

Media Offspring of the Romanian Revolution: A comparative analysis

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ABSTRACT The Romanian revolution of December 1989 was a political event, a media event and a media-theoretical event. It provoked an impressive amount of speculation on the mere possibility of history under the new mediatic conditions, which reduced its images to a parade of symptoms of the ever-growing tendency of politics towards spectacularization and even self-annihilation. Instead of trying to develop a similarly encompassing theory on the audiovisual representation of the revolutionary fact, the present article concentrates on three different media objects made after 1989: (1) Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's documentary essay *Videograms from a Revolution*; (2) the YouTube clip *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*; and (3) Corneliu Porumboiu's fiction feature *12:08 East of Bucharest*. These objects are analysed transversally and in shifting pairs, with a focus on their concrete audiovisual language, in connection with issues such as discursive and manipulation strategies, historical legitimation attempts and hierarchical media models. The aim is to transform these works into oblique, yet more empirical access points to the implications of the status of the events of December 1989 as the first full-fledged "televised revolution" for the collective memory, as well as for later audiovisual reworkings of that historical moment

KEYWORDS Romanian revolution; televised revolution; media politics; mediatization of politics; visual rhetoric.

On December 1989, the Romanian socialist regime crumbled due to a series of events ranging from popular revolts starting in the city of Timișoara and expanding like wildfire throughout the entire country, to the rapid takeover by a crisis leadership in which the military allied itself to the insurgents, consecrated political opponents and secondary figures of the Communist Party. It possibly constituted the most resounding of the falling bricks of the wall that still separated the Western and the Eastern Blocs at the end of the decade. Its death toll rose to around 1000, including former president Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, who were

executed after a hurried trial. The events of December 1989 were also inscribed in history as “the first televised revolution” (Siani-Davies 2005, 2) due to the heavy involvement of the national broadcasting network in the visualization and therefore in the concretization of this violent transfer of power.

This article does not aim to shed new light on the nature of the involvement of mass media in the unfolding of the Romanian revolution. Nowadays, the advent of digital technology, the generalization of image-recording devices and the succeeding blur between audience and media experts and between producers and consumers of media content have completely hijacked the debate concerning the audiovisual representation of social movements, relegating the concept of “televised revolution” to a seemingly narrow and bygone segment in time. Nevertheless, whether it is considered a fixed, yet still muddled moment in time, or an expression of social and media relational configurations that are still relevant for understanding the present despite the changes that occurred at the level of technological infrastructure, the Romanian revolution can be a valid standing point from which to study the intricacies of media, political thought and political action.

Apart from the status of “first televised revolution” as mentioned above, the events of December 1989 were also characterized by the extreme rapidity with which they were seized by theoretical thinking and absorbed into large-scale narrations about the evolution of media and of the concept of history. One telling example is the international symposium *The Media Are With Us!: The Role of Television in the Romanian Revolution*, held on August 6–7, 1990 in Budapest, Hungary. The conference, set up by the Media Research Foundation, an organization which reunited various specialists from the fields of art practice and theory in order to initiate debates on the impact of new technologies on all facets of society, demonstrated an extraordinary velocity of reaction, as the change of regime in Romania had taken place barely half a year previously. The titles of the lectures are revelatory for the more pregnant topics that would detach in the decades to come from the shapeless mass of media reflections generated by the events in Romania. They often came in the form of concise, hard-hitting maxims such as *Post Political Technology: Media Replaces Materials* (Ingo Günther), *The Media as Mask: The Sublimation of the Revolutionary Gaze* (Peter Weibel), *Electronic Angels of History: The Screen of Politics* (István Csörögi), *Revolution Theatre on Television: Dramaturgical Forms* (Vintillă

Ivănceanu), or *Television Image and Political Space in the Light of the Romanian Revolution* (Vilém Flusser), pointing towards a few main concerns: for one, the validity of the concepts of the political, and more extensively, of the historical, insofar as their traditional material – reality – proved to be under threat from the potency of its mediatic representation; for another, the relevance of having recourse to stale opposing notions of, on the one hand, the spontaneity of popular revolt and, on the other, the fabrication and manipulation of the organized coup. This could be seen in the context of mediatic language that blurs boundaries between documentation and construction, and leads to the spectacularization of every event that it transmits.

