

The memory of communism in Romanian art after 1989

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Abstract: The memory of communism remains a persistent and influential presence in post-communist Romanian society and artistic practice. This article examines how the communist past is represented, reconstructed, and critically reinterpreted in contemporary Romanian art. Drawing on theoretical approaches to memory and recollection, the study explores the ways in which individual and collective memories are mediated through artistic expression. Focusing on the works of Ion Grigorescu, Șerban Savu, and Cristian Rusu, the article analyses how different generations of artists engage with the legacy of communism—ranging from direct testimonial practices to indirect, reflective reconstructions shaped by post-communist transition. Through film, painting, performance, and installation, these artists transform the memory of communism into a critical tool for understanding trauma, historical continuity, and the ongoing impact of totalitarian ideology on Romanian society.

Keywords: memory of communism; post-communist art; Romanian contemporary art; collective memory; trauma; Ion Grigorescu; Șerban Savu; Cristian Rusu.

Introduction

The memory of communism continues to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration, reflection and debate, even though 35 years have passed since the regime collapsed. This article aims to analyse how the memory of the communist period is represented and reinterpreted in Romanian art. The research focuses on a fundamental question: How is the memory of the communism illustrated in post-communist artworks?

The topic remains extremely relevant, as the painful and traumatic past continues to influence and permeate Romanian society. Through this research, I attempt to highlight the persistence of the memory of communism in post-communist artistic creations. Art that incorporates the memory of the communist period is not merely a simple recollection of the past, but highlights the profound impact that the communist period has on the present.

After the 1990s, interest in exploring memory and trauma in Romania grew significantly, which is no coincidence. The fall of the communist regime was followed by a gradual opening up of the archives of the former communist states,

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which allowed new information about the past to be discovered¹. The moment of change, which came after the manipulation of history, was shocking and confusing, bringing with it a need to re-evaluate the past.

To understand the complexity of the subject, it is important to define the concept of “memory” according to Jean Piaget. The psychologist described memory as a form of knowledge, more precisely “knowledge of the past”². According to psychologist Mielu Zlate, through memory, individuals “imprint, preserve and reuse”³ not only their own experiences, but also those around them. Based on research conducted by psychologist Septimiu Chelcea, these processes – imprinting, preserving and reusing – appear in most psychological definitions of memory, under the specific names of memorisation, storage and reactivation⁴.

However, memory is interdependent with the issue of recollection, defined by Maurice Halbwachs as “a reconstruction of the past with the help of present data ... many representations that are based, at least in the background, on testimonies and arguments”⁵. The author argues that a detailed reconstruction of an event from a closed personal perspective is not sufficient to produce a memory as a result. The information must correspond to that of other individuals and vice versa “because it is constantly transmitted from them to us and vice versa, which is only possible if we have all been and continue to be part of the same society”⁶.

Mihaela Moraru considers that memory “is nothing more than the process of recollection, of remembering, a process in which memory plays a primordial role, as it is the repository of memories”⁷. Memory is not stored only as flat information, but involves several processes, such as feelings, emotions, experiences, where the affective side of the individual is engaged. We access our memories through memory, and when we access them or when they are accessed, memories are brought into the present and serve as a source of self-knowledge, self-reflection, as well as knowledge of others and the surrounding world. From the point of view of author Ana-Maria Cornilă, when it comes to memory, it is not just “a simple repository where memories accumulate and memory is not a simple repetition of the past”⁸.

¹ *** (2016). *Art in Romania between 1945 and 2000: an analysis from the perspective of the present*, UNArte, București, pp. 242-243.

² Jean Piaget (1999). *Mémoire et intelligence*, 1970, apud Mielu Zlate, *Psihologia mecanismelor cognitive* [Psychology of cognitive mechanisms], Polirom, Iași, p. 345.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Septimiu Chelcea (2008). *Psychosociology. Theories, Research, Applications*, Polirom, Iași, p. 130.

⁵ Maurice Halbwachs (2007). *Collective Memory*, Institutul European, Iași, p. 117.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁷ Mihaela Moraru (2015). *The Cherry Orchard in a Romanian Adaptation (from Pintilie's 'Wheat Field' to Alexa's 'Jars')*, “Romanoslavica”, vol. LI, no. 2, Editura Universității București, București, p. 40.

