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## Between a Harmless Game and a Bittersweet Disease: Forms of Nostalgia in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Comparative Literature

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on novels, essays, films, and popular culture miscellanea representative of Central and Eastern Europe, in the attempt to explain how nostalgia developed in this area since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe has undergone a major - and, for many, unsettling - historical shift, thus, perhaps not surprisingly, nostalgia for the former communist regime does not lack in popularity. Due to the region's turbulent past *cum* present, millions of Eastern Europeans have migrated westward; homesickness is only one of the feelings they share. The region is also a cauldron for far-right ideologies, which carry their own nostalgias. Obviously non-exhaustive, this dissertation takes on a series of study cases representative of two fundamental forms of nostalgia: personal and collective. I am examining two essential aspects that define each form of nostalgia: firstly, nostalgia's relationship with suffering; and, secondly, nostalgia's ability to be toxic or useful. Among the authors discussed below are Andrei Tarkovsky, Milan Kundera, Mircea Cărtărescu, Filip and Matei Florian, Cezar Paul Bădescu, Gabriela Adameșteanu, Wolfgang Becker, Dubravka Ugrešić, and Dan Puric.

This study emphasizes nostalgia's complexity, which is not only given by its various forms but also by its fluidity. Personal and collective nostalgias often overlap, childhood nostalgia is enhanced by nostalgia for a place, and harmful nostalgia may prove useful sometimes. The map drawn here, which places nostalgias along personal and collective, painful and bittersweet, and temporal and spatial lines, offers a better understanding of how nostalgia unfolds nowadays, when migration, political extremism, and populism are on the rise.

**Keywords: personal nostalgia, collective nostalgia, post-communism, Central and Eastern Europe, Romanian society and culture, suffering, toxicity, coping mechanisms.**

## Summary

This thesis examines how nostalgia developed in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and especially in Romania. Each chapter focuses on different forms of nostalgia: homesickness, nostalgia for childhood, for a beloved person, for communism, or right-wing nostalgia. Each nostalgic form is analyzed by comparing some of the following novels or films: Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia*, Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Mircea Cărtărescu's novel *Nostalgia*, Mircea and Matei Florian's novel *The Băiuț Alley Lads*, Gabriela Adameșteanu's novel *Fontana di Trevi*, Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *The Ministry of Pain*, and Cristian Mungiu's film *Occident*. Nostalgia's relationship with suffering and its ability to be toxic, useful, or both are the elements that are chiefly examined in the case of each comparison. The final goal is to feature nostalgia's complexity given by the complicated historical, political, and economic context that developed in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

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## Introduction

During the 1812 Franco-Russian war, the Russian army leader, General Kutuzov decreed that any soldier showing signs of nostalgia would be executed. He kept his word at least on two documented occasions. Risking an epidemic of nostalgia among his troops would have been, well, dangerous. Two centuries and change later, *pace* Kutuzov, the same word is called upon not only to recall the peacefulness of the times gone by, not only to add to the defence weaponry system of the growing number of victims, but to also name a small appliances company. Nowadays, nostalgia is a ubiquitous, dynamic, and, implicitly, ambiguous concept. It straddles the wide country of the soul which stretches from bittersweet, harmless emotions to tetanising pain.

Nostalgia is a modern concept. In its beginnings, it had been associated with the pain (*algos*) generated by a long-delayed or impossible return (*nostos*). Jean Starobinski argues that, as it was directly linked to pathology, nostalgia was considered an illness strong enough to kill the individual afflicted by it. As time passed by, the term stopped designating a univocal meaning, as nostalgia does not always generate intense suffering, nor it necessarily implies negative outcomes for the nostalgic. Just to give a contemporary example, the nostalgia associated with consumption has nothing tragic or intense. Unless things change unexpectedly due to the ongoing victimhood epidemic, it is reasonable to say that, in this deterministic universe no one will die because s/he regrets the passing of the Nike sneakers fashionable in the nineties. Starting around the second half of the twentieth century, nostalgia progressively became fashionable, quite fashionable, then very fashionable. It now encompasses both common types of nostalgia: individual longing for one's bygone youth, and forms of collective regret, such as

consumerist nostalgia. Popular culture, consumerism, globalization, and migration, political instability and the most recent revival of far-right ideologies relate with nostalgia in different ways and thus often generate various viewpoints: nostalgia is positive and harmless (Davis), always implies suffering (Malpas), can only be a personal experience, rather than a collective one (Malpas), or is domesticated by consumerism (Gary). This multitude of takes is an object of interest for many fields, which generates overlapping but also contradictory definitions of nostalgia: from marketing (retro marketing) and phenomenology to psychology (nostalgia and its therapeutic value) to trauma-, migration-, and memory- studies. This concept has reached a high point in its history, in which its swelling makes it challenging to even trace the borders of its semantic domain. Would it be a gross exaggeration to say that we find ourselves in the midst of a nostalgia industry?

Personally, I cannot ignore nostalgia as a topic of reflection (avoiding it as a feeling is a different matter). For years, I have heard my grandparents pine for their life during communism. And they are not alone in this voicing. Credible statistics show that millions of Romanians miss the old red times.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as millions of Romanians emigrated to the West in recent years, homesickness took an equally, omnipresent statistically relevant feeling. I recount - cannot even count how - many interviews and documentaries I have seen featuring Romanians leaving in tears their homeland. In passing, let me say that I have become an emigrant, and a (temporary?) immigrant myself. Last but not least, the retromania and the vintage wave coming from the West have hit Romania as well. They caught my attention from the very beginning, not that this was their intended purpose. The Western pop-culture is imbued with nostalgia: vintage and retro

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<sup>1</sup> See section "Postcommunist nostalgia: Romania's case."



fashion, vintage cars, old furniture, flea markets<sup>2</sup>, ruin pubs... TV series such as *Stranger Things* and *Mad Man* were a huge success in Romania.

Understanding what nostalgia has become is a challenge worthy of a complex project such as a doctoral thesis. This thesis, for instance... My personal experience was decisive in accepting this challenge, yet my decision to focus on Eastern-European nostalgia was taken after considering other arguments as well. Dubravka Ugrešić argues that because Eastern Europe's recent history is more intense than its Western counterpart's, nostalgia is more generous in showcasing its numerous faces (1998, 222). Dubravka believes that the museum has become "a paradigm of the contemporary sense of temporality" (ibid.). "Recently," she writes, "Europe has produced the biggest souvenir in the world, the Berlin Wall" (ibid.). After the fall of the wall, pieces torn of it were gifted around the world<sup>3</sup> and smaller bits were sold as souvenirs. The wall has been scattered in thousands of *lieux de mémoire*, as Pierre Nora would rightly call them, so the trauma of communism would not be forgotten. Yet this huge souvenir park also speaks about the contemporary need to conserve and museify. As Andreas Huyssen argues, the Western ultra technologized society has reached a point in which it lost its capacity to remember and thus an obsession for memory has developed (6). The world has been museified, the past is fetishized, and the museum is idolatrized. To fetishize Eastern Europe's past is more complicated than to fetishize the Western recent past (the fifties, the sixties, etc.) because this past is more intensely - or at least more vocally - despised by some and loved by others, with some loving and hating it at the same time.

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<sup>2</sup> In my hometown there is one of the biggest Romanian flea markets. In "piața Flavia" one can find photos from the interwar period, old cameras, vintage garments and bikes, silver spoons and coins, communist memorabilia, etc. As these are the Balkans, one can also find fake Armani cologne and Nike sneakers knock offs sold directly from the trunk of the car, along with hot goods from the West (usually sold on blankets by smiling merchants).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Timișoara "Museum of the Revolution," received a piece of the wall that is now exposed in the museum backyard.

Why does one need a piece of the Berlin Wall? Why does one need communist memorabilia in general, as some of the collectors do not purchase such objects to commemorate and remember the past but just because they fetishize the past? Owning an object that is linked to a traumatic past activates in some a perverse pleasure that is similar to what people feel when watching a car crash. One cannot help watching the carnage that stopped the traffic on the freeway, even if such a curiosity is cruel. But why is it immoral that some find pleasure in watching tragedies, but it is not immoral to fetishize a past that many consider atrocious? The quickest answer, which does not solve the issue, is that the same past is idealized by others, such as the communism nostalgics. For them, a tragedy has been transformed into the Golden Age.<sup>4</sup> If they were those watching the carnage on the highway, they would see the most beautiful sunset that falls on the puddles of blood and this “beautiful” image would fill their hearts with joy. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to disregard their attempt. Romanticizing the past involves nostalgia or nostalgias that can be superficial, or painful, even contradictory, and they all ought to be tackled here.

Another reason why I decided to study Central - and Eastern - European nostalgia was the revival of right-wing nostalgia, which unfolded differently, depending on the local socio-historical context. In countries such as Hungary and Poland right-wing parties and their populist rhetoric convinced numerous voters. In Romania was not quite so. Over the last years<sup>5</sup>, right-wing nostalgia came to be linked to some charismatic figures such as Dan Puric, an actor with a pan Slavic Christian orthodox rhetoric, or to the “Dacopathy” phenomena, which idealizes the Dacians, Romanians’ ancestors who predate the Roman colonization of parts of their land. It is

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<sup>4</sup> This past has become fashionable. Some think it is cool to wear T-shirts or caps that feature communist symbols. This fashion is vulgar and offensive to many: Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara *ejusdem farinae* are morally responsible for countless deaths. I personally find nothing “cool” about such morbid characters.

<sup>5</sup> The far-right party that almost gave Romania’s president in 2000 lost its popularity especially after the death of its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor.

worth understanding better why nostalgia for an idealized and allegedly glorious past has led to different results in Romania, in contrast to other countries from the region.

This thesis has Romania as its main point of reference, yet I am going to compare each Romanian nostalgic take with its counterparts from other Central-and Eastern-European countries.<sup>6</sup> At that, a comparative endeavour will highlight both Romanian particularities and significant regional commonalities. As I mentioned before, the time frame is settled by the fall of the Iron Curtain, because this is the historical event that boosts a large variety of nostalgias, both personal and collective. Nevertheless, I do not aim to be exhaustive or to make an inventory of all nostalgic forms. I do focus instead on a series of representative forms: nostalgia for childhood, for a loved one, for the birthplace, nostalgia for communism, and right-wing<sup>7</sup> nostalgia. Although nostalgia entails numerous meanings, there are some major elements that it is commonly linked to. In the beginning, nostalgia was exclusively associated with homesickness. This relationship has remained fundamental to nostalgia until this very day. Then nostalgia was linked to nationalism and the feeling of belonging to a lost country. Today, such feelings have developed into aggressive forms of nostalgia that go on a par with resentment and even hatred. Longing for one's youth or childhood or for a loved one are, as well, fundamental nostalgic experiences because they are enhanced by crucial human feelings such as love and the desire to remain young. All these feelings share one common element, namely loss, "the irrecoverable," which can only be evoked by reviving the past.

Nostalgia is a fluid concept that vacillates between different theoretical levels, and thus requires an interdisciplinary approach: from metaphysics to psychoanalysis and from cultural

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<sup>6</sup> This theses focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, however if I were to continue my endeavour and make it a bigger research project, I would also focus on the nostalgic forms that are specific not only to Central and Eastern Europe but also to other regions.

<sup>7</sup> This is a generic term and I am only using it in order to give a hint about a nostalgic form that is in fact more complex and almost impossible to label.

anthropology to history and political sciences. My endeavour is guided by a series of questions that I consider essential for the logic of nostalgia. Firstly, I am asking, what is nostalgia's link with suffering? Suffering<sup>8</sup> (*algos*) has been a central concept for nostalgia from the very beginning. When Johan Hofer coined the term, he assumed that nostalgia's suffering is both corporal and spiritual, as the illness caused by homesickness has emotional causes but a physical manifestation. Suffering remained at the core of the concept even after nostalgia was separated from the field of pathology, because nostalgia is focused on the irreversibility of loss, as Jankélévitch would say. And loss generates suffering. However, not all forms of nostalgia entail intense suffering, if suffering exists at all, as is the case of pop culture nostalgia or some forms of nostalgia for childhood. I shall thus explain how nostalgia's economy changes based on the intensity of suffering.

The second fundamental question concerns nostalgia's outcomes: under what conditions is nostalgia useful or harmful to the subject(s)? Because from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century nostalgia was considered a disease, the harm it entailed was of a pathological nature. Outside the medical realm, nostalgia remains a source of spiritual unsettledness and in many cases a source of intense suffering. Nevertheless, nostalgia might as well employ positive outcomes, as is the case of *Ostalgie*, which is a collective form of nostalgia that helps former East Germans to cope with their past and with the sudden changes that took place in Germany after the fall of the wall and the reunification. By asking whether nostalgia is harmful or not, I am not aiming to produce moral judgments over it. Even though it can be misleading and can lead to a hateful or resentful behaviour, nostalgia does not always follow a clear path, therefore it

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<sup>8</sup> I prefer to use suffering instead of pain, for the surplus of focus on the subject that it carries. For more on the similarities and distinctions between suffering and pain, see the first chapter.

is not easy to decide whether nostalgia is harmful, useful, or both. Furthermore, as harmfulness does not entail a moral judgment, nor does usefulness need to employ a strictly pragmatic take.

I will examine nostalgia's relationship with suffering and its ability to be either harmful or useful in several incarnations. In the second<sup>9</sup> chapter, I will analyze Tarkovsky's movie *Nostalghia*, which features a lengthy metaphysical meditation on nostalgic suffering. Tarkovsky depicts homesickness as a suffering so intense, that it can lead to death. Even though Tarkovsky's film was produced before the fall of the Iron Curtain, there are several reasons why this film suits my endeavour. Firstly, Eastern Europe's recent history is linked (and significantly determined) to Russia's political evolution. Secondly, *Nostalghia* was the first film Tarkovsky directed after he fled the Soviet Union and, as he states in his interviews, it explores his own homesickness, even though the film obviously transcends his personal experience. Furthermore, *Nostalghia* anticipates one of the most popular forms of nostalgia that was about to spread across the space behind the former Iron Curtain, as millions of Eastern Europeans fled their home countries hoping to find a better life in Western Europe. Last but not least, *Nostalghia* depicts the most intense form of nostalgic suffering. This will serve as a point of reference for the other forms of nostalgia which will be examined in the other chapters.

In the third chapter, I am going to focus on personal nostalgia. The first section focuses on Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, which features an intense form of nostalgic suffering. Even though the novel was published before 1989, it is one of the few artworks that depicts such an intense form of nostalgia and that anticipates emigration nostalgia from Central and Eastern Europe. The rest of the chapter analyzes lighter forms of nostalgia. Mircea Cărtărescu's volume *Nostalghia* depicts both nostalgia for a beloved person and nostalgia for childhood.

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<sup>9</sup> See the literature review in chapter one.

I shall continue to analyze nostalgia for childhood in two other novels: *The Băiuț Alley Lads*, written by Filip and Matei Florian, and Cezar Paul Bădescu's novel *Tinerețile lui Daniel Abagiu*. Both novels bring into discussion the political element, as childhood is recalled within the socio-political context of communist Romania. Nevertheless, communism is not necessarily the recipe of an unhappy childhood, especially for Florian brother's novel. Furthermore, both novels feature nostalgia as a phenomenon that marginalizes suffering.

In the other half of the chapter, I will deal with home country nostalgia. In the section called "Kitsch Nostalgia," I shall analyze how homesickness is featured in *manele*, probably the most original and the most disregarded music genre that emerged in post socialist Romania. My goal is to determine whether nostalgia is inauthentic when it is infused with sentimentalism and it is featured in kitsch artistic productions.

In the last two sections of this chapter I further analyze the relationship between nostalgia and Romanian emigrants by focusing on a phenomenon that I call anti-nostalgia. Anti-nostalgia combines the feeling of longing with the revolt for one's home country or for the micro-universe of home (family, friends, etc.). I shall analyze *Occident*, a film directed by Cristian Mungiu, a documentary about the phenomenon of sending parcels from Romania to Romanian emigrants called *Diaspora la pachet* (Diaspora to Go), and *Fontana di Trevi*, the most recent novel written by Gabriela Adameșteanu, one of the most important Romanian novelists.

In the last two chapters, I shall focus on collective forms of nostalgia. In the fourth chapter, three types of nostalgia will be analyzed, which emerged in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain: Ostalgie, Yugonostalgia, and Romanian nostalgia for communism. As featured in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Ostalgie is a coping mechanism for the sudden cultural and political shift that occurred in East Germany after 1989. Yugonostalgia is as well a

coping mechanism, which focuses on evoking elements that used to build Yugoslav identity. In Ugrešić' novel *The Ministry of Pain*, Yugonostalgia is shared by emigrants who fled during the Yugoslav conflicts and who still struggle to cope with war trauma. Unlike Ostalgie and Yugonostalgia, Romanian nostalgia for communism is a more dramatic and dogmatic form that appears to entail a harmful form of suffering.

In the last chapter, I am going to focus on nostalgia linked to far-right ideologies. I shall approach this ideological framework from a very broad perspective, as in most of the cases ideology is a rather fuzzy element. Such nostalgias rely on a feeling of fear and on an apocalyptic perspective that transcends one specific ideology, even though it is enhanced by conservative and far-right rhetoric. In the first section, I am going to examine the profile of nostalgia manifested by some members of the Hungarian Guard, as it is depicted in *Keep Quiet*, a documentary broadcast on Netflix. In the second section, I am going to examine *Diavolul e corect politic* (The Devil Is PC), a novel written by Ștefan Baștovoi, a Moldavian-Romanian writer who depicts political correctness as the greatest evil faced by humanity. In the third section, I will analyze the apocalyptic and ultra-orthodox vision embraced by Dan Puric, who wrote the volume of essay *Despre omul frumos* (On the Beautiful Man). In the last section, I shall continue my analysis of the ultra conservative Orthodox perspective only that this time I am focusing on the case of Dacopathy, which is a bizarre belief that Dacians, the pre-Roman ancestors of the Romanians, are the cradle of civilization and embraced Christian Orthodoxy even before the birth of Christ. I am going to analyze *Dacii liberi* (The Free Dacians), a documentary released in 2018 that depicts of the particulars of some of the Dacopathy believers.

Regarding the case studies I shall examine, although novels are my main reference point, non-artistic sources are also very important. The three documentaries I focus on offer a glimpse

into the actuality of nostalgia, which otherwise would be ignored. Just to give an example, the story of Csanád Szegedi, the Hungarian anti-Semitic EU parliamentarian who discovered later in life that he was of Jewish origin might become a film or a novel one day, yet so far the documentary produced by Netflix offers a better understanding of the Hungarian Guard, the far-right paramilitary movement that shocked Europe. This documentary is indispensable for a better understanding of right-wing nostalgia, as it emerges nowadays in Hungary.

My analyses do not exclusively focus on art, or on highbrow creations. Nostalgia is not an exclusively elitist cultural product. Therefore, in order to have a deeper understanding of it, I also take into consideration sources that do not entail the rigors, or the complexity of highbrow art. For instance, the *manele*, a musical genre that is popular among Romanian emigrants, especially among unskilled workers. From another perspective, creations such as Baştovoi's novel *Diavolul este corect politic* are rather mediocre and even though the author aims for a highbrow status, such novels lack complexity and sophistication: the story is simplistic, the author's beliefs are expressed in a clumsy way, never mind that the style is modest. Yet these examples are necessary for a better understanding of nostalgia. Overall, this thesis focuses on fictional and non-fictional creations that enjoyed critical attention (for good and, sometimes, for bad reasons). The thesis deals with the ways in which nostalgia developed dynamically in various socio-political contexts of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, I am not arguing that nostalgia has changed in a manner that makes it unrecognizable. Nostalgia oscillates between what defined it from the very beginning, *algos*, and the cultural contexts that shapes it in various ways.



## Chapter One: Literature review

Since the seventeenth century, when the term “nostalgia” was coined, its meaning changed on various occasions. As Helmut Illbruck argues, in the beginning nostalgia named a deadly disease consuming those displaced from home, while it now reached the point in which “it seems, anything not nouveau can already express nostalgia” (4). Nostalgia emerged within the still naïve realm of Enlightenment medical sciences and it became a global phenomenon that concerns even the lightest forms of fascination for the past. Some, such as Jameson, argue that this generalization trivializes nostalgia and deprives the concept of a real meaning (287). Others, such as Linda Hutcheon (20) and Gary Cross (3) argue that nostalgia is a fluid concept - and that there is nothing negative about that.

Nostalgia entails suffering or not, it can be harmless or harmful, it can be personal, collective, ironic, reflexive, intense or light. Nostalgia has become an object of study for numerous fields - social psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, memory studies, marketing, etc. As Jankélévitch points out in *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, regardless of the definition one gives this term, one element is stable in all definitions: nostalgia is based on the irreversibility of loss.<sup>10</sup> What can be lost? The past, one's youth, home, a loved one, a bygone political system, etc. Loss entails various implications for each field.

In retro-marketing, loss is what makes a product appealing. There are numerous articles that define this phenomenon. To sample only a few: Susan Lolak, Alexei Matveev and William Havlena's “Nostalgia in Post-Socialist Russia: Exploring Applications to Advertising Strategy,” Darrel Muehling and David Sprott's “Exploring the Boundaries of Nostalgic Advertising Effects: a Consideration of Childhood Brand Exposure and Attachment on Consumers' Responses to

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<sup>10</sup> Although loss is reversible sometimes.

Nostalgia-Themed Advertisements, A Consideration of Childhood Brand Exposure and Attachment on Consumers' Responses to Nostalgia-Themed Advertisements,"; and Leila Lefi and Abderrazak Gharbi's "Nostalgia and Brand Attachment: Theoretical Framework and Application in the Case of a Tunisian Advertising." In psychoanalysis, loss grounds the relationships between melancholia, mourning, and nostalgia. For instance, Alessia Ricciardi's "The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film." In cultural studies, a dominant view has loss link the past with issues of identity and of various cultural and mass consumption products. See for instance Gary Cross' *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*.

The examples are so numerous and the theoretical approaches are so varied that it is impossible to even mention them all in the context of this thesis. There are a few studies that have become of reference for most of the scholars interested in nostalgia, regardless of their theoretical background, which emphasize the contradictory outcomes of this concept. Jean's Starobinski's article, "The Idea of Nostalgia" opens this list, as it follows the medical history of the concept and thus brings to light the pathological implications that were attributed to it until the end of the eighteenth century. Starobinski's study brilliantly emphasises the devastating consequences associated with the longing for the lost home. For two centuries since the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer coined the term, nostalgia had been a synonym for intense physical and spiritual pain. Although the alleged medical implications of this term were naive, it is worth noticing that people have acknowledged how strong this emotion can be.

Thirteen few years after the publication of Starobinski's study, Fred Davis published *Yearning for Yesterday: a Sociology of Nostalgia*, where he argues that nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion that is predominantly positive, completely harmless, and useful in many cases. He states

that nostalgia is about regretting something pleasant and that if nostalgia encompasses pain or sadness, it always envelopes them by a “benign aura” (Davis 14). Not only that nostalgia is benign, but it actually has a significant role, just as long-term memory has, “in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities” (Davis 31). Nostalgia saves a self from the sudden changes (such as abrupt social ones) by “(1) cultivating appreciative stances toward former selves, (2) screening from memory the unpleasant and shameful, and (3) rediscovering and, through a normalizing process, rehabilitating marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves” (Davis 44-45).

Steven Crowell connects nostalgia with a philosophical perspective on death. In his view, nostalgia does not mourn what is dead but deals with the fact that death is returning and it is responsible for our finitude. Thus, nostalgia always gravitates around the I (as a temporal structure) and the concern that the end cannot be eluded. Nostalgia is the “sudden and painful experience of this <<having been>>” (Crowell 98). The nostalgic invokes that part of her/himself that has already been lost as if death has been already partly stuck itself in. In other words, nostalgia is the suffering of the I that acknowledges the rupture between the ego and temporality: there is a discontinuity between the present and the past that the self has no way of compensating. There are, however, more moderate positions representing the same phenomenological perspective, such as the one held by Jeff Malpas who, in his essay, “Philosophy’s Nostalgia” argues in favour of a contemporary form of nostalgia that does not have *algos* at its core, but which cannot be totally separated from pain.

The perception of nostalgia changes profoundly in the late capitalist context. Firstly, nostalgia becomes ubiquitous in a different fashion. Whereas in the nineteenth century it was strongly linked to nationalistic ideas and thus entailed the process of reviving and idealizing the

glorious religious, ethnic or heroic past of a country, consumerism brings nostalgia into the mainstream, as it becomes a popular presence in various fields, from entertainment to fashion. In *Consumed Nostalgia. Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*, Gary Cross argues that nostalgia has become a means to cope with the fast pace of late capitalism, which shifted its focus from longing for the past to fighting against the present by eternalizing the past. Nowadays, people seek for a past time in which the ever-accelerating change could be stopped, Cross argues. Thus, they find refuge in the time of childhood which they try to possess by purchasing objects that remind them of this specific period. Their endeavour can be harmless but it might as well be deceitful and toxic. There is nothing either tragic or painful in buying a pair of retro Nike sneakers but this might embody a schizophrenic relationship with time as Jameson calls it (Jameson 287), as the past cannot be transformed into a perpetual present. Thus, consumed, nostalgia marginalizes suffering. This marginalization might turn out to be either benign or toxic.

Svetlana Boym is the author who not only acknowledges the dual status of nostalgia, both as malignant and benign, but who also situates this concept in the socio-political context of post-socialist Eastern Europe. She defines two types of nostalgia: reflexive and restorative. The restorative nostalgia is a dogmatic approach of the past, as an entity that needs to be accurately reconstructed. This form of nostalgia is usually representative of nationalistic perspectives and it is deemed toxic. Unlike reflexive nostalgia, restorative nostalgia is more concerned with the finitude of the past and develops a fragmentary and ironic way of longing for the past. Although still linked to suffering, the reflexive nostalgia is a benign form.

Boym's significant work opened the path for numerous studies that address the implications of nostalgia in Central and Eastern Europe. Most of these studies focus on the socio-political dimension, namely the transformations undergone by nostalgia over the transition

period. As in the previous cases, the role of nostalgia and its link to suffering are equivocal. Yugonostalgia, Ostalgie or, as it is simply called in Romania, nostalgia for communism are collective forms of nostalgia that focus on a past that was often traumatic. The idealization of this past is a means of coping with the unpredictable present. In *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, Dubravka Ugrešić states that in Croatia these people are derogatively called zombies, as they link their lives to a dead time and to memories of a dead country, Yugoslavia. In articles such as “Goodbye, Lenin! Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism,” and “Unattainable Past, Unsatisfying Present - Yugonostalgia: an Omen of a Better Future?” nostalgia is featured both as a mechanism that falsifies the reality and as a means to preserve an identity or to counterbalance the aggressive transitioning to the western way of living.

Romania’s situation is very much the same. Post-communist nostalgia is an issue that caught the attention of several scholars, who do not fail to mention that the figure of Nicolae Ceaușescu is central for the post-communist nostalgics. In “Nicolae Ceaușescu: between Vernacular Memory and Nostalgia,” Maria Alina Asavei focuses on “Nicolae Ceaușescu’s ubiquitous enactments in the vernacular memory of post-communist Romanian public and private sphere and on the relationship between these enactments and nostalgia” (Asavei 11). As Asavei focuses both on vernacular memories and artistic productions, she argues that post-communist nostalgia does not necessarily have to be perceived in negative terms, as a restorative and unhealthy process. Diana Georgescu shares a similar nuanced perspective. In “Ceaușescu Hasn’t Died: Irony as Counter-memory in Post-Socialist Romania,” she analyses some parodic songs about Ceaușescu and argues that irony (which differentiates itself from humour by being primarily polemical and having a social character) is a valid practice of remembrance. This alternative stands under the label of counter-memory as it emphasizes how irony challenges

mainstream memory. This alternative memory marks an important shift in perspective. Thus Ceaușescu, as the embodiment of the Communist party, is not being perceived as a tragic, sublime or heroic figure anymore: an “ironic reframing not only demeans but also diminishes and or cuts down to size the figure of the former Communist leader” (162). Georgescu argues that songs such as the one composed and interpreted by the Romanian artist and performer, Ada Milea, “Ceaușescu Hasn’t Died,” suggest that, “despite the general anti-Communist rhetoric, the only thing that binds together the national community of Romanians is the haunting presence of its former communist leaders.”<sup>11</sup>

Post-communist nostalgia is a privileged issue among Romanian scholars, and this is mainly due to the stubborn present of communist issues in Romanian collective memories, which still sparks very intense debates. Nevertheless, there are many other aspects linked to the post-communist nostalgia that require more attention. For instance, the link between retro-marketing and Romanian post-communist nostalgia was largely ignored. That is the reason why I have written an article regarding the link between revived communist food brands and nostalgia. The main purpose of this article was to emphasize that a shift in perspective is possible regarding the narratives that refer to the Romanian communist period. Whereas for many years the communist past was only invoked either in tragic or in critical terms, humour and irony finally constitute a different narrative, one that aims at a reconciliation with the past.

Another under-explored issue is nostalgia for the nineties. The nineties represent the period in which Romania switched from communism to capitalism. It is a period of social unrest, and of fundamental socio-economic changes. It is also a period of uncertainty, in which hundreds of thousands of Romanians emigrated. Nevertheless, this is when Romanians tasted freedom for

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<sup>11</sup> I am using information provided in my article “Changing Narratives through Communist Food Brands. Three Romanian Case Studies: Rom Chocolate, Gostat Meat Products, and Polar Ice-Cream.”

the first time after forty-five years and had their first consumerist experiences: grocery stores, Western products, Western-like TV entertainment, uncensored popular culture, etc. Regarding personal nostalgia, childhood in the nineties is different, as it is the first generation's that grew up in capitalism, yet without enjoying the certainty and comfort of a Western kind of life. As I am one of the Romanians whose childhood is marked by the late-nineties atmosphere, I know from personal experience that the universe of my childhood is different from communist childhood and it is different from childhood lived after the nineties. Childhood in communism, or at least in the eighties, was marked by strict rules in schools, by line ups for even the most basic products, by food penury, but also by the freedom that was experienced on the playground, by the joy of tasting hard to get sweets of what were then exotic fruits (bananas and oranges), etc. The children who grew up after the year 2000 enjoyed the benefits of more socio-economic certainty and a more Western kind of life, yet less freedom on the playground, as parents embraced a Western style of parenting, and less time spend among friends, because computers and video games became increasingly popular. Children of the nineties had school experiences similar to the one children had before 1989, as teachers were used to the communist teaching style, which entailed a very severe, rigid approach to pedagogy. They also enjoyed freedom on the playground,<sup>12</sup> and their craving for foods and sweets was aroused by the Western products that were at long last becoming accessible, yet unaffordable for most of the Romanians. They thus faced many of the challenges of the pre-1989 childhood, but in a freer, more colourful, and less austere socio-economic context.

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<sup>12</sup> As parents were busy with their jobs, children were many times on their own. The so called "generația cu cheia la gât" (the generation with the key on their neck) referred to children who grew up in the big communist cities and who many times had to take care of themselves and of their younger siblings. As the situation did not change much after 1989, children like me grew up in the very same way. Our parents trusted us that we can take care of ourselves and we did, yet many of us took the liberty to enjoy experiences that would never be shared with our parents if signs of our bold "experiments" could be concealed: burns on carpets, smoke on the kitchen walls, broken windows, scars, angry neighbors, etc.

Although I do consider that nostalgia for the nineties should be studied as a phenomenon in itself, not much can be said from a comparative literary perspective, as arts can hardly be curtailed to fit only such a specific timeframe. Therefore, nostalgia for the nineties could be better studied from an anthropological perspective or from the perspective of cultural studies and I do hope that the time will come when scholars will pay attention to this period. Nevertheless, I am going to make numerous references to the nineties, as post-communist nostalgia did appear during this period.

Regarding the nostalgias enhanced by far-right ideologies, articles such as “A Cross-National Comparison of Nationalism in Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovak Republics, Hungary, and Poland”, written by Hilde Weiss, analyze how nationalism, ethnic intolerance, and anticapitalistic feelings entail an idealization of the past within Central and Eastern European countries. There are also articles that examine the role of the main populist parties in disseminating a rhetoric based on an apocalyptic message and on the regret for the past. Papers such as “Radical Right Framing of Social Policy in Hungary: Between Nationalism and Populism” analyze the path followed by Fidesz and Jobbik, which are now the dominant political parties in Hungary, a country that has turned to illiberalism in the last years. However, nostalgia related to far-right ideology does not get as much attention as it deserves either, even though there are studies such as James Frusetta and Anca Glonț’s “Interwar Fascism and the Post-1989 Radical Right: Ideology, Opportunism, and Historical Legacy in Bulgaria and Romania,” which compare how the phenomenon developed in several countries from this region.



Since its very first years of democracy, the flame of xenophobia, racism, and toxic dogmatism burnt in Romania, as politicians such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor<sup>13</sup> constantly poured gas on fire.<sup>14</sup> The myth of a golden past was also part of their rhetoric. As years passed by, more forms of nationalism developed and the mythologies regarding the past flourished. For instance, the Dacian mania became very popular. Some Romanians believe that Dacia, the ancient territory of what is now Romania, was the cradle of civilization. Some of them are convinced that even Jesus Christ was Dacian.<sup>15</sup> The issue has not been ignored by scholars and essayists. Dan Alexe has recently published *Dacopatia* (Dacopathy), an instant-success volume that deals with some of the myths embraced by “dacopați” (Dacopaths; this is how people who embrace the myth about Dacian superiority are called). Yet his book is a collection of essays, which even though erudite and very well written, do not fit the scholarly standards. There are, however, scholars who focus on this issue in an academic manner, such as Monica Spiridon’s “Romanian Cultural Identity: Remembered, Recorded, Invented.” There she analyzes the link between national communism and Dacian mania, as Ceaușescu first bankrolled the myths about Dacians, as a means to build a nationalistic Romanian history that should enhance patriotism and thus oppose the Soviet Union’s internationalism.

Some see in Eastern Europe the most prolific context for studying nostalgia: “as much as Holocaust has become a paradigm for researchers in memory studies [. . .], works on nostalgia are paradigmatically Eastern Europe” (Ange and Berliner 1). The post-socialist context enhanced both collective nostalgias, such as Yugonostalgia, Ostalgie, or post-socialist nostalgia,

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<sup>13</sup> Corneliu Vadim Tudor was the head of the hard-line nationalistic party România Mare (The Greater Romania Party), whose infamous role was to spread the myth of Romanian superiority and to instigate to conflict between Romanians and Hungarian ethnics from Transilvania.

<sup>14</sup> See also Markéta Smrčková’s “Comparison of Radical Right-Wing Parties in Bulgaria and Romania: The National Movement of Ataka and the Great Romania Party.”

<sup>15</sup> See *The Free Dacians* documentary.

far-right nostalgia, and personal nostalgias, such as migrant nostalgia, nostalgia for a loved person, and so on. Although there are several studies that pay attention to the socio-political profile of nostalgia in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, very few of them focus on other types of nostalgia, such as nostalgia for homeland or nostalgia for youth. I would mention Codruta Alina Pohrib's study "Writing Childhoods, Righting Memory: Intergenerational Remembrance in Post-Communist Romania" or David Herman's study "Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity." Furthermore, none of them specifically analyze the role of nostalgia as a malign or benign presence nor directly focus on its link to pain. There are instead novels, essays and autobiographical essays, movies and documentaries in which this topic is present in different forms. Besides the ones that I shall analyze in my thesis, I would also mention Ioana Pârvulescu's volume of autobiographical essays *Și eu am trăit în comunism* (I also Lived in Communism) and Gabriel Decuble's volume of essays *Cartea roz a comunismului* (The Pink Book of Communism), Ștefan Baștovoi's novel *Iepurii nu mor* (Rabbits Don't Die) and Oana Moisil's documentary *Cei care pleacă* (The Ones Who Leave).

Furthermore, Romanian post-communist nostalgia benefited from a fractured scholarly approach. To my knowledge, there is no academic endeavour to contextualize and compare the different forms of nostalgia that developed after 1989, personal and collective, both to the left and to the right. As nostalgia is very complex and never easy to define issue, a study that follows nostalgia's different forms in relation to the Romanian post-communist social, historical, and political context is necessary. Otherwise, nostalgia will keep enjoying merely fuzzy representations and will not be deeply understood other than related to some niches.

Furthermore, nostalgia is even better understood when the comparisons include similar nostalgic

forms from the region, as such an endeavour reveals the nuances that differentiates Romanian nostalgias.

## Chapter two: Burnt by Nostalgia: Deadly Nostalgia in Tarkovsky's Film

### *Nostalghia*

#### 2.1 Introduction

I will analyze the two examples of (deadly) nostalgia that are depicted in Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia*, by chiefly focusing on their relationship with the idea of suffering. Although these examples' consequences are intense, I do not regard them as radical forms of nostalgia, but rather as an etalon of how painful nostalgia can be. A "fatal attachment," as Tarkovsky calls it, for the native land is a "classic" form of nostalgia. It is difficult to analyze nostalgia as suffering, and, by the same token, ignore *Nostalghia*, which is one of the most relevant contemporary artistic creations that focused on this theme.<sup>16</sup> The complex depiction of nostalgia from this film is almost unprecedented: a form of suffering focused on the loss of a place but also on the loss of a past time, a disease, a test, an expression of loneliness, a form of suffering that links one with his or hers roots, an unbearable pain, yet a necessary evil.

*Nostalghia* tells the story of Gorchakov, a Russian poet that comes to Italy to inform himself on the biography of a Russian musician from the eighteenth century that spent a part of his life in Italy. While accompanied by Eugenia, a translator who is in love with him, he travels to Bagno Vignoni, where he encounters Domenico, who is considered insane by everybody else besides Gorchakov, who resonates with Domenico's mystic perspective. The film focuses on Gorchakov's homesickness but also on the mystic views of Domenico.

Tarkovsky's film not only features nostalgic suffering at its utmost, but also links it to the historical context of the East. As the director confesses in *Sculpting in Time*, he had as a source

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<sup>16</sup> Not to mention that the movie enjoyed ample international recognition, as it was awarded significant prizes at film festivals such as Cannes, it was enthusiastically received by film critics, and was subsequently taken up by numerous academic scholars.

of inspiration his own nostalgia for Russia and for his loved ones who could not flee the Soviet Union to join him. Although, as Tarkovsky argues (Gianvito 120), this is not an emigration movie, it is a film about the pain of being far away from home. As Tarkovsky was facing a tacit interdiction to produce movies in the USSR, *Nostalghia* was filmed in Italy. In fact, the director never returned to Russia after he made this film, as the Russian authorities made it obvious that he would never be allowed to again direct movies back home. This film indirectly emphasizes the role politics and historical events play in creating the context for irreversible loss, which is going to be greatly important in the following chapters. Although nostalgia and *Nostalghia* are not directly linked to the political dimension, the communist dictatorships contributed in various ways to the development of several forms of nostalgia: people were either forced to emigrate, or they were confronted with brutal changes (expropriation, imprisonment for political reasons, etc.) that made them obsessed with their past, longing for an imagined life in another political context.

This film also sets the ground for a significant comparison. *Nostalghia*, with an “h,” refers, according to Tarkovsky, to Russian homesickness. He argues that this feeling is specific to Russians and does not occur elsewhere, not even in other Slavic countries (Tarkovsky 202). Therefore, this chapter creates a profile of nostalgia that is going to be compared in the following chapters.

As the main goal of this chapter is to analyze the relation between nostalg(h)ia and suffering, there are several aspects that I will be addressing. First of all, nostalgia employs a continuous oscillation between homesickness (mainly represented by Gorchakov) and the longing for an idealized past (represented by Domenico and, implicitly, by Gorchakov), yet the

two types of nostalgia are not going to be examined separately because they share numerous common elements. Tarkovsky has a holistic way of perceiving them:

Ultimately I wanted *Nostalghia* to be free of anything irrelevant or incidental that would stand in the way of my principal objective: the portrayal of someone in a state of profound alienation from the world and himself, unable to find a balance between reality and the harmony for which he longs, in a state of *nostalgia* provoked not only by his remoteness from home but also by a global yearning for the wholeness of existence. (Tarkovsky 204)

The Russian director does not differentiate between homesickness or other kinds of suffering related to nostalgia, as long as they all stand under the sign of crisis and intense suffering.

Furthermore, at this point it is inconclusive whether Tarkovsky perceives nostalgic suffering as toxic or useful. This is in fact going to be the main focus of this chapter: What are the outcomes of nostalgic suffering in Tarkovsky's artistic universe? Does nostalgia have a meaning, or it is a curse or a plague, something that cannot be eluded and does nothing but devour the sufferer both physically and spiritually?

Before going any further, a brief clarification ought to be made. In several of his interviews, Tarkovsky argues that *nostalghia* is a mortal disease<sup>17</sup>. He thus implies that nostalgia goes beyond exclusively spiritual suffering, as its effects spread to the body as well. These physical effects of nostalgia employ a return to the original meaning of the concept, namely a spiritual and physical affliction (Starobinsky 86). The difference is that Tarkovsky is aware that the medical naiveties attributed to nostalgia in the seventeenth century are not credible anymore. Today it is common knowledge that nostalgia is unlikely to cause death or severe physical pain because it is clear that nostalgia has nothing in common with meningitis or other diseases that

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, *Sculpting in Time*, pp. 202, 206 and John Gianvito, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, p. 81.

doctors from the seventeen and eighteen century mistook nostalgia for. Nevertheless, Tarkovsky insists on its pathological implications. After all, there is a tradition in Russia to compare the human soul with more palpable elements, such as the environment. Just to give an example, Berdyaev argues that “spiritual geography corresponds with physical [geography]” (Berdyaev 2).

According to Ronald Schleifer, “both pain and suffering are notable human experiences, yet the difference is that pain usually refers to a physical threat, as it focuses on the body and suffering.” Suffering is best understood as a response to a serious threat to one’s “personhood, those aspects of someone’s life that vitally define them as a human person” (Schleifer 9). Yet the distinction between pain and suffering is often fuzzy because there are some cases in which the most painful experiences are less physical and rather mental, as is the case of sexualized torture (Schleifer 115). In *Nostalghia*, the body is obviously affected by a tremendous suffering. Gorchakov has a fragile body, he takes pills, he bleeds from his nose, and dies from a heart attack. Domenico burns himself to prove how serious is the decline of the humanity. The same flames represent the nostalgic suffering that burns both the body and the soul. *Nostalghia* features the body as an extension of the troubled soul and nostalgic suffering as a form of carnal pain as well.

## 2.2 One plus one equals one

In *Nostalghia*, both main characters suffer from nostalgia<sup>18</sup>. Andrei Gorchakov is a famous Russian poet who has come to Italy to study the biography of Sosnikov, a seventeen century Russian musician that had lived for a while in Italy. Just like Sosnikov, Gorchakov is devoured by homesickness. Sosnikov returned to Russia but never found the home he

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<sup>18</sup> For more information regarding the plot and the characters, see also Nariman Skakov’s *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*, and Robert Bird’s *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema*.

desperately longed for, so he committed suicide. Gorchakov would never find his home again either, as he dies in Italy. Andrei's fragile aspect but also his aura of a saint is what strikes the viewer from the very first scene. He is a Dostoyevskian character (such as prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin) who is absorbed by his inner painful world and who neglects his body and the outer world. Gorchakov has a distinctive sign, one that is common to many Tarkovskian heroes, namely a gray strand of hair<sup>19</sup>. In the New Testament's book of Acts of the Apostles, fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit descends as tongues of fires and touches the apostles on the head. Gorchakov looks like he has been touched as well. The Russian poet has been chosen and something very important is going to happen to him. After the descent of the Holy Spirit, the apostles speak in many tongues and are ready to spread the word of God across the world, yet the people that surround them believed that they are drunk, as they cannot understand what the apostles are saying. Just like the apostles, Gorchakov is an enigma for most of the people who interact with him. Because he has been chosen, he carries a huge burden on his shoulders and nothing but pain awaits him. His sign speaks of a wound that is open in his soul. Nevertheless, his burden entails spiritual depth and wisdom. He grasps meanings that remain concealed for most people: he is the only one who understands Domenico and he is the only one who truly understands Russia and Russian poetry. Gorchakov is followed by an aura of a saint, yet this aura has nothing solar in it. The most common gesture made by Gorchakov is to smoke. The smoke is a rather impalpable substance that only touches his inner body, as if it is both spiritual and toxic. Smoking can be compared in symbolic terms to burning incense, only that this ritual reflects in Gorchakov's case his state of irritation or pain. He lights a cigarette every time something bad happens: when he arrives at the hotel, when he later quarrels with his guide, when he gets drunk, when he remembers his home, etc.

