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## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Remembering the past: Representations of women's trauma in post-1989 Romanian cinema

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the long-term effects of Romanian communist natality politics and the way in which cinema was used to re-appropriate the past after the shift in political climate in 1989. Romania's process of coming to terms with the past was characterized by political reluctance to explore the communist legacy. However, personal attempts of recollecting the past have a unique ability to bridge the intergenerational gap and facilitate the transmission of knowledge and memories. This paper therefore presents two examples of Romanian cinema focused on the experiences of those directly affected by the family planning politics of the communist regime. *Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf* (2005), directed by Razvan Georgescu and Florin Iepan, is a documentary based on oral testimonies and documents that sketch the history of Romanian communism and the involvement of various individuals. The second source used—*4 Months, 3 Weekes and 2 Days* (2007) directed by Cristian Mungiu—is a film that uses a different language and technics in order to re-appropriate the past, not through direct testimony of those involved, but creating fictional characters. The target audience of these movies—as is often the case with historical cinema—is the second or third generation. Cinematography provides a simple and popular way of connecting these generations with the experiences of their predecessors.

**Subjects:** Cultural Sexuality; Cultural Studies; European History; Media & Film Studies; Women's & Gender History

**Keywords:** Romanian cinema; family politics; communism; women; child rearing

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper examines Romanian natality politics during the communist regime, and the post-1989 attempts to re-appropriate the past through cinematic representations of this topic. We consider two examples of Romanian cinema focused on the traumas and experiences of those directly affected by the family planning politics. Cinema often spans the intergenerational gap and can reproduce traumas that are difficult for those who underwent them to confront directly. In this way, the second and third generations can access their relatives' struggle and recognize the strength required to survive such circumstances. The cinema examples presented in this paper address women's trauma during the communist regime, as many Romanian women found themselves trapped in a system that controlled their entire lives—even their bodies.

## 1. Introduction

In the former communist countries of Eastern Europe the process of coming to terms with the past (Bickford & Sodaro, 2010, p. 76) was approached using a variety of memory mechanisms that range from transitional justice (Stan, 2013), lustration law and public commemorations, to autobiographical references and oral history public collections. In Romania the political class was mainly reserved in dealing with the past, especially in the years following the change of regime. The main attempts in this direction were results of the individual initiatives, sometimes with the support of newly founded civic organizations. As the post-1989 social and economic status of the country brought a large area of problems that required the attention of the political class and occupied an important part of the media space and indirectly the public arena, the process of coming to terms with the past became marginal, in a manner more or less influenced by the necessities of the political class. In the Romanian post-communist society, the main attempts to come to terms with the past include both individual and collective recollections, as well as institutionalized frameworks for public memory (Mitroiu, *in press*). The question of intergenerational transmission of memory is interlinked with the issue of multiple voices of the past and with the variety of methods, language and media that can be used. The lack of public attention given to the communist past, but also the multilayered nature of remembrance question the ways in which the second or third generation can relate with their parents/grandparents' stories. What mechanisms are used and how the personal stories are integrated at the level of collective memory? The present study, part of a larger one dedicated to the recuperative memory in post-1989 Romania, focuses on the ability of the cinema to contribute to the process of coming to terms with the past through the fictional stories. These are inspired by the reality of the past or by its capacity to offer space for alternative narratives of the past, such as women's stories of their trauma related to abortion. The topic of the Romanian communist politics of family planning and the ways in which their consequences at personal level were approached by the post-1989 cinematographic productions represent the core of our paper. Some of these productions are read in the frame of recollecting memory, implied by the process of coming to terms with the past wrongs.

Under Nicolae Ceausescu, who was in power between 1967 and 1989, and under the watchful eye of the Romanian political police, the *Securitate*, family planning was one of many oppressive mechanisms used by the communist regime. In 1955, after Stalin's death, Romania followed the USSR in instituting permissive abortion legislation, and by 1957 abortion was provided in public hospitals at women's request in exchange for a small fee. This liberal phase was short lived. Ceausescu's policy on abortion had three phases. Decree 770 of 1 October 1966, stated that it was illegal to terminate a pregnancy. Only under exceptional circumstances might a woman end a pregnancy, such as when a pregnancy endangered a woman's life, when one or both of the parents had a hereditary disease that would be transmitted to the child, when the pregnant woman had suffered some severe physical and/or psychological injuries, if the woman was older than 45, if the woman had already given birth and had to care for four children, or when the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest. Decree 53 of 1972 brought about a small but important change by dropping the age when a woman had the right to abortion upon request from 45 to 40 years old. In 1985, Decree 411 raised the legal age back to 45 years and stating that a woman must already have five children. Consequently, many families faced the material and psychological difficulties of raising unwanted children; child abandonment increased, and many families were destroyed by someone's incarceration for failing to obey the law. Medical personnel also became the target of fierce surveillance.

