Opposition to the Communist Regime on Screen: Representations of Intellectual Dissidence in Post-1989 Romanian Cinema

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving representation of intellectual dissidence in Romanian cinema after the fall of communism, focusing on three films: *Fox: Hunter* (1993), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006), and *The Case of Engineer Ursu* (2023). Through a comparative analysis grounded in film theory, memory studies, and political history, the study argues that Romanian cinema has assumed a compensatory role in narrating the moral and historical dimensions of opposition to the communist regime. Drawing on frameworks from scholars such as Marc Ferro, Robert Rosenstone, and David Bordwell, the article examines how each film constructs distinct narrative universes that reflect changing public attitudes toward the recent past. The article traces a shift from the tragic solemnity of early post-revolutionary portrayals to the reflexive irony of the New Romanian Cinema and finally to the factual, justice-seeking tone of recent documentary. These aesthetic evolutions mirror Romania's ongoing struggle with historical accountability, civic memory, and critical consciousness. By recovering the figure of the intellectual dissident, cinema emerges as both a site of ethical engagement and a space of public remembrance in a post-totalitarian society still negotiating its relationship with the past.

Keywords: intellectual dissidence, critical consciousness, Post-communist Romania, Romanian cinema, communism, civic memory.

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More than three decades after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Romania continues to grapple with the critical acknowledgment of its totalitarian legacy. Although the transition to democracy began immediately after 1989, the official process of confronting the communist past has often been delayed and marked by hesitation. Notably, the regime was formally condemned only on December 18, 2006, by President Traian Băsescu—seventeen years after the Revolution of 1989 and just two weeks before Romania acceded to the European Union on January 1, 2007. In a striking development, sixteen years later, in 2022, Traian Băsescu was officially declared by the High Court of Cassation and Justice to have been a collaborator of the former communist secret police, the Securitate. This decision significantly undermined the credibility of his 2006 gesture and cast renewed doubt on the sincerity of the state's relation to its totalitarian past.

In more than thirty years since the Romanian Revolution, certain political actors and segments of civil society have attempted to implement measures aimed either at preventing former members of the communist regime from attaining positions of power, or at uncovering and holding accountable those responsible for the killing of 1,166 people during the 1989 uprising. The Timişoara Proclamation of March 11, 1990, the 1994 initiative by the Civic Alliance to officially condemn communism, which never reached parliamentary debate, and the repeated delays of the 1989 Revolution case to the Military Prosecutor's Office are among the most publicly discussed yet ultimately ineffective examples. More than three decades later, not only has there been no formal trial of communism in Romania, but even the legal proceedings concerning the Revolution and the subsequent Mineriads, meant to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of hundreds, remain incomplete. Fundamental questions, both preceding and following the events of 1989, continue to go unanswered.

Since the 1990s, personal opposition to politics appears to have retreated from civil society into the realm of art. In particular, post-1989 Romanian cinema has symbolically assumed the role of a moral tribunal, gathering "narrative evidence" and constructing an ethical indictment of the recently dismantled

dictatorship. Filmmakers such as Lucian Pintilie regarded the condemnation of communism as a moral imperative of artistic creation (Turcuş, 2015), and the cinema of the 1990s emerged as a vehement anti-communist indictment of the totalitarian past.

This article focuses on the representation of intellectual opposition in three Romanian films released at different moments of the post-communist period: *Fox – Hunter* (1993, dir. Stere Gulea), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006, dir. Corneliu Porumboiu), and *The Case of Engineer Ursu* (2023, dir. Liviu Tofan). Each of these works, in its manner and at varying temporal distances from the events of 1989, critically confronts the communist past, compensating for the absence of an immediate institutional condemnation of the former regime. All three films share a central concern with the representation of the dissident intellectual. *Fox – Hunter*, inspired by events leading up to the December 1989 Revolution, portrays the persecution of a nonconformist schoolteacher by the Securitate, highlighting the brutality of the repressive apparatus. In turn, *12:08 East of Bucharest* adopts an ironic approach to the memory of the Revolution, challenging official narratives about the December 1989 events. *The Case of Engineer Ursu* reconstructs the tragic fate of dissident Gheorghe Ursu and offers an explicit moral indictment of the Securitate, while emphasizing the prolonged struggle for justice during the post-communist years.

The paper adopts a cultural studies approach with intersections from historiographic analysis and film theory. By situating cinematic representations of intellectual dissidence within the broader post-communist Romanian socio-political context, the study examines how film functions both as a site of memory and a tool of critical reflection. It draws on historiographic methods to trace how real dissident figures and events are reframed through narrative and aesthetic choices. Simultaneously, the article employs key concepts from film theory—such as diegesis, mise-en-scène, and narrative temporality—to analyze how cinematic form shapes public memory and contributes to the construction of historical consciousness.

The study departs from several core hypotheses. Since the 1990s, personal opposition to the political regime has increasingly relocated from the public sphere into the arts (literature, film, theater), gradually diminishing its visible presence in civic space. Opposition thus transitions from the realm of lived experience to that of cinematic imagination. The representation of the dissident evolves in time.

Cinema assumes the symbolic role of the state and, through its thematic choices, offers society a form of "evidentiary material" for potential personal reckonings with the communist past. In this way, film comes to address topics such as political imprisonment, deportation, and human rights violations, becoming, as Constantin Pârvulescu (2009) explains, a medium through which historical reality is both remembered and interpreted.

In his work *Cinema and History* (1988), Marc Ferro (1988) explores the idea that film is not merely a tool for entertainment, but an agent and source of history, playing a crucial role in shaping public perception and historical understanding. He argues that cinema reflects both the conscious values of its creators and the dominant ideology of the society in which it is produced, while also conveying unconscious or subversive meanings. Art thus became a site of critical reflection, a symbolic tribunal of the totalitarian past, and a means for cultivating critical thought. In this sense, the film confronts viewers with their history. The relationship between reality and cinematic imagination is a theme frequently explored in film studies. Ferro further hypothesizes that films with historical subjects offer insight not only into the past but also into the societies that produce them.