⁸ Ana-Maria Cornilă (2008). *Literature – mnemonic art*, “AIC”, no. 22, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, p. 3.

This brief introduction to the role of memory and remembrance in the individual provides a general framework for understanding the mechanisms through which the memory of the communist period influences society. The totalitarian communist regime has, in a relatively short time, become a subject of historical study, but one that continues to have a significant impact on society. The collapse of the regime forced Eastern European countries to inevitably confront issues related to memory and forgetting, transforming these themes into central concerns for post-communist societies.

The communist period had a profound impact on culture and artistic practices. In most cases, these were subject to official propaganda, with many artists being forced to work within the limits imposed by the totalitarian regime. However, some of them found ways to criticise the system, creating works of art that addressed themes diametrically opposed to what the state accepted.

A relevant example, which incorporates memories of the communist period into his work, is the artist Ion Grigorescu (born 1945, Bucharest, Romania). In Eastern Europe during the communist period, experimental art, a movement to which Grigorescu belonged, represented a response against the state. This artistic practice symbolised a way for artists to resist the system, express their creative freedom and criticise totalitarianism through various artistic forms that alluded to the problems of the communist regime.

Ion Grigorescu is an artist who is difficult to characterise and decipher, his artistic career being extremely complex. Since the 1960s, a doubling of his artistic personality has been observed, notable for the contrasts he has used over time. As Aurora Király states in her significant work “Photography in Contemporary Romanian Art: Trends in Romania after 1989”, Ion Grigorescu oscillated between “exhibitionism” and “introversion”, towards “avant-garde experiments” and explorations with religious connotations⁹. The author adds an essential comment on the artist's works, namely that they can be seen as instruments “of analysis and exorcism”¹⁰ of the system to which he belonged. The works he created over time materialised through the use of themes and discussions anchored in the reality that surrounded him.

He is a versatile artist who has used a wide range of media, from painting, photography, drawing, photo collage, mural painting, *performance*, film, engraving and even icons. His works only became known to the general public after the 1990s because, during the regime, he explored various unconventional themes, such as sexuality, the human body, and the inadequacies of the communist regime, making it impossible to exhibit them publicly¹¹.

⁹ Aurora Király (2006). *Photography in Contemporary Romanian Art: Trends in Romania after 1989*, UNARTE, București, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ The Contemporaries. *Ion Grigorescu*, retrieved from: <https://www.contemporanii.org/artisti/ion-grigorescu>, accessed on 10 December 2024.

In this study, we will refer to two significant works by the artist, “Dialogue with President Ceaușescu” (1978) and “Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu” (2007). The works created highlight both the difficulties and dissatisfaction with the communist regime and the influence that the regime had on Romanian society.



Fig. 1 Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with President Ceaușescu*, film, 7:11 min., 1978, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146172>

The first work captures an imaginary dialogue between the artist and himself, taking place in his studio, where he plays two opposing roles: on the one hand, he is the artist, and on the other, he is the former president of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu. In this film, lasting 7 minutes and 11 seconds, a contrast is created between the two roles: on the right, the artist appears dressed in ordinary clothes, and on the left, he is portrayed as a character wearing the dictator's distinctive clothes and a mask that faithfully reproduces his features¹².

The work highlights both the doubling of artists during the communist period and the restoration of a power relationship. This time, the artist is heard questioning the former president: “I tried to put myself in Ceaușescu's shoes and imagine how he would respond to the tough questions that no one in real life would have had the courage to ask him”¹³. The film ends with the quote: “If the people cannot rule, then at least let them criticise!”, a paradoxical call to action made in silence to Romanian society.

In the interview between Klara Kemp-Welch and Ion Grigorescu, the process of making the film is explained in detail. Ion Grigorescu states that the

¹² MoMA, *Ion Grigorescu. Dialogue with President Ceaușescu*, retrieved from: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146172>, accessed on 10 December 2024.

¹³ Klara Kemp-Welch (2013). *Impossible Interviews with Ceaușescu: Ion Grigorescu and the Dialogic Imagination*, in Șerban, Alina (2013). *Ion Grigorescu. The Man with a Single Camera*, Sternberg Press, London, p. 160.

work did not involve any complicated technique. The artist recorded the two scenes one after the other, and the sequences were then superimposed, thus creating the visual effect of an imaginary dialogue between the two characters. In addition, the artist used a specific method of typing the dialogue on thin “indigo” paper and then integrating it into the film¹⁴.



