today).

There is no doubt that photographs taken by the secret police in Eastern Europe, whether surreptitiously on the street as part of their surveillance activities or during the process of arrest and imprisonment, were acts of violence in Sontag's terms. The subjects of these photographs were not given the opportunity to consent to being recorded in this way and it is evident that such images were taken against their will and intended as instruments of harm. These are by no means "innocent images." This raises considerable ethical questions for those who wish to reproduce them today, whether on the pages of scholarly journals, in the media or on the walls of the gallery. When consent was not given, what obligations accompany their reuse today? When these images are now published in the *open* context of a free press and uncensored media rather than the *closed* world of communist societies, do they constitute part of a new kind of "civil contract" in Azoulay's terms? Do any kind of authorial rights remain in the hands of the photographer after the apparatus for which they worked closes down? What right do the subjects have to the images in which they appear? And can they be transferred to others? Certainly, the archives in which they are preserved now exercise those rights "on behalf" of those subjects in some national settings extending extensive rights of access and reproduction (such as in the Ukraine since 2015) and in others, placing narrow limits. So although access to secret police archives has been granted in seemingly broad and inclusive terms in many countries, with access guaranteed to victims and, in a number of countries, their direct descendents, as well as to large numbers of researchers, ordinary citizens are often reluctant to seek access to

their files for fear of what they might contain or are "locked out" due to economic or educational disadvantage. Archives tend to be located in capital cities, far away and expensive to reach for large portions of the population. Additionally, rights of access are based on the identity of individuals thus excluding the descendent communities from accessing and gaining control over materials that relate to their communal experience of repression. Publication or display of archival material risks being yet a further step in this process of alienation.

Such matters are somewhat easier to resolve when the subject of the secret police photograph is able to determine the circumstances of their mediation. American academic Katherine Verdery in her fascinating book, *My Life as a Spy. Investigations in a Secret Police File*, describes her responses to reading surveillance reports compiled by the Securitate during her time undertaking fieldwork as an anthropologist in Romania in the 1970s and 1980s (Verdery 2018). She was suspected of being a foreign spy engaged in elaborate acts of deception for her homeland. She was undertaking close observation of Romanian society; not as a spy but as an anthropologist (though she sometimes wonders what the difference was in her book). "Her" weighty file features surveillance reports and interviews with informants, some of whom she counted as friends and close colleagues during her time in Ceaușescu's Romania. Researched and written twenty years, and more, after the end of communist rule, *My Life as a Spy* records not only Verdery's reflections on these highly suspicious and often confused documents but also her attempts to meet and discuss the surveillance with her observers today (former secret police agents and their informants).

My Life as a Spy features on its cover one of the images which had been made by means of a hidden camera (using recording equipment that the agents called "Technica Operativa T.O. / Teo") in a hotel room (Figure 4). It shows Verdery in her underwear. Notes written in earliest phases of her research capture vividly



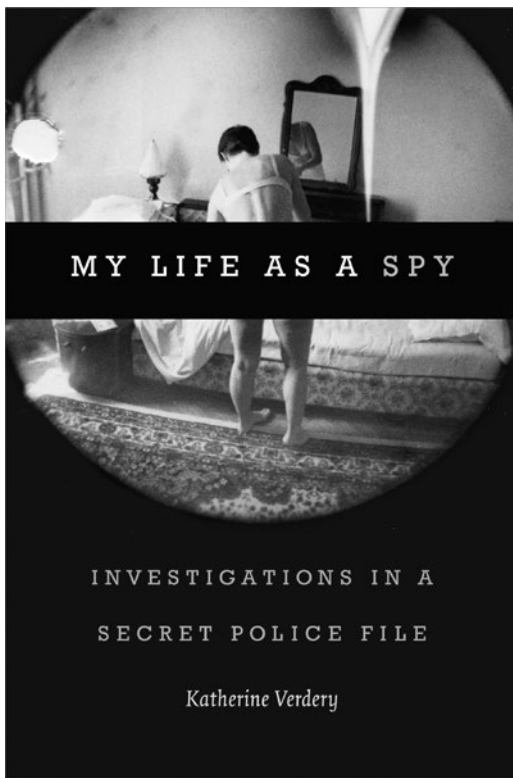


Figure 4. Cover of Katherine Verdery's 2018 book *My Life as a Spy. Investigations in a Secret Police File* featuring a Securitate image of the author in her hotel room in 1985 (Reproduced with permission of Katherine Verdery).

the emotional reaction she felt on seeing this image in the file for the first time:

19- 9-10. Reading my Cluj file makes me want to cry, for the various friends brought in on my case as either informers or themselves under surveillance. I come upon photos of myself from the "Teo" in my room at the Continental Hotel in Cluj. I am in my underwear, making my bed and then using the mirror above it to fix my hair. The outlines of my body are quite clear, though the photos are lousy. Later I have a mental image of myself in my underwear, pinned like a butterfly on a collector's table with spot-lights shining on me from several directions. Become embarrassed, then feel angry, then violated. Imagine if I had actually made love with someone in that bed... how appalling. These people are merciless (Verdery 2018: 183).

A second image appears in the book which was taken during a later surveillance operation. In 1988 she was photographed on the street while being accosted by a Securitate officer, Major "Dragomir." Both appear in the photograph, "Dragomir" somewhat more clearly than Verdery in the double portrait. Twenty-five years later she writes to "Dragomir" to ask him to meet and to discuss the long surveillance operation that he conducted of her. In the letter, she reports that she is "writing a book based on my file ... and would like [it] to be as close as possible to the truth. You will appear in it in any case, with the photo; it would be great to be able to present your 'human face' and not only the propaganda of dissidents from those times" (Verdery 2018: 258). After meeting and sharing what Verdery admits to be a "good human connection," she is troubled, remorseful that a collection of essays under the title of *Secrets and Truths* is about to be published featuring the image and naming him. She knows from the contacts in the *Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității* (National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives) that "Dragomir" has been able to obscure his past and even claim to have been a revolutionary. Nevertheless, she asks her editor not to remove the image but to take his "name out of the text."

Verdery is able to exercise rights to "her" image precisely because she is an author and, as such, in control of the context in which it will appear and also the interpretation that it is given (as she makes obvious to "Dragomir" when she writes to him). Moreover, she is able to exercise those rights because of the policies and legal frameworks that guide the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives in Romania. In this way, *My Life as a Spy* is, in part, a form of redress. But her mediation on the rights and wrongs of the double portrait makes clear, it is also a practical and self-reflexive exercise of the ethics of representation.

Such examples are rare, though by no means unique: artist Cornelia Schleime, who left the GDR in the mid 1980s, made artworks using her Stasi reports in 1993 in which she attempted to perform for the camera the descriptions which



had been generated by agents a few years earlier. The results are wilfully absurd (Krasznahorkai 2021, Blaylock 2021). But far more often those who reproduce the photographic images in secret police archives are not those who feature in them. (Or equally, in the case of the use of images confiscated as “evidence,” they are not their photographers or owners). What then are the responsibilities of the researcher, curator or anyone else engaged in acts of historical representation to those who are not able to object to their appearance in images which were created in circumstances of coercion or violence? This is most evidently the case with regards to images of those who are no longer alive.

Famously, Claude Lanzmann decided against the use of “historic” images in his documentary film on the holocaust, *Shoah* (1985), because they had, in large number, been produced by photographers and film makers working in the service of Fascism and genocide (LaCapra 1997). Such images were corrupted by their original purpose as propaganda. Moreover, such material could only ever approach the topic obliquely, namely the murder of Europe’s Jews, given the meagre images which depicted that precise and final event. Instead, Lanzmann turned to eyewitness accounts; testimonies of the living. One conclusion that might be drawn from this decision to forego historic images is that they are so tainted or incomplete that they are irredeemable or unusable. In 2008, Georges Didi-Huberman refused Lanzmann’s version of the *bilderverbot* (prohibition on images) in his study of the tiny number of clandestine images taken at Auschwitz by a member of the *Sonderkommando* working in the gas chambers (Didi-Huberman 2008). For the French philosopher and art historian, they are “images in spite of all” and, as such, oblige us to look. No longer capable of functioning as pleas for aid, they act today as injunctions to remember. Didi-Huberman’s arguments about the capacity of images to speak across irreversible time don’t ultimately depend on the status of their makers as victims or oppressors. He writes: “in the face of every image we have to choose whether, or how, to make it participate in our knowledge

and action. We can accept or reject this or that image; take it as a consoling object or as a worrying object; make it ask questions or use it as a ready-made response” (Didi-Huberman 2008: 180).

Vagramenko and Nicolescu grapple with similar concerns in regard to their use of images of violence perpetrated by the secret police during the very act of taking mugshot photographs for a file on a group of arrested religious believers in Soviet Ukraine. Whereas historians such as Susan Crane (2008) advocate reclassifying and contextualising photographs of the Holocaust in order to overcome the banal tendency to circulate images of violence in the expectation of shared human emotion and revulsion, Vagramenko and Nicolescu highlight how, through curatorial choices, it is possible to encourage audiences to look differently at images of violence in order to grasp their multivalency and historical agency regardless of the violent hand that produced them. Through an exploration of the complex layering and staging of a Soviet secret police file and the set of mugshots it contains, and their own curatorial practice of layering displays, they demonstrate how the encounter in the exhibition space can be used to peel back the strata of images to reveal presences that secret police manipulations attempted to conceal. Vagramenko and Nicolescu argue that despite the evidential power of the image shot by the secret police, they can be used to bring the archive alive as a site of the agency of resistance as opposed to a site solely defined by victimhood.

Surveillance images—taken against the will of the subjects—sometimes constitute the only record of acts of dissent or of resistance and the state’s violent response to it. Displaying such materials in public exhibitions or making them available open-access online, in the way that both the Hidden Galleries project (<http://hiddengalleries.eu>) discussed by Povedák, Vagramenko and Nicolescu in this issue and in the COURAGE project (<http://cultural-opposition.eu/>) outlined by Bódi and Huhák, have done, highlight the complex ethical

issues related to historical contextualisation, patrimony and repatriation, the rights to privacy and to be forgotten and the implications of re-mediation of secret police materials. The sometimes paradoxical nature of secret police photography is also discussed by Bódi and Huhák. The account they give of the exhibition mounted by the *Inconnu* Group in a private apartment in Budapest in early 1987 and its closure by the Hungarian secret police, demonstrates another contested value of the archive in the post-communist era, namely the secret police as chroniclers or documenters of cultural heritage. The unintended act of preservation that resulted from the secret police operation in this case has, in post-communism, been transformed into valuable cultural heritage that challenges perceptions of the power of the state to control culture and suppress agency. As Bódi and Huhák explain, by providing open and free access to previously restricted secret images, the COURAGE project was able to subvert the secret police intention to eliminate dissent exposing the way that “the secret police itself created—in the frame of their destruction—the group of sources that today is the single visual trace” of the exhibition.

The late David King, the author of powerful photobooks on the histories of the Soviet Union, held a similar view to that of Didi-Huberman. A British designer, photographer, collector and committed supporter of Trotsky throughout his life, King set himself the task of discovering the revolutionary culture which had been extinguished so brutally during the Stalin years, often by working with visual materials in Soviet archives. His best-known book *The Commissar Vanishes* (1997) records the ways in which official images were subject to manipulation when leading figures associated with the regime became *persona non grata* during the Stalin years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, King went through the Central Archives of the former KGB researching the images which had been taken of its victims during the Great Terror. They included the portraits taken by the secret police on the day of the arrest, with the subject looking shell-shocked and dishevelled as

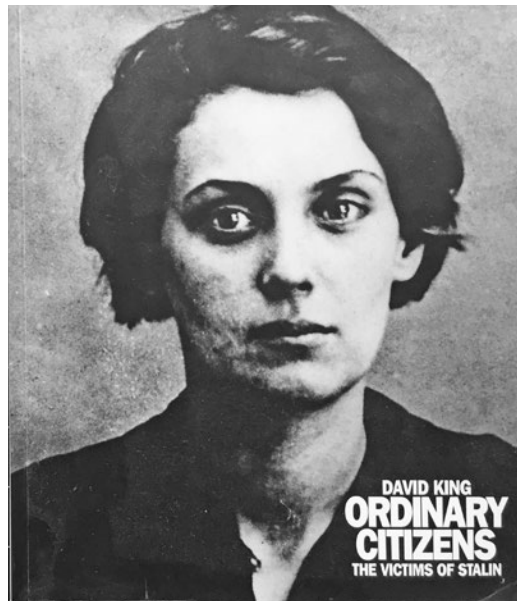


Figure 5. Cover of David King's 2003 book *Ordinary Citizens* featuring the arrest photograph of Tamara Litsinskaya. The file which accompanies this image in the Central Archives of the former KGB reports “Born 1910 in Moscow. Non-Party member. Student. Address unknown. Arrested on February 8, 1937. Sentenced to death on August 25, 1937. The charge: Unknown. Shot the same day.”

they stood before the camera in the Lubyanka, the notorious headquarters of the NKVD (later KGB) in Moscow. Each passport size image was pasted into a grey folder with meagre biographical data and the “crime” for which they had been arrested recorded. In 2003 King reproduced a number of these small images as full-page portraits in a large-format book called *Ordinary Citizens—The Victims of Stalin* (Figure 5). Each was accompanied by a small biographical statement that museum curators like to call “tombstone” information—date of birth and of death, employment and marriage status. Accused of absurd crimes, these ordinary citizens were often executed within hours or sent into the vast penal system known as the Gulag where many perished. In publishing his book, King’s act was a minor act of reinstatement of a person who had been effaced by state violence. The book contains very little text: the absurdity of the indictments and the scale of the injustice did not warrant further explanation. Instead, King makes his point with the invitation to look: “The reappearance of these ordinary people,



face-to-face with their accusers and close to death, serves as an indictment of Stalinism and the former Soviet Union" (cited by Moore 2017). Here, one is reminded of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' declaration of the ethical imperative that accompanies looking at the face of another. He describes it as a moment of moral obligation:

There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure without defence. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill (Levinas 1985: 86).

The portraits of the arrested are not the only faces in the secret police archives across Eastern Europe that have been preserved. Others include the mugshots of the secret police agents themselves. What are the ethics of their reproduction today? Does Levinas moral obligation hold in this instance too? In 2005-07, IPN organised a series of street exhibitions in Polish cities featuring dozens of mugshot portraits of secret police agents who had been active in the Polish People's Republic. Known as *Twarze Bezpieki* (The Faces of the Security Services), these displays, using "a language of justice and transparency, ... associated the faces with cruelty, treachery, and crime; not just any crime, but above all what is called 'communist crime' (zbrodnie komunistyczne)" (Gökariksel 2019: 112). Public exhibition here was a kind of indictment or trial, albeit one which did not extend the right of defence. The House of Terror does something similar when it lines up mugshots of perpetrators with terse summaries of their activities, particularly those engaged in the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956.

The question of who to show and how

to name is not—or not only—an abstract or philosophical one: it is, like all ethical considerations of this kind, a practical one too which impacts on the authors contributing to this theme issue. Lacking an extant local museum or archive, or even a solid monograph about the history of life in Mizil, Cosmin Manolache and Cosmin Pavel had to seek out alternative images for their imagined museum. Some images were collected from flea markets and others donated by residents of the town who responded to their posts on social media (at www.miziliada.blogspot.com, or on Facebook #muzeulorasuluinecunoscute). In their article in this issue *Martor*, all of the images come from people who have given their consent to their reproduction and have agreed to share their names.

Where individuals cannot give consent, can society do so in their place? Povedák, in her account of bringing surveillance photography to the exhibition space, explores another strategy to potentially escape the lens of the secret police. The photographs that Povedák encountered in her research are from a secret surveillance operation that recorded, amongst other things, religious gatherings conducted in nature with the intention of avoiding the prying eye of the authorities. In questioning the ethical use of these images, Povedák describes the steps that she took including engaging the community in discussions on the presence of the images in the archive, their accessibility and potential use for research and the right of use as outlined in legislation. She also took the moral decision to explain to the community, once she understood that they did not wish to become the objects of academic research, how, even though they have no rights over the images contained in their file, they could nevertheless request a 50-year embargo on their use in accordance with the legal regulations of the archives. This question of control over the use of and reproduction of photographs taken of unwilling participants has been debated both in terms of the Holocaust, as discussed above, but also colonial-era images of indigenous people, especially those taken of restricted religious ceremonies and rituals.



There are some peculiar similarities between the experience of indigenous peoples and the surveilled group discussed by Povedák: in both cases the target of the intrusive lens was secret religious gatherings but another less obvious commonality is that images were not intended to find their way back to the communities they captured. In the case of indigenous peoples, they were for the consumption of white colonial anthropologists and publics distant from the remote peoples they depicted (Peterson 2003: 119) whereas the secret police never dreamt of a scenario in which their images would find their way back to their targets. The opening of secret police archives has resulted in a similar dynamic of the re-encounter with intrusive photographs experienced by indigenous peoples, only much closer to home. The publication of restricted Australian aboriginal rituals is today unthinkable (Peterson 2003: 119), should the reproduction of surveillance images require the same level of consent and control?

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Remediation

The exhibition and publication of archival photographs is an act of remediation, a concept that has been developed and employed by media theorists to describe the way in which many kinds of images are transposed from one setting or medium to another (Bolter and Grusin 1999). In this process, distribution often involves the detachment of an image from its original context of use and the acquisition of new meanings unintended by its author. In this issue of *Martor*, Alexandra Bardan explores the *remediation* of socialist iconography as publicity for bars and nightclubs in the 2010, asking questions about the ethics of a phenomenon which seems to be as much about forgetting as remembering. Similarly, archival photographs are rarely encountered by their viewers in the “original” setting of the archive file but in the gallery or on the pages of a publication or a

website. In the process of remediation by the gallery, for instance, photographic images are often blown up or appear on digital screens. These may be minor modifications designed to allow the “original” image to remain preserved in its archive setting but they are modifications nonetheless. As such, remediation raises ethical questions about aesthetic decisions: if enlarging an image is a reasonable action, is colourisation of a black and white image also acceptable? If presenting an image on screen, is it legitimate to give it a musical accompaniment or to use a “Ken Burns Effect” leading the eye with moving close ups? For exhibition curators and book designers aesthetic decisions need to be aligned with ethical ones. Facing the reluctance of the community to allow images of their coreligionists to be reproduced, the Hidden Galleries curators, as Povedák explains, chose to display a line-drawing tracing the outline of a possible spy (in his white summer shirt, fishing) with his “targets” sitting in the background in place of the original surveillance image. Drawing of this kind acts as a kind of sign “pointing” to the photographic image in the archive without detailing the events it records. In this way, the curators intended to challenge both the perceived incontrovertibility of the photograph as material evidence of a particular religious act whilst respecting the right to privacy and transferred “ownership” of the original image/artifact itself. Here, the remediated display image attempts to reconcile the competing moral imperatives to represent past injustice whilst also respecting the personal integrity and agency of the targets of repression.

In the boldest act of remediation examined in this issue of *Martor*, the authors of a new book called *How to Look Natural in Photographs* discuss their approach to images collected or taken by the Secret Police in the People’s Republic of Poland and now in the archives of IPN. Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica’s photobook features an unsettlingly diverse range of images, only some of which constitute the now familiar form of the secret police photograph, namely the mugshot and the surveillance image. Others include grim crime scene photos. A handful



remain entirely uncertain, eluding the efforts of the IPN archivists to make sense of them. Eschewing the task of stitching these images into a legible narrative with a synthesising accompanying text, *How to Look Natural in Photographs* combines unsettling combinations of images, often double page spreads, and unexplained loops of time where some figures and motifs recur pages apart. Spreads from the book appear like visual intertitles in this issue of *Martor*. Bartecka and Rusznica deploy a variant of the technique of incongruous juxtaposition that the surrealists invented almost a century ago in the hope of shaking these images out of the conventional frames into which the post-communist memory politics has screwed them so tightly. While historians and anthropologists might object to the seemingly irresponsible way in which they have approached their subject, their book demands that we look and look again

at a class of images that we think we already know.

This theme issue of *Martor* is not offered to readers as the definitive answer to the many questions raised in this introduction. Any such claim would be self deceiving. Nor are they explored by the contributing authors of the essays in abstract or detached ways. In fact, a large part of the contributions are reflections on the ethical dimensions of practice whether conducted by photographers, anthropologists, artists, curators, archivists or historians. Ethical practice calls for an engagement with what is possible but also what is right. Their reflections are presented here as *attempts* to make responsible and fair engagements with the material and visual legacies of societies which were themselves blighted by injustice and inequity.



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I. Hands at Work

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



Fig 1: Exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

The Hand at Work or How the KGB File Leaks in the Exhibition

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Martor 26: 24-46.

ABSTRACT

The article tells the story of the use and perception of images of violence from an unusual trial against a group of believers, arrested in 1952 in Ukraine. Visitors to an exhibition held in 2019 at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca were invited to look at two sets of photographs: originals and spruced-up copies coming from a recently opened criminal file retrieved from the SBU (former KGB) archive in Kiev. Through the reconstruction of the story of the people who suffered the arrest, we attempt to question the use of research ethics and of heritage in relation to retrieving from archives and displaying violent images of the past. What are the attributes and limits of showing? And what can we learn from the hand at work, the process of actively manipulating the image?

KEYWORDS

Images of violence; museum exhibition;
KGB archives; clandestine religion;
Soviet Ukraine.



Introduction

In November 2019 in Romania at the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca images of a four-volume criminal file retrieved from the Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service (former KGB Archive) were exhibited on a museum wall. It was a room dedicated to Police Aesthetics, part of a larger exhibition on clandestine religion in the secret police archives in Central and Eastern Europe.¹ Visitors were invited to look through a piece of semi-transparent paper at the mugshots of a group of people from Soviet Ukraine charged by the MGB (as the Soviet security services were known at the time) as

members of the "ecclesiastical-monarchist organization 'the True Orthodox Church.'" The exhibition research team felt that the images were too powerful to be exhibited large, or framed. The team decided to exhibit the images on a clipboard that visitors could handle themselves and covered the clipboard with semi-transparent tracing paper. Out of the entire exhibition in Cluj-Napoca these images were the only ones explicitly showing violence. The exhibition generally was not about the repression itself, but about how the secret police represented, visualized, and systematized the groups that they were pursuing. The images and materials presented were all confiscated, collated, or created by the police or secret police and originated from diverse so-called "anti-

religious” operations. As the introductory label of the exhibition written by the curators Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapaló notes, the materials have a dual character: they were used by the secret police as incriminating evidence against religious communities, but they also represent memory and cultural patrimony, bearing testimony to the creative spirit of groups and individuals who suffered persecution.

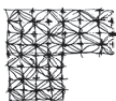
The text printed on the tracing paper varied (Figure 1). We had a shorter version and a longer version. The shorter text told visitors that violent images were on display. It also invited them to look behind the paper at the images and see if they noticed any difference between the two sets of photographs. The longer text told a story of what we labelled “Singing Women”.

But truly, this was only a simplification of the materials found in the file. As this article shows, the story of Panfil Kolesnik and of his family and religious group, including children, has many layers to be discovered.

This article examines the use of archival images of violence and suffering in the creation of post-Soviet heritage, namely by being exhibited in a museum context after being retrieved from the formerly top-classified secret police file. While choosing to display the images of violence—but also providing a choice to the visitors “not to look”—we are aware of the ethical concerns raised and the danger in the banal recirculation of images of historical violence that “may prevent, rather than facilitate, engagement with the historical subject” (Crane 2008: 309). While historian Susan Crane advocates for the reclassification of Holocaust photographs, we try to find different ways to look at and read the images of violence. Following the opening of the secret police archives after 1989, the life of these secret materials then embarked on an entirely new trajectory. An increasingly massive amount of digital (and open-access)

objects from recently opened communist-era archives began to travel in the public sphere. The process is irreversible. Today they circulate more widely still on various social media platforms, where one often finds them completely removed from any sense of their original context and pasted into new narratives. In order to avoid this “banal attention” Susan Crane writes about, we seek to historically contextualize the images, to immerse them within the story of socialist repression but also within the storylines of those people who were pictured, including the afterlife of the MGB file in which the images were enclosed. By gradually adding layers of the story, we grasp a multivalent power of the photographs under scrutiny. In other words, through “thick reading” of the file and reconstruction of the story, the spectator can see the changing meanings and the historical agency of the photographs and begin to read the images in a different way: not (only) as images of violence and suffering but as images of resistance and resilience. This re-contextualizing approach reveals the believers’ agency not only as victims but as historical actors who withdrew from the Soviet system, choosing instead nonconformist social and religious alternatives.

The pictured persons were not crying as we thought originally, they were singing and praying; despite the police officers trying to restrain them for the arrest photograph. Prisoner resistance to being photographed is not necessarily uncommon. In the broader European context, one finds instances of police attempting to photograph reluctant arrestees, such as Irish Fenians refusing to sit for their mug shots and laughing at the camera, or a female suspect contorting her face for the photographer (Suibhne, Martin 2005: 107; Gunning 1995: 27-29; Tagg 2009: XXV). Such candid photos reveal the hidden reality that lurks behind police photography in general, that is, as Christian Phéline described it, the exercise of political power on the body and image



Singing Women

They never stopped singing and praying—during their arrest, while their photographs were being taken, during their pre-trial interrogations, and even during the court hearing.

This group of twenty-three believers were arrested as members of the True Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 1952. All we know about them now is that they were poor peasants who practiced their faith in their private homes, mainly at night. This was enough to charge them with conducting anti-Soviet activity and propaganda.

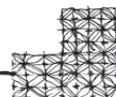
Their trial was highly unusual, breaking all the standards of the secret police's criminal procedures. As reported in the secret police internal statements, believers resisted arrest: they barricaded the entrance of their house, tore their own clothes off, fell on the floor, crying and singing out loud. Later they refused to answer any questions during the entire pre-trial investigation. "*God knows*" and "*I will only answer before the Judgement of God*" were their only answers to the investigators while all the time they were praying out loud and singing religious hymns, even during the court session.

During their pre-trial detention, believers went on a hunger strike as a result of which five of them died a few days after being sentenced by the court. The arrested believers also refused to walk, to talk, or even to sleep on their beds. The policemen had to carry them everywhere, to the interrogation rooms and to the courtroom. They were sentenced to between ten and twenty-five years in labor camps. Most of them had their sentence reduced in 1955 as a result of an amnesty after Stalin's death. However, some of them were arrested again in 1957.

Here we see two versions of their arrest photographs. As the photographs were being taken, believers intentionally closed their eyes, turned their heads away from the camera, or sang while the secret police violently tried to restrain them, their hands and black gloves clearly visible. Police officers later tried to correct these "spoiled" photographs and to remove the traces of their violent intervention from the images. The "spruced-up" copies with the shaded hands of policemen were used in the official documentation, while the smaller-size original photographs were appended to the back of the arrest questionnaires.



Archive file:
HDASBU, fond 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 1





of the suspect in which the camera itself operates as an extension of the law and the embodiment of the discipline-mechanism (quoted in Gunning 1995: 27). But the case of the images exhibited in the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca reveals another important dimension and, hence, ethical implication. Looking at their file in the present we believe that the arrested believers refused radically, on religious grounds, to be photographed or recorded during interrogation sessions. By exposing these images of resistance we run a great risk of becoming co-creators of this story of violence. Yet, by adding layers of tracing paper, we also make the image less visible to the audience. Therefore, we prevent visitors from looking at these images easily. We invite them instead to reflect on and debate the impact of violence on people and the harmful hand at work. In this case, the museum/ exhibition space is conceived as a healing place, not as one that recreates torture. We undertake a “thick description” of the file and the photographs and interpret the layered process of working with the image and of using the image as document in staging a past and, later, in us telling the story of a regime and the process of coming to terms with contested pasts.

In the history of socialism there are multiple examples of manipulation of images to correct past events for present purposes. There is the Soviet anecdote about an imagined Armenian Radio broadcast, reproduced by Watson: “Armenian radio is asked ‘Is it possible to foretell the future?’ Answer: ‘Yes, that is no problem: we know exactly what the future will be like. Our problem is with the past: that keeps changing’” (1999: 2).

This example has an obvious meaning: that socialist ways of looking at history were troubled by the representation of the past. This tendency was also encountered in the socialist obsession with documenting and archiving the present (which was believed to be unquestionably “glorious”)—an attitude which clashed with the need to re-write the

past for present uses. In these processes of archiving and re-writing, there was always something left by mistake, or something that was not never thought to become visible, a remainder or a trace which escaped deletion.

Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) uses the example of a hat as a trace. In February 1948, two Czechoslovakian communist leaders stand together on a snowy Prague balcony. One of them gives his hat to the other leader. The two men are photographed and this becomes an emblematic image of the Czechoslovakian revolution. Four years later, the owner of the hat is expelled from the Communist Party and executed; he is removed from all official records, including the now-famous photograph. All that survives of him—in the photograph—is his hat on the other leader’s head.

We have taken the notion of layers and exploited the very manipulation of the document attempted by the KGB investigators, and later the manipulation researchers and visitors operated. The composition of the file from the Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service is deciphered in the composition of the display. What we found in the archival material was a double manipulation of the truth and of the image. First it was the manipulation of force. To imprison, to restrain by force the arrestee, to hold his or her head with brutal hands is something horrible. Second, to shade out hands and gloves in the attempt to delete the hand with a scratch, is again another form of lie. Talking about icons and iconoclasm during the Reformation in Germany, Koerner wrote: “The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image’s claim to offer truth” (2002: 93). We know that scratched surfaces talk about a desire or requirement to delete something.² As we have discussed elsewhere (Nicolescu 2017), acts of creation of images and displays have ethical dimensions; wherever there is such intervention or manipulation, intuitively we sense that



Fig 2: Exhibition
"Hidden Galleries:
Clandestine Religion
in the Secret Police
Archives" at the
Museum of Art in
Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Photo credit:
Roland Vaczi.

something important is there. For those of you who will read this article up to the end, we write the story of Panfil Kolesnik and of his group, but also in order to add another layer to our museum exhibit—a letter written by the youngest child of Panfil Kolesnik in 1998. This letter was not introduced in the display, but is essential for understanding the importance of telling this story further.

This study addresses the complicated process of making heritage out of controversial and traumatic pieces of knowledge retrieved from the secret archives. Telling the story of these people in a museum context shifts the way archival images are perceived. We transform these images into heritage, we give them a public dimension, one that allows for manipulations and domestications of memories. The making of heritage, particularly related to the contested past of totalitarianism, is a controversial social and cultural process—an act of communication and meaning making that creates ways to understand and engage with the present (Smith 2006: 2). It involves a dynamic interplay between the agency of a spectator, the agency of “things” displayed, and a social context in which this interaction occurs. Through this field of interaction, new values and meanings are

embodied—an often emotional moment that creates a sense of commitment and belonging in the present (Plets 2019: 1081). The heritage is ours—whoever is looking at the images—although people depicted in the photographs are not related to us, nor are their religious communities that left living traces of memories. Yet it is us who attach social and cultural values to them and link them to the present. Historian David Lowenthal explains that in a world full of hunger and strife people need heritage, because they need simplified stories about the past that can solve present insecurities. When grandparents can no longer tell these stories to their children on their laps, heritage does this work.

Heritage starts with what individuals inherit and bequeath... [It] offers evocative personal inventory: memories... old photographs... family words and tales... grand-mother's old quilt ... a locket with a picture of a long-forgotten aunt... smells that trigger past events ... an old wedding dress... father's pocket watch... our ancestral cemetery... special holiday meals... [. . .] a favourite teddy bear... a tree you climbed as a child... [. . .] a lullaby... (Lowenthal 1998: 31).



We are interested in delving into the images themselves, but also into what transpires between the viewer and the photograph when these images are not told in a private context but looked at, commented on, and interacted with in a public institution (Figure 2). Their role in the technology of memory. The relationship between the state-produced photography, post-socialist memory of violence, and traumatic pasts. Memories of state violence.

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What do we learn from the file

In May 1952, a group of twenty-three believers was arrested in eight neighboring villages in the Kiev region of Soviet Ukraine. No one knew much about them. Their co-villagers described them as Stundists or Baptists and knew nothing more than the fact that, even though they displayed Orthodox icons, crosses, and church books in their homes, they never went to Orthodox Church and did not recognize Orthodox priests. The members of the group lived isolated lives; they rarely talked to their neighbors, avoided representatives of the Soviet authorities, and never discussed their faith except to repeat the phrase: "God knows" (*Bog znaet*). All we know about them now is that they were poor peasants who gathered for prayer in secret in their homes, sometimes travelling between villages to pray together. Statements taken from forty-eight witnesses (all of them recorded by KGB investigators nearly a month before the group's arrest) confirmed that the believers refused to enroll in local collective farms or to work at other state enterprises, never paid taxes or registered for other Soviet documents, and never used money ("the mark of the dragon")³ or sent their kids to public school. They farmed their individual plots and occasionally worked on the side in exchange for food and clothes. Some had been arrested before and had

spent time in prison. Others had had their children forcefully taken from them and had never seen them again.

The MGB official closing indictment charged the group with conducting anti-Soviet activity and propaganda as members of the "ecclesiastical-monarchist organization 'the True Orthodox Church.'" Although none of the twenty-three defendants, nor the forty-three witnesses, nor even the interrogators themselves ever mentioned the name of the True Orthodox Church, the nature of the case required rigid categorization according to the standardized Soviet secret police practice. It required the assignment of otherwise ordinary semi-literate peasant believers from the Ukrainian countryside to an established "cliché from an infamous stock of characters" (Vatulescu 2010: 38; Verdery 2014: 56). Starting from the late 1920s, the Soviet state launched an all-country repression campaign against popular religious dissent movements and grassroots religiosity, which were as difficult to control as they were difficult to define. The concepts such as the "red-dragon-type organization," the "ecclesiastic-monarchist underground," and the "True Orthodox Church" were formulated on the pages of the secret police (known as OGPU in the late 1920s) files. A novel documentation genre, a model criminal file and model indictment against the "ecclesiastic-monarchist underground," printed as a brochure and circulated amongst regional GPU branches, worked as a sort of manual that transmitted a constellation of categories and techniques and trained secret police officers in the regions to produce homogenized and standardized knowledge through repeated formulae and frames (Vagramenko 2021). The group on trial in May 1952 fit into this framework; it was a model case applied in practice.

Having said that, the case was unusual and seems to break the standards of the investigation file of the late-Stalinist period. Four volumes of the case were the outcome of



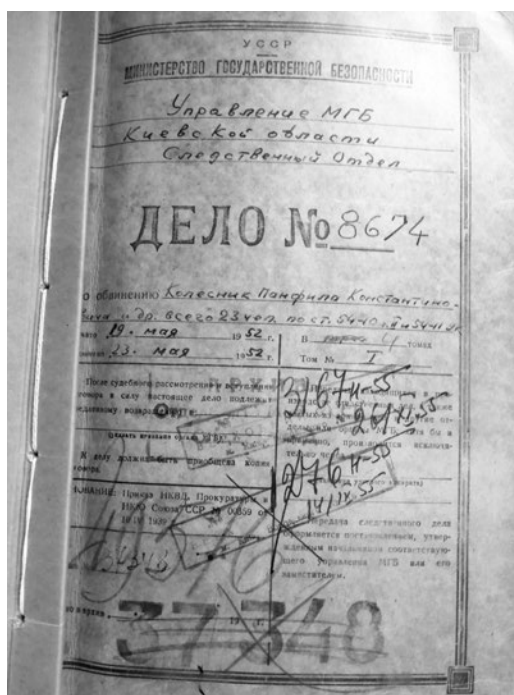


Fig 3: Criminal file on Panfil Kolesnik and other 22 believers.
Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346.

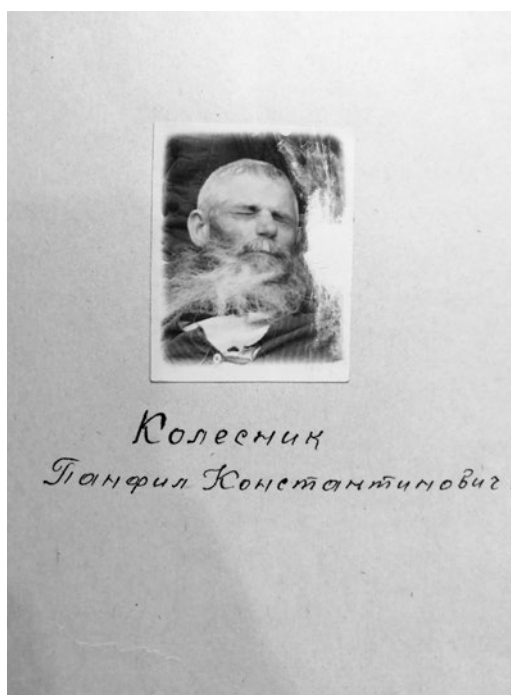


Fig 4: Arrest photograph of Panfil Kolesnik. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346. ark. 3.

an exceptionally short (at least for the 1950s criminalistics standards) investigation. The pre-trial review of the believers was brief: a mere three days of interrogations and then an additional night of twenty-two orchestrated confrontations between the arrestees and witnesses (conducted from 9 p.m. until 4 a.m.). During the review, the believers refused to answer questions, responding to everything by saying simply “God knows” or “I will only answer to the Judgment of God.” They offered no denunciations or confessions. They never stopped singing and praying. They kept at it when the police came for them, as their arrest photographs were being taken, during the interrogations that preceded their trial, even during the court hearing. The case lasted nine days between the arrests and the court hearing with its final decision—twenty-five years in labor camps for most of the defendants.

Another important piece of information that we learn from the file is its unusual visual composition. The file opens up with a

single photograph pasted in the middle of the page, with yellowed traces of glue, and only a name handwritten under the photo: Panfil Kolesnik (Figures 3 and 4). An image shows an old bearded man with closed eyes, his head turned away from the camera, and a torn jacket. On the right side of the photograph, something was thoroughly scratched off. Whereas KGB photography normally functioned as an extension of the textual narrative—identification photographs of arrestees or surveillance photographs appeared as inserts within standard textual files—this file singled out the image from the rest of the documentation narrative. It was attached to a blank sheet of paper. Apparently, the photograph was taken in prison, and it was supposed to be the man’s criminal identification portrait, commonly known as the mugshot. Nevertheless, the image clearly broke all the rigid rules and guidelines applied to the taking of mugshot photos in Soviet criminalistics practice. The guidelines required that arrest photographs

have a standardized two-shot form, one full frontal facial view paired with a view from the side, almost always shot against a light background, free of distractions that might obscure the contour of the face, combined with the textual description of the arrestee's features. According to the Soviet criminalistics manual, no physical intervention in the photograph was allowed (Vyshinskii 1935: 52-54; more on KGB photography see Vagramenko, forthcoming). The photographs we find in the file followed none of the above mentioned rules. Yet if shadings were made in order to hide some infringement of the criminalistics standards, why was the "deviant" image of Panfil Kolesnik placed so central in the file, as if to attract attention?

