

Witnessing Horrorism: The Pitești Experiment

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ON WITNESSING TRAUMA

This article will explore a highly traumatic experiment that was conducted during a totalitarian regime in Romania on more than 780 students who, because of real or imaginary activities against the communist regime, were incarcerated and ‘re-educated’ in the Pitești penitentiary between 1949 and 1951.¹ This article uses trauma theory to investigate witnessing this historical event and to analyse the elements that made it unique. More specifically, the work of Dominick LaCapra, Lawrence Langer, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub on the process of witnessing and testifying,² has shown that after a horrible experience the victim’s recollection of the event can be obliterated. In particular, Caruth has emphasized that trauma is ‘the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena’. She has pointed out the paradox of traumatic experience: the ‘absolute inability to know it’.³ In the immediate aftermath of an intensely painful, traumatic experience the victim’s narration is both amnesic and ‘unspeakable’. The article looks at the ‘unspeakability’ of the Pitești experiment and analyses the different roles the writers of the books on Pitești assumed. Laub has theorized three distinct levels of witnessing: ‘the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’.⁴ The first is that of the eye-witness who often finds himself in the position of not believing what he/she faced. The second model, that of testimony, leaves an outside to which one can speak. In the third case, the narrator and the listener ‘alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience – with the sense that there is a truth’

¹ Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România, *Raport Final*, Bucharest, 2006.

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992); Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 91-92.

⁴ Dori Laub, ‘Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 61.

that they are both trying to reach, this sense serving ‘as a beacon’ they ‘both try to follow’.⁵ These models will be explored in the section referring to witnessing Pitești, which will also attempt to describe the steps taken in order to obtain the total psychological control of the victims. To this end, Judith Lewis Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* reveals that the final step in the psychological control of the victims is achieved when the victim is ‘forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments. Psychologically, this is the most destructive of all coercive techniques, for the victim who has succumbed loathes herself, an aspect that will be dealt with in all sections dealing with the accounts on Pitești.’⁶

At the same time, as the analysis of the books on the Pitești experiment will show, the Pitești experiences resulted not only in the victims’ dissociation and amnesia, but also in their unwillingness or inability to speak. The accounts of Dumitrescu, Bacu, and Goma cover all the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that Herman has described: hyperarousal (a reflection on ‘the persistent expectation of danger’), intrusion (‘the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment’) and constriction (‘the numbing response of surrender’).⁷

Many students were incarcerated in Pitești, yet many chose not to depict the acts of explicit violence that were inflicted upon them directly but to speak through the voices of others. Although the space of the article does not allow a prolonged discussion on why they chose silence to the outside world, a mention should be made of the two main reasons for such a gesture, one political and one psychological. The fear that they would be caught by the Romanian Secret Police (*Securitate*), even if they moved from communist Romania, was perhaps the most valid reason why there are so few accounts published in the immediate aftermath of the Pitești experiment. The former prisoners suffered much psychological violence and its final stage is to ban speech, as Anne-Marie Roviello has shown. She writes: ‘it is specifically prohibited to talk about this violence, recount it, or make it into an object of *interest* and thereby dissipate part of the diffuse terror it engenders’.⁸ The second reason is related to both the shame of telling stories that would seem unbelievable, and an unwillingness to relive the trauma. Writing about their experiences would have meant reliving the trauma which, in Judith Lewis Herman’s opinion, ‘carries with it the emotional intensity of the original event. The

⁵ Laub, p. 62.

⁶ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 83.

⁷ Herman, p. 35.

⁸ Anne-Marie Roviello, ‘The Hidden Violence of Totalitarianism: The Loss of the Groundwork of the World’, *Social Research* 74 (Fall 2007), 923-30 (p. 927).

survivor is continually buffeted by terror and rage’, emotions which are ‘outside the range of ordinary emotional experience’, since they ‘overwhelm the ordinary capacity to bear feelings’.⁹

FROM TERROR TO HORROR

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, terror is ‘the state of being terrified or greatly frightened; intense fear, fright, or dread’. Whereas, horror is defined as ‘a painful emotion compounded of loathing and fear; a shuddering with terror and repugnance; strong aversion mingled with dread; the feeling excited by something shocking or frightful’. Most commentaries on gothic fiction maintain writer Ann Radcliffe’s main difference between the two terms, namely that terror refers to the sublime, being related to the anticipation of something horrific, while horror is related to physical emotion and belongs to the realm of sensation, occurring as a reaction to something rather than in its anticipation.¹⁰ Thus, there is a temporal difference: terror refers to what *could* happen, while horror to what *has* just *happened*. Although aware of such definitions, I am interested in the progression from terror, to total terror and then to horror, as theorized by Hannah Arendt. In her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she distinguished between ‘terror’, which was used in order to defeat the opponents of a regime and ‘total terror’ which had a precise aim: ‘not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself’. Terror was installed by torture, the ‘essential feature of the whole totalitarian police and judiciary apparatus’. Arendt divided the aims of terror as ‘rational’ (to make criminals speak), yet limited (the criminal could refuse to speak, in which case he was killed) and ‘irrational’, ‘sadistic’ and therefore anti-utilitarian. Total terror was employed by totalitarian regimes in order to ‘liquidate all spontaneity’. This is related not only to direct, physical violence but also to the ‘indirect’ or ‘hidden violence’.¹¹ Moreover, according to Arendt, in the Nazi concentration camps and the Gestapo cellars, ‘total terror’ transformed into ‘horror’, placed ‘outside of life and death’.¹²