What clearly transpires from the intellectual ebullition that seized media scholars after the Romanian revolution is the fact that an otherwise marginal political event, an inevitable deflagration of the animosity the socialist regimes had managed to brew in their populations and that had no major impact on the course of world or even regional history, could still become a galvanizing object of study for a field of research, media studies. This field was in the process of exceeding and engulfing all other human and social sciences, and would provide intellectual tools for understanding all mass movements in the coming 21st century. The Romanian revolution spawned many media theories, but also many media objects. While the echoes and the memory of the political events of December 1989 were certainly shaped by these media objects, they were in turn shaped by the revelation (whether seen as threatening or exhilarating) of the enormous influence on political action and, more extensively, on reality that the audiovisual mass media held – as demonstrated by this “first televised revolution”. Therefore, I contend that the topic of the Romanian revolution, whether or not it entails the use of archival material, generates a surge of self-reflexive questioning within the audiovisual work that addresses it. Obviously, this tendency can be fought or, conversely, it can be embraced; it also takes different shapes according to the self-definition of that work and especially to its stance on the basic possibility of conveying truth through constructs of image and sound (and therefore its acceptance or rejection of traditional categories of documentary and fiction).

The present article will concentrate on three different media elements that will be analysed transversally and in shifting pairs. The aim is to transform them into oblique, yet highly relevant empirical access points to the issue of the impact of the Romanian revolution on later

audiovisual representations/reframings of the events as well as, more generally, on the politics of media and the mediatization of politics in the post-communist era. The three elements in question are:

1. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's documentary essay *Videograms from a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution*, 1992).
2. The clip of 4 hours and 44 minutes of raw live footage captured from TV on 22 December 1989 that circulates on YouTube under the title *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut / Revoluția română în direct*.
3. Corneliu Porumboiu's fiction feature *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau n-a fost*, 2006).

The analysis of the individual works and the parallels drawn between them will open threads of discussion on the means of audiovisually constructing a historical event both during and after its actual unfolding; on the echoes the transformation of the act of image-making into a tool of direct political intervention may have in the subsequent media production; and on how issues such as discursive and manipulation strategies, historical legitimation attempts and hierarchical media models, whose expressions vary according to temporal distance, the explicitness of the author's interventions, the level of complexity of the argument or the ease of aligning the work with contemporary problematics, influence their reception and may deflect back on the collective memory of the Romanian revolution.

The technicity of power in *Videograms from a Revolution* (1992)

Amongst the most memorable interventions in the previously mentioned 1990 symposium *The Media Are With Us!: The Role of Television in the Romanian Revolution* was Vilém Flusser's. He avidly seized on the events of December 1989 in order to present them as the crowning of his long-gestating theory concerning the succession of media configurations, unfolding under the sign of the confrontation between image and written word and, more amply, between mythical consciousness and linear – and therefore political – consciousness.

In Flusser's evolutionary trajectory, the image is the first to burst on the scene of the thinking man's consciousness and to coagulate in systems of expression, belief and social organization; linear writing was then invented precisely in order to challenge the vertiginous power of visual representation and its pull towards chaos and mysticism, away from "the world of experience". Due to the apparition of the printing press, the written word consolidated its grip on modern societies and relegated images to the status of appendix. But it was again a set of technological factors, those which allowed the rise of the audiovisual media of cinema and television, which would reverse this domination. According to Flusser, the conditions under which the Romanian revolution unfolded unquestionably marked the fulfilment of this "second coming" of image consciousness (Flusser 1990). Television was no mere historical agent in a popular uprising. The medium being – as is any image – essentially anti-political, based on (chance) happenings rather than (apprehensible) events, instantaneous and homogenizing rather than processual and causal, its taking the forefront of human efforts to make sense of their environment was in effect the end of history.