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *anonymity and simplification*. We realize that for the Cluj-Napoca exhibition we did not choose the image of Panfil Kolesnik, but only of some women in the group. We did not give their names. We even hesitated between calling them Singing Women and Crying Women. We were not sure what the images in the archive showed. Very often ethnographic and museum exhibitions talk about people generically without giving names. Sometimes they do this for reasons of lack of space, other times because they do not have access to the archival materials that usually accompany objects and images brought in the exhibition. It also happens that they do not give names because when a specific image or object was taken from the field, names of people from whom the images/ objects came were not considered important. Simplification operates on another level in many museums. Once objects are taken from their context, they can be manipulated more easily.

The other twenty-two individual cases in the file started with similar mug shots of the arrestees, except the case of Panfil's wife, Maria Kolesnik, whose mugshot for some reason was removed, leaving only traces of

yellowed glue on a blank page (they were possibly re-used in Maria's subsequent trial in 1957). The images captured an unusual dynamic: as the photos were being taken, old and young women and men intentionally closed their eyes, turned their heads away, some images with grimacing faces tell that depicted arrestees were crying or singing, yet some others helplessly hung on the policemen's hands. Nine photographs were visibly altered—scratches obscured something in the photographs (Figures 5 and 6).

As we sift through pages of the file, we discover *what* was so thoroughly scratched out of the images. The smaller-size, original photos were appended to the back of the arrest forms. There we see what was removed: the officers tried to restrain the resisting believers, their hands and gloves clearly visible. When police officers later tried to correct these "tainted" photographs, they removed the evidence of their violent intervention from the images, which one can see in the spruced-up copies with the hands of the policemen shaded out (Figures 7 and 8).

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The gap, or how the file leaks

It is this discrepancy between the original photograph and its spruced-up copy that gives a glimpse into what happened. This gap between the original image and its primitive photomontage—shaded hands and gloves of policemen violently restraining the arrested—also tells us about the very process of knowledge production. "The voices of the persecuted reach us (when they do) through the filters of their persecutors' questions and as copied down by third parties, the notaries," points out Carlo Ginzburg while reading transcripts of inquisition trials (1980: x) in an observation that is directly applicable to the Soviet secret police interrogation protocols. The voices of defendants are



filtered through the KGB interrogator's questions, and we can (or cannot) hear them through his (in)ability to master the narrative of the protocol. In both historical cases, the transcripts of (inquisitorial and Soviet political police) trials are the product of pressure and coercion. Yet Ginzburg grounds his research on the conception of discrepancy between the questions of the inquisitors and the responses of the defendants—the gap separating the narrative of the interrogations by the judges from the responses of the defendants. This narrative gap allows him to salvage from inquisitorial trials the fragments of forgotten popular culture of sixteenth-century Italy. There is little gap to be found in the KGB file. The Soviet interrogator was empowered by the system to distort the voices of the persecuted, as well as to emasculate the entire document's heteroglossia, the co-existence of a variety of often antagonistic voices that participated in the production of the text (Verdery 2014: 51–52). In the production of the narrative of the KGB file, the task of the officer was to subordinate it to a single dominant interpretation or to the governing epistemologies. This order constituted the established state narrative of the documentation and determined what can and cannot be said and what can and cannot be shown. In other words, in its record keeping, the Soviet secret police processed discordant textual pieces or voices into a standardized textual format—the wooden language that is often difficult to read. This biased compilation of heterogeneous sources constructed a new socialist reality and had enormous power over people's lives. The final text of the criminal file was supposed to demonstrate the utmost victory of the Soviet power over the anti-Soviet enemy. In this instance, to triumphantly unveil the organized political insurgency hidden behind the mask of spontaneous religiosity.

In this production of socialist reality, however, the secret police files sometimes

failed to overcome heteroglossia. The interrogators were often not so skillful (or educated enough) at mastering the narrative and encoding the text in standardized formats. Sometimes we can find the narrative gap Ginzburg writes about that separates the dominant Soviet narrative and the answers of the persecuted. Likewise, brushed-up interrogation protocols can leak the voices of persecuted believers with their faith and agency, undermining the patterns of KGB narrative and exposing different storylines and viewpoints. To make it clear, let's compare the following three answers of the same woman during the lengthy interrogation, which was part of a criminal case that preceded the arrest of Panfil's group.

Defendant: "We prayed and read the Gospel and the Saints' Lives. Panfil used to tell us that every true believer and he who truly wants to achieve salvation of the soul has to [trust] God always and to follow God's commandments—do not offend anyone, do not kill, love your neighbor, do not steal and do not lie, and do not sin with words nor deeds. He spoke nothing else . . ."

Officer: "We know that he gave you and others direct instructions about anti-Soviet activity. Why don't you report on this?"

Defendant: "He possibly told something but not in front of me, therefore I can't report on this . . ."

Officer: "The investigation knows that under the guise of religious teaching he, in fact, carried out active anti-Soviet work. We suggest you to report the truth in regard to this matter . . ."

Defendant: "He used to give us anti-Soviet instructions and trained us in an anti-Soviet way, using our religious superstitions. He carried out his anti-Soviet agitation during prayer meetings at his house."⁴





Fig 5: Altered arrest photograph of Raisa Kornienko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 185.



Fig 6: Altered arrest photograph of Maria Tishchenko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 242.



Fig 7: Original arrest photograph of Raisa Kornienko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 192 rev.



Fig 8: Original arrest photograph of Maria Tishchenko. Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 249 rev.





Fig 9: Altered arrest photograph of Galina Kravchenko.
Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 96.



Fig 10: Original arrest photograph of Galina Kravchenko.
Source: SBU Archive, f. 6, spr. 69346, ark. 103 rev.

The time gap between these three answers was several hours. We can only guess what happened during these hours, whether the discrepancy between the answers was a sign of coercion or a relative inability of the interrogator to master the narrative at the very beginning. On another occasion one can find the mixture of registers within the same sentence: “[register A] I decided to follow Dakhno and Panfil and to live [like them], to pray, and to give up earthly life in order to save my soul, [register B] that is to say I decided to continue my participation in the anti-Soviet activity of the Dakhno’s group.”⁵ The mixed register and the gap between different representations of the same voice allow us to read *against* the archival grain: to retrieve stories of the unrecorded life of an ordinary believer in the Ukrainian countryside during late Stalinism. It also allows us to read, as Ann Stoler suggests (2009: 22–28), *along* the archival grain and to look into internal mechanisms of the KGB file production.

This is all the more important, as the KGB documentation was the product of the state machine and a fundamental element in the technologies of knowledge production—the technologies that, according to Stoler, reproduced the state itself.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *process*. The hand at work in an archival context is something that researchers very often see—documents are annotated, changed. One can see various drafts and changes made to various documents, be they texts or images. But these changes are also testimony of temporal changes, of processes. How can museums capture such processes? We have used the tool of the layered display, one in which the visitor participates actively in the process of discovering the change made to the document/ image (Figures 9 and 10).

Similar to textual forms of the secret police documentation, the photographs enclosed in the file provide an insight into

both the repressed histories of popular religion and the origin and mechanisms of knowledge production. The difference (or Ginzburg's gap) between the original image and its copy with the primitive photo manipulation unveil the use of violence, which the MGB tried to conceal—shaded hands and gloves of policemen violently restraining the arrested. These “banal traces of difficult history” (Elizabeth Edwards, quoted in Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2011: 91) show how standardized representation of the “enemy” contrasted with what the original mugshots, together with the file stories, disclosed: peasant religious radicalism which the upheaval of Stalin's Terror and the turmoil of the war had brought forth. The gap between the two versions of the images also reveals what Ann Stoler (2009) calls the file's epistemological and political anxieties: the law of what cannot be shown, the disturbed Soviet order and common sense. It finally exposed the fear on the part of the secret police of breaking the code of silence surrounding the use of violence and of disclosing what might be seen as a failed case of enemy unmasking.

The somewhat crude editing of the images shown above—replete with shaded-out gloves and hands—tells us something of the technical approach of an officer to a photograph and the logic behind it. What could actually spoil a mug shot: the things outlined in internal manuals, such as closed eyes or grimacing faces of prisoners; or rather aspects that could not be found in manuals, such as the hands of policemen exposing violence? As we argue elsewhere, these physical alterations, or what Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004: 13) would refer to as “material intervention in the narrative” of the photograph, have the power to fundamentally alter the meaning and content of the image. Thus, in addition to exposing the usually hidden coercion that was inherent to the arrest process, this set of MGB photos shows how the language of the photograph was re-instrumentalized

to generate a different narrative and hence new meaning and agency as evidence for the prosecution of the group on trial (Vagramenko, forthcoming).

The techniques of retouching and photo manipulation were formally prohibited in the police practice. Yet, they were not as straightforward as open violations of police procedure or conscious manipulation of police photography for malevolent ends. Nor were they a mere embodiment of a disciplinary technique (Tagg 2009; Suibhne, Martin 2005: 102; Gunning 1995: 29–31). The use of photography by the Soviet political police assisted the production of a new kind of knowledge and power. Through the repurposing of photographs for new functions, or by shading elements that were considered to be out of place, the Soviet secret police created new objects of knowledge and reinforced the regime of truth that laid the foundation of a new social order.

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Panfil's story: A holy man or a ringleader



The arrest on May 19, 1952 was part of a larger MGB campaign to purge popular religiosity from the Ukrainian countryside in the mid-1950s. Four months prior to the arrest of the twenty-three believers, local KGB officers “liquidated” another group of believers from the same villages, also tried as True Orthodox Christians. In a snowball effect, their interrogations threw up new names, hence new arrests and new trials, which, in turn, triggered new arrests. Sometimes spouses, relatives, and acquaintances of the arrestees formed a separate criminal case.

The defendants were mainly widowed or single mothers and their children of full legal age. Many of them had lost their husbands during the Second World War. Among the arrestees were also younger persons with school education, former

Komsomol members, kolkhoz workers, and socialist activists. They withdrew from Soviet life once they had chosen religious conversion, which took place during or immediately after the war. All were classified as poor peasants in the arrest forms: a hut with a straw roof and a small household plot was the biggest property listed. Some were wandering from village to village, begging or doing casual work in exchange for goods. Upon their arrest, the children of the defendants were taken into custody and sent to orphanages; as we will show later, the story of one of the children unexpectedly appeared in the afterlife of the file.

A fifty-two-year-old poor shoemaker, named Panfil Kolesnik, was the main defendant (the group criminal file was titled “Kolesnik and others”). He was arrested along with his wife Maria and his son Ivan. Panfil was known in the surrounding villages as a visionary elder (*prozorlivyi starets*) and a holy man, “the man who lived the life of a righteous man” (*zhivet zhizn’u pravednika*), and people used to gather at his house for prayers. The interrogator translated this as the “ringleader (*glavar*) of the illegal underground group.” Panfil was also a man of radical religious principles. He turned his peasant house into a domestic church, full of icons and ecclesiastic books, and fully dedicated himself to God. “You have to pray everywhere and think nothing else but about saving your soul,” witnesses reported his words. He preached the narrow path of losing everything in the name of God—the thorny path, he told, not everybody could follow. “He has chosen only God and to think of nothing else, in the hope of saving his soul on the Last Judgement, the Doomsday,” testified one of his followers. Another arrested woman recalled Panfil’s word: “I have decided to go to all lengths, even to death, in the name of God, for all I want is to save my soul.”⁶

The file traces the beginning of Panfil’s religious path as far back as 1926, the time of the post-Revolution turmoil. During the collectivization in the 1930s, Panfil refused

to join kolkhoz and the Soviet authorities confiscated his private piece of land and a farm. In the following years, he worked as a shoemaker in exchange for food or goods, never touching Soviet money. Panfil and his co-believers did not recognize secular authorities: they did not take part in Soviet state enterprises, refused to accept Soviet internal passports, and to participate in state elections, did not pay taxes, nor signed up for the Soviet government loan. Fully withdrawn from social and state life, holding lengthy overnight prayers and avoiding contacts with their neighbors, they sparked both rumors and curiosity. Reportedly the Soviet authorities from *sel’sovet* administration and Komsomol activists visited their houses on a number of occasions: “to inquire about the nature of their faith (*sushchestva ikh very*),” but never heard anything from them except “God knows”.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *field specificity*. How can we interpret Panfil’s position in relation to the state? Are there any current figures behaving in similar ways today? How do contemporary art exhibitions regard and display these movements of opposition in the present? It seems that various fields and disciplines intersect. One wonders what happens if materials obtained from one field are used in others.

For some believers, the May 1952 arrest was not their first encounter with the Soviet repressive machine. Some had been previously sentenced for refusal to serve in the army, others for not paying taxes or accepting Soviet documents. In winter 1940, the court ruled to terminate Panfil’s custody of his three minor children for refusing to give them a communist education in a public school. The children were forcefully sent to the orphanage. “After his children were taken away, he ran across the village barefoot in winter and prayed, but soon they came after him too, to arrest him,” a neighbor reported.⁷ As we read the file, we learn that during the



war, the orphanage was closed down and children lived on the street. The eldest child, Ivan, was wandering and begging until he reunited with his family after the war. The fate of the other two children remained unknown. In May 1952, at the age of twenty-four, Ivan was arrested together with his parents, Panfil and Maria. By the time of the arrest in 1952, Panfil's family counted two more minor children, aged seven and eleven. They too were sent to the orphanage; but this time, as we will see later, the file gives a glimpse into their further life.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *nuance*. The information that we found in this file and the richness of analysis is extremely nuanced. What do museums need in order to be more nuanced? In our case, it is very probable that an entire room/ exhibition could have been dedicated only to this file. But are museums places to diffuse nuanced information, or rather places to condense information and tell short stories? In the exhibition we focused mainly on the idea of layers, which is crucial to how archives work. By allowing visitors to touch the boards on which more layers of images and texts were exhibited, we wanted to create a metaphor of the archival research. We wanted to show to them a slice of the richness found by the researcher delving in the archive.

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More layers of the file story: arrest and verdict

Their arrest and trial were anything but ordinary. Based on the official description of the events that appears in the file's closing indictment, the believers who had gathered at Panfil's house for overnight prayers resisted the arrest and barricaded themselves in the house, tearing off their clothes, breaking windows and furniture, falling to the floor, and hysterically screaming and singing.⁸

The file, however, included the statement of the group conducting the arrest, written in haste on a crumpled notebook sheet. This document describes the events in a different way: the arrest group (the MGB officers and village council members) broke the windows and forced their way into the house. "The arrest was undertaken with the use of force," it states (this can explain the broken furniture and torn clothes). Believers were kneeling to pray, when the officers broke in. Refusing to follow police orders, they sat on the floor holding hands and began to sing and pray aloud as the officers were dragging them into the truck.

Following their arrest, a number of the believers went on a hunger strike and were forcibly fed, as a result of which possibly as many as five of them died just a few days after sentencing. They also refused to walk, talk, or even to sleep in their beds while in prison, which meant that they had to be carried everywhere, to the interrogation rooms and the courtroom included. Once in the court room, the believers refused to sit and lay down on the floor. They were singing religious songs and praying aloud, as the judge was reading the closing indictment:

The investigation has proven the following: the illegal anti-Soviet organization True Orthodox Church is the most reactionary ecclesiastic-monarchist organization whose aim is to carry out hostile activity in order to restore the old monarchist order in the USSR. To achieve this, the members of the organization, under the guise of differences with the legally functioning in the USSR [Russian Orthodox] church, carried out active hostile work against the current state and social order in the USSR.⁹

Another accusation was that the defendants carried out active anti-Soviet agitation, popularizing "monarchist" teaching, despite all the witness interrogation protocols that testified rather a sort of vow of silence amongst the believers and their refusal to communicate with the outside world, with even the closest neighbors



knowing little about their faith. Following the same logic, the judge criminalized the religious upbringing of the defendants' children: "In order to recruit new members into the sect [they] educated their children in religious spirit and drew them into the True Orthodox Church underground."¹⁰

The prosecutor asked for twenty-five-year sentences for each of the defendants except the two youngest women aged twenty-two and twenty-three. For his final plea, Panfil was brief: "God be my judge, I ask only God to pardon me."¹¹ The rest of the defendants, except one woman, refused to make his or her final plea. Unexpectedly, after days of silence, an elder woman, Agrippina Rybak, gave up: "I ask the court to forgive me. I have realized that this faith is hostile towards Soviet power. My husband was killed in the war, I ask the court to pardon me." We do not know what made her speak, and whether she had previously kept silent at all, or she had been silenced in the file. Her case is even more ambiguous as we learn that apparently she was the only one from the group who did not go on hunger strike while in prison: the medical report on her force-feeding is absent. Her final words possibly saved her life, as she became the third person in the group who got a reduced sentence—ten years in labor camps.

The court pronounced the verdict on May 29, 1952. Two days later, on May 31, one of the defendants, Khristinia Tishchenko (aged sixty), died in the MGB prison No.1 in Kiev, before deportation to a labor camp could occur. A month later, on June 26, her twenty-six-year-old daughter Maria died in the same prison. Panfil Kolesnik was reported dead on June 10, in the same prison. Paraskevia Kornienko (aged fifty) and Matrena Ivashchenko (aged fifty-eight) died the following two months in the same prison. Natalia Nakoreniuk (aged sixty-four) died a few days after she was deported to the Gulag. The rest of the surviving convicts had their sentences reduced in 1955 and then commuted altogether in 1956, as a result

of the amnesty following Stalin's death. Some were rearrested in 1957, however, and sentenced to new terms. Paradoxically, the state bureaucratic machine continued to appeal and review Panfil's verdict in the following several years (up to 1956): first, it declined the re-examination of his case, then initiated the appeal process and approved the reduction of his term, and finally amnestied him. Even though Panfil had died long ago behind the walls of the same state machine.

As an echo of the story, three years after the trial, being already Gulag prisoners and working at the copper mines of the infamous Steplag labor camp, two believers, Raisa Kornienko and Liubov Levchenko, refused to sign the document on the reduction of their term: "due to her religious convictions," wrote a prison officer, adding with a spelling mistake, "a nun (*manashka*)."¹²

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The file's afterlife instead of conclusions

After the final release of the defendants, the file was closed with the following wording: "release due to the inexpediency of imprisonment;" but it had its afterlife in postsocialism. As was the case with most of the Soviet-era criminal cases based on "political crimes," this case of the twenty-three believers was re-examined by the rehabilitation commission in 1992. All former prisoners were rehabilitated, most of them posthumously. Yet, there was one more document that the archivist had appended to the file as late as 1998. It was a letter written by one of Panfil's children, Miron Kolesnik, and sent to the Ukrainian Security Services forty-six years after the trial. In his letter, Miron inquired about the rehabilitation status of his parents and his brother Ivan, all of them accused in the case. His letter shed light on a story that did not make it into the file. Miron was eight by the time of the





Fig 11: Exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

arrest of his family in 1952; his elder sister Irina was eleven. After both parents and their elder brother Ivan were imprisoned, Miron and Irina were sent to an orphanage. Their new birth certificates stated "parents unknown." From the letter, we also learn that their mother returned home in 1956 being very ill. (We do not know whether she was able to reunite with her children). The next year, however, she was arrested again and sentenced to another ten years, which she served fully in the Mordovian Gulag. She died shortly after her final release. Miron's brother Ivan followed the same path of the second term and deportation to the labor camp. "My parents and my brother were repressed for no justifiable reason, in 1957 as in 1951, for they committed no crimes. They all were religious, [honest] and hard-working people," Miron wrote in his letter. He knew about the hunger strike that happened many years ago in the MGB prison and he knew about the death of his father but he never managed to find out where his father

was buried. The archive kept not record in this regard.

Miron's story enclosed in a letter at the end of his father's file shows that archival files are alive. Papers, letters, notes can continue to be added. But Miron's story is also one about the role of museums and heritage sites as institutions which tell stories. Heritage, Lowenthal warned us, can be used for good purposes as well as for bad ones. As researchers and curators, we need to know how to write the stories so that we heal wounds rather than make new ones. In the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, we hope we managed to heal.

EXHIBITION THOUGHT: *beyond text*. Having the images exhibited on the wall, a different encounter with the visual material takes place. As we have already developed this idea elsewhere, museums have the power to tell stories beyond texts; "museums allow for a bodily proximity and a new type of knowledge to emerge" (Nicolescu 2020).



Fig 12: Students visiting the exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Photo credit: Roland Vaczi.

The many visitors that stopped in front of this display and were attracted by its message wrote feedback cards explaining how this story and the entire exhibition moved them. The text below is an example of what a

secondary school pupil or a student in Cluj-Napoca took from the exhibition. Looking at the scanned card and the calligraphy one can almost sense the emotion felt by this young visitor.

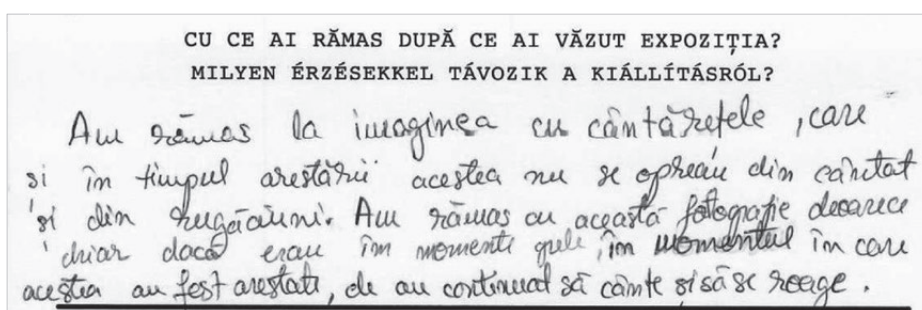


Fig 13: A feedback card written by a visitor of the exhibition "Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives" at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. © Hidden Galleries project.

"I took with me the image of the singing women which during the arrest did not stop singing and praying. I kept in mind this photograph because it made me think that even if they were passing through very difficult moments during the arrest, they kept singing and praying."



Other examples of feedback cards add to this one.

I only came for a short visit, but what I saw here was so captivating that I stayed for hours.

*

I was impressed with the women that were tortured in prison, who even though suffered, did not stop from testifying their faith. The entire visit was impressive and I enjoyed learning new things about my own country.

*

I got to experience a small portion of the emotions of those times. I was left with the question of conserving these articles and objects in the archives or within the communities. I am glad that I have the right to religious freedom.

*

Contact with a life that I would have never known about otherwise. I found a small part of history that I don't remember learning about in school. I looked at life experiences and tragedies that were, until now, just some names in an archival inventory. Signed by students UAD (University of Art and Design).

*

A very enlightening and comprehensive exhibition! I've never seen an exhibition of this kind before and covers a part of history and society I knew very little of. I particularly liked the asking of the ethical questions relating to these materials.

As Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko argue, there is a "radical incompatibility of the different narratives derived from the same photographs" (2011: 88). Images that originally were used as evidence against anti-Soviet activity, nowadays, retrieved from institutional obscurity in their dusty files and pasted into the new narratives of a public exhibition, they acquire new meaning and new agency as witnesses for the prosecution, this time not for the dictatorial regime but against it. This demonstrates, Sarkisova and Shevchenko's argument goes on, "the malleability of photographic interpretations as well, paradoxically, as the powerful evidential appeal that images . . . continue to exert as undeniable 'certificates of presence.'" In a similar vein, in the display as well as in this essay, we have attempted to show how the different ways of looking and seeing the images of the Soviet-era repression shape the memory of the past for individuals, as well as for communities. When we did not know an answer, we asked questions. As some quotes inserted above show, the exhibition

texts asked questions of visitors about the ethical use of the images on display. Reading the feedback cards, one notices how various visitors learn different things and adapt what they learn to their previous knowledge and educational background. Looking at these "certificates of presence," younger generations learn stories that were not told by their grandparents and parents out of fear, out of shame, or out of ignorance/lack of knowledge. Talking to young visitors, we learn that their grandparents suffered similar persecutions or that they were employed amongst the persecutors. There are mechanisms involved in the articulation of the traumatic experience and in how the difficult stories are to be told in the present.

The recent past is recent, and there are still wounds to be discovered and healed, by domesticating the past for our own uses. Heritage allows for revisitations of archives in contemporaneity (the digital archive of the project and the displays), but it also stages past traumatic experiences for us to learn in the present from convoluted pasts.



NOTES

1. The exhibition *Imagini din Galerii Secrete* was curated by Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapáló as part of the project "Creative Agency and Religious Minorities: 'Hidden Galleries' in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe," funded by the European Research Council (No. 677355), with additional research on Ukraine under the project "Religious Minorities in Ukraine from the Soviet Underground to the Euromaidan: Pathways to Religious Freedom and Pluralism in Enlarging Europe," funded by the Irish Research Council (No. GOIPD/2017/764). The display of these Ukrainian files was also taken further to subsequent exhibitions: *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* at Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest; *Through the Lens of the Secret Police* at University College Cork, curators Gabriela Nicolescu and James Kapáló; and the VR exhibition *The Underground*, curators Tatiana Vagramenko, Dumitru Lisnic, and James Kapáló.

2. As it was the case with photographic manipulation in the Stalinist period, when a political *persona non grata* was to be airbrushed out, cropped, or blacked out in all official

publications and posters, or photographs of repressed relatives were removed from family photo albums for the safety of those who remained (King 1997).

3. Haluzevyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukraïny [State Archive Branch of the Security Services of Ukraine in Kyiv] (HDASBU), f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol.4, ark.71rev.

4. HDASBU, f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark. 27-29rev.

5. HDASBU, f. 6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark. 12rev.

6. HDASBU, f.6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 2, ark.13 rev.

7. Ibid., ark. 212.

8. HDASBU, f.6-fp, spr. 69346, vol. 4, ark. 3.

9. Ibid., ark. 4.

10. Ibid., ark. 13.

11. Ibid., ark. 77 rev.



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Lacquered History: Soviet Crafts and Problematic Memory of the Communist Past

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Martor 26: 47-54.

ABSTRACT

The paper questions the ethics of displaying lacquer miniatures representing the Soviet past drawing on the example of an exhibition and publishing project *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* undertaken by the All-Russian Museum of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art (Moscow). In November 2017, almost 300 lacquer miniatures were displayed to commemorate the centenary of the Russian Revolution and other upheavals of the twentieth century. While recognizing the efforts of the curators to introduce the imagery of lacquer painting into the actual discussion on the communist past, I argue that the project irons out the controversial nature of the Soviet regime and literally "lacquers" history. I criticize the project for (1) using lacquer miniatures merely as illustrations of the historical events; (2) ignoring political, economic and cultural conditions of imagery making; (3) evading discussion of the problematic past. The review suggests questions to be asked about the representation of history in lacquer miniatures that could help museum curators working with Soviet imagery in crafts.

KEYWORDS

Soviet history; visual history; Soviet crafts; lacquer miniature; exhibition project.



In 2017, a new wave of discussion about the Russian Revolution as an event that still has a significant impact on today's world caught public attention. International media and scholars kept an eye open for reactions to the centenary from Russian officials and intellectuals because reassessments of the Soviet past are frequently interpreted as the symptoms of changing strategies of maintaining the legitimacy of the political regime in modern Russia (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz 2020). While several publications, both in the press and in academic journals, noted the confusion of the official authorities about centenary celebrations (Fitzpatrick

2017; Rendle and Retish 2017; Kurilla 2017), Russian cultural institutions and artistic communities responded readily to the anniversary with various exhibitions and events, which raised new questions and concerns over the difficult past. Those events were neither forced nor confined in their approach to the problematic memory of the Revolution and the communist past. Both the largest Russian museums and small cultural institutions were creative in exploring the topic, telling stories, and representing the Revolution and its aftermath through the items held in their collections (Chuvilova 2018). For example, the All-Russian Museum

of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art launched a series of exhibitions *Born by October* that sought to acquaint visitors with the evolution of the decorative and applied arts under the Soviet regime, from folk crafts to industrial design.¹ Officially unrelated to the series, but obviously in the logic of anniversary celebrations, the museum held an exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature*, which focused public attention on representations of historical events in the art of lacquers.²

Artistically designed papier-mâché objects with decorative painting coated with lacquer became the hallmark of Russian crafts, although lacquer work was not a traditional technique to decorate and preserve objects of everyday use in Central Russia where it flourished. In the eighteenth century, courtly Russian lacquer art arose out of European fashion for Asian lacquers. Masters were invited from Western Europe to head the first lacquer workshops and train Russian apprentices, which copied contemporary European chinoiserie and imported East Asian models. During the nineteenth century, a number of workshops emerged near Moscow, taking on a leading position in the industry. The Lukutine (former Korobov) and Vishniakov factories improved the quality of lacquers, as well as decorative painting, introducing new motives and Russian themes, which were becoming popular due to the romantic nationalist strivings of the educated elite (Kopplin 2016). Idealized scenes from peasant life, the famous Russian troikas, Ukrainian motives, rural and urban landscapes dominated in painting.

The imagery of lacquers broadened after the Russian Revolution: a workshop in the village of Fedoskino near Moscow not only survived the turmoil but also served as an example for newly organized workshops. Under the Soviet anti-religious policy, old icon painting workshops in the villages of Palekh, Mster and Kholui switched to the new medium and secular themes in painting

(Jenks 2005). When they turned to lacquers, the former icon painters, who specialized in miniature painting and created compositions with dozens of saints or biblical scenes in an incredibly limited space, designed new images from secular Russian folk culture and medieval Russian history, as well as compositions on contemporary Soviet themes, such as collectivization, industrialization, cultural achievements of the Socialist state, and so on. Picturesque and decorative miniatures catch the viewer's gaze with their sophisticated visual language remarkable for the abundance of details, bright colors, and vivid compositions.

The potential of Russian lacquer miniatures to tell stories and fire people's imagination makes them a powerful medium for representing the image of the past. In recent years, collectors and researchers have critically explored historical subjects in Soviet lacquers, studying the genealogy of the images, highlighting controversies in historical representations, or questioning miniatures as visual historical sources (Gershkovich 2011; Lavrov 2016; Berezina 2017). However, these debates hardly went beyond a narrow circle of scholars. The Museum's exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* brought the discussion to a new level, introducing the collection of lacquer miniatures on Soviet subjects to a broader audience.³

The exhibition was divided into seven sections, each of which was dedicated to a certain historical period: the Revolution of 1905–1907, the Revolution of 1917, the Russian Civil War of 1917–1923, Building a New Society, the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, Building a Developed Socialism, and the Decay of the Socialist State in the 1990s. Every section was comprised of miniatures created between the 1920s and 2017, with imagery relating to the major events or historical figures of the given period. The curatorial texts on the walls commented on the historical events. One can

gain an idea about the texts that accompanied the exhibition from the introductory article and description of objects in the catalogue *History of Russia. The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature* that was published for the exhibition opening (Pirogova 2017).⁴

It is remarkable how the breadth of the exhibition's theme contrasted with the diminutiveness of the medium. The lacquer paintings are often no bigger than a smartphone screen. Even though every label indicated a utilitarian function of the object (for example, a casket, a cigarette holder, a powder case, or a photo frame), the displayed items were rarely designed for private use. Many lacquers were created especially for exhibitions or commissioned by museums and were never meant to be private objects. However, the peculiarity of miniature painting invited the observer to shorten the distance to the displayed objects and to find a position closer to the showcase. To see a miniature better, one had to lean over the glass of the showcase, or walk around it if the sides of the box had decorative patterns. It engaged visitors in a closer relationship with the artworks, literally shortening the distance to the depicted past.

While the museum space and the medium of lacquer boxes implied that a visitor would be *physically* engaged, there was no room for critical *intellectual* commitment due to the straightforward curatorial narrative that accompanied the exhibition. Russian and Soviet history was presented as linear, coherent, and joyful, as if all the present-day debates over the controversial past never existed. When museums become recognized as public institutions that provoke thoughts and question conventional interpretations, such an attempt to avoid negative or problematic aspects of the past prevents the exchange of ideas and constructive reconsideration of history (Alexander and Alexander 2008). The exhibition in question presented a particular historical narrative adopted by the curator as a universal interpretation of the past and supported by

the visual arguments of lacquer miniatures. I deem such an attempt to persuade the viewer to accept the model of shared history as problematic since (1) lacquer miniatures were used merely as illustrations for the historical events; (2) political, economic and cultural conditions of imagery production were ignored; (3) the curators evaded the discussion of conflicting interpretations of the past.



More than historical illustrations?

The exhibition project represented an outstanding job by the Lacquer department in studying, classifying, and describing the objects of the collection. However, when the curators entered the debates about the communist regime and the history of the twentieth century, their expertise in art history seemed insufficient for dealing with the problematic past in an inventive way. The approach they chose meant to be safe and consistent: the lacquer boxes were arranged according to the historical master narrative structured by revolutions and wars, which were punctuated with periods of relative peacefulness designated as the "building of the new society." The displayed objects illuminated the narrative with the artists' visual reflections on the historical episodes. In a showcase dedicated to a certain event, for example, the Revolution of 1917, there were miniatures painted both in the late 1920s and in the 1980s.

On the one hand, such an approach had its advantages. The observer could see how the visual interpretations of the symbolic events changed over time. For example, if we compare the miniatures on the Great Patriotic War from the late 1940s and the 1970s, we will see how the artistic conventions of the genre transformed. During the 1940s, artists sought to create a heroic and patriotic image of the war,





Fig. 1 Serebryakov, Ivan, *The Defenders of the Land of Russia, 1103-1942*. Casket. Mstera, 1947. 6.2 x 29.4 x 19.5 cm.
© All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.



Fig. 2 Puchkov, Petr, *Not a Man Forgotten*. Box with a lid. Fedoskino, 1975. 1.9 x 4.2 x 5.8 cm.
© All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.

referring to the great battles of the past, Russia's military victories, portraits of the military leaders (Fig. 1). In the 1970s, artists turned to portraying an experience of the war as traumatic past, depicting the landscape disfigured by the Czech hedgehogs, or a grieving female figure that mourned for all those killed (Fig. 2). These miniatures testify to changing attitudes to war which, interestingly enough, may not correspond to the official triumphalist narrative. However, the exhibition text did not comment on such a striking contrast, either failing to notice this shift or leaving the visitor to make his/her own speculation about it.

On the other hand, the exhibition left an impression that the historical fact has a primary meaning and the artists merely reflected it in their works. The curatorial texts were lacking sensitivity to issues related to the complex relations between history and its visual representation (Burke 2001). For example, in the exhibition catalogue, short historical notes accompanied reproductions of the miniatures. These comments, which are mostly complimentary of Soviet power, in the majority of cases ignore the miniatures as artworks and provide only historical

comments about the depicted events. This approach to compiling a catalogue turns the volume into a richly illustrated historical textbook rather than a museum catalogue. In post-Soviet art criticism, it is common to refer to the lacquers on Soviet themes as "agitation lacquer" or *agitlak* (Gershkovich 2011). Still, as we see, the modern curatorial practice did not get beyond the use of images for structuring a biased historical narrative. The images are thus held "hostage" twice: being used in political agitation during Soviet times and supporting the post-Soviet schematizing representation of the communist past.



Objects without history

The manner of displaying the lacquer miniatures and the accompanying texts were also inattentive to the circumstances of the Soviet Union's policy on the artists' work and crafts. Lacquer miniatures are characterized by the great importance of authorship and the artist's individual approach to solving

a particular composition and theme. However, it is important to notice that under communist rule, the production of national crafts, as well as other artistic goods, was placed under the economic and ideological control of the state.⁵ In the Soviet Union, a set of approved themes and subjects and recommendations for their implementation limited the artist's creativity. Each work, especially those dedicated to Soviet themes, occasioned several art councils and discussions. Art historians consulted the artisans to make sure that the picture on the lid was ideologically correct and at the same time maintained the tradition of artistic practice. It didn't mean that the artist's imagination was completely suppressed, but the miniaturists had to meet the expectations of Soviet art and the production system they belonged to.

Institutionalized practices such as competitions for prizes, thematic exhibi-

tions, or museum commissions supported the search for Soviet imagery in lacquer miniatures during the Soviet time. In the exhibition catalogue, one could read that the painters responded vividly to the events of Soviet life and "glorious pages of the history" (Pirogova 2017: 7) (Fig. 3). I do not question the interest of artists in life around them, but I have to note that besides internal intentions, the external stimuli were also important, and museums played an important role in controlling exhibition opportunities for artists and allocating financial and social resources. Some of the displayed lacquers appear to be the outcome of commissioning or collaboration between the museum and the artists. Moreover, the foreword of the catalogue discloses that contemporary artists also created several artworks for the exhibition project, "to reflect on the various events from the modern point of view" (Pirogova 2017: 6). Reflection on the

Fig. 3 Mokin, Sergei, *The Leader of Socialism and the Jubilant Proletariat*. Casket. Kholui, 1935. 4.7 x 19.9 x 13.8 cm.
© All-Russian Decorative Art Museum, Moscow.



comparison of the contexts of artistic work in different periods of time could have been a starting point for the thought-provoking discussion about the role of commissions in artistic practice, the limits of artistic autonomy, the influence of institutionally supported official historical narrative on the visual imagery of artistic crafts.

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Conclusion Silencing the past, dramatizing the present

When museums are places for the collective work of memory, it seems especially reactionary for an exhibition focused on Russian history in the twentieth century to evade discussing the problematic past. One might argue that if indeed there were no lacquer miniatures picturing forced labor, deportations, or any other manifestation of the regime's violence, how could the curators incorporate "a shadow side" of the history in the exhibition? I believe that would be possible by providing space for personal stories of victims of political repression amongst artists, art historians, or patrons of the craft. For example, Alexander Zubkov, a miniaturist and a head of the workshop in Palekh, was arrested and executed in 1938, and his name was almost erased from Palekh's history even though he had been "a widely respected figure among the [Palekh's] artists and a central reason for their Soviet successes" (Jenks 2005: 149). The art historian Viktor Vasilenko, who worked at the Scientific Research Institute of the Art Industry and regularly visited lacquer workshops giving lectures and consultations, spent nine years in Gulag labor camps following his arrest in 1947. After rehabilitation in 1956, he continued working on national crafts, but shifted his attention to the study of decorative art of Ancient Russia and peasant art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Was this choice

of research topics a form of escapism? How did the bright representations of the achievements of socialism in lacquer miniatures correspond to the experience of those who suffered under the communist regime? Answering those questions and voicing the stories that do not fit the heroic narrative of the Soviet history could add new dimensions to the discussion about the relations between art and ideology in the twentieth century.