Using this model, I will analyse the gradation from terror to horror in the Pitești experiment. Wherein, ‘horrorism’ will be understood as a sufferance that never ends, going beyond an individual’s

⁹ Herman, p. 42.

¹⁰ See Ann Radcliffe, ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’, *The New Monthly Magazine*, 7 (1826), 145-52.

¹¹ See Arendt, p. 325.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 325, 344, and 444-58.

actual death and relating to eternal death. The term ‘horrorism’ was coined by Adriana Cavarero to better describe the regime of the extermination camps in her thought-provoking *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. For Cavarero, the shift from ‘total terror’ to ‘horror’ marks the scene of massacre. Building on Arendt’s assertion that concentration and extermination camps were ‘the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified’, Cavarero agrees that WW2 was precisely the moment when total terror, devoid of its purpose, coincided with extreme horror. Horrorism is ‘characterized by a particular form of violence that exceeds death itself’, thus is never-ending, as ‘evidenced in the infinite scene of torture, a word whose etymological root lies in the Latin verb “*torquere*” (supplying English with the verbs “to torque” and “to distort” and the nouns “torture”, “torment”, “torque”, “torch”, and “tort” but normally translated as “to twist”)’.¹³

Musing on Levi’s description of the *Muselmann* as a ‘an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen’,¹⁴ Cavarero believes that this creature could no longer be ‘exposed to offense’ since he baffled ‘the very violence of which he [was] nevertheless the product’. Levi’s ‘miserable and sordid puppet’ was exposed to ‘extreme horror’,¹⁵ a shocking experience that annihilated the difference between life and death. Reduced to ‘a bundle of reactions’ that ‘separates him as radically as mental disease from everything within him that is personality or character’, this individual is a Pavlovian dog, a ‘ghastly’ marionette with a human face over whom the system has triumphed.¹⁶ Anne-Marie Roviello associates this moment of triumph with the main objective of the totalitarian organization: ‘to pervert *human plurality* into a *mass* of fragmented individuals, to suppress the common world and substitute it with alienation from the world, from others, and from oneself’.¹⁷

METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

Precious few works on the Pitești experiment were published before the 1989 Romanian Revolution: Dumitru Bacu’s *Pitești* (1963), Grigore Dumitrescu’s *Demascarea* (1978: The Unmasking),

¹³ Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 32 and 40.

¹⁴ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 90.

¹⁵ Cavarero, p. 42.

¹⁶ Arendt, p. 455-56.

¹⁷ Roviello, p. 925.

Virgil Ierunca's *Fenomenul Pitești* (1981: The Pitești Phenomenon) and Paul Goma's *Patimile după Pitești* (1981: The Passions According to Pitești). These accounts will be the prime focus material of my research, the main goal of which is to point out the transformation of terror into horror, and to distinguish the unique features of the Pitești experiment. These accounts were acts of dissidence, as by necessity they were published in what the communist regime referred to as 'enemy countries', during a period when Romania was hiding the truth about this brutal experiment; their authors opposed totalitarianism with the risk of being captured and eliminated by *Securitate*.

Conversely, in an attempt to let the world know its tragic story, an abundant literature on the Pitești experiment appeared after 1989. In 2000, the University of Pitești, the City Hall, the 'Memoria' Cultural Foundation and the Romanian Association of the Former Political Detainees started the annual International Symposium entitled 'The Pitești Experiment – Re-education through Torture' as a gesture towards accepting responsibility for the atrocities of previous generations and ensuring a place in the collective memory for these tragic events. A detailed documentary called *Demascarea* (The Unmasking) was broadcast on Romanian national television in 2011.¹⁸ All these sources are used only for historical presentation, with the exception of Gheorghe Boldur-Lătescu's book, *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, the contradictory conclusion of which will be analysed in the last section.¹⁹

A HISTORY OF THE PITEȘTI EXPERIMENT

In the following part, I will present the history of the Pitești experiment, with the aim of giving meaning to the specific acts of violence committed in this prison.

After the coup on 23 August 1944, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) rose from a position as a minor party to assume political control, while at the same time the Soviets were infiltrating Romania's most important institutions, including the Military and Secret Police. King Michael was forced to abdicate in 1947 and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej became the president of the Popular Republic of Romania.

¹⁸ *Demascarea*, dir. by Nicolae Mărgineanu (AGER Film, 2011).

¹⁹ Gheorghe Boldur-Lătescu, *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, trans. by Daniel Teodorescu (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2004).

