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Romanian documentary in transition : the role of documentary films in reshaping post-communist Romanian identity

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ROMANIAN DOCUMENTARY IN TRANSITION:
THE ROLE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN RESHAPING POST-COMMUNIST
ROMANIAN IDENTITY

By

Petronela Serb, B.A. Ryerson University, 2006

A thesis

presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

in the Program of
Communication and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2009

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Romanian Documentary in transition: The Role of Documentary Films in Reshaping

Post-Communist Romanian Identity

Masters of Arts, 2009

Petronela Serb

Communication and Culture

Ryerson University and York University

ABSTRACT

Since the fall of communism in 1989, Romanian citizens have changed dramatically, along with Romanian electronic media, which have transformed themselves from a one-party-controlled institution to a plethora of commercial broadcasters. By focusing on this era of dramatic transition, this thesis argues that documentary films have provided Romanians with the tools needed to deal with the past critically. More specifically, the intent of this thesis is to analyze how documentary films do the work of selecting, recollecting, and re-presenting narratives of the past, and to demonstrate that editorial choices resonate with wider social needs. The scope is limited to a short history of the documentary genre, focusing on a detailed analysis of two post-communist documentaries: *Memorial of Pain* ('Memorialul durerii', 1991), by TV producer Lucia Hossu-Longin and *The Great Communist Bank Robbery* ('Marele jaf comunist', 2004), by Alexandru Solomon. Ultimately, the thesis traces the ways in which trauma, shame, and amnesia also influence the shaping of both documentaries and identities.

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Introduction: Trauma, Amnesia, and the Post-Communist Romanian Documentary

“«avoir souffert ensemble»; oui, la souffrance en commun unit plus que la joie. En fait des souvenirs nationaux, les deuils valent mieux que les triomphes; car ils imposent des devoirs; ils commandent l’effort en commun”
Qu’es-ce qu’une nation? – Ernest Renan

“A country without documentary films is like a family without a photo album”
Motto – Astra Film Festival, Sibiu, Romania

Trauma. Shame. Fear. Forgetting. These are the objects of psychoanalysis. Individuals who suffer trauma often live with the shame of having been victimized, of lacking the agency or willpower to oppose the aggressor. They may also experience fear of reencountering aggression, and may resort to the mechanisms of forgetting in order to maintain a sane psyche. Consequently, when the trauma is experienced at national level, citizens who go through the oppressive period together may eventually display signs of collective amnesia as a way of dealing with issues of shame and fear, even as they move forward in re-defining their own identity, including national identity. It comes as no surprise, then, that trauma, shame, and amnesia are objects of cultural studies, and should lie at the centre of analysing the interaction between cultural products and the making of communal psyches.

Filmmakers (inside or outside a country) have the opportunity to turn a recording camera’s eye towards the most sensitive social, economic, political, or cultural issues that are the symptoms of a breathing national entity. The result is a collection of images that bear witness, sometimes edited under the form of a documentary film. Whether these documentary collections reflect a *cinéma-vérité*, or a reflexive, retrospective, or

investigative style, they can provide important components and building blocks in the process of constructing and re-constructing communal identity.

Starting from this premise that documentaries play a crucial role both in reflecting and in shaping identity, this thesis seeks to show that the production of documentary film is instrumental to the construction of identity including national identity. What the producers decided to address in their documentaries, the issues they present on the screen, and the subjects they chose to edit out, all of their editorial choices are indicative of a community's need to have certain narratives of the past re-collected, and some left out. The Romanian documentaries produced after the fall of communism demonstrate a burning necessity to deal with the uncertainties and black holes of the past, in order to reconstruct a national identity for the future. Regardless of their aesthetic or production value, all Romanian documentary films (and feature films for that matter) produced after 1989 provide insight into a nation caught between wanting to discover the past and wanting to forget, seeking approval from the West, and being suffocated by too much nationalistic pride to be able to change. Thus the proposed research aims to generate a better understanding of the interplay between social, economic and political transition and the production of documentary films in post-communist Romania.

The nineteenth-century industrial revolution and the dominance of a capitalist economy imposed upon the western world a paradigm of time and speed, rendering individuals obsessed with the need to maximize their available time. Not just the economy, but all the other elements of social life started turning in accordance to the hypnotizing ticktock of watches and clocks, as Costica Bradatan, a Romanian US-based scholar, notes: “not only did the traditional arts become more and more interested in the

issues of duration, change, decay, ‘instant’ (the Impressionist painting is only the most obvious example), but a completely new art appeared, an ‘art of time’ per excellence: the cinema” (Bradatan, p. 265). Cinema, with its 24 frames per second moving images on film, was capable of keeping track of and keeping up with the speed of social development. With the emergence of cinema-vérité, and the first documentary films, anthropological research gained a most valuable tool, unprecedented in its ability to infiltrate, capture, and represent true-to-life images of people, societies, and places.

Of course, the documentary camera, as an artfully constructed reality on film, also limits and distorts historical reality, as producers make countless editorial decisions along the way, from deciding when to turn the camera on, and what to point it at, what shooting angles to choose, how to introduce a character or frame a situation, and ending with the narration that can greatly influence the way in which the subject matter is perceived by the viewer. In fact, film may be manipulated and the producer’s intentions may be servants of a hidden propagandistic agenda, or they may have personal biases. This does not render the film unsuitable for analysis, however, but it does require contextualization in order to deconstruct the documentary and decipher its underlying meanings. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (released in 1935, focusing on the Nazi Party Congress, including Hitler’s and other party members’ speeches) is the textbook example for how a documentary produced with propagandistic purposes is also a valuable snippet of its era as well as a well-crafted aesthetic product. The same is true for a number of documentary-like films produced by Romanian communist propaganda organs, as part of the indoctrination of the masses with terminology and ideals regarding the “glorious socialist society”.

From 1947 up until 1989, Romania was one of the Eastern European countries ruled by a communist regime. Under these circumstances, all of the media were controlled by the state and were meant to sustain the image of the “sole party” and its leader, as well as to implement the portrait of the “new man” – founder of a bright socialist future for Romania. Thus, documentary films during that time were mere propaganda segments aimed to induce confidence and adherence to the regime’s policies and actions. Often these films did not reveal much about the state of things amongst the people, but, nevertheless, they provided a frame through which to look at that communist society, and to try and read from what is not being shown, nor told, the realities of the day to day life. It is an exercise of patience, of informed analysis, much like Romanian director Alexandru Solomon’s work, *The Great Communist Bank Robbery* (2004), a post-communist documentary that is critically constructed around a communist propaganda film from 1959. By presenting a fake documentary within his own documentary film, Solomon provides a new frame through which his contemporaries can probe what the original film conceals, thus using journalistic approaches to break the old, twisted frames of propaganda message. Solomon is just one representative of a new generation of Romanians that chose to break with the past, a generation that is at large credited with the upheaval of December 1989, which led to the removal of communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu; a generation that, throughout the 1990s, saw its revolutionary ideals betrayed and the hopes for re-establishing a strong national identity swept away by corrupt political interests.

The events of December 1989, which originated in Timisoara (western Romania), and then expanded to the capital – Bucharest, and to major cities, were

initially labelled as a revolution, only later to be denied that attribute and be re-labelled a coup d'état. The thousands who had taken to the streets, most of them university students, felt robbed of their revolution. Being robbed of a revolution means being robbed of the attempt to protest against a system that was oppressive for such a long time. It means having lost the opportunity to perform an act of subversion, an exercise that is crucial in dealing with a traumatic past. Having "made a revolution" was what helped define the young generation, whereas being denied that recognition generated an identity crisis, a vacuum that was slowly filled by misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and mistrust.

Ironically, the robbing of the revolution started in the revolution's most incipient phase, when The Council of the National Salvation Front (NSF, an organism seemingly created ad-hoc by participants in the events from the capital) issued a statement to the country, published in the Official Monitor, on December 22, 1989. The communiqué made use of the most dramatic expressions in order to appeal and appease the masses; amongst other things, it called for:

The elimination of the ideological dogmas that have caused so many damages to the Romanian people, and the promotion of the real values of humanity.
The elimination of falsity and fraud, and the implementation of criteria of competence and justice in all areas of activity.
Establishing new foundations for the development of national culture. The surrender of the press, radio, and television from the hands of a despotic family into the hands of the people. (quoted in Stoica, p. 287)

The NSF declaration seemed to encompass democratic values to which the rest of Romanians were aspiring, and it received immediate support from politicians and intellectuals of various backgrounds. On December 23rd, 1989, several politicians looking to re-establish the National Peasant Party signed a manifesto that openly declared adherence to the ideas put forth by NSF. However, it was not long before the ambitions

of NSF members became obvious: the organisation decided on January 23rd 1990 to gain recognition as a political party and to participate in the upcoming elections – as a result, several founding members decided to resign from NSF, while other established political parties (National Peasant Christian-Democratic Party, National Liberal Party, and Romanian Democratic Socialist Party) publicly denounced the act as illegitimate (Stoica, p. 27). Several days later crowds gathered in Bucharest to protest the NSF's participation in the elections, chanting “no to neo-communism”, “Yesterday Ceausescu – today Iliescu”, and “who spent five years in Russia cannot think like Bush” – slogans aimed to denounce the communist background of Ion Iliescu, the leader and mastermind behind the National Salvation Front. Within 24 hours, NSF supporters, aided by miners arrived to the capital from the Jiu Valley, organized a counter-protest, destroying political parties' headquarters, and dispersing with violence those who participated in anti-NSF demonstrations. The slogans chanted by this second wave of protesters were from a different realm: “death to intellectuals!”, and “down with the sons of bourgeoisie and legionaries”. It was just the first of seven violent interventions by Jiu Valley miners (three in 1990, one in 1991, another in 1994, and two in 1999), later coined as “mineriade” (‘the work of miners’). If the new generation of Romanians still had the energy and momentum to protest, after being robbed of a Revolution, then the waves of “mineriade” finally put that to rest, by denying intellectual expression through use of physical force.

Romanian journalist and media analyst Mihai Coman pointed out that the demonstrations of January 1990 represented a significant phenomenon for the entire nation; the media coverage of the protest rendered the University Square (the main

gathering place for protesters) into a “sort of axis mundi”, the center of the country, where the attention of an entire nation was focused (Coman, p. 134). Coman argues that the fervour of the protesters, the ad-hoc chants, the prayers and appeals to divinity, the crowd auto-defining itself as “scamps”, were part of a symbolic return to archetypal definitions of the Romanian spirit. On the other hand, the violent reprimand came as a forceful scission between the present and the past, linked by too frail a connection. Besides implication on the economic, political, and social domains, as well as foreign interpretation, the “mineriade” left behind them an un-bridgeable rift at the core of Romanian national consciousness; henceforth Romanians would be unable to relate to or to trust each other, let alone experience a feeling of belonging to a unified nation of some sort.

During a live radio show in December 2003, Romanian journalist, radio and TV talk-show host Robert Turcescu launched a discussion centered on the meaning of Romania’s national day (celebrated on December 1st, in memory of the Great Unification of 1918, which sealed the creation of the modern-day Romanian state). Turcescu asked his listeners to discuss what it means for them to be “united”, and was not surprised to discover that Romanians did not see themselves as being united at all, not even around big issues, such as joining the European Union. One listener argued that one cannot talk about being united around an issue, when one has not the slightest idea what that issue is (i.e. Romanians did not understand the intricacies of joining the EU, but thought of it as a good place to be, hence the large majority was in favour of joining the EU). Turcescu was left without a comeback line, and later wrote in regards to the incident:

After all, what unites us? Or, what keeps us united anymore? How much solidarity is there amongst the herd that gathers around artesian fountains after

each important win for the national soccer team? How much unity is expressed by the jets of urine that stain the walls of the House of Senate and the surrounding ministerial buildings every time there is a big union protest in Revolution Square? What kind of cohesion should we try to identify in the huge, sad-looking line-ups for free beans and sausage given out to Romanians, “happy” that there have been 85 years since the Great Union? (Turcescu, 2004, p. 137)

Turcescu’s questions are painfully sad, precisely because they point out the reality and they pin down the anomalies of a society lacking a coherent discourse on national identity. Romanian citizens are unable to relate to each other at a profound level and, instead, share in the futile joys provided by the spectacle of consumerism. The transition years did not provide Romanians with a proper sense of national identity and pride, leaving them adrift, victims of repetitious electoral promises, content to clap mindlessly at the circus exhibited in all areas of social life. Easily influenced by foreign cultural and political elements, many Romanian citizens sleepwalked into democracy, with a severe deficiency in regards to a unifying national sentiment.

The 1990s in Romania meant a continuation of communist-acquired forms and mentalities on one hand, and a direct appropriation of Western ready-made products and policies on the other. On the cultural scene, most precisely in the cinema, the production and consumption of documentary and fiction film after 1990 represent a reflection of the nation’s attempts to deal with the communist past while trying to redefine itself in a world that demanded quick compliance with democratic values, including an impartial legal system, a free economic market, and the right to free speech. The documentary in particular, as opposed to feature films, underwent a dormant phase during the 1990s and early 2000s, when national audiences manifested little interest in the genre, and producers slowly grasped the meaning and potential of such a powerful tool. “During the 1990s Romanian film professionals and audiences seemed to agree that the domestic

documentary was ‘dead’”, points out Adina Bradeanu (2007), a Romanian researcher at the University of Westminster, London. The apparent extinction of Romanian produced documentaries had two main causes – which are interconnected at various levels (political / governmental, social): lack of funding; and the widespread association with production centres formerly known for authoring propagandistic material: the Romanian National Television (TVR) and the Sahia Studio (established in the 1950s and the sole producer of documentaries during the communist regime).

While the Sahia Studio virtually ceased to exist, the production of documentary reportage for the first post-communist decade has been the monopoly of the public broadcaster (The Romanian National Television – TVR, later re-labelled Romanian Television Society) – an institution itself in transition, struggling with the process of updating its programming, its leadership, and implicitly its mentality. Despite outdated shows and approaches, the Romanian Television Society maintained its audience, mainly because it remained the sole over-the-air nation-wide broadcaster until the launch of private channel ProTV in 1995. Even after the appearance of private TV broadcasters, TVR enjoyed a special status due to a large budget available from legislated mandatory membership fees charged to every house that owned a TV set. With the availability of a bottom-less budget, and the lack of an institution or deontological code to hold it accountable, TVR had no incentive to speed up the cleansing process amongst its administration, producers, and equipment.

The fall-out between general audiences and TVR is the result of an obstinacy with which TVR clung to journalistic practices inherited from the communist era, a mentality that was for long time reflected in public programming. Cristi Puiu, internationally

acclaimed Romanian director, declared in a 2006 interview: “the Romanian documentary is facing difficulties because for a long time it has been the tool of communist, fascist, and other types of propaganda. This has rendered the Romanian documentary inert, with a few notable exceptions” (Atheneum, 2006). The mistrustful Romanian audience would slowly migrate towards private broadcasters, which were providing programs created according to a more objective, impartial, westernized model.

As 2000, alongside the boost of cable TV providers, the Romanian public started manifesting its preference for documentary film through their fidelity to foreign TV channels that aired such pieces (History Channel, BBC). Among the national broadcasters, TVR continued to be seen as the main source of documentary films, especially through its cultural programming channel, Romania Cultural. According to an IMAS (Institute for Marketing and Surveys) 2004 study, TVR viewers that had an interest in documentaries were highly satisfied with the pieces aired by this channel, whereas viewers of other high-rated national broadcasters manifested a higher interest, but declared a lower level of satisfaction. This could be translated into a growing disappointment with regard to the availability of documentary films, and also a desire to have productions from other sources than the public broadcaster.

However, the private broadcasters’ format was mostly centered on news and entertainment, and did not include documentary films. Documentaries brought no return on investment, had no government financing, or were simply not “hip” enough. As far as the Romanian public was concerned, there was no desire to follow stories that would depict the hardship endured under the communists, given that things had not yet changed enough to place individuals in a comfort zone from where to look back at a time of

destitution. With dreams of a prosperous capitalist existence shattered, people preferred the refuge offered by entertainment media.

Anca Pusca, writing about Romania in transition, argued that, “for a society that has undergone a series of important shocks and transformations since the fall of communism in 1989, the TV provides people with a sense of support and security, often depicting a false image of a much brighter and optimistic every-day. Many refuse to watch news channels and restrict themselves to watching entertainment shows and talk shows” (Pusca, p. 49). This state of lethargy is the same as that noticed by Robert Turcescu who could not quite understand why Romanians do not share a feeling of belonging to the Romanian nation, of being united through nationality. It is a psychological state of intentional oblivion, an attempt to forget about the difficulties of the real world, and to escape in alternative worlds provided by scandal media or Hollywood fiction films. Pusca furthers her argument in regards to the Romanian public’s need for escapism, by outlining the differences suffered by the country during the transitions to communism, and then to capitalism: “while shock in the communist system was carefully cushioned through a series of different social protection mechanisms – some more effective than others – the shock of capitalism is cushioned by a series of material promises that appear to be more tangible than ever” (Pusca, p. 52).

Indoctrinated by communism, disillusioned by capitalism, and reduced to silence by the paradoxically simultaneous influence of both communism and capitalism in Romanian social life after the Revolution, Romanians chose to disavow any claims for responsibility towards the past, and, implicitly, towards the future. What could be seen by some critics as a *laissez faire* attitude, is perhaps better understood if framed by Ernest

Renan's opinion on what characterizes a nation: "l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses" (the essence of a nation is that all the individuals have a lot of things in common, and also that all of them had forgotten quite a bunch of things, Renan, p. 9). For a nation that had suffered subjugation for most of its historical existence the moment had finally arrived to simply forget quite a few things – and media escapism is the best tool to provide that.

It is no surprise, then, that journalists' attempts to raise awareness and to incite the public's interest in documentary films continued to 'hit a tall wall' for several years. Many Romanian journalists and filmmakers are complicit with upholding the wall by hindering their own decisions on how to portray the communist era, on what to talk and what not to talk about. By putting some narratives in the foreground, while ignoring others, filmmakers too partook in the nationwide amnesia that mandated oblivion in regards to questions related to extremist internal groups such as the Iron Guard and the fascist collaboration during the war, or the nature of communism before and after Ceausescu came to power. Situated at the crossroad between unveiling the past and avoiding taboo subjects, Romanian documentary films were the fruit of a paradoxical situation. This type of contradictory approach vis-à-vis remembering is not singular to Romania, however; nations with a history of occupation (such as France and Poland, for example) have similar issues in constructing an official narrative that deals with the shame of having been complicit with the invading enemy. It is a self-chosen blindness that is internal to the documentary films as well, just like any other type of cultural

product that represents the state of things in a country where remembrance is necessary but also dangerous.