Much propaganda surrounded Ceausescu's natality policy. Thousands of kindergartens, schools, and nurseries were built almost overnight to answer the needs of this new age. Special programs were created for intelligent children, and the Romanian school system became one of the most advanced in the world. Children were required to participate in sports and competitions in order to maximize their physical potential. The improvement of their intellects and physical strength was necessary for shaping children into the "New Man," a project of communist ideology. In the 1960s, Romania was considered one of the most liberal countries in the communist bloc, but Decree 770 was kept far from the public attention. Forbidding abortion was just one aspect of the legislation. For example, all contraceptives were forbidden, forcing pregnant women to become mothers. By 1969,

the birth rate had doubled, with one million babies over the natural growth of the Romanian population. Propaganda was stronger than ever—Romania’s population rose to 20,000,000 and the newborns were welcomed with the stereotype salute of that period, as it was repeated in radio and TV broadcasting: “It was meant for you to be born in the golden summer of the 10th Congress, to fulfill a figure of symbolic values and dimensions: 20,000,000.”

The family planning affected many families, women, and children. The paper focuses on the results of the natality policy at the level of individual destiny and on the manner in which the second or third generations relate to the past. The first part of this paper presents the Romanian communist natality politics, the surrounding ideological context, and the long-term effects thereof. The paper then explores the post-1989 attempts to re-appropriate the past through the cinematographic examples. In post-1989 Romanian society, the political class showed a clear reluctance to explore the communist legacy. However, different attempts to recuperate the past were made, even if official discourse did not always encourage this process. The memory of the past is interlinked with the transitional justice mechanisms, and political attention often focused mainly on theoretical aspects, failing to encourage practical efforts and the legal framework necessary to facilitate a clear politics of memory. Our research assumes that the recollection of the past takes a mediated form, which can fill the intergenerational gap and facilitate the transmission of knowledge and memories. The past is a rich source for cinema topics and the mediated character of recuperative memory makes it possible for film to represent and discuss the past and its traumas. Thus, our research presents two examples of Romanian cinema focused on the experiences of those directly affected by family planning politics. *Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf* (2005), directed by Razvan Georgescu and Florin Iepan, is a documentary based on oral testimonies and documents that sketch the Romanian historical and individual involvements. This documentary brought to life the painful social experiment that attempted to foster the “New Man” through Decree 770 of 1966. From Ceausescu’s point of view, abortion was a social illness created by capitalism, and, set free from capitalism, women now had the opportunity to bring up a new generation without fear of the future. The second material used, *4 Months, 3 Weekes and 2 Days* (2007) directed by Cristian Mungiu, is a cinema movie that uses a different language and mechanism in order to re-appropriate the past. Mungiu’s film is about abortion and friendship in the last years of the communist regime, presenting the life events of several female characters living in a world governed by Decree 770. Movies often offer a unique perspective on the past, mixing collective and personal memories, expressions of the regime language, and images that can spark memories for the generations who directly experienced the past, but which also construct new symbols for the second or third generations. The target audience of these movies—as is often the case with historical cinema—is the second or third generation. Cinematography provides a simple and popular way of connecting these generations with the experiences of their predecessors. Thus, different mechanisms of recollected memory are used in order to make the reality of the past more accessible to younger generations or to foreigners with no direct experience of the communist regime. The research also considers a sample of communist propaganda films from the period, and some attempts by the regime’s opponents to present the traumatic realities of communism.

## 2. Family planning politics and propaganda

Family planning tactics were used in the communist bloc of Eastern Europe to respond to the constant need to increase the workforce for achieving the communist ideological goals. This also gave women a new and vital role. In Romania, family planning politics had severe repercussions. Personal trauma resulting from the demands made on women eclipsed any benefits intended by the communist regime. One of the most complete accounts of the topic was written by Gail Kligman. Her 1998 volume *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu’s Romania* offers a detailed approach of the abortion topic and of the consequences that followed the communist politics of reproduction. At national level the topic of family politics under Ceausescu’s regime was approached from the economic and demographic perspective (Andreescu, 2013; Doboş, 2010) and by analyzing the remembering process implications (Anton, 2009; Betea, 2004). It was also analyzed in

Eastern Europe context (David, 1992; Wolchik & Meyer, 1985), and in relation to the communist ideology (Stenvoll, 2006).

Throughout its history, the practice of abortion has been surrounded by an aura of shame, secrecy, and misunderstanding. Despite the impediments raised by religion, or legal sanctions, women have resorted to this practice even at the highest cost—their lives. In ancient Greece, both Plato and Aristotle advocated for abortion as a way of regulating fertility and limiting family size (David, 1992, p. 2). Hippocrates campaigned against it, grounding his view on the physical suffering that abortion can cause (McLaren, 1990). In the Roman Empire, there were few legal restrictions on abortion. The common opinion was that the fetus was a part of a woman's body and women could request its removal. The term "abortion" with its present meaning comes from the Latin *aboriri*, "to perish" (Millar, 1934). During the nineteenth century, most European countries placed severe restrictions on the performance of abortion at any stage of pregnancy. Almost one century later, according to Marxist and Leninist ideology, abortion was viewed as a social illness created by the capitalist system (Stenvoll, 2006, p. 6). It was believed that as social conditions improved and the state assumed a higher role in child rearing, abortion rates would slowly diminish (David, 1992, p. 4). In 1913, Lenin asserted that the Bolsheviks were fighting for "the unconditional annulment of all laws against abortions. Such Laws are nothing but the hypocrisy of the ruling classes" (cited in Karpov & Käriäinen, 2005). Thus on 18 November 1920, the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to legalize abortion, under Lenin's authority and through a decree of the Commissariats of Health and Justice.

