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Abstract

This article examines the Romanian and American reception of Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), arguing that the film's representational minimalism indirectly caused an excess of interpretation across cultural contexts. This over-interpretation was possible because the film's aesthetic minimalism encouraged viewers to decode the story through the lens of their own cultural and political predispositions. The historical and social background against which American viewers consumed this story of an illegal abortion during communism shaped its meaning (and perceptions about its political relevance), plugging an art-house Romanian film into the larger national debate over reproductive rights in the contemporary United States. Thus, in its transition from the domestic to the global marketplace, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* was transformed from an act of amoral probing of Romanian individual and collective memory about communism, into a film about the controversial nature of particular individual choices within the liberal capitalist paradigm.

Keywords

abortion, communism, film, memory, Cristian Mungiu, new wave, realism, reception, Romania, United States

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4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (henceforth *432*) is the second feature film by the then 39-year-old Romanian director Cristian Mungiu.¹ In 2007 it received the Palme d'Or at Cannes, the top award at the prestigious European film festival, and went on to garner numerous other prizes at film competitions: 17 more awards at film festivals around the world, and nominations for 10 others, including the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film. The film became the most visible example of a 'new wave' in Romanian film post-1989 – the creation of a generation of filmmakers that refuse labels and rewrite the rules of cinema as art and as business in contemporary Romania.

We argue in this paper that both the film's minimalist representational regime and the director's refusal to 'take sides' in telling a very controversial story about the past, open the film to excessive interpretation in the present in both Romania and the United States. One of the causes of this excessive interpretation was that the cinematographic realism of *432* functioned differently when moved from one ideological context to the other, and that the historical and social background against which the film was consumed shaped its interpretation. The very transparency of the representation encouraged viewers to identify with different cultural and political issues according to their own cultural and political predispositions. Thus, in its transition from the domestic to the global marketplace, *432* was transformed from an act of amoral probing of Romanian individual and collective memory about communism, into a film about the controversial nature of particular individual choices within a liberal capitalist paradigm.

As the following pages will discuss, such a reading of *432* enables us to reflect on the different uses of reality and representation in films set during communism, yet marketed globally, as they address domestic and international audiences with the competing imperatives 'Remember!' and 'Enjoy!' In the United States in particular, *432* injected itself fully into the political controversy surrounding reproductive freedom. Despite its limited release in only a few art-house cinemas across the country, it became part of the national conversation on abortion, was actively debated in the blogosphere and was used by both sides as an argument supporting their position.

The plot of the film is deceptively simple. The story takes place over 24 hours in an unnamed town in Romania in 1987. While contemporary viewers know that communism will collapse two years later, the protagonists have no such certainty. The film opens with two college students setting out on a trip. Yet this is no mere weekend outing. One of the students, Găbiță, is pregnant and is trying to secure an abortion in a time when this was illegal and extremely dangerous. Her friend Otilia is helping her. We do not learn about the circumstances of the pregnancy or the reasons for Găbiță's decision to have the abortion. In fact, choosing is not even part of the plot, and in the film the decision has already been made. Viewers are left to wonder about the father, about Găbiță's reasons for having the abortion, and even why she waited so long to have it. By leaving the discussion of the protagonist's choice outside the film, Mungiu wants to unsettle our ethical understanding of the narrative (Wilson, 2008: 19). The film stays squarely with the complicated procedure of securing the abortion, showcasing the absurd difficulties facing women locked in a set of circumstances over which they have very limited control, and dealing only obliquely with moral dilemmas.

In search of the illegal procedure, Otilia and Găbiță have to jump through many hoops, tell many lies, and make bribes with money, goods and their own bodies.

Unexpectedly, the heroine is not the girl undergoing the abortion, but her friend Otilia, who has to make all the arrangements, meet the abortionist – the seedy and ironically named Mr Bebe – find a hotel room where the procedure can take place anonymously, and organize the entire expedition, while dealing with some of her own issues, such as attending a birthday party for her boyfriend's mother. The pregnant Găbiță is a flighty and frivolous girl, so completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation that she constantly avoids responsibility by placing it increasingly onto the shoulders of her friend. She forgets to bring the necessary supplies, does not follow Bebe's instructions to the letter, and, most importantly, lies about how advanced her pregnancy is. Faced with higher risk and no extra money, the abortionist requires sex from both girls in exchange for his services. After this ultimate test of friendship, Găbiță stays in the hotel room waiting for the procedure to follow its course, while Otilia has to run to her boyfriend's house for the birthday party. Later, it is again Otilia who has to gather up and dispose of the foetus, in a maddening ride through dark alleys, chased by stray dogs and threatening shadows. The end of the film leaves the girls in the hotel restaurant. Having recovered after her ordeal, Găbiță is hungry, but Otilia cannot eat what is on the menu, which consists of leftovers from a wedding taking place in the background: meat, brains and liver. To Găbiță's question about what happened to the foetus, Otilia tells her: 'We'll never talk about it again.'

Before and after communism: 432 in its historical context

Despite its excellent critical reception in the US (the nuances of which we will discuss later), *432* did not make it onto the Oscars shortlist for Best Foreign Film. We do not want to exaggerate the importance of Oscar recognition, but for a small-budget film from a country like Romania the Oscars provide exposure and advertising that translate into easier access to the US entertainment market, which is notoriously unreceptive to foreign films. It has been speculated that the Academy's snub had as much to do with the film's treatment of abortion as with the director's cinematographic choices (Chattaway, 2008; *NPR*, 2008a). Yet *432* was not intended to be a feminist manifesto or to start a conversation about the morality of abortion or women's rights to control their reproduction, either in a Romanian or an international context; indeed, in a Romanian context the film can best be seen as an act of representation and remembrance of everyday life during communism, presented without the ideological layers that used to accompany such representations.

That 'Remember!' was a central imperative on Cristian Mungiu's agenda seems to be confirmed by the efforts the director made to reach as many Romanian viewers as possible. In 2007 he organized a travelling cinema which took the film to the inhabitants of smaller towns where cinemas no longer exist (in 2007 there was a total of 35 cinemas in Romania, a country of 22 million people). For Mungiu, as we will discuss later, this act of memory, reflected in the aesthetics of the film and its uncomfortable topic, is an act predicated on an honest and unflinching look at the most repressed realities of private life under communism.² Furthermore, this has implications for how the film would be received internationally, as *432* is far removed from the 'Ostalgic' German films of the early 2000s,³ and from the more ambivalent account of Romanian

life under communism that informs Cătălin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006).

