

“SOMETHING NICE TO REMEMBER”
SILENCE AND MEMORY BETWEEN GENERATIONS
IN TWO GULAG FILMS

Oana Popescu-Sandu

(Assistant Professor of English at the University of Southern Indiana)

Abstract: After 1989, several Bulgarian films engaged in the exploration of the communist past, but, as in the Romanian case, the period of exploration did not last very long. Yet the topic of the past did manage to reach a point of saturation. Bulgarian film scholar Dina Iordanova writes that “the gloomy 1950s were recycled ad nauseam [...] Before long, the topic of human rights violations and moral compromises of the period was no longer attractive to filmmakers.” (New Bulgarian Cinema 61) Iordanova adds that Bulgarian film, after the early 1990s, turned away from the traumatic past to focus on other problems of identity, in a manner similar to the Russian *chernukha* genre. (60) My analysis of several Bulgarian films will show, that, like in the Romanian case, the line between productive exploration of the past and the repetition of communist paradigms is very thin.

In my analysis of the Bulgarian film I focus less on the mechanisms of the confession proper and what it reveals about the past, and more on the way the past and the present live together within the same body and the even same film frame. I will look at the crippling effect of the past on the present, at the effect the unresolved life of parents has on children. Lilly’s confession to her son in *Canary Season* is not cathartic but deadly; Țandără’s son is crippled, both physically (as he suffers from liver disease) and mentally.

Canary Season (like *The Afternoon of a Torturer*), shows how the confession of parents does not help children and does not enlighten and unburden the present. The confession is sabotaged, delayed, undervalued or simply comes too late. The life of the children is meaningless and joyless unless they decide to escape the perpetual return of the dead and to the dead that is sometimes advocated by the older generations.

Keywords: exploration of the past, communist nostalgia, confession, *The Afternoon of a Torturer*, *Canary Season*.

The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth.
(Eva Hoffman)

In ancient Greece, after the civil war between Athens and Sparta, the Athenians attempted to recreate a harmonious united community by enacting the principle of “*me mnesikakein*” – “do not remember the suffering.”

Opposing parties and exiled warriors were received back in the community, their past wrongs forgotten and not prosecuted, and revenge against them prohibited. Yet, the principle of forgetting was not accepted by everybody even though it had the possibility to provide a peaceful ending to the war, strengthen the democracy, and a focus on external, rather than internal, enemies. This is to show that temporary forgetting and selective remembering has been used by societies throughout the history of humankind. The twentieth century was particularly ripe with events that required long periods of silence and heavy memory work in order to survive and process traumas like the Holocaust, Hiroshima or the Gulags. However, my article emphasizes the effects of selective or disdained memory on the second generations in order to show that there is more at stake in the process than the mere silencing of the parents.

In this article, rather than directly focusing on the historical facts, ideologies and struggles of the past and trying to ascertain their degree of truthfulness, I will look for signs of the existence of the traumatic past in the present. This is one way in which we can look at the past: by analyzing its effects on the present, by seeing the present as a symptom of the past, by looking for the story of the parents in the life of the children. For the purposes of this article, I chose to illustrate these ideas with an analysis of film instead of writing. Film, as a quasi contemporary medium, has the ability to penetrate the younger, visually inclined public consciousness faster. Written narratives have tended to focus on the experience of the parents, that first generation that suffered and was imprisoned and described its experience in memoirs or fiction. Although extremely popular in the early 1990s, such narratives have lost their impact on the wider, especially on the younger, audience. It is here that film, a different medium, “read” differently in today’s faster paced world, has a chance to contribute to the lengthy process of uncovering the past and its effects on the present, maybe overcoming some of the weariness, even prejudice, already existing with regard to the genre of “Gulag narratives.”

The two films I propose for analysis, *Canary Season* directed by Evgeni Mikhailov (Bulgaria, 1993)¹ and *The Afternoon of a Torturer*² directed by

¹ *Sezonat na kanarchetata* (The Canary Season), 1998, dir. Evgeni Mikhailov, Tucson, AZ: Interesting Films Different Perspectives. Although younger than Pintilie, Evgeni Mikhailov (1954–) is also a director that came of age professionally during Bulgarian communism. Some of his films are: *L'assicurazione* (The Insurance, 1998), *Smartta mozbe da pochaka* (Death Can Wait Awhile, 1985), *Dom za nezhni dusbi* (A Home for Gentle Souls, 1981). After 1989 he worked mainly as producer in his capacity of director of the Boyana Film Studio, being involved, like Pintilie in Romania, in the process of reviving film production and distribution. Under Mihailov’s leadership, Boyana regained its status as one of the largest, if not the largest, film studios in Southeastern Europe.

