ART AND POWER: THE METAMORPHOSES OF ROMANIANVISUAL CULTURE BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY (1950–1989)

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Abstract. The paper examines the metamorphoses of artistic institutions and visual discourse in communist Romania between 1950 and 1989, through an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates art history, cultural sociology, ideological aesthetics, and visual anthropology. The study argues that Romanian art under communism cannot be reduced to mere political propaganda, but must be understood as a complex symbolic system in which the aesthetic, the ideological, and the moral coexisted in a constant relationship of tension and negotiation. By applying the theoretical frameworks of **Pierre Bourdieu** (the artistic field), **Michel Foucault** (symbolic discipline), **Boris Groys** (the total art of Stalinism), and **Jacques Rancière** (the distribution of the visible), the essay demonstrates how Romanian art functioned as a space of aesthetic and moral resistance within a totalitarian regime that instrumentalized the image as a tool of control.

The analysis focuses on institutional transformations—such as the **Union of Fine Artists**, the **Combinatul Fondului Plastic** (State Art Production Enterprise), and official exhibitions—while also addressing the symbolic survival strategies practiced by artists, with particular attention to Southern Bukovina (Romania), where local identity filtered ideology into an aesthetics of discretion and inner integrity.

The research reveals the existence of an **"aesthetics of ambiguity"**, characteristic of Romanian art during the communist era: a subtle balance between obedience and freedom, between control and poetry. In conclusion, the visual legacy of communism is interpreted as a **cultural memory in transformation**, requiring an ethical, lucid, and non-ideological reading, in the spirit of a visual anthropology of twentieth-century Romania.

Keywords: *Romanian art; socialist realism; visual ideology; artistic field; aesthetics of power; cultural memory; Southern Bukovina; symbolic resistance; Bourdieu; Groys; Rancière; art and ideology*

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In the history of postwar Romania, few domains underwent such a profound symbolic reconfiguration as the visual arts. Between 1950 and 1989, the image became both the privileged language of power and the silent space of interior freedom. Art and ideology intertwined in an ambivalent relationship—at once alliance and tension, a tool of propaganda and a refuge of the spirit.

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In this sense, the Romanian communist period can be read not merely as an era of constraint, but as a laboratory of the symbolic, in which aesthetics was compelled to become politics, and politics, in turn, an aesthetic spectacle. Beyond the propagandistic discourse, the artistic reality of these decades reveals a complex negotiation between dogma and sensibility, between the imposition of the norm and the survival of personal expression.

Totalitarian regimes, perhaps more than democracies, understood the ontological potential of the image. As Walter Benjamin observed, "fascism aestheticizes politics, while communism politicizes art."[2] In Romania between 1950 and 1989, these two dimensions fused into a specific form of "political aestheticization of existence." Everything had to become image: the discourse, the leader, the factory, the peasant, the future.

In a world where the word was controlled, the image remained an ambiguous instrument—susceptible to regulation, yet capable of slipping toward metaphor, poetry, and ambivalence. In this respect, the visual arts represented a paradoxical space: ideologically constrained, yet never fully reducible to propagandistic schematism.

As the cultural theorist Boris Groys noted, "totalitarian art did not destroy the avant-garde but fulfilled its dream: the transformation of life into a total work of art."[3] The Romanian communist regime achieved precisely this—transforming everyday existence into an ordered spectacle of images, in which the aesthetic became a subtle form of governance.

To grasp the complexity of Romanian art under communism, one must adopt an interdisciplinary approach, situated at the intersection of the sociology of culture (Pierre Bourdieu), the institutional theory of art (Howard Becker), the philosophy of power (Michel Foucault), and political aesthetics (Jacques Rancière, Boris Groys).

In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the artistic field is an "autonomous microcosm," governed by its own rules of legitimization, yet always traversed by economic and political forces. Under communism, this field was colonized by the state: the symbolic autonomy of art was replaced by ideological heteronomy. Yet, within this constraint, artists continued to produce new meanings, negotiating their status and moving between obedience and autonomy.

For Howard Becker, art is not merely an individual act but part of an "art world" — a collective system of production, distribution, and reception.[4] In socialist Romania, this system was bureaucratically organized: the Union of Fine Artists, the Combinatul Fondului Plastic (the State Art Production Enterprise),

[2] Walter Benjamin*, Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1968, p. 242.
[3] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 13–19.
[4] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, p. 34.

ideological commissions, juries, and thematic exhibitions. Artists depended on this network for professional existence, yet it simultaneously provided them with means of survival. In Becker's logic, even under censorship, art operates as a complex cooperation, a paradoxical solidarity between creation and control.

