

# THE BLACK HOLE PARADIGM. EXHIBITING COMMUNISM IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** In the early 1990s, Romania's communist past was a subject of heated public and private debate in which the historian's voice was hardly ever heard. It was the time when metaphorical accounts of the country's difficult past were more fashionable than serious academic analysis. It was in the 1990s that the 1945-1989 period came to be described as "a black hole" in Romania's history, as a time when Romanians were "out of history". My argument is that Romanian exhibitions on communism have taken up this unfortunate metaphor and, although academic accounts of our recent past are currently more nuanced, the practice of exhibiting communism has remained confined to these old-fashioned dichotomies and to what I describe as *the black hole paradigm*.

My article will mainly deal with two important museums, the only ones that had the determination and courage to establish, in the troubled 1990s, permanent exhibitions dealing with the country's communist past. The Sighet Memorial Museum and the Romanian Peasant Museum are to this day still the only museums that exhibit communism every day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Yet they were constructed in a specific memorial context. The influence of this is visible in the curatorial concept of the exhibitions, in their usage of space and architecture and in the basic argument they strive to convey about the communist past.

**Keywords:** museum, representations of communism, the Sighet Memorial Museum, the Romanian Peasant Museum.

## WELCOME BACK, HISTORY!

The political context of the early 1990s, with a neo-Communist power in charge of establishing democracy in Romania, turned the debate about the legacy of the Communist regime into a crucial, contemporary matter with immediate effects on political, cultural and academic life. Briefly put, the neo-Communist established power actively discouraged any initiative at uncovering or at least opening the debate on the communist past of the country,

thus establishing what Vladimir Tismăneanu calls a “politics of amnesia”.<sup>1</sup> The result was, in my view, a radicalization in the position of those who felt the need for such a historical, political and even moral investigation. It is my argument that the constant denial of access to “the real story” of Romanian Communism pushed Romanian anti-Communism into a radical realm which focused mainly on Communist crimes and described the whole era as a criminal era.<sup>2</sup>

In the enthusiastic months following the Romanian Revolution, several civic groups were formed, among which the Group for Social Dialogue was one the most influential for the emerging Romanian civil society.<sup>3</sup> The Group has been publishing the prominent *Revista 22* since January 1990 and has been uniting, in writing and public action, the most visible Romanian intellectuals with a clear anti-communist leaning. Their view of the last half century of Communist regime is clearly stated in the editorial of the first issue of *Revista 22*: “There was half a century when history ceased to exist.”<sup>4</sup> In the second issue of the journal, Bogdan Ghiu happily writes: “Welcome back, history!”<sup>5</sup> followed by a two page editorial on: “Should history restart where it stopped?” (*Istoria se reia de unde s-a oprit?*).<sup>6</sup> This type of consideration became paradigmatic for this group’s position on the communist past: Romanian history unfolded progressively until the Second World War when suddenly history stopped and Romania entered “a black hole” from which it was miraculously delivered in 1989.<sup>7</sup>

Irina Nicolau, ethnographer and one of the creators of the Romanian Peasant Museum, of which this article shall have much more to say in

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, “Democracy and Memory: Romania Confronts Its Communist Past”, in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May 2008, 617, p.168.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent overview of the memory struggles over de-communization in Romania and Eastern Europe is offered in Lavinia Stan’s writings. The myths surrounding de-communisation are analyzed in Lavinia STAN, “The Vanishing Truth? Politics and Memory in Post-Communist Europe” in *East European Quarterly*, December 2006, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 383–408. For a slightly different story of the “process of communism” in Romania, see Florin ABRAHAM, “Raportul Comisiei Tismăneanu: analiza istoriografică” (Tismăneanu Commission Report: an historiographical analysis), in Vasile ERNU, Costi ROGOZANU (eds.), *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale raportului Tismăneanu*, Chisinau: Cartier, 2008, pp. 9–13.

<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on its own formation, the Group’s site proclaims: “The Group for Social Dialogue was constituted in January 1990 as a critical reflection institution in a historical time marked by the violent decomposition of the totalitarian communist state and the transition from communized society to the formation of civil society” <http://www.gds.org.ro/> (accessed July 14th, 2010). Unless otherwise stated, all the translations from Romanian to English belong to me.

<sup>4</sup> „Editorial 22” in *Revista 22*, January 1990, no. 1, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Bogdan GHIU, “Pași către un dialog interior” (Steps towards an inner dialogue) in *Revista 22*, January 1990, no. 2, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Revista 22*, January 1990, no. 2, pp. 18–19.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, this view is congruent with the Communists’ own theory on history. They also aimed to bring about the end of history, but in a positive way, ending the chain of exploitation and entering the final, paradisiacal stage of history.

subsequent pages, was writing in the early 90s: “There is in Romania a huge emptiness that one has to fill with its own body, in order to build upon. Or maybe it is better to build a bridge over it, with one pillar in Samurcaș’s<sup>8</sup> times and the other in the place where the future starts. But are we wise enough to make that bridge? Are we working fast enough?”<sup>9</sup>

Foreign informed observers of Romanian reality were puzzled by these maneuvers of amnesia and included questions of dealing with the past in their research. American anthropologist Katherine Verdery was writing as early as 1994: “How did it happen that Romania is partly resuscitating the past in this way, seeking to lift out whole chunks of the Communist period as if it had never occurred?”<sup>10</sup> More recently, in 2005, cultural and art critic Boris Groys points out towards the same a-historical vision on the communist past, still vivid in Eastern Europe:

