"Partially Color"– Rethinking Exterior and Interior Spaces in Communist Romania

Laura Visan, York University, Toronto

Abstract: This essay explores the complementarities between the exterior of Bucharest and the comforting interiors of Romanians' apartments during the last two decades of communism. My analysis is building upon Henri Lefebvre's concept of code and his three-tier dialectic of space: *spatial practice*, *representation of space* and *spaces of representation,* highlighting the role of communist architecture in reinforcing the coercive power of Nicolae Ceausescu and the Romanian Communist Party, and in dissuading any act of rebellion against the communist regime. I will attempt to demonstrate that a Manichean perspective, positioning the personal apartment as a safe haven against the hostile communist exterior does not accurately render Romanians' relation with the communist apparatus, and I will insist upon several instances of (forced) complicity between them and the political regime. The last section of my essay is dedicated to the role of television in *mediating* between exterior and interior spaces in the communist regime.

In his study dedicated to late socialism in the Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak (2005) remembers a popular movie of the 1970s – *The Irony of Fate* (*Ironiia sud'by)*. Its protagonist gets drunk in Moscow, on the New Year's Eve, and by mistake, takes the plane to Leningrad. Being convinced that he is still in Moscow, he gives a taxi driver his address. But a street named *Second Street of Builders* exists in Leningrad, as well. The hero arrives on a similar street to his street, in front of an apartment block identical to his block in Moscow, with the same type of stairs, same door numbers, and same apartment layout. The movie has a happy end, because the hero falls in love with the woman who inhabits the apartment in Leningrad.

The amusing plot of the movie revolves around the standardization of the public space during communism, a common phenomenon in the East-European block. As Yurchak observes, the "standardization of everyday tools, references, and scenes were part of a larger standardization of discourse during the Soviet period…" (2005: 37). Romanians, for instance, who probably watched *The Irony of Fate* several times, as the Romanian television had the annoying habit of broadcasting a movie repeatedly, were well accustomed to living in a big city whose new districts looked all the same. They jokingly said that if a person would have his eyes tied up and be abandoned somewhere in Bucharest, he would have a hard time identifying his whereabouts, as most of the new areas had a similar pattern: grayish 10-storey apartment buildings, interconnected by a maze of narrow alleys with *Dacia* cars parked on their sides.

In response to this alienating environment meant to instill in people's minds the idea of universal equality between all members of society, people attempted to personalize their communal or personal apartments, transforming them into 'sanctuaries' or shelters from the external space seized by the communist regime. Many families tried to embellish the standardized, sturdy communist furniture by covering it with embroidered tablecloths or hand-made covers. The socialist commerce offered a limited range of house decorations, most of them of bad taste. Wishing to avoid the ubiquitous plaster dog statues or the 24-piece dark-blue

serving sets, women were engaged in a tireless chase for nice objects that would give their apartments a 'unique' feeling.

In their high-rise apartments, people could talk and joke, criticize the regime and mock Nicolae Ceausescu's ungrammatical speech, listen to the anti-communist discourse of *Radio Free Europe,* or watch VCR movies with their friends (a semi-illegal practice during the 1980s). Romanians responded thus to the propaganda messages disseminated through all media by the Romanian communist party. In public, most people refrained from criticizing Nicolae Ceausescu, fearing the omnipresent informers, but they enjoyed telling jokes about the president and his wife when no 'suspicious ear' was around. Many people participated in this oral subculture of inventing and circulating anti-regime jokes; it was a practice of half-telling things, similar to the habit of actors or writers to sneak so-called 'lizards', "soparle" , into their discourse – critiques against Nicolae Ceausescu were disguised under innocuous jokes. An important difference between 'inside' and 'outside' resided thus in the possibility to say things overtly, in front of a safe audience, as opposed to whispering them[1].

It is important not to treat the exterior and interior spaces in terms of a binary opposition. Alexei Yurchak has aptly noticed the wrong tendency of analyzing the socialist environment in Manichean terms of 'us vs. them', arguing that we should rather aim for an 'us *and* them' kind of interpretation. Too often socialist regimes have been defined in binary oppositional terms, such as "oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people (…), official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and counterlanguage, public self and private self…" (2005: 5). In his view, this type of approach was tributary to antisocialist and non-socialist agendas in the Western discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, and to the Manichean discourse surrounding the Cold War, when the Soviet bloc was regarded as the enemy of the West.

In this essay, I will explore the complementarities between the communist exterior of Bucharest and the comforting interiors of Romanians' apartments, building my analysis upon a set of concepts coined by Henri Lefebvre (code, and the three-tier dialectic of space). In the beginning, I will briefly attempt to situate Lefebvre's work in the context of a communist society, considering that most of his work represented a critique of capitalism. Further on, my analysis will focus upon the urban code of Bucharest during the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting the role of communist architecture in reinforcing the coercive power of Nicolae Ceausescu and the Romanian Communist Party, and in dissuading any act of rebellion against the regime. The perspective will be than narrowed down, from the general milieu of the communist Bucharest, to a single high-rise building among the thousands in the capital of Romania. Drawing upon the Lefebvrian triad *spatial practice*, *representation of space* and *spaces of representation,* or perceived, conceived and lived spaces, I will argue that a Manichean perspective, opposing the apartment to the hostile exterior, does not accurately render Romanians' relations with the communist apparatus. To support this claim I discuss several instances of (forced) complicity between them.