Flusser also sketches the aftermath of this discontinuance of history, affirming that in post-historical times, politics must find a hunting ground other than reality; therefore, it settles for images, which become the muddled locus of public and private experience alike. However, following Flusser's reasoning, it is unclear what actual impact this change of paradigm has on political actions, except for the overgrowth of its spectacular dimension, which now has to also adjust to the specificities of the medium of technological images.¹ In his presentation, Flusser tried to give an element of an answer by contrasting the monistic perspective which defines all ideologies with their constitutive act of varying points of view during the process of conceiving a still image (Vasily Klenov 2011 18:42). Even more relevant is the situation when the point of view shifts within the same continuum of images, as can happen in the case of moving image recordings – but beyond this purely technical aspect lies the same question of perspective understood equally as a moral and spatial coordinate.

¹ Obviously, such a dimension was never completely absent, but previous modes of political exhibition were more preoccupied either by the adaptability of their act to the then-dominant medium of the written word, or by the particular socio-spatial configurations within which they occurred – for example, the agora or the forum.

This dual – physical and ethical – dimension of the camera’s every standpoint is at the core of Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică’s 1992 documentary essay *Videograms from a Revolution*. The film is a compilation of numerous visual materials varying in levels of officiality (from state television to amateur material), in proximity and in complicity with the events that happened in Romania between December 19 and 25, 1989. In opposition to the dominant intellectual climate of the immediate aftermath of the Romanian revolution, characterized by a perilous willingness to rush to conclusions concerning happenings that were still shrouded in confusion, Farocki and Ujică plead for disengagement with generalizing narratives and interpretations that transcend prevailing facts. Instead, Ujică claimed that

[t]he fundamental perspective of our film [resides in its emphasis on the materiality of the medium, on the photograms that constitute it]: we – Harun and me and the viewers – don’t see anything else except what the cameras see and we don’t talk about anything else than what we see. We don’t talk about what we assume is happening behind closed doors, or in the visible or invisible centres of power, or in people’s heads, but only about what is visible. Another appropriate title would have been *What is visible (...)*. (Gorzo 2016, 12)

As Gorzo points out in his exegesis of Farocki and Ujică’s film, there are three main fields of tension that form around the apparently modest task of “sticking with the cameras”, without trying to fill in the interpretative lacunas which are left behind by the partial audiovisual documentation of the events. All three of these tension fields relate to oscillations between two poles that represent opposing techno-aesthetical configurations, as well as political and social conceptions.

The first ranges from prudent distance to integral implication, from fearful cameras hiding behind window curtains to avid close-ups of the protagonists who sometimes willingly offer themselves to the scrutinizing gaze of the camera, and other times endure it as one facet of their punishment at the hands of the new rulers. Farocki and Ujică demonstrate that drastic leadership changes often entail equally drastic changes in regimes of visibility stemming from modifications in the governance of bodies: the flight of Nicolae Ceaușescu on December 22 meant the lifting of a certain paralysis that was gripping the expectant population and a permission to take to the streets. *Videograms* contains several bits of material shot from the inside of cars by disbelieving

citizens that cross the city as if to physically experience their right to join the ecstatic crowds. Democracy thus acquired a spatial manifestation before it was even experimented as a political system.

While most cameras are breaking away from the tripod, the cameras from the national television station keep their positions, yet they resort to a different kind of displacement: an optical one. In previous official televisual communications, wide or medium shots enforced a respectful distance between the viewer and the higher strata of society – rulers, providers of information, “voices” and “faces” of the nation – and fixed framing was a common characteristic. In contrast with this, the chaos of the days of the revolution – especially the one reigning in the television building, turned into a symbol of the new political and informational order – extends to the cameras. Now they zoom in wildly, adopting some of the formal characteristics of amateur shooting style, which became for a very short while a canon of spontaneity and direct engagement with the action, as well as of reliability. Cameras close in, for instance, on the bruised face of Ceaușescu’s youngest son Nicu, who was arrested while the dictator and his wife were still on the run. Not only is the former leader’s body no longer untouchable (and is momentarily being molested through the intermediary of his son, while his subsequent arrest and execution will definitely eradicate his aura), but its exhibition on television is considered part of the democratization process, a purifying display of brutality.