Andrej Popov explains the politics underlying the early soviet pro-abortion policy: "Legalization of abortion seemed the most rapid way to create changes in traditional family relations and in women's social positions. The family became an important object of attention for the new Soviet authorities. Traditional family life and religion were the most basic barriers of the old culture. They were the most serious targets of destruction in the attempt to achieve the principal aims of the new Soviet authorities: the construction of a new society and the creation of the new Soviet Man. The abortion policy was one among many instruments in the purposeful destruction of the pre-revolutionary Russian family and Russian culture" (Popov, 1994, p. 274).

In 1936, under Stalin's regime, abortion was criminalized with some exceptions: when the mother's life was in danger or in the case of inheritable disorders. According to the Soviet view, abortion was no longer needed, as the capitalist system no longer existed; women had equal rights and could now bring into the world a new generation (Zielinska, 1987, p. 253). Stalin's death brought about an end to this policy, however, and by 1955, abortion was no longer forbidden. By the mid-1960s, three out of four pregnancies ended in abortion, and the total number of abortions had reached 5.5 million (DaVanzo & Grammich, 2001).

In the 1930s, Romania had a birth rate of 22.8–29.6 per one thousand population (Wolchik, 1985). Romania followed the Soviet example and in 1957, introduced permissive abortion legislation. In exchange for a small fee, women could request an abortion in public hospitals. Ceausescu's vision was a traditional one, rooted in the Stalinist model, centered on the family and its role. Decree 770 of 1 October 1966, stated that all interruptions of pregnancies were illegal except under exceptional circumstances. For more than two decades (1966–1989), the Communist Party, by reinventing the past and manipulating the present, constructed the new identity of "the socialist mothers" (Anton, 2009, p. 12). Fetuses were considered the property of society and thus women had no individual rights to make decisions about their fate. There was no room for individual rights in the socialist society, and citizens were subject to the strict demands of the state (Kligman, 1998). Women had to be members of the Party, committed to the socialist cause, and most importantly, they were required to be the mothers of the "New Man." Abortion was the ultimate form of selfishness and a sin against the entire nation (Keil & Andreescu, 1999, p. 479).

According to the communist ideology, the population had a triple role: workforce, subject of income, and consumer of goods (Soare, 2013, p. 63). The newly adopted pronatalist policy was based

on economic, political, and ideological factors. The need for a large workforce became more prominent in the 1950s, due to the industrialization process implemented by Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej. Population growth was linked to Romania's economic development. Even Ceausescu referred to population as a "component of national power," and "an attribute of State sovereignty" (Ceausescu, 1981). Supplementing Ceausescu's objective of making Romania a leading power in the Balkans, (Flood, 2000, p. 207) population growth was also seen as a source of military power. According to socialist ideology, the family was the center of the communist society, and so "the birth rate should be increased, an adequate age structure of the population and people's youth should be maintained, children should be educated and taken care of because the young generation represents the future of the Romanian socialist nation" (Programul, 1975, p. 68).

Following his dream of rebuilding Romanian society, Ceausescu enhanced women's roles. Women were seen as strong individuals who could contribute to the development of the society as workers, and also as mothers. Romania had one of the highest rates of female involvement in the working sector (Morrison, 2004, p. 170). As Fisher (1985) states, the system initiated a campaign meant to offer equal opportunities for women to attain higher level positions. Unfortunately, this initiative was short lived; it ended as soon as Elena Ceausescu received a position inside the Party Executive Committee (Keil & Andreescu, 1999, p. 489).

On 24 June 1975, the Romanian propaganda system released an iconic movie debating one of the central issues of the country: illegal abortion. Written and directed by Andrew Blaier, "Ilustrate cu flori de camp" (Picture Postcard with Wild Flowers) was based on the story of a young girl, Maria Goran, presented as a victim not of the system, but of her own making. Featuring important Romanian actors, such as Draga Olteanu Matei, Eliza Petrachescu, Carmen Galin, Elena Albu, Georghe Dinica, and Paul Ioachim, this project was meant to emphasize the selfishness and danger that lay beneath a woman's refusal to bring into the world the "New Man." The plot centers on the short-lived love story between Laura, a naive young girl, and Titel, an older, married architect. In time, their relationship results in an unexpected pregnancy. Titel's reaction is to convince Laura that the best way of dealing with this problem is for her to acquire an illegal abortion and for him to try to end his failing marriage. He knows the perfect person to help Laura in her moment of need—a midwife from a small village outside Bucharest. Laura travels to this village, where she will stay in the house of an older woman and her daughter, Irina. In their mutual naivety, Irina and Laura bond, and Irina even tries to make Laura change her mind and keep the child. Due to complications with the abortion, Laura dies, and out of fear of discovery, the midwife buries her body in the backyard. But the trauma does not end here, and Irina—blaming herself for Laura's death—chooses to end her own life. The propagandistic moral of the story is simple: illegal abortions are dangerous; why then be selfish and refuse to bring a child into the glorious socialist world? Why get involved with shady and cruel people, or live with the blame that you killed someone? In the end, the remorse may drive you to end your life.

Many women paid with their lives when they tried to pursue their individual rights in this way, and most of them were forgotten. Maria Goran, however, also became a postmortem victim. Her story was transformed into propaganda in order to serve the Party's pronatalist agenda. The system saw art as the ultimate form of indoctrination and "used it to provide clear answers to social questions that in turn would guide social behavior" (Andreescu, 2014, p. 56). Emphasizing the important role of women in communist society, broadcasts on national television featured propaganda such as this quotation from a young factory worker: "When you are happy it is very easy to say, I am a happy person, all is well, just like I dreamt my life would be. We know that and we send our love and gratitude to comrade N. Ceausescu and comrade E. Ceausescu. We thank them for this beautiful youth" (Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf).

