



STARTING FROM FORGIVENESS – A PROSPECT OF ARCHIVING THE TROUBLED PAST

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Abstract – Taking a controversial documentary film as a case study, the article considers forgiveness as a social practice, proposing an alternative to social antagonism between victims and perpetrators. The following chain of reflections is a direct consequence of the violent reactions to a documentary that was intended to give the public access to what had been on the minds of Secret Service officers during an extremely repressive political regime in Communist Romania. The press interpreted the documentary as an attempt to “whiten” the Communist secret service police, which was detrimental to the victims. In line with new theoretical directions that raise the possibility of a peaceful configuration that serves both parties, our approach examines the wider social shifts necessary to provide trans-generational amity through reconciliation and cultural repair.

Keywords: Victimhood, Community, Kinship, Memory, Forgiveness, Cultural Repair

In the summer of 2022, a scandal was ignited by a television documentary¹ reflecting the perspective of the officers from the Romanian Secret Service Agency during the Communist Regime (in popular terms, the *Securitate*). The documentary was broadcast on national TV in June and uploaded onto the official Romanian Public Television Youtube channel the same day, gaining around ninety thousand views. Only 18 days later, a string of detractions was launched, following a polemical journalistic report published by a private media company called G4Media. The report generated a chain reaction across online and offline media outlets, as well as amongst social media users.

G4Media, an independent online publication founded in 2018, had gradually been gaining visibility for its alarming reports on corruption in the Romanian political and administrative system. Four days prior to the broadcasting of the TV documentary, G4Media had published a disturbing report warning that new legislation regarding the Romanian Secret Service Agency was meant to increase the power and impunity of this institution beyond even what it held during the Communist Regime². G4Media's subsequent article published in reaction to the TV documentary suggested that the Public Television had fabricated the documentary as a reaction to G4Media's investigation into the Secret Service police law proposal and that it was meant to "whiten the image of the former secret service police officers"³ whose interests were supported by the new proposed law.

Soon after this scandal burst, following multiple debates it became clear that it was impossible to create a 48-minute documentary film in three days: the interval between the publication of the G4media investigation and the broadcasting of the journalistic piece. Nevertheless, the editorial team that incited these rumors remained fierce in their accusations and pushed them further, insisting on the ill-intentions of the TV journalists. These moves attracted supporters all over the media; people were easily convinced that there must be a connection between the TV journalists and the Secret Service Police⁴, especially because the Public Television has always been run by political appointees closely related to whoever is in power⁵. Regardless of these allegations, what interests us in this study is the nature of the conflict that was so easily induced between two main groups that were almost instantly formed: the supporters of the TV documentary and its filmmakers versus those attacking the public TV team and supporting the independent media's attempt to unravel the so-called "whitening" of the Communist secret service police.

We are first going to examine a few general trends that transcend this particular incident: 1. The way mass media and social media shape our community by antagonizing opinion groups in the name of truth; 2. The characteristics of this disputed truth in the light of recent efforts to differently historicize the past, based on what is convenient or inconvenient at different times. Our examination will further prompt us to consider issues regarding transgenerational guilt and trauma, which

have the power to either shatter or strengthen a community, as well as the relationships that connect individuals based on how we archive the past and transfer it to future generations.

The following chain of reflections is a direct consequence of the violent reactions to a documentary that was intended to give the public access to what had been on the minds of Secret Service officers during an extremely repressive political regime. This was a documentary that I worked on personally, as a filmmaker, with the deep conviction that it would usefully offer missing testimonials from a history that is often too preoccupied with the victims to thoroughly analyse the complexity of evil political ramifications that nurtured the worst, sometimes inhuman features in human beings.

The Possibility of Hostility

The documentary was called *Women in Securitate. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The idea came to me after I found out, to my surprise, that women officers also worked in this institution – something completely unknown even to historians of this widely feared political entity during the Communist Regime⁶. I had previously made two other documentaries focused on male officers, describing their duties and daily activities and the way they viewed the regime⁷. This third documentary was intended to append the female perspective, a move that was interpreted as a means to induce compassion among viewers and empathy towards “the enemy”⁸. The interviewees agreed to talk under the condition of anonymity. Only their voices were recorded, because they did not know us well enough to be sure that we would keep our word and blur their faces. Most of the visuals in the film consisted of archival footage from the Regime that illustrated in a cinematographic, discursive manner the oral storylines presented by the women. The effort to illustrate these women’s life stories with archival material was perceived as a service to portray them more empathically and consequently deliver their stories in a credible way.

The inquiry into the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the scandal, as well as the social context at large, are pivotal to our analysis since the scandal conjured up a myriad of related factors. The stakes of the heated online debates were high due to longstanding hatred towards

the *Securitate* officers for their past activities and also for the privileges that their category of state workers enjoyed even after the fall of the Regime. These privileges were mostly financial, including “undeserved huge pensions” – a widespread topic on the mass media agenda in recent years⁹. This long-induced hostility towards the *Securitate* was thus a catalyst for the campaign driven by G4Media, which strategically emphasized the evil of the Secret Service in their headlines. Interestingly, most online readers were instantly convinced by such slanderous headlines without reading further. Many independent commentators jumping into the debate condemned the documentary while admitting that they had not even seen it, despite its free availability on YouTube. Significantly, one month after the documentary was uploaded, just prior to the eruption of the scandal, it had gained 92.000 views as well as multiple comments condemning the officers’ defensive expositions. Two weeks into the scandal, the video had only gained one thousand more views but had attracted a plethora of tirades blaming the Public Television team, either for a putative lack of responsibility and respect for the victims of the Regime, or for complicity with the officers¹⁰.