² *După-amiaza unui tortionar*. *The Afternoon of a Torturer*, 2001, dir. Lucian Pintilie, 80 min. Romania – France. Lucian Pintilie (1933–) is in no way a newcomer to the discussion of the after-effects of communist regimes on societies. After all, he felt it in his own life, when, in the early 1970, after several of his directorial creations caused political uproar, he was “invited” to emigrate. After a successful career abroad, he returned to Romania in the 1990s and directed

Lucian Pintilie (Romania, 2001), describe desperate attempts to find or transmit a significant story about the communist past. Such narratives are existential, they are necessary because they give meaning to individuals and to generations. In *Canary Season*, Malin's search for a father and for "something nice to remember" goes against his mother's wish to not reveal her story. She believes that it is better for him to be without a past than be inscribed in the narrative that she provides. In the film, we see the tragic consequences of this purposeful withholding of memory. Such consequences are also strongly emphasized in Pintilie's film. The son is not as present as in the Bulgarian scenario yet he is deliberately and forcefully interrupting the father's confession. Unlike Malin, who is desperately looking for validation in the past, Ticuță refuses to listen to and acknowledge his father's narrative. Ultimately, the struggle for meaning that these characters undergo is representative of the struggle for meaning of a whole culture, with both impulses present: the wish to know the past and the equally powerful desire to reject it.

The Bulgarian film is constructed in such a way that although the story of the mother, Lilly, occupies the central position, the film is framed by the story of the son. The film starts with the son, moving, in short sequences, from his early childhood, to his school years (1972), to March 1980 when he is imprisoned for attacking his mother's lover, to his release from prison more than a year later. This builds an image of Malin as a troubled youth, who does not understand his mother's choice of partner (the lover is an image of abjection, fat and vulgar, reminding Malin by his very presence that he is a bastard), always unsettled. Because his mother keeps her past hidden from Malin, he cannot understand why their life is as dejected as it is. His need to belong somewhere is emphasized by his repeated yet failed attempts to reconcile with his mother and by his desire to be accepted in the motorcycle gang with whom his girlfriend, Lada, associates. His relationship with Lada seems to momentarily give direction to his life. However, this relationship upsets a rival member of the group who beats him severely. This seems to be the breaking point. Malin goes back to his mother's house apparently looking for money, but, in a locked drawer, he finds her box of mementos, her "props of memory"³. At first the mother is reluctant to give him the meaning of the mementos that mostly tell of a love story between her and Slavcho, shown as a soldier in an old postcard. She insists that: "You don't have a father." Without other leads, Malin misinterprets the de-contextualized "prop of memory" and believes that Slavcho is his father and confronts him only to be disappointed.

a number of films that are sharp and sarcastic portraits of communist and post-communist Romanian society: *Balanța* (The Oak, 1992), *Prea târziu* (Too Late, 1996), *Terminus Paradis* (1998), *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă* (Niki and Flo, 2003), *Tertium non datur* (2006).

³ A "prop of memory" according to Stephan Feuchtwang, is an object which "stirs a chain of recalling attached to an original memory trace", Stephan FEUCHTWANG, "Loss. Transmissions, Recognitions, Authorizations", in Susannah RADSTONE, Katharine HODGKIN (eds.), *Regimes of Memory*, London: Routledge, 2003, p.76.

He returns to his mother. This is the moment when Lilly's story begins to unravel.

