

Translating Romanian National Identity: Politics of Nostalgia and Irony in Andrei Ujica's "The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu" and Alexandru Solomon's "Kapitalism – Our Secret Recipe"

Abstract: This paper examines two instances of different discursive approaches to post communist Romanian identity, namely Andrei Ujica's "The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu" and Alexandru Solomon's "Kapitalism-Our Secret Recipe." The focus is on how Romanian identity is translated from an anticommunist cinematographic discourse characterizing the past twenty years into a truly post communist one that seems to be emerging. The key concepts used range from Shklovskian defamiliarization, nostalgia and the sublime to irony as social discourse and negotiation.

Keywords: Romanian post communism, postmodernism, nostalgia, irony, translation, the sublime, documentary, docufiction, defamiliarization.

It is our aim in this paper to approach two very different, if not opposing, texts that investigate the issue of postcommunist cultural identity and coming to terms with the communist past Andrei Ujica's *"The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu"* and Alexandru Solomon's *"Kapitalism-Our Secret Recipe"* in an attempt to tackle questions on the relationship between Romanian postcommunism and the postmodern as well as argue that ironic nostalgia is an extremely useful if not needed memory practice. Even more so, it serves to articulate a new identity by a different translation, or rather, a different model of translating past into present. As is easily noticeable, we choose to operate with a both-and approach to irony and nostalgia in the postmodern context, rather than with the binary opposition that has troubled postmodern theoreticians.

The former cinematographic text will be approached from multiple vantage points, including "heteroglossical nostalgia" (Todorova and Gille 2010, 15), Shklovskian defamiliarization, nostalgia and the sublime (Fritzman 1994), irony as social discourse and negotiation (Hutcheon 2000), as well as Žižek's theory on the negative in an attempt to establish to what extent Andrei Ujica's

* M.A. in British Cultural Studies and a Ph.D. candidate with the University of Bucharest, the Doctoral Programme of Literary and Cultural Studies.

fictional “autobiography” is indeed a suitable recipe for merging history and art to spur healthy social dialogue and to create new “lieux de memoire” in present-day Romania. The latter will be used as a counterpoint as Alexandru Solomon’s documentary is both formally and ideologically part of the “traditional” discourse of continuity between the “ancien regime” and present-day cultural and political realities. In an interview for the “22 Magazine”, Ujica reveals the principle behind this anesthetizing attempt to deal with recent history: “Inasmuch as history is the matrix of the narrative, you can approach it by narrative means, as do great historical and this new type of historical film I put forward can do in today’s world.”¹

Postcommunist countermemory will be analyzed syntactically and not morphologically starting from Andrei Ujica’s film, which we believe puts forward a completely original discursive toolkit that comes to fill a niche that has long been left empty in Romanian postcommunist identity reconstructions. Solomon’s documentary falls along the lines of the inescapable past, while Ujica’s is a revisiting with a difference. What is more, “The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu” relies on metadiscursive irony in a truly postmodern spirit, while “Kapitalism-Our Secret Recipe” relies on textual irony, thus failing to provide more than a reiteration of the extant complex of postcommunist Romania and its eternal transition. Both productions rely on the image of Nicolae Ceausescu; Ujica’s film assembles film footage from archives and aims to create a coherent first person narrative, which unnervingly enough, lacks a voice proper. Andrei Ujica himself defines his production in terms of a fictional universe building on real, larger-than life characters, namely Nicolae Ceausescu: “Ultimately, we are probably dealing with a type of “fictional cinema with real characters” as Alex Leo Serban called it.” On the other hand, Solomon seems to abuse the voice-over which is in fact Ceausescu’s imagined reaction to the flourishing capitalism system in line in postcommunist Romania, bolstered by controversial figures such as Dan Voiculescu, Dinu Patriciu, George Copos, Ioan Niculae, Gigi Becali, and Dan Diaconescu. He also intersperses his interviewees’ declarations with short animations that use Lego to represent the transformation of state-owned properties into personal “capital” after the revolution in 1989. His comments are sarcastic at times, but the prevalent register fluctuates between disappointment and cynicism, which have been part of the mainstream discourse on the continuity of communist practices in postcommunist Romania under the name of “nomenklatura privatization.” Herein lies the core differences between the two types of discourses that we seek to analyze and derive our conclusions from: Solomon resorts to shallow irony aimed at mass audiences, who will most likely respond to the documentary as to yet another confirmation of the fact that Romania has not managed to overcome the core elements of communism inasmuch as