The second field of tension is created by the multiplication of recording devices, from the unique camera eye of the Communist regime, materialized by the official camera filming Ceaușescu’s final speech at the balcony of the Central Committee on December 21 to the myriad of cameras of amateurs but also foreign correspondents flooding the streets, back to the single perspective maintained during the Ceaușescu couple’s trial and execution. This single perspective is readily embraced by all the other organs of the newly freed press, as proved by the striking shot of the room filled to the brim with reporters filming a television set airing the execution footage, featured towards the end of *Videograms*. As Constantin Pârvulescu summarizes:

The arc of *Videograms*’ camera-character is articulated by the changes in the cinematography of its [consecutive] shots, caused by camera-event interaction. Each new footage sampled in *Videograms* shows a new position of the camera as a recording and participating subject in the revolution. The story starts with a camera that shies away from the public space and films the events from a

secure private location. It continues by showing how this camera becomes bolder and approaches the event, until it not only merges with the revolutionary crowd, becoming a body among many others – the mass-body – but also adopts disembodied technologies of representation, and becomes a mass-medium. (Pârvulescu 2013a, 361)

While Farocki and Ujică attempt to comment on the shifting boundary between popular uprising and coup d'état by analysing the succession of mediatic morphologies happening during those crucial few days, other takes on the same material are likely to place the emphasis differently. Undoubtedly, there is no such thing as the “raw footage” of the struggle for power that materialized between the walls of the national television headquarters (at least not in public circulation); but Farocki and Ujică's editing decisions and dense analysis is actually more obtrusive than their claims might suggest. The whole assemblage of shots is built to draw a cyclical narrative of almost tragic dimensions, from the cyclopic eye of the Communist regime to that of the newly instituted National Salvation Front. Hence, the film quietly laments a short period of true revolutionary grace crushed by a return to the technical and communication status quo and to a similar unbalance of power, all under the guise of a different economic and political regime.

The snippet and the whole: rhythm, discursive strategies and acts of manipulation in *Videograms* and *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*

A more rudimentary, yet longer and, in some respects, more edifying version of the National Television footage from December 22, 1989 that is featured in *Videograms* can be found on YouTube under the title *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut / Revoluția română în direct*. At 4 hours and 44 minutes, the clip allegedly contains a faithful rendition, with no exclusions or additions, of the way the material was ordered and broadcasted to the original audience that fused the line between spectatorship and active participation during the events of December 1989. Before making any other observation, let us note the discrepancy of meaning between the English and the Romanian title of the video. The English version claims that the footage is uncut, meaning in this context, one supposes, that it respects the integrity of the televisual transmission of December 22. However, this claim is obviously false, as there are noticeable omissions. For instance: the

musical interludes that punctuated the live transmission (of which we know because they are clearly announced by the anchormen) never appear for more than a few frames; they were either edited out in the digital version or, more probably, were originally not recorded on tape, as seems to indicate the characteristic glitches that sometimes cut short these musical sequences. On the other hand, the Romanian title is more factual, insofar as it only restates the consecrated formula of the “live revolution”, without making any further comment on the exhaustivity or authority of the material.

The background information concerning the video is very limited: it was posted on December 22, 2012 by a user whose channel is called *Arhivat* (Archived) and features another 18 videos, most of them interviews with or speeches of Corneliu Vadim Tudor, an important, if quite extravagant far-right figure of the Romanian post-socialist political scene, and various clips on Arsenie Boca, a priest that was persecuted by the Communist regime and is now under consideration for sanctification by the Romanian Orthodox Church. *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* has been watched approximately two hundred thousand times and has spurred a number of comments, with the most reactions being elicited by those deploring the staged nature of the depicted events, the murderous manipulation of an authentic desire for change, especially among the youth, and the lack of improvement in living standards since 1989.

Watching this video today cannot be detached from the settling of a generalized suspicion towards the spontaneity and bottom-up structure of the Romanian revolution, in the context of the failure of democracy to deliver on its promises. As editors Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovsky notice in the introduction to their 2009 anthology, after the events, “[the medium was more and more frequently] charged with the most general accusation, one situated outside the field of law: television was thought to be the supreme agent of manipulation, in the service of an invisible power” (Țichindeleanu and Petrovsky 2009, 30). Much more than an empathic transposition in the mediatic whirlwind that engulfed Romanian spectators in December 1989, posting such a video 20 years after the events is an act that invites critical remembrance. Constantin Pârvulescu, speaking about self-reflexive cinematic representations of the Romanian revolution, makes a statement that can apply just as well (and perhaps even better) to *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* when he argues that