In Lilly's story we see one component of communist oppression: the side of the victim; Pintilie's film will develop the other side, that of the victimizer, the torturer. Although the figure of the victim/prisoner is present in both films it is developed more distinctly in the Bulgarian film in the character of Lilly. However, unlike a typical camp narrative⁴, Lilly's story does not foreground her own personal suffering, she does not spend time complaining about or describing life in the camps or in the psychiatric ward or detailing her strategies of survival. She focuses more on her desire to be freed in order to find her child. Moreover, *Canary Season* is set before 1989 so Lilly's story has a different tone and purpose than the story of Franz Țandără, the main character of the Romanian film, which is told after the fall of communism. Hers is a story of loss but one which can achieve redemption or recognition only on a personal and not on a social communitary level. The narrative of her suffering will remain an individual, familial memory as she cannot "witness" or regain her status or search for justice through her story. Her story is not one that the communist regime would want to acknowledge but rather silence and hide.

The function of witnessing, however, is performed on a metanarrative level through the film itself. The film becomes the carrier of Lilly's story and the viewer a witness for the lost lives of both mother and son. The film itself, by representing the previously silenced suffering, becomes a symbolic search for justice and redemption. This is a role that is often occupied by films about the communist experience after 1989⁵. After 1989, Bulgarian films engaged in the exploration of the communist past, but, as in the Romanian case, the period of exploration did not last very long. In spite of this the topic of the past did manage to reach a point of saturation. Film scholar Dina Iordanova writes that "the gloomy 1950s were recycled ad nauseam [...] Before long, the topic of human rights violations and moral compromises of the period was no longer attractive to filmmakers."⁶ Iordanova adds that Bulgarian film, after the

⁴ For more details on camp narratives and their structure in different cultures see Ekaterina BONCHEVA, *Svideteli: Bulgarskiiat Gulag: Sbornik ot dokumentalni razkazi za kontslagerite v Bulgariia*, Sofia: Izd. na v. "Demokratsiia", 1991; Ruxandra CESERIANU, *Gulagul în conștiința românească. Memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărelor comuniste (eseu de mentalitate)*, Iași: Polirom, 1998, 2005; Leona TOKER, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

⁵ See other films like Stanimir Trifonov *Izpepehlyavane* (Parched), Bulgaria, 2004; Kostadin Bonev, *Podgriavane na vcherashniia obed* (Warming up Yesterday's Lunch, Salt Lake City: Distributed in USA and Canada by BG Media, 2002.) This film was the Bulgarian nomination for the Academy Award for Foreign Film in 2002. *Canary Season* was the Bulgarian nomination in 1993. No Bulgarian film was officially selected. Documentaries: Atanas Kiriakov, *Oselelite lagerni razkazi* (The Survivors. Camp Stories, Bulgaria: s.n., 1990, 2008); Andrey Paounov, *Problemata s komarite i drugi istorii* (Mosquito Problem and Other Stories, Bulgaria/USA/Germany, 2007).

⁶ Dina IORDANOVA, *New Bulgarian Cinema*, College Gate Press, 2008, p. 61.

early 1990s, turned away from the traumatic past to focus on other problems of identity, in a manner similar to the Russian *chernukha* genre.⁷

With difficulty, Lilly starts connecting and interpreting the "props of memory" in her box. She had a hard life. She was a high-school student when she fell in love with Slavcho who was soon drafted for a long stay in the army. While the romantic relationship with Slavcho had been developing, idealistically and innocently, in love letters sealed with "a thousand kisses", she was raped by Ivan, the son of a highly placed communist official. Lilly is pure victim. She is a victim of what had become a topos of post-communist film: "communists as sexual villains." When her pregnancy was uncovered, after a failed suicide attempt, she was forced to marry Ivan by a party tribunal. Her marriage did not "create the healthy socialist family" that the tribunal had in mind. It was a sham and a very unhappy union. Lilly stopped attending school, refused Ivan's drunken advances, and lived under the watchful eyes of her mother in law, while still writing to Slavcho. After Malin was born she returned to her mother's house. Soon, however, her mother in law, after having discovered her correspondence with Slavcho, denounced her as an "enemy of the people". She was arrested and sent to the prison camps.

After overcoming her initial confusion for being imprisoned without a trial (the other inmates laughing at her "innocence" about the way in which the system functions), Lilly seems to understand the mechanism of survival in the camps. One of the few camp scenes described by her has to do with Margarita, a woman arrested at the same time with her and now her new friend. Margarita is overwhelmed and gives up, refusing to work and behaving irrationally. At this point we see the figure of the seductive but extremely evil camp woman commander – a topos of women prison camp stories from Bulgaria – who beats Margarita and proceeds to burn her alive in front of the other prisoners. The reason I relate this scene, and I will return to it later, is because in Pintilie's film we are reminded of this when the son threatens to burn the father as a punishment for wanting to tell his story.