It is worth examining this switch in people’s attitudes generated by the mass media’s accusations and how much public adherence to this conspiratorial perspective had been garnered. Even the positions adopted by other journalists and media commentators seemed to be influenced by the initial suspicion that the documentary was a political command. In a further attempt to startle state officials, G4Media conducted a lobby campaign trying to influence the National Council of the Audiovisual to penalize the Public Television. The topic attracted a high level of media attention in favour of the publication.

Our particular documentary stood out as controversial because it did not reiterate the customary format that usually highlights the horrors of the Communist Regime through the testimony of its victims. Nor did it point towards the perpetrators as faceless, indecipherable absolute enemies. As the press and others who followed their lead claimed that the documentary should have depicted the *Securitate* in a negative manner, as a malefic organism, they were consciously ignoring the fact that the storylines created by the interlocutors did not support such a view. Given a presumption of innocence (those interviewed had never been prosecuted or proved guilty), the documentary

script could not allow for a counter-discourse that would have insisted upon their culpability.

The partial canvas offered by history has always been a consequence of denying “the other” the right to speak. Reversing the spectrum of the horrors committed against the unarmed victim, what Adriana Cavarrero described as an “ontological crime”¹¹, by denying the disempowered the right to agency, signals a condemnation to an ontological annihilation. In turn, claiming responsibility for wounding the other in the name of an ideological truth constitutes an argument for a new humanism. Grounding this new humanism requires a transdisciplinary examination of practical matters as well as a thorough theoretical reflection regarding the political *regime of representation*.

The impact of the scandal and the power of mass media to shape opinions are not so much the central topics of this paper as is the possibility of a community. I had been reflecting on this issue at the intersection of media and cultural studies and examining it from several points of view. But it wasn’t until this scandal arose that the idea of forgiving the perpetrators came to me. In the context, it suddenly made sense, and I started documenting the topic. A deeply relevant theme widely examined by academia is the culture of victimization. Portraying an *absolute other* as a vilified offender, placed in opposition to the general morals and beliefs of a community, has long been a cultural practice. Our modern societies have more recently developed technologies of truth that have the potential to induce enmity based on a new value: the defence of any victim, regardless of the consequences.

The various faces of the historical “other” require an in-depth examination. The idea of “otherness” is formed through a dynamic and continuous process of creating ingroups and outgroups, generating stereotypical identities that separate “us” from “others” and “who we are” from “who we are not”. Social cohesion is built through shared group identity. As N. O’Leary remarks, “A particularly important way that this feeling of social cohesion and identity is provided is by the mass media framing and portrayal of deviant and idealized identities – put simply the feeling of <<them>> and <<us>>”¹².

The concept of the “imagined community” was proposed and developed by Benedict Anderson in 1983 in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*¹³. Based on ideologized

social constructions that divide people into good and bad (i.e., victims and criminals), mass media follow in the footsteps of cultural institutions such as the publishing and film industries by providing simplified frames of reference that nurture an aspirational idealized idea of community, what Anderson named “an imagined community”. In her book, *A Victim Community*, O’Leary develops the topic of victimhood based on concrete examples of the construction of media events. Drawing from Anderson, O’Leary notices that the challenges of life in late modernity are “characterized for some by anxiety, fragmentation, and exclusion”¹⁴, which facilitates the urge to build imagined communities in a formulaic manner.

The simplification process of reality produces “binary oppositions, which are ultimately exclusionary in nature”¹⁵. They induce an apparent consensus, based on a very few stereotypical characteristics of the Other, just enough to reinforce “our own innocence and normality. Ultimately, the inclusive imagined community is constructed in direct opposition to those defined as <<others>> (Greer, 2007)”¹⁶. O’Leary identifies a scheme of identities that come into play when the antagonization of victim and perpetrator is being fuelled by the strategies of mass media representation. She notices how

[...] in this context, the notion of community emerges from the collective agreement of virtuous identities via the identification and labeling of the deviant identity of others. This is not a distinction made solely on the basis of victim or offender. Virtual imagined communities only develop around particular types of ideal victim¹⁷.

In O’Leary’s opinion,

It is clear that the significance of media representations for the study of crime, deviance and victimization is in part attributable to the fact that for many people what they know about these issues is derived from the plethora of mass media representations and accounts. Within academia, the media provide a rich source of data for research, whether as interpretive accounts of crimes and subsequent criminal justice proceedings or the object of academic criminological study in its own right¹⁸.

O’Leary’s view reflects a more general concern regarding the culture of victimization and its repercussions on our ideas about what a community should look like. In this context, it is worth noticing that

the victims of the Communist Regime have been highly profiled both in mass media and in the publishing industry over the past two decades. The process of selection that predominated in the recent historical accounts gave a prominent voice to the victims, to the detriment of the vilified others, the purported perpetrators. The question here is to what risk?

The overarching strategy has long been political, related to a keen insistence on criticizing a political system that Romanians needed to make sure was banished to the past. Demonizing Communism and everything that had to do with it remained on most intellectuals' agendas for almost two decades after the fall of the regime. Unmasking the horrors of the Communist Regime was the general goal of a group of productive historians, afraid of the still unstable political climate¹⁹. Portraying the *Securitate* officers as a group of state-paid torturers seemed reasonable in this context. The idea of a scale of guilt has never been on the table. The *Securitate* had to be held responsible, blamed for the atrocities and inhuman behaviour towards citizens and, not the least, exposed in time so that its tentacles – both political and financial – wouldn't extend further in the new liberated society. Unfortunately, the latter goal remained a ruse, since most big businesses after the fall of the Communist Regime, as well as much political authority, are generally considered to have remained in the hands of ex-Communist high-ranking employees and their *Securitate* officer acolytes. The price of this fierce practical campaign was a new community built on extensive practices of division, generating what O'Leary described "as condemnatory social environment"²⁰. Thus, the *Securitate* officers ended up being among the "varied categories of <<deviant others>>"²¹.