The last section of my essay will be dedicated to the role of television in *mediating* between exterior and interior spaces in the communist regime. I will build upon the interviews that I undertook for my MA thesis[2] in 2005-2006 with Romanian immigrants in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. My intention was to analyze the meanings that the respondents, whose childhood years coincided with the last two decades or communism, gave to the propaganda discourses targeting them, and also their strategies for negotiating with the regime. My research consisted of semi-structured, open ended ethnographic interviews, as this method "attempts to

understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana and Frey 2000: 653). The criterion for selecting the respondents was that each person had spent at least 12 years in Romania under the Nicolae Ceausescu regime.

Lefebvre and the communist space

Researchers have extensively dealt with the role of architecture in Eastern Europe after World War II and during the almost five decades of communism (Boym 1994; Buchli 1999; Crowley 2002; Harutyunyan 2006; the researchers associated with the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture 2004; Zahariade 2004; Haase 2007). Surprisingly, except for David Crowley's research on Warsaw apartments, references to Henri Lefebvre's theories on urban space are not present in this corpus of truly pioneering research. I will attempt to address this gap by incorporating some of the most famous Lefebvrian ideas in my analysis.

It was a challenging task to apply Lefebvre's work to the 'second Europe', as the Eastern part of the continent has been often called, because his critique was mainly directed against the use of space and the everyday living practices in capitalist societies. As Rob Shield notes, two major themes unified the work of the French theorist: a "deeply humanistic interest in alienation" and his "methodological understanding of the work of Marx and Engels" (1999: 2). Neither of these two streams would seem to be compatible with my topic, simply because the communist society[3] had supposedly provided a harmonious and prosperous environment for all its members, disrupting all class inequalities and eliminating thus any reason why people might have felt alienated[4]. In a state-controlled economic system observing (in theory) the slogan 'to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities,' there was no room for oppression or economic exploitation.

However, some Lefebvrian perspectives upon the capitalist urban space do apply to the communist environment as well. Lefebvre argues that space in capitalist societies has an instrumental role in preserving the existing mode of production. Space and hegemony are interdependent, and they both contribute to the establishment, "on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a 'system'" (Lefebvre 1991: 11). In a similar fashion to Michel Foucault, Lefebvre views the space materialized as knowledge and action. Foucault distinguished between two intercommunicating levels of knowledge. One was noticeable at the level of the individual, who was constituted as "a describable, analyzable object (…), in order to maintain him in his individual features, in his particular evolution (…) under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge" (Foucault 1977: 190). The other level of knowledge manifested in the governments' attempt to 'organize' people in accordance with several parameters: "birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation" (Foucault 1978, 25). What connected these two levels was a set of social norms. They represented an indispensable tool for producing "*knowledge* of individuals" by "subsuming their individuality under a type" (Rouse 1994: 103).

Communist Romania followed a similar pattern but in a more overt fashion. The *biopower* measures imposed by Romanian authorities beginning with the late 1960s – the complete banning of contraception and abortion, the requirement that each woman under 45 gives birth to four children, and the starvation of population, euphemistically called *scientific alimentation*, - were complemented by a powerful propaganda discourse. In a similar fashion to Stalin, who had become "the living protagonist of an almost sacred cult" (Brooks 2001: 60),

Ceausescu had constructed an image for himself as a national hero and a father of the nation. Moreover, his ubiquitous presence on radio and television, in the press, on gigantic outdoor panels, and in portraits displayed in any public institutions, including hospitals and schools, aimed to keep Romanians in a continuous state of surveillance and dissuade them from any act of rebellion against the communist regime.

Authorities constantly reinforced this state of surveillance by seizing the personal time and space of individuals. Following the tradition of Stalinist Russia, where "the promotion of a new national time from above left little room for public recognition of private time" (Brooks 2001: 78), the Romanian state 'etatized' the time of ordinary people (Verdery 1996: 51). Romanians were thus caught in endless queues for basic products, were obliged to attend state-organized patriotic demonstrations, waiting for hours to greet Ceausescu, or had to spend their mornings and evenings in unlit, unheated commuter trains. All these strategies were meant to "immobilize bodies for hours, destroying their capacity for alternative use of time" (Verdery 1996: 51). Though forcedly 'kept busy' by the regime, Romanians still managed to create their own tactics for dissent with the communist party. The scope of this paper does not allow an extensive treatment of this topic but researchers of the former communist space have amply documented it.

Communist authorities also seized the personal space of Romanians, by demolishing numerous individual dwellings built before World War II and forcing their inhabitants to move into high-rise apartment building. The changes undergone by the Romanian urban space during communism will be explored in richer detail below. For the moment, suffice to remember the words of an ordinary Romanian, who had to live in such an apartment building: "[t]he communist block of flats is very much similar to a mixer, if you think of the way it was used by the party and state leaders. After almost thirty years of professed counter-elitist policy, every block is a strange mixture of population of the most varied social extraction" (V.M.,123).[5]

The code of Bucharest during communism

The practices of seizing individuals' time and personal space contributed to reinforcing the code of the communist society in Romania. Henri Lefebvre borrows the concept of code from semiology and applies it to urban spaces, emphasizing the fact that a simple reading (decoding) of a certain space is not sufficient. According to Lefebvre, space should not be reduced to "the status of a *message* and the inhabiting of it to the status of *reading*" (2001: 7). Thus, the analysis of an apartment building in Bucharest should go beyond the description of its dilapidated exterior and the relations between its inhabitants. It should rather consider the reason why such buildings have been erected to replace individual housing, and the message that the RCP aimed to convey to ordinary Romanians: that privacy and a fair amount of personal space are a remnant of the decadent bourgeois world. It should also consider the need of the communist party to keep Romanians under constant surveillance and its pretense to have created an egalitarian society, as well as the impact of people's forced movement into apartment buildings has had on the socio-demographic structure of Romania.