In the East, as well as in the West, there is some consensus that the communism would have been a time of erasure and oppression of the national culture, for Russians but also Ukrainians, Romanians and Hungarians... It was a kind of gap, it was a non-historical, anti-historical period that would have been only characterized by oppression and suppression of something... So if communism is understood as erasure of national tradition, in the name of universalistic ideas, then people think that this erasure of erasure is minus-minus that brings plus and return to the origin[...].<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1990s, however, the dilemma concerning an evaluation of the Communist past faced historians even more urgently.<sup>12</sup> Those historians working in schools and museums, for example, had to come up with an immediate practical solution for their everyday work. Once again, history stopped in 1945 with history teachers desperately confessing they don’t know what to tell their students about the post-1945 period.<sup>13</sup> A history manual published

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<sup>8</sup> Al. Tzigara Samurcaș was the director of the National Art Museum, the predecessor of the Romanian Peasant Museum in the interwar period.

<sup>9</sup> Irina NICOLAU and Carmen HULUȚĂ, *Dosar sentimental* (Sentimental dossier), București: Liternet, 2003, p. 54, <http://editura.liternet.ro/carte.php?carte=48> (accessed June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Katherine VERDERY, *What was socialism, and what comes next?*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Boris Groys, “Utopia Is Investment in The Artificial? A conversation with Boris Groys about the Post-communist condition”, in *Idea, Arts + Society Magazine* 2005, no. 21.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview on Romanian historiographical struggles and development in post-communism, including the debates over the communist past see Cristina PETRESCU, Dragoș PETRESCU, “Mastering vs. Coming to Terms with the Past. A Critical Analysis of the Post-Communist Romanian Historiography”, in Sorin ANTOHI, Balázs TRENCSENYI, Péter APOR (eds.), *Narratives unbound: historical studies in post-communist Eastern Europe*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2007, pp. 311–371.

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, I am not aware of any studies concerning the changes in history teaching in the early 1990s, so these considerations are based on my own memories of schooling in the 1990s, while I was a secondary and high school student.

in 1942 by P. P. Panaitescu<sup>14</sup> was re-edited by the Didactic Publishing House<sup>15</sup> and used as a basis for teaching history in primary and secondary school. The unfolding of Romanian history naturally ended, in this manual, in the interwar period.

### MUSEUMS IN TURMOIL?

Equally clueless about the necessary changes and the new narrative of Romanian history were museum professionals. In most cases, the contemporary history sections in museums were simply closed down under heavy locks, and it is essential to note that not even 20 years after the 1989 rupture, has anything been conceived of which could fill those empty rooms. With notable exceptions, like the County Museum in Alexandria hosting a permanent exhibition on collectivization in Teleorman, Romanian museums, central or regional, have been keeping a perplexed silence on the country's communist past ever since 1990.

“Almost a year after the 1989 December Revolution, the situation of historical exhibitions in most museums is the same: the contemporary history section is completely closed, the ‘precious quotations’ were eliminated and the texts were revised and most of the copies of objects were removed from the show-cases.”<sup>16</sup> This is part of the first text published in *Revista Muzeelor* (Museums’ Review) in 1990 that actively engages with the transformations museums were undergoing as a result of the general political and societal transformations. It was published in the August-October 1990 issue of the journal. No issue prior to this had shown any sign of the immense change in Romanian society and politics. Apart from the decree organizing the Commission for Museums and Collections signed by Ion Iliescu on February 5<sup>th</sup> 1990, there is nothing in these early 1990 issues of the *Museums’ Review* that might hint at the transformations museums were going through or were expected to go through.

In this article, Anghel Pavel attempts an honest evaluation of the last 15 years of Romanian museology trying to hint at the causes of the crisis museums found themselves in. He points to heavy political involvement in the museums discourse, excessive centralization and the obligation of every museum to have “the complete circuit” (circuitul complet).<sup>17</sup> The *complete circuit* is a term introduced in the 1970s and ‘80s in the museum profession as an expression of the obligation of every historical museum to present the history

<sup>14</sup> The editors seemed to be unaware of the fact that P. P. Panaitescu was a preeminent figure of the interwar Romanian fascist movement, the Iron Guard. What was important in the early 1990s was that he was an interwar historian untainted by Communist ideology.

<sup>15</sup> P. P. PANAITESCU, *Istoria Românilor* (History of Romanians), București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Anghel PAVEL, “Încotro, muzeele de istorie?” (History museums, where to?), in *Revista muzeelor*, no. 8–10/1990, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44–48.

of the Romanian nation from prehistory to the present day. It meant that even an archaeological museum had to add special rooms dedicated to the Communist achievements and also that regional museums should abandon regional history and present Romanian history in the national narrative specific to the 1980s national communism. Anghel Pavel argues for abandoning this concept and thus allowing regional museums to focus on their original specializations and not be forced to deal with subjects which exceed their competences (like exhibiting the history of the communist regime, for example).

It is only the last issue of 1990 that opens the debate on the necessary transformations in museums, with the publication of a *Frame-Program (program-cadru) for museal development*.<sup>18</sup> The program is the result of the meeting held on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1990 by the Commission for Museums and Collections. The main objective of this program is “restructuring of the museum network”, “with special attention to revising, completing and thematically remaking of history and archaeology museums... including some themes deliberately excluded in the past (reflection of personalities, of religious development, political realities, etc.).”<sup>19</sup> The deadline for this part of the program was 1993–1994; it is to this day largely unaccomplished. Another point of the program is concerned with the establishment of new museums with a bewildering range of topics: Sports Museum, Automobile museum, Cinematography Museum, Aviation Museum, Hunting Museum or Museum of Commerce!<sup>20</sup> The program also proposes acquisitions of contemporary art through an ethnographic expedition in four African countries which was proposed for 1991–1992.<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of dealing with the past, the long-awaited program is useless; it only alludes to the necessity of “revising, completing and thematically remaking of history and archaeology museums” but the main museological effort in Romanian museums seems to be directed towards very different topics: from Hunting museums to African expeditions.

