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# My (post-)post-socialism: A personal photo essay

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## Abstract

The paper is a multi-modal, autoethnographic exploration of the visual remnants of lived post-communism in a typical block of flats neighborhood of a Romanian city. By using film and digital photography, alongside narrative reflection, the author summons memories and blends observed and lived reality with creative non-fiction to build an affective photo-scape. The work is a meditation on visual emotional memory triggers and a cathartic rendering of lingering past(s) in present experiences.

## KEYWORDS

auto-ethnography, multi-modal, photography, post-socialism, visual

“People articulate their relationship to the past, present, and future through objects and landscapes that transport them on multiple temporal trajectories.”

(Moretti, 2025)

## PART 1. INTRODUCTION

This present paper is a multi-modal auto-ethnography project in which I captured on photographic film vistas from my childhood neighborhood. It is comprised of three parts. The Introduction, where I explain the intention behind the project, the narrative intertwined with the visual element, and a discussion on nostalgia, memory and post-socialist anthropology. The aim was to visually and narratively represent how my layered experience of returning home maps visual memory, affect and post-socialist forms.

\*

The project materialized on my return to my native city of Timișoara, Romania, after having spent the best part of the decade abroad, in the *West*. To me, the neighborhood seemed largely unchanged,

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testimony to the strong post-socialist visual imagery and built landscape I grew up in. I wished to capture that, maybe from a fear of losing my memory of it, but also from the joy of returning to it, however gray.

That said, the idea came to me after a talk discussing calls to move on from the “post-socialist” label (Chelcea, 2025; Gallinat, 2022) in relation to Eastern Europe. As a MA student at the time, still reading Verdery (1996; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999), Kligman (1988), and Kideckel (2008), it stayed with me as a marker of the end of an era. In light of that sentiment, this project is a visual exploration of “post-socialism” as I understand it and still see it around me.

Furthermore, this project is an exteriorization of my thought processes as an ethnographical actor. Presuming a third-party observer, all of us could be viewed as participants in ethnographically observable and interpretable actions. However, it is rare that an anthropologist plays a dual role, both actor and observer-interpreter. Thus, this reflexive work attempts to mediate the gaze of an immigrant returning home, to their East-European neighborhood. The resulting product is an incomplete, subjective, and interpretative mix of photography and narrative, aimed at giving form to my relationship to the past (Moretti, 2025).

Initially, I wanted to label this as an “unfiltered” personal take on memory and landscape. On further reflection, I realized it is very much filtered. While I tried to commit to paper and film my thoughts, it is all filtered through my interpretation of the world. In practice, the present work is transformed by living in Western Europe the past decade, by my recent studies, and my personal views, as well as the exterior framework that conditions recollection (Halbwachs, 1980). I am capturing and offering to view my neighborhood, or the parts of it that strongly resonate with my idea of “post-socialism.” In this context, “post-socialism” is an aesthetic, a way of being, a (potentially unwanted) legacy I see all around me.

The rendition and exteriorization of my memories and perceptions has taken the most direct route I could envision, considering a mind reading machine was not invented yet. First, using the camera to capture the present image of the place from my memory. Second, developing and post-processing images. Third, committing to paper the reflections the landscape triggered. Fourth, bringing them together in a coherent manner so that it makes sense to a reader. The result is neither strictly a recollection of my childhood, nor a description or a faithful capture of visible-to-me elements remaining in situ. The (built) landscape is not (quite) the same, and I have added an extra layer of depicted memories, a very imperfect form, before offering a viewable digital object.

In other words, what I bring forward is a visual project where the images are a medium to represent several temporal and experiential strata. The photographs are the visually mediated product interlacing lived experience and memory. They encompass the place that existed in my childhood, now transformed, the place as remembered, and the place as I found it on my return.

Most of the photographs were taken using an over 40-year-old Yashica Fully Automatic point-and-shoot camera (Figure 1). The decision to use this camera was twofold. I wanted to bring to life an object of personal value. Also, by using an object belonging to my family and dating from the era of my birth, I added a further physical link between (remembered) past and present.