¹ My own translation

economy and politics are concerned. What Solomon does is project Ceausescu's gaze from past into present as an uninterrupted beam. Ujica's perspective is quite the opposite: his non-fiction film starts with the mock-trial scene, used as a pretext for Ceausescu's reminiscing about his dictatorship years (and here archive footage is assembled by the director), which is then rounded off at the end by a different "trial" scene. In this case, Ceausescu's gaze is retrospective as is the audience's, but the future is inescapable in this exercise in nostalgia, as is the reassessment of the present, as Svetlana Boym explains in "The Future of Nostalgia": "Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection. (...) This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; (...) the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future." (Boym 2001, 49-50) Boym's differentiation between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia" is extremely useful in the context of the debate that "The Autobiography" has caused in the cultural press, with some claiming that it will excite feelings of nostalgia and that it is a redeeming tacking of Ceausescu's image and others advocating it is redeeming, but only in the sense that it calls for a repositioning of Romanian national and cultural conscience vis-a-vis its dictator. Linda Hutcheon's position on "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern" might help confirm the latter position, which would make Ujica's "Autobiography" the first postmodern cinematographic (and consequently, public given the broader audience involved) attempt to deal with the communist past in a way that allows for the necessary reflective distance and that constitutes an exercise in counter-memory by appealing to the memory of Romania's great political Other and using its own weapons of propaganda to defeat it symbolically and exorcise the historical trauma: "irony and nostalgia are not qualities of objects; they are responses of subjects—active, emotionally- and intellectually-engaged subjects. The ironizing of nostalgia, in the very act of its invoking, may be one way the postmodern has of taking responsibility for such responses by creating a small part of the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past." (Hutcheon 2010, 57)

One of the voices maintaining the former point of view is Doina Jela's in a review she writes for "Observatorul Cultural" in which she claims that the hyper-intellectualized mock-documentary is too theoretical to serve the purpose it prophesizes and that it is bound to have the effects of a process of "restorative nostalgia" "Since I left the cinema, I haven't been able to answer the question: What was this written for? And, more importantly, for whom?