It is no wonder that, in this context, the courage and initiative of creatively dealing with the past did not come from museum professionals. Two museums, established in the early 1990s by professionals coming from outside the museum sphere, were to articulate a discourse on the communist past, to boldly engaged with the communist heritage, societal and museal, and manage to at least open a debate on the necessity of dealing with the past in the museum space. These institutions were the Romanian Peasant Museum, established by state initiative in February 1990 under the direction of artist Horia Bernea and the Sighet Memorial, established by private initiative in 1993 with the efforts of the Civic Academy Foundation and especially of writer Ana Blandiana, yet partially supported with state subsidy ever since 1997. Although intellectually very connected to the above-mentioned group

<sup>18</sup> Gavrilă SARAFOLEANU, “Program-cadru de dezvoltare muzeală” (Frame-Program for museal development), in *Revista muzeelor* 11–12/1990, pp. 117–119.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118.

promoting a black-hole view on the communist past, the initiatives of these two museums aimed to uncover unknown dimensions of the past while also insisting on a criminalizing perspective specific to the radical anticommunism of the period.

### COMMUNISM IN THE UNDERGROUND. *THE PLAGUE EXHIBITION AT THE ROMANIAN PEASANT MUSEUM*<sup>22</sup>

The Romanian Peasant Museum is one of the rare examples of a communist museum (i.e. an official museum of the communist regime) transformed into a museum about Communism. Despite its name but in accordance with its history, the Romanian Peasant Museum is still the only institution in the capital city to host a permanent exhibition on Communism.

The Romanian Peasant Museum was re-established in 1990, on February 5th, barely one month after the demise of the Romanian Communist regime. The building assigned to it was originally built at the beginning of the 20th century as an ethnographic museum. The Museum of National Art had been removed from the building in 1952, and the V. I. Lenin – I. V. Stalin Museum (which was later renamed the Marx–Engels–Lenin Museum) installed in its place. In 1958, another propaganda museum was brought to the left wing of the building, the History Museum of the Romanian Workers' Party. The two museums functioned simultaneously until 1966, when the Marx–Engels–Lenin Museum was silently dissolved into the new History Museum of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement of Romania, which occupied the building until 1990. This museum was informally called the Party Museum and despite these several changes of name and location it continued to be, throughout the communist period, a true museum of communism: of the communist movement, ideology and party.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This part of my research, concerned with the early history of the Romanian Peasant Museum has already been published, in a similar form in Gabriela CRISTEA, Simina RADU-BUCURENCI, "Raising the Cross. Exorcising Romania's Communist Past in Museums, Memorials and Monuments", in Oksana SARKISOVA, Peter APOR (eds.), *Past for the Eyes. East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, CEU Press: Budapest, 2007, pp. 273–303. The argument of that article was stressing the links between anticommunist and Orthodox discourse in representing a victimizing version of Romania's communist past in museums and memorials.

<sup>23</sup> The history of the Party Museum has attracted so little attention among researchers, that not even its successive names have been so far correctly recorded. The only publication that briefly touches upon the history of the building during communism, records an inaccurate succession of names (Petre POPOVAT, "Muzeul de la Șosea" (The Museum by the Boulevard), in *Martor. Supliment* 1999, no. 4, pp. 1–140). My own research into the history of the Party Museum (Simina BĂDICĂ, "Same exhibition, different labels': Romanian national museums and the fall of communism" in Simon J. KNELL (ed.), *National Museums*, Routledge, 2010) could only access printed materials (museum albums, newspapers, Museum's review) as the archive of the former History Museum of the Communist Party is still not archived and thus unavailable for research at the Romanian National Archives.

The Romanian Peasant Museum was to construct its identity in sharp contrast with its predecessor. It was not only a question of institutional succession; the distance to be established was between two eras, two worlds, two regimes. The team at the Peasant Museum chose to establish this distance in a very peculiar way. On a museographical level, the basic concepts in dealing with the heritage of the old museum were fakery and truth. The former communist museum was considered a “fake museum”; therefore its objects were “fake objects”. The new museum was built through a dialogue with the objects, but this very dialogue was denied to the communist objects. On a discursive level, the distance taken was even sharper: the old museum was a “ghost” still haunting the building of the Peasant Museum, which needed to be exorcised. From an architectural point of view, the basement was considered the only place suitable for an exhibition on Communism: the only exhibition room on Communism is also the only one that requires the visitors to descend underground.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of this basic opposition was present from the first moment of the re-establishment of the museum, in February 1990. Andrei Pleșu, the minister of Culture at that moment, explained his decision:

The idea of reestablishing a museum of ethnography in the building on the boulevard<sup>25</sup> was not the result of an effort of imagination, but of memory. That building was designed by Ghika-Budești<sup>26</sup> especially to be an ethnography museum... It seemed symbolically useful to exorcise the ghosts of a fake museum such as the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party with a museum belonging to the local tradition.<sup>27</sup>

The links connecting the Romanian Peasant Museum and the former communist Party Museum were more powerful than just inheriting/re-occupying the building. The museum inherited the exhibitions displayed in the exhibition halls, the collections in the back rooms, the library and, importantly, the staff of the communist museum. The story of the Peasant Museum is told by the new staff<sup>28</sup> as the story of a struggle: a physical struggle with the transformations that the building underwent as a communist museum and with all the objects that had lost any purpose or meaning, and a spiritual struggle with the ghosts of Communism. The physical fight did not take too long: only a few months for dismantling, cleaning the exhibition rooms and transferring

<sup>24</sup> For an in-depth account on the meanings of going underground during Communist times, see István RÉV, “Underground”, in *Retroactive Justice. Prehistory of Post-Communism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 240–303.