Robert A. Rosenstone (2006), meanwhile, emphasizes the parallels between historical reality and film, highlighting that both are constructed through a set of narrative conventions. This raises the question of whether fictional representations of opposition are themselves merely another manifestation of the imaginary.

André Bazin (2022) addressed this relationship by asserting that "cinema can only ever be a representation of reality" (p.14). DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) adds that, despite its capacity to reflect or imitate the real, film is essentially an artistic and technological construct that interprets and transforms human experience. He compares the media-created world to Plato's Cave, suggesting that audiences in both cases are directly shaped by the medium in which they are immersed. Lastly, Cistelecan (2017) observes that filmmakers are often self-reflexive within their works, actively taking a stance toward reality as such.

Between 1947 and 1989, Romania did not have any officially recognized political or professional organization that opposed the ruling system imposed by the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), the sole legal political formation in power for over four decades. In contrast, Poland saw the emergence in 1980 of the independent trade union *Solidarity*, a key opposition force led by Lech Wałęsa, who

was later elected president in 1990 following the 1989 elections. In Romania, the PCR exercised power through a totalitarian regime, making any form of dissent, even at the level of ideas, conversations, or attitudes, a punishable offense. Such acts were prosecuted under Article 193/1 (activities against the working class), Article 207 (crime of usurping the constitutional order), or Article 209 (crime of conspiracy against the social order). Punishments ranged from property confiscation and loss of employment to long-term imprisonment, torture, and forced labor. According to data from the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (IICCMER) and the archives of the former Ministry of Internal Affairs, the number of known political prisoners in Romania between 1944 and 1959 is estimated at approximately 70,000. The total number of victims of the broader communist camp system, which included prisons, investigative detention centers, forced labor colonies, deportation sites, and psychiatric institutions, reaches into the hundreds of thousands. These individuals are often referred to as "dissidents."

In his essay *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel (2005) argues that dissidence does not necessarily entail overt political opposition but rather constitutes a moral choice to live in truth, a refusal to participate in the systemic falsehood imposed by totalitarian regimes. This conception is illustrated through the example of the greengrocer who displays official slogans in his shop window not out of conviction, but due to conformity and fear. Thus, the act of living truthfully becomes a form of resistance in itself. This understanding of opposition closely mirrors the way dissent manifested in Romania.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt (1994), in *The Origins of Totalitarianism and On Revolution*, emphasizes organized opposition as a vital form of political action essential to public life. She contends that political freedom is not found in retreat into privacy but rather in the collective capacity to act deliberately in the public sphere in defiance of authoritarian power. In Arendt's view, dissidence emerges as a collective expression of freedom, whereby individuals organize to propose political alternatives, resisting totalitarian domination through shared initiative and solidarity.

However, Romanian historical reality aligns more closely with Havel's framework. The communist regime in Romania did not tolerate, and severely punished, any form of collective organization that could potentially challenge the system. After coming to power in 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu imposed an

authoritarian regime characterized by extensive repression, ideological rigidity, and a cult of personality. The Romanian Communist Party's (PCR) governance emphasized nationalism, censorship, the suppression of dissent, and the total elimination of political pluralism. The Securitate, the state security apparatus, played a central role in the implementation of these policies, maintaining a vast network of civilian informants.

Dissenters, those who spoke, wrote, or were otherwise suspected of opposing the regime, were subject to interrogations, arrests, persecution, torture, and, in many cases, death. Individuals often sought to conceal their views for fear of being denounced by informants, who were frequently drawn from among their family members, friends, or acquaintances. Less overtly violent forms of repression included professional marginalization, property confiscation, surveillance, and house arrest. Once uncovered, acts of opposition became not only personal liabilities but also sources of intergenerational trauma. The totalitarian state extended its persecution to dissidents' families: children were barred from accessing higher education, relatives were monitored, and family property was seized.

The regime's policies culminated in the economic austerity of the 1980s, during which individual welfare was subordinated to the state's industrial and debt-repayment goals. Within this context, isolated acts of opposition, such as those of Doina Cornea, Mircea Dinescu, Mugur Călinescu în Botoşani, the engineer Gheorghe Ursu (killed in detention in 1985), and the 1987 workers' protest in Braşov, were individual and uncoordinated, lacking institutional representation. Nonetheless, these acts played a crucial role in destabilizing the regime and catalyzing the events of December 1989.

Beginning in December 1989, the nature of political opposition in Romania shifted, albeit briefly, from a personal stance to a public phenomenon. During the Revolution and the early post-revolutionary months, opposition was openly expressed through figures such as Doina Cornea, Vali Sterian, Corneliu Coposu, and Marian Munteanu. However, this oppositional spirit failed to endure, either as a sustained form of critical consciousness or as an influential political organization. In the ensuing decades, opposition, as a form of resistance to the system, was largely extinguished. Several pivotal events of the 1990s contributed to this erosion: the disregard of the Timişoara Proclamation, the violent Mineriads, the absence of an official condemnation of communism, the failure to bring former regime figures to justice, and the unresolved legal proceedings concerning the 1989 Revolution. As a

result, the phenomenon of political opposition nearly vanished from public life. It would re-emerge only sporadically, often temporarily and unevenly supported by segments of the political class, during key moments of civic mobilization: the protests over Roșia Montană în 2013, the demonstrations following the Colectiv nightclub fire in 2015, and the widespread resistance to Government Emergency Ordinance 13 in 2017. The dismantling of oppositional and anti-authoritarian spirit was not accompanied by the establishment of a robust democratic culture. The absence of institutional mechanisms for confronting the past, such as lustration, transitional justice, and education of critical thinking, contributed to the consolidation of a public sphere characterized by passivity and conformity. In the absence of civic models of dissent and incentives for independent reflection, post-communist Romanian society remained vulnerable to authoritarian rhetoric. Within this context, the absence of genuine political opposition has contributed to the gradual erosion of collective critical thinking.