Stalinist Romania became engaged in a sustained effort to purge all former opponents of the Communist Party, the ‘enemies of the people’. The strongest challengers of the political regime were imprisoned at Sighet, which was close to the border with the Soviet Union.²⁰ Whereas, some former members of the Iron Guard were sent to Aiud; workers, peasants, schoolteachers and lawyers to Gherla; National Peasant Party members were incarcerated in Galați; former policemen in Făgăraș; pupils in Târgșor and students in Pitești. Some of these students were former members of the right-wing movements, including members of the Iron Guard, members of the Peasants’ Party and members of the Liberal Party. Since students were considered the hardest to convince about the values of the Communist Party, new ‘techniques of psychiatric abuse’ were to be used ‘not only to inculcate terror into opponents of the regime but also to destroy the personality of the individual’.²¹

In summer 1948, in the Suceava prison, the first method of re-education, based on Marxist-Leninist readings and discussions on the communist regime, was initiated by former legionnaire Alexandru Bogdanovici. Eugen Țurcanu, a prisoner sentenced to seven years of imprisonment did not participate in this action, finding the whole process insincere; instead, he initiated *Organizația Deținuților cu Convingeri Comuniste* (the Organization of Detainees with Communist Convictions). This organisation ended in April 1949, because the communist authorities objected to its structure.²² Țurcanu was then transferred from Suceava to Pitești in September 1949 to implement a violent re-education programme with a selected group of regime collaborators; these collaborators came to believe they ‘healed’ prisoners by removing the ‘rot’ inside them. The programme started with the tacit approval of Alexandru Nikolski (born Boris Grünberg), the chief of Romanian *Securitate*, sent directly from the Kremlin. Deletant argues:

Nikolski’s aim in applying the ‘re-education’ programme was two-fold: to destroy existing political opposition and to prevent the emergence of a future one among the post-war generation. The method of torture and brainwashing chosen had the advantage of not only permitting the arrest of other opponents of the regime still at liberty, who would be denounced under interrogation, but also making prisoners, who themselves became torturers, accomplices to the crime.²³

²⁰ Tiberiu Troncotă, *România comunistă: Propaganda și cenzură* (Bucharest: Editura Tritonic, 2006), p. 110.

²¹ Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (Armonk and New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 29.

²² *Raport Final*, p. 599.

²³ Deletant, p. 31.

Nikolski found in Țurcanu, the native savage, the most original implementer of the teachings of the Soviet pedagogue, social worker and writer Anton Semionovici Makarenko (1888-1939). The latter had established self-supporting orphanages for street children, among which the Gorky Colony and the Dzerzhinsky labour commune, where *besprizornye* (street urchins), incorrigible thieves, swindlers and delinquents were rehabilitated.

Makarenko's novel *The Pedagogical Poem* or *The Road to Life* focuses on the formation of the New Soviet Man by abdicating the child's individuality and blending him into the collective.²⁴ The child's position altered drastically from that of a simple member of the collective to an all-powerful Commander on Duty, which was for Makarenko the best method to ensure the child would be taught to both obey and command. Makarenko's system of education began to be implemented in the Soviet Union ten years after his death, and flourished in 1956 when new types of boarding schools were decreed.²⁵ The Secret Police adopted re-education in order to transform prisoners into the 'new men'.²⁶

There are several similarities between Makarenko's and Țurcanu's re-education programmes. Firstly, both conceived the New Man as nothing but a machine that responded mechanically, similar to a Pavlovian dog. Secondly, group organization was similar: Makarenko elected detachment commanders only for short periods of three or six months, after which their place was taken by another member of the unit. Țurcanu selected his group of regime collaborators, maintaining Makarenko's system of rotation that gave his assistants the opportunity to play both a leading and a subordinate role.²⁷

However, unlike Makarenko, Țurcanu conceived his re-education programme in four stages or 'unmaskings' (*demascări*), accompanied by unimaginable physical and psychological torture. In the first stage, 'external unmasking', the detainees needed to show their loyalty to the Party by revealing the different ties with the 'enemies', ties that they had hidden during enquiries of the *Securitate* before they were sentenced to jail. In the next stage, or 'internal unmasking', prisoners had to divulge the names of 'enemies' to the Party, meaning those who were less brutal to them inside the prison. The more fictitious the enemies, the greater the chance for the prisoners to move onto the next stage, entitled

²⁴ Anton Semionovici Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), pp. 26-7.

²⁵ Daniel Dorotich, "Makarenko System": Education through the Collective: For the Development of the New Soviet Man, and its Application in Soviet Education (unpublished master's thesis, McGill University, 1961), p. 84.

²⁶ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *The Devil in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2012), p. 2; *Raport Final*, p. 614; Virgil Ierunca, *Fenomenul Pitești* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), p. 11.

²⁷ Dorotich, pp. 37-8.