The historical background of the film is the aftermath of Decree 770, passed by Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1966, which made abortion a crime punishable by imprisonment. Women could only have an abortion if they were over 45, if they already had five children, or if their life was in danger because of the pregnancy. No religious or moral reasons motivated the law. Communist governments in general had liberal abortion legislation. The Soviet Union, which set the pace for policies around the communist bloc, legalized abortion in 1920, made it illegal in 1936, and reversed those restrictions in 1955, but Romania was an exception to this trend (see David, 1992; Kligman, 1998). Ceaușescu considered a high birth rate hugely important for the economic and political success of the country – his motives were politics and production, not an increased sense of religious morality or social ethics. The ban was the centrepiece of a set of aggressive pro-natalist measures which aimed to double Romania's population by the year 2000. The outlawing of abortion went in parallel with a ban on all contraceptives, and the immediate result of the two policies was an unprecedented baby boom. Schools and nurseries were built (as well as orphanages). Romania was even praised by the West for its resurgence in population. Indeed, the third World Population Conference organized by the United Nations was held in Bucharest in 1974.

Yet this demographic success story had a dark side; in the context of increasingly difficult social conditions in Romania, particularly during the 1980s, when food shortages were common and severe, abortion became the only available family planning strategy. This period is addressed in Florin Iepan's documentary film *Decreței* (*Children of the Decree*, 2005). Over 500,000 women died from botched abortions, blood poisoning or haemorrhage in the 25 years the ban was in place. Furthermore, the law resulted in long-term changes in Romanian attitudes to family planning, despite the religious views of the majority of the population. The 2005 Special Eurobarometer listed Romania and Poland as the most religious countries in Europe, yet for uneducated and poor Romanian women in rural areas abortion rates remained high (European Commission, 2005: 9–10). According to a report cited by the World Health Organization, in 2006 the abortion rate was 68 per 100 live births in Romania, and abortion was a non-issue in the Romanian political landscape (Sedgh et al., 2007).

In her landmark study *The Politics of Duplicity* (1998), Gail Kligman explores the process by which communist realities in general and Ceaușescu's reproductive policies in particular encouraged the emergence of a culture of individual and collective dissimulation. This refers to the complex patterns of strategic silence that Romanian women (and sometimes men) turned to in order to exert some measure of control over their private lives, when state intrusion continually pushed for the blurring between private and public. Yet, while creating space for resistance to state policies, the same culture of dissimulation and duplicity supported the communist regime both through the institutionalization of such practices, and through an internalization of the official narrative of reality even by those whose everyday lives contradicted that same narrative. Building on Kligman's insights, we argue that through their reactions and interactions, the main characters in *432* dramatize the various manifestations of dissimulation in communist Romania, from the search for agency via informal networks of support in Otilia's character (but also in

her request to ‘never talk about it again’) to Găbiță’s denial of reality, to support for the regime as epitomized by the several agents of power, from hotel clerks to wardens in halls of residence, to the silences between Otilia and her boyfriend about the many inequalities of their relationship, and ultimately to Mr Bebe’s ruthless manipulation of both the regime and the two women for personal gain.

At the same time, the story of the film compels Romanian audiences to revisit the individual and collective refusal to acknowledge the many contradictions within the socialist state’s public discourse and rhetoric of equality: first, the contradictions of a regime that promised Romanian women emancipation from traditional gender roles and access to the labour force, while at the same time pushing them back into their role as mothers by monopolizing all control over their reproduction;⁴ second, the denial of the ways in which private relationships were transformed by the state’s intrusive policies ‘into the bodies and lives of its citizens’ (Kligman, 1998: 6); and, last, the inequalities embedded in a supposedly classless system and their impact on women’s choices. In other words, to Romanian viewers, *432* frames the choices of the characters as limited not only by the state, but also by the cultural norms of Romanian society, many of which were still recognizable in 2007: abortion remains a commonly used family-planning strategy in Romania today, and the use of contraceptives in general is the lowest in Europe (De Irala et al., 2011). It is first and foremost these choices and contradictions that the film explores when seen in the Romanian context.

Before and after communism: *432* and aesthetic choices

Central and Eastern European filmmakers have recently started to draw upon the individual consequences of collective forms of subordination to political power, showcasing in their films the silenced individual experiences hidden behind the ideological justification of reproductive legislative policies.⁵ According to Zielinska, like the 1998 Polish film *Nothing*, or the Bulgarian film *Canary Season* (1998), directed by Evgeni Mihailov, *432* speaks

to the relationship between individual tragedies and their collective implications. The fact that both are Eastern European productions ... leads us to consider the region-specific power constellations that institute repressive ... measures into body politics that tragically subject the body’s fate to social and governmental interventions into people’s privacy. (2010: 180)

Film has a role to play in discussing and processing these tragedies in the public sphere.

The transparent style of *432* can be traced back to the director’s individual choices, as well as to larger aesthetic trends that preceded and shaped it. Mungiu’s film belongs to a new period or a new generation in Romanian cinema, often called a new wave or neo-realism, which in 2001 closed a gap in film production resulting from aesthetic, logistical and financial problems, with the film *Stuff and Dough* by director Cristi Puiu, and which emerged as a reaction to the dominant socialist realism of the pre-1989 years, when film was aesthetically subordinated to the ideology of the communist state. However, as Rodica Ieta comments, young directors paradoxically returned to realism as their

preferred vehicle in a way that rejected not only socialist realism but also their predecessors' attempts to undercut this socialist realism:

The young generation of Romanian directors resorts to realism with the same passion that their predecessors and masters (important names in Romanian cinema, such as Lucian Pintilie, Dan Pița, Mircea Veroiu, and Mircea Daneliuc) invested in undermining realism by wrapping it in layers of philosophical speculation, undertones, and encoded meaning. (Ieta, 2009: 24)

Lucian Pintilie's hyperbolic violent dark comedies (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1981; *The Oak*, 1992), with their carnivalesque, daring style, became the jumping-off point for the new filmmakers. According to Ieta, the new realism was developing very rapidly and dipping into other important moments in European cinema, like kino-eye (Dziga Vertov, 1920s), Italian neorealism (1940s), the French new wave (1950s–60s), and magic realism (Ieta, 2009: 23). This view is also held by the Romanian film critic Alex Leo Șerban, who argues that the Romanian new wave, with which Mungiu is generally identified, is reclaiming, among other trends, a neo-realism which it missed in its earlier versions, for ideological reasons:

Romanian cinema missed out on the neo-realism of the forties (which it is reclaiming only now), just as, for the same reasons, it did not manage to slip through more than a handful of titles inspired by the Nouvelle Vague (such as *100 de lei / 100 Lei*, the underappreciated film of Mircea Săucan from 1973). A certain amount of 'freedom', very relative, as one would expect, was allowed only in the case of screen adaptations; in these films directors could afford to 'cite' up-to-date cinematic formulas, within limits. (2010: 10).

