

II. Poetics of Adaptation

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Recycling and Confronting *Ostalgie* under the Romanian Transition.

I'm an Old Communist Hag – an Unfaithful Adaptation

Abstract

Using a comparative and intermedial approach, this paper aims: 1. to outline a typological overview of several literary and cinematic modes of representing communism in the Romanian society after 1989, highlighting, at the same time, the identitarian clichés pertaining to the transition that are inherent therein; 2. to focus analytically on Dan Lungu's novel *I'm an Old Communist Hag!* (2007) and the homonymous film directed by Stere Gulea (2013), examined in terms of communist nostalgia, a theme that is present in both artistic products; 3. to theoretically circumscribe the type of adaptation particularized by Gulea's cinematic rendition, by reference to the concept of the "ethics of infidelity" (Leitch 2010).

Keywords: Post-communist nostalgia, adaptation, identity, Romanian transition, Dan Lungu, Stere Gulea.

In the Romanian society, the period of transition from communism to a chaotic and ambivalent capitalism was marked not only by an inefficient sluggishness insofar as the creation of democratic institutions was concerned, but also by a gradually outlined dynamics of identitarian representations. In the 1990s, amidst post-communist euphoria, but in the absence of professional publishers and coherent funding mechanisms, both literature and the cinema were left in abeyance, being of secondary concern. Romanian culture had more important things to do: it had to face its own past – a somewhat normal task after forty years of communism. The

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EKPHRASIS, 2/2013

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consequence of this moral duty was tantamount to an influx of memoirs or memory-related works. Before being addressed from a historiographical standpoint, the biography of the recently concluded communist period was subjectively filtered and televised.¹ Disquieting carceral testimonies, censored confessions or “drawer,” unpublished epistles – some of these were authentic, others were just fuelled by resentment, victimization, mystification or proffered denunciations (freely, at last). Thus, it is not surprising that only in 2004 did a book entitled *Reabilitarea ficțiunii* (*The Rehabilitation of Fiction*) appear (Simuț 2004). After more than a decade during which memory had become repetitive and, at times, had sanctioned lynch law, it was time for an alternative filter of identitarian representation. Exeunt the (auto)biographical pact, enter the fictional pact.

The Screen of Transition

A new generation of fiction writers and directors who had barely come of age under communism made the transition from biography to story. However, while the testimonial stage had been marked by the oppressive memory of those who had experienced the traumas of the past, the narrative stage was bound to keep its allegiance to the present. As the transition to democracy gained ground as a topic on the politicians’ agenda and as a social reality, relating back to communism could occur only in a screened manner – by reference to the dominant ideology of the period. Thus, the perspective enabled by the transition generated a denouncement of the convention or ideological screen whereby communism had been represented, that is, appropriated. The authors of the films/novels I shall be referring to here do not assume an authorial narrative convention, but transfer such responsibility onto the characters, uncovering their own conventionality. The mind-set of the present provides the imagological and narrative backbone of a defunct era: communism can be caught glimpses of, therefore, *via* clichés engendered by the transition.

In outlining a possible typology based on the principle of representing communism through the lens of the post-communist transition, we might dub the first category thereof “the black book of communism.” Cristian Mungiu’s second film, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) and Lucian Dan Teodorovici’s latest novel, *Matei Brunul* (2011), fall under this category. Both chart two exemplary stories about characters whose lives were marked by communism. Resorting to emblematic themes and genuine tragic clichés, Mungiu the director paints a fresco of the repercussions that clandestine abortion could engender in Romania during the 1980s, while Teodorovici the novelist describes the life of a promising young man, ruined by Gulag; both the film and the novel depict a detached, albeit no less intense image of the past. This is a mature perspective on communism, from the vantage point of the post-communist transition. It is not by chance that the two representations have been appropriated in the West as identitarian versions that are symptomatic² of the Romanian society as a whole.