Silencing the past and cutting corners resulted in a confusion about how to talk about the 1990s in Russian history. The last section of the exhibition was called "The Decay of the Socialist State," and the lacquer miniatures displayed here were notably different from previous ones. The artists criticize political authorities by painting state officials without heads or portraying the unsightly sides of Russian life. In the introductory article, a comment on the modern history of Russia turns into a search for internal and external enemies. Annotating Aleksandr Smirnov's work *The Siege of a Russian City*, the curator and author of the article wrote: "As always after the turmoil, Russia began to rise, but found itself in a hostile ring of those whom it helped at the cost of the well-being of its people." She considers the country a victim of somebody's hostile plans, and its modern history a result of a betrayal by political elites (Pirogova 2017: 34–35).⁶ Making such a statement discredits the curatorial practice as an activity that commits itself to searching for points of convergence between different positions and broadening perspectives on the artworks.

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The medium of lacquer miniature can lead us to the metaphor of "lacquered history." The reluctance to initiate a discussion and question Russian and Soviet history of the twentieth century is characteristic of more than one exhibition or museum (Khazanov



2000). This essay sought to make this lacquering visible through the remarkable example of the exhibition *Russian History: The Twentieth Century in Lacquer Miniature*. I consider lacquer miniatures to be an outstanding medium for highlighting the controversy of the communist past—since it lends itself to questioning from the perspectives of visual history, material history, sociology of art and other critical disciplines. Instead of illustrating history with miniatures, the question can be posed differently: What history is embedded in these images, and could it be told through them? Which subjects come to the foreground and which turn out to be hidden? How does this particular version of history relate to other approaches to the past?

To provide place for multiple voices from the past means to make room in the modern museums for a professional collaboration between museum specialists, historians, sociologists, activists, and other experts. When talking about re-shaping the social imagery of the communist past or working with the problematic memory of the twentieth century, it is also important to invite the audience to participate in these discussions, since it could bring multiple perspectives and concerns to the debates. Such an approach might be a new challenge for museums, but it would help curators to stay in touch with actual discussions in society and remove at least some “layers of lacquer” which state ideology so diligently imposed on matters of public history.



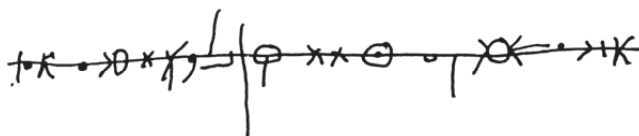
NOTES

1. The central event of the series was dedicated to artistic glass and ceramics of the 1960s–1980s. See information about other exhibitions of the program [available at: https://vmdpni.ru/data/events/2017/04/vesna_v_oktyabre/index.php; accessed on October 11, 2020].
2. I used my personal notes, exhibition catalogue, videos, photos, and reviews to refresh my impression of the exhibition [available at: https://vmdpni.ru/data/events/2017/11/istoriya_rossii_v_lakovoy_miniatyure/index.php; accessed on October 11, 2020].
3. The Museum's Lacquer department organized the exhibition, supported by RHANA Corporation and the Foundation “History of the Fatherland.” The department manages the collection of over 5000 lacquer works that cover the history of Russian lacquers from early experiments of the late eighteenth century to the works of contemporary artists. The core of the collection is Soviet lacquers.
4. The author of the introductory article is Lyudmila Pirogova, the Honored Worker of Culture of the Russian Federation, the head of the Lacquer department at the All-Russian Museum of Decorative, Applied and Folk Art.
5. The same could be said about other countries of the Eastern Bloc, not only the USSR.
6. Smirnov, Aleksandr, “The Siege of Russian City.” Casket. Kholui, 2000. 3.7 x 28.4 x 22 cm. Artist's property.



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Experiences of Socialism in Romanian Exhibitions: Ethical Implications of Display, Invisibility, and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The representation of tangible and intangible heritage from the socialist period in Romania has increased and diversified since the House of the People opened for visitors in 1994. Permanent and temporary exhibitions focused on various aspects of life under socialism—from food, housing, and entertainment to the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu couple—have flourished especially in the 2010s. In this article, I examine the different ways in which exhibitions represent the socialist past by displaying objects linked to consumption, leisure, and domesticity and by organizing interactive experiences around the material culture and spaces associated with socialism. The main questions addressed are: Whose perspectives and experiences of the socialist period do these exhibitions represent? What are the direct and indirect ways in which these exhibitions make political commentaries? What are the ethical issues raised by the strong interactive component of some of these experiences?

In order to answer these questions, I will look at four exhibitions opened after 2010: *Casa Ceaușescu* (Ceaușescu Mansion) and *80east* in Bucharest, *Muzeul Consumatorului Comunist* (Museum of the Communist Consumer) in Timișoara, and *Muzeul Traiului în Comunism* (Museum of Living in Communism) in Brașov. My analysis is informed by research on the representation of socialism in museums since 1989, by reflections on the ethical responsibility of museums and on the political commentary they generate. Based on the analysis of the exhibitions and on interviews with the founders of these initiatives, I discuss the dimension of space and issues of representation, the interactive component as a source of authenticity and its relation with trust, and the political relevance and position of these exhibitions.

KEYWORDS

Museums; socialism; consumption; material culture; everyday life.



Introduction

In 1999 I visited the House of the People for the first time while on a school trip. Not quite a museum of socialism, the building was still one of the first instances of “museumification” of the recent past that I encountered. As a teenager from a small town—whose world consisted mostly of the neighborhood I grew up in with its “communist” apartment buildings, the school, and some shops—the large rooms,

crystal chandeliers, marble pillars, and other similar material aspects impressed me. While revisiting the place in 2014, I couldn’t help but notice the strong emphasis on quantitative information about the size and scale, value of materials, and the guide’s insistence that we don’t stray from the group and don’t take pictures. At the same time, I wondered why there was no mention of the socioeconomic context of the House of the People’s construction, such as the scarcity of goods in the 1980s or the demolitions done to clear the space for this building.¹

Martor 26/2021 - Visual Ethics after Communism

The representation of tangible and intangible heritage from the socialist period in Romania has increased and diversified since then. Especially since the early 2010s, numerous and more diverse exhibitions have become available for the public. Both public and private actors have organized permanent and temporary exhibitions focused on a wide range of topics: from consumption, housing, and entertainment to the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu family. In addition to offering insights into less known aspects of life during socialism, some of these initiatives also create interactive experiences for the public. Visitors can browse through almanacs, magazines, and newspapers, listen to vinyl records, feel the texture of a couch upholstery from the 1970s, eat *pufuleți*² and *parizer*,³ and drink a cup of *nechezol*.⁴ Outside these very specific changes in content and practices, how do these initiatives shape the process of remembering socialism in Romania? Do they contribute to a representation of the past that is more nuanced than that found in the sporadic exhibitions of the 1990s?

In this article, I examine the representation of socialism⁵ in four Romanian exhibitions or experiences: *80east* and *Casa Ceaușescu* (Ceaușescu Mansion) in Bucharest, *Muzeul Trailui în Comunism* (Museum of Living in Communism) in Brașov, and *Muzeul Consumatorului Communist* (Museum of the Communist Consumer) in Timișoara. By focusing on items linked to consumption, domesticity, and leisure, these cases shed light on particularities of everyday life during socialism. The questions that I address in the following pages are: Whose perspectives and experiences of the socialist period do these exhibitions represent? What are the direct and indirect ways in which these exhibitions make political commentaries? What are the ethical issues raised by the strong interactive component of some of these experiences?

The four cases discussed in this article also shed light on a more general debate in

museum studies concerning the definition of museums. According to Macdonald, several motivations and concerns—such as the fear of forgetting, the search for authenticity, wanting to deal with the fragmentation of identity and to educate oneself—lead to a complex situation when attempting to define what a museum is (2006: 5). For instance, can temporary, corporate or virtual collections be considered museums?

While each initiative discussed here presents some characteristics of a museum, none of them meets all the criteria for what ICOM (The International Council of Museums) defines as being a museum.⁶ They are open to the public and provide education and entertainment, but, for the most part, the artefacts exhibited are not professionally conserved and researched in order to be better contextualized. The founders of the Museum of the Communist Consumer and the Museum of Living in Communism stated clearly during our conversations that they are not professional curators. *80east* benefited from the support of some consultants, but ultimately it was not the work of curators either. I could not find any official information about who organized the exhibition at the Ceaușescu Mansion, but based on my visit and some critical opinions expressed in online magazines,⁷ I would argue that this exhibition was not prepared by curators either.

Of course, museums—as institutions and concepts—are constantly changing and do not exist in a vacuum. For example, museological practices—such as collecting, assembling heritage, and performing identity—are no longer limited to the museum space (Macdonald 2006: 6). However, questions concerning the definition of museums are beyond the scope of this article. That is why, for the sake of conceptual clarity, I will refer to the four Romanian cases as exhibitions or experiences.

I visited the Ceaușescu Mansion in 2017 and the Museum of the Communist Consumer in 2018, and I was able to take a virtual tour

of the apartment from the 80east project through their website.⁸ I also conducted interviews with the founder of the Museum of the Communist Consumer and the owner⁹ of the Museum of Living in Communism, as well as with the person in charge of the 80east project. In addition, I analyzed pictures, different types of videos,¹⁰ and online articles and blog posts about these initiatives.

I chose to look at these specific cases mainly because the exhibitions addressed aspects pertaining to various types of domestic and private spaces. Domesticity is a widely discussed topic in anthropological and historical studies focused on the Soviet and socialist period in Russia and Eastern Europe (Drazin 2001; Buchli 2002; Zarecor 2009; Fehervary 2011; Kelly 2011). Research underlines that the home was a site in which public and private actors interacted in complex ways. While the state tried to reconfigure, regulate, and standardize the domestic sphere, people responded to these interventions in subtly challenging ways. For example, they personalized their homes with small decorative objects (Kelly 2011: 64) and used their kitchens as places for small public gatherings in which they shared life stories, political views, and strategies for procuring goods (Kelly 2011: 80).

The cases examined here use the domestic space to represent quite different topics—the precarious living conditions of the working class, the violation of rights, the peculiarities of consumption, and the luxuries enjoyed by the political elites—and they do not always do this in explicit ways. Some integrate this space in a clearly defined script, while others seem to let the visitors explore it on their own terms. However, in all of these cases the domestic space becomes an arena where ideologies, values, aspirations, and inequalities become subjects of conversation.

The socioeconomic context of the 1980s in Romania inspired, to different degrees, the content and organization of

the exhibitions. 80east is, as the name says, exclusively dealing with this decade. The Museum of Living in Communism does not have an explicit focus on the 1980s, but the audio-visual material shown to the visitors and some of the furniture and ornaments are from that time period. There is no clear emphasis on the 1980s at the Ceaușescu Mansion, since this was the residence of the Ceaușescus from 1965 to 1989. However, the tour includes many references to the 1989 Revolution. Finally, the Museum of the Communist Consumer includes almost no specific temporal reference, other than “the communist period.” As a visitor, I could recognize many of the objects exhibited and place them in the broadly defined period of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

I start with an overview of the representation of socialism in museums since 1989 as discussed by researchers working on Romania, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Poland. I then discuss the link between museums and politics, approached through the ethics of representation. I continue with a short description of the four cases examined in this paper. The remainder of the article focuses on several topics identified during my analysis of the exhibitions and the interviews conducted with the founders/amateur curators: the dimension of space and issues of representation; the interactive component as a source of authenticity and its relation with trust; and the political relevance and positioning of these projects.

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Changes in the museum representation of socialism

Since the fall of the regime, the representation of socialism in Romanian museums has changed, but only gradually and not in a unidirectional way. These changes are visible in the frequency and overall organization of exhibitions, but also—more specifically—



in how objects from that time period are “treated” by museums. What is displayed and what is kept away from view? What happened to the “politically charged” artifacts found in museums before 1989? What about the seemingly banal everyday objects? How are these objects recontextualized in museums? These are some of the questions generated by the rise of a new museum scene.

The first thing that happened in the 1990s was the removal of any reference to the socialist decades from exhibitions as a way for museums to reinvent themselves (Bădică 2014: 276). For a while, museums almost completely avoided engaging with this time period. Nicolescu discusses the example of “The Time Room” at Museum of the Romanian Peasant that includes a detailed timeline of Romanian history handwritten on the walls, but only the start and end years of socialism and no mention of collectivization or peasant revolts (2017: 12).¹¹ This connects to Bădică’s argument that the representation of communism in Romanian museums has been shaped by the “black hole” paradigm that views those forty-two years as a time when Romania was “out of history” (2010: 81).

Vukov describes a similar situation in Bulgaria where, after the dissolution of the socialist state, a large proportion of the museums exhibits created during socialism were closed and the collections put in storage permanently (2008: 320). After that, museums focused on ethnographic representations of local cultural traditions and on the pre-socialist times at the expense of critical historiographic reflections (Vukov 2008: 321–323). At the time of his research, the only museum of socialism in Bulgaria was in Pravets, and it was dedicated to the former socialist leader Todor Zhivkov (Vukov 2008: 307–308).

In Romania, the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Sighet Memorial Museum were the first to break this silence in 1997 with curatorial commentaries about socialism. The former opened “The

Plague–Political Installation” as part of the permanent exhibition, while the latter was established in a former political prison from the 1950s. In both cases, the exhibitions were built around what came to be the dominant narrative about the socialist past: that of a totalitarian and illegitimate regime that can be understood only in light of the opposition between oppression and resistance (Bădică 2010: 91; Pohrib 2015: 3–4). Overall, by focusing on communist crimes from an anti-communist perspective, these museums have described that whole era as a criminal one (Bădică 2010: 82).

In time, the initiatives to represent and preserve the memory of socialism in Eastern Europe have multiplied and diversified and researchers have taken note of this. The former GDR has been a particularly rich research site, with several amateur private museums of everyday life under socialism shaping the production of cultural memory through their practices of display (Bach 2017: 8–9). Berdahl (2005) also discussed a local collection and exhibition, the *Zeitzeugen Ostalgie* project (Ostalgie Witnesses to History), as well as a fashion show of East German clothing held at the Leipzig Forum of Contemporary History. The practices and narratives found in these initiatives point to multiple, fluid, shifting, complex, and contradictory forms and domains of memory production and consumption (Berdahl 2005: 167).

In her research on Poland, Main (2008) constructs a detailed and critical analysis of the representation, display, and discussion of objects related to communism in exhibitions. She looks at the case of the Proletaryat Café in Poznań that shows a simplified version of communism, mixing artifacts from different time periods and countries, without any contextualization. She also examines an online collection of images, sounds, and texts illustrating daily life in communism, arguing that it doesn’t have a narrative aspect and is a mere clustering of separate entities (Main



2008: 376–379). Analyzing the activity of an independent NGO focused on the experience of dissidents, she argues that the initiative still manages to show everyday life in communism at the intersection between state control and individual choices and behaviors (Main 2008: 390).

In the Romanian context, private efforts to represent and preserve the recent past have also been examined by social scientists. Petrescu analyzed how the online sharing of private memories about communism shapes collective memory and generational identity, and how it provides alternatives and complementary perspectives to the hegemonic representation of communism (2014: 596–597). Pohrib advanced a similar argument, looking at the online organization and distribution of images and texts about communism as an indicator of a different form of generational identity, separated from trauma (2015: 8). Private initiatives of museums focused on consumption and everyday life have also been described as advancing nostalgic and personal memories, presenting “the ‘normality’ of life under a dictatorial regime where most citizens suffered from economic deprivations more than political persecution” (Preda 2017: 171).

Private museums have been the subject of much criticism from historians and curators for being too affirmative of life during socialism, trivializing dictatorship, emotionally manipulating the audience, lack of critical distance, and inadequate preservation of objects (Bach 2017: 62). In his critical discussion of the tactile, interactive, and informal means of representing the past and claiming authenticity by these museums, Bach pointed also to some of the positive effects of these initiatives (2017: 48). They contribute, even unintentionally, to a more nuanced understanding of daily life as a site of transformation and adaptation in the past.¹² The value of these museums rests less in their representation of “how it really was” and more in that they help “overcome rather than reinforce the worn but persistent

binary of totalitarianism and everyday life as antagonistic frameworks for understanding the socialist past” (Bach 2017: 79–80).



Ethics and politics in museums

As already hinted in the previous section, a common feature of these private museums is their positioning outside and sometimes even against politics. The founders/ amateur curators claim they have no intention of glorifying the past, but that they want to show life “as it really was” by treating objects as witnesses and dignifying people’s lived experiences (Berdahl 2005: 164; Bach 2017: 10, 63–64).

A strand of research that has focused on the public engagement with these museums proves the contrary: these exhibitions are actually political because they portray a regime that failed to supply consumer goods. Visitors’ comments in guest books indicate “a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption” (Berdahl 2005: 165). Comments exchanged online about visual and textual recollections of communism also point to the negotiated nature of the biography of objects, the sensorial component of materiality, and to political associations (Pohrib 2015: 8).

In this article, however, I focus on two other aspects stemming from this apolitical and anti-political positioning of museums: the ultimately political effects of their practices and discourses and their ethical responsibility, both in the context of a changing society. The first one is based on studies about museums and art in Eastern Europe that point to the political questions and topics that artists and curators raise in their work. For example, Bach interprets the activity of amateur private museums



as a response to Western narratives about life in the socialist past as either a lie or a crime. This is a political topic in itself, but the museum founders, which in many of these cases are also curators, don't frame it as such because they react to what they perceive as an overly politicized environment (2017: 65).

When looking at post-1989 changes in the Romanian Peasant Museum led by Horia Bernea, Nicolescu (2017) explains that these were influenced by the ideas of many thinkers, including nihilist philosopher Emil Cioran and historian of religions Mircea Eliade. These thinkers argued that art can be detached from politics, and that it can be done without ethical implications—even if they had both supported far-right regimes in late 1930s Romania only to embrace more democratic ideas after their immigration to France and America respectively in the 1950s. However, as Nicolescu argues, the display at the Romanian Peasant Museum can only be political since it aimed to change Romanian society by cleansing it from communism (2017: 14–17).

In the early 1990s, this cleansing happened on metaphorical and visual levels, for example through displays that emphasized the material and physical characteristics of clay, mortar, and wood instead of the white, grey, flat museum surfaces from the communist times and by getting rid of most of the items connected to communist propaganda (Nicolescu 2017: 2–3). At the same time, the “new” approach to display in the museum “subtly integrated the ‘communist’ past into the new aesthetics by incorporating bits and pieces retrieved from that past” (Nicolescu 2017: 4). Ultimately, by objectifying and reifying communism, the curators incorporated some parts of this past into the museum (Nicolescu 2017: 4; 19).

The second point, namely the ethical responsibility of museums in a changing society, links a general topic in museums studies to the social, cultural, and political context of postsocialist Romania. It raises questions of representation and perspective,

balance, access, and assumptions that are at the basis of ideas expressed in the museum space (Besterman 2006: 440–441). To what extent are the curators responsible to show to the public that what they see inside the museum is the product of opinions, assumptions, and conjecture rather than something inherently true (Edson 1997: 195)? How can the recontextualization of objects in the museums manipulate public values and opinions (Dean 1997: 198)?

Inspired by research on the mutually constitutive visual and material components of society and the ethical issues of difference, identity, and power raised by these, I do not approach these museums as spaces where materiality has a fixed meaning (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 3–5). Instead, I ask questions about what is seen and what is invisible, what is allowed to enter public memory, and what happens when certain visualities and materialities are excluded (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 7–8).

Bădică (2010) argues that starting from the 2000s the representation of the communist period in Romanian museums improved in terms of nuance and documentation, but that the “black hole” paradigm remains dominant. In the remainder of this article I examine the four cases of new museums in light of some common issues raised by the representation of socialism in museums: the reluctance to engage with the recent past, criticism of nostalgia, balanced and nuanced representations, and apolitical or anti-political approaches.



Remembering socialism in Romania: four examples

The Museum of the Communist Consumer opened in 2015 in Timișoara in the basement of the pub *Scârț Loc Lejer*. Ovidiu Mihăiță, who is also an actor and co-founder of the



independent theater group *Auăleu*, initiated this project and runs it in collaboration with various volunteers, such as touristic guides and other colleagues. Designed to look like a “typical communist” apartment, it includes furniture, books, ornaments, toys, board games, kitchen utensils, appliances, food and drinks labels, and many other things distributed between the living room, bedroom, kitchen, and children’s room. However, since people continue to donate objects, the collection keeps growing, so the place looks less like an inhabited apartment and more like a storage space.

The Ceaușescu Mansion is the former residence of the Ceaușescu family, located in Primăverii, a residential neighborhood in Bucharest. It was built in the mid-1960s and extended in the 1970–1972 period. In March 2016, it opened for visitors as a permanent exhibition¹³ administered by Regia Autonomă Administrația Patrimoniului Protocolului de Stat¹⁴ (“Rețeaua Memoriei. Expoziția permanentă ‘Casa Ceaușescu’ – București,” n.d.). The guided tours of approximately one hour take the visitors through Ceaușescu’s office, the private apartment of each family member, the living and dining rooms, evening and day lounges, the dressing, the wine cellar, the cinema, the winter and summer gardens, the spa, and the indoor pool room. According to the exhibition website, visitors have a chance to see how the former president lived privately and to admire several paintings, tapestries, porcelain, crystal, and wood items, as well as mosaics (“Casa Ceaușescu. About,” n.d.).

80east is a project run by Funky Citizens, a Romanian NGO. It was the recipient of a one-year grant from the US Department of State and later funded by the NGO until the end of March 2020. Private companies, logistics, administrative, and communications teams, architects, and consultants also supported the project. In addition, people donated objects and materials and money (through an online campaign).¹⁵ The space was organized like a family

apartment from the 1980s with a living room, bedroom, children’s room, kitchen, and bathroom. It was also furnished and decorated with things from that decade. Launched in February 2019, the main goal of the project was to help high school students¹⁶ understand the (lack of) rights and freedom for citizens during communism (“80east. Despre proiect,” n.d.). During their visits the students explored the four active rooms and had to complete three to four small tasks in each of them. At the end of the visit they would have a debriefing session in which they discussed what they had learned about the topic. In addition to their goal of providing civic education, the project team also aims to give insight into the realities of life in the 1980s by encouraging visitors to engage with the objects and technologies of the past and with the domestic space overall (“80east. Apartamentul,” n.d.).

Raluca Feher, former journalist who currently writes and works in advertising, opened the Museum of Living in Communism in Brașov in 2019. She bought a three room apartment that used to belong to a family of factory workers and set it up mostly on her own, with some help from friends who donated objects. The apartment has furniture, ornaments, and appliances from the 1970s and 1980s. Visitors can choose between a three-hour guided tour and an overnight stay. In both cases they learn about the urbanization and industrialization of Brașov, they watch videos about the 1989 Revolution, listen to Radio Free Europe, or try food and drinks typical of the socialist period, and so on. Raluca decided to organize this experience in response to a perceived increase in nostalgia for communism. She wants to make sure that people don’t forget what it was like and to educate younger generations about the recent past (Adrian Jătăreanu, “Muzeul Traiului în Comunism/ Museum of living in communism e celebru,” Facebook video, 2:31, September 19, 2019, <https://fb.watch/4bsC8Vn9c9/>).





Is there a “communist apartment”? Space and issues of representation

I started this project by asking questions about the experiences and perspectives represented in these new initiatives and thinking that I will find most of the answers in the objects displayed. Objects are indeed important, but their values and meanings only make sense in the social, cultural, and political context of (post)socialist Romania. Questions pertaining to the space in which these exhibitions are set up turned out to be essential for understanding this context and the issues of representation.

The topic of space was apparent both in the visiting experience and in the discourses of the founders or amateur curators. Typically museums create a narrative environment that has an inherently spatial character and the potential to connect with people’s perceptions and imagination (Hanks Hourston, Hale, and MacLeod 2012: xix–xxi). For instance, the experience of going through the numerous bedrooms, lounges, and leisure spaces of the Ceaușescu Mansion provides a powerful contrast with seeing a forty-nine square meter apartment that used to be shared by a family of five like the one from the Museum of Living in Communism.

The generally low quality of housing in socialist Romania was—and sometimes still is—visible in the standardized small apartments characterized by lack of comfort and privacy, poorly done electrical installations, plumbing, and isolation (Voicu and Voicu 2006: 56–57). In light of people’s memories from and experiences of the past and the images of “gray,” uniform apartment buildings circulated on social media and in movies, the “extravagant” and luxurious interiors of the Ceaușescu Mansion are met with disapproval, contempt, and even revulsion by some visitors.

Furthermore, how the founders and/or amateur curators talk about and use the



Photograph 1 - Kitchen from the Museum of Living in Communism.
Photo credits: Raluca Feher

space within each case mirrors both past and current topics, such as quality of life, socioeconomic inequalities, and consumer aspirations. Space becomes overcrowded with objects, like in the Timișoara museum that, ironically, gathers a large collection of consumer goods to illustrate a time when there wasn’t actually that much to consume.

In Brașov the visitors also get to experience space as a scarce resource in two ways: as part of the guided tour that can include maximum six people due to space constraints and by spending the night in the apartment and getting “to feel what a worker felt in 1987”¹⁷ (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020). The lack of space is actually one of the main things that the public notices and comments on when visiting the apartment: “People notice the size (note: for example the small kitchen, see Photograph 1), I mean the fact that it is so cramped. They ask themselves how in God’s

name did five people—meaning a family with three daughters—live there and how did they raise their children there?” (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020).

As previously discussed, one of the main reasons for choosing to look at these particular cases was their focus on the domestic space, the site of the everyday and the private life of individuals. While in the case of the Ceaușescu Mansion it is clear that the visitors get to see the residence of the former presidential family, things are not so clear-cut in the other cases. Whose experiences did these “recreated apartments” represent? Are they representative of certain socioeconomic categories? Is there such a thing as a “communist apartment”?

One point that generated quite a lot of discussion, among Romanian historians, social scientists, journalists, as well as members of the general public, was the architectural style and year of construction for the buildings that host these exhibitions. The buildings of the Museum of the

Communist Consumer and of the 80east project originate both in the 1930s and look quite different from what people commonly associate with the socialist-era apartments with small rooms located in ten-story buildings. The reasons for this are mostly practical. Ovidiu only had access to the semi-basement of the building where he used to live. And the team of 80east needed enough space to organize the tours for groups of approximately thirty students as this was a condition of their funding.

Of course, these interwar buildings were also part of the Romanian urban landscape during socialism, providing nationalized housing for people living and working in cities. In the words of Cosmin, when talking about the building that hosted the 80east project: “It is true that communism existed in that house too, meaning that it didn’t keep away from it” (Cosmin, personal communication, September 11, 2020). The point is that acknowledging the existence of a variety of spaces and experiences is

Photograph 2 - Living room of the 80east apartment. Photo credits: Ion Mateș, 2019



important in order to avoid reducing the socialist past to stereotypical images of uniformity and the discourse of grayness (Fehervary 2009).

That does not mean that people's criticism towards the choice of space is unfounded or irrational. For example, there is indeed something bourgeois about the apartment used in the 80east project, with its high ceilings, large windows, and big rooms (Photograph 2)—especially considering that it is a vehicle for teaching students about the economic shortages, the restrictions, and the violation of rights of the 1980s. Comments posted by viewers on the social media page of the project emphasize sometimes the contrast between what is shown and what others experienced. An analysis of the public engagement is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning that these reactions illustrate people's expectation to see displayed what they perceive as the experience of the majority. A parallel practice exists in the display of objects in the museums of everyday life in GDR, where the inclusion of a certain object is not the result of its uniqueness, but because it indexes all other objects of its type. The exhibits thus convey a concentrated version of the everyday, where objects—disconnected from owners—are still seen as authentic, even if there is no systematic way of verifying their provenance (Bach 2017: 69).

Throughout my conversations with the people in charge of the exhibitions, they seemed to understand that the information they conveyed through the "reconstructed apartments" represented one side of life in the recent past rather than an absolute truth. When asked if the apartment hosting the Museum of Living in Communism is a typical apartment for that time period, Raluca answered that she considers it typical for a working-class family. She gave a more nuanced account of housing conditions during socialism, by comparing it with the apartment where she grew up: "... there were some apartment buildings much more

dignified and decent. I mean still three rooms, three big rooms, hallway, two bathrooms. We had a balcony so it doesn't compare, and we were on the first floor so, again, we could hold on and go through the winter easier" (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020).

Cosmin, the main person in charge of the 80east project, also agrees that the space used in their project is not that of a typical "communist apartment" since it has a garden, two exits, and access through a spiral staircase. Right after that, he mentions his family home in the south of Bucharest where four people had to share two rooms. However, this nuance and awareness of the diversity of experiences communicated during our conversation is not necessarily conveyed through the exhibition space or on the project website. For instance, the place is described as an *apartament optzecist*,¹⁸ that is not only communist or *ceausist*,¹⁹ but also realist, that is inspired by actual life in the 1980s ("80east. Despre proiect." n.d.).

While this is still a balanced approach, which does not claim to represent *all* the realities of the time, the description from "The Apartment" section of the website focuses almost exclusively on topics such as propaganda, repression, and scarcity as exemplified by this sarcastic description:

Welcome to the golden age of the Romanian society! The time when productivity reached the sky, when the Romanian citizen was well fed and satisfied, and when factories and plants bustled with happy comrades. When newspapers talked about "Economic tasks exemplarily fulfilled" and about "Inspiring workers relations" with an enthusiasm that almost made one shed a tear. ("80east. Apartamentul," n.d.)

In this context the apartment becomes an instrument for conveying civic education and not so much for critically engaging with the daily, domestic life of people living in a socialist state.



Interactive experiences: authenticity and trust

The first time I saw a recreation of a “communist living room” was in 2011, in the temporary exhibition *‘70/ ‘80. Our Youth* at the National Museum of Romanian History. Back then visitors were not even allowed to take pictures, let alone touch any of the objects displayed. By contrast, three of the four experiences analyzed here have a strong interactive component meant to confer authenticity to the visiting experience.

Ovidiu describes this type of authentic experience that he aimed to create by allowing people to engage directly with the objects:

I wanted it to be very— Since it is about toys, small objects, it is nice to touch them, some of them you can see how they work. You can look through the drawers. You know, I didn’t want it to be an uptight thing, you know, that you look at from three meters distance and you are not allowed to take pictures of. On the contrary, you can touch them. (Ovidiu, personal communication, August 28, 2020)

Raluca told me about the efforts she made to gather a collection of books, magazines, and newspapers from that time that visitors and guests could browse through. They can also play board games, watch videos from the 1989 Revolution and movies from socialism, and listen to Radio Free Europe. She also replaced the more modern sinks, toilet, appliances, and electronics with older models and kept (a restored version of) the furniture from the 1970s and 1980s, to reflect the quality of life of those decades. This whole complex and rather expensive process of reconstruction was meant to create an authentic experience and not a mere improvisation.

The interactive component also serves an educational purpose, as in the 80east project where the students get to complete

a series of tasks that require the use of several objects from the house. Some of the more light-hearted tasks entail taking a selfie with a film camera and preparing your backpack for going to school on Saturday, the way a student would do back then. Other tasks are more politically charged. While they vacuum the floor in the bedroom, the power goes off, and they have to use a broom. This is a specific reference to the austerity measures of the 1980s, when in order to speed up the payment of the foreign debt, Ceaușescu imposed restrictions on goods and utilities (Verdery 1996: 41–42). Cosmin explained to me that he wanted to organize this experience in an apartment because it allows a “learning by doing” approach in which interaction and the senses play an important role: “I show you pictures, sure pictures are nice too, but it is different when you enter a space that also smells in a way from that old furniture” (Cosmin, personal communication, September 11, 2020).

On a continuum from active to passive visiting experiences, the Ceaușescu Mansion is closer to the passive end. During my visit in 2017 the tour guide took me through all the rooms open to the public and gave me a lot of information about the origin of the objects, type of craftsmanship, gifts displayed, but also some mundane details about the habits of the Ceaușescu family and the rumors about the house that had been in circulation. The exhibition was organized in a “classic” way, with lanes for visitors delineated with retractable belts and signs indicating the name of each room and the furniture style.

While it makes sense not to allow the visitors to touch the objects because of their material value and—sometimes—uniqueness, the attempts to construct a realistic image of the lifestyle of the Ceaușescu family are more ambiguous. The curators tried to make the space look like an inhabited one with various degrees of success. For example, the dressing room displays some of the clothes that Elena and Nicoale Ceaușescu usually wore



Photograph 3 -
Suit displayed
in the dressing
room of Elena and
Nicoale Ceaușescu.
Photo credits:
Maria Cristache.



(Photograph 3), and their bedroom has been left unchanged since December 22, 1989 when the couple ran away from Bucharest (Photograph 4). The dressing room offers quite a “staged” image, with suits displayed on mannequins and on hangers, but seeing their original pajamas and bed sheets in the shared bedroom is more effective in constructing a realistic image of their life in the past.

Besides being a tool for showing “life as it really was,” the interactive component also sheds light on relationships based on trust between the founders/ amateur curators and visitors. When I asked Ovidiu if he was comfortable leaving the visitors alone with the objects and to explore the space on their own, he said: “A person who comes to the museum is not a danger. I prefer to leave it like this because, if let’s say out of 100 people one is stupid, I would rather

Photograph 4 - Shared bedroom of Elena and Nicoale Ceaușescu. Photo credits: Maria Cristache.



that the stupid one breaks something than the other 99 suffer because of him and can't touch, search, and so on" (Ovidiu, personal communication, August 28, 2020). There were even a few theft incidents, but since people keep donating objects it has been easy to replace them so far.

At the same time, this points to the paradoxical value of objects that seem to be both scarce and abundant. Ovidiu set out to "rescue" things in danger of being discarded in order to preserve some memories of people's lived experiences under the socialist regime. The strong positive response received from people who keep donating things shows that, perhaps, it is not the objects that are in danger of disappearing, but the shared sense of cultural intimacy and of ownership over the recent past (Pohrib 2015: 9–10).

Trust plays an important role also in Raluca's approach at the Museum of Living in Communism. People who choose to spend the night in the apartment have to acknowledge, when communicating with her prior to their visit, that they understand that this is not a hotel with modern comforts, like Internet and new furniture, but a way of experiencing the life of a working-class family during socialism. Furthermore, the quite expensive collection of books, magazines, and newspapers—that have become rare items—adds a heritage value to the space. The seemingly mundane apartment thus becomes a museum that needs to be treated with respect.

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Apolitical representations and political commentaries

Gille claims that the phenomenon of postcommunist nostalgia "symbolizes the evasion of talking about the past in the public sphere and in political terms" (2010: 284). This approach moves the focus

from the political content of nostalgia to more abstract reflections on how people, groups, and organizations talk publicly about the socialist past. I would argue that examining the explicit and implicit political stances taken by the exhibitions discussed in this article is still a necessary first step for understanding how these initiatives shape the ways in which the socialist past is remembered.

The Museum of the Communist Consumer and the Ceaușescu Mansion claim to offer an apolitical representation of socialism. Ovidiu says that he got the idea to open a museum of communism after hearing some of his friends complain that people wanted to get rid of objects from that period. However, he didn't want to represent communism from a political point of view, but as a lived experience of others and of himself.

Still the space has the potential to "speak" about several politically relevant topics. Some of the more unusual items from the collection at the Museum of the Communist Consumer are different toys—train cars, trucks, and pistols—built informally by the workers in Timișoara factories. Besides being examples of the production and circulation of goods in the secondary economy during socialism, these toys also elicit an emotional reaction—at least from Ovidiu, the founder, who describes them as "the most moving" in connection to the image of a child playing with these crude, unpolished objects.

There are also several imitations of products from the West, like the board game *Privatizare* (Photograph 5), the "communist" version of Monopoly. These imitations shed light on the complicated engagement with the real and imagined West through consumer goods (Bren and Neuburger 2012: 5). However, inside the exhibition there is no emphasis on the political relevance of these topics. It is up to the visitors to make these associations, based on their knowledge and experience of socialism.

The emphasis on the style of decoration,





Photograph 5 – *Privatizare*, Monopoly-type of board game displayed at the Museum of the Communist Consumer. Photo credits: Maria Cristache.

the origin, and value of objects and materials, as well as on the habits, routines, and interests of the former president indicate that the curators at the Ceaușescu Mansion tried to avoid politicizing things. Still the guided tour is sprinkled with information about the politics of consumption during socialism, although it does not articulate a message about it. A well-known rumor is that the master bedroom's en-suite bathroom has faucets, sinks, and mosaics made of gold when in fact these are only gold plated. The guide also gives details about what happened with the house during the 1989 Revolution, when people broke in and stole mostly food and electronics. These details point not only to the general economic scarcity of the 1980s, but also to how people related to the material environment around them through values and aspirations.

By contrast, the Museum of Living in Communism takes an explicit anti-nostalgic stand. This is how Raluca describes her motivation for starting this project:

Practically we very much forget what has happened to us, you know. Meaning that we end up in a nostalgia, embracing nostalgia for the communist times. Because some grandparent, parent comes and tells you,

“But in communism it was clean,” or “In communism it was I don’t know how,” and “Come on, in communism we ate well. You had everything. You could get a hold of things.” And like this, in this zone where nostalgia replaces truth, and we risk considering that this period was something else than it was, namely a terrible tragedy for the Romanian people. (Raluca, personal communication, August 28, 2020)

In the Introduction to her book *Post-communist Nostalgia*, Todorova points to similar tendencies of the media to treat postcommunist nostalgia as a malady (2010: 2) and to look down on positive attitudes towards socialism (5). In the “Postscript” to the same book, Gille continues this discussion by underlining that postcommunist nostalgia is “social critique, however confused, hidden, subtle or cautious” (2010: 283).

At the same time, the exhibition includes a large print collection containing the children’s and teenager’s magazine *Cutezătorii*,²⁰ the newspaper *Scântea*,²¹ and different almanacs, as well as board games and movies from that period. This audio and visual material, together with the snacks and drinks associated with the socialist period appeal to people’s bittersweet memories and to feelings of nostalgia.

During our conversation, Raluca often mentioned the lack of interest in and knowledge about the recent past in Romanian society as a gap that she wants to fill. She thinks that the older generation, who experienced socialism, wants to forget the past humiliations, while the younger one did not get to learn about this in school or to talk about it at home. By reconstructing the domestic space of a working-class family from socialism and opening it to the public, she comments on the (in)visible in the public memory. She also frames the everyday practices of looking, remembering, and living as a collective responsibility (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 8)

While this initiative succeeds in starting

a more accessible discussion about socialism at the level of quotidian practices, it does not leave much room for discussing the diversity of people's lived experiences. Todorova underlines the importance of taking seriously the memories of those who experienced communism and respecting "their claims of having lived a full and dignified life, in contrast to claims that all that is remaining from communism is a collection of exotic memories or that people had at best lived halfway normal lives" (2014: 5).

In this case, what the exhibition presents as communism seems to be equated with the last decade of the regime. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to think of the Museum of Living in Communism as a representation of the 1980s or of working-class life in the specific context of industrialization, urbanization, and labor's rebellion in Braşov.