The movies gathered under this (often contested) label of 'new wave' share a similar use of cinematic realism. In the process of escaping the aesthetic conventions of communist film, new wave filmmakers choose a certain minimalism that is often read, according to Șerban, as miserabilism, because the topics covered are plain, everyday life and drab tragi-comical reality. This minimalism is meant to simplify representation, to take mimesis as far as it will go in an attempt to short-circuit all other methods of representation and, in a way, reset the mind of the viewer and avoid previously used formulae. As one American cinema reviewer put it, 'The viewer is denied the luxury of distance. After a while, you feel you are living inside these movies as much as watching them' (Scott, 2008). As part of their new repertoire, filmmakers use long shots, hand-held cameras, amateur actors and fresh faces who have not been typecast. The scripts are often inspired by real events. All this leads to a veiling of the authorial hand. Consequently, a number of films look and feel like documentaries.

Thus we can say that new wave Romanian moviemakers have made the transition, in the words of Susan Hayward, from a seamless realism (that is socialist realism), 'whose ideological function is to disguise the illusion of realism', to aesthetical realism, which 'attempts to use the camera in a non-manipulative fashion, recognizing the purpose of realism in its ability to convey a reading of reality' (Hayward, 2000). This marks a break with previous filmmakers. Even those who were not proponents of socialist ideology had a message embedded in their film (often anti-communist): a political and social

commentary that was supposed to guide the viewers in their interpretation of the films. Their films (like the literature of that time) were sharing in the duplicity of the regime, asking to be read between the lines, so that an intricate system of double meanings could be understood. For example, according to Jackel, in Pintilie's film *Carnival Scenes* (1981) 'allusions to the destructive madness of power and the violence of social relationships in a country in a state of decrepitude did not escape the bureaucrats at Romania's ministry of culture' (1999: 27), who immediately censored the film.

However, Mungiu presents his film to us without the layer of dissimulation. As he said in an interview for *Cineuropa*, in 432 'everything was very flat, pictorial, onscreen' (La Porta, 2012). For example, the first scene is a lesson in reading the film, when he takes the audience back in time, to the objects and signs of the past, and teaches them a new way of interpreting film. The objects present on the table in the hall of residence, so familiar to the audience, make up a collection of representative objects from the period (as part of the documentary vein in new wave films) as well as an invitation to see them from a different perspective. Before we see any of the main characters in the film, the camera spends a long time, a long shot, on the centre of the room, the table and the window, making an inventory of the past. These objects act like a Proustian 'madeleine' – an invitation to go back to the past but following a less travelled aesthetic road.

Therefore we see Mungiu moving closer to an André Bazin-like cinematic realism, which, according to Francesco Casetti, is 'at the same time psychological, technical and aesthetic realism' (1999: 32). We also agree with Casetti that cinematic realism goes beyond the plain mirroring of reality and sits at the juncture of processes of perception, mental habits, linguistic processes and communication strategies, adding up to a complex concept and leading to an even more complex practice (1999: 42). This view of the realism effect as being created at the intersection of the film, the viewer and the cultural context (the rhetorical triangle) enables us to analyse how the interpretation of the film changes as it travels from one cultural, aesthetic and linguistic context to another.

Moreover, the new wave's effort to readjust representation was also present in documentary films such as Alexandru Solomon's *The Great Communist Robbery* (2004), which is itself a re-enactment of a communist show trial. The idea of re-enactment is symbolic to Romanian cinema post-1989: *The Re-enactment* was the title of a 1968 film by the famed director Lucian Pintilie, which led to a political reprimand and to his subsequent exile. According to Șerban, the idea and action of re-enactment is also crucial to the understanding of the aesthetic regime of Romanian film before and after 1989, and highlights, on a different level, the concept of duplicity discussed earlier:

the 'film-inside-the-film' in *Re-enactment* represents a revealed lie, a deconstructed simulacrum: not only do the people placed in front of the camera 'lose spontaneity' and produce an 'imperfect' reality, but the mere fact of pushing them to an act of manipulation, of 'doctored' reality, reveals the image's complicity with the person who records on tape. Image represents an instance of Power, and in order for this Power to be ethically correct the hand that records the real must be pure, inasmuch as possible purified of any ideology. *Re-enactment* signs the death certificate of Ideology-as-Image (hence Power). (2010: 13)

Mungiu's film is itself a re-enactment of a reality that seems to be forgotten, or at least has been marginalized. The past, in its everyday form or the more extreme repressive forms, has not been a consistent part of the discussion and reassessment of history in the Romanian public sphere. Mungiu's film can be seen as an ambitious project to rewrite history and make it visible both for those who lived through it and for those who are finding out about it now. It is an attempt to bring the past into the light and retrieve what has been repressed – an attempt that culminates in the central scene of the film, which we shall analyse later.

This view of the film as history becomes more relevant in the context of the aesthetic commonalities shared by the films of the new wave: tracking shots minimize authorial input and influence in editing and also distance the viewer from the habit of 'decoding the message' embedded by the filmmaker. The clear connection between ideology and image is broken.⁶ Moreover, the new techniques mark a renewed focus on the image and the way the image has meaning in itself (especially in the absence of an extra-diegetic soundtrack), rather than being a background for the verbal. Words can and do carry the duplicity that was mentioned earlier and discussed at length in Kligman's book (1998). Images, at this point, seem to be more transparent.

This new regime for images is also meant to stir up the audience's viewing habits. According to Russian critic Mikhail Yampolski, in his discussion of post-Soviet Russian cinema, 'the cinematic mind unconsciously recreates old myths, clichés, and stereotypes' (1994: 16), and while it does that, it cannot gain further access to the represented reality or understand new social and ethical situations. Moreover, Mungiu's film has the same quality as a number of recent European art films which, in the words of Asbjørn Grønstad, engage in 'the emotional, psychic, and ethical slicing open of the gaze of the spectator' (2012: 6). The unwatchable moments, like the central scene of Mungiu's film, where the viewer is compelled to view the image of the aborted foetus, are meant to break the illusion of the film as entertainment. As Grønstad emphasizes, 'sitting through them ... feel[s] like hard work' (2012: 23). Mungiu wants his Romanian viewers to do this hard work and to go through the process of remembering and processing the past as a condition for remaking the present.

Yet, as we shall discuss in this article, the result of the hard work depends on the context in which the film is seen, because, as Shohat and Stam argue, 'while at one level film is mimesis, representation, then it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers' (1994: 180). The film is the act of recuperating and representing a marginalized reality and returning it to its place in history. However, as utterance, the film's plot acquires different dimensions for its Eastern European and American audiences, emerging from the position of the film as utterance, while the central scene becomes unwatchable for Eastern European or US audiences for different reasons. As we shall discuss later, when marketed to the US, the film was labelled a thriller – an entertaining mystery in an exotic political context. The tension between art film and the idea of entertainment comes to the foreground here. Mungiu also points out that 'Films that are not entertainment are not popular in Romania. This is why we receive less money from the state for art-house films, and why I had to look for international funding. My film will be seen much more abroad than it will be at home. That's just how it is' (La Porta, 2012).

