

**Looking Away**  
by Catalina Florina Florescu<sup>1</sup>



Foto 1: Ceaușescu 100. Reproduced here with permission from the photographer, Eli Driu.

In her essay “On Morality,” published in 1968, Joan Didion affirmed: “At least some of the time, the world appears to me as a painting by Hieronymus Bosch” (161).<sup>2</sup> In his famous triptych painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Bosch uses three oak panels to represent Paradise, Hell, and, in the middle, the garden that gives the title of the work. Completed somewhere around 1515, the painting has been illustrative of what humanity once presumably had and people’s proclivity towards sins and damnation. Who and/or what are our monsters today? We sinned and we were pardoned, but then we have done other unspeakable things. Rooted in a very strong message of what sins do to humans and how far we have fallen, today Bosch’s painting may have an ironic, however feeble, déjà-vu feeling. Look around and see what happens in the world. The wars. The corrupt politicians. The gentrification of neighborhoods. The vulgar. The excess. The material. The pollution. This is all *on* us. These are our monsters.

How do we write history today? Is this what we leave behind? An inability to have cured poverty, stopped bombings and killings, solved inequality, and decreased the levels of pollution? Didion used that reference to Bosch’s painting to talk about the relativization of abstract

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here belong exclusively to the author. Also, the author is not affiliated with any political party, here or elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Didion, Joan. *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

concepts, in her case morality, and how we twist them so that they fit our logic and excuses. Done by employing the grisaille technique, where shades of grey are used, the panel depicting Hell sticks out. It is through a grisaille-like lens that I look at the images taken by the young Romanian photographer, Eli Driu. On January 26<sup>th</sup> 2018, a group of supporters of the former dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, went to Ghencea Cemetery in Bucharest to participate in an event that was meant to gather attention to Ceaușescu's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Some of these persons are also members of the Romanian Communist Party.



Foto 2: Ceaușescu 100. Reproduced here with permission from the photographer, Eli Driu.

When the revolution of 1989 ended communism in Romania, people were on the streets or gathered around a radio/ TV set, fervently following the news, in a state of euphoria: it was almost incredulous that Romanians would end communism and the reign of an insane regime that had started in 1965. The hope was that, once *killed*, communism would never return. However, in 2010, the former Socialist Alliance Party declared it wanted to change its name and reinstated the Romanian Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> That year, a congress also took place, a congress where representatives from China and North Korea attended. Constantin Rotaru, its leader, in

<sup>3</sup> <http://npcr.ro/p-c-r/program-politic.html>

one of his statements (see original citation in footnotes<sup>4</sup>) compared the “genocide” of today’s Romanian leaders to their acts of corruption and inability to cater to the population’s needs.<sup>5</sup>

The word “genocide” is a very strong one, though. “Genocide” was frequently used back in 1989 and early 1990’s when journalists were playing with our collective psyche to make sure we would *not* forget. “Genocide,” as I retrieve those moments from my memory, was a way to describe the brutal killings of people revolting in Braşov, Timişoara, and other cities that would become martyr-cities, before the stage of sacrifice moved to Bucharest. “Genocide” was also used to remind the Romanian population, starved off of truth, that Ceauşescu’s regime eliminated many people and destroyed many families if they badmouthed the dictator, or if they criticized urban projects that drastically redefined the landscape of Romania, or, just, by brainwashing us, the youth, from the kindergarten age to high school. We were *şoimii patriei, pionieri, utecişti* and, by the time we reached 18 when legally adults, we had been trained in the art of the submissive, tacit and humiliating acceptance of what should not have been accepted as normal. The collective spirit was slowly and surely altered. Because if you want to ensure you have created irreversible damage, you need to upscale your Machiavelli-like techniques. And communists knew torture and wrapped it under the rubric of patriotism.

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It’s 2018. I am far away. To find out that the Romanian Communist Party has been restored since 2010, this comes and does not come as a shock. It comes because I am a naïve and believe that people do not want to return to an era when we had rationed food and electricity, when we were disconnected from our neighbors and the world. When we were hearing *Aici Radio Vacanţa!*,<sup>6</sup> we knew it was a lie, and then wanted to listen to *Aici e Radio Europa Libera!*<sup>7</sup> But I am also not shocked at the news because there is an increased movement to dismantle democracy, to make it look weak and ineffective. At the first international congress of the Romanian Communist Party in 2010 with guests from China and North Korea, people in the audience heard playing “Internaţionala comunistă,” the most famous socialist anthems composed in 1870 by the French composer, Eugène Pottier. <sup>8</sup>As Rotaru said, “We must use globalization as our ally, and not an enemy. Our purpose is to create a socialist model that would allow a steady national growth that would secure our social peace.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Constantin Rotaru, preşedintele Partidului Socialist Român, abia aşteaptă să ajungă el şi partidul său la guvernare pentru a-i acuza pe actualii conducători ai României de genocid: ‘Ăştia se autofaultează. Păi, din 1989 şi până azi populaţia României a scăzut cu trei milioane de locuitori. Ăsta nu e genocid? Dacă venim noi la putere, Partidul Socialist Român, îi condamnăm cu legile lor. Ce-a făcut Ceauşescu n-a fost genocid, că nu degeaba şi-a pus judecătorul ăla, Gică Popa, ştreangul de gât. Genocid e azi.’” [adev.ro/nshmwf](http://adev.ro/nshmwf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://a1.ro/news/politic/s-a-reinfiintat-partidul-comunist-roman-id88747.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTr8xio5Zl8>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoDDA\\_HVAHw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoDDA_HVAHw)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DrQ-c\\_ps6E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DrQ-c_ps6E)

<sup>9</sup> “Trebuie să transformăm globalizarea într-un aliat, nu un inamic. Scopul nostru este să creăm un model socialist de dezvoltare durabilă care să garanteze cu adevărat pacea socială,”

<http://a1.ro/news/politic/s-a-reinfiintat-partidul-comunist-roman-id88747.html>



Foto 3: Ceaușescu 100. Reproduced here with permission from the photographer, Eli Driu.

