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The 'Affairs' of Political Memory:  
Hermeneutical Dissidence from National Myth-Making

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**Abstract**

Self-serving hegemonic visions of history are institutionalised by dominant memory entrepreneurs, simultaneously imposing an authoritative version of 'what happened' and their right to articulate it. These visions and the hierarchies of honour they consecrate are cultivated trans-generationally, aiming to ensure the community's political cohesion, as well as the emotional attachments that can ensure its reproduction over time. This paper has three objectives. First, it brings insights from social epistemology to bear on a conceptualisation of political memory-making and proposes the concepts of 'hermeneutical dissidence' and 'hermeneutical seduction' to capture the critical interrogation of such mythologies. It highlights the obstacles facing any attempt at subverting them, particularly given the resilience of cognitive and emotional investments in particular schemas of perception and understanding in relation to the boundaries of the community and its history. Second, I transplant the descriptive concept of 'affair' formulated by pragmatic sociologists into debates about political memory, infusing it with a dose of normativity in order to shed critical light on various types of hermeneutical dissidence from dominant, emotionally-anchored, exclusionary imaginaries. Third, to render the theoretical proposal concrete, I introduce two 'memory affairs', both triggered by debates over the meaning and gender of political resistance.

**Keywords:** masculinist resistance, political memory, hermeneutical dissidence, hermeneutical seduction, affair, Louis Malle, Herta Müller

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Self-serving hegemonic visions of history are institutionalised by the state and dominant memory entrepreneurs, who seek to simultaneously impose an authoritative version of 'what happened' and their right to articulate it. These visions and the hierarchies of honour they consecrate are cultivated

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trans-generationally via history textbooks, memorialisation institutions and rituals, compensation policies and the canonisation of certain artworks, aiming to ensure the stability of the community's identity, as well as the emotional attachments that can ensure its reproduction over time. Because individuals' embodied and emotionally anchored schemes of perception, expectations, aspirations, and the scope of their political imagination are shaped by their investments in these dominant visions of who they are as a historical community – i.e. in their community's doxa – disrupting habits of remembering and imagining cannot simply be a matter of awareness raising: challenging entrenched hierarchies of authority and institutionalised memories simultaneously requires a measure of hermeneutical seduction.

This paper seeks to make three contributions. First, I bring insights from social epistemology to bear on a conceptualisation of political memory-making as a complex, multi-directional<sup>2</sup> hermeneutical exercise, involving both memory and the imagination. Political memory includes sifting through and interpreting events, practices and actions such that the past can be read in relation to the present and the future. Certain 'grands récits' colonise a community's hermeneutical space, closing off the political space of meaning to public debates about 'what happened'.<sup>3</sup> I propose the term 'hermeneutical dissidence' to capture the critical interrogation of such mythologies and highlight the obstacles facing any attempt at subverting exclusionary master-narratives, particularly given the resilience of cognitive and emotional investments in particular schemas of perception and understanding in relation to the boundaries of the community and its history. I suggest that dissidents face a double challenge: constitute themselves as authoritative memory-makers and effectively seduce supporting publics into existence. Hermeneutical seduction is articulated as a function of the content of dissident counter-narratives, the modalities of telling them<sup>4</sup> and of valorising the structural opportunities afforded by the context.

Second, I transplant the descriptive concept of 'affair' formulated by pragmatic sociologists into debates about political memory. An 'affair' is understood descriptively as a social form that polarises the public over the relevance and meaning of a norm that was transgressed. (Claverie, 'Sainte indignation') The emergence of an 'affair', I suggest, reflects the success of a dissident's inserting or prying open a hermeneutical fissure in a community's mnemonic doxa. However, I

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<sup>2</sup> For the multi-directionality of memory, see (Rothberg).

<sup>3</sup> For my account of the colonisation of memory spaces by absolutist mythologies and the salutary role of hermeneutical 'caring refuseniks', see (Mihai, 'The Caring Refusenik')

<sup>4</sup> Medina discusses this distinction in relation to his concept of 'hermeneutical hero' (Medina). Deploying an Arendtian idea of exemplarity, I make a similar point in (Mihai, 'Denouncing Historical "Misfortunes"')

depart from a purely descriptive account of affairs and inject them with a dose of normativity in order to shed critical light on political memory struggles, their protagonists and the preconditions for change in dominant, emotionally-anchored, exclusionary imaginaries. In other words, I move beyond pragmatic sociologists' neutral diagnostic work to distinguish critically between different types of hermeneutical dissidence.

Third, to render the theoretical proposal concrete, I read two instances of memory struggles as 'memory affairs'. While a large literature tackles judicial, financial, political and religious affairs (Claverie, 'Sainte indignation'; Offenstadt and Van Damme, *Affaires, scandales et grandes causes*; Sapiro; Thompson), I introduce two that were triggered by contestation of the controlling images (Hill Collins) of political (masculine) resistance. One affair took place in France in the 1970s and the other in Romania in 2009-2010.<sup>5</sup> The melodramatic<sup>6</sup>, absolutist, 'pure' masculinist vision of resistance that colonised political memory in both cases obscured shameful, inconvenient aspects of the past and impoverished collective visions of political agency and contestatory politics. Filmmaker Louis Malle and Nobel laureate Herta Müller used different media (film and autobiographical fiction) to dispute the heroic, masculinist resister that kept the collective imagination captive, monopolising emotional investments: in the guise of the unified, virile, armed resisters in France after WWII and of contemplative, Apollonian 'resistance through culture' in post-communist Romania.