This crisis of opposition was also mirrored in the Romanian film industry, which, like society at large, underwent substantial changes in the 1990s, coinciding with the first signs of capitalist transformation. Film studios transitioned from state ownership, where content had been subject to censorship, to a privatized environment that offered greater freedom, yet was constrained by market logic. This new freedom was conditioned by profitability: Romanian cinema now had to produce films that addressed themes of public interest and could draw paying audiences. Approximately one-third of the themes addressed in 1990s Romanian films were inspired by subjects that had been taboo or censored under communism. One such theme was the opposition to the communist regime. The earliest post-1989 cinematic productions that employed archival footage or artistic representations of individuals who resisted the totalitarian regime introduced a new figure previously absent from Romanian cinema: the dissident. In this initial phase, directors drew upon personal memories, direct experiences with the communist regime, testimonies, archival documents, and footage from the Revolution to construct this figure. These early representations were not only acts of remembrance but also attempts to fill the void left by institutional silence, articulating through film a form of moral and historical redress.

One of the most common representations of opposition in Romanian cinema is that of the intellectual dissident. This may be explained in part by Edward Said's theory of the intellectual as "someone who assumes the responsibility of speaking

truth to power, challenging dominant systems, and defending universal values such as justice and truth" (p. 11). Under the Romanian communist regime, intellectuals were among the most heavily surveilled social categories. This intense monitoring was motivated not only by the domestic voices of dissent but especially by those in exile, who, through international media outlets such as Radio Free Europe, publicly exposed human rights violations, systemic injustices, and the physical and psychological abuses to which Romanian citizens were subjected. Figures such as Nicolae Steinhardt, Doina Cornea, Paul Goma, and Monica Lovinescu gave up their freedom, and in some cases, the ability to reside in their own country, to speak both to fellow Romanians and the West about the realities of life under dictatorship. Despite their moral courage, Romanian intellectuals did not manage to organize a coherent political opposition to the communist regime. The opposition that did exist remained largely individual. The most notable episodes of collective resistance, such as the 1987 Braşov workers' protest and student activism, emerged not from the intellectuals but from labor and youth movements. Even among the intellectual diaspora, opposition often remained confined to a "resistance through culture," a notion later critiqued by both Monica Lovinescu and Nobel laureate Herta Müller as having little political or social impact on a European scale. After 1989, the Romanian intellectual became an increasingly marginal figure, with public representation reduced to a handful of isolated voices, among them Corneliu Coposu, Doina Cornea, and Marian Munteanu, who gradually faded from the public sphere.

In Romanian cinema of the 1990s, numerous films engage critically with the period of communist dictatorship, often through the figure of the intellectual depicted as an anti-communist hero. These "intellectual" characters typically appear in stark contrast to the voiceless working class, which had been the regime's ideologically privileged social category. This form of cinematic anti-communism emerged from a need to retroactively represent a silenced and marginalized intellectual opposition, an opposition that, before 1989, had remained largely invisible, while the proletariat was promoted as the regime's ideal citizen. Within this context, *Fox - Hunter* (dir. Stere Gulea, 1993), the director's first feature film to directly address the events of December 1989, stands as a representation of the dissident intellectual, inspired by the real experiences of Herta Müller (2009), a writer and dissident harassed by the Securitate in the 1980s. Even at the literary level, Müller describes life under dictatorship as "an unimaginable and oppressive sequence of concentric prisons," (p. 45) where generalized suspicion forces

individuals to adopt social masks, and where "victims can only escape by becoming hunters of people themselves" (p. 102). This dark universe, in which the boundary between prey and predator becomes blurred, underpins the portrayal of the intellectual in *Fox - Hunter*, a film that explores the protagonist's opposition to a regime that devours its citizens.

Narrative Worlds and the Memory of Communism in Contemporary Romanian Cinema

The three films under analysis, *Fox - Hunter* (dir. Stere Gulea, 1993), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (dir. Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006), and *The Case of Engineer Ursu* (dir. Liviu Tofan, 2023), construct distinct narrative worlds, yet share a common focus on the exploration of the communist past and how it is situated within historical reality. Each film offers a stylistically different perspective on memory and collective trauma, illuminating both convergences and significant contrasts.

In *Fox - Hunter*, the cinematic universe is shaped by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the final years of dictatorship. The film, adapted from the work of Herta Müller, captures the psychological terror of a regime that systematically erases intimacy; the private sphere disappears entirely as the individual's home and personal life are invaded by the ever-present gaze of the Securitate. Gulea's direction conveys the trauma of the era with immediacy, focusing on the pre-revolutionary context in contrast to the New Romanian Cinema generation, which would later explore the ambiguities of the 1989 Revolution and the transition of the 1990s. As such, *Fox - Hunter* offers a direct and realist portrayal of fear and silent resistance, avoiding any nostalgic embellishment. Although the screenplay is authored by Müller, a writer herself surveilled and persecuted by the Securitate, ultimately forced into exile in 1987, the film approaches recent traumas with balance, authenticity, and nuance.

In contrast, *12:08 East of Bucharest* reconfigures the memory of the Revolution within a comic-parodic register. Corneliu Porumboiu constructs a post-communist provincial narrative world in which the boundary between the banal and the historical subverts heroic mythologies. Skepticism toward recent memory becomes a parody of the legitimizing narratives surrounding the Revolution. Set in an obscure town east of Bucharest, the film centers on a televised debate attempting to determine whether a genuine revolt occurred there on December 22, 1989, before the flight of Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu from the capital. The film's

minimalist style, characterized by long takes and a fixed camera evocative of low-budget television studios, amplifies the irony of the situation. Film critic Andrei Gorzo (2007) observed that Porumboiu "made a film about big events as seen from the humblest possible vantage point," managing to extract from this premise both comic spectacle and a deeply universal truth about how lived history is transformed into narrated history. In this sense, *12:08 East of Bucharest* explores the memory of communism as it is mediated by time and distorted through the lens of the post-revolutionary transition, employing humor as a vehicle for social commentary. Rather than immediate terror, the film is dominated by melancholy and the everyday absurdity of a community reevaluating its revolutionary past with self-irony. Porumboiu's approach offers a nuanced reflection on the cultural and psychological residues of the communist era, questioning the reliability of memory and the construction of postcommunist identity through irony rather than condemnation.