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, the stalker or Kris Kelvin from *Solaris*.



Domenico, on the other hand, represents the typology of the insane person who is self-marginalized and ostracized by his community and who is nostalgic for a time he personally did not live in, but that was (as he believes), nevertheless, a far greater period - one of the great masters, in which people were closer to the fundamentals of life. He is, as Tarkovsky states in one of his interviews, nostalgic for spirituality (Gianvito 87) and he intends to sacrifice everything for it. Just like Dostoyevsky's character Alexei Nilych Kirillov, he intends to kill himself for the sake of society. When he first encounters Andrei and his guide, Domenico asks for a cigarette from Eugenia. His gesture is rather made to catch Andrei's attention. Later, Domenico says that he never learned how to smoke and that there are more important things to do in life. He is referring to saving the world, which would act out the primal script established by the self-sacrifice of Jesus for humanity. But the fact that the fire is lighted, even for a cigarette, anticipates the essential goals of their relationship. Fire, as a kind of spiritual beacon, is what should save the world and what kills Domenico. Even the Saint Catherine pool, where the two men meet for the first time, is linked to the same symbol since the steam coming from the water and the smoke of cigarettes look alike.<sup>20</sup> When Domenico speaks about the pool, he uses the Italian word "fumo," which can mean both steam and smoke. Moreover, the pool is where Gorchakov is going to die. But before dying, he actually follows Domenico's advice and throws away the cigarette he was smoking. This may be evocative of Jesus' call to Matthew the Levite, who is a tax collector, to throw away his money and follow Jesus (Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27). It is the moment when he decides to keep the promise he made to Domenico and save the world. Just like Andrei, Domenico has a sign on his head. The black cap that he always

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<sup>20</sup> The multitude of symbols used by Tarkovsky seems overwhelming sometimes, for both viewers and scholars. He is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest aesthetes in independent cinema but his spiritual struggle and his metaphysical questions might be featured in a manner that overload some of his movies. Perhaps that is the reason why his first film, *Ivan's Childhood*, and his last one, *Sacrifice*, are even stronger movies, because the director embraces aesthetic simplicity, even a minimalist approach (à la Bergman).

wears has a hole on the right side. In the scene of the speech the hole becomes a white dot.<sup>21</sup>

Domenico and Gorchakov wear the sign that announces their sacrifice. On first glimpse, the two characters embody two different types of nostalgia, yet things are more complex, as more nuances need to be taken into consideration.

The film begins by focusing on Gorchakov's suffering. As he and his interpreter, the beautiful Eugenia, arrive at the spas of Bagno Vignoni, a splendid ancient location also visited by Sosnikov, Gorchakov soon finds that he is not enjoying being there. He is distracted and moody, lacks motivation to do any sightseeing, sleeps for endless hours just to dream of his home and his wife; he is skinny and pale, and constantly takes pills. There are two (almost) irresistible "temptations" that have no effect on him. Firstly, the aesthetic pleasure does not stimulate him in any way. He refuses to see the frescoes of Piero della Francesca, about which, as we find out from Eugenia, he used to speak often. Aesthetic pleasure has actually the opposite effect on him. He states at some point that he is tired of all the beauty that surrounds him. Not even the beautiful interpreter, who tries to seduce him, makes a different impression: no carnal or spiritual pleasure tempts Gorchakov anymore.

Domenico is an exotic character about whom legends circulate in the small spa resort. One thing is certain, however, namely, Domenico has an apocalyptic perspective upon life, which is the reason for which he keeps his family captive in their house for eight years. This imprisonment is his attempt to save the family from the influence of the "wicked world" - modern secularized, materialistic society that has gone astray and lost its spiritual compass. As the present is in a profound crisis, he praises a vague past. Upon meeting Gorchakov, Domenico becomes convinced that he should not only try to save his own family, but the entire world. Domenico is the only one who gains Gorchakov's attention. Whereas the others tend to

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<sup>21</sup> See the scene here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JikGhqQh4c4>.

marginalize Domenico because of his insanity, Andrei argues that the insane are rejected because their madness is scary, hard to grasp, while, in fact, they are closer to the truth. This is in line with the ‘holy fool’ concept from Russian tradition and Dostoevsky in particular (e.g., Stinky Liza in *The Brothers Karamazov*).

The two characters develop a special relationship that is sealed by a series of symbolic gestures. When they talk, they put aside any mundane and superficial gestures. Whereas the interpreter<sup>22</sup> represents the banal, Domenico and Gorchakov only aim for the essential in their conversations. They ignore any taboos or social rules that should have guided their first meeting. Gorchakov tells bluntly the Italian that he knows why Domenico has kept his family locked up. Then they go inside Domenico’s surreal house and share bread and red wine. They eat and drink as if the purpose of consuming that bread and wine were not to nourish their bodies, but their souls. Although the bread and the wine have not been blessed by a priest, they do represent the body and blood of Christ that the two share in order to authentically connect with each other at this analogue of the Last Supper. Then an even more important event takes place: Gorchakov receives from Domenico the candle he needs to keep burning when crossing the pool, which is the symbolic gesture that would save the world. Domenico cannot cross the pool by himself, so he passes this tremendous responsibility to Gorchakov. Therefore, their relationship is enhanced by a goal that transcends life and death, as it concerns the spiritual salvation of the entire human race (Shakov 172). The commissioning of a grand spiritual quest or task by a master (Domenico) to an apprentice (Gorchakov), evokes the mandate given by Christ to the Apostles to go out into the world and preach the Gospel (Acts).

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<sup>22</sup> There have been numerous debates (see, John Gianvito, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, p. 94) about Tarkovsky’s misogyny. Although I do not have even the slightest intention to become a moral judge of Tarkovsky, there are indeed moments when his patriarchal perspective can be hard to digest by some.

The third element that illustrates how close the two men are emerges when Gorchakov watches himself in the mirror but sees Domenico's reflection instead. There is thus a point at which their identities overlap (Shakov 177). Their messianic goal and the implicit huge responsibility that rests on their shoulders redefine the boundaries of personal identity.  $1+1=1$ , this is the contradictory mathematical formula written on one of the walls of Domenico's house, which actually expresses the unity of the two men (Sushytska 39). The same idea is reconfirmed in the scene in which Domenico pours into his hand two drops of olive oil, saying that one drop plus one drop make a bigger one, not two. This does not mean that one is estranged from his own identity as he is becoming the other; on the contrary, this entails that one becomes more aware of the other's concerns and sufferings. Thus, Gorchakov embraces Domenico's goals and vision. The final gesture that consolidates their common destiny but, at the same time, incontestably separates them is their concomitant death. Domenico commits suicide in Rome; Gorchakov dies in Bagno Vignoni. Both were trying to save the world.

At this point, nostalgia intersects with a messianic drive and with the suffering caused by the realization that the humanity has reached its lowest point. This does not mean that Gorchakov's homesickness is marginalized, but it is now included into a wider perspective that stands under the sign of suffering. The world is not well and sacrifice is required to save it: "Tarkovsky admits as much when he tells us that Gorchakov's nostalgia is not just a result of his distance from home, but is a symptom of a global yearning for the wholeness of existence" (Loughlin 372). Gorchakov is devoured by his homesickness but at the same time he resonates with Domenico's view on the world and struggles to fulfill the promise he made to him. However, this change of perspective might give a special meaning to nostalgia which generates suffering at the service of a greater, nobler goal:

Both Domenico and Gorchakov as two separate individuals have to disappear in the depths of nostalgia: Domenico is consumed by fire and Gorchakov by water. Both deaths, but especially Domenico's, are difficult to accept, unless we understand them mythologically, as a sacrifice that opens in us the possibility of the new. Both Domenico and Gorchakov are led by the sirens of nostalgia toward something that appears to be their demise but that turns out to be a new beginning. For Gorchakov (and perhaps for Tarkovsky as well), it is the world in which we do not have to choose between Russia and Italy, between being with our loved ones and having freedom and resources to create beautiful works of art. For Domenico, it is the reality in which people live harmoniously with their different others and with nature.

Nostalgia, as a longing for that which is not, can either prevent us from creating or call forth something new – the new that never was. Plunging into the deep waters of nostalgia is risky. But if we hear out its terrible and wondrous song – what the Greeks called *deinos* – if we allow it to take a hold of us and destroy the limits of our self, we might return to our new home, we might repeat with difference. (Sushytska 42)

Nostalgia can be a regenerative force that employs suffering as a constructive challenge (as a test). This means that regardless of how intense nostalgic suffering can be, it is a necessary step in reshaping a new beginning based on regret. One regrets the loss of a place, namely Russia in this film, and an idealized past time - the one longed for by Domenico. Regardless of the reasons that generate their nostalgia, they both decide to sacrifice themselves in order to do something for the future of humanity. And they both lose their lives trying to accomplish this. Gorchakov was about to return to Russia when he decides to fulfill the promise he made to Domenico. He confronts his homesickness and this final effort proves to be unbearable for his weakened body. Domenico plans his suicide as a last warning sign for humanity: he suffers from the knowledge that the world is not as it used to be. Both their actions are based on a nostalgic perspective, which comes in the form of enormous pain.

And yet their choices do have a purpose, namely, sacrifice meant to save themselves and humanity from a spiritual void. Sacrifice is a major theme in Tarkovsky's artistic universe. Movies such as *The Sacrifice* and *The Stalker* depict characters who sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. Following the pattern of Christ's sacrifice for human sins (1 Cor. 15: 3ff) and some of Tarkovsky's characters act out the same spiritual algorithm: Alexander from *The Sacrifice* the stalker, and, last but not least, Domenico and Gorchakov. In "Tarkovsky's Philosophy of Love: Agape in Stalker and Sacrifice," Bilge Azgin argues that the stalker and Alexander reflect the ideals of *agape*, which is "an unselfish love which gives itself away through the act of sacrifice" (Azgin 210). Some of Tarkovsky's characters give everything of themselves and undertake intense suffering in order to prove that love and bottomless kindness still exist and can change the world. Furthermore, their sacrifice is a means to react against the crisis in which the world finds itself in. At the same time, it points toward a future that needs to be radically different (Azgin 211). Therefore, their sacrifice is a messianic gesture. Domenico and Gorchakov adopt a messianic role and this is not something unusual in Russian culture. After all, as Berdyaev says, in the minds of the Russians "exists a vigorous messianic consciousness" (Berdyaev 2). Below, I am going to question the limits of this messianic perspective. My assumption is that the film offers a more complex perspective on this issue, one that transcends Tarkovsky's opinion as expressed in the interviews, namely that the world can be saved<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, John Gianvito (ed.), *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews*, p. 144.

### 2.3 From a messianic perspective to an apocalyptic one

In order to better understand this (alleged) messianic perspective and its link to the idea of sacrifice, it is important to focus on one of the fundamental themes that preoccupied Tarkovsky not only in *Nostalghia* but throughout his entire career. As he mentions several times in his interviews<sup>24</sup>, he was convinced that people's supreme objective should be to regain their spirituality. His conviction is that the humanity is facing a spiritual crisis of the sort that it has never faced before (Gianvito 116). On the few occasions on which he tries to explain what exactly he means by spirituality, his answer is rather ambiguous and chances are that he meant it to be this way (Gianvito 145). There are, however, a few key ideas that guide us to better understand what he had in mind. Tarkovsky makes a sharp distinction between the materiality of the world, the mundane and superficial layer (that is augmented by the modern way of living: consumerism, materialism, lack of roots), and the mysterious layer of our existence, which we chiefly access through art and religion. As in the case of apophatic theology, this is a mystery and therefore cannot be explained. It is rather an experience that transcends words and reason. Nevertheless, one should interrogate oneself about life. For Tarkovsky, a spiritual endeavour is an investigative process. One should step out of one's comfort zone and ask the questions that truly matter: why are we here?; what is life?, etc. But people have stopped asking these questions and this has led humanity to an unprecedented spiritual crisis (Gianvito 144). Domenico's final speech probably expresses Tarkovsky's thoughts as well.

Even though Domenico and Gorchakov are rejected and marginalized, they are certain of their belief; moreover, they are ready to make the highest sacrifices in order to save the world.

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, John Gianvito (ed.), *Andrei Tarkovsky...*, pp. 66, 78, 84, 94.

This is why they resemble the profile of a Christian apostolic or prophetic figure.<sup>25</sup> *Nostalghia*'s strong ties with the religious<sup>26</sup> universe have been analyzed by Gerard Loughlin.<sup>27</sup> He states that “the nostalgia that Tarkovsky evokes, and that envelops his characters and viewers is as much theological as it is autobiographical” (Loughlin 371). He also argues that the theme of homesickness and the autobiographical character of the movie can also be interpreted, when related to some leitmotifs in Tarkovsky's films (return to the roots of the ancestors, search for the spiritual) “as the fundamental homesickness that Christianity evokes through the story of Eden's loss” (Loughlin 371). The movie features numerous Christian elements: the monastery, the statue of Madonna del Parto, the religious ceremony from the beginning of the film, the holy sacrament that has already been analyzed, the bible from Gorchakov's room, and the examples can go on. Domenico and Gorchakov talk and spread the news (especially Domenico) about the end of time and try to persuade people (in Domenico's final speech) to return to the fundamental values. Gerard Loughlin argues that the two characters can be both prophets and apostles. He refers to Agamben's book *Time that Remains*, where the Italian philosopher compares the two religious figures, and argues that Domenico and, by extension, Gorchakov are both prophets, as they announce the end of time, and apostles, as they recall the fundamental act of Jesus' presence on earth. Both figures are connected to a messianic perspective: the apostle comes after the Messiah (and nostalgically recalls Him) and the prophet before.

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<sup>25</sup> On the profile of the Christian martyr, see Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*.

<sup>26</sup> I am using this general term, as Tarkovsky does not manifest in this movie the appurtenance to any specific confession. Although the church featured in the film is catholic, *Nostalghia* is not about belonging to a specific confession.

<sup>27</sup> There are other studies that also deal with this issue. See, for instance, Daniel O. Jones's dissertation, *The Soul that Thinks: Essays on Philosophy, Narrative and Symbol in the Cinema and Thought of Andrei Tarkovsky*, and Nariman Skakov's *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*.



Both the figure of the apostle and that of the prophet are many times related to the idea of sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> They give up their lives and their families. Many times they confront society, and they are marginalized, blamed or punished for their beliefs. They live in solitude; they are misunderstood or simply ignored. Their life stands under the sign of suffering, as they have to continuously fight for what they stand for (Grieb 221). And this accurately represents the situation of Domenico and Gorchakov. They are misunderstood and isolated by society, they are separated from their families and fight until their last breath to save the world. However, it is inconclusive whether their efforts, even as religious gestures, really make a difference - for themselves and for the rest of the world.<sup>29</sup>

There is, however, another concept fundamental to Tarkovsky's view. Tarkovsky considers that time has two instead of three essential components, namely the future and the past:

Time is said to be irreversible. And this is true enough in the sense that 'you can't bring back the past', as they say. But what exactly is this 'past? Is it what has passed? And what does 'passed' mean for a person when for each of us the past is the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present, of each current moment? In a certain sense, the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient, than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection. King Solomon's ring bore the inscription, 'All will pass'; by contrast, I want to draw attention to how time in its moral implication is in fact turned back. Time can vanish without trace in our material world for it is a subjective, spiritual category. The time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed within time. (Tarkovsky, 58)

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<sup>28</sup> The prophet is an important figure of the Old Testament and the idea of sacrifice was an issue of great importance for Christian theologians, as they wondered whether the (ritual) sacrifice can be related with Christian rituals or it should be considered but a pagan religious tradition. For more on this, see C. Lattey "The Prophets and Sacrifice: a Study in Biblical Relativity" and James E. Coleran, S.J "The Prophets and Sacrifice." Nevertheless, I am emphasizing a different meaning of the sacrifice, namely the sacrifice of Christ. After all, only Christ's participation made it Christian - though Kierkegaard said that Christianity died on the cross.

<sup>29</sup> Even if they fail, their gestures are meaningful in that the two endow them with meaning. Meaning does not disappear even if it is lost on the addressee.

The future marks what is going to happen and the past refers to what already happened. The present is the ambiguous and unstable element in between the two. That is why he attributes a great importance to the past, as this is the time frame that people already possess. The past (or at least its perception) enhances one's connection to one's roots, which is essential for a spiritual endeavor. The past is even more important in contemporaneity, when humankind faces such a deep crisis:

What is occurring with us now? I am searching for the words which will not really offend you. For, naturally, I hold myself up to these same claims. The meaning is in the following: we have lost our spirituality, we have ceased to have any need for it. Why? Let's pause with the simple fact that I posed this question . . . Yet it would seem that this is the wrong time to lose our spirituality. For there has never been such a difficult situation on the planet, be it in a political, spiritual, or social sense. (Gianvito 143)

The past is a reference point in regard to the gloomy present and it eventually should be a starting point for regaining spirituality. The question is if the moment of crisis can be overcome and if *Nostalgia* reflects this idea, as messianism makes sense only when one believes in salvation.

In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben analyses messianic time as conceived by Apostle Paul in his letters. Messianic time, or the time that remains, is the time in which "we need to make time end." Whereas in chronological time people exist without having the capacity to control it in any way, thus being reduced to the status of "impotent spectators" that witness how it passes by, messianic time is the only "real time" that people possess and in which they make their way to eternity. Messianic time is not future-focused but it is actually a contraction of past and present, in which "we will have to settle our debts, at the decisive moment, first and

foremost with the past” (Agamben 78). This recapitulation, as Agamben calls it, is not at all nostalgic; on the contrary, it is a critical invocation of the past. Messianic time stands in opposition to apocalyptic time. The latter is not eschatological. As it contemplates the end, it is situated on the last day, the Day of Wrath. “It sees the end fulfilled and describes what it sees” (Agamben 62). The essential difference between the two is that messianic time aims for salvation, whereas apocalyptic time is captive in the realm of crisis. This distinction might fundamentally change how suffering and nostalgia are depicted in *Nostalghia*. If the protagonists’ efforts are trapped in the realm of crisis, this means that their sacrifice is in vain because nothing is going to end the crisis. The feeling generated by an unavoidable crisis is beautifully expressed in Andrei’s final scene. He faces his death surrounded by walls; and desperation is all he feels. The stairs that would take him to see the rest of the world are unreachable, as he faces his last moments. This scene is echoed in Paolo Sorrentino’s television series *The New Pope*. In the eighth episode, Pope Pius XIII is depicted naked in an empty pool, gazing at the papal regalia. Unlike Andrei, the pope has been resurrected; he is strong, and ready to save the Catholic Church and the world. Gorchakov lacks the strength to leave the pool and to tackle his agonic state because he has been devoured by homesickness. The Pope does not think of anyone specifically, does not love anyone specifically because he loves the world and he is determined to save it.

In his interviews and essays, Tarkovsky refers repeatedly to the role of the artist in regards to overcoming the moment of crisis:

Because, regardless of the fact that exclamations about the end of the world and crises have arisen for a long time, humans have never experienced the degree of pressure that we experience today. And the paradox, it would seem, is that it is specifically now that it is necessary for artists to approach their own profession and their own selves in a

completely different way. But, nevertheless, we see that art is in a very difficult situation and only produces ordinary goods. This is the relatively gloomy picture that arises before me when I think about the problems of contemporary art. I believe, however, that an enormous task has been entrusted to art. This is the task of resurrecting spirituality. (Gianvito144)

There are instances, though, at which he doubts that the crisis is going to be overcome. His tone turns apocalyptic:

People can take exception to what I'm claiming—they say that throughout history there have always been difficult periods and intellectuals have always cried that the end of the world is approaching, the Apocalypse is coming, that it's impossible to live, that there's no freedom, and so forth. But at the same time, I can open, for instance, the memoirs of Montaigne who, as is well known, lived at the height of various religious wars in France, when blood was flowing freely, Catholics were slitting the throats of Protestants, when it was impossible to go from one fortress to another without being robbed, when villages and cities burned and gallows stood along roadsides . . . It was impossible to even call this existence, for life wasn't worth a kopeck. And in the face of this, Montaigne wrote that had he been told that, on account of various reasons, he could not live, even if he wanted to, in one of the Far Indies, he would consider himself seriously offended. (Gianvito 144)

Although he stands to fight against this - to him - unprecedented moment that humanity is confronting, Tarkovsky is not always convincing when affirming that the fight is going to be won. Many times he gives the impression that the fight is symbolic, rather than efficient. This may be glimpsed from the despair in Stalker's final soliloquy in the eponymous film. Here he is bemoans the fact that he cannot save the people taken by him into the (spiritual) zone from their petty, shallow existence. He is like a Jesus without the apostles. It is as if the hopelessness of the salvation project is taken off Tarkovsky's shoulders and placed on those of his hero so that Tarkovsky himself can perhaps retain a glimmer of hope.

*Nostalghia* features a series of elements that contribute to an apocalyptic scenario. To begin with, the set<sup>30</sup> of the movie is apocalyptic: the ruins, the flooded church, the destroyed cathedral, the water that pervades everything create the context of a world about to disappear. The weather is always gloomy, there is no sign of joy, there is a general feeling that life is slowly ending: the spa town itself is a destination for old or ill people and for women who cannot have children. Then, the moments that precede the deaths of Gorchakov and Domenico are surrounded by an apocalyptic aura. They both die in anonymity and their message remains virtually unheard by anyone. Although Domenico gives a speech before he sets himself on fire, no one but a handful of lunatics listen to it. The death itself resembles the loss of a fight, rather than a noble sacrifice. Gorchakov's death appears to be the expression of physical failure, rather than sacrifice. If he were to be compared with Jesus, his death would mark the moment when Jesus is about to be crucified. The *kenotic* moment in which God and the divine attributes have forsaken Jesus sculpt him into a mere human who reaches the rock bottom of existence. Yet, in the Neo-testamentary order of things, this is the necessary condition for the resurrection: he needs to be nothing in order to mean everything again (Koci 604). Yet for Gorchakov the salvation might never come true, which is why he remains trapped in his suffering and uncertainty. In his last moments, Gorchakov looks overwhelmed by his burden. His life and death stand under the sign of a profound crisis.

Domenico, on the other hand, is not taken by surprise by his death. He chooses probably the most painful and dramatic death- the ultimate trial by fire. The two deaths have something in common. The fire<sup>31</sup> timidly flickers in the case of Gorchakov and savagely burns Domenico. The flame is the sign of salvation and purification and it is also an apocalyptic warning sign, one

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<sup>30</sup> See also Gerard Loughlin, "The Long Take: Messianic Time in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*."

<sup>31</sup> See also Nariman Skakov, *The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time*.

that is unbearably painful for the person who has lightened it. But the dramatic final gesture, the distorted screams of pain and the images on the disfigured body that crawls on the pavement can be interpreted as a sign of a supreme sacrifice or as a desperate sign that obliterates any hope. The painful final gesture should express in a very graphic manner how serious the impasse in which the humanity finds itself is but, at the same time, it might also express a chronic lack of hope.

A number of years before *Nostalghia* was filmed (in 1969), the whole world was shocked by the suicide of Jan Palach, the student who burnt himself in a public square in Prague to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Although Domenico's motivation is different, his fictional suicide shares some important elements with the tragic event that took place in Prague: both heroes consider themselves part of an apocalyptic context that require an extreme gesture; they sacrifice themselves in the name of a greater goal and in the name of many people who can or cannot be saved. They both consider their death more meaningful than their life. Furthermore, their death should be a message for the whole world yet remains a dramatic ambivalent gesture. It might have produced a substantial effect or might be nothing but a gesture that loses its meaning. Jan Palach sacrifices himself not in the hope that this will affect the political status quo, but because he considers it is the only gesture that matches the despair he feels given the dramatic situation faced by his country. Unlike Palach, Tarkovsky's Domenico and Gorchakov harbour the (Christian) hope that the world can change. Yet the differences stop halfway. The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka distinguishes between prophetic and apocalyptic sacrifice; he argues that only the prophetic one is genuine. Prophetic sacrifice is the one made out of love, which is perceived not as a sentimental posture but as an ontological difference: "In other words, love is giving oneself away, but this giving does not appear as giving something (for something

else), but as the appearing of being itself” (Koci 607). This means that the sacrifice is not an exchange that implies giving and waiting for something in return but employs giving all away (kenosis), even if life is finite, as only this total renunciation generates a new beginning that transcends finitude. Apocalyptic sacrifice is trapped in the moment of crisis and is marked by surprise, rather than certainty. The beginning might come or not, and therefore the sacrifice is not total: for Gorchakov, death itself is the surprise; for Domenico, it is the suffering of death. Their respective sacrifices are trapped in this moment of agonistic surprise as in a loop. Even if they are ready to give everything and do not expect anything in return, their gift is itself trapped in the moment of crisis and it might not generate anything Other. Jan Palach made a sacrifice that would not produce anything because his gesture was desperate. Gorchakov and Domenico might have made a similar kind of sacrifice.

Gerard Loughlin argues that Domenico and Gorchakov can be both prophets and apostles, as they both support a messianic perspective. Chances are, though, that they are mainly prophets of the Apocalypse, which means that their sacrifice is in vain and so is their (nostalgic) suffering because their death and all the pain they experienced prior to their death has no finality. It existed only as a consequence of their incapacity to elude the crisis and to accept that the crisis has an end. However, it is difficult to conclude whether suffering from nostalgia is or is not meaningless. In order to better understand this, I would like to take a closer look at what suffering means.

## **2.4 The logic of suffering**

So far I have analyzed the role of nostalgia in relation to a messianic perspective. This entails that nostalgic suffering has a meaning, which makes it a constructive emotion. Nostalgia

transcends the egocentric level, as it focuses on a noble and general purpose: saving humanity. This is what allegedly makes nostalgia constructive, namely that, in order to regain one's spirituality, one needs to reconnect to one's roots, and implicitly to a better past. The fact that this journey into the past is painful is just the inevitable price that ought to be paid. On the other hand, nostalgic suffering might have no positive outcome whatsoever. There is thus a contradictory understanding of suffering, which is essential for the perception of nostalgia itself. There are two major perspectives on suffering, which make it look either destructive or constructive. Suffering can be a painful but useful experience or, on the contrary, it can be meaningless. These two perspectives have numerous implications in philosophy and religion.

From the Christian point of view, the idea of suffering is essential for redemption. Christ has to suffer in order for humanity's sins to be forgiven. Suffering, though, is not only the price that needs to be paid in exchange for divine forgiveness; it is also a means of purification. Christ, the apostles, the martyrs, the hermits- they all consider suffering spiritually transformative, as their pain is a test of their faith and proof of their moral strength (Stoeber 40). In this view, suffering is not useless; rather, it is the ultimate experience that opens the gates of heaven. Nevertheless, not all suffering is good. There is nothing positive about the suffering caused by a natural calamity or the suffering of a child (Stoeber 60). This is eloquently presented in the "Rebellion" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Ivan who rejects the suffering of children as a tool used to bring about God's grand plan. At one antipode, Schopenhauer is the philosopher par excellence for whom suffering is meaningless and thus stands at the core of his pessimistic perspective. There is a long Western philosophical tradition - starting with the Stoics - that seeks a means of escaping suffering.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, although some initially find suffering meaningless, most of them develop a system in which, just as in the case of Christianity,

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<sup>32</sup> See also Jeff Malpas & Norelle Likiss (eds.), *Perspectives on Human Suffering*.



suffering becomes constructive. For instance, suffering lacks meaning in Levinas' philosophy (Kang 496), yet it can change its status, because to be ethical, which is the central concept for the French thinker, means to expose oneself to other people's suffering. Therefore, when one suffers for other people's suffering, one's pain becomes meaningful, because it opens the perspective of the inter-human. Suffering is one of the central elements in Nietzsche's philosophy as well. *Amor fati* defines how people should handle suffering. As suffering is meaningless and impossible to elude, people need to learn how to embrace it in order to live authentically.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of suffering is omnipresent in the Russian culture (Laferriere 3). From Berdyaev and Gogol to Solzhenitsyn and Vladimir Sorokin, suffering is a leitmotif that employs several major themes, from mysticism to the unbearable contemporary history. There are numerous authors who state that the Russians have a very specific way of suffering, and Tarkovsky is one of them (Tarkovsky 202). One of the Russian emblematic figures that inspire him is Dostoyevsky<sup>34</sup> and it is not a coincidence that Dostoyevsky is the first one who breaks the link between Orthodoxy and suffering and thus implies that suffering is actually meaningless. Elisabeth Powell argues in her doctoral thesis that Dostoevsky lost the faith that suffering is from god. Suffering is instead an experience that is miserable and degrading and thus Dostoevsky questions its very meaning.<sup>35</sup> Suffering becomes more of a masochistic gesture, as it entails a tendency toward self-defeating and self-destructive behaviour (Laferriere 7). In *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering*, Daniel Rancour Laferriere focuses on Russian masochism, which he describes - by using Anita Weinreb Katz' definition - as a

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<sup>33</sup> See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science* and *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>34</sup> Tarkovsky intended to shoot a film about Dostoevsky. In his diary, *Time within Time: the Diaries 1970-1986*, he writes about the preparations he made for this movie. He mentions that he needs to read everything that Dostoevsky wrote and he also has to read more Russian philosophy in order to understand him better.

<sup>35</sup> It ought to be added that, given Dostoevsky's profoundly polyphonic discourse, the author had another side that admired suffering and viewed as anything but meaningless. This is evident in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky never espoused any idea completely and was always torn into more than one direction.

“behavioural act, verbalization, or fantasy that, by unconscious design, is physically or psychically injurious to oneself, self-defeating, humiliating, or unduly self-sacrificing” (Laferriere7). He argues that masochism cannot be perceived as the essence of the Russian national character,<sup>36</sup> but rather as a socio cultural practice that can be spotted in various artistic and social contexts. He begins by analyzing the long history of the Russian population tendency to be submissive to the nobility. He then focuses on the case of the hermits who lived in Russia starting in the seventeen century, who used to harm themselves in order to get closer to God. The Russian intelligentsia is also under scrutiny, as the author argues that “the self-destructive or humiliating idea recurrently surfaces in the literature about the intelligentsia” (Laferriere 46), which is in fact a feeling of guilt that requires some compensatory behaviour.

Although Laferriere’s book is speculative, it provides an interesting and debatable explanation for suffering and puts emphases on its meaningless character, while linking it to the Russian socio-historical context. This predisposition to a totally gratuitous but very intense form of self-flagellation might showcase not only that suffering is meaningless but that some people in a specific cultural context use suffering as an unconscious self-harming reflex. The question is whether such a tendency can be linked to Gorchakov or Domenico. At first sight, the situation seems pretty obvious, in the sense that Gorchakov does not seek suffering; on the contrary, suffering for him is the kind of personal calamity that he cannot elude. But what if his incapacity to cope with it is in fact his refusal to do anything to stop this suffering? After all, he makes no effort to overcome his suffering; he does not want to visit the spa town; he refuses to eat and to engage in an erotic relationship with Eugenia or to do anything else that would mitigate his overwhelming pain. His effort or his lack of interest in making any effort can be interpreted both

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<sup>36</sup> If that even means anything...

ways, which reinstates the major dilemma of this chapter: his suffering might as well be constructive or meaningless.

## 2.5 The dual status of suffering

Maybe, though, the meaninglessness and the meaningfulness of nostalgic suffering do not exclude each other in Tarkovsky's artistic universe. Nostalgic suffering is a tremendous struggle that elevates and then crashes the nostalgic. This means that nostalgic suffering oscillates between good and evil, as nostalgia is a bitter antidote against the lack of spirituality (*pharmakon*) and unbearable and gratuitous spiritual (and physical) pain (poison). Emil Cioran is one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century who approached suffering as a core subject of his writings, and who embraced a dual view of suffering. For Cioran, suffering is (sometimes) an evil force that shatters life:

The Christian conception of suffering and the current conception of suffering are fundamentally false. According to them, suffering is a path towards love, if not the essential path towards love. To speak about the path of suffering as path of love means to ignore the satanic essence of suffering. The stairs of suffering only take downwards, never upwards. The stairs of suffering lead to inferno, not to heaven. And the dark that surrounds you on the stairs of suffering is not less infinite than the light that blinds you on the stairs of happiness.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Emil Cioran, *Cartea amăgirilor*, p.173: Concepția creștină și concepția curentă a suferinței sunt fundamentale false. După ele, suferința este un drum spre iubire, când nu este calea esențială a iubirii. Dar oare creștinismul numai în această problemă ar trebui corectat? A vorbi de drumul suferinței ca drum al iubirii este a nu cunoaște nimic din esența satanică a suferinței. Pe treptele suferinței nu urci, ci cobori. Ele nu formează scări înspre cer, ci înspre infern. Și întunericul în care ajungi pe scările durerii nu este mai puțin infinit și etern decât lumina ce te orbește pe scările bucuriei.

He then goes on by saying that suffering acts as a force that sets one apart from the core of life. Whereas the divine force seeks harmony, suffering entails the opposite. His perspective has a lot in common with Ronald Schleifer's definition of suffering, who argues that suffering is the most intense force that humans face and the encounter of humanity with suffering has paroxysmic outcomes, as the human is annihilated. Cioran does not offer a classic definition of suffering because suffering can merely be expressed in words. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, argues that some types of pain "unmake the world" and destroy the impossibility of discourse. Cioran uses a series of metaphors that associate suffering with darkness, descent, destruction, and tremendous force. The same elements are present in Tarkovsky's film. The sun is always missing, there is an impenetrable, gloomy atmosphere, the joyous Italy is featured as a realm of melancholia and darkness. Gorchakov perfectly integrates into this atmosphere. His fragile body and spirit are the expression of a man in ruins. This is brilliantly depicted in the scene in which Gorchakov ends up on an underground level where he gives a speech in a state of inebriation to a child who cannot understand Russian. His weird monologue given in front of a public that cannot actually understand what he says, emphasizes even better the kind of suffering that shatters the spirit, as the logos itself is deconstructed by the strength of the suffering. As for Domenico, he lives in a ruined house in which passing from one room to another is made through an imaginary door, which functions as another symbol for a space in which matter slowly degrades and vanishes. This house used to be the space of forced isolation for his family and still conserves the memories of their evacuation - shown in a flashback. The house sits on two symbolic pillars- isolation and unfamiliarity-, which actually leads us to the other major consequence of this

abyssal suffering, namely, solitude. Cioran argues that real suffering, the kind that is truly deep and unbearable generates loneliness:

Suffering for another person is sterile and ineffective. Pain is real and true only for those who suffer, because no one can suffer in one's place. The whole world can struggle for someone's destiny; how is this going to change one? When suffering, one is completely lonely. Yet this is not the suffering inspired by a musical experience, when one floats above the world, as it is the kind of loneliness when one is suffocated by his existence, when one feels time and space as adverse forces that are essentially detached by one. The positivity of the human being experienced in pain is not the one felt when having an erotic exaltation, but it is the result of the reality that is objectively unveiled. This sentiment of positivity is because in pain one does not have the experience of absolute loneliness, which is a sensation that is irreplaceable in despair. If great sufferings are mute, why does the human become lyrical when suffering? Paradoxically, it is because are mute and inexpressible.<sup>38</sup>

Suffering isolates humans because it alters reality by shattering the notions of time and space and deprives people of the ability to express pain, leaving them incapable to communicate their sorrow to the rest of the world. Loneliness, as Gadamer argues, is always linked to loss (Costache 133). The person who suffers loses his or her ability to be amongst others and to express what s/he feels. Gorchakov and Domenico have lost their families and are both socially isolated, as they have also lost the ability to make themselves understood by others. They are both between two worlds and they lack the capacity to truly connect to any of the two. Gadamer and Hannah Arendt, following Heidegger, make a distinction between solitude (*Einsamkeit*) and

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<sup>38</sup> „În suferință omul este absolut singur. Dar nu acea singurătate pe care o inspiră muzica, în care plutești într-o fascinantă legănare deasupra lumii, din cauza unei plenitudini interioare excesive, când nu mai poți pune frâu unui conținut debordant și te avânți într-o expansiune de voluptuoasă nebunie, ci o singurătate în care ești apăsător de existență, în care simți timpul și spațiul ca forțe adverse, detașate esențial de tine, fără a ajunge la sentimentul irealității vieții. Sentimentul pozitivității firii pe care-l încerci în durere nu este acela ce-l trăiești în exaltarea erotică, fruct al integrării în existență, ci acela care rezultă din conștiința unei realități ce se prezintă obiectiv în față. Acestui sentiment al pozitivității se datorește faptul că în durere nu ai senzația absolutei singurătăți, senzație nelipsită în disperare. Dacă marile dureri sunt mute, pentru ce omul devine liric în suferință? Paradoxal! Chiar fiindcă sunt mute și inexprimabile” (Cioran 1990, 92).

loneliness (*Vereinsamung*). Solitude is the result of a constructive action that is sought by the human individual, because in solitude, as Hannah Arendt would say, “I am by myself, together with my self” (Arendt 476), loneliness occurs when people are “deserted by all others” (Costache 133). Gadamer believes that in loneliness people lose nearness to others and they are not supported by something communal anymore. Both Gorchakov and Domenico live in a state of unfamiliarity, as they cannot resonate with anything and anyone that surround them. In their loneliness, they suffer from Durkheim’s anomie, perceived as a lack of compatibility between their values and the society’s values. Durkheim outlines in his book *Suicide* how anomie develops in people who are unable to resonate with the path followed by the rest of the society. And this becomes a reason of suicide. The only difference is that in *Nostalgia*’s case, suicide is a statement, not a means to escape society as it is presented by Durkheim.

Nostalgia can only be associated with loneliness because at the core of its logic stands the unaccepted pain caused by loss, namely something that is needed but is missing. So nostalgia is by definition incompatible with the idea of solitude. Even if the two protagonists of Tarkovsky’s film correspond to the messianic profile, Gorchakov’s or Domenico’s loneliness comes as a burden. Even if it is part of the economy of sacrifice, and even if the sacrifice is meaningful, loneliness is that part that might as well counterbalance the positive outcomes of the sacrifice. Gorchakov’s greatest burden is that he is separated from his family and his home. His loneliness is not a form of spiritual gain but a form of unbearable suffering. And this loneliness is what sheds a different light on what could have been Gorchakov’s and Domenic’s link to sacrifice. Cioran states that:

But what can you do when you haven’t found the means to avoid suffering by yourself?  
And when you have the memory of so many past sufferings and the presentiment of so

many future pains, other people's torment does not sweeten your own pain. Jesus did not suffer for all the people because if he had suffered as much as it is being said there should be no pain left after him. Yet it seems that all the people who came after Jesus without being saved by his suffering haven't done nothing but to contribute to the infinite of human suffering. If he had suffered in his divine nature, suffering would have not existed anymore. But Jesus only suffered as a human and thus his suffering could only save a few, and caressed others, yet he did not caress the lonely ones.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps nostalgic suffering should rather be seen as a painful experience that, as Nietzsche would say, is human all too human, and that reveals, in fact, a failure of the divinity to save the human race from suffering. Furthermore, this failure reveals that suffering itself is meaningless because, if God has not been able to end suffering, it does not mean that it gave it a goal (Cioran 23). Instead, this is just a terrible accident with unbearable consequences for many individuals. Yet such a perspective reflects the perspective of one who undergoes a lot of suffering and who might afterwards change his view through post-factum rationalization.

Nevertheless, as fearful as suffering can be, one should bear in mind that Cioran has a dual perspective on suffering, as he also perceives it as a force that leads to lucidity and self-knowledge. Suffering is the price one needs to pay in order to experience an essential transformation:

People have not understood that only suffering can fight against mediocrity. Neither culture, nor the spirit can change one as much as pain can. The only weapon against

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<sup>39</sup> „Dar ce poți face când n-ai găsit nici un mijloc de a nu fi singur în durere? Și apoi când ai memoria atîtor suferințe trecute și sentimentul atîtor dureri viitoare, chinurile cărui om ți-ar putea îndulci amara chinurilor proprii? Iisus n-a suferit pentru toți oamenii; căci dac-ar fi suferit atît de mult pe cît se spune, după el n-ar fi trebuit să mai existe dureri. Ori se pare că toți oamenii care au venit după Iisus, fără să fie salvați prin suferința lui, n-au făcut prin chinuri decît să adauge contribuția lor la infinitul suferinței umane, pe care Christos nu l'-a putut realiza. Într-adevăr, puțin a avut de suferit Iisus pentru ca noi să mișcăm atîta de îndurat. Dacă ar fi suferit în natura lui divină, după el n-ar mai fi putut exista suferințe. Dar Iisus n-a suferit decît ca om și astfel suferința lui n-a putut răscumpăra decît atît de puțin, deși a mîngîiat pe mulți, fără să poată mîngîia însă pe cei mai singuri.” (Cioran 1991, 23).

mediocrity is suffering. Only suffering changes temperaments, conceptions, perspectives, attitudes, visions, ways of being, because any great and durable suffering affects the very essence of being. It is a change of perspective, understanding, and feeling. After you have suffered a lot it becomes impossible to connect with that period in your life when you haven't suffered because any suffering brings you in an unnatural state in which you become estranged of your normal aspirations. Therefore, suffering makes a saint out of a man who was born for life and replaces all the illusions with the gangrene of renunciation. All the unsettledness that comes after suffering keeps one in a tension in which one cannot be mediocre anymore.<sup>40</sup>

Cioran considers that only suffering changes the human race. Just like Tarkovsky, Cioran considers that suffering is in fact a necessary evil in the struggle against the mediocrity of the world, as it enhances deep changes in those who truly suffer. But, as Cioran says, a fundamental change comes with a monstrous amount of pain. The suffering might sanctify humanity or might reveal life in a way that mediocrity could never do, and yet this intense and major change does not come with a happy ending of suffering, on the contrary. The atrocious suffering associated with homesickness is in fact the kind of pain that can actually be essential for one's spiritual renaissance. Tarkovsky talks several times in his interviews about the importance of having roots. He considers that it is essential for people to be linked to the place in which they were born and then grew up, as there are some strong spiritual connections between a person and the culture to which s/he belongs. One can only justify one's life when one is connected to one's home. However, not just any place entails authentic roots, as there are cultures, such as the

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<sup>40</sup> „Oamenii n-au înțeles că împotriva mediocrității nu se poate lupta decât cu suferința. Nu schimbi mare lucru prin cultură sau prin spirit; dar modifici inimaginabil de mult prin durere. Singura armă împotriva mediocrității este suferința. Prin ea schimbi temperamente, concepții, atitudini și viziuni, schimbi direcții de existență, deoarece orice suferință mare și durabilă afectează fondul intim al ființei. Modific în fondul intim al ființei, ea modifică implicit și raportul acesteia cu lumea. Este o schimbare de perspectivă, de înțelegere și de simțire. După ce ai suferit mult, devine imposibil să-ți mai dai seama de perioada de viață în care n-ai suferit; căci orice suferință te înstrăinează de dispozițiile tale naturale, te aduce într-un plan de existență străin aspirațiilor tale firești. Astfel dintr-un om născut pentru viață, suferința face un sfânt și în locul tuturor iluziilor lui întinde plăgile și cangrena renunțării. Întreaga neliniște ce urmează suferinței menține pe om într-o tensiune în care nu mai poate fi mediocr.” (Cioran 1991, 25)



American one, that are too young to have developed roots - the reason for which the Americans may perceive themselves as being rootless, which comes with serious spiritual consequences (Gianvito 119). It is thus preferable to long for one's roots, even if the associated suffering is excruciating, because this gives one depth. Otherwise, when people can easily settle down anywhere and nothing draws them back to their home, it means that they are alienated and shallow. This lightness, just like the lightness of the consumerist lifestyle - which is also generated on the north American model - are in Tarkovsky's view a form of spiritual suicide (Gianvito 119).

Up to this point, suffering has been described both as a necessary and unnecessary harmful force, and so far it has been unclear which one would actually better represent Tarkovsky's artistic view. However, thanks to Cioran, a new perspective is possible, as he does not actually choose between meaningless or meaningful suffering, because he argues that they can exist concomitantly. This means that nostalgia is not solely good (or useful) or bad (or toxic). Furthermore, it means that good and evil can coexist and influence each other. This proves how complex the implications of nostalgia are and emphasizes that an antonymic perspective does not always work.