Women and power

One of the main sites of difference in the reception of the filmic utterance between Eastern European and American audiences focuses on the issue of women's rights and agency. Mungiu's film indirectly chronicles the multiple vectors of power intersecting women's bodies during communism. Romanian communism was grafted onto an essentially agrarian and paternalistic society. Despite its 'gender-neutral' rhetoric, the state patriarchy merely preserved traditional gender roles, moving them into a new ideological context (Miroiu, 2010: 584). As Kligman notes, women's wombs were declared party property and communist propaganda described abortion as a crime against the nation and its prospects because it threatened the future workforce, while conventional mores shunned single mothers (1998). In *432*, the oppressive patriarchal system that parallels the state oppression of the main characters is gradually revealed via the interactions of the individuals. The main figures of authority with whom Otilia and Găbiță have to negotiate their predicament are male: Adi, Otilia's boyfriend (who provides money but requires her presence as a dutiful girlfriend at a family function), and the abortionist (who provides the abortion and requires money, sex and silence). Furthermore, there is no telling if Otilia was not impregnated by the abortionist, or maybe is already pregnant, and as the film progresses we become increasingly aware that she could be in the same situation as Găbiță one day. And if so, what will be her final choice: marriage to Adi or another illegal abortion?⁷ In one of the earlier scenes in the film, Otilia reproaches Adi for not being more careful when they make love in case she gets pregnant. He dismisses the issue and argues that he will take care of it. The question resurfaces again at Adi's house, in the context of the dramatic events still unfolding, unbeknownst to him. Otilia finally explains to her boyfriend what has happened with Găbiță, and wonders what would happen to her if she were to get pregnant. Adi's immediate solution is marriage, yet Otilia's outburst, 'I'm not spending my life making you potatoes', indicates her frustration with the mandatory domesticity that circumstances force upon her generation.

One direct extension of, and follow-up to Otilia and Adi's conversation on their possible future together is the discussion at the dinner table, when Otilia is forced to listen to small talk while wondering if her friend has survived the abortion back at the hotel. Multiple film reviews and blogs in the United States interpreted the dinner scene as a moment that conveys the tension between Otilia's awareness of her friend's danger and possible death and the trifles the people at the table were talking about (see Scott, 2008). However, the centrality of the scene in the plot also dramatizes the multiple forces limiting women's choices in communist Romania. Class, gender and political ideology all intersect in the small talk that frames Otilia's silent dread about her friend's state. Adi's parents and their friends comment on the supposedly easy life that youngsters were having in the 1980s – halls of residence, free education – contrasting it with their own time. As representatives of the older generation, their statements reassert and validate the state's policies of equal access to education and work, so that an ideologically laden narrative of progress permeates the private sphere of the family and their friends celebrating over a meal. However, those who talk about the benefits of the regime are the men at the table, secure in their sphere and authority. The women are silent on the matter, or merely

swap domestic tips and recipes. Otilia does not move, looking ahead, as the unassuming product and illustration of the visible and hidden practices of late socialism.

As the dinner table conversation demonstrates, besides generational differences, class is also embedded in the very structure of the plot in ways that may escape international audiences, as well as younger contemporary Romanian ones. Găbiță and Otilia come from a small town and live in a hall of residence, which already hints at their origins and social class as inferior, despite the egalitarian rhetoric of a supposedly classless system. The friends and family of Otilia's boyfriend are doctors, part of an unofficial elite with access to benefits – safe abortions being just one of them. By contrast, we learn that Otilia's father is a blue-collar worker, and her own training in engineering implies a career in a factory, devoid of promises of a better income or privileges down the road. Conversely, as doctors, Adi's parents and their friends are at the receiving end of a complex network of bribery that can only be hinted at in the film. They nonchalantly smoke Kent cigarettes, the currency of choice on the Romanian black market, and the one brand that Otilia so desperately searches for at the beginning of the film; at the centre of the unmoving image the camera is fixed on a bottle of expensive imported brandy, a luxury unavailable to the population at large in communist Romania. Furthermore, the cacophony of reflections on the superior quality of life that the younger generation is supposedly enjoying compared to their parent's own youth (completely lost on an audience depending on limited subtitles to follow the plot) points out the distance between the realities of these Romanians and the world inhabited by Otilia and Găbiță.

On a domestic level, the film engages with the transparent, yet oppressive system that limits the choices of the two young women. Yet, as an instantiation of the deep reach of that culture of duplicity into the private lives of ordinary people, nowhere in the film do the women – young or old – acknowledge the existence of any pressures on their personal autonomy. Clearly, class can mitigate the limits that patriarchy and state oppression put on women's reproductive freedoms. Significantly enough, Adi, Otilia's boyfriend, is an only child, which is typical of many middle-class families in Romania – a sign of affluence which allowed the women either access to contraceptives or, more frequently, to safe abortions. The silence of the women is both an individual way of coping with violence and trauma and a form of collective resistance and solidarity. However, it also points to the fact that, in Kelsey Wood's words, 'any discourse of power relies on a mechanism of self-censorship' (2012: 133). What in the West would start a discussion on individual rights, freedoms and choices, in communist Romania is a matter of being (or not being) smart enough to avoid certain situations and to know how to deal with them once they arise. The whole plot has been reduced to a matter of practicality rather than values, of being expedient rather than principled. The end of the film explores the implications of that collective silence after the collapse of communism. Mungiu ends his story with a demand for silence: Otilia and Găbiță are never to talk about their ordeal again. Yet the last scene also interpellates the viewer directly, as Otilia turns her head and looks straight into the camera. With that gaze, the film becomes a negation of Otilia's demand for silence, as it invites reckoning with the trauma that millions of Romanian women lived with for 25 years and, possibly, its current cultural and social consequences.

'Contextualized interlocution': Romanian and American receptions

In spite of the direct act of breaking the fourth wall of the film and interpellating the audience, the Romanian reception of the film, as expressed in film reviews and online blogs, was mainly divided between three main interpretations. The most significant body of reviews analysed the film through the lens of its aesthetics. This group of reviewers consistently avoided touching on the historical and social implications of the story, to the point where the director himself expressed his frustration at what seemed to be a collective obliviousness to the context in which the story evolved (Șerban and Budac, 2008). A second body of reviews wrote about *432* through the lens of the international recognition it had received (Blaga, 2008; Grădinariu, 2008; Corciovescu, 2008), while a third (and significantly smaller) group of reviewers cast the story of *432* as a necessary act of memory with profound political implications in the present.