Out of the four cases analyzed in this article, 80east is the most complex in terms of political commentary and positioning. As a civic education project, it sets out to teach students about democratic rights and freedom in contrast with their absence in the 1980s. Obviously, this is reflected in the types of tasks that the students have to complete. For example, they first listen to Ceauşescu's speech in which he blames hooligans for the protests in Timişoara and then to news from Radio Free Europe about how the army is shooting and killing protesters. After that, they have to write a letter to a friend from West Germany, using a coded language, in order to find out what is actually happening.

The project has been criticized in left-leaning circles for the accuracy of its representation of socialism, especially in relation to the space and the architectural style of the building.²² According to Cosmin, it has also been criticized for focusing too much on condemning communism in the same vein as anticommunist discourses do.

However, by integrating everyday practices, spaces, and objects in this educational experience, the project contributes

to a more nuanced discussion about the past. Here there is much more dialogue and input from the public than in "traditional" museums where visitors are presented with a unique narrative that leaves no room for interpretation (Bădică 2014: 97). What people expect to find in such a space strongly depends on their past experiences, current socioeconomic status, and political orientation. The fact that 80east provides the space for voicing diverging opinions is a good start.

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Conclusion

This article examines recent initiatives of remembering socialism in Romania by focusing on four exhibitions and/ or experiences launched in the 2010s. It engages with issues of representation through spaces and objects that have been part of the everyday life of several actors. It also examines the role of interactive experiences and how these exhibitions relate to politics.

While my analysis points to a few shortcomings of these exhibitions—such as the difficulty of building a nuanced account of socialism and the sometimes uncritical engagement with materiality—I would not dismiss them as removed from the sociopolitical context or as mere nostalgic representations. Behind each exhibition or experience there is a voice, collective or individual, reflected in practices of display, the selection and use of space, and the overall discourse of the founders and amateur curators.

I agree with Bădică's (2010) claim that things have improved in terms of nuance and accuracy of exhibitions, but that these new exhibitions are not completely divorced from early representations of communism as a "black hole." As Knell, MacLeod, and Watson argue, modern museums are not always the product of linear developments



“from cabinets of curiosity, through the disciplinary museum, to modern conceptions of the living, eco-, digital or post-museum” (2007: xix). The cases discussed here challenge the practices of display, (lack of) interaction with the public, or over-reliance on text found in “traditional” museums, but they also fall in some of the old traps, such as lack of reflection on their own positionality or assuming that material culture has a fixed meaning.

The representation and remembering of

socialism in Romania is shaping up to be quite a diverse field in terms of the experiences and perspectives covered. There is diversity within the field, but not so much within each specific experience or exhibition. Perhaps this is not surprising given the nature of the topic which is still fresh in the memory of many social actors. That is why collaboration between curators (professional *and* amateur) and critical engagement with the public are essential for understanding the complexity of the recent past.



NOTES

1. Light (2000) points to similar characteristics of the guided tours: the emphasis on physical dimension and scale, on (Romanian) materials and craftsmanship, and the fact that it is still a working political building. He criticizes the lack of information about the context, the history of the building, and about Ceaușescu's involvement in the project (171).

2. Corn puffs, made with cornmeal, salt, and oil.

3. Similar to sliced bologna.

4. Coffee substitute consumed especially in the 1980s.

5. Throughout this article, I use the term communism when quoting from or paraphrasing the interviews conducted with the museum founders/amateur curators who used this term exclusively and when quoting from or paraphrasing studies that use this term. When I refer to my own arguments I use the term socialism based on the distinction between communism (promised) and socialism (provided). Communism as a perfectly egalitarian society was never achieved in Romania, and it was continually postponed (Vais 2016: 24). Furthermore, the museum collections discussed here and my analysis of them are not focused exclusively on the totalitarian character of the regime in Romania through topics such as surveillance and scarcity. The cases discussed here shed light also on consumption practices, leisure, the design of goods, media products. Thus I consider the term socialism more appropriate for capturing the nuance of my argument.

6. In 2007 ICOM defined a museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves,

researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (“ICOM,” n.d.). A new definition has been discussed at the 2019 conference. It adds emphasis on inclusion, participation, transparency, multiple perspectives, and critical dialogue. However, voting to adopt or not this definition has been postponed. (For more information, see: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>)

7. For example, the article “Despre Ceaușescu numai de bine – la 30 de ani de la Revoluție” [Only good things about Ceaușescu – thirty years after the Revolution] by Cristina Modreanu; available at: <https://revistascena.ro/arte/despre-ceausescu-numai-de-bine-la-30-de-ani-de-la-revolutie/> (in Romanian).

8. Since the funding for the project ended and, with the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the curatorial team decided to stop renting the apartment in which the exhibition was organized and to put the objects in storage for now.

9. I use the term owner because the apartment that hosts the museum, as well as the furniture and objects found in it, belong to Raluca Feher. In the case of the Museum of the Communist Consumer, the space is private property of the founder, but the objects displayed are mostly acquired through donations.

10. Reports about Ceaușescu Mansion, the Museum of Living in Communism, and the Museums of the Communist Consumer and a video from the launching of the 80east project.

11. Nicolescu's discussion is based on fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2011 in the museum. Since then, the year 1962, when collectivization ended, has been added to the timeline, as well as the names of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu.

12. For example, by representing less explicit practices of resistance, embedded in everyday life, such as creative responses to scarcity or writing letters of complaint to institutions (Bach 2017: 79).

13. The exhibition is done in collaboration with The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism (<https://totalitarianism.ro/?lang=en>), under the authority of the Romanian Academy and The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICMER). (<https://www.iicmer.ro/en/home/>), a governmental structure that aims to analyze the communist regime and its consequences.

14. In English: Autonomous Direction for the Administration of State Protocol Assets. The Autonomous Direction is a legal entity functioning based on economic management and financial autonomy. Its purpose is to administer, preserve the integrity of and protect the assets that belong to the public

domain of the state ("Despre R.A.-A.P.P.S." n.d.).

15. For a complete list of collaborators and financing sources, see: <https://80east.ro/despre/>; <https://www.sprijina.ro/cauze/educatie-civica-intr-un-apartament-comunist> (in Romanian).

16. Upon request the museum could also be visited by adults. It was also used for different types of events and as a film set.

17. The 1987 revolt of factory workers from Brașov is one of the topics covered by Raluca during the guided tours at the museum.

18. 1980s apartment.

19. Related to Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime.

20. The Daring Ones.

21. The Sparkle.

22. In discussions on the Facebook pages of 80east and of Funky Citizens. For example, in the comments section of the video posted when 80east was launched (<https://fb.watch/4gvyLrhJZE/>).



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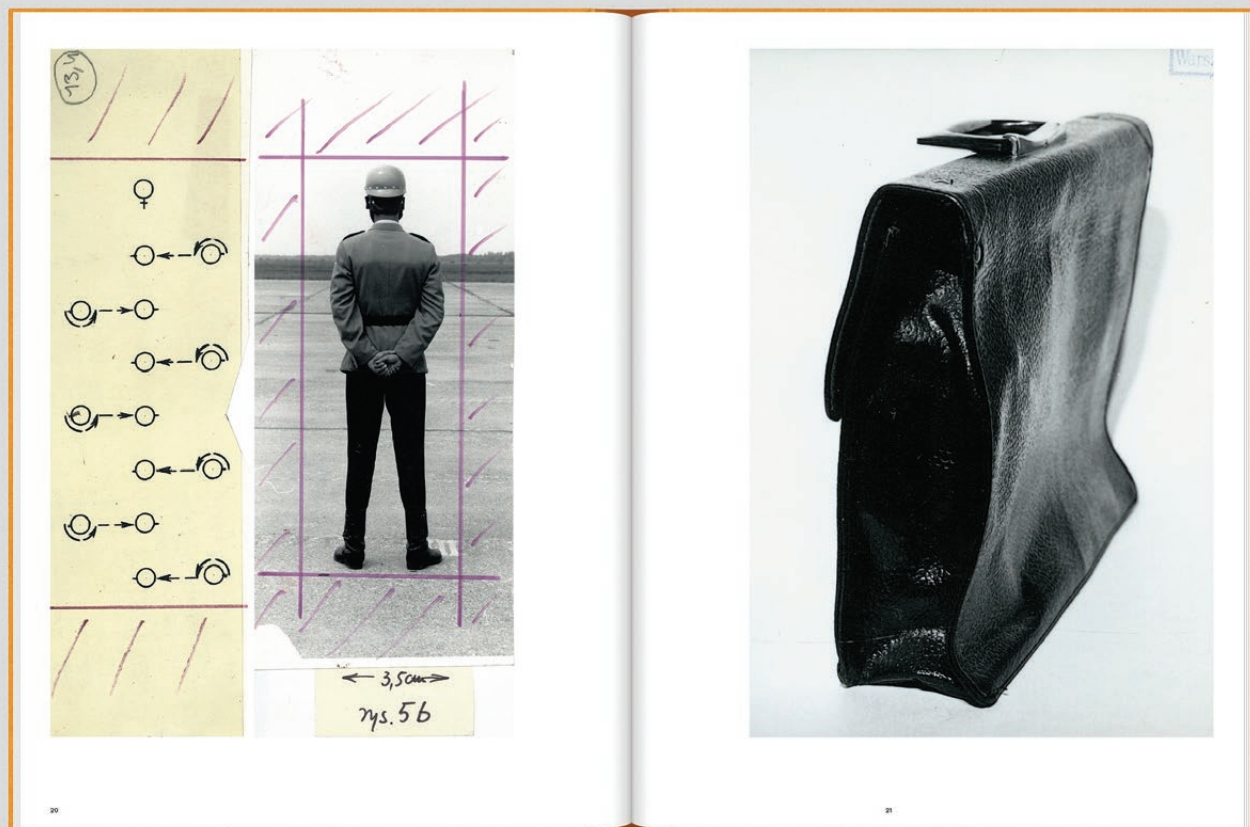
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II. Alternative Memory Practices?

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.

KEYWORDS

Collective memory; alternative memory practices; communist symbols; commodification of nostalgia; visual rhetoric.



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

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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; Rekšć 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

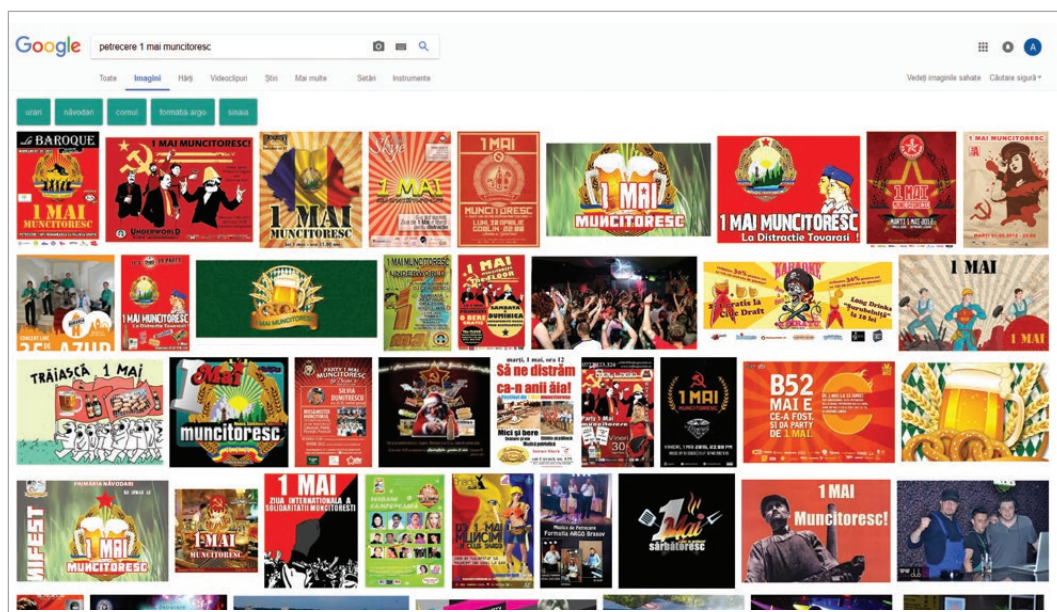
Documentation on communist themed parties for my previous study yielded a body of more than seventy digital advertising posters published since 2009, some of which can be seen below, in Figure 2. For the present study, I focused solely on online clubbing posters and banners, an exhaustive

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 “Ceașescu.” 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 Ceașescu, 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.



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, Braşov, Iaşi, 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 Ceauşescu's birthday); First of May;

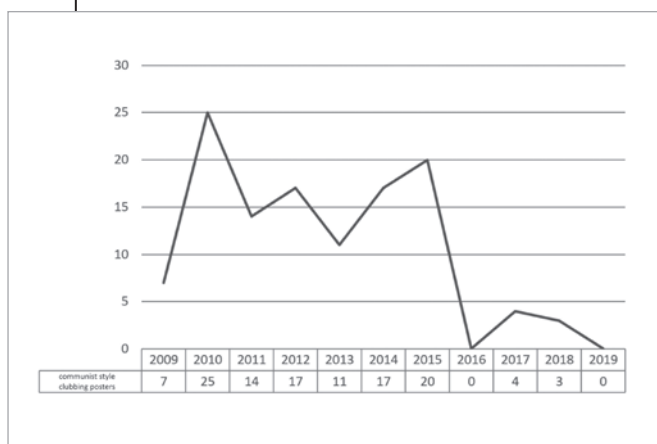


Figure 3. Time frame of 2009–2019: the number of communist style clubbing posters posted each year. Source: Author's archive.

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 Ceaușescu 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, Ceaușescu 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 “Ceaușescu 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, relies on an instrumental view of nostalgia fueled by the digital turn. In the case of mediated nostalgia, Paul Grainge notes, the production of a nostalgia framed media is “not the necessary reflection of a mood (longing) or cultural condition (amnesia), but the result of specific technological transformations and strategies of niche marketing” (2002: 29). Beyond a certain point, products, practices, and services framing the socialist past become harder to grasp, given the multiple and contradictory meanings that shape how they are understood. Whether they are called communist themed parties, like the ones identified in Romania, or nostalgia parties, raves, bars, theme cafés, coffee shops and restaurants in Budapest, Berlin, Sankt Petersburg, Kiev, and Prague (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2015; Berdahl 1999; Bach 2015; Kalinina 2014), they have been considered in the broader framework of the commodification of the recent past. Key to this trend is also the wider context of the posters’ productions, stemming from but also targeting the new creative classes of the globalized neoliberal society, conceptualized in Bennett’s understanding of the “neo-tribes” (2000: 83)—whether they are called “millennials,” “hipsters,” “neo-yuppies,” etc.—less centered on class, a fragmented and fluid construction of individual and collective cultural identities expressed within the clubbing context. Then again, the chosen timeframe of this study provides novel interrogations on the rise of leftist ideologies and of a global “millennial socialism” (Jacobson 2019) emerging in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, with the proper framework remaining to be established. In this respect, a notable tentative approach explored the local clubbing scene along with the emergence of a middle class of young urban creatives, deconstructing through historical and sociological lenses the figure of the Romanian hipster (State 2019).

Daphne Berdahl explored the boom of the nostalgia industry through examples

ranging from pubs where cheap East German beer was served by host(esse)s dressed in socialist uniforms, to “Ossi Parties,” “Ostivals,” and “Ossi Discos” in Berlin or elsewhere, less than ten years after the reunification of Germany in 1990. These gatherings reflected just a few sets of practices in the growing GDR nostalgia industry, which was analyzed by Berdahl also as “an interplay between hegemonic and oppositional memories” (1999: 193). If the *Ostalgic* practices were examined by Daphne Berdahl as a form of counter-memory triggered by resuscitated objects of the communist past, the Romanian communist themed parties promoted consistently through web channels after 2010 may raise a different set of observations. The first one is related to the new digital and generational context of the new millennium that provides a different mode of nostalgia production. Second, as revealed by my field research (Bardan 2018: 63), clubbing posters and advertisements gradually remained the only medium accommodating visual propaganda elements, while, in fact, most of the parties no longer relied on elements of communist iconography, in some cases not even on the retro angle of an oldies playlist. Hence, the communist symbols gained visibility mainly through online forms of visual communication and promotion. Third, and related to an important methodological point when analyzing the nostalgia industry, the research object examined in this study covers exclusively the visuals promoting the themed events, and not the parties themselves. In this respect, we may follow Berdahl’s lead for building an analysis framework based on the way Arjun Appadurai (1986) approached commodities, with a focus on the “second life of objects.” Thus, the body of digital posters and banners unearthed communist propaganda elements that entered a new phase of their careers when placed in the visual promotional context. A similar approach to the newfound online visibility acquired by 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.

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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Recent and Radical: Excess, Absence, and Erasure in the Museum of Recent Art

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ABSTRACT

Inaugurated in 2018, the Museum of Recent Art (MARE) in Bucharest has rapidly become one of the leading contemporary art institutions in Romania. Rivaling state-financed museums, MARE's approach to exhibiting contemporaneity is dialectical, exchanging the conventional, chronologically determined museological method for anachronism. This approach provides a framework through which the perpetual theoretical correspondence between past, present, and future artistic practices is facilitated. Focusing on art that circumvented the official visual discourses of the communist regime and on art that emerged after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, MARE's novel museological method has, however, been impaired by the museum's failure to fully account for the country's totalitarian history. The absence of context, an unethical silence that can be seen as a symptom of Romania's unresolved tension towards its communist past, underpins both the conception of the museum's building and that of its permanent collection. Impeding discussions of nationalization, coercive state mechanisms, and the imposition of Socialist Realism, MARE further limits the emergence of art historical narratives by reaffirming the traditional, hierarchical superiority attributed to fine art forms.

KEYWORDS

Postsocialism; nationalization; museology; dialectical contemporaneity; decorative art.



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Introduction

The increasing turn towards critical museology in the past decade has led to the reconsideration of a fundamental question regarding the discipline: what makes a museum radical? Whether the repudiation of a monolithic, teleological view of history or the refashioning of exhibit displays in order to circumvent the centrality of Western narratives, such reconfigurations of institutional discourse have attempted a dynamization of the museum, further dismantling its once phonetic and conceptual association to the

mausoleum (Adorno 1967). Within Eastern Europe, the fall of the region's dictatorial regimes and the ongoing process of transitional justice that ensued in its wake have generated the ideal context for the implementation of museological reform in previously ideologically subjugated, state-run institutions.¹ The emphasis placed on "decommunization" and the process of postcommunist reconciliation in Eastern Europe have aided in identifying the systemic remnants of the *ancien régime* (Stan and Tismăneanu 2015: 36). Warning against the creation of "new mythologies" regarding "a traumatic, violent and brutal past," scholars such as Vladimir Tismăneanu have urged for active national participation in seeking

both “historical and legal accountability” (2015: 24). If “dialogue and knowledge preempt the destructive force of silence,” as Stan and Tismăneanu (2015: 24) have argued, the museum can be seen as a crucial instrument for the reassessment of the recent communist past.

More than three decades after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, Bucharest remains one of the only capitals in Eastern Europe without a museum dedicated to its totalitarian past. Similarly, the subject remains absent from the permanent collection of the National Museum of Romanian History, while the city’s contested public monuments are often aimed at the sedimentation of alternative, state-led historical narratives that diverge from those pertaining to popular memory (Young and Light 2016). Due to the persistence of prerevolutionary administrative structures and the duplicitous public condemnation of the regime by a corrupt political class,

the communist past has become an anathema in Romania today, denounced as taboo or a mere historical syncope (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 78). As this tendency for suppression emerges, how do politics of erasure destabilize the ethics of exhibiting communism? Has the desire for historical elucidation not been sufficiently popularized or do particular factors favor the manifestation of *silence*? I will turn to a case study of the country’s first private art museum, Muzeul de Artă Recentă (Museum of Recent Art), in reading through such questions.

Inaugurated in 2018, the Museum of Recent Art (from here on MARE)² in Bucharest is a novel, much anticipated critical outlet in the field of postmodern and contemporary Romanian art (Figure 1). Situated in the residential neighborhood of the former communist *nomenklatura*, the Neo-Moorish villa that preceded the museum was forcibly expropriated during the nationalization

Figure 1: Museum of Recent Art, designed by Youssef Tohme Architects and Associates (YTAA). Photo credit: Smaranda Ciubotaru



process, subsequently becoming the home of the Foreign Minister Ana Pauker in the 1950s. Benefitting from a predominantly positive reception by international art publications (*Art Newspaper*), the museum, however, has been subject to mixed reviews in the Romanian media. Labeled “anticommunist” by one of the country’s primary art publications, *Revista ARTA*, MARE appears to have struck a problematic chord through its nearly exclusive focus on the diversity of artistic production operating outside of the socialist visual canon (Cioană 2018). While the museum’s scope is to present works that circumvented and subverted the paradigmatic dominance of Socialist Realism (alternatively named Humanist Realism during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship), the erasure of ideological art from its curatorial discourse obscures context, thus posing an ethical dilemma. Reductive and dismissive, the “anticommunist” label that has been attributed to the museum fails to reflect the complex, multivalent nature of the Romanian transitional context following the 1989 Revolution. I will argue that MARE is symptomatic of Romania’s “unresolved tension” towards its totalitarian past, opting for complete obstruction when faced with the difficult task of exhibiting communist history (Ciobanu 2015: 260). This obstruction is twofold, occurring initially, through *excess* at an architectural level, and secondly, through *absence* within its permanent collection. In the first part of the study I will focus on the demolition of the once nationalized villa that preceded the museum. Opting for an architectural design that aims to preserve the memory of the old house, MARE, conversely, does little to contextualize the history of the neighborhood in which it is situated. Due to the amalgamation of old and new aesthetic elements in the current building, the novel may take precedence over the uninformed visitor, paradoxically causing the museum to become a *lieu d’oubli*, a place of forgetting as

defined by Maria Todorova (2010a). Working to revise a Western-centric perception of Eastern European art, while abandoning the linear chronology inherent to art history, the museum enacts a radical museological approach that I will analyze through Claire Bishop’s (2018) concept of *dialectical contemporaneity*. Lastly, I will address the absence of both socialist visual discourses and decorative art from the museum’s permanent collection as a significant impediment to an understanding of the historical context, as well as to the future diversification of curatorial narratives.

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Erasure through excess: Design and the non-material heritage of the museum building

The subject of MARE’s building has, perhaps more than any other aspect of the institution, been highly polemicized. Pertaining to a built heritage protection zone³ in Primăverii neighborhood (northern Bucharest), the Neo-Moorish villa that preceded the museum was constructed in 1939 during a period of intense architectural development in the area (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Interest in the neighborhood, however, spanned not only the 1930s. Following the formalization of the communist regime in 1948, the implementation of a nationalization process led to the abusive, widespread seizing of private property in Primăverii.⁴ The neighborhood’s central position and numerous gardens appealed to the communist *nomenklatura*. Emulating the Soviet model that saw the housing of all Party officials in one area, Primăverii soon became the residential quarter of the communist elite (Brucan 2019: 81–4). After the mass expropriations and forced evictions of the late 1940s and early 1950s, communist officials turned their focus to the increasing expansion and modernization of the neighborhood. As a result, Primăverii



remained the designated residential area of the *nomenklatura* until the 1989 Revolution and, in some cases, continues to house former officials of the regime due to the delay in the introduction of equitable property restitution policies in Romania.

The neighborhood's negative associations were also perpetuated in the ensuing postcommunist context as a result of the questionable, irregular, and unethical implementation of such policies.⁵ In 2001, at the insistence of the European Union, Parliament finally adopted legislation concerning the matter of "natural restitution," thus ending the tenant-owner dichotomy that had dominated the Romanian political arena of the 1990s.⁶ Despite the introduction of a new legislative framework that favors titled owners, successful restitution cases remain sparse, particularly in historically charged areas such as Primăverii. The restitution of the 1939 Neo-Moorish house that preceded MARE was one of these cases.

Nationalized in 1950, the house became the temporary residence of Foreign Minister Ana Pauker, one of Romania's most reviled communist political figures due to her hyperbolized association with the Stalinist regime and the harsh, oppressive, and extreme collectivization process carried out under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's leadership.⁷ Subsequently occupied by diverse tenants during the communist period, the house was sold following its restitution and torn down to enable the construction of MARE. Discussions surrounding the demolition of the house have either starkly criticized the museum for disregarding the preservation of architectural heritage (Cioană 2018), arguing that part of the building should have been integrated into the current structure, or have adopted a far less critical stance that opposed partial integration as a threat to "stylistic unity" (Ghenciulescu 2018). The latter viewpoint, posited by the architecture magazine *Zeppelin*, prioritized the *authenticity* of the building, the conservation of its visual

and material integrity.⁸ While a common practice internationally, the magazine argued, the conjoining of old and new architectural fabrics has often been carried out in problematic ways for the buildings of Bucharest.⁹ Rather than preserving a fragmented version of the building, whether through the reintegration of its facade or its decorations into a new structure, *Zeppelin* contended that demolition was proposed, perhaps, as the more drastic, yet "honest" approach (Ghenciulescu 2018). In spite of the divergent perspectives regarding the way in which the initial house should have been preserved, both positions attribute much significance to the *material aspect* of the former building and the fact that none of it remains. The nearly exclusive preoccupation for the *physical* preservation of heritage appears to dominate both perspectives, for both are focused on the demolition of the house as the singular source of concern. A brief mention of the building's "historic aura" in the *Zeppelin* article appears to be the only allusion to the issue of non-material heritage and the perpetuation of memory. Therefore, I would like to shift the discussion to the time following MARE's creation. While the destruction of the Neo-Moorish house is problematic, it is the inevident aesthetic quotation of the former house in the current museum building and the lack of information provided to the visitor that obscure the dissemination of its history and, implicitly, the collective memory of Primăverii's vast nationalization.

Preserving the shape of the old house, yet compressing its volumes, YTAA, the architectural firm that was commissioned for the project, opted for a black monochromatic exterior and the raising of the museum building in order to accommodate a spacious ground floor framed by glass panels. The underground floor, a former bunker, was likewise preserved and converted into an exhibition space. According to the firm, the eerie, phantasmal appearance of the museum is intentional, as the building



Figure 2:
The Neo-Moorish
house
that preceded
the museum.
Photo credit:
Adrian Bălteanu.
Courtesy of
Adrian Bălteanu.



Figure 3: Side view of the
former Neo-Moorish house.
Photo credit: Adrian Bălteanu (2010).
Courtesy of Adrian Bălteanu.



Figure 4:
Detail of the
Neo-Moorish
house that
preceded
the museum.
Photo credit:
Adrian Bălteanu
(2010).
Courtesy of
Adrian Bălteanu.

should evoke the disquieting history of the previous house and of Romania's totalitarian past.¹⁰ Contrary to its ghostly exterior, the interior is equipped with a gift shop, cafe, cinema, library, and outside sitting area, integrating the conventional *mise-en-scène* of the museum. As the visitor enters the building, the eerie facade is exchanged for a familiar, inviting setting. This is when the process of obstruction commences. The lack of signs or information regarding the history of the former house, its nationalization, Ana Pauker's stay, or the bunker-space that lays beneath it begs the question whether MARE assumes too much of the visitor's *a priori* knowledge of the venue and of Romania's communist past. Devoid of context, the museum as a site of memory is undermined and the building's efficacy in enabling recollection must be probed.

Maria Todorova's study (2010b) of the sudden destruction of the Georgi Dimitrov¹¹ mausoleum in Sofia offers an ideal theoretical backdrop for this analysis.

No longer a physical site, the Dimitrov mausoleum still qualifies "as a *lieu de mémoire*, or, rather, a *lieu de mémoire détruite*, a curious site of destroyed memory with the preserved memory of the destruction" (Todorova 2010b: 426). Todorova describes the persistence of the mausoleum's silhouette in the collective memory of Sofia's inhabitants, despite the absence of a material trace. The inhabitants that were accustomed to the mausoleum before its demolition in 1999 are reminded of the former structure upon seeing the green space that lies in its place, while those too young or born after 1999 have inherited the memory of the spatial signifier through its perpetual association

with the empty square.¹² Recall, Todorova explains, “does not need to be produced by a literal trace; recall itself, prompted by a context—a book, a discussion, a thought—can produce an image” (2010b: 428). Thus, rather than the lack of a physical artifact, it is the obstruction of context that can prevent recollection and the perpetuation of memory. By providing no verbal or textual information of its past within the museum space, MARE is inhibiting its history from being remembered or, prior to this, from fully materializing. This materialization of history is what Todorova defines as *retention*, a crucial element of the memory process that precedes the function of *recall* (Todorova 2010b). MARE, or rather YTAA, have contended that the structural quotation of the previous Neo-Moorish house within the design of the current building acts as a catalyst in concretizing its history. Yet, I would argue, it is the compressed shape of the former structure, the monochromatic shell of the museum and the addition of the glass curtain walls on the ground floor that, together, do not enable retention but rather an *erasure* of the past through an *excess*¹³ of components. Towards the end of the Dimitrov study, Todorova argues that a conversion of the mausoleum’s structure for any other purpose would have been an effective method to make of it a *lieu d’oubli*.¹⁴ Echoing Umberto Eco and Marilyn Migiel’s 1988 essay, *An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget It*, Todorova argues that deficient acts of remembrance result from a multiplied semiosis: “One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences” (Eco and Migiel 1988, quoted in Todorova 2010b: 430). As such, MARE’s referencing old architectural forms alongside the sleek, novel appearance of the contemporary art museum produces a surplus of signifiers. The discrepancy between what has been quoted and what is novel, however, *cannot* be established due to the lack of historical context provided by the museum. MARE’s building bears an *excess*

of *presences* that are homogenized under the guise of the new. Unlike designs that conjoin the old and new fabric of buildings, where the material remains of the previous edifices are still visible, the museum’s building hinders differentiation through the uniformity of its appearance. The visitor runs the risk of deeming everything novel for there is nothing to indicate which architectural elements were appropriated (or what their source was). The memory of the Neo-Moorish house, its nationalization and Ana Pauker’s stay, as well as of the post-totalitarian moment of restitution is effaced. Given that retention and recall are conditioned by the existence of context, the absence of information can potentially halt all processes of remembering, paradoxically making the museum a *lieu d’oubli*. In order to prevent the interpretation of MARE’s building as an *ex nihilo* creation, void of its communist past, more should be done to emphasize its history and the history of the area to which it pertains.

Within heritage studies, “the intangible value of the site” has become an increasing area of interest for scholars, while the growing use of *interpretation* as a mechanism for the mitigation of destroyed cultural heritage sites also attests to this (Cameron 2009: 133).¹⁵ Implemented through the employment of personal (tours, reenactments) or non-personal devices (such as signs, multimedia displays, photographs), the interpretation of a site secures the perpetuation of its historical narratives.¹⁶ Thus, interpretation could also prove a useful tool in aiding MARE disseminate the history of the former Neo-Moorish house, the collective memory of the neighborhood’s nationalization process, and the latter takeover of Primăverii by the communist *nomenklatura*. In its current state, the museum’s building not only fails to enable retention, but it nearly erases its past. This poses an ethical dilemma that is further amplified by the absence of Socialist Realism from the museum’s collection, another form



of silence to which I will turn later. If cultural institutions such as MARE fail to provoke discussions about Romania's communist history, this could potentially lead to a larger phenomenon of "mis-memory"—a distortion of the memory of communism as a result of insufficient acknowledgement and critical analysis within the public sphere (Stan and Tismăneanu 2015: 32). The very brief historical outline of the building that can be found on MARE's website is insufficient, signaling the need for a more thorough exploration of the topic, while further problematizing the lack of information within the physical space of the museum. If not supplemented by interpretation, the museum's limited, online recognition of its past, rather than its integration into a larger museological discourse, can pass off as a mere commercialization of communist history in the attempt to capitalize on it (Creed 2010: 39–41). As the postsocialist city has shifted from the constructive excess of the Left to that of the Right, the preservation of architectural heritage, be it through tangible or non-material means, remains a crucial tool in counteracting oblivion. MARE's shortcomings in bridging the historical and the contemporary at an architectural level are not, however, reflected in its museological approach where the contrary can be seen. I will discuss this in the following section.



Dialectical contemporaneity and transition to a radical museological framework

Before the comprehensive analysis of MARE's museological approach, a brief outline of its permanent collection and the interior structure of the museum is warranted. MARE's current collection has resulted from the collaborative efforts of Lebanese investor and founder, Roger Akoury, and MARE's general director and acclaimed

art historian, Erwin Kessler. What began as Akoury's private collection gradually expanded with the purpose of becoming a museum. Kessler's active involvement in the collecting process, often reflective of his own research interests and theories of recent Romanian art, has generated an alternative to chronologically systematized art museums such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC).

MARE has taken 1965, a year of great sociopolitical and artistic vicissitudes, as a point of departure in constituting its collection. Marking the death of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and, as a result, an ensuing period of liberalization that had been anticipated by the thaw of 1963–1964, 1965 would see a definite repudiation of Soviet power and the progressive turn towards national identity in Romania (Verdery 1991: 116–134). Elected as the new secretary general of the Communist Party, Nicolae Ceaușescu served as the driving force of the liberalization period until 1971 when his *July Theses* indicated a complete reversal of the political and cultural openness exhibited following 1965 (Verdery 1991: 116–134). Ceaușescu's propensity for nationalism and his denunciation of Soviet ideological imports led to a revival of artistic production. Condemning "any tendency towards exclusivism or rigidity," alluding thus to the dominance of Socialist Realism before the liberalization period, Ceaușescu called for "stylistic diversity," urging the cultural sphere to stray away from a Soviet-imposed canon while remaining "responsible" in the selection of subject matter.¹⁷ The call for aesthetic diversification coincided with the opening of Ion Țuculescu's seminal retrospective at Sala Dalles in Bucharest. An expressionist artist influenced by Romanian folklore, Țuculescu had been recently historically rehabilitated through the efforts of *Arta Plastică* magazine, as the pre-1965 imposition of the Socialist Realist dogma had marginalized all the work that did not adhere to it (Cârneli



2013: 73–4). In the latter years of the 1960s, the perpetuation of artistic momentum through the frequent and desired exchange with Western culture likewise contributed to the greater aesthetic separation from Socialist Realism.¹⁸ Short-lived yet fruitful, the period of liberalization was replaced in the 1970s and 1980s by Ceaușescu's cult of personality and the preference for a rebranded "Humanist Realism." For this reason, alternative visual approaches were forced to go *underground*¹⁹ until 1989. One of MARE's objectives is to recover such visual discourses while combatting "mis-memory" and removing the ideological filter set forth by the art historical narratives of the latter communist period. Contrary to the design of its building, the museum's collection better enacts the logic of preservation, even if doing so partially (for a complete exclusion of the regime's aesthetic canon, which I will discuss in the next section, is evident).

In keeping with the significance of 1965, MARE has not, however, opted for a museological method determined by a linear, chronological succession of events akin to that found in state-administrated museums such as MNAC. Furthermore, the vertical, rather than horizontal, conception of the museum obscures a fixed starting point, as the visitor is free to choose where to begin. The underground and last floors are used for temporary exhibitions of Romanian art, while the first and second floors leading up from the ground floor house the museum's permanent collection. The sinuous structure of the museum, bearing multiple corridors that link the rooms on each floor, both evokes the domestic function of the preceding building and breaks with the conventional vast gallery space of the White Cube format. The staircases connecting each floor create spatial interstices that are designated for the display of Western artists. Rather than clearly delimiting each section of the museum, separating temporary exhibitions spaces from the permanent collection, MARE has interwoven them in order to

make its visitors alert to possible thematic connections. Even the permanent collection of the museum is subject to change every two years, underscoring the need for curatorial dynamism and the perpetual revision and addition of art historical narratives. As such, while MARE does indicate its museological approach, it does not impose the narratives of its current display as the sole perspective, thus favoring narrative polyvalence. I will return to MARE's stimulation of narrative multiplicity, following a discussion of its museological approach and the anachronic model of contemporaneity that it employs.

Referring to the permanent collection catalog, the visitor might choose to start on the second floor with the room illustrating the "stylistic diversity" of the mid 1960s where works by Ion Țuculescu, Horia Bernea, Andrei Cadere, and Napoleon Tiron are exhibited. Passing through one of the corridors, the visitor then reaches a second room that focuses on the subversive art of the 1970s and 1980s (such as Constantin Flondor, Paul Gherasim, and Paul Neagu) (see Kessler 2018). The two parallel corridors of the second floor are also used to display the main visual discourses of the period: that of the neo-Orthodox group *Prolog* and that of the neo-Constructivist group *Sigma*, as well as the artwork of artist Florin Mitroi (see Kessler 2018). Descending to the first floor, the visitor is met with the theme of stylistic diversity again, now seen through the lens of contemporary art. The corridors are similarly used, displaying a series of cardboard paintings by Nicolae Comănescu (*Rostopasca* group) on one side and works by conceptual artists and photographers (Vlad Nancă) on the other. Breaking with a conventional, chronologically determined curatorial approach, MARE has inserted contemporary artists such as Bogdan Vlăduță (influenced by the *Prolog* group) or Mircea Roman (juxtaposed with Napoleon Tiron) in its second-floor display, provoking dialog between temporal frames. This is also achieved through the presence of artists

such as Florin Mitroi or Ion Grigorescu on both floors. Further, the very structural layout of the permanent collection can be used to discern thematic and aesthetic continuity. An example is the vertical juxtaposition of the *Prolog* group and Nicolae Comănescu corridors, situated on a diagonal. The works are linked through their subversive nature—the former in relation to the communist regime and the latter to its remnants following the 1989 Revolution. As such, Comănescu's use of profanity, bright industrial paint, and cheap everyday materials can be thought of as an “inverted echo” of *Prolog*'s proclivity for religious symbolism and muted colors (Kessler 2018). On the first floor, MARE's director Erwin Kessler, points to Grigorescu's work *Geniul și epoca* (The Genius and the Epoch) as a metaphor for the curatorial approach of the museum. A Socialist Realist painting “begun” in 1950 by Hrandt Avakian and “completed” in 1990 by Grigorescu through the addition of a contorted corpse in the foreground, the work serves as an analogy for the artist's ability to exhume the past (Kessler 2018). What is illustrated is “an assertion of multiple, overlapping temporalities” (Bishop 2018: 19) and consequently, the source of MARE's radical museological strategy: an anachronic perception of contemporaneity.