The Case of Engineer Ursu adopts a markedly different approach, documentary and investigative, that extends the narrative universe beyond fiction. Directed by Liviu Tofan, the film reconstructs the real-life case of dissident engineer Gheorghe Ursu, who was killed by the Securitate in 1985, producing a factual indictment that draws a direct link between the crimes of the communist regime and post-communist efforts to achieve justice. The documentary retrospectively follows Ursu's death and his son Andrei's decades-long quest for accountability, juxtaposing victims' testimonies with interviews of former Securitate officers who remain free under the post-1989 regime. This cinematic universe oscillates between past and present, incorporating archival footage from the Ceaușescu era, interviews with witnesses, and footage from post-communist court trials, thereby exposing the lingering influence of dictatorship into the transition years. In contrast to Porumboiu's fictional and ironic approach, this film adopts a sober and activist tone, with an explicit aim to recover historical truth and to formally condemn those responsible. As critic Mihai Maci (2023) noted, Ursu's story represents "a wound in our democratic conscience," and the act of securing justice becomes the son's mission. Thus, the film operates not only as a cinematic narrative but also as an act of memorialization and juridical intervention, highlighting the persistence of communist residues in Romanian society long after 1989. *The Case of Engineer Ursu* explores questions of moral responsibility within a repressive political context and reminds the public of the value of free expression, the necessity of opposition, and the role of civic dialogue, using Gheorghe Ursu's story as the example. The film was

released just days before the expected verdict in the case brought by Andrei Ursu, who demands that those responsible for his father's death be held accountable and charges the Securitate with crimes against humanity. As journalist and director Liviu Tofan (2024) noted in an interview, Andrei Ursu is attempting what Romanian society has failed to accomplish over the past three decades: a trial of communism, through the elucidation of his father's case. Tofan has emphasized in a radio interview that this "activist documentary" serves primarily a civic, rather than aesthetic, function. For the first time in Romanian cinema, the film is used as a medium to raise public awareness around an imminent act of justice.

While *Fox - Hunter* and *The Case of Engineer Ursu* immerse the viewer in the direct traumas of dictatorship, the former through an intensely personal fictional drama, the latter through a documentary investigation demanding historical truth, *12:08 East of Bucharest* offers a satirical reflection on how post-communist society remembers and trivializes its recent past. All three films explore Romanian cinema's relationship with the communist legacy: from realist reconstructions of fear and totalitarian control, to ironic interrogations of collective memory, and ultimately to the present-day need for justice and historical clarification. These narrative worlds, though stylistically diverse, share a common goal, to cinematically represent the traumatic legacies of communism and to endow them with aesthetic, moral, or historical significance for a society still grappling with the search for truth more than three decades after December 1989.

The Intellectual as a Figure of Opposition in *Fox – Hunter*

The protagonist of *Fox - Hunter*, Irina (played by Oana Pellea), is a high school teacher in Timişoara who is explicitly described within the narrative as "the dissident" of the school. According to Constantin Stanislavski (2013), realistic acting must be grounded in the internalization of emotion and authentic responses to external stimuli. Pellea's performance is marked by hesitant glances and movements, indicators of a constant fear of surveillance, a rigid posture shaped by psychological oppression, and prolonged silences that function as passive forms of resistance in contrast to explicit verbal dissent.

Set during the final months of Ceauşescu's regime, the character refuses to accept the ideological compromises imposed upon her. For example, she challenges the mandatory patriotic labor of students, which she perceives as a form of child exploitation. Her dissatisfaction is expressed directly to local authorities who arrive

at a tomato-picking event only to load their vehicles with vegetables harvested by students. This act of defiance triggers intensified repression by the regime. The Securitate subjects Irina to a full arsenal of psychological pressure. She is constantly followed, receives anonymous threatening letters and phone calls, and is harassed on the street by an officer, one scene includes the line, "I've wanted to fuck you for a long time," intended to humiliate and intimidate her. Such episodes underscore the deeply unequal power dynamics at play, where violence, including sexual violence, is deployed as a metaphor for the individual's helplessness under totalitarian rule. Through Irina's portrayal, the film constructs the figure of the intellectual not merely as a critic of the system, but as a symbolic locus of moral resistance, bearing the psychological and physical burdens of dissent in a hostile political environment.

Despite these forms of intimidation, Irina refuses to abandon her principles. In contrast to her friend Clara (played by Mara Grigore), a factory worker who becomes romantically involved with an undercover Securitate agent, Pavel Murgu (portrayed by Dan Condurache), and continues the relationship even after discovering his true identity, Irina rejects collaboration and resists emotional blackmail. The film thus juxtaposes two archetypes: the upright, incorruptible intellectual (Irina) versus the vulnerable worker (Clara), who, whether through weakness or opportunism, ultimately consents to compromise with the regime. Irina's solitude is intensified by her friend's betrayal, a metaphor for the erosion of trust in a society where every relationship is potentially corrupted by suspicion and denunciation.

The protagonist's moments of personal despair reveal the human dimension of dissent. Amid the euphoric chaos of the 1989 Revolution, Irina momentarily loses sight of her fiancé, who is serving in the military, and engages in a brief affair with Paul (played by Claudiu Istodor), a friend who is both a doctor and a musician. This narrative detail underscores the complexity of her character: although she serves as a civic symbol of resistance, she remains susceptible to emotion and human vulnerability. Taken as a whole, Irina is portrayed as the critical conscience of her community, an intellectual whose individual defiance anticipates the broader rupture between segments of civil society and the oppressive regime, preceding the outbreak of the Revolution. Her character functions not only as a representation of moral integrity but also as a reflection of the emotional and existential toll exacted by sustained political resistance under totalitarianism.