As the victim has become a central focus of discourse, the group of people joining the "team" of the victims has been continually growing, as we distance ourselves from our kinship to past societies. The fewer connections to the past and the fewer practical implications, the stronger the solidarity, generating what O'Leary called "a victim community". The stereotypical portrait of the *Securitate* officer, developed over the past three decades by way of victim testimonials appropriated and perpetuated by this joining cohort of messengers – journalists, historians – is that of extreme cruelty and lack of scruples, alongside unjust material and financial advantages.

In the case of our scandal, according to some historians, one more practical reason for this vilification campaign was to diminish the visibility of the extended network of contributors to the oppressive political system. In Mădălin Hodor and Mihai Demetriade's opinion²² – two historians exploring the *Securitate* archives – the officers became the black sheep over the years with the precise intent to conceal the full network of accomplices in the former State apparatus, such as medical and judicial staff as well as civil collaborators. Covering up this wider network of collaborators who preserved the climate of fear and the general state of societal surveillance has been a hidden agenda of the powerful for many years.

Interestingly, this perspective shifts the debate towards the interests behind the media campaign against the officers and the documentary film. Noteworthy, the three female officers that we interviewed for the film described their routine tasks in a non-threatening way, suggesting that they did not take part in any harmful activities. They insisted that in their departments nobody was harming anyone and that their daily office or field workload consisted of duties that any secret service, irrespective of the political regime, requires as a form of national protection. One officer even affirmed: "I do not know of anyone in my department to have ever even slapped someone"²³. We shall discuss later this need to justify and reject public blame without assuming any form of guilt. For now, we should examine the visceral emotions generated by these apparently exonerating statements.

There was a unanimous public view that these statements were lies, and unanimous outrage and disgust in the thread of comments on YouTube. Some commentators invoked the officers' lack of respect for the victims of the regime, others incriminated the speakers to the extent of threatening them, demanding their punishment, and ordering them to show their faces²⁴. In the midst of the scandal nurtured by the mass media, the defenders of the victims became offenders. Two of the officers – who purportedly did pursue domestically harmless activities of international espionage – and the third, who solely handled secretarial tasks, were all suddenly held guilty for not assuming the blame for the entire intelligence system. Referring to the mass media contribution to shaping this public identification with the victims of mediatized crimes, David Garland notes:

The victim is every victim, she could be you or related to you. This personalizing trope, repeated endlessly on television news and documentaries, represents the crime victim as the real life “it could-be-you” metonym for the problem of personal security. And in so doing, it shifts the debate away from the instrumental reasoning of crime control analysis towards the visceral emotions of identification and righteous indignation²⁵.

In my opinion, what pressed the public balance in favour of those journalists who condemned the documentary was this attitude that Garland described as “righteous indignation”. Not being resentful risked exclusion and implied identification, either with the perpetrator or with those ignorant of historical facts. It thus became a social imperative to defend the victim, even long after the crime had been committed. “For some, the suffering victim has become a valued commodity”²⁶, as O’Leary puts it, while the presumed public enemy is “portrayed as absolutely evil and beyond understanding”²⁷. The enemy has monstrous features, undepictable and unrepresentable. The accused should not have a voice or the freedom to express themselves, and, even more questionably, *the perpetrator should not be acknowledged*, we should not explore their individual reasons and justifications. We have no social responsibility to understand the perpetrator and its environmental context. The condemned strategies of rejection as well as the monstrous features once attached to the victim are now projected onto the perpetrator as “absolute other”. The postmodern aim of hearing alternative voices and discourses cannot apply in this case. “Expressions of challenge to anger and retribution can be seen as an extension of the arguments discussed earlier, where if you are <<for>> the victim you cannot be seen to understand or empathize with any element of the deviant other”²⁸. O’Leary considers this to be symptomatic of the late-modern world, where there is a need to become emotionally involved, displaying a demonstrative participation in order to compensate for an otherwise fragmented society. This factitious mechanism grounding an artificial sense of community and of consolidation comes with a price, affecting the very fabric of the collective.

Through the complex late-modern connectivity of the internet, these expressions of demonizing the “other” and identifying so strongly and closely with victim(s) may be seen in some ways as a broader expression

of unity with the victims themselves. These expressive and emotive responses - with opposition between idealized victim and monstrous stranger - are also part of the way in which people negotiate problems of crime, anxiety and uncertainty in the late-modern world²⁹.

Negotiating present issues differs from negotiating the past. Nevertheless, I believe that Brian Massumi's concept of a "preemptive war"³⁰ – referring to how media discourse today induces fear and anxiety, embodying the logic of pre-emption – holds in both cases. The past can be portrayed in such a manner that it brings current concerns to the fore, making history relevant in a contemporary scheme. A sense of shared hate nurtures a sense of community, and it can easily be projected onto past events. My aim is not to relativize the facts of the past but rather to underline the mechanism that sustains certain historical views in an apparent attempt to consolidate community.

This conclusion draws us deeper into the issues of collectivity and community and invites the question of how an imagined community would best satisfy a public appetite for factuality while concurring with the imperatives of one regime or another and thus encouraging a particular mode of social engagement. What makes passions run so high, fermented by a feeling of "united sorrow, loss and caring for the victims and their families"³¹ In such a problematic context, one relevant observation made by O'Leary refers to "the erosion of the distinction between private and public grief [that] addresses head-on the textual and pictorial practices that suffuse information and entertainment"³². This "vicarious grief"³³ annuls any possibility to focus on "the vilified other", almost denying the possibility of their human existence.