Only such a two-faced profile can explain the ambiguous implications of nostalgic suffering, which, as reflected in this chapter, implies sacrifice and masochism, gratuitous and necessary suffering, fear of mediocrity and the need of spirituality. Gorchakov suffers from homecoming and then becomes part of the great scenario of Domenico. Their respective nostalgic forms of suffering intermingle and therefore are toxic and necessary at the same time. Gorchakov is figuratively killed by his nostalgia, he lives in a sad universe haunted by a reverie of home. He is slowly destroyed by his suffering, which discards him from society, and - partly -

from the real world. Gorchakov is like a ruin of the spa resort that long ago was significantly better - as when he was home, together with his family, in Russia. But as bad as this suffering is, the prospect of leaving a country without feeling pain is even worse. Tarkovsky would argue that it is better to die of nostalgic suffering than to live without having an authentic connection with the place where one was born, as it many times happen today with those called globetrotters (tourists, adventurers, economic migrants, etc.). Such suffering is vital for a spiritual revival and if people do not feel this anymore it means that the apocalypse has arrived. Furthermore, Tarkovsvsky argues that suffering shakes the comfort that nowadays functions as a barrier between people and their spirituality<sup>41</sup>.

Nevertheless, in order to embrace a rough but exclusive positive form of suffering, nostalgia should be less ambiguous and harmful. And this is not the case in the film, because it is too close to total destruction and to a gratuitous but excruciating kind of suffering. This suffering isolates the nostalgic individual from the whole world and leaves it in darkness. Gorchakov is a fragile presence that advances towards death. Even when his nostalgia is somehow mitigated by a higher goal, that of sacrifice in the name of humanity in its entirety, the sacrifice itself might be useless, as it does not reach any audience and is instead stigmatized by his death. Domenico is isolated from his community, haunted by the disappearance of his family and by his conviction that the world needs to be saved. He is surrounded by the ruins of his house, as if the whole world has come apart. He lives as if the world is about to end and he does his best to save it. His painful and useless death mirrors the tremendous suffering in which he has lived thinking that the world used to be so much better. His atrocious death witnessed only by insane people (partly) speaks in the name of a useless sacrifice.

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<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, *Interviews...* pp. 86-87.

This oscillation should not be mistaken for a harmonious relationship between uselessness and usefulness, as it is rather an unpredictable shift from excruciating and meaningless pain to a meaningful spiritual experience. Maybe nostalgic suffering would have been less ambiguous in better times, as are the ones longed by Domenico, but Tarkovsky's conception stands in the shadow of the apocalypse, and his belief in salvation is weakened by the doubt that the world can really be saved. Eschatological belief, that has deep roots, according to Berdyaev (*The Russian Idea* 19), in Russian culture, reaches a critical point in the film and because of this nostalgia lacks an irrefutably constructive role.

## Chapter three: Personal Nostalgia

### 3.1 Introduction

Tarkovsky's *nostalghia* sets a high standard for our understanding of nostalgia. That is why the first question that seeks an answer throughout this chapter is: how intense are the nostalgic sufferings depicted in Central and Eastern European cultures in comparison with the Russian *nostalghia*? Furthermore, how intense does nostalgia have to be in order to be considered authentic? Last but not least, what does nostalgia become when it ceases from relying on suffering?

In order to address these questions, I am going to examine how three of the most common forms of nostalgia - for a beloved person, for childhood, and for a place - are reflected in a series of novels (and one film) that are representative of Central and Eastern European art<sup>42</sup>. All three are chiefly personal forms of nostalgia, which means that they primarily concern the individual, not a group of people, as is the case of political nostalgia, which is going to be analyzed in the following chapters. Personal nostalgia entails a more intimate relationship with the past and thus sets the ground for a more intense feeling. However, as I am going to show, it cannot always be completely distinct from collective forms of nostalgia, nor can it exclusively fall under one category of personal nostalgia because they often overlap.

The first form of nostalgia that I am going to analyze involves a deadly kind of suffering. Yet, this suffering is rather an exception within the contemporary artistic<sup>43</sup> Central and Eastern European context, as I have not been able to identify other cases of "deadly nostalgia." This exception is iconic Central European novelist, Milan Kundera. The second and fourth part of his

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<sup>42</sup> The artworks I have chosen have been well received by critics, have sold in significant numbers, and have become of reference for the literary generation they represent.

<sup>43</sup> To my knowledge, there are no movies or novels to portray an equivalent of *nostalghia*.

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* depict the story of Tamina who, as the narrative voice itself states, stands at the core of this novel (Kundera 165). Tamina is a thirty-two years old woman who fled Czechoslovakia together with her husband, who was persecuted by the communist authorities. Soon after they escaped the embrace of the Iron Curtain, her husband died and she found herself alone in a small French town where she started working as a waitress. She had only one goal in her live: to keep the memory of her husband accurate. At a first glimpse, Tamina's nostalgia is fuelled by the loss of her husband. However, Czechoslovakia, and especially Prague, or "the city of evil," as it is called in the novel, is omnipresent in her evocations, because her hometown is essential for her past: "It is a novel about laughter and forgetting, about forgetting and Prague, about Prague and the angels" (Kundera 165). Tamina, her husband, and Prague were caught in a sort of perverse symbiotic relationship that she is incapable of telling apart. Tamina is the product of the past she lived with her husband: all the time they spent together, the nicknames he gave her, the affection he showed her, the challenges they faced together. At the same time, she is the product of the city in which she lived, as her love story and her entire life are strongly connected to Prague. That is why Tamina's deadly nostalgia is focused on the loss of a beloved person, but it is also fuelled by the loss of her home (a city and a country). In what follows, I shall examine the implications of both.

### **3.2 From mourning to obsession**

Freud states that mourning is a natural process that helps one overcome the loss of a loved one. For Freud, any object of attachment should be replaced in time, after a period of intense suffering (Freud 245). When this transition does not take place, mourning develops into disorder or even mania (Ricciardi 25). Tamina is greatly affected by the death of her husband.

Her life as a widow is a pale and bitter copy of what her life used to be when her husband was alive. Tamina's pain is excruciating. She has reached the point when she deliberately objectified herself: she is a hand that serves coffee and alcohol, an ear that listens to her clients' selfish stories, and a body that has sex without enjoying it. She functions mechanically because all her energy is focused on remembering her husband. As she only has one goal, her great plan is to recover the 11 notebooks in which she kept a diary of everything that she and her husband did since they got together. The notebooks will never reach her and even if they did it would not have made a difference in how she feels because her pain is too intense. Therefore, it is improper to name Tamina's pain mourning, as it is in fact "an ongoing and pathological condition" (Gil and Nesci 4) that is actually the cause of her death.

Freud calls the pathological condition that cannot overcome loss, melancholia. Tamina could be considered a melancholic if her pain would not be strictly oriented towards the past. Alessa Ricardi considers that mourning that is unable to overcome the past should rather be called nostalgia (24). The two concepts have, indeed, a very long common history. Baudelaire, for instance, does not even make a distinction between the two (Stamelman 395). Both nostalgia and melancholia focus indeed on loss; however, melancholia entails self-loathing and self-accusation. Freud perceives melancholia as a deeply narcissistic condition, which is not Tamina's<sup>44</sup> condition, though. Tamina has instead developed an obsession for the past. She would do anything to recover the past exactly as it was. Her obsession stops her from fully experiencing what a common nostalgic endeavour would be like, as she always tastes the bitterness of nostalgia, which is caused by the loss associated with the feeling, yet she never tastes the sweetness of nostalgia, which is usually given by a temporary revival of the loss.

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<sup>44</sup> See also Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva*.

Tamina is thus experiencing a pleasureless form of nostalgia, which is continually worsened by the passing of time, which makes memories less vivid.

Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflexive nostalgia. Reflexive nostalgia is more concerned with the finitude of the past and develops a fragmentary and ironic way of longing for the past. Reflexive nostalgia is benign, although it is linked to suffering. Restorative nostalgia is a dogmatic approach of the past, as it aims for its accurate reconstruction. Boym gives the example of the restorations that took place at the Sistine Chapel, where those involved tried to bring the paintings to their initial form, the one given by Michelangelo, thus ignoring the patina of time, namely all the centuries that passed by and that had their own role in building the identity of the chapel. Those who ordered such a radical revival had a dogmatic perception of the past, as they could not accept that the past itself is a dynamic process whose fluidity ought to be accepted. Tamina desires a revival of the past as precise as the restoration of the Sistine Chapel.<sup>45</sup> She would like to remember every detail of her husband's face and body and she is eager to recall, in chronological order, everything that they did together. Her drive accepts no compromises and her desperation betrays an obsessive perspective upon time, as the past should be frozen in the name of her enormous pain.

Tamina's greatest fear is forgetting. As time passes by, she realizes that she cannot clearly remember different details of her husband's look, not to mention different things they used to do together, such as their vacations, which are covered in fog. Ricœur makes a distinction between several types of forgetting. Whereas the *sorrow of finitude* defines the normal loss of memory, associated with erosion and aging, the *immemorial forgetting* is "that which was never an event for me and which we have never even actually learned" (Ricœur 441).

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<sup>45</sup> See also how Lenka Pankova uses the concept of restorative nostalgia in relation to *The Book of Laughter...* in her "Novelistic Nostalgia: The Pleasure and the Pain."

Tamina perceives the *sorrow of finitude* as an *immemorial forgetting*. For her, forgetting her husband is the equivalent of a metaphysical vanishing. That is why her nostalgia is driven by fear and despair. Whereas, usually, nostalgia romanticizes memories, Tamina is looking for precision with pathological intensity. For her, nostalgia is not a source of compensation of a loss but a desperate means of resuscitating the past. The nostalgic usually looks in the present for triggers that enhance time travel. Tamina, instead, searches in the present for signs that contribute to the precision that she craves for. For instance, when she meets a new man, she uses his body as a mental support to build a profile of her husband:

During these exercises she tried to evoke his skin, its color, and all its minor blemishes: tiny warts, protuberances, freckles, veins. It was difficult, almost impossible. The colors her memory used were unrealistic. They could not do justice to human skin. As a result, she developed her own technique of calling him to mind. Whenever she sat across from a man, she would use his head as a kind of sculpture armature. (Kundera 84-85)

Yet her senses work against her, as they distort what she had stored in her mind: the voices she hears alter the memory of her husband's voice; the faces she sees blur the image of her husband's face, etc.

One might argue that Tamina suffers of some form of archive fever, in the sense that she is preoccupied with keeping her memory alive, which does not automatically make her a nostalgic. After all, Pierre Nora states that forgetting is a collective problem that contemporary society is facing, that is why it has become necessary to build *lieux de mémoire*, in order to keep the memory alive. Tamina searches and erects her personal *lieux de mémoire*. The notebooks that she wants to bring from Prague and the passport photo of her husband have this function. However, Tamina is doing a lot more than preserving memories:



She has no desire to turn the past into poetry, she wants to give the past back its lost body. She is not compelled by a desire for beauty, she is compelled by a desire for life. There she sits on a raft. Looking back, looking only back. The sum total of her being is no more than what she sees in her. And as her past begins to shrink, disappear, fall apart, Tamina begins shrinking and blurring. She longs to see the notebooks so she can fill in the fragile framework of events in the new notebook, give it walls, make it a house she can live in. Because if the shaky structure of her memories collapses like a badly pitched tent, all Tamina will have left is the present, that invisible point, that nothing moving slowly toward death. (Kundera 86)

Her obsessive preoccupation creates a vicious circle that is characteristic of nostalgia because the nostalgic is convinced that the past is superior to the present. According to nostalgia's logic, one should escape the present and find a refuge in the past. This leads to a routine that marginalizes the present on behalf of an imaginary world. Tamina's routine, however, is stopped halfway because her memories are not precise enough, so she constantly starts the evocation from the very beginning. This means that the nostalgic evocation is interrupted before reaching its final point just to be started again, because it is unfulfilled. Furthermore, Tamina struggles with a radical form of nostalgia because she can only live in the present by invoking her past, as her present is useless without her past.

This repetitive yet unfulfilled evocation shares a lot in common with the economy of the ritual, especially with religious rituals. Mircea Eliade analyzes numerous aspects of the ritual in several of his books, especially in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* and *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. As he focuses on the link between spirituality and rituals, he argues that the ritual is fundamentally a re-creation of a primordial moment, such as the creation of the world. Such a ritual seeks to reiterate the divinity's acts and gestures that created the world and thus a regeneration of the world is performed (Eliade 1975, xii). A ritual is a breach in the real

world, as it is performed in a sacred or magic time and space and has the purpose to evoke a mythical time. Regarding Christian rituals, Bernard Cooke argues that:

As risen, Christians believe that he is beyond our set of dimensions and our historical happenings, but he continues as part of our history because his presence occurs in Christians' faith which is in space and time. Christ's presence, as all personal presence, is an active reality; it is his self-communicating with those who "hear" him. His self-gift to believers is a transforming influence in their lives that enables them to change the world in which they live and thereby co-create with him the kingdom of God. In this way, being symbols of the risen Christ in history, Christians not only remember Jesus but also make it possible for him to participate in the ongoing course of human history. This they do in a special way when they gather for rituals that speak their faith in who he was and what he did, but speak also their faith in what he continues to do in their midst as they ritualize that faith. (59)

Regardless of the cultural context, the religious ritual offers meaning to life itself, as it mediates between human and god. The ritual is periodically performed in order to invoke a sacred event that took place in the past, which is relived by the performer, who needs to scrupulously follow a series of pre-established steps, as otherwise the ritual is not fulfilled.

Tamina does not perform a ritual because, as I have already argued, her attempts are never fulfilled: she cannot truly return to her mythical time (the time she spent with her husband). Moreover, whereas a religious ritual is a natural expression of one's spiritual needs, Tamina's obsessive evocation is a destructive need that is generated by the incapacity to cope with her tremendous loss, which is, however, practiced with religiosity, as if it is indeed sacred. Nevertheless, she does follow the logic of the ritual. She does engage in a repetitive endeavour that should activate a unique moment from the past. She does separate herself from the profane space and time when performing her invocation and she does consider this exercise superior to reality. Moreover, she uses objects that help her perform her invocation, which is similar to the

way in which objects are used to perform religious rituals. For a believer, a cross is more than an object made of metal, as it symbolizes Christ's sacrifice. A priest cannot perform the liturgy without a cross. Similarly, the photo of Tamina's husband or their diaries are bits and pieces that recompose his memory. Therefore, she needs them in order to perform her invocation. What is even more important is that she does not really make a choice to perform her ritualistic invocation. Eliade argues that, without the ritual, the believer falls in profanity and their life won't ever be the same. For thousands of years, people from all across the world will not imagine their lives without the sacred (and implicitly without the ritual). Even though to be spiritual or religious might be considered a matter of choice, for long periods of time this choice did not really exist. How can a man in an Australian tribe deny his ritual of initiation and how can he deny its sacred function? In the same manner, Tamina's life does not mean much to her if devoid of nostalgia. Therefore, her invocation comes as a necessity. She does not choose nostalgia; she is just overwhelmed by it. However, the ritualistic nostalgia does not sanctify the life of the nostalgic, nor save it, nor make it better. It is like a sacrificial ritual, yet without the divine reward in return for the sacrifice.

Eliade describes the mindset of traditional societies where time is not linear but circular. In ancient China, the ancestors were not really gone. They were back in a different form. This eternal return, which makes the past and the present coterminous, excludes nostalgia. But Tamina lives in the modern world where time is linear. So the attempt to bring back the past pits a premodern mindset against the modern one, and that is the source of the nostalgic's suffering. Tamina is out of her time.

### **3.3 From fighting against forgetting to forgetting the forgetfulness**

Because Tamina's worse enemy is forgetting, she uses the best means at hand to fight against it. As I have already mentioned, she has or tries to get in the possession of some essential personal *lieux de mémoire*. The first one is the passport photo, actually the only photo of her husband that she still owns, the second *memory sites* are the notebooks that she tries to recover from Prague. Kaitlin M. Murphy speaks about the role of objects "in resituating memory and the past in the present" (274). Banal objects such as spoons or boots can in fact "activate memory and testify to the events of the past" (274). Such objects can even compensate the absence of a human body. That is the role of the passport photo that Tamina has, which is the only palpable object that reminds her of her husband's features:

Lately she has begun noticing with desperation that the past is growing paler and paler. All she has left of her husband is his passport picture. The other pictures remain behind in their appropriated apartment in Prague. Every day she looks at the grimy, dog-eared picture showing her husband full face (like a criminal in a mug shot). It is not a good likeness. Every day she spends some time in a sort of spiritual exercise, trying to remember what he looked like in profile, then half profile, then quarter profile, going over the lines of his nose and chin, and every day she is horrified at new spots where her memory hesitates about which way to go. (Kundera 84-85)

Even though the photo is not very clear (which is a reason of frustration for Tamina), it remains an indispensable object. However, the passport photo is far less important than the notebooks from Prague, where she documented not only events or impressions of her husband but she also described smells, tastes and other essential details that contribute to the concreteness that she is obsessed with. Her husband's body, which was incinerated and whose ashes were spread in the wind, was "recorded" into the notebooks she struggles to recover. This concreteness is in fact essential when suffering and remembering intersect:

Longing for concreteness designates a specific type of longing for a deceased which manifest in relations where issues of compromised retention and corrosion of body memories are involved. Contrary to a standard conception of longing or yearning for the deceased, as a (nostalgic) desire to return to a past familiar presence, longing for concreteness designates a longing for the very conditions of possibility for establishing and nurturing a continued bond to a deceased. As we have seen, this may involve significant existential suffering. While I expect that the phenomenon of longing for concreteness is most pronounced in cases of early parental bereavement, I think it is reasonable to assume that this may be involved in varying degrees in the more commonly distributed fear of forgetting. (Køster 9)

Allan Køster argues that there is a connection between the deceased's body and the mourner's body, whose "body memory," which is a sensorial conservation of the deceased's body, helps one to overcome the mourning period. When the "body memory" does not exist, the mourner might get stuck in his or hers mourning. In Tamina's case, the body is an essential aspect of her remembering efforts. Her husband's flesh, with its smell, its taste, and its tactile feeling are recorded by Tamina's body after touching each other, showing affection, and engaging in erotic experiences. Yet Tamina's "body memory" and her memory in general do not support her enough in her crusade against forgetting.

Tamina reaches a point when she thinks that if she cannot remember everything she might as well forget all. One day, a handsome man comes at the café and convinces Tamina to take her on a trip. She hesitates in the beginning but then she humps on in his convertible and travels to an island. The handsome man is actually the angel Raphael, who takes her to a place populated only by children, who only play all day long. In the beginning, Tamina is hesitating and finds it difficult to take part in all the games. She also feels uncomfortable to appear naked in front of the children but then she leaves behind all the constrains that stopped her from behaving

like a child. She accepts her role on the island of forgetting where children live exclusively in the present and have no link whatsoever with the past.

Kundera offers an uncanny interpretation to three fundamental symbols: angels, children, and laughter. Whereas angels commonly represent the divine kindness and purity, Kundera places them in the historical context of Prague, where Catholicism was imposed by force in the seventeenth century, replacing the Hussite religion.<sup>46</sup> Thus, angels rather represent the exponents of a religion that made itself popular by force and violence. Beyond their childish appearance, angels have in fact the capacity of tricking people, and this is what they did when they hidden the real meaning of laughter:

Whereas the devil's laughter pointed up the meaningless of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well-conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was. [...] Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels have gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the Devil's) have the same name. People nowadays do not even realize that one and the same external phenomenon embraces two completely contradictory internal attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish it. (Kundera 62)

Kundera uses a parable to deconstruct the meaning of laughter and to put it into a new perspective, one that reflects the contemporary Central European historical context, which in fact is the source of his interpretation.<sup>47</sup> According to this new interpretation, the angelic laughter is evil. Following the same logic, children are an image of alienation:

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<sup>46</sup> A Christian sect, formed around the teachings of Jan Huss (who was burned at the stake and whose ashes were spread in the Vltava river, deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>47</sup> Kundera is a provocateur who reinterprets in his works different concepts, thus challenging their commonsensical understanding. For instance, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he gives a new meaning to lightness and heaviness. For the Czech novelist, lightness means lack of moral responsibility and it is connected to the contemporary Central European history and the heaviness entailed in the desirable burden of being moral.

“Children, you are the future,” he said, and today I realize he did not mean it the way it sounded. The reason children are the future is moving more and more in the direction of infancy, and childhood is the image of the future. “Children, never look back”, he cried, and what he meant was that we must never allow the future to collapse under the burden of memory. Children, after all, have no past whatsoever. That alone accounts for the mystery of charmed innocence in their smiles. History is a succession of ephemeral changes. Eternal values are outside history. They are immutable and have no need of memory. Husak is the president of the eternal, not the ephemeral. He is on one side on the one side children, and children are life, and life is “seeing, eating drinking, urinating, defecating, diving into water and observing the firmament, laughing, and crying” [...] The idiot of music finished his song, and the president of forgetting spread his arms and cried, “Children, life is happiness!”.

On the children’s island, Tamina is supposed to forget everything, including husband and country. It is not a coincidence that her tragic love story and her exilic experience overlap. The island is a destination where one breaks with any kind of links that defined who one was. That is why the island is also the image of an infantile Czechoslovakia, and her husband is her country’s past, which vanished just like him. The motherland is the intimate space that creates who one is, as one’s identity is rooted in the socio-cultural context specific to each country. This intimacy is taken by Kundera to a deeper level, as he links it to the figure of the lover: the motherland becomes the “husband land.” Tamina embodies the desperation felt by each exile that lost his or her roots. Her roots go deeper than the communist Czechoslovakia, as the regime itself denies the past. She is not only the hero of a tragic love story, as she is also the interface of a tragic history.

Tamina’s home country was ruled by an authoritarian president who did his best to make people embrace an infantile future that lacks any kind of roots in Czechoslovakia’s past. This implies no expectations from the future. Husák dreamed of a society of infantile adults who can

be educated according to his desire. In fact, the infantilization of a society is a topic that was previously approached by other renowned Central-European novelists and essayists. Witold Gombrowicz depicts in *Ferdydurke* a dystopian world inhabited by schoolboys only. His subversive novel was contested both by the Nazi and the communist authorities, as it was obvious that Gombrowicz depicts the nightmarish totalitarian universe, where people are transformed into docile idiots who have no values or initiatives of their own. This issue also catches the attention of Czesław Miłosz. In his famous essay *The Captive Mind*, he speaks about the “new men” created by the Stalinists, who forgot or deeply hid within themselves any thoughts and values that were not inspired by the state. Kundera thus continues a Central-European intellectual tradition that keeps rebelling against the aggressive, brainwashing tactics of the totalitarian regimes. Tamina finds herself on the island of forgetting, where childhood becomes a synonym for numbed consciousness. The child laughter that she constantly hears on the island is in fact the evil laughter of the angels. Their laughter is the lightness of existing in time as if time will never end for them, and, forever, nothing will change. And because nothing changes, they have no responsibilities, therefore no values to guide their choices.

Tamina tries to become part of their world. They do nothing else but playing, so Tamina takes part at their games. While she plays, her body loses her “body memory,” as it becomes an object that satisfies childish curiosity. Even her sexuality is infantilized. Each night, the children touch her intimate parts and provoke her some soft orgasms. When the children touch her, her body forgets everything it knew and becomes a flesh toy that the children use to satisfy their innocent yet cruel curiosity. Each day she plays with the children; the game turns into a ritual of forgetting. While playing, nothing matters but the universe of the game, the rules that need to be respected, and the desire to win. The children play their games with seriousness because games



prevent them from growing up. In Tamina's case, the games should infantilize her. In a complementary universe, namely communist Czechoslovakia, Gustav Husák kept his country captive in what Kundera sees as the idiotic game of pop music. He does not care that so many intellectuals flee but he does his best to bring back home a pop star and a kitsch figure whose music reflects a rootless new world.

The children follow the rules of the game, which is in fact a way of ignoring any kind of responsibility because nothing besides the game can be taken seriously. The fact that they have no responsibilities means that they are amoral, even pure, only that for Kundera purity is in fact cruel. When the children fight for a game and Tamina intervenes, they decide to hurt her, even to kill her. This is in fact the face of rootless childhood, which involves no moral responsibility. Their cruelty is an expression of their curiosity. After all, when hitting Tamina with rocks or when watching how she drowns in the cold water they do nothing but keep playing:

If anyone is full of bitterness and hate, it is Tamina, not the children. Their desire to cause pain is positive, exuberant: it has every right to be called pleasure. Their only motive for causing pain to someone not of their world is to glorify that world and its law. (Kundera 185)

Tamina is full of bitterness because she cannot become a child. Unable to sink in forgetfulness, she runs away from the island and tries to go back to the real world. She is like other migrants who escaped communist Czechoslovakia. They cannot forget their home country so they cannot live on the children's island, yet their struggle to swim to a safe land turns fruitless.

### **3.4 From forgetting to ignoring**

Kundera associates forgetting with ignoring. Tamina is in fact trapped in between the fear of forgetting and the cruel evidence that she is insignificant for all the people that surround her. Before running to the island, which is not even a real place, Tamina lives a shadowy life in France: “It never occurs to anybody that she might have loved someone, and the love meant something to her” (Kundera 95). None of her new French “friends” wants to know anything about her previous life. “Did anybody ever ask her anything? Sometimes people would tell her what they thought about her country but no one was interested in her own experiences” (Kundera 94). They use her as an “ear” for their problems and they limit their knowledge of her home country to a series of stupid or naïve impressions: it is either an exotic destination or too a dangerous place, as the boy with bad breath believes. All the people who surround Tamina are egocentric, narcissistic, and, in living peaceful yet banal lives, they embrace clichés and make up false problems. Tamina finds herself in a selfish and impenetrable world. Kundera stresses a very common and dramatic situation of many political exiles and immigrants in general. Besides the thin layer of politeness, no one is interested in showing a general interest and patience for the newcomers. They are nothing but dispensable presences.

As Said says, “exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (Said 51). Tamina tries to make sense of her life in a new context, only that the new world has little to offer. Even though the situation would not have changed significantly if Tamina had been welcomed differently, it definitely did not make things easier. Tamina lives in a world that cannot be replaced by a new one, because the surrogate is far from offering anything that could even falsely replace the old world. That is why Tamina oscillates between the tremendous loss of the old world and the impenetrable carcass of the new one. Her only alternative is to somehow fix the brutal separation from the old world. Thus,

instead of trying to overcome the loss, she aims to hide it by perfectly conserving everything that the life in the old world meant for her. That is why Tamina and Gorchakov share many common things. They are both lost in their adoptive country, there is nothing that connects them to the new places they are in, there is not even enough to keep them healthy in the new context. That is why they are devoured by their loss of roots:

The people who have emigrated (there are a hundred and twenty thousand of them) and the people who have been silenced and removed from their jobs (there are half of a million of them) are fading like a procession moving off into the mist. They are invisible and forgotten. (Kundera 23-24)

Their suffering is indifferently observed by children, namely people who lack responsibility, the communist government or people from their adoptive country, where no one really cares about the newcomers and their past. As in the case of *Nostalgia*, the nostalgic suffering isolates one from the rest of the world. One is captivated by one's loss. The image of Tamina swimming in the sea, being surrounded only by water and dark, knowing that it is impossible for her to reach the shore, represents in fact the tragic condition of deadly nostalgia, which is defined by an unbearable form of isolation. Gorchakov dies in an empty pool, Tamina dies in the sea. Both are spaces of solitude, both limit vision, there is nothing beyond the water for Tamina and there is nothing that can be spotted behind the walls of the pool for Gorchakov. Furthermore, there is no one there to save them. The walls of the pool and the wall of water confirm that the nostalgic is in fact alone and no one sees what the nostalgic is going through, because no one can really penetrate their hopeless universe. In both cases, death comes as a capitulation: life under the sign of nostalgic suffering devoured them. They die as they suffered, surrounded only by the walls

that separate them from the rest of the world. The symbol of water - that is also omnipresent in *Nostalghia* - emphasizes the feeling of isolation. One cannot communicate with others in water, nor can escape water easily. The water sucks one in. In the end, it suffocates, which is how Tamina dies as well.

There is a little bit of a Tamina in all modern people who can never truly wrap their minds around transience. The eternal return gave premodern people a tool of dealing with loss: they did not live in a world where real transience existed. We live in a world where transience always looms above us even when we deny or try not to think about it. Tamina might be just an extreme case of something we all share metaphysically in a world of linear time.

### 3.5 The bitter-sweetness of nostalgia for a beloved person

In 1989, the Romanian poet (and yet to become Romania's most renowned contemporary novelist) Mircea Cărtărescu published a volume that compiles three stories (or novellas) that pay a tribute to nostalgia. The volume itself was supposed to be called *Nostalghia*, but the communist censorship decided that, given the fact that Tarkovsky, who had become a persona non grata behind the Iron Curtain, released a movie by the same name, Cărtărescu needed to find a different title for his novellas<sup>48</sup>. Hence, the volume was called *Visul* (The Dream). After the Revolution, the author added two stories (*The Rouletist* and *The Twins*) and republished the book under its uncensored title, *Nostalghia*.

Mircea Cărtărescu's nostalgia shares a series of common points with Kundera's previously analyzed nostalgia.<sup>49</sup> Firstly, both authors associate love with nostalgia and suffering. Secondly, the setting - Prague for Kundera, and Bucharest for Cărtărescu - is equally important

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<sup>48</sup> As if the word nostalgia found no place within the world behind the Iron Curtain.

<sup>49</sup> See also Lenka Pankova, *Novelistic Nostalgia: The Pleasure and the Pain*.

for both authors, as it employs a significant role when nostalgia is evoked. Thirdly, Cărtărescu, just like Kundera, sees nostalgia as a complex and multifaceted feeling that encompasses childhood, sensations regarding a setting, and memories of a beloved person. Last but not least, both novelists escape the real and thus place love and its nostalgic evocation within a surreal context: an island of children for Kundera, an oneiric realm for Cărtărescu.<sup>50</sup>

Cărtărescu's nostalgia also pays tribute to Proustian involuntary memory:

In fact, whether I prefer it or not, the Proustian method was familiar to me before I even knew who Proust was. It is odd, but as an adolescent I had all the experiences, unique and unrepeatable of certain writers: I know Proust's madeleine effect – the discoidal candies, spongy, pink and excessively perfumed; or the gleaming of a badge on the chest of a passer-by that engendered in me the powerful emotion of recalling a place, of recreating an atmosphere. (Cărtărescu 71)

There are several madeleines to be tasted in *Nostalgia*. They play the consecrated role of activating sensations valued in the past (Bales). There is, however, a quite significant distinction. *In Search of Lost Time* engages the involuntary memory as part of a “vast structure of recollection” (Bales 100) that has the final scope of finding a truth in the past, one that would contribute to the complex portrait of Marcel. In *Nostalgia*, the involuntary memory mixes truth and fiction and thus elevates fiction to the status of truth but not by calling it truth but by calling truth fiction. The five stories invoke the past differently, yet none truly aims to discover any truth. Truth is useless because none of the characters expect any precision from the past, on the contrary, the past itself is a constitutive part of the surreal realm that is featured in Cărtărescu's volume. Furthermore, the invocation of the past is rather bitter-sweet, as it aims for a ludic re-

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<sup>50</sup> There is another very broad yet significant common point, namely the fact that both writers make appeal to the postmodern stylistic repertoire: unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, etc.

taste of past events that might as well be exaggerated or invented and yet they are invoked for the simple reason that the past is fascinating. This perspective is radically different from Tamina's ritualistic invocation of the past that counts exclusively on precision and on accurate memories.

The *Twins* features a past love story, just like the second and fourth part from *The Book of Laughter...*, yet this time the painful separation does not involve the past in the same manner. The story's protagonist, famous writer Andrei, recollects his first love experience for his beautiful and stylish high school classmate Gina. *The Twins* commences by describing the gestures of a man, probably a transvestite, putting on makeup and a dress. The meaning of this scene can be understood at the end of the story when he sets himself on fire. He was in fact trying to be one with his love, because he believes that love creates a painful unity. Lovers are like twins sharing the same womb and the same features. This sentimental image reflects how a teenager perceives his first romantic experience. Moreover, the suicide from the end of the story should as well be interpreted as a symbol of unbearable love: this final gesture is not about death but about the drama of love:

There is a white sheepskin coat, with black and red ornaments, overcoats - citrus yellow and a cream-colored one, another of fox fur that that Gina never wore at school - and three long and fluffy jackets, all hooded. [...] You empty everything and spread it all over the unusual edifice in the middle of the room, anywhere that you can fit it. You give up the thought of dragging the wardrobe into the pile [...] Everything is ready. The room looks as if it was ready for painting. You laugh hysterically as you drag yourself along the naked walls, marveling at the echo of your laughter in the devastated room. You can hardly stand. You grab the yellow dress, the heavy one with pleats and folds, and pull it over your head. Absent-mindedly, you bind the laces at the neck and at the wrists. [...] You head for the large terracotta fireplace and extract from behind it the can that you prepared beforehand. You sprinkle the entire pile of furniture and clothes, and then keeping your head turned to avoid breathing in vapors from the brownish-yellow liquid, you pour it on your dress. "This is all," you shout, "it's all, it's everything!" You feel like vomiting and actually do in a corner of the room. [...] You crumple a newspaper you pick up from the floor, and you clamber, squeezing underneath the rolled-up carpet on

top of the piano, sheltering yourself in the thick layer of perfumed clothes. You ignite with the lighter the crumpled newspaper and throw it bellow [...] (Cărtărescu 160)

Towards the end, the narrative turns to a surreal path. This changes the meaning of death itself, as if it took place on an oneiric plan, not on the “real” level of the story, which means that Andrei did not commit suicide on the “real” level. Unlike Gorchakov’s and Tamina’s cases, death is not caused by a nostalgic suffering but by the suffering of love itself. Andrei does not kill himself because he tries to rememorize his story and he finds this invocation unbearable, but because he finds his separation from Gina excruciating.

Andrei remembers the ups and downs of their relationship and how these changes affected him. In the beginning, Gina was fascinated by his intellectual aura, just as he was fascinated by her beauty, her rare and expensive clothing and perfume (a Dior perfume was indeed a rarity during the communist regime), and her personal charm and humor. As their friendship becomes more intimate, he is the one that depends on her caprices and moods, as he is not granted the status of an “official” boyfriend. However, what matters most are not the big events but the details that contributed to the evolution of their relationship and the stylistic richness that is used to recollect each of these small and apparently insignificant elements: their walks through the streets of Bucharest, the affection they shared in her room, her beautiful old house (in a city that was systematically demolished and rebuilt during that period), their phone conversations, the sensorial memories such as the taste of her skin or her elegant smell, their frequent fights, etc.

Andrei’s nostalgia is fundamentally different from the ritualistic nostalgia embraced by Tamina. Whereas for Tamina the obsessive character of her longing provoked a deep suffering,

Cărtărescu's regret for the past entails a rather soft kind of pain. This nostalgia resonates with Fred Davis' definition:

Some will, to be sure, allow that their nostalgia is tinged frequently with a certain sadness or even melancholy but are then inclined to describe it as "a nice sort of sadness" – "bittersweet" is an apt word occasionally used. The implication is that the component of sadness serves only to heighten the quality of recaptured joy or contentment. (Davis 14)

In this case, nostalgia is a mix of pain and pleasure and it is deliberately activated by the nostalgic. Andrei is looking for his madeleines, as he enjoys their taste. Unlike Tamina or Gorchakov, for whom nostalgia comes as an unchangeable and unavoidable experience, Andrei is the one who triggers it.

I have previously argued that Tamina's nostalgia follows the logic of a ritual. Andrei's nostalgia has a lot in common with a notion that is itself like a ritual, namely the game. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga states that both games and rituals are part of the play element of culture: "In myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play" (Huizinga 5). The play element precedes culture and civilization, as it is present not only to humans but to animals as well. Both games and rituals create a world that is in the continuation of the real world, yet it intensely absorbs the performer or the player, as if it was real. This world is activated or created for a limited amount of time, but its creation can be later repeated. Moreover, it exists in a space - called by Huizinga "magic circle" - that separates the gamer or the ritual performer from the ordinary world. This separate world functions in accordance to its own rules and enhances the existence of a different time. As for the differences, "games rarely contain any offerings to gods or their like as mandatory requirements" (ritualistic



games boundaries). The game can be played or not or, to use Huizinga's words, "play can be deferred or suspended at any time" and those who play the game might as well live their lives without the game. The game is thus an addition to one's life, but it is not vital, as it can be replaced by other games, it can be played some other time, it can suffer some alterations in the way it is played. Unlike the game, the religious ritual accepts no changes: it needs to be performed at a specific time and it makes a crucial difference in the life of the believer, because it is a necessity.

Whereas Tamina cannot live without the nostalgic invocation of her husband, Andrei might not be able to live without his girlfriend (which is also debatable) but he can for sure live without invoking her exact image, or the exact order of the events they experienced together. Andrei's recalling is not a stringent necessity but a habit that provokes pleasure and pain, just like many games do. He does indeed revisit all the important moments of their relationship just like the believers invoke the beginning of the world. He remembers their walks in Bucharest, how he used to take her home and to talk for hours about books, how she would tease him by telling him stories about his boyfriends. He recalls her looks, skin, and smell, the intensity of their first kiss, their fights, and their first sexual experience. Yet his life does not depend on all these memories. The game is par excellence free, in the sense that it is not enhanced by a duty, and neither is Andrei's endeavour. Just like any game, he temporarily isolates himself in the time of his memories, which is different from the real time. Furthermore, he temporarily isolates himself in the universe of his story. He chooses to step into a magic circle, yet there are no signs in the text to indicate that his life fully depends on the shifts between "real" and fantastic.

Even though Huizinga argues that the game is an activity that is not "serious," he states that many games are played with great seriousness: "as we have already pointed out, the

consciousness of play being only a pretend does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness” (Huizinga 5). After all, one of the chapters of his book is about war as a game. Yet regardless how serious the player is, there is a “fun-element that characterizes the essence of play.” This is the fundamental element that differentiates game-like nostalgia from ritualistic nostalgia<sup>51</sup>. Whereas Tamina’s nostalgia provokes no pleasure or fun whatsoever, Andrei’s evocation of the past is bittersweet, which means that he does obtain pleasure (even if it is counterbalanced by suffering) when being nostalgic. Therefore, nostalgia, like the game, “contributes to the well-being [...], but in quite another way and by other means than the acquisition of the necessities of life” (Huizinga 6). The nostalgic obtains no material benefit from being nostalgic, but might obtain pleasure instead. One can also think of the pleasure of suffering as such. Self-flagellators, an anchorite like St. Anthony and many others have enjoyed suffering. Dostoevsky revelled in suffering: at least through his characters.

The sweet taste of nostalgia is best mirrored by the invocation of the city of Bucharest, which is inseparable from the evolution of their love story. Bucharest is itself sweet and bitter. It is the city where Andrei suffered but also where he tasted love for the first time. Andrei does not think of his city as a means to accurately conserve memories, as he sees it instead as a witness of his love and of his life in general. There are two faces of Bucharest that are depicted in *The Twins*. One is the brand new Bucharest that is being built by the communists; the other one is the old Bucharest, or what was left after it was demolished.<sup>52</sup> The Bucharest that was about to vanish completely left behind some scattered streets that offer a fragile and slightly decadent image of a city that did not survive Ceaușescu’s ambition to build a new capital.

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<sup>51</sup> I reiterate the fact that Tamina’s nostalgia follows the logic of a ritual without actually being one, because Tamina’s invocation is never fulfilled. The distinction between ritualistic nostalgia and ritual is important because the former does not provoke pleasure whereas the later might.

<sup>52</sup> Cărtărescu’s book does not encompass political references. The novel was partly written in the eighties, when the communist censorship was paying great attention to any suggestions that might hurt the Party’s reputation.

Andrei shares an intimate relationship with the old city. That is why Bucharest anticipates his love:

For the period of three months, I constantly sensed that my heart was heavy with an abstract love, a love for no one. I couldn't stand being home for a moment. I would go out and roam the streets of Bucharest, translucently golden from the sun, incessantly expecting to meet someone unknown. (Cărtărescu 97)

The city has its own way of announcing that a big change was about to come. Andrei walks on Venera Street and stares at Gina's house before even knowing that is where she lives:

One evening while walking on Venera Street, I heard a high-pitched mechanical melody. I recalled instantly the childhood scene, that strange house with hundreds of toys. [...] A girl appeared there, framed by red woollen drapes. She seemed to me unusually tiny and attenuated, her light chestnut hair was long and curly, the color of oak bark. [...] I retained only vaguely, in passing the aristocratic mien and went on with my walk till nightfall. After that, I looked up at that window above the marquee each time I took my walk on Venera Street, but for an entire half year there was no one there except, sometimes, an old lady. (Cărtărescu 96)

It wasn't until we arrived at her house, the massive house with the marquee and willow in the courtyard, on Venera Street, that I saw the connection between Gina and the girl I had seen that evening at the draped window above the marquee. (Cărtărescu 101)

The city "takes" him to the place that was about to become the center of the universe for Andrei, as if Bucharest has an harmless way of plotting not so much against him but for him. Then the city becomes the witness of their friendship:

[...] I walked her home, along the gray wet walls of the houses on Taras Shevchenko Street. From time to time, shiny fruit fell from the nearly bare chestnut trees. There was a powerful, nostalgic smell of smoke in the air, wafting from the courtyards with forged iron fences [...] (Cărtărescu 100)

Over the months in which they become close friends, Bucharest is part of their daily routine: same streets, same houses, same walls. The old city is welcoming and charming, it has something mysterious and pleasant, exactly as Gina's house. Then when they temporarily break up, the story of their separation is marked by a shift from the old Bucharest to the new one: grey buildings and tight flats where teenagers listen to heavy metal<sup>53</sup> and drink cheap alcohol. This new Bucharest is claustrophobic and weird, it has something unwelcoming and can get overwhelming for Andrei. He encounters Gina at a party organized by his classmates in a typical communist flat where he ends up getting drunk, vomiting, and finally falling ill for several days. When they get back together, the city becomes old and mysterious one more time and then when they have their first erotic experience the city turns into a gigantic surreal creature:

The halls were awakening. The display windows began to move, snouts yawned, eyes rolled. The birds began to caw and clatter, to beat their wings in order to escape from the branches to which they were nailed, and stirred the suffocating dust, smelling of paint and seaweed. We ran down the stairs followed by the piercing yell of the peacocks and sped through the first-floor halls. The dinotherium's skeleton, bones the size of the tree trunks, made enormous efforts to stand again, filling the surrounding space with trepidations. (Cărtărescu 154)

They commence their erotic experience in Gina's room, a beautiful place with icons on the walls - another element representative of the old Bucharest, when Christianity was not a taboo. But then they open a hidden door that takes them from her room into a labyrinthine Bucharest and

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<sup>53</sup> Heavy metal was banned by the communist authorities.

then straight to the “Grigore Antipa” Museum of Natural History, where the exhibits and even the walls come to life. This general madness is in fact a way to express the unusual of their first sexual act. It is as if the inner city conspires against them one more time, as in fact the city has its own twisted way of keeping them close to each other. This final experience turns playful nostalgia into an adventure. When recalling this final bittersweet experience, Andrei takes pleasure from remembering an intense and unusual experience. This link between nostalgia and adventure is going to be even better emphasized in the following section.

### **3.6 Nostalgia for childhood**

Cărtărescu’s playful nostalgia is even better stressed when it is linked to nostalgia for childhood. Childhood is an essential topic especially in two of the stories: *Mentardy* and *REM*. In the followings, I shall focus on *Mentardy*. *Mentardy* (Mendebilul in Romanian) is in fact the nickname of the boy whose story stands at the core of this narrative. This nickname suggests the weirdness, even the insanity of the character. The nickname belonged initially to another character called Crazy Dan (Dan Nebunul) who would go on the roof of some apartment building and threaten to kill himself. Unlike Crazy Dan, the hero of the story, the other *Mentardy*, shocks his audience, namely a bunch of children who live behind the Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard (a working class neighbourhood from Bucharest) by doing a lot of unusual things, many of them significantly more uncanny and also more sophisticated than the suicidal attempts of Dan Nebunul. The narrative voice belongs to another child from the group, who is an adult when the story is recollected, Mirciosu (coming from Mircea). Actually, the story has a strong autobiographical turn. Ștefan cel Mare is the neighbourhood where Cărtărescu grew up. Despite

the fact that in the end of the story the narrative voice states in a very postmodern fashion that all the stories that were recalled in *Mentardy* are in fact untrue, Mentardy was a real character<sup>54</sup>.