‘moral public unmasking’. During this third stage, victims had to deny their family or closest friends and their religious convictions. Finally, in the fourth stage, detainees were forced to re-educate their best friends, thus losing their status as victims. A failure at any later stage sent prisoners back to square one.

In Room 4 Hospital, a cell which was a former prison infirmary, Țurcanu led his group equipped with improvised weapons (clubs, boards, bats, belts hidden under the mattresses), and with sheer sadism, using the motto: ‘On them, boys!’.²⁸ His methods of re-education were: hanging weights of forty-kilos on the back of the ‘students’ for five to six hours, forcing the inmates to stare at a lit bulb, pulling out hairs with special devices, crushing fingers or toes, and Chinese water torture. Țurcanu’s assistants made the detainees fight like rams by knocking their heads together. They also forced them to eat over-salted food without water to drink or to eat extremely hot food whilst on the floor like animals, without using their hands. Prisoners were made to urinate in other detainees’ mouths and to defecate into canisters from which they were then forced to eat. Other torture methods included hanging the detainees with their heads in the lavatory, burning detainees’ soles, and forcing them to lick excrement off the sides of the toilet bowl. Țurcanu liked to practise different experiments day and night. He tested their physical endurance by forcing prisoners to stand all night facing the wall or to genuflect for hours. Between fifteen and seventeen people would stand on a victim, repeatedly knocking his head against the cemented floor. After some detainees attempted to kill themselves, all prisoners—the majority in major pain, with bleeding wounds and without the possibility to wash, which was another source of despair—had to sleep sideways with their hands on the blanket, under the careful supervision of Țurcanu’s assistants. These assistants stayed awake all night, distributed blows once bodies relaxed and made sure that there would be no more suicide attempts.

In June 1950 several re-educators were transferred to Gherla under the leadership of Alexandru Popa, Țurcanu’s second in command.²⁹ The Pitești experiment saw its end before Stalin’s death in 1952 when the *troika*—Ana Pauker, the foreign affairs minister and her main helpers, Vasile Luca and Teohari Georgescu—were purged as scapegoats, showing the West that the regime was not guilty of any crimes. Țurcanu and some of his servants were found guilty of having acted as agents of Horia Sima, the former leader of the Iron Guard in exile, and were charged with conspiracy to compromise the Communist regime and executed in 1954. Between 1956 and 1957, Alexandru

²⁸ Andreea Bianca Popescu, ‘Osândiții din “Mlaștina disperării”’, *Experimentul Pitești: Conference Proceedings: Aspecte privind represiunea în regimurile dictatoriale comuniste* (Pitești: Fundația Culturală Memoria Filiala Argeș, 2016), p. 141.

²⁹ *Raport Final*, p. 606.

Dumitrescu, the director of the prison, Tudor Sepeanu, former director of Bucharest Security division, and the military doctor, Viorel Bărbosu, were sentenced to death. With their demise, the secrets of the Pitești experiment were buried.

WITNESSING PITEȘTI

Accounts of Pitești contain the ‘unspeakable’ and are addressed in the theoretical part of this article. Bacu confesses: ‘PITEȘTI will never let itself be written. Because not EVERYTHING about Pitești belongs to the realm of the possible’.³⁰ Goma testifies to the relentless display of almost ritual violence on the mutilated and wrecked bodies of the inmates and the intense psychological torment: ‘I had heard groans before – at Codlea and some time before Bălan’s roars had eaten my liver as well. But never ever had I heard such a rage: of death’.³¹

In the light of the theories on trauma witnessing presented in the first section, I distinguish between the roles the writers of the books on Pitești assumed. From all the authors analysed here, only Dumitrescu was a former Pitești convict, thus what Laub named a ‘flesh-witness’. As the leader of the Youth Section of the Peasants’ Party from Argeș County, Dumitrescu strongly believed in the principles established by leaders Iuliu Maniu and Ion Mihalache, supporters of the Western Allies and adversaries of the Soviets. Dumitrescu’s account testifies to Țurcanu’s sadistic overpowering of weaker individuals.

The next day, in Room 4 Hospital, full of so much terror, of atrocities that led to suicide—Șerban Gheorghe slit his veins—of beatings to death, Nițu gave up the ghost here, amongst us, Țurcanu does not seem at all disturbed. How could this terrorist get to such a thorough level of dehumanization? I wonder if he is a congenital murderer or if he was, in his turn, terrorized to such an extent that he cannot be moved by suffering, by torment, by death.³²

³⁰ Dumitru Bacu, *Pitești. Centru de reeducare studențească*, (Bucharest: Atlantida, 1991), p. 20.

³¹ Paul Goma, *Patimile după Pitești*, 5th ed. (Bucharest: Amarol, 2012), p. 22.

³² Grigore Dumitrescu, *Demascarea* (Munich and Bucharest: Jon Dumitru Verlag and Mediana Edit, 1996), p. 104.