If documentaries turn a blind eye to the indigenous complicity to communism, fascism, nationalism, ethnic hatred, then they are also blind to the resistance movement that existed on the cultural scene during the communist regime. The New Wave of Romanian cinema did not arise out of a vapid desert, and its tackles attempting to denounce communism are not singular. Romanian directors had won international acclaim for their masterpieces starting with Ion Popescu-Gopo's *A short history* ('Scurta istorie'), winner of the Palme d'Or in 1957, and continuing with *Forest of the hanged* ('Padurea spanzuratilor') by Liviu Ciulei – winner of Best Director Award at Cannes in 1965, and *Renaissance Songs* ('Cantecele renasterii') by Mirel Iliesiu – winner of Palme d'Or for documentary in 1969. Along Iliesiu, other notable documentary directors during the communist period include: Ion Bostan, Paul Barbaneagra, Iosif Bertok, Sabina Pop, Doru Segal, Titus Meszaros. Working in the shadow of and with the constant threat of censorship in their mind, these filmmakers had to resort to special techniques such as heavy symbolism to make their messages heard subversively by the Romanian public. The creation of a meta-language that relied on intelligent metaphors and hyperboles is definitely the most important merit of this generation of directors, who worked to keep their art alive during a period of severe oppression.

Although important directors have manifested their disapproval towards the communist regime during its most imposing years, the scope of this thesis does not extend to include the forerunners in the genre. Having detailed the problems journalists

and documentary filmmakers had in dealing with the past, the purpose of this thesis is to document the extent to which they succeeded.

The two documentary films selected for analysis each received considerable critical acclaim and public appreciation, each however, of a different nature. Lucia Hossu-Longin's series of documentaries *Memorial of pain* ('*Memorialul durerii*' – produced under the TVR tutelage and broadcasted as of 1991) received warm accolades all around the Romanian cultural realm and was followed on television by adults who remembered or had been educated about the gravity of events conducted by communist officials; however the series did not manage to grasp the fleeting attention of the young generation, too mesmerized with Hollywood films to even fake some interest. On the other hand, Alexandru Solomon's *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, produced in 2004 (Romania and France co-production), presented itself in such a way that actually brought people to the cinema theatre. Solomon places his characters in well-established frames, with theatrical back-drops, allowing them to interact with the archival footage on their own, and limiting his own intervention to a minimum. These are just a few of the reasons younger Romanians flocked to see the film's premiere. Solomon's documentaries are a product intended not only for the national market (where there are little money to be made), but for audiences and broadcasters abroad, a quality that enthralled the generation of westernized Romanians, avid to finally watch a documentary film of international calibre.

The great gap between Hossu-Longin's series and any subsequent documentary productions was due to a lack of government funding for the film industry in general. Independent producers were a species virtually non-existent during the 1990s, when there

were no trained professionals to take over the task of making independent documentary films, and no finances to cover the costs. It took the Ministry of Culture 15 years to legislate the funding of Romanian-made feature and documentary films. The “Ordinance Regarding Cinematography”, promulgated in 2005, stipulates the creation of a “fund for cinematography”, administered by the National Centre for Cinematography that will help finance national or co-produced projects (including documentaries). The value of the financial support rises to 15% of the total production costs, up to a maximum of 700,000 Euros. A substantial boost came for co-productions, which could receive an additional funding of 20% from EURIMAGES (European Cinema Support Fund).

Ioana Avadani, CEO at the Centre for Independent Journalism, was among those who tried to promote the idea that “the documentary is a form of preserving recent history. And we believe that the decrease in documentary productions is making us lose a great chunk of our current history” (quoted by Popescu, L., 2006, para 25). It will take a while for the public and the film producers to mature enough so that the former manifest interest in the documentary story and the latter manifest interest in the way the public perceives their films.

While the documentary production stalled, the feature film was prodigious, starting to receive national and international critical appraisal as of 1993 (with Nae Caranfil’s *E pericoloso sporgersi*). As opposed to fiction film, where the new generation of directors started to search fervently for new means of expression, new cinematic styles, the documentary film was marked by an inclination towards rediscovering the recent past, with little concern for artistic value in itself. Most of the documentary titles that emerged immediately after 1990 were focused on political prisoners jailed by

communists, biographies of important historical persons (i.e. the former sovereign of Romania, King Mihai I), or on portraits of literary figures (i.e. poet M. Eminescu), and only later would the focus switch to more current issues. The need to attack the stories that had been kept away from the public eye for decades can be explained by a sentiment of urgency, of having to record as many testimonies of those involved, as long as they are still alive to recount those stories for posterity. Another, more important reason, is the fact that recollecting testimonies from the past represents a mandatory exercise for stitching up the consciousness of a nation which became confused as to its continuity through history and the nature of its identity.

Perhaps one of the most important incentives to support the work of re-collecting the past and to produce homemade documentaries was the fact that foreign producers manifested their interest in issues concerning Romania. Producers from the West filmed their documentaries from a foreigner's perspective, making editorial choices that would prove daunting for the Romanian viewers. Documentaries on Romania's "children of the streets", on the Romany minority, or on corruption issues, were at the centre of the West's interests. Confronted with these images, the Romanian public shrugged in shame and disapproval, feeling that foreigners unjustly misrepresent them. Should the representation be arguably objective, undoubtedly impartial, Romanians still had the feeling that they were being robbed of the right to tell their own stories, and would not recognize the value in a foreigner's take on the country's situation. How can, after all, an *other*, completely remote, not even tangent to the lived experience of communism and transition, have the audacity to speak *in the name of* the Romanian people? This entitlement, this sentiment of being still an insider is perhaps a newly discovered feeling,

just-in-time for the young generation of Romanian film directors, amongst which those dedicated to the production of state-of-the-art documentary films.

It is in this context that this thesis suggests an analysis of the production of documentaries in Romania after 1990, in an attempt to explore how the subjects deemed suitable for being documented in this way speak to the manner in which a new national identity is being shaped. Do the types of documentaries produced in post-communist Romania reflect the state of the nation during these transition years? Are Romanian documentaries preoccupied with bringing attention to current social issues and thus helping the society to deal with the present and its requirements, or are they reflections on the past, attempts to revive histories that were silenced by communists and to present a polished, historically coherent image of Romania to the West? Which of these methods better serve the development of Romania as a nation?

Chapter 1: National Identity, Propaganda and Documentary Film in Communist and Post-communist Romania

Throughout history leaders have used various communication channels to appeal to their citizens' conscience, be it to gain their political endorsement, to solicit their participation and support of national endeavours, or to explain their actions and decisions. From Hitler's televised public speeches, to Churchill's radio discourses, to Bush's address to the nation, propaganda through the media may not prove that the media effects theory is true; however, it does imply the existence of an audience (a community, a nation), which is comprised of individuals sharing some commonalities that may make them receptive to the same propagandistic message. As we focus on today's developed, high-tech, internet-connected world, it becomes even more apparent that the media (in any of their multiple facets) are active factors that influence and define the nations they service. It would be difficult to imagine western civilization without the media, and, in turn, the media help us "imagine" our civilization.

The concept of the nation as an "imagined community" was coined by Benedict Anderson who relates the birth of nationalism to the development of such mass communication tools as the newspaper and the novel. Anderson considers the nation "an imagined community" because, just as with a readership, people assume the existence of others who are part of the same audience, or of the same "nation" respectively. It is impossible for each individual to have a first-hand confirmation of the existence of those other people within the nation, but through the shared experience of reading the same

literature and newspapers, people feed off of the same source of information and gain awareness of ideals manifested by others within the same society. References used by novelists in their work are meant to trigger recognition within the readers, who can identify names of places, people or customs, and can even identify themselves as being part of that community which exhibits those behaviours.

The “national imagination” is incited by novels describing heroes who are placed in a “sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside” (Anderson, p. 30). The familiar is described in general terms, so that it addresses a greater audience. Moreover, the writer may address the reader as if already part of this “imagined community”, thus reinforcing the feeling of belonging that was incipient in the reader’s mind. The same mechanism is utilized by newspapers, where the subjects of the articles themselves become characters with intermittent appearances throughout the printing of the newspaper (Anderson, p. 33). Anderson argues that the very fact that there is no logical connection between the articles published in one edition of a paper proves that the audience takes on the role of creating imaginative links between them, much in the same way they do when imagining the nation as a community they belong to.

Expanding on Anderson’s theory, it can be argued that documentaries (as a particular type of media) provide a unique critical perspective on questions dealing with the past, and offer the possibility to redefine a national identity for the future. Just as with newspapers, radio, or television, documentaries have been used to record and to represent historical, political, social and cultural aspects of society. Encapsulated in its very definition, the documentary holds the advantages of keenly observing the present,

critically analyzing the past, and reflectively pondering the future. Thus the documentary becomes not solely a recorder of the process of change associated with the development or the re-construction of national identity, but it is also an active participant that shapes that very process. What the documentary offers to a nation in transition is, most of all, a mirror held up to itself, in which facts about the past or the present can be revealed, analyzed, discussed, and, in the end, put to rest. For example, for a country with a traumatic past, such as war, terror, or tyranny, understanding and accepting its own past may be the only honest way for a nation to move forward, with the awareness of its history and an understanding of what defines its identity in the present. In the case of Romania, the documentary film can be analyzed as a symptom of social life, which progressed alongside the changes of regimes, from the instauration of communism in 1947, to its overthrow in 1989, and the transition to democracy period that followed.

Since its inception, the Romanian documentary has been used as a frame in which events or places out of the ordinary were brought closer, made familiar to the large public; through the 1920s and 1930s Romanian documentary films were focused on immortalizing peasants' life and customs, nature, and special activities in the life of the Romanian royal family. With the instauration of totalitarian regimes, the documentary is attributed increasingly more propagandistic roles; King Carol II can be noted for being the first Romanian ruler to use film for recording and redistributing images that laid the base of his cult of personality – scout-like organizations for the Romanian youth, large manifestations of dance, song, and military parades were all encouraged by Carol II in the hopes of manipulating the population into blind submission and total devotion towards

their king. Ironically, the same imagery and techniques of manipulation would be later recycled under communist direction.

Laurentiu Damian, an accomplished Romanian documentary filmmaker and theorist whose career spans from the 1980s until the present, maintains that “the documentary emerged out of ‘the news journal’s jacket’ and out of the propaganda’s need to impose its achievements and to shape consciousness through film” (Damian, p. 19). The ‘journals’ were, in the 1950s, short montages screened prior to feature films in cinemas, with the aim of informing and manipulating the population. Their role was later taken on by the television journals (after the inauguration of the Romanian national television in 1956); however, Damian argues that the documentary as a genre in Romania owes its existence to those initial reality bits on film.

Given that, historically speaking, the documentary film in Romania has been inseparably intertwined with interests of propaganda, it can also be said that the documentary genre in Romania owes, at least partially, its existence to the regimes’ need to manipulate the masses, to shape their consciousness anew, in order to gain them on the side of the ruling ideology. The communist party in particular found film a useful tool in disseminating its ideology amongst the Romanian population. Documentary film, along with the other tools of propaganda – newspapers, television, radio, was used strategically to pick apart and forcefully reconstruct Romanian identity, according to the communist last which could only fit the ‘New Man’, ‘the founder of socialism’, ‘the hope for Romania’s bright future’. The metaphor is especially appropriate given that the country’s dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, was by profession a shoemaker, prior to becoming ‘the Romanian nation’s most beloved son’ (*cel mai iubit fiu al poporului roman*), ‘the great

leader' (*marele conducator*), as he was usually addressed by the media and public officials (Ceausescu's wife, Elena, was also included in the cult of personality, being repeatedly lauded for made-up achievements, and given such agnomens as 'mother of the nation', 'world-wide recognized scholar'). 'Comrade Ceausescu, general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, president of the Romanian Socialist republic, supreme commander of the armed forces' (as went his official title) had the ambition of implementing a 'unique' vision, refined to perfection during his 24 years in power (1965 to 1989): the Romanian people as one large, hard-working family, where everybody shared equally in the privileges of free higher education, minimal unemployment rates, and great technological advancement. The utopian image of the 'New Man' was promoted rigorously through the state-controlled television station, radio, and newspapers – the media hid as best they could the truth about property confiscation, forced labour camps, and poor economy. The realities of food rations, electrical power and gas unavailability, impossibility to travel or to express oneself freely were impossible to hide, as people lived them every day.

Party officials got to work by using the media to present the Romanian peasant and communist worker as leading a glorious existence. These categories, regarded as founders of the socialist society, were epitomized through documentary-like montages describing their active, meaningful lives, dedicated to sustaining a communist Romania. Films were also made with the goal of instigating nationalistic pride by placing great emphasis on the most notable Romanian historical events. At its discretion, the communist nomenclature erased or simply took out of context historical facts from school books, while stories of past glorious Romanian rulers or of revolutionary movements that

could somehow be related to the communist ideology were intensely marketed to the large public through grandiose cinematographic adaptations. Period feature-length films coming out of the 70's Romanian studios, such as *The True Life of Dracula* (1979), *Michael the Brave* (1971), *The Independence War* (1977), *Stephen the Great* (1974), were using large numbers of extras and imposing landscapes to inspire patriotism in the viewer. Although true to some historical aspects of the real characters, most of the movies lacked aesthetic value and dramatic content, as their main purpose was merely to serve as a propagandistic tool, diverting attention from the atrocities of the communist era, and building up Ceausescu's image by association with other recognizable Romanian leaders. In her essay dealing with the phenomenology of horror in Romanian cinema, Christina Stojanova claims that "the emergence of a number of nationalist epics in the 1960s and 1970s could be explained primarily with reference to Ceausescu's need to consolidate his position vis-à-vis powerful Party rivals, but also with respect to his megalomaniac ambitions to see himself as part of the indigenous monarchic succession" (p. 227).

The dictator's ambition expanded to all media, which were tightly controlled by party officials, and dedicated to the consolidation of Ceausescu's cult of personality. Every single piece of information that was to reach the large public, regardless of its medium, had to pass first through the hands of the communist censors, known simply to Romanians as '*cenzura*' ('the censorship'). The censorship expanded from being simply an organ of party control, to being a mental state that governed the actions of all individuals. In the film and television industry, the censorship can be identified even through a quick overview of production titles that received approval for broadcast. Most

of the TV news journals were a daily report on the presidential activities and work visits, while documentary films mandatorily celebrated the 'beautiful life' of the working class. Unavoidably, there were the pieces focused on the dictator and his wife: *Holiday in the Mountains* ('Vacanta la munte'), 1968, one of the gifts "lavishly packaged in special leather-bound boxes" offered by the state-controlled *Sahia Studio* to the presidential couple (Hadeln, p. 114); *We Will Win* ('Invingem'), 1977, intended to portray Ceausescu as a courageous, devoted, selfless leader who intervened immediately after the devastating earthquake of 1977; *Homage Paid by the Nation to its Beloved Leader* ('Omagiul tarii conducatorului iubit'), 1988, a documentary produced on the occasion of Ceausescu's seventieth anniversary.

Movies such as these were screened for the public in order to attest most notable communist accomplishments: *My Contemporary* ('Contemporanul meu'), 1962, a film "intended for the edification of the masses, shows several turners in a factory participating in a race to finish their work first" (Hadeln, p. 112); *4000 Steps to the Sky* ('400 de trepte spre cer'), 1963, "was supposed to be just another in the long line of films about the working class" (Hadeln, p. 113); *The Eternally Feminine* ('Eternul feminin'), 1969, a film promoted as a homage to the working woman; *And We Will Go by Boat* ('Si ne-om plimba cu barca'), 1976, a film about the displacement of an entire village in order to make room for a hydro-electrical power station, carefully edited, as to present the process as a great achievement of modern engineering, and not a detriment to the environment and the community.

There were of course directors who tried to slip between the stiff fingers of the censors, and to convey an alternative, more subversive vision to the Romanian public.

Some of these movies made it through onto the screen, such as: *The 'D' Case* ('Cazul D'), 1966, a veritable social enquiry (cinéma-vérité style) about an old man and his long-lost adoptive daughter, a movie that enjoyed a greater degree of liberty than what directors faced after the crack-down of 1968; and *The Suspects* ('Suspectii'), 1968, a film officially about the safety at work, but in fact depicting the scandalous conditions of the plan-accomplishment driven workers (Hadeln, p. 113-114).

A very important example is *Water Like a Black Buffalo* ('Apa ca un bivol negru'), 1970, a collaboration involving multiple young directors who immortalized the catastrophic realities brought about by a major flood. The censorship found it too heartfelt and insisted upon adding at the beginning a montage of images showing Ceausescu as the problem solver who provides housing options for the flood victims (Hadeln, p. 115). This last minute, mandatory fix-up made the film release-able to the public, while sewing the scarlet letter of propaganda to a project that had emerged out of the free spirit and idealism of a handful of young directors.

When analyzing the impact that *Water Like a Black Buffalo* had at its time, Laurentiu Damian acknowledges that its artistic concepts reverberated into succeeding feature film productions. Furthermore, Damian sees this documentary as having been a potential turning point, an incipient *manifesto* put together by a cohort of directors which, unfortunately, failed to become a well-defined, self-aware *generation* (Damian, p. 46). The reproach, coming from a director who saw his movies banned by communist officials (*Maria Tanase*, 1986; *Zero level*, 1988), can be interpreted as more than an artistic criticism. It is not simply the failure to continue applying novel techniques and ideas into future projects, but it is the failure to resist the stamp of communist censorship, a failure

to speak out and present to the world the truth about events much more horrific than that 1970 flood. The 'failure' is a label that applies not only to film and documentary directors, but also to all intellectuals of the communist era, from journalists, to writers, to artists, to professors.

