

ROMANIAN JOURNAL OF  
**COMMUNICATION**  
AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Volume 17, no. 2 (35) / July 2015

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The Journal is published three times a year. The journal has been indexed by ProQuest CSA, EBSCO Publishing, CEEOL, DOAJ, Cabell's Directory, Index Copernicus and Genamics Journal Seek. This journal is recognized by CNCSIS and included in the B+ category ([www.cnscis.ro](http://www.cnscis.ro)).

The titles of the articles have been translated into Romanian by the publisher.

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Mălina CIOCEA\*  
Alexandru CÂRLAN\*\*

## Prosthetic memory and post-memory: cultural encounters with the past in designing a museum

### Abstract

This paper<sup>1</sup> investigates the sources of representations on the communist period and the type of engagement with the past in an experiential museum, in the context of the National Network of Romanian Museums' project for a laboratory-museum of Romanian Communism. Our analysis of focus-groups in October-November 2012 explores the public's expectations in terms of museum experience and engagement with objects and the potential of an experiential museum to facilitate deliberation about the past. We use the conceptual framework of recent studies on postmemory (Hirsch, 2008) and prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2004, 2009) to focus on ways of building the experiential archive needed to produce prosthetic memory. We consider that such an analysis is relevant for two interconnected problems: the bidirectional relationship between a projected museum of communism and a prospective public, and the methodological insights available for investigating this relation. With regard to the first problem, this paper makes a case for treating museums as a memory device rather than a *lieu de memoire* and analyses the role of the museum in relation to cultural memory. With regard to the second problem, it offers an example of conducting research on prospective publics which departs from traditional marketing approaches, adopting theoretical insights and analytical categories from specific conceptualizations in the field of memory studies.

**Keywords:** postmemory, prosthetic memory, remembrance practices, laboratory-museum of Communism

### Introduction

This paper investigates the sources of representations on the communist period and the type of engagement with the past in an experiential museum, in the context of the National Network of Romanian Museums' project for a laboratory-museum of Romanian Communism. Immediately after the fall of communism in 1989 in Romania, "museums were challenged to reinvent themselves, to renounce the blasé museum and become antidote-museums" (Bădică, 2010, p. 283). In other words, they had to reframe their production and management of significances of Communism. In the process, many of them seem to have preserved the fundamental idea behind "father-museums", that their mission was to teach their public about the truth. Against this background, the National Network developed the idea of a laboratory-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of research developed in the project *Mediere și mediatizare în memoria cinematică a comunismului românesc* [Mediation and Mediatization in the Cinematic Memory of Romanian Communism] of the Laboratory *Communication, Discourse, Public Issues* (CODIPO) of the Centre for Research in Communication, Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, NUPSPA.

museum, a fluid concept going against traditional museological practice and allowing negotiation of the meaning of the period. “The laboratory-museum is [...] not a temple (it does not propose or attempt to fixate a narrative for our recent history), but a place that welcomes experimentation and takes a grassroots approach towards building an institution that takes seriously its potential audience. The laboratory-museum does not attempt to transform our recent history in a museum object but aims to facilitate a process of coming to terms with this sensitive time in our past” (presentation text by Viviana Iacob, initiator of the project). The result of such a design will be a museum without a permanent exhibition, whose ownership will be claimed by no particular cultural institution.

This enterprise is not an isolated voice in the Romanian public sphere. There is vivid debate on the relationship between coming to terms with the Communist past and the integration of this experience in collective memory as a salient element of cultural identity. A map of discourses on this topic would highlight the polyphony of voices, an array of remembrance agents, overlapping images and symbols, a plurality of mechanisms and strategies for promoting various perspectives on Communism. There are, for instance, official institutional discourses (see *Tismăneanu Report*, the publications of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and Memory of the Romanian Exile, the online photo collection of Communism), allegedly private discourses (Nicolae Ceaușescu’s blog, web page and Facebook account), cinematic enterprises (such as *Tales from the Golden Age*, Mungiu et al., 2009, *Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Autobiography*, Andrei Ujică, 2010, *The Great Communist Robbery*, Alexandru Solomon, 2012). These competing discourses meet in various media contexts (televised debates, press files, citizen journalism), where they negotiate versions and meanings of Communist experience in terms of historical relevance, moral responsibility and identitarian significance. We take these discourses as competing inputs for building the collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) about Romanian communism, although they circulate in different contexts and have distinct publics.

