

## **Project acronym:** Comemory

### **Overview**

This project aims to investigate and assess the impact and consequences of the anticommunist stance upon cultural policies, institutions and representations in Romanian film and literature between 1990 and 2006. The main objective is to develop a locally bound set of concepts which are translatable in an East-Central European transnational context. Using a methodology derived from the fields of intellectual history, cultural and memory studies, and ideological critique, Comemory takes into account the complex nature of anticommunism – an aggregate-concept which entails altogether a creative method, a reception grid, a strategy of cultural policy as well as a politically informed ideological platform. Consequently, the project aims to reframe the community memory of the post-1989 transition by exploring the anticommunist biases of the cultural production and of its structural transformations in post-communist Romania. The research focuses on: a. the canonical debates of the 1990s (East-Ethical revisionism, modernist-postmodernist ideological debacle, National Curriculum reform); b. the restructuring of film and literary industries (financing, professional organisations, cultural distribution); c. historical narratives (developing both up-front critique of communism and formerly taboo themes or aesthetic programs).

### **Project Description**

#### *(1) The importance of the issue from scientific, social or cultural point of view*

- This project brings an original contribution to the field of Romanian and Eastern European cultural studies, by its interdisciplinary approach, the actuality of the topic and the methodological frame assumed.
- Although widely influential and active in reshaping the cultural and economic institutions after the fall of the communist regime, the topic of anticommunism has long been avoided in the public debate, at least during the 1990s. It wasn't until December 2006 that anticommunism acquired an official confirmation, when The Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania provided a report which enabled president Traian Băsescu to publicly condemn the communist regime as "illegitimate and criminal".
- This historical and political milestone marks, however, just the tombstone of a long-active paradigm whose grounds can be traced back to the extremely prestigious phenomenon of 1960-1989 dissidence, with its many strands extending in the social, intellectual and artistic fields (from the popular counterculture, to the subversive strategies of literature and film, to the more vocal oppositional discourse of Radio Free Europe). That long history accounts for the perception of anticommunism as a natural, unquestioned attitude, so that, after 1989, it could be taken for granted

and reinforced by the new commandments and commitments of Europeanization. Interestingly enough, both the public space and the scholarly studies rarely addressed directly or critically this major civilizational frame. Our project tries to fill this gap, by evaluating and investigating the impact and consequences the anticommunist stance has had upon Romanian post-communist cultural policies, institutions and representations in film and literature.

- Another point of seminal importance is the relevance of the anticommunist topic for all transitional cultures of the former Soviet bloc. This project thus rallies to a systematic conceptual framework and explanatory models already in use in post-2000 international scientific research. Even if Romanian culture illustrates an emphasized case of anticommunism – nowhere in Eastern Europe as acute and influential as here – local film and literary studies have not yet brought a major scholarly input in this comparative area of research.

## ***(2) The limitations of current approaches by analysing the state of the art***

- A main reason for this lack of Romanian studies on the topic resides in the complex nature of anticommunism, an aggregate-concept which entails altogether a creative method, a reception grid, a strategy of cultural policy, but also a politically informed ideological platform. Unable to grasp all these aspects in a single, coherent method, existing studies about post-communist Romanian film and literature focused upon aesthetic phenomena isolated from their larger historical and ideological context or were less convincing in correlating the specific field of art with public discourse.

- Another major reason encumbering the critical awareness of anticommunism lies in the fact this stance remains deeply embedded within local cultural establishment, mainstream historiography and political discourse. As such, it functions as an unquestionable assumption, rather than a topic of debate, an interpretive monopoly exemplified in books or public interventions signed by supporters of conservative and neoliberal ideologies.

- Our project challenges also the methodological limits of postcolonial studies applied to post-communist cultures, which typically work with concepts tailored for non-European, subaltern nations. Against this Orientalization of Eastern Europe we try to grasp the particulars of the post-communist Europeanization of this region with a major focus on Romanian cultural production. Instead of resorting to a Western-built framework, this project develops a locally-bound set of notions which, however, are translatable in a transnational context.

- Finally, the project assumes a critical standpoint towards linear from-to concept of transition restricted to a single version of Europeanization, unable to encapsulate the complex transformations of post-communism and its marked continuities with the socialist past, as well as Eastern European

states' adherence to regional long-inscribed cultural traditions. This determinist-path paradigm fuels the direct confusion of post-communism with anticommunism.

### **(3)Topics**

- The necessity to reframe the post-communist transition has become so the more evident as the last decade witnessed the emergence of a corpus of processed-media archives, 1990s-oriented studies and of certain methodological tools which make obvious the then-unapparent discrepancies between the 1990s' discourse of crisis and the actual productivity of strategies meant to reconfigure the entire cultural field from an anticommunist vantage point. While the media and public discourse of the 90s proclaimed a moment of cultural stagnation and institutional crisis, the actual cultural mechanisms worked towards the full reshaping of the domain of film and literature. These structural transformations, led by an anticommunist modelling of community memory, were active on three basic levels: cultural policies, institutional construction and artistic representations.

**a. Cultural policies** gravitated largely around the canonical debate which, right after 1990, was conducted along three main coordinates:

- East-ethical revisionism redefined the scale of literary values in ideological terms, foregrounding instead of the formerly canonical writers and directors – now accused of compromising with the regime, both the communist one and its post-1990 so-called crypto-communist avatar – the counter canon of less prominent artists, who stood, however, on more articulate anticommunist positions.

- The modernist-postmodernist literary debacle, long overdue in Romania, also assumed ideological overtones after 1990. It led to the imposition of an anti-canon whose replacement of the modernist paradigm was justified, among others, by the identification of modernism with communism, and of postmodernism with capitalist democracy.

- The school and university national curriculum was quick to absorb the new reversed canonical hierarchy shaped in public debates. It consequently privileged writers and directors praised for their politically subversive attitudes during communism.

**b. The institutional construction** in post-communism relied on professional (ASPRO, Filmmaker's Union) or largely intellectual and civic organizations (GDS, AC) that functioned as leading public voices and, even though nurturing a clear ideological agenda, acquired popularity so the more as they claimed an apolitical status. Also, the national cinema industry mirrored the cultural-political power relations set after 1990 in the

sense that directors considered subversive before 1989 (such as Lucian Pintilie, Dan Pița, Mircea Danieliuc) were promoted as heads or key figures of the main production companies, whence they pursued their own cultural and management policies and attracted most funding opportunities. A similar process took place in the publishing field, where former communist publishing houses were privatized and restructured by privileging issues on anticommunist themes.

- c. **Film and literary representations** absorbed much of the anticommunist discourse professed by the 1990s intellectual elites and media. At least two representative attitudes can be grasped in this respect. The first one assumes an up-front critique of communism, which is depicted in antagonizing terms magnifying its abuses and horrors. Another artistic strategy attacks indirectly communism by recuperating the formerly taboo themes and aesthetic programs, such as those related to sexuality, mysticism, gender problematics or religious issues. Also, Romanian film and literature of the 1990s reassessed the grounds of national identity, which had long been subject to communist propaganda and its subsequent stereotypes. The arts attempted to free from the traumatic spectre of communism by resorting to liberated strategies and formulas like minimalism, authenticity, miserabilism, aggressive poetry, psychedelic visions, raw protest. Instead of the Aesopic aesthetics common during communism, denotative realism flourished during the 1990s in both film and literature.