After Lilly's release, she and Malin left her seaside hometown forever. She seemed to find a home with a woman who saves her from being homeless, Aunt Addy. Yet she was forced to leave this home after being asked to falsely denounce the woman. A victim of a false denunciation herself, Lilly cannot do it in spite of the material benefits that were promised to her. Next in her series of misfortunes, while she was working as a janitor in a hospital, she witnessed

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 60. In Russia, by the end of the 1980s, the examination of the past gave way to the analysis and representation of the present. Films of this period are moving away from the taboos of the Soviet period and engaging with new contemporary topics such as prostitution, drug abuse, the life of youth, violence. The features of *chernukha*, as explained by Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, are: 1) a collapsed agonizing family; 2) animalistic natures, ultimate immorality and unmotivated cruelty; 3) death of ideals, no hope for the future; 4) horrible living conditions; 5) senseless hysterics and 6) "adult" scenes, Andrew HORTON, Michael BRASHINSKY, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 163–164.

the political cover up of a wrongful death at the hand of the officials. As a consequence she was locked in a mental institution, medicated and subdued. When she finally left the hospital she found Malin in an orphanage, and he did not recognize her. After this, they started their life as we know it.

This is, briefly, Lilly's story, a story that she keeps hidden from her son. She says that she does not regret what happened, she made her choices in good conscience. The only things she regrets are missing important days in Malin's life and losing track of her little sister. The mementos that Malin found are all she has to tell a story and it is only she who can tell it, who can connect the seemingly random bits and pieces together in a coherent narrative. The film seems to subdue the traumatic effects of her story only to explosively underline them in her son. We see less of Lilly's anguish and pain but we see more of Malin's. Nevertheless, Malin seems to accept this story and looks at his mother tenderly, maybe the only moment of tenderness towards his mother in the whole film. He says "I don't remember the sea." He does not remember his past, his origins. Upon leaving her mother's apartment he throws a small toy figurine, the only one memento from his father Ivan, through a window and breaks it. The move suggests his anger as well as his breakthrough to the past. At the end of the film he steals a motorcycle to go to the sea, to return to the origins and to an imaginary home and maybe start again. But the return is impossible. The return of the dead, be they people or memories or feelings, is not possible. In spite of knowing about the past he cannot fully possess it, he has to be satisfied with just the story which reaches beyond the spans of his memory. He leaves the house and calls Lada to meet her in order to go to the seaside with the band of bikers. The realistic side of the film ends with police and ambulances gathering at the scene of an accident. We see Lada in shock and Malin lying dead on the ground. It is too late.

Indeed, the mother's story comes too late for Malin. Her confession to her son in *Canary Season* is not cathartic but deadly. It cannot stop the unraveling of his life. It cannot undo what years of erasure have done. Before he leaves on his final adventure, Malin, unknowingly, meets his father, Ivan, in a bar. Ivan is a drunk and relies on the same old stories of Western rock-and-roll as in his youth. He tells Malin the joke about the peasant whose tombstone said "he was born and he died." There is nothing in between, no life worth telling, no happy years or even days. After Malin's death, in the final surreal scenes of the film, the viewer sees him walking through a flooded cemetery until he finds his own gravestone on which those same words are engraved: "He was born and he died". This provides a clue to the meaning of the film, if we did not know it already: Malin's life was unfulfilled. Not necessarily because of his own bad choices, but because of things that happened before he was even born. In her discussion of the way second generations absorb the traumatic memories of their parents, Marianne Hirsch emphasizes that these new generations are "dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, *whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generations* shaped by traumatic

events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (my emphasis)⁸. Malin’s story is, therefore, doubly shadowed. First because of traumatic stories that were hidden from him – his mother’s life cut short by a system that solved personal issues with political measures, and her well-meaning but traumatic veiling of the past. Secondly, his story is “evacuated” because now he has to live with the weight of the impossible knowledge that his mother shared with him. He is made a witness to an alternate life whose destructive presence he had felt throughout his life but could not explain in coherent terms.