<sup>25</sup> Before World War II, the National Art Museum was known as the “museum on the boulevard” since it was located on the main promenade boulevard of Bucharest, Kiseleff Boulevard.

<sup>26</sup> Famous Romanian architect, representative of the (Neo)Romanian architectural style. The museum was built according to his plans between 1912 and 1938.

<sup>27</sup> Irina NICOLAU, Carmen HULUȚĂ, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>28</sup> Among them, the most important is the director appointed in 1990: Horia Bernea, famous Romanian painter and artist. He would continue to run the museum until his death in 2000.

the objects to other institutions (such as the National History Museum and the National Archives). Ioana Popescu, head of the research department and a visual anthropologist at the museum, who was part of the museum team since 1990, told me in an interview the story of the rediscovery of the exhibition rooms:

On the outside, the building has arches in neo-Romanesque style. On the inside, we were surprised to discover no cupolas, no arches. There were long rooms, some square-ish, some like wide halls that you walked through, with straight walls on each side. Then we realized that the walls were not real: they were only fake walls hiding the splendid interior architecture.<sup>29</sup>

The same company that had installed the former exhibitions was hired to dismantle them. They discovered that the panels and the fake walls were so solidly made that it took an enormous amount of time, money and work to get rid of them. The researchers of the museum actively participated in this process. “We float in the red works of Ceaușescu and in the blue volumes of the *Soviet Encyclopedia*. The panels of the former exhibitions are deeply embedded in the walls, meant to last for eternity. They leave holes like craters after they have been removed.”<sup>30</sup>

Another part of the physical struggle was against the old collections, which were considered “trash” by the researchers and museographers of the new museum.

At first, we wanted to throw everything away. Then we realized that we couldn’t do that because we could be attacked when it was noticed that we had thrown away communist books. The political moment was still not very clear... So we discussed it with the Museum of National History and with the State Archives and we tried to throw over to them most of this trash, what we called “trash”. What nobody wanted to take, we put in the basement, in a room that we still call the Chamber of Horrors. Later, we received offers from abroad, from private persons or institutions that wanted to buy communist objects from us. But they were no longer here so we answered with dignity that we would not sell our country.<sup>31</sup>

Irina Nicolau<sup>32</sup> has different memories of how the difficult heritage of the Communist Party Museum was handled. She recalls that they treated the collections of the old museum carefully since they were a part of recent history

<sup>29</sup> Ioana POPESCU, Tape-recorded interview by Simina Bădică, Bucharest, Romania, April 26, 2004. Personal archive.

<sup>30</sup> Irina NICOLAU, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ioana POPESCU, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Irina Nicolau, writer and ethnologist, was Horia Bernea’s right-hand in conceiving and building the museum. She was the center of an informal group of mostly young people who were co-opted into the museum’s projects.

and they did not want to do what the communists had done: erase the past.<sup>33</sup> However, most of the exhibits of the former museum were not even regarded as objects with any patrimonial value. The History Museum of the Communist Party was thought of as a museum of fake photographs and words.

The metaphor of exorcising the communist ghosts is a recurrent theme in the narrative of the museum, and also of post-communist Romanian society at large. “Exorcism” became more than a metaphor when Horia Bernea decided, in the spring of 1991, to call on the clergy priests to chase away these spirits in a religious ceremony.

While the dismantling took place, Horia Bernea had the idea that we needed to clean the space not only of fake walls and fake objects, but also of the bad spirits that must have sneaked in and lived among us... He brought some prelates who came to sprinkle the holy water (*aghiasmă*), to clean the whole museum. They entered every storage room, every little corner; we have pictures of that. And it is interesting to see that we were all there. We were all there because we all had to be sprinkled with holy water... And the priests who came with huge buckets of holy water were sprinkling with all the strength in their muscles. It seemed that their arms were going to break off their shoulders when they were sprinkling. They flooded everything in holy water. When they found themselves in front of that famous sculpture of the heads of Marx, Engels and Lenin - there was one in almost every room - they were throwing, flooding it with water as if by this they would destroy it. One of these triple busts ended up in the interior courtyard of the museum. It was huge so we couldn't send it anywhere, we had no money for special transport so finally it was dragged to the museum's courtyard and it is still there now among the rubbish and the remains of the dismantling, surrounded by a square metal fence.<sup>34</sup>

Conquering the space of the museum was thus one of the first tasks of the team gathered around Horia Bernea and Irina Nicolau. In the early period, they were not even allowed to enter the museum or the exhibition halls. They felt surrounded by a hostile environment, which included not only the building and the “fake objects” of the communist collection, but also the staff of the former museum:

They received us with a clearly stated, declared hatred. We finally managed to greet each other but it was clear that we were taking their place and they would have to leave, one way or another. That they would not find their place in the framework we were thinking of for our museum. It was very hard for us to get to know them by name.<sup>35</sup>

Among all of these down-to-earth problems, however, the museum began to organize small events and exhibitions,<sup>36</sup> to produce unconventional little

<sup>33</sup> Irina NICOLAU, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ioana POPESCU, interview.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> The first temporary exhibition organized by the museum in 1990 was “Clay Toys” followed

booklets, most of them hand-made, to establish its reputation as an innovative museum, which takes patrimony objects out in the street and hires traditional music bands (lăutari) to play on the streets of Bucharest. They began to think of the permanent exhibition, searching for a theme that would give meaning to the new name of the museum. The outcome would have to be both a “healing museum” as Irina Nicolau wanted it and a “testifying museum” as Horia Bernea wished. And it did become, in my view, both a healing and disturbing museum, thought-provoking, annoying and beautiful, fundamentalist and delicate. In 1996, it was awarded the European Museum of the Year Award.