Ten years later in 1985, the tragedy of a young factory worker who died as a result of an illegal abortion was used by propaganda to underscore the negative effects of refusing to have children. The authorities compelled the family of the deceased to carry the funerary cortege through the front

of the factory so that all the women working there would see this mother as a bad example. Propaganda was spread by way of national television in order to increase the fear and terror associated with the communist regime. The TV show “I will expose you to the Spotlight!” (“Te dau la Reflector”) aired on 27 January 1967, and it soon became a matter of social scandal. The show exposed many of the corrupt actions of the communist state, all for the purpose of entertainment. In a world where the greatest gift a woman could offer to the Party and to her country was, according to the communist propaganda, to give birth to the “New Man,” it was nevertheless possible for a woman to be deemed unsuitable to mother her own child. Thus in some cases, the Almighty Communist State could claim a woman was unfit to be a mother and the TV crew, along with members of the Militia, the Romanian police, would appear at the doors of single or unmarried mothers and gave them two choices: they go along with the story, which portrayed them as bad mothers, whose children were taken from them and placed in orphanages, or they went to prison, and their children would still end up in orphanages. The show featured silent, teary-eyed mothers agreeing with everything that the reporters were saying—they were bad mothers who were unable to take care of their children. Their children were then taken into state custody. What the TV show missed is that these women were forced to give birth to unwanted children, grew to love them, and then the very state that put them in this position called them bad and irresponsible mothers and took their children away. Orphanages were filled with hundreds of thousands of “abandoned” children. The pain these women endured at having their children ripped away from them was glossed over by the state praising itself for rescuing these children and bring them up to be the perfect “New Man.”

### 3. Representations in post-1989 Romanian cinema

Abortion was not a private issue under communism. Social and legal context took precedence over individual decisions. Post-1989 interpretations of this phenomenon vary, and also include political and social aspects that transcend the individual sphere. For example, for Maria Bucur-Deckard (2008), abortion was for Romanian women an act of dissidence. It was their way of opposing the regime. The assumption of a “political and national womb” (Bucur-Deckard, 2008) is related to the fact that individual freedom had no place in Romanian communist society. Even the private sector and individual human bodies were subject to totalitarian control. Moreover, dissidence was rarer than in other ex-communist European countries—thus giving way to the need for some post-1989 scholars to find indirect acts of dissidence. The present paper explores the representations of abortion and related trauma by following women’s image in post-1989 Romanian cinema. We are interested in the mechanisms of re-appropriating the past through cinematic representations and in the creation of postmemory (Hirsch, 1997). Postmemory refers to the memory of trauma transmitted to the second or third generations who did not directly experience the past, but have been made aware of it through the stories of their parents or grandparents. Cinema presents itself as another medium of intergenerational memory transmission.

In 2005, a collaboration between Lucia Hosu Longin, Florin Iepan, Paul Pauwels, and Razvan Georgescu resulted in one of the most impressive stories of communist Romania. A coproduction Germany and Romania, “Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf” reveals the story of the “unwanted children” and their families. The documentary uses testimonies, historical facts, images from the communist period, and archival documents to offer a chronological approach of the period. At the heart of the documentary are the painful testimonies of the people that witnessed and experienced the effects of the natality policy: from known public figures and medical personnel to everyday people, including children born due to Decree 770, and also persons who were performing illegal abortions for profit.

Having no modern contraceptives, women often turned to traditional beliefs to induce abortions, including various substances such as mustard, tea, antibiotics, lemon juice, and herbs. Some women, including Romanian celebrities, confessed how—unable to obtain an abortion—they attempted to induce miscarriage using unscientific methods like jumping into a pool of icy water, undergoing curettage on their kitchen table without any anesthesia, or receiving treatment from people who had no medical education or experience. Doctors likened the string of illegal abortions carried out by

mechanics, butchers, and veterinarians to a serial killing. Such negative effects of the ban on abortions were never made public and all the women who died remained unknown, except for one case—that of twenty-year-old Maria Goran who died in a village in the south of Romania. Her remains were found two years later, buried in the backyard of a house, and her story was distorted by communist propaganda and presented in the movie “*Ilustrate cu flori de camp*” (1975).

Starting in 1973, women’s unwillingness to give birth to unwanted children was considered to undermine state authority, and Ceausescu decided to involve the police. Each hospital was outfitted with a prosecutor and members of the secret police responsible for reporting the hospital’s activities. One of the assistants from the Urziceni hospital’s gynecology department recalls watching the cars arrive at night, filled with secret police. Their purpose was to interrogate all women, screen all women’s paper, and the hospital documents. If women denied that they had tried to obtain an abortion, the police threatened them with prison and death, and often beat them in order to obtain a confession.