While *Canary Season* is set before the fall of communism, *The Afternoon of a Torturer* is set after 1989 therefore engaging with a different understanding of the past. The film, directed by Romanian Lucian Pintilie, was released in 2001 as an adaptation of the book-document by Doina Jela entitled *Drumul Damascului. Spovedania unui fost tortionar* [The Road to Damascus. The Confession of a Former Torturer]⁹, which contains Jela’s interviews with a former torturer hired by the communist regime. The post-communist period is supposed to be the period of witnessing, redemption and personal and social recognition and justice, when the stories of abuse come to light and find their place in a new historical narrative. A story like Țandără’s is supposed to confirm the numberless accounts of the victims. Yet he finds it difficult to gain an audience for his testimony in his family as well as in the public sphere. Moreover, Țandără does not seek forgiveness but he seeks punishment, and he is directly interested in the value of his story as testimony in a legal sense.

In the post-1989 period, many new Romanian films focus on allegorical representations of the communist period, on adaptations of classical literature or of previously censored works. The mood is dark, violent and grotesque, often hyperbolic, removed from reality¹⁰. Few Romanian films deal more directly and in a more realist manner with the past¹¹. The most notable example is the TV documentary *Memorial of Suffering* [Memorialul Durerii], directed by Lucia Hossu Longin, (premiered on August 14, 1991, 150 episodes until 2007), a series of one-hour episodes focusing on different aspects of the repressive Romanian communist system. According to the book *Memorialul Durerii*¹² published in 2007, the film stopped being aired in 2004, after being reduced to twenty five minutes and showing after midnight or during the “dead” afternoon hours (from the initial 9 p.m. slot). As the director writes, the justification for cutting the series was that the Romanian Public Television

⁸ Marianne HIRSCH, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 22.

⁹ Doina JELA, *Drumul Damascului. Spovedania unui fost tortionar*, București: Humanitas, 1999.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Hotel de Lux* (Luxury Hotel), Dan Pița dir. 1992.

¹¹ For a comparison of Pintilie’s film with another well-known Romanian prison film *Blessed Be Prison* (dir. Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2002) see the article Elena DULGHERU, “Two Insights into the Romanian Gulag”, in *Kinokultura*, May 2007, nr.6.

¹² *Memorialul Durerii. O istorie care nu se învață la școală* (Memorial of Pain. A History They Do Not Teach in School), București: Humanitas, 2007. The book contains the text of a selection of thirty six episodes and it is accompanied by the corresponding episodes on DVD.

station “should be interested not only in the past, but also in the ‘present and the joy of the future’”¹³. This statement, while it may sound (and actually was) dismissive and reminiscent of communist rhetoric on the “Golden future”, reveals the underlying societal conflict between the necessity to explore the past and the similar need to explore the present and its possibilities, especially in the context in which the discourse of the past does not find a way to adapt itself to the new social and economic conditions.

In Pintilie’s film, an elderly unnamed professor, who is a former political prisoner, and a young journalist, travel to a provincial town to meet with former torturer Franț Țandără who wishes to tell his story. His last name means *shard* in Romanian, in this context further emphasizing the fragmented nature of the past as well the many lives rendered to shards by the system. At his isolated bee farm, surrounded by a high wire fence, they listen to his story, interrupted by threatening phone calls from his son. In the beginning of the film we can see the professor, the journalist, and Țandără arriving at the farm. On the roof of the shack Țandără’s wife is planting a white flag, apparently the symbol of bee-keepers. The barbed wire surrounding the farm is already visible and it will remain so throughout the film, reminiscent of the prison settings described by Țandără and symbolic of his state of mind and sense of isolation from the rest of society.

We first hear about his son, Ticuța, early in the film, while he is driving his guests to his bee farm. His car breaks down and he mentions that he has a new car as well but his son does not allow him to drive it although it was he, Țandără, who actually bought it. At this point Țandără breaks down crying and says that everything he has he will give to his son in order to appease both his son and God. He keeps his son’s photograph on his windshield, above his rearview mirror. He talks directly to the photograph and then the camera lingers on the photo for some long seconds after they start moving again. Prompted by the journalist, Țandără mentions that his son is 37 years old but he does not work to earn his own living because he has been suffering from cirrhosis since he was 19. Țandără considers the son’s disease as his punishment from God for his life and voices this conviction several times. So, although the son is not physically present in the film until much later, like in the Bulgarian film, we have the story of the parent being framed and deeply affected and by that of the son.

