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A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

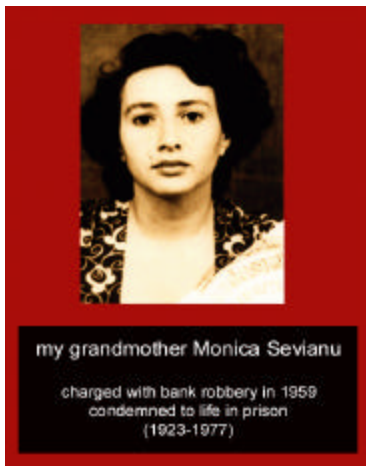
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RECONSTRUCTION

a film by irene lusztig

synopsis

On September 18 1959, my fourteen-year-old mother watched as the Romanian Securitate (secret police) burst into her home and arrested her mother and stepfather. No explanation was given for the mysterious and traumatic arrests: only months later did my mother learn that her parents, Monica Alfandary Sevianu, and Igor "Gugu" Sevianu, together with four other men, had been tried and condemned for their alleged involvement in the hold-up of an armored car transporting over a million lei in state money to a branch of the Romanian National Bank. My grandmother Monica was the only woman involved in the hold-up, and the only member of the group who escaped without a death sentence. Five years into her life sentence, she was set free by the political amnesty of 1964. She returned to her family and children, and eventually managed to immigrate to Israel, where she died in 1977.



Reconstruction is a feature-length documentary that strives to explore the ramifications of the so-called "Ioanid Gang" bank heist of 1959.

The film uses the event of the bank heist as a point of departure for an examination of present day Romania as a landscape scarred by its history, struggling with the legacy of its past. My grandmother's story, as told through interviews with her surviving friends and relatives, archival footage, and contemporary footage shot in Romania, can be seen as a metaphor for a search for historical truth that, while elusive and highly subjective, is also critically important for Romania today, as it struggles with its painful transition from communist dictatorship to democracy. Mirroring this broader idea of a nation's search for historical truth is my family's more intimate search for truth and identity: my mother's search as she tries for the first time to confront her childhood and to understand what led her mother to abandon two young children for a political gesture equivalent to suicide, and my own search to understand this painful chapter in history as a second generation Romanian immigrant seeing Romania for the first time.

The "Ioanid Gang" bank heist of 1959 was by all accounts one of the most controversial political cases in the history of Romanian communism. That anyone would even consider masterminding a bank hold-up in a society where owning money was a stigma and police surveillance was unrelenting was inconceivable. The fact that all six "gangsters" were prominent Jewish intellectuals and former underground communists made the incident



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even more fantastical. The crime, the arrest, the closed trial, and the fact that five men were executed for an economic crime created a tremendous sensation in Bucharest. But even more sinister was the subsequent Party decision to arrange the shooting of a feature-length propaganda film called *Reconstituirea* (Re-enactment), a so-called documentary produced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (described by one of my interviewees as a "gruesome case of cinema vérité"). Instead of professional actors, the six convicts themselves were forced - either drugged or lured by the false promise that their death sentences would be commuted to life - to re-enact the official version of their own crime and arrest on film. When Party members and journalists were invited to closed screenings of this film in 1960-61, the macabre production sent shock waves into the ranks of the Party. *Reconstruction* uses footage from this old film (a rare and horrifying archival film, which has almost never been screened outside of Romania) as an armature for a new film, which re-examines the events of a story that has been suppressed by the Romanian government for over forty years.

The details of the story were, and still are, shrouded in mystery - even today, rumor and paranoid conspiracy theory are hopelessly intertwined with fact. After years of constantly re-invented history, the task of reconstructing the factual framework of a story mired in Romania's darkest and murkiest political machinery is both daunting and imperative: only through a conscientious effort to address these secret chapters of Romanian history can contemporary Romania finally come to grips with the atrocities of the communist regime and begin to rebuild its broken society.