There were women who refused to implicate those who had helped them with their abortions, even though they knew that in this way they were signing their own death certificates. In the case of illegal abortion that had endangered a woman’s life, doctors were only allowed to operate, even in emergency cases, only with approval from the hospital prosecutor or secret police. Many women who went through illegal abortions died from infections, if they ever reached the hospitals. Saving their lives was often beyond the capability of the medical staff. The lucky ones went home without the possibility of ever having another child—often having had their ovaries or uterus removed. Some of these women were only 18 years old. Their trauma was compounded by the grief of their partners and families. Many men who came to the hospital to see their wives were told that their wives were dead, and received no further information. The documentary “*Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf*” presents the testimony of a nurse, who after so many years, still has tears in her eyes, recalling the desperate look on a man’s face when he came to ask about his wife and received the news that the mother of his four children was dead.

The “New Man” had to be as strong as steel, have the balance of a gymnast, and intelligent as the child wonder Radu Postavaru, who became a musical conductor when he was only five. Postavaru became an international example of the superiority of the new generation. The “New Man” could not be produced by or belong to an undervalued minority, and so the abortion was allowed depending on the women’s ethnicity, for example the Roma women were often still granted abortions in hospitals. Though it began their with different intentions, Decree 770 eventually became an instrument of ethnic purification. The decree influenced many generations. For example, at the end of the 1980s, the children of the decree had become young adults, some of whom were then victims of the same law that contributed to their birth.

As a result of economic problems, women had no desire for having children in a world where they knew they might not be able to feed them. The state response took the form of periodic, mandatory obstetric exams, which were conducted at women’s workplaces, even in factories. In the 1980s, Ceausescu decided that Romania would pay off all external debts, and all imports were shut down, including medicines and reagents. In this period, all pregnancies were tested using male frogs. Though it sounds ridiculous today, this test was popular in the nineteenth century. The procedure was based on the reaction that male frogs had when injected with the urine of pregnant women.

The documentary mainly responds to its task: to resume the tragedy of communist politics of family, using personal testimonies in order to make the past knowledgeable for the second or third generation. Putting face to face the images filmed during the communist period and the testimonies made after that period, the documentary offers direct access to the lives and experiences lived by the women and by their families who were affected by the Romanian politics of family during the communist period. The images of happy women singing and dancing, images that were also used by the communist propaganda, contrast with the pain and the traumatic experiences narrated during

the filmed interviews. The main idea brought forward by the documentary is the permanent surveillance of the fertile women who became a public good, as they were controlled and kept under permanent scrutiny. The responsibility of the unwanted pregnancies was entirely the woman's burden even if they were living in a world dominated by man. Thus, the lack of man involvement in dealing with the unwanted pregnancies is also raised. The women risked their lives during illegal abortions, and if they survived they also risked their freedom. Unfortunately, even if the documentary represents perhaps the best resource for the second or third generation and even for the non-Romanian citizens to learn more about the past and the communist politics of family, there are some topics that failed to be considered. Embracing the hypothesis of a collective struggle between women and Ceausescu, the promoter of the politics of family, the documentary tends to offer a simplistic vision over the responsibility for the past. From the beginning the documentary states Ceausescu's main responsibility by pointing his plan of changing the country without addressing the existence of a complex political apparatus that ideologically and politically controlled the country and its people (Verdery, 1991). The final scenes presenting the execution of Ceausescu and his wife in 1989 indirectly raise the question of the "scapegoat," the guilt for everything, in that period their death being interpreted as the end of a tragic period. Thus, Ceausescu's death was used to diminish the public attention given to the past, without properly addressing the topic of guilt and individual and collective responsibility. The documentary presents the facts, offering some interpretations over the past, elaborating on the political and ideological context and suggesting the idea of the unwanted born children as the main agents in the 1989 change of regime. In 1989 those children were the young adults who took the Romanian streets and asked their freedom. They were once more victims of the communist ideology, as many young men and women were killed during the 1989 bloody events in Timisoara and Bucharest.

The topic of abortion in the communist era was analyzed by Cristian Mungiu in his film *4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days*, which was released in 2007. Initially, the movie was conceived as a part of a wider project entitled "Povestiri din Epoca de Aur" (Tales of the Golden Age). This project presents stories of ordinary people living in communist Romania: "The Legend of the Official Visit" (*Legenda Activistului in Inspectie*), "The Legend of the Party Photographer" (*Legenda Fotografului Oficial*), "The Legend of the Chicken Driver" (*Legenda Soferului de Gaini*), "The Legend of the Greedy Policeman" (*Legenda Militianului Lacom*), and "The Legend of the Air Sellers" (*Legenda Vanzatorilor de Aer*).

The first frames of the film present the mundane life of the two protagonists, Otilia and Gabita. Through images of simple objects like soaps, shampoo brands, instant coffee, powdered milk, dorm furniture, and shared shower rooms, the viewers are slowly introduced into the everyday life of these two women (Parvulescu, 2009). As Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy and Oana Popescu-Sandu observe, "these objects act like a Proustian madeleine—an invitation to go back to the past but following a less traveled aesthetic road" (2014, p. 231). The movie focuses on the friendship between the two women and their responses to the trauma of abortion. As Wilson (2008) observes, the movie's "concerns are not confined to the emotive subject [of abortion]: rather than having any male bias, then, the film's achievement is to contextualize abortion with reference in particular to the question of women's friendship" (p. 18). The movie starts by presenting the two female protagonists who are preparing themselves to leave the room and make a trip whose purpose remains unknown to the audience. Gabita is having troubles packing for their future journey and doesn't know what to do with her two goldfish. Otilia appears distracted by in her own thoughts, as she moves frantically through the room with no purpose at hand. She soon leaves the dormitory to meet with her boyfriend, Adi. She needs to borrow money for the journey. The difference between the two girls is readily apparent, as observed by Godeanu-Kenworthy and Popescu-Sandu (2014, p. 226): while Gabita can shock by her lack of energy and apathetic attitude, Otilia can be best described as the centrifugal power. She is in charge of providing the money, booking the hotel room, and even meeting with Mr. Bebe, who is not seen as the "villain" of this film but the offspring or the expression of the monstrous communist system (Florescu, 2011).