The film I used was an Agfa APX 35mm 100 ISO 36 exposures, monochrome. After shooting, it was processed by a brick-and-mortar photo studio. I received the developed negatives and digital scans of the photographs.

While color photographs would have been available in the 1980s, mostly as a novelty item, the choice of black and white photography was a vehicle meant to separate the present form of “place” from the “place” reconstructed from my memories. What the reader sees is a rendition I believe is closer to the atmosphere of my remembered childhood. In color, the photographs would have highlighted the recent transformations: the renovated facades, sometimes in pastel colors, the multitude of cars, perhaps litter, and would detract from the exercise I invite viewers to participate in. They would highlight the present of “place.” Opting for black and white creates a sense of detachment, artificially linking them to the past as avatars of the “place” of my memory.

In practice, the camera itself acted unpredictably, owing to its age.<sup>1</sup> Some frames were blank and some are out of focus (Figure 2), which is a very potent reminder that memory is likewise unreliable.



FIGURE 1 Camera with developed film.

Not only does it distort with time but it is permeated by collective memory and often draws on external frameworks to situate itself (Halbwachs, 1980). Moreover, as Shobeiri (2024) astutely observes, “despite its visual exactitude in capturing events, photography can imitate the incompleteness of memory by allowing the viewer to extend time and thereby project a mental image onto the photograph.” To use de Duve’s (1978) terminology, the images are “pictures,” meaning a “self-enclosed reality” which attests that “a ‘now’ in the past existed” (Wigoder, 2001 in Shobeiri, 2024).

Finally, some photographs I edited using the draw function on my Remarkable tablet, to illustrate some changes and caption some images with the feeling or place they evoke or represent.

The narrative accompanying the photos is written intentionally in a stream of consciousness style, in parts, to evoke presence and to better convey unstructured perception, sensory memory, or internal processing. These fragments are written in italics. The text also includes creative reconstructions of past dialogues, remembered aggregates, that help convey a sense of place and act as auto-ethnographic material, examples of interactions and remembered atmosphere. These are marked with quotation marks. Some words I kept in my native Romanian. The terms post-communist and post-socialist and their variants are used interchangeably.

Furthermore, the more interactive, experiential elements of the narrative do not have illustrations. I chose to use the landscape, the hard, edgy, crumbling, gray concrete as the embodiment of all of the above and the physical, tangible evidence of this “post-communism” that I feel still lingers in Romanian culture, societal structure, institutions, and, for some of us, in our memories.

## PART 2. PHOTOGRAPHIC AND NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS

I was walking my dogs thinking of my (post)post-socialism (Figure 3). For me, this is the space it is embodied by and (self)experienced in. *It has changed recently*. Since my return, probably less than a year



**FIGURE 2** No entry.

ago at the time of writing, the garages went down, the area excavated, most of the trees mercilessly cut down, and the space made a slightly larger car park.

*All new paint and full of cars pushing its newly marked boundaries.*

*Somebody dumped an old cast-iron radiator behind my bloc of flats, on the 'green area', in the newly paved parking lot, which is currently just a mixed heap of soil, litter and construction debris; where they cut down the tree that was shading my window (see [Figure 4](#)<sup>2</sup>). Oddly, it is painted bright yellow instead of the usual off-white. It's probably more expensive to take it to a recycling centre, the petrol to get there costing more than any money received on the reclaimed metal.*



FIGURE 3 Everywhere is a playground.



FIGURE 4 The yellow radiator.

*“The Roma will get it”, I’m sure somebody said to themselves when they left it there. “After all, that’s what lots of them do, don’t they? Collect scrap metal to sell by the kilogram to salvage yards”, they might have continued to justify both their willingness to fly-tip and their stereotyping of the ethnic minority.*

As I turned the corner, I saw a sole sports shoe, *lost or abandoned by somebody, sitting alone at the end of what was a car parked there not too long ago.* The green spaces reflect the interaction of some resident(s) with the

surrounding built landscape, some tidier, with planted flowers and decorative bushes, some ignored, some full of parked cars, some neither here nor there:

*“Oh...the lady on the 4th floor waters them. Nobody else cares and we are not really supposed to intervene on public space. We could get fined by the municipality, you know?”*

The neighborhood has changed, but not that much. It is now a slightly more colorful rendition of the gray visual monotony in which I grew up, now a “modernized version” of it. It has more cars, more air-conditioning, a sad-looking play area, which is almost always littered, but much of the things I would see outside my flat window in the early 90s are the same: the back of the U-shaped block of flats, then our playground, still there, clothes still hung to dry outside balconies (see [Figures 5 and 6](#)).