During the summer break, when all the children were outside playing, a new child shows up. He had just moved in the neighbourhood with his mother and that was his first encounter with the other children. From the very beginning, he shocks everybody by unexpectedly descending from one of the obscure places where none of the children dared to go. Even though the children are circumspect about the new boy, they invite him to play Whitchbitch (Vrăjitoaca) together, which is a game they invented. Because he instantly refuses, they try to force him to play, but as they push him to the ground, Mentardy has a very violent reaction that stuns everybody. He is then saved of the fury of his peers by his mother.

Despite the very unusual first encounter, Mentardy manages to charm or even hypnotize all the other children due to his amazing talent to invent and tell stories. For quite a while, all the children forgot all the other games and did nothing but to listen to the mesmerizing stories told by Mentardy. His influence grows so much that he easily becomes the leader of the group (some sort of child-guru). He even invents a set of rules that are written in chalk, which all the children commit to follow. For weeks in a row, the children would only talk about him and his stories. His influence gets so big that at some points some of the parents starts to wonder whether his presence among the other children is harmful. However, things end as violently and abruptly as they start. In one of the days, Mirciosu visits Mentardy and finds out that he bought a pen that had hidden inside the photo of a naked woman. Shortly afterwards, Mentardy and one of the girls that was part of the group<sup>55</sup> are discovered completely naked, examining each other. Mentardy overstepped some sacred boundaries, reason for which he is immediately punished by the other

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<sup>54</sup> See also Sergiu Crăciun, “O esență narativă.”

<sup>55</sup> At least informally, because girls were not members of boy’s gang.

children who start throwing rocks at him. Although he resists heroically for a while, he is eventually hurt by one of the rocks. After this incident, he simply vanishes from the playground and from the neighbourhood.

Just like Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Cărtărescu reveals how cruel children can be. Both authors elude the cliché of the pure and innocent childhood.<sup>56</sup> Children are selfish, mean, violent and ready to seriously punish those who are unlike them.<sup>57</sup> The difference is that Cărtărescu still has an eye for the charm of childhood and he explores it in his story.<sup>58</sup> Childhood memories are involuntarily activated in a Proustian fashion, only that the trigger is a dream the young writer (the narrative voice) has. His dream first reaches an easier to grasp level of memories and then a deeper one, where long-forgotten memories were concealed. Cărtărescu's character is quite the opposite of Tamina: whereas Tamina forgets, he remembers. And this reveals two very different attitudes. Tamina's dominant sentiment is fear of loss; Mircea is rather confronted with surprise. His overall feeling combines unsettledness, due to the surreal character of the recalled memories, and pleasure, because childhood is recalled.

As I mentioned in the beginning, Bucharest is a leitmotif in Cărtărescu's novel. Unlike Andrei, Mircea is not aware of the existence of old Bucharest, yet he is mesmerized by the huge new Bucharest, with its tall buildings and its numerous lights:

Sometimes I would steal out of the starched bed sheets, rigid as broken glass but light as paper, and tiptoe to the window. I watched Bucharest's skyline with [...] large and ashen buildings teeming with windows, the downtown skyscraper with the Gallus billboard like a bluish globe above it, the Victoria department store, the fire watchtower to the left, the arching buildings on Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard, and off in the beyond, the hydroelectric

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<sup>56</sup> For more on the similar perspectives Kundera and Cărtărescu have on childhood, see Lenka Pankova, "Novelistic Nostalgia: The pleasure and the Pain," p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the myth of childhood innocence, see also Joe Moran, "Childhood and Nostalgia in Contemporary Culture."

<sup>58</sup> In fact, it is debatable whether Kundera really has childhood in mind, or he rather refers to infantilization.

plant, with its immense chimneys spitting out twisted strands of steam. (Cărtărescu 35-36)

The city is a huge source of amazement. Its humongous buildings, its secluded corners, and its beautiful lights were a source of endless fascination for Mircea. All his memories are topographically marked, especially by the Ștefan Cel Mare Boulevard, by some window displays that he vividly remembers, by the Obor district, the place where he would purchase toys from and which, as the years pass by, irremediably changes- which is the classic nostalgic remark one can say about a place.

Childhood is recalled as a cluster of feelings, sensations (smells, tastes, etc.), and moods. He especially remembers the playground, with all the mysterious ditches, corners and stairs, the gang and, last but not least, all the games they used to play. Mircea does not idealize his childhood. He does not compare it to his adult life and he does not unconditionally love it. However, his childhood is still a lost paradise, yet one in which selfishness, cruelty, and the insecurities of any child are also acknowledged. This perspective replaces a romanticized depiction of “happy” childhood with a complex perspective that encompasses adventure, surreal experiences, innocent cruelty, humor, and fascination.

The playground plays a crucial role for his nostalgia, as this is the site where all the adventures (culminating with Mentardy’s story) took place. This place has nothing idyllic, as it is nothing but a muddy, chaotic, still under construction site. It was a very common site for the big cities of Eastern Europe that had to accommodate numerous workers who’d moved to the big cities to take part to the socialist “dream” of building competitive - in reality not really so -



heavy industry based economies. Mircea was one of the numerous children who transformed the gray and unwelcoming new neighborhoods into fascinating playgrounds:

The apartment building was in a stage of near-completion. It abutted on one end a building which always made me feel uneasy because of its crenellations and watchtowers, its infinite perspectives - which later I found again de Chirico - while in the back, facing the mill (another medieval building, of sinister scarlet), it was still propped up by rusty scaffolding. Behind the apartment building the earth was ransacked by sewage ditches, which in places plummeted to the depth of two meters. This was our playing field, separated from the mill's courtyard by a concrete fence. It was a new world, strange and dirty, full of places to hide; and we, seven or eight boys, aged between five and twelve, armed with blue and pink water pistols we bought for two lei at Little Red Riding Hood, the toy store at that time in the Obor district, became every morning its masters and explorers. (Cărtărescu 31-32).

Whereas Andrei enjoys the remains of the old and beautiful Bucharest, Mircea savors the chaotic set-up of the new Bucharest. For an adult, the dirty and stinky construction sites would cause nothing but distress and bitterness, yet for a child it was a mysterious, always full of surprise realm. Child's imagination and spirit of adventure transform such a gloomy site in the perfect battleground for a fight with water pistols. Following the same logic, the dangerous deep ditches become the perfect places to hide when playing hide and seek. Children take advantage of the place to play numerous other games and even to invent a new one, everybody's favorite,

Whitchbitch:

All day long we chased each other through the labyrinthine sewer ditches. We found our way down through certain spots, walking on top of the pipes painted with pitch and the giant faucets; the smell of dirt invaded our nostrils, of earthworms and larvae, of pitch and fresh putty. It filled us with madness. We armed ourselves with water pistols, covered our faces with masks made of corrugated cardboard we got from furniture warehouse. In order to make them all more frightening, we painted the masks at home with leering fangs, bulging eyes and dilated nostrils. Then we chased each other through the tortuous ducts, while above us a thin slice of sky darkened with the passage of time.

When, turning a corner, we came face to face with an enemy, we roared and charged at each other, scraping ourselves and ripping each other's T-shirts or printed blouses. No one knew who invented the game called witchbitch. We continued playing it for years without getting tired of it, still playing it even in the eighth grade. It was a mixture of more benign games: cops-and-robbers, hawks-and-doves, hide-and-seek. At the start, there was only one witchbitch, which we picked by counting. The witchbitch alone wore a mask; "she" also carried a stick from which the bark had been removed. She counted to ten with her face to the wall, then charged through the ditches, looking for victims. [...] The witchbitch hunted us through the evil-smelling ditches, and when she succeeded in striking one of us with the stick, she let out a horrific roar. The victim had to remain frozen in a paralyzed position. The witchbitch dragged him by the hand to the lair, where she knuckle-cuffed his head an agreed number of times; thus baptized, the prisoner became a witchbitch himself. He put on a mask, and the hunt continued. Toward evening, when above the mill's giant towers the first stars glimmered on the still bluish sky, only one survivor remained, hounded by a horde of witchbitches who bellowed their sinister shrieks. The tenants awaited that moment with horror. They threw potatoes and carrots at us from their balconies, while the cleaning ladies lunged at us with their brooms, all to no avail: the witchbitches would not rest till they captured the last victim, usually a tiny child who, upon seeing the game turn to reality, became terror-stricken. At night it was terrifying to come face to face with a single masked witchbitch, let alone an entire flock. The last one to be caught was dragged to the nearest stairs, where the rest of the gang made hideous faces at him and acted like they were about to swallow him. (Cărtărescu 37-38)

The games that are described are intense, loud, and harsh. The boys crave for adrenaline and mystery. They escape the reality by creating a universe in which fear, competitiveness, and even violence are fun. There are moments when their appetite for violence is almost repelling. Mircea remembers how they used to torture to death small animals such as cats. What prevails is their need for adventure and their even stronger appetite for amazement. Roger Caillois analyzes several categories of games, among which *Ilinx* "includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (23). Dervishes, Mexican *voladores*<sup>59</sup> but also some children games seek panic, ecstasy or both at the same time. When

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<sup>59</sup> They used to practice a primitive and dangerous form of bungee-jumping.

recalling his childhood, Mircea does not depict an idealized universe but one full of suspense. His nostalgia focuses on this need of wild, reckless, albeit violent fun that regrets an island of innocence, as the one described by Kundera, only that this island is not a dystopia, it is nothing but the fascinating realm of childhood.

The children that are part of the “gang” are far from angelic: they are rather weird, naughty, and quite primitive. In fact, the “gang” itself bases its hierarchy on the principle of strength. That is why the leader, the one who can beat any of the members, is not smart at all. However, their weirdness is often funny. In fact, this element of humour creates an even sharper contrast for when Mentardy appears and gives a surreal turn to their lives:

I do not wish to spend any more time with them. All these little colored and perfumed clouds are merely a way of painting a “picturesque” landscape, and I can’t allow myself to bore you with a picturesque tale. *Background* - this is what all of us were, for him who came and changed something in us or at least left an inexplicable mark on our lives, for him who couldn’t even beat up Lumpy but was for a time the focus of rapt attention and respect for Mimi himself. (Cărtărescu 33)

Mircea remembers his friends with candor, yet they are far from being as important as the unusual person that changed their lives, namely Mentardy. He is the central figure of the story because he represents the utmost of mystery and adventure that Mircea compares childhood with:

I don’t remember any other similar theories - I say theories because I don’t know what else to call them - but all of them were in the spirit of the ones above. They fascinated us because they were the substance of Mentardy’s substance. You had to hear him speak and especially see him gesticulate, you had to feel the enchantment and the fright and the melancholy of those evenings. It was as though we were watching a strange film in muted colors, from coffee-brown to ashen-gray, the garnet-red of the mill and the greenish-black of the acacia’s leaves. I don’t need to say that, pausing from the telling of some tale with Arabs and caravans, he left us veiled in the pungent perfume of fiction, ready now for revelation... That’s how we spent an entire month that summer, huddled around Mentardy. (Cărtărescu 48)

Whereas games such as *Witchbitch* generate a lot of adrenaline, Mentardy fascinates them on several levels. His imaginative stories, exotic attitude, and his unusual ideas created a magic atmosphere that lasted for weeks in a row. Mentardy built a web in which he kept all the children captive, and they enjoyed it, as this was the most complex game they ever took part at. This game replaced any other activity they used to do before, as none of the children wished anything else but to be part of the weird universe of Mentardy. When he was not outside playing, the game would be put on brake, yet the children barely played any of the old games because nothing can be compared to Mentardy's stories. Yet the infamous moment when Mentardy's spell is broken does come because he does something unacceptable. When he strips in front of the girl, he makes a step towards another age, when sexuality destroys the magic of their age. Therefore, he is drastically punished for his reckless gesture. When children hit Mentardy with rocks, they actually refuse to accept the inevitable future, when the amazement they were able to feel at that age is going to be permanently lost.

For Cărtărescu, nostalgia for childhood is synonymous with the need for amazement and mystery. He recalls this story because, as the narrative voice emphasizes, this is the most unusual event that happened in his entire life. His travel into the past is in fact a surplus of enjoyment that he brings into his life. He memorizes the weird story of Mentardy because he wishes to revive the amazement he experienced when he was seven. For him, nostalgia entails a shift from adulthood to the surreal world in which the unusual was a state of fact. Following the logic of the game, his recall temporarily separated him from the real. When he recalls the story, the present is irrelevant. He thus builds a magical circle in which he evades. His attempt is gratuitous because there is no pragmatic need for his gesture. However, he treats this endeavour with great

seriousness. As children would not admit that their games are less important than reality, so is Mircea's need to strongly believe in the inexplicable story of *Mentardy*.

### 3.7 Sweet and funny nostalgia

Mircea recalls the most unusual moment of his life because he wants to have a taste of childhood's amazement. *Mentardy* featured nostalgia as a concept that focuses less on suffering and more on the pleasure of evoking a past. Suffering is even less important for Filip and Matei Florian who wrote a partly autobiographical novel entitled *The Băiuț Alley Lads (Băiuței)*, which showcases what childhood during communism was like in Romania. Each chapter written by Filip is followed by one created by his brother. They engage in a dialogue based on humour in which they evoke common memories. Whereas Cărtărescu's stories paid a tribute to magical realism, Florian brothers stick to a more realistic perspective. They put together bits and pieces that marked their childhood: a pair of cowboy boots, the taste of candies or homemade pies, soccer games they played or watched, school experiences, friendships, etc.

In the first section of this chapter, I argued that Tamina's nostalgia suits Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia. The American-Russian theorist also provided a definition for an antonymic form of nostalgia, which she calls reflexive. Whereas restorative nostalgia is a dogmatic approach of the past, as an entity that needs to be accurately reconstructed, reflexive nostalgia is more concerned with the finitude of the past and develops a fragmentary and ironic way of longing for the past. *The Băiuț...* features a form of reflexive nostalgia that barely has any links with suffering, as it perceives the past as a source of pleasant memories that are recalled without dogmatism and that enhance a playful perspective over the past.

Their evocation is not only enjoyable, but it actually enhances bonding between the two brothers. Even bitter losses have their charm when remembered. For instance, the older brother regrets the fact that he lost his hair:

For example, one of the things that come under this category is my hair, which has now well and truly been swallowed up by the earth. Of the fringe that came down to my eyebrows in primary school (limp, floppy, and plastered to my forehead as it was), of the mullet tied up in a pony tail that hung over my shirt collar, of the long sideboards that masked my jug lugs, but made my chin look even pointier, of all these tonsorial endowments, which ultimately weren't really up to all that much, a magnificent bald pate has sprung up, not quite a Kojak, but not far off. (Florian, 36)

As his hair will never grow again, pain or frustration is mitigated by a self-ironic evocation. Filip recalls in great detail his hair, yet he accepted that his looks changed. He uses such memories to see himself as a child, reason for which his recall is playful and pleasant.

Their evocations are even sweeter when they remember objects that they treasured. Filip remembers a pair of cowboy boots that his father bought for him in a weekend:

The pointy black shoes [...] cost 330 lei. I can tell you that exactly. Father did not hesitate because of the price, but because of their impetuous line, like that of a speedboat. He pressed his palm to my brow to check that I didn't have a fever. He asked me four times whether I was sure I liked the design, as if he didn't hear my answers or my pleas. Each time he asked he was amazed, very amazed and he kept trying to explain to me that they were shoes for a dandy. He gradually understood how it is when you are making the transition from childhood to adolescence, but he could not suspect anything about the success Dan Anghel from entrance C had been having with the chicks since he got himself a pair of shoes exactly like these nor could he imagine what pointy shoes meant to Nicoleta. They were impeccable, with pointed toecaps, a thick, very tall heel, and a transversal strap. True, they did not prove to be very comfortable. It was as if I was walking on stilts. They made quite a loud tapping noise and were slippery

when dribbling a ball, but for kicking they were without compare: they launched the ball with pinpoint precision and it would reach dizzying speed, just like Nicoleta's lips when you walked her home after school and, without turning on the light in the basement of the block, you led her down the passageway to the box rooms, where it smelled of pickled peppers and damp potatoes. (Florian 38)

The boots do not exist anymore, and this is already a sign that showcases that their nostalgia is not dogmatic. Whereas for Tamina each object that remembered her of her husband was crucial, Filip's boots did not mean enough to preserve them in order to have a palpable presence of the past and this is especially because that past is only invoked in a playful and inoffensive manner. The evocation of that past is not in fact needed, only wished.

There is, however, another element to be taken into consideration when interpreting the Florian brothers' nostalgia, namely the political context. Many of their memories depend, one way or another, on the communist regime and the peculiar reality that this political context implied. The regime spread its influence on each level of their lives: school, leisure time, televised entertainment, food, clothing, etc. School, however, plays a special role, as it was a place with draconic rules, in which censorship, propaganda, and the teachers' closed-mindedness created an unwelcoming, even absurd environment. Filip recalls how his teacher, who did not have anything to object to for a while, suddenly decided that he needed to obey the rules and cut his hair. This was indeed a very strict rule in Romanian schools and in Romania in general, as long hair and beard were forbidden and people would need a special permit to enjoy the privilege of looking different.

Filip also recalls his burning wish of becoming a pioneer, which was considered a big accomplishment for children back then. Becoming a pioneer was a distinction offered on behalf of the Communist Party (similar to Hitler youth) to children who had good results in school and

had a good behaviour. They also had to fulfill other steps that would prove one's trustworthiness, deserving the honor of being accepted among those who fight in the name of the Communist Revolution. A classmate's endorsement would be such a proof. A special and solemn event used to be organized for those who were about to become pioneers, as they would swear faith to the Party and to the country. Despite the dystopian character of the whole situation, children were very excited that they would receive red scarfs to tie around their necks and some would even receive stripes and medals, which meant an even greater honor. Filip was initially not considered for this great distinction, which made him feel marginalized<sup>60</sup> and disappointed.

Yet nostalgia is scarcely affected by the political context. Pleasant childhood memories are made despite the regime or even against it. Even if their historical context, their moral underpinnings and their connection to the truth may be questionable, the feelings were genuine. And in that sense, induction into the Pioneers remains a good thing divorced from its historical context: on a subjective level. As Maya Nadkarni argues:

Such nostalgia was not apolitical, but instead reflected the specific form of "antipolitics" sought by Hungarian citizens [and Pohrib also ads Romanians] and encouraged under the previous regime: a cultural fantasy about the insularity of private life under socialism that stood in contrast to the political battles that characterized life in post-socialist democracy (Pohrib 144).

Childhood in particular and often personal life at any age was in many cases strictly delimited from the political harsh reality. For Florian brothers it did not matter that they lived in a country with absurd rules, as their childhood was fully enjoyed anyway:

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<sup>60</sup> The same disappointment is also depicted in another novel about childhood experiences under the communist regime, namely Stefan Baştovoi's *Iepurii nu mor* (*Rabbits don't die*).



I only have to think of how Filip believes at the beginning of chapter six, that little Matei ‘must be sitting into a piece of apple pie, drinking some squash, reading and rereading the letter from big Matei, eating fistfuls of sweet rice-puffs Pufarins, sucking a Mentosan lozenge, crunching on a boiled sweet and thinking of all those things set down so curiously on paper, things such as he has never come across in any of his storybooks’, and I become embarrassed as a wee bairn catching Father Christmas up the chimney.

I don’t know what you would do if you were shrunk down inside a book that exuded such a hieratic state of joy, let alone such a paradisiacal languor, in the realm of so many wonders (which, by the mere fact of being listed, offer the taste-buds luxurious pampering), I don’t know whether you would go into a huff because of the absence of a box of Cip sweets or whether you would merely view this omission (as I do) as an instance of tender concern for the friability of milk teeth. I don’t know whether you would hide your tears like any self-respecting adult and, above all, I have no way of knowing whether you would feel something resembling a tingle, or rather an itch, worming its way deep inside you. (Florian 94)

Such a positive invocation does not involve a dogmatic perspective on the regime. The two brothers are aware what was communism like, they make no illusions about it, yet this does not stop them from enjoying their past<sup>61</sup>. Cărtărescu’s childhood nostalgia share an important element with the one depicted by Florian brothers, as both nostalgias follow the logic of the game. In both cases, the evocation of the past is a voluntary, unnecessary act, that can be stopped anytime and that creates its own universe. What is even more important is that in both cases nostalgia has the role of provoking pleasant feelings. In *Mentardy*, it was associated with the need of amazement, in *The Băiuț...* it focuses more on the need for pleasure, as childhood is about laughter and enjoyment.

### 3.8 Ironic nostalgia

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<sup>61</sup> The link between private life, nostalgia, and the communist regime is a complex matter that is going to be further analyzed in the next chapter.

For the Florian brothers, humour and nostalgia go together. Yet even if suffering is marginalized, some light forms do emerge sometimes: for instance, the bittersweet memories about their babysitter, who became more of a foster mother, and who made numerous sacrifices for them. They remember how she spoiled them and how she even spent her last money to buy them sweets. They are, however, saddened when remembering her because she was not alive anymore. As I have argued, their nostalgia is reflexive, which means that even if suffering is marginalized,<sup>62</sup> a sort of bitterness ensues in the recalling of some memories. The novel that I shall further analyze stresses the element of irony and disregards *algos* or any infusion of pathos, which differentiates it from reflexive nostalgia.

In *Tinerețile lui Daniel Abagiu*, Cezar Paul Bădescu sets an ironic tone from the very beginning. The title itself makes an uncanny reference to masturbation. Daniel Abagiu, the name of the main character's alter-ego, can be read with an emphasis on the "l" and the "a" from the beginning of the last name, as "labagiu" is slang in Romanian for "masturbator." The same word can be used to refer to a person whose actions always end badly, such as a loser. The novel is a postmodern *Bildungsroman*, as it follows the formation of the main character from childhood to adulthood.<sup>63</sup> Whereas in *The Băiuț...* the evocations were most commonly sweet and pleasant, Daniel Labagiu has mixed feelings when recalling the numerous failures of his life. It is as if his life follows an infamous rule: the more important the moment, the bigger the failure. Just to give an example, he remembers that his first ever attempt of having sex is not fulfilled because he cannot have an erection due to the cold from the apartment.<sup>64</sup> What is supposed to be romantic

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<sup>62</sup> However, in some cases reflexive nostalgia can as well focus a lot more on *algos*.

<sup>63</sup> The novel deconstructs the psychological growth of the protagonist that is specific to a *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>64</sup> During the eighties, Ceaușescu started paying back the external debt of Romania. This implied a period of long privations for Romanians: food was rationalized, electricity was interrupted for several hours a day, water was never hot, and the heating in the apartments was cut off.

and sweet becomes awkward and even traumatizing, as this first experience will hunt him for more than a year, when he finally has sex with a different girl.

The endless chain of failures starts in his early childhood. As he and his cousin were in the same class, they were always competing against each other, and the cousin would always win: the cousin was their teacher's favourite, he had more influence over their classmates, he would win more games and more fights. No matter what Daniel would do, his cousin was one step ahead. For instance, the teacher chooses his cousin to be the conductor of the class' choir. Daniel objects that he would be a better conductor. The teacher lets him prove his talent, so he mimics the chaotic gestures of a real conductor, as he seen on TV. All the other children found this very amusing, so they start laughing. In the end, his cousin would be the one chosen by the children to be the conductor, so he did nothing but to embarrass himself in front of the whole class.

Despite all the awkward moments, he invokes his past as if there is nothing dramatic about it because he relies on humour and irony to mitigate any cringing memory. Self-irony becomes a pretext to prevent him from becoming sentimental. The question is whether nostalgia still has a role in his endeavour because even if humour might be compatible with nostalgia, as it brings along the pleasant element, irony seems rather incompatible, because it doubts and contests. Bjørn Schiermer and Hjalmar Bang Carlsen distinguish between three forms of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia, reflexive nostalgia, and ironic nostalgia. The ironic nostalgia is the only one that has not been explained yet:

Ironic nostalgics thus experience some of the same emotions and the same collective warmth as the restorative collective, while at the same time implicitly denouncing the inauthentic idealisations of the lost object as mere 'nostalgia'. On the other hand: whereas restorative and ironic nostalgia focuses on the object, reflective nostalgia cultivates the

very feeling of nostalgia and its collective and ritual construction. Ironic nostalgia distances itself from the sentiment of nostalgia, reflective nostalgia delves deeper into it. It is not ashamed of itself. It is not tainted by 'critical' thought. Yet, in contrast to restorative nostalgia, it knows the object is lost. The participants collectively delve into the nostalgia as nostalgia, consciously exploiting and amplifying the bittersweet sentiment together. (Schiermer, Carlsen 162)

The two scholars argue that ironic nostalgia engages with the past in a manner that rejects sentimentalism. Whereas nostalgia is commonly known for its intense sentiments and for its seriousness, irony tends to temper these expectations. The ironic nostalgic acknowledges that nostalgia tends to idealize the past, reason for which chooses not to fully identify with it. The ironic nostalgic manifests its affection for the past being ready to make fun of it and to see its limits.

At a first glimpse, such a perspective might seem counterintuitive, yet there are other scholars who argue that the two concepts are not incompatible, especially when approached in a postmodern key. Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés affirm that irony influences how nostalgia functions. Their main argument is that “the look back can retain its sentimental power and yet give in to an ironic rejection” (Hutcheon, Valdés, 25). Hutcheon states that nostalgia does not simply evoke memories because it tends to be utopian. Nostalgia has an important emotional impact that “comes in part from its structural doubling-up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past” (Hutcheon, Valdés, 26). Irony, on the contrary, has little if anything in common with idealisation because irony tends to doubt, to critique, and to impose “the necessary distance” toward the past. Valdés lists, in the second part of their dialogue, a series of examples of Spanish movies in which nostalgia intersects with irony. He argues that several Spanish directors dearly evoke aspects of the interwar past, yet they do not forget that the

same past involved many deeply negative aspects, which they also evoke in an ironic manner. Thus, nostalgia becomes circumspect, as its drive to idealize is mitigated by a more lucid perspective.

In *Daniel Abagiu...*, the same lucidity intermediates the relationship between memories and the communist regime. Just like the Florian brothers, Bădescu makes a distinction between the personal level of his memories and the political and social context, yet he takes the critique of the communist regime more seriously. He felt the absurdity of censorship even from high school:

We sang rock [...] and we wrote two songs [...]. We played the two songs at “Cântarea României” [talent contest during the communist period] and we had success. Yet our success did not last long because none of our songs was about disarming-peace. Rock bands could not sing about Ceaușescu because this music was not in accordance with the ideals of the Party: it was mandatory to be about disarming [...]<sup>65</sup>

The presence of the communist dictatorship could hardly be ignored and that is why humour and irony overlap and generate a more critical perspective. When looking back, the narrative voice states that he learned how to live with the huge shadow of the communist dictatorship:

It is true that by the end of my teenagerhood I revolted against the system. But it was in fact an immature revolt, which it mainly aimed the idea of system itself. I think that if I had lived in capitalism, I would have embraced the Marxists ideas.

PS: Of course, I would wake up at 4 am to queue for milk. But these things are forgotten<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> Cântam rock [...] și aveam și două piese proprii [...]. Cu acestea am participat și la câteva faze ale „Cântării României” și am avut succes. Până când, la faza pe județ, ni s-a înfundat: nu aveam nici o piesă despre dezarmare-pace. Formațiile rock nu puteau cânta despre Ceaușescu, pentru că muzica lor nu era conformă cu idealurile Partidului: era „imperios necesar” să aibă însă ceva cu dezarmarea [...] (Bădescu 114)

<sup>66</sup> E adevărat, spre sfârșitul adolescenței am ajuns și eu să mă revolt împotriva sistemului. Dar era, de fapt, o revoltă adolescentină, care până la urmă viza idea de sistem. Cred că, dacă aș fi trăit în capitalism, aș fi îmbrățișat ideile marxiste. (Bădescu 114)

PS: Bineînțeles că mă sculam și eu la patru dimineața să mă duc la coadă la lapte... Dar lucrurile astea se uită. (Bădescu 115-116)

However, even the fact that he feels the need to stress that as a child he managed to find pleasure in those complicated times suggests that it was indeed a challenge and he perceives it accordingly because history makes itself present even in the most intimate moments:

The last meeting I attended was in high school, on the stadium, on Youth Day. When the rain started, we had to split and go home, yet I did not go, as I preferred to have a walk with a girl. The wet and transparent blouse, the cold shivers that required hugs - it was cool! That rain - I found out afterwards - was radioactive; it was the first Chernobyl day<sup>67</sup>.

Yet humor and irony always save the day. This event - as all the others that are recalled - is not followed by any tragic consequences, because a balance between the happiness generated by his experiences and the absurd period in which he lived is always established. Furthermore, irony does not stop the feeling of pleasure generated by these memories, which remain essential for him:

As we know, the Pioneer Organization was a paramilitary one, just like Hitler jugend (they had black ties, ours were red). Even so, not being made a pioneer in the first series would have meant a big tragedy - in the second series those with 7 and 8 averages were made and in the third series those with 5 and 6 averages. Because I only was a group commander (red stripe), I thought that yellow and blue stripes are the most beautiful. They fascinated me and I remember that once when I saw some in the window display of a book shop, I asked the saleswoman to let me touch them. The red tie with a tricolor [the Romanian flag] would make faces more beautiful and so I fell in love with a girl dressed as a pioneer. She was blonde, the tie was red, and the stripe was yellow – what could have been more beautiful<sup>68</sup>?

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<sup>67</sup> Ultimul miting la care am participat a fost în liceu, pe stadion, de Ziua Tineretului. La un moment dat, a început ploaia și a trebuit să spargem rândurile și să mergem la casele noastre. N-am făcut-o și am preferat să mă plimb pe străzi, cu o tipă. Apă șiroind prin păr, bluză udă și devenită transparentă, mici frisoane de frig care se cereau rezolvate cu îmbrățișări - a fost mișto, ce mai! Ploaia aceea - aveam să aflăm apoi - fusese radioactive; era prima zi de Cernobâl. (Bădescu 113)

<sup>68</sup> După cum știm, Organizația de pionieri a fost una paramilitară, așa cum era și Hitler-jugend a naziștilor (ei aveau cravate negre, noi roșii). Cu toate acestea, dacă nu m-ar fi făcut pionier în prima serie, ar fi fost o mare tragedie

Even the remembrance of the inconveniences of the political system can be pleasant:

In my town, the light was off between 5 pm and 8 pm, when “Telejurnalul” [the daily news broadcast by the national television] would start. In the beginning, my folks used to sit around the light of a candle but then my father managed to find a tractor battery that would aliment a small fridge bulb. But I would never stay inside because I would go out with boys and girls to hang around in front of our flat building. The dark would offer an intimacy that otherwise would have been impossible to enjoy. When the power came back, we were all very said.<sup>69</sup>

The difference is that the pleasure or the affection that might be linked to these memories do not contribute to an idealisation of the past. Neither childhood, nor the political regime are seen in a better light than they really were. One could argue that nostalgia has always involved suffering, as even its Greek root suggests (*algos*) and only postmodernism diluted nostalgia, as it reduced it to a feeling of affection for the past. The question is whether this affection is enough to be called nostalgia? Hutcheon implicitly pleads for a democratic perception of nostalgia. Hutcheon follows how the concept changed its meaning since the seventeenth century, when the term was coined. Her argument is that because nostalgia engaged various meanings, which depended on the cultural context, it might as well entail a new interpretation specific to the postmodern context, as nostalgia meant one thing, for instance, from a romantic nationalist perspective and it entails

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pentru mine - în seria a doua erau făcuți cei cu mediile 7, 8 și indisciplinații, în a treia cei cu 5, 6 și repetenții. Pentru că am fost doar comandant de grupă (șnur roșu), mi se părea că șnururile galbene și albastre erau deosebit de frumoase. Aveam pentru ele o fascinație aproape evlavioasă și țin minte că, odată, când le-am văzut în vitrine unei librării, le-am cerut vânzătoarei să le pipăi. Cravata roșie cu tricolor înfrumuseța chipurile, și m-am îndrăgostit pentru prima oară, în clasa a doua, de o fată îmbrăcată în pionier, la un „careu.” Ea era blondă, cravata roșie, iar snurul galben - ce putea fi mai frumos? (Bădescu 112)

<sup>69</sup> În urbea mea, lumina se stingea între orele 17 și 20, când începea „Telejurnalul.” Ai mei, la început, stăteau la lumina lumânării, iar după ceva vreme taică-miu făcuse rost de o baterie de tractor care alimenta un bec mic, ca de frigider. Dar eu nu rămâneam niciodată în casă. Ieșeam cu băieții și fetele în fața blocului. Lumina stinsă ne oferea o intimitate pe care altfel nu am fi găsit-o. [...] Revenirea curentului era întâmpinată de toți cu mult regret. (Bădescu 115)

different meanings in the late capitalist society. It is rather a myth to think that nostalgia did not change its substance since old Greece. This dogmatic perspective is nostalgic for the concept of nostalgia itself, which is in fact a restorative form of nostalgia, which would expect the concept to never change and to be revived exactly as it was, as if it always was the same. Nostalgia has reached a point in which suffering can be less important than the affection for the past, because this predisposition to turn backwards and to feel bitter and/or sweet feelings when reviving memories is what primarily defines nostalgia. Affection for the past is simply regret at the passage of time and the ephemeral nature of life. In that sense, every gaze at the past is a form of nostalgia. Even when we recall bad things, the evocation reminds us that we have less time left to live. Nostalgia can be soft, just the way it can be intense or devouring. Nostalgia can be deadly or can define the feeling of affection one feels for one's childhood, and none is less nostalgic than the other because they do follow the same mechanism: they do escape the present to revive the past and they do engage with the important memories that make one's life meaningful.

### 3.9 Kitsch nostalgia

Irony mitigated a sentimental approach and minimized or canceled the role of suffering. At the opposite pole, stands an exaggeration of the sentimental element. Pathos<sup>70</sup> is crucial for nostalgia, but can an excess of pathos influence nostalgia's relationship with suffering? Can a too sentimental nostalgia make suffering melodramatic and thus obliterate it?<sup>71</sup> Kundera would argue that, in order for the suffering to be authentic, it needs to elude kitsch. In the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera extrapolates the aesthetic definition of kitsch, and sees it from a

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<sup>70</sup> Pathos and *algos* have different meanings. Even though pathos too entails pain, the term firstly refers to eliciting feelings.

<sup>71</sup> See also Chris Cagle, "The Sentimental Drama: Nostalgia, Historical Trauma, and Spectatorship in 1940s Hollywood."



broader perspective that encompasses politics, human relationships, and feelings. Kitsch appears to be something nice, cute, comforting or useful, while at the same time it is moral, beautiful, sentimental, and caring. When a politician sees his child playing, he drops a tear. But, then, he drops another tear. His crying seems the normal reaction a father would have when touched by his paternal feelings. Yet, the second tear says about the first, “how beautiful it is that I cry”; the second tear is a fake one and betrays the mediocre attitude of a politician who wants to impress other people. Kundera calls such a gesture kitsch. So is the Czech emigrants’ transparent suffering that is depicted in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. They meet in Paris and share their bitterness and longing for their home country, yet they are rather concerned with exhibiting their feelings, which do not even seem so real anymore, as they lack discretion and depth. For Kundera, a cheap parade of emotions is always kitsch. Hermann Broch argues that this excess of sentimentalism is rooted in romanticism and is the effect of scattering so many tragedies of love and suicidal (64). He argues that kitsch transforms human life “into a neurotic work of art, i.e. one which imposes a completely unreal convention on reality, thus imprisoning it in a false schema” (Broch 64). The link between neurosis and kitsch is what enhances the saccharine type, and there is no surprise that politicians love it too, because what they call beautiful becomes a mask for their cynicism (Broch 65). In general, Broch argues, kitsch enhances a runaway from reality following the path of sentimentalism (65).

Some artistic creations that depict Romanian post-socialist homesickness deal with a kitsch form of nostalgia. Unlike the intellectualized and very highbrow artistic creation that depicted Tarkovsky’s nostalgia, nostalgia for homeland, as it appears in post-socialist Romania, entails nothing as intense, nor as artistically elevating as its Russian counterpart. The first important aspect that ought to be taken into consideration is that there is no post-socialist novel

or movie to depict nostalgia for homeland in a form that could be comparable with nostalgia.<sup>72</sup>

Not only that Romanians do not confront a deadly form of homesickness, but many of them might as well deny the feeling itself. However, some artistic echoes of “burning” homesickness do exist, only that they can be found on a popular culture level.<sup>73</sup>

During<sup>74</sup> the nineties, a new musical genre becomes extremely popular in Romania, namely manele<sup>75</sup> (Bretèque and Stoichita 327). Manele (sing. manea) singers paid great attention to homesickness, as many of their listeners were workers who earned money doing low-paying jobs in Western Europe.<sup>76</sup> From the very beginning, this music was created to be as popular as possible. The lyrics are very simple, even simplistic, and -although the singers belong to the Roma community- are written in Romanian, and thus address the Romanian public as well. The manele have been approached with disgust by cultural critics, highbrow artists, mainstream intellectuals, and most of the people who considered themselves educated<sup>77</sup> because they considered this genre the ultimate proof of kitsch and vulgarity. It was quite common for people

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<sup>72</sup> To my knowledge, there are no relevant (to be distributed in libraries and to have sparked the attention of literary critics) novels or films.

<sup>73</sup> This thesis has mainly analyzed movies or novels that rather have a high-brow profile and ignored other artistic genres such as music. However, now a point has been reached when the horizon needs to be expanded. More popular culture examples are going to be examined in the following chapters.

<sup>74</sup> This paragraph and a part of the following one is from my article “Hipsters in Central and Eastern Europe: From Domesticated Nostalgia to Manele, and Protests” in *Hipster Culture Anthology*. Heike Steinhoff. ed. London: Bloomsbury, in press.

<sup>75</sup> Manele is a genre that developed in the years of post-communist transition in Romania, and it has its roots in oriental, lăutărească (fiddlers’), and gypsy music. According to Estelle Amy de la Bretèque, the manele is not only related with other musical genres from the Balkans (such as turbo-folk), but also with genres outside the Balkan area, namely the Armenian *rabiz*. Usually the lyrics focus on themes such as: fortune, success, love, sexy women, and enemies. While most of the manele singers, such as Florin Salam, Liviu Guță, Sorinel Puștiu or Romeo Fantastick, are of Roma origins, this music is popular among marginalized communities and criminal world of both Romanians and Roma. Some of the information I use in this section comes from my forthcoming paper Alex Condache, “Hipsters in Central and Eastern Europe: From Domesticated Nostalgia to Manele, and Protests.”

<sup>76</sup> In an excellent article entitled “Turbo-Authenticity: An Essay on Manelism,” Vintilă Mircea Mihăilescu argues that manele embody the dream of the post-socialist Balkan society after it encountered the west: make money and show of the success. That is why the manele express the dream many Romanians have of becoming *barosani*, namely well-established people who deserve the respect and admiration because of what they have accomplished in life (252). However, manele do sing for poor people too, namely those whose dream is not to become *barosani* but to earn enough money to support their families.

<sup>77</sup> Some concealed racist feelings also alimanted some of these perspectives.

to state: “I listen to any music but manele.” (Spirala Colorată). Their bad reputation is so strong that it created a new slang word in Romanian: *manelar/-ist*. A manelar is an insult, as it refers to a person associated with manele culture, who is also a punk, maybe a thief, someone who lacks moral values or manners, lacks education, taste, and even the ability to speak grammatically correct sentences (DEX). There were only a few Romanian scholars, such as Speranța Rădulescu (Rădulescu) and Adrian Schiop (Schiop) who tried to better understand this music and to argue that this phenomenon is not anti-artistic. Their opinions were promoted by a few public figures, such as Cătălin Ștefănescu, who is the moderator of one of the most important cultural talk-shows (“Garantat 100%” / 100% Guaranteed) to appear on public television. Their efforts are salutary, as this genre was too many times perceived from too dogmatic, rigid, and elitist a perspective<sup>78</sup>.

Sentimental art had its moment of glory during the nineteenth century, as it focused on domestic scenes and intense emotions mainly associated with women. The sentimental fiction lost credibility from the perspective of artistic movements such as modernism, realism, and postmodernism, with some even believing that this is failed art, as it became a label for melodramatic, unsophisticated, and unrealistic representations (Williamson 5). This seems to be the issue with the homesickness manele. As most of the popular manele singers (Florin Salam, Adrian Copilul Minune, Țancă Uraganu, Denisa, Nicolae Guță) dedicated songs to the theme of homesickness, there are a few recurrent motifs: home versus Western foreign countries, dor (longing) and suffering, sacrificing for money, leaving parents and children behind (sometimes perceived as a form of betrayal).<sup>79</sup> The lyrics never go beyond a very simple level, as there is a

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<sup>78</sup> In the last few years, the genre has been rediscovered by hipsters, which perceive manele as an underground phenomenon, because of their bad reputation.

<sup>79</sup> The motifs of homesickness manele differ from those used in show of manele, as they usually focus on: enemies, money, success, wise guys, gang dominance, power, etc.

series of words that are always repeated: parents, children, house, Romania, strangers, work, money, friends, brothers, enemies, suffering. These words entail a simplistic and melodramatic form of lyricism, as their role is obvious: even the simplest people should understand that these songs are about the endless pain of Romanian emigrants.

The homesickness manele come with videos posted on YouTube,<sup>80</sup> which usually depict the artists as emigrants who suffer greatly, especially in cliché scenes such as saying goodbye to their families,<sup>81</sup> walking alone in airports<sup>82</sup> or doing hard work on construction sites.<sup>83</sup> The characters that play in the videos together with the artists look as if they do not take their role seriously, and cannot find their spot in the decor that always looks cheap: improvised apartments or airplanes where the people who are filmed look rather surprised to be there. Just to give an example, Guță's video *Stau printre străini* (I Live among Strangers) depicts the singer among other migrants while crying at a table and eating polenta, considered a Romanian national dish.<sup>84</sup> Even though they should look very sad, they try so hard that the effect is far from being credible. In the same video, Guță is depicted while working on a construction site, only that all he does looks fake, and so is the sadness he intends to display while pretending to work. Without exception, the videos look cheap and lack professionalism even on a technical level. Whereas Romania is usually portrait as a paradisaal place<sup>85</sup>, with mountains, rivers, and loving people, the West (străinătate) shows up as a gray and unwelcoming place.<sup>86</sup> Usually, the artist is featured singing while in the background plays various videos of picturesque Romanian landscapes, as if

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<sup>80</sup> The songs have reached hundreds of thousands of views and even millions. For instance, Denisa's song „Doamne, grea-i străinătatea” has 7,8 million views.

<sup>81</sup> See, for instance, Liviu Pustiu, „Iar sunt la aeroport.”

<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, Denisa, „Doamne, grea-i străinătatea.”

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, Nicolae Guță, „Străinătatea.”

<sup>84</sup> See Nicolae Guță, „Stau printre străini.”

<sup>85</sup> See Nicolae Guță, „Dor de casă.”

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Nicolae Guță, „Stau printre străini.”

he or she would be there.<sup>87</sup> While acting and singing, the artists usually make idiosyncratic gestures to show pain, such as holding a hand on their chest, as if they would touch their heart.

Nevertheless, this genre expresses the pain of homesickness and it speaks in the name of many Romanian emigrants. If one hops on a Romanian couch that takes workers to Germany, Italy or other Western countries, one will most likely listen to manele.<sup>88</sup> The purpose of homesickness manele is to generate sympathy in viewers:

This sympathy serves a key rhetorical function: engaging reader sympathy allows the text [in this case, the video and the lyrics] to generate compassion for its subjects and subject matter, so that sentimental scenes and characters promote emotional and moral education for the reader [or viewer]. (Williamson, 6)

The manele meet the expectations of many people who need a simple and predictable way of expressing their emotions. Jennifer Williamson argues that:

“ [...] sentimental literature deliberately employs the familiar, using clear language to convey ideas while also drawing upon repeated, recognizable themes in order to make use of the social and cultural resonance an author expects a particular trope to hold for the reader.”(Williamson 5)

Such a perspective is representative of manele as well. While some need more complexity from art, others do not have such expectations, yet their feelings should not be disregarded.

Three of all the motifs invoked above are present in all the songs: working abroad is considered a sacrifice, the foreign countries are a source of estrangement and the predominant feeling is that of *dor* (see below). Most of the emigrants leave Romania due to financial reasons. Their decision is life changing, in the sense that those who leave endure a bitter life in countries

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<sup>87</sup> See Nicolae Guță, „Dor de casă.”