In his study on Romania's situation under Ceausescu, Julian Hale also notes the intellectuals' failure to achieve a "creative renaissance", relating it to Romanians' "tendency to obey meekly and lie low until the trouble is over" instead of opposing an oppressive system (Hale, p. 132). This nation-wide willingness to surrender in the hands of fate has been traced by scholars such as French historian Jules Michelet, and Romanian writer Lucian Blaga, to the Romanian myth of *Miorita*. *Miorita* is a ballad that has been circulated in over 1500 variants, especially amongst communities of shepherds. It is the story of a young shepherd, leading his sheep through the pastures along with two companions who eventually decide to kill him and take over his flock. A magical ewe (*miorita*), endowed with human speech, tells the shepherd about the plot; however the young man does not take action against the criminals, and chooses to dream of a mystical marriage ceremony instead. The second chapter shall expand upon the symbolism associated with this myth within the Romanian culture, and the way it is interpreted by an episode of the documentary series *Memorial of Pain*. It is, however, necessary to linger a little further on the specifics of a Romanian society under the communist regime, in order to understand the difficulty of choosing dissidence over compliance.

Communist Romania experienced for over forty years a type of enclosed society that can be compared to Benedict Anderson's accounts of the western civilization prior the eighteenth century. Medieval people, Anderson argues, did not have a sense of the

present time as a moment in the progress from past to future, but felt that they lived the end of times – based on the Church’s teachings that the sacrifice of Christ is not merely a historical event, but that it takes place continuously. Just as people in the fourteenth up to the seventeenth century were governed by a clerical mentality promulgated through the esoteric use of Latin, so the Romanian nation, from 1947 to 1989, was ruled by an ideology enforced through the use of the “wooden language” (*‘limbaj de lemn’*), a type of Orwellian newspeak, and through the instillation of terror, as Andrei Plesu notes when describing the characteristics of the propagandistic language in Romania: “the wooden language is a type of language out of which the speaker is absent. Since both the message and its formula are completely predictable, the ‘transmitter’ becomes nothing more than a pass-way, an acephalous instrument, that does not participate in what is being transmitted” (Plesu, p. 324). The result of this falling out of grace of the “word” is a society where “life becomes stereotypical, the microphone devours the orator, the stage swallows up its actors” (Plesu, p. 324); it is a place where people are trapped, without the possibility of thinking, communicating, or creating. In this view, the wooden language is more than “the linguistic product of totalitarian ideologies”: it is a materialized curse that voids human spirituality of all its values (Plesu, p. 325).

The demythologization of language, and of the society as a whole, placed the individual in an arid desert, void of concepts or ideals that carry higher meaning, a place very similar to Jean Baudrillard’s “realm of the simulacra”. The fantastic destruction of political variety, cultural and religious artefacts and values, peasants’ establishments, ethnic minorities, freedom of speech, lead to a collapse of the entire society, a “fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other ... an implosion of

meaning”, as Baudrillard puts it when describing the invasion of the real by the hyperreal (Baudrillard, p. 31). It is, perhaps, understandable, then, why so many intellectuals chose to continue holding up the same happy masks, and to obey the requirements of their political censors. On the other hand, many movie makers, including documentary directors, chose to divert their attention to more easily approachable subjects, such as nature – a notable case being Ion Bostan, who spent most of his life in the Danube Delta, and received critical acclaim through such films as *Under the Eagle’s Wing* (‘Sub aripa vulturului’), 1964, *In the World of Wild Ducks* (‘In lumea ratelor salbatice’), 1977, and *Impressions from the Delta* (‘Impresii din Delta’), 1978. These types of titles had little trouble getting past the communist censors, which always encouraged the portrayal of the great national natural resources, alongside the well-established group close-up of workers ready to explore those resources for the greater good of the nation.

The typifying of social classes, individuals, and hierarchies is a phenomenon that evolved as part of the “wooden language” used within the mechanism of Romanian communist propaganda. As exemplified by the documentaries listed in the beginning of this chapter, Romanian citizens were taught to fit into particular categories, be it “the workers”, “the peasants”, “the party member”, “the nation’s pioneers” (‘pionierii’), “the nation’s hawks” (‘soimii patriei’), or “the patriotic mother” (‘mama eroina’). This complex and well organized brain washing process was imposed onto the nation not only through television or cinema, but also through the school system, party meetings and rallies. Indoctrination started at the earliest age, through a program initiated by Ceausescu himself – “The Nation’s Hawks” (‘Soimii patriei’) – an organization that stands without counterpart in all of the communist countries of the Eastern Block: all children aged 4 to

7 were automatically part of this organization which imposed an uniform, had its own flag and coat of arms, and had as its official goal to educate children about communist, patriotic and social revolution ideology. Public manifestations were encouraged in order to maintain solidarity amongst members of the Romanian socialist society; military parades, national music festivals, stadium mass demonstrations (including perfectly coordinated choreographies, cheer-leaders style, which used tens of individuals to construct visually the name of the dictator, or even his portrait). Especially when seen on screen, in a realistic, documentary-like depiction, these images had the power to enchant individuals. The viewers, those who did not get to directly participate in the mass celebrations, felt represented at the event through those delegates that they were able to see on screen. Those present at the communist military parade, or demonstration, become visual archetypes representing each and every one of the people watching them at home (a process described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that such portrayals through film, were almost never individual, but collective, encouraging the communion within the same mentality, evoking the state of belonging to a fabled equalitarian society. It is interesting to oppose this specific purpose-driven approach to a Canadian example – that of *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-railway Switchman*, a documentary directed in 1953 by Roman Kroitor. The documentary idea had started off as part of an anti-Communist series during the Cold War, aimed to help define Canadian national identity, a series which (ironically) was designed to include “‘types’ like Maritime Coal Miner, Montreal French Businessman, Ottawa Civil Servant, and Chalk River Atomic Scientist” (Hancox, p. 18).

Polish-born Tomkowicz was selected to represent the category titled “New Canadian (Winnipeg)”, a category ever growing, ever a minority.

What was possible in 1950’s Canada would not have been an option for Romania of the sixties, seventies and eighties, as national minorities (gypsies, Hungarians, Jews, Armenians) were absent from the mainstream discourses. Furthermore, an individual portrayal of a worker who barely gets by while being over worked would have been a too realistic, never to be screened documentary. The Romanian communist leaders knew that they had to keep the citizens subdued by providing them with images they could identify with, characters they could recognize due to common traits that were shared by all part-takers in the communist hierarchy. In discovering those commonalities, each Romanian viewer, (as if a close relative of Adorno’s spectator mesmerized by the culture industry), became appeased at the thought of belonging to a greater system, and thus not being an outcast, for “to be an outsider is the greatest guilt” that can be attributed to the individual by the system (Horkheimer & Adorno, p. 121).

If within the culture industry as described by Adorno, the hypnosis of images can be eluded and a subversive existence within it can be imagined, things are far different within the communist system. Here the hypnosis is not only unavoidable, but it is a sine qua non for existence; for to be deemed an outsider within the communist system meant not just living with psychological guilt, but physical extermination altogether. Under these circumstances, it becomes easier to understand why an entire nation chose the alternative, even when that included loss of civil rights, freedom of expression, and of personal and national identity.

The re-shaping of Romanian national identity, providing citizens with a new role to play within the great scheme of Romania's communist future, went far beyond the process of dissipating propagandistic messages, and invaded individuals' private lives. The process conferred meaning and value to things that were in *themselves* void and meaningless; it eradicated traditional beliefs, customs, and intellectual treasury, in order to reuse and parade their vacant *coquillage*. Romanian citizens, having been stripped off their most basic rights, and thus reduced to a sub-human state, were subsequently exposed to a complex process of erasure of national historical background, which uprooted the nation's connection to its own past and made it possible for the rewriting of past and present history. The icon of Romania's ancestry now void, the Communist party steps in to take on the role of parent (Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu are often depicted as the mother and father of the nation), which also allows it to "give voice" to its 'children'. On the white canvas that had become the Romanian national conscience, Ceausescu and his foot soldiers began applying the strokes that defined the 'New Man'.

The process of moulding Romania's national consciousness followed the pattern described by Alan Blum in his essay "Voice and its appropriation": children learn by appropriating the "voices" of their parents, that is, they start off being "voiceless" (without possessing a meaningful understanding of the world) and they are *given* voice by their parents in an exchange that lies at the heart of the construction of the *self* (Blum, 2001, p. 118). Blum considers that voice appropriation can be understood as a natural process that allows individuals to arrive at a better understanding of their identity. The Romanian citizens, under the threat of communist oppression, posed as children willing to mouth along whatever their parents asked them – occasionally referring to the

gratification of secretly confessing their disapproval. Thus, for over four decades, the national identity that was shaped *for* Romania was that built in the chambers of communist thought. All the products coming out of Romania's cultural industry, between 1967 and 1989, including books, journals, magazines, films, documentaries, were all mere dummies mouthing out the same typological constructs, generated by authors who were trapped like everyone else, and unable to speak up against the master ventriloquist.

Subversive messages occasionally made their way to the ears of the general public, usually due to the masterful utilization of the 'wooden language', which had slowly become a code recognizable by all, and thus lending itself to the creation of subliminal messages. As citizens began to familiarize themselves with this language, it became easier to read between the lines, and to interpret the intentions of the communicator, or hidden truths behind their messages.

According to Alan Blum, giving and taking voice is a reciprocal process, much like the art of ventriloquism, where on the one hand the ventriloquist provides the dummy with a voice, while on the other hand the dummy itself provides a medium for the ventriloquist to express himself. The most apparent limitation here is the total control of the ventriloquist over the dummy; however, "there is a touch of the dummy in any ventriloquist just as there is a touch of the ventriloquist in any dummy" (Blum, 2001, p. 119). Blum points out that the dummy can exercise such an influence over the voice that is being externalized through it that the dummy can be said to gain control over that voice, and thus become a ventriloquist in its turn. There have been indeed instances (such as Lucian Pintilie's *Re-enactment*, 'Reconstituirea', 1968) where subtle subversive

messages have been passed on from intellectuals, past the censorship, towards the Romanian public.

Blum adds another dimension to the process of voice appropriation, arguing that the ventriloquist himself can be possessed by a higher voice, that of the art of ventriloquism, which will guide his actions, thus rendering the ventriloquist into a puppet as well. The obsession with implementing the ideals of socialism in the consciousness of Romanian citizens through propaganda, as well as the uncontrollable urge to receive continuous adulation from the masses, were two forces that inhabited Ceausescu's persona and turned him into a puppet of his own creed. By the end of his rule, Ceausescu had become blinded by ideology and refused to see the realities of a country that was descending into chaos; his failure expanded rendering him incapable of observing that his most trusted followers slowly distanced themselves – which eventually led to the coup d'état of 1989.

This was the state of things during Ceausescu's era, not only for those on the cultural scene, but for almost all Romanians. If in Benedict Anderson's accounts, the Church placed all believers into a simultaneous, divine dimension of time where the Apocalypse was imminent, then the Romanian Communist party stripped citizens of the most basic human rights, and made them fear the punishment of the ominous militia that infiltrated the microcosm of Romanian life.

A gripping portrayal of the results arising from dehumanization is Lucian Pintilie's *Re-enactment* ('Reconstituirea'), 1968, a realist movie within a movie, banned immediately after its first couple screenings in Bucharest cinemas. Pintilie's movie tells the story of two youngsters who are forced by militia officials to re-enact the fight they

had the previous day, this time in front of the camera. The purpose is to portray the two boys as the bad sheep, hoodlums who derailed from the socialist path, and ended up committing petty crimes, thus ruining their lives; once filmed, the re-enactment would be screened in front of party members for “educational purposes” (a common practice during the communist era in Romania). The tragedy is that during the filming, the two boys end up taking things too seriously, which leads to the dramatic death of the main character, Vuica. His death carries great symbolism, as it comes after repeated requests from the director for ‘more realism’ in the exchanges between the two boys, who were not taking the filming seriously. After countless takes of a fake punch and fall, Vuica instigates his friend to hit him for real, and receives more than he asked for, as he injures his head as he falls to the ground. Although he is obviously hurt and bleeding, Vuica dies with a smile on his face, rhetorically asking his friend: “why did you hit me, yo? Why did you hit me?”

Death separates the two friends, Vuica leaving behind a heartbreaking question to shatter the very foundations of friendship and trust, while, in fact, the director was the one responsible for causing the tragedy. The ‘director’ of the staged re-enactment, himself a communist official with ambitions of cinematographer, abused his power by continuously ordering the boys around, demanding more than they could provide – and more than it had actually happened, thus demonstrating a feeling of entitlement to construct peoples’ lives as he saw fit. The communist official did more than just turn them against each other and direct them as if puppets, he actually strategically submitted the two friends to a process of dehumanization.

One of the measures taken to ensure that the youngsters do not try to escape was to retain their ID cards, without which nothing was possible in a communist country, not even purchasing food. Vuica is the one that points out to his friend that by having retained their ID cards, the communist official had reduced them to a state of animals. Vuica jokingly asks his friend what the difference is between monkeys and humans, and also provides a satirical answer: “monkeys do not have ID cards”, thus spelling out for the viewer that party officials had the power to confer or withhold the status of being human. The theme of the under-human, an individual robbed of identity, free-will, and agency, will be further analyzed in connection with *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, a documentary produced in 2004 that deals with another forced re-enactment of an unexplainable bank robbery during the communist era in Romania.

It is now perhaps easier to comprehend the state of entrapment in which Romanian citizens were placed – an experience that induced feelings of panic generated by the lack of power to influence one’s environment. Alan Blum, in his essay *Panic and Fear: On the Phenomenology of Desperation*, associates the panicked individual with an actor, or a dummy that is conscious of itself, but also of the overpowering agency that is in control of his/her being (Blum, 1996, p. 678). When faced with the choice between survival and non-being, the *self* does not have the luxury of sitting on the fence, and has to come up with a speedy answer. This experience acts as a demoralizing factor that “requires a radical redefinition of the self” (Blum, 1996, p. 680), a self that is trapped in two ways: firstly by the particular emergency situation, and secondly by the impossibility for reflexive rational thinking. The threat that the individual envisages in the future is what looms over his/her decisions, and the only solution to escaping it is “a resurrection

of will” (Blum, 1996, p. 688), a solid grasp onto a solid set of beliefs which can guarantee a rooting of the self into the past and the possibility to come towards the self by arching out into the future. Unfortunately for the Romanian people, this escape and possibility of officially re-defining itself was out of reach all throughout the communist period, given that the national values had been counterfeited, and the link to the past almost completely severed at the roots.

The only available links that helped maintain Romanian traditions and kept Romanians connected to their ancestors’ values, as well as to each other, were religious and superstitious beliefs, as well as an underground culture maintained by circulating jokes that poked fun at the dictator, watching over-the-air TV stations from neighbouring countries (Bulgarian in the south, Hungarian and Yugoslav in the north and west, Romanian-populated, albeit official Russian-speaking Moldavia in the east), tuning in to Romanian radio Free Europe which was broadcasting from abroad (Tismaneanu, 1999, p. 33), or by becoming versed in writing and reading between the lines.

With the overthrow of communism in 1989, and the transition towards a democratic society, Romanian citizens needed to narrate experiences of a traumatic past, to deal with animosities, bring them up in public display, and conversely, leave other uncomfortable truths untold. The documentary film allowed for the presentation of never-before heard stories, hidden thus far under the golden curtain of communist glory, while also subconsciously complying with the communal shame and leaving aside some of the more sensitive subjects. The task was not an easy one, and, as the previously state-owned Sahia Studio went bankrupt, it seemed that the project of recovering a nation’s lost memories would be postponed indefinitely. It was a television producer, a woman –

Lucia Hossu-Longin, who stood up to the challenge, and in 1991 started the filming of *Memorial of Pain*, a series of documentaries grouped under the motto “a history never taught in school”. Lucia Hossu-Longin dedicates over 120 episodes to the re-telling of stories of resistance carried out by Romanian dissidents from within and outside the country, during the communist regime.

The process of re-telling is a long-awaited and much needed exercise for a nation that had lost connection and understanding of its own past. It is also a process of re-visualizing and providing proper context to traumatic images of the 1989 revolution (as perceived by the Romanian citizens – as opposed to a coup d'état, as it was later labelled) and the subsequent trial and execution of Ceausescu and his wife. A set of images surrounding the events of 1989 that were broadcasted endlessly: the random gunfire presumably by terrorists in the street; the disoriented masses; a communist dictator lost for words; the crowd chanting louder and louder against communism; a helicopter flight; Ceausescus' dishevelled appearance in front of an anonymous ad-hoc court; the cold-blooded military execution of what looked like a defenceless old couple.

The live airing of the revolution on national television, taken over by ‘revolutionaries’, was a moment for Romanians to come together on a virtual level, glued to their TV sets and radios, amazed and afraid at finally being given a massive dose of reality, after decades of fictitious news journals. The overwhelming flow of events, broadcasted across the country, was very similar to other revolutions broadcasted live, such as footage that was aired during the fall of the Berlin Wall. David Culbert, when analyzing the coverage provided by American broadcasters, noticed that the images selected and the way in which they were presented to the American public was quite

different from what German citizens would have expected or were able to see on German television. For the American news, only images carefully selected by film editors and producers made it to air, thus the end result being manipulated according to the mentalities of the capitalist westerner, happy to see the destruction of a socialist system. Although selection from the multitude of images available, and editing in order to make the segment make sense to viewers in America, are necessary parts of the process, Culbert argues that this process “focuses – but also restricts – memory” (Culbert, p. 231). The producer points out the viewer to look at specific images, thus making them understandable, but also, by not presenting the rest, restricts the image that the American viewer could have constructed in their mind in regards to the fall of the Berlin wall.

In comparison, the broadcasting of the Romanian revolution took place mostly without intensive producers’ involvement, as many segments were aired live, without possibility to edit. As a result, Romanian viewers had to find a way to deal on their own with the gruesomeness of the images aired on national television. The shock was far too big to digest overnight, as many Romanians later manifested disapproval of the way in which the Ceausescus were exterminated. The act of revisiting the communist past and recounting it through documentary film can be interpreted as a step in the act of forgiving oneself as a nation for having indirectly and symbolically killed Ceausescu. Whether focusing on Ceausescu’s persona or simply on stories that do not reference him directly, all the documentaries about the communist era in Romania have Ceausescu as an indirect character, lurking in the background, as the mastermind that generated many of the stories to be told through the camera of a documentary film maker. Recounting over and over stories of hardship and persecution suffered by people during the communist regime

helps to provide justification for the dictator's execution, and to re-focus Romanians' attention from the unfairness of Ceausescu's dismissal, towards experiences shared by all citizens. Through this process, Romanians not only gain a cleaner conscience – being more aware of the crimes attributed to Ceausescu, but also get the chance to relate to their co-nationals who all went through the same difficult times, and now by recounting them can finally distance themselves from them and move forward as a nation.