Several criteria justify the case selection. While in both cases hermeneutical dissidence was expressed via artistic fiction, the respective publics read fiction as history. Both hermeneutical dissidents touched on the content of memory – 'what happened?' – *and* on the hegemonic storytellers' standing to tell the story. Given the high political, symbolic and emotional stakes, both instances of dissidence were met with virulent indignation and denounced by memory gate-keepers as assaults on the sacredness of resistance. In both cases, a melodramatic genre of political discourse, moralising both national narratives and the dissidence against it, was deployed to push the dissident outside the relevant mnemonic community. However, in both cases, indignation was not shared consensually, signalling that the national myths colonising the memory space were not immutable *and* that memory gate-keepers' strategies for hegemonising their master narrative were vulnerable to contestation. The dissidents' counter-narratives provided an alternative to historical

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from French and Romanian are mine.

<sup>6</sup> Anker theorises melodramatic political discourse in US politics (Anker).

melodrama, proposing new historical protagonists that citizens could emotionally identify with, thus seducing alternative mnemonic publics into existence.

The paper begins by delineating the concepts of hermeneutical dissidence, ‘affairs’ and ‘hermeneutical seduction’. The next sections discuss in detail two memory affairs: first, the *Lucien, Lacombe* affair against the background of the virile vision of resistance that dominated French political memory until the 1970s and Herta Müller’s critique of the elitist, Apollonian, masculinist and sexist view of ‘resistance through culture’ and the uproar it caused in Romania in 2009-10. The conclusion offers some comparative insights.

### **Hermeneutical Dissidence in the Space of Memory**

‘Official’ political memory is a crucial part of the national common sense or doxa. It shapes individuals’ assumptions about the boundaries of the community, historical allies and enemies, objects of national pride and hatred, the protagonists of the community’s history, for both celebratory and vilifying reasons. Historical excisions – of unsavoury episodes or uncomfortable truths – are operated by the mnemonic community’s ‘social scalpel’ (Zerubavel 96). The ‘topography of the past’ (Zerubavel 1) has lacunae that are not accidental. Instead, they are the result of power constellations, intentional and politically self-serving: a community’s selective habits of historical remembering reflect various groups’ unequal access to processes of meaning, itself a function of these groups’ relative power.

Communities socialise their members into their mnemonic traditions, enabling some collective aspirations and emotional attachments and disabling others. Officially-sanctioned memory serves both as a source and a constraint on the exercise of political imagination, which never functions *ex nihilo*: national mythologies inevitably shape its scope and content. To understand this dynamic, the concept of the ‘mnemonic imagination’ (Keightley and Pickering) is particularly illuminating as it captures the routine interplay between these two faculties: memories are organised into coherent narratives via the imagination, while the imagination builds on sources provided by memory to help us navigate the present and articulate visions of the future.

The exercise of the mnemonic imagination is not merely an intellectual one: it is embodied and emotionally anchored, which makes the practices, institutions and relationships it underpins resilient to opposing forces. The stability of a community’s historical master narrative is reproduced in individual patterns of behaviour, memory and imagination and through specific forms of

sociality, uncritically and often beyond the radar of consciousness. Supported by strong commitments and emotionally rooted, official visions of who ‘we’ are as a community and of our past inform the ways we behave towards each other, the state and other groups in the present, within and without the national borders. We are perpetually submerged in a ‘doxastic din’ (Brossat 58), within which we are constituted as subjects. Given the stability of this embodied, socio-mental topography, then, the challenge is to find ways of disrupting the automatism of the memories, attitudes, emotions and actions it motivates.

While the picture I painted above may give little room for hope, no national doxa is so totalising as to completely close the space of meaning to all alternative hermeneutical sources. What is more, individuals’ emotional commitments to the doxa need constant reactivation to be effective. This paper is interested in the fissures in official remembering where heretic common senses flourish. To understand how doxastic fissures appear and how they can be widened, I now turn to pragmatic sociology and the concept of ‘affair’.

According to pragmatic sociologists, all affairs begin with a scandal, which emerges when a public denunciation of a transgression successfully mobilises the public’s consensual indignation and results in the offender’s punishment (official or symbolic). (Boltanski) A scandal evolves into an affair only if segments of the public follow the denunciator’s judgment, while others challenge their credentials and their claims’ veracity.

Functionalist sociological accounts understand scandals as a diagnostic lens for gauging deeper social and psychological structures. For this school of thought, scandals are instrumental to social control and maintaining existing hierarchies: in mobilising the public in indignation against the transgression, the scandal reaffirms the normative order that precedes it. (Verdès-Leroux; Smith; Blic and Lemieux) In contrast, pragmatic sociologists, whose perspective I endorse here, recognise the discontinuities scandals insert into the social common sense and the practices, institutions and relationships it informs. (Boltanski; Brandl; Boltanski and Claverie) Pragmatic sociologists zoom in on the scandal as a social form worth studying in itself – not just diagnostically, for understanding the doxa and its complex underpinnings. This is because they read the scandal as having a potentially transformative impact on social regimes of valorisation and the relationships, hierarchies, judgment practices and emotional investments they enable. According to pragmatists, the scandal changes norms even as it reaffirms them, for norms are never the same in the wake of the ‘test’ that the scandal initiates (de Dampierre). Even when confirmed via a scandal, a

community's doxastic investments – institutional, symbolic, emotional – are being tested and at least partially displaced in the process of managing the transgression. Scandals often make implicit norms explicit and, when successful, galvanise renewed emotional support for them. (Brandl)

For a scandal to emerge, a public expression of disapproval regarding a perceived wrong must find a morally and affectively responsive audience. The stake of the scandal is usually clear: defending the victims constituted by the violation of a moral, religious, political or legal norm. (Offenstadt and Van Damme, 'Introduction') In the absence of uptake, there is no scandal, either because no transgression is thought to have happened, or because the violated norms are obsolete: the large-scale political and affective activation of the social sense of justice is the scandal's *sine qua non*. (de Dampierre; Boltanski) We need not assume, as functionalists do, that the public is fully formed and pre-dates the scandal: on the contrary, it is the scandal that at least partially summons its own public. The very experience of 'sharing indignation' (Le comité éditorial 6) institutionalises a public via references to the dominant regime of valorisation that is being put to the test by the scandal.