Dumitru Bacu, a student at the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, spent time in jails from Timișoara, Jilava, Gherla, Canal, Constanța, Aiud and Bucharest. His account can be framed within Laub’s second model of testimony. He was a medium for the transmission of first-hand testimonies that he narrated linearly, steeling himself against emotions. Bacu’s book starts with his transfer to Gherla, where he met a former convict from Pitești, whose words make us think of the post-traumatic symptoms of hyperarousal and intrusion described by Herman. The student was in ‘a permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment’ and relived ‘the event as though it were continually recurring in the present’.³³

Be wary of me! I am a student. And this must tell you a lot. Be wary not only of me but of all students. Especially of the ones who are your friends. They can harm you a lot especially because you cannot distinguish, under the mask each of them wears and that for some has become a new face, what abyss lies between what we were in the recent past and what we wanted to be.³⁴

Virgil Ierunca, a literary critic, publicist and Romanian poet who had been living in France since 1947, assembled and juxtaposed facts as a historian. His account is based on the recordings he and his wife, Monica Lovinescu, made of a former Pitești convict still living in Romania whose identity remained unknown; revealing his name would have cost him his life. To paraphrase Laub’s theory on witnessing, Ierunca filtered the narrator’s memories and added his own reflections: ‘to reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life’.³⁵

Paul Goma’s *Patimile după Pitești* cannot be included in Laub’s models of witnessing, since he chose to write a semi-fictional work that combined fact with fictional elements. Yet, this form of representation through literature probes the past from an unexpected vantage point. A graduate of Letters, Goma was incarcerated at Jilava and Gherla for his novels criticizing the Communist Party published abroad. After many international appeals, he had been stripped of his Romanian citizenship and exiled in Paris, wherefrom he started a new life as a political asylum seeker. Goma felt that it was his duty to write book on Pitești.

³³ Herman, pp. 35-7.

³⁴ Bacu, p. 39.

³⁵ Laub, p. 62.

I knew [...] that *the book of Pitești* had to be written – but who would do it? Surely, only someone who could have *spoken* – and would have had the right to *speak* – about *Pitești*. My role, which was minor, boiled down to not letting-go, not letting-one-forget. So annoying was it, at the end of the day, that at some point, Davidescu told me: ‘It is easy for you, it is not your memory, it is not your forgetting, yet what about me?’

He was right: why would I pry into their souls, their past and present (and future) – had they then not suffered enough, there, at Pitești? If I had not been spared by God from going there and if I had been there, wouldn’t I have behaved the same towards my memory now?³⁶

In a sense, Goma’s account is more expressive than the accounts written by what I presented in the theoretical part of this article as primary witnesses, secondary witnesses and ‘the witnesses to the process of witnessing’. This expression is possible through the protective shield of fiction, or what could be seen as the book’s big ‘fraud’. Goma endowed his narrative with a remarkable self-reflexive edge through the first-person narrator, Pop Vasile, ‘I’ as witness. Paradoxically, he adds black humour to his narrative, making fun of his position as the spectator of a play where actors shed a lot of blood, mocking Țurcanu’s Moldavian accent and the hypocrisy of his assistants.

From the very beginning, Țurcanu himself made sure that Pop Vasile, a wounded man shot in his knees, could ‘have a good, special view, as if from the upper circle of the theatre’, giving him not a bunk, but a real bed, the only one except Țurcanu’s.³⁷ Bacu, Dumitrescu and Ierunca related facts accurately, without using literary devices. As we know from them, prisoners were forced to stay on the edge of the bunk with their hands on their knees, looking ahead. They were never allowed to speak to, look at, or make gestures to the others during the day. Pop Vasile is never separated from the facial expressions of the inmates, observing their fears and attempting to bridge the distance that would render horror through loathsome, visceral descriptions of the beatings.

Țurcanu – masterly! I cannot see him, I think he is somewhere down, on the cement, defeated, covered by bodies, yet his voice... His voice came out of him more than perfect: as if, indeed, he had been knocked down by opponents, as if he had been ganged up on and overpowered, it yelled at Cori with Țurcanu’s throat.

³⁶ Goma, p. 284.

³⁷ Goma, p. 8.

Cori is good too: although a bit stiff, when he knocks on the door with both fists; instead, his eyes turned towards the interior of the room, play a truthful game of horror; the actors who interpret the janitors are also good (helped by their costumes – the uniforms); so is the one who plays the director – otherwise in the scene that follows Dumitrescu takes over the leadership.

Now the ‘gangs’ can be easily distinguished: the ones who interpret the janitors wear janitors’ uniforms and hit credibly with credible clubs; the ones who are hit moan, shout credibly enough, although, to my taste, some exaggerate, they yell stronger than the acoustics of the room can bear. Excellent these ‘noise-makers’ go on being: they imitate perfectly, not only the sonorous effects of the hits, but also the effects of the effects: the cracking of broken bones. As far as the props masters, the make-up artists are concerned, they are swept off their feet with so much work and they consume an impressive quantity of red paint and at the same time, I don’t know with what, they make bumps, more closed, more open wounds, real cracks, then broken teeth and other effects, they have work to do with I don’t know what products, I believe it is ammonia, to give the olfactory sensation of urine and probably vinegar with sugar, so that the red paint smells of blood, and then I don’t know with what they make the heavy and sharp odour of faeces.³⁸

NARRATING HORRORISM: THE UNIQUENESS OF PITEȘTI

Stating that no parallels can be drawn with the Holocaust, Arendt believed in the uniqueness of the abominable crimes committed by the Nazis due to the fact it was impossible for the survivors to understand what happened to them.³⁹ In fact, the uniqueness of the Shoah consisted also in the industrialized mass murder, using machineries and technologies of destruction that led to an unprecedented number of deaths.