While the first frames of the movie are meant to recreate the reality of the communist era, they also present the objects that make up the only available private space within that world. The attention shifts from the individual and private space, as much as the communist system permitted such to exist, to the repressive outside world that the friends will soon confront and be victimized by. The objective of their journey is finally revealed as the acquisition of an illegal abortion. The viewers become witnesses to the women's trauma, step by step, as they follow the two friends into a clandestine world, along blind corridors, where there is only the sound of footsteps. Catalina Florina Florescu affirms that the darkness is a metaphor presented by Mungiu: "In communist Romania the one who was silent and submissive was the one who could have a long life. Put differently, the one who stayed in darkness was safe" (2011, p. 3).

The two girls meet Mr. Bebe (the doctor) in a hotel room. He begins asking routine questions, and somehow the scene seems like a regular visit to the doctor, despite the unusual circumstances. The fact that Gabita is due in four months and not two, as she initially claimed, makes the doctor refuse to proceed with the abortion for the established price (3,000 lei). He proposes a new deal. He will perform the abortion if both women agree to have sex with him. "In a society with questionable moral principles, this rape will pass unnoticed. In other words, Mr. Bebe's offence has the perfect alibi: how could these women report the rape to the authorities since it is part of a secret, desperate deal" (Florescu, 2011, p. 5). After the women's sexual abuse and after the doctor exits, Otilia has to leave Gabita for a few hours to attend the birthday party of her boyfriend's mother. Outside the hotel room, life goes on in spite of this tragedy, as if the hotel room exists in a parallel universe. Otilia is shown at the dinner table, surrounded by people chatting and laughing; her grief remains her own. In communist Romanian society, the culture of dissimulation (Kligman, 1998) was practiced as a way of survival, and this particular scene in Mungiu's film exemplifies this concept. The dinner party is emblematic of not only the differences between generations but also between members of different social strata and the benefits afforded to some. Adi's parents and their friends (Adi is Otilia's boyfriend) are all doctors and part of a certain elite class that has given them immunity against state control. They have access to black market goods like expensive cigarettes, drinks, and other objects that were typically used for bribery, sometimes even to procure an illegal abortion (Godeanu-Kenworthy & Popescu-Sandu, 2014, p. 234). *Confesiunile unui cafegiu* (The Confessions of a Coffeehouse Owner), features the story of Florescu (2014), who dedicated his life to serving his clientele and had access to goods commonly used in the black market (coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, etc.). Obstetricians were regularly paid in black market merchandise by Securitate officers and Communist Party leaders (*nomenklatura*) to illegally terminate their wives' or girlfriends' unwanted pregnancies. Florescu helped these doctors by buying and redistributing the goods obtained as payment for their interventions.

When she returns to the hotel room, Otilia receives a gruesome job: to get rid of the fetus. This thirty-second shot of the aborted embryo represents an oft-criticized moment in Mungiu's movie. But as Asbjørn Grønstad points out (2012, p. 6), the image of the fetus lying on the bathroom floor acts as a reminder that this is not an entertainment film, and in a society where food shortage was a daily problem, abortion was a family planning strategy adopted by many women. The next emblematic image of the movie shows Otilia walking the streets of the city, carrying in her bag the dead fetus and searching for a place to get rid of it. Returning to the hotel, she finds Gabita in the restaurant. There, Otilia asks that they never speak again about what happened that day. The final scenes of the movie are vague, leaving critics free to interject their own ideas and interpretations. Some saw the end as a celebration of the individual who triumphed in the communist system. "The very last shot presents Otilia facing upward, exhausted yet still somewhat satisfied with the outcome of the illegal intervention, in which, for once, they fooled the communist system" (Florescu, 2011, p. 12). Others, such as Parvulescu (2009), emphasize the fact that the last scene of the movie, the "post-traumatic silence," undoubtedly represents the mourning of a child lost.

After requesting that they not speak of the incident again, Otilia looks directly at the camera—implicitly looking into the eyes of the audience—and in this moment the transfer of testimony is

realized. The two women will not speak again, but the film made the audience witness to their ordeal and Otilia's look invites the audience to speak for them; to remember and to help them, albeit indirectly, to come to terms with the past. As the victims are not able to re-experience the past by remembering and re-telling their stories, the audience—as witness of the past via cinematographic mediation—is invited to become active in this personal but also collective process of reckoning with the past. Otilia's gaze is a cry for help at the level of collective remembrance.