<sup>88</sup> There are, however, drivers or travel companies that have funny rules such as: No manele and no karate movies.

where they feel unwelcomed and where they need to work intensely and to refrain themselves from many needs in order to save the money their families need. What they do in the adoptive countries is only meaningful in the light of the sacrifice, which both justifies and amplifies their suffering. They fled Romania because they had no other choice, which makes the separation even harder to bear.

Their suffering has two sources, which are interlinked: estrangement and *dor*. Estrangement is the consequence of leaving one's home country for another place. The relationship home-Western country can be better understood through the *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* antinomy, as it is defined by Max Weber in *Economy and Society*. The German sociologist reinterprets the terms first used by Ferdinand Tönnies to stress the transition, specific to the nineteenth-century industrial period, from the traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) to modern society (*Gesellschaft*). The *Gemeinschaft* represents the traditional community in which the focus is on harmonious relationships between its members, on the simple way of living, and on the importance of mutual help. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, marks the transition to the logic of rationalized market forces, which, according to Weber, pushes into the background the closer and more authentic relationships that were established between the members of the community and represents a banal way of living. The homeland, Romania, is perceived as a place of simple human connections, where people are surrounded by relatives and friends, as friends themselves are many times called brothers. A rural image of Romania actually predominates in the videos. For instance, the motif of the mother, which is often evoked, also belongs to a rather patriarchal community, where women still wear scarves on their heads (which they also use to wipe their tears) and live only to see their beloved children again.<sup>89</sup> The Western

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<sup>89</sup> See, for instance, Cristi Dules Gerard Brazilianu, "Mă întorc blindat de bani."

countries are depicted as some very developed yet dehumanized and standardized places, where empathy and authentic human relationships are inexistent - at least for people like them.<sup>90</sup>

Hannah Arendt argues that in the capitalist world the human is reduced to the function of a job holder, which actually estranges<sup>91</sup> one from oneself. Furthermore, she makes a distinction between labor, which is perceived as something mechanic and repetitive that lacks meaning and durability, and work, which is meaningful and durable. The Romanian emigrant is depicted in manele as a job holder who labours to support his or her family.<sup>92</sup> As one arrives in the West, one discovers what Arendt calls the “modern world,” namely a world that destroyed intimacy, as it developed a system greatly concerned on a social level about economic necessity, which was initially an issue that was considered private and that was addressed on a household level. In fact, Romania is not so different from the West anymore, as it embraced the capitalist model since the beginning of the nineties. Yet in the melodramatic universe of manele, home (as both the micro universe of family but also the macro universe of a home country) is totally different to what the outside world is like. Their need to make money pushes them outside of their comfort zone and let them face a world indifferent to their needs and feelings. The Romanians discover a place that

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<sup>90</sup> Numerous comments posted on Youtube by fans confirm this perspective. Many people express their bitterness related to working in countries where no one truly cares about them and where people are “cold” and selfish.

<sup>91</sup> In “Hannah Arendt: The Appearances of Estrangement,” Jerome Kohn argues that Arendt makes a distinction between alienation and estrangement because she wants to distance herself from Marx, who uses the concept of alienation to offer a materialistic perspective strictly related to labor, which she criticizes in *The Human Condition*. I also prefer the term used by Arendt because it has a meaning closer to the Romanian word “înstrăinare,” which suits better in this context. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 85.

<sup>92</sup> As I am rereading this section during the Covid-19 pandemic, I am adding this brief observation that showcases even better the implications of this infamous situation. Even though at the beginning of April 2020 Romanians were under very strict rules regarding the isolation, thousands of Romanians gathered on airports to go to Germany and UK to work in the fields as asparagus pickers. This was indeed a very absurd contrast. While Romanians would be stopped on the streets by police and even Kalashnikov-armed soldiers, as they had to provide very solid reasons for having left their houses, the Romanian government agreed to allow thousands of seasonal workers to travel. In fact, Germany put pressure at the highest political level for Romanian workers to come, as their agriculture relies on cheap labour force from Eastern Europe, especially from Romania. Many of the people who were filmed on the airports getting ready to embark in special planes, were wearing masks, thus proving that they were aware of the risk they were taking. Yet their precarious financial situation pushed them to take the risk of flying to a mighty Deutschland- where medical insurance was not available to them - in order to earn some money, while the majority of the population did not even dare to leave their houses.

feels almost uninhabitable and inhospitable which make them want to escape (Kohn 432). For instance, a popular manea called “Măine plec acasă” (I go back home tomorrow) belonging to Nicolae Guță tells of a man who is going to leave the West regardless of the financial consequences (money doesn’t bring happiness, ain’t it?). In another song called „Printre străini viața nu e frumoasă” (Life’s not nice among strangers), Denisa pictures the West as a place where no one cares about emigrants. “Străinătate”<sup>93</sup> is depicted as a place of exhausting labor<sup>94</sup> (construction, dishwashing, agriculture) and of poor living condition: (cheap accommodation, poor food, etc.).

The term “străinătate” - also replaceable with the synonym “afară” (literally “outside”) - which is obsessively repeated in manele, not only emphasizes the opposition between emigrants and the local rich and “cold world,” but also sheds light on the loneliness one feels when thrown into the West. The distinction<sup>95</sup> between loneliness and solitude (made in the previous chapter) suits this context as well, as loneliness expresses a state of disruption and of isolation that is hard to endure. This pain is mainly caused by “dor,” the Romanian word that specifically expresses homesickness. “Dor” is a word that sparks Romanian pride, as many still believe that it cannot be translated into other languages, for it describes a very specific state of spirit. In fact, this is far from true. As Svetlana Boym argues, the word has correspondents in other languages: “litost” in the Czech, “tesknota” in the Russian, “saudade” in the Portuguese, etc. (28). Nevertheless, “dor” is a feeling represented, since the mid-nineteenth-century Romantics, as having deep roots in Romanian culture, which entails a strong feeling of sorrow and an intense suffering for homeland

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<sup>93</sup> There are two words to express this state: “singur,” which would be the most common translation for “lonely,” and “străin” (alien) which actually expresses better the state of loneliness among strangers.

<sup>94</sup> See Nicolae Guță, “Stau printre străini.”

<sup>95</sup> See section “The Dual Status of Suffering.”



and for beloved persons.<sup>96</sup> Dor is caused by a loss that fuels a painful yet romanticised evocation. In manele, it is usually expressed in association with melodramatic images such as: bitter tears, burning tears (lacrimi fierbinți), crying heart (îmi plânge inima), and burning heart (mă arde la inimă). The suffering is so intense that it spreads to the body and has an erosive effect. “Dor” is perceived as a pain that eats away the nostalgic’s soul.

These songs portray homesickness in a rather commonsensical and naively filtered artistic perspectives. Manele do not reinterpret the feeling, but they rather work as a piece of realistic creation that features a very common, yet intense feeling. The metaphors are predictable and unsurprising, and the images are nothing but a melange of clichés. Manele singers such as Denisa or Nicolae Guță give a cheesy answer to a form of suffering that is profound, intense, and widespread. Their answer is listened and appreciated by numerous migrants. The cathartic function of art is achieved for hundreds of thousands of emigrants by listening to these songs. Postmodernism showed that mass culture should not be judged by the canons of highbrow art, but rather to be understood and appreciated within its own socio-cultural context and according to its own standards. Such a representation of homesickness is entitled to invoke suffering as any other artistic creation, as the millions of migrants who listen to manele endure the suffering of homesickness just like anybody else.

### **3.10 Anti-nostalgia**

Romania has one of the highest rates of emigration in the world. Since the fall of the communist dictatorship, more than five million (out of twenty-three) Romanians have fled their

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<sup>96</sup> Dor is essential for Romanian culture. *Miorita*, the Romanian pastoral ballad that stands as a foundational myth for Romanians - a fatalist one, as the hero, the Moldavian shepherd, accepts that he is going to be murdered and does nothing to change his faith- is embedded by dor . Also “doina,” which is a folklore musical genre that is considered essential for Romanian culture, and which is by definition sad and melancholic, relies primarily on dor.

home country in search of a better life<sup>97</sup>. As Adriana Cordali Gradea argues, the West was inculcated in the Romanian psyche as a paradisaical world, where fridges are full, apartments are warm, and money come easily. As time passed by, the living standards have considerably improved in Romania, or at least in urban Romania. Furthermore, many Romanians traveled abroad and got it: the West is far from being a wonderland. Yet many Romanians still consider that life in the West is incomparably better than what they can expect in their native country, as Romania still struggles with corruption, an unreformed educational system, and precarious medical services. For more than forty years Romania played the role of a “possessive husband.” Regardless of their real feelings, Romanians were brutally obliged to express their unconditioned love for their country and to never, ever leave it. After the 1989 Revolution, Romanians were finally allowed to be openly sincere with their “abusive husband.” What initially seemed a beautiful love story, it soon turned into an ugly breakup, the kind that is preceded by the final

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<sup>97</sup> There are some important aspects that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, Romania has witnessed several ways of emigration. The first massive wave fled Romania immediately after the Revolution, when the so-called “*mineriade*” took place. Another huge wave fled the country after 2007, when Romania joined the European Union. More emigration waves, some smaller, some bigger, occurred during these two milestones. As Romanians continue to emigrate in huge numbers, one should be aware of the fact that there are important sociological and anthropological differences between these waves. Firstly, there are significant age differences between those who fled Romania in the nineties and those who emigrated recently. For instance, those my age (in their thirties), who emigrated in the last five to ten years, do not have memories of the communist regime, as we were born just before the Revolution or after. Secondly, those who fled Romania in the nineties were too demoralized by the rough transition to even consider returning (however, some of them did return). Some perceptions have partly changed after 2007. Many of those who leave consider the idea of returning. That is why many Romanian villages have been “invaded” by some huge (and kitsch) and empty villas whose owners work in countries like Spain, Italy or UK and who hope that one day will return. That day might never come, as many erected their houses in undeveloped regions of Romania, where the rate of unemployment is still very high. There are also those who leave for a limited amount of time, until they manage to save money to start a business or to finish their studies. Some of them do indeed come back (this phenomenon has become more popular in the last years). There are also other relevant factors that ought to be taken into consideration: education is just one of them. For instance, Canada managed to attract an important number of high skilled Romanians workers (such as doctors and engineers). There might be nuances in the way they perceive their country. During these three decades since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Romania has become a totally different country, as it is a consolidated democracy with developed and charming cities. Yet many Romanians still consider that their country has nothing (or not enough) to offer them, so this is the element that unites what Romanians emigrants, regardless age or educational background think. My endeavor does not exhaust the subject, as more applied sociological and anthropological studies could identify how the concept of anti-nostalgia has its own particularities to each generation. My purpose is to merely coin this term and to define a tendency, from a comparative literature perspective, that can be identified amongst all generations of Romanian post-socialist emigrants.

promise: “I don’t want to ever see you again!” However, as it so often happens, an abruptly ended relationship does not in fact cut off all the strings that kept the two partners together, as there are too many feelings and too many memories involved. The feeling many of the Romanian emigrants have for their homeland is quite fuzzy, as it combines both longing for the place in which they grew up and revolt against the country that is responsible for their self-imposed exile. I have called this mixed feeling “anti-nostalgia,” as it combines repressed nostalgia with the refusal to long for a place that is responsible for their suffering.

While the transition from communism to capitalism was no walk in the park for any of the Central and Eastern European countries, it was a nightmarish experience for countries such as Romania and Bulgaria (Bâc 367). Whereas Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary benefited from the expertise or at least from the goodwill of their political leaders, post-communist Romania had the misfortune to be ruled by the second echelon of the communist nomenklatura, which posed in a recycled political and economic elite (Roper 65). The bloody Romanian revolution (actually coup d’Etat) brought to power the FSN (The Front of National Salvation) led by Ion Iliescu, a communist official marginalized by Ceaușescu, who was supported by Moscow and important leaders of the Securitate (the secret police). FSN rapidly became a political party and won the national elections with the help of the national television, the only one that existed at that point, which they controlled (Mungiu). Under their catastrophic management, which was succeeded by the hesitant and mediocre leadership of the CDR (The Romanian Democratic Convention), Romania faced a period of chaos whose effects spread to all important areas, from economy and health to education and public security:

In Romania, as well as in other former communist European countries, the collapse of the communism has not determined - as many hoped for -, a change with positively

comprehensive effects in the socio-economic sphere and, implicit, in the ways of life, but it established a veritable economic, social and moral crisis. The strong polarization of the society, the poverty [...], the drastic decreasing in the incomes and declining of the purchasing power of large groups of individual, unemployment, layoffs of labour in many sectors of the economy, the uncertainty of tomorrow, the contracting of loans without the possibility to return them and, in this way, eviction from housing, the increasing of the social inequality, the expanding of ethnic intolerance and discrimination of groups, the radicalization of social conflicts are just some of the changes of dramatic character which have affected the former communist societies. (Rădulescu 168)

In just a few years after the fall of the dictatorial regime of Ceaușescu, Romania has become a country with a considerable external debt, a sizeable inflation, and a tremendously demoralized population. That is the reason why emigration looked more like a desperate runaway.<sup>98</sup> Their escape marks how nostalgia itself is going to be felt after emigration.

*Occident* is a movie directed by the multi-awarded director Cristian Mungiu that depicts in a tragicomic key the determination of numerous Romanians to leave their country. The film tells the story of a young couple who separates because the wife, Sorina, wants to emigrate, while the husband, Luci, refuses the idea, as he is confident that they can still build a future in their own country. In fact, his decision is influenced by the failed attempt to illegally cross the border before the fall of the communist regime, when he was caught and imprisoned for a while. His decision of not leaving is in fact very unusual given the circumstances and contrasts the mindset of most people of his age. Not only his wife but also the other two characters (both in their thirties) Luci intersects with have plans to emigrate: his friend, Gică dreams to become a cook on a cruise ship, even though he has no cooking skills and does not even know how to

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<sup>98</sup> As I mentioned previously, this varies from generation to generation and it became less intense today. Yet it is still common to congratulate one when decides to emigrate and to immediately confirm that such a decision is indeed very good as Romania is hopeless. Therefore, the sentiment of disappointment and revolt is still very strong.

swim, and the girl Luci falls in love with after his wife leaves him is encouraged by her family to do whatever is necessary to leave, including to marry a foreigner.

The plot begins with the eviction of Sorina and Luci who barely find a place to sleep. This is what actually determines Sorina to choose another path in her life and sacrifice her love for Luci on behalf of a better life in the West. She meets her new Western lover, Jerome, in the cemetery, when she is looking for help, after her husband is hit in the head by a bottle. After the incident from the cemetery, Luci finds himself lonely, trying to make a living by working in a mall as a mascot for a beer company. He encounters a young and idealistic woman who writes poetry and tries to find a meaning to life while working as a mascot for a telecommunication company. Even though they fall in love, their love story has no chance because she is persuaded by her mother to leave the country. Her mother, helped by his father's mistress, finds a husband for her, a young man from Italy. They will only find out that he is black when he comes to Bucharest, which shocks the entire family. In fact, the father, a police colonel (a former militiaman) whose level of intelligence is not very high, draws the final conclusion: „Mi-ați băgat maimuța în casă” (You have brought this monkey in my house). Despite their atrocious stereotypes, both mother and father do their best to please Luigi, the Afro-Italian, as their wish to see the young woman in a better place is beyond any stereotype or taboo. In the end, she moves to Germany helped by a Romanian who was beaten by her father years ago because he attempted to illegally cross the border.

The film uses humour and irony to feature how Romanians lost their hope. Their “burning desire to leave Romania is not simply a fashion statement, a reflection of a popular trend. Many of the characters contemplate living their homeland not because they feel the need to adhere to a growing trend, but because their lives seem futureless” (Paulesc 236). The rhetoric

of leaving<sup>99</sup> is shared both by youth and elderly, only that old people consider that it is too late for them to leave. In fact, this is a cliché that is still very popular in Romania: old people say that only age stops them from leaving but young people have no excuse whatsoever. When the film was launched, Romania was not a member of the European Union yet, therefore many of those who emigrated had to take enormous risks because they had no legal rights to work in European countries and many of them started their new life abroad by doing under the table work. Others, just like Sorina, tried other methods. It was quite common for beautiful Romanian women to look for husbands in Western countries. Many of them emigrated after exchanging but a few letters and some photos.

At the movie's outset, when they discover that their belongings have been displaced in front of the apartment building, Sorina states that she would go anywhere but "this shitty place." Romania is perceived as an excremental realm, and this is an image many Romanians would resonate with<sup>100</sup>. As William Ian Miller argues in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, the excrements entail two essential properties: dirtiness and toxicity. These are, nevertheless, characteristics that would fit Romania's profile as well. Romania is dirty on a moral level, as it is devoured by corruption. Bribe (mită) is considered necessary even for the most banal things. Colonel Vișoiu, Mihaela's father, asks for a transfer for her daughter and gives a kitsch painting as a reward for his demand. Corruption creates its own logic, which kills meritocracy and sets in motion unpredictability and insecurity. Corruption goes hand in hand with poverty. In *Occident*, fridges are empty, and wages are ridiculously small, if they come at all. Luci used to be a researcher, but he has not been paid for three months. This gloomy scenario is augmented by an urban image of post-socialist Romania, where gray communist blocks, stray dogs, and puddles chaotically blend with

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<sup>99</sup> I borrow this syntagm from Adriana Cordali Gradea's article, "The Rhetoric of Leaving, or the Mirage of the Fetishized West in Cristian Mungiu's *Occident*."

<sup>100</sup> See also Mircea Vasilescu, "Țară de rahat" (Shitty country).

huge banners, shopping centers, and ugly new villas owned by those who take advantage of the system. As times are tough, people become cruel and aggressive. Luci is about to fight with the two neighbours who pulled the strings to see him evicted. All these contribute to a toxic environment that hurts people and endangers them. Sorina would go anywhere as long as she escapes Romania, just as one would go anywhere else when being in the proximity of a polluted and harmful environment. Even children dream about fleeing. The kindergarten where Sorina works is visited by a shady Westerner who allegedly intends to intermediate adoptions. Children do anything in their powers to convince the guest that they should be adopted. A child even pretends to be orphan.

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas argues that impurity is enhanced by “an out of place” relationship. A boot placed on the kitchen table breaks the chain of normality and of order. The same logic speaks for Sorina who believes that she leaves in a “shitty place.” She feels out of place in a country that lost track of normality and order. Sorina lost her home before even leaving her home country. Her displacement is featured in the movie on several occasions, as it embodies two levels: she does not belong to a country, but she also does not belong to a family, because she rejects her husband and she has no other relatives to go to.

When the homeland becomes uninhabitable, the West comes to shelter the mirage of good life. However, once one starts to know the West, the reality proves to be far from the expectations. As Romania is not their home anymore, the emigrants are in search of a new one. Yet what they find does not totally match the definition of a home. In the third chapter of *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym analyzes the relationship of Russian emigrants with their home country. Although they have numerous reasons to be disappointed by their homeland, they

transform their new home in its replica.<sup>101</sup> Romanians also look for surrogates of their home in their new countries. The online publication “Recorder” has made a series of video reportages that document the emigration phenomenon. *Pachet de Crăciun pentru copiii duși departe* (Christmas parcel for far away children) is a documentary about the tens of thousands of parcels that are sent from Romania to different countries before Christmas and Easter. These parcels contain mainly food and home-made alcohol, such as wine and palinka,<sup>102</sup> which are greatly appreciated by Romanians emigrants. As a Romanian emigrant from the UK states, “if it is not from your mother, you have nothing” (Dacă nu ai de la mama, nu ai nimic).<sup>103</sup> Romanians appreciate even the simplest products that come from home, such as pickles or potatoes. Yet their cravings are not limited to food. A Romanian employee who works in a Romanian deli from the UK bitterly notices that, “We try to bring as many products as possible to make them feel [the Romanians] as if they are back home, but we can only bring food, because we cannot bring everything else...” (Dar na, încercăm să le aducem cât mai multe produse de acasă, să se simtă ca acasă. Dar oricum doar mâncarea, că restul noi nu puteam să le aducem ce-i acasă...). Indeed, many Romanian migrants need more than food to make themselves feel better in their adoptive countries. However, what they need can never actually be imported because they want to feel as if they are home without actually being there. And they want their children to share the same feelings. The man who says that mama’s food is the best is asked what he expects from his child who is about to be born. He replies: “I want him to grow up as a Romanian because I am Romanian. I don’t want him to be English except for the leaving conditions but besides this he needs to be Romanian in his heart.” (Vreau sa crească ca român, că eu sunt român. Ca englez...

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<sup>101</sup> Brighton Beach is a well known example.

<sup>102</sup> Plum, apricot or pear brandy.

<sup>103</sup> In “Collective Nostalgia and Domestic Country Bias,” Dimitriadou Marika argues that nostalgia works as an emotional motivation for consumers, in the sense that it determines them to purchase products that were produced in their countries, as these products are considered authentic and more reliable.



doar traiul unui englez, dar el să fie român în inimă aici, în...). He makes his wish while his nephew unpacks more goodies from Romania and describes what he finds in the bags in English because he barely speaks Romanian. Such wishes to isolate within the imaginary borders of a Romanian realm never actually come true, as loss is irreversible. As Svetlana Boym states, their wish to build surrogates proves that the idea of home becomes unstable, as the old home does not exist anymore, and the new home, as long as it needs to look like the old one, is not quite accepted either. This places the emigrant in face of an even harder to accept truth: the idea of home has become fluid, even ungraspable.

Once the new surrogate home reveals its downsides, the emigrants start to look backwards. As they cannot simply forget the reasons that determined them to leave, they find comfort in evoking the micro-universe of home that encompasses numerous elements that generate nostalgia: family dinners, parties, school memories, erotic experiences, sights, foods, etc. Yet nostalgia for the micro-universe of home stands in opposition with the revolt and despise inspired by the macro-universe of home: inefficient institutions, corrupt politicians, an unreformed health care system, poor infrastructure, collective traumas, etc. The clash between the two is what generates anti-nostalgia. The two antagonistic feelings establish a painful oscillation between the bitter sweetness of nostalgia and the bitterness that comes from contempt and disappointment. One overlaps with the other to create a confusing evocation of the homeland.

Gabriela Adameșteanu's latest novel depicts how anti-nostalgia functions in a fictional context. *Fontana di Trevi* tells the story of Letiția, a Romanian woman who lives in France and who returned to Romania for a short period of time to solve the legal issues concerning a property that she inherited. Her impressions about Romania are divided between the sweet

memories of her first love and the bitter memories of her experiences under the communist regime that caused her exile:

When I pulled the purple curtains, I saw the sunny sky above Bucharest which I always recognize with a pain in my chest. Is it pity that I feel for this city, always precarious, always badly administered? Or is it pity for myself that I have lived here half of my life? Or is it nostalgia for my youth? Probably a bit of everything [...] (Adameşteanu 21)

Romania remains a trigger for positive memories about youth, friends, and family. The perception of her home country encompasses a temporal dimension that employs the realm of personal memories. Whether she likes it or not, Romania is always present in her thoughts, as some of her most precious memories are inevitably connected to it.

While not providing a straight definition of anti-nostalgia, Boym identifies instead a series of implications that are specific to this feeling. Firstly, she focuses on the link between anti-nostalgia and the burden of history. She analyzes the predisposition of Russian emigrants to try to “escape the burden of historical time” (Boym 31), and thus come to live their lives as if the past were not further back than yesterday. Romanians now in their forties and older are similarly haunted by their nightmarish communist history. The communist experience marked their childhood, if not their adulthood as well. Therefore, Romanians need to forget or forgive how their country treated them. As Ricœur argues, these two steps embody a natural process, yet the chaos of the Revolution and of the ensuing transition are far from being the fertile soil for reconciliation; or at least for forgetting. After all, Ricœur argues that the process of forgiving is complicated, if even possible (Ricœur 487).

What is left is the (failed) attempt to ignore the past. To trauma scholars this can be worded as such: “individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial”

(Alexander 3). As for collective traumas, a society needs to develop complex mechanisms to cope with them. This includes the creation of new narratives which are supported by several healing steps, such as the official identification of those who are responsible for having inflicted the trauma (Alexander 4). As this did not happen in Romania, the burden of history generates a feeling of rejection toward the country's recent past, which extends to the country as a whole, past, present and futureless. And this is what happens to Letiția, too. She left Romania and she managed to build a decent life in France. Now sixty years old, she does sport and yoga, she watches her weight, she buys expensive clothes, and she looks better than her Romanian friends. Underneath this superficial stratum stands her former life in Romania. She knows copious stories of friends who were persecuted by the regime. So was her husband, who was fired from the university, where he worked as an assistant professor, because he refused to collaborate with the regime, although he did make some minor compromises, as was praising the regime in the journal where he used to publish. She recalls the precarious lives people used to live under a regime that was obsessed with control, just as she remembers the Revolution, which was almost as tragic and absurd as the regime itself. While she moved on with her life, such memories kick out frequently one way or another, especially as her husband never came to peace with his Romanian past, reason for which it keeps it alive for both of them.

However, the country's past overlaps with the personal memories and the specific nostalgia for one's childhood and youth. In "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices," Maya Nadkarni talks about the "insularity" of private life during the socialist regime. Therefore, anti-nostalgia does not entail a full rejection of the past. It is rather an oscillation between ignoring and remembering, and, further, between despising a traumatic collective past and longing the sweetness of personal memories, which willy-nilly, are

associated with that collective past. Letiția's visit to Romania is marked by her sweet recall of her love story with Sorin. After so many years, she is surprised to find out that she still has feelings for him. When in Bucharest, she recalls many of their sweet moments together: "I remember that after we were making love we would spend time talking about Ceaușescu and about my relatives. The vodka would make me sad [...] If my uncle would know what his niece was doing in his apartment..." (Adameșteanu 36). Even though they are totally different people, the fact that she is in Bucharest again has an effect on how she relates with her memories. As her husband says, she is "caught by the memory of the land" (mă prinde memoria pământului). Bucharest is the palpable presence that revives what was buried in her memory folds. Small details such as the communist apartment where she sleeps remind her of the room where she and Sorin consumed their love story. In fact, she realizes that she never again had such intense feelings as she had for Sorin. Up to a point, Letiția is like Tamina and Mircea: her love story was shaped by the city, and she needs palpable things in order for her memories to surface. Yet, the same city is also remembered as the oppressively gloomy site where she endured live under communism.

When forgetting, forgiving or ignoring are not possible, Svetlana Boym argues, the opposite perspective - that actually leads towards the same anti-nostalgic reaction - is likely to occur, namely the obsessive invocation of the past's downsides. Some Romanians will never make peace with the fact they were marginalized by the communist authorities and they never managed to pursue the careers they dreamed of. Others will never be able to accept that no one was convicted for the murders that were committed during the Romanian Revolution. Others will never forget the so-called "mineriade," namely the repeated invasions by large groups of miners of Bucharest to crush the protesters that were requiring a political class cleaned of former

members of the communist nomenklatura. Yet even more will never come to peace with the transition from communism to capitalism, as Romania was devoured by corruption. Letiția's husband encompasses a bit from all these typologies:

“If they [the nomenklatura] were still alive, you would see them all at Cotroceni [the presidential palace]! Next to Basescu! Next to Iohannis! Next to anyone who seats on that chair. [...] You want to drag me there where people take pride in their falsified biographies.” (Adameșteanu 27)

“Romania is a country built on imitation, where opportunism is inculcated in everybody's minds: the Romanians learn foreign languages from their early youth so that they can betray.” (Adameșteanu 20)

Unlike his wife, his revolt grew so big that he does not even want to visit Romania. He does instead follow the Romanian actuality, he knows in detail the Romanian politics, and he talks all the time about his home country.

This “need for non return,” as Lenka Pánkova calls it, is a coping mechanism some emigrants need. Such a mechanism is even more understandable for the generation represented by characters like Letiția's husband who actually emigrated before the fall of the Iron Curtain. For years, they believed that they would never be able to return to their home countries. Those who illegally crossed the border did not even know whether they would ever be able to see their relatives again. Given the circumstances, they needed to develop a mechanism of survival; otherwise they could as well face a similar destiny to Tamina's. Nevertheless, “their non return need” did not mean that their home country was forgotten; it actually meant that their home country is only perceived as a source of evil<sup>104</sup> that constantly haunts them.

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<sup>104</sup> Since I came to Canada, I had the chance to talk to several people who left Romania before 1989. I noticed that the way many of them perceive Romania suffers no change, regardless what happens in the home country and regardless how connected they are to Romanian actuality. Their perception got stuck in a time because they need to

Anti-nostalgia follows the very same logic of nostalgia: the past is evoked and relived as vividly as possible. The present itself becomes secondary during the evocation. Just like a ritual, the evocation is frequently repeated. Furthermore, whereas nostalgia idealizes the past, anti-nostalgia stresses the worst in the past - it reverses the idealization process, even if both perspectives have a similar approach, as both entail a personal and potentially exaggerated (or fictitious) evocation of the past. Nevertheless, such an anti-nostalgic perspective is not completely separated from nostalgia because in many cases evoking the negative past is a self-defensive mechanism of those who cope with too intense a homesickness. For some, the home, which in this case embodies the micro universe of friends, family, hometown, etc., still effects a strong or stronger attraction. Therefore, anti-nostalgia becomes a refuge in front of the suffering produced by the loss of the beloved birthplace. Whereas in the previous case anti-nostalgia was based on ignoring the disappointing past, which counterbalanced the sweet personal memories associated with it, in this case anti-nostalgia comes as a reaction to an intense nostalgia for one's birthplace. Either way, anti-nostalgia is not an equivocal rejection mechanism, but a consuming love-hate relationship.

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justify why they left their country and, moreover, why they do not return. Regardless how significant changes are in Romania - they indeed are and occur on various levels, from the socio-political level to the artistic -, Romania will always be perceived through the lens they saw it before leaving.

## Chapter four: Postcommunist Nostalgia

### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I have focused on different forms of personal nostalgia. I am now turning to the examination of postcommunist nostalgia, which is a form of collective nostalgia. Collective nostalgia is a rather new concept, and it did not receive as much attention as personal nostalgia (Dimitriadou & Maciejovsky 446). It has recently caught the attention of social psychologists and sociologists because it is related to issues such as national biases, group cohesion, and even nationalism. As Wing-Yee Cheung and Constantine Sedikides argue, “collective nostalgia refers to longing for the way society used to be” (302), which means that nostalgia entails not only personal memories, but collective memories as well<sup>105</sup>. “Collective nostalgia is a group-level emotion that has consequences for both intergroup and intragroup relations” (302), in the sense that people who relate to collective past experiences tend to develop a sense of cohesion and to think of themselves as different than the rest of the society. That is why collective nostalgia is “experienced in the context of a particular social identity or as a member of a certain group and pertains to events or objects related to this group” (Dimitriadou and Maciejovsky 446). Collective nostalgia can confer “vital psychological benefits, including self-esteem, social connectedness meaning in life and optimism” (Dimitriadou and Maciejovsky 446) and it can lead to social changes because it “motivates and regulates attitudes and behaviour”(Cheung and Sedikides 303). At the same time, collective nostalgia can lead to

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<sup>105</sup> However, this does not mean that collective nostalgia and collective memory are alike. Collective memory is interpreted and manipulated by “trustees of symbolic power”: politicians, mass-media, writers, etc. (Rekšć 108). Collective nostalgia is itself manipulated by different actors that influence the public opinion, yet at the same time it has an even more unpredictable relationship with objective truth.

favoritism (between the members of the group), lack of trust (for the members outside the group), feeling of uncertainty regarding the present, and other biases.

As Dominic Boyer argues, nostalgia in Eastern Europe does not exist only on an individual level, but emerged as a regional phenomenon, which was caused by a series of profound changes:

Eastern Europe suffered a mighty cultural displacement in the aftermath of the events of 1989-1990. On the one hand, its borders and horizons opened. Yet, its internal life worlds were shaken and in some cases shattered, its population unsettled in all senses of the term. Then, in the ensuing fifteen years, forces of change stormed across the region, moving as weather mostly does, from West to East. Although it is difficult to plot the vectors of a tempest, the dominant historical forces at play in post-Socialist Eastern Europe have nevertheless been assembled under rubrics like: (neo)liberalism, late capitalism, globalization, marketization, Europeanization, technocratic governmentality [...]. A certain market-centered modernity, a modernity that state socialism had been straining to resist for decades, hit Eastern Europe fast and hard in the 1990s. And this was only the half of it. (17)

Fantatising about the past has become common for many Eastern Europeans (Boyer 17). They are longing for the communist regime, its autocratic leaders, and a safer and more prosperous lifestyle. Depending on the country, various factors shaped this feeling: the need to cope with the abrupt switch to capitalism, identity issues related to the sudden socio-economic changes, job insecurity, economic challenges, corruption, etc.

## **4.2 Ostalgie**

Although postcommunist nostalgia emerged in all the countries from the former Eastern Bloc, it took on specific forms according to each region. “Ostalgie” (Ost means East in German; the term makes it for the best pun in the series) which refers to East German nostalgia, might



bear closer similarities with “Yugonostalgia” (Yugo from Yugoslavia), yet it differs to how nostalgia for communism developed in countries from the former Soviet Union, or Romania. Furthermore, different nostalgic narratives can develop even within one country. For instance, in Romania’s case, some of those who were already adults during the seventies and the eighties manifest the most impenetrable and intense form of postcommunist nostalgia.<sup>106</sup> Yet younger generations, which only grew up during communism and lived most of their adult life after 1989 have lighter nostalgic forms, if nostalgic at all<sup>107</sup>.

Regardless of the differences, one thing is certain: even though postcommunist nostalgia relies on collective memories, it cannot be separated from personal nostalgia. As I have already argued in the previous chapter, there is an interaction between personal memories and the communist regime. In many occasions, postcommunist nostalgia is actually generated by a series of personal nostalgias. Nostalgia developed in various forms, and one cannot be easily separated from the other, just like in the previous chapter nostalgia for a beloved person could not be separated from nostalgia for a place. The oscillation between personal and collective might change the relation with suffering. That is why in this chapter I shall further analyse the relationship between suffering and nostalgia.

One of the lightest, yet more popular forms of nostalgia is Ostalgie<sup>108</sup>. Combining<sup>109</sup> the German word for “east,” Ost, with the word nostalgia, Nostalgie, Ostalgie names the nostalgia

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<sup>106</sup> There are significant differences between the seventies and the eighties. This has several explanations. In Romania, the Communist Regime had its golden times starting in the mid-sixties and ending at the beginning of the seventies, when Ceaușescu became enthralled with the North-Korean ruling model of severe social control, and the cult of the Leader. The eighties were marked by poor living conditions. Yet it seems that the eighties are still perceived positively by those who regret the regime. A study made in Poland confirms that nostalgia does not only focus on the seventies, as this would make more sense in terms of living standards, because the eighties are also very much regretted. For more on this, see Monika Prusik and Maria Lewicka, “Nostalgia for Communist Times and Autobiographical Memory: Negative Present or Positive Past?,” p. 690.

<sup>107</sup> For more on this, see section “Narratives of Romanian communism.”

<sup>108</sup> I am focusing on what Ostalgie became starting with the end of the nineties, when the feeling was associated with irony, humour, and parody. In the beginning of the nineties, Ostalgie was associated with a more dogmatic form of

manifested by former Eastern Germans for a series of products from their communist era under the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and for the “golden age” kind of atmosphere that may be evoked by such products. In the late nineties, a retro wave hit many former Eastern Germans who brought back to life several iconic GDR products, including foods and beverages, such as Knusper Flocken chocolate and the quite popular Vita Cola, an East German version of Coca Cola.<sup>110</sup> Their efforts went further than simply reviving some brands, as many seemed to long for more complex experiences recalled by these brands. For instance, a replica of a typical GDR hotel has been opened in Berlin.<sup>111</sup> Those who check-in will have the nearly full experience of what it was like to spend a night or more in a GDR hotel, which includes not only the ‘70s aesthetics of the building and the poor menu, but also the lacklustre entertainment. Furthermore, it seems that for a while there were serious plans of even creating a GDR theme park in East Berlin.<sup>112</sup>

Ostalgie<sup>113</sup> increased its popularity thanks to the tragicomedic film directed by Wolfgang Becker, *Good Bye, Lenin!*. The movie tells the story of Alex, a young man who lives in East Berlin together with his sister, Paula, and their mother, Christiane, who witness the biggest change to occur in recent German history: the fall of the Berlin wall. When the protests against the authorities burst, Christiane, a Party apparatchik, is overwhelmed, especially after she sees her son involved in the manifestations, so she suffers a heart attack and falls into a coma. When,

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postcommunist nostalgia. For more on this distinction see Daphne Berdahl, “Good bye, Lenin: Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism,” p. 185.

<sup>109</sup> This paragraph is taken from my forthcoming article, “Changing Narratives through Communist Food Brands. Three Romanian Case Studies: Rom Chocolate, Gostat Meat Products, and Polar Ice-Cream.”

<sup>110</sup> For more on this, see Lauren Shockey, “In Former East Germany, a Search for Lost Foods.”

<sup>111</sup> For more on this, see Petra Rethmann, “Post-Communist Ironies in an East German Hotel.”

<sup>112</sup> For more on this see, Daphne Berdahl, “Good bye, Lenin: Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism,” p. 186.

<sup>113</sup> As Barbara Mennel argues, *Good Bye, Lenin* depicts Ostalgie as “as an adaptation of western stereotypes into positive attributes of easternness” (62), and this is the perspective that I am actually focusing on, yet I am acknowledging that Ostalgie has its critics, who argue it is “a dangerous form of selective amnesia” (62).

months later, she wakes up, the world in which she used to live until recently was no longer there. Her son, suspecting that getting to learn the brutal truth would kill his mom, begins a restless and comic fight to hide all the changes from her. As she recovers in her apartment, all she sees, wears, and tastes is East-German brands. The TV news she watches are recordings made by her son, whose creativity grows to be up to the task of building around her the bubble of a “whole” simulated world.

Christiane was a devoted member of the Socialist Unity Party (the East German Communist Party) who lived her life as if there was nothing more important than the communist ideals. As a teacher, she would help spread around the communist rhetoric and she would do her best to prove her patriotism. Years before, when her children were too young to remember, her husband fled to West Germany and she refused to follow him because she was afraid that, had their plan failed, the authorities would take their children away. Because her husband left, she was under the supervision of the secret police. The Party could not punish her husband for his betrayal, but she was there to undergo the consequences of his “unforgivable” gesture. That is why she struggled to become a model citizen, so the Party would eventually forgive her husband’s betrayal. She played her role so well that she ended up believing it. She swallowed what Czesław Miłosz calls the “Murti-Bing pill,”<sup>114</sup> the ability to conceal even from herself any belief that the authorities would find unacceptable.

After the years in which her devotion for the Party grew, the unconceivable happened: the communist regime, which was there forever, overnight was there no more. So Christiane’s self-imposed - and by now deeply inculcated beliefs - turn out to have become outdatedly futile. West Germany was GDR’s biggest enemy and there was nothing more decadent than capitalism.

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<sup>114</sup> In Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’ novel *Insatiability*, the Murti-Bing pill cures those who “suffer” of independent thought.

But when West- and East Germany reunited and capitalism replaced communism. Christine, and many like her, “seem[ed] to miss a sense of legitimacy of their past” (Blum 230). The symbols, hierarchies, and many of the values that shaped her life were thrown to the trash can of history.

Christiane starts noticing small disconnects, grows progressively suspicious and ends up by realizing the size of the changes when she sees that Lenin’s larger-than-life banner on the building across the street had been replaced by an equally big one featuring a Coca-Cola ad. Her shock was shared, in the early days of postcommunism, by many East Germans.

Now, decades later, the ripple effects of those shocks having worn out, Ostalgie in its current incarnation is frequently defined by a sentiment of cynicism, irony, and parody” (Berdahl 186). The Trabant<sup>115</sup> parades, the East German-like hotels and bars, the Ostalgie parties, and the revival of East German brands invoke the past in a humorous way. When one puts on a pioneer uniform and attends an Ostalgie party, one seeks amusement and glances, not without an ironic wink, the past when one was obligated to wear such a uniform in order to fit the One Party-drawn line.<sup>116</sup> The film itself features Alex’s efforts as a playful struggle. There is always a comical element in what he does in order to keep the lie alive: he replaces jars of pickles, he is excited that he finds an East German coffee brand, he lies that Coca Cola is actually East German, he pays some of her mother’s former pupils to sing pioneer songs on her birthday, etc.

In staging the make-believe-it-all game for his mom, Alex sets up a simulation of the past that unfolds in parallel with the real world. One of the categories of games analyzed by Roger Caillois is named mimicry, such as children’s initiations, games of illusion, arms, masks, disguises (Caillois 36). These games rely on imitating a mythological, exotic, or a world that existed in the past:

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<sup>115</sup> The emblematic East-German, two-cylinder tiny car, popular within the Eastern Bloc.

<sup>116</sup> See also Daphne Berdahl, “Good bye, Lenin: Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism,” p. 183.

The game has only one rule: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the decor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself. (Caillois 90)

Mimicry relies on creating the illusion that something is real. Alex is the one that wears the mask and sets up the *mise en scène* for his mother who was tricked into playing the game. Whereas he needs to pretend the illusion is real, she is like people in tribes who, when wearing a mask, truly identify themselves with the deity represented by the mask (Caillois 95). Nevertheless, both end up behaving as if there were no rift between illusion and reality. Even when Christiane finds out the truth, she continues to play the game and she is deeply appreciative that her son created this complex narrative for her. Alex will realize she knew the truth only after her death. Nevertheless, going back (or, forward) to reality is too much for her. Just like Tamina, she needs her past in order to exist in the present. Tamina suffered of a ritualistic and deadly form of nostalgia. Christiane does not control the evocative process because her son is the one who anticipates her deadly nostalgia and develops this complex game for her. The game prevents her from getting sick with deadly nostalgia.

Christine's death is not caused by nostalgic suffering. On the contrary, nostalgia is the game that keeps her alive for a while. This game is both serious and funny, futile and useful, romantic and ironic. Unlike Christine, when Ostalgie "players" purchase East German brands or when they sleep in an East German like hotel, they put on the mask of an East German and thus create an illusion that compensates a loss. Yet, this does not mean that they would prefer the loss to be reversed for good. The game they play gives them enough of East Germany. Unlike other

forms of postcommunist nostalgia, Ostalgie does not entail the regret for the communist regime or its political leaders.<sup>117</sup> An East German hotel is like, well, the Disneyland that tourists visit to experience a miraculous world.

Jean Baudrillard distinguishes between three orders of simulation of the real. A first-order simulation, for instance art, is nothing more than an artificial representation of the real, which does not aim to transcend its status. The second-order simulation blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal. Finally, the third-order simulation lacks any link with the real, as it creates the hyperreality, namely a world without a real origin that produces its own logic (Baudrillard 17). As long as she was not aware of the game she was involuntary playing, Christiane was in hyperreality. After she realised what her son was doing, she became part of a second-order simulation, because the real was still blurred. Ostalgie activates when the real is blurred, as the real is overwhelming and thus hard to comprehend. Ostalgie creates an “East German Disneyland” in which people relieve some of their GDR experiences. Their experiences are not accurate, and they are aware of that, yet they need this illusion to make reality acceptable.

Gary Cross argues that nostalgia has become a means to cope with the fast-paced late capitalism, which shifted its focus from longing for the past to fighting against the present by eternalizing the past (11). Nowadays, people seek for a past time in which the ever-accelerating change could be stopped, Cross argues. Thus, they find refuge in the time of childhood which they try to possess by purchasing objects that remind them of this specific period. Ostalgie is also very much linked to objects representative of East Germany.<sup>118</sup> These objects are sold according to the rules of market economy. Ostalgie emerges in capitalism and follows its logic, as East

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<sup>117</sup> There are only a few who still regret the former communist regime. See also Martin Blum, “Remaking the East German Past: Ostalgie, Identity, and Material Culture.”

<sup>118</sup> Even though childhood is not the only element that enhances it.

German brands become pop culture commodities.<sup>119</sup> There is nothing tragic nor painful in buying a pair of retro sneakers, but this might embody, as Jameson calls it (Jameson 287), a schizophrenic relationship with time, as the past cannot be transformed into a perpetual present. Yet this is not the case of Ostalgie, because it does not idealize the past:

Because a majority of East Germans now recognize that they have been forced into a new position of dependence and second class citizenship and that they cannot meaningfully participate in the civil society of a unified Germany, their opposition has, again, taken the form of a dissident sub-public. This sub-public manifests its resistance to processes of Westernization in attempts to rescue the "everydayness" of life in East Germany into the present against the wholesale equation of the GDR with totalitarianism. Grounded in the past, this non-nationalist search for a distinct East German identity satirizes the GDR's totalitarian characteristics and recovers its everyday features in opposition to both Westernized modernism and socialist realism. (Sadowski-Smith 2)

Ostalgie is a bridge between past and present, as it is a mechanism of coping with both. As Martin Blum argues, the logic of this nostalgic perspective is based on the need to be connected with the past, which is in fact a reaction to the radical political, economic, and cultural changes that East Germans had to cope with (230). Yet this nostalgic connection unfolds in a light and non-dogmatic manner. The GDR products are not purchased because they can match the Western quality, nor because they evoke a glorious lifestyle, now forever gone, but because they are a palpable link to a world that defined them until not long ago.