In the case of *Securitate*, there has long been a dearth of explanatory discourse about the diversity of their experiences, who they really were, and what determined them to choose that professional path as officers. Our documentary series, dedicated to the *Securitate*, chose to go against the flow and represent the unrepresentable in a rather experimental manner. This process revealed the huge latent potential of the "unheard", defending their right to exist, to be seen and taken into account based on their individual experiences as opposed to vilifying generalizations. The officers' frustration with this trend of victimization is key to understanding their denial of an unconditionally

evil past, as well as their refusal to play their prescribed “roles” in the process of making sense of recent history.

Significantly, the female officers felt the urge to portray at minimum their close working environment in complete opposition to the general picture depicted in media coverage and history books. They showed no interest in admitting that the *Securitate*, as an institution, did not serve people’s interests, nor did they acknowledge the multiple cases of inhuman behaviour brought to the fore by historians and researchers for three decades. There was an obvious attitude of disavowal, a refusal to acknowledge the Regime’s criminal dimension, that, as a filmmaker, I very subtly explored and depicted in our film.

Regardless of the degree of guilt shared by our female officers, the mass media’s fierce denial of the right to depict the enemy except via condemnation and blame is symptomatic of the damaged social and community fabric of our society. As O’Leary reads into Garland’s observations: “However, this new political imperative, where victims must be protected, their voices heard, their anger expressed and memories honored, also contains a large element of exploitation and sanctification of victims”³⁴.

Our social environment, supercharged with historically inherited and induced responsibilities, should be considered in its entirety when exploring relationships and kinships. As a starting point, we can appeal to Donna Haraway’s suggestion to learn how to live and die on a damaged planet³⁵. The past is loaded with shameful examples of human inhumanity that we need to learn to live with. On the other hand, we need to share our planet with our living enemies. Not only with their cultural and historical markers but with them as living beings; in such a way that no further injustice is being done and no more transgenerational hate is being passed (whether by mistake or negligence) into the future.

I would go as far as to say that our transgenerational existence together constitutes an ongoing responsibility (Haraway), influencing the interdependent organic fabric that Donna Haraway described as a “string-like”³⁶ configuration of our communities. Lyn Margulis’ idea of symbiogenesis, later discussed by Donna Haraway in relation to cultural studies³⁷, might help us metaphorically to conceive the extent to which our interdependence looms much larger than we are ready to admit. Haraway invited us to reflect upon the possibility of imagining

the other as an earthling, an I-Other beyond human, deprived of the cultural attributes that hold us captive to a system of values nurturing antagonization and violence. In Mihai Demetriade's view – that partially defended our documentary – the *Securitate* officers fooled the TV journalists into buying their stories³⁸. Like other commentators, Demetriade completely excluded the possibility of a different approach while also ignoring the theme of the title: "A Report on the Banality of Evil". When Hannah Arendt used this expression to characterize the semi-consciousness of functionaries in complying with inhuman directives, she also touched upon an even more delicate aspect that few were ready to admit: that there were Jewish people who took part in the Holocaust mechanism, either out of fear or for specific benefits. Instead of understanding the big picture of such a complex phenomenon, most people accused Arendt of blaming the victims. Our use of Arendt's syntagma was a signal that the documentary was attempting to depart from the simplistic binary of us and them, good and evil, while still acknowledging the depravity of the political regime.

The Regime of Representation and the Reconciliation Within

There is an emerging body of research addressing the idea of reconciliation between victim and perpetrator, sustained by a developing therapeutic praxis for managing intergroup conflict. Nurit Shnabel and Arie Nadler elaborate a model for reconciliation based on equally acknowledging the emotions of both parties³⁹. They address the risk of nurturing the conflictual state under a permanent threat:

[...] Being a victim is associated with a threat to one's status and power, whereas being a perpetrator threatens one's image as moral and socially acceptable. To counter these threats, victims must restore their sense of power, whereas perpetrators must restore their public moral image. A social exchange interaction in which these threats are removed should enhance the parties' willingness to reconcile⁴⁰.

Restoring the perpetrator's "public moral image" requires a thorough reformation of one's frame of mind. This paradigmatic shift might necessitate an even more complex reconfiguration, not only of individual views

but also of social practices at large. Along with reforming the practices of archiving and historicization, a conversion of the regime of representation – a rather dystopian reality – is required. This rearrangement entails new strategies for archiving and representing the past that renounce the old practices and turn toward a new model.

In *Apology and Its Acceptance: Perceived Reconciliatory Attitudes Reduce Outgroup Dehumanization*⁴¹, the authors examine the danger of dehumanization within intergroup animosities originating from a historical conflict⁴². One example brought to light is the harshness of behaviour towards war prisoners based on previously promoted dehumanizing images of the other. Similarly, the image of a perpetrator is subject to widespread generalizations. The potential restoration of the perpetrator's public moral image suggested by Shnabel and Arie Nadler does not require the denial of the factual reality of the vilified other but rather a rearrangement of the features of the "absolute other as perpetrator" that we've been trained to project whenever such antagonized kin are being offered for public evaluation.

Mass media representations and theatricalization have long played a key role in enforcing a certain reading of events, to the point that an expected attitude is often internalized by the wider society and acted upon by social media. "A Report on the Banality of Evil", the subtitle of our documentary, was a syntagma that revealed the possibility of a different paradigm with regard to the most atrociously dehumanizing phenomenon: the Holocaust. Arendt's phrase has previously been associated with another cinematic production that represented the Holocaust through the eyes of "the other" – *The Specialist*, a controversial documentary from 1998. The director, Eyal Sivan, and his scriptwriter, human rights activist Rony Brauman, reassemble the footage from Adolf Eichmann's trial so that it ends up not depicting Eichmann's abominable persona but serving rather as a critique of the system of representation and punishment that judged Eichmann.