Nevertheless, reading the accounts on the Pitești experiment, alongside narratives of Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel, we can see that there are several common elements in these trauma narratives that could contradict Arendt’s assertion. The life of the prisoners from Pitești can, to some extent, be

³⁸ Goma, p. 65.

³⁹ Arendt, p. 444.

regarded as commensurate with the life of the prisoners of the concentration camps, a *tormentum ad infinitum*, as Dumitrescu’s descriptions of his first and last day in Room 4 Hospital made it clear.

From all that happened yesterday, there is no doubt that the ones who planned terror did so to destroy our nerves, to exhaust our strength, to demoralize us. Room 4 Hospital is thus the purgatory in which we were sent by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

I looked merely a second, yet I thought immediately of all these tortured people—from here and from other rooms—who will continue, over an interminable night, the torment of this process of dehumanization.⁴⁰

The cover of Bacu’s *Pitești* displays in the bottom right-hand corner the grated window of a prison cell. In the background one can distinguish the barbed wire of a concentration camp and read the words: ‘At Buchenwald dying was easier’. Such a bold remark should not be read as boasting that Romanians suffered more under Stalinist rule than Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and members of the Resistance under the Nazis, but as a reference to one important difference between concentration camps and the Pitești phenomenon: at Pitești, death was forbidden.

As many Holocaust survivors confessed, the victims of the concentration camps who were initially saved from the gas chamber were in such a state that they wished to end their infernal suffering sooner. The Nazi had no wish to keep them alive if they were no longer able to work. Death was therefore, paradoxically, something victims desired. In the Holocaust six million Jewish people perished. In Pitești only twenty-one actual deaths were registered.⁴¹ Prisoners saw death as the easiest solution to escape the horror they were experiencing.

Many were the students who not only provoked the beating but desired it ardently out of desperation. It was the only possibility to give a small chance to death [...] but those who carried out the experiments knew this. So did the tormentors from the cells because many of them had wished the same when they were in the same situation. The command was categorical. Blows to the temples, directly in the heart, on the nape of the neck or any

⁴⁰ Dumitrescu, p. 63 and p. 168.

⁴¹ *Raport Final*, p. 603.

other part of the body that could lead to death were not allowed. It was not the physical death of students that was necessary. Had it been necessary, this could have been applied easily.⁴²

The vigilance of Țurcanu’s assistants increased with one prisoner’s attempt to commit suicide and one prisoner’s jumping from the stairs on the way to the bathroom.⁴³ He warned the inmates: ‘Let everybody find out: here, nobody commits suicide! Is that clear? Here, nobody takes his own life, no, no! [...] As far as the martyrs are concerned... Țurcanu roars with laughter, and immediately all the others around him laugh. Here we don’t fabricate martyrs, boys!’⁴⁴ What Țurcanu had in mind was rather ‘the death of the soul’; the soul was to be replaced ‘with conditional reflexes, the creation of new men, useful to the society in the future’.⁴⁵

Another difference between Nazi concentration camps and Pitești was that the Nazis generally made the distinction between the dominating and the dominated. There was a difference between the perpetrators who driven by their blind brutality and those who were the ‘living dead’ or ‘walking corpses’.⁴⁶ In Pitești, these boundaries were erased.

After a long day of work in Auschwitz, prisoners returned to their barracks knowing that the Nazis worked them to death, beat them with cruelty, and killed their mothers, sisters or children. Victims endured pain together, often supporting one another. Emotional resilience was vital for physical survival in a concentration camp. A good word from a kind-hearted fellow prisoner helped survivors retain their will to survive. Of course, counterexamples can be found if we explore Holocaust literature that describes the abuses of kapos, those prisoners assigned by the SS to supervise forced labour. Being recruited from violent criminal gangs with the purpose of administrating the camps with brutality, kapos generally accepted collaboration with the SS in order to receive better rations of food and other privileges. Another category occupying a position hinging between perpetrators and victims was comprised the *Sonderkommando* members, transformed by the Nazis into facilitators of mass murder. They guided new arrivals into the gas chambers, removed bodies afterwards, shaved their

⁴² Bacu, p. 78.

⁴³ Dumitrescu, p. 109.

⁴⁴ Goma, p. 75.

⁴⁵ Bacu, p. 74.