This last group included critics and reviewers across both mainstream publications and the more intellectually sophisticated Romanian periodicals. In her essay 'It's in the details' ('Detaliile fac diferența'), the film reviewer for the online publication *Liternet.ro* Christina Anghelina foregrounds the political importance of the film as an antidote to a national nostalgia for communism, because it teaches the members of her generation, who do not remember that time, 'that the solution for the problems of the present is not and can never be found in the past, but in the future' (Anghelina, 2007). The film critic for the respected daily *România Liberă*, Iulia Blaga, focuses on the present social and cultural implications of the unacknowledged trauma of the survivors of communism by arguing that *432* tackles indirectly the moral corruption that saps Romanian life even after the end of communism (Blaga, 2007). Andrei Gorzo's review in the intellectual weekly *Dilema Veche* not only captures the social implications of the film in their entirety, but also reflects on the degree to which communism perverted intimacy. 'By banning abortions and restricting access to contraceptives Ceaușescu's age deepened women's vulnerability to men's selfishness, although both the vulnerability and the selfishness have always been there' (Gorzo, 2007).

And finally, in the literary magazine *Observator Cultural*, the public intellectual Ovidiu Șimonca contextualizes *432* by integrating its plot into his conversation with a woman in her fifties who lived through the Decree and remembered similar stories. Șimonca thus construes the film as the anthropological recreation of a world and a set of social relations remembered only by survivors: 'Otilia's errands ... bring us back to our youth ... It is a world that still feels like your own, even 20 years later, but to which ... you don't want to return' (Șimonca, 2007). The most vehement review in terms of its clarity and historical framing was published – ironically – in a blog linked to *Gazeta Sporturilor* (a sports magazine with a predominantly masculine readership). Sports blogger Maria Andrieș, in a lyrical departure from her ordinary topics, describes the film as the condensation of 'fifty-some years of terrorized silence, distilled in a few faces tortured by fear', a portrayal of an age which represented 'the collective rape of millions of women. But there are no documents, statistics or files. The victims, socialized in an ancient culture of guilt, won't talk. And the culprits count on it, as they always do' (Andrieș, 2007). In other words, although a disproportionately small group, the

writers that did read the film through the lens of gender and history cut across a wide variety of publications whose readership covers a wide spectrum in terms of education, age and class.

Yet Mungiu's effort to push Romanian viewers to remember met with resistance, as the anecdotal evidence in Șerban's interview seems to indicate. The limited number of reviewers and bloggers that engaged with the traumatic legacy of Ceaușescu's Decree in their interpretation of the film – and who therefore were able to reflect on its consequences for the present – betrays a lack of willingness to engage with the past which perhaps has its roots in what some scholars have identified as a wider Romanian unease about coming to terms with communism and its legacy. Of all the countries in Eastern Europe, Romania was one of the latest to do so, and, despite notable progress, still seems reluctant to explore deeply the moral and social entanglements of its communist past (Ciobanu, 2009; Tismăneanu, 2008).

Such a lack of engagement with the past can be seen through the lens of Slavoj Žižek's explanation of the workings of ideological fantasy, an explanation that we will use here to understand both Romanian and American engagement with the film. There are three actors here: present society and individuals, the state and the Other. While present society and the state are easier to identify in each setting, the Other changes its meaning in a more drastic way according to each cultural context. In the Romanian context, the Other is the repressive and the repressed past on a collective and individual level. In the American context, the Other is not only the exotic, orientalized Romania represented in *432*, but also the history surrounding the issues of abortion and the many inequalities in American society that are dramatized in the online discussions about the film.

In *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), Žižek designates the state as the buffer zone between the competing fantasies of the Other, arguing that the existence of a corruptive Other that threatens the perfect society fulfils an ideological function by allowing us to think such a perfect society possible. Fantasy “teaches us how to desire” ... provides a “schema” according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure’ (1997: 7). Only by traversing the fantasy, Žižek contends, can we reach a ‘zero level’ where we see what our own representations of reality and our social systems were hiding from us, and what they were eliminating, in order for our construction of reality to persist. The cinematic realism of *432* and its emphasis on the transparency of realism seemed to facilitate such an invitation.

One can safely assume that a large part of the intended audience for the film in Romania is attempting to forget communism: individuals trying to forget their own corrupted intimacies, or politicians interested in keeping the past in the past so as to screen off their own participation in it. For this group, the film is a product of both history and imagination. As the fruit of historical imagination, it becomes an utterance of an Other that ‘threatens’ a particular interpretation of communist history and, consequently, of present and future history. To understand the consequences of this process we look to Aleksandr Etkind, who works extensively on memory in post-communist Russia, and who argues that ‘Two processes converge on the stage of postcatastrophic memory, the defamiliarization of the past and the return of the repressed. Excavating the past buried in the present, the scholar of a postcatastrophic culture watches

memory turning into imagination' (2009: 631–58). We concur that defamiliarization and the return of the repressed also occur in the Romanian cultural space. For example, by looking through the screen from the past to the present, Otilia opens up the door for the Freudian 'return of the repressed' which is presented to the viewer as a defamiliarized past in form and context. However, in the context of the Romanian new wave we part from Etkind, who points out that 'Uncomfortably for the historian, postcatastrophic memory often entails allegories rather than facts' (2009: 631). On the contrary, in the Romanian context, in spite of the multiple versions of history in circulation, and in spite of a lack of consensus about the past (as in the case of Russia), the move is not towards the allegorical but rather towards stark unembellished realism, probably as a reaction to excessive allegorization in the period immediately following the fall of communism.

Moreover, while Otilia, in an act of self-preservation and self-censorship, says they will never speak about the events again, in fact her gaze powerfully opens up the conversation by travelling from the present (when the film was conceived) to the past (when the film is set) and back to the present (when the film is viewed). So does the gaze of the viewer; it bounces back from the past to the present revealing the cracks in its ideological construction of the present. Again Žižek is useful in explaining this process when he writes that:

it is therefore not enough to assert, in a Foucauldian way, that power is inextricably linked to counter-power, generating it and being itself conditioned by it: in a self-reflective way, the split is always already mirrored back into the power edifice itself, splitting it from within, so that the gesture of self-censorship is consubstantial with the exercise of power. (1997: 27)

Therefore, when Otilia decides not to speak about it anymore, her statement is not locked in the past. Under the eyes of the audience, her silence becomes a filmic utterance that is 'mirrored back' into the present and its own fantasies of coherence: it becomes power.