Yet Țandără will tell his story in spite of the son, not at his request, as in the case of Lilly and Malin. We find out about the son’s dislike for his father’s actions early in the film, when Țandără receives the first of several phone calls including one from a Mr. Teodorescu, who apparently is an important person and who asks Țandără to stop what he is doing, the implication being that he

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 424. At present, reruns are aired on the Cultural Romania channel. In December 2006, in a speech officially condemning the abuses of the communist period in Romania, the Romanian president, Traian Băsescu, recommended that new episodes of the *Memorialul* be filmed and aired as part of a multi-pronged education program.

should stop sharing his story with the journalist. When he refuses, saying that what he does is his own business, the son intervenes to threaten him. This ensures that the viewer becomes aware of forces outside Țandără's private realm that might be interested in sabotaging the confession. This is an important factor in judging the importance of the past for the present. The film will also highlight the way its different characters attempt to avoid the depth of the story in spite of being there to listen to it.

During his confession, or rather testimonial, Țandără talks about his family and the events of his youth, as well as about the people who initiated him into and were his partners in torture. Țandără reluctantly recounts how he killed his father, the grounding act of his future development. He describes his interrogation work in a psychiatric ward – mirroring in an ironical way Lillys' stay as a victim in such a ward – and the way he saw his place of employment as home. His confession is interspersed with images from his past. None of these images, however, are of torture. They are all images of his family and of one other important figure from his past: the woman who taught him how to torture. Towards the end of the film (in a scene I will return to later), Țandără's son, Ticuța, visits him, abusing and threatening his passive father, trying to stop the confession. At the end of the day, when the interview is over, the professor and the journalist leave. There is much left unsaid.

Throughout the interview, the past is alive and present for Țandără. Images of the past are always part of the cinematic story. These images are not cinematically separated from the present, they are not traditional flashbacks. Those listening to the story inhabit the same time and space, the same frame, as the characters in the past. While Țandără and his guests sit at the table, in front of them they see the “theatre” of Țandără's past, a collage of images that were not necessarily real but which are, nevertheless, alive in Țandără's memory. We can interpret such foundational scenes through the angle provided by Paul Antze, as images which “while not constituting actual representations of the past, are nevertheless the core of ourselves – the base of our own self-recognition”¹⁴. These are images that Țandără imbues with meaning for his own sense of self.

Țandără looks straight into his past, he is in direct relationship with it. The past talks to him and tempts him. The point of view is of essence in these captions. Sometimes the past seems out of focus. Then it is not Țandără that looks at the past but the viewer, from behind his back, through Țandără's perspective. We see less than what he sees, which suggests the incompleteness of his confession. In a different image, close to the end of the film, where Țandără directly looks at the group of people important in his life, the past is in focus. He himself is watching them and they watch him (and us), they are an integral part of the present and cannot be separated from it. This further emphasizes the idea that the past and present cannot be separated, they live in a symbiotic relationship and the more invested one is with the past the more it changes

¹⁴ Antze quoted in Susannah RADSTONE, Katharine HODGKIN (eds.), *op. cit.*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 13.

the present. One cannot place the past in a box, as Lilly did in *Canary Season*, and access it whenever necessary.

One important image in the series of scenes from Țandără's past is that of him as a young boy sitting up in a tree and looking at the group gathered to hear the story of his own corruption. The boy provides a silent running commentary on the events recounted by Țandără. The boy smiles when the events Țandără recounts are happy or just ordinary. The image of the boy serves multiple purposes. One is to humanize Țandără and to confuse the viewer's moral compass. Another is to show that he was not born evil but was made so by a series of events that were initially out of control, that were caused by his own extremely dysfunctional family, especially his relationship with his father who he ends up killing. This reminds us of Malin's conflict with his stepfather, the attack he had to pay for by going to prison. In Țandără's case, the parricide is the beginning of his "education" as a torturer. Thus, the film points out that intergenerational conflict is nothing new but, as in Lilly's case, here too, the personal offence becomes a political tool for recruiting not only new victims like Lilly, but new torturers as well.