[...] *The Specialist* does not reiterate the well-rehearsed flaws of the trial. Rather, through a number of self-conscious strategies, the film becomes an analytical reflection on why this trial is relevant to our continued memory of the Holocaust and how it is represented. *The Specialist* clearly announces itself as an aesthetic articulation of the Holocaust, an aesthetic articulation of the legal proceedings which, in turn, are

shown as a performance. Of course, Sivan is not the first to announce the legal process in general, or the Eichmann trial in particular, as closer to a theatrical performance than a legal trial. However, *The Specialist* is radical for its challenge to the court room's aestheticization of evidence via exposure of its own cinematic manipulations⁴³.

The Specialist was criticized for inducing in the audience the uncanny feeling of empathizing with the perpetrator, even feeling like a part of the perpetrator's staff. I argue that this cinematic strategy should be considered the first, experimental stage in the process of shifting the paradigm of representation. The shock value of such a viewing position is an early part of the effort to denounce the ongoing political regime of representation that encourages a culture of victimization: a culture detrimental both to a thorough process of historicization and to the attempt to build a strong, inclusive community.

The Possibility of Forgiveness

To many, Eva Kor's declaration that she decided to forgive her perpetrators came as a shock. She was a Holocaust survivor who lived through the medical experiments conducted in the laboratory of Josef Mengele at Auschwitz. At the age of ten, Eva and her twin sister were grabbed from their mother - whom they never saw afterwards - and became guinea pigs, as she refers to it, in a laboratory of death. In the opening of the "Biomedical Sciences and Human Experimentation at Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes — The Auschwitz Connection" symposium, organized in Berlin in 2001, Eva Kor delivered a speech where she recalls being asked by a close friend:

"Would you be willing to forgive Dr. Mengele?" It was an interesting question, and I thought about it and decided that I could. Well, if I forgave Mengele, I might as well forgive everybody. I had no idea what I was doing. I only knew that it made me feel good inside that I had that power⁴⁴.

Kor describes how she entered a process of healing through the possibility of forgiveness. She went on, saying:

My latest thoughts on how to heal the pains of the past are different than most victims. As I understand it, most governments and world leaders bear a heavy burden in trying to keep the world at peace. In

my opinion, they have failed miserably by not advocating, encouraging and facilitating survivors of tragedies such as the Holocaust to forgive their enemies, which is an act of self-healing. Most governments and world leaders advocate and support one thing only—justice. Justice does not exist, and by demanding justice they condemn the victims to life long suffering⁴⁵.

To most, Kor's act did not only seem extreme and revolting, but also confusing. But the moral and psychological logic behind her act of forgiveness is anything but irresponsible. First, according to her testimonials, it helps her deal with her past. According to Kor, forgiving places you above the perpetrator, it empowers you, which is different from the common understanding of justice as achieved through vengeful punishment.

Kor's approach also undermines the logic of victimization, of the "solidarity of sorrow" that O'Leary was describing in her book. The victims' needs regarding their own traumatic past differ from the imagined community's logic of solidarity. The solidary citizen does not mourn or heal but assumes a defensive position in the name of an often-simplistic media representation meant to reinforce a certain common belief. The "collective public shows of grief"⁴⁶ often follow a different logic than true solidarity with the victim. We can go as far as to say that forgiveness is a unique privilege of the victim. No supporter of the victim has the power or right to forgive. Nevertheless, the community that insists on punishment – according to its own judicial and social system - and that denies the right to acknowledge the vilified one, to "understand and empathize with any element of the deviant other"⁴⁷ might negatively condition the victim's own manner of dealing with their past. Threats of violence and death to the offenders and the "calls for excessive punitive justice"⁴⁸ serve a purpose antithetical to the spirit of a working community.

One prevailing paradigm shift is currently being promoted by abolitionist feminists who seek non-exclusionary forms of social practice, including the reintegration of former female prisoners into the fabric of society in a manner that provides collective and restorative social space. Central is the notion and praxis of repair, in order to establish and develop stronger communities. Such a contemporary view encourages an approach to criminality from a social justice rather than criminal justice perspective.

Following their lead, when tackling the issue of forgiveness, we need to employ theories that provide insightful perspectives into the intricacies of the ongoing disciplinary regime. This study is concerned with both the possibilities and the difficulties of trying to reform a system that tends to preserve a harmful mechanism of binary oppositions, thus endlessly producing silenced and marginalized individuals at the periphery of what becomes ideologically central. Forgiveness is a notion that can be employed in a transhistorical manner, as its possibility has never been taken into account in most institutional traditions. But recently, particular attention has been paid to the decolonial and abolitionist feminist practices to issues that require our empathy and understanding.

Our aim here is not a total reformation of the justice system based upon the principle of forgiveness, but simply to examine the limits of the present system of punishment and the limitations imposed on the mere possibility of forgiveness. What Michel Foucault described in terms of a hierarchy that divides the state institutions from their outcasts adopts a reverse order in this new scheme, where the state prosecutors (*Securitate*) become the subject of a different type of prosecution. However, the system of punishment still maintains a binary order of power, adding the late modern transhumanistic institutions such as new media and social media: the victims' supporters become the prosecutors.

In this new scheme, forgiveness seems impossible. As we shall discuss further, forgiveness is only possible when guilt is acknowledged by both parties. When the scales are tipped in favour of the victim, the guilty other is pushed towards extreme disavowal. In our case study, the officers had very little willingness to concede the fact that the institution they were working for was committing crimes against humanity. This gives perspective on the equation of forgiveness, for such a practice is made possible only in a climate of mutual understanding between the two parties. The equation must include the granting of self-expression to both. The way that new media and social media have been configured, the one assumed to be guilty has limited access to speech acts – which constitute the ineluctable condition for avowal and repentance inasmuch as repentance requires the possibility of forgiveness – and therefore is denied a social environment where admitting

guilt might offer the possibility of being heard, understood, and forgiven. A speech act offers the circumstances for bringing to language an experience. A muted experience – regardless of its absolute or circumstantial moral value – preserves the unjust society and perpetrates a broken community.