Denunciations can have various targets, ranging from condemnations of general injustices to naming specific offences and aiming to activate a penal response. (Boltanski 169) In speaking out, the denunciator affirms both the veracity of their claims and their right to make them. This unavoidably inflicts violence on the target's reputation – a necessary step in summoning a public court, either judicial or of opinion, to assess and repair the perceived damage the transgression caused. (Boltanski and Claverie 415) The denunciation has both a truth aspect (it informs the public about a wrong) and a moral aspect (it invites judgment on it). If they fail to be persuasive on either of these dimensions, the denunciator risks being ignored or even denounced themselves.

The denunciator's perceived 'normality' (174) but also, I would add, their hermeneutical authority, are crucial for the scandal's success: not all denunciations 'echo' (Medina). To succeed, they must be 'de-singularised' (197): denunciators must depersonalise the conflict and persuasively invoke general interests. Proving personal disinterestedness and a commitment to the 'public good' enhances the chances of uptake. Suspicions over a hidden, selfish interest by the denunciator can disqualify them. (Boltanski 194) To be recognised as a valid source of claim-making, the denunciator must also remind their public about the legitimacy, value and authority of existing norms, alliances and constituencies (Boltanski and Claverie), re-activating their emotional commitments.

The timing and location of the scandal, as well as the rhetorical register used, influence its trajectory. So does, I suggest, the authority (moral and epistemic) and the levels of symbolic and material capital enjoyed by the denunciator and their capacity to tap into existing affective attachments, awakening and amplifying them in support of the existing normative configuration. If successful, when the dust settles, the public has re-affirmed their grounding values (de Dampierre 336). However, even if affirmed, the norms have been affected by the test that the scandal subjected them to. Thus, the scandal

... is the resounding and unforeseen transgression of a value, of a norm, and more generally of an order... Troubling, it shakes the order undermining the values that underpin it, and reveals, in making visible its vulnerability, that it is not intangible. (Dosquet and Petit 151–52)

Crucially for this paper, scandals sometimes evolve into ‘affairs’. This is pragmatists’ technical term for instances when the denunciator is made the object of a counter-accusation by their very target and their allies. (Claverie, ‘La naissance’) Opposing camps, often of unequal strength, are constituted and civil discord ensues, polarising the community. (Sapiro). On all sides, new forms of relationality, emotionality and practice emerge, strengthened by the experience of shared outrage in confrontation. (de Dampierre 336) The divided public’s reaction to the transgression highlights the fragility and indeterminateness of the social doxa: new, competing interpretations of a norm are brought forth, opening the possibility of significant transformations in existing forms of sociability, the contours of political imagination and institutional practice, including in hierarchies of gate-keeping authority.

This paper argues that this formal account of scandals and affairs articulated in pragmatic sociology helps us think through processes of reconfiguring a community’s hermeneutical space of memory. Its conceptualisation of how normative transgressions trigger processes of testing the principles of a community’s doxa offers a suitable interpretive framework for reading struggles over collective memory. However, this formal matrix must be supplemented with a historically grounded account of the difficulties involved in mnemonic hermeneutical dissidence, i.e. in untying prematurely tied memory knots<sup>7</sup> and opening the space of meaning to more complex accounts of historical agency that could reorient a public’s practices of identification and emotional investments. Moreover, a dose of critical normativity must be injected into the formal account, with a view to distinguishing between various forms of dissidence.

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<sup>7</sup> See (Sanyal; Milton).



The affair opposes two forces vying for the same audience, but, unless the norm at stake is obsolete, the dissident's task appears to be more challenging. Given the strong cognitive and emotional investments in national mythologies, the dissident's chances of success, i.e. the chances of transforming a scandal into an affair, depend on their capacity to provide a persuasive narrative but also to seduce the public into accepting its veridicity, rightness and authority. As the metaphor of seduction suggests, this is not exclusively a cognitive process. Seduction is a function of articulating a counter-narrative that both resonates cognitively and provides alternative objects of emotional investment. The manner in which this counter-narrative is told matters too. Since '... the past is ... congealed as schema and is, as such, overdetermined and fixed in its sense; this is the past as ... myth, stereotype, distorted and isolated remnant' (Al-Saji 141), we need dissenters to insert moments of hesitation that open up the space and the time for the exercise of the mnemonic imagination. In hesitating, the routine relationship between these two faculties is broken. It is in the space between them that the dissident inserts an alternative memory configuration that resists subsumption to existing interpretive schemas and interrupts habitual emotional identification.

But how can hesitation be triggered? Given the historical specificity of the contexts where hermeneutical dissidence emerges, there is no blueprint. The rhetorical register and imagery matters in dissidence as much as it matters in denouncing it. The identity of the dissident and the alternative sources of hermeneutical authority they can invoke are crucial to short-circuiting the cognitive and affective automatism of remembering and highlighting the artificiality of received narratives. Tapping into the collective hermeneutical pool of concepts to preserve a sense of familiarity while reinventing – expanding or contracting their scope – can be fruitful. The medium in which dissidents articulate their dissent – political discourse, artistic works, memoirs – influences the size of the uptake. The genre of both master- and counter- narratives is also important, as we shall see in the empirical analysis. Timing and the space of dissidence also count. In thinking about the success of dissidence, we must therefore take into account both elements related to hermeneutical dissidents' identity and choices *and* the opportunities opened by the doxastic structure and its emotional armature: the latter should not be understood exclusively as obstacle.