According to Parvulescu (2009), Mungiu's film focuses on daily life under communism in Romania, and pictures the Romanian society in a less judgmental manner than the official historical accounts, precluding the collective condemnation of the past without consideration for the individuals who had few options in finding a way to cope with life under communism. The movie can be viewed as an objective storyteller, presenting the reality of a totalitarian system through the perspective of individual lives. Through the mediation of cinema, which elicits empathy, the audience has the ability to interpret and experience the gruesome historical period when the only free space was hidden within individuals. After the movie was released, some Romanian critics saw Mungiu's creation as an opportunity to recollect the past, describing this film as a way for the younger generations to learn about the past and to avoid the mistakes of their parents. Others point out the capacity of the movie to highlight the problems and corruption of present society. On the other hand, some critics remark that Mungiu's view is too minimalist, and encourages viewers to interpret the film based on their cultural and political beliefs: "Thus in its transition from the domestic to the global marketplace, 432 [as was Mungiu's movie named shortened] was transformed from an act of amoral probing of Romanian individual and collective memory about communism, into a film about the controversial nature of individual choices within a liberal capitalist paradigm" (Godeanu-Kenworthy & Popescu-Sandu, 2014, p. 226).

The film does not exclusively focus on the trauma of abortion and rape as exceptional events, but attends to the daily experiences of women who were forced to survive under a totalitarian system. Florentina Andreescu approaches the movie from the same perspective, as she underlines the "agonizing condition of Romanian women whose body and sexuality were appropriated and strictly regulated by the socialist state." Wilson (2008) analyzes the film in relation to other movies that take abortion as their subject—such as *Juno* (2008)—in which all that matters is the survival of the child without any focus on the mother (who, in the case of *Juno*, gives her child up for adoption). In Mungiu's film, the mother seems to have no feelings for her unborn child, as her main focus is to survive in the absurd communist world. "The focus is in fact chiefly on the young women whose lives are newly damaged by the actions they take; the extent to which they are able to take care for themselves or of each other is the main moral concern" (Wilson, 2008, p. 18).

The topic of abortion raises many questions related not only to the lives of women, but also to the politics of education and raising children under the Romanian communist system. In 1985, Copel Moscu produced a short documentary entitled *There Will Come a Day*. This film focuses on the everyday activity of a turkey farm, describing all the processes involved in the work, as well as the lives of the workers and their children, who spent their days in the farm's kindergarten. The movie traces an obvious parallel between raising birds and raising children, and so the state censored it and the film was not presented to the public until five years later, in 1990. Scenes of female workers deciding in a minute which chicks were normal (and therefore kept), and which did not meet all the necessary qualities (and were therefore thrown away) served as a poignant metaphor of a state that viewed human children in the same way.

There were numerous factors that contributed to the institutionalization of children. Gabriela Walker underlines some of these: the restriction on abortions, which eventually led to an increased rate of child abandonment; the communist system's ignorant perspective on children with special needs—in the eyes of the Party, such children did not meet up to the standards of the "New Man"—and the general state of fear in which the entire population lived (2011, p. 151).

The process of institutionalizing children was delegated to the Ministry of Education. Using as benchmarks a child's ability to walk, talk, or chew by the age of three, the ministry would decide if the child should be housed in a regular orphanage or a special institution. As Lynn Morrison asserts, children who were raised in orphanages had a slower development, due to the fact that they were not engaged in social activities—nobody talked to them or even picked them up. Due to poor muscle development and even poorer coordination, these children were deemed disabled and moved to special institutions (Morrison, 2004, p. 171). Even the smallest physical defect could mean an entire childhood spent in orphanages or other institutions. In one of his studies, Hancock (1997) points out that most of the institutionalized children were Roma, due to the fact that the Roma families had low socioeconomic status and their parents were more likely to be unable to care for them. There are numerous cases of children with disabilities placed in institutions by their families, who strongly believed (encouraged by an agent of the Party) that their children would have a happier and healthier life in the hospital. After their admittance, children were deprived of human contact and affection and received no education. The truth about these children's living conditions came to the public's attention starting in the 1990s, with TV documentary series such as *Turning Point*, *60 Minutes*, and *20/20*. Hancock (1997) describes the situation this way: "Because of a lack of human love and contact during their first years of life, a frightening number of the children have underdeveloped motor and communication skills; some are unable to speak or walk or feel normal human emotions." These institutions were closed spaces, allowing no visitors. The staff were usually uneducated workers hired from nearby villages or cities, and were forced to take care of high-needs children without funding, food, or medicine, ultimately watching them perish day after day. According to a study conducted by Saupé (2008), in institutions such as Cighid, 50% of the cases taken in died each year. According to communist ideology, the New Man had to be harmonious, intelligent, athletic, and strong, and would help transform Romania into an international power. These children had none of these qualities, and so the system hid them. This was Ceausescu's way of cleansing Romanian society. Studies conducted in the 1990s and later have analyzed the negative effects of institutionalization of children, including severe cognitive deficits, and social deficits bordering on autism. The slow cognitive development these children showed after adoption (Kaler & Freeman, 1994) demonstrates yet another insidious effect of the communist regime. In countless ways, women, children, and their families were victimized by the state policies.

#### 4. Conclusion

During the course of this study, I interviewed a 60-year-old woman, who confessed to me her inner pain at not having had children. She was twice married, but both marriages ended without children. In the first case, she was physically abused; in the second, her husband was too old. She told me that she was not bothered by the fact that she was forced to pay a celibacy fee, which the communist state imposed on all couples without children. What was really difficult for her was the deference the state showed to families with more children, often in ways that significantly impacted the quality of life for those who were childless. Examples ranged from living space—those having more children had the right to live in a bigger apartment—to daily food rations. She recalled the endless queues that formed for everything, recounting in particular the time she waited incessantly to buy some meat. The distribution of meat, was determined according to the number of children one had: mothers with five or more children—"hero mothers," as the propaganda deemed them—received their rations first, then those with four children, three, etc. At last when it was the turn of the women and men without children, they found everything had been sold and the truck that had transported the meat had already been washed. Childless couples did not deserve much in the Romanian totalitarian system, and as the goods were rationed, they were among the first to be considered without value.