The “healing” component of the museum was obviously aimed at the traumatic memory of the Communist regime. Paradoxically, the initial reaction to this past, as reflected in the first permanent exhibition, is a total indifference to it, a deliberate refusal to make any reference to recent history. The first exhibition, entitled *The Cross*, was inaugurated on April 19, 1993; the French anthropologist Gérard Althabe observed that the exhibition probably spoke more about the communist past by its total lack of reference to it.<sup>37</sup> Actually, it spoke rather about how the communist past was viewed in the early 1990s by Romanian intelligentsia: as a black hole that had to be forgotten, put into brackets, in order to reach more easily back to the interwar period where “real” Romanian history and identity was supposed to be found.

After cleaning the museum and removing the traces of the communist past, it seemed necessary to the new staff to reinstall a sense of normality and truthfulness in the previously abused image of the peasant. And this normality could only be reached by keeping silent, for a time, about everything that had been mystified and altered under communist rule. As Ioana Popescu remembers,

We started with the idea that the discourse on the cross must not be a vindictive discourse. Horia Bernea did not want, by *The Cross*, either to cover the horrors of Communism, or to use it as a weapon. He simply wanted to try to induce certain normality, a normality that he could not imagine in the Romanian world in the absence of the cross. A cross that he saw as an element of balance and order... So he started by wanting to make peace. A calm and normal speech. We did not think for a moment that in the exhibition *The Cross* there should be the victory of the cross over Communism.<sup>38</sup>

It seemed more urgent for Horia Bernea’s team, in the early 1990s, to bring into the museum what was beautiful and harmonious about the Romanian peasant, what was timeless about him. Only after the permanent display was more or less finished, did the need for a discourse on ugliness become urgent. The museum that they had created was “a serene museum, a museum of peasant balance, in which you didn’t notice that you were in fact walking

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by displays of icons, painted Easter eggs, an exhibition called “Chairs”, all experimental and daring in terms of exhibiting techniques and message.

<sup>37</sup> Gérard ALTHABE, “Une exposition ethnographique: du plaisir esthétique, une leçon politique”, *Martor: The Romanian Peasant Museum Anthropology Review* no. 2, 1997, pp. 144–158.

<sup>38</sup> POPESCU, interview.

on bones, walking on dead people, dead peasants who had everything taken away from them.”<sup>39</sup> From this point of view, it was itself becoming fake and misleading and it needed, Irina Nicolau thought, a counter-balance to all its serenity. This counter-balance was going to be *The Plague*, the only exhibition hall organized in a basement room. Irina Nicolau was thinking about it as early as 1990. “I was dreaming of an exhibition set up in the technical basement, where we could isolate four small, damp rooms and a former bathroom with broken tiles, a steamy mirror and a dirty bath-tube. I imagined the bath-tube filled with water in which old newspapers would float among the sunken bronze busts of Lenin, Stalin and Gheorghiu-Dej.”<sup>40</sup> The existing exhibition, *The Plague*, is not very far from what Irina Nicolau imagined in 1990.

*The Plague – Political Installation* was opened for public in 1997 and it is to this day, in 2010, part of the permanent exhibition. It is a small room in the basement, just before one reaches the toilets. The only explanation given to the visitor is on the small notice at the entrance: “A memorial of the pain and suffering collectivization caused to the peasant world”. The upper part of the walls of the room are painted with red hammers and sickles, “painted in oils on a strip of blue, they still look like blood drops”<sup>41</sup> while the lower part is covered with issues of the communist newspaper *Scântea*, bearing lists of peasants imprisoned for resisting collectivization. Numerous busts of Lenin and Stalin facing each other or the walls or corners of the room and large pictures of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej are squeezed in very close on the same red-painted wall. The center of the room is occupied by a huge porcelain vase with the inscription: “To comrade I.V. Stalin, a sign of love and gratitude from the Romanian Association for Tightening Relations with the Soviet Union”. To be able to read the inscription, one has to tour the room four times. Four huge ashtrays support the cord that surrounds the vase. A green board entitled “The collectivization class from child to adult” features poems and short compositions that children were forced to learn and write about the benefits of collectivization and hatred towards the kulaks (*chiaburi*). The exhibition was accompanied by a booklet, *The Red Ox*, consisting of the testimonies of peasants who suffered through the collectivization process.

The contrast between this room and the rest of the museum could not be sharper. While everything in the museum was meant to breathe harmony and beauty, *The Plague* was immediately striking in its ugliness. Walking through it the visitor is assaulted by the strong, violent colors and the “fake objects” (mainly communist kitsch) on display. One of the slogans of the Romanian Peasant Museum is “a real museum is one that you come back to.” *The Plague* seems to contradict this by making you want to climb back up the stairs, to get out of that basement.

One of the strongest points of the new museographic discourse proposed by the Peasant Museum was dialogue with the objects: letting the objects speak for themselves, letting them conquer the space and find their most

<sup>39</sup> POPESCU, interview.