The bar for beating carpets is gone, and the cinder blocks pile became garages relatively soon after we found them stacked under the carpet bar, but the shortcuts are there (see [Figures 7–9](#)). The vines, covering some makeshift awnings at some of the entries, may very well be the same, 30 years of growing and twisting and providing shade. *More cars*. The “ecological” parking, which was needed, is just honeycomb plastic slabs and dust (*and mud, if it rains*), the trees I used to climb, gone, but much remains.

What I hope to make visible in the frames are the physical triggers of a visual memory of my childhood, the parts that have not changed, that are recognizable to me and on which the shadows of my memory, the understanding of my city and country's past, through the lens of the camera, onto black and white film. Using these tools helped me create another new layer of old links between my mind's eye and my memories, what I saw in present times and what I could capture to show others ([Figure 10](#)). *Which makes the place of my childhood and the photographs below something like distant cousins, in a way. Four times removed.*

\*

Where is the post-socialism? I don't need to look for it; it jumps out at me from every corner (see [Figure 11](#)).

*It is there, in the abandoned, ripped-out-of-somewhere radiator, in the work-half-done of the parking lot, in the lonely shoe forgotten. It's in the indifference for the public space, which I was told was taken care of by the state ‘inainte’ (i.e.*



FIGURE 5 The view (1).



FIGURE 6 The view (2) From the inside.

before 1989) and belonged to everybody and hence nobody. In the some marginally taken care of, some quite well kept, some barren green areas around the blocks of flats.

I would also say it is in the quite cleverly arranged 15-minute city, if I was not worried people would label me some sort of '[communist] nostalgic'. Within walking distance of my home there is a school, a nursery, what the West would call a farmer's market (an open space with stalls where people could sell their produce), a cinema (no longer operational), a post-office (still operational and feeling very 'comunist' in appearance: iron grates all round, a heavy iron framed glass door with remnants of printed or sometimes hand written paper notices stuck to it, advertisements faded by the sun, and



FIGURE 7 The shortcut (1).

*the mandatory snaking queue in the morning, for they service customers slowly, owing to old technology and clunky, state mandated software and limited personnel), a pharmacy, which I would say has been there forever, but maybe I'm adding it to the landscape because I expect it to fit. No, an acquaintance confirmed it has been there "forever". "Complexul", as people know it. A bakery! Though that might have moved slightly. A 'langoși'<sup>3</sup> place, which moved, but is in its current location for decades, nonetheless. A little further you can get a tram, and further still there is a bus which can easily take*



FIGURE 8 The shortcut (2).

*one to the city centre within twenty minutes. A little further still, in the opposite direction, there is yet another school and nursery. Oh, and, of course, a doctor's office. Mustn't forget about that, the 'dispensar', as my family called it in the 1990s, and the bookshop where one's parents could buy school supplies.*

That was my whole universe (Figure 12). Maybe in some ways, it still is when I come to visit or stay for longer periods here. I still don't venture much outside of the bus/tram/school/market/ back of the parking lot hexagon on foot (Figures 13–16). *Old habits die hard.*



FIGURE 9 The shortcut (3).

\*

So why does it make me feel so strongly that it is quintessentially post-communist?

*Because it is a maze of block of flats, of concrete matchboxes stacked on top of another, many still a dull grey which makes things look like a depressing Eastern-European art movie. Because people still defer responsibility, the 'state' must take care of things and when they fail to do so, no one steps up to at least try to get the municipality to take action.*

*"It was always this way, they don't care about us", some would say.*



FIGURE 10 This was a playground.