### **The museum as a memory dispositif**

In the context of the project for a laboratory-museum of Communism, we intend to investigate the role of the museum in building the cultural memory of this period and the politics of memory in the cultural sphere. We start from Gillian Rose’s approach to discourse analysis in visual methodologies (Rose, 2001) to further differentiate between two directions in investigating how a museum’s discourse impacts upon the process of building cultural memory: one dealing with sources of representation, narratives proposed for the past and intertextuality, i.e. with discursive formations and their productivity, and one dealing with institutional practices, technologies of display, issues of power and regimes of truth generating a particular engagement with the past in a museum. Although requiring different focal points in analysis (i.e. text and intertextuality vs. display technologies and engagement with the object), both directions stem from Michel Foucault and both can be subsumed to the wider approach of *dispositif* analysis. In relation to cultural memory, Laura Basu considers that “*Dispositif* analysis allows us to examine the wide range of phenomena and their relations that constitute a cultural memory, without being stalled by debates as to what is and is not a ‘text’. It would mean identifying the constituent elements within a given *dispositif*, the relations between them, and the subject positions they bring about.” (Basu, 2011, p. 35). Her approach identifies three

main elements of memorial *dispositifs*: medial, temporal and political. This categorization allows the analyst to emphasize the different workings of various media in building and shaping memories (the medial element). It also points to the revolutionary changes in temporality brought about with the shifts from the ‘pre-modernity’ to ‘modernity’ to ‘postmodernity’, shifts that have changed the shape and structure of memory (the temporal element). Finally, it shows how cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and uniqueness, inevitably generating forms of inclusion and exclusion involved with identity (the political element).

In relation to the political dimension of cultural memory, reference frameworks and interpretation schemata are needed to give knowledge about the past a common meaning for a community. Public memory builds on institutions and monuments (which are, essentially, semantic instruments that translate significances), but also on public discourses, since modern collective memory is social (a theoretical tradition stemming from Halbwachs). In this respect, we can take cultural memory as “an externalization and objectivation of memory, which is individual and communicative” (Jan Assmann, 2010, p. 122).

The contemporary interest in memory practices and devices may be taken to stem from an anxiety of contemporary culture about forgetting. Various explanations have been proposed for this memory crisis, among which the technological advancement and mediatization, which have accelerated the obsolescence of artifacts and cultural experiences alike. Paradoxically, media as instruments of remembering have been blamed for the memory amnesia of present times, because of the commodification and spectacularization of history, which might trigger the banalization of historical events. In this respect, Adorno’s argument that commodification equals forgetting can be further developed to explain memory crisis through the creation of distance from historical events. In Halbwach’s view of a live, collective consensual memory, storage devices are not necessary; it is mediation that invites the development of remembrance strategies and practices.

In this context, what German philosopher Hermann Lübbe called ‘musealization’ in the early 80s (strategies of memorialization not restricted to museums) is an attempt to fixate cultural identity for the modern individual. Andreas Huyssen draws on Lübbe to understand musealization as a compensatory device for the “transformation of temporality in our lives” (Huyssen, 2011, p. 432), with the observation that cultural traditions are themselves affected by the same processes of change.

History museums are places where public memory is built as a symbolic and political resource both through exhibits and deliberation on the meanings of history. The significance of political events becomes visible through categorization and their “*consequentiality* in and for the social and ideological context” in which they are invoked (Tileagă, 2008, p. 359). The performative dimension of remembrance (Jasinski, 2001, p. 356) proposed by a history museum builds significance in the same way as rituals and ceremonies, for instance, and is partly responsible for the non-hegemonic character of public memory (because both the objects and the agents of remembrance are submitted to debate and critical discussion).

Forms of social activism can develop from this debate, and this ties in with the mission that history museums have assumed in time: to investigate historical evolutions and ideological representations of events. In the case of a museum of Communism, the management of these representations has to take into account several constraints: first, it needs to address the issue of its past as an instrument of official propaganda during Communism (Bădică, 2010, p. 275); second, it has to reflect competing discourses about the Communist experience in the

public sphere; third, to stimulate dialogue among various such discourses. The social memory of Communism is to be found in conflicting, “lay” and scientific interpretive frameworks alike (Tileagă, 2012a). Essentially, history museums present an elitist version of the communist past, a fact which is also true of public political discourse (Tileagă, 2012b). On the other hand, studies on people’s attitudes toward Communism show an array of perspectives which vary widely with age, level of education and social status (see IICMER report, 2012).