[such works] remind viewers that televisual traces of the revolution are not the revolution, but representations of it – a simple truth, which, however, has often been forgotten, both during those days and later, as such traces were uncritically included in documentaries about 1989. Most of the images in TVR's archive cannot serve as historical evidence, since a very good part of their content is misleading. (Pârvulescu 2013b, 372)

Despite being substantially less articulated than either the uncritical documentary features Pârvulescu mentions and Farocki and Ujică's essay, the so-called raw footage shown in *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* still displays a process of discourse formation that mirrors the organization of a new ruling elite in the country: in the first hour and a half, the material only oscillates between two different studios that are constantly stormed by people demanding the floor, while the subsequent two hours are increasingly turned towards the outside of the television headquarters, especially on the events unfolding outside the Central Committee from the roof of which Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu had fled by helicopter only hours earlier. Finally, the last half-hour is a fully-fledged reportage, a compilation of footage recorded across the country containing its fair share of spectacular moments, such as the exhibition of the former dictator's riches, stacked in his house in Bucharest, which was broken into by revolutionaries followed by the now ever-present camera.

In their film, Farocki and Ujică use various fragments of material from the first two parts, but their abridged length and, especially, their insertion as pieces in a wider and very well-structured argument rob them of certain characteristics that become particularly salient when watching the whole of *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*.

For example, the long blocks of time of television² allow us to truly measure the role the medium played not only in bringing about the change of regime, but also in installing total confusion concerning the inner workings of this change, followed by a gradual canalization of the

² This expression is not a paradox in the particular case of the televised Romanian Revolution. Television is not usually known for being a medium that encourages the unfolding of lengthy blocks of audiovisual time, especially due to its economic constraints that entail the interruption of the material with ad breaks, for instance. In the chaos that reigned over the newly-conquered television headquarters in the first hours of the Romanian revolution, the cameras were often freewheeling, mirroring an entire nation's confusion over whom to follow, both visually and ideologically.

anxieties thus created. The more consistent speaker interventions selected by Farocki and Ujică were in reality parasitized by a myriad of short snippets of information (and disinformation), sometimes conveyed by the anchormen Teodor Brateş and George Marinescu, other times by individuals bursting into the studio with supposedly first-hand knowledge. The belief in television as a credible medium of information, once it had been removed from the control of the Communist propagandists, coupled with the panic caused by the violent events on the streets, might have contributed to the gullible reception of this tumult. Today, however, what seems to be most apparent is the somewhat contrived pathos and the disjointed efforts to reunite all the threads into one coherent national narrative.

The fact that there is very little editing in the first hour and a half of the footage – other than when transitioning between sequences shot in the two main television studios – does not confer fluidity, but rather puts additional pressure on the viewers who must cut out their own centres of interest. The space, although cramped, acquires a prismatic quality, dispersing statements and conditioning behaviours. It is particularly noteworthy that most speakers are highly conscious of the presence of the cameras and try to adjust their performance according to it, positioning themselves in order to be best seen by them and abruptly stopping when they believe recording may not be in progress; yet they only have an approximate technical knowledge of the working of the devices and even of the framing within which they are positioned. Therefore, with the exception of audiovisual professionals like Brateş and the numerous actors who lent their well-known physiognomies to the events of December 1989, few others succeed in taking full advantage of the easy ‘starification’ which the medium dispenses. When the occasional speakers finish their announcements (and frequently even before they have managed to do so), they are unceremoniously ousted either from the studio, or at least from the centre stage and sent towards the background, behind the invariable line of silent extras holding flags with a hole in them, in place of the emblem of the Socialist Republic of Romania.

Thus, the specific setting of the television studio and the structural configurations imposed by the camera frame, far from simply imposing an abstract grid onto reality, actually determines what qualifies as space (of visibility, therefore of action, of existence) and what is mere “non-space”. The area of the political is therefore physically reduced to the

field of view of the cameras, thus generally confirming but also nuancing Flusser's argument mentioned at the beginning of this section: the image does not entirely cancel the political, as the philosopher contended, but it does reduce it to an appendix, a consequence of its technical existence rather than vice versa. This reversed hierarchy becomes particularly obvious in *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* through the procession of representatives of specific socio-professional categories (refinery workers, sailors, engineers, priests, students and of course, artists), who regularly make their way to the tribune to pledge their allegiance to the revolutionary power in an effort to secure the place of their group in the new society. The position on the political chessboard is consecrated by the state of "being-in-the-image".