<sup>40</sup> NICOLAU, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

appropriate place in the display. Horia Bernea claims that “The Romanian Peasant Museum was born out of dialogue with the objects, an accepted, provoked, always attentive dialogue, without any preconceptions.”<sup>42</sup> In the case of *The Plague* exhibition, he confessed, they totally ignored this freedom of the object. The objects in this exhibition used to be exhibited in the Communist Party Museum. They were, by necessity, objects of a fake past, of an unreal reality. “As opposed to the dialogue with the patrimonial objects, where I forbade myself any preconceived ideas, here we absolutely need a political bias. As we couldn’t exhibit the lies of the regime, we tried to exhibit its ugliness.”<sup>43</sup>

The troubling thing about the “political installation” of *The Plague* is that it is not necessarily only about collectivization. It is a discourse on the years of Communism, on the ugliness, absurdity and fakeness of the first decades of communist rule in Romania. In a published conversation between Irina Nicolau and Horia Bernea, about this exhibition, the main theme is representing Communism, not collectivization:

Pasternak said that a talented writer should describe those years such that the blood of the readers freezes and their hair stands on end. This is the reaction we should have aimed for, but we obviously did not succeed. We could have obtained it only if we had closed visitors into the exhibition room among the objects which are all aggressively ugly and kept them there locked up without water, food or hygiene for a week.<sup>44</sup>

A little sheet of paper kept and later published by Irina Nicolau makes the intentions behind the display even clearer. It contains a list of possible names for the exhibition on collectivization imagined by Horia Bernea. *The Plague* could as well have been entitled “the breaking of the silence”, “essay on death”, “essay on murder” or “the Plague – the breaking of the silence.”<sup>45</sup>

To talk about Communism in 1997 was indeed “breaking the silence.” To this end Horia Bernea used harsh metaphors in the booklet accompanying the exhibition:

Communism is a disease of society and soul; it is opposed to the life-giving convention; an “ideal” stupidity, totally oriented against life; a destructive “atheist sect”; orientation against the spirit, comfortable to the lower parts of man; the exaltation of shameful evil; absolute hatred, affirmed with no

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Horia BERNEA, Irina NICOLAU, “L’installation. Exposer des objets au Musée du Paysan Roumain”, in *Martor. The Romanian Peasant Museum Anthropology Review* 1998, no. 3, pp. 224–225. The idea of keeping the visitor “prisoner” for a while, in order to make him not only understand but feel, is not so new. The Terror House in Budapest keeps visitors for three long minutes in a slowly descending elevator, watching and listening to stories about how people were hanged in that very building.

<sup>45</sup> NICOLAU, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

reservations; an attempt to destroy the multi-millennial attempt at spiritualization; a sinister utopia.<sup>46</sup>

The story of the Romanian Peasant Museum is one of the rare success stories of Romanian transition, a *Romanian miracle* as some already put it. If the story is indeed seducing one must not forget that the experience of the Peasant Museum is quite singular and the situation in the vast majority of Romanian museums is similar to that described in the beginning of this article: immovability, perplexed silence and low-quality uncontroversial exhibitions, if any. Theories concerning museum practice were practically non-existent in 1990s Romania. One of the rare examples of a polemic text that engages with the challenges and difficulties faced by museums in post-communist Romania also comes from the team of the Peasant Museum in Bucharest. Irina Nicolau's *Me and the Museums of the World*<sup>47</sup> was written in 1994 when the Romanian Peasant Museum was in the making. In her text and in her work as a museum curator, Irina Nicolau developed the oppositional concepts of *mother museum* and *father museum*. Nicolau explains these terms:

As opposed to mother-museums, where you meet unknown objects – appropriated although remaining unknown – the father-museums give explanations, produce reasoning, educate... The mother-style is an antidote to the hyper-amnesia towards which the father museums push us, together with all our society.<sup>48</sup>

For her, *the mother museum* is the prototype of the museum, simply “a place where you see objects that you like.”<sup>49</sup>

In the same text, Irina Nicolau also developed the notion of the *antidote museum*. The antidote museum responded to the double crisis facing Romanian museums in post-communist period. “The Romanian museum is in a double crisis, provoked by the consequences of Communist ideology and by the danger of badly appropriated occidental museology.”<sup>50</sup> She does not give a clear definition but rather composes a *Decalogue of the antidote-museum* that she thought necessary in “periods of cultural, social and political convalescence:”

[...] 3. One doesn't go to the antidote-museum as one would go to a church, neither to a school, a tribunal, nor a hospital or a cemetery.

4. The antidote-museum is the museum of “Look at that!” Its exhibitions free the object of any stereotyped interpretations.

5. One comes to the antidote-museum to see the objects...

<sup>46</sup> Horia BERNEA quoted in *ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> Irina NICOLAU, “Moi et le musées du monde. L'histoire d'une expérience muséale dans un pays de l'Est”, in *New Europe College Yearbook 1994*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

8. The antidote-museum shows, but also hides. It is for people willing to invest imagination and time.<sup>51</sup>

## COMMUNISM IN THE PRISON. THE SIGHET MEMORIAL-MUSEUM.

However engaged in dealing with the communist past, the Romanian Peasant Museum was never meant to be a museum of communism, a museum dealing specifically with the communist regime, communist victims and, why not, responsibility for communist crimes. Such a museum was indeed established also in the early 1990s, but in the far north of the country, in Sighetu Marmatiei, in the building of a former prison, which functioned as a political prison in the 1950s.