Because is this is an autobiography then it can function as a candidature. If this were possible an overwhelming majority of Romanians would reelect him (i.e. Ceausescu) even without this defence that lies by omission.” (Jela, 2010) Doina Jela’s voice is not singular and it voices a fear that has been present in the Romanian public space for years, that is a fear to distance oneself from the communist past and intellectualize it lest the moral approach we allegedly need should be lost. Here, Alexandru Solomon’s documentary functions as a perfect counterexample: it displays a moralizing attempt, resurrecting the dictator and ironically making him express satisfaction at how his legacy has been honoured by the former exterior commerce directors and present-day moguls. The last “imagined” sentence Ceausescu’s voice utters in “Kapitalism” is “I go back to where I came from feeling reassured and confident, knowing I have survived in each and every one of you.” (Solomon 2009 53’ 30”-54’)² The point being made at the level of the discourse and metadiscursively as well is that there is no rupture in the identity of the “elites” and perhaps no dividing line between the communist and postcommunist realities. While this type of discourse might be agreeable for those who expect an ironic yet moralizing evaluation of current realities, it is clearly not able to cause the proper distance for self-reflexivity that we believe is paramount in trying to make sense of Romanian postcommunism in a postmodern context. Frederic Jameson’s attack of the ironic, trivializing instruments of the postmodern, as they are evaluated by Linda Hutcheon, provide a new insight into the criticism leveled at Andrei Ujica’s film as they seem to pose the question of whether indeed the postmodern discourse is a favourable terrain for our approaching our postcommunist problems: “These are what he calls “fashion-plate, historicist films” that reveal “the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past.” To him, these are the inauthentic, nostalgic “celebrations of the imaginary style of a real past” which he sees as “something of a substitute for that older system of historical symptom-formation, formal compensation for the enfeeblement of historicity in our own time” (Hutcheon 2010, 85) This “enfeeblement of historicity in our own time” is apparently a handicap that cannot be surmounted by resorting to ironic “reflexive nostalgia” which will do nothing but weaken the critical attitude that is necessary for an actual coming-to-terms with the past. The debate opens new fronts by this recontextualization of the postcommunist in the terms imposed by the postmodern and leads to further questions about the role of the historian and the artist and the juxtaposition thereof. This is precisely the kind of question Apor and Sarkisova ask in his “Past for the Eyes”: “To what extent can the activities of the artist and the historian reinforce, contradict, or remain in dialogue with each other? What are the similarities and the dissimilarities between the artist using historical allegories and analogies to produce general moral claims and the historian

² My own translation

explaining particular situations? Where are the limits of moral judgments by artists and historians? Is there an inherent responsibility of historical interpretation embedded in the tradition of visual representation?” (Apor and Sarkisova 2008, xi)

The answers seem to revolve around whether we accept a moralizing attitude towards the past as an appropriate stance on our recent history and whether blame can safely and fruitfully be apportioned and, perhaps most importantly, if it can help towards the real bone of contention we are dealing with: post-1989 Romanian identity. We believe that Hutcheon’s new interpretations of nostalgia and irony in the context of the postmodern provide a theoretical answer to that question inasmuch as ironic nostalgia seems to be one of the most appropriate tools for reassessing the past in light of the present and future and the only one that leads to a satisfactory heteroglossia in our society that has been marked traumatically by the uniformity of discourse and pernicious double-codedness. That Romanian society is marred by an overwhelming number of contradictions is a foregone conclusion and that it is this rupture and the inability to deal with it that delays the reshaping of our identity is equally true.

When discussing the new type of metafictional cinematographic productions in former socialist countries, Apor and Sarkisova make an interesting claim: “The mechanisms of meaning attribution are explored in numerous examples; the fusion of “authentic” footage and “invented” fiction creates opportunities for legitimizing the most contradictory statements.” (Apor and Sarkisova 2008 xi)

Might it not be that this is precisely what we as Romanians living in post-communist, postmodern times should do? That is, be able to legitimize multiple discourses so as to accommodate a pluralist identity that would otherwise remain fractured and traumatic? To this purpose, such cinematographic, i.e. artistic, endeavours as Ujica’s emphasize the collective nature of irony as social discourse and “heteroglossical nostalgia” (Boyer 2010, 16) and help integrate individual memory into collective memory, yet another Gordian knot of the postcommunist debate. “(...) to design landscapes of individual memories via a collective enterprise” (Apor and Sarkisova 2008 xi) seems to be one of the motives behind “The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu,” one which is vitally necessary. “

The multiplication of nostalgia by the multiple positions we are forced to take when confronted with historiographic metafiction is a valid, possibly redeeming postmodern tool that becomes available to the Romanian society through “The Autobiography”: “Finally, it is multiplied: nostalgia for the past is complemented by nostalgia for the created memories of that past, as experienced and “relived” through the “original” and its “representation” in a process which erases the differences between (real) memories of the past, fictional memories and memories of the fiction.” (Apor and Sarkisova 2008,

xii) Alexandru Solomon's documentary, however, does nothing of the kind; it unifies and equates realities putting forward an image of a historical-moral and temporal-continuum that is inescapable, reinforcing the age-old Romanian complex of being "trapped within history."