On the other hand, the multitude of heart-wrenching stories turned some viewers off, especially when the stories were presented in an overly dramatic way – a style commonly embraced by Lucia Hossu-Longin in her cinematic treatment of the *Memorial of Pain* series. It is a situation similar to the one described by Mirca Madianou in her 2005 study of Greek media and their role in shaping Greek national identity. Some of Madianou's interviewed subjects expressed their disappointment with the Greek news, claiming that the news are "no longer watchable" (Madianou, p. 60). In the audience's eyes, public channels were perceived as producers of primitive newscasts (thus not able to satisfy the informational needs of a modern society), while private channels were seen as hunters of sensational news (thus distancing and alienating their viewers).

The parallel to Romanian documentaries helps to establish two different categories of documentary film making styles: that represented by Lucia Hossu-Longin, who worked under the auspices of the Romanian National Television, and thus inherited part of the old-school stylistics and mentality, while on the other side lay directors such as Alexandru Solomon (director of *The Great Communist Bank Robbery* and part of the Romanian New Wave in cinema), who applies new, and arguably westernized cinematographic and journalistic treatments to his documentaries. While Hossu-Longin's

aim is to record as soon as possible testimonies from people, before they might pass away and leave their stories untold, or before their stories were forgotten, Solomon's focus exceeds that of simply collecting facts, and centres on presenting them in an appealing way that hooks in the audience.

Mirca Madianou was noticing that the lack of choice within national media made Greek people turn towards non-national media, such as CNN or BBC, especially during a time of war, when the conflicts involving Greece were making headlines around the world. Similarly, throughout the 1990s, before the generation of young directors made its presence felt, Romanian viewers who wanted an alternative to the style presented by news or documentary pieces presented by the national broadcaster, would turn to foreign media for news journals that were in accordance with their expectations. However, the level of representation within foreign media was rather low for Romanian news, as once the Revolution and turmoil associated with it passed, very few events were considered important enough to make it to the news cast abroad. A more detailed analysis of Romanian image in the foreign media is to be presented within the third chapter.

As the new millennium swung in, more documentaries were produced about Romania, both by Romanian nationals, as well as foreign producers. The difference in approach between the two is interesting to note, as the films produced by (or for) foreigners are usually centred on post-communist issues, whereas the interest of Romanian producers continued to be on the communist era. The Romanian public, although not encouraging too much the local production, also manifested dissatisfaction with the foreign view on Romania, usually labelling 'too critical' the foreigners' approach on stories about ethnic hatred (Reka Kincses' *The Balkan Champion*, 2006),

about the fate of Romanians of Roma ethnicity (Gillian Kovanic's *Suspino: A Cry for Roma*, 2003), or about things too plain to make it to the big screen, such as a village of women knitting socks (*Vilalge of Socks*, 2006, by Klaudia Begic and Ileana Stanculescu).

The differences in style and approach that characterize Romanian-made documentaries, such as *Memorial of Pain* and *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, shall be the focus of the following two chapters.

Chapter 2: *Memorial of Pain: Re-collecting Trauma Narratives and Rebuilding National Memory*

As of January 1990, Romania slowly entered a state of transition from the communist regime to a more democratic society. The “Western World” (democratic European states, along with the USA) was anxiously awaiting a rapid adaptation to its own system of values, encouraging Romania in its efforts to distance itself from the Russian sphere of influence. Foreign support came in various shapes, from political recognition of the newly formed governing coalition, to convoys delivering food supplies and clothes to rural areas. One of the most relevant types of support was assistance for the Romanian media field. Organizations such as the Soros Foundation for Romania, along with the Council of Europe, started implementing programs meant to provide Romania with modern media equipment, as well as with workshops offering training for up and coming journalists and media managers. The mentality of the westerner, forged at the flare of colonialism and capitalism, was only holding its own: there could be no progress without the help of mass-produced tools and pre-established consumerist schemata; the old communist ways had to go, and with them the outdated technologies. Replacing old printing equipment, video cameras, recording devices, antennae, etc, with new ones, was a necessary technological update, but it also bore symbolical meaning: it represented the first step from a Romanian collectivist society – where anything went, everything was as good as new for decades, and nothing ever got renewed, towards the shiny world of consumerism – where everything has to be in mint condition, frequently updated, always new, never reused.

The irony of the role played by the West in Romania's shift towards democracy is that most of the material goods that arrived into the country during the 1990s as foreign aid were, of course, second-hand goods. After more than four decades of having waited for the Americans (during the second World War there was a nation-wide expectation that the US army would arrive and force the Russians to withdraw their troops from Romania – a hope for outside intervention that continued to shine dimly for dissidents throughout the dictatorship period), Romanians were finally receiving the long yearned-for attention. It mattered little that the aid was comprised of hand-me-downs that fell from the table of their distant, much admired relatives from the democratic world. In the media, a large offering of foreign television channels available through thriving cable provider companies quickly satisfied the hunger for anything made in Europe or the US. After such a long draught of information availability, and a continued lack of national radio and television broadcaster variety (TVR remained the sole TV broadcaster up until 1995, when the market saw the first private national television channel – ProTV), Romanians flocked to have cable installed in their homes, and finally became branched to the outside world.

This infatuation with the West has deep historical roots, which go far beyond the expectations developed during World War II, and arch back in time towards the Romanian “illuminist movement” at the end of the eighteenth century. The Romanian provinces at the time experienced a late “illuminism”, as described by George Calinescu – esteemed Romanian literary historian, who notes the great merits of the scholars from the Transylvanian School (*Scoala Ardeleana*), from 1781 to 1820. The cultural movement was defined by a nationalistic approach, aimed to demonstrate with as much

historical proof as possible that the Romanian people was a direct descendent of the Roman population that conquered Dacia (more or less the territory of today's Romania) at the beginning of the second century AD. Scientific arguments brought forth in this regard would prove the existence and persistence of the Romanian people on this territory, thus refuting claims of other nations over the land. Theories brought forth by intellectuals of the Transylvanian School have been an important catalyst in the formation of a solid national identity, which forged the way for the unification of the three Romanian provinces (Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia). The "late Romanian classics", as Calinescu refers to them, concerned with the origins of the Romanian people and language, initiated the first attempts "to prove, through any means, that the majority of the words are Latin based, and to discard the leftovers from the barbarian languages, meaning Slavonic influences" (Calinescu, p. 69). The intellectuals of that period, the first Romanians to ever study and publish abroad, had as their motto the Latin expression "ex Occidente lux" (out of the west we receive our light), which emphasized the desire to affiliate the nation with the Western culture, and implied the tacit rejection of influences from the East.

'Fast forward' to 1990: the West was, once more, prompt to offer guidance and support on a profound symbolical level – inspiration for the re-writing of the Constitution, which was to encompass the right to freedom of speech. The new statement of fundamental laws, adopted in 1991, and further revised in 2003, had at its base previous Romanian Constitutions - those of 1866 and 1923. These were in turn inspired by European legislative documents, the Belgian Constitution of 1831, and the Napoleonic Code of 1804 (according to jurist and author Bocsan Mircea, the existent Romanian

Constitution bears more resemblance to the Napoleonic Code than the French Code itself [Bocsan, 2004]). The Communist Constitution of 1948 was thus abolished, and Romania found itself catapulted into the first row of developing, democratic countries. After more than four decades where the Constitution was simply for show, and not for protecting citizens' basic rights, Romania was expected to perform a historical acrobatic move with the grace of its famous gymnasts: it was a back somersault, jumping over the communist experience, getting inspiration from the short period of inter-war democracy (1922-1938), and sticking a perfect landing in the twenty-first century. The faultfinding jury, composed of the great western powers, was ready to dock points for any technical mistake, expecting Romania to swiftly cover up the gap that had separated it from the rest of Europe since 1947, to quickly forget its communist past in order to assimilate the democratic and capitalist values.

There are multiple analogies with past instances where Romania has tried to integrate itself into a western civilization it already felt part of. During the 1990s Romania was undergoing a transition similar to that experienced during the mid nineteenth century: as of 1848, along with the novel ideas spread by the nationalistic revolutionary movement, there came the desire to appropriate institutions and standards from the Occident. The three Romanian provinces, each under a different protectorate at the time (Transylvania and Bucovina as parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Wallachia as part of the Ottoman Empire, and Moldavia under Russian protectorate), were striving towards independence and recognition from the western world, thus willing to adopt any values that would deem them worthy of such recognition. Titu Maiorescu, influential Romanian literary critic and politician in the second half of the nineteenth century, points

out that in this blind struggle to imitate the Western world, the Romanian society ended up adopting “forms without substance”, thus placing itself in a situation where underneath the cloak of modernity lay a shallow structure lacking true content. Maiorescu was writing in 1868:

Before we had a political party, which would require a medium of expression, and a public interested in the sciences, which would require its literature, we created political journals and literary magazines, thus falsifying and despising journalism (...) Before we had a culture outside of schools, we created Romanian athenaeums and cultural associations, and we despised the spirit of literary societies. Before we had even a shade of original scientific activity, we created the Romanian Academic Society, with philological, historical-archaeological, natural sciences departments, and we falsified the idea of an Academy. (Maiorescu, para. 23)

The discontent manifested through Maiorescu's writings is not towards the institutions themselves, but towards the thoughtless mimicry that defined their genesis. Although he supported progress, Maiorescu argued that it needed to be gradual, and with a full awareness of the social hierarchy in existence (the large majority of people were peasants, whose interests and concerns were not recognized within the process of modernization).

A mirror situation encounters Romania during the last decade of the twentieth century. The forced changes that occurred in all areas of social life completely overlooked the needs of a preponderant social segment that had gotten used to being called “the working class”. These are, if one were to draw their genealogical tree, the grandchildren of Maiorescu's ‘only real social class’ of the late 1800s – the peasants. The same category that once got by-passed within a national modernization process, would later on, during the communist regime, mandatorily get displaced from the countryside to the city, and requested to assume the role of the proletariat. Thus, in 1990, the largest component of Romanian society was entering democracy with a very vague, if any, sense

of its own identity. Add to this corrosive ignorance the previously noted desire to resemble in as many possible ways the western world – two elements which stand at the base of reconstructing the post-communist Romanian identity.

In relation to a similar process observed in colonial spaces, Homi Bhabha described the aspects of representing oneself through mimicry as giving birth to a “partial presence” of the subject, a presence that is both incomplete and virtual. Because “mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask” (Bhabha, p. 126), the subject becomes a dead ringer for the identity it tries to emulate, while turning all of its own individual characteristics in exchange for a state of being that is very similar, but not quite *the other*. This is precisely what happened in Romania as soon as Ceausescu was overthrown and the borders were finally open: many people, especially many youngsters, were overjoyed by the liberty to put away their uniforms and party membership cards, to slip into branded t-shirts and jeans, and to declare themselves fans of every conceivable Anglophone music or movie star. With a general sense of disinterest towards traditional cultural values and towards an accurate retelling of history, Romanians were, on a large scale, mesmerized and athirst to *become* westerners. They lacked the ability to recognize that dressing like westerners, listening to the same music and watching the same TV shows and movies brought them closer to being impersonators, and further from being equal partners. Recognition for having achieved a considerable likeness to the ‘West’ came at a slow rate. Romania joined NATO in 2004, and the EU in 2007 – the “safeguard clauses“, appendixes to the EU treaty, bearing witness to the Union’s mistrust for the possibility of complete cultural assimilation.

The irony of partial representation, according to Bhabha, is the fact that the subject imagines and desires *authenticity* through the process of imitating. On a canvas lacking a well-defined historical background, as well as a solid understanding of the new techniques of democratic governance, Romania began constructing a new image of itself that could fit unabashedly in the gallery of illustrious European civilizations. However, since “what emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history” (Bhabha, p. 125), the re-definition of the Romanian national identity within western conventions lacked the substance associated with a people that is conscious of its own past. The gap produced by the communist regime’s cover-ups left the narration about Romanian national identity somewhat hollow, discontinued; thus, after the revolution, one of the factors that was able to provide a bridge between the past and the present was the media.

In particular, documentaries such as the made for television series *Memorial of Pain* have been part of a much needed effort to reconstruct missing parts of the lost national identity. However, given the large involvement of politics in the media, the process of bringing out the truth and presenting it to the public has been scattered with obstacles. Documentary producer Lucia Hossu-Longin declared for a newspaper interview that “under no circumstances was I to denigrate the system, aside for the people who managed it poorly. It was the new stylistics of the wooden language. A few months later, the anticommunism manifested by the characters in *Memorial of Pain* had obviously become a rare oddity amidst the local landscape” (Grosu, para. 8). In the same interview, Hossu-Longin also laments the continuation of communist mentality amongst her journalist colleagues working for the Romanian Television, an institution supposedly

free and independent after the Revolution of 1989, but fraught with corruption and deception during its transition years of the 1990s.

The Romanian media environment in its entirety was an area where implementation of foreign standards was a case of “form without substance”. Involvement from the West, direct or indirect, was, as James Miller points out, a serious task meant to “replace Communist journalism with what they termed ‘fact-based’ or ‘democratic’ journalism” (Miller, p. 44). The intent of this strategy was to implement the objective, detached style of journalism that is the privilege of the ‘free world’, and also the main catalyst in “the emergence of democratic self-governance in Central Europe” (Miller, p. 44). The Soros Foundation for Romania, for example, created in 1990, had as its core goal to “develop programs which can rapidly and efficiently cover the lack of civic initiatives and educational alternatives” (quote from The Soros Foundation website). The statement, although arguably reflecting the realities of 1990s Romania, is, nevertheless, condescending: it reflects the colonialist approach of the “western powers”, which are programmed to assume that a former subject of Russian-inspired communism does not possess the necessary tools to lift itself up to their own standards of civilization. Furthermore, the assumption that democratic institutions, economic standards, or freedom of speech can be easily plastered on to the surface of Romanian society has proved to be flawed.

On the political scale, the switch to democracy did not occur as foreseen in the chambers of the European Union, or the Council of Europe. According to Gheorghe Bratescu, in his article titled ‘A failed plot’, printed by the Romanian-language, American-based magazine *Clipa*, Ion Iliescu managed to grasp the power in December

1989, after having gained permission from Mikhail Gorbachev to install a “communism with a human face” in Romania. Ion Iliescu, previously one of the highest ranking officials in the Romanian Communist Party, afterwards fallen out of grace with Ceausescu, had supposedly plotted a coup d’etat that resulted in the overthrow of Ceausescu in 1989. The opinion is currently shared by many Romanian intellectuals and politicians, including Ion Diaconescu (member of The National Peasants Party since 1936, political detainee from 1947 to 1964, and leader of NPP between 1992 and 2000), who stated in a 2008 interview: “Iliescu did not wish for democracy full heartedly. It was normal; he was coming from a family of old communist tradition.” Diaconescu recalls that during the first election campaign, in May 1990, himself and other liberal politicians, along with the accompanying journalists, had been harassed and chased out of their home ridings. “After the revolution I remember a couple of French journalists asking Iliescu if Romania will start seeing multiple political parties from now on. Iliescu thought about it and said that in fact there can be democracy with a single party. He pondered some more and then accepted the idea to have multiple parties, but some just for show, with the governing party holding 80-90%”, stated Ion Diaconescu in the same interview.

For most of the 1990s, Romanian democracy was merely a mask paraded for the foreigners, as in reality the strings were being pulled by politicians leading the nation by the deeply ingrained, albeit slightly modernized, communist mentality. Needless to say, the media continued to be controlled by the governing politicians; thus, in spite of efforts from abroad, the journalistic deontology still lacked a vertical, dependable backbone. The Open Society Institute states in its 2008 monitoring report of television channels across Europe, that in Romania, both public and private broadcasters are still in the hands of key

political figures. The Romanian Television Society (SRTV) continues “to be at the mercy of Parliament, which can sack their entire management by rejecting its annual report”, and the national television and radio station boards are still elected “on the same old mechanism that keeps both institutions captive to political will” as stated by the European Union Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP, p. 374). On the other hand, the private channels are urged by EUMAP to adopt “a code of ethics guaranteeing journalists’ independence from media owners” and also to “invest in training their journalists to raise the standards of professionalism in news reporting” (EUMAP, p. 376).

These two characteristics of Romanian media remained unchanged as of 1990, and they should be seen in the light of two important factors. First of all, the only journalists that had professional training in the beginning of the 1990s were the ones formed under the Communist regime; adaptation to new styles of journalistic reporting, writing, producing, or announcing, although sincerely pursued, was unavoidably going to take time, or, in some cases, was unattainable. The persistence of this journalistic guild continuum had as an implicit result a continuation of style and mentality, especially within the Romanian Television Society, where the lack of political variety represented on screen has always been an issue. Second of all, given the growing demand for new journalists, with the emergence of public broadcasters, many individuals were accepted into the trade without having the necessary training, or the required background to fulfill such a job. Journalism post-secondary studies were offered by the University of Bucharest as of 1990, and two other universities offered programs as of 1992 and 1993; thus the first cohort of ‘democratically-trained’ journalists would have been that of 1994.

Beside the absence of a new generation of journalists, there lay the lack of interest to promulgate any legislation that would incriminate communist officials, especially during the 11 years of Ion Iliescu's presidency (1989-1996; 2000-2004). It was 10 years after the Revolution of 1989 that the Romanian political system finally allowed for the creation of The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (*Consiliul National pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securitatii*), an organism whose purpose is to make publicly available files created for individuals who were being surveilled by Securitate agents and informants. It took almost 20 years for a response to all the open letters requesting an official denouncement of the communist dictatorship: the Romanian president Traian Basescu, in a special address to the Parliament on December 18, 2006, condemned the Romanian Communist dictatorship as "illegitimate and criminal", a regime that "stumped over the law, and forced citizens to live in lies and terror" (Basescu, para. 1). Basescu concluded his speech with the note that, in the absence of this public condemnation, Romanians would have continued to live with the skeletons of their own past, and that, along with the condemnation, people can finally "build the future of democracy in Romania and a national identity on a clean slate" (Basescu, para. 59).