## **Yugonostalgia**

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<sup>119</sup> Reviving socialist brands is a niche of retro marketing that focuses on the appeal some brands have for nostalgic consumers who used to purchase such items in the past. For more on this see Katja H. Brunk, Markus Giesler, and Benjamin J. Hartmann "Creating a Consumable Past: How Memory Making Shapes Marketization."

Yugonostalgia might be even harder to grasp than Ostalgie because the socio-historical background in which it is rooted is even more complicated. One of the main elements that makes the situation hard to untangle is the fact that the feeling appeared after a series of atrocious military conflicts that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia.<sup>120</sup> As Yugoslavia broke into several smaller states, each had its own Yugonostalgics. At the same time, each newly formed state was politically motivated to reject the feeling because Yugonostalgia contradicted the nationalist rhetoric that each state (Serbia, Croatia, etc.) aggressively promoted. Yugonostalgia is admittedly experienced by numerous people, yet not so many admit that the positive feelings they have for former Yugoslavia should be called as such, as the term has a derogatory connotation because it is associated with a conservative and regressive position.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, even though they do not regret the communist party itself, they do long Yugoslavia's reputation because, thanks to Tito, Yugoslavia's leader, the country had come to play, in the 1950s through the 1970s, a mediating role between East and West. The Yugoslav subjects had the privilege of traveling abroad and enjoyed a better life than people from the rest of the communist countries. That is why even though the political element is not central, it cannot be totally ignored, at least because Tito remains a figure admired by many.<sup>122</sup>

Regardless of all the ambiguities, Yugonostalgia is a feeling that focuses on "memories related to social issues like health, workplace security and education" (Maksimović 88), and on the cultural and artistic aspects that shaped everyday life in Yugoslavia:

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<sup>120</sup> For more on the military conflicts from former Yugoslavia see, for instance, MacDonald, David Bruce, *Balkan Holocausts: Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia*.

<sup>121</sup> For more on the ambiguous implications of Yugonostalgia, see Ivan Maksimović "From Yugoslavia to Yugonostalgia: Political Elements in Narratives about Life in the Former SFRY."

<sup>122</sup> See also Lindstrom, Nicole, "Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in former Yugoslavia."



These text [Lexicon of Yu Mythology] entries, photographs, drawings, and illustrations are dedicated to the vast array of phenomena concerning everyday life in the former Yugoslavia. Some of them describe either the celebrated or the disdained personalities of different professions (folksingers, directors and screenwriters, a few politicians, musicians, sportsmen, and so on). Others cover art phenomena (animation, comic books, film) or topics that involve deeply ingrained personal memories, such as children's games. Heterogeneous phenomena of Yugoslav pop-culture alternate with each other: the entries on female arm-wrestling champions and hairstyles are followed by references to mass-market print culture, sports, fictional characters, and gadgets, and the extraordinary list of female "stars," many of whom initiated budding Yugoslav teenage males into the realm of sexual fantasy. There are many references to prominent public spaces, urban subculture and slang, or entries referring to the experience of mandatory service in the Yugoslav People's Army. In addition to an entry on the literary phrase "Blue Jeans Prose," coined by the Yugoslav literary critic and avant-garde scholar, Aleksandar Flaker, one can find plenty of terms and entries related to various products of material culture manufactured in Yugoslavia, ranging from laundry detergent to cars, from children's magazines to journals of political theory, from graphic design to cakes. (Maksimović 90).

The text above lists the numerous categories that the *Lexicon of Yu Mythology* contains, which is a book, based on a website, to which many ex-Yugoslavs contributed in order to put together what they longed for.<sup>123</sup> The *Lexicon* showcases that Yugonostalgia chiefly depends on all the small aspects that defined daily life in Yugoslavia. This project owes a lot to the Yugoslav<sup>124</sup> novelist and essayist Dubravka Ugrešić, who argues that Yugonostalgia should be linked to personal memories and experiences, rather than politics:

They no longer remember party congresses, or years of change [...] or the names of political leaders, they hardly remember their common geography and history: they have all become Yugo-

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<sup>123</sup> For more about the list, see Aleksandar Bošković, "Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of Yu Mythology."

<sup>124</sup> She was born in Kutina, which is now a Croatian town, yet here is what she says about her home country: "Although I now have Croatian citizenship, when someone asks me who I am I repeat my mother's words: <<I don't know who I am anymore...>> Sometimes I say: <<I am a post-Yugoslav, a Gypsy>>" (Ugrešić 1995, 7). From the very beginning, Croatia embraced a very nationalistic approach and thus tried to delete from everybody's memory the Yugoslav period. Ugrešić was one of the most vocal voices that criticized the nationalist stance of the Croatian government, reason for which she became a target for Croatian media. She left the country in 1993.

zombies! But what they do most often and most gladly recall are the years of festivals of pop music, the names of singers and songs. [...] And it is just this culture of the everyday - and not a state or a political system! - that is the source of Yugonostalgia, if such a thing exists today. Nostalgia belongs to the sphere of competence of the heart. Just like pop music. (Ugrešić 1996, 133).

Ugrešić pleads for an intimate form of Yugonostalgia, one that transcends national borders and languages and reunites people based on their collective Proustian memories, namely anything that recreates the atmosphere of a life that has forever gone: food, sweets, drinks, music, movies, actors, etc. The pop culture dimension, broadly perceived, is the sweet and inoffensive dimension of their lost life, and is what usually makes people, regardless of their educational and ethnic background, to resonate with, because both Serbians and Croats ate the same chocolate and listened to the same music, and many still crave those experiences. Yugonostalgia should enhance reconciliation among ex-Yugoslavs because it shows that they share the same bittersweet experiences. Yet Yugoslavia is perceived by nationalists as an anti-national feeling because it enhances a sentimental pact with the enemy. It was for this reason that Ugrešić was portrayed in the Croatian media as a traitress.

Ugrešić explores further the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia in the *Ministry of Pain*. The novel tells the story of a group of Yugoslavian refugees who settled in Amsterdam and struggle with war trauma and dislocation. As they go back to school, they attend the same class of Serbian-Croatian literature held by the main character of the novel, Tanja, herself a refugee. What was supposed to be a literature class became more of a group therapy meeting, in which both traumatic and sweet experiences are recalled. As they come from different corners of former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia...), Tanja struggles to find a common ground, so she invents a game to help them bond and find a collective mechanism of coping. She thus invites

them to put their memories in a virtual red-white-and-blue-striped bag, a “gypsy bag,” as it is called in the novel, which is a symbol of the Balkan emigrant:<sup>125</sup>

Gradually our red-white-and-blue-striped bag filled up. There was a little of everything: the now dead world of Yugoslav primary and secondary schools, the idols of Yugoslav pop culture, all manner of Yugo goods - food, drink, apparel, and the like - and Yugo design, ideological slogans, celebrities, athletes, events, Yugoslav socialist myths and legends, television series, comic strips, newspapers, films... (Ugrešić 2004, 57)

Positive memories barely come out in the beginning, but when the students gain each other’s trust, they find numerous common points. Given the circumstances, their ability to share seems miraculous:

Surrounded by the indifferent walls of our imaginary laboratory, we breathed life into a life that no longer was. We took turns massaging the heart and giving artificial respiration. Clumsy and amateurish as we were, we eventually succeeded in bringing back the beat of that bygone era. Most of them returned to their childhoods: it was the safest, least threatening territory. Whether the details were their own or what they had gathered from their parents or whether they had made them up, as Igor often did, was not important. Every detail contained its morsel of truth. (Ugrešić 2004, 59)

The bitterness of their nightmarish experiences is sweetened by memories of the safe space of childhood or by the innocent pleasures food or music have to offer. Their sharing seems innocent

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<sup>125</sup> This cheap and ugly zipper bag was indeed for many years very popular among emigrants coming from Eastern Europe. It is less used now, even though it is still considered useful for sending parcels from East to West. The bag has its own complicated and fascinating history. Here is what Ugrešić says about it: “In any case, the plastic bag with the red, white, and blue stripes made its way across East-Central Europe all the way to Russia and perhaps even farther - to India, China, America, all over the world. It is the poor man’s luggage, the luggage of petty thieves and black marketeers, of weekend wheeler-dealers, of the flea-market-and launderette crowd, of refugees and the homeless. Oh, the jeans, the T-shirts, the coffee that traveled in those bags from Trieste to Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria... The leather jackets and handbags and gloves leaving Istanbul and oddments leaving the Budapest Chinese market for Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, you name it. The plastic bags with the red, white, and blue stripes were nomads, they were refugees, they were homeless, but they were survivors, too: they rode trains with no ticket and crossed borders with no passport” (Ugrešić 2004, 42).

in Amsterdam, yet it is considered unacceptable back home, as tensions between the newly formed states is paramount. It is hard to grasp the number of wiped out families or people tormented within their communities for the simple reason that they were Croatians or Serbians.

The politicians from former Yugoslav states followed the recipe of infantilization, as Kundera would call it, as they aimed to impose a new status quo: “The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory” (Ugrešić 2004, 45). People were thus persuaded to erase fifty years of Yugoslavian history, as otherwise they were guilty of unpatriotic acts. The small group of Yugoslavian expats fight against infantilization, yet their victory is not clear, nor easy:

I realized I was walking a tightrope: stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our former country had pressed the delete button, I the restore button; they were erasing the Yugoslav past, blaming Yugoslavia for every misfortune, including the war, I reviving that past in the form of the everyday minutiae that had made up our lives, operating a volunteer lost-and-found service, if you will. And even though they were manipulating millions of people and I only these few, we were both obfuscating reality. I wondered whether by evoking endearing images of a common past I wouldn't obscure the bloody images of the recent war, whether by reminding them of how Kiki sweets tasted I wouldn't obliterate the case of the Belgrade boy stabbed to death by his coevals just because he was an Albanian, whether by urging them to “reflect on” Mirko and Slavko, the Yugopartisans of the popular comic strip, I wouldn't be postponing their confrontation with the countless episodes of sadism perpetrated by Yugowarriors, drunk and crazed with momentary power, against their compatriots; or whether by calling up the popular refrain. That's what happens, my fair maiden, once you've known a Bosnian's kiss I wouldn't be dulling the impact of the countless deaths in Bosnia, that of Selim's father, for instance. The lists of atrocities knew no end, and here I was, pushing them into the background with cheery catalogs of everyday trifles that no longer even existed. (Ugrešić 2004, 46)

The typical nostalgic bitterness might become unbearable in *Yugonostalgia*'s case because loss coincides with the most terrible experiences: murders, rapes, bombardments... The nostalgic should filter the painful experience and isolate on the island of subjective pleasures, yet when traumas are fresh, what initially started as a nostalgic evocation might suddenly turn into the revival of the most disturbing memories. This dangerous shift has unpredictable consequences in the novel. After Tanja had the impression that she managed to build solidarity and trust within a very atypical group, she finds out that one of her students filed a complain against her saying that she does not really teach Serbian-Croatian literature, which was true, because they were too concerned to fill in the bag of memories. This betrayal turns her into a rigid and strict teacher, which confuses the entire group. In the end, the situation gets out of control, as one of her students takes her as a hostage and gives her a discourse about how dangerous and painful her experiment was. At the very end of the novel, the two of them move in together, which emphasises one more time that the line between trauma and affection is very thin.

Nevertheless, *Yugonostalgia* is depicted by Ugrešić as a band-aid that covers the wounds of those who struggle to find their way in the post Balkan wars world. Just as *Ostalgie* was the answer to an identarian issue, so is *Yugonostalgia*. Ugrešić argues that many ex-Yugoslavs, especially those from the diaspora, long the multi-cultural identity of Yugoslavia. The brutal changes left many in limbo, as fifty years of Yugoslav history cannot just be ignored for the sake of embracing a fresh made history that connects new formed states with a mythological history that came to an end with the advent of World War One.<sup>126</sup>

The Yugoslav identity was promoted by the communist regime and broadly accepted by its subjects. That is why pop culture is so important and it is appreciated by former Yugoslavs,

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<sup>126</sup> The former Yugoslav states tried to press the delete button on their communist and communal history, only to replace it with a mythologized history that supports their respective nationalist rhetorics. See also Siniša Malešević, *Ideology, Legitimacy and the New State: Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia*.

regardless their educational background, because pop culture is the realm where multiculturalism was enhanced and conflicts were easy to elude (Maksimović 88). After the break up, pop culture remained a peace maker. Ana Petrov observed that, in 2015, artists (such as Ana Bebić and Željko Vasić) were still writing songs about Yugoslavia and picture its demise as a great loss. Furthermore, Petrov argues that “Yugonostalgia functions as an integral part of the (music) market” (205), which even if greatly affected by the dissolution, it started to pick up once things settled down a bit. Just like Ostalgie, Yugonostalgia followed the path of commodification and it became a money-maker: Tito’s blue train, guided tours, music, flea markets for Yugoslav symbols, theme restaurants and parties, etc.

This trend is anticipated in the novel as well: “In a few years, all that nostalgia crap is going to be a big money-maker” (Ugrešić 182). Pop culture plays either the card of sentimentalism, especially in the case of music, or that of humour and irony, as is the case with Yugonostalgia tours or parties. In both cases, some might get lost and behave as “Yugo-zombies,” namely people who miss “Yugo exactly as it was,” politics included, and thus enhance a restorative kind of nostalgia. Yet most of them use pop culture as a Proustian madeleine that activates a series of pleasant memories that are collectively shared. For them nostalgia is a reconciliatory element because it does not aim for a return of the past, yet it uses whatever can be saved in order to cope with the uncertain present.

#### **4.4 Postcommunist nostalgia: Romania’s case**

An episode of the *Ministry of Pain* has Tanja visiting her mother back in Zagreb. A poster of Tito hangs on a wall in her mother’s apartment. This discovery came as a weird surprise because her mother was not at a Tito fan at all. After her husband fought as a partisan in

World War Two, he spent a year in a labor camp, under Tito's rule, so, in the family, Tito used to be regarded as a traitor. Ugrešić tells this story to distinguish between the Yugonostalgia she pleads for and this dogmatic form of nostalgia that embraces lies and myths of a distorted political past allegedly superior to what the present has to offer. The same distinction can be easily made in Ostalgie's case. That is why Yugonostalgia and Ostalgie find a refuge in pop culture, because it is less pervaded by the political dimension.

This distinction is harder to make in Romania's case. Firstly, the political element is strongly linked to Romanian postcommunist nostalgia. Secondly, pop-cultural evocations are less present and so are humour and irony. The nostalgics and the anti-nostalgics agree on one thing: the communist past is serious business. Romanians reconciled<sup>127</sup> to a lesser extent with their past and this is reflected in their dogmatic, very critical, or sentimental evocations.

There are several narratives that recall Romania's communist past<sup>128</sup>. They represent different social groups, hierarchies, political ideologies, and personal reasons. These differences are not always clearly opposed in terms of ideology or political interests, as some of these narratives are built on vastly differing grounds. For instance, the dominant narrative, which is held by some of the best-known Romanian intellectuals and by the non-left political establishment, portrays communism as a criminal regime. Not only is this perspective in opposition to the people who are nostalgic for the regime, but it represents different social groups, as the nostalgic people predominantly belong to the working class and have no direct

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<sup>127</sup> See more about this in "Anti-nostalgia" section.

<sup>128</sup> Some of the information I use in this section comes from two of my forthcoming articles, "Changing Narratives through Communist Food Brands. Three Romanian Case Studies: Rom Chocolate, Gostat Meat Products, and Polar Ice-Cream," and "Hipsters in Central and Eastern Europe: From Domesticated Nostalgia to Manele and Protests."

influence on the political actors, although they do represent an important electoral group that is intensely targeted by politicians, especially by the Social Democratic Party.<sup>129</sup>

The dominant narrative<sup>130</sup> often invokes the report released by The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (PCACD), also known as “the Truth Commission.” In April 2006, just a few months before Romania’s admission into the European Union, Romania’s then-president Traian Băsescu appointed noted political scientist and University of Maryland Professor, Vladimir Tismăneanu, as the Chair of the Commission. The purpose of the Commission was to detail the crimes committed by the communist regime, and thus offer a solid basis for an official condemnation of communism. The report,<sup>131</sup> also known as the “Tismăneanu report,” encompasses an analysis of the whole period of Romanian communism, from the post-WWII Soviet imposed and inspired installation of the communists in power, to the December, 1989 revolution/coup d’état, and emphasizes elements such as the structure of the Communist Party, the carceral system, the secret police (Securitate), the dissidence, the censorship, the economic crisis of the ‘80s, the food penury, and the Party’s monopoly on cultural life.

Whereas the dominant narrative pleads for a firm condemnation of the communist regime, the Romanian progressive leftists disagree<sup>132</sup> with the report<sup>133</sup> and argue in favour of a

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<sup>129</sup> The Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD), which is the biggest Romanian party, is very popular among working class people. On an official level, PSD criticizes the communist regime. However, several PSD leaders (such as Ion Iliescu, the first Romanian president) are members of the former communist nomenklatura and took full advantage of the poorly regulated capitalism that replaced the communist regime. See also Adrian Cioflâncă, “Nostalgia pentru comunism.”

<sup>130</sup> I personally resonate with this narrative because the communist regime was a terrible experience for Romanians. Even today one can see the consequences of that nightmarish experiment.

<sup>131</sup> See Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile (eds.), *Raport final*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007).

<sup>132</sup> The report was first vehemently contested by the opposition parties, namely by the extreme right-wing Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare - PRM) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). The public position of these parties was not surprising, as their leaders, Corneliu-Vadim Tudor (PRM), Ion Iliescu (PSD), and Adrian Năstase (PSD), were part of the communist nomenklatura. See also Cristian Tileagă, “Communism in Retrospect: The Rhetoric of Historical Representation and Writing the Collective Memory of Recent Past,” *Memory Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2012), pp. 462-478.



nuanced, albeit partly favourable understanding of the communist period, especially of the Ceaușescu regime, which they claim was responsible for numerous positive changes, such as the modernization of Romania and the fight against illiteracy (Rogozanu 168).<sup>134</sup> Despite the obvious opposition between the two narratives, they do share a series of commonalities. Both positions are held by educated people, both engage in a dialogue (sometimes in the form of aggressive public exchanges) and try to influence political decisions. It is true, however, that those who support the conclusions of the report are more popular, and have more access to the press and to the Romanian educated public.

Unlike the supporters of the previous narratives, those who are taken with the nostalgic narrative, that is, those who regret the disappearance of the regime and who believe it would have been a better choice than all the democratic political alternatives, rarely engage in public dialogue.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, they are not part of the intellectual elite, as they predominantly belong to the working class.<sup>136</sup> In 2010, Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie<sup>137</sup> (IRES) carried out a survey that captures many of their opinions. The survey is also interesting because it reveals the considerable percentage of people who regret the loss of the communist era and who have their own interpretations of the historical facts.<sup>138</sup> Thus 41% of the respondents would elect Nicolae Ceaușescu as their president, 63% of the respondents believe that they lived a better life during the communist period, and 68% believe that communism was a good idea that was badly

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<sup>133</sup> See Vasile Ernu, Costi Rogozanu, Ciprian Siulea, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu (eds.), *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale raportului Tismăneanu*, (București/Chișinău, 2008).

<sup>134</sup> I have put on an equal position the dominant narrative and the narrative expressed by a group of Romanian leftist intellectuals. However, the dominant narrative is more credible for the very simple reason that it is based on numerous historical sources. In my opinion, the group of leftist intellectuals are more biased, as they believe that they need the past to justify why communism is an alternative to capitalism.

<sup>135</sup> Some scholars believe there is a conflict between the mainstream intellectuals and the masses of nostalgics. For more on this see Mihai Stelian Rusu, "Battling over Romanian Red Past. The Memory of Communism between Elitist Cultural Trauma and Popular Collective Nostalgia."

<sup>136</sup> Sabina Fati, "Românii și nostalgia la români."

<sup>137</sup> The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy.

<sup>138</sup> See IRES, "Nostalgia trecutului. sacrificiile prezentului. Sondaj de opinie."

implemented.<sup>139</sup> Another survey, released by Public Affairs in 2012, reveals that 53% of the Romanians would welcome the return of the communist regime. Yet another IRES survey that was released in 2016 reveals that 52% of the respondents consider the Romanian Communist Party to have been better than all the Romanian parties in existence in present-day Romania.<sup>140</sup> Their responses seem to reflect the economic concerns that the population is currently facing, which make them selectively remember their communist experience by ignoring the extreme austerity that marred the last decade of the communist regime.<sup>141</sup>

All these narratives shun humour; none features a more relaxed view of communism as a past that needs to be accepted, but as a past that is either rejected, reconsidered, or longed for. These polarized positions lead to a variety of reactions. On the one hand, there is the predictable and justifiable reaction of publicly releasing documentaries, studies, artworks meant to explain and conserve in the collective consciousness the dark side of the communist regime. On the other hand, there is the dissemination of myths about the communist regime that contributes to the idealization of the regime by those who still regret its loss.<sup>142</sup> Either way, the recent past is invoked in a sentimental and often rigid manner. For example, many of the “nostalgics” still consider Ceaușescu a key figure in Romania’s history, deserving of their adulation. Even today, many gather to his tomb to celebrate his birth and to mourn his brutal death (Mischie). On the opposite side, many intellectuals or journalists, such as Monica Cercelescu and Alina Stanciu

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<sup>139</sup> See IRES, “Nostalgia trecutului...”

<sup>140</sup> See Elena Dumitru, “De ce e PCR cel mai iubit partid din România. Nostalgia după comunism în Europa de Est.”

<sup>141</sup> The president of IRES, Vasile Dâncu, confirms the link between postcommunist nostalgia and their survey in “Românii și nostalgia comunismului. Însemnări la un sondaj de opinie.”

<sup>142</sup> Some of the most popular myths are related to the allegedly financial security and to the low unemployment rate but there are other myths which concern the most prominent communist figure, namely Nicolae Ceaușescu. For instance, many believed that Ceaușescu managed to run to China or Cuba. See Eugen Ovidiu Chirovici, “Cinci mituri despre sistemul comunist din România,” p. 28.

(Gerogescu 157), refuse an ironic and humorous perspective of the past, which they view as immoral.<sup>143</sup>

Yet humour or irony<sup>144</sup> are not always dismissed, nor are some pop-culture initiatives. Among the artists who took the audience for a ride on the ironic slopes are Mihai Stănescu, Ada Milea<sup>145</sup> and Ion Barbu, who greatly helped relax the discourse on the communist past, and allowed it to expand to other increasingly popular fields, such as marketing. Some of the retro-marketing initiatives from Romania revive popular products of the communist period, such as Rom chocolate, Polar ice-cream, and Gostat salami. Although the ads that promote these products evoke some of the most off-putting moments of the past, such as the endless line-ups or the omnipresence of the secret police, they also entertain a different image of the communist regime. Yet these cases are rather isolated, controversial, and intensely contested or they entail a

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<sup>143</sup> In a recent interview, the Russian novelist Liudmila Ulițkaia states that she disagrees with the recent artistic attempts, such as the performances based on Soviet music played at the “Sovremennik” theatre, that invoke the communist past in a humorous key. She considers that the communist trauma was too damaging to be linked to humour on any level. I am writing this article being aware that for some remembering communism and laughter are totally incompatible, regardless of the context. I consider that they are fully entitled to have this perspective. See Iulian Ciocan and Alexandru Bordian, “Ludmila Ulițkaia despre supraviețuirea după Gulag și despre nostalgie. INTERVIU.”

<sup>144</sup> Humour and irony were extremely important during the communist regime. Making fun of the regime was an authentic and very popular coping mechanism. See also Miruna Iacob, “Humor as a Survival Technique during Communism in Romania.” Yet when the dictator died, the jokes about the regime did not seem that funny anymore. Romanians did not lose their sense of humour, yet communism became a subject that had nothing in common with laughter anymore. Nevertheless, as thirty years passed by since the fall of the regime, humour does seem like a reasonable solution for some people. In a recent interview given by the Romanian writer Ioan T. Morar, he says: “Comrads, let’s brake up communism with vigilance but with a laughter on our faces” (Să ne despărțim de comunism răsând, dar cu vigență, tovarăși!). Even though I am not entitled to recommend recipes on how Romanians should handle their trauma, as I am too young to have had the experience of communism, I do believe that humour is a coping mechanism that would help Romanians to overcome this nightmarish experience.

<sup>145</sup> Georgescu analyses some parodic songs about Ceaușescu and argues that irony (which differentiates itself from humour by being primarily polemical and having a social character) is a valid practice of remembrance. This alternative stands under the label of counter-memory as it emphasizes how irony challenges mainstream memory. This alternative memory marks an important shift in perspective. Thus Ceaușescu, as the embodiment of the Communist party, is not perceived as a tragic, sublime, or heroic figure anymore (168).

bitter form of irony (or sarcasm). For instance, the ads that promoted communist brands have been accused of taking advantage of nostalgia and of disrespecting the trauma of communism.<sup>146</sup>

There are also some bars or restaurants with a communist thematic, such as “Scârț” and “Atelier Mecanic.” Here, objects decorate these bars, which are representative of the communist period: toys (such as the rubber doll, with an oversized head and members screwed in the body, simply known as the plastic doll, or plastic replicas of Eastern European cars and trucks), handbooks (such as the alphabet books with drawings that depict the socialist reality), bicycles (for instance, the Pegas bicycle, which was very popular in the Socialist Republic of Romania), original furniture, industrial objects, and placards with political slogans famous in the era. Their bars are transformed into unconventional museums, where fragments of the communist past receive a new “existence” among other moments from the past reflecting other eras. These locations are transformed in lieux de mémoire, places that keep alive memories that otherwise would be forgotten (8). Probably the most relevant example is “Scârț,” which also hosts the Communist Consumers Museum. The basement is organized as a one-bedroom apartment - a most typical apartment in the Socialist Republic of Romania - and it exhibits numerous objects that were used in daily life before 1989. For instance, in the kitchen there are hundreds of products that one could find in such a place during the communist period: utensils, plates, pots, cans, bottles, all being made either in Romania or in other communist countries. These are the objects that recreate how reality looked like in most of the average urban Romanian families, they mirror what people bought and what they used. Nonetheless, their effort to conserve a past cannot be compared with the nostalgia of those who long for the regime. In fact, the owner of the museum states in an interview that he is not nostalgic for communism. His museum only aims to

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<sup>146</sup> See Marius Chivu, „Comunismul e ca un suc de portocale. Interviu cu Alexandru Dumitrescu, director de creație adjunct, McCann Erickson.”

conserve a world on its way out (Tion). Furthermore, these places did not create a trend, as some of them, such as “Atelier Mecanic,” already closed.

Nevertheless, these are rather pale signs that reconciliation might emerge after almost three decades, only that is representative of young educated people,<sup>147</sup> now in their thirties of forties. On the Romanian hipster music scene, the pop culture music of the eighties (muzica ușoară, literally “light music”) resurged. The pop beats, and simple lyrics about love helped singers such as Angela Similea and Mirabela Dauer to become the iconic voices of mainstream music for the decade before the revolution. After 1989 they slowly lost their popularity, as other pop, rock, house, etc. figures gained more success. In 2015 and 2016 this music that smacks of sentimental kitsch all throughout became increasingly popular in hipster clubs in Bucharest (“Eden,” “Control,” etc.), and their interpreters were invited to significant music festivals, such as “Electric Castle.” Whereas irony stands behind this artistic choice, these concerts’ atmosphere enables a genuine connection between the artists and the public. This connection is justified not only by the enthusiasm of the artists whose music knows a revival with the young generations, but also by the youths themselves, who make it obvious that they enjoy listening to the songs, beyond any sort of irony (Foarfă). This music finds a spot near the vintage objects from the historically-themed bars, as it contributes in recreating the same atmosphere. The communist era is not longed for, but its eclectic revival is more and more appreciated. This music, just like the toys from the Museum of the Communist Consumer, refers to the communist period from a different perspective. This music invokes what was ludic and intimate, as it revives some of the moments spent at home, in the family. Thus, a nightmarish era gains a new perception, invoked as is from a reconciliatory position. Yet such an attempt remains an underground phenomenon;

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<sup>147</sup> I am referring to people with post-secondary studies.

these attempts do not reach the amplitude of Yugonostalgia or Ostalgie and do not intermingle with the main narratives that I described at the beginning of this section.

#### 4.5 Back when I was young...

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, when one regrets the communist regime, one implicitly expresses one's longing for a series of personal experiences, associated with that specific political context, when one was younger, stronger, more potent, healthier, more good looking, etc. In some cases, people are aware that what they are nostalgic for is only coincidentally related to the communist regime. That was the case of *The Băiuț Alley...* and *Tinerețile lui Daniel...*, for both novels emphasize that nostalgia exists rather despite the communist regime, not because of it. Some can be even clearer in making such distinctions. In several collective volumes that gather recollections from the communist period,<sup>148</sup> most of the authors make a sharp distinction between nostalgia and the socio-political context.

In *Cum era? Cam așa... Amintiri din anii comunismului românesc* (What Was It Like? Something Like That... Memories from the Years of Romanian Communism), the Socialist Republic of Romania is evoked both as a nightmarish place and the place where numerous positive experiences occurred. Remembering such memories generates various reactions. For instance, Răzvan Petrescu, one of the best Romanian short story writers, vehemently rejects the idea that nostalgia is what he feels when evoking his pre 1989 memories:

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<sup>148</sup> For instance, Gabriel H. Decuble (ed.), *Cartea roz a comunismului* or Ioana Pârvulescu (ed.), *Și eu am trăit în comunism*.

It is not masochistic nostalgia for the communist period but melancholia for the times when life had flavor because, regardless where we spent it, excepting jail, those are the years when we were young [...] There is no nostalgia, only dread and endless hate.<sup>149</sup>

Petrescu considers that communism has nothing in common with his sweet experiences, as whatever was enjoyable in his life had nothing to do with the political context but only with the fact that he was young.<sup>150</sup>

Yet others have a different perspective. For instance, Doina Jela points out that nostalgia is a confirmation that her youth has not been lived in vain. For her, happiness is a superlative moment and such moments used to be reached when one would find foods like oranges, chicken, or chicken liver. Poverty has its own intense moments of joy. Such moments reach an utmost level of satisfaction that is hard to be experienced in different circumstances. That is why such memories are never forgotten. The happiness that emerges in the context of deprivation is thus evoked with fascination. Yet the need to revive this happiness puts one in a rather perverse situation. Remembering that happiness and longing for that intense feeling also implies remembering the socio-political context. Going back to that moment means going back to its unbearable context, thus one marks the other.

Some (emphasis on some) authors see a stronger relationship between the communist regime and nostalgia for communism. Vasile Ernu<sup>151</sup> published a volume called *Născut în URSS*

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<sup>149</sup> “Nu e vorba de vreo nostalgie masochistă după vremurile comuniste, ci de melancolia trezită-n noi de timpul în care viața avea parfum, pentru că indiferent unde i-am petrecut, exceptând închisoarea, sunt anii când eram tineri. [...] Nici urmă de nostalgie, dimpotrivă groază și o nesfârșită ură.” (Mihăilescu 68).

<sup>150</sup> Here I focus on collective volumes, but anti-nostalgia is very common in numerous novels. The most renowned examples is Herta Müller, who transformed her traumatic communist experience in a leitmotif of her novels.

<sup>151</sup> Vasile Ernu is a Moldavian writer who lives in Romania. In general, Moldavian writers that write in Romanian (which is official language in the Republic of Moldova, only that under a different name: Moldavian language) are easily integrated within Romanian culture, based not only on the common language but also on the common history the two countries share. Moldavian writers (those who live in the Republic of Moldova as well) are usually

(Born in the USSR) which pleads for a joyful acceptance of the communist past, because it entailed a charming lifestyle that was forever lost:

Looking back, the book has also been received with great enthusiasm because I propose an archeology of the past that is radically different from the obsessive-dominant one from [Romania]: the past must be hated and condemned. But why? Is it not our past? Why cannot we assume it? Maybe, besides suffering, haven't we also loved, danced, drank, cried, laughed? We even had babies. What are we doing with that? This less rigid approach was enjoyed by many readers. But I have also been cursed and labeled as a "nostalgic & communist."<sup>152</sup>

Vasile Ernu recalls numerous sweet experiences he had as a child and teenager in Moldova, currently the Republic of Moldova, formerly part of the USSR. He considers that, despite the atrocities communism is responsible for, one should differentiate between the phases (some less harsh than others) communism went through and thus acknowledge that there were times, especially in the seventies, in which a specific Soviet culture developed and it is a shame that many cannot appreciate the numerous positive aspects it had to offer.<sup>153</sup> In fact, he states that his experiences under communism made his childhood and teenage years unique and would not trade them for anything in the world, especially not for a life in a capitalist country. Costi Rogozanu argues that Ernu follows the same logic of Ostalgie, as he focuses on an ironic kind of

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published by Romanian publishing houses and target the Romanian public, which is a considerable bigger audience compared to the Moldavian public.

<sup>152</sup> "Privind în urmă, cartea a fost primită și cu mult entuziasm, pentru că puneam problema și propuneam un anumit tip de arheologie a trecutului într-o formulă radical diferită decât cea obsesiv-dominantă de la noi: trecutul trebuie urât și condamnat. De ce? Nu e trecutul nostru? Oare nu ar trebui să ni-l asumăm? Oare, atunci, pe lângă suferință, nu am și iubit, dansat, băut, plâns și râs? Am făcut chiar și copii. Ce facem cu ei? Acest tip de abordare mai puțin crâncenă a plăcut multora. Dar am primit și multe înjurături și etichete de „nostalgic & comunist” (Chiruță).

<sup>153</sup> From a psychological stand-point, this is a common mechanism: "The memories will depend on the specific period of communism, though. Somebody who locates his or her best years in the 1950s may recollect different things than somebody whose best years fell within the 1970s or the 1980s." (Prusik & Lewicka, 679) Overall, one tends to remember what one considers the best period one experienced.



nostalgia that evokes pop-culture experiences, without being trapped in the past (Rogozanu). In fact, the book had<sup>154</sup> its own website where one could listen to soviet music, watch videos of Lenin, Khrushchev and other political figures, and see memorabilia (Ernu).

Yet his longing has deeper roots, as Ernu's sweet personal experiences not only coexist with the communist regime but are the result of the lifestyle imposed by the regime, thanks to which the author is said to have been the "perfect homo sovieticus" (Ernu). For instance, he remembers the "advantages" of living in apartments shared by several families. Whereas others recall the bitterness of being compelled to share even the most private spaces such as a kitchen or a toilet, Ernu argues that in such spaces a spirit of communality and cohesion developed. Because personal space was hardly available, people learned to develop genuine friendship relationships that were based on honesty, dialogue, and the availability to share. He embraces the same positive perspective when it comes to waiting in lines. He considers that this was actually an opportunity for the soviet citizens to socialize (Ernu).

Ernu's book sparked numerous reactions. Some considered that he offered a detached, personal, and funny perspective upon Soviet life, which encourages Romanians to accept their past and acknowledge that life implied numerous positive outcomes, regardless the downsides. Others are certain that Ernu uses his book to promote his leftist ideological agenda and to relativize the truth about the gloomy communist past. For instance, Cristina Modreanu argues that Ernu speaks about the social benefits of the shared apartments, yet he ignores the miserable conditions people had to endure in those cramped spaces (Ernu). Nevertheless, Ernu oscillates between personal memories and collective experiences and between the private dimension of life and the politics that inevitably determined it. Furthermore, Ernu dreams about the "Soviet

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<sup>154</sup> The link can no longer be accessed.

paradise,” which is shaped not only by Soviet art and culture but also by the communist ruling philosophy.

Ernu is aware that the political dimension overlaps with his personal experiences. His nostalgia is fed by this *mélange*, which even if it idealizes the past, it mixes the two dimensions on purpose. Yet, many are not aware of this distinction. Some believe that they regret the communist regime, but they actually regret their personal experiences and their lost youth. Monika Prusik and Maria Lewicka use the term “happy youth” to describe this situation, which they define in the following way:

One of the most popular common-sense explanations of postcommunist nostalgia is through the concept of “happy youth.” For the majority of the people who still remember communism, their critical period coincided with the communist years (1945–89). Their positive evaluations of communist times could thus be due to the fond memories of their youth rather than to the advantages of the communist system. (678)

The tendency to idealize the past and to romanticize the truth stands at nostalgia’s core, which often makes it misleading. Yet, in this case, things are even fuzzier. As Magdalena Reksć also argues, nostalgia for communism is nonhistorical, fragmentary, and selective (107). One does not remember about the endless lines but recalls that one received a vacation voucher, so one had the “amazing” opportunity to spend a week at the seaside. One bases one’s regret of the communist regime on such biased personal memories.

Monika Prusik and Maria Lewicka conducted a study in which they conclude that the role of “happy youth” is smaller than one might think, because “human memories are not pure inventions but are rooted in objective historical facts. As is known, people at large tend to prefer the status quo rather than change and are risk averse rather than risk seeking” (691). That is why

the working classes tend to have a positive evocation of the communist past and intellectuals rather not, because they had a different experience with the communist regime, their expectations were different, and so are their memories. As it is difficult to disentangle what is based on personal memories and what is not, more attention is required, as what it seems a common-sense affirmation, namely that personal memories shape postcommunist nostalgia, might in fact be a misleading cliché, which should be verified based on each case.

#### 4.6 The old commie

In his novel *I'm An Old Commie!*, Dan Lungu features an insightful portrait of the Romanian nostalgic for communism.<sup>155</sup> The title itself emphasises who is usually nostalgic, namely old people who lived a significant part of their lives during the communist regime. It also puts an emphasis on how other people perceive the nostalgics, as there is always something derogatory in calling someone nostalgic. Romanians do not have an equivalent for the term Yugo-zombies, yet they would gladly borrow it.<sup>156</sup>

The novel tells the story of Emilia, a woman in her sixties, who struggles to adapt to the post-communist world. Because she cannot find her place in the present, she finds a refuge in the past.<sup>157</sup> She grew up in the countryside and when she finally managed to move to the city and find a job in a factory, her life became a lot better. She then got married, got an apartment, and had a daughter. She remembers they could afford everything they needed: they had a beautifully

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<sup>155</sup> The novel was adapted into film by Stere Gulea. Unlike the novel, the movie focused on showing the “human face” of the main character, which sparked reactions in the cultural press, as many considered that the movie fails “to understand the significance of their tacit collaboration with a criminal regime”(Komporaly).

<sup>156</sup> They do use the derogative term “babă comunistă,” old commie hag, referring to a woman that deeply misses the communist era. Yet when referring to men, Romanians simply use the word “comunist,” in a derogative manner. In some occasions, one might be called a “securist” (from Securitate, the secret police during the communist period) to refer to someone who is intrusive or who is curious about somebody else’s life, for instance a person who spies his or his neighbors.

<sup>157</sup> See also Jozefina Komporaly, “<<Don’t You Dare to Vote With the Communists!>>: Timeliness, Nostalgia and the Authenticity of Experience in *I’m a Communist Bidy!*.”

furnished apartment, she would visit a hair stylist monthly, had fashionable clothing, and meat and butter sufficed. After the Revolution, their factory shut off, all her co-workers retired, her daughter emigrated to Canada, she lacks new clothing, and there is no butter in her fridge. The world as it used to be has gone forever. She used to have friends and she would have a good time at work. People used to tell jokes, and there was a feeling of solidarity among them. The chaos of the transition blotted out all these things and left instead nothing but disillusion and isolation.

Her life finds meaning in remembering the stories of the past, because the past is safe and comforting. Furthermore, the past is malleable, as it responds to her desires:

After Catrina left, I couldn't stop thinking about the past. I pattered around the house muttering to myself. When you're getting on in years, it's nice to do that. You clean the slate with different people, you come up with the replies that you couldn't think of at the time, you smile at the nice memories, you go over the sequence of events however many times you like, to grasp why things turned out the way they did and not otherwise. Your plans have to do with the past rather than the future. You keep rearranging the same pieces of the puzzle, without getting bored of it for a single minute. It's the same with children, and Alice was no exception: they like to listen to the same story over and over again. You're only interested in talking to people of the same age, because that's the only way you can find new pieces to fit the puzzle, which are getting scarcer. And if the past was wonderful, whereas the present is a disaster, than talking to yourself becomes a necessity. (Lungu 43)

Living in the past entails a specific routine, just like living in the present. One does the same things one would do in the present: one talks to people, solves problems, enjoys surprises. One can even make plans. The past is not only a realm of memories: it is also the time where one actively enjoys life. That life is under control not only because it has already been experienced but also because it can be changed according to one's desire. That is why the past is not like a museum in which one should enjoy the exhibits without actually touching anything; it is more

like Disneyland, where people can go and become part of the action. Furthermore, they become the engineers of this fantastic world, as the design of the past can be altered.

As her list of nostalgic moments is long, a special spot is taken by what could be called the “daily victories” of life during communism:

Later on, the foreman turns up in an Aro jeep with the administrator. They back it up to the door of the workshop and signal two guys to unload it. Then the foreman and the administrator make an inspection. The man from the lyceum nods in satisfaction and says:

“There is no need to paint the part on which the mattress rests.”

“It’s nicer like that, because they won’t rust,” says the foreman, giving us a wink.

After the two talk among themselves, making the arrangements for tomorrow, the man who I think must be the administrator climbs into the Aro and leaves. The foreman calls us all inside. On the workbenche, which is spread with plastic sheeting, Culidiuc has started cutting up the second pig. [...] We take a headcount and start sharing out the meat. The best cuts are set to one side for the foreman. Culidiuc wipes up the blood and wrings it out over a bucket. He asks for a beer. [...] There is enough for everybody. I watch in amazement. To the others it’s nothing unusual. They remember the cheeses, the barrels of cooking oil and the sacks of Carpați cigarettes they’ve shared out on other occasions. I go home, happy, carrying ten kilos of meat. (Lungu 41)

Life in the Socialist Republic of Romania followed its own logic that might be hard to comprehend for someone who did not have such experiences. After Ceaușescu’s decision to quickly pay off the country’s external debt, Romania started to struggle with a severe lack of food, including milk, meat, eggs, bread, sugar, fruits, and vegetables such as potatoes and onions. As most of the quality products were meant for export, the domestic consumption was strictly controlled. Monthly rations were imposed for most foods, and it became illegal to stock food for more than a month. Finding even basic foods became challenging in Romania. The endless line-

ups became an omnipresent sight in front or behind any food shop. People spent long hours queuing for any food item that happened to be available. The queue was a space for rivalry and, in some situations, aggression because often the goods were scarce and would not reach all the people in the line up. In order to partly compensate for the generalized lack, friendly relations with people who could provide some of the required goods were very important. Knowing the salespeople from the shops - “alimentare” (food shops) and “aprozare” (veggies shops) - or people who worked in slaughterhouses or bakeries was privileged knowledge, as they were able to provide some of the foods otherwise impossible to purchase. People developed “networks” to provide them with whatever they needed, from fruits and meat to cigarettes or cosmetics. Whenever one “got” something, it was perceived as a victory. These victories are remembered by Emilia as authentic reasons of joy and, at the same time, as an irrevocable proof that life was better back then.<sup>158</sup>

The ten kilos of pork meat Emilia brought home, along with other similar victories seem very little for a high stake such as defending the communist regime. Indeed, they are, yet Emilia does her best to support her position. Here is what she tells her daughter in a debate they have over the recent past:

“I think you’re exaggerating when you say much, much, better, Mum. Have you forgotten the meat lines? They stretched all the way around the block...”

“True, there were lines back then but nowadays you go to the shops, you admire the cutlets, you drool, and then you go away again, because you don’t have any money to buy them. Or else you can stand and watch while some nouveau riche buys two kilos of steak. I don’t know when was better... On the television I see people dying of hunger, families with children sleeping on the street... That kind of thing never happened in the days of communism.”

“It will sort itself out in the end... We’re still in the transition period... but I’m optimistic.”