The museum as a storage device against forgetting is an artificial construction in that it introduces categories, chronology and causal interdependence where there is little or none. This recreation of history is, however, constitutive of remembrance as discourse about the past, in much the same way representation of reality is constitutively different from reality. “[O]ur contemporary memory crisis with its attendant rash of commemorative acts may be based less on the production of synthetic memories than the migration of history into advertising and the nostalgia industry seems to affect and more on the paradoxical assumptions embedded within the methodology of curatorship and the ideology of the collection” (Boyer, 2011, p. 379).

In the light of these theoretical considerations, the project of a museum of Communism seems to be confined to two extremes: one would be to adopt a stance similar to Adorno’s formula “coming to terms with the past”, and admit that such a museum assumes a specific mission (the truth about Communism), a certain epistemological authority and ideological role, which would encourage a museum concept along the very lines criticized by Boyer. But such a project, normatively oriented, might collide with the expectations of a younger generation, for whom issues of guilt and responsibility, crucial to Adorno’s argument, might not be at stake. The other extreme would be the contemporary experiential museum, focused on prosthetic re-living (as conceptualized by Alison Landsberg), with no claim for epistemological or ideological authority, proposing an affectionate and even entertaining engagement with the past, and favoring a decidedly deliberative stance, where the visitor freely negotiates the meaning of history throughout the museum experience. The risk of such a project, at odds with a traditional view of the museum, would be the dissolution of any unitary meaning of history and the perceived “trivialization” of the experiences of previous generations. Both options can assume the mission of the antidote museum (Bădică, 2010) and both can propose an exhibiting regime of an elitist or broad appeal. The success of any of them is dependent on assumptions about how the public connects with the previous generation and what kind of place they allow for museums in this process. The analytical framework for investigating the relationship between the young generation (probably disconnected from the past) and previous generations is developed in the following section.

### **Post-memory and prosthetic memory: two approaches to generational gap in memory studies**

Two concepts describing the mediations at stake in the progress from communicative memory to cultural memory are particularly apt for understanding how young generations can appropriate the past into their memories. Although different in scope, explicative power and theoretical rooting, both concepts investigate the works of memory within a generational gap and the dynamics between private and public forms of memory. The differences in understanding the interplay between memory and identity in these two approaches render them as valuable starting points in the elaboration of a museum project.

The concept of postmemory is a very important analytical contribution proposed by Marianne Hirsch in the field of holocaust studies (2001, 2008). The concept describes specifically the bridging of a generational gap between the “generation before”, those who experienced cultural or collective trauma, and the “generation after” or “the second generation”, who “remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). According to Hirsch, characteristic of this type of remembering is that “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is (...) the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation.” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107) The consequence of such a relation between past and present is the maintenance and perpetuation of a living connection between generations, which fosters group identity and defines relations with out-group. In this context, photography has a key role – and in particular family photographs, since “as a medium of postmemory clarifies the connection between familial and affiliative postmemory and the mechanisms by which public archives and institutions have been able both to reembody and to reindividualize “cultural/archival” memory.” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 115). In this sense, the indexical quality of photography makes it a central piece of a museum’s *dispositif*, linking representations and forms of engagement with processes of identity formation.

Hirsch recognizes the multiple problematic aspects of her approach. Whether postmemory is limited to the “intimate embodied space of the family” or can extend to more distant observers and participants outside the frame of intergenerational exchange, remains undecided. Associated with this aspect is the confinement of postmemory only to victims of trauma – which although plausible, doesn’t necessarily exclude the possibility that bystanders and perpetrators could take part in this structure of intergenerational transmission of trauma. She remains optimistic about the inclusive possibilities of post-memory, although some prerequisites are still implicit in this engagement with postmemorial processes: “Postmemorial work (...) strives to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 111) It’s unclear, in this fragment, what are the prerequisites for postmemorial work to be effective, and its limits in relation to total strangers, but certain criteria of belonging seem to be required in order to be part of postmemorial processes: a symbolic belonging to the group of victims or a connection with the events.

Different questions arise when the concept of postmemory is exported from holocaust studies in other fields, such as post-communism, where the dynamics of memory produce a mode of remembering totally impossible in the original framework: that of nostalgic remembering. Such a conceptual relocation might be risky since “postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; (...) [but] a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106), Yet, while at odds