Documentaries such as *Memorial of Pain* (series started in 1991 - director Lucia Hossu-Longin), and *The Great Communist Bank Robbery* (2004, director Alexandru Solomon) filled a void of information generated by the lack of involvement regarding this issue on the side of Romanian state officials. The *Memorial of Pain* documentary series represents an important collection of testimonies, starting with former political detainees, fighters of the resistance, up to members of the former *Securitate* services. The episode *The Boys from the Mountains* has been selected for analysis because it is representative of

the *Memorial of Pain* series, depicting impressive stories of survival and bringing forth the voices of those who lived through them. Focused on the armed resistance within the mountains of Transylvania, the documentary presents its main characters (Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, Toma Pirau, Silviu Socol, Ioan Chiujea, prof. Pridon) as symbols of a continuity of the traditional Romanian spirit: free-thinking, dignified, willing to die rather than to live with the shackles of oppression. The boys and men who took to the mountains hoping to build a network of anti-communist guerrilla troupes were motivated by noble ideals of liberty and justice, and they become paragons who maintained the flame of authentic Romanian identity, as opposed to the generalized sense of social paralysis that overtook most of the population, resigned in face of the communist regime.

The Boys from the Mountains presents the story of the resistance group that was formed and activated in the Făgăraș Mountains, in central Transylvania, under the leadership of Ioan Gavrilă-Ogoranu, then. The mise-en-scène is especially difficult since only a handful of surviving participants remained; thus, most of the footage is comprised of sit-down interviews, nature and ambiance shots, as well as artistic shots juxtaposed with voice-over segments. The production value and journalistic style of this particular episode are a leitmotif for *Memorial of Pain* in its entirety, as similar restrictive circumstances and editorial choices define all of Hossu-Longin's documentary series.

The documentary's five-minute opening sequence is relevant not only for establishing the key figures and storyline, but also in order to exemplify the structural characteristics specific to the *Memorial of Pain* series. A black and white aerial view of snow-covered mountaintops, accompanied by an audio track comprised of loud wind gusts, overlapping a chorus of men's voices, provide a theatrical backdrop for inter-

cutting a series of archival photographs and documents. The first portrait of the series is, as opposed to the rest, not a still image, but live footage of a pensive elderly man, whose image fades into an old photograph representing a young man. Just as with the subsequent images, he is not identified, and the viewer has to assume that the two images represent the same individual, at opposing points in his life. The viewers will later figure out that this is the main figure of the documentary, his real identity being that of Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, the leader of the resistance in the Făgăraș Mountains.

The archival documents shown on screen as part of the opening collage are cropped so that the names of their respective subjects are not visible. It is easily deducible that these are excerpts from the *Securitate* records of the fighters who took part in the armed resistance; as typical of *Securitate*, they contain pre-typed categories, such as 'Place and date of birth', 'Son of', 'Profession' and 'Current occupation'. Information about each individual is filled in usually by hand, with a recurring word in the 'Current occupation line': "bandit". This word is centered on the screen - it is the label applied to those men in the pictures, a designation that supersedes their actual names, identities, and previous occupations. The way in which Hossu-Longin chose to show these documents within the opening segment is meant to show that, as far as the *Securitate* was concerned, the main characters of this documentary were considered villains, evildoers of the lowest class. It is not relevant to match the portraits to names or to the archival documents; the collage of images is a symbolical representation of a group of individuals who stood for the same ideal, and who endured the same oppression from the side of the communist regime.

The structure of this segment implies the existence of two sides to the story: one that is visible, recognizable (the men in the photographs), and one that is hidden under the mask of bureaucracy (the hand-written *Securitate* forms). In order to recognize the presence of these two opposing forces, the viewer needs to appeal to a historical narrative that was only murmured in secret before 1989, and was starting to gain more volume during the 1990s: the *Securitate* was an organ specialized in surveilling, capturing, interrogating, writing out false reports, accusing and condemning enemies of the state. These characteristics need not be spelled out in the documentary's overture; the producer relies on the viewers' emotional response to create a portrait of both the resistance fighters and the *Securitate*, with the assurance that the public's allegiance lies with the former, and their disdain with the latter.

Aside from the quickly fading in and out of photographs and documents, there are a few sets of words that are coming up on screen during the introduction; these subtitles provide general information about the story to come: 'Instauration of terror', 'Cruelty and tragedy', 'The men take to the woods', 'The fighters are waiting for the Americans', 'Subversive armed groups', 'Captures and executions', 'Centers of resistance against communism', 'Prepared to fight', 'Willing to die for freedom', 'Fagaras opposes resistance, arms in hands'.

These subtitles, crawling left and right on the screen at unpredictable moments, are, just like the rest of the images, superimposed briefly on top of the panning shot of mountains. The speed with which all the elements proceed along the screen precludes the use of logical reason and appeals to viewers' empathy: quick connections have to be

drawn between photographs of candid young men, papers denominating outlaws, dramatic subtitles, and the lyrics of the song playing in the soundtrack.

As if the visual imagery was not sufficient to frame the dichotomy between resistance and *Securitate*, the soundtrack provides another thick layer of meaning. The patriotic tune that plays in the background is in fact the resistance official anthem sung by fighters in the mountains as far back as 1950. The song's presence is representative not necessarily due to its lyrics (it is, again, hard to pay attention to all the words, considering the abundance of visuals), but due to its referencing of an archaic tradition of Romanian oral culture. For a people that experienced foreign occupation most of its history, verbal utterance had been the only means of preserving Romanian language and culture. Thus, a meaningful parallel is constructed between the resistance and mythical rhapsodists credited with the continuation of Romanian folk culture. The soundtrack has four perceptible voice changes, where the tune is taken over by a different male voice, which furthers the similarity to a story that is being passed on amongst members of a very united group (the resistance group thus becomes a stand-in for the nation as a whole). It is also not a coincidence that the tune is composed according to the characteristics of a traditional lamentation melody called *doina*. This style of singing is associated with emotional states of great distress, mourning, longing, or sorrow. It is also associated in the Romanian culture with an imagined space (*plai mioritic*) composed of meadows, hills and mountains, where such songs are heard, carried by the voices of shepherds along their transhumance itineraries. The imaginary creation of this particular cultural symbol can be analyzed through Homi Bhabha's perspective on locating cultural identity; Bhabha states that "the recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national

identity emphasizes the actuality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression” (Bhabha, 205). Whether intentional or not, *The boys from the mountains*, in its opening sequence, paints precisely that imagined *mioritic* scenery, providing the audience with a location where to situate the film’s characters, and with the instantaneous psychokinesis to that sphere that lies at the core of Romanian collective identity.

The most recognizable *doina* is *Miorita*, (considered to have a collective author - multiple generations of Romanian shepherds), the story of a young shepherd who finds out from a personified ewe (*miorita*) that his two companions are plotting to kill him and take over his livestock. The shepherd’s response is one of resignation in face of his implacable destiny: instead of taking action and defend himself against the perpetrators, he accepts his fate and conceives an oral will envisioning his death as a mythical wedding ceremony, a return to Mother Nature. His subdued choice has been paralleled by many, starting with French historian Jules Michelet, to a nation-wide characteristic that sees Romanians as giving up easily in front of obstacles that come their way. The analogy between the young shepherd and the Romanian nation is also used in *Memorialul Durerii* by journalist and activist Octavian Paler, who argues that the armed resistance in the mountains has proved the opposite of the fatalism from *Miorita*. Paler laments that amongst all the nations who endured oppressive regimes, Romanians are the only ones who did not recognize the merits of those who formed a resistance against the regime:

We alone, it’s as if we’ve been cursed. We alone allow foreigners to believe that we have been a nation of cowards. That we did not oppose the Soviet colonization, for many, many, many years... and that we endured patiently. We alone allow foreigners to talk about the Romanian passivity, and we hasten ourselves to highlight endlessly this passivity and our so-called *mioritic* patience, forgetting that some of our

compatriots have actually contradicted the resignation philosophy from *Miorita*, for seventeen years - I repeat, for seventeen years.
(*The boys from the mountains*, 02:23:50)

These are the words that are placed at the end of the episode *The Boys from the Mountains*, as an appeal to the viewers to ask themselves why there has been so little recognition awarded to the heroes of anti-communist resistance. Octavian Paler is allotted substantial time on screen to make his case, being given priority over the main narration, which is Lucia Hossu-Longin's voice over. Like an authentic Cerberus, Paler is the first, as well as the last speaker to address the camera, performing the ritual of forewarning the viewers in regards to the characters they are about to see, and then, at the end, of bestowing the viewers with the responsibility to carry forward the torch of inquiring into the past.

The first shot of Octavian Paler is adequately framed to position him next to a peasant house, behind an artisanal arched gate, a symbolical pass-way to a space of retelling and recollecting memory. As the camera zooms in past the gate, the viewer follows it through, leaving the outside world, and getting pulled into the "hell" that is the act of remembering. Paler is not your usual interviewee either, as he does not appear to be answering any previous questions from the producer, as he addresses the camera directly, shifting his gaze from the ground to the camera as he provides his monologue. He leans in on the house's porch, as if to illicit the support and approval of the Romanian peasants, who are represented through the presence of the house; his clothing – suit pants, blue shirt, burgundy scarf, trench coat and hat – reveals his intellectual background. Paler, who was born and grew up in a small village near the Fagaras Mountains, but was then schooled in the capital and became a famous writer and journalist, is one who still

experiences strong ties to the village and peasants realm, but is also a representative of the city and cultural world. He is placed *in* the courtyard, but *outside* of the house, he is *from* the village, but not *of* it anymore – this ambivalent characteristic makes him the perfect narrator to connect the viewer to the characters in the documentary. Paler provides an articulate, self-deprecating address, through which he highlights the resistance fighters' merits, and states his pride vis-à-vis the existence of an armed resistance and a wide net of support across the villages of his childhood. A dissident in his own right, Paler rebukes any praises directed to his own person, and humbly admits that his only merit is that of “not being insensitive towards *their* merits” (the merits of the resistance fighters). However, there is a certain sense of being entitled to speak about the resistance precisely *because* one was born and raised in the Fagaras area, presumably in the proximity of the fighters themselves, their successors, or those who provided them cover. This heightens the feeling of a large family, a closely-knit group, whose members are interconnected through solidarity, and who only allows one of their own to speak in their name. Hossu-Longin herself chose to emphasize this affiliation between the documentary's subjects; the subtitles underneath Paler's medium close-up read: “Octavian Paler writer born in Lisa village – Fagaras“. Similar credits are given to other individuals who seem to have been selected simply due to their physical proximity to the events: “PhD. Eng. Nicolae Ciocan born in Sercaita, a village that opposed communism”, a local who expands on Paler's line of thought; as well as a sequence of an unnamed man subtitled – “Witness of the events of 1950, village of Ileni”, who gives a very short account of gunshots he heard during a *Securitate* raid in his village. Most of the interviewees, including actual victims of communist militia, are also identified through a

family relationship they hold to a certain key resistance fighter. Some of the subtitles are: “Vasile Blebea brother of Toma Pirau“, “Aurel Socol brother of Silviu Socol”, whereas a former female detainee is not given a subtitle, but is referred to in the voice over as “the sister of Ioan Chiujdeu”.

Some of the people who speak on camera are not directly identified or introduced; instead, they are simply allowed to recount events they have witnessed, thus carrying the documentary’s story-telling process further. It is disconcerting nevertheless that even the most important figure that appears in the film does not receive on-screen identification. Although he is extensively mentioned throughout the voice-over and provides long segments of sit-down interview clips, Ioan Gavrilă Ogoranu is not identified through a voice-over introduction, nor through a subtitle providing his name, as he first appears on camera.

The assumption made by the producer is that the viewers will recognize Ogoranu based on the references made throughout the narration, and also due to his appearance on other episodes of *Memorial of Pain*, where he was properly identified through subtitles (i.e. the episode *Appeal for the Motrescu Case*, as well as the episode dedicated to Ogoranu entirely – *The Old Man*). It is inherent in this assumption that Lucia Hossu-Longin sees the *Memorial of Pain* series as a unit that cannot be separated into its parts, but needs to be watched, and absorbed from one end to the other, or otherwise the process of understanding and deciphering the truth would be undermined. Although the episodes are edited to fit an hour of television broadcasting (each episode runs from 45 to 50 minutes), and each treats a particular case, they are interconnected at a profound level, standing together as the pieces of a veritable monument raised to honour the victims of

communism. Given that a material memorial for the victims of communism in Romania has yet to be built, the *Memorial of Pain* is the electronic version of an otherwise absent tribute. Hossu-Longin herself declared for the Romanian magazine *Revista22*, in June 2007: “My movie is a gesture of reverence towards the martyrs of anticommunist resistance. A proof that memory, love, and faith in God can conquer nothingness and oblivion” (Grosu, para. 50).

Having recognized the merits of the producer’s exploits, the question remains what the documentary series *Memorial of Pain* means to those who lived through the communist era, and also for the younger generation. On an online forum about Romanian movies, under a thread asking for information on how to purchase the newly released DVD pack *Memorial of Pain*, one user confessed that due to the suffering and pain presented by the documentary, he or she would never purchase the film, implying that watching it is too much of a traumatic experience:

I don’t have it and I don’t believe I will ever purchase it. There is simply too much sadness. And each episode would stir up my emotions even more. Which is why I don’t think you’ll find it easily through people, since it’s not like ‘City bang bang’ or ‘Troy’ (Prien, 2007, [Msg. 2])

The comment is representative of an approach that sees Romanian audiences shying away from watching and listening to accounts provided by victims of the communist regime. Susan J. Brison in her essay titled “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self”, described the need for trauma survivors to have the opportunity to tell their stories to an audience that is willing to listen, and able to validate the experiences that are being revisited through the process of narration:

Trauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future. In telling a first-person trauma narrative to a suitable listener, the survivor is, at the same time and once

again, a second person, dependent on the listener in order to return to personhood. (Brison, 41)

In *The Boys from the Mountains*, it is obvious in a couple of cases that individuals have difficulties dealing with their trauma and even more so when they have to speak about it in front of the camera. Most of these people (including Ion Buta – imprisoned for 13 years; Aurel Socol – survivor who lost 6 brothers to the communist jails; Ioan Chiujdeia's sister – abused and beaten by *Securitate* officers to confess the location of her brother) are answering Hossu-Longin's questions with reticence, obviously troubled by the request to revisit that period of their lives. Ion Buta maintains a defensive stance throughout his interview clip, arms crossed, unable to withhold his tears in front of the camera, a visible weakness that makes him even more uncomfortable; Aurel Socol takes long thinking pauses when talking about his brother, clasping and rubbing his hands against each other. The most touching behaviour exhibited on camera is that of Ioan Chiujdeia's sister, who appears to be in her 80s at the time of filming:

Hossu-Longin: You haven't forgotten...

Chiujdeia: How could I... just when I think of how much they beat me...

Hossu-Longin: They beat you?

Chiujdeia (with a mournful facial expression, sarcastic voice): No, they didn't. They spared me cause I was pretty...

Hossu-Longin: How old were you?

Chiujdeia (same phlegmatic tone): Thirty-nine. Was that good enough you think?

(*The boys from the mountains*, 02:17:00)

Chiujdeia's stoicism and strength does not even allow her to sigh in front of her interviewer (a loud sigh is provided by a woman sitting next to her, possibly a member of the family). It can only be assumed that this woman, as well as the men that appear during the documentary, have not been given the chance so far to present their narrative recollections in front of an audience that supports and believes them. Ion Gavrilă

Ogoranu seems to be the only one at ease in front of the camera, which is not due to less suffering, but rather to the fact that he is one of those who felt the need to put his experiences in writing and to talk about them whenever he had the chance. Ogoranu had published seven volumes of his memoirs *Fir trees can be broken, but they never bend*, as well as three other books by the time of his death in 2006. Even for him the response from the wide public was never satisfactory. He declared in an interview for a local Romanian weekly:

Nobody wrote a comprehensive history of the resistance around the country. I have a feeling people do not want it to be written. I have a feeling that it would bother some individuals who tried their best to catch us and kill us back then... We have become persona non grata. Except for Lucia Longin's *Memorial of Pain*, we have not appeared on TV. (Serb, 2002, p. 3)

The fact that there has never been any nation-wide recognition of fighters in the resistance or of others who suffered one way or another during the communist dictatorship, has put those victims in a position of continuously repressing traumatic memories, and for many of them the *Memorial of Pain* represented the only means of dealing with the experience of a traumatic past. As a result, the documentary series appeals greatly to the emotional side of its viewers, by making use of cinematic techniques that increase the dramatic content.

Bill Nichols analyzes the effect that movies have on their viewers when the cinematic structure is aiming mostly at the emotive and less at the rational side of the audience. Nichols considers that movies (of any genre) are being watched with an expectancy to have reality presented as is, without a (or very little) rational involvement from the viewer. Bill Nichols gives as an example Jean Luc Goddard's film *Le Vent d'Est* (1969), a political film produced by the Dziga Vertov group – at the helm of

French cinema's new wave, and labelled at its time a "Marxist western" (Wheeler, p.114). The film is a self-critical, self-reflexive political commentary intended to bash the west and promote French communism. It begins with a continuous shot of a couple lying on the ground, without much action for almost 8 minutes. The voice-over eventually switches tone, from what appeared to be an interview recording to a straight-out reflexive commentary about the nature of movies. Nichols uses this revolutionary film to point out the fact that viewers usually sit back and abide by "the tacit understanding that a film is a 'reflection of reality' captured in the mirror of that magical 'eye of God' that is a movie-camera" (Nichols, 1976, 101). When watching a movie, we wait for the characters on the screen to tell us what is happening *to them*, without ever asking what is happening *to us*, as viewers interacting with a particular movie. The end result is a failed dialogue between viewer and movie, "and when this happens the film no longer speaks with us, or even to us, but instead speaks *for us*, in our place" (Nichols, 1976, 101).

This type of voice appropriation, the substitution of the public's voice through the film's voice, is apparent in regards to Romanian viewers of the *Memorial of Pain*. Throughout the documentary series, former resistance fighters, detainees, squealers, and witnesses are all recounting what happened *to them*, and their emotional accounts become a proxy for the feelings of an entire nation. The characters in the documentary are the ones who kept the Romanian spirit alive, and thus, when looking to reconstruct a sense of national identity, people should be looking at these examples as a continuation through time of what it means to be Romanian. Just as Octavian Paler suggests within the documentary, Romanians should all be proud that a handful of people had the

courage “to put liberty above life, in times of great terror”. In other words, regardless of their personal experience during communism, Romanians, as a nation, have the right to appropriate through empathy the bravery of those who opposed the regime.