Because when it rains there is mud, and potholes fill with petrol and oil stained puddles and people still try to push forward when boarding the bus or tram from a residual fear that they will not make it in and they will have to wait who-knows-how-long for the next one (while ignoring the GPS tracking app and electronic schedule above). Because you hear people at the doctor's:

*"[The past] wasn't so bad. You couldn't go abroad, but who cares? Young people should visit their own country first. What good is it that the shops are full now if we can't afford it?"*

Because the tiller, shop assistant, or seller still think they have the right to chastise you in an irritated voice, instead of being neutral or perhaps conjuring a hello and a small smile, when presenting your articles for check-out:

*"Well?? ... what do you want me to scan so you can pay? Give me those!"*

Because when dealing with institutions and bureaucracy, you are still required to bring physical copies in a cardboard binder "cu şina,"<sup>4</sup> and any instructions you find are rarely correct, complete and up to date.

*"Oh, I see, well, you need to talk to the Registrar. They might still be at work [it was 3.30 pm]/We'd serve you gladly, there's information in the system, but now you have to go four floors down to Mrs So-and-So and ask her, if she's still around/Who are you? Oh, it's Mr??? You said Mrs. Is that with a D? Well, that's not possible at all, you have to come again. Don't you see in the kind of country we live? They cut our bonuses!",* I heard while taking care of some medical issues for my father.

All of these, partial, merged, maybe reconstructed memories of interactions and lived (social) experiences swirl in my mind when I think about *my* experience of post-socialism.

\*

And yet, I do not wish to leave you with a sour-tasting, lingering sense that Romania remains "uncivilized" feeling.

There are also better roads, a dog park, institutions with functioning webpages, and some services can be accessed online. Trams are new and air-conditioned, some have electronic schedules visible in the stops and (some) people shop in "hipermarketuri,"<sup>5</sup> take holidays in exotic locations abroad, cars are new, imported, and *big and loud*, and I, and others, can study abroad and work on decent salaries.



FIGURE 11 The wall.

Romania will always be a “post-communist” country, for the simple fact that the communist rule is part of our history. It still feels like a “post-communist” country because both communism and the immediate “post-communist,” “transitional” period is within living memory and some habits and structures (conceptual and architectural) linger, or at least their ghosts still haunt (some of) us. If we want to look for them, we can see them in our surroundings. *Perhaps, in that same vein we will also be somewhat byzantine forever, as well, I am sure we can find those influences still lingering if we also look for them.*