The second category might be generically entitled the “pink book of communism.”³ Representing a sort of bitter idealization of life under communism, childhood games amongst the derelict socialist blocks of flats and adolescent love requited in the context of absurd educational constraints are evoked as fragments of diminished normality. According to the American publisher of the novel written by the brothers Filip and Matei Florian, *Băiuștii* (2006)/*Băiuș Alley*, “Every day life is recounted through their young eyes. Their story is one of childish naivety set against a backdrop of life imposed by communism.” Things are a little more tense in the film directed by Cătălin Mitulescu, *How I Spent the End of the World* (2006), which nonetheless has a happy end. Lilu, the seven-year old protagonist, has failed to assassinate Ceausescu as planned, and Eva, his sister, who is 10 years older than him, clandestinely emigrated shortly before the end of the communist world. The agony of a bygone time becomes the feast of a marginal community whose members live fully only through their offspring. With hindsight, looking back at communism from the angle made available by the transition, it becomes clear, thus, that ideology could be countered not only by flouting it, but also through the triumph of innocence.

The third option for retrospectively representing communism from the perspective of the transition – the “grey book” – is one that we might call burlesque. In the episodes of *Tales from the Golden Age* (directed by Cristian Mungiu & Co., 2006), parodying quotidian life situations under communism imbues the narrative plots with comic realism. Each short film reconstructs one “urban legend” from the period of the Ceaușescu regime, decanted by the collective mind as representative of that era. As burlesque farces from another world, the stories in *Tales from the Golden Age* entail, as a first impulse, the recognition of the communist archetypes, followed immediately by identitarian distancing in a humorous vein. Derision essentializes the past and creates distance. Such a film is, in fact, a very effective export product, emphasizing the idea that the separation of the Romanian society from communism is now complete, since it can revisit its past with such laid back detachment. From this viewpoint, the film seems to be an illustration of Marx’s remark whereby “man separates from the past with a loud and irreverent laughter.”

A humorous character, in her own way, is the protagonist of the film *I'm an Old Communist Hag!* (2007) by Dan Lungu. This time, however, parody has another function. Emilia, the protagonist of the novel, is emblematic of the category of (*n*)ostalgic citizens during the Romanian transition. In the context of Dan Lungu’s novel, the proper sense of the term is strictly denotative, meaning “a [useless] sentiment for an irretrievable temporality and/or a longing to return to a totalitarian system” (Sadowski-Smith 1998: 1). The subversive meaning of the concept, adequate to the German space after the fall of the Berlin Wall – “consumers of *Ostalgie* may escape the dominant order without leaving it” (Berdahl 1999: 206) – can only tangentially be ascribed to the imaginary of *I'm an Old Communist Hag!*

The novel is constructed according to a relatively predictable scheme. We are in the 1990s: Emilia, a low-income pensioner, lives in an apartment in the province, with her husband Tucu, as their daughter Alice is away in Canada. The long moments of solitude – as the husband retreats in the countryside, for a few days a week, to raise livestock and grow vegetables – occasions the woman's sundry memories of her youth, spent under communism. Lungu diegetically alternates her memories with diverse moments of the present. The choice is strategic: Emilia talks to Alice about elections (the daughter trying in vain to convince her to vote for the Liberals), to Rozalia (the bourgeois seamstress who is trying to recover her estates, confiscated by the communists) and to Aurelia (a former co-worker, whose memories of communism are different from hers). However, Lungu's novel is the centre of gravity in Emilia's mythologized past, which becomes both a sort of compensatory universe, counterpoised to the present of the this transition, and an opportunity for questioning her existential values.

The book has sparked conflicting reactions. Leaving aside the fact that some commentators have simplistically associated the protagonist's nostalgia with the author's own perspective, the question of who is Emilia, really? has received radical answers:

“Dan Lungu writes, unperturbed, in the genre of socialist realism, but reverses the polarity of values. Communism becomes thus the bad guy – which is good for Dan Lungu's political orientation, but is not so good for his literature: for the defective blueprint remains the same.” (Iovănel 2007)

The novel is considered biased, as every scene does nothing but illustrate the thesis of communism's nefariousness. The rationale behind this type of argument is as follows: through these lenses, Emilia appears not as a genuine character, but merely as an ideological puppet: however attached to the communist values she might want to come through and however nostalgically she might reminisce about them, she manages to decant only a discordant image of those times. Her nostalgia is parodied by repetition, the point of this narrative and ideological game being the denunciation of communism, responsible not only for the mystification of memory, but also for sabotaging the transition itself:

“In a scene from the hag's childhood, the girl who will become a hag is playing in a wagon of wheat [losing her little hat]. Well, not just playing; she reflects Romania's exploitation ratio at the hands of the Soviet Union. Wheat is not innocent: it is part of a shipment of five carloads that the Romanians give the Soviet brothers in exchange for a single carload of wheat (‘In the Soviet Union, scientists have invented much better wheat. That is why the Soviets, like elder brothers, have decided to help us. We give them five carloads of bad wheat, and they give us one carload of good wheat, for seed’). After a while, the little hat will be recovered from the car filled with Romanian wheat that the Soviets will be returning to the Romanians as ‘much better’, Soviet wheat. [...] Almost every page contains such a verticalization of the thesis. (Iovănel 2007)

The idea is that one cannot empathize with such a falsely naïve consciousness, since, under the guise of Emilia's allegiance to communism, there lies concealed the rhetoric of radical anticommunism, according to which, the failures of the transition are due to such retrograde attitudes. The poor woman's nostalgia becomes thus a kind of pathological symptom of a society that cannot break away from its infamous past. *Emilia* are all those who cannot adapt to the new realities because their make-up was vitiated by communism.

The problem with this interpretation comes from the fact that, still, the novel does not go through with illustrating the overturned socialist-realist scheme. If it did, the protagonist would have to be "come round" and be persuaded to convert to capitalism, understanding eventually that she cannot keep living in the past. What removes the novel from this scheme is precisely the fact that Emilia's sole project resides in "reviving the past" (Lungu 111). Progressive to the end, she conceives the future as an ingenuous utopia. She would like to restart the metal confections factory where she used to work as a young woman, but she is discouraged by her former co-workers. However hard we might try to associate this propensity with Emilia's at least partial change of mentality, the argument falls through because this is a flat character, anchored in the past, and not a round character. She does not adapt, but seeks to adapt the present to the past.

Obviously, Dan Lungu does not take on Emilia's nostalgia as his own authorial perspective. Still, it would be questionable, to say at least, if he used his character merely to place himself amongst inveterate anticommunists. At this point, phenomenology becomes just as important as ideology. The author simply allows his character to manifest herself. And in this, at times, implausible manifestation – for her ideological speculations are sometimes too specialized – Emilia manages an "outstanding feat: she internalizes communist identity amidst an exclusively capitalist ideology" (Borza 2011). Among the various memory flashbacks, transcribed by Lungu in various registers – ranging from the sentimental to the burlesque – the protagonist has a self-reflective, almost dialectical moment, which problematizes her concept of communist identity:

"I used to regret those times, the people I had been surrounded by, the joy, the solidarity, but I don't know why, all this nostalgia could hardly be labelled *communist*. I mean I might know. Maybe because in the old days, we called communists those who gave fiery speeches during boring, long meetings. Those who stuck to the party line without seeing left and right, without a care for people and without understanding the particular situations. For us, it was not the party members who were communists, but the politricks and the zealots. I did not regret those guys. Now the communists were the ones who had lied, who had taken by force, put people in prison, tortured them, and so on. I was neither. What kind of a communist was I? But if those were the communists, did it mean that I wanted communism without the communists? But was communism possible without "those kinds of communists"? If not, did I still want communism? [...] I no longer wanted to be one, but I was. Can you be one without wanting to be one?" (Lungu 55)

