

Title: "Was it, or was it not?" Memory and (tragic) comedy in the Romanian transition
Oana Popescu-Sandu, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

The film "Was it, or was it not?" [A fost sau n-a fost?] (2006) by the young Romanian director Corneliu Porumboiu goes beyond its first query "Was it or was it not Revolution in our city?" in 1989 to, in the words of famed director Lucian Pintilie, the purer question "Was it, or was it not?" in order to reach "a moment of void, panic and sadness." My paper will analyze this passage from a question of fact to a question that probes the very existence of the subject, of memory and the validity of memory constructions. Moreover, the film highlights the way reality has been produced in the post-communist period and how people decided to participate or not in that production. We see these processes not from the center, from the capital with its decision makers and its nouveau riches, but from the margin (shift highlighted by the film's uniform English title "12:08 East of Bucharest"), from a provincial town with an amateurish TV station and middle aged anchor. The very production of this film and its popularity suggests that the exploration of the past and of the moment of transition is crucial for the way society has defined itself in the post-communist period. Looking at the 1989 moment 16 years later, however, also pinpoints the many ways in which avoiding or misrepresenting the past has led to broken, disillusioned identities that find it almost impossible to reconstruct themselves.