However, image is strongly rivalled by sound, and Pârvulescu goes so far as to assert that

in spite of being *audiovisual* documents, most of them (...) are only visual mediations of sound. They show men talking into the camera of a television studio, delivering "communiqués to the population". And, since their content is mostly inaccurate, they matter only as display of all sorts of affect – panic, indignation, incertitude, suspicion, and enthusiasm. They are in fact sound (deception/affect) masquerading as image (truth/representation). (Pârvulescu 2013b, 372)

I would, however, disagree with the statement that visuality is secondary. Radio was not a strategic objective for the revolutionaries, perhaps because it already represented a space of freedom through the existence of dissident radio stations emitting from outside the country such as 'The Voice of Europe'. Television, on the other hand, was an uncontested bastion of the regime; it is precisely the fact that it fell at the hands of the opposing forces that explicitly marked the end of an era, in a language that was immediately understandable to all. The political change assumed a perceptible form that would not have been nearly as impactful, had it been transmitted only through sound. And ironically, it is the full *audiovisual* spectacle (sound and image) of the revolution that now triggers derogatory remarks regarding the lack of authenticity and "bad theatrics" of the participants in the televisual transmissions of December 1989, as proved by many of the reactions in the comment section of the video *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*.

Finally, what Andrei Gorzo identifies as the third field of tension in Farocki and Ujică's film is that created between the documentary and the constructivist function of the cameras that captured the events of December 1989 (Gorzo 2016, 9-11). The footage from *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* does not show the behind the scenes of some of the featured sequences, as did *Videograms* when it gave viewers access to the multiple takes required by a foreign correspondent commenting on the fights with alleged terrorists loyal to Ceaușescu, or to the moments preceding the beginning of the first live broadcast of Free Romanian Television – or TVRL (Televiziunea Română Liberă), as the station was immediately retitled. But various acts of transforming reality – minor ones which are inherent to any audiovisual mise en scène, and major ones that turn fabrications into facts by confiscating the truth capital of the image – are also visible in the lengthy broadcast material featured in *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*.

Because of the abrupt change of rhythmicity and of level of constructedness between the traditional studio emission and the chaotic swirl of bodies and words that characterized the first transmissions of Free Romanian Television, in the second context the switch between the wide and the narrow framing is rarely very accurate. Therefore, many unplanned details that normally would have been excluded by zooming in instead interfere with the main action. For instance, around two hours and fifteen minutes into the video, while a grieving parent asks for the decent burial of the victims, the wide shot reveals the silent anticipation of the next speaker, a female student who gestures towards her two colleagues, heavily bruised and sitting down, to stand up. The young woman takes her turn and is followed by a well-known writer; the image switches first to a close-up of the speaker, then to another with the hands of one of the wounded students who holds a bullet. This close-up is not only unexpected and unrelated to the writer's discourse (which addresses precisely the beginning of a new era where television will become an exclusive purveyor of moments of truth), but it is also held a little too long, capturing the instant when someone takes the bullet from the student's hands, points it up and places it back between his numb and bandaged fingers, in a much more visible position.

Therefore, in both *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* and *Videograms*, ubiquitous acts of rehearsal and ordering of the unruly elements composing a real environment become the metaphor for the impossibility of a zero degree of audience manipulation in any form of

audiovisual communication, as well as of a political system not based on the withholding of certain facts from public scrutiny, and on the deliberate misrepresentation or cosmeticizing of others.