Symbols of Oppression and Cinematic Style

Fox - Hunter employs visual symbolism to convey both the mechanisms of state terror and the moral degradation characteristic of the totalitarian universe. The central symbolic element, suggested by the film's title, is the fox. Within the narrative, Irina's possession, a decorative fox fur displayed in her apartment, becomes the target of anonymous intrusions. Members of the Securitate clandestinely enter the teacher's flat and slice the fur into pieces, leaving behind a disturbing trace intended as a threatening message. This act serves as a metaphor for harassment. Irina, like the fox, is a free and intelligent being whom the regime seeks to trap and silence. At the same time, the image of the fox also evokes the regime's cunning, a camouflaged predator that dominates its victims under the guise of banal everyday routines.

Another striking symbol is the "worm in the apple," introduced by the director in the film's opening sequence as a visual metaphor for the rot within a morally decaying society. The atmosphere of the city and the era is rendered through stark imagery that captures the "dehumanizing society and extreme destitution" (Fulger, 2014) of the final decade of Romanian communism. From material deprivation to the omnipresence of fear, every cinematic detail underscores the sense of a universe in moral decomposition and on the brink of collapse.

Stylistically, the film blends realist and metaphorical registers.

Stere Gulea adopts realism, at times bordering on documentary, by shooting in authentic locations and incorporating archival footage, such as Nicolae Ceaușescu's televised speech on the events in Timișoara în December 1989. These elements anchor the narrative in historical reality, lending the film both authenticity and gravity. At the same time, the director employs poetic and allegorical devices (such as the aforementioned symbols) to heighten the emotional impact of the narrative. Post-1989 Romanian cinema frequently resorts to vulgarity and violence as a compensatory reaction to previously censored taboos. *Fox - Hunter* is no exception: its explicit scenes (such as the officer's aggressive sexual advances) reinforce the film's depiction of terror and moral degradation. Yet this direct stylistic approach serves the director's intention to portray the regime in its full brutality. Simultaneously, the film retains a deeply human and reflective dimension, largely

due to Oana Pellea's performance, which enriches the political message with empathy and introspection. The protagonist is not reduced to a mere symbol, but is rendered as a complex, living individual, captured in the turmoil of her contradictions, fears, and hopes.

The film constructs a cinematic universe shaped by three dominant elements: fear, alienation, and the surveillance imposed by the Romanian communist regime of the 1980s. Analyzing this universe through the lens of Mark J. P. Wolf's (2012) theory enables a deeper understanding of how a primary world is built, an alternative version of reality, and how audiences comprehend and engage with such an environment. According to Wolf, this world qualifies as "primary" because the film offers a direct representation of reality, devoid of fantastical elements, and "alternative" in that it is grounded in historical reality, albeit filtered through stylistic distortions (such as noir aesthetics, long and static shots, and the strategic use of sound to heighten tension) and subjective perspectives (the world as seen through Irina's eyes, the fragmentation of memory, or the depiction of the Revolution as a peripheral, muted event). Wolf defines an imaginary cinematic world by its "internal consistency, degree of immersion, diegetic detail, and extension of the world beyond the immediate action" (Cap. 1). The movie *Fox - Hunter* constructs an oppressive space in which characters are trapped in a suffocating reality, with no possibility of escape. Through its aesthetic choices and narrative focus, the film immerses the viewer in a world governed by fear and control, underscoring the existential constraints of life under totalitarian rule.

Fox - Hunter offers a nuanced portrait of the intellectual as a dissident during the final years of communist Romania and on the threshold of political transition. It highlights the courage, isolation, and vulnerability of those who dared to resist an oppressive regime, while also drawing attention to the ambiguities of post-revolutionary liberation. The film's resolution is marked by bitter irony: following the fall of the dictatorship, Irina experiences the euphoria of newfound freedom, only to soon discover that she remains under surveillance. In the final frame, the fox fur continues to be cut, even after the regime's collapse, suggesting that the former power structures of the Securitate have survived the political transformation. Through this image, *Fox - Hunter* transcends historical reconstruction and becomes a meditation on hope and disillusionment. Stere Gulea's film stands as a powerful example of how post-1989 Romanian cinema has sought to recover the figure of the dissident as a bearer of critical conscience and

dignity in a traumatized society, while also probing the psychological cost of newly won freedom.

The Dissident Intellectual in *12:08 East of Bucharest*

In *12:08 East of Bucharest*, director Corneliu Porumboiu constructs a minimalist socio-political comedy set in a small provincial town east of Bucharest, just before Christmas, sixteen years after the fall of communism. The central character, Tiberiu Mănescu (played by Ion Sapdaru), is a history teacher locally known for his alcoholism and questionable reputation. Film critic Mihai Fulger describes him, along with the other protagonists, the television station owner, Virgil Jderescu (played by Teodor Corban), and a retired pensioner, Emanoil Pişcoci (played by Mircea Andreescu), as one of the "small people" (Fulger, 2006) of post-communist provincial life, whose existence is defined by everyday banality. Mănescu proudly claims that on December 22, 1989, he was among the first to protest against the regime in the town square, before the symbolic hour of 12:08 (the moment when Nicolae Ceauşescu fled the Central Committee headquarters). This assertion grants him a (self-proclaimed) aura of revolutionary legitimacy, as a local intellectual dissident who defied the regime. However, the film gradually dismantles this heroic self-image through irony and its carefully constructed narrative context. Porumboiu thus critiques the processes by which memory, heroism, and dissent are retrospectively constructed and mythologized in post-communist Romania.