In light of Nichols’ argument, it can be argued that *Memorial of Pain* characters are speaking *for* the entire Romanian nation, as they are chosen by the producer to tell a story that has been up until then stolen from the people, and is now rendered back to them. Given the editorial choices made by Lucia Hossu-Longin, *Memorial of Pain* is arguably an exercise of recovering memories, re-collecting one by one pieces of historical evidence, as lived and witnessed by those speaking on film, and not an act of retribution, of incriminating the culprits (attesting to this is the title of one of the episodes - *Do not avenge us*). Within the episode *The Boys from the Mountains*, *Securitate* officers and prosecutors are named but are not visually identified on the screen, and those who collaborated with the communist regime are not directly incriminated, the producer choosing an ambivalent position towards them. “Forced or not, a brother has condemned his brother to death” declares the voice-over in regards to Vasile Blebea, who had just appeared on screen to describe the death of his brother, without being questioned or held accountable in front of the camera, and the viewers, for his betrayal.

The choice of focusing on the victims, heroes, survivors of the “Romanian Gulag” can be seen through the political prism that continuously placed pressure on Lucia Hossu-Longin not to use the names of former Communist Party members who retained key positions even after the fall of communism; however, it can also be seen as an invitation towards the Romanian people to judge on their own, and to start ejecting

from within the society those sources of continuous mischief, in order to purge the Romanian culture of their outdated mentality, and to finally acquire the status of an increasingly democratic country.

The *Memorial of Pain* series represents a visual collection of lasting testimonies through which the Romanian nation can look at its own past. Bill Nichols defines documentaries by using a comparison with the fiction film: he states that the latter provides for the viewers the opportunity to look in through a window “upon a well-lit room, overhearing and overseeing what occurs inside, apparently unbeknownst to the occupants”, whereas the documentary is an instance where the viewers “look out from a dimly lit room, hearing and seeing what occurs in the world around” them (Nichols, 1991, p. 112). Romanian documentaries that focus on Romanian history during the communist regime offer a chance to look from one “dimly lit room” (that of 1990’s Romania in a state of transition), into yet another room, where light itself had been for the longest time a mere slogan of propaganda, while the occupants were being forced to live in spiritual and material darkness. Nichols’ analogy suggests that documentaries provide a window onto the historical world for audiences sitting comfortably in the obscurity provided by their homes (a room – dimly lit – like a cinema theatre), and that the process of looking at the world occurs through a somewhat clear medium (a window), into an environment that is presumably well-lit and readily available for being watched and listened to.

While fulfilling a similar role as that described above by Nichols, Romanian documentaries *about* communism make the connection between two ‘rooms’ uncomfortably similar: the lack of light from the room inhabited by the watchers is

representative of a society recently freed from dictatorship, where individuals continue to behave with the scrupulosity of the victim who is not yet sure whether the walls of his or her room still have ears. On the other side of the 'window', the documentary films represent a reality previously hidden and unavailable, thus covered by the dense veil of conspicuous lies and misinformation campaigns lead by the Romanian Communist Party. The 'world' represented on the screen, however, remains limited, surrounded by walls, with a low ceiling, and little sparkles of light here and there, given that many truths are buried deep, and plenty questions remain unanswered. It becomes an existentialist wager for the Romanian national consciousness to be able to look through that window and decipher silhouettes of actors from its recent communist past – an exercise meant to shed more and more light into this prison-cell-like world.

Identifying and naming both the victims and the oppressors is an exercise intended to dissipate the uncertainties and fears of Romanian post-Decembrist public, providing at least partial closure, a new-found appreciation for figureheads of the resistance, and a seemingly well-defined target for national resentment: former officers of *Securitate*, anonymous informers, and key members of the Communist Party. Actual retribution, beyond the frames of a screen, never came, as most of these characters continue to be important players in the Romanian political system, and even the most notorious *Securitate* torturers go on with their peaceful lives. Such is the case of colonel G. Enoiu (interviewed by Alexandru Solomon for *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*), who had interrogated and tortured tens of prisoners detained for their dissident actions; all of these detainees were willing to testify against him, and were backed-up by public requests from Romanian NGOs such as The Civic Alliance (*Alianta Civica*),

ProDemocracy Association (*Asociatia ProDemocratia*), December 21st 1989 Association (*Asociatia 21 Decembrie 1989*). There was no legislation in place for the incrimination of individuals who took part in crimes and abuses under the communist regime, as those in themselves had yet to become imprescriptible under the law.

Chapter 3: *The Great Communist Bank Robbery: Revisiting the Past and Packaging Memory for the Future*

The process of re-appropriating *history* and *stories* from the communist past has proven to be, as showed in chapter 2, a snail-paced development. Various forces were pulling Romanian citizens in opposite directions, driven by political, economic, and (some might argue) foreign interests. Enterprises such as *Memorial of Pain* faced various types of obstacles, starting with the fact that most of the participants in the events were no longer alive, to the hindering of the production and broadcasting of certain episodes through political pressure, and ending with the lack of interest from the general public. It seems as if, as long as the sole declared purpose of the documentary was to collect testimonies and to uncover veritable accounts about the suffering endured at the hands of the communist gumshoes, its appeal to a large public was diminished.

There is a sense of wrong timing, a paradoxical phenomenon that has a product such as *Memorial of Pain*, a project dedicated to enlightening Romanians on their recent history, come out in a cultural draught, addressing a public that was absent minded, uninterested by indigenous films, let alone documentaries. Thus, *Memorial of Pain*, along with most of the Romanian movies produced during the 1990s, were in fact addressing no one – an absent minded public is an absent public, one that leaves the theatre seats empty, or switches the TV to a different channel.

The mission to recollect national memory (previously falsified), and to reconstruct national identity becomes a problematic endeavour, destined for failure, as its

subject – the Romanian nation, remains indifferent, suspicious, and vastly uninterested. Writing about the national acclaim, or lack thereof, received by movie-makers after Cristian Mungiu's Palme D'Or win of 2007, Romanian movie critic Alex Leo Serban observed that "the autochthonous public is *not* interested in film" (Serban, 2009a, p. 58). This trait, of perpetual dissatisfaction coupled with sharp mockery (and self-mockery), was inherited through generations, and has been visible even during the communist regime, when Romanians were secretly displeased with the system, and resorted to humour and subtle satire as acts of subversion. A therapy through humour was used to externalize the hatred towards the system, as jokes about the presidential couple circulated from one corner of the country to the other; the code names used to cover up real identities were known by everybody: nicknames such as Ceasca (a diminutive resulted from Ceausescu's name, meaning 'cup'), and Bula (the butt of all jokes, a fictitious character that made it to the 59th place on the top of 100 greatest Romanians, a 2006 national television show that based its final chart on almost 354,000 votes).

After the revolution, dissatisfaction with the new system manifested itself through low elections turnouts, mistrust and misunderstanding vis-à-vis the political class (the election of ultra-nationalist and extremist Corneliu Vadim Tudor as the runner-up in the presidential election of November 2000 attesting to the amenability and naiveté of the electorate), a mass exodus of working forces towards Italy and Spain (where millions of Romanians fled to work for low wages, in order to send money back home), and, in the cultural sphere, a sense of escapism manifested through an orientation towards foreign cultural production (starting with movies and television channels). Given that reform of the former state-controlled organisms was stalling throughout most of the 1990s,

Romanians continued to associate them, their representatives, and the services or products put out by them with the old nomenclature.

The search for a new identity, one that is not iterated by the old organs of a destitute and detested entity, meant for a lot of people a complete shift towards what was being offered from the outside world. New definitions of culture, society, democracy, moral values, were all sought and found in civilisations that did not carry the communist stain. It is a phenomenon noted in other nations that had to make peace with a tumultuous past. Gerd Gemunden, writing about national identity in unified Germany, noted that for those born after the war it became a difficult task to accept being part of a nation that had generated the Holocaust; as a result, Germans embraced American pop culture as a “way to displace a tradition considered complicit with, or at the very least tainted by, Nazism” (Gemunden, p. 121). Similarly, in post-communist Romania, the young generation found it hard to dissociate themselves from the image of the previous generation that had lived under the communist regime. As such, it was easier to completely ignore those narratives constructed *about* the communist era, or *by* people who continued to be associated with the old mentality.

Within the Romanian artistic sphere, the process of finding a new, uncompromised identity underwent a similar development as that of the Romanian society as a whole. Representatives of the old cinematographic wave continued to make movies after the fall of the regime that had promulgated them to the rank of *esteemed* cinematographers, with the sentiment that nothing had changed, and that they were still entitled to play center stage even after 1990.

One of the main representatives of the old school is Sergiu Nicolaescu, now an octogenarian, director and primary actor in such movie epics as *Michael the Brave* (1971), *War of Independence* (1977), *Mircea* (1989), *Death Triangle* (1999), and *Carol I* (2009). His case is particularly of interest, as he was regarded as one of the best movie-makers of the Ceausescu era, and continued to maintain an influential position in the Romanian cinema and politics long after communism's demise: Nicolaescu entered politics in 1992 alongside the Social Democratic Party, and continues to hold a chair in the Romanian Senate until the present day. Although his movies captured considerable audiences before and after 1989, movie critics have placed his works (such as *Occident Express*, 2004) on the list of "films not to be seen". In an article published in *Evenimentul zilei* (Today's event), in January 2007, Romanian film pundits Margareta Nistor and Valerian Sava are condemning the production of pretentious films with no real aesthetic value, whilst calling for the Romanian audience to grow-up and to educate themselves in regards to veritable film-making. The agreed-upon opinion is that it will take a few years for the new generation of film-makers to regain the trust and appreciation of an audience that is slowly evolving to include more of the younger people, who, due to a new perspective on the world and a different education, will prove to be more demanding.

Unfortunately for the representatives of the Romanian cinema New Wave, the influence manifested by members of the old squad, such as Nicolaescu, goes far beyond alienating the public, and into more ardent issues such as government funding of independent projects. As president of the Senate Cultural Committee, Nicolaescu for instance has the political power to influence legislative changes so that government funding for cinematography gets directed first of all to those who are within the accepted

web of producers, and hinders distribution of funds to the young directors, regardless of their success. Film critic Alex Leo Serban deplores the current state of affairs at the Ministry of Culture level, and resigns his trust in the ability of this organism to manage the trouble in which the new generation of filmmakers finds itself. In a dialogue with fellow Valerian Sava, published in June's edition of the monthly *Idei in dialog* (*Dialogue of ideas*), Serbanescu notes that the Ministry favours the representatives of the old wave, "that which leads nowhere, although it's swooshing back and forth, sterile, with money from the CNC" (The National Centre for Cinematography).

The sourness with which the old wave is perceived by new critics and filmmakers parallels a nation-wide sentiment regarding the corruption that is still being felt in all areas of social, political, and cultural activity. The majority of people have come to accept it as an ipso facto of transitioning from communism to democracy, a process that requires a couple of generations to be phased out before showing signs of proper lustration. On the other hand stand those people who fight relentlessly for a change at the core of the system, and who continue to pursue that goal regardless of the impediments. A.L. Serbanescu and Valerian Sava, along with 6 other movie critics, have recently submitted a very acid official request to the Romanian Parliament, beseeching its members to "save the new Romanian cinema", to help it "survive and to rhythmically accomplish its purpose, not simply due to the irrepressible individual genius and to the constant support from the international festival juries, as well as from the new generation of critics, but also, most decisively, from the Romanian political organisms and factors" (Birsan et al, April 2009). Almost two decades after the revolution, this cry for help

signals a worrisome situation within the Romanian cinema, that sees its most valuable cohort of directors jeopardized by political games leading to lack of financial support.

The Romanian New Wave is a current that signalled its presence in 2001 with Cristi Puiu's *Marfa si banii* (*Stuff and dough*), the first post '89 Romanian movie to break away from the old mould, and to receive important international acclaim. The "wave" was rather small, and lacking momentum, as only two noticeable movies followed, in 2002: Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* and Radu Munteanu's *Furia*. Cristi Puiu reinvigorates it though, in 2005, with *Moartea domnului Izarescu* (*The death of Mr. Izarescu*), a film that received the distinction *Un certain regard* at Cannes that year. After a syncopated debut, the New Wave is finally seen and given credit as a proper art movement. With Cristian Mungiu's win of the 2007 *Palm d'Or* for his masterpiece *4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days*, the existence of a cohesive artistic community that was appealing to large audiences had become irrefutable. It was as if the value of these movies suddenly increased in the eyes of the Romanian public, as soon as such yearned-for recognition arrived from abroad. Especially *4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days*, was a movie that was not easily swallowed by Romanians: its reality a little too harsh, its truth a little too close to home. The two main characters, university students during the last period of the Ceausescu regime, have to help each other out while one of them is attempting to get an illegal abortion, to be performed in a hotel room, by a dubious individual. Mungiu's shots are bare, and cold, with natural light (or rather darkness); his characters are themselves bare, chilling in their despair (the pregnancy is almost too far along to have an abortion, which adds to the looming tension), or their inhumanity respectively (the "medical practitioner" blackmails the girls for more than just money).

The Cannes jury appreciated and rewarded a suspenseful thriller, but the public at home was split: some did not care to be reminded of such depressing times, while others found Mungiu's approach taken out of context, requiring more detail for viewers who did not live during those times.

The sense of strong realism, almost *cinéma-vérité* style, or "mimetism" (as labelled by A.L. Serban), that defines Mungiu's directing choices is an over-arching characteristic of the Romanian New Wave. Although it could be tracked back to the insufficient funding, the minimalism defining some of the most recent Romanian movies is a reflection of an intrinsic desire to strip the artistic act of unnecessary embellishment, and to present the world as it is, in an extreme opposition to the falsified images that had been presented to Romanians through the propaganda tools of the communist system. The naturalness, the strict framing, the purposely shaky camera work when following people on screen, the long pauses and emphasis on dialogue are all staples of the Romanian New Wave movies that have received most critical acclaim. In comparison with some of the films related to the old school generation, where the plot is complex, lengthy, with plenty of extras on screen, the New Wave centres on simple, powerful stories, where the viewers get to stick with a handful of characters through a short period of their life (very commonly one or two days). When put against each other, movies of the new generation appear as a revolution against the old, a revolution that does not resume to useless artifice, an ideological revolution "against the *lie* in which previous generations lived complacently! This lie has been conjugated on all tenses, infiltrating deep in the social strata – and, by extension, the artistic strata" (Serban, 2009a, p. 59).

Although the Romanian artistic world, the cinema in particular, was finding ways to explode and to try and extirpate through a process of creative selection the detrimental factors that held up its transfiguration, the Romanian public maintained its unimpressed grimace. Sure, it was a matter of national pride to receive the *Palme d'Or*, and Mungiu started gathering some more fans *because* his value had been recognized in the West, however, grumblers continued to criticize. Even this year's *Un certain regard* award winner at Cannes, *Police, adjective* by Corneliu Porumboiu, was praised for its "Euro and bicoastal art house play" (by Jay Weissberg, writing for New York's *Variety*), but was somewhat misunderstood at home. Internet forums and comments sections for this movie's trailer (arguably not a trailer per se, since it presents a clip of the movie, and not the Hollywood style edited jolt of video clips) show that the public is split between those who believe it to be a stroke of genius and those who see it as deplorable. If the previously mentioned long one-camera shots, seemingly slow evolving plot, and focus on dialogue did not alienate viewers, then the characters' obsession with words and semiotics probably did the trick.

The main character, a young policeman (representing the young generation of Romanians), has trouble fulfilling what he sees as a useless mission, given that he believes the law will soon change and his current suspects will no longer need surveillance or punishment. However, the policeman's reticence in pursuing weed consuming adolescents is confronted with his superior's strict interpretation of the rule of law – a situation only too familiar to young people challenging outdated components of the old Romanian hierarchy. Porumboiu's effort to pinpoint the backbone of an absurd bureaucracy, parading remnants of the communist propaganda linguistics, although

lauded elsewhere, is presented in a package that the Romanian public does not appreciate. This could be due to a nationwide attention deficit disorder, a by-product of exposure to action-packed, fast-cut Hollywood flicks, or to an overexposure in real life to the issues presented on screen – a feeling expressed by many Romanians, who do not have the disposition to re-live their own daily experience through fictitious film characters, given that they are already fed up with the never ending struggle to overcome moral and material obstacles raised by old mentalities (“we live in Romania and that occupies all of our time” is a very famous saying, launched by Romanian talk show host Mircea Badea, and circulated since as the perfect aphorism to describe the mental state of an entire nation).

A third element that needs to be taken into account in regards to the low degree of appreciation of Romanian films amongst their home public is a low percentage of art and cultural literacy. Romanian media and communications scholar Adela Rogojinaru suggests that, with the transition towards democracy, the media also transitioned to an entertainment-based model, perfected in the United States, and blown out of proportions by Romanian television and tabloid style newspapers, to such an extent that the society witnessed the creation of a hideous monster: the “mass-commedia”. Rogojinaru continues making her point by pointing out that:

Such media heritage did not help in imposing a new communication discipline. It offered a mid point between media influence and political propaganda. It needed some good years to understand the specific nature, object and functions of public and institutional communication. (Rogojinaru, p. 552)

The Romanian public, however, was slow in educating itself to recognize and require value from the media, in any of their facets. In 2009, movies such as *Angels and Demons*, and *Yes Man* brought over 90.000 viewers (each) into the Romanian cinemas.

Police, adjective was sitting at a deplorable 2.504 ticket buyers in its launching week this year, whereas, on the opposite side of the spectrum, Sergiu Nicolaescu's 2008 release *The Survivor* (a sequel to one of his hits from the 1970s, and the apple of discord that triggered the young directors' protest towards the handling of CNC funds in 2006) brought in almost 30.000 people (Golea, 2009). Adela Rogojinaru, in a study of challenges met by emerging public relations in Romania, notes "disparities in media consumption, especially electronic media: in 2007 TV continues to dominate both the news and advertising markets, about 34-25 percent announced increase compared to 2006" (Rogojinaru, 550). The culture promoted by private television channels is that of soap operas – amongst the most watched being Italian *Edera*, Brazilian *A Escrava Isaura* (Isaura the slave), as well as American *Dallas* and *The Young and the Restless*; reality TV shows – most of them imported brands, adapted and produced under Romanian television licences: American 'Big Brother' (the Romanian production maintained the name), Spanish 'Sorpresa Sorpresa' (*Surprize Surprize*), German 'Nur die Liebe zählt' (*Din Dragoste*); late night talk shows – *Chestiunea Zilei cu Florin Calinescu* ('The Daily Issue with Florin Calinescu'), a rip-off of David Letterman's show, and *Marius Tuca Show*, which is similar in style to Larry King Live.