I now turn to two case studies that, I propose, instruct us about the mechanisms of change within institutionalised regimes of political remembrance. I read them normatively, to highlight the critical value of hermeneutical dissidence that targets reductive hegemonic concepts. I begin with the *Lacombe, Lucien* affair and its contribution to the reconfiguration of France's mnemonic habits.

### **Collaborationist Virility**

Germany occupied France partially, then fully between 1940–1944. After a shockingly quick, humiliating defeat, Marshal Pétain implemented a policy of ‘state collaboration’ with Germany. Anti-Semitic laws were passed, tapping into the history of French anti-Semitism. (Joly). Most people slowly accommodated themselves to the occupiers, unsure of Allied victory. Counting several thousands in 1940, organised resistance was internally heterogeneous, including military and civilian resistance, within and without France. By 1944, it comprised between 300,000 and 500,000 fighters (Marcot), an increase related to public discontent with Germany’s economic exploitation of France and Pétain’s rule. Armed struggle, the distribution of illegal publications, political strikes, sabotage were part of a sustained, risky fight, in which communists were over-represented.

Until the ‘70s, the political memory of WWII was heavily dominated by general De Gaulle’s vision. (Flower) He faced a complex task: ‘bury the dead, celebrate the heroes, punish the traitors and push them into the flood of opprobrium – or of forgetting – compensate the victims and recognise their status.’ (Wieviorka, *La mémoire désunie* 18) Given the uncertainty and contestability of all categories listed above and the search for a reassuring narrative to sustain recovery and promote national reconciliation, he adopted a strategic politics of memory, imposing the story of a unified, virile French resistance – greatly at odds with the reality of widespread accommodationism and passivity. The quick, disgraceful defeat, French participation in the genocide, and the fortunes made via ‘economic aryanisation,’ were forgotten. (Flower) France was constituted as the innocent victim of Germans’ barbaric invasion, rescued by her virile heroes, saviours of European values and guardians of ‘civilisation’.

During this period, artistic engagement with the War supported the Gaullist myths. The ‘lofty figure of the soldier in the army of shadows’ (Wieviorka, *The French Resistance* 461) who ‘combines the secret agent, the sheriff or the outlaw as played by an actor in a western, and the fearless knights beyond reproach, who, submachinegun in hand, blows up an incalculable number of factories and trains’ (Azéma 169) becomes the main historical protagonist of French mnemonic imagination, object of national pride and gratitude, and antidote for both the shame of the defeat and of owing the country’s liberation to the Allies.

Historians explain the strong emotional investment in this vision by reference to France’s crisis of virility after the crushing defeat of 1940, which created 1,800,000 French POWs (Kelly; Capdevila,

'Le mythe du guerrier et la construction sociale d'un « éternel masculin » après la guerre.'; Capdevila, 'L'identité masculine et les fatigues de la guerre (1914-1945)). During and after the Occupation, opposing ideological discourses overlap in symbolic processes of centring virility as essential to honour, patriotism and action. (Mosse) Vichy itself had promoted two manly ideals: the father-worker spearheading the conservative revolution and the anti-Bolshevist legionnaires, fascist knights restoring masculinity in a feminised democracy.

On the resistance side, manliness indisputably took centre stage. From London, de Gaulle associated the defeat and collaboration with cowardly femininity, and resistance with masculine honour. (Capdevila, 'The Quest for Masculinity in a Defeated France, 1940-1945'). While women resisted alongside men, the French Forces of the Interior (the organised armed resisters within French territory) established an exclusive equivalence between active resistance and manliness. Communist propaganda also promoted the strong, muscular worker-fighter as the image of anti-imperialist resistance. (Capdevila, 'Identités') Unsurprisingly, a narrative of 'compensatory hyper-masculinity' valorising salvific violence (Capdevila, 'Le mythe du guerrier' 616-17) was institutionalised after the war, inviting displays of patriotic pride.

This narrative follows a melodramatic genre. As Anker writes:

... melodramatic political discourse casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists.... By evoking intense visceral responses to wrenching injustices imposed upon the nation- state, melodramatic discourse solicits affective states of astonishment, sorrow, and pathos .... It suggests that the redemption of virtue obligates state power to exercise heroic retribution on the forces responsible for national injury. (2)

Within this melodramatic scenario, 'compensatory hyper-masculinity' was enacted politically to redeem masculine national virtue. Examples abound. The trial of the anti-Semite writer Robert Brasillach featured extra-legal allusions to his homosexuality and supposed enjoyment of German domination, as well as the prosecutor's equating treason with 'sleeping with Germany' (Kaplan). During post-Liberation purges, theatrical virility took centre stage: resisters brandished their weapons, buried the dead with military honours, and executed supposed collaborators in great displays of patriotic fervour and self-righteous indignation on behalf of the victimised French nation. The gendered reclaiming of national space via wild purges validate the 'masculinity crisis'

thesis: women accused of ‘horizontal’ or ‘sentimental’ collaboration were publicly shorn in widespread shaming rituals, thus reaffirming masculine authority over their bodies. Authentic resisters, as much as last-minute heroes, ordinary men and women who spent the war in waiting, participated in fervid humiliation ceremonies (Virgili), thought to mark the return to sovereignty.