Yet, this film is not as much about the past and its horrors as it is about the present and its horrors. Pintilie's main idea is that the present cannot articulate its identity because it avoids these dark parts. The director's self-declared aim is to "electrocute the viewer's flaccid, Romanian consciousness" although he knows his efforts are useless.¹⁵ The film's main idea, writes Pintilie, is that "hell is on earth", or, rather, I would argue, hell is in the present; it is in Țandără's burdened consciousness, as well as in those who refuse to listen to his confession. To develop this idea I will insist on two elements of the film: the relationship between past and present, and the attitude of the other characters toward Țandără's confession.

Those surrounding Țandără embody different kinds of avoidance of the truth contained in his story: the journalist tries to keep her objective, business-like demeanor and not be affected emotionally by the events she diligently records. One reviewer said that the contrast between Țandără and the journalist is that between the visceral and the intellectual. There is only **one** point where Țandără's story breaks through the professional façade of the journalist: "I would like to ask you something", says the journalist. "You said that you yourself tortured a dying man. That you used him for lessons. Together with a woman... How many do you think died this way?" "Maybe a hundred", answers Țandără, "only by my hands." "How many did you say, a hundred?" This is a number that the journalist will return to, after the interview is over and it will become the leitmotif of her trip back home. On the other hand, Țandără's half-blind wife wants to forget the past and begs the journalist to stop "torturing" her husband with useless questions. She feels the emotional burden of the story and does not care for the judicial or the intellectual.

¹⁵ Lucian PINTILIE, *Bricabrac*: Humanitas, 2003, p. 446.

At the same time, the professor lives in his quasi optimistic universe full of irrelevant theories about everything, from the nature of the universe itself to the philosophy and craft of beekeeping, and he falls asleep during the testimonial. The professor, supposedly the most invested in this testimony as a former political prisoner, leaves the table at crucial moments in the story. The camera follows him to the backyard outhouse. One can blame it on his weak bladder but it can also be his inability to listen to what Țandără has to say and his wish to escape the horrible past. Yet, if we look at this movie through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection¹⁶, we see that he cannot escape the horror in Țandără's story, as it follows him even as he moves away from it. The outhouse and his frequent visits suggest that, despite his optimism, his "flatness", as director Pintilie calls it, the professor can run but cannot hide because abjection is part of himself as his past and his present. To push this point further, the professor falls asleep repeatedly during Țandără's testimony. Is he not interested, is it this another escape method, or is he just plain tired, as Țandără says? Pintilie defends his comical flat representation of the Professor in a letter to the real life Professor from Doina Jela's book. The director argues that his film is pure fiction, a fiction film inspired by Jela's book, and that the Professor's figure was constructed in such a way as to access Pintilie's own tragicomical, grotesque universe and has no relationship with the real Professor.¹⁷

There is no doubt that Țandără is burdened by his past as a torturer. He does not hope for redemption, though. What he wants is to be judged but nobody wants to do it, legally or morally. He prays to God but does not ask for absolution as he believes that his deeds are beyond forgiveness. Țandără believes that his son, with his almost fatal liver disease and his abuse of the father, is his punishment from God. He sincerely wants to tell his story but often fails to reach the truth because what he wants to say is too terrible for his audience, he cannot utter it and the audience may not be ready to listen to him. Ticuță, the son, sees his father as a traitor of the country for revealing his past, and, as if returning to the initial parricide, threatens to kill his father by burning him alive. Of course Ticuță rejects his father's memory, there is nothing "nice to remember" in that story; however, my point here is that Ticuță's rejection is so violent, so public, so obscene, that it tells us something beyond the personal conflict between father and son.

In a crucial scene close to the end of Pintilie's film, Țandără's son visits with his friends before a soccer match. They are all dressed in the colors of a national team and, somehow surprisingly, accompanied by several men in suits who will eventually take out their guns in order to contribute to the noisy cacophony meant to frighten Țandără. The son will lecture the father about confession. The son's speech should not be read as rightful indignation. It is

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva develops her notion of abjection in Julia KRISTEVA, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

¹⁷ Lucian PINTILIE, *op. cit.*, pp. 470–471. To reinforce his point, neither the professor nor the journalist have names in the film.

full of clichés used in the post 1989 period, a ready-made position that the son occupies using the excremental, bestial, sexually charged vocabulary that characterizes the inflammatory discourse of the period¹⁸. As we will see, this film, ultimately, it is about the son, about what the present has become [Note: I did not correct the grammatical errors within the son's discourse]:

Son: What are you up to, asshole? Hello Miss, greetings Professor!