The cinema examples presented here captured women's trauma during the communist regime. Based on real testimony (*Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf*), and also on created characters (*4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days*), the films cross-generationally transmit women's struggle to survive in a hostile society where liberty was limited to their inner thoughts and emotions. As the characters from Mungiu's film show, many Romanian women were confronted with difficult choices, and their

lives were trapped in a totalitarian system that controlled even their bodies. Many of them did not try to fool the system (Florescu, 2011), nor oppose it through acts of dissidence (Bucur-Deckard, 2008; Cazan, 2011), but simply resigned themselves to living in a society that did not respect or treat them with dignity. Women clearly wanted to have the freedom of choice, especially with respect to their own bodies, but they also wanted better material conditions and a free society where their children would have a future. Life under the system was not something to be chosen or refused for the women portrayed by Mungiu's film; it was the only social reality that they knew. Essentially their entire lives were spent under the same totalitarian conditions, as the Romanian communist regime lasted from the end of World War II until 1989. As previously mentioned, critics interpreted the abortion in Mungiu's film as a dissident act of women that reclaimed their bodies "as the first location where the clandestine space begins to take shape" (Cazan, 2011, p. 94). Others remarked on the alienation of the women from their bodies, as the experience of the abortion and rape is connected to a stranger from whom the two characters actively try to separate (Andreescu, 2014) as a mechanism of surviving. This separation is a symptom of traumatic stress that cannot be confronted directly. The audience is witness through the lens of the camera, and at the end of movie the abortion is only one traumatic act in a long string of abuses that constituted Romanian women's daily lives. That is why we cannot agree with Florescu (2011) observation that the two women were not victims, as "they manage to flawlessly keep hidden the whole abortion procedure" (pp. 13–14). One of them went through an invasive and brutal abortion procedure, both of them were sexually abused, and all of this in constant fear of legal punishment in a hostile society. No one can deny the victim traits presented in the movie, but victimization does not make the characters weak. It is the task of post-memory to recognize the victims, to create spaces for their stories, and to cherish their narratives and their power to endure the past traumas. Mungiu's characters are representative of the Romanian women trapped in a totalitarian world where they were treated objects (as in the case of rape or the confines of their social status, in which their role was limited to the function of birthing and raising children) and had few choices in life: they could become wives and mothers, or become criminals (as abortion was a penal crime). Through the mediation of cinema, Mungiu preserves and presents women's personal stories, and these narratives are socially representative for the broader experience of Romanian women. Despite significant potential to mediate past experiences across generations, these narratives remain largely overlooked—the forgotten or ignored stories of the inconsequential few. It is imperative that we re-appropriate the past through these personal stories, through the powerful tool of cinema, rather than referring only to the official discourse of collective memory. The tendency of the latter is to make generalizations, and to gloss over the differences between personal memories and the official story with its ideological spin. This puts our re-appropriation of the past at risk of becoming shallow, as meaningful personal stories are forgotten or dismissed and lose their place in the collective memory. The second question raised by the cinematographic representation of the past concerns the legal and moral responsibility. The two cinematographic examples discussed here failed to directly address this question. This is not only a matter of women who died, unborn children and the guilt feeling involved by abortion—a feeling never mentioned in the two productions analyzed.<sup>1</sup> Nor is only a matter of the disabled children whose shocking images of negligence and criminal abandonment presented in "Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf" can haunt the viewer's mind; it is also a matter of the responsibility of their women's caretakers and the failure of the public opinion to request justice in this matter.<sup>2</sup> Even if indirectly, the cinematographic representations of the past must invite the viewer to think over the past and over the personal and collective guilt: how was it possible to allow so much suffering and why is the Romanian society not focusing more on this process of coming to terms with the past? As knowledge is the main step in this direction the cinema responds well to this need by offering glimpses over the past. However, this process needs to be continued in a systematic manner, with the implication of political and official actors and based on personal testimony. The personal narrative can surpass the difficulties of relating to the past only based on institutional frames of memory,<sup>3</sup> and can enrich the empathic level involved by postmemory (Hirsch, 1997). It is never too late for justice, and for assuming the legal and moral responsibility for the past wrongs, especially as the younger generations are quietly losing the contact with their parents and grandparents' experiences of the past.

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### Notes

1. The guilt feeling is a repetitive motive in the interviews used by Lavinia Betea in her study.
2. The caretaker woman interviewed in the documentary spoke about the ordeal endured by these children and by the fact that she worked there only because she needed a job, but not for a moment did she reflect on her personal guilt and/or responsibility. It is clear that the process of coming to terms with the past didn't properly include the legal and moral responsibility for the past, as these elements are not present at the level of personal and public discourse.
3. For example, in many former eastern communist countries different associations of former victims or deportees took the task of educating the younger generations through different programs conducted in schools and various educational media. For example, see the case of the Association of Deportees in Poland: Zessin-Jurek (2015).

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