At this point, one might ask if the relevance of Ceausescu's image is indeed so great to our postmodern postcommunist attempts at reconstructing national and cultural identity as to justify the ongoing debate. The answer will, from our point of view, be definitely affirmative. The void left behind by the events of 1989 and the lack of a proper trial for Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu has contributed immensely towards a chronic indecisiveness as regards our identity.

Zizek most observantly points to this symbolic void by analyzing the flags being waved by revolutionaries in 1989, with the symbols of the Communist republic cut out and the indexical hole in the middle: "It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the "open" character of a historical situation "in its becoming," as Kierkegaard would have put it, of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by the new one." (Zizek 1993, 6)

Indeed this void is yet to be completed in symbolic terms and the lack of a proper trial did not help much towards the development of a critical, legitimized attitude. Mark Osiel expresses the need for a proper trial in the case of a society which is historically traumatized and which "can greatly benefit from the collective representations of the past, created and cultivated by a process of prosecution and judgment, accompanied by public discussion about the trial and its result." (Osiel 2000, 39)

By allowing Ceausescu to voice his version of the truth in a silent, almost surreal way, "The Autobiography" may recuperate this failure to organize a proper trial in the sublime register of fictional history: "The old pathologies(e.g., distrust of the public sphere, lack of a legitimate, legitimating narrative, and proliferation of alternative "legitimate" narratives) re-emerged, superseding any hope that a shared "revolution" myth would offer a common identity and a clear break with the "old"" (Ely and Stoica 2004, 112) This is precisely why Ujica's attempt to create anew a more suitable discourse is so important and can recuperate a public voice that has been seeped into mistrust so far. As Ely and Stoica remark, "The inability of the trial, a traditional forum for creating shared memories, to reaffirm the "revolution" myth can also be understood through this failed break with the "old". Between the "old" and "new", a hole still remains in Romania's collective memory of the December Events." (Ely and Stoica 2004, 112) This hole is to be filled with a different discourse, perhaps one in the vein of what Andrei Ujica has put forward.

Ujica's metafiction has a prosthetic value, aiding the bridging of this gaping hole between the "old" and the "new," while allowing for individual memory

to be merged into the fabric of collective memory (for example, the scenes where young people are dancing and which include songs that have been added by Ujica during the montage allow a flow of memories on the part of the viewer, whose personal reality fill this “blank” space in the historical narrative).

We can only hold with Diana Georgescu’s view that “ (...) Ceausescu’s figure loomed so large in the Romanian imagination that only the registers of the sublime, the heroic, or the tragic could contain him.” (Georgescu 2010, 155) and therefore once again validate the in nuce discourse sketched in “The Autobiography” as an ironic memory practice: “Playing with and against the registers of the sublime and the tragic, ironic memory practices are both indirect processes of remembrance of the communist leader in an often demeaning or irreverent manner and process of resignification.” (Georgescu 2010, 155)

We are able to identify the presence of the sublime in conjunction with nostalgia in any attempt to recapture and understand the communist past and its myriad facets as well as the value of imagination – as an aesthetic exercise – working towards grasping the ungraspable. As Fritzman suggest in his article “The Future of Nostalgia and the time of the sublime, “The sublime is a matter of the sensible presentation of a thing which points beyond itself, signifying that there is something else which necessarily remains unrepresentable. (...) Here again the sublime transverses nostalgia.” (Fritzman 1994, 20), The only logical conclusion that follows in terms of the historicity of nostalgia and the sublime and their reworking in the realm of the aesthetic is that “This is a future which reactivates the past, and so may provide a site of resistance in the present.” (Fritzman 1994, 25), which we believe solves the quandary concerning the double positioning of the artist distributed in the role of a *sui generis* historian in the production of fictional historiographic accounts by liberating Ujica from all claims of over-anesthetizing a reality which otherwise calls for solid moral and historical reevaluation: his is an attempt to tackle the nostalgic and the sublime that inform the imagology of Nicolae Ceausescu and by extension of the communist regime which stretches into the future and creates a beneficial resistance in the present. Once again, this resistance is only moral and fleeting in Solomon’s documentary, which in a way pacifies the audience through its shallow, textual irony. In light of the concepts that have been put forward, one must not forget that “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.” (Shklovsky 1991, 12) and “The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu” will prove to be more than a mere revisiting of the dictator’s image, but an