Emilia's dilemma is that she fails to recognize herself in the proximate genus of the communists either in the sense of that era, or according to the definition provided by the transition paradigm. She feels her identity as a specific difference. Therefore, her communist nostalgia seems to have no object. Instead, it does have content. While labels are misleading, what she experienced in her life remains: that harmless comfort, those modest holidays, the minuscule flat in which she had raised a child, the proletarian parties, the sufficient salary, the gas tank from the Party. But Emilia finds it difficult to rank herself amongst the communists, for she contributed nothing to this system, she was only the beneficiary of a polity that gave her a reasonably decent urban life. As far as she is concerned, communism did have, though, an "understanding for particular situations." The statement from the end of the quotation – "Can you be one without wanting to be one?" – should be interpreted not as the expression of her identitarian doubt, but rather as a subtle dissociation in relation to the evil side of communism, which Emilia does not ignore, nor gives it its due weight. What she regrets is not an ideology, but the social order that "had arranged a quiet sewer for her youth" (Gorzo 2013). Reduced to her stance as a puppet in Dan Lungu's anticommunist script, Emilia's nostalgia loses its introspective, even self-questioning consistency. This dimension of her discourse is not, indeed, alien to the novel. Rhetorically non-homogeneous, the flux of her memory frequently has melancholic-argumentative overtones. As a victim of the transition, Emilia makes a swift, pragmatic reckoning and deems that she used to live a better life under communism. A diminished, but safe existence is preferable, in her view, to an uncertain transition, dominated by poverty. Thus, Dan Lungu maintains both stakes of the story. By indirectly parodying Emilia's flashbacks – rendered in free indirect style by the protagonist – the writer emphasizes the absurdity of communist (n)ostalgia, and in light of the character's advocacy of communism, she is given an existential complexity that counters the any suspicion against an authorial slanted totalitarianism.

"The Ethics of Infidelity"

Recently, in 2013, the arguments of the "communist hag" were revived in a screened version of Dan Lungu's novel. The film spawned an interesting polemical debate⁴ between two generations of intellectuals regarding the way in which the Romanian society should relate to its communist legacy. Before analysing the arguments sparked by the film, it should be noted that the director Stere Gulea and the script co-writers Lucian Dan Teodorovici and Vera Ion substantially changed the story of the source text, and this requires a conceptual clarification of the idea of fidelity in film adaptation.

In the classical approach, methodologically consecrated by George Bluestone's book, *Novels into Film* (1957) and extended including in recent approaches (Cartmell & Whelehan 2007), the fidelity criterion served to reinforce the meaning of the novel or to assist in the teaching of literature through film. The overarching assumption of these approaches is that in relation to literature, film representations have a lower sta-

tus. The degradation of film as a medium is indirectly supported by the constant appeal to the idea of mimetic fidelity. The maximum that the cinema can do is to (visually) illustrate the narrative with accuracy. Fidelity turns thus from a correlative principle into an axiological criterion. Being, by nature, by-products/derivatives, whose fidelity is questionable, adaptations have only one chance of maintaining relevance, that is, their value: to be as reverent as possible.

On the other hand, the acknowledgment of infidelity as an essential principle in analysing the relationship between novels and films coincides with a kind of return of the repressed in adaptation studies. Recent approaches (Leitch 2010; Westbrook 2010), informed by respect for the cinema as a medium, do not exclude fidelity – for denying it would suspend the relevance of the comparison – but turns it from a valorising mechanism into a hermeneutic barometer. The idea would be that there is no point lamenting the lack of fidelity of a film in relation to a novel, but that one should question and seek to explain the stakes of the infidelity and the purposes of the adaptation. Based on one of Terry Eagleton's remarks about the Derridean concept of the "text" – "'Textual means that nothing stands gloriously alone'" (2010: 26), Brett Westbrook defines adaptation as a field of "glorious plurality" (44). As long as the meaning is not exclusively embedded in the source text, but in the process of adaptation, infidelity can also become significant in a hermeneutic sense.

Thomas Leitch speculates on the ethical potential of the idea of fidelity, demanding, symmetrically, an "ethics of infidelity," relevant to the reception and assessment of adaptations. He argues that:

„the main things that have been enjoined historically in specifically ethical terms to be faithful are husband and wife, either because a woman's adultery betrays her husband's pecuniary investment in her under the Mosaic law, or because both spouses have a duty to re-enact Christ's faithfulness to the church in an analogy expounded in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Yet because 'contracts *create* transgressions,' as Tony Tanner argued thirty years ago, the possibility of adultery, arousing both condemnation of a heroine like Emma Bovary who violates the marriage contract and an empathetic understanding of her avid reaction against the stifling bonds of marriage, provides both a basis for the bourgeois novel, which incorporates 'a tension between law and sympathy' and the seeds of its dissolution. [...] The possibility of adultery is also productive because it 'effectively re-narrativizes a life that have become devoid of story'" (Leitch 66).