In a country where Hollywood movies top the blockbusters list, television maintains the culture of mediocre film production, and Romanian movies are screened with empty seats, it is perhaps understandable that the movies coming out of the New Wave nurseries, branded by the hot iron of minimalism, turned out to be a strange life form, despised by the pop culture worshipping public. Regardless of whether or not the public understood or accepted them, the movies produced in Romania after 1989 "no

matter their quality! – represent a faithful mirror of the human mutations (sociological and all the others) endured by the Romanian society” (Serban, 2009a, p. 47). It is only normal that those who recognize themselves in the mutations on the screen should not appreciate the movies for their artistic value. Furthermore, if Romania’s image as seen and represented by Romanians does not please the majority of Romanians, then the image that is presented outside Romania’s borders, through the eyes of foreigners, is even more disconcerting. Writing about the image of Romania in North America immediately after the Revolution of 1989, Andaluna Borcila notes the interest in sensationalist stories, such as those of orphan children whose heart wrenching stories were brought to the American public in 1990, immediately after the fall of communism. The biggest concern for the American producers were not stories that would unveil the complex systematic oppression endured by the Romanian people, and its international context (there was no interest to bring out those skeletons), instead, the focus was on the drama, the ‘unbelievable’ accounts of child mistreatment and abuse. News coverage of communist instituted orphanages where children were placed randomly, neglected, left to their own devices, sometimes ‘accidentally’ infected with HIV, as well as reports of children living on the street, ‘graced’ the TV evening news headlines. There was no background provided to the story, no mention of Ceausescu’s famous law to make abortion illegal in 1966 – a project which led to countless deaths among mothers seeking help from midwife wannabes willing to risk imprisonment for a good enough amount of money, as well as to the numerous unwanted children who ended up abandoned at the orphanage. That story was picked much later by Romanian documentary filmmaker Florin Iepan, in his

Children of the decree (Decreteii), made in 2004, where he addresses the various implications of Ceausescu's obsession with increasing the Romanian population.

However, in the West, Romania's image gained even more sensationalized coverage in 1996, with special broadcasts of Hillary Clinton's visit to Bucharest, followed by the fictionalized production *Nobody's Children* (about the visit, and the aid brought to the needy orphans), as well as the special coverage of the Romanian gymnasts present at the 1996 Olympic Games (each being given individual short feature clips, portraying them as children, relying on the team's coach as if a proxy father figure). Andaluna Borcila, analyzing the American media's approach towards a post-communist Romania, notes that, as far as the Americans are concerned, "the 'communists' – the Romanian government or Romanians in general – couldn't and can't take care of the orphan children. The orphans stand in for all Romanian children but also for the idea of Romanians as children who must be monitored, evaluated, and perhaps scolded by the western media observer as they take their first steps toward democracy" (Borcila in Forrester et al - "How I found Eastern Europe", p. 45).

The West's infatuation with sensationalist stories materialized in a specific type of documentaries produced *about* Romania *by* foreigners – or by native Romanians, who emigrated and returned to produce a film under foreign TV licensing, which films are quintessentially different from those made *by* Romanians *about* Romania. The latter are focused on either digging up Romania's recent past, or on stories that have in their foreground Romanian ethnic characters, whereas the former can be catalogued in two main categories: films about the communist dictator Ceausescu and the events related to his dismissal in 1989, and films about the problems that Romania is facing – orphans /

children of the street, and minorities in Romania (mostly about Roma, and Hungarians). From the first category, here are a few titles: *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), technically the 'director's cut' of the live footage of the Romanian revolution; *Ceausescu: the unrepentant tyrant* (1998), a 50 minute biography aired by A&E; *Ceausescu: the last dictator* (1990), a portrait of the dictator, and the televised revolution.

The second category has proven more prolific, as problems left behind by communism (such as ethnic groups, and children aid) remain daily concerns in Romania. *Children underground* (2002), a US production about children living out of a Bucharest subway terminal; *Life and death in Dallas (Auf der Kippe - 1998)*, a German documentary by Andrei Schwartz, a Romanian native of German descent, about both social and geographical marginalisation of Roma people in a Transylvanian city; *Balkan Champion* (2007), a personal and heartfelt exposé about the Hungarian ethnic Elod Kincses, the film-maker's father, and his attempts to maintain a spotless political career within the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania. There are, of course, documentaries that attempt more pleasurable portrayals, such as *When the road bends: Tales of a gypsy caravan* (2006). The documentary, aired on KLM flights, follows gypsies from different countries around the world (including Romania) that gathered for a special musical tour showcasing the similarity of their cultures. Underneath the joyful encounters and self-discoveries, there lay the harsh realities still faced by some of the characters amongst their home community: Roma people living in Romania describe the racism they face in the educational system and elsewhere.

If for Romanians themselves it was disgraceful to have those kind of images be the only representatives of their country abroad, for the Westerner's imagination the

images were in accordance with previously constructed narratives about the countries behind the Iron Curtain, and the perfect tool to reinforce through opposition definitions of a much more civilized Western identity. The fact that the images presented were true increases the sense of helplessness in controlling outsiders' interpretations of Romanian realities; there was no possibility for Romanians to put together a different film, or feature, or documentary, and present it to Western audiences on BBC, France1, or ABC. Upon realization of the misrepresentation suffered at the hands of foreign media, the Romanian public had nothing left to do than to come to terms with the feeling of powerlessness and to try to gain some agency by creating some of their own narratives about Romania's recent past, where they can have a chance to explain (albeit for an uninterested local and foreign audience) the context of events. Borcila notes that "while the communist regimes incontestably had drastic effects that are traceable on the landscape of East and Central Europe, it is also true that the Cold War imaginary assigned this territory a consistent opacity with just as much effect on its (in)visibility" (Borcila, p. 58). It would prove to be a difficult task trying to re-establish a Romanian national image abroad, as Romanians got trapped between the effects of 40 years of communism on the most delicate elements of their social and moral makeup, and the unclear lens through which the West was looking upon them. Mixed up in the big bowl of Eastern European conflict ravaged territories, Romania had to simply put up with being incorrectly labelled, and thus limited in the interaction with the West, whose tone continued to be characterized by condescendence.

For the West, Romania represented an *other*, a presence that is brought center stage at its most pitiful moment (good news about remote places rarely make it to CNN

News), and that is meant to feed an intrinsic curiosity, almost a fetish, for exotic subjects of discussion.

What Romanians slowly came to realize was that the western public already had a series of preconceived ideas about Romania, some of them based in reality, but blown out of proportion, very much like Bram Stoker's story of Dracula, a fifteenth century Romanian ruler turned horror movie character. Emerging from the depths of an unknown land, Transylvania, Dracula fascinated movie-goers all around the world. It was not the same in his native land, where people knew Dracula for who he really was: Voivode Vlad III the Impaler. Born in Transylvania, Vlad III became the ruler of Wallachia, another Romanian province, during the fifteenth century. He is most known for his extreme cruelty in punishing his opponents, who were usually tortured to death by impalement. This established his fame as a blood-thirsty ruler, a trait that is shared by his fictional counterpart. Vlad's cruelty was not rare at that time in history, nor was it the most atrocious. Having been sold to the Turkish Sultan as a child, Vlad had seen his share of cruelty, injustice and betrayal. A man of noble descent (grandson of Mircea the Elder, an important Wallachian ruler), he was accustomed to fight in order to obtain what was justly his own, and to always be on guard to protect it. Although it is true that he punished unfaithful boyars by having them impaled, many of the related stories were made up as to increase his notoriety, such as one legend that has Vlad eating his dinner in the middle of a forest made of impaled victims. A 'monster' in his own right, Vlad the Impaler was definitely a feared ruler, as the people gave him the nickname "Dracul" (the devil), which was then transformed into "Dracula". The name can be traced back to the Order of the Dragons, a religious organization that Vlad belonged to, but it may be safe to

assume that the people of Wallachia were ignorant of this aspect at that time. In Romanian folk tales, Dracula has gained the fame of a just ruler in whose time no one dared to pick up a bag of money off the street if it was not theirs. Most importantly, he is remembered for having fought the Ottoman Empire and successfully keeping them outside the borders of Wallachia. In a country where other rulers (notably Constantin Brancoveanu and his four sons) were declared saints by the Church for having been killed by the Ottomans, Vlad's atrocities did not deter the Romanian people from making him a national emblem. Especially during the Communist dictatorship, certain historical characters such as Vlad the Impaler were heavily used as means of propaganda to incite nationalism in the people. History books would highlight the heroic aspects and leave aside the mass murders, in order to accentuate the image of an infallible ruler, which could then be related back to the Communist dictator. In the eyes of many Romanians, it became important to have a more accurate representation of such an imposing character.

The discrepancies between the fictional character and the historical one were unsettling, and many Romanians felt that the real Dracula was not done justice. The countless cinematic representations that Dracula has seen since F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) explored Dracula's *otherness*, an embodiment of chaos and disaster only too familiar to America through the new waves of immigrants in the 1930s (Phillips, p. 15). The "Eugenics" policy and other older racial and anti-Semitic ideologies led to denying immigration to people coming from parts of Europe that were deemed improper, such as the Eastern and Southern regions.

In his essay on *Dracula* from "Projected Fears", Kendall R. Phillips suggests it was the direct correlation between the WWI, which originated in the Balkans, and

Dracula's origin that made the public see in him such an ominous threat. Many of those watching the movie had been to war, and those who had not, were still mystified by its meaning and implications. The connection between Dracula and the Balkans triggered in everyone's imagination the association with the atrocities that were brought about by the war. Phillips argues that "a horrific creature arising out of the Balkans must have made some sense to American audiences" (Phillips, p. 23), as Dracula's invasion of Britain could be interpreted as an invasion of America – which indeed happens on a different level, that of the pop culture that has been so greatly influenced by Dracula's image. As a result, the movie has no other choice than to slay the monster and relieve the western audience from his overpowering grip.

Foreigners' appetite for documentaries and movies such as the ones discussed previously signifies the presence of a colonialist mentality, that is concerned with 'humanitarian causes', desperate situations in need of intervention from the all-powerful colonialist clemency – it matters little whether or not the cause of the situation in question was generated by the same factor later to pose as the rescuer. This is a behaviour signalled by Anca Rosu in the accounts of Robert D. Kaplan about his travelling experiences in Eastern European countries, as detailed in his book *Balkan Ghosts: a journey through history*. Kaplan, whose book had a fair amount of success with the western public, sets off with a confessed desire to engage and participate fair-mindedly in the lives of the locals; however, he finds himself unable to comprehend traditions and customs he deems barbarian. Rosu believes that Kaplan's attitude is not singular, and that "it signals a crisis of American self-definition where a colonial attitude remains central, even in the absence of colonialism" (Rosu, in Forrester et al, p. 157). America – and the

West, by extrapolation – may not have colonized Romania, but the instantaneous immersion of post-1989 Romanian society into the boundless universe of western culture is the modern day ideological equivalent of a Victorian military conquest. The subjects of this new type of colonialism fulfill similar roles to people of the olden days colonies, although on a more subtle level: outright racism and exploitation have been replaced by the scrutinizing gaze of a patronizing, remote imperialist. Rosu believes that “such a need is essential to an identity that depends on the negative images of others to construct an image of the self”(Rosu in Forrester et al, p. 157).

Similar approaches are noted by Peter Bloom vis-à-vis the creation of French films about the off-road vehicle race Paris-Dakar, instituted in 1978. Bloom notes that the footage fulfilled old colonialist dreams of connecting Algeria to sub-Saharan Africa by train, a goal accomplished in the imaginary through the crossing of the desert by the cars participating in the rally. The cars, and the cameras that followed them, became symbols, stand-ins for the humanitarian work that was supposed to be completed by the colonialists, while “the Saharan Desert figured in the French colonial imagination as the ultimate decompression chamber of the West” (Bloom P.J., p. x).

Whether held up as a bad example, a depraved *other* that helps define the goodness in the westerners’ identity, or pinned down as a charity case, a Romanian, just as any colonial subject, had to acknowledge the existence of those labels in the interlocutor’s psyche, in order to enter a dialogue with the West. Coming to the realization of this *état des choses* was probably the moment of the biggest disenchantment with the American support for Romanians. Not only did the American help not arrive during the most difficult times of Soviet influence and communist rule,

but when it was finally possible to receive open, official assistance, the foreign help left many Romanians with a sense of uneasiness. On the political arena, Romania tried to make friends with both the United States and the European countries, a policy which proved to be ineffective, if not contradictive at times, although it eventually gained Romania a spot in the NATO and the EU. Nevertheless, changing its image in the world had to do with more than simply having good diplomats sit pretty in international congress photos. Romania had to tackle the way in which the western public in general perceived it, a task rendered even more difficult by the increased presence of Romanian workforce across Europe, as soon as visas for Romanians were lifted in 2001. One of the most effective ways in which that was accomplished was through the success of Romanian feature films and documentaries of the New Wave, gaining critical acclaim at international film festivals.

The Great Communist Bank Robbery, produced and directed by Alexandru Solomon - from the new generation of Romanian directors, is one of the first Romanian made documentaries to reach and captivate a western audience. The film made official selection at Amsterdam, Minneapolis, and Hong Kong Jewish film festival, won the Grand Prize at Mediawave festival, Hungary, in 2005, as well as other awards in Hungary and France. Besides official recognition as an important historical documentary, the film stands out as having the potential to impress upon the consciousness of the westerner, precisely through its westernized approach to filming and packaging the story. The documentary was co-produced by Romanian *Libra Films*, along with French company *Les Films d'Ici*, and was backed by ARTE (Franco-German TV network), BBC, and France 2. The fact that the movie is skewed towards a foreign audience is obvious from

the outset, as the English title references a classic of the western film genre (the apotheosis of western culture), *The Great Train Robbery*, a 1903 silent film by Edwin S. Porter. Solomon adjusts the title to include “communist”, and “bank”, two words that help better describe the subject of the documentary, but seem oddly out of place.

The title must be interpreted in its entirety, as a black humour joke: it is neither the bank (The National Bank of Romania) nor the robbery that are communist, let alone “great”, but it is the way in which the robbery was dealt with by communist intelligence, and the subsequent filmed re-enactment that make the villain act worthy of the outstanding adjective. It is as if, having the heist immortalized on film reel is what makes it “great”, as in spectacular, a show for all to see. On the other hand, the documentary’s Romanian title holds different connotations: *Marele jaf comunist* (which translates literally to ‘the big communist robbery’) does not carry any ironic subtleties, and can be connected rather to the moral damage and cultural annihilation of the Romanian spirit at the hands of communist oppressors. The robbery can also be related to the idea of the stolen revolution, Alexandru Solomon himself acknowledges that his approach and cinematography treatment were characterized by a western film-making style, and defines his production as a “film noir with gangsters, in a communist country” (Popovici and Blaga, para 9). The documentary’s introductory narration reiterates that fact: “*Reconstruction*, made in 1959, was a gangster film, produced in a country where gangster films were banned, and if they were shown, it was just in order to demonstrate the inevitable collapse of capitalism” (*The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, 00:03:10).

The Great Communist Bank Robbery centers on the heist of the National Bank in 1959’s communist Romania, conducted by the most unlikely of thieves (former high

ranked party officials), and followed by a re-enactment filmed for the communist party's internal affairs propaganda. Two months after the official date of the robbery, five men and a woman were caught, charged, and sentenced to death (except for the woman, who was sentenced to life in prison, but released after a few years through an act of amnesty). Before their trial, which was shot live, the six culprits were forced (with the promise to receive compassion from the judges) to play their own roles in the propaganda movie *Reconstruction*, that was to be screened on a closed circuit including only the most important members of the communist party. Directed by Virgil Calotescu, an established filmmaker at the time, *Reconstruction* is a lugubrious docudrama, an unbelievable precursor of the reality TV show, with awkward settings and actors: one of the men's apartments had to be re-decorated in order to look more opulent on camera, while the offenders/actors gradually lose their confidence as the movie progresses and they realize their 'deal' with the communist prosecutors was a Machiavellian lie. The communist party's strategy of using civil offenders in movies that re-enact their offences has profound ideological implications. The practice establishes the party as an all-mighty entity, able to dispose of people as if puppets in a satyr play arranged so that it displays the agility of the controlling agencies (*Securitate* and militia), and that instils terror in the viewers, who become aware that their fate would be similar to that of the people on the screen, should they try and become 'subversive elements'.

Once cast as protagonist in such a twisted production, mouthing along lines of a script intended to incriminate, an individual is denied the status of human being, forced to perform and to appease the whims of a sadistic executioner. The intricacies of this type of psychological crime have been the subject of Lucian Pintilie's feature film

Reconstruction (1968), as well as of a documentary still in the works (due to lack of financing), titled *Genocide of the souls*, produced by Toronto based Romanian filmmaker Sorin Iliesu, who attempts to bring to light the atrocities committed in the political detainees' camp from Pitesti, Romania. This camp, kept a secret from the population at large, and certainly not publicized through party commissioned films, was the expression of the same criminal mentality that denigrates and animalizes human beings; in Pitesti, prisoners guilty of having manifested their religious beliefs were forced to act-out Bible-themed sexual orgies, for the pleasure of their prison guards. The cruelty of this and other camps is noted by British historian Tony Judt, who analyzed the communist regime and its interpretations on the other side of the Iron Curtain:

Communism in Romania, even more under Dej than Ceausescu, was vicious and repressive - the prisons at Pitesti and Sighet, the penal colonies in the Danube delta, and the forced labour on the Danube-Black Sea Canal were worse than anything seen in Poland or even Czechoslovakia, for example. But far from condemning the Romanian dictators, Western governments gave them every encouragement, seeing in Bucharest's anti-Russian autocrats the germs of a new Tito. (Judt, pp. 258-259)

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the head of the state at the time of the bank robbery, was a Stalinist by formation, which made him disobey Nikita Khrushchev's requests for de-Stalinization, and ironically transfigured Dej into a likeable figure in the western world. His ascension to power within the communist party came at a time when the movement was in dire need to expand its membership base amongst ethnic Romanians. Notably, since the removal in 1924 of one of the party's founders, G. Cristescu, a socialist rather than a communist, up until the instauration of Gheorghiu-Dej at the helm in 1944, the Romanian communist party did not have any ethnic Romanians as its general secretary (Tismaneanu, 2008, p. 51). Historian Vladimir Tismaneanu notes that "up until

Romania's occupation by the Red Army, in 1944, the Communist Party in Romania was a marginal and unpopular organisation, which, at the moment of its coming out of the secret underground, had appreciatively a thousand members, including those exiled to the Soviet Union, and those fighting in the French maquis" (Tismaneanu, 2008, p. 38). These first members of the communist party were ethnic Hungarians, Polish, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, or Jewish. Paradoxically, once having established his dictatorial authority, Gheorghiu-Dej adopted a nationalistic view and started a mass ethnic cleaning of the communist party, especially aimed at its most prominent Jewish members.