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<sup>158</sup> This paragraph is from my article “Changing Narratives through Communist Food Brands. Three Romanian Case Studies: Rom Chocolate, Gostat Meat Products, and Polar Ice-Cream.”

“It’s easy to be optimistic when you live in Canada, in France, or in America... It’s harder to be optimistic when you’re here and you have nothing to live through it. Then you’ll find out the meaning of the word optimism!”

“Come on, Mum, I know very well what the transition is like...”

“Do you know! And I know the situation of the foreman who steals the whole factory when it gets privatized, but we don’t put the same meal on the dinner table.”[...]

“You know what, it’s the people who got rich overnight who travel, the people who stole everything we worked for. As for shouting you can shout as much as you like, because nobody’s listening anyway... If it were up to me, I’d bring back communism tomorrow.”  
(Lungu 45)

The transition was tough for most Romanians<sup>159</sup> and tougher still for old people who lacked the skills or the energy to adapt to the new world. “The shelves are full but we have no money,” has become the punch line used by people like Emilia when comparing the transition with the times before the Revolution. As they might have been right in the nineties, the economic situation did improve and their fridges were less empty than they were in the eighties, yet their perception remained unchanged. Romania could only be seen through the lens of the Apocalypse, and no one could change their perspectives, not even their children, because their coping mechanism relied on this narrative.

Emilia’s opinions produce effects beyond the discussions she has with her daughter because, even though she has no expectations from the future, she still intends to cast her vote:

“Say, Mum, who will you be voting for on Sunday? That’s also why I’m phoning.”

“Is that what’s keeping you awake at night in Canada? Not knowing who I’ll be voting for?”

“It isn’t a major international issue yet. Ha, ha! I just wanted to know... Go on, tell me!”[...]

“Oho, Sunday is still a long way off... I’ve got plenty of time to decide and to change my mind a hundred times...”

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<sup>159</sup> See also “Anti-nostalgia” section.

“Humph, you’re stringing me along. Let me explain it to you. I’m a member of a Romanian association here, and we’ll all decided to do our bit for the elections in Romania... and so each of us has to talk to two or three people, however many we know, and persuade them to vote for democracy.”

“In other words, you’re canvassing?”

“Well, not really... The idea isn’t really to persuade people to vote for a certain party, but to persuade them not to vote for the ex-communists.”

“Is that so? Then who should they vote for?, Pope Pius?”

“Come on, Mum, I’m being serious.”

“What, and I’m jokin, am I? As far as I am concerned, things are very simple: before the Revolution, I had a much, much better life than I do now. Whom would you vote for in my shoes?” (Lungu 44-45)

When her daughter tries to convince her that she should reconsider her political opinions, Emilia reacts aggressively. She is certain that the best politicians are those thanks to whom she had a good life before 1989, such as her boss. Emilia’s nostalgia is based on personal experiences, yet when nostalgia determines her to make a political choice, it becomes collective and has social consequences. In fact, this was the major issue that alimented the conflict between generations and between classes in Romania. After the Revolution, the second echelon of the communist nomenklatura, which had grabbed the power, which was one of the main reasons why Romania was devoured by corruption and incompetence<sup>160</sup>. Even today, PSD (Partidul Social Democrat - the Social Democratic Party), Romania’s biggest party, which traces its origins in the communist nomenklatura, is still the most corrupt and toxic party<sup>161</sup>. Younger generations and especially educated people are very critical toward old people because they are SDP’s electoral victims.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> For more on Romanian transition, see “Anti-nostalgia” section.

<sup>161</sup> There is a record number of parliamentarians, government members, including a former prime-minister, Adrian Năstase, who were convicted for different corruption deeds. Just a few months ago, Liviu Dragnea, PSD’s leader, has been jailed as well. Before that, his effort to stop the anti-corruption fight was restless. Although the number of articles about PSD members’s illegal bussiness are numerous, I will only give one example that offers a sinthesis on Dragnea’s attempts to control the fight against the anti-corruption movement. See “Romania: Leaders will go further against rule of law.”

<sup>162</sup> Even though over the past few years PSD was also able to persuade some younger college graduates to vote for them, most of their votes come from old people. For more information, see “IRES | Surprize în profilul alegătorului. De cine a fost votat PSD.”



Emilia represents the type of person who would vote for SDP. Her nostalgia isolates her in a world that is inaccessible to her own daughter, and this is a reason of frustration for both of them.

Emilia's world is dominated by resentment. She feels rage and anger because of the massive destruction that the socialist industry suffered, because corruption has swollen, random people got rich, and people like her are poor. In fact, her negative emotions are so strong that resentment is too frail a term to encompass the complexity of the situation, which could be better described by the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*.<sup>163</sup> As Sjoerd Van Tuinen argues, resentment is a consequence of the incapacity to change or forget one's suffering. One aims for revenge in order to compensate one's pain, yet revenge is not fulfilled and thus suffering becomes even more intense (1):

‘The man of resentment’, as Nietzsche calls him, is therefore incapable of forgetting; he constantly relives the sad passions of the past at the cost of losing the future. His illness is the archetype of sickness in general: ‘You cannot get rid of anything, you cannot cope with anything, you cannot fend anything off – everything hurts you. People and things get intrusively close, experiences affect you too deeply, memory is a festering wound. Being ill is a kind of resentment itself. (Tuinen 1)

Emilia is incapable of forgetting whomever stole her life: politicians, businessmen, young people who dream of democracy, and she constantly relives the experiences of her past. She is hurt by everything that comes along with(in) the present, and lacks the ability to overcome her gloomy

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<sup>163</sup>As Sjoerd Van Tuinen argues, resentment is a moral anger (felt as indignation) determined by the situations in which one is hurt as a consequence of breaking the rules of coexistence. For more on the distinction resentment-ressentiment, see also the Introduction to his *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment*.

state. Emilia cannot find her place in the world and her anger is never constructive because she does not have the strength to change anything. Furthermore, the “ressentiment never ceases to legitimate and intensify itself through the negation and blaming of a hostile world that it nonetheless remains dependent upon” (Tuinen 1). This is what Emilia constantly does. Her narrative about the better past and the dark present gives meaning to her life. The past is the imaginary world where she escapes, yet the present is where she truly is, which she never ceases to criticize, nor to accept.

Because of her suffering and anger, she becomes bitter or, as Nietzsche would say, she is “endowed with the poisoned eye” (Tuinen 1). She hates the world in which she lives, she despises the people that adapted to it, especially those who became wealthy, and she cannot stand to be contradicted, as this might as well prove that other people are entitled to live differently or that herself could have a different life. Not even her daughter, whom she loves greatly, can express critics about her mother’s past without provoking an aggressive reaction. Such reactions are distractions that give meaning to Emilia’s life.

Like Emilia, numerous nostalgics have the “poisoned eye.” No one should dare to contest their narrative about the past, just as no one should contest their political opinions<sup>164</sup>. Their bitterness is reflected even by various minor gestures that such people do: from the very banal gesture of an old woman who finds joy in spying her neighbours to the aggressive reaction a building manager (administratorul blocului) might have when rules are overstepped in the building one is responsible for<sup>165</sup>. Nietzsche argues that the *ressentiment* aims for a reversal of

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<sup>164</sup> Just to give an example, I can never discuss politics or contradict my grandparents regarding their past. Neither historical facts, nor the fact that I have been granted the status of the “favorite nephew” allows me to approach this taboo subject without generating a conflict. For more on this issue, see Dana Gavreliuc, Alin Gavreliuc, “Generational Belonging and Historical Ruptures: Continuity or Discontinuity of Values and Attitudes in Post-Communist Romania.”

<sup>165</sup> Spying one’s neighbors or imposing rigid rules are considered reflexes developed before 1989. The stereotype of the building manager that is like a party activist is quite common. As many of them are aggressive and resist

values. After the Revolution, those who were nostalgic for communism were decisive in supporting the second echelon of the communist nomenklatura to rule Romania in its first years on the democratic path. They were convinced that they were making the right decision when imposing the values they longed for: “compassion, altruism, selflessness, equality, and justice” (Elgat 2). Like Emilia, many thought that compassion and altruism were shared with their co-workers or with other people who provided goods for them.<sup>166</sup> As for equality, that was considered the biggest loss, as communism gave the impression that they are all the same.<sup>167</sup>

In fact, that was not true, as the Party had its favourites who enjoyed numerous privileges. People like Emilia were aware of these differences,<sup>168</sup> just like they are or should be aware that compassion and altruism were often betrayed when co-workers would snitch on them or when they would get involved in conflicts when waiting in the never ending lines for food that marked the last decade of communism.<sup>169</sup> Yet under the pressure of transition, all these aspects are forgotten or ignored. That is why they thought that if voting for the people who ruled their lives for decades the values they believed in (and that were never fulfilled) would be reinstated, which did not happen. However, when their political decisions were contested, their drive for revenge activated their thirst for justice, as resentment is eager for justice (Tuinen 1). In the first years after the Revolution, huge protests took place in Bucharest, as students and numerous

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collaboration even for the most banal issues, younger generations consider that their behaviour is representative of the communist period. In fact, not only the building managers but also other bureaucratic jobs where the employees are rude and prefer to postpone solving issues are perceived as a reminiscence of some reflexes learned during the communist period, when a governmental job would entail a lot of power. Even though this is a common situation, there is a danger of creating a negative stereotype about different social categories.

<sup>166</sup> Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn argues that Eastern Europeans who lived a part of their life during the communist regime are fond of an economic model based on redistribution.

<sup>167</sup> The differences were huge. The Party had its favorites who had access to privileges that simple people could not even dream of. The higher on the political hierarchy one was, the bigger the privileges were. There was even a special network of stores that would sell goods and brands impossible to find someplace else (such as sweets, beer, cigarettes, or coffee), which was accessible only to the privileged ones.

<sup>168</sup> It was common knowledge that the Party takes care of its people.

<sup>169</sup> Emilia knew that one of her co-workers was an informant who would snitch on them to the political activist from their factory.

intellectuals contested the “recycled” communist ruling class. The president, Ion Iliescu, and his acolytes, reacted in the most cynical way, by calling thousands of miners to Bucharest to disband the protesters.<sup>170</sup> The clashes between the protesters and the miners were very violent, as many students and intellectuals were brutally beaten and some even lost their lives. Yet those who casted their vote in favour of the “reformed” communists believed that miners brought justice, as the students aimed to destabilize the country. Their reaction combined fear and a feeling of victimization.<sup>171</sup> They felt that the protesters would take their only chance to bring back the values they longed for. They were thus the victims of the students who protested. This victimization is in fact another consequence of *ressentiment*, because they embraced the victim status and waited for the government to solve an issue that entailed making other people suffer. Their bitterness pushed them to accept that other people would be heart in the name of the values they believed in.<sup>172</sup>

Emilia has her own moments of victimization, which are activated by the same political disputes. When debating with her daughter about Romania’s past and future, she states:

“My future is up on the hill, in the cemetery. I’m looking forward to it.”  
 “I see you’re in the mood for morbid jokes.”

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<sup>170</sup> The so called “mineriade” marked the first years of Romanian transition and they remain the most violent and traumatic events that took place in Romania after 1989. For more on mineriade, see Alin Rus, *Mineriadele. Între manipulare politică și solidaritate muncitorească*. [translate]

<sup>171</sup> Starting with the televised Revolution, Romanians were constantly manipulated. When the mineriade began, the only Romanian television channel, which was controlled by the government, bombarded Romanians with fake news about the protesters. They were depicted as punks, anarchists craving for chaos, and hooligans. The authorities had no hesitation in spreading absurd rumors. For instance, in a time in which Romanians did not even knew how drugs looked like, Romanians were “informed” that the protesters were on drugs.

<sup>172</sup> The same victimization feeling surfaced in the last years when massive protests against corruption took place in Romania. While the protesters had a similar profile as those who were beaten by the miners almost thirty years ago, those who saw them as a threat are the same people who were thankful for what the miners did in Bucharest in the nineties. Now, just like then, they were manipulated by television, and lied by the same politicians or those who followed their footsteps. The protesters were pictured as young spoiled corporatists sponsored by foreign powers to instil disorder in Romania. Old people and supporters of PSD made their own protests to defend what they believed in and to support the politicians that, they think, always took care of them.

“Oh, what am I supposed to do, Alice, if the only good things are all in the past for me?”  
(Lungu 47)

When claiming that her future is at the cemetery, Emilia reveals again her resentment, as she plays the role of the victim for her daughter, whom she should acknowledge her mother's suffering. Yet, at the same time, she is a genuine victim. Because the present is frightening, the future does not really exist anymore. Emilia lives in the past and waits for everything to end, because nothing fundamentally good can happen. The present is like a limbo in between the past and the end. In the limbo she is isolated of the joys she used to have. Gorchakov experienced loneliness because he was far away from home and Tamina struggled with loneliness because her husband died. Emilia's loneliness is caused by the fact that she lost her lifestyle and all the certainties that came with it.

As Maria Todorova argues, the fall of the Iron Curtain came with the “trauma of deindustrialization,” which entailed not only economic decline, homelessness, a decline in health services, but also the loss of job security (5). David Kideckel speaks of loss of worker identity, which caused great distress and pain (29). That is why Emilia dreams about reopening the factory where she once worked. The factory not only guaranteed her financial security but it also helped her to escape a rural life, which she despises. Her working place was a safe spot where she bonded with many people, with whom she spent numerous joyful hours.<sup>173</sup> The feeling of

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<sup>173</sup> In communist factories people learned how to split their time into actual work and prolonged breaks that could last for hours. This aspect is mentioned by Emilia as well. Juraj Buzalka mentions a joke that was popular in Czechoslovakia and that sums up the absurd logic of communist work production from all across the Eastern Europe: “The joke, titled the seven wonders of socialism, claimed that under socialism, (1) everybody had a job; (2) even if everybody had a job, nobody worked; (3) even if nobody worked, the plan was 100% fulfilled; (4) even if the plan was fulfilled, there was nothing available; (5) even if there was nothing available, everybody had everything;

belonging given by a job enhanced the mythologized feeling that cohesion and genuine relationships could be developed during the communist regime, and indeed they could, only it was far from being as romantic as some recall.

Juraj Buzalka states that postcommunist nostalgia transcends the standard belief that it is based on the loss of social security (1004). She argues that the everyday life is actually based on a rural model that “recycles” values that were enjoyed even before the modernization brought by communism:

In the shortage economy of socialism, pensioners usually helped their children, houses were built using the reciprocal assistance of friends and family members because official services were hard to afford or were of extremely poor quality. Boys served in the compulsory army service for two years. After returning home, they usually got married immediately. Women had their first child most frequently at the age of twenty-one. Nothing of the current extension of youth well beyond the age of thirty was known among the baby boomer parents of the 1970s and 1980s. The nostalgia of socialist generations reveals a romantic representation of the premodern condition, with the importance of family ties, self-subsistence, and connection to nature, the phenomena I analytically define as post-peasant. In other words, technically modern and urban socialist society unintentionally valued agrarian habits and representations, and an informal economy was necessary for the survival of this post-peasant economy. (Buzalka 999)

This post-peasant economy was imposed on an agrarian setup and people retroactively identified the communist modernization with a series of values older than the regime. Peasants became workers and so they shifted from a rural to an industrialized era, which employed a model of sociability and of mutual support that reproduced in a twisted manner some values that were rooted in a rural model. This model was far from perfect and I already argued that the idyllic

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(6) even if everybody had everything, everybody was stealing; (7) even if everybody was stealing, nothing was missing” (996).

belief that communism employed authentic and close human relationship was constantly contradicted by the brutal reality, which enhanced betrayals between friends and a “save yourself” mindset. Nevertheless, from a nostalgic standpoint, the transition destroyed these values.

People like Emilia did not manage to find a new identity, neither as workers, nor as something else. Maria Todorova states that “longing for security and stability leads people toward stupidity, but it is not a stupid longing” (7). Younger generations, mainstream media, and numerous intellectuals frequently manifest their condescendence, if not their despise towards those who long the communist regime. Yet such a perspective merely goes deeper in comprehending the complex mechanism of postcommunist nostalgia. Whereas *Ostalgie* is more about “coordinating and cultivating intimacy through shared expression” (Boyer 20), postcommunist nostalgia is more dogmatic, more intense, and more aggressive. Whereas *Yugonostalgia* or *Ostalgie* are coping mechanisms, Romanian postcommunist nostalgia functions as a surviving mechanism.

There is, however, a point when this phenomenon attenuates or changes, at least for some of the nostalgics. David Kideckel writes about the miner community from Valea Jiului, which he first observed during the nineties. He argues that, after Romania’s integration into the European Union, jobs were easier to find and the standard of living increased significantly, so people forgot their nostalgia, as they adapted to the new market. This confirms what Boyer believes about some forms of postcommunist nostalgia: “So *algos* and *mania*, yes, but with the core referent of autonomous (self-rule) rather than *nostos*” (26). Postcommunist nostalgia is dogmatic and painful, yet the tendency to return home (to the past) can be controlled if the nostalgic gains autonomy in the present and if prospective of “self-determination” is credible (Boyer 26).

Postcommunist nostalgia has a very pragmatic, even materialistic, dimension. Its intensity depends on the socio-economic context. Therefore, if the nostalgic finds some financial stability in the present, their temptation to live in the past fades.



## Chapter five: Right-Wing Nostalgia

### 5.1 Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, collective nostalgia is based on a series of collective memories. Yet not all forms of collective nostalgias rely on memories, as some losses are never truly experienced, but simply imagined. Just to give the most notorious example, the nostalgic motto “Make America Great Again” refers to a socio-economic context that many did not even experience. Assuming that America the Great is the one that succeeded in the Second World War, carrying unprecedented global glory and economic growth, many of Trump’s supporters have no personal experience related to the fifties and sixties. The past they regret never belonged to them: their collective memories are replaced by collective beliefs. The resurgence of populism and nationalism across Europe and North America enhanced a nostalgic form that, unlike post-communist nostalgia, is based less on personal experiences<sup>174</sup>: it chiefly depends on the feeling of belonging to a community or a group with a fictional past. After all, as Benedict Anderson argues, each nation is an imagined political community, because any community that is more developed than a village, in which people rely on direct contact, embraces a common narrative (4). These narratives take on many occasions the form of “prescriptive versions of history” (Soroka), which are imposed by some of the political actors. In countries where right wing parties are in power, such as Poland, these narratives are supported by laws, such as the law voted by the Polish Parliament in 2018 that sanctions Polish people who argue that Poland shares its part of responsibility for the Holocaust.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> As I have shown in the previous chapter, post-communist nostalgia is the result of a negotiation between personal memories and collective memories and beliefs.

<sup>175</sup> For more on this, see Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*.

Such nostalgias usually rely on radical right-wing ideology; yet, not all the case studies to be further analyzed are linked to a specific political context. This chapter focuses less on the political aspects of nostalgia, as it seeks to examine how the intersection between ideology, or a dogmatic set of beliefs rooted in an ideology and nostalgia is materialized in some specific cultural contexts. Ethnocentrism, anti-globalism, the fear of looming danger (the emigrants, the terrorists, the climate change, etc.) or the feeling of the imminent coming of the apocalypse do not always rely on a specific ideology and do not always lead to political action. The reactions many people have are too contradictory to follow the path of an ideology, as their system of beliefs is too eclectic, which does not make it less dogmatic. The combinations of dogmatic beliefs alimented by fear seem endless nowadays. And the exoticism of some of the results is simply astonishing, if not hilarious. For instance, one wishes to live as a Dacian<sup>176</sup>, a Christian Orthodox, and a vegetarian, as it happens in Romania, because one considers that the contemporary world lacks spiritual depth and is too money focused, yet one's beliefs have no political repercussions, even if one developed such a system of beliefs after consulting alternative media that have a political agenda.<sup>177</sup> My goal is to examine some of these mechanisms as they manifest in Eastern Europe, especially in Romania. The post-communist evolution of radical right is complex, and I have no intention to cover the whole spectrum and its numerous implications.

## **5.2 Once a dogmatic, always a dogmatic**

As Tony Judt points out, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Central and Eastern Europe were predisposed to embrace radical right views, as this phase had not been worked through after

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<sup>176</sup> For more about the Dacians, see the last section of this chapter.

<sup>177</sup> Such as Russian propaganda and fake-news.

World War Two, when communism was forcefully imposed (Just 84). Hence, many rediscovered the temptation of nationalism, chauvinism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia. The inter-war period for Romania and Poland or the pre -1918 years for Hungary turned into the Golden Age and thus became a source of inspiration for numerous people. The rhetoric of the legionari (Legionnaires)<sup>178</sup> or of the radical right in Hungary caught on and it many times led to aggressive behaviour and ethnic conflicts. In fact, the Golden Age of Hungary and that of Romania are in a clash, which is rooted in a territorial dispute. Transylvania was Hungary's big loss when it signed the Trianon treaty, according to which it became Romanian territory. This dispute has never been solved. For instance, it was the spark that led to a series of bloody conflicts in the nineties, when Hungarian ethnics from Romania and Romanians got involved in a series of violent confrontations.<sup>179</sup>

Neither the Hungarians nor the Romanians focused their hatred only on their neighbors, as other communities were allegedly plotting against their Golden age resurrection: the Roma community, the Jews, and, more recently, the migrants. After the 2008 economic crisis and especially after the migration crisis from 2015, their hatred has grown exponentially, as uncertainties and fear became more acute. In Hungary, the Jobbik party has enjoyed increased popularity, gaining fifteen percent of the seats in the Hungarian Parliament in 2009. As they defined themselves as a conservative, Christian, and nationalistic party, their goal was to defend

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<sup>178</sup> A fascist movement also known as “Mișcarea legionară” or “Garda de Fier” (The Iron Guard) that was established in 1927 in Romania and based its rhetoric on Christian Orthodoxy, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. Their leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a charismatic person who is still regretted by many in Romania, was assassinated in 1939. After his assassination, the movement's new leader, Horia Sima, made an alliance with General Ion Antonescu, an important military leader and Romania's prime-minister between September 1940 and August 1944. The Legionnaires were equal partners in the country's government until January, 1941, when, after mounting a bloody rebellion against Antonescu, and being quickly defeated by the army, the movement was dismantled.

<sup>179</sup> The conflict took place in March 1990 and it involved thousands of people on both sides, Romanians and Hungarians. The clash occurred in Târgu-Mureș, a city in Transylvania with a considerable Hungarian ethnic population. Five people lost their lives during the fights, a few hundreds were wounded, and the relationship between the two ethnic groups from Târgu-Mureș were affected for a long time.

Hungarian identity and to fight criminality, which in their opinion was reaching skyrocketing levels due to the Roma community. Even though their rhetoric toned down after 2014, many Jobbik members still embrace a radical wing perspective, as they have a discourse that focuses on anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism, and praises authoritarian measures (Szombati).

In 2007, a paramilitary movement called the Hungarian Guard (Magyar Gárda) emerged as an extension of the Jobbik Party. Two years later, it was dissolved by a Budapest court, yet its brief existence showcased the damaging role such a movement can have among minorities, as their vigilante activities resurrected an interwar fascist kind of atmosphere in many villages where a significant number of Roma people live (Sárik). One of the founders and leaders of the Hungarian Guard was Csanád Szegedi. His spectacular story turned into a documentary called *Keep Quiet* that is streamed on popular platforms such as Netflix. Szegedi made himself popular in Hungary by having a radical anti-Semitic position. Yet his opinions changed when he found out that his maternal grandparents were Jews and his grandfather died at Auschwitz.

The first part of the documentary offers a closer glimpse at what it was like to be a member of the Hungarian Guard. The main function of the Guard was to protect the Hungarians and their culture from any enemies, most of them imaginary.<sup>180</sup> Even though weapon possession by civilians is strictly regulated in Hungary, their aggressive attitude, and their military-like aspect would be, nevertheless, intimidating for those under their scrutiny. Dressed in black uniforms, black caps, and white shirts, they would organize parades, events, and vigilante strolls and marches. They imagined that they would fight a defensive war against all Hungary's enemies, thus military values were treasured: hierarchy, honor, patriotism, devotion, cohesion, fraternity, heroism, sacrifice, etc. Although their commitment could not be questioned, they

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<sup>180</sup> See also Varga Mihai "Hungary's <<anti-capitalist>> far-right: Jobbik and the Hungarian Guard."

rather mimicked the game of war, as a real fight was out of the question, even though they did engage in several violent activities.

Huizinga argues that the war itself is a game, as it follows its own rules; it runs in a specific time and place that separates it from the daily life; it develops its own universe that is unlike the world at peace; and, last but not least, it is played in order to be won (Huizinga 90). As the war itself follows the logic of the game, the simulacrum of a war is even more like a game. The third category of games described by Roger Caillois is called mimicry, and it refers to games that involve mimesis or role playing. The members of the Hungarian Guard played the warrior role. They were inspired by warriors that brought glory to Hungary in the past, such as Béla IV of Hungary, who rebuilt the country after the Mongol invasion, or Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary and Croatia from 1458 to 1490, under whose reign served the so called Black Army, which was an army of mercenaries.

Their evocation is, as Boym calls it, restorative, because they wish for the past to be restored without alteration. This is what actually showcases that their endeavor does not follow the logic of the game through the end. As Caillois argues, the game follows the rule of futility, which means that the player could play the game as many times as one pleases, because nothing was produced or gained when the game was previously played. Furthermore, Caillois argues that the fear of death works against the pleasure of “pure play.” Last but not least, one should be aware of the nature of the game, which cannot be mistaken for reality, even though the player accepts that the veracity of the game is comparable to reality itself. Therefore, the Hungarian Guard played a corrupt game, which was supposed to change reality itself. What remains specific to the logic of the game is their need to pretend that they are something else than they really were, and that their desire to escape the reality is attended to. The result is a schizophrenic

endeavor that has consequences over the reality, as their imaginary universe does not replace the reality, yet it does disturb it.

Besides the myth of the warriors, they look backwards to feed into another phantasm, namely the universe of a simple rural life that was lost and ought to be recovered. That is why some members of the Hungarian Guard think of themselves as “nothing but some simple peasants” (*Keep Quiet*). Some of them would occasionally wear peasant outfits instead of their black uniforms. The *Gemeinschaft* vs. *Gesellschaft* dichotomy suits their antagonistic perspective. The *Gesellschaft* is represented by globalism and wild capitalism and it entails lack of spirituality, because people have allegedly lost their faith in God and other religions impose their own beliefs to the detriment of the right faith, which is toxic for one’s identity: a pure Hungarian that lives among Hungarians in harmony, trusting each other, helping each other, believing in the same God and attending the same religious events, eating the same food, consuming the same drinks, and dancing to the same music.

Regardless of the myths they embrace, their ambition to revive them in the present entails an aggressive attitude towards some ethnic or religious groups, which is the nucleus of all fascist and neo-fascist movements. The “gypsies,” the Jews, and the “Muslims” are held responsible for all the imaginary losses and for the decline of contemporary society. As René Girard points out, the scapegoat is the target of the collective fury, reason for which it allegedly deserves to be sacrificed. Unlike the victim that is sometimes sacrificed, the scapegoat deserves no compassion and its presence is undesirable (Girard 12). People like Szegedi needed a scapegoat to justify why they do not live in the phantasy of the past. That is the reason why their nostalgia becomes violent, as it is the source for collective hatred. The *ressentiment* identified in the context of post-

communist nostalgia reaches its utmost in such a context, as violence is considered part of the solution.

What is notable in *Keep Quiet* is that the delirious universe of someone like Szegedi can be seriously shaken when one faces incontestable proof that one's beliefs are wrong. When Szegedy finds out that he is actually a Jew, his phantasmatic universe falls apart. His family kept this secret hidden because they were afraid of attracting anti-Semitic violence. They did not reconsider their decision even when Szegedy built a political career and became a European parliamentarian gaining popularity through anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the beginning, he tried to conceal the news, yet his party colleagues and sympathizers found out anyway, so soon after he became a scapegoat himself. In the following three years, he made a dramatic switch, as he turned from an antisemitic militant into a religious Jew. The relationship he had with the past also changed dramatically. Initially, his beliefs lied on a romantic perspective of some glorious moments from Hungary's past, especially the period before World War One, when Hungary led the Austro-Hungarian Empire together with Austria. After he found out that his grandmother is an Auschwitz survivor and his grandfather lost his life in the camp, the past is reinterpreted as a traumatic event. Szegedi's spectacular story showcases how delusive nostalgia can be. Whereas a post-communist nostalgic is an engineer in a personal Disneyland, who has the liberty to adjust the scenario, Szegedi is one of the architects of the Disneyland, as he contributes to the creation of the whole scenario. When the past is connected to a tragic historical period, the Disneyland becomes more of a set for a drama, which has serious repercussions in the real world.

When Szegedi is confronted with the truth, he escapes the spell of nostalgia. However, many did not believe that he truly reconsidered his beliefs. Even though he quit all political functions and began a series of conferences among different Jewish communities, having the

purpose to share his experiences, many doubt his change of views and hesitate to accept him as a genuine Jew. For them, he remains captive in the same past that initially radicalized him.

Whether this is true or not, his changes do indeed offer a hint about how he generally relates with the past. After he discovered the truth about his origins, he embraced religious Judaism full steam ahead, he had himself circumcised, learned Hebrew, and visited Israel. One way or another, Szegedi needs to be attached to a mythology that would offer him meaning in the present. Even though the two types of mythologies are very different, his need remains the same.

### 5.3 The role of fear

The Jobbik Party and the Hungarian Guard base their worldview on fear. Hungary is under serious threat, they claim, so they need to intervene before it is too late. Without this fear, all far-right movements would collapse since their ideological basis is very schematic and simplistic. That is why the role of the scapegoat is so important, because the *Kampf* needs to be pointed against someone. The threat they face has apocalyptic dimensions, as everything is at stake: their values, their identity, their safety, their lifestyle, even their life.<sup>181</sup> This feeling of fear is representative of far right, regardless the country.

In *Diavolul este corect politic* (The Devil is Politically Correct), Savatie Baştovoi depicts several of the mechanisms that generate this fear. The novel was published in 2010, two years after the economic crisis, when populist politicians and all of the right-wing movements from Europe and North America saw political correctness as another scapegoat that is responsible for the Apocalypse that they allegedly struggle to prevent.

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<sup>181</sup> The issue of criminality is central to their rhetoric.



Savatie Baştovoi<sup>182</sup> is a Romanian-Moldavian writer who, after a spectacular debut on the Romanian literary scene, decided to become a monk and retired to a Christian orthodox monastery from Transdnistria.<sup>183</sup> He continued to publish and some of his novels, such as *Iepurii nu mor* (The Rabbits Do Not Die) enjoyed international recognition. Yet some of his most recent novels and essays are used as a means to proliferate a conservative orthodox perspective, reason for which many of his texts are closer to religious propaganda than to genuine literature (Mocanu). His ultimate goal is to persuade his readers on how to follow the “right” spiritual path, and how to embrace the moral values that are in accordance with this path. As his opinions embraced a very rigid patriarchal perspective, his success among a large number of Romanian Orthodox Christians increased, as his books sell in big numbers and his conferences enjoy great public success, especially among young people.<sup>184</sup> As his opinions radicalized, any progressive idea became an embodiment of evil: multiculturalism, globalism, religion tolerance, ecumenism, women’s emancipation, sexual diversity, even democracy.<sup>185</sup> The contemporary world is pictured as a tremendous trap in which one can lose one’s most precious gift: the soul.

*Diavolul este corect politic* (The Devil is Politically Correct) is a dystopia that pictures how the world would look in a not very distant future if it were to follow the path of liberalism and political correctness. The main character, Jacob Kohner, lives a solitary life in his apartment, as most of the social contacts he has are online. On many occasions, not even these contacts are friendly, because he engages in fights and debates that make him feel even more fragile and lonely. Jacob earns his living by acting in fast-food commercials. His earnings have to be

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<sup>182</sup> His name before becoming a monk was Ştefan Baştovoi.

<sup>183</sup> It is an autonomous region on the territory of the Republic of Moldova where significant Russian troops are stationed.

<sup>184</sup> His success can for sure be quantifiable. His profits are based not only on book selling and conferences but also on the leather goods he designs, produces and sells on the internet under his own brand.

<sup>185</sup> Besides his books, Baştovoi holds a blog where he expresses his ideas. In recent years he became more of a Putin sympathizer.

carefully spent because he needs to pay his internet bill, to purchase food, and some clothing, yet not too many, as he barely leaves his house. Like many of his generation, Iacob was castrated. This was the result of a law according to which the second child of each family cannot procreate, unless parents pay a one hundred-thousand-euro fee. His older brother quit his right of procreation in exchange of one hundred thousand euro and moved to Israel where he embraced a promiscuous homosexual life.

The world in which Iacob lives is dominated by an evil political class that has created a dehumanized society in which people do not believe in empathy or love anymore. As people 65 and over are considered useless, according to the infamous law no. 182/110, they are euthanized. Iacob's mother faced the same cruel end. His son is informed that his mother was euthanized and that if he wishes to pick up her ashes, he needs to pay a thirty-five-euro fee. Even though he loved his mother, he forgot to visit her in her last year of life, because even if people crave for love and human connection, they lost the ability to engage in normal human relationships. That is why people like Iacob are at the same time cruel and fragile, selfish and exposed. He is nevertheless very affected by his mother's death, so he does pick up her ashes.

The taxi driver that takes him to the place where his mother's urn is deposited proves to be one of the people with whom he argues on the internet. Yet this time they manage to connect and thanks to him Iacob has the chance to encounter a lifestyle that otherwise he could not even imagine. Alexandru owns a house at the outskirts of the city where he lives a simple and peaceful life together with his 75 years-old mother, whom has been hiding from the authorities, as she was supposed to be dead already. Alexandru's house is an island of normality within a nightmarish world.

By the time Jacob meets Alexandru, a series of strange events occur. The prime minister, who was campaigning in their city, suddenly dies on a stage. The corpse spreads a pestilential smell and is surrounded by flies. Same bizarre end is shared by other politicians that hide on an island outside the city, as they passed the old age limit. This is the beginning of an outburst of violent events that create an apocalyptic atmosphere in the world:

Jacob turned on the television. All the channels were talking about the unprecedented virus that attacked the mondial bank system. In most of the cities, people were fighting the police because people could not use their bank cards, in a time in which liquid money did not exist anymore. The borders between states have been closed, because access to people's personal information has been stolen. Because they were afraid they would run out of food, people were devastating stores and malls. Because of all the chaos, two million people lost their lives in just a few hours, and the numbers would grow by any minute.<sup>186</sup>

The internet is shut off, the banking system collapses, violent protests take place all over the country, so the government eliminates half of the population. Jacob escapes the chaos by moving into Alexandru's house. There he starts reading the bible and becomes a priest. Nevertheless, when the time comes, he does not escape the euthanasia law. Even though he does not defeat the system, he does not really die, as he rises to the sky.

The only hope to escape this nightmarish scenario comes from God. One of the few positive characters in Baştovoi's novel is a priest called Ioan. All his life he helped people to find God and taught them how to save their souls. He is the one who converted Jacob's mother just before her death. Ioan proves to be fundamental in Jacob's life as well. Even though the priest is

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<sup>186</sup> Jacob porni televizorul. Toate canalele vorbeau despre virusul fără precedent care atacase sistemul bancar mondial. În mai toate oraşele izbucniseră ciocniri de stradă între forţele de ordine şi oamenii care nu-şi mai puteau folosi cardurile bancare, într-un timp când banii lichizi nu mai existau. Graniţele dintre state au fost închise, deoarece accesul la bazele de date ale persoanelor fusese blocat. De frica de a rămâne fără provizii, oamenii devastau magazinele şi marile centre comerciale. În decursul a câteva ore, în urma ciocnirilor de stradă şi a haosului general, şi-au pierdut viaţa peste două milioane de oameni, cifra lor crescând cu fiecare minut (Baştovoi 78).

dead, Alexandru reads the bible Ioan owned before he was euthanized, and that is how he encounters God. Ioan represents the profile of a holy man who fights in the name of faith regardless how big the challenges are. He, just like Alexandru and his mother, is the remnant of another world. This world can only be restored if people regain their belief in God, because only God and his moral law can save the world from decadence and destruction. If the entire world cannot be saved, as the worse already happened, salvation can still occur on an individual. Those who fail to do so are going to rot in the pestilential, cruel, and nightmarish world of sin.

Baştovoi depicts an antagonistic and simplistic world in which those who fail to choose good are going to face the worse consequences. The evil takes some very concrete forms, as it destroys souls and flesh alike. The politicians' bodies rot within seconds and emanate a terrible smell because their souls are corrupt. They thus undergo the punishment they deserve, as they are responsible for creating a dystopia. This is in fact a warning sign for the Western political class, as they are as well morally corrupted and lead the world towards a dystopia. His readers should be aware of this unfortunate path on which many of today's occidental leaders lead the world. That is why his dystopia takes place in the proximate future, because the contemporary world is already facing the beginning of the apocalypse: people in the Western world are already opting for voluntary euthanasia, homosexuality is considered normal in numerous countries, people have been absorbed by their online lives, etc.

Baştovoi perceives the modern world as an endless series of traps. Liberal policies destroy the balance of the world. Humanity is facing spiritual destruction. Baştovoi embraces the role of a moralist that announces the end of it all. He does not consider personal sacrifice, as Tarkovsky's Domenico does: he wants instead to instill fear. He is himself overwhelmed by fear. In *Liquid Fear*, Zygmunt Bauman analyzes the sources of fear in today's global world. As he

describes different types of fear, from individual fear to social and planetary, he analyzes the role of politics and of the state in causing fear (Lastra 134). Bauman points out that despite the fact that today's world has reached levels of comfort, security and technological progress that have never been reached before, the feeling of insecurity is more intense than ever. One of the main causes is the way globalization is perceived. In the fourth chapter of his book, he speaks about the "terrors of the global," where he argues that globalization spreads the fear of not being able to escape, as borders are either liquid or non-existent, so problems spread on the entire planet immediately:

The 'openness' of our open society has acquired a new gloss these days, one undreamt of by Karl Popper, who coined that phrase. No longer a precious yet frail product of brave, though stressful, self-assertive efforts, it has become instead an irresistible fate brought about by the pressures of formidable extraneous forces; a side-effect of 'negative globalization' – that is, the highly selective globalization of trade and capital, surveillance and information, coercion and weapons, crime and terrorism, all now disdaining territorial sovereignty and respecting no state boundary. (Bauman 96)

The "open society" entails vulnerable people that face challenges they do not control, nor understand<sup>187</sup> (Bauman 96). In a global world, one has no place to escape, because everything is accessible. This led to an obsession concerning the borders. Just to give a local example, when the migrant crisis unfolded in 2015, Hungary was in the beginning a transit country for many of the migrants who were heading West. The reaction Hungary had, which is ruled by a right-wing conservative party, shocked the whole Europe. They built huge fences on the borders with Serbia and Romania in order to stop the migrants entering Hungarian territory. Yet the decision enjoyed popular approval in Hungary, as the anti-migrant rhetoric spread out across the country. The

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<sup>187</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic does for sure fall under such a perspective.

same rhetoric caught on in Romania as well because in a liquid world fear is liquid as well, and no border can stop it. Even though Romania was avoided by most of the migrants, the feeling of insecurity built up there anyway. As thousands of comments posted on social networks about the migrants show, many Romanians saw themselves invaded by strangers that would slowly impose their religion and their habits and change Romania forever.

The discourse of negative globalization has its scapegoats: the USA, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. There are also some “mythological” figures that bring the evil across the world, such as George Soros, the Jewish billionaire who allegedly wants to control the world, and, more recently, Bill Gates, who intends to insert microchips in people and thus control everybody. It was quite common to see huge banners on Hungarian highways displaying anti-Soros propaganda. Also, the most popular news channels from Romania, “Antena 3” and “Romania TV,” unashamedly spread the most absurd rumours about Soros, who allegedly controls the Romanian justice, Romanian secret services, and Romanian intellectuals. He apparently controls everybody who is against the political agenda supported by the owners of the two TV channels. Such scapegoats spark hate and resentment within society: “The globalization of harm and damage rebounds in the globalization of resentment and vengeance.” (Bauman 97). A few months ago, two men from Sri Lanka were hired in a small Transylvanian town. Hundreds of townspeople protested when they found out that their bread had been touched by “hands that are not white.” The owner of the bakery and the mayor faced public rage. People were scandalized that two strangers, who do not speak their language, believe in different Gods, and come from an exotic country are taking their jobs - regardless whether the locals do not want those jobs anyway.

“The spectre of vulnerability” is omnipresent within the society. The danger is everywhere, as anyone is a potential factor of harm<sup>188</sup>. The security issues have become more important than ever. Terrorism has spread fear all over the world and even if the probability of dying of a terrorist attack is very small, the danger embodied by terrorists makes a direct appeal to people’s fear of death. Terrorism has split the world into those that bring terror and the innocent people that undergo such an evil endeavour. The Christian world found itself in a sort of crusade (as George W. Bush called it) against the Muslim fundamentalist that are too often hard to differentiate from the rest of the Muslims, especially for populist political leaders and their square-minded followers:

In the infuriatingly multivocal, confused and confusing world of criss-crossing yet mutually incompatible messages whose main purpose may well seem to be the questioning and sapping of each other’s reliability, the monotheistic faiths coupled with Manichean, black-and-white world visions are about the last fortresses of the ‘mono: of one truth, one way, one life formula – of adamant and pugnacious certainty and self-confidence; the last shelters for the seekers of clarity, purity and freedom from doubt and indecision. They promise the treasures which the rest of the world blatantly and obstinately denies: self-approval, a clear conscience, the comfort of fearing no error and always being in the right. (Bauman 113)

Fear leads to dogmatic opinions. In many occasions, Manichaeism is religiously based, so the enemy appears as a satanic force that brings the Apocalypse. This perspective appeared 2000 years ago when St. John railed against the *Pax Romana* in the last book of the New Testament - Revelation. Because the Apocalypse is coming, many want to turn back to God. For them the modern world brought nothing but disarray, so the return to God would be the only solution:

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<sup>188</sup> Unfortunately, this perspective became tragically dangerous in the context of the pandemic.

This current ‘replacement of replacement’ - the reversal of modern management change, offering a return to the time before the invention of drawing boards – has its advantages. In one go, it reveals the people responsible for one’s misery and offers a fool proof way of getting rid of that misery and its culprits. And as long as the pent-up rancour, born of fears that are all the more vexing for being diffuse and of unclear origin, can at long last be released on a tangible target, and right away, it does not matter much that following that way is unlikely to put paid to misery. (Bauman 115)

The return to God entails a rejection of modernity and its values - again following the biblical model. White supremacists, Muslim or Christian Orthodox fundamentalists, the Hungarian Guard, and so on, aim for a similar ideal. They dream of a Golden Age in which ethnic or sexual diversity was not an issue, when security challenges were under control because enemies were stopped at the border and could not infiltrate among them, when patriarchal values were not questioned, and when tradition, which entailed a predictable lifestyle, was respected.

Baştovoi craves for the very same ideals in his novel. Political correctness has brought diversity, uncertainty, death, and moral corruption into the world. People should reject modernity and return to how world was before, when God was the central figure. People should comprehend that political correctness is satanic, and should thus embrace the patriarchal values. The return entails predictability and familiarity, because what is new is unsettling and employs insecurity. When Iacob goes to Alexandru’s place, he has a taste of what “normality” looks like: a house in the countryside, away from the temptations of the city, where a son takes care of his mother, as all children should do, and they live a simple live, growing vegetables and praying to God.

#### **5.4 Kitsch nostalgia and the Romanian being**



Baştovoi is only one of the public figures that oppose the idyllic rural universe to the satanic modern world. Dan Puric is another very popular voice representing the Romanian Christian Orthodox Conservatives that embraced an anti-occidental, pan-Slavic perspective. Just like Baştovoi, his books sell in significant numbers, numerous people attend his conferences, and televisions and radio stations invite him to share his opinions. As he is an actor and a very talented pantomime dancer, his charisma helped him to develop his own niche which proves to be quite lucrative. People like him and Baştovoi managed to obtain significant income by selling their ideas. Their alarmist, simplistic, yet toxic discourse is rarely for free, which showcases that cynicism and pragmatism are both part of the equation. Dan Puric combines nationalism, Christian Orthodoxy, and an anti-globalist speech. He argues that Romania is a great nation, with a glorious yet tragic past. The biggest challenge Romanians faced in their recent history is the communist regime,<sup>189</sup> which was a terrible hit for Romania's spirituality, as it was an atheistic dictatorship.