The argument set forth by the professor from the University of Delaware unravels three constants distributed in a causal manifestation. The first – *transgression* – is inscribed in the very nature of the marital contract as the latency of infidelity. The second – *re-narrativization* – marks the consequence of the breach of contract by one of the spouses, a consequence that leads to an amendment of the contract. Finally, the third – which is two-headed: the *condemnation* or *empathy* – envisages the reception of the

breach of fidelity and, implicitly, of the contract rescission, conveying the effect of the former two. By transferring this reading key onto the concept of adaptation, Leitch concludes that the latter

“depends on infidelity not merely in a negative sense, at the failure to adhere to a pledge of fealty, but in a positive sense, as a response to an injunction to be fruitful and multiply untrammelled by repressive social laws and mores” (66).

The problem of the analogy between a marriage contract and the one established between the source text and the adaptation text appears, according to Leitch’s scheme, at the reception level. As cultural products arising from the confluence of at least two creative consciousnesses and involving at least two different media, adaptations require a comparative approach that inevitably leads to a polarization of value judgments. But this symmetry of axiological opposites – condemnation vs. empathy – raises a fundamental question: what is the responsibility of an adaptation? Should it be faithful to the source text or should it be free and imaginative? In other words, which prevails? The criterion of precedence or the criterion of innovation? The categorical answer given by an entire tradition of adaptation studies is as predictable as it is paradoxical: as Leitch writes, “The ethical imperatives of adaptation, whenever they have been articulated, have all been on the side of fidelity” (66). Therefore, axiological symmetry remains, as it were, a simulacrum, since the axiological verdict rests on the side of fidelity. Mimicry sparks “empathy” and creativity attracts “condemnation.” Plurality betrays its ambiguity. The justification of such a discriminatory situation, Leitch believes, derives from the fact that the hermeneutics of adaptation has built and consolidated its discourse mimicry by predicating it on the concept of artistic mimesis, derived from Plato and Aristotle, which is an essentially ethical concept. The romantic conception whereby art is a product of the imagination failed to impose itself precisely because it lacked the ethical weight. Therefore, as regards the reception of adaptations, the rigidity of the contract has stifled the latent tension of transgression. When the latter manifests itself, according to this reductive view, a rule is violated, a text does not open. Precedence grants authority and democratic concepts such as intertextuality, appropriation, or remake remain functional only between “non-derivative” texts.

Leitch fails, however, to mention yet another paradox. This concept of the – albeit conservative – fidelity of adaptation has manifested itself, after all, since modernism. Alienated though the hermeneutists of adaptation may have become from romantic poetics, they are always ready – based on the criterion of innovation/novelty – to value yet another Joyce, Camus or Kafka. On the other hand, modernism is no longer mimetic either: it has atomized its ethics into rebelliousness and, later, into irony. Benefiting fully from infidelity – by denying tradition – modernity undermined its ethics by approaching the idea of adaptation (a field marked, in fact, by the dialectic tension between fidelity and infidelity) through the rigid filter of a slanted aestheticism. This is just one of the possible and also plausible explanations of the “resistance to theory” (Westbrook 25) – in adaptation studies – that has still not been

sufficiently overcome either by poststructuralism or be more recent, culturalist approaches. However, in the terms of Umberto Eco, if fidelity prudently outlines the interpretation limits of an adaptation, infidelity provides the fertile grounds for a work opening out and lending itself to adaptation. The title of a book announcing the triumph of subjectivity in the Romanian literary criticism of the 1960s – *Infidel Readings* (Manolescu 1966) – seems symptomatic not only as a methodological option in the study of adaptation, but also for the textual relationship that it establishes. This code for appropriating the domain creates, I believe, the premise of the desideratum whereby “rather than solely adapting adaptation to theories, theories also need to adapt to adaptations” (Elliot 32).