Insisting on the preservation of the past through a simplistic canonical configuration of the historical facts might further block the possibility of forgiving. In a chapter from his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*⁴⁹, titled *Difficult Forgiveness*⁵⁰, Paul Ricoeur undertakes an exploration of the possibility of forgiveness in relation to the conditions of historicization, raising “the question of the representation of the past on the plane of memory and of history at risk of forgetting”⁵¹. In his view,

Forgiveness – if it has a sense, and if it exists – constitutes the horizon common to memory, history, and forgetting. Always in retreat, this horizon slips away from any grasp. It makes forgiving difficult: not easy but not impossible. It places a seal of incompleteness on the entire enterprise. If forgiveness is difficult to give and receive, it is just as difficult to conceive of. The trajectory of forgiveness has its origin in the disproportion that exists between the poles of fault and forgiveness⁵².

Ricoeur identifies a difference in height, of a vertical disparity, “between the depth of fault and the height of forgiveness [...] below, the avowal of fault; above, the hymn to forgiveness”⁵³. Ricoeur reads this situation as one of the many paradoxes of forgiveness. In his opinion, this disparity, in order to be corrected, should be “pushed to the limit, to the point where even the love of one’s enemies can appear as a mode of reestablishing the exchange on a nonmarket level”⁵⁴. In his view, forgiveness should be placed in a “horizontal relation”, where each of the two terms of the equation, the victim, and the perpetrator, can act to restore the peaceful situation.

Paul Ricoeur identifies a pair in forgiveness and promise, saying that “In order to be bound by a promise, the subject of an action must also be able to be released from it through forgiveness”⁵⁵. The guilty party must experience agential potential in the face of the irreversibility of their past actions. The deprivation of agentiality is thus a key flaw in our system of punishment. Ricoeur is explicitly skeptical of the series of “institutions established for the purpose of public accusation”⁵⁶,

which he considers to be “removed from selfhood (the judicial, the political, social morality)”⁵⁷.

These institutions themselves appear to exist in several layers depending on the degree of internalization of guilt indicated by the social rule: it is on the judicial level that the formidable question of the imprescriptibility of crimes is raised, which can be considered to be the first major test of the practical problem of forgiveness⁵⁸.

Ricoeur goes on to discuss “the moral guilt inherent in the status of shared citizenship”⁵⁹ that resonates with what O’Leary entitled the “collective public shows of grief”⁶⁰ so unprecedentedly widespread in our late modern world of technology. Both thinkers are concerned with the restrictions imposed by the ongoing social mechanism of punishment and the possibility of conceiving of an alternative *modus operandi*. Ricoeur depicts forgiveness as an outcast of society, an exception not worth integrating into a system obsessed with the punitive:

The question then raised concerns the place of forgiveness at the margins of the institutions responsible for punishment. If it is true that justice must be done, under the threat of sanctioning the impunity of the guilty, forgiveness can find refuge only in gestures incapable of being transformed into institutions⁶¹.

For Ricoeur, the issue of forgiveness is closely related to that of culpability. Following Jean Nabert, he situates culpability together with death, suffering, and struggle as “boundary situations” (limits of existence defined by Karl Jaspers) that describe what Ricoeur characterizes as “historical conditions” on an ontological level⁶². “The experience of fault offers itself as a given to reflection”⁶³. Returning to our initial case study, it could be said that the practices of dialogue and interview are spaces of self-reflection. Nonfictional film, as a genre, is also a space of reflection. Being approached by a journalist who may hold you guilty and yet treat you as a decent human being, with a right to express yourself as you wish, may be perceived as an act of forgiveness. It is not an act of forgiving in itself (no one can forgive except the victim), but the invitation to “speak” is felt as a space of acceptance. Acceptance, in turn, invites repentance. This attitude may offend the ones unready to forgive, but it may reduce the gap between the “us” and the “them” and so make a peaceful present and future possible. It offers the opportunity for change

more than the old antagonizing equation, where punishment becomes the singular option.

The three female officers that we interviewed were never officially accused of any crime, nor were they suspected of having acted immorally in the course of their professional activity, which spanned not more than a few years⁶⁴. Any guilt that we may ascribe to them would be due to being part of an oppressive system. Complex as it is, their situation reveals a particular state of guilt, one shared by a community of people, despite wide variance in each person's individual level of implication. I read the officers' need to defend themselves in part as an attempt to fight back against the general condemnations that have placed pressure on them and their families over recent decades. The paradox of forgiveness here is reflected in the feeling of injustice that blocks its emergence. In order to be forgiven, one must admit one's guilt. Yet this step has been made almost impossible by our dual systems of punishment and public denouncement. This is not to say that those who committed crimes or were part of an oppressive system should not be held accountable for their acts. Nevertheless, as Ricoeur observes, our sole obsession over punishment might annul the possibility of a different kind of closure, perhaps more useful to a society where victims and perpetrators, and also both of their descendents, need to share the social space and build a present and future community. This calculation ought to determine the way we formulate the forgiveness equation, taking it back from "the margins of the institutions"⁶⁵.

In the *Epilogue*, Ricoeur resumes his theoretical explorations from *Memory, History, Forgetting* in the light of forgiveness, considering that an operative way of putting the three concepts to work would be "structured starting from and building on the wish for a happy and peaceful memory, something of which would be communicated in the practice of history and even in the heart of the insurmountable uncertainties that preside over our relations to forgetting"⁶⁶. Forgetting does not mean removing the memory of past events, but rather reconsidering them to the ideal point of forgetting the hatred and anything that nurtures it.