Claire Bishop has signaled this model of contemporaneity as one which abandons the presentation of contemporary art as a static continuation of postmodernity. It turns instead towards “a plural and disjunctive relationship to temporality” that breaks with the idea of the linear historical progression (Bishop 2018: 18–9).²⁰ Further, by opting to refer to its collection as one of *recent art*, MARE has similarly circumvented the direct allusion to postmodernism or contemporaneity in its nomenclature, hence abandoning “Western hegemonic categories” (Bishop 2018). The peripheral quality often attributed to Eastern European art and the difficulties in exhibiting it result from the attempt to match it to a

conventional, linear Western art historical model.²¹ Works such as that of Grigorescu challenge this model through their recursive temporality, avoidance of clear categorization, and resistance to historical sedimentation. Further, by exhibiting Grigorescu's work on both floors of the permanent collection, MARE problematizes the explicit chronological positioning of the artist. The anachronic model that underscores its museological approach gives way to what Bishop has termed *dialectical contemporaneity*, a “navigation of multiple temporalities,” and the questioning of their reoccurrence during “specific historical moments” (2018: 23). Framed by this, the alignment of the “stylistic diversity” room on the second floor to the one on the first floor dispels the apparent relativist pluralism of the more recent counterpart. A parallel can be drawn between the liberalization period of 1965 and that ensuing after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In both instances the diversification of artistic production is propelled by the disappearance, be it even temporary, of a dominant, politically imposed visual discourse. Within the rooms, the juxtaposition of works such as those of Teodor Graur and Ioana Bătrânu connect the use of political critique in pre- and postsocialist contexts. The piece of pork meat positioned centrally in Graur's painting, reminiscent of Orthodox icons in size and composition, draws upon the scarcity of food during the 1980s in Romania. Graur's work was initially exhibited at the experimental gallery *Atelier 35* at the height of Ceaușescu's totalitarian manifestations (1983–1984). Bătrânu's painting *Porcii noștrii* (Our Pigs, 2002) depicts an exhausted sow feeding her numerous piglets, an allegory for the desolate state of postcommunist Romania and the many “political mouths” it has to feed. Drawing upon the theme of chronic lack, the Graur-Bătrânu pairing points to the recurring fact of an ignorant political class, concerned with personal economic gain rather than the well-being of



citizens. Through the means of *dialectical contemporaneity*, art reveals the systemic remnants of the *ancien régime* and the dangers of concealing how they operate. Recalling the metaphor of Grigorescu's painting *Geniul și epoca*, history becomes a corpse that we cannot bury as it is subject to perpetual exhumation and reiteration.

In addition to the anachronic model of contemporaneity that lies at the basis of its permanent collection, MARE's radical museological approach can also be attributed to the aforementioned stimulation of narrative multiplicity. The museum opens up and facilitates the polyvalent production of narrative. Its anachronic underworkings further amplify this, as the museum is no longer governed by a strict chronology, thus also allowing for the application of multiple alternate methodologies transhistorically. The visitor can follow the museum's parallels or simply generate her own reading (based on other discourses). In a state of permanent narrative mutability, the dynamism of MARE's collection is further amplified through organized tours given by artists, film directors, and other personalities of the Romanian cultural sphere. The viewing experience is activated, as, with each new curator, the visitor experiences the museum through a different lens. Given that the tours are not scripted, one has the possibility to interact and challenge the narrative presented rather than simply act as a passive listener. An alternative to the written text, MARE has chosen to animate and diversify the curatorial voices that narrate its collection. By letting artists give tours to visitors, the museum not only enables a confluence of the past and the present, by way of its anachronic display, it similarly sets the ground for connections with future series of works. No longer a mausoleum or site of ruins (Douglas Crimp 1980), the museum is activated, becoming a space of living interaction and dialectical encounters. Through its radical museological approach, MARE proposes an alternative to the Western-

centric model of the static, contemporary art museum. The small spaces it allocates to exhibiting non-Romanian art can be taken as an ironic reversal of the marginal importance conventionally attributed to Eastern European art. "Thinking the center and the periphery together" Rothberg (2013: 82), MARE reasserts the importance of exchanging an East-West dichotomy for a model which sees the development of Romanian artistic production on par with that of Western countries.²² However, it is perhaps this desire to be considered of equal importance to Western art that has led to the same problem that the museum's building poses: decontextualization and, therefore, an erasure of the past and the creation of "mis-memory." The absence of Socialist Realism or Ceaușescu's later Humanist Realism from MARE's collection, albeit a conscious curatorial choice, obscures the communist regime's oppressive imposition of a dominant visual discourse both before 1965 and after 1971, while treating the communist period as a historical syncope to be forgotten or remembered selectively. The significance of the liberalization period or the subversive acts of the *Prolog* group are, hence, deprived of their full meaning, while the symbolic violence inflicted by state-led structures, such as the Romanian Artists' Union (UAP), is minimized. The next sections will focus on *absence* within the collection and the potential distortion of *dialectical contemporaneity* and narrative multiplicity. While adopting a novel museological approach, MARE has not paid attention to the ethical complications of fragmenting the past.

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Erasure through absence: Socialist Realism and subsequent derivatives

The Romanian publication *Revista ARTA* has taken the most deprecatory stance towards MARE, generating a highly controversial

review of the institution following its opening in 2018. Emphasizing the “anticommunist sentiment” of the museum, the publication has largely justified this observation by pointing to the destruction of the previous Neo-Moorish house and to a statement made by MARE’s director regarding the absence of avant-garde artist Geta Brătescu from the permanent collection (Cioană 2018). According to the director, Brătescu’s work was not selected for the museum due to her “historic affiliation with the communist regime,” her appurtenance to the state-led Romanian Artists’ Union, and her participation in the Romanian pavilion of the 1960s Venice Biennale with Socialist Realist works (McGivern 2018). *Revista ARTA*’s review goes on to signal the lack of context provided in the permanent collection, while condemning the “nationalist discourse” that lies behind the museum’s missing comparison of Western and Romanian art (Cioană 2018). I would argue that the focus on Romania rather than Western tangents is not the result of an underlying nationalist sentiment, but an attempt at demarcating a local context that is often overlooked when exhibiting most Eastern European art internationally (Piotrowski 2009: 11–29). Museums such as the Tate Modern that have included Eastern European artists in their permanent collections have, however, selected those artists that have been assimilated by a Western art historical canon as a result of predominantly working in Western countries.²³ By dismantling the primacy of the “center,” MARE has simply allowed for the recuperation of the “periphery” through a change of focus.

However, far more problematic than the missing East-West parallel are the *selective* presentations of the Romanian context and the museum’s supposed “anticommunist sentiments,” issues that *Revista ARTA* only touched but not expanded on. As MARE’s focus is the presentation of visual discourses that circumvented and resisted the official state-dictated canon of the communist

regime, the museum has opted not to display any Socialist Realist or Humanist Realist art. In doing so, MARE has once more assumed too much about the visitors’ *a priori* knowledge and their ability to infer a juxtaposition with the official art of the former regime. As the gap increases between generations who have directly experienced communism and those who have “no memory of it or understanding of its mechanisms” (Popescu-Sandu 2010: 118–9) museums play a crucial role in explaining Romania’s totalitarian history and the different modes through which its system of oppression operated. Increasingly unstable, this past is “vanishing or completely absent,” restricted to individual memory or archival materials that have not sufficiently protruded into the public sphere (Popescu-Sandu 2010: 118–9). Oana Popescu-Sandu writes that “Discussions of communism as a shaping agent” are regularly “avoided, skipped over and effaced” (2010: 119). In the absence of discussion, the identification of communist forms (mental or institutional) that persist within the postcommunist context can be impeded. This can potentially render MARE’s enactment of *dialectical contemporaneity* unsuccessful as the recognition of the past within the present and the cause of resurgent thematic threads is conditioned by prior historical knowledge. Hence, the lacunae within MARE’s illustration of artistic production during the communist regime can lead to the decontextualization of works created both *before* and *after* the 1989 Revolution. While the omission of the regime’s official visual language can be considered a product of “anticommunist sentiment,” I would argue against the adoption of such terms, or rather stances, due to their categorical and simplifying nature. *Revista ARTA*’s perspective trivializes the complexity of confronting and exhibiting Romania’s totalitarian past during the ongoing, arduous process of transitional justice. MARE’s fragmented display is a symptom of the tense, unresolved



character of Romania's communist history. Gestures such as the public justification of Brătescu's exclusion from the museum can be interpreted as an attempt to gain "moral capital," for MARE's permanent collection features numerous artists that had either adhered to the Romanian Artists' Union, were affiliated with the regime, or carried out state commissions (Georgescu 2010: 159).

The term *anticommunist* implies a binary, whereas the delimitation of the ethical from the unethical within discussions of the regime *cannot* be so clear-cut. The coercive power of the secret services (the Securitate), as well as the great difficulty in living outside of state structures, rendered many unable to bypass insertion within the communist public sphere. Recently, a great amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the role of the Romanian Artists' Union in constituting a preferential system that exclusively benefited individuals who created in line with the state canon (Mocănescu 2011; Drăghia 2017; Predescu 2017; Lăcătușu 2017; Preda 2015). This led to an unbalanced distribution of commissions based on an internal hierarchy of ideologically resonant artists. A centralized power controlling all artistic activity, the Union proliferated the aesthetic guidelines of the regime, rewarding those who abided by them through the sale and display of artworks, as well as the possibility to travel abroad on cultural exchange programs (see above). Functioning as an ideological rather than a professional organization, the Romanian Artists' Union served as a "velvet prison" (Haraszti 1987), an administrative apparatus whose aid was conditioned by one's willingness to compromise (Enache 2017). MARE acknowledges this as it continues to exhibit artists such as Ion Grigorescu or Constantin Flondor that were forced, either directly or as a result of circumstances, to create for or collaborate with the regime. There is a grey area that prevents the adoption of any radical, dismissive binaries (such as the aforementioned communist vs.

anticommunist binary). Sensitive to the issues of state coercion and constraint, the museum has not been categorical (with the exception of Brătescu) about any of its artists' pasts, yet it does little to explain why this is so. If not contextualized by the presence of an official socialist visual canon, MARE risks not only a distortion of *dialectical contemporaneity*, but the minimization of the coercive power of the Romanian Artists' Union and a reduction of the impact generated by subversive art. Groups such as the neo-Orthodox *Prolog* used Christian symbolism within their work in order to counteract the heightened ideological ban on religious practice in the 1980s (Dumitrescu 2017). Discredited by Marxist-Leninist thought and referred to as an "opiate of the masses," religion similarly posed a threat to Nicolae Ceaușescu for it rivaled the expansion of the dictator's cult of personality.²⁴ Positioning *Prolog's* visual discourse against the backdrop of Ceaușescu's Humanist Realism (an adaptation of Socialist Realism that saw the dictator as its protagonist) would help emphasize the reactive nature of the group's artistic approach. By not placing the group within the frame of the Romanian totalitarian milieu of the 1980s, MARE has obstructed the source of *Prolog's* subversiveness. Yet another crucial point where a socialist visual canon can be used for contextualization is the earlier 1965 period of liberalization. As the museum has placed much emphasis on this timeframe, it is important to stress the historical circumstances that allowed for the diversification of artistic production in the late 1960s. The inclusion of both Socialist and Humanist Realism would also facilitate the comparison between the "stylistic diversity" that followed Gheorghiu-Dej's death and that emerging after the 1989 Revolution. Further still, the display of official communist artwork could also exemplify MARE's focus on visual discourses that circumvented the regime through works that did not evade but, conversely, attempted



to work within the canon. State commissions such as Ion Grigorescu's *Portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (1979), while seemingly ideologically correct, were rejected upon evaluation due to the subversive substratum they were deemed to possess (Pintilie 2017: 407). Using TV broadcasts as the referent for the work, Grigorescu's painting shows three depictions of the dictator arguing over a model of Casa Poporului (the House of the People, now Palace of the Parliament) (Pintilie 2017: 407). The realistic, aged (and thus, not idealized) appearance of the dictator and the ambiguous composition of the work prompted its refusal. A similar case that was, however, accepted by the communist officialdom was Ion Bitzan's *Homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu*, a singular, unflattering depiction of the dictator surrounded by a foggy blue background (Tanta 2017: 244). Many such state commissions also disguised a particular irony, serving as a double entendre. Valeriu Mladin's 1987 painting *Ceaușescu-Romania*, while intending to depict the idyllic image of the dictator guarding over a crowd of running school children, could likewise be interpreted as a crowd fleeing away from the despotic leader (Pintilie 2017: 407).

By erasing the presence of visual discourses imposed by the communist regime from its collection, MARE has succumbed to the same unethical silence that it has assumed vis-à-vis the presentation of its building's history. Choosing to obscure rather than to attempt a discussion of the regime's oppressive mechanisms proves problematic as it decontextualizes the art within the museum, impedes transhistorical connections, and minimizes the effects of systemic coercion. MARE's museological approach has created a fecund setting for the analysis of Romania's recent history through the prism of art, yet it fails to take into account how much knowledge the visitor possesses about the topic. Fraught with tension, the understanding of the country's communist past continues to make

many uneasy. Museums should facilitate the alleviation of such sentiments through continuous reflective action. In order to do so, the consideration of all aspects, negative and positive, must be assessed. I finally turn to the absence of decorative art from MARE's collection in order to signal a blocking of narratives through the lack of medium diversity and the further creation of "mis-memory" through selectivity. Predominantly housing painting and sculpture, the museum reinstates an art historical model that regards "fine art" as hierarchically superior to other art forms. MARE's director considers painting the domain of recent Romanian art that has been subject to the most aesthetic innovation. I will argue against this, using the revival of tapestry in the 1970s and 1980s as a case study and counterexample, while pointing to the art historical distortions that can occur as a result of such generalizations. Failing to illustrate diversity outside of the category of fine art, the museum obstructs the remembrance of phenomena such as the Fondul Plastic (Artistic Fund) stores or of narratives pertaining to the overlap of art and industrial production (that was once mediated by textile and ceramic artists).



Erasure through absence: Decorative art and reinstated dichotomies

The absence of decorative art from MARE's permanent collection is starkly augmented by the presentation of a single embroidery on the first floor: Ana Bănică's *Ochii tăi iubitul meu, mă aproprie de D-zeu* (*Your eyes my love, bring me closer to God*). In contrast with this absence, one of the museum's recent temporary exhibitions *Marginalized, Isolated, and Excluded from Romanian Art* boasts an unprecedented diversity of medium, encapsulating painting, drawing, and sculpture as well as ceramics, textiles, and ready-mades (Kessler 2020: 19). This

diversity of medium, while a positive form of complementing the lacunae in the permanent collection, begs the question of why such an issue is not of primary but of merely supplemental importance. Having placed much emphasis on the plurality of art forms in the introduction of the exhibition's catalog, MARE has, inversely, associated those media that do not appear in its collection to notions of marginality, isolation, and exclusion. Paired with the lack of diversity in the museum's permanent display this can generate the interpretation that domains such as textiles and ceramics have seen little development and hold a peripheral significance in comparison to painting or sculpture, an interpretation that the director of the institution frequently champions.²⁵ Further, the emphasis on the unique quality of the artists included in the *Marginalized, Isolated, and Excluded* exhibition has been done at the expense of much generalization regarding artistic production in Romania during the communist regime. I will use

the example of tapestry to highlight and problematize some of the generalizations that appear in the exhibition catalog.

In the chapter about textile artist Constantin Petraşchievici, curator Ioana Şerban refers to the small dimensions of his works and their embracing of "string ends, pieces, patches, weaving and material *per se*" as an alternate direction to that of the conventional, imposing, monolithic wall tapestry (2020: 82). Şerban goes on to summarize the great interest in tapestry that commenced in the 1970s in Romania, as "tapestries were meant to decorate monumental surfaces (in the equally monumental, oversized and overstated spaces of communism)" (Şerban 2020: 82). The medium is then contextualized through the exacerbated nationalism of Ceauşescu's dictatorship and the use of large state-commissioned tapestries to glorify the country's protochronist history (Şerban 2020: 82). Şerban also signals the propensity for large dimensions among abstract

Figure 5: Adriana Nicodim: *Apa* [Water]. Sisal twine, 1973. Tapestry, mixed techniques. Photo credit: Adriana Nicodim.

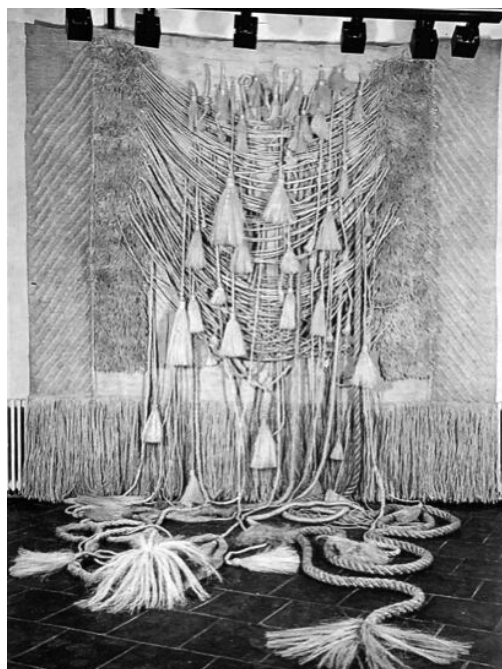
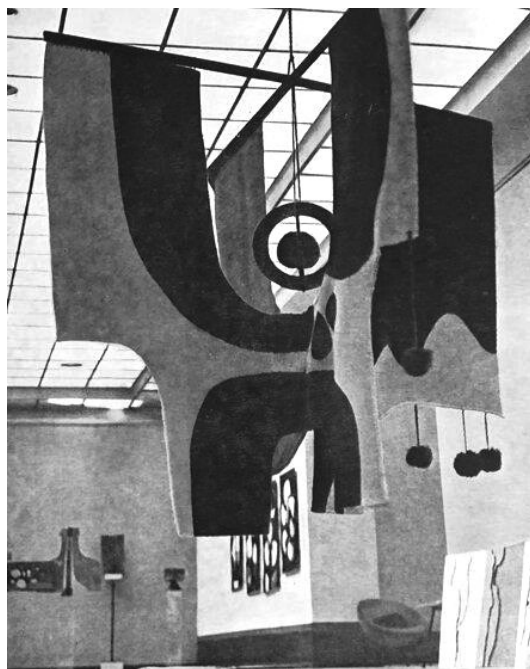


Figure 6: Teodora Stendl: *Fluture* [Butterfly], 1971. Wool. Tapestry, mixed techniques. Collection of the Museum of Visual Arts (Galaţi, Romania). Photo credit: Teodora Moisescu-Stendl and Ion Stendl.



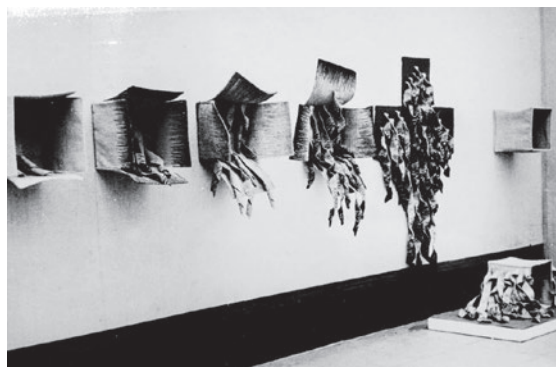


Figure 7: Elena Haschke-Marinescu: *Metamorfoză* [Metamorphosis]. Soft sculpture, mixed technique. Goar hair, metal, wool. Exhibited at Sala Dalles in 1984. Photo credit: Elena Haschke-Marinescu.



Figure 8: Elena Haschke-Marinescu: Detail of *Metamorfoză* [Metamorphosis], 1984. Soft sculpture, mixed technique. Goar hair, metal, wool. Exhibited at Sala Dalles in 1984. Collection of the Museum of Art (Bacău, Romania). Photo credit: Elena Haschke-Marinescu.

textile artists such as Ritzi Jacobi. Such arguments, while effective in individualizing Petraşchievici's work, conflate all other textile artists under the same dimensional paradigm, while disregarding stylistic diversity and innovational pluralism. The 1970s and 1980s marked a prolific period in the history of tapestry making, both in Romania and internationally. Artists such as Elena Haschke-Marinescu, Ariana Nicodim, Ion Stendl, Teodora Stendl, and Ana Lupaş drew upon the fecund tradition of vernacular textiles and the concept of intermediality in order to push the inherent, ontological properties of the medium.²⁶ Questioning the historical subordination of tapestry to a pictorial referent, to figurative depictions, and to the structural space of the wall, Romanian textile artists began to break with the two-dimensional conventions of the medium (see Buşneag 1976; Grozdea 1982). In Ariana Nicodim's work *Apa* (Water, 1973) the rows of overlaid ropes emerging from the tapestry's plane protrude into the space of the viewer, cascading to the ground to occupy both the space of the wall and that of the floor (Figure 5). Teodora Stendl's 1971 kinetic tapestry *Fluture* (Butterfly) entirely escapes the wall and two-dimensionality by hanging instead from the ceiling, mounted on a cross-shaped wooden structure that matches the four "wings" of the work

(Figure 6). Elena Haschke-Marinescu's *Metamorfoză* (Metamorphosis, 1984), a sequence of seven three-dimensional cubes that progressively open, displays an intermedial confluence of sculpture and tapestry as the sixth cube of the progression is entirely floor bound (Figures 7 and 8). The aforementioned works, while varying in size (discussed from large to small), reflect the multiplicity of approaches to textile art within the Romanian context of the 1970s and 1980s that occurred outside of the regime's ideological impositions. Petraşchievici's attention to material, pieces, patches, and weaving can also be observed in the works of Mariana Oloier and Teodora Stendl's who used naturally colored wool, traditional weaving techniques, and modular formats for their tapestries (Buşneag 1976: 12–4). Petraşchievici's small, sculptural conception of textile works is similarly integral to the practice of artists such as Haschke-Marinescu (Figures 9 and 10). Thus, generalizations such as Şerban's do not hold up when juxtaposed with the polyvalent nature of tapestry production during the last two decades of the communist regime in Romania. Moreover, such diversity contradicts the assertion that fine art forms saw the most progress and attention during this timeframe.

Excluding decorative art from its





Figure 9: Elena Haschke-Marinescu: *Untitled*. Twine and ceramic tiles.
Photo credit: Elena Haschke-Marinescu.
Courtesy of the Marinescu family personal archive.



Figure 10: Elena Haschke-Marinescu: *Untitled*. Felt and string.
Photo credit: Elena Haschke-Marinescu.
Courtesy of the Marinescu family personal archive.

permanent collection and reducing its impact to the work of a few artists in temporary exhibitions (as is the case with tapestry), MARE distorts reality to fit its narratives. By minimizing the evolution of decorative art to a few isolated instances, the museum manages to reinstate the hierarchical superiority of fine art, a notion that has been vigorously combatted since the 1970s by scholars and decorative arts movements such as the American Pattern and Decoration (Goldin and Kushner 2012; Swartz 2007). Much like the Romanian textile artists of the 1970s and 1980s, these movements sought to undo the conventionally negative connotations attributed to decoration throughout art history.²⁷ In addition to the historical association of decoration to decadence, kitsch, or even crime,²⁸ the utilitarian function inherent to ceramics or textiles has also been used to argue against the aesthetic and semantic values of such objects.²⁹ Traditionally, the artwork invites for contemplation and an evaluation of the discourse that frames its conception. Objects with practical functions have, thus,

been largely excluded from the category of 'Art' due to an elitism derived from the "Cartesian heritage of mind-body dualism" that prioritizes cognitive processes (Markowitz 1994: 68). Thus, the dismantling of a dichotomy between fine art and decorative art in the 1970s can be seen as an invalidation of the Cartesian logic, a logic that MARE problematically reiterates by placing nearly all of the emphasis on innovations in painting. Alongside the Socialist Realism lacunae in its permanent collection that threatens decontextualization, the lack of medium diversity in the museum can lead to a severe restriction of the narratives that the institution can generate. In the case of decorative art, two significant themes can emerge if the current collection is supplemented: the overlap of art and industrial production and the intersection of art and life. I will briefly turn to the realm of textiles once more in order to illustrate a possible exploration of such themes.

Following the completion of higher education programs, graduating textile artists would be distributed to factories

or other state-owned enterprises in order to secure the workforce required for the upkeep of socialist industry. Textile factories such as the *Dacia Textile Enterprise* employed artists to create designs and establish the distinct color schemes of mass-produced fabrics (Figure 11). Consequently, in addition to an individual practice, artists contributed to bridging the gap between art and industry. Given the interdependence of craft and decorative art in Romania, numerous textile artists (as well as ceramicists, metal workers, and glass workers) were also given the opportunity to work for the Central Union of Craftwork Manufacturers (UCECOM) to produce artisanal objects inspired by Romanian ethnology.³⁰ These objects were subsequently exported for international consumption leading to a popularization of Romanian culture in the 1970s, particularly through the reinterpreted variants of traditional garments created by UCECOM's textile artists.³¹ Within the country, Fondul Plastic stores created a space for artists to sell handmade objects ranging from holiday cards to neckties. Administered by the institution that provided loans, studio spaces, and pensions for artists, such stores constituted not only an additional source of revenue, but allowed for art to protrude into the everyday by way of diverse items.³² As the phenomenon of Fondul Plastic stores remains within the collective memory of artists that worked during the regime, the little literature that exists on the topic invites museums to look back and attempt its recuperation.

When venturing to redeem artists, MARE should pay greater attention to the unethical nature of art historical generalizations, particularly with regards to art forms that have been minimally represented within its own collection. By augmenting the importance of a particular oeuvre, juxtaposing it to a unidirectional perception of other artistic productions, the museum's narrative works to diminish the complexity of a medium. In the case of textile art,



Figure 11: Elena Haschke-Marinescu with her colleague Ileana Dăscălescu checking the quality of the printed fabric produced at the Dacia Textile Enterprise in Bucharest. Courtesy of the Marinescu family personal archive.

Petrașchievici's work is presented as an innovation against the monolithic backdrop of monumental, socialist commissions and limited artistic inquiry outside of state-led art production. Here, erasure does not occur in an outright form, but is veiled by an attempted retrieval of marginalized, isolated, and excluded art that, however, is framed through a curatorial discourse that prioritizes individualization to the detriment of a more accurate, holistic view. While the museum cannot point to and fill all lacunae within its collection at once, it is important that such curatorial endeavors do not confound *contextualization* and *generalization*, for while the former aims to engender knowledge, the latter obscures it through omission.





Conclusion

In the current climate of critical, or even radical museology, cultural institutions must be held accountable for the histories they are either directly or indirectly refusing to acknowledge. Like museums of former colonial powers that are gradually unearthing “uncomfortable truths” within their permanent collections, the postsocialist context of transitional justice commands the same of Eastern European institutions tasked with remembering the recent and traumatic communist history of the region. Within countries such as Romania, the systemic perpetuation of communist structures has made the recognition of its totalitarian past and the breadth of its oppressive mechanisms, a slow, arduous, and ongoing process. Treating socialism much like a historical error, the country has refrained from fully confronting its history by minimizing the discussions about the topic in the public sphere, thus delaying the natural turn towards decommunization. The lack of a normalized discourse regarding communism poses a great problem for future generations whose direct access to primary sources, such as individual experience, will have eroded. As such, museums must assume a restorative role in the process of combatting historical amnesia and “mis-memory” by perpetually bringing the past within the contemporary, by revealing and dissecting the latent systemic remnants of the *ancien régime* towards the larger scope of the *tabula rasa*, the “clean slate” which enables progress, rather than the “slate wiped clean” of sociopolitical antecedence.³³

Rivaling state-administrated contemporary art institutions through its radical museology, MARE has benefitted from an increasing visibility as a result of its recognition by the Romanian Ministry of Culture and other government officials.³⁴ Integrating an anachronistic model of contemporaneity in its curatorial approach,

while similarly activating the museum display through tours provided by artists, MARE has created an optimal space for the dialectical encounter of past, present, and future. However, one of its museological faults lies in the constitution of the display based on an *a priori* assumption of the visitor’s holistic knowledge regarding Romania’s communist history and its unethical silence vis-à-vis the topic due to its tense, unresolved nature. The museum has obscured the presence of the former regime both through the *excess* of elements incorporated into its building’s architecture and through the *absence* of Socialist Realism within the permanent collection. These curatorial choices function in tandem with an active erasure of the past, as discussions about traumatic collective events (collectivization, nationalization) or those regarding the coercive power of state-led apparatuses, such as the Romanian Artists’ Union, are silenced. Recuperating artists that circumvented the socialist canon, the museum does much to salvage works that operated outside of the communist regime’s ideological parameters. Regardless, in the grander scheme of Bucharest’s museums, MARE fails to deviate from the discursive obscurity that governs other such institutions with regards to this topic. As a result of its private ownership, the museum is, conversely, free of the burden that is the state-imposed narrative and its curatorial application. Not dependent on government funding, its self-sufficiency allows for critical distance and a positioning outside of a politicized cultural sphere. In order for the museological novelty of MARE’s approach to not be undermined, more attention has to be paid to contextualization and the reversal of art historical hierarchies. The decorative art lacunae in its collection, while also impeding the potential formation of new narratives, points to the questionable prioritization of fine art forms as the only exemplars of innovation within recent Romanian art history. As MARE uses the term *museum*,

and not *collection*, in its nomenclature, this suggests that a more neutral and inclusive perspective should have been adopted when building its permanent display. Radical, both in its positive and negative aspects, oscillating between novel (*dialectical contemporaneity*) and antiquated (Cartesian

dualism) notions, it could be that MARE will find balance in one of its future permutations. Given that a change in its permanent collection is due soon, it remains to be seen if such a radical institution is capable of implementing even more radical change.



NOTES

1. For more on the concept of transitional justice in postcommunist countries, refer to Lavinia Stan (2009).
2. The name of the museum will be discussed further on in the paper.
3. The original term in Romanian is *zonă construită protejată*. Such areas can be identified on the Bucharest City Hall website.
4. For more on the process of nationalization, see Tismăneanu (2003).
5. The issues of restitution and confiscated housing as a financial asset are discussed in Stan (2006); Demeter (2018).
6. During 1990s, politicians of the National Salvation Front advocated for the right of tenants to continue inhabiting nationalized housing, while the opposition proposed restitution as the only ethical solution. Warning against an impending housing crisis, the Salvation Front (comprised of former communist officials) implemented policies that permitted tenants to buy the nationalized homes to which they had been relocated during the regime. In areas such as Primăverii, these policies benefited former members or descendants of the *nomenklatura*, allowing them to purchase properties that had been abusively seized (see Stan 2006: 190–5).
7. During Gheorghiu-Dej's period of de-Stalinization (late 1950s), Ana Pauker's involvement in the violent collectivization process carried out by Dej's regime was amplified as a justification for the purging of Soviet communist officials from Romanian central administration. While Pauker was famously opposed to forced collectivization, the mythology surrounding her persona continued to be propagated throughout Ceaușescu's regime and persists within popular culture today (see Kligman and Verdery 2011: 105–210).
8. For more on the concept of authenticity, see the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Nara Document on Authenticity (1994).
9. The integration of old architectural elements into new designs rarely pays attention to proper conservation practices in Bucharest. Documents such as the ICOMOS Venice Charter (1964) do not forbid the repurposing of built heritage for other social functions, however, they forbid demolitions or modifications "which would alter relations of mass and color." Often, such architectural fusions are done by simply adding a discrepant, modern structure to an old, existing one with no intention of reconciling the two elements. An excellent example of this is the headquarters of the Romanian Architect's Union in central Bucharest where a glass office building simply emerges out of the remaining French Renaissance facade of the Păulescu villa that previously served as the Austro-Hungarian Embassy in the nineteenth century.
10. For more information on the building project see the YTAA website (<http://ytaa.co/projects/museum-of-modern-art>).
11. Bulgaria's first communist leader, who was at the head of Bulgaria from 1946 until his death in 1949. His mausoleum, located in Battenberg Square, was demolished without notice by the Bulgarian authorities in 1999.
12. The location is now a popular meeting place in Sofia, which is still referred to as the Dimitrov mausoleum.
13. One can forget on "account not of defect but of excess," see Eco and Migiel (1988).
14. The conversion of the mausoleum into a theatre was proposed. See Todorova (2010a: 430).
15. See also Kalman (2017); Kaufman (2009); Smith (2006).
16. Kalman (2017: 548).
17. *Scântea Newspaper* (July 20, 1965) quoted in Cârnelci (2013: 68).
18. Two of the most notable exhibitions organized in Romania during the liberalization period were the 1968 Paris School exhibition and the American Abstract Expressionism exhibition of 1969 (Cârnelci 2013: 74).
19. The Romanian term *artă de sertar* (drawer art) became a colloquial form of referring to art that could not be exhibited due to its subversive nature.
20. Bishop also refers to the perpetuation of "postmodernism's post-historical deadlock" as a second, more conven-

tional model of exhibiting contemporaneity. This model sees contemporary art as a mere chronological perpetuation of postmodernism's pluralism and referential nature, thus upholding its dependence on the historicity of modernism. Bishop argues in favor of the anachronic model for its "generative" rather than static nature, its ability to operate solely through the logic of postmodernism and produce the "new" by "collapsing a past and future into an expanded present" (2018: 19).

21. Both Bishop (2018) and Piotrowski (2000: 12) have signaled the difficulty of adapting Eastern European art to the static, chronologically bound Western framework as a result of its multiple temporalities.

22. This model exchanges the conception of Europe as geographically split, as bearing a center and a periphery, for an integrative conception that embraces multiplicity and points of confluence.

23. An example is sculptor Paul Neagu who lived and worked in the United Kingdom after having permanently left Romania in 1970. Neagu had limited contact with the Romanian art scene of the 1970s and 1980s, exhibiting and teaching in Scotland for most of his life.

24. Karl Marx's critique of religion in Marx (1970, originally published in 1844).

25. Erwin Kessler (director, Museum of Recent Art), in a discussion with the author, Bucharest, August 20, 2020.

26. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins introduced the concept of intermedial art as work that evaded belonging to one medium. Intermedial art is liminal, mediating, and confounding distinct art forms. See Higgins (1967).

27. For an overview of this, see Jaudon and Kozloff (1978).

28. Here I am referring to Adolf Loos's moralizing essay *Ornament and Crime* (1908) that deplored the appeal for excessive decoration, considering it an impediment in the cultural evolution of society.

29. Semantic values refer to the "possibility or necessity of interpreting the work," while aesthetic values are "beauty, its formal unity or its evocativeness" and the capacity of the work to produce a reaction or invite contemplation. See Markowitz (1994: 56–7).

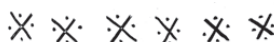
30. Olga Horșia (former director of UCECOM), in a discussion with the author, Bucharest, June 24, 2020.

31. Ibid.

32. Anamaria Smigelschi and Silvia Colfescu, "Despre boema românească din anii '70 - '80" [About the Romanian Bohemia from the 1970s–1980s], discussion at the Stories of Bucharest Conference, National Theatre of Romania, December 8, 2019.

33. Anamaria Smigelschi and Silvia Colfescu, "Despre boema românească din anii '70 - '80" [About the Romanian Bohemia from the 1970s–1980s], discussion at the Stories of Bucharest Conference, National Theatre of Romania, December 8, 2019.

34. MARE's director, Erwin Kessler, is often invited by the Ministry of Culture to participate in discussions regarding the elaboration of policy for the funding of the contemporary art sector. The museum has recently gained the attention of deputy Prime Minister Raluca Turcan who applauded the institution's support of contemporary artists through acquisition programs, as well as its innovative approach to exhibiting Romanian art. For more information, see the website of the Romanian Ministry of Culture (www.cultura.ro).



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Fig. 1, 2. *Steps to Heaven* monument, October 2008 | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

The Museum of the Unknown City Part I

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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.

KEYWORDS

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



A Museum Concept: Invisible and Subjective

How it began was paradigmatic. In the summer of 2008, I happened to accompany architect Cosmin Pavel when he met the mayor of Mizil to present designs for plain volumetric markers to replace a monument that had been removed from a pedestrian thoroughfare. After

he was shown a number of versions, the mayor's reaction was disconcerting: "No! Wait a minute, I've got a better idea!" He left his office and came back a few minutes later with a scale model of a monument that was a pastiche of Brancusi's *Column of the Infinite* in Tîrgu Jiu: "We could have it rising from the mound you showed me!"

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During the discussion, on finding out that I work at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, the mayor asked me a direct question: "We'd like to create a museum of our own here. Couldn't you give us some of your folk costumes?" A partnership with such a mayor and local authority would obviously have been difficult, if not impossible. The uncouthness of the episode revealed to us how local politicians conceive of projects for the benefit of the community: in a manner devoid of research, concept, debate. The imposition of his own ideas, a kind of administrative mysticism that was to reach its apogee in his sixth term as mayor, bizarrely combined communist and capitalist modes of action, an infelicitous adaptation of professional reprofiling that is an increasingly frequent practice in Romanian society.

Another pertinent episode that brings to light the dependence of local cultural projects on political decision-making was when Adrian Năstase was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in the Mizil uninominal electoral district. Năstase is a well-known collector and also donor, who as Prime Minister gave the go-ahead for the founding of a number of major museums in the Bucharest cultural sector, such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art and the National Museum of Antique Maps and Books. It was hoped that as Deputy for Mizil he would support the creation of a local museum. Indeed, on his personal blog, he twice recounts being visited at his local electoral office by an aged history teacher, who suggested the museum project to him,¹ a meeting now conserved in the blogosphere.

The two episodes are symptomatic of how the *museum* is viewed at the level of local administration in Romania, an image that does not seem to have changed for decades. Since the inter-war period, the museum has been conceived and perceived as almost exclusively a social connector, in

the absence of any other conceptualisation, but one which has been augmented by the enthusiasm of priests and schoolteachers. In Mizil, the earliest initiative was in September 1928, when a library and museum of "various ecclesiastical, geological and numismatic antiquities" (Popescu 1929: 3) was created in the parish buildings of the church of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The press article announcing this cultural event concludes with an appeal: "As the museum is barely in its infancy, the Reverend Father asks that we support it, requesting that all those who have various antiquities donate them to the museum, which we hope will grow in size, doing honour to our town. Such museums, but larger, can be found in every town in Transylvania" (*Ibid*: 3). It was not the first cultural initiative on the part of Father Lefter. Before arriving to serve as a priest in Mizil, he had founded a library at the theological boarding school in Bucharest, where he was head of the student centre.

A few years later, in 1933, the same weekly newspaper announced that in Buzău, the administrative seat of the county of which Mizil was part, a "regional teachers' museum" had been established, which was to gather together "regional collections, some by donation, others by purchase": "At Girls' Primary School No. 1, a regional teachers' museum has been created, consisting of the following sections: zoology, botany, ethnography, history and the military, religion, numismatics and medals, arts, journalism, the history of medicine, geology, monography, and childhood" (Muzeul regional... 1933: 2). Each section was to be run by an artistic board, while a committee of at least one hundred was to deal with the collection of materials. In the beginning, the museum was financed by the 10 lei fees paid by active members.