Lefebvre argues that the code serves to fix "the alphabet and language of the town, its primary signs, their paradigm and their syntagmatic relations" (1991: 47). Elsewhere he suggests that a unitary code of a city is equivalent to a "common language" of that city (1991: 73). The socialist urban code aimed to negate the urban code of the 'bourgeois' interwar era. Historical

buildings, monuments and sixteenth-century churches were bulldozed in order to make room for the 'new' city designed in accordance to the requirements of the communist party.

In what follows, I will provide a brief analysis of the architectural trends in Romania during the twentieth century, particularly during the communist decades, emphasizing the changes undergone by the urban code of Bucharest throughout time. Two main trends emerged in architecture during the first half of the twentieth century: "modernism and the search for a national style, [two trends that were] theoretically opposed, yet unusually liable to conciliation. The low building density of traditional Romanian cities (in the process of modernization) offered sufficient space for both tendencies to develop, hence softening the ideological contradictions" (Zahariade 2004: 56).

At the same time, a new architectural form, the "Blockhaus", redefined the Romanian urban space. The first apartment buildings constructed in Bucharest were limited to "a maximum of 8-10 stories" (Giurescu 1989: 4). After World War II, with the full support of the Soviet Union, the communist party seized political power in Romania and transformed the country into a republic. Monarchy, or the "bourgeois – landowners' regime", as it was called by the communist authorities, was disrupted. Deemed an elitist practice indebted to pure aesthetic pleasures and detached from the actual needs of the population, architecture was soon exposed to the repercussions of the communist regime. Famous architects were imprisoned, their studios nationalized. A rhetoric of the new was enforced: "an active new, a resentful new, too. It involve[d] the *removal of the traces left by the capitalist society*, and the creation of a new appearance" (Zahariade 2004: 62).

Functionality came to prevail over aesthetics; cities had to accommodate a wave of uprooted populace - country dwellers were forced to work on the building sites opened throughout the country. Urban architecture replicates the Bauhaus model popular in Germany after the First World War. Its creator, the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, aimed to bring people into a "symbiotic relationship with the industrial society, as efficient, purposeful and rational as a machine" (Tilroe 2004). The apartments in Bauhaus buildings were both comfortable and spacious. In Romania, however, the socialist Bauhaus-inspired buildings aimed at accommodating a large number of inhabitants, while relegating the need for personal comfort to secondary importance.

Myriads of identical housing blocks of prefabricated panels with small apartments were built in the major Romanian cities. The landscaping developed during the interwar years in the so-called bourgeois era was destroyed; "high-rise buildings [we]re placed at an unacceptable closeness; certain pleasant urban places in the already achieved housing zones [we]re spoiled" (Sandqvist and Zahariade 2004: 71). The major plan of 'urban systematization,' as the communist propaganda pompously labeled the demolition campaigns, represented a social engineering exercise meant to facilitate the process of surveilling Romanians. The depersonalized urban space of the 1980s played a crucial role in creating and constantly re-producing the code of the socialist society.

The socialist urban code had at its core the rejection of the interwar (bourgeois) architectural principles. It was, in fact, the rejection of several decades of history during which the recently established communist party had played a marginal role in the political life of Romania. The communist propaganda apparatus disseminated the image of a powerful communist party acting as an oppositional force against the two main political parties that dominated the interwar years: the Liberal Party, and the Peasants' Party. In turn, Nicolae

Ceausescu was fashioned as a Gavroche-like character, who allegedly played a key role in overturning the bourgeois regime.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Romanian history was abruptly rewritten in order to suit the interests of the communist leaders. The Nicolae Ceausescu regime used history as a form of self-legitimization to position itself in the line of a long historical tradition. Nicolae Ceausescu was often represented as a 'hero among heroes', or a 'dignified follower of the Romanian historical traditions'. Moreover, the absolute power of Nicolae Ceausescu and the communist party had to be translated at the level of the urban code. Many historical buildings, some of them with unique architectural value in South-Eastern Europe, were demolished to make room for the grotesque 'House of People' (called 'The House of the Republic' before the 1989 Revolution), built on an enormous area of 330,000 square meters.

The 'People's House' was the cornerstone of the urbanization plan enforced during the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. The edifice was surrounded by an assembly of high-rise buildings, mostly populated by members of the communist party nomenklatura. Even if these dwellings were more comfortable than the 'ordinary' blocks – i.e., they had a larger floor area, and often benefited from uninterrupted heating and hot water – they remained merely high-rise buildings, not very different from their myriads of concrete counterparts in the districts of Bucharest.

The high-rise building was thus the basic unit of the communist space. The identical block assemblies were intended to preserve the unitary code of the communist Bucharest, gathering a large number of people with different professions and social backgrounds. Demolishing traditional Romanian buildings and replacing them with block *kvartals* was the preeminent spatial practice during the Ceausescu regime. Just as the Church needed churches in order to exist and preserve its privileged position (Lefebvre 1991), the communist leaders needed high-rise building in order to maintain their control over Romanians, and translate that power at the level of the urban code. Their plans (which were fortunately disrupted by the 1989 events), stated that by the mid-1990s, 90-95% of the Bucharesters would live in high-rise buildings (Sandqvist and Zahariade 2004: 70).

