

## Introduction

Some works of art have that quality of being universally understandable, you can relate to them no matter where you come from or which group you belong to. On the other hand, I feel, I cannot fully understand some just because I don't belong to a certain place or a certain time, because I never shared the same memory with the maker. So, the subject of this thesis arose from my interest in history, and in how I relate to history. More accurately it is the history of memory, the collective memory and its relation to the contemporary art. It is an attempt to relate these two fields through analyzing some characteristics of what it is called collective or social memory with the contemporary art at a certain time and in a certain space.

The term 'collective memory' originated in Maurice Halbwachs' work "The Social Frameworks of Memory" in 1925, it was as well used by Aby Warburg, in the same period, in his work "Mnemosyne". The term encompasses so many and different meanings, even by its denomination, that eludes to individual and collective features, thus it is futile to give a description of the term itself. What it is relevant though, is "the way in which people construct a sense of the past" (Confino, 1988, p.1386), enabling to position themselves in a historical and cultural structure. In many views, Norra (1992), Olick (1999), Assmann (1988), the term indicates a multitude of phenomena related to the study of social memory. Olick (1999) points out that the term has been used to refer to "aggregated individual recollections, to official commemorations, to collective representations, and to disembodied constitutive features of shared identities; it is said to be located in dreamy reminiscence, personal testimony, oral history, tradition, myth, language, art, popular culture, and the built world" (p.336). Gierstberg (2008) enforces this by stating that "our historical consciousness finds expression every day in our words and actions, and leaves its traces in every aspect of our culture". According to Nietzsche, the collective memory stems from the human need of maintaining their nature consistently through generations, idea that is further on propagated into the theoretical reflections of Assmann (1988). In his paper on "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" he reckons that cultural memory represents the answer to the problem as it "directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (p. 45). What stems from these approaches is the common view set by Halbwachs, that, individual memory is socially mediated and relates to a group as well as limited in space and time.

Through this approach I want to identify and analyze the visual language used by contemporary Romanian artists which relates to characteristics of collective memory. Their use of themes related to, or found in the cultural memory of a certain period and space, creates an alternative image of the past. This image, in turn, acts as a self-reflexive inquisitor on the dynamics of a

group. The image is not created by the usage of the same themes, but they are connected by the same common past and by the same social interactions. This pinpoints that the use of the themes, which are different from one another, is not employed only by one artist but by several individuals working in different environments. Thus, it enforces the idea of a connection to a common knowledge, through experience and reflection. Furthermore, my inquiry into the Romanian contemporary art is meant to provide an insight into the framework of recent history and its perception and assimilation. The multitude of same elements pointing towards a common and specific past, assumes a certain powerful if not a traumatic experience.

As a wide range of sociologists, anthropologists and historians reflected on the manner in which impactful events have been and are shared by groups in the form of a collective memory. Nowadays, the theories available are equally bridging and separating the meaning of this concept as this is emphasized in the literature review presented further on in the paper.

This research aims to analyze how important the role of collective memory is in the visual language employed by Romanian contemporary artists. In order to emphasize this main direction of the research I will try to answer some other questions concerning the universality or specificity of the visual language, the way it is used, its characteristics, peculiarities, etc. It will be a comparative and descriptive study for the part in which I will set a frame for the collective memory and an analytical study for the part in which I will review works of Romanian visual artists. Although it seems a separated exercise, the first part creates a base and a set of rules for the second part to function properly as a fair scrutiny into the subject. More, the second part cannot function without the framework set by the first part, and I am emphasizing this aspect in order to diminish the division between these parts of the research.

Artists to be considered for review: Mircea Cantor, Adrian Ghenie, Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor, Ciprian Muresan, Serban Savu, Ioana Nemes. This selection is based upon criteria as notoriety and age. These criteria are important as I want emphasize, first their exposure to the international art scene and second their relatively young age at the moment of the fall of communism in Romania, which implies that their art formation was not constrained by the practice of the official communist education. That doesn't mean, nonetheless, that their work is not biased by the existence of such a political system, on the contrary their works often criticize or expose anomalies still to be found in the Romanian collective imaginary. Not all are working with subjects related to Romania's communist past, though all work, as I will try to prove, with themes related to collective memory.

Their approach towards this subject varies greatly from one to another. Some of the artists above have a direct interaction with the collective memory of the recent past, others employ it as an under-layer of their work, and others just hint at it. It is central to the research that all these different stands are taken under scrutiny as they all hail from the same generation.