Mungiu's cinematographic choices challenge his viewers to identify with the characters and the situation. When Otilia breaks the filmic convention that posits the viewer as an invisible voyeuristic presence, she does it as if to ask 'What would you have done?' To international viewers, the question can be framed through issues of friendship and, again, personal choice. Yet to Romanian audiences the question can also be 'What did you do?' or an imperative 'Remember!' After all, many of the adult viewers of the film either lived with the consequences of the Decree or were 'children of the Decree' themselves – either the lucky survivors, the wanted children selected from the multiple abortions that inevitably marked the lives of Romanian women in the 1970s and 1980s, or unwanted children – accidents that materialized in perhaps unwanted marriages and shared lives. Yet if, according to Stanley Cavell, film is fascinating because it enables us to see the world without ourselves because the viewer is 'mechanically absent' (1971: 24) and rendered invisible, in this shot that absence is made presence when the main character looks straight at us in the last scene of the film.

Yet Otilia's gaze was met – and decoded – by different viewers. As the film made the transition from a domestic to an international – especially American – market, the

'fantasy' to be traversed changed alongside the ideological framework of the reception of the film. The reach of the film changed too, as the impact of *432* on the American art-house cinema viewership market was bound to be limited. Nevertheless, the film became part of a larger conversation in the blogosphere than its narrow distribution may have initially suggested. Based on the reviews and commentaries about the film on American blogs and in American publications, we can distinguish roughly two categories of participants in this conversation: the art film aficionados and the passionate participants in the national debate over reproductive rights. Mungiu's film engages both groups simultaneously.

The framing of the film as a realistically told story about oppression in communist Romania urges viewers to embrace its realism as an invitation to traverse a fantasy which, in the end, had the potential to obscure the existence of America's own state fantasy. The minimalist aesthetics of the director forces viewers to fall back on their own cultural background to decode the story. Furthermore, as the background of this tale of total oppression, 'communism' stands for any totalitarian regime; yet as a clear ideological signifier, the term still maintains a powerful symbolic status as a negative pole of identification and identity-construction even in post-Cold War America. The promised clear-cut distinction between the ethical universe of the film and that of the domestic viewer proves to be hard to maintain, given the political weight of the abortion controversy still raging in the United States. In other words, ironically, although the story is framed as an exotic tale of 'total oppression' that had the potential to indirectly reassert the freedoms that the liberal capitalist state grants individuals, the director's cinematic style and the controversial nature of the topic in the US might pull the same viewers into an ethical dilemma that exposes the constructed nature of simplistic ideological distinctions between forms of state power and their authority over individual (female) bodies.

While the communist historical background of the film is never stated openly, in contrast to the German films *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) or *The Lives of Others* (2005), it represents a crucial part of the conceptual vocabulary used in understanding the predicament of the characters as early as the trailer of the film. The two-minute trailer casts it to international audiences as an action movie.⁸ The American version opens with Otilia borrowing money from Adi, then avoiding his question about what she needs it for. The caption for the scene situates the story in a specific point in time and a specific ideological background: 'Living under total oppression before the fall of communism'. Thus, from the outset, the American trailer places the story in now-extinct communist Europe. Interestingly, although not radically different in structure from the American version, the trailers for the European market never mention communism or oppression, nor do they explicitly frame the story through this lens (*AlloCiné*, 2007; *Cinemagia*, 2007; *MoviePilot*, 2007). The cuts are dynamic, using the visual vocabulary of a conventional genre: the mystery film. Scenes that are irrelevant to the storyline of the film (a knife Otilia discovers in Mr Bebe's bag, a phone ringing, Otilia hanging up a phone in a phone booth) are taken out of the chronological sequence of the film itself and stitched together to promise a suspenseful, fast-paced narrative revolving around the revelation of a secret. Yet, as both American and European audiences are quick to discover once the film begins, the secret is revealed early on, and what follows is no murder mystery. In the trailer, Mungiu's

432 metamorphoses into something it ultimately is not. This speaks not only about certain marketing strategies used to maximize profit as the films enter different markets, but also about a certain inability to translate one cultural product and mode of expression into another set of genres and expectations.

The US trailer's reference to communism and its overt connection to the film's gendered tale of oppression are at the crux of this metamorphosis. As such, they illuminate the resilience of Cold War structures of collective self-definitions in contemporary American culture. The American film's reviewers did not fail to comment on the political context of the story. David Edelstein, in his piece in *New York Magazine*, describes the plot as 'the depiction, lest anyone forget, of what happened to people, on the outside and the inside, under a repressive régime' (2008); NPR's interview with Cristian Mungiu is entitled 'Oppression and abortion in Mungiu's *4 Months*' (NPR, 2008b); James Bowman's musings in his review for the conservative online publication the *American Spectator* reflect on the difference between the characters' choice under a dictatorship and those of the American pro-choice viewers of the film:

Which of us can be sure how we might act if we were subject to the desperation created by living under a totalitarian regime? That desperation serves in the film, by motivating the abortion, to reinforce the pro-life view of the momentousness of such an act. (Bowman, 2008)

And finally, in *Time Magazine*'s top ten list of films for 2008, Richard Corliss firmly locates the film in a world ideologically defined and presented as safely removed from the experience of the American reader: 'Strap yourself in for this minimalist, splendidly acted horror film – and count your blessings that you live in a country where choosing an abortion doesn't mean losing a life' (2008).

Corliss's comment is merely the most explicit articulation of the underlying Cold War tropes that structured the American response to the film, either by associating the characters' attitudes to abortion with the atheistic ethos of communism, as in Edelstein's review, or by using the desperation of the two women's lives under totalitarianism to explain their decision, while casting the arguments of pro-choice American women today as tenuous at best, as in Bowman's piece. This triangulation between the American public, references to an ideological Other and the role of the American state is not new. In *The New American Exceptionalism*, Donald Pease explores the complex ways in which, during the Cold War, American identity became dependent upon the ideological competition between Americanism and communism (2009: 18). He writes:

While the belief in American exceptionalism derived its authority from the account of the unique place of the United States in world history that it authorized, it drew its structure out of its difference from the social imaginaries that it attributed to the Soviet Union, to Europe, and to the so-called third world. (Pease, 2009: 11)

Pease argues that the fantasy of American exceptionalism and its political efficacy resided in its ability to provide American citizens with the psycho-social structures necessary to ignore the exceptions (violations) by the state of the principles it supposedly protected (2009: 12). The threat of communism as the potential destructor of 'the

American way of life' encouraged citizens to identify with the liberal state. Pease argues that 'US citizens embraced the state's exceptions by taking up liberal anticommunism as a homogenizing political ethos', to the point where 'the energy for domestic politics was parasitizing upon the state's projection of its irreconcilable internal political conflicts onto the arena of international conflict' (2009: 27). This state fantasy, although challenged from within by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and further weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued to provide a rationale for the increasingly contested role of the American state in regulating the lives of its own citizens. Yet Pease's narrative of a state fantasy predicated on the subjective identification of the citizen with the liberal state leaves out the issue of gender. While, according to him, 'US citizens ... inhabited, participated in, and enacted the will of the National Security State at home and abroad', women's relationship to the state was (and remains) essentially different from that of men, through the power that the state can, and still does, exert over their bodies (2009: 33). Indeed, the ongoing political controversy that has been raging in the United States since *Roe v. Wade* (1973) can illuminate the limits of the ideological paradigm within which American viewers consumed *432*, by exposing the highly contested role of the American state in the private lives of its citizens.⁹ In other words, regardless of the ideological arguments behind them, reproductive legislative policies expose the gendered experience of all state power.