Dissenting narratives did emerge, highlighting the nation’s widespread accommodationism and challenging the unified resistance myth (Atack and Lloyd). However, before de Gaulle’s death and the generational change, the state kept melodrama safely in place (Nettelbeck). It was only in the 1970s – the setting of the *Lacombe, Lucien* affair – that the doxastic structure became permeable to dissidence from various corners. Presidents Giscard d’Estaing and Pompidou did not endorse the cultish veneration of the Resistance, opening the space for heretic voices to emerge. Artists and historians took advantage of the less militant state memory policy and proposed less flattering counter-narratives: Marcel Olphüs’s *Le chagrin et la pitié* (1969), Patrick Modiano’s first trilogy, Philippe Aziz’s 1970 *Tu trahiras sans vergogne* and Robert Paxton’s 1973 *La France de Vichy* all contributed to de-mythification. (Wieviorka, *La mémoire désunie* 197) While not without its moralistic, extreme-right or reductionist entrepreneurs, the assault on the hegemonic view had begun.

The much-studied (Walsh; Sineux; Keyser; Cieutat; Sarnecki) film *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974, directed by Louis Malle, written by Patrick Modiano) provoked anxiety from the beginning: due to its political sensitivity, public institutions tried to block its distribution. Given its timing, its historical veracity outweighed its artistic qualities: the French expected an accurate snapshot of the war. (Golsan) Malle’s realistic style, *mode rétro* fed this expectation, but many spectators were disappointed by his refusal to provide an unambiguous, satisfying account of masculine heroes and cowardly villains. In illuminating French complicities and the dubious association between masculinity and resistance, the film foregrounded the ambiguity of French positioning and rejected melodramatic readings of history.

The film focuses on Lucien, a young, poor and uneducated farmer during the last months of WWII. He is on a quest for social recognition, which he eventually obtains by joining the Gestapo. Lucien works as a cleaner in a nursing home, a menial job he hates. His father is a POW, while his mother is involved with her employer, Mr. Laborit, whose wealth Lucien envies. To change his life, Lucien approaches a known resister, the village teacher, asking to join the struggle. The teacher firmly

rejects him, patronising him as a young, ignorant boy. This first rejection deepens his sense of dissatisfaction and resentment towards his elders, the gate-keepers of respectability and manliness.

On his way to work one evening, Lucien gets a flat tire and fails to arrive before the curfew. A group of *gestapistes* catch him spying on their party and arrest him. Realising Lucien could be a source, they get him drunk and interrogate him. Inebriated and resentful at the teacher's dismissal, Lucien betrays him to the *gestapistes*, a gesture he appears to regret when later, hungover, he faces the arrested man and realises the gravity of his deed. The teacher calls Lucien a 'bastard', an insult that, against the background of a simmering frustration with his subordinate position in hierarchies of masculinity, contributes to his feeling flattered by the Gestapo's job offer, which comes a few minutes later.

Once enrolled, Lucien participates in raids and looting, and climbs the economic ladder. He harasses his Jewish tailor's family – the Horns – who are hiding in the village. The family comprises Albert, the tailor, his mother, Bella and daughter, France, Lucien's romantic interest. Lucien does everything to be accepted by the Horns, his clumsy efforts perpetually highlighting the class differences between them. An affair develops between Lucien and France, punctuated by moments of brutality and rejection. In the end, depressed, Albert turns himself in to the Gestapo, while Lucien rescues Bella and France from deportation and provides for them, though not clearly entirely out of noble reasons.

The film's hermeneutical dissidence is complex. First, the war is narrated from a collaborator's perspective, not the resisters' – as the norm dictated. In making Lucien his main character, Malle rejects the dominant melodramatic script. Second, Lucien is not unambiguously a villain, nor a weak coward, as per the national mythology. He is moved by a simple idea of competitive manliness: economic prosperity and control over a woman – both key to other men's respect. A hyper-masculine man, Lucien's is on the wrong side of history, rejoicing in the power he has over villagers, especially over older men. Yet, he also uses it to protect the Horns, though it is unclear whether motivated by care or vanity. He helps his mother financially. Towards France, he is capable of both tenderness and violence. Lucien is executed during the purges, and, due to his ambiguity, the spectator is left uneasy about the punishment.

Third, the film introduces a diverse cast of *gestapistes*: few are rabid anti-Semites, many are déclassés and black marketeers. Most distrust and disrespect Pétain, call him names and practice shooting on

his portrait. This picture of the diversity of motivations within the group challenges reductive views of French innocent victimhood. It relativises the role of ideology and stresses the attraction of economic gain in French complicity.

Fourth, while male resisters are depicted in action, Malle undermines gendered ideas of resistance by introducing subtler behaviours, by women and old Albert. Albert and Bella are very reserved towards the *gestapistes* – Bella never addresses them and refuses to acknowledge their presence. The tailor – though more pragmatic – responds monosyllabically and keeps washing his hands. France is romantically intrigued by Lucien but, sensing his unscrupled roughness, maintains an ambivalent attitude throughout. Towards the end, she contemplates murdering him. The family's resistances did not register with critics, exactly because, I argue, of the centrality of armed struggle within France's mnemonic imagination.

I read the controversy around the film as an affair in the hermeneutical space of memory. Initially, it constituted a favourable public, who considered it an artistic masterpiece. (Golsan) Jean-Louis Bory, whose novel on French collaboration won the Goncourt prize in 1945, applauded it as the first 'true' film about collaboration (Greene). Many reviewers praised its aesthetic value and the director's artistry. (Feste-Guidon) The film won several international awards and was nominated for the Foreign Film Oscar. The film's seduction worked through its complex storytelling about ambiguous characters but also Malle's cinematographic techniques: long beautiful shots of the idyllic French countryside, the faithful reconstruction of the period's style, and Django Reinhardt's music combine to usher viewers sensorially and emotionally in Lucien's world, making it difficult for them to develop a clear, unambiguous attitude towards him.