Reconstruction is constructed as a description of two parallel journeys (both physical and emotional) that converge at the end of the film. The first is my own journey as a filmmaker and researcher, as I try to assemble a portrait of a grandmother I never knew through the fragmented, often contradictory narratives of people who knew her. In order to make this film, I embarked on an often intense process of total immersion, moving to Bucharest for seven months, and learning to speak Romanian. My filmic search for my grandmother leads me to the old bank building where the hold-up occurred (now being renovated for use as a home for senior citizens), the street where my mother used to live, and the infamous political prison Jilava. My search to learn more about my grandmother and the enigmatic story of the bank heist leads me from New York to Frankfurt to Israel, and finally to Bucharest in search of friends and relatives who can tell me their memories of Monica Alfandary Sevanu. These interviews with witnesses (including family members, neighbors, prison



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guards and government officials) are an important component of the film. In my quest to uncover what really happened, I encounter an overwhelming number of completely different versions of the same story. I hear that the gangsters were part of an organized Zionist movement, stealing money to help Romanian Jews. I hear that the group planned to use the money to buy a plane and leave the country. I hear that, crazy from



disillusionment, the group of former romantic communists plotted the robbery as a grandiose kamikaze-style act of political theater. Ultimately, the contradictory and baroque stories that I collect about the incident are far more interesting and revealing than any clear-cut exposé, as each person I talk to tells me memories shaped by forty years of silence, distance, and struggle to construct a logical narrative around an illogical act.

The second journey is that of my mother, who immigrated to the US nearly thirty years ago, as she returns to Bucharest for the first time since leaving in her twenties, and tries to reconcile a city rendered nearly unrecognizable by urban decay with the Bucharest of her memories. My mother, who left Bucharest in 1970, remembers both Romania and her mother with an uneasy combination of bitterness and sentimentality. After the arrest of her parents, my mother was left alone to take care of her younger brother. Almost all of her relatives and family friends were arrested for questioning, and the few friends that were left in Bucharest, caught up in the general atmosphere of terror and paranoia bred by the mysterious political arrests of the Gheorghiu-Dej regime, refused to have anything to do with her. Understandably, my mother's memories of Romania are indelibly marked by the experience of being a political pariah, an "enemy of the people" who was asked to leave high school (enemies of the people, she was told, are not worth educating), an orphan at the age of fourteen. Only through my interest in making a film about Romania does my mother gradually begin to talk about these more painful childhood memories, and, when I decide to move to Romania for six months to finally see the country where my parents grew up, my mother decides that she will come and visit as well.

While *Reconstruction* begins by presenting itself as a personal family story, using interviews with relatives and friends of my grandmother and contemporary footage shot in Bucharest, it gradually expands into a more complex essay form incorporating and interpreting images from the old propaganda film *Reconstituirea*, as well as other propaganda images from communist Romania.



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Reconstruction uses the story of the bank hold-up and the production of the propaganda film as a point of departure for a meditation on how a regime invents itself through the images it produces, an exploration of representation, reality, and authoritarianism in which, ultimately, images become deadly weapons. Through such archival images and interviews (including an interview with the cinematographer responsible for shooting *Reconstituirea* as well as other propaganda films of the 50's and 60's) *Reconstruction*



raises questions about images, truth, and political theater that are at the heart of the film. *Reconstruction* opens with an excerpt from the archival film *Reconstituirea*: in the past, we are told, historians, who were all too often subjective and inaccurate, recorded history. Today, thanks to modern recording devices like the movie camera, reality is preserved intact: a reality that is absolute, objective, and beyond question. *Reconstruction* returns to this premise of cinema as truth throughout the film as it quotes the older archival

film, undermines its assertion of historical veracity, and juxtaposes it with the contemporary retelling of history.

Reconstruction is both a family story spanning three generations, and, at the same time, a film that takes on larger issues, challenging notions of official histories and propaganda. It is both a personal meditation on the act of making a portrait of an absent protagonist, and a political meditation on the Eastern European communist experience from the perspective of a second generation Romanian-American. Ultimately, *Reconstruction* doesn't aspire to reach a final conclusion about the bank robbery, nor does it demystify the enigmatic persona of Monica Alfandary Seviaru.