“I’m talking about my life”. A Family Story

Returning to Stere Gulea’s film *I’m an Old Communist Hag* (no exclamation mark), what is worth mentioning is the director’s intuition as regards the perspective on adaptation. In one of his interviews for the Romanian newspaper *Adevărul*, when asked about the relationship between the script and Dan Lungu’s novel, Gulea answered: “It’s a struggle. [...] You have to break up with it so that you may re-approach it” (Gulea 2013). Probably without having read Thomas Leitch, the Romanian director appears to have taken over the latter’s terms. He takes the breach of contract to its utmost consequences, even postulating his separation from it (the break-up), which he understands as a condition of its (re)appropriation. The term Gulea uses is not at all an innocent one in adaptation theory. Julie Sanders has used to make a broader distinction, functional in the field of intertextuality and rewriting:

“An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original. [...] On the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain.” (Sanders 2005: 26)

According to the conceptual framework imposed by this dissociation, not just any appropriation can be an adaptation by default, but any adaptation requires a minimum amount of appropriation. Adaptation remains under the auspices of mimicry, while appropriation marks out the territory of creativity, which has freed itself from the “constraints” of the source text.

Stere Gulea says more or less the same thing, trying to answer those who accused him of having produced a film that swerves too far away from novel. His plea for a substantial degree of autonomy is quite clear: “I wrote a script. Will the film, in itself, stand or not? I think it is inevitable: the film, as it is, is it consistent with what it proposes? Does it hold?” the director urges one not to circumvent the comparison with the novel, but to capture its specific appropriation thereof. He does not ignore the adaptation process, but stresses the fact that his film is something else in relation to the novel, a distinct artistic product (“[a] decisive journey away”).

Unlike the novel by Dan Lungu, which remains stuck in the memory of the communist past, Stere Gulea's film opens with a flashback from the protagonist's adolescence, as she gets off a rural bus and reveals her identity to a man who has probably waited for her. But the black-and-white frame is suddenly interrupted by the sound of an old telephone, the *mise-en-scène* comes to colour and life, and the woman (Luminița Gheorghiu), whom we initially see from behind, absorbed in sticking some photos in an album, responds – at first quietly, but later by becoming animated – to the news that she will receive a surprise visit. We understand that she has been speaking to her daughter Alice, who will arrive together with her husband Allan from America in just a few days. The first scene introduces us visually into a warmly lit interior, acquainting us with a socialist domestic space onto which the modesty of the Romanian transition has been superposed. The second scene presents Tucu (Marian Râlea), the protagonist's husband. He returns home from his rural farmstead (we learn that he was there from the previous phone call). The man goes to the market to fetch some more supplies, which he will claim to be his "own production," cheerfully greets his neighbours and – in an memorable frame that captures the burlesque Romanian inventiveness – he hangs his shopping bag onto the hook of an improvised micro-crane, which will slowly climb towards the fourth floor in a splendid vertical traveling. Finally, the following two scenes (the evening discussion in the bedroom and the reckoning of the expense budget in the morning) thematically mark Gulea's film. The central theme of communist memory, so striking in the novel, is here replaced by the family theme. While Lungu had relegated the concrete meeting between the two generations to half a page, reducing it to a conflict over the telephone about the 1996 elections, Gulea narratively develops precisely this ellipse of the novel. By exploring the meeting between the two parents and their daughter, accompanied by her husband, the film adaptation breaks out of the adaptation frameworks, decidedly entering the unpredictability of appropriation.

The most important consequence of the thematic mutation imposed by the director's perspective is that the narrative perspective no longer belongs exclusively to the protagonist. The mythologized microhistory from the novel gets atomized, in the film, into several fragmented micro-histories. Emilia is no longer the sole representative of the Romanian transition. Besides her, there are several other complementary or antagonistic voices. In this regard, the most powerful scene of the film takes place while the characters are seated at table. In a cramped atmosphere, in the protagonists' house, those invited include not only the intimate guests – Alice (Ana Ularu) and Allan (Collin Blair), but also Emilia's sister, Sanda (Anca Sigartău) and Mrs. Stroescu (Valeria Seciu), a painter turned seamstress under communism because she had a "bad file." The turning point anticipating the climax scene and, in a sense, the entire film is prepared by Gulea through montage. A noisy setting, presenting the reception of the guests amid popular music playing discretely in the background, in which compliments are uttered, nonsense is discussed and, in principle, there is much bluster, is followed by a

framework dominated by total silence. The characters' attention is drawn by some TV news that informs them about the exhumation of the Ceaușescu. Camera switches from the TV screen, offering a wide shot of the diners' faces. The silence is shattered by Alice, declaring herself appalled that Ceaușescu and communism still provide news subjects of national interest. The naiveté of the young woman receives the father's ironic reply, announcing her tongue-in-cheek that if he were to run again, Ceaușescu would win the elections. This occasions the start of an almost political dispute:

Alice: Really, Mom, are you going to vote for the communists?