Conclusion

I introduced the hypothesis that a different regime of representation might be useful in preparing the community for a better future

together. In doing so, we should employ a method that takes into account artistic, creative, and theoretical attempts to overcome this aporetic state of uncertainty by offering scenarios that tackle the binary antagonization pairing victim and perpetrator as “us” and “them”. One more significant aspect that we haven’t yet touched upon pertains to the area of the affective legacy transmitted transgenerationally across the assumed perpetrator’s lineage. The post-memorial affect should be considered an important historical resource at the level of a social inheritance. Donna Haraway’s concern with “leaving and dying together on a damaged earth” appends a compelling responsibility concerning the function of post-memory and transgenerational liability. Responsibility, as in “to be able to respond”⁶⁷ requires a social and representational regime that grants the constitution of alternative kinships and relationscapes. Agentiality, beyond hostility, demands the conditions of a culture of repair. The right to a speech act, to visibility within discursive and inclusive practices of representation may confer the foundation. It denominates not only the access to utterance, but also to history and memory as a common good, what Frances Guerin called “memory through the perpetrator’s lens”⁶⁸ as an expansion towards a complete historical span.

Restoring the perpetrator’s public moral image, the goal that Shnaabel and Nadler were advocating for, might not only serve the necessity of living together but also of leaving behind a healthy community. The grievance inscribed in the mechanisms of punishment and defamation stays at the core of the unremitting problem of transgenerational trauma and violence. I consider this excursion only to be a prolegomena to contingent issues surrounding the process of preserving a turbulent past. My thesis is that the troubled past, instead of being viewed as a source of shame to be buried or condemned, can serve as a resource for depicting the complexity of kinship and its relationscapes and thus for healing a wounded society.

- ¹ *Adevăruri despre trecut: Femei în securitate. Raport asupra banalității răului*, uploaded by TVR, June 7th 2022, min. 25.18, e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_kvN5B7YYo&ab_channel=TVR [July 20th 2023].
- ² S. <https://www.g4media.ro/exclusiv-g4media-publica-integral-cele-10-proiecte-de-legi-ale-securitatii-nationale-documente.html> [July 20th 2023].
- ³ Andreea Pavel, *Spălarea Securității comuniste la TVR, într-o emisiune despre "șansa femeilor" să intre în sistem după 1980/ Un fost ofițer, despre securiști: „Niște oameni absolut minunați, cu greutăți, onești”/ Se pun sub semnul întrebării mai multe fapte ale Securității* [The Communist Security cover-up on TVR, in a programme about the “chance for women” to enter the system after 1980/A former officer, about the Securitate: “Absolutely wonderful people, with difficulties, honest”/Several facts of the Securitate are questioned] in *G4Media*, e.g. <https://www.g4media.ro/video-spalarea-securitatii-comuniste-la-tvr-intr-o-emisiune-despre-sansa-femeilor-sa-intre-in-sistem-dupa-1980-un-fost-ofiter-despre-securisti-niste-oameni-absoluti-minu.html> published on July 25th 2022 [July 20th 2023].
- ⁴ S. Andreea Pora, *O mizerie! Cum a vopsit TVR oile negre securiste*, in *Revista 22*, 15th August 2022, e.g. <https://revista22.ro/opinii/andreea-pora/o-mizerie-cum-a-vopsit-tvr-oile-negre-securiste> [November 14th 2023]; Oan Stănculescu, *Securitatea, descrisă ca un ONG caritabil, într-o campanie TVR despre istoria recentă a României*, in *Press Hub*, July 29th 2022, e.g. <https://www.presshub.ro/securitatea-descrisa-ca-un-ong-caritabil-intr-o-campanie-tvr-despre-istoria-recenta-a-romaniei-230927/> [November 14th 2023].
- ⁵ One other reason for the success of the defamation campaign was the lack of reaction from the Public Television. There was no official declaration clarifying the misunderstanding and/or defending the work of its journalists.
- ⁶ Mădălin Hodor, historian and researcher at the National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives (CNSAS), has stated this in an informal conversation and also published a note on his Facebook page (in August 2022) reiterating his surprise that there were women officers in the *Securitate*.
- ⁷ *Adevăruri despre trecut: Securitatea, brațul înarmat al partidului*, s. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlpC3OEcJuI>, uploaded by TVR, December 9th 2020 [July 20th 2023]. *Adevăruri despre trecut: Martorul invizibil – Securitatea și supravegherea* [Truths about the Past: The Invisible Witness – the *Securitate* and the Surveillance] and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6uuCOqEc6k>, uploaded by TVR, May 10th 2021.
- ⁸ S. Andreea Pora, *O mizerie!...* and Andreea Pavel, *Spălarea Securității...*
- ⁹ S. Mihai Adelina, *Adevărul statistic al pensiilor speciale de la Interne, Armată și Securitate: 3% din pensionari consumă 10% din bugetul total*, in *Ziarul Financiar*, January 23rd 2011, e.g. <https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/adevarul-statistic-al-pensiilor-speciale-de-la-interne-armata-si-securitate-3-din-pensionari-consuma-10-din-bugetul-total-7913077> [November 14th 2023]; V. Burlă,