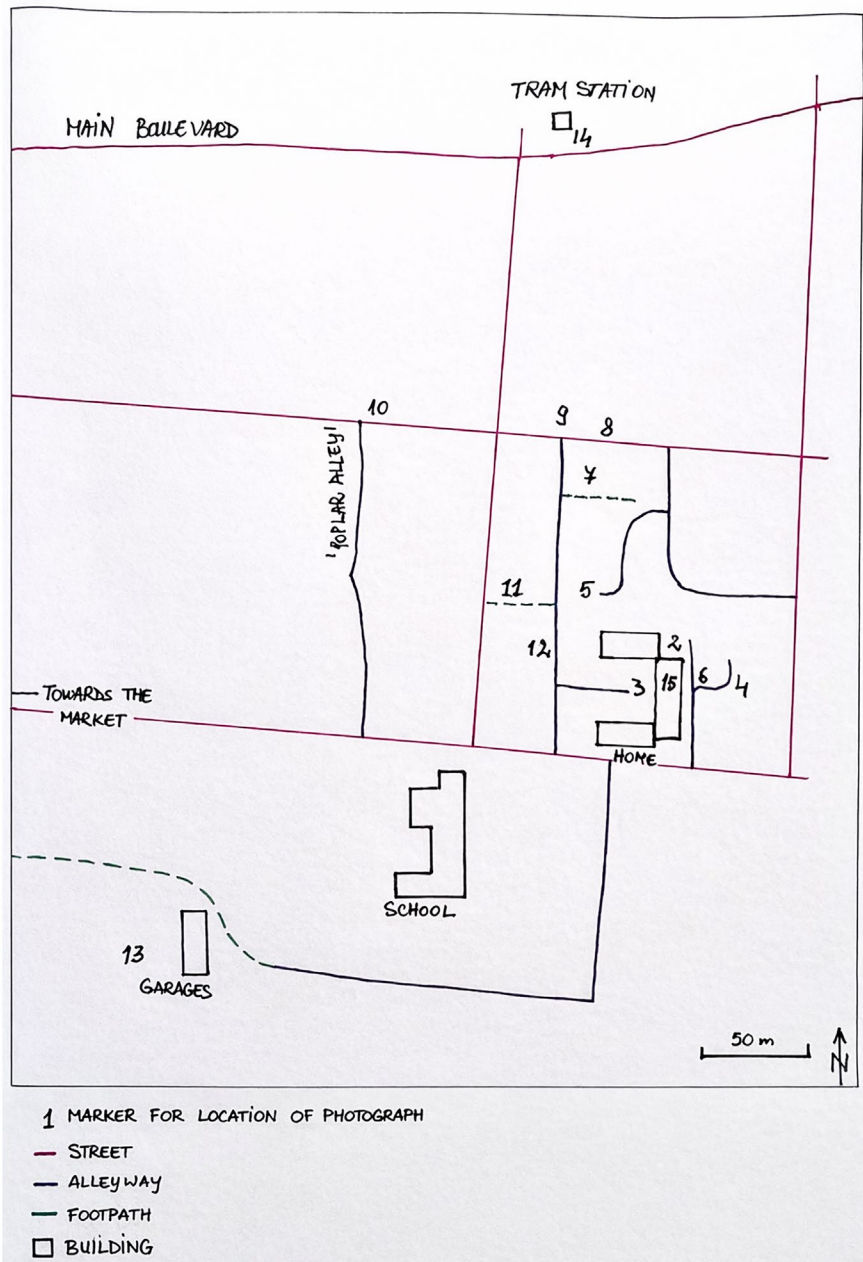


FIGURE 12 Hand drawn map of the neighborhood.

### PART 3. ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Reflecting back on the narrative and images, this third part is concerned with identifying and discussing their intersection with the broader anthropological discourse of memory, belonging, and post-socialist space.

Let us start with nostalgia. Does my project come from a place of nostalgia? As they say, it depends. It depends on the meaning one ascribes to nostalgia. Nostalgia for the joys and seemingly unlimited time and the more than enough space to play in from my childhood? Perhaps. Inherited nostalgia for



FIGURE 13 A world away.

some socialist past or early post-socialist times? Certainly not. Nostalgia as an anchor of memory? Yes. Allow me to elaborate.

First of all, in a post-socialist context, nostalgia is a short-hand for describing a longing for the times of socialist rule, when life was perceived to be better (Svasek, 2006). As Svasek points out, it tends to be more prevalent if the participants have been negatively impacted by the transition, especially if losing their secure employment, social standing or they struggling to maintain their living standards. In my case, I was too young to have consciously experienced the world before 1989. Furthermore, as I grew,



FIGURE 14 Poplar alley.

I was told stories of being bathed as a baby in freezing rooms, by candlelight, for there was no heat or electricity, since the country was making immense efforts, at the expense of the population, to pay the external debt under Ceausescu's end of rule years. My parents and grandparents, once freed from the fear of speaking their discontent, never hid it from me: waking up in the small hours to queue for bread and eggs, the struggle to find milk for infant me, the suspicious looks and package searches when generous friends from abroad sent over baby formula. My grandparents were retired around the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain, so their livelihood was not greatly affected. My parents found better jobs in the 1990s and were finally free to employ their knowledge of English and receive visits and more letters



FIGURE 15 The beyond.

and parcels from foreign friends. So it was in high school and university that I encountered first hand nostalgia for the communist rule. It was another decade or so until I understood where it came from. For this reason, I say that this project is not born out of “communist nostalgia.”

However, I would say that it is a feeling closer to the original meaning of nostalgia, that of homesickness. With my being away, returning to this personal *lieu de memoire* (Nora, 1989) triggered the feeling of nostalgia which Arnold-Foster links with affirming “symbolic ties with friends, lovers and family; [making] close others come to be momentarily part of ones present” (2024, p. 200). It also served as an anchor for belonging, which further solidified my conceptualization of the past and place where my initial social relationships (trans)formed (Edwards, 1998).