This is the context in which the six protagonists of *Reconstruction* get cued in: Alexandru Ioanid, former chief of the Criminal Police; Paul Ioanid, head of studies at the Military Academy - aviation department; Haralambie Obedeanu, Dean of the School of Journalism and writer for *Scanteia*, the communist party propaganda tool; Sasha Musat, former leader of the socialist youth, secret agent and fighter; Igor Seviianu, aviation engineer, fighter during the WWII, employed by the Interior Ministry; Monica Seviianu, a 36 year old journalist. Their most important crime was that of being Jewish, a fact for which they had to pay by being marginalized or completely rejected from the structures of the communist party. When presenting their police files, *Reconstruction* does not provide information about the important positions they held within the party, but labels them as Zionists, pariahs of the society, looking to gain money without working for it, and thus attempting to subvert the makings of the new socialist establishment. In fact, the thieves had been the victims of Gheorghiu-Dej's ethnic cleansing campaign, left without means of subsistence (fired from their jobs), and disillusioned by the ideological promises of the communist movement.

Gheorghiu-Dej's policy was grounded in a much older attitude that defined the political and social Romanian spheres. Toni Judt notes that during the war the Romanian political class was composed of nationalistic individuals, eager to repudiate all Jews, Hungarians, and Russians, who were all seen as factors that menaced Romania's territorial and moral integrity (Judt, 2008, p. 258). If the Russians and the Hungarians had claims over parts of Romanian land, then the Jews were seen as potential proselytizers that could affect one of the pillars of Romanian national identity: the Orthodox faith; as historian Irina Livezeanu points out, the reputation of the Jews was probably the worst amongst the ethnic minorities in Romania, given that "the Hungarians and Germans were not Eastern Orthodox, but at least they were Christian" (Livezeanu, p. 13). Livezeanu considers that "the image of the Jews was further implicated in and affected by the endless interwar debates about the national essence, in themselves a telling symptom of the deeply felt Romanian identity crisis" (p. 13).

Romania had come out of the Great War a winner, managing to finally see all its various regions reunited under one state; questions of national identity were starting to emerge, as the newly expanded country had to deal with never before raised issues of national minorities, and superiority claims amongst inhabitants of different regions. If it was a difficult step for Romanians of various cultural backgrounds and class origin to accept a common definition that would diminish regional importance to favour the national element, then it was much more simple to point out those elements that did not belong to Romanian identity, and put them in the mixing bowl of ethnic minorities. It was in this context that Jewish people such as Seviianu, Musat, and the Ioanid brothers opted to be part of the communist movement, which offered the illusion of an utopian world

where race and religious denomination no longer mattered. Having been so discriminated against, they became fervent adepts, and, as Vladimir Tismaneanu noted, they were “united by a negation of their Jewishness, and a frenzied desire to replace it with a different feeling, a wider one, of belonging” (Tismaneanu, 2008, p. 60).

One can only try to imagine the great disillusionment that struck the authors of the bank robbery at the moment when the party they so strongly believed in kicked them out and labelled them *personae non gratae*. The desire to make a statement, to strike the system in one of its vulnerable spots, is certainly the most logical argument brought forward as justification for the crime. Having been members of the nomenclature, the six knew that they were being surveilled, and that they stood little to no chance of tricking the *Securitate* agents that were already monitoring their day-to-day activities. Alexandru Solomon leaves the viewers to decide which one of the multiple motivations seems more plausible, pointing out a few faults in the arguments publicized by the communist police in the *Reconstruction*. Regardless of the efforts to portray the six as bandits, people of the lowest rank, thieves by nature, who wanted to steal “workers salaries” and live a care-free life, it is tremendously far fetched to believe that a group of intelligent people would think that they could spend that kind of money (280,000 dollars at that time) when their heads were already on the *Securitate*’s block. It is also unreasonable to assume the group intended to use to money to aid the Zionist movement, as it was impossible to purchase guns or ammunition in Romania, and the Romanian bills could not be exchanged for foreign currency, thus holding no value outside the borders.

Whatever their reasoning, the group had sufficient inside information to plan out the perfect heist: they followed the bank car in a taxi, stopped it in the middle of the

street, across from a police station, in broad daylight, at gunpoint, opened the back door – that did not even have a lock, and fled with the bags full of money. As Teodora Tuturman, one of the bank’s employees, points out in the documentary, no one had ever expected that to happen: whenever the bank had asked for more security assistance from the police, they were told to “calm down, we are not in America, we won’t get robbed”. Another unexpected element for the investigators was the fact that those that committed the crime were former members of the highest party structures; the police took several months questioning and detaining thousands of other suspects before considering the option of monitoring those from the Ioanid group. These are just a couple of the things not mentioned in the original *Reconstruction*, which, as Alexandru Solomon’s narration points out, “hides more than it reveals”.

Solomon tries to fill in the gaps by interviewing friends, family members, and former cellmates of those in the group, the cameraman who shot the re-enactment, *Securitate* officials who were in charge of the case, and by citing archive documents, such as interrogatory reports, and informants’ notes. The testimonies clarify the sordid details of “the Ioanid affair” (the code name for the robbers’ file), including the torture (and, in cases, subsequent murder) of innocent suspects, the relentless questioning in order to obtain auto-denouncing statements, and the continuous arrogance and spitefulness of the investigators. Solomon’s careful patchwork puts side by side clips of suspects (a bank employee’s daughter, aged 14 at the time; one of the guards who was in the bank car during the robbery; and later during the investigation, one of Monica Sevianu’s cellmates); and of the *Securitate* officers who questioned them: Gheorghe Enoiu, *Securitate* Chief Investigator, and Gheorghe Blidaru, *Securitate* investigator.

Although not directly incriminated, the investigators' cunning, and smiling accounts are chilling when framed by some of their victims' emotional recollection of their ordeals.

As if having them side by side on the screen was not sufficient, Solomon provides the opportunity for the two sides to reunite, by putting them in the same cinema theatre, under the pretext of watching a special projection of *Reconstruction*. Despite of the director's hopes, the interaction is minimal, or non-existent, and, as Leo Serban pointed out, "the 'awakening of the conscience' does not take place: the communist monsters have no conscience - they have justifications" (Serban, 2009a, p. 237). Each group proceeds to their seats, the victims at the front, the investigators at the back, as if the past had been completely erased, and at the same time re-enacted seamlessly once more. As they sit in their chairs, watching the movie projected on the screen, a strange phenomenon seems to take place: they are caught on two levels of existence, the present, and the past; they can recognize themselves in the images on the screen, thus being plunged back into the reality of the re-enactment, re-living that past experience, while the documentary's camera shows them as beings living the present, in the seats of the theatre. The theme of the spectacle, of the spectator watching a movie, a partially made-up story posing as reality, has been exploited in the documentary by Solomon, who had so far incorporated numerous clips from *Reconstruction* being screened in an empty theatre, respectively in a few instances for his audience of interviewees.

For Solomon's exercise to reach its goal, then we, as viewers (in a close or distant future) who are watching this film (in the theatre, or on our TV), need to become self-conscious, aware that we are, just as the group of people in the cinema theatre, watching a story that is being told to us by someone, and that we need to make our own personal

judgments on what is shown to us on screen. It is only then that the circle becomes complete: the three levels of time – past, present, and future – become concomitant, thus unequivocally linked to each other. This might just be the solution to what Costica Bradatan, a US based Romanian scholar, called “a haunting theme in today’s debates over post communism”: the necessity of facing the past (Bradatan, p. 260). Bradatan argues that re-appropriating the past is a difficult task, given that the past was counterfeited and rewritten so many times by the communist apparatus. Erasing some facts and fabricating others have been the tools of mass manipulation, and have resulted in depriving people of a proper sense of time:

...the past was constantly altered, rewritten, and reshaped in the communist regimes, precisely to obtain this “alteration of men on a mass scale”, the true symptom of the success of revolution. Communism died before succeeding, and what we come across when looking at it in different moments before its death is a humanity not at all transfigured or Messianic, but instead one deeply traumatized and dislocated, severely suffering from moral paralysis, hopelessness, and amnesia. (Bradatan, pp. 275-276)

Recovering and healing the past may not be possible for the traumatized, dishevelled victims and participants in the events related to the robbery, but for the viewers of Solomon’s documentary, the new generation of Romanians, it is still within grasp. What Solomon points out is that achieving it is a complex and lengthy process, as exemplified through the trials of Alexandru Ioanid’s son, Alex Galis, who tries to dig up the truth by researching his father’s files stored with the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS). What started off as a desire to fill the void left by the disappearance of his father when he was 4 years old, and to find out his burial place, became a detective’s work of going through thousands of pages of reports and informer’s notes. Alex Galis reaches the conclusion that the allegations raised against his father were

mostly made-up, and that the trial the six robbers went through was unfair: “one of many of its kind at that time”. This is sufficient in order to rehabilitate the image of a long-lost father, and Ioanid’s son returns partially appeased to his home in London (just like the other Jewish interviewees present in the documentary, who are self-exiled).

In the big picture presented by the documentary, the six thieves are not completely rehabilitated, which means that, if their intention was to act against communism, their actions were useless, and their subversion tainted by their misdeed. Because they are not able to provide the viewers with their own explanations, the six characters remain distant, villains in a gangster movie as Solomon had put it, unable to convey their innocence to a public that continues to judge them, 50 years after the fact. If their first trial was simply a show put up for the cameraman’s lens, then perhaps this second one will prove more tolerant and honest. The one thing that the viewers can take away from this documentary, is a sense of the course of history, so that it may never repeat itself. This is precisely what film-maker Sorin Iliesiu, the director of *Genocide of Souls* (*Genocidul sufletelor*), is hoping to accomplish, as he states on the website designed for raising funds for the completion of his documentary: “history can repeat itself at any time, but by knowing the truth we can avoid repeating such a history, precisely because the genocide of souls represents an essential charge in the trial of communism”. There remains, however, the fear that the public continues to be uninterested in unveiling the truth, and the trail of communism will remain an ideological phantasm, proceeding with empty seats, much like Solomon’s shots of the empty theatre where *Reconstruction* was looping endlessly. Romanian film critic Leo Serban sadly noted the paradox that

today we need explanatory footnotes, and “contextualization”, and analysis, and psychodramatic essays, in order to *understand*: a mediocre movie, a fake

documentary (docu-drama, rather), that represents, for the history of cinema, the exact opposite of the brilliant documentaries produced by Leni Riefenstahl – such a toxic piece of junk produced by the communist propaganda has to be re-projected, in the year 2000 and something, up on a (big) screen, viewed, discussed... (Serban, 2009a, p. 237)

Although it is understandable that some people would like to have the reels of *Reconstruction* wiped off the face of the earth, so that such dehumanizing footage can never again be seen (the question of whether or not to destroy Auschwitz is a valid parallel), for those who have been involved, or who are heirs of those ostracized by communism, it is a vital component of making peace with the past and being able to understand their past, to trace back their roots and properly define their own individual personality. Such is the case of Irene Lusztig, Monica Sevianu's granddaughter, who returned to Romania in order to create her own documentary film, titled, ironically, *Reconstruction*, just like the movie that was the only memory Irene had of her grandmother. Lusztig's film also uses clips from the original *Reconstruction*, as a well as footage with her mother rediscovering places she had long left behind, creating, not a political investigative documentary like Solomon, but a touching family story, a collection of narratives aimed at reconstructing the portrait of Monica Sevianu.

In the conclusion of *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, Alexandru Solomon encourages all his viewers to do what Irene Lusztig and Alex Galis did out of personal need to fill the void and stigma left behind by their close relatives. Solomon relocates his dysfunctional group of viewers for a more dramatic take of them watching 1960's *Reconstituirea* one more time. The location is an old summer amphitheatre, used probably for projections during the communist regime (communist paraphernalia carefully included in Solomon's well constructed cinematography), a place long forgotten

and now destitute, left without seats, a split wall instead of a screen, and plants invading through the cracks in the cement. It is perhaps a coincidence that the same location had also been used for two music videos: one for a one hit-wonder Romanian female rapper named Marijuana, and one video for a very young girl, named Cleopatra Stratan, who started her musical career when she was 3 years old. The whimsical lyrics to Cleopatra's music video shoot in the summer theatre echo ironically with the message carried by Solomon's documentary: "doesn't matter what the deal is if you don't give up; it's important to remember what you're supposed to forget". The verses, part of a song intended to poke fun at the naivety of children, describe perfectly the mental state of people living during the communist regime, where one had to continuously be self-aware, never to voice things that could be interpreted as undermining the state's authority. This psychological entrapment is better described by Stefan Heym, in his novel *The King David Report*:

I . . . am constantly of a split mind, knowing one thing and saying another, or trying to say what I know, or saying what I do not think, or thinking what I do not say, or wanting to say what I know I must not think, or wanting to know what I think I will never say: thus I turn in circles like a dog trying to catch the flea that is biting its tail. (Heym quoted in Bradatan, p. 276)

As for the viewers of *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, the plea to remember what others have tried to wipe out, or tried to make them forget, is underlying in Solomon's choice to end his film by allowing the voice of the communist propaganda resound between the columns of the summer theatre, while being watched doubtfully by those who knew only too well that the promises of "constructing a New Man" and "building the socialist world" had in fact destroyed thousands upon thousands of lives, most of whom remained completely anonymous, never having made it to the big screen,

like the authors of the great bank robbery. Symbolically, the last shot of the documentary is of the movie reel “hiccupping”, just as the narrator was about to finish his phrase about the happy life awaiting the new man, and to pronounce the word “communist”. The projector’s light fades out, the theatre is empty, deserted, not even the small group is there anymore, just an empty space, underneath the night skies, taken over by vegetation. It is perhaps a very subtle comparison between the theatre and the communist ideology, and the director’s wish to never again have it come into the spotlight.

Conclusion

A period of transition is by definition one of the most difficult, albeit enriching, periods of one's life. The act of becoming, of changing from the present self, familiar, and relatively well defined, into an *other* self, distant, unfamiliar, unknown, can be at times challenging, even terrifying. The various forces that push and pull at the present self to create the other, future self, are instrumental in the process of transition, and that is what renders the phenomenon alarming, given that the forces are external to the self and thus cannot be controlled. Although the future self will most likely maintain some resemblance to the old one, in the case of Romanian national identity that was transitioning from a communist past to a democratic future, not even the makings of the present self were a certain thing. Having acquired the status of a unified nation in 1918, Romania barely received two decades of relative internal peace (notwithstanding the dictatorships of King Carol II, 1938-1940, and of Marshall Ioan Antonescu, 1940-1944) to address questions of national identity, ethnic minorities, and territorial autonomy, before being forcefully pushed into a communist regime that had its own pre-established terminology for what a national identity should be, what it should become, and how it should get there. Thus, after three dictatorships, after a stolen revolution turned coup d'état, after seven "mineriade", after having joined the NATO, and the EU, 91 years after the Great Unification, Romania continues its search for a unifying national identity.

In its post-communist existence, the Romanian nation has continued to embrace everything that came its way, from the biggest Hollywood blockbusters, to the cheapest Mexican soap operas, from the latest Mercedes Benz model to the wooden wheeled horse-drawn carriages on the main roads, from world famous opera sopranos (such as

Angela Gheorghiu) to the most debilitating oriental-influenced tunes (called 'manele'), from public institutions' lustration of former communist elements (as required by the EU) to the stubbornness of holding on to old traditions that defy any EU regulations (such as the small home-made alcohol distillery, or the production and sale of unpasteurized milk and cheese by independent shepherds).

In this complex process of renegotiating the boundaries of what it means to be Romanian, a very important factor has been the re-collection of testimonies and memories from the past, which helped put together the puzzle of a lost (technically stolen) national identity. Through the work of documentary films aimed to record and represent stories that had been kept secret by the communist censorship, the Romanian consciousness was allowed to deal with the psychological trauma associated with the years lived under oppression. As the generations of Romanians born or raised after the communist regime start to mature, the interest in recuperating the past starts to gain centre stage, and the public begins to realize the importance of knowing and understanding one's past in order to be able to define one's identity in the present. Perhaps this awareness and sense of urgency are due largely to the integration in the European Union, and the implicit threats of losing one's national identity amidst the mishmash of citizens of the global village.

Throughout the 1990s the Romanian society was more concerned with its own period of transition and all the hardship associated with accommodating to western standards, than with asking itself important questions about the past, and trying to reclaim narratives that had been silenced by the communist regime. As a result, efforts such as that initiated by Lucia Hossu-Longin, through her *Memorial of Pain* series, although

representing important acts of collecting memory did not generate a large audience response or interest. The testimonies gathered by Hossu-Longin, regardless of their viewership, stand as an important exercise of telling one-another, as members of the same nation, stories of lived trauma, of courage, of exceptional idealism, so that in this way those veritable stories and their value can be applied towards the process of re-defining Romanian identity.

The new millennium brought about not only a visibly more democratic Romania (now having to conform to European legislation), but also a more mature public, a generation willing to share in those democratic values, and learning how to expect and demand them from the country's officials. It is perhaps not a coincidence that at the same time the Romanian cinema also matured, as to yield way for such documentaries as Alexandru Solomon's *The Great Communist Bank Robbery*, a film that, besides presenting a most unusual story from the *Securitate* archives (film and document), represents a turning point in the history of the genre in Romania, through the new approach taken in the rendering of historical events.

The two documentaries each stand on their own as key elements in the portrait of Romanian society at their time, as each one of them is a direct result of the state of things and mentalities of their era. It is in a way true that each of the documentaries could be produced only at that certain time, because the public, the Romanian society was (respectively was not) prepared to have them.

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