Com'on, asshole, what are you up to? Didn't I tell you to stop fooling around? Why don't you? Huh? Why? Do you want to confess yourself? Go ahead, go to the priest and confess yourself! Listen, the bells is tolling! The church is across the street, you can go and confess yourself! Forgive me, father, I have done this and that, I played with the dead, I sodomized them... But you, you don't want to. You don't want to go to the priest. You go to Radio-ditch and become a snitch. You sell out your own country, man! You sell it, your dear country! "Cause you have no other. You snitch on it and you foul it. For how many greens, for how many do you foul it? You think you're somebody, you hang up on Mr. Teodorescu! You! How dare you to hang up on Mr. Teodorescu?

Do you see these kids, moron? [group of soccer fans singing the Romanian national anthem] Tell me, do you see them? Do you, moron? We're going to burn you alive, asshole. Listen well, we will ... listen, now we're going to the game with these kids. Pay attention, we win, we come back and we burn you. Do you hear this, daddy? We're going to put you on fire. (Car horns. Roll call of fans)

Țandără: It was Ticuță, he went to the game with the guys. He's upset, he's really angry with me. Only let God not take him from me. (to wife) Com'on, bring some honeycomb.

Țandără is powerless in front of the son, he lacks words – he does not speak back to the son – and he does not show anger. As viewers, we are surprised and frustrated by Țandără's passivity. We know he feels anger, and he showed it in his behavior towards his wife and at other moments in the story when he snapped at his listeners. Yet, when his son confronts him, he sits quietly, with his eyes to the floor accepting the verbal abuse – almost like a victim. Moreover, we fail to see the potential in Ticuță, the way we saw it in Malin. Quite the opposite, in this film we tend to paradoxically sympathize with the villain, with Țandără. The mechanism of emotion seems to reject Ticuță because we see him as an abject offspring of everything horrible that Țandără did in his life. Even more, the son takes over the right-wing pseudo-communist nationalist discourse which judges the father's wish to unveil the past as betrayal, as an act of pollution of the country. In this scene, we see the invasion of the abjection into the everyday; however, it is not through the fear of pollution that the son invokes, but through the very presence of the son and his friends: the obscenities they shout at Țandără, the graffiti they draw on his

¹⁸ For more on this kind of discourse see Ruxandra CESERIANU, *Imaginarul violent al românilor*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003.

shack (a huge penis)¹⁹, the baring of “unclean” body parts etc. It is as if the horror in Țandără’s life comes out through his son. The present, seemingly unknowingly, is fully perverted. Țandără himself does not believe that the future generations – that of his grandson, for example – will redeem his effort and value his confession. He sees himself as being discarded as a useless ridiculous old man. The film shows how the confession of the parent does not help the children and does not enlighten and unburden the present. The confession is sabotaged, delayed, undervalued or it simply comes too late, making the life of the children meaningless and joyless.

In periods of heavy rewriting of history, younger generations find themselves pulled among several conflicting narratives of the past. This leads to imaginary and existential instability as one does not have a stable personal or cultural history to rely on and ground one’s development. Younger generations in post-communist countries are often blamed for their destructive behavior and for their lack of values. To understand that, it might be worth looking at how they negotiate their sense of identity in relationship with the past of their culture and that of their parents.

Oana Popescu Sandu
opopescusa@usi.edu
 English Department
 University of Southern Indiana
 8600 University Boulevard,
 Evansville, IN, 47712

¹⁹ Dina Iordanova interprets this in the following way: “The giant penis someone has sprayed at the front suggest that the torturer lives under siege from vandal gangs who use the outrageous media revelations about the shady past of this neighbor mostly as a pretext for setting free their own need to brutalize others. These vigilante hooligans probably would themselves happily become torturers should there be a demand”, Dina IORDANOVA, “Whose is this Memory: Hushed Narrative and Discerning Remembrance in Balkan Cinema”, *Cineaste*, Contemporary Balkan Cinema Supplement, Summer 2007, p. 24.