Michel Foucault helps us understand the invisible dimension of control. Power, he writes, "is exercised not only through prohibition, but through the internalization of norms."[5] In Romanian art after 1950, control was not only external—through censorship—but also internal, through aesthetic and moral self-censorship. The artist learned to see reality in permissible terms. Thus, aesthetics became a form of internalized discipline—an act of aesthetic submission.

For Boris Groys, socialist art must be understood not merely as an aesthetic ideology but as a secularized theology: a religion of the visible, in which the image replaces transcendence. Under communism, the image became sacred—the icon of the new world, of the leader, of the transfigured people. It promised collective salvation through labor and progress. From this perspective, socialist realism functioned as a political theology in images.

In Jacques Rancière's view, art's political dimension lies not in its explicit message, but in its capacity for "the distribution of the visible"—in determining what can be seen, represented, and perceived.[6] In communist Romania, the state controlled this distribution: it decided what could exist visually. Yet within this order, art found ways to subtly redistribute the visible, creating fissures within the ideological apparatus of perception.

Art as the Language of Ideology

Socialist realism, officially adopted after 1948, was not merely an artistic current but a program for the reorganization of reality. As Maxim Gorky declared at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, "the artist must depict life in its revolutionary development."[7]

In Romania, this directive took the form of a double imperative:

- Art had to be "true"—to express the objective reality of socialism in construction;
- Art had to be "educational"—to shape the collective consciousness of the new man.

The result was a hybrid form of creation, in which painting, sculpture, and graphic art were burdened with moral responsibility. The artist was no longer an observer of the world, but its builder.

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[5] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 183.
[6] Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2000, p. 29.
[7] Maxim Gorki, *Raport la Congresul Scriitorilor Sovietici, Moscova, 1934*, in „Selected Works", Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1979, p. 212.

In the first decades (1950–1960), this orientation produced a visual corpus dominated by themes of labor, collectivization, industrialization, and socialist heroism. Yet even within this frame, artists succeeded in imprinting a lyrical dimension upon the image: chromatic expressiveness, compositional monumentality, and formal balance.

Thus, Romanian socialist realism distinguished itself from the Soviet model through a note of humanism and poetry. In the paintings of Alexandru Ciucurencu, Corneliu Baba, and Ion Țuculescu, the imposed themes became meditations on human dignity, and the figure of the worker turned into an archetype rather than a mere political symbol.

Spaces of Ideology: Artistic Institutions as Mechanisms of Control

Behind creation lay a complex bureaucratic infrastructure sustaining the artistic system. The Union of Fine Artists (U.A.P.), the Combinatul Fondului Plastic, the Exhibition Committee, and the Committee for Culture all formed a network of filtering and legitimization.

Access to exhibitions, materials, travel grants, or salaries depended on ideological loyalty. Art thus became a form of symbolic capital politically regulated, in Bourdieu's sense.

However, this institutional network was not purely oppressive—it also acted as a mechanism of professional protection. The U.A.P. provided artists with studios, commissions, and visibility—a degree of stability within an unstable system. Paradoxically, communist bureaucracy created the very material conditions for a relative continuity of artistic life.

Art as a Space of Negotiation

After 1960, with the political thaw following Stalin's death, Romanian socialist realism gradually transformed. The heroic dogmatism of the 1950s gave way to a more moderate realism—lyrical, humanistic, and introspective.

This change coincided with a partial re-autonomization of the artistic field. Artists began to experiment with color, to introduce universal themes, and to reinterpret ideology through personal sensibility.

As critic Dan Hăulică observed in 1970, "Romanian art liberates itself not through rupture, but through refinement; by aestheticizing ideological content, it transforms propaganda into visual poetry."[8]

This sentence perfectly defines the logic of Romanian aesthetic resistance: not frontal opposition, but internal metamorphosis of meaning. In a regime that demanded ideological art, true subversion lay in beauty.

[8] Dan Hăulică, *Despre lirismul artei românești contemporane*, in „Secolul 20", nr. 5–6, 1970, p. 78.

The Aestheticization of Nationalism and the "Golden Age" of Controlled Imagery

The year 1965 marked an ideological turning point in Romanian visual culture. With Nicolae Ceaușescu's rise to power, classical socialist realism gave way to a new aesthetics of the national, meant to legitimize the political discourse of "independence" from Moscow.

If in the 1950s art glorified the proletariat and industrialization, in the following decades it would celebrate roots, history, and the "Romanian specificity." This shift, though presented as liberalization, was in fact a reorientation of symbolic control—from internationalist ideology to the mythologized origins of the nation.

Paradoxically, artists found here a window of freedom: the appeal to tradition, folklore, and myth allowed the reintroduction of an authentic visual vocabulary, filtered through local sensibility. Painters and sculptors began to depict archaic figures, folk motifs, and mythic landscapes—themes apparently conforming to ideology, yet capable of expressing a poetry of spiritual continuity.