Svetlana Boym (2001) coined the term “reflective nostalgia,” which concerns immigrants. In her view, those who left and feel nostalgia about their homeland can have different loyalties to the ones they were born into. They also distinguish between being nostalgic for the fatherland (or a certain time in its history) and longing for the place of their birth, at local scale (house, city, region). Furthermore, Boym notes that it can foster a “creative self” (2001, p. 492). It is in this interpretation that I place my project's origin.

Because the present work is circulated digitally, refers to a diffuse feeling of childhood and place nostalgia, and features urban post-socialist landscape, one could argue it is a contribution to digital nostalgia (Kalinina, 2014). However, when the images are read together with the narrative, it becomes clear that the project diverges from celebrating socialist architecture. Instead, it provides visual cues that contextualize the mixed, shifting emotions brought to life by revisiting the space: memories of childhood alongside lingering, inertial, sometimes detrimental social practices that dot my experience of post-post-socialist Timișoara.

Moving into space and place and reflecting on my relationship with the block of flats, I do not remember having an opinion on them in my childhood. It was just where I lived and where I played. Us children played in front, in the parking lot, in the back, near the garages, to the side, in the shortcuts. They were just the form space took around us. I do remember longing for nature: going to the countryside, to the hills, to the mountains, seeing greenery.



FIGURE 16 The tram station.

For my grandparents' generation, who were allocated a block of flats based on workplace, seniority, family composition and, of course, perceived loyalty to the regime, the flats were the promise of convenience. Krtisztna Fehérváry captures the pageantry around "gifting" flats to "deserving families" in her *Politics in Color and Concrete* (2013): narrations of the moment someone took possession of their new place were described as being given "they keys to paradise" (p. 75). They may not have been paradise, but they would have been a great improvement over the rental single rooms and shared kitchens in houses without any indoor plumbing that they lived in before.

It was in my youth that the block of flats started symbolizing a certain type of spatial oppression and visual discomfort for me. By this time, their facades were crumbling, they were not only gray, but stained by rain and rust and green spaces were being taken over by cars and trees cut to make room for parking lots. As Şalaru (2025), drawing on Bourdieu, puts it, space is not just a backdrop, but is a bodily experienced reality, similar to Lefebvre's lived space (1991). Thus, my perception of place and space became a proxy for both the social changes around me, as well as my changing sense of belonging. As a result, upon my return, I saw the landscape around me in a different light, this time. While still strikingly lacking in greenery for my tastes, and somewhat visually restrictive, the feel was that of reuniting with an old friend, hence a personally lived experience of what Czepezyński calls a cultural landscape that is the result of "battles between versions of the past" (2008, p. 132).

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As a whole, the project is an illustration of how returning to a place is less a matter of simply revisiting a built environment or landscape, but experiencing its affect, potential triggers of memory and the framework within which they function, and all the social transformations in between.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding was received for this project.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No datasets were generated or analyzed during this study.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The project did not require formal ethics approval but was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Kent, the ASA, and EASA.

## PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable—no human participants other than the author were involved.

## PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Not applicable—no third-party materials were used.

## CLINICAL TRIAL REGISTRATION

Not applicable—this is not a clinical trial.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> One of two photographs taken by phone, in a matching esthetic. This was to illustrate the camera used for the project and the developed negatives.
- <sup>2</sup> The second photograph taken by smartphone, since the Yashica failed to capture this evocative moment on film. While I acknowledge that its quality differs from the rest, I chose to include it as it was highly relevant to the narrative and it preserves the cohesion of the visual storytelling.
- <sup>3</sup> Romanian borrowing of the German *langosch*, a pastry product similar to a large, savory doughnut which can be served salted, with garlic sauce or a variety of fillings, most commonly feta-like cheese and dill.
- <sup>4</sup> Lever-arch file.
- <sup>5</sup> Another way of saying supermarket, borrowed, in my understanding, from the French *hypermarché*.

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