The first time I saw Driu’s photos, I thought I would get sick.<sup>10</sup> I look at the images in a state of disbelief and pinched myself several times to see if I was alive. And I was. And the images were real. And I thought of Bosch’s painting (especially the last panel on Hell). My head was spinning. I heard another group of refugees barely made it safely to Europe. I read about the American Congress’ shutdown. I went to see a play with and about teenagers in which one of them was a D.A.C.A.<sup>11</sup> I went to teach a class and caught myself changing the tense of the verb from past to present: “...the Romanian Communist Party was, I mean, *is*, ...” and I did not let students notice this, but inside I was spiraling.

I think we let history repeat. We allow that to happen. We can’t seem to pass over miniscule or petty personal agendas to realize that communism was never good. We forget too

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<sup>10</sup> I am, however, grateful that Eli took these photos. Without them, I would have not found out that the Romanian Communist Party had been restored /reinstated. Photos like this make me revisit moments in history as they become proof of what needs to be addressed immediately. In this case, the whole purpose of writing this piece is a caveat. Do not dare to forget! People died so that there is no more communism in Romania.

<sup>11</sup> Acronym for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. More information can be found here: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/dream-act-daca-and-other-policies-designed-protect-dreamers>

easily. In the January 28 edition of *The New York Times*, Javier C. Hernández wrote, citing what are not his views: “Officially, the Communist Party embraces a dozen ‘core socialist values,’ including freedom, rule of law, justice and democracy.”<sup>12</sup> Are we going to be manipulated again that communism allowed rights there and elsewhere? What is our responsibility to *own* our present?



Foto 4: Ceaușescu 100. Reproduced here with permission from the photographer, Eli Driu.

*Looking away* is the title I give to this short, reflective essay. I would like to never have to look at images of people in support of Ceaușescu -- nostalgic, and almost from another planet people. *But* if I will look away, I will do it only after I have exposed the danger of this group of fanatics. No, it is not okay to be nostalgic after Ceaușescu. It is not okay to use his abusive regime in history and compare it to what happens in Romania today. We cannot return to communism. It is a disease. In a book chapter published a few years ago, I talked about communism as rhizome. I dedicated that piece titled “Performing Memories: Communism as Rhizome” as following: “To my parents’ generation because it was not as fortunate as mine. To my son and the subsequent others because they ought to morality know about communism” (70).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/world/asia/beijing-propaganda-xi-jinping.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Romanian Culture in the Global Age*, eds. Rodica Mihăilă and Dana Mihăilescu. U of Bucharest P, 2010: 70-95.

Ceaușescu would have been 100 in 2018. But that's hardly the point.<sup>14</sup> Let us remind people of how awful communism truly was: it crushed our freedom chewing our dreams and spitting them on the ground. That's communism. That's systematic abuse. Or, if that's still not credible enough, let us hear from Matei Vișniec's Iuri, a character from his play *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* (2003)<sup>15</sup>

IURI: Open your mouth wide. Say *u*. Exhale. Say *utopia*. One more time. Think seriously since this is a word with a crescendo. Utopia. So, what's a utopia? Utopia is when you are knee-deep in shit and want to escape. But before you do that, you got to think. And the more you think, the more you realize that you are not alone in this situation; like you, there are others knee-deep in shit and they also want to escape. To ensure you are successful, you need to make sure that you don't save only yourself. That would not be wise. You need to make sure that all who are knee-deep in shit have escaped (74).<sup>1617</sup>

**Bios:**

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*Eli Driu* is a young, passionate, professional Romanian photographer. More about her ambitious projects can be found here: <http://elidriu.ro/>

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, 2018 marks 100 years since Romania's "Great Union."

<sup>15</sup> Full script in Romanian can be read here: <http://editura.liternet.ro/carte/50/Matei-Visniec/Istoria-comunismului-povestita-pentru-bolnavii-mintal.html>

<sup>16</sup> (*Către bolnavii mintali*): Deschideți larg gura. Spuneți *u*. Respirați. Spuneți *utopie*. Încă o dată. Utopie. Concentrați-va bine, este un cuvânt care are o curbă crescătoare. Utopie. Deci, care este o utopie? Utopia este când ești vârat în căcat și vrei să ieși. Dar înainte să ieși din căcat trebuie să te gândești. Și dacă te gândești bine îți dai seama că nu ești singurul vârat în căcat și care dorește să iasă. Ieșirea din căcat nu se face decât împreună cu ceilalți care sunt vârați împreună cu tine în căcat.

NB: The translation is mine.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.americanstudies.ro/libs/docs/title-88965.pdf>