The American career of *432* testifies to the tension between a certain narrative of the American liberal project and the gendered experience of that project. Discussions of the film's topic, quality and chances for the Oscar often paired it with the other pregnancy film that came out the same year, *Juno*. Even before its opening in American cinemas, *432* had become simply 'the abortion movie'. Articles chronicling its victory at Cannes had already alerted American audiences to this dimension of the plot, and effectively propelled the film into the highly politicized and charged atmosphere of the American pro-life/pro-choice controversy. In Europe this was not an issue. The exception was the *Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's semi-official publication, which criticized Mungiu's film in very stern terms (*Gândul.info*, 2007: 3). By contrast, in the US, news about the film was already agitating the conservative and Christian blogosphere even before *432* was available there. After its US release, bloggers and cinema critics started pondering its significance. Paradoxically, both sides of the ideological debate surrounding abortion claimed the film as an illustration of their point. The film's narrative of violence and oppression and its representational minimalism made it flexible enough to be moulded into two different ideological arguments. For this article we researched film reviews that appeared both in mainstream American publications and in liberal and social conservative online publications and blogs in 2007 and 2008.

The prominent US evangelical publication *Christianity Today* featured a fairly balanced review by Peter Chattaway that revolved around the question of whether the film was pro-choice or pro-life, concluding that it did not argue for either side and that it merely showed 'how good people and bad are embroiled alike in this tragedy' (Rainer, 2008). Many other Christian websites and film blogs, Protestant and Catholic (*Lifesitenews.com*, *National Review*, *FilmChat*, *American Papist*, *Catholic Fire*, *Rightwing FilmGeek*), focused similarly on the choice that the main character makes and

on the director's emphasis on showing the aborted fetus. The Catholic website *Decentfilms.com* focused on the film as a story about abortion, praising the director's decision to offer an unflinching long shot of the fetus on the floor (Greydanus, 2007). One reviewer on the news site *National Right to Life* mused on the intended or unintended effect of the film:

I don't believe it is possible to come away from the film without at least considering the possibility that an abortion not only costs a helpless victim his or her life but also extracts a considerable chunk of humanity of those who take that life. (Andrusko, 2008)

Thomas Hibbs, in a review titled 'Unspeakable acts' published in *NationalReview.com* concludes that the film shows 'abortion as a capital example of human degradation' and that in choosing to do so, it 'gives a face to the voiceless victim' (2008). Overall, most of the reviewers favoured one quote from an interview with Mungiu published in *Film Criticism*, in which the director said that 'People should be aware of the consequences of their actions' (2010: 107).

On the other side of the debate, the *New York Times*'s Manohla Dargis described *432* as 'a clearly pro-choice film' in its display of the traumatic effects of removing options from the hands of women, and as 'a welcome alternative to the coy, trivializing attitude toward abortion now in vogue in American fiction films' (2008). Ann Hornaday, writing for the *Washington Post*, praised the film as an 'example of filmmaking that dares to be honest about the high stakes of women's reproductive lives' in portraying 'how disconnected abortion had become from morality under the Ceaușescu regime' (2008). *Feminists for Choice*, an American-based blog, commented on the film in 2010 in the context of American debates over reproductive rights: 'What struck me most about *4 Months*, though, was how much of Otilia and Găbiță's experience is still relevant today, in the US' (Erdreich, 2010). The film also features on legal blogs, where it is discussed in the context of post-*Roe v. Wade* America, as an illustration of the legal dimension of (and practical impossibility of maintaining) a ban on abortion, even if imposed for secular reasons. Opinions clashed when Amy Taubin and Michal Oleszczyk locked horns over the issue of abortion in *432* in letters published in *Film Comment* (Oleszczyk and Taubin, 2008: 11). There is, of course, also a smaller group of reviews, such as that by Andrew O'Hehir in *Salon*, which refused the choice angle, and tried to present the film as a thriller, a film noir with two female protagonists or an exploration of friendship under duress (2008).

Central to these American interpretations of the film's message is the idea of individual choice, which belies the importance of the political and cultural framework that dominated the discussion in the US, and which becomes particularly problematic in debates over abortion. Given the political context of the reception of the film in the United States, the reality that the film represented on the screen (and invited viewers to get immersed in) had a relevant correspondence in the present. Overwhelmingly, the cultural and political framework from which these reviews are written betrays the changes that the message of *432* underwent when transferred from the Romanian national market to the American one. Its limited reception and the prominent role it acquired in the conversations about reproductive rights in the

United States place *432* in the unusual situation of a foreign film that became part of a more general if limited discussion about a national issue, a situation even more improbable given the notorious imperviousness of the American film market to foreign productions.¹⁰

Moreover, as a film about private life under totalitarianism, *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert has compared *432* to the 2006 German Stasi drama, *The Lives of Others* (2008). Yet we argue that Mungiu's film differs from *The Lives of Others* in several ways. First, despite similar functions within their countries of origin, *432* and *The Lives of Others* as acts of collective memory, *432* and *The Lives of Others* were consumed differently on the American market: while the German film scored significantly higher at the box office, *432* received more press reviews and continues to do so. In *The Lives of Others*, the distance between American viewers and the plot is moral, temporal and spatial. The film foregrounds the repressive face of the German communist regime that intruded into people's private lives. This narrative strategy allowed for an easy decoding and easy global exoticization of the violence and oppression it showcases: the intrusiveness of the totalitarian state and its oppressive apparatus are fully visible but also fully institutionalized, and the main character is an agent of the state. *432* offers a less clear ideological boundary between viewer and story. While this is undeniably a story about life under a totalitarian regime, overt ideological references to communism and Ceaușescu are missing. The story has no visible agent of the state: the closest we come is the female officer at the hall of residence who questions Otilia about her missed doctor's appointments. Communism is not present through the usual shortcuts: references to Ceaușescu or the Securitate, the use of the appellative 'Comrade', the use of school uniforms, military parades, police interrogation or surveillance equipment. It is the total surveillance society, where everyone watches everyone else, where the mechanisms of oppression and censorship have been internalized by everyone and rule even the most banal everyday interactions, and where morality no longer exists.