Emilia: So you tell me, who should I vote for?

Alice: But have you forgotten the meat queues that went all the way around the block?

Emilia: What we got by, our fridge was full of everything. No one starved to death and people did not die hungry in the street like they do now, people with small children.

Alice: Maybe they died, mother, but we didn't hear about it.

Emilia: We would've heard.

Alice: How could we have heard when we had two hours of TV broadcasting a day. OK, tell me so that I can get it: What was this awesome thing communism did for you?

Emilia: Communism made blocks and gave me an apartment for free to raise my child in it. It built factories, I had a secure job.

Alice: And capitalism would also have built blocks and factories.

Emilia: Mansions for thieves!

Alice: Oh, mom, I thought you were just pretending, but you're more of a communist than I thought.

Emilia: Well, I gave myself away. I'm an old communist hag. What can I do? I know I worked honestly and I did not hurt anybody.

Mrs. Stroescu: It's not that, Mrs. Ciorcilă. Communism was an absurd, utopian system.

Emilia: It may have been, but I'm talking here about my life. About my youth, and it's there, in that communism. What shall I do now, forget it?

Mrs. Stroescu: And mine is there too and it wasn't cheerful at all, ma'am (44.40-46.12)

In Gulea's imaginary, the transition accommodates multiple perspectives on communism. The nostalgia of the resigned Emilia, the revolt of the emancipated Alice and the sadness of the discrete Mrs. Stroescu are particularized versions of existential choices, which essentialize various layers of mentality during an advanced transition. The fact that these views are polemically shared in a family context suggests the polarization of the perspectives adopted on the totalitarian past at the level of individual biographies. This process of converting controversy into intimacy is, in fact, characteristic of Gulea's style, as he uses the "audiovisual language of family entertainment,

[meant, insofar as the audience is concerned] to keep any of the members of any family in a comfort zone" (Gorzo 2013).

On the other hand, *I'm an Old Communist Hag* is a "film about our anticommunist tropes. The past – reactivating nostalgia or, conversely, states of rebellion – seems to be further and further removed: it is becoming hazy, blurred. The communist past is no longer actual, but people [...] behave as if it were" (Burța Cernat 2013). Such a well-argued conclusion would not have been possible if Stere Gulea had not appropriated narrative time too, thereby bringing about yet another fundamental shift in relation to the novel. Very inspired, the director brings the story up to date, lifting it from the confusion of the 1990s into the economic crisis of the years 2008-9. Thus, there arises the possibility that Emilia's nostalgia may not remain as thick as Dan Lungu envisaged it.

If micro-histories are multiple, macro-history also has a recalibrated dynamics. The myth of communism, so ridiculous in Emilia's reminiscences, but so relevant for her existence and her inner life, silently collided – in the novel – with the myth of the West, of European integration, of prosperity that can only come from the West. The nostalgia for communism was the negative example, which held the Romanian transition in place. By telling the story of young people who return defeated from the American paradise – as they have lost their jobs and the bank threatens them with foreclosure – Gulea interrogates this myth of the West. While this is obvious to almost any spectator, the director proves much more subtle and enjoyable when he presents the autochthonization of capitalism. Sanda's peddling of useless, garishly kitsch objects or the subsistence boutique from Celestin's balcony outline a domestic universe converted into a bearer (pseudo)capitalist matrix. Also, after he decides to sell the country house to help his daughter, Tucu remains baffled when the real estate agent speaks to him using the language of the crisis (in its turn an economic as well as imagological export 'product'). Explaining the situation to Emilia, the man becomes confused and outraged: "No one's buying, no one's selling. It's all dead. Everyone is waiting. What the hell are they waiting for?".