The action unfolds during a live broadcast of a local television program, hosted by Virgil Jderescu, a former textile engineer turned journalist and owner of the station in the post-1989 era. He invites two guests, Tiberiu Mănescu and pensioner Emanoil Piscoci to debate the question of whether a genuine Revolution took place in their town (Vaslui). This minimalist setting, an improvised studio of a provincial television station, becomes the space in which the grand theme of the Revolution is filtered through the lens of local banality. Andrei Gorzo (2006) observes that Porumboiu created "a film about big events as seen from the humblest possible vantage point." Through this low-angle perspective, in which major historical events are viewed from the standpoint of ordinary people, the film demythologizes the notion of the dissident hero. Professor Mănescu is not portrayed as a charismatic leader, but rather as a failed intellectual who drinks away his pension and carries the burden of unpaid debts.

The televised debate, filmed in a static, realist style (with a fixed camera capturing in long takes both the awkwardness of the speakers and the improvised provincial nature of the set), reveals the absurdity and fragility of Mănescu's claims. Initially, the history teacher enthusiastically recounts his revolutionary experience, but his narrative is quickly challenged by viewers calling in live. Several indignant citizens recall that Mănescu was drunk on the morning of December 22, humiliating details that undermine his credibility and his self-proclaimed status as a dissident. The serious question ("Was it a revolution or not?") gradually devolves into a communal farce; the audience appears more invested in airing personal grievances and ridiculing Mănescu than in pursuing historical truth. In this way, the figure of the intellectual dissident is subjected to a process of demystification through ridicule. What remains is not a tragic hero, but a beleaguered schoolteacher mocked by his fellow townspeople. As Erving Goffman (2022) writes "public identity is a performative construct shaped by social interactions" (Chapter 1). This perspective proves crucial in understanding how *12:08 East of Bucharest* critiques the retrospective construction of heroic memory and exposes the vulnerability of intellectual authority in the post-communist public sphere.

The film's tone remains fundamentally ambivalent; beneath its surface-level comedy lies a melancholic undercurrent. Porumboiu does not demonize his characters but observes them with a blend of irony and compassion. In the final segment of the television broadcast, after a series of mocking phone calls, a woman (played by Coca Bloos) calls in with a somber, authentic voice to recount how her husband was shot and killed in Bucharest during the Revolution. This moment abruptly shifts the register of the scene, the studio falls silent, and the participants are forced to confront the insignificance of their quarrels. Ultimately, *12:08 East of Bucharest* is not about revolutionary glory but about failure. As Mihai Fulger (2006) notes, the characters' engagement with this historical moment serves primarily to awaken their consciousness of personal defeat. Tiberiu Mănescu, who survived the Revolution only to continue living a mediocre life, finds himself publicly confronted with his failures and self-deceptions. Rather than emerging as a hero, as he had imagined himself in his mind, he is revealed as an anti-hero: an anonymous intellectual attempting, long after the events, to insert himself into the collective memory as a significant figure, yet succeeding only in exposing his minor vanities and illusions.

The narrative style adopted by Porumboiu is minimalist and realist, characterized by long static shots, dialogue filled with pauses and banalities. The

film authentically captures the dull, disenchanted atmosphere of the post-revolutionary transition in a peripheral town, where the initial revolutionary enthusiasm has dissipated, giving way to indifference and confusion. Ultimately, the viewer is invited to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, only to be confronted in the final moments with a sudden and diffuse sadness that lies beneath the surface irony of everyday life. This subtle approach, as actress Luminița Gheorghiu (2006) notes, is "devoid of stridency and seemingly detached, yet devastating in what it merely implies about our indifference and vengeful rage." Such a treatment lends Porumboiu's film a distinctive reflective power concerning the memory of communism and the myth of opposition. Through understated realism and tonal ambivalence, the film questions both historical self-representation and the emotional residues of post-totalitarian societies.

To better understand the narrative universe of the film, we can apply several key concepts from David Bordwell. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell (1987) analyzes cinematic narration through the relationship between narrator, spectator, and character, as well as the structuring of information within the narrative. *12:08 East of Bucharest* constructs a narrative world that reflects uncertainty, intellectual frustration, the fragility of memory, and the absence of a dominant perspective on the Romanian Revolution. Bordwell defines diegesis as the world constructed by the film, which includes not only the visible spaces but also those implied through dialogue and action.

In Porumboiu's film, the narrative universe is extremely limited, both spatially and temporally. The action unfolds in the provincial town of Vaslui, in a pastel visual palette that evokes post-communist stagnation. The narrative time is confined to a single day, focused on the preparation and airing of Virgil Jderescu's television program, which centers on answering the question of whether a genuine uprising occurred in town before Ceaușescu fled. The spaces are narrow and claustrophobic (modest old apartments, a small TV studio), reinforcing the sense of isolation and the limited scale of the events described. This narrative restriction aligns with David Bordwell's notion that minimalist storytelling constrains the viewer's access to information, making ambiguity a central viewing experience. Bordwell classifies films along a continuum of informational control, ranging from omniscient (where the viewer knows more than the characters) to restricted (where the viewer knows only what the characters know). *12:08 East of Bucharest* employs a restricted narration: the audience learns about the characters' pasts and

the credibility of their memories solely through the TV broadcast dialogue. Unlike *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) the documentary by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, which provides a coherent, archival-based perspective on the events of 1989, Porumboiu's film offers contradictory, fragmented, and confusing information. The viewer is placed in a position of epistemic uncertainty, with no authoritative voice to validate or invalidate the claims made by Tiberiu Mănescu. This narrative technique is central to Porumboiu's exploration of relative history and fragmented memory: multiple witnesses offer differing accounts of the same event, none of which are confirmed as "true." Technically, the cinematography is static; the camera passively observes the action without intervening or guiding interpretation. This filming style contributes to a sense of mundane realism, where events unfold slowly and without dramatization. The absence of diegetic music and the use of natural lighting reinforce the minimalist aesthetic, underscoring a sense of monotony and the absence of heroism or festivity. The dialogues are marked by pauses, hesitations, and inconsistencies, emphasizing the dissonance between individual memory and historical truth. *12:08 East of Bucharest* thus constructs a fragmented, minimalist, and ironic narrative world in which the past cannot be reconstructed solely through memory. The film takes place in a limited universe, especially in its second half, where all action is confined to the local television studio and operates through a restricted narration and a detached narrative perspective. This approach reflects the condition of the intellectual in a society in transition, as well as the confusion and ambiguity of both individual and collective memory regarding the 1989 Revolution.