Second, unlike *The Lives of Others*, which deals with a period that has undergone a fairly open process of public scrutiny and atonement, *432* tackles a period in recent Romanian history that has never been explored, and which is in the process of being forgotten.¹¹ From this point of view the film has a political stance, framed by the historical context of recent Romanian history. Mungiu declared that he wanted to tell a story for people of his generation who could remember the past and who felt a sense of solidarity with one another, and also to fight against forgetting.

Third, and relevant to the American reception of *432*, the film deals with what remains, to this day, a highly charged and highly politicized topic in the US. As such it offers American viewers not just a glimpse of violence, trauma and oppression in a far-away time and place, but it bears a direct relevance to their own society. This is true of other countries as well. For instance, since the film also received the French National Education Prize, the film was screened in French schools as an educational film about issues that French teenagers deal with, according to a 2007 report from *Le Figaro* quoted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The fantasy the American viewers are invited to traverse is their own. It has less to do with the old Cold War ideological

paradigm which opposed communism and capitalism and posited the United States as morally superior to the Soviet Union and its satellites, and more to do with debates that are today more personal for the individual lives of American citizens.

Central scene, final scene and conclusions

In what was arguably the most controversial moment of the film, Otilia has to take the aborted foetus, which is lying on a towel on the bathroom floor, and find a way to make it disappear. The camera is on the ground, on the same level as the foetus, employing an eye-level frontal shot. As viewers, we are tied to this image while we hear the conversation about practical concerns between the two friends. The moment is difficult. It is the moment when all realisms meet: there is no discourse or music in the film to explain or accompany what we see – the words are disconnected from the image, embodying the break between reality and representation, but also leaving the viewers without guidance, to create their own inner discourse about what they are seeing.

The scene dramatizes the multiple engagements with the culture of deception and dissimulation mentioned earlier. The ideological realism of communism falls apart – if it had not done so already. How can one believe anymore in the progress narrative after witnessing this scene? The viewers have to listen to a conversation that does not address what they are seeing, marking the split between sign and signifier, reality and the way in which it is represented. The foetus embodies the ultimate truth about the communist regime and also about the regime of representation.

Furthermore, it is not only communist ideology that falls apart, but the capitalist and Hollywood-like command to ENJOY! ‘Our sense of reality’, says Žižek, ‘is always sustained by a minimum of disidentification’ (1999: 267). In this scene, the audience, already primed by the perceived miserabilism, does not identify with the narrative. Yet, at the same time this is in the knowledge of what structured their reality, their past and, to a certain extent, their present. Has the film failed to show its audience what ‘true reality’ is? To a certain extent yes, especially if the viewer persists in denial, in ‘negating the negation’. However, on the level of representation this counts as a reset moment. One is unable to identify not only with the story line, but also with a way of organizing reality.

Žižek argues that after traversing the fantasy and seeing what lies at its core, most go back to ‘fully identify [them]selves with the fantasy’ (2009). In the context of the film, the characters have to duplicitously continue to live the ideological fantasy. Yet the fantasies they go back to are not interpreted in the same way on both sides of the Atlantic. This is why at the end of the film the characters reach a pact not to talk about it. This is it. There is nothing more to say. Yet when Otilia gazes at the viewer, Eastern European realities and American audiences meet in that glance, asking and being asked the Lacanian question: *che vuoi?* (‘what do you want from me?’). The subject must seek clues to its identity in its social and political life, asking the same question of others (and the big Other). While in Romania an awkward public silence continues to cover the plight of women during the years when Decree 770 was in force, in the United States the film was perceived as exotic and raw, unveiling communist reality at its very core. American viewers, after watching the scene, may return to their own reality convinced of

its superiority, whether or not this was merely the validation of an already existing pro-life or pro-choice position.

The international career of *432* and the differences in its reception illuminate the impact that national history, cultural proclivities and political framework have on the response to these films in global markets. Despite the celebrated (or feared) rise of a global imaginary shaped largely by the existence of a global entertainment market where films are freely consumed by international audiences, *432* shows that these audiences may not be watching the same film, as the stories filmmakers tell are filtered twice: first through their own cultural lens, and then through that of the destination country.

Notes

- 1 We are very grateful to Vitaly Chernetsky and Stephen Norris for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are our own.
- 2 On some of the ways in which film performs history see Rosenstone (2006).
- 3 For more on the German context, see Pinkert (2008) and Berdahl (2010). For more on nostalgia in the socialist context see Boym (2002), Berdahl (1999), Bloom (2000), Boyer (2006; 2010), Jozwiak and Mermann (2006), Kapczynski (2007), Staab (1998) and Godeanu-Kenworthy (2011).
- 4 Ceaușescu repeatedly and publicly argued that women's most important role is being a mother. In one of the best-known instances, at the 1973 Plenary Meeting of the Romanian Communist Party, he declared that a woman's highest honour is to give birth. For a survey of Romanian feminism from the nineteenth century until the end of communism, see Miroiu (2010) and Verdery (1996). *Children of the Decree* addresses Decree 770 and its effects on the lives of women and children.
- 5 See Zielinska (2010) for a comparison of Polish and Romanian cinematic responses to their respective national policies on abortion.
- 6 The same impulse to unravel the 'ideology-as-image' is at the core of *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), a film made up solely of official and unofficial archive footage of Ceaușescu in an un-narrated montage that turns reality into filmic fiction and back again by de-mythologizing the figure of the communist leader.
- 7 *432* has been extensively compared with another film about an unwanted abortion that came out the same year. *Juno* (2007), an independent film by the Canadian director Jason Reitman, was immensely popular in the US and globally at the time of its release. The feel-good comedy about a teenager who keeps her baby and puts her up for adoption won an Oscar for best original screenplay, and garnered 64 wins and 41 nominations at film festivals across the world.
- 8 A similar mismanaged genre assignment is mentioned by Rodica Ieta with regards to another movie by Mungiu, *Occident* (2002): 'Perhaps not entirely without irony, IMDB labels *Occident* as "comedy". If this is what the West sees in the three stories, then the West might as well be a *fata morgana* effect for the East and vice-versa' (2009: 24). Again the tension of interpretations between Eastern and Western Europe come to the fore.
- 9 One of the more high-profile points in the debate was the 2007 Supreme Court ruling which upheld a 2003 ban passed by Congress and signed by President Bush, which criminalized abortions in the second trimester of pregnancy, a decision framed by pro-choice activists as 'part of a larger agenda to outlaw abortion entirely' (NARAL, 2012: 1).
- 10 We are grateful to Stephen Norris for this comment.
- 11 For more on the memory of communism in Eastern Europe, see Todorova (2010).

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