Gradually, however, an alternative public – moved by opposing ideologies but sharing indignation – caused a scandal by denouncing its multiple 'sins'. Verisimilitude took central stage: Malle was accused of not casting 'representative' victims and perpetrators. Lucien's class and a-politicism and the Horns' ambivalent attitude towards him was viciously contested (Jankowski; Burrin) Some read the film metonymically and condemned Malle's foregrounding complicity over resistance (Hoffmann). Communist critics were aggravated by a perceived erasure of armed resisters (Frey): their sacred memory was the primary victim of Malle's transgression. His refusal to judge Lucien and his making it difficult for the spectator to inhabit the comfortable moral high-ground from where virile (Gaullist or communist) heroes are easily distinguishable from effeminate cowards was vehemently attacked. (Zimmer) Michel Foucault highlighted the director's class positionality and

reduced the film to a bourgeois manoeuvre to obscure popular struggles against Nazism and render the bourgeoisie's own collaboration less problematic. (Foucault et al.) Malle's belonging to a rich, Pétainist family and his previous work with nationalist writer Roger Nimier fed the violent *ad personam* attacks. His hermeneutical dissidence fissured the norm underpinning the new French order – a norm that made the memory of the war palatable by establishing honourable hierarchies of manly valour – causing a vituperative uproar in melodramatic tonalities: Malle was 'othered' as the (bourgeois, revisionist, right-wing) enemy of the 'sacred resistance', and the attacks on him tried to restore the weight of the moral tale.

Though Malle's rejoinders were generally unpersuasive (Golsan), especially to former resisters and communists, the timing of the affair – the '70s and its multi-pronged assault on resistance mythology – meant that Malle's seductive vision could summon an alternative public, thus displacing both the resistance myth and its gate-keepers' interpretive authority. He was helped by critics' failure to de-singularise their claims: their reading was ideologically overdetermined. Malle's alternative to the national melodrama – his rejection of pedagogical, moralistic films and Lucien's complexity as character, captured in beautiful cinematography – inserted a moment of hesitation in public habits of remembering, inviting a positive emotional investment in a more honest, though less flattering, narrative about the past. Through its choice of standpoint and ambiguous protagonists, as well as the aesthetic qualities of the film, it threatened the reified link between resistance and masculinity and the myth of the unified – as opposed to marginal – resistance. Taking advantage of the fissures that were opening up in the doxastic structure of French memory, Malle accentuated its growing vulnerability by violating dominant interpretive conventions and betraying affective expectations.

Decades later, *Lacombe, Lucien* remains controversial, though it is now included in high-school history curriculum. The memory of the polarising affair – itself mythologised (Golsan) – still prevents a fully clean engagement with the film today. However, the film's complex dissidence contributed immensely to the demise of melodramatic Gaullist and Communist mythology, which opened the path for public reckoning with French complicity in the Holocaust, and the gradual recognition of women's role in the resistance. In what follows, I turn to another affair centred on the norm of masculine resistance: that of 'resistance through culture' in communist Romania.

### **'Resistance through Culture' between Purity and Subterfuge**

An authoritarian ultra-nationalist communist regime ruled Romania between 1947-1989. The party-state infiltrated workplaces, churches, homes, text-books, minds and bodies (Kligman; Copilaș; Corobca, *Controlul cărții*; Marcu; Mareș and Vasilescu; Vasile et al.). Given the geopolitical situation, the regime controlled its citizens for decades, deploying violence and co-optation. Anti-regime resistance was active in the early years: several uncoordinated, ideologically diverse and scattered groups of armed resisters fought against communisation until the mid 1960s, by when they had been decimated by the Secret Police. (Dobrinu)

The armed resisters of the 1960s disproportionately captured national myth-makers' attention after 1989. Intense efforts were made to recuperate their story so as to trouble ideas about Romanians' widespread acquiescence. As in France, they were martyred and a unified plan to resist the Soviet imposition of communism was melodramatically attributed to them. (Ciobanu) Their heroism was overblown, and (certain) biographies were purged of extreme right-wing affiliations. While this example would make for a straightforward comparison with France, I turn to another, less studied, yet dominant, masculinist myth of resistance, the 'resister through culture', i.e. Romanian intellectuals who withdrew in the life of the mind to escape ideological contamination.

The intellectual sphere was fiercely targeted under communism. Intellectuals were purged, numerous publications were outlawed. Academic freedom suffered, while Marxism-Leninism became compulsory in schools. Presses, galleries, cinemas and art collections were nationalised. Social sciences, arts and the humanities were severely policed. Blackmailed, threatened or bought by the secret police, intellectuals spied on their peers. The profession of writer was institutionalised: the state paid them salaries and entrusted them with 'educating the people'. (Preda, 'Art Must Be Politicized' 150) Censors and secret agents regimented the intellectual life. Fearful of repercussions, many self-censored. However, adherence to the party's line was profitable: material and symbolic goods stimulated aligned artistic creation. The more ambitious were more willing to compromise. (Corobca, 'Reacții La Cenzura Comunistă') Some became sycophants, integrated in the propaganda machine.