It is worth mentioning that, of all professional categories, young Romanian architects were probably the most vocal dissenters against the Nicolae Ceausescu regime and the urban code his political apparatus enforced. Their forms of protests ranged from informal exhibitions or seminars on architecture held outdoors (their access to 'traditional spaces' being forbidden) to overt critiques against the abusive form of urbanization implemented in the major Romanian cities. In the second half of the 1970s, they began to question the quasi-mandatory lack of differentiation and "tried to propose other types of dwelling, sociologically substantiated, for different life-styles, drawing upon the low-rise, high-density developments, or what the French architecture calls *habitat intermédiaire"* (Sandqvist and Zaharescu 2004: 71). In the most fortunate cases, when not answering the architects' protests in a coercive manner, the communist authorities remained indifferent.

Inside *and* outside

The high-rise building apartments, small and modest as they were, represented a shelter for many East-Europeans from the aggressive propaganda of the communist regimes. David Crowley looks at the public apartment in 1950s Warsaw as a site of opposition against the political authorities. According to him, it was clear that the "'threat' of the private was recognized by authority in Poland in the early 1950s (…). The state sought to exercise its

influence over life behind 'closed doors'" (2002: 187). Exploring the pre-1989 Smolensk neighbourhoods, Angela Harutyunyan argues that the authorities aimed to integrate "at least on the surface – people's everyday life into the public sphere and leave no room for feelings like isolation or segregation" (2006: 413). However, in spite of the state's attempts to forcefully integrate people into the 'big family' of the communist society, people continued to prefer the privacy of their own apartments in the Soviet 'microrayons' (micro-districts). In turn, Tom Sandqvist argues, in 1970s Romania, the personal apartment was "a sort of an asylum, a sanctuary where you could be protected from the hideous world outside, from that cold, dark, unfriendly reality that everyone suspected and nobody trusted" (Sandqvist 2004: 33).

But the matchbox-sized *fortresses* in high-rise buildings were not completely separated from the hostile communist urban space. According to Alexei Yurchak, "[r]ather than any clear-cut 'us' versus 'them' or 'private' versus 'public', there was a ubiquitous self-embedding or interweaving of these categories" (2005: 5). In a similar fashion, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman argue that, under communism, "[e]veryone was to some extent complicit in the system of patronage, lying, theft, hedging and duplicity through which the system operated" (as cited in Yurchak 2005: 7). The everyday strategies and complicities embraced by numerous individuals represented in many cases ways of survival. People rarely enjoyed the compromise they had to make; they rather grinned and bore it, as a Romanian saying goes. But despite its radicalism, this perspective is particularly relevant for the relations between people and the state apparatus in totalitarian spaces. Examining the interactions between "subjects" and their "space and surroundings", and the contradictions between them, are key for understanding a particular urban code (Lefebvre 1991: 18).

To illustrate the complementarity between the exterior space of the high-rise buildings and their interior, or, between the urban space dominated by propaganda, and the haven of the personal apartments, I will rely upon Henri Lefebvre's conceptual triad of space, which distinguishes between spatial practice (the realm of the *perceived*), representations of space (the *conceived*) and representational spaces *(lived)*. Spatial practice refers to the "production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre 1991: 38). It contributes to the preservation of a particular mode of production. This dimension of urban space includes particular areas or buildings developed with a clear purpose in mind: "…parks for recreation, (…), sites for death (graveyards) and remembrance (memorials, battlegrounds, museums, historic walks and tours" (Shields 1999: 62). In Bucharest, the endless districts of high-rise buildings, the red outdoor panels with patriotic slogans displayed on the facades of most public institutions, the concrete fountains reminiscent of Phuong Yang, and the House of the Republic and its surrounding area represented instances of spatial practice intended to reinforce the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu and the Romanian Communist Party.

The 'representations of space' (the *conceived*) constitute the second level of Lefebvre's three-tier theory. This is a more abstract level of approach, centered upon *conceiving*, or planning the urban space. It is the realm of "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers…" (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Such constructions or conceptions of space "rest on social conventions that establish which elements are related to one another and which elements are precluded." (Diener et al. 2006: 169). These conventions are not immutable; they are often at the core of disputes and renegotiations, coming from architects, urbanists, and the public. In this point, Lefebvrian arguments collide with the realities of the communist regime, which did not leave room for public debates regarding the use of space. Even if Nicolae Ceausescu had no architectural training, he made frequent recommendations that architects and

urbanists were obliged to incorporate in their work. Even if architects and planners may have disagreed with the practice of cramming individuals into high rise buildings, they had to comply with the president's orders regarding urban practice.

The third dimension of the production of space includes representational spaces *(lived)*, or 'spaces of representation', as Rob Shields proposes, dissatisfied with Donald Nicholson Smith's translation from French. This dimension revolves around the space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence foregrounds "the space of inhabitants and 'users'…" (Lefebvre 1991: 39). The space is appropriated by residents, and it incorporates difference, as well as subversive and counterhegemonic manifestations. In Romania, most acts of subversion were confined to private spaces; therefore personal apartments may be considered instances of representational spaces.

