

# What I Learned from Andrei Gorzo: A Brief Commentary

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**Abstract:** Andrei Gorzo, a leading Romanian film critic and academic, has long been known for his insightful analysis of cinema and literature, often interweaving personal history into his work. His latest book, *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene: O istorie de familie* (*What I Learned from Graham Greene: A Family History*), diverges from expectations by blending memoir, literary criticism, and historical reflection. This paper explores how Gorzo's engagement with Greene's works, both as a reader and as a translator, shaped his approach to storytelling and analysis. Further, it examines Gorzo's distinctive narrative techniques, such as his use of abrupt shifts, associative storytelling, and reflective interjections, which mirror Greene's themes and style. Ultimately, the book navigates Gorzo's family history, particularly his father's entanglement in Romania's communist and post-communist realities, through the moral and ideological lenses found in Greene's fiction. By drawing parallels between Greene's depictions of secrecy, betrayal, and survival and his own lived experiences, Gorzo constructs a deeply personal yet universally resonant narrative. Thus, Gorzo's *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene* is a memoir on the intellectual and emotional engagement with literature's power to shape identity and understanding, through which Gorzo not only pays tribute to Greene but also crafts a poignant exploration of memory, history, and the role of storytelling in making sense of the past. *veries*.

**Keywords:** memory studies, fiction, cinema, criticism, communist history

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Andrei Gorzo is a prominent Romanian film critic and academic who began publishing film reviews in 1996 and has since established himself as a leading voice in both Romanian and international film criticism. Gorzo studied at the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" (UNATC) in Bucharest and furthered his education at New York University. He earned his doctorate in cinematography and is currently a professor at UNATC, where he teaches film history and theory. As a result of his education and career, Gorzo has authored several influential books on cinema, including *Bunul, răul și urâtul în cinema* (Polirom 2009), *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (Humanitas 2012), and *Imagini încadrate în istorie: Secolul lui Miklós Jancsó* (Tact 2015). In 2023, he co-authored *Beyond the New Romanian Cinema: Romanian Culture, History, and the Films of Radu Jude* with Veronica Lazăr (Lucian Blaga University Press), and *Desene mișcătoare: Dialoguri despre critică și cinema* with Mihai Iovănel (Polirom).<sup>1</sup>

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1. For an overview of Gorzo's education and career, see Christene d'Anca, "Moving Words About Moving Pictures in Andrei Gorzo and Mihai Iovanel's Dialogue: A Commentary," *Revista Transilvania*, no. 9 (2023): 65: "Andrei Gorzo, even before earning his doctorate in film and theater studies from the National University of Theater Arts and Cinema "I.L. Caragiale", began publishing in his field, with his doctoral thesis turning into one of the most seminal theoretical works on New Romanian Cinema – *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel: Un mod de a gândi cinemaul, de la André Bazin la Cristi Puiu*<sup>2</sup> [Things That Could Not Be Said Otherwise: A Way of Thinking About Cinema from André Bazin to Cristi Puiu]. Now, among almost a dozen books and countless published articles, two of his more recent works, *Viața, moartea, și iar viața criticii de film*<sup>3</sup> [Life, Death, and the New Life of Film Critics] and *Beyond the New Romanian Cinema: Romanian Culture, History, and the Films of Radu Jude*, co-authored with Veronica Lazăr, demonstrate his ongoing efforts to not only contribute to the discipline, but further bring Romanian film criticism into international conversations. Additionally, aside from his formal publications, Gorzo also maintains a blog, which he regularly updates with similarly relevant, insightful, and in-depth posts about the ongoings of cinema, such as his most recent entry (at the time this article was written) about Cristi Puiu's newest film, *MMXX*. Arguably, Andrei Gorzo has done more than any other critic to integrate Romanian films into the larger cinematic world stage."