A year later, also in Buzău, a Museum of Ethnography opened on 29 July, "in the Sibiceanu buildings on Bulevardul Gării, at the initiative of Mr Costică Dumitrescu,

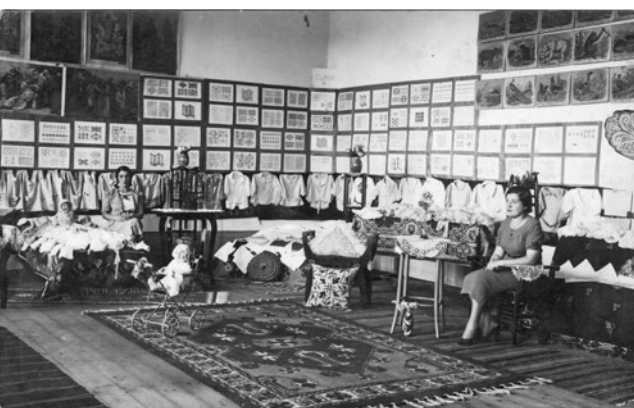


Fig. 3. Exhibition of work and drawings, Girls' Gymnasium, Mizil, 1936-1937 | "Miziliada" Collection.



Fig. 4. Museum, Boys' School No. 2, Mizil | ANR.

head of the Boys' Secondary School, and without the material assistance of the school authorities" (Un muzeu... 1934: 4) which was later to become the property of the school.

The emergence of these all-encompassing micro-museums within schools fostered emulation and, we may assume, also competition. The Buzău example was adopted in Mizil, most obviously in the Mizil Girls' School exhibition of work and drawing and later in the school museum that teacher Virginia C. Stoica established "through her own personal contribution and that of her pupils"² at the No. 2 Boys' School, along with a school pharmacy, as revealed by a certificate dated 20 October 1941.

as it was a threat to a regime founded on exploitation, juxtaposed with the new plan of the village, where the place of honour is held by the school, the culture club, the people's council, the dispensary, alongside the new houses for the co-operative peasants, would be a strong educational factor" (Stoica 1967: 145) The emphasis on school museum activities is interesting, and in principle, they could provide an educational alternative via practical modules that were far more effective in the teaching of various subjects, but also raised ethical issues when it came to the procurement of documents: "We would achieve two important things. The first relates to the instructional-educational efficacy of history, geography and natural science lessons, and the second, to the use of children to help collect documents precious for reconstruction of local history,

After the Second World War, school museums and so-called "museum corners" became a widespread educational practice and method in history departments. In addition to their teaching purpose—that of "encouraging pupils to collect objects" and "mobilising them to make exhibits by hand"—there was also a stated ideological purpose: "As an example of a museum item, this plan of the village as it was in the past, with its mayor's office and gendarmes' station, institutions sited in a place of honour next to the boyar manor house, and its school, abandoned a number of times,



Fig. 5. Museum Corner, School No. 1, Mizil | School No.1 Archive.

which are liable to perish" (*Ibid.*: 146). Explorations in Mizil have revealed the disappearance of many artefacts and documents collected from 1947 to 1989 for school museum corners, one of the main causes of which was the ambiguous status of such items.

This whole micro-tradition was enough to make us decide to take upon ourselves any locally applicable idea or museum/curatorial project. In 2010, the national context began to witness a series of such local initiatives, which were to increase in number over the course of time.

One such project is "The Memorable Town,"³ organised by the Bv-Cv-Hr branch of the Order of Romanian Architects, whose aim is to "cultivate a sense of local identity" through dialogue "between locals and architects on the topic of the evolution of the public space and urban architecture" as part of conventional or street exhibitions, art installations, video screenings, lectures, and publications. There are similarities with the Museum of the Unknown Town project inasmuch as exploration of the town's history is based on images of Braşov from various times, supplied by locals' family albums or private collections. The differences are quantitative in nature: the archives of Braşov are incomparably

larger than those of Mizil, and therefore the potential for realising thoroughgoing historical and sociological studies is significantly less in a small town like Mizil. The advantages provided by the case of Mizil are to do with the exploration of a smaller field, even if this entails the unreliability of official information, and also of a territory of the imaginary, arising both from perceptions of the town and the subjective memories of its inhabitants.

The authors of another initiative, "Memory Loop," are researchers, designers, activists and programmers. They have constructed a digital memory tool as part of the *Memory Tour: Civic Education on the Streets of Bucharest* project, which "enables dialogue between past and present, highlighting the importance of materiality in reconfiguring the memory of historical events."⁴ A series of events from the history of twentieth-century Bucharest are

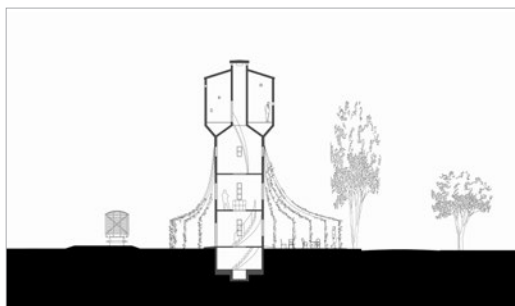


Fig. 6. Container-museum —section of the Water Tower | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.



Fig. 7. Container-museum, front elevation | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.

contextualised through the presentation of opposing historiographic interpretations and concretisation via “different media of visual and/or artistic expression.”⁵ The proposal has the advantage of exploring the process of memorialisation, including a substantial bibliographic survey, and whose mechanisms are presented to pre-university and university students from Bucharest via digital interfaces and guided tours. In this particular case, the differences when compared with the goals of the Museum of the Unknown Town are greater, inasmuch as the events that took place in the capital, as selected and presented by “Memory Loop,” were of national importance, which has enabled a process of memorialisation and generated a symbolic map relevant to the whole community, regardless of political affiliation. In the case of the Museum of the Unknown Town, the process of memorialisation finds its equivalent in the local architecture and urban fabric rather than in monuments and memorial plaques. In this potential territorial dialogue, the Museum of the Unknown Town is also a museum of subjective memory, despite the danger of resorting to approximations and fiction.

As far as I am concerned, the first step I took was in the autumn of 2008, when I began a blog dedicated micro-histories from my home town, ludically named *Miziliada*, and shortly after that I started writing a column (*mizilicuri* [aperitifs, fig. *bagatelles*]) in a literary magazine. After which I wrote three screenplays⁶ inspired by local histories and published *Etalonul Mizil—ficțiunile măsurătorilor* (Iova and Manolache 2016). At the same time, with architect Cosmin Pavel I worked on designs for a small local museum that would avoid interference from the local authorities. The first proposal, which was bold but difficult to realise, was to assemble shipping containers next to Mizil Station and to convert the water tower, which would have required the approval not of the town hall but rather the Ministry of Transport.

The second, more pragmatic proposal, although not as spectacular as the first, was to use a small building at the edge of town owned by architect Cosmin Pavel, as a space for meetings and storage of a collection of everyday items of local relevance. This proposal, titled *Mizilesque* (Constantin and Pavel 2015), made its debut in 2013 and was developed over a period of two years.



Fig. 8. *Mizilesque*, Mizil, Dallas district | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.

The results of the 2016 local elections made it possible for our team to work with the local authorities. In 2017, we proposed our museum project to the new mayor. We envisaged that the museum would be housed in one of the town's most familiar buildings, but which had fallen into disrepair. The building had been owned by the mayor at the



Fig. 9. Old Town Hall (c. 1940) | Laurențiu Bădicioiu collection.



Fig. 10. Old Town Hall (2014) | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

turn of the twentieth century, who had been made famous by a literary text (Caragiale 1900), as well as by his combativeness locally and his prominence in the national press of the time. In 2018, the project was adopted by Mizil Town Hall and put forward for funding via the Regional Operational Programme, Priority Axis 13: Supporting the Regeneration of Small and Middling Towns. Funding was granted in 2020.

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. It is a project to explore the past as an unofficial, semi-obscure, distant and sterile subject, accepting approximations, memories, nostalgies, desires, doubts, expectations, paradoxes, repetitions, exaggerations, astonishments, errors, suppositions, dreams, pains, myths, tensions, hallucinations, justifications, superstitions, reminiscences, equivocations, habits—a space of small miracles, an ocean of subjectivity such as the poetic lode in *Spoon River Anthology*. Such a museum cannot help but be one of forgetting and, inevitably, resignedly, one of incomplete and impossible rediscovery.

“Museum of an Unknown Town” is the memory of a non-existent town. For, the majority of museums reconstruct worlds that no longer exist. They reinvent them as part of a utopic exercise applied to the past, despite the overwhelming amount of information available to them and which they utilise. But knowledge is more than just accumulation. To an extent variable from case to case, it is also imagination, which enables innovation.

The “Museum of an Unknown Town” does not yet exist. 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

To paraphrase Montesquieu, we asked ourselves how it would be possible to create the museum of a small town of fourteen thousand inhabitants without repeating the experiences of similar towns and instead providing something new? From the outset we rejected exhibition concepts that combine history and ethnography to the



Figs. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Sketches for the "Museum of the Unknown City."

exclusion of all else, in a manner that imposes uniformity, and instead we made room for the imagination and intertextuality.

But first of all: What is Mizil and in what way? At the turn of the twentieth century, the town was renowned as a place where nothing happened apart from political squabbling, which often made the national news. It was an eminently mercantile town, which enjoyed a certain prosperity, but which also suffered calamities of varying degrees: a fire that almost wiped it off the map in 1866, followed by three lesser fires; three major earthquakes and other middling ones; occupation during the two world wars, after which the communist regime brought major changes in the structure of the populace and its economic profile.

For more than half a century, the mayors of Mizil competed, through the repetition of clichés, with the image of Le Capitain Cap, the petty aspirant to the French Parliament satirised by Alphonse Allais (2017) in his texts, in a style that looks forward to Caragiale's *A Solemn Day*. The town's mentions in the national newspapers were complemented by its appearances in plays,⁷ humorous sketches, lampoons, and literary reportages. The repeated satire resulted in a distorted image, compounded by the homonymy of *Mizil* and *mizilic* (snack; trifle, thing of no importance), which encouraged the use of the town's name in countless satirical comparisons. The following is an example of geo-social scaling:

Bucharest has its own particular nostalgia and weakness: for Paris. When you think of Paris, you'd even be prepared to walk all the way there, and Bucharest seems to you like Mizil. Because Paris—unlike London and New York, far larger cities—has a spirit of its own, a Parisian one, which is hard to define, but which you can put your finger on straight away, once you're in Berlin. (Aderca 1931: 1)

The same as in *Etalonul Mizil: ficțiunile măsurătorilor*, in the working proposals for

the museum project, we tried to capture the fluid memory of the city that is scattered throughout the official archives, the press, life stories, photographs and artefacts from family collections, and which would counterbalance the image created by the press over the decades. This textual-visual information in all its density was repositioned under the sign of a number of terms/spaces that bring to light a history of the town that is less familiar, even to its inhabitants: *Gauge, Humour, Amour, Monument, War, Politics, Railway Station, Death*, whose connective tissue, in the hiatus between real city and fictive city, is self-irony. The source of inspiration for this curatorial response of ours is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, in which symbol, metaphor, deliberate lacuna, and the fragmentary shine forth and structure a new narrative, one that is more attractive than the kind of narrative to be found in realist novels or classic museums, and combine with nostalgia and the refined observations of texts such as Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* and *Der Passagen-Werk* or W.G. Sebald's poetic-theoretical texts on memory and destruction.

Inevitably, we found questions as to the purpose and relevance of a museum in a town like Mizil to be unavoidable, and literature and cinema proved to be of significant help in our attempts to investigate, document and theorise the endeavour.

In the much-acclaimed mini-serial *Chernobyl*, the story opens with a voiceover from a character who chooses to tell things as they really are: "What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognise the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth, and content ourselves instead . . . with stories." It could serve as a motto for any attempt to write or revisit the past. The history of Pripyat, a town



built in 1970, was cut short by the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986. On site, only fragments of the disaster have remained, but there are also the personal remnants of the town's inhabitants, who were moved to the new town of Slavutych. In a potential futurological exercise, the abandoned city might be regarded as a future museum, perhaps a hundred years from now, a time capsule of the Soviet world, preserved by the unavoidable force of a disaster. A museum would be inconceivable in the absence of official and, above all, unofficial histories of the disaster. The dimensions of such a museum might rival the idea of the map as a representation of the world that Borges proposes in *On Exactitude in Science* by ludic reference to an imaginary author and work,⁸ and at the same time, it might help us practise the impossibility of objectivity as found in a museum that is a perfect replica of reality.

The tragedy of 1986 might be one of the ideas⁹ that on which the dystopia *A Visitor of a Museum* (1989) was based, a Soviet cinema production in the genre of *Chernukha*, whose backdrop is a world forever changed by an ecological disaster. Its ruins constitute the so-called *museum*, an inaccessible place that can be reached only for one week a year, when the waters that cover it slowly recede. Its mysterious pull and the decaying new world it inhabits, in which rubbish, deformities and religion dominate, transform it into a myth hard to fathom or accept, but which is therefore all the more alluring to the visitor who sets off to make an impossible exploration of it, out of dissatisfaction with contact mediated through photography: "— What makes you think the Mound is the main thing? — The Museum is a city first and foremost. A city. — Who knows . . . — The priests in their so-called sacred texts . . . — What? What about the priests? — . . . speak of the Mound, the Museum. And a path shall open from this age to the beginning of time. An ancient city will be revealed with its great mysteries. A mound will stand outside

the city upon which rises . . . and so forth. That's what it says, so the Mound is the main thing. — Enough. How can you take seriously all that nonsense? (. . .) — There was a city here? — Where? — Here. — Maybe. I don't remember."

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the metaphor of the *museum* was employed again the same year, 1989, in another Soviet film, *Zerograd*, a dystopia in which the history of the Russians/Soviets is superimposed on the histories of a small provincial town, and which in a comic, absurd manner uses memorialisation by means of museumisation, ideological ambiguity, surrealism, and postmodern pastiche of national history (Kabanova 2011: 103) through the lens of the glasnost policy, all of which converges in the nightmare of the main character: "Zero City is a city without coordinates, a zero on the world map, existing only as a visual expression of Varakin's inchoate fear." (Lawton 1992: 221-222). The museum becomes an alternative to the desolate landscape of Town Zero (Kabanova 2011).

It may be that such theoretical exercises are possible only in the aftermath of catastrophes such as those that struck Chernobyl and Pompei. It is not only in such contexts that history is rewritten in constant pendulation between scientifically argued truth and the truth politically laid down. Likewise, museums and monographs, as forms that popularise national or local history, have sometimes proven perfect mirrors of a political vision of history and meddling in the writing of history. One example is the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party. In a monograph on Mizil written by history teacher Gheorghe Panait in the 1970s, ideological constraints demanded that more room be given to the period immediately after the Second World War than to that preceding it. Social life prior to the establishment of the people's republic was reduced to clichés and frameworks that purged reality. Between the idea of a museum that perfectly conserves and



reconstructs a world and one that provides an idealised representation thereof, whether intentionally or not, there are numerous possibilities for experiment, the most honest of which seems to us to be to make allowance for imperfectability.

It is in this interval that the “Museum of the Unknown Town” is situated, as an honest attempt to enter into a dialogue with the invisible town, the town of personal memories, of which official history and in particular the history controlled by the communist regime take only selective and self-interested account in their assertion and consolidation of an ideology. The museum we propose is a place for every voice, an inventory of contexts, of observations of irreversible things, of psychological and social awareness, a kind of *Haus der Begegnung*,¹⁰ in which the past— orphaned stories and photographs, but not only—is convoked in order to make visible the infinitesimal, imperfect, but perfectly legitimate history of a community. Such a museum, however, will not be able to be realised by a multiple author, as polyphony is only a source, rather than an authorial element, as Alexandru Solomon argues in the conclusion to his book exploring documentary film as a cultural product dependent on the *use of documentary images* and on *practices of remembrance*, but also at the intersection with new technical possibilities: “But no matter how tempting and seemingly generous the idea of the collective work might be, in which the author fades into the background and acts simply as a catalyst for others’ contributions, it negates the very essence of the creative process. The creative documentary requires an ‘I’, a personality capable of perceiving, judging, reflecting the world through the prism of its own deeper experiences, in defining which the memory plays a central rôle. To understand documentary film’s propensity to the new media as a form of authorial democratisation, as a disappearance of the individual perspective, is a false lead” (Solomon 2016: 216).

The exercise of knowing induced by the “Cities Quartet” card game invoked by W.G. Sebald in *An Attempt at Restitution*¹¹ as a driver of future curiosity in exploring maps, atlases and history, brought interbellum Germany to the dining-room table via symbolic images of cities: cathedrals, railway stations, bastions, squares. Sebald would thereby come to compare the image of Stuttgart station, subsequently rediscovered on a postcard from 1939 sent by a little girl, with the real city that he was not to visit until 1976, asking himself, the same as in many of his other writings, “what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run,” and “why when I take the S-Bahn toward Stuttgart’s city centre do I think, every time we reach Feuersee Station, that the fires are still blazing above us, and that since the terrors of the last war years, even though we have rebuilt our surroundings so wonderfully well, we have been living in a kind of underground zone?” The entire excursus discovers invisible, unsuspected links, constructing a subjective network, a legitimate part of history, woven from fragmentary images of a city viewed through the eye of a writer, who optimistically concludes in favour of open, poetic forms of representation: “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship. A place that is at the service of such a task is therefore very appropriate in Stuttgart, and I wish it and the city that shelters it well for the future.”

Sebald’s highly personal explorations, alongside those of the other writers mentioned above, are yet another example in whose wake we wish to situate conceptually the “Museum of the Unknown Town.” The unpredictable links between the images and texts of differing personal experiences are capable not only of sensitising local



visitors to the history of the town, but also of making them aware that they are a part of that history, that they can enrich it by cultivating a practice of memory. Even the country's and the town's communist past, problematised in the last thirty years in a manner that has often been cliché-ridden and tended to uniformity, might be viewed in a more nuanced way, through a kaleidoscope of personal, tangible experiences. Obviously, there will be limits to the search for criteria such as the relevance, representativeness, accuracy and precision of such an installation activated by subjectively charged texts and images. It will always be debatable to what extent X, a person with particular features, finding himself in situation Y at moment Z, will put forward a legitimate viewpoint. But there will always be the possibility that any person, through all the information that lends consistency to his biography, might enrich history with his voice and his choices.

The objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy is one of the keys to reading our museum proposal and at the same time the sensitive area that might draw criticism from the ethical standpoint in its use of images and stories from a private person's life. The manner chosen in order to shed light on such a project prior to its construction can affect the memory or private space of the photograph's owner or of those the camera once captured in its frame. But by adopting Walter Benjamin's idea¹² of removing the text from its established spaces and, in our case, imposing it as a reflection of the project on the currents of the present, i.e., social networks, whither it would seem the world has decamped, we are merely extracting the image from the regime of storage in order to integrate it in a living regime of circulation, flux. The image-text assemblage is not a finished product, in the historicising sense that classic museums give it, but rather the element that needs to create a space of dilemmas, choices and revisions, which necessarily interacts with the psychological space of the visitor via activation, immersion.

We therefore regarded as important the significant and complementary presence of text alongside image. The main argument is the *image* of the town generated almost solely by various kinds of text, as I argued above. The production of image and text that has grown exponentially in the last fifteen years—films and serials available online, short films and stories that circulate on social networks—has rapidly altered and shaped sensibilities, expectations, and modes of reception. We therefore have a vast process of self-exposure, self-alterity, with which very many people seem to feel comfortable. It is the reason why we chose a form of promotion adapted to the current global context.

Undoubtedly in its attempt at representation, this procedure can be subject to or ascribed ethical limits, starting with the agreement of the photographs' owners to appear in public and continuing with the juxtaposition of texts that explore and extend the context of the image to a larger extent than mere identification of the characters, the place, and the time. What encouraged us to act in this direction was also enthusiasm on the part of the community, as well as donors, and not merely the enthusiasm of the archive's initiators. It was this passion that erased the dividing line between actor and audience, consolidating the coherence of the project, which finally the new town council did not hesitate to support.



Between Pamuk and Gorzo: Istanbul, Bucharest, Berlin

The "Museum of the Unknown City" is a counter-utopian endeavour (Ghiu 2011), in the sense of the term employed by Bogdan Ghiu, in which the utopia of communism and that of history, both of them collectivised, albeit to differing degrees, are confronted not with a closed/concluded counter-utopia of



Figs. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23. *The Invasion* (2006), Berlin | Photo credit: Dumitru Gorzo



Figs. 24, 25, 26, 28, 29. *The Invasion* (2006), Bucharest | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

the town within a well-defined story,¹³ such as the museum/novel/installation¹⁴ created by Orhan Pamuk, but rather they are counterposed with the utopias of real subjectivities, which generate, open, multiply the space of performative, participatory memory to the detriment of the contemplative memory.

Indeed, the manifesto of the Istanbul museum closes with an unexpected, even visionary, statement inviting us to produce for ourselves, metaphorically speaking, our own versions of a personal museum: “11. The future of museums is inside our own homes” (Pamuk 2012: 57). Since what needs to be altered is the relationship between community and museographic material, which still functions through authoritarian formulas.

To the autobiographical fictions of Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The Museum of Innocence* are added a twin construct that exerts a different power over the visitor through its unconventional mode of constructing by means of superposing the reality of Istanbul onto the reality of their characters. The dioramas realised in collaboration with a series of artists are collages/installations/assemblages of objects, images and text that go beyond museographic practices are samples of subjectivity with a power of seduction superior to those that are bounded by scientific principles. What is provocative and open to interpretations and criticism, from the museographic as well as the ethical standpoint, is not only the realisation of the dioramas in themselves, but also the provenance and selection of the elements contained therein, whose author is none other than Orhan Pamuk.

Another example of pushing the limits is *The Invasion* (2006) project by contemporary artist Dumitru Gorzo, which puts forward a unique mode of conceiving the connection between local community, memory, and exhibition. Museographic practices are avoided by means of transforming the city into a museum of improbable dimensions, permanently accessible until the copies of

the images exhibited deteriorate.

Hundreds of photographs of peasants from Ieud exhibited in Bucharest and Berlin on lampposts and walkways, in bus stations, on walls, windows and doors, in the form of stickers. Without instructions as to their use, (potential) narrative vehicles for passers-by, and a different, outward-looking viewpoint: they aren’t just exhibited, they visit.

The street museum: there were numerous discussions in the late nineties among artists and in particular among curators about what art museums should look like in the 2000s. There was much talk of a *Museum of the Future*, a museum consisting solely of photographic and video documentation, along with descriptions of works, actions, interactions, and so on. In *The Invasion*, I shook up the idea of a *Museum of the Future* a little—the name is contradictory as long as the museum mainly has to do with conserving the past. To be more exact, treated as documents, the photographs of the peasants from Ieud become active witnesses to their existence. The image/representation becomes an image/presence, an image with a dual meaning: to be seen and to see.

The photographs in question are examples that the photographer from Ieud was unable to sell to some of the subjects attending the events at which he was a permanent fixture. He sold them to me when I told him that I needed a stock of old images for various projects.¹⁵

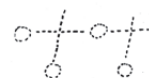
In 2007, I was one of those who were able to discover in both Bucharest and Berlin dozens of the hundreds of such photographs from the seventies and eighties taken in private contexts, reproduced as stickers, and pasted in public spaces. I was familiar with Gorzo’s unconventional paintings of peasants and I had an inkling as to the author of these interventions, which was subsequently confirmed. Among other forms of urban culture, these peasants from Maramuresch made their appearance in a manner that

was bizarre, fresh but with an aroma of old wine. The shock also came from the contrast between the imaginary, the urban trends and trepidations into which these images and their original space inserted themselves, a space intensively cultivated and associated with living, authentic traditions both by the mass media and the tourist industry, as well as by ethnologists, anthropologists, and museum curators. The impact of the provocation was guaranteed, but . . . What connotations might it hold for the passer-by? Is it possible to evaluate such encounters? These peasants from the recent past invading post-communist metropolitan spaces under the cloak of anonymity were transformed into symbols of an exotic world. This was one of the effects. At the same time, the same as in the Pamuk example, by means of a highly subjective artistic act, the author of the interventions is to a large extent released from the exigencies of criticisms from the ethical standpoint.

museography, which, above all else, demands boldness.

Situated on a similar wavelength is the “Museum of the Unknown Town” proposal, which places the visitor in the skin of the co-author, of the archaeologist-constructor of his own life,¹⁶ in the skin of the protagonist of an imperfect narrative, as well as in the skin of him who investigates the social dimension of a partly known world. Whereas in the films of the Romanian New Wave there is a shift from the fictional to the documentary, as Alexandru Solomon (2016: 34) observes, our experiment moves in the opposite direction, pivoting from the documentary to the creative, as can also be observed in the Gorzo and Pamuk.

(Continued in *The Museum of the Unknown City. Part II*, pp. 147-155)



NOTES

1. <https://adriannastase.ro/2008/10/17/despre-demnitare/>; <https://adriannastase.ro/2008/11/04/mizil-cest-moi/>.
2. Romanian National Archives, Ministry of Religions and Public Education Collection, File No. 514/1942, p. 25.
3. <https://orasulmemorabil.com/category/blog/>
4. <http://bucladememorie.ro>
5. <http://bucladememorie.ro/metoda/>
6. *Visul lui Adalbert* [Adalbert's Dream] (2011), *Ultima zi* [The Last Day] (2016) and *Carne de iepure* [Rabbit Meat] (2015) by director Gabriel Achim.
7. *Microbii Bucureștilor* [The Microbes of Bucharest], Paul Gusty's local version of the play *Die Großstadluft* by Oskar Blumenthal and Gustav Kadelburg, National Theatre, Bucharest, 1892; *Romeo și Julieta la Mizil* [Romeo and Juliet in Mizil], George Ranetti, National Theatre, Bucharest, 1912.
8. “In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their

Both examples go beyond contemporary methods of working with and innovating mechanisms to activate memory. None is perfect and in fact we do not believe that there can be perfection in such a fragile territory. The limits of objectivity always go hand in hand with the limits of time or society's constantly renewed rules of representation. Cases of stepping out of the frame are not necessarily to be condemned, but rather they are alternative attempts whose shortcomings and criticisms of which in regard to the ethics of using the images, even if they are to be taken seriously, are nonetheless minimal. As their authors are artists, who by definition break conventions, they are all the more deliberate the more the aim of such interventions/creations is not objectivity, one of the possible reasons that make them liable to criticism, but rather that of exploring the limits of representation and

Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. —Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658” (Borges 1999: 325).

9. Director Konstantin Lopushansky was the production assistant for the film *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), and the screenplay of his first film, *Letter from a Dead Man* (1986), was co-authored by famous Russian sci-fi writers Boris Strugatsky and Vyacheslav Rybakov. Film critics have suggested that the Brothers Strugatsky influenced the filming of the productions on which they worked with Konstantin Lopushansky.

10. The Meeting House community centre, founded by Jacob Levi Moreno and Haim Klemmer in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century (1908-1914), provided voluntary social assistance to refugees, recent immigrants, and the homeless.

11. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/12/20/an-attempt-at-restitution>

12. “[T]rue literary work activity cannot aspire to take place

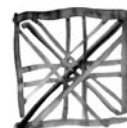
within a literary framework—this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know” (Benjamin 1979: 45).

13. “I wanted to collect and exhibit the ‘real’ objects of a fictional story in a museum and to write a novel based on these objects” (Pamuk 2012: 57).

14. “The Museum of Innocence” (Masumiyet Müzesi).

15. Details kindly provided by Dumitru Gorzo.

16. “Not a plan, but a formula, an art of life, an existential technique: people want to construct their own lives, the architectural devices against which, for the most part, they have had to struggle, will have to be brought on their side, in the sense of counter-utopian constructability of life” (Ghiu 2011: 277).



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III. Connecting Communities

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



Connecting Communities: “From Near to Far. Visual Cartographies of the Spaces 2 Mai and Vama Veche”

Exhibition organized by tranzit.ro/Bucharest. Curator: Iuliana Dumitru.

Exhibition design: Alex Axinte. Exhibition presented at the Romanian Peasant Museum, Tancred Bănăţeanu Hall, 15 October–15 November, 2020.

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ABSTRACT

The *Visual Cartographies of the Spaces 2 Mai and Vama Veche* exhibit brings together works of visual art in multiple forms, from different artists, spaces, and historical periods. Artefacts from established artists and villagers are displayed together to explore the connection between two seemingly different communities and the enduring charm of Romania's poshest summer destination.

KEYWORDS

2 Mai and Vama Veche; community; culture; artefacts; images; history.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche have been landmarks of the Romanian socialist space. The physical and geographical elements, such as the border and the sea, constructed a space of marginality, populated by a variety of ethnic groups, which served as a place for political, social, and economic experiments in both modern and communist Romania. Situated on the fringe of empires and later, at the very edge of the southern part of the country's territory, the villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche were both different micro-experiments within the larger demographic, social, and economic laboratory that the province of Dobrogea became from the moment of its incorporation into the Kingdom of Romania until the fall of the communist regime. The development of tourism infrastructure on the Romanian side of the Black Sea coast was the last of these experiments, but the communist state's concern with border security spared these

villages from the development that occurred in other seaside resorts. The sea, the borderland, a multi-ethnic local community, and special state policies were key factors in the development of niche tourism, a process that started in the early twentieth century, reached its peak during the communist era, and, arguably, continues to this day.

The fascination with the villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche and the communities that developed around them over several decades had its starting point during the interwar period. The first summer guests to 2 Mai were those too shy or too young to have made a name for themselves, artists and intellectuals, such as Alexandru Paleologu, who avoided the fashionable summer destination of Balçic and chose instead the beautiful, large, secluded beach and equally “oriental” atmosphere of the small, old city of Mangalia and its neighboring village, 2 Mai (Paleologu, Iorga 2012: 159-160).

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Some, such as Nina Cassian whose poetry inspired the title of the exhibit, reached the village accidentally in the summer of 1954 and continued to visit every year from then on—until her departure to the United States in 1985 (Cassian 2010). By the late 1960s, the village had become famous and even too noisy for others, such as Ion Ioanid who complained that Bucharest holidaymakers disturbed the patriarchal charm the village had once fostered (Ioanid 1996, v. 5: 227-229). Gradually, as the number of tourists grew, and the socialist project of Mangalia Shipyard swallowed a large portion of the beach, many took refuge in the neighboring, southernmost village in Romania, Vama Veche. A summer camp for the employees of Babeş Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, which ran by renting all available rooms from the locals, had opened there in 1962. Together with the canteen which the university opened in 1973, it was the only development that Vama Veche experienced until the fall of the Iron Curtain. Concern for border security coupled with Nicolae Ceauşescu's increased paranoia and his obsession for the urban planning scheme designed to turn villages into urban industrial centers led to the decision to demolish the villages of Hagieni and Vama Veche. Their inhabitants were to be relocated into new apartment buildings in Limanu. When the decision was reached, in 1987, Vama Veche had thirty-two households and no restaurants, pubs, cafes, or stores. Had it not been for the Revolution of 1989, the village would have been erased, as the demolition works started in December that year.

The beach in Vama Veche remained therefore untouched and continued to provide inspiration to artists, such as painter Silvia Radu and her husband, sculptor Vasile Gorduz, Simona Runcan, Ovidiu Marcu, Cristian Pepino, Anamaria Smigelschi, Constantin and Ion Pacea, or Nicolae Comănescu. The list is by no means exhaustive, just as this exhibit also does not encompass all art forms that developed



Fig 1: Prayer pillows and a rosary made by villager Olga Naum. They were sewn and woven from scraps of textile material and used in the Lipovan church. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.

on the sandy beaches or in the courtyards of the two villages. Theatre and musical performances are absent, while literary creations and films are merely hinted at. Books, novels, memoirs, academic works are sampled and rest quietly on a shelf, barely visible, and with good reason since *From Near to Far* is first and foremost an exhibit about visual art forms. These include the ephemeral installations that Simona Runcan created on the beach in Vama Veche in the 1980s, the hundreds of sketches graphic artist Anamaria Smigelschi drew, the pastel drawings of puppet theatre director Cristian Pepino, the drawings and paintings that Geta Brătescu and Constanța Stratulat created in 2 Mai, the photographs taken by Viorel Simionescu to illustrate how the location of 2 Mai and Vama Veche became a junction between the natural and industrial space, the old slides with portraits of friends that Irina Crivăţ made, or the photographic dialogue between son, Alexandru, and father, Adrian Maftei, a tableau vivant that mother and wife, Lucia Maftei, complemented with a ceramic depiction of a snail inspired by the seascape (Dumitru 2020).

On display were not only works from established artists, and it is this point, hidden in plain sight, that constitutes the strength of



the exhibit. Artefacts from villagers mostly designed to embellish the domestic space of the house and yard, but also souvenirs, or agricultural tools, traditional Romanian and Tatar weaving, macramé, Lipovan objects used in church rituals, wooden benches and tables, painted chairs, sculptures were also exhibited. Lenuța Sandu offered a blue vase which she adorned with sand and seashells. Alexandra Naum offered a rosary and the pillows used in church for the head and knees when the Lipovan worship ritual was performed. Ainur Velișa opened the chest with things sewn or received as dowry by his mother, Saide, some of which date back to the early twentieth century. Elena Dumitru offered two old, metallic, restaurant chairs which were once in use at Dobrogeanu Restaurant and which she had painted over and turned into art objects that no one dared to sit on anymore. Itu Constantin, an electrician by trade, agreed to share with the curator some of his own stone and walnut wood sculptures. Liliana Ivan offered old photographs made by Mr. Stancu, the village photographer. Silvia Cubaniț offered a bag of macramé she had made during long winters, and Maria Ghelbere agreed to display three pieces of handmade, colorful tapestry.

These objects can be framed into the naive or popular art category, argues the

curator, but under closer scrutiny they tell the viewer more than one story (*De la aproape către departe* 2020: 4). The agricultural tools, for instance, include a pair of shears which were used by one of the village shepherds, an old occupation practiced continuously from when the village was first established until the end of the communist period, and one that offered a certain degree of autonomy even during the communist period. The prayer pillows used in the Lipovan church were sewn and woven from scraps of material left from various stitching pieces of cloth and thus speak about a time of scarcity but also of faith and centuries-old traditions that endured even in communist Romania. At a closer examination, the visitor discovers that Saide's weaving and Maria Ghelbere's tapestry share common motifs, a subtle indication that the old ethnic communities of the village did not live in isolation from one another. Most strikingly, the sculptures that Itu Constantin made out of old stones and wood that he found around the village and Elena Dumitru's painted chairs tell a story of mutual influences wherein villagers adopted forms of artistic expression from their guests and thus bridged the worlds of high and popular culture. Viorel Simionescu's photos purposely juxtaposed the industrial and rural setting while showcasing a pastoral world that still found its place, albeit awkwardly, among tents and factories. Ada-Maria Ichim's poetic movie *2 Mai Evening* recreates the atmosphere of a typical 2 Mai evening by the beach, while Miruna Tîrcă's documentary *Slack Time* offers an insight into the lives of the villagers after the end of the tourist season. No matter which direction visitors turn their heads, they are exposed to multiple worlds which come together in more ways than one, although this can be seen more clearly during the summer months.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche have been the subject of academic research ever since the early 2000s (Guga 2006, Tîrcă 2004, Vasile 2011, Mihăilescu 2005, Tașcu-



Fig 2: Ceramic depiction of a snail inspired by the seascape, by artist Lucia Maftei. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.



Fig 3: Right hand corner: photos by Viorel Simionescu juxtaposing natural and industrial landscape followed by smaller photographs made by the local photographer of 2 Mai village, Mr. Stancu. Left hand corner: portraits of local people, part of an artistic dialogue between father, Adrian Maftei, and son, Alexandru Maftei. In the corner, a blue vase made by Lenuța Sandu with sand and seashells. Center: Tatar weaving and macramés sewn by Saide Velișa. In the background, a TV screen showing the film *2 Mai Evening* made by Ada-Maria Ichim. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.

Stavre 2017). The theses and monographs were, in large part, based on their authors' firsthand experience with the two villages either as long time vacationers, like Mihăilescu, or as young anthropologists fully immersed in the study of the community, the case of Guga, Tîrcă and Vasile, or as social activists turned political scientists, like Tașcu-Stavre. All of them spent extensive periods of time in the villages inside and outside of the summer season and based their studies on oral history interviews with both locals and tourists. They all sought out ways to understand the present and offer solutions for a sustainable development through a thorough exploration of the past. Though intertwined, all have looked at time, place, space and people as separate entities. The focus was more often than not on the outside and the relation between guest, host and environment, while the inner workings of village life were analyzed partially and only in connection with the subject matter

of the research. As a result, the binary opposition between past and present is at the core of the narrative and divides the audience: a friendlier reader experiences a feeling of nostalgia for the remoteness of fringe seaside socialist landscape in which living conditions were dire and youthful exuberance at its peak. In turn, disillusioned readers still embroiled in condemning the communist past point towards a totalitarian system in which everything was either controlled or lacking and a still muddier present in which touristic infrastructure and living conditions whether in urban or rural settlements are still highly problematic. Assessing past and present with its various threads and the ways in which they connect and coexist is a challenging enterprise for professionals, academics, researchers, sociologists, or activists, and even former tourists. For professional and local artists, cultural production and everyday life were lived experiences, embodied locally.



Iuliana Dumitru, the curator of this exhibit is an insider. Born and raised in 2 Mai, she experienced postsocialist transition firsthand. She had her first job at twelve, preparing coffee for tourists on the camping grounds that her parents managed. Hers was no ordinary childhood. Having been socialized with tourists from a young age, she kept in touch with many of them, developed friendships which turned into networks that later on encouraged her to develop an academic career centered on the village that was once a hub for artists, writers, and actors. Her special position allowed her to move freely between the worlds of the artists and locals, explain the connection between them, and make the visitor privy to the aesthetic intimacy of both.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche were not artistic colonies in an institutionalized form, but rather places where many free spirits, some of whom were professional artists, congregated in the summer to relax, exchange ideas, and find inspiration for future works. What attracted them here was a particular mix of mostly visible elements (remote, pastoral location, the sea, the border line, an ethnically mixed local community) alongside a deeper sense of shared, hidden, ingrained history. Snippets of this history became visible at times in old worn-out stones, gold-threaded sewing, and dusty paintings. Whether 2 Mai and Vama Veche served as a continuation of the "Romanian Barbizon" that was once Balçic during the interwar period is a question not yet answered. What is certain though is that artists and villagers made use of the means available to them to make life a little more bearable under the strenuous modern, socialist, and postsocialist period. Taken together, the images and material displays ground an in-depth narrative about different histories, times, people and spaces that made a successful transition from a convoluted past to a challenging, slightly more settled present. The visitor's and the tourist's gazes may well be eschewed by nostalgia and

summer vibe, yet the embodied art that developed over decades on both sides of apparently separate worlds testifies to the connection between the past and the present, continuity and change, high and popular culture, creating a spectacular narrative that continues to fascinate Romanians.



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This photograph was taken by Tamás Urbán at a concert in 1981 (It now belongs to Fortepan).