I will now proceed to an analysis of the complementarity between exterior spaces (the spatial practice realm), and interior spaces (representational spaces) in Bucharest during the last two decades of communism. My analysis will explore the interdependence between the space owned and controlled by the communist authorities and the personal apartments in high rise buildings. As Henri Lefebvre suggested, walls or enclosures provide only a physical means of separation between interior spaces and the larger realm of the social space. In spite of all barriers, though, a bedroom or a garden remain "fundamentally part" of the social space (1991: 87). In a similar fashion, individual apartments, often viewed as safe havens against communist propaganda, were inseparable from the larger communist milieu.

Beginning with the 1970s, the communist regime increasingly favored the construction of high-rise buildings with very little space between them and with very small apartments. A block had a variable number of doorsteps, arranged alphabetically, as "scari". The *"scara"* was a section of the building, with a common entrance and a number of apartments – usually four or five on each floor – organized around a common staircase. If the building was taller than four floors, each *"scara"* had its own elevator, which was frequently out of order. In some cases, living on a certain *"scara"* functioned as a factor of social segregation. In my high-rise building[6], for instance, the A *"scara"* was known to be mostly inhabited by intellectuals – university professors, doctors – or by persons said to have connections with the *Securitate*, Nicolae Ceausescu's secret police. Conversely, the E and F "scari" were largely inhabited by construction workers. E and F dwellers sometimes transgressed the *"scara"* border and socialized more willingly with the As; even so, the relation between the two enclaves was more often than not tense. However, in other blocks this segregation was hardly visible. Theoretically, families had to move into the apartments assigned to them by authorities without having much say in the process.

In reality, however, many Romanians were able to negotiate the authorities' decision by resorting to their networking chain, an inevitable and indispensable reality during the communist years. This act of tacit subversion, undertaken in complicity with second echelon members of the political apparatus who could help individuals move in different apartments than those assigned to them, in exchange for money or gifts, demonstrates that the realm of representational spaces *(the lived)* and that of spatial practices (the *perceived*) were intertwined in the communist society.

Describing the daily existence of an ordinary Bucharester family in the 1970s and 80s, Tom Sandqvist notes how Niculae Constantinescu, the father of the family, was able to move his family from the "concrete calvary called Drumul Taberei" to an "awfully designed apartment" on the fourth floor of a block close to downtown Bucharest (2004: 32). The new apartment

allowed for more space than 12 square meters per person, as Romanian law stipulated. However, this was the only diversion from the rule. For the rest, the block complied with the spatial code of the communist society: "[t]he shabby L-shaped, dark gray block had three doorsteps and looked like any other block built in the 70s with long rows of windows, built-in balconies on the façade, and asphalted yards" (…). The entrance hall door "was made of iron and painted green" (2004: 32).

Researchers of the East European block have minutely analyzed the interiors of communal or individual apartments (Boym 1994; Buchli 1999; Crowley 2002; Zahariade 2004; Harutyunyan 2006; see also Utekhin, Nakhimovsky, Paperno and Ries 2006 for online video tours, photos and audio documents on Russian communal life, and for memories of former residents). All agree that people attempted to personalize their apartments, in response to the monotonous exterior code imposed by the communist regimes. Transforming a block apartment into a home required patience and creativity, since most consumer goods were standardized, poorly designed and painted in dull colors. Visiting several apartments in Smolensk, Harutyunyan notes people's preference for "lively wallpapers or murals, carpets or baroque curtains", in contrast with "the external grayness of the microrayon buildings" (2006: 419). Furthermore, in response to the somber communist code, a large number of apartments displayed a popular form of eclecticism. Plaster statues, innumerable vases in different shapes, embroidered table cloths, goblins, plastic fruit – all shared the room with the 24 piece china set – usually reserved for guests or family anniversaries – and with refashioned 'imperialist' souvenirs, such as empty coke cans, now used as pencil holders. Revisiting the Leningrad communal apartment of her neighbor, Svetlana Boym rightly speaks of an "obsession with commemoration and preservation in the most ostensible fashion" (1994, 150). Memories and sentimental value, materialized in the myriad of 'dear objects' from East Europeans' apartments become a bulwark against the cult of newness promoted by communism.

Partially Color: television mediates between inside and outside

As Lefebvre argues, dwelling entails an act of appropriation: "…the 'private' realm asserts itself, albeit more or less vigorously, and always in a conflictual way, against the public one" (1991: 362). In what follows, I will explore how, from their personal apartments, ordinary Romanians coped with the surveillance strategies implemented by the communist regime by watching TV and, most important, how contestation left room for negotiation.

The television occupied a central position in Romanians' apartments, both literally and figuratively. Enjoying a privileged status, it was most often placed in the middle of a sturdy wooden bookcase, the pride of any socialist living room. Very few people had more than one television in their apartments, so watching TV provided families with a reason for gathering together in the "sufragerie" (living room). Many Romanians decorated the upper side of the television with a curio or a finely embroidered piece of fabric. When turned off, the television was carefully covered with a cloth.

Until the early 1980s, Romanian television broadcast in black and white only. There was only one broadcasting station, the state-owned "Televiziunea Romana". In 1985 the second channel was closed and the airing time of the first channel gradually decreased to two hours per evening in 1989. Romanians had heavy, wooden-framed, black and white televisions in their apartments. The year 1983 brought a small technical revolution in Romania, with the appearance

of the first Color televisions. However, the fortunate owners of such televisions could only partially enjoy them, since the Romanian television only broadcast select shows in Color. Those programs were usually marked with a small "c" in the TV guide and, as the television itself advertised its programs, it was a "partially color" broadcast.