Romanians face an even greater challenge in the present, as the modern world is the greatest threat Romanians have ever been confronted with. In *Despre omul frumos* (About the Beautiful Human), he says:

Years passed by and it has proven that the old man was right. The country has transformed into a field in which a weird weed has grown: “the chaff-wheat.” It is impossible to sort this weed. How can one separate good from evil when the chaff grew in the heart of the wheat? Communism gave birth to its mutilated child. Romania's people do not have the courage to be clean wheat anymore because they lost their *memory*. We live confused, our hope is dead, we are like the wheat that is scattered here and there and is swallowed by chaff. Fragments of

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<sup>189</sup> He uses an argument that is also common among Polish conservative thinkers. They believe that Poland was a “crucified nation.” Regardless the historical moment, history was cruel with a noble country that struggled to overpass the endless series of tragedies. See also Alan Davies, “The Crucified Nation: A Motif in Modern Nationalism.”

kindness, chips of light that vanish when we get close to them... Since the *chaff-wheat* has appeared, so did the *hopeless hope*, the continuous abortion of human's hope.<sup>190</sup>

The politicians, the International Monetary Fund, and the globalization phenomenon or, as he calls it, the “degeneration of a globalizing type” (degenerări de tip globalizant) (Puric 35) are responsible for the decay of the most important values: Orthodoxy, traditions, patriarchal family, the rural universe. He states: “They don't see that Romania is falling down.”<sup>191</sup> They: those who are responsible for the decline but also all the Romanians who are caught in the vicious circle of abnormality. He argues that Romanians lost the sense of normality, as nowadays what is normal has become an exception. He thinks that morality is a rarity in his country because many of his compatriots suffered a mutation that enhanced opportunism, cowardice, and fear.

Yet the Apocalypse can be eluded because Christian Orthodoxy is fundamental to the Romanian being, which means there still is an unpolluted substance in Romanians (Puric 53). Therefore, people should embrace again conservative values: “This is what conservative means: conserve the nation, conserve the family, conserve the fundamental things of the nation [...]”<sup>192</sup> Puric considers that Christianity, the Romanian identity<sup>193</sup>, and Romanian spirituality are indissolubly linked, therefore Romanians need to return to God again. He even uses a pseudoscientific argument formulated by a Romanian Nazi scientist called Păulescu who

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<sup>190</sup> “Anii au trecut și bătrânul a avut dreptate. Țara s-a transformat într-un ogor, în care a crescut o plantă ciudată: “neghina-grâu.” De necules, această plantă, și, mai ales de neales. Cum să separi binele de rău, când în inima grâului a crescut neghina? Comunismul își născuse în sfârșit copilul mutilat. Oamenii României de azi nu mai au curajul de a fi grâu curat, căci i-au pierdut memoria. Trăim zăpăciți între noi, cu speranțe ucise înainte de a se naște, ca spicele de grâu ce mai răsar aiurea, înghițite apoi de trupul vârtos al neghinei. Fragmente de omenie, cioburi de lumină, ce se retrag de îndată ce ne apropiem de ele... De când a apărut neghina-grâu a apărut și speranța fără de speranță, avortul continuu al nădejzii în om” (Puric 49).

<sup>191</sup> Ei nu văd că România se prăbușește (Puric 38).

<sup>192</sup> Conservatorismul asta înseamnă: să se conserve națiunea, să se conserve familia, să se conserve creștinismul, să se conserve lucrurile fundamentale pentru neam și de aicea încolo, tot ce se întâmplă (Puric 72).

<sup>193</sup> Whatever that means.

believed there is something in any species that cannot be changed <sup>194</sup> (40). This unchangeable element for Romanians is Christian Orthodoxy. This is what makes them special among other nations.

This ontological constant is showcased in Romanian popular art. Puric considers that the Romanian peasant is a model of purity and authenticity; therefore, Romanians should aim towards this healthy and pure ideal that was represented by the rural universe. As in the case of the anti-modernist underpinnings of apocalyptic discourse, here too, there is a biblical model - the negative assessment of urban civilization in the Old Testament, e.g., Babel, Sodom, Gomorrah, the Canaanite cities, etc. The “beautiful human” (omul frumos) finds his or her roots in the countryside, where nature, God, and human lived in harmony. Puric nostalgically evokes his childhood among sheep, clean rivers, and endless forests. The soil, even the rocks, should all be cherished and loved for the very simple reason that they exist on Romanian territory. He gives the example of a Romanian peasant mother who leaves Romania for the very first time in order to visit her son. She carries in her suitcase a Romanian traditional shirt (*ie*), which is white and pure as the soul of its owner, a black skirt, and a huge river rock, because the woman knows that she is going to miss her country,<sup>195</sup> so she needs something to keep her connected to the native land. The old simple woman from the countryside is a leitmotif of his book. He praises her simplicity, generosity, spiritual depth, and her ability to understand what is truly essential in life. Such portraits are even more inspiring when their image is obnubilated by suffering. Puric obsessively evokes the sentimental image of the mother who lost her sons in wars, such as World War Two, as he thinks there is nothing more impressive than a mother’s suffering who made the

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<sup>194</sup> He does not clarify what it means to skip from one rase to another. He says: “You can skip from one rase to another, yet rases are fix” (Poți sări de la o specie la alta, dar speciile sunt fixe) (Puric 40).

<sup>195</sup> He uses the word “dor.” For more on this concept, see the “Kitsch nostalgia” section.

supreme sacrifice for her country: her children. The simplicity of the old woman who has nothing but love for God and her country should be a source of inspiration for all Romanians.

Intellectuals also have a role in inspiring Romanians to return to the right path. The interwar generation<sup>196</sup> represents the supreme canon for Dan Puric. Among these intellectuals, many had fascist sympathies, such as Nae Ionescu, a Romanian philosopher and a mentor to numerous young intellectuals. His sentimentalism reaches the utmost when evoking the ideas of those who were persecuted by the communist authorities or died in political prisons.<sup>197</sup> According to Puric, some of these intellectuals have an essential role in defining the Romanian being<sup>198</sup>, which reached its plenitude during the interwar period<sup>199</sup> (Puric 14).

However, the intellectual who was the most inspired in expressing the Romanian Christian being is Mihai Eminescu, who is considered Romania's national poet<sup>200</sup> and who precedes the interwar generation:

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<sup>196</sup> Also known as the '27 generation, it is indeed the most famous and creative generation of Romanian intellectuals. Some of them, such as Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade, who managed to leave Romania before the installation of the communist regime, enjoyed international recognition.

<sup>197</sup> The fifties were indeed atrocious, as it is the period when the communist regime installed in Eastern Europe, including in Romania. Hundreds of thousands of people who represented a real (some of them criticized the regime, others were members in the historical political parties, and others opposed the nationalization and collectivization campaign) or imaginary (the communist took no risks, as they encouraged a general feeling of terror) threaten for the newly installed regime endured torture and the most terrible imprisonment conditions. Many of them lost their lives in labour camps, if they survived to even get to the labour camps.

<sup>198</sup> The idea of a Romanian being or of a Romanian spirit was very appealing not only for cabotins such as Dan Puric but also for some important Romanian philosophers such as Lucian Blaga and Constantin Noica. Their thinking were inspired by German philosophers, for instance Spengler. In *Trilogia Cunoașterii* (The Trilogy of Knowledge), Blaga speaks about a Romanian spirit that is sinusoidal like the Transilvanian hills. In *Devenirea întru ființă. Scrisori despre logica lui Hermes* (The Becoming unto Being. Letters about Hermes' Logic), Constantin Noica speaks about the modulations of being, which is an ontological configuration specific to Romanians.

<sup>199</sup> Romania was among the winners of the Great War, so when the Trianon treaty was signed, Romania annexed several territories, such as Transylvania, Dobruja, and Banat, where a significant part of the population would speak Romanian. When Dan Puric says that the Romanian being reached its plenitude during the interwar period, he romanticises the creation of what was called Great Romania, which not only meant the unification of some territories but also meant the development of a Romanian spirit or essence, namely something of a metaphysical nature that defines the Romanian identity.

<sup>200</sup> Mihai Eminescu is a Romantic poet whose value is incontestable, yet the idea of a national poet might sound exotic, regardless it is a myth many Romanians believe into. It was partly inculcated by the communist authorities who imposed a bizarre form of nationalist communism. This phenomenon is going to be further analyzed in the following section.

If you want to see how the Romanian Christian substance is showcased, let us analyze a few lines from Scrisoarea a III-a - this heroic anthem of our nation. The symphonic character of the poetry imbibed in its key moments by a sublime Christian thrill.<sup>201</sup>

Eminescu is not a specifically orthodox writer, he is a Romanian writer, fundamentally Romanian, and that is why Christianity manifests to him in a natural way, as much as it has to and when it has to.<sup>202</sup>

Puric argues that Eminescu is the most capable of expressing the Romanian essence. His opinion is, however, contradictory for the very simple reason that, while he argues that the Romanian being reached its fulfilment during the interwar period, he says that this being was better understood by a poet who died in 1889. Nevertheless, this contradiction does not stop him from arguing that Romania's essence is based on heroism and that the Romanian Christian essence might as well imply a combative attitude when the situation requires it (Puric 95).

Just like his lectures and televised interviews, Puric's book sports a brand of idyllic sentimentalism. The past is heroic, pure, and authentic. People are kind, generous, and love their country more than anything else. Mothers and fathers do not hesitate to sacrifice themselves. The peasants are simple and wise, they pray to God, and represent a world that is more like a rural Disneyland. The past is not only idealized but is evoked through a series of cheesy and cliché images. The shirts of the peasants are white because their soles are pure, the soil is imbibed with the blood of Romanian soldiers that sacrificed for their country. Each rock and each tree branch should be loved and treasured because it grows or stands on the soil imbibed with the soldier's blood.

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<sup>201</sup> "Dacă vreți să vedeți exprimată substanța creștină a poporului român, să analizăm câteva versuri din Scrisoarea a III-a - această "Eoică" a poporului nostru. Caracterul simfonic al poeziei este străbătut în momentele cheie de un sublim fior creștin [...]" (Puric 92-93).

<sup>202</sup> "Eminescu nu este un scriitor explicit ortodox, el este un scriitor român, fundamental român, și de aceea creștinismul se manifestă la el în mod natural, atât cât trebuie și atunci când trebuie" (Puric 95).

Walter Benjamin speaks about aestheticizing politics in relation to Nazi Germany's use of art as a propaganda tool. Lutz Koepnick (2) argues that the same phenomenon is present nowadays, when politicians use aesthetics to invalidate "the complexity of modern society." Dan Puric is not a politician, yet he is a soft ideologue and a pop culture apostle that publishes books, gives lectures on the radio and television, and speaks in a way that gives the impression of erudition but actually aims at the masses. Even from the title of his book, *The Beautiful Human*, he suggests that moral values should encounter the aesthetic ones. He thus embraces a Platonic logic, in which what is good is also true and beautiful, so the universality of the "real" beautiful human cannot be contested. Furthermore, such an approach uses aesthetics to refashion ideology as "a space of authenticity" (Koepnick 3) and gives it the appearance of "unified and heroic art" (Koepnick 3). The beautiful human, who is inspired by the beautiful and heroic past, is the purpose to which all Romanian should aim. In fact, this is nothing but a simplification that ignores nuances and embraces shallowness, as it imposes an ideal that lacks connection with reality.

Puric evokes a universe that is simplistic, unreal, misleading, and sentimental. He persuades his public to believe that the world he depicts is beautiful and genuine. This contrast between appearances and intentions, and the overabundance of sentimentalism suit Kundera's definition of kitsch. In the previous chapter, I explained Kundera's image of the politician's fake tears. Kundera's definition of kitsch transcends the aesthetic implications of kitsch, as he considers that kitsch also describes politics, history, and even homesickness.

The homesickness *manele* shared with Kundera's definition of kitsch the excess of pathos, the simplistic images, and the abundance of clichés. Yet *manele* are not fully represented by Kundera's definition because *manele* do reflect some migrants' suffering. Furthermore, they are

sincere in expressing nostalgia and other feelings that are interconnected such as sacrifice and “dor,” as these feelings are truly experienced. Puric’s nostalgia is closer to Kundera’s definition of kitsch because it entails sentimentalism and possesses a deeply misleading character. Puric has not experienced the past he idealizes, yet he evokes this past using simplistic and cliché images. Like a politician, he tries to persuade his public, saying that the past should as good be the future, yet he projects a fake and poorly aestheticized image of the past.

Kundera has a very plastic definition of kitsch:

It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch. "Kitsch" is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. (Kundera 6)

Like Hesiod in his account of the Golden Age, Puric denies the existence of “shit” in the past. The past is perfect, as if all the heroic mothers and fathers do not even use the washroom. Even when suffering exists, that is heroic suffering, which is not “shit.” The past has nothing to hurt one’s eyes or feelings. This cheesy perfectness is superficial and relies on clichés, as the past entails a lot more nuances than the stereotype images of perfect nature, divine harmony, and heroic sacrifice. Even the manele singers were more realistic than Puric. Their idealisation of the rural Romania is not as dogmatic as Puric’s, as they admit that people leave Romania because the rural universe is not enough to hold one home when financial needs are stringent. Puric plays his own music, yet his songs lack the honesty of manele.

## **5.5 From romanticizing the past to reinventing reality**

Authors such as Puric and Baştovoi idealize the past, yet the past they picture had some connections with reality. The Hungarian Guard's myths are as well rooted in reality. Yet there are cases when the connection with reality is very poor because it is replaced by some phantasmagoric scenarios about the past. In this case the Disneyland created by the nostalgic is overpopulated by creatures that never existed except in the mind of the engineer. This is the case of the Dacopaths,<sup>203</sup> who believe that the whole European culture owes its existence to the Dacians, an ancient civilization that existed on nowadays Romania's territory, which were colonized by the Roman empire, after king Decebalus lost two wars to emperor Traian. Even though little is known about the Dacian beliefs and lifestyle, an entire mythology about the Dacian culture has developed and numerous Romanians take it for granted. The Dacopaths believe that Romanian's pure roots are Dacian and when the Romans colonized Dacia they polluted this purity. According to them, the Dacians were spiritually superior people. They were also brave warriors, great hunters, and had a prosperous life. Many believe that they reached a technological progress unprecedented someplace else in the epoch and that the Dacian gold was the purest and came in impressive quantities (*Dacii liberi* - The Free Dacians).

Within the last years, Dacian products have "invaded" the Romanian market. One can buy Dacian honey, Dacian wine and beer, Dacian clothes and jewels. One can as well go to one of the numerous so called "traditional Dacian restaurants" and eat Dacian potatoes, soups or stews. Obviously, none of these products are truly related to the Dacian culture, excepting the clothes and jewels, as some information is known about what they used to wear. But besides this, all the other products have nothing in common with the Dacians. It would have been impossible for the Dacians to eat, for instance, potatoes, since this plant was brought from South America centuries later. Nevertheless, the "Dacian" food has in fact become part of the pop culture and

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<sup>203</sup> Comes from Dacopatie, "daco" refers to Dacia and "patos" refers to a disease.



marketing campaigns are dedicated to it. The story that sells focuses on purity, authenticity, and tradition. Dacian products are traditional, as if they existed in Romania for thousands of years, and this is enough to be considered superior to anything that is created in today's world, when globalism brings products from everywhere and no one really knows whether they are trustworthy or not. The label of rustic attached to Dacian products should create the impression that they come from a perfect pastoral universe where pollution and technology has not yet destroyed the aura of untouched nature, as such products address the contemporary need to return to a more simple life, where scientific experiments, pollution and disease did not brake through. This traditional element is aesthetically represented by consecrated Dacian symbols such as the Dacian wolf,<sup>204</sup> but also by elements that have nothing in common with the Dacians. For instance, the so-called Dacian restaurants feature a folk aesthetic specific to mid nineteenth century rural Romania and play folk music of the same period.<sup>205</sup> The effects are kitsch and unconvincing, so such locations are very popular.<sup>206</sup>

Yet being a Dacopath entails a lot more than simply enjoying fake Dacian foods. They have transformed their beliefs into a dogmatic system, almost an ideology. A Dacian is also a nationalist, a person who is concerned about Romania's future, who is against globalism, consumerism, multiculturalism, and against foreign interventions, such as those pursued by the USA and the European Union. In an unintentional ironic twist (given the paganism of the

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<sup>204</sup> For more on this, see Andrei Pogăcias, "The Dacian Society - Fierce Warriors and Their Women Sources and Representations."

<sup>205</sup> Or a simulacrum of that music.

<sup>206</sup> See, for instance, Restaurant Miorița from Timișoara:

[https://www.google.ca/maps/uv?hl=ro&pb=!1s0x47455d2cbb484a5f%3A0xb3920048c24574e7!3m1!7e115!4shhttps%3A%2F%2Fh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipMDXGkfMDcStCx0eAU6gTo1\\_t\\_4YQnKHFrIVAA4%3Dw329-h160-k-no!5srestaurant%20miorita%20timisoara%20-%20C%4%83utare%20Google!15sCgIgAQ&imagekey=!1e10!2sAF1QipMDXGkfMDcStCx0eAU6gTo1\\_t\\_4YQnKHFrIVAA4&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwicqsfrqanrAhVI\\_SoKHf73DwEQoioiwCnoECBMQBg](https://www.google.ca/maps/uv?hl=ro&pb=!1s0x47455d2cbb484a5f%3A0xb3920048c24574e7!3m1!7e115!4shhttps%3A%2F%2Fh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipMDXGkfMDcStCx0eAU6gTo1_t_4YQnKHFrIVAA4%3Dw329-h160-k-no!5srestaurant%20miorita%20timisoara%20-%20C%4%83utare%20Google!15sCgIgAQ&imagekey=!1e10!2sAF1QipMDXGkfMDcStCx0eAU6gTo1_t_4YQnKHFrIVAA4&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwicqsfrqanrAhVI_SoKHf73DwEQoioiwCnoECBMQBg), Hanul dacilor from Ploiești: [http://www.hanuldacilortatarani.ro/galerie\\_foto.html](http://www.hanuldacilortatarani.ro/galerie_foto.html) or Ferma dacilor, which is an entire complex in Tohani: <https://www.fermadacilor.ro/ro/contact>.

historical Dacians), the Dacian is also a very religious person, a dedicated Christian Orthodox who considers Romania to be “Grădina Maicii Domnului”<sup>207</sup> (The Virgin Mary’s garden), namely a gift from God that needs to be kept pure. In fact, this obsession with purity is very common among Dacopaths because they consider that Dacian roots are noble and superior and represent an imaginary alternative to the contemporary world that is decadent and unpredictable (*Dacii liberi*).<sup>208</sup>

Dacopathy is depicted in a documentary directed by Andrei Gorgan and Monica Lăzurean-Gorgan, called *Dacii liberi*<sup>209</sup> (The Free Dacians). The documentary features the opinions and the live stories of different Dacopaths. Some of them made enormous sacrifices to live according to their beliefs. The documentary begins by featuring the Saint Serafim village from Năeni, the only Dacian village from Romania. The village is entirely new and only a handful of people live there. Yet more people gather when special events take place, such as a “Dacian” wedding, which is depicted in the documentary. The groom and the bride plan to move into the village and they indeed spend a while there. However, by the end of the documentary it is revealed that they moved out because life in the village is harsh, as there is no running water nor electrical power. One lives off the land. In fact, after a while, only two people remain in the village, a father and his son. They spend their time praying and growing vegetables.

Even though not many people chose to live in the village, the community has many supporters. Their views combine their fascination for the Dacians with nationalism and Christian Orthodoxy conservatism. As one of them says, “vrem să înviem puțin din stilul lor de trai” (We want to bring back to life some aspects of the Dacians’ way of life). But they do not know much

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<sup>207</sup> This syntagma was used during the protests that took place in Romania in the last six years. I shall explain the phenomenon in further depth in the following pages.

<sup>208</sup> See also Dan Alexe, *Dacopatia și alte rătăcirii românești*.

<sup>209</sup> I am thankful to Ilinka Mihăilescu and Monica Lăzurean-Gorgan that made the documentary available for me.

about their lifestyle, so they might as well believe anything. For instance, the Orthodox priest who gives the sermon at the Dacian wedding from the village says that the Dacians were “amazing” animal growers, they were also very good at carving wood and stone and they used to make traditional clothing. The naivety of such an affirmation is striking. But then so is their conviction that the Dacians believed in Christ’s resurrection.

Their desire to isolate themselves or at least to stay close to a secluded community speaks about their incapacity to adapt to the contemporary world. The “terrors of the global” (Bauman) determined them to take a radical decision and live as if they do not belong to the contemporary world. Such people do not leave the magic circle of the game anymore. Usually, a nostalgic reconnects with the past for a brief period of time because nostalgia has its moments when it activates, yet the dacopaths struggle to import the past into the present and make the evocation of the past a continuous process. Tamina, for instance, constantly struggles to revive every detail of her past, because this is what gives a meaning to her life. The Dacopaths from Năeni cannot recall the past because it does not belong to them. So they simply invent a past based on some common beliefs and struggle to shape their lives according to this past. Their present becomes one with their phantasm and their nostalgia becomes an extreme phenomenon that dictates how to live their lives. The result of such a perspective is toxic. The people who embrace such nostalgia are delusional. Their opinions, which are disconnected from reality, make one wonder whether they are sane or not. The two Dacopaths from Năeni share some of the weirdest opinions. The son, who talks more in the documentary, skips from conspiracy theories, to the purity of the Dacian gold, to the resurrection of Christ.

Yet not all the Dacopaths are as extreme in their choices they make like the inhabitants of Năeni. But they are equally delusional. The documentary features some national congresses held

by so-called experts of the Dacian culture and civilization. In fact, these meetings look more like a collective self-intoxication with myths and fake stories. Their strongest belief is that Dacia is the cradle of the European civilization and their superiority is incontestable. This “truth” was allegedly concealed by foreign powers because those who rule the world, the Americans, the Germans, the Jews, etc., seem to be against the Romanians. One of the most renowned supporters of these scenarios is Gheorghe Funar, a notorious nationalist figure and former mayor of Cluj-Napoca, one of Romania’s biggest cities. He shares some of his opinions in *Dacii liberi*. For instance, he says that Germany owes its existence to the Dacians. He argues that “Deutschland,” the German word for Germany, comes from “the Daci (Dacians) land,” because the two words, “Deutsch” and “daci” sound almost identical in Romanian. This evokes the mythologization of the Aryans by the Nazis.

In fact, opinions such as those expressed by Funar existed since the seventies, because the communists heavily sponsored the mythology about the Dacians. When Ceaușescu distanced Romania from the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, he and his acolytes replaced the internationalist ideology with a nationalist perspective, which was supposed to create cohesion among Romanians and to picture him as a great man of state, one who comes from great ancestors, almost as brilliant as himself. The absurd combination of nationalist-communism was supported by a persuasive rethoric, which was disseminated on numerous levels, from pop-culture to the educational system. On Ceaușescu’s orders, Romanian history was romanticized and changed in a radical manner (Boia 2011). Generations of Romanian children learned a counterfeited history, according to which the historical provinces that later constituted Romania were ruled by glorious leaders that fought the Turks and remained independent for centuries. Before them, the Dacians were as well exceptional people. This romantic history was also

promoted in a series of historical movies directed by the most popular Romanian director, Sergiu Nicolaescu. Movies such as *Mihai Viteazul* (Michael the Brave, 1971), *Dacii* (The Dacians, 1966), and *Columna* (The Column, 1968) became of reference for millions of Romanians who believed that the events pictured in Nicolaescu's propagandistic productions are in fact real (Spiridon).

The most notable concept produced by nationalist-communism is called "protochronism," which refers to the belief that Romanians and their ancestors were the first in creating the European civilization and in inventing the greatest technical inventions of the world. According to protochronism supporters, the Dacian civilization was the most advanced of its time. The remnants of this belief unfold in a contradictory manner in nowadays Romania. On the one hand, Romanians tend to be unsatisfied about themselves and believe that Romania cannot compare to other countries, such as Germany, which represents the typology of a well-organized country with huge abilities to innovate.<sup>210</sup> On the other hand, Romanians believe in their glorious past. The most notable myth is that about the historical regions from nowadays Romania that defended the Christian Europe against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>211</sup> Another myth that grows in popularity is the superiority of the Dacian culture. Both narratives are meant to compensate for a disappointing present. The past becomes a realm where Romanians find comfort by tackling their frustrations and their inferiority complex.

In fact, it is quite common for people to believe that their nation is the center of the world:

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<sup>210</sup> For more on this, see Alin Gavreliuc, "Româniile din România. Individualism autarhic, tipare valorice transgeneraționale și autism social."

<sup>211</sup> For more on this, see Lucian Boia *Două secole de mitologie națională*.

Needless to say, the British, French, Germans, Americans, Russians, Japanese, and countless other groups are similarly convinced that humankind would have lived in barbarous and immoral ignorance if it hadn't been for the spectacular achievements of their nation. Some people in history went as far as to imagine that their political institutions and religious practices were essential to the very laws of physics. Thus, the Aztecs firmly believed that without the sacrifices they performed each year, the sun would not rise and the entire universe would disintegrate. (Harari 163)

Small and big nations need to justify their existence by linking it to a great past or to the greatest past. Therefore, Romanians do nothing but to embrace a popular trend. It is, however, interesting to follow how these narratives of greatness unfold for each nation.

Yet not all Dacopaths are satisfied by simply evoking the past. Some of them focus on the future, and on politics. Starting in 2014, numerous protests took place in Romania. The first big series of manifestations that burst after many years of silence was against the gold mining from Roșia Montană, where the Canadian company “Gold Corporation” was planning to pursue aggressive exploitation that would destroy seven mountains from the beautiful region of Apuseni. What started as an ecologist protest soon turned into an anticorruption manifestation, as the exploitation would have been possible with the complicity of several local and high level politicians.<sup>212</sup> Since then, there were tens of protests<sup>213</sup>, in which hundreds of thousands of people participated, and which took place in numerous cities and towns from Romania. The variety of people who attended these protests is surprising: from apolitics to social-democrats or liberals, from anarchists to nationalists, from hipsters to hippies, from corporatists to working class, from atheists to Christian Orthodox Dacians.<sup>214</sup> These series of manifestations opened the

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<sup>212</sup> For more on this, see “Towards a Conceptualization of Casual Protest Participation: Parsing a Case from the Save Roșia Montană Campaign.”

<sup>213</sup> For more on this, see “Tens of Thousands Stage Anticorruption Protest in Romania” (2018). In Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications. Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC.

<sup>214</sup> Overall, these protests meant a huge step ahead for Romania, as they played an essential role in determining the political leaders to respect the rule of law and to keep Romania on a democratic path. For more on the profile of the protesters, see Doru Pop “Revoluția hipsterilor” and Cătălin Ștefănescu “Monumental hipsterului necunoscut.”

appetite of Romanians to protest against several issues, some real problems, others not quite so. For instance, a few hundred Romanians protested against Covid pandemic restrictions imposed by Romanian authorities. Many of them were negationists who did not believe in the existence of the virus. The conspiracy theories propagated by obscure sites make numerous victims among Romanians and the dacopaths are among them.

Luis Bratu is one of the Dacopaths who is interviewed in *Dacii liberi*. He is a very active voice among some groups of dacopaths that embracing conspiracy theories such as the ones about the American billionaire George Soros who, they believe, is plotting against Romania. Luis Bratu was also involved in organizing a protest to demand jobs for Romanians instead of money for Syrian refugees. His nationalistic and xenophobic views are rooted in his belief that Romania is a unique country, with a glorious past, which had and still has many enemies. He embraces a rhetoric that is also common to other nationalists such as Puric, as they believe that Romania had a tragic but heroic past which is now facing apocalyptic times (*Dacii liberi*).

Last but not least, some of the Dacopaths care less about Romanian politics, as they focus on the spiritual side of the Dacian civilization. They try to revive several Dacian deities, rituals, and spiritual symbols; or so they think. One of their rituals is featured in *Dacii liberi*. The participants to the ritual are dressed in Dacian like clothes and, as they lighten fires, they recite incantations in Romanian. The affected men voices that recite the incantations sound theatrical, as if the whole ritual cannot be taken seriously. Their beliefs are even harder to be taken seriously, as their “Dacian” rituals entail a series of esoteric beliefs which have not been documented by any credible historical sources. They, for instance, think that their rituals activate energies that reinvigorate their souls and bodies.

The Dacopaths engage with nostalgia in a twisted manner that directly affects their lives. The phantasm of the past shapes their present in such a manner that reality overlaps with mythology. On several occasions, their fuzzy beliefs entail resentment and aggressivity. Their bubble is toxic and does not give them the feeling that they are actually protected of the world that surrounds them. Therefore, they sometimes get out of their bubble and fight the world, as Luis Bratu does. What is even worse than fighting is the refusal to stay in contact with the outside world, as the father and the son from the Dacian village. Regardless their way of relating with the world, the Dacopaths behave like a sect. And nostalgia is what keeps the sect together.



## Conclusion

Nostalgia's complexity is not only given by its various forms but also by its fluidity. Personal nostalgia overlaps with collective nostalgia, childhood nostalgia is enhanced by nostalgia for a place, harmful nostalgia can be useful at the same time, etc. Even though I have tried to categorize nostalgia, it is very difficult to put the finger on some predictable, clear or "pure" nostalgic forms, that is why in order to explain a specific nostalgia I always had to analyze the context in which it emerged. The same unpredictability occurs regarding nostalgic suffering. Suffering can be intense or light, it can be useful or harmful or both at the same time.

In the second<sup>215</sup> chapter, I examined *nostalghia*, which is the Russian version of a deadly form of homesickness. According to Tarkovsky, it cannot be encountered anywhere else in the world because it is specific to the Russian soul. As far as my research has reached, I have indeed not found anything identical in relation to homesickness. However, *nostalghia* is not only linked to homesickness. *Nostalghia* features two characters, Gorchakov and Domenico, who suffer of nostalgia. As they are united by a common goal, their nostalgias become one. Domenico's longing for a more spiritual world overlaps the ravishing homesickness of Gorchakov and both nostalgias reunite under the sign of sacrifice. As long as the sacrifice is meaningful, so are suffering and nostalgia. However, it is debatable whether the sacrifice made by Gorchakov and Domenico is meaningful or not. At the same time, even though Gorchakov and Domenico die, it does not mean that their nostalgia is toxic either. One who does not suffer might already be dead inside and one who suffers is elevated by one's pain. The Romanian-French philosopher Emil Cioran describes suffering as a force that can destroy or save one from mediocrity. Tarkovsky, it seems, shares that perspective. The Russian director perceives the Western contemporary world

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<sup>215</sup> In the first chapter I focus on the literature review.

as a universe that has been suffocated by its own mediocrity. Tarkovsky's nostalgia oscillates between destruction and elevation, between an overwhelming pain and a necessary spiritual state to overcome it, even if this overcoming were leading straight to death..

In the third chapter, I examined several forms of personal nostalgia. Both Milan Kundera and Mircea Cărtărescu depict nostalgia for a beloved person, and both connect this feeling to nostalgia for a site: Prague for the Czech novelist and Bucharest for Cărtărescu. Unlike Tarkovsky, Kundera depicts a form of nostalgia that is obsessive, toxic, deadly. Tamina is trapped in her past and nothing can bring her back into the present. She lives her life struggling to recover each detail from the past because her nostalgia feeds out of this precision. Her ritualistic nostalgia, as I called it, works against her because the past cannot be recovered in its entirety, so each new attempt to revive it is obsessive and destructive. Whereas Kundera's nostalgia is intense enough to kill, Cărtărescu's is bittersweet. Andrei revives his first love experience feeling both pain - because his love story ended - and joy, for he can at least recall the experience.

In the third chapter, I also focused on nostalgia for childhood. Childhood elicits a bittersweet nostalgia, which features the past in a positive light and marginalizes suffering. Unlike Kundera, who uses the metaphor of childhood to express lack of memory and moral responsibility, Cărtărescu depicts childhood as a realm of mystery, adventure, and intense sensations. Even though childhood is not idealized, it is perceived as a fascinating time. Such nostalgia follows the logic of the game, as Huizinga describes it, because it evokes the past as a means to temporarily escape the present, and isolates one from daily reality in a magical circle that employs its own time and space. Even though the evoked past is considered as real as the reality itself, one is aware that this is a temporary experience, which can be arrested any time one

wishes, only to be recommenced in the future, at will. Unlike Tamina's ritualistic nostalgia, such nostalgia does not need to truly live in the past nor to revive the past exactly as it was. Such nostalgia does not have a purpose other than "having fun" by reviving what once was lived with great enthusiasm.

Same game-like nostalgia appears in Filip and Matei Florian's novel *The Băiuț Alley Lads*, only that this time childhood is remembered as a pleasant experience despite the bitter socio-political context. The communist regime marked their childhood and even though some of their memories are gloomy because of it, their childhood is evoked as a sweet experience. In several occasions, the privations caused by the regime is what enhances the pleasure, as sweets are hard to get and therefore more appreciated and rules are strict and the pleasure of breaking them is even bigger.

Unlike *The Băiuț Alley...*, Cezar Paul Bădescu's novel *Tinerețile lui Daniel Abagiu* features childhood nostalgia as a bittersweet evocation that is mitigated by humor and irony. As childhood is marked by a series of small but humiliating defeats but also by the daily life absurdities caused by the communist regime, humor and irony define nostalgia, which does not rely on suffering but on a playful evocation. Nostalgia brings together unpleasant and pleasant memories and employs irony and humour to intermediate between amusing, bitter, and enjoyable memories. Furthermore, ironic nostalgia eludes dramatism, as irony entails a non-dogmatic evocation of the past that puts together bits and pieces that are overall enjoyable.

The light and non-dramatic nostalgia featured in Bădescu's novel stands in opposition with kitsch nostalgia featured in homesickness manele, the music genre that divided Romania between manele lovers and manele haters. Manele employ sentimentalism as a means of expressing suffering related to homesickness or, as it is called in Romanian, "dor."

Homesickness manele combine a kitsch aesthetic and an excess of pathos to express suffering felt by Romanian emigrants who made the ultimate sacrifice of leaving Romania to gain money for their families. Beyond the simplistic lyrics and the cheesy images, homesickness manele do speak in the name of many Romanian emigrants, especially of those less educated. Their nostalgic suffering is enhanced by a feeling of estrangement that makes them feel unwelcomed in the Western countries where they work. Even though such a nostalgia is the kind that “burns the heart,” it is not toxic. As Tarkovsky points out, if one does not feel pain when leaving one’s country, one is dead on a spiritual level, because one cannot connect with the spiritual roots of one’s country.

In the last section of this chapter I dealt with anti-nostalgia, which is an overlap between the revolt against the macro-universe of home (Romania as a state that disappointed its citizens) and a feeling of nostalgia for the micro-universe of home (friends, family, etc.). Such an experience is common among Romanian emigrants, as they cannot make peace with their home country whose past and present still haunts them. Anti-nostalgia’s suffering is generated by the conflict of a love and hate relationship. One cannot simply miss one’s country, nor cannot forget it and move on. Such a relationship is not only painful, but it is also confusing, unsettling, harmful, as one oscillates between the antagonistic forces that defines one’s relationship with Romania.

In the third chapter, I switched to collective forms of nostalgia and I analyzed several forms of nostalgia for communism. I first examined Ostalgie’s cult movie *Good Bye, Lenin!* Even though in some particular cases Ostalgie leads to an idealization of the East German past, it mainly entails an ironic and humoristic evocation of the past, which falls under Boym’s definition of reflexive nostalgia. Even though such an evocation is more relaxed and playful,

Ostalgie is not totally separated from suffering, as it mediates between a traumatic past and a very unpredictable present. Ostalgie is a coping mechanism that supports some East Germans to adapt to the capitalist world.

Just like Ostalgie, Yugonostalgia manifests as a peace maker of the past and of the present. Unlike Ostalgie, Yugonostalgia is contested more vehemently, especially by nationalists from the former Yugoslav states. Dubravka Ugrešić is one of the most popular voices that defended Yugonostalgia. In *The Ministry of Pain*, she features Yugonostalgia as a factor that preserves identities of exiles who struggle both to cope with war trauma and to adapt to Western lifestyle. Unlike Ostalgie, Yugonostalgia relies less on humour and irony and more on a sentimental evocation of various pop-culture elements that constituted Yugoslav identity, from music to foods. Nevertheless, both nostalgias are - at least as they are displayed in the artworks I analyze - reflexive, as they do not idealize the past, nor aim for its dogmatic revival.

Romanian nostalgia for communism is more dogmatic than its aforementioned counterparts. Even though there are examples of ironic or humoristic nostalgia for communism, its predominant form relies on a dogmatic idealization of the past. However, when glorifying communism, people chiefly remember their personal happy memories. Despite this, their regret for the former regime does make them aggressive when their convictions are challenged and does determine their political views, regardless these views are against the welfare of Romanians. The Romanian nostalgics do not trust the present and do not see themselves in the future. All they can do is to revive their past, which is romanticized and cosmeticized according to their needs.

Nevertheless, Romanian nostalgia for communism is not solely toxic because, just like Ostalgie and Yugonostalgia, works as a coping mechanism. Romanian transition from

communism to capitalism came with a big price, as many lost their jobs and found themselves living a very unpredictable life and thus their nostalgia helped them to resist a nightmarish present. That is why even though their nostalgia employs negative outcomes, it cannot be judged based on them only. This oscillation between harmful and necessary should be a strong argument for those who judge nostalgia for communism for its dogmatism but end up being themselves dogmatic.

In the last chapter, I focused on several types of right-wing nostalgia. As I have stated from the very beginning, the right-wing label is very broad, as it refers indeed to conservative, patriarchal, dogmatic, and radical perspectives, yet it cannot be linked to a specific political doctrine for the very simple reason that these perspectives are unpredictable, mixed up, and fuzzy. Right-wing nostalgia romanticizes or simply reinvents the past because the present is perceived from an apocalyptic perspective. Fear is an essential component of this mechanism, and its outcomes are hate and resentment. One suffers and blames others around for one's idealized loss. Right-wing nostalgia entails a belligerent attitude, as it aims to revive the past. This dogmatic need to revive the past suits Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia, which aims to bring back the past exactly as it was. Unlike nostalgia for communism, right-wing nostalgia cannot be mitigated in time because the present cannot be realistically changed according to the hateful and diluted needs of those who are the victims of such a nostalgia.

In the first section of this chapter, I analyzed the profile of one of the founders of the radical-right paramilitary movement - now illegal - Hungarian Guard. The members of the Hungarian Guard see themselves as patriotic warriors who defend their country. As their role is inspired by the past, their evocation follows the logic of the game called by Huizinga mimicry or mimesis, which means that they try to imitate models from the past. However, their endeavour is

not a game, because their apocalyptic view of the world obliterates the golden rule of the game which, as Roger Caillois argues, is always futile, because it follows no final goal. This means that the Hungarian Guard members played a corrupt game that aimed to change reality itself and even though they do not replace the reality, their actions do have an effect on it.

In the second section, I examined Ștefan Baștovoi's novel *Diavolul este corect politic*, in which the near future is displayed as a dystopia ruled by political correct values and progressive politicians that impose measures such as assisted death, castration, and gay marriage. Baștovoi longs for a patriarchal, rural and, most especially, Christian Orthodox world. Only the return to such a world would save the humanity from, as Baumann calls it, "the terrors of the global." Baștovoi views are ruled by fear, therefore his nostalgia is dogmatic, aggressive, and toxic. The return to the past is not a temporary escape from the present but the necessary escape from the doomed reality.

The same distinction between the decadent present and the idyllic rural and patriarchal universe is made by Dan Puric, one of the most popular conservative and pan-Slavic voices from Romania. In his volume of essays *Despre omul frumos*, he depicts, in a very sentimental tone, what he thinks is the Romanian being, which finds its roots at the country side, among peasants and their genuine values: devotion for God and endless love for Romania. At the antipode is the urban, desacralized, and corrupted world of contemporary Romania, which either turns its gaze towards the past and learns from its ancestors or will face spiritual death. Puric's tone is dramatic, simplistic, cheesy, and hypocritical. His nostalgia is less about suffering and more about faking it. That is the reason why his nostalgia is kitsch. Unlike the kitsch of homesickness *manele*, this kitsch transcends the aesthetic realm and tries to impose a political view of the world, which makes it toxic.

Nostalgia's relationship with suffering, which stands at the core of my thesis, varies depending on each particular case. The map I have created, with personal and collective forms of nostalgia, with unbearable painful and bittersweet nostalgias offer a better understanding of how the concept exists nowadays, when migration, political extremes, and populism are omnipresent. In many cases, nostalgia does not rely on *algos* but on *nostos*, which does not mean that one nostalgic form that entails more suffering is more authentic than one that marginalizes pain. Even if *algos* remains a fundamental concept, nostalgia is first defined by its relationship with the past or with a place rather than by its ability to generate suffering. Nostalgia chiefly focuses on evoking a loss and on relieving the time before the loss occurred.

The other central element that I focused on was nostalgia's ability to be harmful or useful. By the end of the second chapter, I have shown that one does not exclude the other. Nostalgia can devour and elevate the nostalgic at the same time. In many situations, suffering is preferable because the alternatives are worse: emotional numbness, alienation, lack of spiritual depth. In some cases, especially in the last chapter, I made a distinction between harmfulness and toxicity. Toxic nostalgia refers to those cases when the nostalgic suffers without benefiting of any positive outcomes, as is the case of right-wing nostalgia.

Based on nostalgia's relationship with suffering and its ability to harm or be toxic, I have proposed some new definitions. These definitions shed light on a series of aspects related to nostalgia that were undiscovered so far, yet they do not redefine the concept of nostalgia from scrap. I have stressed the distinction between a ritualistic and a game like nostalgia. This distinction was already partly emphasized by Boym's antinomy reflexive-restorative nostalgia. However, I went further in explaining how one relates with the two kinds of nostalgia, and what their effects are. Ritualistic nostalgia (restorative) functions as an unfinished sacred ritual, as it



aims to revive the past exactly as it was, yet it never accomplishes its goals, which makes it harmful and even toxic. Such nostalgia follows a circular movement, which ends only to begin again, without ever reaching its goal. On the other hand, game like nostalgia (reflexive) evokes the past in order to obtain a feeling of pleasure out of it, which makes it less painful, if painful at all. Game-like nostalgia entails bittersweet emotions, the desire for excitement, adrenaline, unusual or mystery. In some cases though some game-like nostalgic forms entail toxic consequences. For instance, right-wing nostalgia follows the logic of the game of mimicry. Regardless of its effects, the logic of the game opens up nostalgia to a space of negotiation while at the same time emphasizing its drive to isolate from reality in order to unfold within a magic circle, functions as a temporary alternative to living in the real world.

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Western Graduate Research Scholarship  
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Society of Graduate Students travel Grant  
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2016-2017, 2017-2018

Research Assistant  
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## Publications:

### Book Chapters

“Hipsters in Central and Eastern Europe: From (Pseudo) Nostalgia to Neo-Manele.” *Hipster Culture: A Reader*. Heike Steinhoff (ed.). Bloomsbury (forthcoming).

“Marginea ca rest, restul ca margine. Două studii de caz: Milan Kundera și Attila Bartis” (The Marginal as a Residual, The Residual as Marginal. Two Case Studies: Milan Kundera and Attila Bartis; in Romanian) (2016). *Metamorfoze ale identității de margine*. Valentin Trifescu, Anca Elisabeta Tatay (eds.). Presa Universitară Clujeană. 85-96.

“Istoria trăită - o altă formă a provincialismului. Două studii de caz: Gheorghe Crăciun și Milan Kundera” (History as a Form of Provincialism. Two Case Studies: Gheorghe Crăciun and Milan Kundera; in Romanian) (2016). *Cartografii literare: regional, național, european, global*. Adriana Babeți, Dumitru Tucan (eds.). Editura Universității de Vest. 262-274.

### Journal Articles

“Changing Narratives through Communist Food Brands. Three Romanian Case Studies: Rom Chocolate, Gostat Meat Products, and Polar Ice-Cream,” *Food & History* (forthcoming).

“The Residual Forms in Contemporary Central European Literature. Two Case Studies: Bohumil Hrabal and Ádám Bodor” (2017). *Caietele Echinox*. Vol. 33: 99-112.

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“O semiotică a corpului în contextul sexualității excesive. Raportări la romanul din interiorul Cortinei de Fier” (A Body Semiotics in the Context of Excessive Sexuality: Reference to the Novel behind the Iron Curtain; in Romanian) (2014). *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity*. Vol. 3: 966-973.