Gorzo typically intersperses his own personal history throughout his writing as he recalls different points in his life when a book or film spoke to him, or how such interactions became transformative.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, I have not only become accustomed to his relatable style, but have also come to expect it. With that said, Andrei Gorzo's latest book, *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene: O istorie de familie* (What I Learned from Graham Greene: A Family History) was not at all what I expected, and I absolutely loved it.<sup>3</sup>

From the first pages Gorzo immerses the reader into the sordid intimacies of his life and family circa 1995. Even though his narrative is biographical, for me there was an added layer of realism as a result of having been online friends with him and his sister for years. It was surreal envisioning the circumstances of their early years, and even more intriguing reading about his father who was one of the most formative figures. Moreover, while the book was a page turner from the start, Gorzo's style simultaneously (and perhaps paradoxically) slowed down and sped up the reading process. For example, at one point he explains his family's situation stating that "the big problem was that, as we had been told, dad had accepted this job for housing (otherwise he had no official position and he was only paid in periodic premiums), well, it was almost December 1995 and we had ended up living illegally in the one house next to the Military Museum and the courtyard filled with people urging us to leave at once and the hearths were cold and my sister and I were communicating through signals drawn from the vapors of our breath and no one had thought to spay the cat."<sup>4</sup> I refer to this type of non sequitur as the "wait... what?" moment. It's jarring but draws your attention and has you consider what you just read. It is also an effective segue into the next section in which the cat become a central character while the reader becomes just as invested in her as the rest of the family. As the narrative follows her adventure into kitty motherhood, the story that follows becomes intertwined into Gorzo's family's history in much the same way the cat became a part of their family, after which Gorzo pivots from the cat and her litter(s) to his own family's transition, and just as abruptly jumps into the meat of the book – his relationship with Graham Greene – which by this point the reader has all but forgotten about, and the stark announcement serves as a reminder and hook. So, what does Graham Greene have to do with any of this?

The following three chapters set the foundation for this relationship. Chapter 2 outlines Greene's trajectory as an author as Gorzo situates him into his contemporaneous timeline embedded between two World Wars, with the Cold War and Vietnam right around the corner. Although Greene was still a child during World War I, the aftermath of the war influenced the societal mood in which he came of age. The disillusionment and existential uncertainty that pervaded post-war Europe found echoes in his later exploration of alienation, betrayal, and moral ambiguity. During this time, Greene traveled extensively, working as a journalist. His experiences in politically volatile regions, such as Mexico (documented in *The Lawless Roads* and fictionalized in *The Power and the Glory*), allowed him to observe firsthand the socio-political consequences of war, revolution, and colonialism. For example, in the latter novel, *The Power and the Glory*, set in 1920s Mexico following a communist revolution, the dynamics of religion and materialism are depicted through the provision of religious services in exchange for money. The story centers on an aging Catholic "whisky priest," whose troubled conscience accompanies him as he is pursued by a young communist officer intent on capturing and executing him to further the state's secularization efforts. The priest's worldview intertwines materialism and spirituality, rejecting the notion that the two are mutually exclusive. Instead, they coalesce into a single entity. This perspective is evident in the priest's pragmatic approach to his clerical duties, as he readily incorporates materialist reasoning when opportunities arise to profit from them. For instance, upon reaching a village where he is asked to baptize children, he immediately calculates the potential financial gain. The unnamed priest effectively trades material wealth for spiritual sustenance, turning God into a commodity. To justify these transactions, the priest recalls advice from his former mentor: "They don't value what they don't pay for." This principle, entrenched within Marxist theory, suggests that the poor come to value the sacred only when it is assigned an exchange value, replacing its intrinsic use value. From this perspective, it is particularly intriguing

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2. However, it is important to note that, as Victor Cobuz wrote in his review of the book, for Gorzo "filmul, literatura și critica sînt lucruri foarte personale, pe care le consumă și le discută înșă cu profesionalism, fără a cădea în excese impresioniste" [film, literature, and criticism are very personal things, which he consumes and discusses with professionalism, without falling into impressionistic excesses]. See Victor Cobuz, "Un creier-ochi literar-cinematic" *Observatorul Cultural* 1241, January 28, 2025.

3. The book has been well-received in Romanian cultural circles, with critics praising its blend of personal memoir and literary analysis. The latest review (at the time this article was written) also came from *Observatorul Cultural* by Octavian Plăiașu, "O viețuire cu Graham Greene" (March 27, 2025).

4. "Problemă mare era că, după cum ni se tot repetase, tata acceptase jobul ăsta pentru o locuință (altminteri n-avea nicio funcție oficială și nu era plătit decât în prime periodice), or, era aproape decembrie 1995 și ajunseserăm să locuim ilegal în casa aia de pe lângă Muzeul Militar și curtea se umpluse de oameni care ne somau să plecăm odată și sobele erau reci și eu și sora mea dialogam prin semnale desenate din aburii respirației și nimeni nu se gândise să castreze pisica" (12-13).

to consider the process of commodifying the divine from the standpoint of the impoverished individuals who willingly pay for it. Thus, as evident from Greene's perspectives depicted in the novel, his experiences abroad greatly contributed to his portrayal of ideological conflicts and human suffering.