Color televisions were expensive and could only be purchased by getting on a waiting list that was several years long. They soon became the marker of a privileged social status, within the limits allowed by the communist regime. More than the financial status of its owner, the Color television was a signifier of social power, demonstrating that its owner had the necessary connections to purchase it well ahead of his/her position on the waiting list. Subverting the list, either with the help of one's connection in the second hand political apparatus, or simply with the help of the shop assistant[7], in exchange for a consistent gift[8], was a tactic associated with representational spaces. It represented one of the multiple ways in which ordinary Romanians negotiated Nicolae Ceausescu's coercive regime in accordance to their needs, and it demonstrated the pervasiveness of a clandestine 'parallel economy' that coexisted with the state-controlled one. This is an example of what Alena Ledeneva calls *blat*: "the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures" (1998: 1). Ledeneva writes about *blat* as a common practice in the former Soviet Union but other countries in Eastern Europe knew it equally well[9].

Color televisions seem to have entered Romanians' lives a decade too late. During the 1970s, the censoring bodies of the Romanian Communist Party still allowed the broadcast of Western shows such as *Dallas*, *Colombo* or *Mannix* on the national television. The situation changed radically in the 1980s, when the second channel of the national television was suppressed, and the first one had its program reduced to three hours per evening on weekdays. As a Romanian remembers, "…you woke up with Ceausescu, you went to bed with Ceausescu 2 hours on end. That was about all: 2 hours in the afternoon, 2 hours during the day."[10]

Exclusively dedicated to Nicolae Ceausescu, television programming played an active role in reinforcing the code of the socialist society. Broadcasting reports from the 'new Bucharest' built during the communist regime, showing aerial views of the endless high-rise districts, television communicated the spatial practice of the communist society. Romanians were thus helped to *perceive* again the new architectural order of Bucharest, in addition to what they could see in their everyday errands through the capital city. They were expected to internalize the urban principles imposed by the communist regime, and enthusiastically acknowledge the 'new look' of the city, with its myriad of grey facades, as the triumph of the socialist era over the architectural remainders of the bourgeois decades. The *plans of urban development and systematization* represented the buzzword of the hegemonic media discourse in Romania during the 1980s. In fact, this was a mere euphemism for the demolition campaigns initiated by Nicolae Ceausescu, in his attempt to eliminate the 'inconvenient' decades of history. Romanians who lived under communism were well accustomed to Ceausescu's pretense to be an expert in almost everything. Although lacking any competence in architecture, he often gave *indications*[11] (i.e., orders) that had dramatic repercussions upon the urban space of Bucharest. Refusing to implement the presidential recommendations was inconceivable. The reports broadcast by the Romanian television often presented Ceausescu directing a pointing stick towards an architectural model while giving *indications* to architects, or equipped with a hard hat and rubber boots and visiting construction sites. Television discourse thus reinforced the socialist representations of space, including the president's conception of urbanism and architecture.

In response to this Orwellian confiscation of media space, most Romanians constructed a set of personal subversive strategies. A common practice was to watch television programs of the neighboring countries. Depending on the region of the country where they lived, Romanians watched the Bulgarian, Russian, Serbian or Hungarian television. They had thus the opportunity to watch programs that were quasi-forbidden by the Romanian authorities, such as the soccer World Cups, American detective movies or international pop music contests.

Even children and teenagers of the 1980s willingly chose the foreign programs over the Romanian ones, as a way of subverting the lack of consumer goods, particularly food, imposed by the communist authorities under the pretense of providing 'scientific nutrition' for people. In fact, significant amounts of aliments were exported, as Nicolae Ceausescu aimed to pay the entire external debt of Romania before deadline. Mentioning the reports she watched as a child on the Serbian television, a Romanian-Canadian remembered: "We were looking covetously at what they had in their grocery stores, Coca-Cola and all the chocolates in the world. It was only on Serbian television that we could see full shelves". She also recalled the images of empty grocery stores in Romania broadcast by foreign televisions and wondered how the reporters managed to circumvent the vigilance of shop assistants to capture those images.

Watching foreign television programs of also helped Romanians transcend the policy of seclusion enforced by Nicolae Ceausescu. During the 1970s and 1980s, the president promoted a hard line isolationist policy, inspired by his 1971 visit to China and North Korea. The communist regime propaganda hailed these two countries and Albania as the traditional friends of the Romanian people. During the late 1980s, the Romanian television gradually suppressed all foreign television programs (most of them produced in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), with the exception of movies produced by the 'traditional friends'. The shows broadcast by foreign stations, received through clandestine aerials sometimes improvised of aluminum washing basins[12], helped Romanians maintain their ties with the surrounding East European space. This happened in spite of Nicolae Ceausescu's abusive attempts to isolate the country from the 'negative influence' of an area witnessing a growing openness towards a market economy.

The second major strategy for subverting the communist code was the quasi-clandestine use of VCRs. Many Romanians were glad to skip the innocent Chinese or North Korean movies with happy peasants and cranes flying over endless fields, in order to watch movies that were incompatible with the communist morale. A Romanian-Canadian recalled that in his teenage years, spent under communism, he loved watching VCR cassettes "with beating, with shooting, with war, with Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Arnold Schwarzenegger", or movies with a fair amount of sexual tension, such as *Top Gun* or *9 ½ weeks*. The VCR movies helped Romanians transcend the border of the communist space. Living in a country with closed frontiers, where owning a passport was a rare privilege, they could escape the constraints of the communist regime, even if at a purely imaginative level.