Stere Gulea's film steers away from the latent or programmatic anticommunism – depending on the angle – in Dan Lungu's novel. It depicts a late transition, in which the nostalgia for communism and the revolt against communism, as well as the still illusory despair capitalism coexist. However, the film escapes from the competitive logic of ideologies, revealing a burdensome naturalness, a sort of reconciled resignation. These people who lose their apartment for 15,000 dollars that they will give her daughter so that she may pursue the American dream, "clench their teeth, don't fight, don't jump at each other's throats, have nothing to reproach one another" (Gulea 2013). It is that humaneness that no longer takes the place of any convention, of any persuasion. After having dreaded her entire life the idea of returning to the country, Emilia does not hesitate one moment when it comes to sacrificing her urban illusion for her

daughter's sake. The film ends on an inspired note, with the image of the two parents in a car stuffed with their savings. An old carpet, which almost covers the windshield, and a green cage stand out in the frame: their modest captivity in a worn-out urbanness. Tucu and Emilia laugh their hearts out poking fun at the film "Life in communism," in which both were extras, and on the radio it is announced that Ceaușescu's DNA has been confirmed after exhumation, so he can continue unhindered to rest in peace. The camera focus rises gradually, shooting a panoramic overview, from a helicopter, of the dismantled industrial areas that preserve the ruins of a communist society, stuck in transition, and conceal the survival of people who have been defeated, but continue to live their lives with dignity.

Conclusion

Therefore, addressed through the clichés of transition in the prose fiction and the cinema produced since 1989, condemned, idealized or regretted, communism remains a landmark of the Romanian identitarian representations. Dan Lungu's novel, *I'm an Old Communist Hag!*, synthesizes, through the theme of nostalgia, a defensive, past-ridden existential version, which is assessed against the opportunities of the transition, and capitalizes upon its ideological bankruptcy at a time when anticommunism dominates the political agenda of the "good" intellectual milieus. By contrast, Stere Gulea's film uses an "ethics of infidelity," appropriating rather than merely adapting the novel. References to the late transition are made this time through the family theme, and nostalgia is just one of the possibilities of relating to communism. Gulea's post-ideological critique reveals that humanity is broken, but still sufficiently strong to face its own illusions and (n)ostalgia.

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- 1 The most important television project dedicated to the Romanian gulag and the Romanians' resistance against communism was the much publicized documentary film directed by Iulia Hossu Longin, *The Memorial of Pain*. It was launched by the Romanian Television in 1991 and it has so far aired 120 episodes, consecrated to the Romanian carceral space and the Romanians' opposition to the communist regime.
 - 2 "Ce livre c'est Amélie Poulain chez les Soviets, Candide dans la République populaire roumaine," as Marine de Tilly writes about the French edition of the novel *Matei Brunul*. "Film-makers in countries of the former Soviet bloc have been using their new freedom to tell at last the stories they couldn't tell then [...] The film has inspired many words about how it reflects Romanian society," according to Roger Ebert, writing about 4,3,2.
 - 3 In 2004, a short-fiction anthology edited by Gabriel H. Deculbe came out (Iași: Versus), gathering several works of autofiction that evoked childhood/adolescence under communism.
 - 4 Nicolae Manolescu and Vladimir Tismăneanu have responded caustically to the three-part article signed by Bianca Burța Cernat (*Anticomunismul românesc postfatum*, in "Observator Cultural," no. 691-693/2013), blaming the new generation of intellectuals for harbouring radical leftist views.

Filmography

1. GULEA, Stere, dir. *Sunt o babă comunistă / I'm An Old Communist Old Hag*, MediaPro Pictures, 2013. Film.
2. MUNGIU, Cristian; HÖFER, Hanno; POPESCU, Constantin; URICARU, Ioana; MĂRCULESCU, Răzvan, directors. *Amintiri din epoca de aur / Tales From the Golden Age*, Wild Bunch, 2009. Film.
3. MUNGIU, Cristian, dir. *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile / 4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, BAC Films, 2007. Film.
4. MITULESCU Cătălin, dir. *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii / The Way I Spend the End of the World*, 2006, Film.

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