As critic Radu Bogdan observed in 1973, "the return toward ethnic values is, paradoxically, a form of humanizing ideology."[9] In truth, artists transformed the political myth into aesthetic metaphor: while for the regime folklore proved national purity, for the creator it became a way back to the essential.

This period produced a double iconography—an official one of monumentality and heroism, and an intimate one of the inner landscape and collective memory.

Bukovina: A Laboratory of Local Visual Identity

Southern Bukovina offers an exemplary case for understanding the relationship between local identity and ideological pressure. Here, Byzantine-rural tradition, Habsburg heritage, and Romanian modernism intersected in a unique cultural synthesis.

After 1950, schools of popular art were integrated into the centralized system of socialist education, yet they continued to cultivate a regional aesthetic canon, based on ornament, color, and compositional balance.

For artists such as Dimitrie Rusu and Radu Bercea, the Bucovinian landscape became a metaphor of identity resistance. This visual testimony encapsulates the dialectic of Bucovinian art under communism—a poetry of silence. Through its soft light, pastoral chromaticism, and orderly geometry, this art offers an aesthetics of moral balance, a form of ethics rendered through plastic means.

Unlike the urban centers (Bucharest, Cluj, Iași), where socialist realism manifested through monumentality and narrative figuration, in Bukovina it was

[9] Radu Bogdan, *Valori și tradiții în arta românească*, București, Meridiane Publishing House, 1973, p. 112.

filtered through the tact of tradition—a blend of modesty, ritual, and discreet resistance.

This silent resistance, defined by historian Titu Popescu as "aesthetic patriotism,"[10] represents one of the deepest forms of symbolic survival in Romanian art. In the absence of political freedom, Bukovina preserved spiritual freedom.

Monumental Aesthetics and Secular Sacredness

During the 1970s and 1980s, the official visual discourse acquired a monumental-sacred form. The leader became the center of a visual cult of personality, while the urban space turned into a stage for the representation of total order. The poster, the mosaic, the bas-relief, and state architecture were invested with a liturgical function: aesthetics was transformed into a secularized theology.

This "secular sacredness" was observed by Monica Enache, who described the official exhibitions of that period as "collective rituals of aesthetic obedience."[11] Yet even within this rigid framework, artists continued to cultivate a double iconography: outwardly, collective heroism; inwardly, humanist reflection.

In the sculpture of Ion Irimescu, the figure of the worker is not a mere ideological instrument but a symbol of existential dignity. Deeply rooted in Renaissance tradition, Irimescu transforms the theme of labor into a metaphor of creation. Through the nobility of form, he transcends the political message, renewing the moral meaning of art.

Similar silent transformations can be seen in the painting of Corneliu Baba, where the portrait of the leader becomes a psychological study, and socialist heroism turns into melancholic sadness. Baba himself confessed in a letter to Petru Comarnescu:

"I do not wish to lie. Nor to shout slogans. I prefer to paint the silence of the solitary man."[12]

Through gestures such as these, artists reclaimed the moral verticality of artistic creation, re-humanizing an official aesthetic destined to glorify power.

Art as Memory and Symbolic Resistance

Beginning in the 1980s, economic crisis and social degradation provoked a turn inward. Art became increasingly introspective, melancholic, at times almost metaphysical. The paintings and graphic works of that decade convey a climate of weariness and solitude, yet also an unbroken search for meaning.

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[10] Titu Popescu, *Identitate și artă în zonele de interferență culturală*, in „Arta", nr. 3, 1982, p. 44.
[11] Monica Enache, *Arta și puterea. Expozițiile oficiale din România comunistă*, București, MNAR, 2016, p. 59.
[12] Corneliu Baba, *Scrisori către Petru Comarnescu*, București, Meridiane Publishing House, 1993, p. 71.

In 1988, art historian Alexandru Cebuc wrote that "Romanian art has learned to speak in whispers. Behind the ideological convention lies a moral discourse, profoundly human."[13]

This aesthetics of silence would later become a collective memory after 1989. In the works of contemporary artists such as Dan Perjovschi, Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor, and Cristian Rusu, the relics of socialist visuality are reinterpreted critically: the mosaic becomes a ruin, the monument an ironic object, the poster an archaeological document.

Thus, post-communism did not destroy the image but reactivated it through lucidity. In the words of Georges Didi-Huberman, "to see does not mean to venerate, but to restore the critical distance between the viewer and the image."[14] Within that distance, a new aesthetics of memory emerged in post-totalitarian Romania—an art that no longer glorifies but understands.

The Visual Legacy of Communism: Between Shame and Nostalgia

After 1989, Romania had to confront not only the material ruins of the regime but also its symbolic residues. Monumental mosaics, heroic statues, propaganda panels, and industrial frescoes remained suspended between memory and oblivion. Communist art, once omnipresent, became an object of cultural ambivalence—shame and fascination, rejection and nostalgia.