The COURAGE Registry: A Gateway to the Cultural Heritage of Eastern European Nonconformism

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ABSTRACT

The COURAGE Registry is a digital research tool that allows exploring the legacy of cultural opposition in former Eastern European socialist countries by cataloging and describing relevant collections on dissident culture across Eastern Europe and worldwide. The linked database reveals a great variety of nonconformist cultural practices that were formerly largely unknown and promotes comparative research of similar phenomena in Eastern European societies and cultures. The researchers on the project tended to treat visual sources as traces of the past equally as important as written documents. Images were not only illustrations of the given narratives but, in some cases, visual documents were the only sources that preserved the memory of the alternative or underground activity, while in other cases, it was the act of taking pictures that resulted in the confrontation with official cultural policy. This article aims to provide insight into the basic dilemmas and issues that the project faced dealing with images for the database through three examples. Firstly, we focus on the photo documentation of an exhibition of the Hungarian art group Inconnu that was made by the secret police following the destruction of the artworks. Secondly, we show how photos were also taken by official photographers who operated in the so-called "grey zone." Finally, our third example refers to Fortepan, a unique public initiative that focuses on the digital preservation of private photographs created between 1900 and 1990.

KEYWORDS

Cultural opposition; underground culture database; digital collection; Eastern Europe; secret police; grey zone.

The COURAGE Project was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program to uncover the visual and material heritage of cultural opposition in former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The main pillar of the project was the online database, the Registry (<http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/>), which contains illustrated descriptions of 566 collections on dissident culture across Eastern Europe and worldwide. Since its launch in 2016, the

COURAGE platform/database has striven to understand how visual and material collections operate and relate to each other. What is the relation between their private, public, and "hidden" nature? Are there any differences between alternative and large mainstream collections? What functions and roles do they serve in the respective societies? How do they present their holdings to the public? And how do these collections shape political and memory cultures?

The creation and preservation of these

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collections are arguably acts of manipulation and interpretation, and their investigation has revealed the hermeneutic processes behind the tendency for cultural opposition to become a self-reflexive social practice. The genre of photography is specific in this respect for it assumes a second-order observer by definition for whom the conscious act of documenting an activity is evident. Collections of photo documentation, therefore, were just as disturbing for the authoritarian regimes as the illegal or non-conformist activities themselves, and it was often rather dangerous during state socialism to create and preserve such collections. This article attempts to provide insight into the basic dilemmas and issues that the project faced dealing with images for the database.

In this paper, by using examples mainly from the Hungarian context, we show that the multiple roles and controversial connections between the participants in the cultural life resulted in different “transitional categories.” The “agents” described in the following categories acted not only as documenters of certain events, as groups of people, and the like, but also the preservers of such photo documents. Our first category refers to the secret police, and their photo documentations, which sometimes became the only chronicler and preserver of dissent culture, such as in the case of the Hungarian art group Inconnu. Our second category is related to those photos that were taken by official photographers who operated frequently in the so-called “grey zone” (e.g., Tamás Urbán). The third category refers to Fortepan (<https://fortepan.hu>) which is a unique public initiative, dealing with the digital preservation of private photographs created between 1900 and 1990. Through this case, one can see how photographs shape the heritage of cultural opposition and dissent in recent times.

The researchers on the project tended to treat visual sources as traces of the past equally important as written documents.

Images were not only illustrations of the given narratives but an effort was made to add detailed descriptions and metadata to them. In some cases, visual documents were the only sources that preserved the memory of the alternative or underground activity, while in other cases, it was the act of taking pictures that resulted in the confrontation with official cultural policy.

Visual traces of the cultural opposition are relatively rare or are hidden. Since such activities could be illegal or banned at that time, it was dangerous for the participants to create such documentation. Photographs of underground or alternative life could be turned into pieces of evidence in the hands of the secret police, and therefore taking photos not only potentially compromised the photographer but was also risky because it made the participants identifiable. Private collectors at some point either destroyed their collections fearing persecution or carefully hid their images. Distrust in the state in general and in public archives often prevented collectors from storing their materials in accessible repositories even after the regime changes (Scheibner 2018: 406).

The press was certainly not a good source of such photographs either. Unapproved images of nonconformist activities or photos of the most underprivileged communities of society were not allowed to be published. Such content was not illegal but was not supported by the state. Such photos were preserved primarily in private collections as the acquisitions of public institutions (museums or archives) were monitored as well; although there admittedly were great differences between the management of these repositories in terms of how strictly they followed cultural-political directives. In most cases, though, an ideological selection prevailed, which frequently sealed the fate of oppositional pieces that went against state propaganda and the mainstream artistic taste of the time. These phenomena together resulted in the lack of visual documentation



on several topics.

Paradoxically, sometimes the documentation of countercultural activities was the result of the surveillance operations of the secret police. As an example here we can mention the exhibition of the Hungarian art group Inconnu titled *The Fighting City* project, which we will analyze later (Huhák 2018). The second category is the visual heritage of alternative or oppositional activities made by the participants or other stakeholders themselves, frequently by professional photographers.

In dealing with this topic, the COURAGE database adopted a strategy opposite to the practice of former socialist states. In contrast with the archives that the socialist secret police would build to accumulate information and to control, the Registry provides free access to these stories and images stored on one platform. The project has thus collected the venues and scenes of alternative culture, the “backstage of communist reality and power” (Bádică 2014: 203), such as the chapel studio in Balatonboglár, the Black Hole underground club, or the Orpheo group’s commune.

Starting with the first category, the Hungarian secret police observed culture in many ways. Surveillance targeted religion, art, youth subcultures, and creative intellectuals throughout the four decades of state socialism in Hungary. One example was the exhibition organized in Budapest in 1986 by the amateur artist group Inconnu to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The group had become well-known for their alternative, oppositional artistic and political actions. They started developing their performances with obvious and direct political content in the mid-1980s, parallel to the actions of the democratic opposition. In 1986, Inconnu announced an international fine art tender to organize an apartment exhibition at Tibor Philipp’s apartment who was a member of Inconnu—as it would have been impossible to organize a public exhibition. The idea of



Photo 1: Inconnu group, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tibor Philipp.

1956 played a central role in the Inconnu mindset, their artistic expression, and their attitude to the Kádár regime (Gyáni 2006).

The foreign pieces sent to Inconnu for the exhibition were mostly copies, reproductions, and mailed-in artworks. According to the police report, the collection was “counter-revolutionary”: forty-three items—photos, graphics, paintings, other artifacts—and illegal press issues (a further thirty-nine items) were confiscated and later destroyed. Although the original catalog included data on the artists and their work, the artifacts themselves—as a collection curated as an exhibition conception—were preserved solely “thanks” to the photo documentation of the secret police. Thereby, the secret police itself created—as part of their destructive action—the collection of sources that today constitutes the single visual trace that depicts the exhibition in its entirety.

Just hours before the opening, the police confiscated all the artworks from the apartment where the exhibition was to be displayed, leaving behind only the official confiscation order. As a reaction to that, the Inconnu group decided to paste more than forty copies of this order (the same number as that of the confiscated artworks) on the

walls in an attempt to create “true visual absurdity” in the absence of the seized items. Even though the original exhibition was no longer physically present, it was opened to an audience of roughly one hundred people. For the opening, the artists of the Inconnu group presented a statement/manifesto, in which they reacted and protested against the action of the police (Sümegi 2010).

Art historian György Sümegi (2010) wrote in his study that *The Fighting City* was simultaneously a political act and a courageous artistic action. This exhibition is undoubtedly unique due to several other aspects. First of all, in 1986 this was the only international exhibition on the topic of 1956 in Hungary. Obviously, numerous artifacts were created to commemorate the Revolution, but none of the artists or groups undertook to organize a public presentation from these materials. Secondly, we cannot find any other examples of simultaneously banning and dismantling a full exhibition either. According to Sümegi, the officers did not consider the collection of artworks a real exhibition because of the unusual installation format—the pictures sent in were mounted on matboard instead of being framed. So perhaps they made this irreversible decision more easily. We can read about this fact in the police documentation, but, indeed, the appearance of the artworks was not the real problem; the goal was to threaten the oppositional groups and the artists (Apor et al. 2018).

The second category of visual material is represented by sources generated by official or amateur photographers who were organizers, participants, or just visitors of the given events. Taking photographs on certain sensitive topics could be interpreted as oppositional action. For example, during the 1980s, Alexandru Barnea, a historian and archaeologist, decided to start capturing buildings in cities and villages with his photo camera as an act of “passive resistance” against the Romanian Communist Party’s policy of demolition of historic buildings—

the so-called *sistematizare* or systematization—as it was about to be put into practice (Pătrășconiu and Petrescu 2017). There is also another example given by the Croatian Goran Pavelić Pipo who took photos of the new wave music concerts in Zagreb from the late 1970s to the late 1980s (Godić 2018). The Hungarian photographer Ferenc Kálmándy also documented the transformations of the Hungarian youth culture, underground pop, and intellectual art scene during the 1980s (Havasréti 2019).

The communist regime was constantly dedicated to creating their representational canon of potentially dangerous social groups, especially the youth subcultures (e.g., the hippies). The negative stigmatization of deviants or the enemy of the state (or the people) could be repeatedly seen during the regime. However, many official photographers were able to use an empathic, humane approach when taking photos of different social interactions and events. Sometimes, this protected status also gave them a unique opportunity to capture the realities of life in the people’s democracy that could be perceived as politically sensitive by the regime. That was also the case of Tamás Urbán who took photographs in a youth prison near Budapest, capturing the terrible conditions and the everyday brutalities the inmates endured.

Urbán was a well-known forensic and social documentary photographer, but also did commercial work. An important part of his oeuvre was related to *Ifjúsági Magazin* (Youth Magazine), where he spent almost twenty years starting with the 1970s, taking photos of the emerging pop music scene (concerts, venues, bands). In the 1980s, he also started working more on social issues (drug addicts, youth subcultures) using a sociographic viewpoint.

Unfortunately, some of his projects fell victim to censorship and could not be seen at that time. However, from the beginning of his career, Urbán was very determined





Photo 2: Black Hole Underground Club, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tamás Urbán.

to archive and document his own works. In 2015, Urbán started using the Fortepan platform for publishing many of his photos. This act also shows how a private collection containing mostly unpublished photographs from the socialist era became part of a digital platform providing free access—it can be used and modified by any user under Creative Commons 3.0.

This case leads us to the history of the Fortepan platform (Scheibner and Horváth 2018), an innovative and groundbreaking answer to the question of how we can make our photo heritage available to a wide audience. The largest free-use digital photo collection documents the twentieth century until 1990. Launched in 2011 as a private non-profit initiative, its name, Fortepan, references a former Hungarian photography company, Forte. The platform has been dynamically expanding as both institutions and private individuals have donated photos; the collection grows by about 15,000 new items each year. As a result, today we can browse more than 134,000 items.

The founder Miklós Tamási's interest in

old photographs was partly connected to the memory of the Revolution of 1956. As he put it in a 2010 interview, "For me, the starting point for collecting photographs was the Revolution. I was interested in 1956 and curious about the details, few of which were available at the time. This was in 1987–1988, and except for a few blurry pictures in textbooks, visual materials were not accessible. Furthermore, my father was taking pictures in 1956. I saw these pictures in the family albums, and they were very interesting" (Terján 2010).

The amateur and official photos on Fortepan mainly originated from flea markets, inheritances, donations from individuals and companies, and public collections. Tamási considers the collection an online exhibition. According to his conception, only those digitized items are put on the website that have good quality, meet the basic compositional requirements, and have some interest regardless of the topic. Fortepan seems to have broken down a social and cultural wall: we can find these photos not only in newspapers,





Photo 3 : Black Hole Underground Club, 1988. Photo credit: Fortepan/Tamás Urbán.

magazines, history books, or in exhibitions, but also in communal and private spaces, in schools, movies, corridors of multinational companies, or even dentist's reception areas (Scheibner 2018).

Fortepan covers, among other things, cultural opposition under communism in Eastern Europe. We can find photos of underground music scenes, alternative theatre, and film, "grey zone" cultural activities, and the democratic opposition. We should mention here the documentation work of István Jávör, the founder of the independent video periodical *Fekete Doboz* [Black Box] (Mravik et al. 2018); photos by sociologist István Kemény and film director Pál Schiffer about the Gypsy settlements; Tamás Urbán's pictures on the underground music club *Fekete Lyuk* (Ádám 2019) or the boarding school in Aszód. These pictures did not get publicity in the socialist era. Moreover, the photos of the actions of Inconnu group are also part of the Fortepan photo collection.

The visual heritage of our past can both

give rise to feelings of nostalgia and create an opportunity to ask questions and to recognize that people are not only passive victims of their fate but also active creators and curators of their lives and environments. This is the attitude that the Fortepan model is based on. The story behind Fortepan demonstrates the power and efficiency of an independent civic project in contrast to the rigid structures of official institutions. It is worth mentioning that the owners do not have to resign their ownership, as Fortepan digitalizes the pictures for free, asking only permission to share them online. If somebody would like to also donate the original photos, these will be preserved in the City Archive of Budapest. The confidence in the project from donors and the general public is nourished by the idea of publicity and accessibility. The donors of photo collections can easily see the results: the pictures are used for the benefit of the public (Scheibner 2018).



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Conclusion

The concept behind the COURAGE database was to avoid the totalitarian paradigm, so instead of juxtaposing or separating the state and society, the project followed those social historians who examined the diversity of dialogues and interactions that took place between ordinary people and representatives of the communist regime (see Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2009; Fitzpatrick 2000, 1999). The revision of the totalitarian paradigm which treated society as the regime's passive object involved changing the way we think about culture. Beyond the propaganda versus samizdat division, researchers on the COURAGE project aspired for a more complex narrative paying attention to the mutual influence, sometimes controversial relationships, and overlaps between the cultural spheres, actors, groups, and venues (Apor and Horváth 2018).

In that framework, this paper examined the specific even paradoxical role that images (photographs) are playing in the interpretation of cultural opposition and dissent during communism. It is important to note again that the quantity and quality of the photographs available on cultural opposition are also telling us about the opportunities of dissent: the presence of the state, the dissent, and the "grey zone" between the two. It is generally true that many events or private photographs are scarce because taking photos under the regime could be too dangerous both for the photographer and for those photographed. However, in many cases, photographs were taken by the state (e.g., secret police), and now these photos are not merely records of particular events or persons, etc. but proof of the intentions of the state. Beyond these, there was even a "grey zone" where official photographers could let themselves drift and capture topics not officially sanctioned as well.

On these grounds, three examples have been discussed, representing different "transitional" categories: first, those types of photographs featuring various cultural events and activities created and preserved by the secret police; second, the photos taken by professional photographers on topics not officially sanctioned. Our third case was the unique Fortepan platform containing private photos. Via Fortepan, this "collection" made invisible by the socialist state became the open heritage of dissent culture and visual history of the twentieth century in Hungary and beyond.

In this context, the COURAGE Registry provides free access to the cultural heritage of these practices that have eventually contributed—in their own different ways—to preserving the memory of Eastern European dissent culture. Moreover, the database including public data of the public and private collections, archivists, museum experts, and other stakeholders keeps this heritage alive on an online platform.



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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 | "Dumitresculoni" 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 lost 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. "Mizilad" archive | "Buia 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. "Viziliad" 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” (Cosașu), 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”)

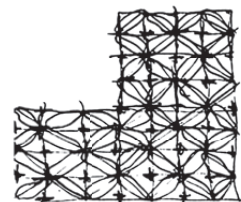


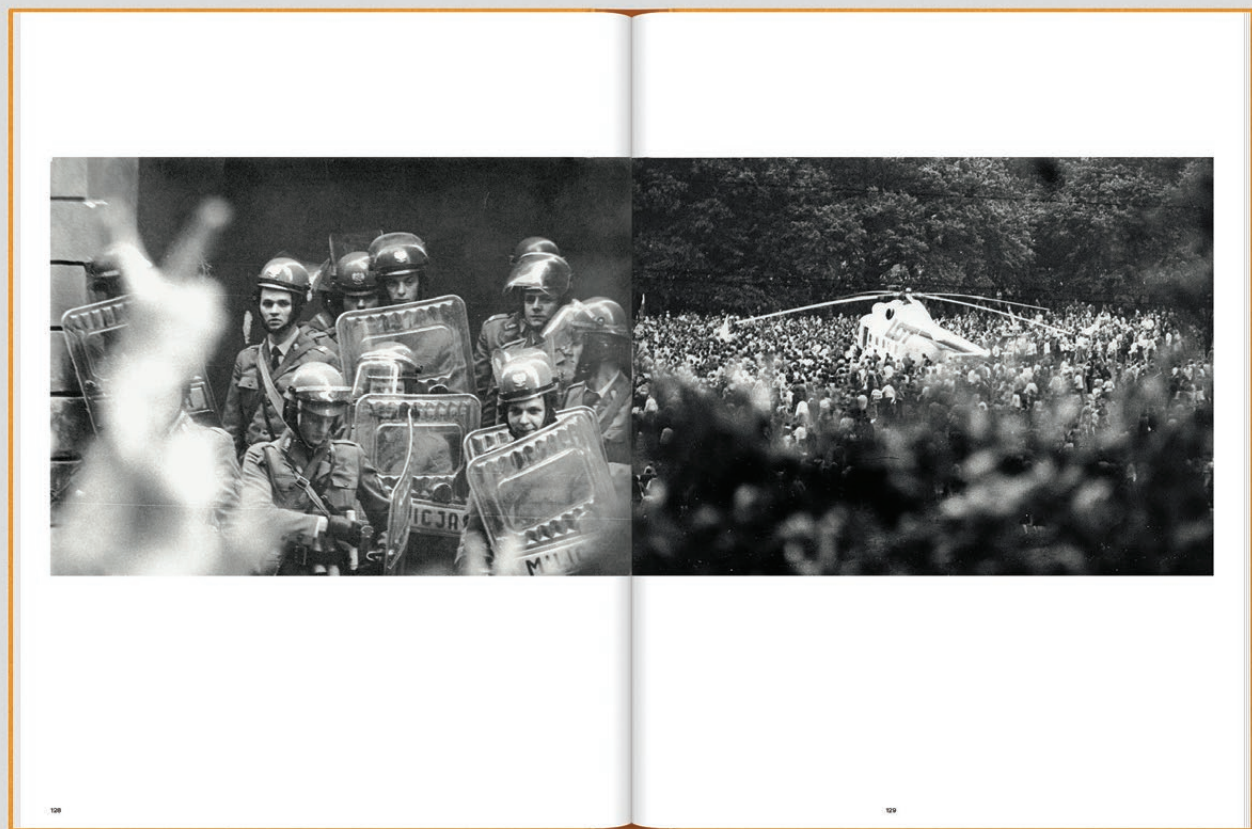


Fig. 4. "Mizilad" archive | "Subțirică Aurel" collection.

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.





IV. Visual ethics now and then

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



The One-footed Roller Skater. A Visual Ethnography of Contemporary Cuba

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with scarcity of goods, consumption, and the ethics of photographing scarcity of goods in contemporary Cuba. It is based on a six-month ethnographic research conducted in 2015 and 2018 respectively and shows some of the photographs I took during these two visits.

In the first part I discuss the scarcity and distribution of goods in and out of socialist environments, differences between capitalism and communism and non-traditional methods of consumption. How do desires of consumption impact people in contemporary communist Cuban society? What is the role of Cuban diaspora in sending so-called capitalist goods to Cuba? It also draws a connecting line between a state-controlled communist economy and specific forms of capitalist entrepreneurship, through the existence of a black market and the distribution of goods between people. The second part of the article questions my position in the field as an outsider who was gradually familiarized with the Cuban understanding of the world more generally, and of consumption specifically. How did locals react to photographs taken by foreigners like me? How can two children share one pair of roller skates and distribute their happiness? Making visible certain aspects of scarcity in contemporary communist Cuban society made me realize that photography has a profound ethical dimension.

KEYWORDS

Consumption; black-market; scarcity; transition; Romania; Cuba.



I was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1991. Only two years had passed since the highest echelon of the Communist Party fell from power in December 1989. It was only after my first visit to Cuba that I realized that communism was not totally over in 1989 and that communism and capitalism coexisted for a while in 1990s Romania (Angelescu et al. 2008). What was my first impression of Cuban society in 2018? Some people were looking to make a profit, others not really understanding the transformation taking place.

But before talking about Cuba, I want to tell you the story of how I perceived the 1990s in Romania—which is also a story of how I learned to speak Spanish. The first years after the fall of the communist regime were tumultuous for many different reasons. Transition meant, among other things, many hours of work for people who did not know what capitalism was and what were its limits. My parents literally worked from morning to night; people engaged in all sorts of businesses; inventiveness was the norm. When I look back at my childhood,

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I cannot really say that I was raised by my own parents in the 1990s, but rather that, until the seventh grade, I grew up in another family made up of three pensioners whose house would open its doors for me after school until late in the night, when my parents would come and take me home. This “new” family who raised me consisted of two sisters, one of them married. They had no children of their own, which meant they had no previous knowledge of how to raise children. They allowed me to do whatever I wanted, including watching *telenovelas* (soap operas produced in Latin America) for hours on end. This was my first contact with Latin America. I continued my studies at Miguel de Cervantes High School of Bucharest, I then graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Communication and Public Relations from the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, and I finished a master’s program at the same university, with a degree in Latin American Studies. In 2018, as part of this degree, I conducted research in Cuba for six months, as an Erasmus exchange student.

When I arrived in Cuba in 2015 and then a second time in 2018, as an MA Erasmus student, the country was dealing with shortages of a variety of goods: starting with meat and bread, for which one had to queue, going through Internet connection and as far as personal hygiene items—soap, shampoo, etc. What was interesting for me to observe was the Cubans’ passion for capitalist products—the missing variety of clothes, personal hygiene items, shoes, bags, etc. only obtainable from the black market, or from relatives or friends living abroad, especially in the US as the closest source geographically. From books or the accounts of other family members I knew that former socialist Romania had experienced the same situation of scarcity—from videotapes, blue jeans to beauty creams and food. But still, the lack of what I felt to be minimal consumption goods made me constantly ask myself questions about the connection

between consumption and happiness. As anthropologist Daniel Miller famously suggested, in the European affluent world, the exercise of shopping can be seen as a love declaration (Miller 1998: 15–23). In contrast with Miller, Perreira notes that the scarcity of Internet connection and other goods in “still existing socialist” Cuba does not impact on its people’s creativity (2011: 199).

While strolling around the streets of Havana one day, I could not help but notice two boys, aged seven or eight, sharing the same pair of roller skates. One was wearing the right boot, and the other was wearing the left one. This way, they both enjoyed skating with only one foot, the other foot just being used to break or accelerate.

I wanted to take a picture of both, but I was not able to. Taking out the phone camera felt a bit odd that day, and not only that day, for outsiders like myself.



Picture 1. Havana, Cuba, 2018. Photo credits: Mădălina Cristea.

In this case, the picture of the two children sharing a pair of skates for me represented a reminder of improvisation and creativity and of childhood in the first years after the



fall of the communist regime in Romania. Plastic colorful skates were rare, and they always came from abroad. In Cuba I noticed children playing a lot on the street, and it struck me to see that two children shared one pair of skates. Not many had such items. The fact that these came from abroad was important. Their happiness came also from sharing. Certain products were so scarce that neighbors and relatives shared and gifted each other different items—school uniforms, backpacks. Certain school items were shared between pupils who went to school in the morning and those who went in the afternoons. Speaking of shortage, I vividly remember one of the stories which I wrote down in my personal travel journal. The popular phrase the locals would use to explain how in the present conditions of the Cuban society, in a month one must choose between food and clothes is *No te alcanza para los dos* (It's not enough for both). Their facial expression was one of resignation. Cuba is a place where its citizens, although showing deep frustration and discomfort with their level of living, are, on the other hand, deep supporters of the communist revolution, as Martin Holbraad states (2013).

Cuba's government has tried to lower people's frustrations with the failing system through an average Internet connection and pretending that the illegal market does not exist in society, whilst blaming the shortages on the US embargo on Cuba. This is where the diaspora enters the scene, sending capitalist goods back home, which only reinforces and prolongs the existence of the black market. In some situations, locals even got to the point where they bartered popular items between themselves, money not being involved in the deal anymore.

So Internet connection was also lacking in Cuba. This lack impacted me on a high level. The connection was so poor that one could barely speak to family and friends at home. The *tarjetas* (cards) provided a limited one to five hours connection time, in the big hotels, some parks or important junctions in

the city, the only places available for a Wi-Fi connection. The card contained a scratch-off code and password, which you needed to authenticate yourself before connecting to the Internet. It could be bought in Etecsa shops, the only Internet and telephony provider on the island, which still operates without competition, at a cost of 1h = 1 CUC. Similar to any other service or product to be sold on the Cuban territory, for this one too you had to wait in line as part of a local's day-to-day struggle. Most likely, that is why the locals do not like to take walks in the sun, nor are they huge fans of spending a day at the beach—if they do, they make sure they're well covered, under an umbrella.

While there, I once posted on social media: "passing from capitalism to socialism isn't easy at all." This line echoed in the back of my head for the whole six months I spent in the Caribbean country; and it still does and will, for as long as I will remember this life experience. It constantly required me to get out of my comfort zone, not because it was a place I had never visited before, but because the Cuban society and culture were totally new compared to the way our lifestyles are built—based on different economical systems which impact the ethics and values of the society. Katherine Verdery described the socialist "economy of shortage" as an economy which depends on the managers' will. "Managers' right to move items of the socialist patrimony around at will contributed to one of the hallmarks of socialist political economies: widespread barter and trading of the goods necessary for production in socialism's economies of shortage" (Verdery 2004: 194). The state proves to be rigid, and people's ability to be entrepreneurs is allowed only partially to exist.

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The second part of the article questions my position in the field as an outsider who was gradually familiarized with the Cuban



understanding of the world more generally, and of consumption specifically. Foreigners are seen as tourists who have money. The most developed branch of the Cuban economy nowadays is tourism. Based on my time observing the field, I found out from the locals that whoever worked in this field lived above average. Throughout my stays in Havana I came to the same conclusion: taxi drivers, entertainers in hotel areas, workers in hotels, restaurants, clubs, car rentals, etc., did have higher incomes than most fellow compatriots. A very important aspect which I noticed is that the services mentioned above were most likely designed for the foreigners—tourists that came with external funds— and a local could not even dream of affording them.

In Havana in February 2018, I was searching for a beauty salon to do my nails. The only possibility to do your nails in Cuba was to go to a beauty salon, since the shops did not sell nail polish. I entered one in *Habana Vieja* (the Old Town). The old town of the city is very popular among tourists looking for the Cuban experience. I would say it is the best place where you can trace and taste the real Cuban culture in the whole capital city.

I was welcomed as a *yuma*,¹ and for the services I received, I was requested triple the normal price. I agreed to pay it. I had no other option. In the salon, there were about seven local black women, with ages between twenty-three and fifty-five. For a while I decided that it would be better to be silent, as they looked somehow bothered by my presence, although I was going to pay 10 CUC by the end of the service. I felt like a lamb among the lions. They started including me in their conversation and accepted me little by little because, just like one said to another in my presence, “She speaks good Spanish.” This is one of the photographs that I did not take.

Later, in the coming months, I would find out that saying I am both *yuma* and a student would reduce the price of any service.



Picture 2. Havana, Cuba, 2018. Photo credits: Mădălina Cristea.

Similarly to the image of the two boys sharing a pair of skates, another image struck me while I was in the field. It was an image of derelict buildings crumbling in the street with no warning signs surrounding them. I took my camera out to take a picture of one such building. While I was taking the picture, I heard two passers-by commenting half laughing, half ironically and critically between each other. “This *yuma* takes pictures of things that are about to fall,” they said. I do not know what they thought about the falling walls and the shortage associated with them. What I did understand, on the other hand, is that we have different evaluation scales, based on the context we were raised in, education, culture, and also different ways in which images that are representative of communism, capitalism,

or the difficult transition from one system to another impress themselves on our minds. In my mind the image of the derelict building was fascinating because it showed lack of care—of the people, of the state towards its citizens.

Indeed, one needs to reflect on what kind of images one takes in the field and for what reason. As Mitchell explains in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*:

... images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that

have desires (for example, appetites, needs, demands, drives); therefore, the question of what pictures want is inevitable. But there is also a historical dimension to the argument that needs to be made explicit. (...) If the phenomenon of the living image or animated icon is an anthropological universal, a feature of the fundamental ontology of images as such, how does it change over time, and from one culture to another? And why does it impress itself so forcibly on our attention at this specific historical moment? (Mitchell 2005: 11).



NOTES

1. *Yuma*, Cuban slang for “foreigner.”

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From the exhibition Faith—Trust—Secrecy: Religion Through the Lenses of the Secret Police, Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives Gallery, 28th February – 5th April 2020. Photo credit: Andrea Benyi / Vera and Donald Blinken. Open Society Archives.

Methodological Notes on Visual Ethics: “Choosing Not to Reveal”

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present my ethical dilemma concerning a secret police case rich in surveillance images that I encountered during the course of my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL). After reading the operative file of a religious community under surveillance during the 1980s, I decided to approach the group, discuss the images and texts I had found about them, and involve them in the research process. However, the group expressed their explicit intention not to engage in the research process. Even though the guidelines and legal framework regarding the publishing of secret police archival materials would allow me to publish the images and the content of the ÁBTL dossier, I decided to respect the religious community's intention and their refusal to collaborate. I therefore discuss issues of different ethical standards and accountability in the light of my “failed” ethnographic attempt and reflect on the ethical responsibility of the researcher. I present how the visual images of this particular case file were eventually included in an exhibition in what I see as an ethically appropriate solution to articulate issues of distrust in researchers as a legacy of surveillance and past secret police atrocities.

KEYWORDS

Secret police photography; ethical concerns; the “unwelcome researcher;” trust; lingering distrust; ethical concerns.



Introduction

In this short methodological essay, I present an ethical dilemma I faced concerning the research and exhibition of a photo-rich secret police file that I encountered during the course of my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL). The case, and the attendant visual ethical questions, emerged whilst presenting my findings to other members of the research team and while thinking to make public my research findings through website entries or publications. Later, these dilemmas were integrated into the curation of the exhibition *Faith – Trust – Secrecy: Religions Through the*

*Lenses of the Secret Police*¹ at Galeria Centralis, Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest as part of the Hidden Galleries project.

The methodological and ethical concerns associated with the problematic legacy of totalitarianism and its secret police have been much discussed. However, only recently has attention turned towards the significance of the material and visual dimensions of communist-era files (see Vatulescu 2010; Luhrmann 2015; Kapaló 2019). As Kapaló suggests, the secret police archives contain a rich repository of confiscated items that can be viewed as a “hidden gallery” (2019: 88).

A number of visual ethical complexities emerge when the researcher recognizes and focuses on the visual materials, particularly those portraying religious communities,



which include images shot through the “secret police lens,” as well as photographs confiscated from persecuted communities to be used as incriminating evidence against them. In the example discussed below, the publication and exhibition of photographs of persecuted religious communities gave rise to further ethical concerns that feed into larger discussions and critical discourses on photographic representations of atrocities, persecution, and suffering. This short essay showcases a few of the multiple paradoxes surrounding the visual representation of vulnerable communities that were targeted by the totalitarian state.



The Hidden Galleries project

The central concern of the European Research Council funded Hidden Galleries project² was to explore the creativity of religious groups under totalitarian rule through the holdings of the secret police archives in four countries: Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. The project viewed “the archive as a ‘hidden gallery’ [...] shifting our gaze to the confiscated images and the creative products of communities and agents” (Kapaló 2019: 88). The research project consisted of two phases, in the first archival research phase, we visited the respective secret police archives and collected and consulted files on minority religious groups. In the second phase, we approached communities whose materials appeared in the archives with the aim of conducting ethnographic work with them. During the course of the ethnographic phase of the research, we contacted several religious communities to discuss their presence in the secret police archives and the images and texts we found there. By bringing the photographs from secret police archives back to the communities, through interviews and photo elicitation,

we gathered alternative narratives of the period and of their experiences from the communities. The project was concerned to work with photographic images as a way of moving beyond “old,” univocal narratives in order to de-center the “archives” by facilitating communities retelling their own experiences.

Throughout the research process we discovered the extent to which these photographs and the narratives of the communities can contribute to our understanding of unknown aspects of underground religious culture. As I argue elsewhere, these images are valuable snapshots for the scholar of religion, portraying and documenting the unexplored religious life and the hidden forms of religious practice during communism, albeit often from the perspective of the regime (Povedák forthcoming).

Naturally, we were concerned to address ethical issues throughout the research process. Ethnographic research of religious worlds, religious lives, and communities is methodologically challenging in many ways. However, our research was further complicated by the fact that we encountered persecuted groups who were left vulnerable or even traumatized by totalitarian encounters and atrocities.



Photographic images of a secretive religious community

In 2017 during my research at ÁBTL, I encountered³ a rich collection of photographs sitting in an operative file from the 1980s. The file immediately caught my attention due to the wealth of both confiscated and surveillance photographs included in it. From the thorough police and interrogation reports, as well as the visual images that complemented the textual materials, an image of an underground, fundamentalist

Christian community emerged. The authorities began surveillance of what it was at that time, the early 1980s, considered an "illegal" religious group; through the photographs, the informer's reports, and the interrogation scripts included in the file, the underground rituals and prayer practices of the community began to take shape in front of my eyes. Many photographs show the everyday underground rituals and the religious materiality of community members and leaders. These photographs enable us to see and to understand how escaping into nature became an alternative "underground" safe space for this particular community operating without a legal license from the State Office for Church Affairs. Even though legal religious entities were only routinely checked by 1980s Hungarian authorities, this particular group held their prayer groups and rituals in the safety of nature. Ultimately, the gaze of the secret police found the community as it is documented by the surveillance photographs inserted in the operative file.

As explained above, one of the methodological innovations of the Hidden Galleries project was to work with the photographs and creative practices of religious communities, hence my fascination with this particular secret police file. The holdings of ÁBTL, for historical reasons, are not as rich a repository of confiscated religious art as others (such as the Romanian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan archives I had the opportunity to view in the course of the project). The visual materials relating to so-called "home-grown," local or vernacular religious communities are scarce, so I was rather excited to approach this community, with its abundance of visual materials, targeted by the state in the 1980s with the hope of addressing questions relating to the lived experience and lived religion of the time.

It was not only the documentary value of the photographs and snapshots of the everyday life of the religious community that made this secret police file especially

interesting. The file also represented a great example of how the photographs—either confiscated or taken during surveillance operations—were used by the secret police with the intention of operationalizing the community's destruction. From this file we also gain an insight into how photographs were used to materialize connections between people, the informer and the faithful, the informer and the agent, the photographer and the targets.

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The "unwelcome ethnographer"

After consulting the file discussed above, I immediately attempted to approach the community. However, it was not an easy task to find contact information since the community had no Internet or social media presence at all. I only had the names of the community's leaders who had been interrogated by the secret police. After finally finding a way to the community, in 2017 I had an extensive telephone conversation with the pastor, seeking permission to approach the community in order to discuss their presence in the secret police archives and the images and texts we found there. In the phone conversation the pastor explicitly expressed that he would like to refrain from all communications with me. To my great disappointment, the leader of the community openly and clearly expressed that I was not welcome at their rituals and gatherings; furthermore, he did not intend to discuss anything with me. I had become an "unwelcome ethnographer" as the pastor, the strategic gatekeeper controlled my access and made a decision on behalf of the community without consulting with them. As I had no other way into the community, the harsh gatekeeper and his personal decision turned my point of entry into a barrier.

Given my enthusiasm for the visual and



documentary richness of the file, I was devastated by the pastor's decision. This refusal led me to search further avenues, and consequently I began interviewing ex-members. The interviews with ex-members eventually opened up a new understanding of the community for me. However, I must underline the problematical ethics of this phase in my research; knowing that I had no consent from the pastor of the community, I did not feel that it would be ethical to use any of those interviews.

Ex-member testimonies as anti-religious propaganda method were often used by the secret police and "testimonials from former believers thus became a defining feature of the post-Stalin press' treatment of religion" (Baran 2011: 164). Eileen Barker (1984) was one of the first scholars to use ex-member interviews in her pioneering monograph on the Unification Church complementing participant observation and interviews of "cult" members. While more and more scholars studying New Religious Movements use ex-member interviews, it has become a methodological challenge, and the social-scientific use of ex-member interviews has been widely debated. While some scholars value ex-member narratives due to the information they can provide and argue that ex-members have both an insider and outsider perspective, others remain critical and emphasize the invalid and biased representations of communities only studied through ex-member interviews and testimonies. I agree with the critiques that a research based exclusively on ex-member interviews would have resulted in biased and invalid results, therefore I ruled out this option.

Nonetheless, the conversations with ex-members helped me to understand that the community continued to operate somewhat underground even today, remaining quite secretive in its ways and not open to collaboration with researchers who approached them, as I had done. The secrecy of the community and the lack of

trust towards me as a researcher did not give me the possibility to enter the "field." I was what Gallo (2011) called an "unwelcome ethnographer." Without trust, I had no bridge into the community. As trust is an essential part of the ethnographic research, without trust it all fails. My failed fieldwork experience and my never before experienced research position as an "unwelcome ethnographer" provoked very interesting discussions in the Hidden Galleries team, and this particular case also contributed to the decision to foreground the concept of *trust* in our Budapest exhibition, which addressed the intersection of *faith*, *trust*, and *secrecy* during communism. The religious group, following their underground secretive religious practices and their traumatic experiences of surveillance and interrogations in the 1980s, we presumed had lost trust in institutions, authorities, and in society in general, while their secretive practices continued to constitute a coping mechanism for their profound distrust.

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The ethical dilemma

This fieldwork failure and my experience as an "unwelcome ethnographer," however, helped me to consider the ethical dimension of the project as crucial to the research as a whole. The Hidden Galleries project, as already discussed, was especially concerned with the ethical questions that arise from working with communities with a legacy of repression and surveillance. However, at this point, I found myself in my own ethical dilemma regarding how to proceed in my research with this particular community without compromising the community and the goals of the project. What would be the implications of pursuing the research based solely on the written archival sources, in the absence of an encounter with the community, after being rigidly rejected and unwelcome?

Should I respect their intention and abandon the research process?

From a legal perspective, in accordance with Hungarian legislation (the provisions of Act CXII of 2011, Act III of 2003, and Act LXVI of 1995), the publication of written and photographic documents found in the archives is the responsibility of the researcher, and the communities' permission is not required. Under the regulations for researchers, I had the option to publish an article based on the archival sources found in the secret police archives without the permission of the community or engaging them in any way. I had all the permissions from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian Secret Police, as all rights are vested upon the researcher.