Exhibiting Communism in a prison is part of the described black hole paradigm, as the idea that the whole of Romania was a huge prison during the communist regime is not far from the mind of the museum's initiators. However, the Sighet Memorial has two distinct phases of existence. The first one, the museum inaugurated in 1997 was nothing more than the museum of the Sighet Prison, a memorial to the victims of communism with a special focus on the victims who lost their freedom and eventually their lives inside the walls of the Sighet prison. The second stage of the museum's development, the current permanent exhibition, proposes a global discourse on Romanian communism, a proper museum of Communism and not merely a prison-museum. Starting in 2000, Sighet is no more a fragment of the story of Romanian communism, a tragic account of the lives lost while establishing the Communist regime in Romania, Sighet has become Romanian Communism as such, the black hole of Romanian history to be looked at through prison bars.

I only visited the Sighet prison-museum once, in 1997, in the first stage of its development; my analysis is thus fragmented between first-hand impressions from my visit, recent virtual visits on the museum's site<sup>52</sup> and secondary literature. In 1997, the museum was still very connected to the actual history of the building: acquired in 1993 by the Civic Academy Foundation it has undergone serious restoration, its inside walls were painted white and some of the cells were transformed into museum rooms exhibiting "prison furniture" and the stories of famous interwar political figures, like Iuliu Maniu and Gheorghe I. Brătianu, who were exterminated in the prison in the 1950s. The effect of the improvised museum, at that time, was devastating, precisely because of the lack of public debate on the legacy of the communist regime

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Fortunately, the Sighet Museum has a rich site, proposing also very instructive virtual visits. See <http://www.muzeuldeluatacasa.ro/> and [http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=518&Itemid=100&lang=ro](http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=518&Itemid=100&lang=ro) (accessed July 15th, 2010).

and the museum's simple and straightforward manner of telling stories of resistance and repression. 1997 was not only the year of the official opening of the museum, on June 20<sup>th</sup>, but also the year when the Romanian state finally recognized the Memorial as a *site of national importance*<sup>53</sup> and started subsidizing its existence; up until 1997, the Sighet Memorial had been totally privately financed.

Ever since 1997, the museum has been striving to encompass more and more aspects of the history of Romanian and East-European Communism, with exhibition halls (actually, cells) on subjects as diverse as everyday life during Communism, to Solidarnosc, the Hungarian 1956 revolution or demolitions in the 1980s. Although the initial focus on repression, and especially repression in the Sighet prison, has been kept (with exhibition-cells dedicated to the victims of the prison), the prison has actually become a metaphor, a paradigm for telling the story of European Communism. The official poster of the Sighet Memorial is thus very telling: two children are curiously looking through the window of a prison cell, while the text wonders *Do you want to understand nowadays Romania?* The reading of this image presupposes two commonly shared assumptions: that one cannot understand nowadays Romania without understanding Communist Romania and that the only valid point of view in understanding the Romanian communist past is the prison cell window.

The same argument can be further sustained by analyzing the specific museographic discourse of the Sighet Memorial, the similarities with the Hungarian Terror Haza, the appeals to national sentiment and feelings of national tragedy and so on, as Gabriela Cristea does in explaining,

why this museum does not play with different types of memories about the past, or search for competing interpretations, but accepts oblivion by simply affirming a single victimizing version of the past: suffering and death on the altar of the Nation. Consequently, the Sighet Memorial Museum is constructed as a holy place of the Romanian nation, and not one that comes from debate between individual memories. The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of Resistance is a memorial for those who fought the Communist system and who became its victims.<sup>54</sup>

#### DIAGNOSIS: ESTABLISHING DISTANCE, DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITY, PROVIDING THE UNIQUE STORY.

However, my purpose in this article is not only to provide an analysis of the ways of exhibiting communism in the 1990s, but, even more importantly to establish the patterns of museographic discourse that these early, courageous

<sup>53</sup> Law no. 95/ June 10th, 1997, [http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=362&Itemid=92&lang=ro](http://www.memorialsighet.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=362&Itemid=92&lang=ro) (accessed July 30th, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Gabriela CRISTEA, Simina RADU-BUCURENCI, *op. cit.*, p. 301.



fig. 1. Poster of the Sighet Memorial for the Victims of Communism and Resistance (retrieved from <http://www.memorialsighet.ro/>).

and sometimes even innovative attempts have established for future incentives at exhibiting communism. The two exhibitions analyzed above present a set of common traits. They are both quite successful in:

1. *Establishing distance* – If one exhibition is in the basement (*The Plague* at the Peasant Museum) the other one is in a former prison in the far north of the country, with cells transformed into exhibition halls<sup>55</sup> (the Sighet memorial). Both spaces are outside normalcy and were especially chosen for this quality of placing the communist past out of the “normal path” of Romania’s history.
2. *Delegating responsibility* – in the black and white story presented in these exhibitions, the villains are always somebody else, outside the Nation (it may be the Soviets, the vaguely generic Communists); the visitor can only identify with the victims, the opponents, *the good guys*, as the villains of the story are cruel beyond understanding; between victim and perpetrator no third option is offered.

<sup>55</sup> For an argument for the crucial role of the space in shaping museological discourse, see Michaela GIEBELHAUSEN, “The Architecture IS the Museum”, in Janet MARSTINE (ed.), *New Museum Theory and Practice. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 41–63.

3. *Providing the unique story* – in the long tradition of the father museum (Irina Nicolau), the temple-museum<sup>56</sup>, and even the Communist museum, the single, unique narrative is the norm in museology. Even more, the museum is understood in these cases as a history lesson that the visitor should learn and internalize by the end of the visit. There is no input from the visitor, no dialogue between the museum display and the visitor's gaze, no detail left to the free interpretation of the observer.