The Tragic Dissident vs. the Ridiculed Dissident

A comparison between *Fox - Hunter* (1993) and *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) reveals the striking contrast in the representation of the intellectual dissident across a span of thirteen years. *Fox - Hunter*, directed by Stere Gulea and based on a screenplay by Herta Müller, a writer who personally experienced communist oppression, offers a quintessential portrayal of the tragic dissident. The protagonist, Irina, a high school teacher in a provincial town in the late 1980s, is relentlessly surveilled by the Securitate and lives under constant psychological pressure. The film constructs an oppressive, almost paranoid universe that emphasizes Irina's vulnerability and quiet courage in the face of state repression. Her confrontation with the regime, symbolically rendered through dreamlike

sequences involving a fox, a metaphor for her being hunted by the secret police, elevates her to the status of a modern hero: an intellectual who resists with dignity and moral steadfastness, even in the knowledge that she cannot overcome the system. The film's tone is solemn and empathetic, highlighting the personal tragedy and inglorious sacrifice of the dissident figure. In this regard, *Fox - Hunter* aligns with a wave of Romanian transitional cinema that addresses the trauma of communism through a grave register, foregrounding the heroism of victims and the inherent malevolence of the oppressors.

In contrast, *12:08 East of Bucharest*, produced more than a decade later, relativizes and ironically subverts this very heroic typology. The character of professor Tiberiu Mănescu can be interpreted as a parodic double of Irina: he claims a role as a dissident, yet the post-communist context portrays him more as a harmless, failed impostor than as a tragic hero. Whereas Irina is a heroine defeated by a brutal regime, Mănescu is a melancholic intellectual defeated by his weaknesses and by his community. The ridicule to which Mănescu is subjected on screen reflects, in fact, a shift in historical perspective. By 2006, Romanian society had reached a point where it could view its past with critical distance and self-irony, deconstructing the myths of the Revolution and resistance. In contrast, in 1993, the wound was still fresh, and the cinematic representations were marked by a strong sense of pain and the moral imperative of condemnation.

Cinematic representations of intellectual opposition to the communist regime have evolved from the tragic pathos of the immediate post-revolutionary decade to the reflexive irony of the New Romanian Cinema. *Fox - Hunter* and *12:08 East of Bucharest* exemplify these two poles. The former presents a haunting portrait of an idealistic dissident crushed by history, while the latter offers a demystified image of the dissident, absorbed into the banalities of post-communist transition. This contrast does not diminish the significance of either approach; rather, it highlights the diverse strategies through which post-1989 Romanian cinema has sought to process a traumatic past and to reflect on the role of the intellectual in confronting political oppression, whether through solemn commemoration or satirical critique.

The documentary by Liviu Tofan and Şerban Georgescu brings to the forefront the true story of engineer and poet Gheorghe Ursu, whose opposition to the Ceauşescu regime, expressed in his journal and critical letters sent to Radio Free Europe, ultimately cost him his life. The film reconstructs, in chronological order,

the Securitate's investigation into Ursu and the tragic outcome of his death while in state custody in November 1985. The narrative structure weaves together two parallel threads: on the one hand, the biographical reconstruction of the dissident, including the socio-political context, the 1977 earthquake, and Ursu's growing dissatisfaction with the regime's policies; on the other hand, the post-1989 efforts of his son, Andrei Ursu, to bring to justice the former Securitate officers responsible for his father's death. This investigative approach positions the film as a seeker of historical truth, transforming the cinematic endeavor into a symbolic act of justice. From the perspective of memory recovery, *The Case of Engineer Ursu* draws upon a rich array of documentary sources, including Gheorghe Ursu's diary, whose daily entries critical of the regime were used by the Securitate as incriminating evidence, his surveillance files, and contemporary testimonies from former colleagues (Mitroiu & Mironescu, 2024). Through these materials, the film reanimates the voice of the dissident intellectual, restoring thoughts and attitudes that were once silenced by the authorities. As such, the film is not only a factual chronicle but also an act of collective remembrance. It contributes to the integration of intellectual dissent into post-communist public consciousness as an essential part of understanding Romania's traumatic past (Dobre, 2014).

Equally, the documentary assumes a pronounced ethical and activist function. Director Liviu Tofan explicitly states the film's motivation to expose the criminal nature of the communist regime and the historical injustice endured by dissidents, none of the Securitate officers responsible for pre-1989 crimes have been held fully accountable. The film thus becomes a moral indictment of the Securitate and a public call for justice. The trial of Ursu's torturers, concluded more than three decades after the crime, with the accused declared not guilty and the process marred by delays, is presented as a case study in institutional failure, which intensifies the film's ethical dimension. The documentary is also activist in intent, being released just days before the Bucharest court ruled on Andrei Ursu's appeal to prosecute his father's interrogators. Its role, as Tofan noted in a Radio România Cultural broadcast, is primarily civic rather than aesthetic. Unprecedented in Romanian cinema, the film is deployed as a tool to generate public awareness around an imminent judicial decision. Overall, *The Case of Engineer Ursu* constructs the figure of the dissident intellectual as both martyr and moral exemplar, transforming his story into a warning against historical amnesia and the dangers of impunity.