By watching the television programs of the neighboring countries or VCR movies, Romanians attempted to subvert the routine of their everyday existence in a communist society, which entailed a multitude of unwanted encounters with Nicolae Ceausescu and the Communist Party. In the late 1980s, Romanians had lost almost any hope that communism would ever collapse. The six persons that I interviewed, teenagers or young adults during the late years of communism, shared this view. They all felt entrapped, preparing for an existence as dull as that of their parents and were constantly searching for coping strategies.

Living in a colorless world dominated by fear, Romanians were, nevertheless, attentive viewers. An ordinary Romanian could not tell precisely when he or she would have the opportunity to watch a Western movie or a documentary again; therefore this experience was attentively enjoyed. The concept of *distraction*, described by Margaret Morse as a set of "[p]ractices and skills that could be performed semiautomatically in a distracted space" (1990: 196) does not apply to Romanians' interaction with the media. I believe that the practice of *passively* keeping the television turned on for the sake of background noise was unfamiliar to Romanians. Programs broadcast by foreign televisions and VCR movies represented compensatory mechanisms for the Romanians who only had access to the information and entertainment filtered by the communist propaganda apparatus. The two media forms represented one of the few barriers against the isolationist policy promoted by Nicolae Ceausescu.

However, neither the existence of clandestine antennas, nor the VCR evenings would have been possible without the complicity of second or third echelon officials, who were supposed to implement the decisions made by Nicolae Ceausescu and the superior political apparatus. While the president and his entourage were perceived by most Romanians as living in an intangible sphere that had nothing to do with the everyday lives of ordinary people, the petty *apparatchiks* could be approached relatively easily. Bribe, barter and various arrangements facilitated Romanians' relations with these individuals, who had strong connections in the parallel economy network. The fact that owning a VCR was quasi-illegal in Romania did not prevent people from getting involved in the circuit of obtaining and exchanging VCR cassettes. Considering the ample underground networking set in motion by trafficking videocassettes, this practice could be analyzed, in paradoxical terms, as a mass subcultural phenomenon of the communist decades. However, this topic deserves a much more detailed treatment than I am able to provide in the present essay.

Conclusion

Building upon two key concepts proposed by Henri Lefebvre, the spatial code and the three-tier dialectic of space (spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation, respectively), I have attempted to dismantle the Manichean image often associated to communist spaces. Although the myriad of high-rise buildings constructed in Bucharest during the communist decades contributed to reinforcing the urban code of the communist society, Romanians developed their own set of strategies and tactics for subverting it. However, these practices often required establishing an unwanted but necessary partnership with second echelon members of the political apparatus. As I intended to demonstrate, in the communist space, instances of spatial practice and representations of space did not produce a dialectical relation with the level of the spaces of representation. In other words, the personal apartments of Bucharesters, often regarded as shelters against the oppressive space of communism, had to have a window open towards the *House of the Republic* and its surrounding area, where numerous such petty apparatchiks and 'service facilitators' lived.

However, as a Bucharester who lived her childhood years under communism and was aware of these practices, I consider that a disclaimer is most useful in this context. By arguing that Romanians negotiated with the communist regime, that the border between them and the individuals who enjoyed a certain level of decisive power was sometimes blurry, I did not mean that the communist decades were not *that bad* actually. Neither did I intend to push people's everyday life and their ways with coping with the regime to an anecdotal level. The existence of

such survival strategies demonstrates that a 'black and white' approach is only able to capture a surface image of the everyday practices in the socialist space, when in fact most Romanians lived through *partially colored* times during the 1970s and 1980s.

Acknowledgements

[1] After 1989, Romanians were allowed to access their personal files compiled by the *Securitate* (the Romanian Secret Police). Some of them discovered that persons considered 'safe', close friends or even members of the family, had written informative notes for the *Securitate*, in exchange for various benefits. This casts a new light upon the 'public-private' distinction in regard with the communist era and refashions the relation between the exterior and interior spaces during the Nicolae Ceausescu era. However, this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

[2] The title of my MA thesis is "A tale of two childhoods: the virtual child and the real child in Romania, 1970s and 1980s" (2006, Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film at Brock University, St. Catharines). My thesis supervisors were Dr. Marian Bredin and Dr. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye.

[3] In Romania, at least, the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' were used interchangeably, in a very confusing fashion. In his speeches, Nicolae Ceausescu referred sometimes to socialism as the superior level of communism, which was projected to be achieved in 2000, when he expected Romania to become a multilaterally developed socialist society. However, this approach was not consistent.

[4] The state propaganda discourse often emphasized that Romanians should feel fortunate and grateful for living under a communist regime that was able to provide a peaceful and prosperous existence for everybody. However, as the ethnographic research undertaken after 1989 documented, Romanians had all the reasons to feel alienated during the 1970s and 1980s, from the constant fear of surveillance, to the miserable living conditions (lack of basic foodstuff and medicines, unheated apartments, and daily power blackouts). This is what several Bucharesters remember: "As a child and adolescent, I used to stand in a queue for hours. I felt that a part of my existence was wasting away, and I couldn`t understand why it was so painful to obtain food. (…)In the early 80's you could only buy tinned fish and biscuits without standing in a queue. No meal without fish, they used to say. In the late 80's you couldn`t even find the out of date cream biscuits called Eugenia. Starting in 1987, things got so bad, that we were terrified we would literally die of starvation". (23); "Generally they [medicines, *my note*] could hardly be found. Those who could afford the got them from abroad, those who couldn't, took aspirin. Because of that, we had to do our best to be healthy and treat ourselves with palliatives. Maybe the death rate was bigger, but we steeled ourselves". (125); "What can I say? Everyone knows it, in winters it was colder inside than outside, and hot water was only rarely running (if at all). Gas

was scarce too, especially in winter. Gas was so weak that you couldn't even light up the stove burners. In order to be able to cook, people used to get up very early in the morning, between 2 and 5 AM, when gas was a bit stronger. I for one did so". (M. C. J., 96) (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant 2002, issue 7; see
http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7)

[5] From The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review 2002, issue 7; see
http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7.