Dissidents were, due to complex factors, fewer than in other Eastern European countries. Some novelists deployed coded languages to escape the censor's eye, while many gave up writing. Exiled intellectuals condemned the regime from abroad, supported by Western powers. A 'drawer literature' developed, too dangerous to publish. Visual artists produced performances and



installations rejecting socialist realism, mostly for private consumption. (Preda, *Art and Politics under Modern Dictatorships*)

The privatisation of artistic and intellectual work was invoked, after 1989, as ‘resistance through culture’, specific to ‘contemplative natures’ (Pleșu, ‘Rezistența Prin Cultură’). The Group for Social Dialogue – a self-authorized, heterogeneous organisation of intellectual ‘gate-keepers’ (Stan) of the country’s morality, artistic value and democracy – promoted it aggressively. According to this narrative, ‘resistance through culture’ uniquely protected the authentic Romanian culture from the regime’s ideological perversion. In typical melodramatic mode, communism was read as an alien Soviet imposition, a historical Black Hole, empty time of national victimisation. (Bădică) This view aligned well with the official, virulent anti-communist mythology that got institutionalised in the 2000s, especially through the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship. (Rusu)

Its main advocates, Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu, conceptualised resistance as the refusal of the communist hijacking of language, meaning and reality. During the 1980s, the two withdrew into philosophical research, mentored by philosopher Constantin Noica, a former extreme-right sympathiser and political prisoner. A community of learning based on an idea of philosophy as destiny, reserved for the elect, untainted by immanence was institutionalised. Given the inaccessibility of recent publications, they studied languages, ancient and modern European philosophy. This was resistance: engaging in meaningful cultural work undermined ideology’s deadening effect. Exiting history – irrelevant ‘meteorology’ – was key to accessing truth. The group cultivated a sense of a noble mission: ensuring the survival of Romanian culture. This mission, however, appears to have been an exclusively manly business, as the groups’ chronicle, Liiceanu’s diary, published first in 1983, testifies. (Liiceanu)

Re-published in several editions by Liiceanu’s own press after 1989, it achieved ‘cult’ status. (Vasilescu) Entering the master’s house in the mountains amounted to a passage into a transcendental space, where history’s misery and frivolity disappeared. Knowledge, reserved for the pre-destined, required a voluptuous withdrawal from the world. The genial master guided his disciples on their journey of self-discovery, bestowing legitimacy onto them. Thus, ‘all hell became tolerable through the paradise of culture’ (7) and the philosopher ‘crossed the water unpolluted by it’ (*Herta Müller la București - In dialog cu Gabriel Liiceanu* 2010).

The diary inspired many young men to embrace rigorous philosophical work, unfortunately in this elitist, masculinist and ahistorical guise.<sup>8</sup> After 1989, national discomfort with the timid anti-communist dissidence, coupled with the group's (self-)canonisation, firmly established 'resistance through culture' in the collective mnemonic imagination. (Manolescu; Vasilescu; Liiceanu and Vasilescu; Iaru; Pleșu, 'Rezistența prin cultură') The notion satisfied the dire national need to reclaim some historical agency after 1989 – especially given other communist countries' stronger record of dissidence – and ground Romania's historical claim to cultural 'Europeanness'. The intelligentsia invested in it symbolically, politically and emotionally, promoting it aggressively, so much so that the melodramatic, controlling image of the resister-philosopher remained largely uncontested until an outsider intimately familiar with the context – Herta Müller – challenged its hierarchies of interpretive authority and the mnemonic community's problematic emotional investments.

The scandal started with Müller's winning the 2009 Nobel Prize for literature. Her novels on the dictatorship are inspired by her own biography: her life as an ethnic German in Romania, her writing, persecution by the secret police and exile to Germany in 1987. They provide a Romanian bestiary of big and small tyrants, carefully drawn in their ambiguous particularity. Müller traces the long-term effect of the dictatorship on human relationships and the normalisation of complicity: everyone, including resisters, compromised. The morally blurry image her work offers sits uneasily with the institutionalised melodrama of the victimised nation and its heroic philosophers.

To the elitist, 'unpolluted' figure of the intellectual, Müller's novels – for the first time translated into Romanian after 2009 – opposed the figure of the ordinary man and woman, who sometimes confronted the regime's henchmen, other times kept silent, fearing for their lives. (*Animalul inimii; Încă de pe atunci vulpea era vânătorul*) In Romania's sea of duplicity, the brave were too few to be effective. Moreover, all resisters were impure, none fitted the melodramatic script. As one of her novels' title suggests, *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter*: in a dictatorship, all hunters are simultaneously victims, and vice versa, though their co-implication in a grey, moral swamp.

While at the centre of many of Müller's novels, intellectuals are all contaminated. Discussing her own bystander status to political repression, she confesses that she felt

[A]n impetuous pity for those it [death] had touched, that spontaneous compassion that lasts for a while, then goes away. That petrification, fingers curled, nails painfully stuck in your

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<sup>8</sup> (Matei) offers a socio-historical analysis of this model.

palm, lips tight while you watched some unknown being arrested, beaten, crushed, in plain sight. ... You feel a languorous guilt that you cannot stop anything bad from happening to the others and a wicked happiness that you had not been the punished one. (*Regele se-nclină și ucide* 56)

Unlike the ‘resisters through culture’, Müller’s characters are always inserted in history, embodied, enmeshed in complex relationships that both nurture and make them vulnerable to repression. They harbour no illusions about the value of photographically documenting extra-legal deaths, smuggling critical texts abroad, or refusing cooperation with the secret police: no historical mission, only ethical commitments and the pleasure of political camaraderie are motivating them. Through her writing, therefore, Müller renders resistance messier, but more accurate for that reason: disrupting the comforting attachment to the idea of ‘resistance through culture’ she leaves Romanians without any consolation, forcing them to face their own complex involvement with the regime. Her *mise en écriture* (Van Damme) made her hermeneutical dissidence publicly unavoidable, especially given the Nobel’s symbolic weight.