⁴⁶ Levi, p. 86; Jean Améry, *At the Minds’ Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor in Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 9; Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 106; Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 56.

hair, removed their teeth, sorted the possessions that remained in the antechambers and cremated the bodies. Sometimes they had to dispose of the bodies of their own relatives. However, the members of the *Sonderkommando*, who were generally killed after two to four months and were not voluntary collaborators, as is evidenced by their various acts of resistance.

Back to the Pitești prison, we need to emphasize that solidarity was not an option for prisoners. As Ierunca mentioned, torture was practised on a daily basis in Romanian prisons. Yet at the end of an enquiry, the detainee often returned to the other inmates who took care of his wounds. At Pitești, re-education meant ‘putting the torturer in the same cell as the tortured and not allowing a single break. Malraux said once that nobody could resist endless torture but did not know then that in Romania the secret of complete success was going to be found: it was enough that the inmates were made to torture one another’.⁴⁷

Any victim who refused to become a perpetrator or who did not beat his former friend ferociously was crushed by Țurcanu’s most brutal assistants, whom Dumitrescu called ‘degenerates’: Steiner, Gherman, Pătrășcanu, Roșca and Oprea, all ‘excelling in beating’.⁴⁸

PAVLOVIAN DOGS

Arendt considered that life before entering the gates of the concentration camp and inside it was based on the experience of horror which inexorably had the role to paralyze, to transform inmates into Pavlovian dogs, ‘superfluous’ beings, entities that lost their individuality. The methods the Nazi used were meant ‘to manipulate the human body—with its infinite possibilities of suffering—in such a way as to destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin’.⁴⁹

Likewise, Pitești prisoners were first reduced to opaque masses of flesh through torture; they were transformed into what Goma described as ‘puppets’ that were beaten, then picked up from the floor and ‘oozed out’ on their bunks after they could no longer move.⁵⁰ Bacu titled the chapter where he described the daily four-to-nine-hour beatings ‘Conditional Reflexes’. During these sessions, he could only continuously hear the yells of the victims that quickly became moans after they were gagged with a towel. Then the psychological terror started. Unmaskings put inmates ‘through a drastic regime

⁴⁷ Ierunca, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Dumitrescu, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Arendt, pp. 296 and 453.

⁵⁰ Goma, p. 80.

whose aim was the definitive collapse out of despair. Having neither the possibility to hit back nor to defend or kill themselves, they were left prey to desperation that the initiators of the unmaskings counted on took possession of their thoughts step by step. They let themselves fall prey to the ordeal, waiting for the tragedy to go on'.⁵¹

Goma related how the 'robots' explained the process of re-education to the detainees.

The process of recovery and of re-education starts very simply, through what we call the work of 'putting things straight man to man'; a detainee explains humanly as if to a colleague, to a brother, to a suffering brother, addressing a colleague, a brother in suffering: Come on, brother, what we did is not good, that it got us here; and we do it wrong if we stubbornly carry on not admitting our fault, so let us make a commitment that we will not repeat such... He explains to him what all detainees know: that the most precious thing for a man is freedom. Then he shows him the real path that leads to the real freedom – not towards any temporary freedom whatsoever. The first step: the self-critical analysis of one's past; the second: the decision to break with that shameful past, unworthy of a man; the third, the offender, once re-educated, becomes, in his turn, re-educator, he helps the others re-educate themselves.⁵²

This explanation testifies to what Roviello calls 'another perversion of totalitarian indoctrination' that 'reaches its ultimate goal when individuals submit to the obligation of describing the evil inflicted on them, and/or which they are inflicting, as a good, as the supreme good, and have to do so publicly and solemnly'. This was 'the ultimate expression of the (self-)destructive violence of the personality in totalitarian regimes', which perfectly summarizes Goma's words.⁵³

Dehumanizing inmates meant transforming them into animals that would eat off the floor. Dumitrescu testifies of this in his account:

I cannot resist the temptation not to cast my eyes towards the others, bent over the smoking canisters. I look at them with emotion! I have never seen more surprised and at the same time more indignant faces than the terrorized faces from Room 4 Hospital. And

⁵¹ Bacu, pp. 71-2.

⁵² Goma, p. 40.

⁵³ Roviello, p. 928.

Țurcanu's face bears a radiant expression of triumph for having brought man down to the level of an animal.⁵⁴

For Cavarero, the 'helpless' is exposed to horror, without carrying arms to defend himself (*'l'inermè'* means literally 'the unarmed one'). He is 'in the power of the other', occupying a position of extreme 'passivity, undergoing violence he can neither flee from nor defend against'.⁵⁵

At Pitești, we can see that even this condition representing the epitome of horrorism was challenged, because here every unarmed prisoner who passively accepted the violence inflicted upon him was also someone who was forced to use violence against others.

Witnesses presumed that Țurcanu's 'robots' had been transformed into Pavlovian dogs elsewhere, since their bodies had traces of torture, but their stories remained unknown to the newcomers in Room 4 Hospital. Dumitrescu attempted to discern signs of humanity in these creatures.