- Pensiile securistilor, aproape imposibil de micșorat*, in *România Liberă*, May 29th 2008; news piece *Pensii mai mici pentru cei care au făcut poliție politică*, in BBC Romania, August 28th 2006, e.g. https://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2006/08/printable/060828_pensii_securitate.shtml [November 10th 2023].
- ¹⁰ S. the already mentioned video: https://www.youtube.com/watchv=L_kvn5B7YYo&ab_channel=TVR.
- ¹¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: naming contemporary violence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2009.
- ¹² Nicola O'Leary, *A Victim Community: Stigma and the Media Legacy of High-Profile Crime*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2021, p. 73.
- ¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, Verso, London and New York 1991 [1983].
- ¹⁴ Nicola O'Leary, *A Victim Community...*, p. 79.
- ¹⁵ Ivi, p. 73.
- ¹⁶ Ibidem.
- ¹⁷ Ivi, p. 84.
- ¹⁸ Ivi, p. 93.
- ¹⁹ See Marius Oprea, *Moștenitorii Securității*, Humanitas, București 2004, and *Bastionul cruzimii: o istorie a Securității*, Polirom, Iași 2008; Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989*, Routledge, London 1995.
- ²⁰ Nicola O'Leary, *A Victim Community...*, p. 73.
- ²¹ Ibidem.
- ²² Mădălin Hodor and Mihai Demetriade are researchers at the National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives (CNSAS). They have discussed these aspects on their social media pages and defended the documentary film. Mihai Demetriade elaborated a seven-page text titled *Reactions, Illusions and the Mythologies of the Memorial Discourse*, explaining in detail, from an academic and historical perspective, why he partially defended the documentary. The text was only posted on social media: s. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2941179356178941&set=pcb.2941179989512211>, August 14th 2022, p. 3.
- ²³ *Adevăruri despre trecut: Femei în securitate...*, min. 25:18.
- ²⁴ See comments on the youtube TVR page, June 7th 2022, e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_kvn5B7YYo&ab_channel=TVR [July 20th 2023].
- ²⁵ David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001, p. 144.
- ²⁶ Nicola O'Leary, *A Victim Community...*, p. 76.
- ²⁷ Ibidem.
- ²⁸ Ivi, p. 80.
- ²⁹ Ivi, p. 76.

- ³⁰ For Massumi, preemption means a threat that has not even emerged, the presumption of a danger. S. Brian Massumi, *Ontopower. War, Powers, and the State of Perception*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 2015, p. 14, *passim*.
- ³¹ Nicola O’Leary, *A Victim Community...*, p. 79.
- ³² *Ibidem*.
- ³³ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham 2016.
- ³⁶ Donna Haraway, *Playing String Figures with Companion Species...* in *Staying with the trouble...*, pp. 9-29.
- ³⁷ Donna Haraway, *Symptoiesis. Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble*, third chapter of *Staying with the trouble...*
- ³⁸ Mihai Demetriade, *Reactions, Illusions and the Mythologies of the Memorial Discourse...*, p. 3.
- ³⁹ Nurit Shnabel, Arie Nadler, *A needs-based model of reconciliation: Satisfying the differential emotional needs of victim and perpetrator as a key to promoting reconciliation*, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, XCIV, 1, 2008, pp. 116-132.
- ⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 116.
- ⁴¹ Wen Jie Jin, Sang Hee Park, Joonha Park, *Apology and Its Acceptance: Perceived Reconciliatory Attitudes Reduce Outgroup Dehumanization*, in *Frontiers in Psychology*, XIII, 2022, e.g. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.809513/full> [July 20th 2023].
- ⁴² S. also Nick Haslam, *Dehumanization and the lack of social connection*, in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, XLIII, February 2022, pp. 312-316, e.g. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34517201/>. The alerts with regard to how “humanness implicates social relatedness, how social distance fosters perceptions of others as less human than the self, and how dehumanizing perceptions undermine close relationships” (p. 312).
- ⁴³ Frances Guerin, *The perpetrator in focus: Turn of the century Holocaust remembrance in The Specialist*, in *Law Text Culture*, X, 2005, p. 168. See also Id., *Memory through the Perpetrator’s Lens: Witnessing via Images Taken by Wehrmacht Soldiers and Officers on the Eastern Front in Rhetoric, Remembrance, and Visual Form: Sighting Memory*, eds. Anne Demo- Vivian Bradford, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Communication, New York 2012, pp. 163-179. Here Guerin examines the privilege given to victims and survivors’ visual testimonials in the process of memorializing and archiving World War II and the Holocaust.
- ⁴⁴ S. <https://candleholocaustmuseum.org/educational-resources/evas-2001-speech-on-healing.html> [July 30th 2023].
- ⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴⁶ Nicola O’Leary, *A Victim Community...*, p. 80.

- ⁴⁷ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁸ Ibidem.
- ⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey-David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2004.
- ⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 457- 506.
- ⁵¹ Ivi, p. 457.
- ⁵² Ibidem.
- ⁵³ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 459.
- ⁵⁵ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁶ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 458.
- ⁵⁸ Ibidem.
- ⁵⁹ Ibidem.
- ⁶⁰ Nicola O'Leary, *A Victim Community ...*, p. 80.
- ⁶¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory...*, p. 458.
- ⁶² Ivi, p. 460.
- ⁶³ Ibidem.
- ⁶⁴ Women were accepted into the Military Academy for the *Securitate* officers only beginning in 1983, and they were given light tasks such as paper work and secretaryship (information provided and confirmed by all three female officers we interviewed).
- ⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory...*, p. 458.
- ⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 459.
- ⁶⁷ See the already mentioned works of Donna Haraway and Bracha Ettinger apud Griselda Pollock, *De la ororism la compasiune: re-figurând chipul de Medusă al alterității, în dialog cu Adriana Cavarero și Bracha Ettinger*, translated by Raluca Bibiri, in *Griselda Pollock. From Feminism to the Concentrationary and Beyond*, Images, Raluca Bibiri (ed.), VII, 2017, pp. 213-257.
- ⁶⁸ Frances Guerin, *Memory through the Perpetrator's Lens...*