Rather, the film points to the impossibility of defining single objective history, encouraging instead a kind of complex and ongoing process of examining and engaging with the past. As it juxtaposes past and present, contextualizing a historical gaze within a contemporary perspective, *Reconstruction* becomes an important and relevant document, a plea for opening up an honest and informed investigation of Romania's



troubled communist legacy as a necessary precursor to Romania's future development. Only a genuine spirit of openness and awareness (both in the official discourse of politicians and in the work of artists, writers and journalists) can foster a climate in which Romania can come to accept and forgive its own history, a climate in which real change is possible.



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festivals

IDFA AMSTERDAM INT'L DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL - *FIPRESCI Jury Nomination*
SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL - *Certificate of Merit*
BOSTON SOCIETY OF FILM CRITICS - "*Rediscoveries/Discoveries*" Award
NEW ENGLAND FILM FESTIVAL - *Best Documentary*
VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
DOCAVIV DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL
IT'S ALL TRUE SAO PAULO DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL
SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
DOCUMENTARY FORTNIGHT, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NY
BOSTON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN FILM FESTIVAL
ATLANTA FILM FESTIVAL
PALIC INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, SERBIA
ALPE ADRIA CINEMA FILM FESTIVAL, ITALY
NEW YORK JEWISH WOMEN FILM FESTIVAL

USA - 2001 - 90 minutes – color / b&w
English, Romanian, French, Hebrew with English subtitles



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RECONSTRUCTION

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credits

produced, directed, and written by: **Irene Lusztiġ / Komsomol Films**

camera and sound: **Maria Luisa Gambale** and **Irene Lusztiġ**

editing: **Irene Lusztiġ**

assistant producer / director: **Maria Luisa Gambale**

sound design: **Richie Williams**

main project adviser: **Richard P. Rogers**

academic advisers: **Radu Ioanid, Vladimir Tismaneanu**

archival footage provided by: **National Archive of Romania, Jilava / National Archive, Washington D.C.**

featuring excerpts from the 1960 film *Reconstituirea*, produced in Bucharest by the **Ministry of Internal Affairs** in collaboration with the **Alexandru Sahia** documentary studio.

Reconstituirea director: **Virgil Calotescu**
Reconstituirea director of photography: **N.N. Marinescu**
Reconstituirea camera assistant: **Pantelie Tutuleasa**
Reconstituirea sound: **Marin Alexandru**
Reconstituirea editor: **Eugenia Gruici**
Reconstituirea music: **Eugen Popescu**

this film was funded by grants from:

George Peabody Gardner Traveling Fellowship
Massachusetts Media Fellowship



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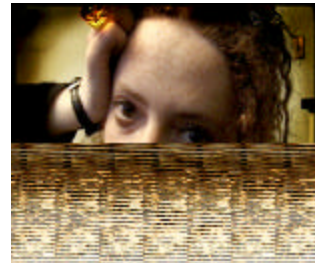
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a film by irene lusztig

director's biography

Born in England to Romanian immigrant parents in 1974, Irene has been living in the Boston area since 1978. She graduated from Harvard with highest honors in filmmaking and Chinese studies in 1997. She has also spent time living in China, where she studied cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy, as well in London, doing postgraduate study at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

Irene was the recipient of a 1997 George Peabody Gardner Traveling Fellowship for young artists, which she spent living in Bucharest, learning Romanian, and shooting *Reconstruction*, her first feature-length documentary. Her previous work includes her graduating student film *For Beijing with Love and Squalor* (1997), an award-winning documentary about contemporary Beijing's underground youth culture and has been shown at film festivals in the US, East Asia, and Europe, and her first short film *Crema Roz*.



Irene is currently in pre-production with a new film about Moscow, the end of the Cold War, and child diplomats. She hopes to move to New York very soon.

director's filmography

***Reconstruction* (2001)**

90 minute video documentary

Produced, directed, written and edited by Irene Lusztig

***For Beijing with Love and Squalor* (1997)**

60 minute video documentary

Produced, directed, written, shot, and edited by Irene Lusztig

***Crema Roz* (1996)**

18 minute 16mm documentary short

Directed, shot and edited by Irene Lusztig



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