One more day passes and another night. The robots are watching us to fulfil their stint as a sentry which the more useful is for the Security, the more thankless is for themselves. It is not hard to realize that they are beings who, to a large extent, have dehumanized themselves; I am saying to a large extent, because they still have suffering imprinted on their faces. This one unveils their spiritual ordeal, their consciousness that does not give them a break.⁵⁶

Yet Dumitrescu's remarks are not confirmed by Bacu, Goma or Ierunca. For Goma, for instance, Țurcanu's assistants looked the same as the others but were completely stripped of moral values out of an instinct of self-preservation: '[t]he bullies are neither less thin nor less pale than the ones beaten, they get the same portion of food – and yet, despite this, where do they find the energy, the power, the stubbornness? From hatred? I do not know, I do not want to know',⁵⁷

The way former human beings were transformed into robots remains unexplained in all accounts. Only their complete obedience to their master is presented in all accounts.

⁵⁴ Dumitrescu, pp. 100-01.

⁵⁵ Cavarero, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Dumitrescu, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Goma, p. 85.

For instance, having lied during the internal unmasking, one of them, Mihai Șaptefrați, unmasked himself as ‘the most fascist, the most bestial, the most anti-Semite’ and proposed to start the external unmasking stage again, as he had not cleaned the ‘rot’ completely. He would use masochistic methods of self-torture, a proposal that even Țurcanu refused.⁵⁸ Șaptefrați was fiercely beaten; yet, instead of hating Țurcanu, he sang an almost religious hymn to his torturer: ‘I promise, I promise! Mihai hurried. But who promises to me that, even after I tear off this mask (and he pointed at his cheek full of blood), I do not find another mask, other masks? Since, you, Mr Țurcanu, taught us – and you taught us well – that unfathomable are the masks of God’.⁵⁹

Another assistant, Pătrășcanu, ‘one of the most ruthless bullies’, was unmasked by Țurcanu himself for having hidden that his fiancée was part of the Legionary Movement. Țurcanu then beat him until he lost consciousness. During his recovery he was forced to eat his own excrement. Dumitrescu commented: ‘The easiness with which Pătrășcanu let his mouth in his own faeces is the proof that the terror that these men were subdued to, in order to be transformed into robots, must have reached sinister proportions.’⁶⁰

In *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, Gheorghe Boldur- Lățescu, a former convict of Pitești prison asserted:

The organizers and executants of the Pitești experiment did not succeed in overcoming the resilience of the Romanian youth. With the exception of a few students who succumbed during torture, such as Niță, Vătășoiu, Gafencu, Oprișan, and others who deserve to be listed in a golden book of martyrs, there were many who made it through all the physical and psychological tortures and came out of prisons with a completely clean conscience. At the same time, the majority of those who gave in to the terrifying pressures, by joining temporarily or only formally the ranks of ‘re-educators’, had somehow managed to change themselves and return, oftentimes risking their own lives, to their healthy moral convictions. They later joined their friends into sufferance and fought openly against the communist regime.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See Goma, p. 179.

⁵⁹ Goma, p. 181.

⁶⁰ Dumitrescu, pp. 115-16.

⁶¹ Gheorghe Boldur- Lățescu, *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, trans. by Daniel Teodorescu (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2004), p. 22.

Such a claim that people were not affected seems surreal and contradicts all testimonies on Pitești that suggested repeatedly that nobody could possibly have a ‘clear consciousness’ after such a horrible experiment. All testimonies liberate a subtext of loss, an unresolved story and neither of them details how victims of Pitești coped with their lives after being released from prison. They all confessed that they carried in their consciousness irreparable damages to be transmitted to the next generations. During recent years, there has been a lot of research on the lifelong effects of trauma, but also the impacts transferred to the second and the third generations that bore deep psychological wounds left by their elders.⁶² I would place such an assertion under what Herman called ‘the practice of dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization, and sometimes outright denial’ after staying in captivity where one’s consciousness has been altered.⁶³ This assertion is also indicative for the fact that the individual remained traumatised, as Peter A. Levine suggests in his work.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have endeavoured to examine the way in which the Pitești experiment was remembered in the works of Dumitrescu, Bacu, Ierunca and Goma, taking into account the status of the witness in the view of several trauma studies scholars.

Arendt’s and Cavarero’s notions of ‘terror’ and ‘horror’, as well as Herman’s and Roviello’s works on trauma helped me give a historical account of this event and to point out that which distinguished Pitești from the Nazi camps, emphasizing the main distinctive feature of the sadistic Pitești phenomenon: erasing the essential boundary between victims and perpetrators.

The last section of the article focused on the actions and effects of Țurcanu and his team; they engineered the annihilation of man through psychological terror and reduced human beings to Pavlovian dogs; this was the indirect violence of the totalitarian regime installed in Romania after WW2, a violence that inflicted wounds impossible to heal.

⁶² Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶³ Herman, p. 87.

⁶⁴ Peter A. Levine, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in Search for the Living Past*, (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

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