Gorzo does not spend too much time on this novel when bringing his past and Greene's together, as he will later do, most likely because the similarities are fairly easy to discern, especially among his target audience – his contemporaries. Nevertheless, it might be useful to further spell it out for a broader audience. The dynamics explored in *The Power and the Glory*, particularly the commodification of spirituality under a materialist framework, resonate with those observed in Romanian communism, especially during the Ceaușescu era. While communist regimes officially promoted atheism and sought to suppress organized religion, they often found themselves entangled in pragmatic compromises and contradictions that echoed the whisky priest's blending of material and spiritual considerations. In Romania, the communist regime sought to control and co-opt religion rather than eradicating it entirely, recognizing the enduring power of faith among the population. Churches, while marginalized, were allowed to operate under strict state supervision. Thus, religious rituals and services, though limited, became valuable in a secularized society. Just as the whisky priest estimated the value of his baptisms, Romanians under communism often turned to black-market spiritual services, paying clergy privately for baptisms, weddings, and funerals that the state sought to regulate or discourage. Ceaușescu's regime attempted to craft a secular «spirituality» tied to nationalism and the cult of personality. This paradoxically echoed the Marxist perspective in Greene's novel: that the value of religion, or any ideology, often derives from its perceived material or symbolic cost. Just as Greene's whisky priest saw value in charging for sacraments, the regime commodified nationalistic rituals, demanding loyalty and participation as a form of transactional devotion to the state. In other words, this relationship created a system where spiritual services and symbols were often subtly commodified or used for material and ideological purposes, mirroring the transactional dynamics in Greene's novel. Ultimately, both Greene's fictional depiction and the Romanian communist reality underscore the difficulty of eradicating faith entirely in a materialist society, and further reveal how materialism and spirituality are not strictly oppositional forces but often coexist in uneasy, transactional relationships – whether under the guise of survival, state control, or personal belief.

Yet, whereas Greene's time in Mexico had a clear psychological effect on him, World War II, on the other hand, had a direct impact on not only Greene's work but also his life. He worked for the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) during the war, and his experiences in intelligence work informed many of his later novels, especially his espionage-themed works such as *The Ministry of Fear* and *The Quiet American*. In Richard Greene's biography of Graham Greene, he also regards this period in Graham Greene's life as a period of theological struggle, especially in regard to religion. At one point Richard Greene tellingly makes the distinction between being religious and belonging to a religion in his description of Graham Greene being "not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to be Catholic."<sup>5</sup> Clearly for Green, the war presented him with bouts of moral conflict, questions of loyalty, and the blurred lines between good and evil which later became themes within his novels. Consequently, characters in works like *The Heart of the Matter* often struggle with personal guilt and ethical dilemmas set against the chaos of war. Gorzo, too, touches upon Greene's religious crisis, and how it affected his views of the author as Greene's wavering relationship with Catholicism, and near abandonment of it often gave way to other unsavory characteristics that Gorzo simply could not ignore. It was not easy for Gorzo to reconcile his original image of a man he practically grew to consider his second father, with newfound information that posits him in a much different and dimmer light. However, far from distancing himself from the author, Gorzo views his less than sympathetic activities and beliefs as proof that people are complicated and there is never just one way to read a person, or in this case, their novels.

Meanwhile, chronologically for Greene, during the Cold War, the ideological battle between capitalism and communism became central to several of Greene's novels. For example, *The Quiet American* is set during the early stages of the Vietnam War and critiques U.S. interventionism, and *Our Man in Havana* explores espionage and political absurdity during the Cold War in Cuba, blending humor with Greene's skepticism toward authority, while Greene's travels to the Soviet bloc and his sympathies for socialist causes also influenced works like *The Comedians*, which critiques neocolonialism and dictatorship in Haiti. According to Christopher Hull, there is reason to believe at this time Greene's activities were "a willful attempt to create a smokescreen around his political persona, and distract from his intelligence gathering activities,"<sup>6</sup> meaning Hull believes Greene to have

5. Richard Greene, *The Unquiet Englishman: A Life of Graham Greene* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 105.