Fig. 2 Ion Grigorescu, *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, film, 22 min., 2007, <https://artmargins.com/reenactment-repetition-return/>

In her work “Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu,” Klara Kemp-Welch points out that Ion Grigorescu reuses the concept from a new perspective, exploring the changes that have taken place in the post-communist period, with Romania's integration into the European Union¹⁵. Unlike the first version, the 2007 work is significantly longer, lasting 22 minutes.

The new dialogue was filmed inside the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, making a direct reference to the art created during the communist and post-communist periods, but also to the profound mark that the totalitarian regime left on society and culture. This time, the film is in colour, shot with a mobile camera that also captures some outdoor scenes, and features sound, unlike the previous version, which was silent. Another new feature of the 2007 version is the introduction of a new character, Elena Ceaușescu. The first sequences show Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu walking through the courtyard of the Palace of Parliament, the characters being played by Ion Grigorescu and his assistant, both wearing oversized masks. The film then presents a new interview between the artist, symbolising the ordinary man, and the former leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu.

¹⁴ Klara Kemp-Welch, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 169.



Fig. 3 Ion Grigorescu, *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, film, 22 min., 2007, <https://artmargins.com/reenactment-repetition-return/>

Through his work, Ion Grigorescu captures the memory of communism and how it can become an artistic tool for critical reflection, reconciliation with the past, and an attempt to offer strength. He not only offers a recollection of the past, but also an analysis of the impact of the communist regime on society.

The rupture caused by the events of 1989 led to a subsequent need to recover and reinterpret the symbols of the communist past, as evoking that period had a potentially healing effect. However, these gestures were situated between the legacy of the traumas of the communist period and nostalgia for that period. Nevertheless, the predominant artistic themes in the period after the fall of the regime did not focus on the social and political realities of that period. After 1989, there was a phenomenon of forgetting and repressing communism. Magda Radu states that it was only later that artists began to bring symbols from the communist period to the fore, with the post-2000 generation focusing on building a brand of communism¹⁶. After 2008, when the economic crisis profoundly amplified the general anxiety of society, this phenomenon intensified.

To offer a complementary perspective on how the memory of communism is addressed in Romanian art, I will highlight the vision offered by artists Șerban Savu (b. 1978, Sighișoara, Romania) and Cristian Rusu (b. 1972, Cluj-Napoca, Romania). Unlike Ion Grigorescu, these artists belong to the generation born towards the end of the communist regime, being influenced more by the echoes of the era and the effects of the post-communist transition by direct experience of the dictatorship. The collaborative work I will present highlights the difficulty of erasing the traces of history and the traumas that Romanian society went through during the communist period.

¹⁶ Magda Radu (2012). *Visual Optimism After 20 Years*, “Arta. Visual Arts Magazine”, Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici din România, no. 4-5, p. 51.

Artists of Șerban Savu and Cristian Rusu's generation often filter the past through collective memories transmitted by family, society and history. They try to understand and reinterpret the totalitarian regime through their work, approaching the past from various perspectives, reflecting on how historical memories and traumas are transmitted and felt in the present¹⁷.

Șerban Savu has distinguished himself through his "realistic" style and a technique often associated with the "paradocumentary"¹⁸. The scenes created by the artist offer a careful look at everyday life, addressing the subtleties of the post-communist transition and the lasting effects of communism on Romanian society. Cristina Beligăr delves into the artist's creative universe and asserts that after 2016, the scenes he creates and the themes he uses are no longer directly related to the post-communist transition, but focus on the architectural and social effects of communism¹⁹.

The characters in Șerban Savu's works are often treated in a way that makes them unrecognisable. Dawid Radziszewski's description of Șerban Savu's works is quite surprising, as he states that the creations are influenced by classical European painters such as "Leon Battista Alberti, the idyllic landscapes of Poussin and Lorrain, and finally representations of peasants by Pieter Bruegel and Jean-François Millet"²⁰.

Cristian Rusu explores ruin as a manifestation of the sublime, using abandoned spaces to evoke both their fragility and the traces of history. Through the various media he uses, from drawing, photography, video, installation and *performance*, the artist creates new connections between architecture and aesthetics, sensitivity, ideology and utopia²¹.