The representation of intellectual dissent in post-communist Romanian cinema has undergone a significant transformation over the nearly four decades since the 1989 Revolution, mirroring shifts in the level of critical thinking within society. Public opposition by intellectuals to the communist regime was difficult to address before 1989 due to strict censorship. Following the fall of communism, the absence of structured memory politics and the lack of institutional critical analysis of the communist past severely impacted how this issue was assimilated into public discourse. As has been observed, there was a "lack of an official memory policy and of rigorous analysis of the past, as well as minimal public interest in bringing historical events to light" (Mitroiu, 2016, p.751) in the immediate aftermath of 1989. The post-communist regime often attempted to revise, obscure, or even erase memory by neglecting acts of public remembrance (such as the publication of memoirs or the creation of museums dedicated to communism). One consequence of this was a delay in developing a collective critical understanding of communism, a phenomenon noted by scholars such as Simona Mitroiu, who observes that only private civic initiatives (e.g., the Sighet Memorial) have attempted to fill this void. As a result, culture and cinema have assumed a partial role in the critical recovery of communist memory and enabling transgenerational knowledge of recent history, despite the absence of institutional support.

From Vehement Condemnation to Postmodern Irony

Immediately after 1989, Romanian cinema began to engage with the trauma of the communist period. *Fox - Hunter* (1993, dir. Stere Gulea) portrays the persecution of a schoolteacher during the final years of the regime, illustrating repressed intellectual dissent within a suffocating atmosphere of Securitate terror. The film adopts a solemn tone of explicit anti-communist condemnation, characteristic of early transitional cinema. Films of the 1990s function as testimonies of the recent past, shaped by a virulent anti-communist discourse that could only fully emerge after the collapse of censorship. This one-dimensional approach, while historically necessary, tends to project a black-and-white memory: the intellectual dissident is depicted as a heroic victim, and the regime as unequivocally demonic. The critical consciousness in early 1990s Romanian society manifested more as moral denunciation than as nuanced analytical reflection. These films thus reflect the urgency of bearing witness and condemning past injustices, but often do so at the expense of narrative complexity and interpretive ambiguity.

A decade later, *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006, dir. Corneliu Porumboiu) shifts the narrative register, emphasizing the distortion of collective memory and the absence of consensus regarding the Romanian Revolution. This bitter comedy, set in a provincial town, investigates whether residents took to the streets before Ceaușescu's flight, an event that would signify the community's courage and revolutionary agency. Two locals, invited to a live broadcast on a local television station, attempt to recall the events of 1989, but the discussion quickly descends into anecdote and absurdity, undermining the gravity of the subject matter. This ironic representation of opposition and revolutionary memory reflects a society in transition, marked by selective amnesia and self-irony. Porumboiu, as a prominent voice in the New Romanian Cinema, embraces an indirect critical discourse: instead of glorifying dissidents, the film foregrounds confusion, the absence of a unified critical perspective, and the tendency to trivialize recent history. As Claudiu Turcuș (2018) observes, the cinematic fictions of the 2000s offer a memory that is more layered than the simplifying narratives promoted through official discourse. *12:08 East of Bucharest* exemplifies this: the truth about 1989 remains ambiguous, as the film presents both the claims of self-proclaimed revolutionaries and the skeptical responses of the community. This meta-ironic approach signals an evolution in critical thinking within the realm of artistic production, through the interrogation of official memory and the exposure of the mechanisms by which the past is reinterpreted, and ultimately, forgotten.

In recent years, amid a maturing public discourse, Romanian cinema has returned to the theme of intellectual opposition as a means of directly challenging social conscience. *The Case of Engineer Ursu* (2023, directed by Liviu Tofan and Șerban Georgescu) is a documentary that investigates the real-life fate of dissident Gheorghe Ursu, an engineer and poet who was tortured and died in the custody of the Securitate in 1985 for criticizing the regime. Simultaneously, the film chronicles the ongoing struggle of his son, Andrei Ursu, to obtain justice in post-communist Romania. Unlike the metaphorical fiction of 2006, this film adopts a factual and militant approach to the legacy of dissent. The editing alternates between archival footage from the Securitate and contemporary testimonies, highlighting unsettling parallels between past and present. At its core, the documentary reveals the institutional failure to prosecute the crimes of communism even after three decades of democratic freedom. The Ursu case becomes a mirror of Romania's post-communist transition: on one hand, it offers an example of intellectual integrity, Gheorghe Ursu refusing all compromise and paying with his life; on the other, it

symbolizes delayed and unfulfilled justice, Andrei Ursu over thirty-year battle without a final verdict. The film underscores that, thirty-five years after the Revolution, a just sentence in the Ursu case is still pending, a situation deemed as hopeless as the abuses of the 1980s (Sabău, 2024). This sobering observation reflects a persistent deficit in critical thinking and ethical will at the systemic level in post-communist Romania. At the same time, the very production and resonance of such films suggest the emergence of a critically engaged segment of the public, one willing to confront uncomfortable truths about both the recent past and contemporary complicities.

The differing representations of intellectual dissent in the films discussed, from the vehemence of *Fox - Hunter*, to the reflexive satire of *12:08 East of Bucharest*, and the investigative documentary approach of *The Case of Engineer Ursu*, highlight a complex trajectory of critical thinking in post-communist Romanian society. In the early years, cinema responded to the absence of an official critical discourse with an emphatic denunciation of the past, even if sometimes in a one-dimensional manner. Subsequently, the New Romanian Cinema challenged memory and the myths of transition through ironic treatments and multiple perspectives, indicating an increased critical distance from the past. Currently, there is a tendency to return to unresolved historical facts and unpunished injustices, with films functioning as catalysts for awareness and critical engagement with the communist legacy. The evolution of this thematic concern on screen, from immediate revolt to mature reflection, demonstrates both the advances and the delays in the development of critical thought in post-communist Romania. This phenomenon suggests that art in general, and cinema in particular, has been and remains a vital space for critical inquiry, especially where public discourse and institutions have failed to assume responsibility for the past. The creation of an authentic and critically engaged culture of memory is an ongoing process, and cinema continues to play a crucial role in articulating and disseminating this cultural work.

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