6. Christopher Hull, *Our Man Down in Havana: The Story Behind Graham Greene's Cold War Spy Novel* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019) 281.



maintained his intelligence work well beyond the confines of World War II, which would explain his continued creation of espionage works in way that “demystified” the secret agent role.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Gorzo reminds us that while in “1978, le Carré was the expert *en titre* on unglamorous espionage [...] le Carré’s espionage is never as ominously unglamorous as Greene’s can be.”<sup>8</sup> It would appear he was still trapped within the bureaucratic boundaries of the secret-agent life, and his writing served as an escape.

In the interim, in Chapter 3, Gorzo ties Greene’s past into his own, making the connection clearer for his audience as he traces the reading habits that he inherited from his father (much like the reading materials themselves), and how these works led to his appreciation of Greene’s, albeit in a surprising round-about way, which he further clarifies in Chapter 4 before vacillating back to his own personal family history during the 90s in Chapter 5.

I particularly like the back and forth between Gorzo’s and Greene’s timelines in which Gorzo draws parallels, while also pinpointing the moments Greene’s texts reached him the most. In these instances, Gorzo’s narrative becomes incredibly reflective and introspective, taking on a psychological dimension as he analyzes not only Greene’s texts, but his own youthful penchants and the reasoning behind them. He states he clung to *Omul nostru din Havana* for his own mental health when his father “had brought the family to the frontier of a world that throughout [his] adolescence [he] would perceive, with increasing alarm, as a tangle of shadows.”<sup>9</sup> Then, he commiserated with Jerome from *Un accident penibil* as they both had to contend with their father’s secret lives, one real, one fabricated.

The following chapters follow suit – but I am not going to give away the fascinating family history. Instead, I will briefly pause over Chapter 14 where Gorzo seamlessly ties together Greene’s short story *Dărâmătorii* and the movie *The Fallen Idol* with two time periods from his youth. The way he makes connections between his and Iulia’s (his sister’s) war play amongst sacks of possessions constantly on the move, and the children in the short story who prolong the destruction brought about World War II with their acts of vandalism speaks to his sharp critical perspective. Then, he superimposes the film’s concept of deception and ambiguity onto the various protective lies he and Iulia had been told by the adults in their lives, which only over time they deciphered, not unlike the film’s protagonist who’s sleuthing to find the truth upturns his entire life. These types of associations enrich the text, but I think for Gorzo, they also deepen his own understanding of the past. Moreover, the tension between truth and fiction that Gorzo grappled with in various capacities throughout his youth, within his home and throughout the larger socio-political tapestry of both pre and post-communist Romania, emerges in such instances and becomes a running theme, further drawing correspondences between Greene’s texts and Gorzo’s life.

Chapter 15, on the other hand, outlines another kind of connection between Gorzo and Greene, as well as two decisive moments in his life. In the 90s, Gorzo discovered “the video library from the British Council and the one from the French Institute. [He] started to diversify [his] tastes. [He] became a cinephile”<sup>10</sup> – a step without which he maybe would not have pursued his current trajectory in his education and career to become a renowned film critic. Then, “the film, *The Third Man*, seen circa 1996, when [he] was in eleventh grade, was the decisive experience that made [him] dependent on Greene”<sup>11</sup> – without which we may never have had this book, nor Gorzo’s captivating family history.

I also believe Gorzo’s earlier translation work played a crucial role in shaping *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene*. His experience as a translator, particularly his work on Greene’s *The Human Factor* (*Factorul uman*, Polirom 2005), allowed him to engage deeply with Greene’s narrative style, themes, and moral complexities, perhaps even more so than he had previously done. I can only imagine that while translating Greene’s novel, Gorzo immersed himself in the British author’s world that was defined by political intrigue, ethical dilemmas, and characters navigating ambiguous moral landscapes. The kind of close reading and linguistic interpretation necessary for translation must have also helped him refine his own storytelling techniques and analytical perspective in much the same way Greene’s preoccupation with the tension between duty and personal conscience must have resonated with Gorzo as he examined his father’s past in communist and post-communist Romania. Thus, as Gorzo applied Greene’s literary lens to his father’s life, interpreting key events, such as his father’s imprisonment and political entanglements through the same nuanced, ambivalent storytelling that characterizes Greene’s work, the act of

7. Gorzo, *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene*, 38.

8. “1978, le Carré era expertul en titre în spionaj neglamoros [...] spionajul lui le Carré nu e niciodată atât de veștejitor de neglamoros cum poate fi a lui Greene,” p. 39.