### PROGNOSIS: INTEGRATING THE COMMUNIST PAST, ASSUMING PARTICIPATION, EMBRACING MULTIPLE STORIES

The 1990s urge to expel the Communist regime from the grand narrative of Romania's history has lost its momentum. The second decade of post-communism saw the appearance of much more nuanced and informed accounts on the Communist past. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have regained their authoritative voices and their accounts are an argument for including the communist story in a coherent narrative at both state and personal level. As things are slowly changing in the academic sphere and, from there, penetrating public discourse, the museography of communism can easily be diagnosed with institutional inertia. The Sighet Museum seems to become the model for representing Communism in the museum, disregarding the fact that Sighet is a memorial-museum dedicated to the victims of Communism and not to Communist history and society as a whole. The National History Museum hosts temporary exhibitions, which only testify to a national institution's hesitations on displaying the national past. The Romanian Peasant Museum continues to display its atemporal Christian peasant while visitors often disregard *the Plague* installation opened in 1997 in the basement of the museum.

Surprisingly, the black hole paradigm has survived the pathos of the early 1990s. Born as a metaphor in those enthusiastic and politically effervescent years, this vision has such a powerful after-life that no one is surprised anymore when it is used as an explanatory model of Communist Romania, from official speeches to museum initiatives. It was not a surprise, then, that the official condemnation of the Communist regime in Romania, performed by president Traian Băsescu on December 18th, 2006, used the same simplistic metaphor: "It was an oppressive regime, which deprived the Romanian people of 5 decades of modern history."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The temple-museum has been coined as a concept and criticized ever since the 1970s. One of the first attempts' was Duncan CAMERON, "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum", in *Journal of World History*, 1972, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 189–202.

<sup>57</sup> Speech by Romania's President, Traian Băsescu, on the Occasion of Presenting the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania (Romanian Parliament, December 18<sup>th</sup> 2006). Available at <http://www.presidency.ro/?RID=det&tb=date&id=8288&PRID> (accessed July 30th, 2010).

Many are the voices that argue for a museum of communism. As Boris Buden put it, “if there is something to be called post-communism, its essential element – from where the name comes - is its relation with the communist past,”<sup>58</sup> and the best place for an analysis of this relation is the museum of communism, “an institution in which the post-communist attitude towards the communist past is programmatically constructed and exposed.”<sup>59</sup> However, what exactly such a museum is supposed to exhibit is a matter of great variation, depending precisely on one’s own attitude towards the recent past.

The official condemnation of communism in Romania also included recommendations on the proper memorialization of the communist regime. Among these recommendations was the creation of a Museum of Communist Dictatorship which “like the Holocaust Memorial in Washington, would be both a place of memory and an affirmation of the values of the open society.”<sup>60</sup> On a different occasion, another official voice, Adrian Iorgulescu, Minister of Culture at the time, stated that “Romania doesn’t need a museum of Communism, but a museum of the fight against Communism.”<sup>61</sup> In 2007, the former political prison in Ramnicu Sarat was taken into custody by the Institute for Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania with the specific purpose of transforming it into a Memorial-Museum for the Victims of Communism.<sup>62</sup> Another museal project supported by the Institute is the transformation of Fortul 13 Jilava, another former prison for political detainees, in yet another memorial-museum for the communist victims and repression in Romania. These are both recent initiatives whose model is obviously the Sighet Memorial-Museum.

It is not without importance that the very term memorial-museum has gained such popularity in the discussion on future museums of communism in Romania; a hybrid between museum and memorial, the memorial-museum was born in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from “the need to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts.”<sup>63</sup> By choosing the specific form of the memorial-museum, the curator chooses a certain narrative framework that is not, in my view, suitable for a museum that seeks to

<sup>58</sup> Boris BUDEN, “În ghetele comunismului. Despre critica discursului postcomunist” (In the boots of communism. On the critique of postcommunist discourse), in Adrian T. SIRBU, Alexandru POLGAR (eds.), *Genealogii ale postcomunismului* (Genealogies of postcommunism), Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2009, p. 59.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> *Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, p. 639. Available at [http://www.presidency.ro/?\\_RID=htm&id=83](http://www.presidency.ro/?_RID=htm&id=83) (accessed July 30th, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Adrian Iorgulescu, Romanian Minister of Culture at the time, at the opening of the temporary exhibition “The Golden Era. Between Propaganda and Reality” at the National History Museum in 2007.

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/ro/proiecte/proiecte\\_muzeale](http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/ro/proiecte/proiecte_muzeale) (accessed August 15th, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Paul WILLIAMS, *Memorial Museums. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Oxford: Berg, 2007, p. 8.

address the complex issues of understanding the functioning and reality of the communist regime.

A museum determined “to assume Communism through knowledge of the totalitarian past”<sup>64</sup> should try to overcome the three traits identified above and specific to a bygone era of militant anticommunism. Instead of establishing distance, integrating the communist past into a coherent story of Romanians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; instead of delegating responsibility for the Communist regime, assuming collaboration and participation to power along with the less frequent yet heroic acts of resistance; instead of providing one unique story, allow the museum to be an agora, a forum hosting multiple stories, contradictory narratives, possibilities for critical reflection and open questions.

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<sup>64</sup> Bogdan IACOB, “Moștele comunismului, la judecata publica” (Relics of Communism on public trial), interview in *Evenimentul Zilei*, July 26th, 2010, <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/moastele-comunismului-la-judecata-publica-901529.html>, (accessed August 15th, 2010).