Many rejected this unflattering narrative, which upset official and unofficial processes of forgetting and frustrated a nationally deeply-felt need for a redemptive story. While few commentators celebrated her talent (Golea; Schiop), the ‘undesired intimacy’ of her work led others to accuse her of failing to ‘move on’. (Iuga cited in Glajar 2013, 54) Ruffled by the award being given to a German ethnic, several intellectuals started a scandal, questioning her narrative, her standing to tell it, as well as her literary merits. Her interpretive dissidence was read as an assault, especially given her targeting of intellectuals and their unwillingness to confront their own passivity by peddling ‘resistance through culture’. A public of indignant ‘victims’ was constituted, contesting her story’s veridicity and her authority to tell it (as a German ethnic and exile) and highlighting the suffering her harsh judgments inflicted not only on the intellectuals, but on the whole traumatised nation: melodramatic modalities were adopted to other her. Pleșu pseudo-congratulated her, diminishing her merit and popularity and misogynistically labelling her ‘recalcitrant’. (Realitatea.net, ‘Andrei Pleșu’) Some foregrounded the political timing of her Nobel, two decades after ’89 – insinuating Müller’s merit was irrelevant. Lastly and perversely, the dictatorship was credited for her award-winning work. (Realitatea.net, *Paul Cernat: Nobelul este revanșa Hertei Müller*, DIGI 24; Gândul)

A dialogue organised between Müller and Liiceanu at the Athenaeum turned the scandal into an affair: two competing understandings of resistance and intellectuals’ authority to narrate the past

clashed, and Müller seduced a supporting public into existence. (*Herta Müller la București - In dialog cu Gabriel Liiceanu* 2010). She described ‘resistance through culture’ as self-serving withdrawal, privatisation, subterfuge, which left the dictatorship untouched. In basic Romanian, punctuated by humorous linguistic licences – contrasting with Liiceanu’s elaborate vocabulary and precious formulations – she firmly debunked the myth of the contemplative intellectual and his special epistemic insight. This was consistent with her fiction where intellectuals, herself included, are never paragons of integrity or courage. She explained ‘resister’ was a label others apply to the intellectual – thus subtly criticising her interlocutor’s conceit in assuming this status for himself, banking the symbolic capital it provided.

The audience in the Athenaeum enthusiastically applauded Müller’s position, kickstarting the affair, which then relocated to the mass media. One camp supported her dissenting narrative and right to tell it, seduced by her books but also her public honesty about her own shortcomings, the refusal of the label ‘resister’ for herself, and her clear outlining of the political costs of mythological self-delusions. They criticised Liiceanu’s impostorship and self-interest (*Sora*; *Glasul*; *Redacția*) – a sign of his failure to de-singularise his claims. The intellectual establishment defended him, often deploying sexist tropes (*Dilema Veche*; *Gândul*). The fragility of the hegemonic view emerged very clearly, tested through the affair. Gatekeepers’ attempt to garner unanimous outrage at Müller’s hermeneutical dissidence faltered as she pried open a wide fissure in the hermeneutical horizon of memory.<sup>9</sup> The affair destabilized the masculinist mythology of ‘resistance through culture’ and the privileges its protagonists accrued, inviting a painful, yet more honest reckoning with widespread complicity *and* the inescapable ambivalence of political resistance.

Müller’s success at turning the scandal into an affair was helped by the Nobel – an alternative source of authority, outside the national (provincial) self-canonising intellectual elite. Timewise, as in Malle’s case, her dissidence benefitted from the change of generation: a predominantly young public, less invested materially, symbolically and emotionally in self-justificatory, anti-communist narratives, was seduced by Müller’s anti-elitism and her humility. The change of generation constituted a structural opportunity that Müller’s hermeneutical assault on myth-makers’ transcendental phantasies valorised. Thus, a much-needed pluralism was injected in the space of memory.

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<sup>9</sup> This was compounded by the news that the group’s members could work undisturbed and even travel abroad only because Noica worked as an agent and informer for the secret police. (Andreescu)

## Remapping the Past, Reimagining the Future

Not all hermeneutical dissidences are equally valuable: some reproduce self-serving hermeneutical erasures. The two cases discussed here have been selected for their troubling the connection between ‘masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.’ (Enloe 45) Benefitting from structural opportunities – the change of generation, efforts by prior dissidents, growing national recognition of the artworld as a space of memory-making – and offering seductive counter-narratives, both dissidents successfully contested official mnemonic regimes by triggering affairs. Malle’s hermeneutical dissidence generated virulent outrage by dissociating masculinity from resistance, including subtler resistances and foregrounding widespread collaboration. Müller’s writing disrupted the association between resistance and apollonian reflection – the privilege of the male philosopher – re-signifying it as subterfuge and opposing to it ambivalent yet worldly forms of contestation by ordinary men and women belonging to a variety of social strata.

Both affairs crossed from the artistic field into the field of political memory. In doing justice to the ambiguity and compromises involved in all political action – resistance included – hermeneutical dissidents in these cases questioned institutionalised, Manichean memories of past struggles that regimented emotional identification with masculinist heroism. Their counter-narratives foregrounded a plurality of different resistances – ambivalent, non-armed, artistic, punctual – by a variety of actors, thus expanding existing imaginaries of political action. Dislocating myth-makers’ right to tell the authoritative story, dissidents sought to legitimise alternative standpoints from where the story could be told, as well as different modalities of telling it. In doing so, they reshaped the pool of hermeneutical resources the mnemonic imagination could rely on in guiding action and proposed alternative objects of emotional investment.

Both affairs dislocated reified masculinist myth-making and remapped the space of memory. Both affairs testify to dissidents’ capacity to insert uncertainty in institutionalised, emotionally anchored and only apparently immutable hermeneutical horizons of memory. Their dissidence foregrounded the inescapable ambiguity of human action and made difficult the maintenance of reductive, melodramatic memories. In doing so, they also opened a new vista onto the future, inviting communities to consider a richer – if less heroic – repertoire of political engagement.

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