9. “adusese familia la frontiera unei lumi pe care pe parcursul adolescenței mele aveam s-o percep, din ce în ce mai alarmat, ca pe o încâlceală de umbră,” p. 48.

10. “videoteca de la British Council și pe cea de la institutul Francez. Am început să-im diversific gusturile. Am devenit cinefil” (111).

11. “filmul *Al treilea om*, văzut prin 1996, cand eram în clasa a unșpea, a fost experiența decisivă care m-a făcut dependent de Greene” (117).

translation, which requires an intimate understanding of an author's intent, structure, and subtext, gave Gorzo the tools to weave together personal memoir and literary analysis in a seamless and insightful manner. In this sense, his translation experience not only enriched his appreciation of Greene's writing but also influenced his own approach to narrating history, morality, and human contradictions in his book.

Then, the ensuing chapters of *Ce am învățat de la Graham Greene* follow the aftermath of 1989 in Romania, that was both euphoric and anticlimactic – as regime changes often are. These chapters were incredibly interesting for me because I left Romania in 1990 and never got to experience the shift undergone by my contemporaries, socially, culturally, economically, and politically, which Gorzo outlines very well. Here, if I were to channel Greene, I would look to the colonial and postcolonial aspects of his texts, such as those found in *The Quiet American* and *The Comedians* that focus on the diasporic aspect of identity, to which I could relate even outside the colonization perspective – although, an argument can be made in favor of it, but I digress. Basically, Gorzo's personal history helps me add to my own corpus of knowledge about the era in order to better understand the Romania I encountered incrementally as I returned again and again in subsequent years. Moreover, I relished our shared experiences. My family history differs drastically from Gorzo's, but has its own sordid past (such as my mother's constant attempts at escaping communism, occasional capture, consequences, and eventual success while she lived in a refugee internment camp in Turkey before being sent to the US in the hopes of liberating me and my father as well, right on the brink of the Revolution that simultaneously expedited her plans while leaving her to feel as though her efforts and suffering had been in vain). However, the greatest connection I made with the book was through the sentiments, beliefs, and ways of thinking, that resonate with the encounters of my own youth. In this regard, Gorzo's family in many ways mirrors mine, while his escape into literature parallels my own early predilections. Yet, I don't believe I am alone in this regard, and despite the fantastic elements connected to Gorzo's father, there is most definitely something for everyone to relate to in the book, which makes it especially captivating, while allowing others to gain a similar sense of introspection into their own past.

Lastly, after a brief foray into Gorzo's time at New York University while he obtained his Master's, the story returns to Romania where he reintegrates into family life, even as he and Iulia moved on, on their own and slowly began living their lives independently. The remaining chapters provide the end of the narrative arc, as well as closure to Gorzo's family history. Yet, despite the somber nature of the topics discussed – predominantly the death of several of Gorzo's close relatives, including his father – he maintains a fairly neutral tone that underscores Gorzo's dedication to a factual representation of the past, as well as perhaps a little bit of his fatalism. This is of course not to say he remains unbiased throughout, but that was never his intention. After all, as he confesses in the last pages, he wrote the book "because after five years, I am not reconciled with [my father's] death and the fact that no one knows about him or the life from which he came. I wrote this for self-help, not to heal from the wound that is him, but rather to meet with him daily during the writing process, on common territory [...] I hope that next time I meet with him I will have the presence of mind to say 'look, I also wrote a kind of spy story.'"<sup>12</sup>

I hope one day he does, too.

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12. "pentru că, după cinci ani, nu sunt împăcat cu moartea lui și cu faptul că nimeni nu știe nici de el, nici de lumea din care venea. Am scris-o pentru self-help, dar nu ca să mă vindec de rana care mi-e el, ci ca să mă întâlnesc cu el zilnic, pe durata scrierii, pe un teritoriu pe care-l avem în comun [...] Sper că, data viitoare când îl întâlnesc, o să am prezența de spirit să-i zic: 'Uite, am scris și eu un fel de poveste de spionaj.'" pp. 207–208.