[6] During my childhood years under communism, I lived in two apartments: my grandparents' (situated in a low-rise building, in a quiet and older district of Bucharest) and my mother's (in a high-rise building, with six *scari*). My grandparents and great-grandparents had lived in houses that were demolished by the communist authorities.

[7] The petty apparatchiks were not the only ones to enjoy a powerful position in the Romanian society. In a state-controlled economy, where the field of services was underdeveloped, if not quasi-absent, whoever had access to the products and services that were chronically lacking on the market were privileged. This category of persons included (but was not limited to) *Militia* officers (i.e., the Police), army members, hotel managers, pilots, flight-attendants, marine officers, sailors, tourist guides, truck-operators, waiters, shop-assistants – particularly those working at grocery stores – and farm workers.

[8] Such a gift usually included "Kent cigarettes boxes, foreign coffee bags, whisky, 'wrapped' eau-de-Cologne and deodorants, home electronic equipment, foreign most of the time, any kind of Western goods" (125) (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review 2002, issue 7; see http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7)

[9] Romanians use the same word for small arrangements, from bribe paid to train conductors in lieu of the ticket, to the soccer games whose result is "arranged".

[10] From The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review 2002 issue 7; see
http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7.

[11] As a Romanian interviewed after 1989 remembers, the 'indication' refers to "any piece of advice or guidance that a person may give in order to help somebody else. The true national climax of this word's career was under the Ceausescu regime. Indications became 'precious'. Actually, the name served as camouflage for downright orders. No one dared reject complete and immediate fulfillment of them". (51) (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant 2002, issue 7; see
http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7)

[12] Remembering the improvised technical devices used by Romanians to receive the programs of the neighboring televisions, a person mentioned that "some crafty people, particularly in the north of the country, used these aluminum basins to make clandestine parabolic aerials. This was the occasion of an announcement posted in the window of a 'Ferometal' shop in Suceava: "We

have basins for cabling in the Russians." (51) (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant 2002, issue 7; see http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7)

References

Boym, Svetlana. 1994. Common places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Büchli, Victor. 1999. An archaeology of socialism. Oxford; New York: Berg

Brooks, Jeffrey. 2001. Thank You, comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to War. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Crowley, David. 2002. Warsaw Interiors: The Public Life of Private Spaces, 1949-65. *In* Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc. D. Crowley and S. E. Reid, eds. Pp. 181-206. Oxford, New York: Berg

Diener, Roger with Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron and Christian Schmid. 2006. Switzerland: An Urban Portrait (vol.1); Basel: Birkhäuser – Verlag

Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey. 2000. The Interview: From Structured Questions to Text. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. Pp: 645-672. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Foucault, Michel. 1977. Discipline and Punishment: the Birth of the Prison. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. The History of Sexuality. New York: Pantheon Books

Giurescu, Dinu. 1989. The Razing of Romania's Past. London: Architecture Design and Technology Press

Haase, Andrea. 2007. Studio Review. *In* BUCHAREST - Fragmentation & Interconnection. Dessau Institute of Architecture Graduate School. Retrieved September 17, 2009, from http://lehre.afg.hs-anhalt.de/dia/projects/studio/bucharest/15.pdf

Harutyunyan, Angela. 2006. Retreat into the Living Room. *In* Transiträume / Transit Spaces – Frankfurt / Oder-Poznan / Warsaw / Brest / Minsk / Smolensk / Moscow. R. Bittner, W. Hackenbroich and K. Vöckler, eds. Pp. 410- 419. Berlin: jovis Verlag GmbH

Ledeneva, Alena V. (1998). Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. The Production of Space. Williston, Vermont: Blackwell Publishing

Morse, Margaret.1990. An Ontology of Everyday Distraction – The Freeway, the Mall and Television. *In* Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism Patricia Mellencamp, ed. Pp. 193-221. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Rouse, Joseph. 1994. Power / Knowledge. *In* The Cambridge Companion to Foucault. Gary Gutting, ed. Pp. 92-114.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Sandqvist, Tom and Ana Maria Zahariade.(2004). Dacia 1300, my generation. Bucharest: Simetria

Shields, Rob. 1999. Lefebvre, Love & Struggle. London and New York: Routledge

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Martor - The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review. T*he eighties in Bucharest*. 2002, 7. Retrieved August 12 2011, from http://martor.memoria.ro/index.php?location=archive&action=details&id=7

Tilroe, Anna. 2004. Observations. In *Ideals in Concrete.* The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, design and Architecture. Pp. 17-22. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers

Utekhin, Ilya, Alice Nakhimovsky, Slava Paperno and Nancy Ries. Communal Living in Russia: A Virtual Museum of Soviet Everyday Life. 2006. Retrieved October 12 2011 from http://kommunalka.colgate.edu/

Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press