For the present research, I consider the approach of the joint work entitled "Reenactment. A Reconstruction for the Past" (2016). The work brings to the fore the mosaic from the former "Steagul Roșu" Factory in Brașov²², exploring how collective memory is reconstructed. The process of creating the work was complex and took place in several stages.

¹⁷ *Romanian contemporary art. Transition, Trauma And The Cluj Connection*, "Cordmagazine", retrieved from: <https://cordmagazine.com/art/romanian-contemporary-art-transition-trauma-and-the-cluj-connection/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

¹⁸ Dawid Radziszewski, *Șerban Savu*, retrieved from: <https://dawidradziszewski.com/artist/serban-savu/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

¹⁹ Cristina Beligăr, *Șerban Savu: "I always imagined myself as a workaholic"*, in "Scena 9", retrieved from: <https://www.scena9.ro/article/serban-savu-interviu>, accessed 10 December 2024.

²⁰ Dawid Radziszewski, *op. cit.*

²¹ ArtEncounters, *Cristian Rusu*, retrieved from: <https://2017.artencounters.ro/ro/rusu-cristian-rusu/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

²² Institutul Cultural Român, *Cristian Rusu and Șerban Savu. Reenactment. A Reconstruction for the Past*, retrieved from: <https://www.icr.ro/pagini/cristian-rusu-si-serban-savu-reenactement-o-reconstructie-pentru-trecut>, 10 December 2024.



Fig. 4 Șerban Savu, Cristian Rusu, *Reenactment. A Reconstruction for the Past*, acrylic on plasterboard, 250 x 650 cm, 2016, <https://www.plan-b.ro/exhibition/2271/>

In the first phase, Șerban Savu recreated the mosaic from the former factory using acrylic on plasterboard, preserving the “character of the original work”²³. The second process took the form of a performance by Cristian Rusu, who destroyed the recreated mosaic, a symbolic and metaphorical act referring to the consequences of the communist regime.

The resulting fragments were kept by the artists like “ancient ruins,” thus referring to the Renaissance practice of preserving relics or to the symbolism of the Berlin Wall, as presented to us through Pier Paolo Pancotto's vision, where pieces of the wall became souvenirs laden with meaning²⁴. In the final stage, the destroyed fragments were reconstructed, like a puzzle²⁵, offering the viewer an overview of the rediscovered “artifact”²⁶.

Through this work, the two artists bring into discussion both the issue of iconography during the communist period and the process of degradation of its vestiges over time. By attempting to understand the communist period, the artists bring to light a forgotten mosaic, erased from collective memory, which they integrate into a new artistic discourse.

²³ Vetrobaji, Răzvan Anton & Miklósi Dénes, *Cristian Rusu & Șerban Savu, Mihai Șovăială*, retrieved from: <https://www.vetrobaji.net/2016/10/05/razvan-anton-miklosi-denes-cristian-rusu-serban-savu-mihai-sovaiala/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

²⁴ Pier Paolo Pancotto, *Cristian Rusu and Șerban Savu. Reenactment. Ricostituire il passato*, Galleria d'arte Accademia di Romania in Roma, 2024, exhibition catalogue, p. 7.

²⁵ Vetrobaji, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Pier Paolo Pancotto, *op. cit.*, p. 7.



Fig. 5. Șerban Savu, Cristian Rusu, *Reenactment. A Reconstruction for the Past*, acrylic on plasterboard, 250 x 650 cm, 2016, <https://www.plan-b.ro/exhibition/2271/>

The memory of communism remains an important subject in post-communist Romanian art, continuing to influence society and culture even today. Through the information presented and the works analysed, the artists not only recall the past, but also highlight the impact of the communist regime on Romanian society. Through the works of the artists presented, the public can access new perspectives and ways of understanding the communist period. While Ion Grigorescu provides direct testimony about the regime, Șerban Savu and Cristian Rusu highlight the degradation of the communist period and its continuity in Romanian society.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that post-communist Romanian art does not merely recall the communist past but actively interrogates its lasting effects on society, culture, and collective consciousness. Through diverse artistic strategies, the examined works reveal memory as a dynamic and critical process, shaped by both personal experience and transmitted narratives. By revisiting, fragmenting, and reconstructing symbols of the communist era, Romanian artists contribute to a deeper understanding of historical trauma and its persistence in the present.

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