This dual attitude reflects what Svetlana Boym called "reflective nostalgia": a form of melancholy that does not idealize the past but contemplates it critically.[15] In Romania, this "reflective nostalgia" manifested through a gradual re-evaluation of socialist visual heritage—from stigmatization toward historical understanding.

Today, more and more scholars, art historians, and contemporary artists approach that era not to rehabilitate it but to integrate it into a visual archaeology of the twentieth century. In the logic of Aleida Assmann, mature societies must "learn to carry their shame as a form of collective memory."[16]

Thus, communist art becomes part of a pedagogy of the past—a source of ethical and historical reflection on how images can be used to shape consciousness.

From Control to Memory: The Re-Signification of the Image

In the context of post-communist transition, Romanian artists began to recover the symbols and visual objects of the former regime. Facade mosaics, banners, and socialist art manuals became subjects of critical and poetic analysis.

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[13] Alexandru Cebuc, *Despre sensul moral al artei noastre recente*, in „Arta", nr. 10, 1988, p. 5.
[14] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position*, Paris, Minuit, 2009, p. 23.
[15] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001, pp. 41–45.
[16] Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 45.

Artists such as Dan Perjovschi reconfigured political drawing into an instrument of freedom; Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor transformed the architectural remnants of communism into installations about memory; Ștefan Câlția preserved in his post-communist painting the same moral order of the image—an ethos of clarity and modesty.

Through these artistic gestures, the image ceased to be an instrument of control and became a means of knowledge. It turned, in Georges Didi-Huberman's sense, into "a breathing space between past and present, between seeing and understanding."[17]

In this way, the visual legacy of communism has evolved into an ethical and aesthetic reference point—a lesson about the power and fragility of representation.

The Aesthetics of Ambiguity

One of the central conclusions of this research is that Romanian art under communism cannot be understood through the simple opposition between 'propaganda' and 'resistance.' It represents a middle zone of ambiguity, where the aesthetic and the ideological coexist, contaminate one another, and are constantly rewritten.

As Hannah Arendt remarked, "even in the darkest of times, there are moments of light."[18] In this sense, the works of Romanian artists from 1950 to 1989 resemble such moments—fragments of humanity within a universe of constraint.

The aesthetics of ambiguity is, therefore, an aesthetics of survival:

- of forms that learn to conceal meaning;
- of colors that speak without asserting;
- of beauty that resists through silence.

In a world of total discipline, beauty becomes a form of dissent. Art no longer confronts power directly but transcends it through refinement. This is perhaps the most subtle lesson of Romanian socialist realism: that the spirit can survive even within the aesthetic conditions of subordination.

The Ethics of the Gaze and the Role of the Art Historian

For the contemporary art historian, the issue is no longer to condemn or rehabilitate communist art but to regard it ethically. As Tzvetan Todorov warned, the memory of totalitarian regimes must be treated "not with hatred, but with moral lucidity."[19]

This lucidity implies recognizing the genuine aesthetic values produced under ideological pressure—composition, formal discipline, harmony of

[17] Georges Didi-Huberman*, op. cit.*, p. 23.
[18] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 9.
[19] Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien: Enquête sur le siècle*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2000, pp. 17–18.

proportion, and craftsmanship. These do not belong to the regime but to the Romanian artistic tradition, which managed to survive political deformation.

To write about communist art thus means to restore the dignity of seeing. The art historian becomes a moral witness: not merely interpreting, but liberating the image from ideological distortion.

A Cultural Memory in Transformation

Today, Romanian society is still in the process of integrating its own visual memory. Some monuments of the socialist era are demolished, others restored, others musealized. This diversity of attitudes shows that visual memory is a living organism, evolving alongside collective perception.

Over time, a new critical canon has taken shape, in which socialist art is studied not for its propagandistic value but for its anthropological potential. It becomes a document, not a dogma; a cultural sign, not a guilt.

As Jan Assmann stated, "every epoch rewrites its past in order to understand its present."[20] Post-communist Romania is doing exactly this: rewriting the communist visual legacy to define its democratic identity.

General Conclusion

Romanian art between 1950 and 1989 represents a history of the spirit under pressure. It lived within ideology, yet transcended its limits through sensitivity, discipline, and aesthetic faith.

Artistic institutions, created as mechanisms of control, also became spaces of professional solidarity; propaganda was often transformed into poetry, and obedience into a form of resistance.

Seen today, this art is no longer a historical guilt but a testimony to human complexity. It teaches us that beauty is never entirely defeated and that the image can redeem what words can no longer express.

In a regime that sought to control even imagination, art remained the only place where man could still see himself. Therefore, the visual memory of communism must not be destroyed but understood—as proof that even when truth is forbidden, beauty always finds a way to speak.

[20] Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, C. H. Beck, 1992, p. 56.

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