operation on (re)constructing the way Romanians perceive their past, present and future in a postmodern context. Perception itself will have been challenged and only then will we, as a society, be equipped with the necessary critical tools to reevaluate our condition.

Therefore, it seems fair to conclude that "The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu" moves beyond an artistic innovation by providing an alternative discourse that can constitute itself into a feasible memory practice likely to replace textual irony by a syntactic, metadiscursive and heteroglossical one, which would prove itself capable of dealing with the insubstantial quality of nostalgia and the sublime. In direct opposition with "Kapitalism-Our Secret Recipe", Ujica's masterpiece manages what the former only promises to do, namely evaluate from a reflexive distance the past and its present legacy. Moreover, it does so while at the same time, unifying the postcommunist and the postmodern discourses that have so far fallen along parallel lines in the Romanian cultural debates.

References

- Apor, Peter and Sarkisova, Oksana. 2008. *Past for the Eyes. East European Representation of Communism in cinema and Museums after 1989*. Budapest : CEU Press.
- Boyer, Dominic. 2010. "From Algos to Autonomos in Todorova", Maria and Gille, Zsuzsa, eds. *Post Communist Nostalgia*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.. Daković, Nevena. *Memories And Nostalgia In (Post-)Yugoslav Cinema*. 2008. Apor, Peter and Sarkisova, Oksana, eds. *Past for the Eyes. East European Representation of Communism in cinema and Museums after 1989*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Ely, John F and Stoica, Catalin Augustin. 2004. *Re-membering Romania. Romania since 1989: Politics, Economy and Societ*. Carey, Henry F, ed. Lanham, Maryland: Lenxington Books.
- Fritzman, J.M. 1994. *The Future of Nostalgia and the Time of the Sublime*. CLIO, Vol. 23. pp.16-29.
<http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5000191718>
- Georgescu, Diana. 2010. "Ceausescu Hasn't Died. Irony As Countermemory In Post-Socialist Romania". Todorova, Maria and Gille, Zsuzsa, eds. *Post Communist Nostalgia*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2000. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern. Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory", in *Studies in Comparative Literature* 30: 189-207.
- Jela, Doina. 2010. "O autobiografie plină de omisiuni", in *Observatorul Cultural*. 556-557
[.http://www.observatorcultural.ro/index.html/articles|details?articleID=24491&pageID=1](http://www.observatorcultural.ro/index.html/articles|details?articleID=24491&pageID=1) Web. 11. 01. 2011.
- Osiel, Mark. 2000. *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

- Shklovsky, Viktor. 1991. *Theory of prose*. London :Dalkey Archive Press.
- Solomon, Alexandru. 2009. "Kapitalism-Our Secret Recipe. Hi Film Productions".
Dvd. Todorova, Maria and Gille, Zsuzsa, eds. 2010. *Post Communist Nostalgia*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Ujica, Andrei. 2009. *Autobiografia Lui Nicolae Ceaușescu: Un film despre persoana din spatele personajului istoric*, interview by Mitchievici, Angelo. Revista 22.
<http://www.revista22.ro/autobiografia-lui-nicolae-ceau351escu-un-film-despre-persoana-din-spat-9323.html> . Web. 11.01.2011.
- Ujica, Andrei. 2010. *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*. Icon Productions. Dvd.
- Zizek, Slavoj. 1993. *Tarrying with the Negative*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.