On the other hand, from an anthropologist's perspective, disclosing historical documents at any cost is not an option. In anthropological research "do no harm" is one of the basic principles of research methodology. Ethnographic research begins with oral or written consent; consequently, trust is at the heart of the research process. Throughout the research process researchers are attentive to the interests of the researched community, and ethnography is by its nature a collaborative process working from the presumption that the research parties trust one another. I therefore came to the conclusion that it would be unethical to continue with any further research or to disclose the photographic or textual materials under any circumstances as I was aware of the community's unwillingness to collaborate in the research process. Even though the guidelines and legal framework regarding the publishing of secret police archival materials would have permitted the use of images of this community without their consent, I decided that the most appropriate ethical response would be to respect their intention that these images remain unpublished and not researched.

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Trust/ distrust

The ethical complexities of my failed research helped the Hidden Galleries team to think about how and why certain religious communities did not want to cooperate and collaborate with the project. These discussions shifted our attention towards reflecting on issues of trust and distrust, and this case in particular became a catalyst for our thinking. When the team embarked on exhibiting our research findings, the inclusion of "trust and distrust in the researcher" became a crucial point to be articulated, and trust became an organizing concept within the curatorial process. Making sense of a "failed ethnographic encounter," therefore, also yielded significant research results. Similarly to the ways in which anthropologists have questioned and called attention to "archival silences," the reason behind why certain communities firmly rejected ethnographic inquiry can lead us to important insights and revelations.

With this in mind, this experience also encouraged the team to question why certain communities had the opposite response and felt the need to cooperate with us in the Hidden Galleries research project. With other communities we managed to build a trusting relationship and deep collaboration. As mutual trust between the researcher and the researched community is at the heart of the ethnographic process, it is particularly important to reflect on this "failed" ethnographic attempt as an indication of the lingering distrust in institutions, authorities, and researchers in general as one of possible legacies of repression and surveillance in the twentieth century.

Recognizing the affective nature of both trust and distrust (Jones 1996: 7) helped us to explain the lingering impact that persecution might have had on these communities.⁴ As Jones (1996) discusses, trust and distrust are very important emotional factors. On the one hand, trusting someone means to



have an attitude of optimism about her goodwill, whilst on the other hand, distrust contains pessimism about the goodwill and competence of another (Jones 1996: 7). In her recent article, Jones also talks about the “affective looping” of trust and distrust. Both trust and distrust as affective phenomena are prone to looping that makes them self-perpetuating:

Affective looping occurs when a prior emotional state provides grounds for its own continuance, or when it provides grounds for another different but allied emotional state which in turn provides grounds for the original emotional state, which further reinforces the allied emotional state, and so on, in a self-supporting loop, a loop that tends to not only sustain but also to magnify both emotional states. It can be hard to break such loops [...] (Jones 2019: 956).

Thus the “affective looping” of distrust, and the possible magnifying effect of this emotional state which led to the lingering distrust, is one of the ways to explain this community’s attitude towards me as a researcher and the institutions of the state and society at large.



Exhibiting a “failed” ethnographic attempt or rather the “lingering distrust” in society

Exhibiting this lingering distrust in institutions and authorities as one of the legacies of repression and surveillance in the twentieth century required a critical sensibility on the part of the curators and the project team. How is it possible to exhibit or tell a story, central to which is the visual record created by the secret police, whilst maintaining the full anonymity of the community?

The decision of the curators of the *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* exhibition and the Hidden

Galleries team was to use an image from the file as a device. Even though the surveillance image we selected contained no recognizable faces or locations, we decided to make a replica, a drawing instead of the original surveillance image in order to generate an image that was at a further remove from the file that gave birth to it.⁵ This solution allowed us to represent the community without revealing their identity and to take one further step representationally away from the file and targeted community. Using the replica enabled us to reverse the phenomenological proximity created by the indexicality of photographs through their “unmatched ability to conjure up a tangible presence of past moments and people” (Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2014: 170) and their “unique capacity to, phenomenologically speaking, put us in a proximity of what they are photographs of” (Pettersson 2011: 185).

In this image we see a man sitting on a chair and preparing his rod to fish. In the background, the group of people targeted by the secret police are gathered in what seems to be a circle. The people are distant, but this image functions rather as a contextualization of the surveillance scene. The drawing loses the qualities of the initial picture. There the person sitting was dressed in a white shirt. The surveillance note in the file presents all the utensils that security officers took with them when the surveillance took place.

This piece was chosen as the Epilogue to the exhibition in Budapest and was dedicated to addressing the complexities of research ethics and trust as a reflexive process but also as an invitation to the audience of the exhibition to think about questions of trust, distrust, and research ethics. In the context of the exhibition, we hoped to encourage the viewer to reflect on the role of researchers and the potential for research on secret police operations to unwittingly replicate the attitude of the totalitarian regime. In order to escape the intrusion of the secret police and call for a critical sensibility



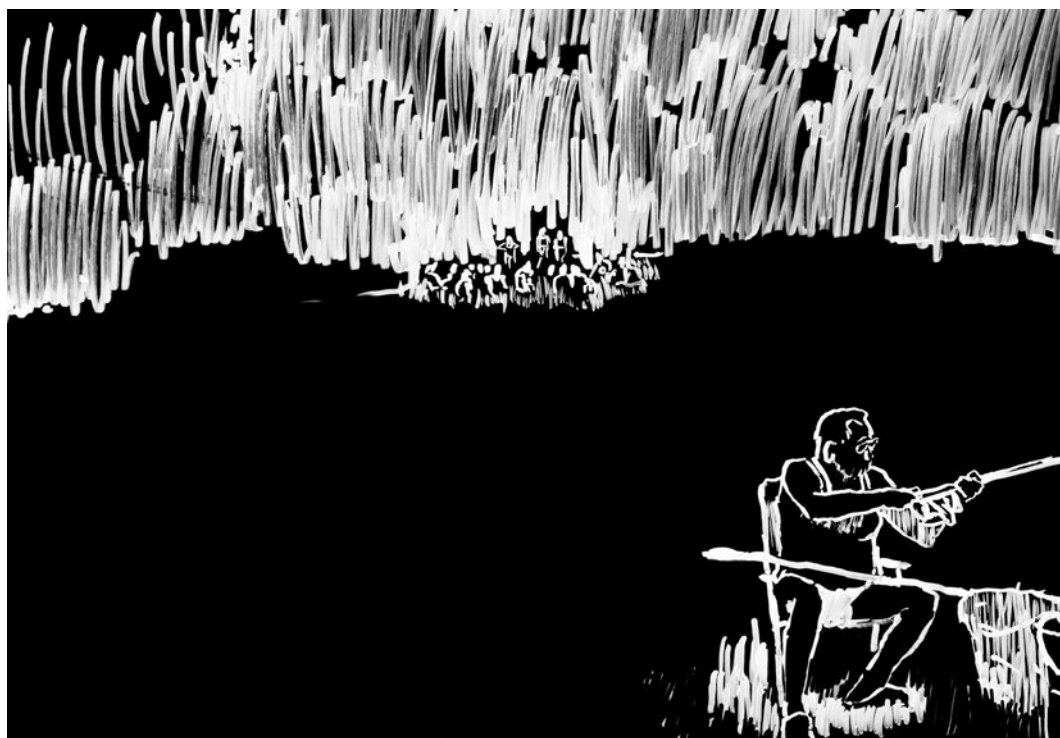


Figure 1. Drawing from the Hidden Galleries exhibition *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* at Galeria Centralis, Blinken Open Society Archives, Budapest. Photo credit: Dániel Kophelyi.

when dealing with secret police visuals, we addressed the following questions in the Epilogue of the exhibition:

What is the difference between the researcher and the secret agent? What happens if a community that has refused to work with a researcher, nevertheless has their secret police file published by others? Are those who were targeted by the secret police aware that upon their request their names and documents can be classified? How can we show how intrusive the presence of the secret police was in people's lives, without replicating the same intrusiveness?⁶

The comparison between the work of secret police informers and that of the anthropologist is not new. Katherine Verdery talks about "police ethnographies" (2014) referring to secret police reports and comparing the work of anthropologists to that of secret police informers. Florin Poenaru,

however, extends this comparison further in his argument that the Romanian Securitate constructed a form of anthropological knowledge for the benefit of the socialist state (2017: 108, 112). He draws an analogy between the toolkit, the "research plan" that guides their inquiry, the laborious work of gathering fieldwork materials, but also the similarities between the substance of how both "anthropology and the Securitate share at the level of producing knowledge in their focus on social relations, social interactions, and social networks" (Poenaru 2017: 113).

Nevertheless, our work with persecuted, and therefore potentially more vulnerable, communities cannot replicate the "police gaze"—or the very same methods that were used on them during communism. Even though the images of the community under discussion in the essay do not portray visually atrocities of a physical or violent type, the display of the images connected to this case without consent would have

reenacted and regenerated the persecution suffered by this group. Susan Crane in her ethical, critical-historical essay focusing on Holocaust atrocity photographs argues for the “repatriation” and removal of Holocaust

images, offering an alternative solution, a radical alternative: “choosing not to look” (2008: 310). In our case the visual ethical paradox was resolved by “choosing not to reveal.”



NOTES

1. The exhibition was one of the key outputs of the ERC Hidden Galleries project. The exhibition was curated by Gabriela Nicolescu and co-curated by James Kapaló. The online version of the exhibition can be viewed here: <https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/?lang=en>.

2. *Creative Agency and Religious Minorities: “Hidden Galleries” in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe* received funding from the European Research Council (no. 677355).

3. I am grateful to Rolf Müller for calling my attention to this

file and for his help throughout the research process.

4. We are grateful to philosopher Katherine Furman who helped us navigate the unknown terrain of the philosophy of trust and introduced us to the work of Karen Jones.

5. The Hidden Galleries team is grateful to Dániel Kophelyi, the designer of the *Faith – Trust – Secrecy* exhibition for producing the replica.

6. <https://faithtrustsecrecy.osaarchivum.org/epilogue-on-trust?lang=en>

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How to Look Natural in Photos: An interview with Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica

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ABSTRACT

In this interview with the authors of *How to Look Natural In Photos*, a 2021 photobook featuring images from archives containing secret police records from Poland before 1989, Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica outline their approach to the republication of this material. They reflect on the nature of images which represent violence or trauma alongside the seemingly banal photographs of mundane scenes and objects recorded by the security forces, as well as the ethics of reproducing portraits of secret police officers. The material on which the book is based is in the possession of *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (The Institute of National Remembrance), an organization created in 1998 by act of the Polish parliament that has been subject of heated debate in the country. Critics have accused it of producing an overly simple view of modern Polish history, one populated by heroes, victims and villains. Bartecka and Rusznica reflect on their relations with this institution and the potential for open interpretations of such material.

KEYWORDS

Photography; Archives; Secret Police; Trauma; Memory; Photobook.



In winter 2021 Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica published a book called *How to Look Natural in Photos*.¹ The handsome volume features many dozens of photographs selected from the archives of the Polish Secret Police now in the possession of *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (IPN / The Institute of National Remembrance), an organization that was created in 1998 by act of the Polish parliament to function as *Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu* (a "Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation"). The archives of the security apparatus which operated in Poland from 1944 to 1989, first as *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* (Department of Security), and then from 1956 as *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*

(Security Service), have been collected by the Institute as part of its remit to both promote public understanding of the effects of communist rule on Polish society as well as to investigate crimes conducted by the authorities against the people during the forty years of communist rule. Its activities have been controversial, with liberal voices in Poland viewing it as an ally of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS / Law and Justice), the national-conservative political party which led a coalition government in Poland between 2005 and 2007 and, in 2015, took full power. Over these years, PiS has mounted a ruthless campaign to consolidate its hold on the country and marginalise those who don't fit into its conservative, Christian and

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family-orientated view of the nation. At the same time, history, and in particular the dark events of the Second World War and four decades of communist rule have become highly politicised fields in Poland with PiS and its allies emphasising the victimhood of the nation as well as deep pride in Poland's "national" traditions of resistance. In this Manichean worldview, modern history is populated by victims and villains.

Bartecka and Rusznica are not employees of the Institute, nor indeed professional historians. Bartecka is curator, critic and script writer; and Rusznica is an artist and curator, whose photographic practice has explored the sensual and ineffable. [One project—a 2018 photobook called *Subterranean River* (Rusznica 2018)—explores the world of supernatural beings at the fringes of the human realm]. Bartecka and Rusznica's book—produced after reviewing many thousands of photographs in the archives of the IPN, including Polish Secret Police—is unlike any volume which has been produced in recent years. Studies like *Praha Objektivem Tajné Policie* [Prague through the Lens of the Secret Police] set out to pin down the *modus operandi* of the Czechoslovak security forces in their attempts to surveil what it regarded as potential enemies (Vitvar et al. 2008). Detailed descriptions of hidden camera techniques, surveillance plans and maps as well as report from agents are accompanied by clumsily composed photographs taken during operations against "suspicious" characters, many of whom were Charter 77 signatories. Other projects like Simon Menner's 2013 book *Top Secret: Images from the Stasi Archives* seem infected with kitsch, finding amusement in the ill-fitting disguises and unsophisticated surveillance techniques in the manuals of the East German state security apparatus (Menner 2013).

By contrast, *How to Look Natural in Photos* defies easy comprehension: the images selected often seem enigmatic or mysterious, particularly in the order by

which they unfold. The book opens with an image of a man midway through dressing in a chaotic and shabby interior (Figure 1). Two or maybe three prone figures seem to lie on a make-shift bed nearby: are they dead or perhaps just sleeping? The image itself seems to be on the edge of disappearance, with white clouds of billowing decay breaking the surface of the print and obscuring the scene. Turn the page, and the next image is of a bouquet of flowers (Figure 2), and then the next is of a boy framed by Coca-Cola crates. Elsewhere, different images of the same event – a parade of officers lining up like a Busby Berkeley dance line or the arrival of a group of men at Katowice station – are reproduced but not in sequence. None of these images or, in fact, any of the photographs crisply reproduced on high-quality paper are captioned on the pages on which they appear. In fact, the captions make a delayed appearance as an "Index" much later in the book and only then in the form of the laconic information which appears in the IPN files accompanying these images. The boy with the Coke crates is "guarding" them at an event marking the death of Cardinal Wyszyński in 1981; the flowers are "Freesias"; and the man dressing is a soldier in a village hut in 1942.

In its unsettling and discontinuous sequences ordered by what might be called "aesthetic" judgments, and in its refusal to adopt devices which allow for easy understanding (like captions or chronology), Bartecka and Rusznica's book looks much more like the kind of lyrical photobook created by the artist than the precise dissections of events and actions favoured by historians of "totalitarianism." With unexplained and yet close proximity of unlike and disconnected scenes, the mood of the book is much closer to surrealism than forensic science. Bartecka and Rusznica seem to be interested in the "optical unconscious" of state surveillance finding an order of beauty in its photographic records that the poet André Breton called "convulsive"





Figure 1. "A room in a village hut", an image taken between 1939 and 1941 in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.



Figure 2. "Freesias", an undated image in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.

because, like a spasm, it is violent or uncontrollable. Even those images which look like "evidence"—photographs of wounds, mugshots, and, in one section, hundreds of shots of people coming and going through the same entrance (of the American embassy in Warsaw) and crime scenes—seem to eschew their documentary function as visual "facts." And for the reader of *How to Look Natural in Photos*, the experience is unsettling, because many of these photographs seem to point to trauma (whether in the events

leading up to their making or in their uses by the security forces in their attempts to coerce the citizens of the People's Republic). Yet, they are not "resolved" by narrative or explicit interpretation. Bartecka and Rusznica pull back from explanation, relying on the laconic catalogue descriptions of the IPN archivist and in the final pages of the book a short matter-of-fact essay by historian, Tomasz Stempowski, cataloguing the techniques of Security Service in Poland before 1989.



David Crowley: *What were the origins of the project?*

Łukasz Rusznica: One of the starting points of the book is an exhibition I made in 2014—*How to Photograph*²—using the same archive of photographs, and with a similar concept. But the exhibition was much more theatrical than the book. Viewers looked at a wall of many photos and then were led into a room containing a single photograph. This second room was rather dramatic, with red light and an old fancy frame. After that they were given the full information about the photograph that they had just seen. They had no choice about how to view the images. And this choice is the difference between the exhibition and the book.

After the show, I had a very strong sense of what the book should be like, even down to the design of the cover. But then I made a huge mistake by inviting Beata to work with me on it (laughing). Working together, I realized that I had to kill my fantasy of the book. This is really where the book began.

Beata Bartecka: I found Łukasz's approach to the exhibition to be quite liberating. Frankly, I was too conservative to make the kind of exhibition of that kind but, seeing it, I was inspired to think—how can these photographs be used without treating them as simply historical artefacts? I should say here that I value history—I like reading historical narratives, I like texts and I am not a visual artist. But respect for this material can act as a restraint too. Working together, I came to understand that photographs do not have to be *only* approached as historical evidence: they can also be experienced as a visual story if one works with, for instance, sequence and structure.

David Crowley: *How did you approach the selection of images and the structure the book?*

Łukasz Rusznica: We made this book in what you might call an “open studio” in

that we printed a lot of photos and then we worked every day for about six weeks on the selection and sequence. It was “open” in a literal sense because people could come and talk to us about the project. During this time, we might, for instance, say “let’s make a sequence about looking.” Or there is a sequence which is like a cabaret dance sequence because we knew that we wanted to make it very dynamic with policemen changing poses. So the book has sections like cars where we look from the car’s perspective. Then we started working on the book as a whole and it became more like working on a movie or a montage. Like a movie, images appear faster, faster, faster to have a kind of climax, often a rather brutal one in fact. And then the images slow down.

David Crowley: *Was there a governing principle?*

Beata Bartecka: Our main approach was to be open to everything. Sometimes we were led by visual principles, sometimes by emotional ones when we put two photographs together.

Łukasz Rusznica: When we talk about the book, some people seem to think that we are claiming that the photographs from the archive are “art” and that means that we think that some of the photos are beautiful images, and are indifferent to the fact that they feature people who are just moments away from being killed.

This is not our intention. But we do think that it is possible to “grab” viewers, to make them invest emotionally and visually, and to encourage them later to engage with the historical events that the images record. We don’t ignore history. In fact, viscosity is the key to unlock the viewer to engage with the past. Viewers need to be “tricked” to make that investment.

Beata Bartecka: We’ve always described this as a kind of “trap.”

David Crowley: *That's an interesting word, but one with negative associations, certainly in English.*

Łukasz Rusznica: It carries negative connotations in Polish too, even with violence. But it is always best to try to make a nasty pill easier to digest. If you have a dog or cat, you hide the medicine in a nice bowl of meat to make it easy to digest. This is a feature of the design of the book: its cover is bright sunny yellow and red – but these are also the colours that say “danger, danger.”

We do give the reader information in the Index (*a catalogue of captions written by IPN archivists—D.C.*) and an accompanying text from a historian, Tomasz Stempowski. But if the reader wants to know the “truth,” they have to work hard for it. They can engage with the book at the visual level or they can turn to the Index but, even then, the Index can deliver uncertainty. I particularly like those statements that say “We don’t know where this photograph was taken, who is depicted or why it was taken.” This is both information and not information at the same time. And then if the reader wishes, they can read Stempowski’s detailed essay at the end of the book. In other words, the reader chooses the level of their engagement.

Beata Bartecka: We “say our piece” through the entire object: in our selection of images, in working with texts from IPN, in commissioning Stempowski and working with a graphic designer Joanna Jopkiewicz who we were talking with about the layout, typography, paper—all elements which influence on the visual and tactile reception of the book. The point is the whole.

We know that the material can be mesmerizing, particularly those images where we don’t know why, when and who. And sometimes the picture is very graphic and dramatic and yet the archive description seems very naïve and simplified. This can be such a contrast. For instance, the book features a photograph of a corpse from the early 1950s but the archive text focuses its



Figure 3. An image from the “Album concerning the spy Joachim Schach and Aleksander Popiak, 1951-1956” in the archives of IPN and reproduced in Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica’s 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.

attention on a print pinned to the wall above the dead man’s head (Figure 3). It was a kind of folkloric poem.

David Crowley: *So in some ways the book points attention not only to the interests of the secret police in photographs but also the interests of archivists in recent years. What is your relationship to IPN?*

Beata Bartecka: You cannot live in Poland and not have an opinion about IPN. It has deep roots because of the political context here. After 30 years or more, we have all seen it engage in different actions. So, when people know that we have worked with IPN’s photos, there are always questions: how did you co-operate with IPN? Was it easy or difficult? Did the organisation control your activities or not? I think that it is important to see our decision to work with the archive as a curatorial decision. It archives material not only from the communist period but also from the Second World War and even before. This is important because we want to draw attention to the archive as a symbol of power. Power uses the archive for its own purposes.

Łukasz Rusznica: Yes, we are interested in using the archive in a way which is not



necessarily that for which it was intended. We work completely within the “rules” of IPN and yet we’ve been able to create a book which extends to the reader the power of interpretation when that power seems mostly to be in the hands of the government through IPN, when power passes judgements about who or what is good and bad in Polish history. And to do this, we assumed the role of naïve young curators who like to “play” with photos. But I don’t want to exaggerate our role too much: the government does not care about photobooks. But queering, or going against the grain or working against the “oppressor,” or against power is good, however small.

There is another observation to be made too. Making this book allowed us to see two IPNs: one that is used by politicians in the game of politics—for instance, to smear Lech Wałęsa by inferring that he was Bolek (*an informant who was discovered in the Security Service files—D.C.*). And another—employees of the institution who have human responses and, as historians, welcome our interest in history.

David Crowley: *Exhibiting images is something that IPN has done before. A few years ago it was responsible for an exhibition of photographs called Twarze bezpieki 1944-1990 (The Faces of The Security Services 1944-1990). Mugshots of secret police from the Polish People’s Republic were mounted on panels with descriptions of their activities during the communist era on the streets of cities like Wrocław, where you are based, and Warsaw too. This was a kind of public indictment of these figures who had, I suppose, hoped to disappear, to be forgotten after 1989. What do you feel is your responsibility to the people who appear on the pages of How to Look Natural in Photos?*

Beata Bartecka: We have had a lot of discussion of the use of portraits and names. At the same time, you can go to the

bookstore and see the publications issued by IPN. In them, all this information is public, everything.

I think that we’ve acted reasonably in terms of being respectful to our subjects because we don’t pass judgment on who is bad and who is good, or announce victim and the oppressor. In fact, there is a sense in which “we are all victims.” When we made the decision to feature the portrait of one of the secret policemen, we show how he changes over the years, how his face shows signs of stress that comes from fear, oppression, violence and so on. From our perspective, the book is about the human being in the context of power, whether that is a communist or Nazi system, as well as the exercise of power during the present day, say, by corporations—the connection between surveillance and capitalism.

Łukasz Rusznica: When Beata refers to this secret policeman, of course we don’t know this guy, we don’t know his history. You look at his face and the image is of a tired man. We include three photographs of him and he gets younger in each. You see him for the first time right after “the burned cars” sequence, his face seems shaken and tired. Here, for us, is a story of how being a person “in power” is not a fairy tale. These faces are documents. I know that it is perhaps shitty that the people in the book have a double life as a human being and as a document, but this is precisely the theme of the book: how we can become intertwined with history. How history becomes part of a life or how a life becomes part of history, and not necessarily in ways that we might desire.

And at the level of images, it is also important that this is also a face that draws an empathetic response from the viewer. This is something that we’ve worked very hard on, to structure the book to generate what we call an “innocent eye.” The first look at these faces is made by an innocent eye. This is the moment when the face is not or not yet a document. And only when you read what happened, or what that subject did,





Figure 4. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring images in the archives of IPN.

Figure 5. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring an image in the archives of IPN.

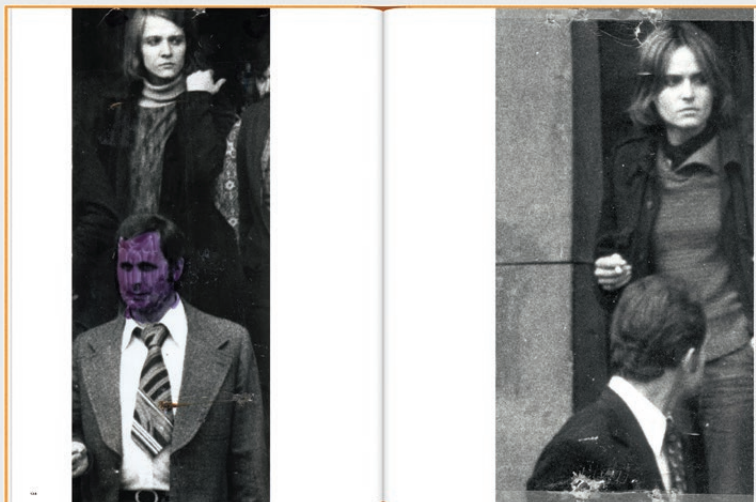
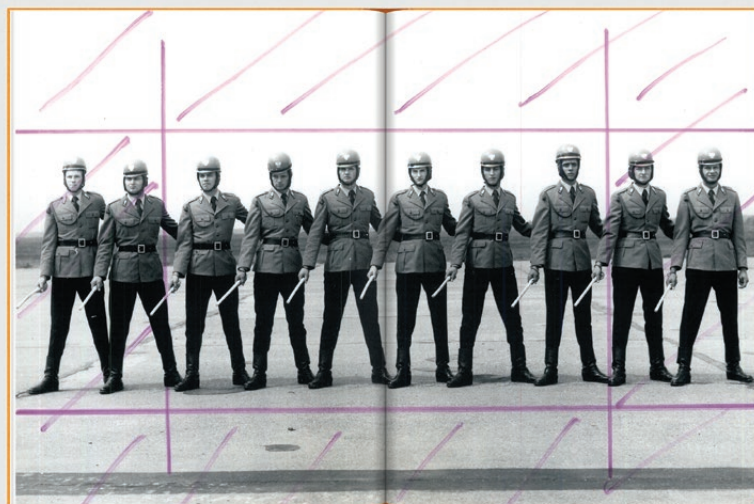


Figure 6. Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos* featuring different "Operational" photographs in the archives of IPN.

does he or she then become a document. But in that first moment, they are human—they are handsome or not handsome, tired or whatever. This is the aspect that makes feel that we are not monsters ... Maybe we are. But we try not to be.



David Crowley: *Were there kinds of images that you chose to draw a line and not to reproduce?*

Beata Bartecka: Yes, we drew lines but not, or not only, for ethical reasons, but also to serve the construction of the book and to impact the impressions of the viewer. Of course, there were many images which were very dramatic, even drastic, that we considered using. But when we laid out the structure of the book we could see that these images would “kill” the others. For similar reasons, we did not want to use images of famous people like Mazowiecki and Wałęsa (*leaders of Solidarność, the anti-communist trade union which was forced underground in the early 1980s—D.C.*).

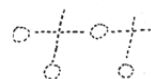
David Crowley: *What has the critical response been to your book in Poland?*

Beata Bartecka: Working with a small publisher means that we have been involved in the promotion of the book. We’ve sent material to the right-wing and left-wing media and there is no response from either side. Perhaps the book is “boring” to them because it does not feature famous people of the kind I’ve just described. Maybe it is because they don’t know what to do with a book which does not take a clear line or offer a distinct interpretation of the past. It is like some kind of “hot potato.”

Łukasz Rusznica: Perhaps they don’t know what kind of “take” to have on our book. They did not bite because they weren’t sure what we’d taste like. But *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*a Roman Catholic weekly—D.C.*)

did publish a long text about the book, a publication which might seem like a weird medium for politics.³ Although it is a magazine for religious believers, it is also one which is not necessarily right or left wing either. They are in the weird middle ground, perhaps a little like us—in a place of left-right purgatory.

Far more interesting was the reception from the non-Polish or Western media. Why? Because we were concerned that a book which uses Polish history to talk about the system and power might be reduced to “simply” Polish history by commentators from the UK or France; that they would not see in our book something that might touch them because as a country from Eastern Europe, our history does not have the power to be “universal.” That our story could not be understood as a story about the state of the world. That was our biggest concern. But we need not have worried: the reception has been fantastic, and it was understood by critics and readers abroad that this book about Poland could be about them too.



NOTES

1. Beata Bartecka, and Łukasz Rusznica. 2021. *How to Look Natural in Photos*. Wrocław: Ośrodek Postaw Twórczych & Palm* Studios.

2. *Jak fotografować – wystawa zdjęć z archiwum IPN*, curated by Łukasz Rusznica with Beata Bartecka, Hubert Kielan, Miejsce przy Miejsce Gallery, Wrocław October-December 2014.

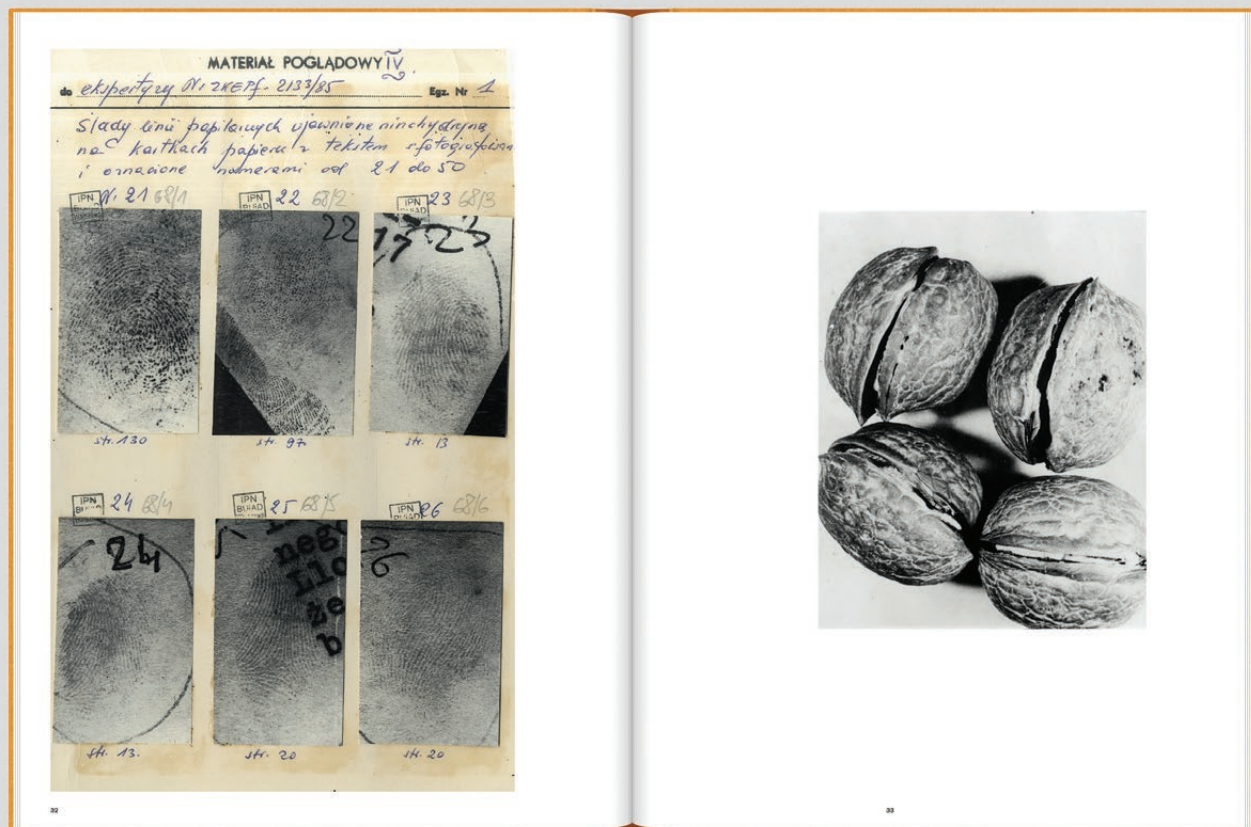
3. Topolski, Maciej. 2021. “W stanie podejrzenia”. *Tygodnik Powszechny* (May 2021). [Available online at: <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/>]

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Vitvar, Jan H., Pavel Zacek, Anna Pavlikova, Miroslav Urbanek, Vladimír Bosak. 2008. *Praha Objektivem Tajné Policie* [Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police]. Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, USTR.



V. Book Reviews

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

Maria Alina Asavei. 2020. *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 309 p.

Reviewed by James Kapalo

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Kapalo, James. 2021. "Maria Alina Asavei. 2020. *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 209 p." *Martor* 26: 182-184.

This book addresses the question of resistance in communist and post-communist Romania through the lens of religion-inspired art. Focusing on the central importance of Orthodox Christian spirituality and imagination, Asavei charts the careers of a number of Romanian artists who responded to communist ideological control of artistic production. The book goes on to trace their practice into post-communism, as they critique the intrusion or "colonisation" of capitalist consumerism in Romanian society and the return of Orthodoxy to a position of cultural hegemony in Romanian society. Much of the book is dedicated to artists associated with the *Prolog* art collective that at various times has been characterised as Neo-Byzantine, Neo-Orthodox or Neo-Traditionalist. Byzantine and folk-inspired art could, due to the Romanian communist regime's sponsorship of a brand of authentic national culture, function both within the bounds of officially sanctioned art production whilst also maintaining a subversive spiritual potential. As Asavei is keen to stress, the group of artists under discussion are diverse and take very different positions on art as social or political critique, both during the communist-era and in the contemporary context. Their works, which are explored

in this volume using archival collections, exhibition catalogues, interviews, diaries, and the cultural press, were rarely characterised by overt opposition but instead constituted a search for authenticity, redemption and a "self-fashioned self" (p. 16) thereby undermining the communist state's efforts to define the personal identity of citizens. How this group of artists situated themselves as countercultural "drop-outs" is described by Asavei as "twice daring" as their nostalgic attraction to tradition and spirituality placed them as outsiders in relation to both the art world and the Romanian national communism, and continues to do so in the consumerist context of present day Romania (p. 17). As the title suggests, this book is situated at the complex intersection of religion, politics and art and as such engages ideas of cultural resistance, aspects of Orthodox Christian theology and notions of national and political memory in Romania. Scholars working on diverse areas of Romanian historical and cultural studies will find Asavei's insight invaluable.

Asavei's opening argument in Chapter 1 of the book is that the intermingling of art politics and religion in Romania produced "manifold configurations of resistance to the dominant *status quo*" (p. 21) both during communism and in the present and that

these are characterised by a yearning for spiritual renewal or revitalization in the face of the alienation, injustice and the brutality of modernity. Chapter 2 explores the discourses and diverse forms that cultural resistance took in communist Romania focusing especially on the phenomenon of art collecting and religion-inspired art. Art collecting, Asavei notes, due to the atmosphere of repression and fear, took on a clandestine character which interestingly survived into the post-communist context (p. 44). Using the example of Sorin Costina's collection of art dating from 1970-1990, the argument is made that the refusal to accept the regime's visual aesthetic order could be viewed as a form of resistance through cultural consumption rather than through cultural production. A more overt form of resistance, however, could be found amongst the group of artists associated with *Prolog*, whose works Asavei insists should be judged as not only resisting the official canon but reclaiming "a type of religious/political experience meant to disclose the limits of the totalitarian model" (p. 47). Amongst other examples, Asavei points towards the powerful symbolism of Marian Zidaru's sculpture-installation, the *Supper*, which featured 12 chicken heads and a chicken heart. This piece functioned to critique the failure of the state to provide the basic nutritional needs of the Romanian people whilst inspiring the hope of salvation through the symbolism of Christ's Last Supper and the Christian Eucharist. The mobilisation of Christian symbolism as a form of political critique is contrasted in Chapter 3 by the state's adoption of Byzantine artistic heritage into the national-communist canon. During late communism, certain Byzantine-inspired works were accepted, alongside folkloric and naïve motifs and styles, into a state sponsored "national-style", which even facilitated the introduction of Byzantine iconology in the portraiture of Nicolae Ceaușescu. For scholars of religions, the themes presented

in chapters 4, 5 and 6 are particularly illuminating and valuable for cross-cultural comparative research on the relationship between new religious movements, art activism and ecological movements. Chapter 4's focus on the theme of the "return to nature" in the work of Neo-Orthodox artists, is peculiarly in tune with current research agendas in the field. Asavei views the nostalgia for a spiritual bond with nature characteristic of these works as a kind of spiritual awakening from the devastations caused by economic, social and political upheavals. The works discussed in this chapter reveal "both spiritual and ecopoetic concerns" (p. 89) that link ecologies of faith with the broader spirituality of environmentalism as well as illustrating the Neo-Orthodox artists understanding of nature as "impregnated with God's presence" (p. 90). Chapter 6 addresses the prophetic dimension of the work of two artists, Marian and Victoria Zidaru, who are associated with the New Jerusalem movement, which has been declared heretical by the Romanian Orthodox Church. The "artistic prophetic activism" (p. 24) of these two artists places them on the fringes of both the art world and mainstream religion as their work has been judged to be offensively nationalistic and disrespectful towards the Romanian Orthodox Church and yet, Asavei claims, they represent an earnest search for ethical amelioration and social justice in contemporary Romania. The remaining chapters of the book explore themes such as the body in communist and (post-) communist art (Chapter 7) and the use of religious themes, symbols and iconography to challenge the cultural hegemony of institutional Orthodoxy in contemporary political life in Romania (Chapter 9). With the closing chapter, Asavei draws these diverse themes together in a convincing set of conclusions on the nature of the entanglement art, religion and politics in contemporary Romania.

The journey that Asavei takes us on is



interdisciplinary in the extreme employing a richness of analysis that takes the reader in a number competing directions, some developed more deeply than others. Asavei presents the argument a number of times in the book that the brand of “post-traumatic contemporary aesthetic mysticism” (p. 1) characteristic of the artists associated with *Prolog* represents a yearning for social justice, a critical ethical spirit and hope, more so than the dangerous nationalism, backwardness and a nostalgic sense of loss that they are often associated with and critiqued for. Art inspired by Christian faith, so often associated with anti-progressive agendas, we are assured by Asavei,

sometimes has another face. Ultimately, by engaging a number opposing themes, such as spiritual versus political, Neo-Orthodox versus Neo-Avant-Garde, Eastern spirituality versus Western consumerism, tradition versus modernity, Asavei is able to presents a generous and yet compelling portrait of the ethical spirit, motivations and impact of these art outsiders. *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania* will be invaluable for a broad spectrum of scholars interested in the shifting and “elusive” boundaries of religion, politics and art (p. 5) in communist and post-communist societies.





"Although the textual holdings of secret police archives have been the main focus of the search for truth and justice, increasingly the visual materials produced and collected by the secret police are being published, exhibited and publicly displayed, whether in museums and galleries or even in urban public spaces. The use of these diverse visual materials, which come in many forms as articles in this issue illustrate, including surveillance images, mugshots and crime scene photographs, as well as confiscated photographs and possessions, all pose their own distinct ethical challenges both as objects of research and as aspects of lost cultural or religious patrimony."

(From the introduction to this issue of *Martor* on Visual Ethics After Communism.)



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