Attempts to legitimize marginal/emotional experiences and hierarchical models within the televisual medium in *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) and *Videograms*

Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* is rightfully considered a distillation of the most stringent characteristics of the Romanian New Wave, with its prolonged, rigidly anti-spectacular observation of quotidian activities, its lower middle-class ennui-laden atmosphere and its deadpan humour, minor-key approach to "serious" topics. In his film, Porumboiu follows the unfolding of an entire day, December 22, 2005 – the sixteen-year anniversary of Ceaușescu's flight from the roof of the Central Committee and the de facto triumph of the Romanian revolution. In an unnamed provincial town,³ spirits are stirred by TV journalist Virgil Jderescu's desire to establish what kind of an echo the events unfolding in Bucharest and in other major urban centres of the country had in the area, or, worded in a typically journalistic, provocative manner, whether the "Revolution had or had not happened in their city". On the topic of the situatedness of the Romanian revolution, Stefana Lamasanu argues that

[i]n fact, the television station's power was so great that it affected – and even decided – the iconic location of the revolution. (...) [T]he uprisings had originally started in Timișoara; in this city, the uprisings had the most impact, the victims were most numerous, the fighting real. Yet, Bucharest is the official, internationally designated space of the revolution, precisely because the televised revolution took place in Bucharest, not in Timișoara, the latter which arguably merited designation as the iconic site of the revolution. (...) The process of television broadcasting brought another layer of meaning and, more importantly, political credibility to the place where the TVRL operated and constructed the televised event. The media event, transformed into a televised event, created the revolution, in that it provided a location for the events, a televisual location. (Lamasanu 2010, 131-132)

³ Through its architecture, the town can nevertheless be identified as Vaslui, the regional capital of the homonymous county and an important administrative and industrial centre during the Communist period.

In *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut*, this transfer of symbolic power to a single location is especially noticeable in the manner in which the city of Sibiu was portrayed during the initial televised crisis communication efforts: as a distant, almost unreal locus of horror, where large-scale massacres occurred and the drinking water was poisoned.⁴ The discursive centralization of the revolution also constitutes the background of Jderescu's attempts to revitalize the identity of his small town, in the context of the downfall of the rural and/or formerly industrial provinces in a country trying to emulate the urbanized, service-oriented model of Western Europe. Despite this downfall, a persistent (and slightly risible) class structure governs the characters' interactions, with Jderescu insistently calling important members of the community before finally settling, for lack of a better option, on a teacher and an "elder" as guests for his talk-show concerning the local manifestation of the Romanian revolution. This attitude operates as a reverse mirror for another characteristic of the televised events of December 1989, since, according to Lamasanu, "these rough scenes 'made viewers into on-screen protagonists of the revolution' (...) and disrespected the normative formal codes used in television news, according to which only news anchors and pundits retain narrative authority" (2010, 128). In Porumboiu's film, the televised debate, which occupies roughly half of the running time, illustrates both the pre-revolutionary and the revolutionary structural model at different moments, thus suggesting the tense coexistence of these two paradigms – and, more generally, of the old and the new – in democratic Romania. The debate starts with a hierarchical power structure, with Jderescu and his guests situated at the top (even if it is undoubtedly the former who is exerting the most authority on the discursive as well as on the technological configuration of the show, frequently scolding the cameraman for the way he frames the image) and with a faceless audience at the bottom. Quite rapidly, this structure shifts dramatically, first through the discreditation of the two "experts".

⁴This particularly emotional narrative surrounding the city of Sibiu was later used as a charge against Nicu Ceausescu, who was the first secretary of the county and therefore considered responsible for the killings. The dictator's younger son was initially condemned to 25 years of imprisonment for genocide and infringing the regime for weapons and munitions; then his punishment was gradually reduced to sixteen, and subsequently five years, as the gun charge was the only one to hold up to closer scrutiny. Ceausescu had in fact fled Sibiu on December 22 at noon, leaving garrison commander Aurel Dragomir in charge (see Burlă 2019 and Historia, n.d)

The teacher, Tiberiu Mănescu, starts by asserting that, on December 22, 1989, he and a few colleagues went to the main square of the city to protest, where they were brutalized by members of the secret police, before being finally joined by a crowd pouring out of their houses at the news of Ceaușescu's flight. Jderescu affirms that the existence of the revolution in their town was determined by a temporal coordinate: if there was any act of protest before Ceaușescu's departure from the roof of the Central Committee, timed very precisely at 12:09 am, then the city can legitimately claim its presence on the map of the 1989 uprising and, symbolically, on that of new, democratic, capitalist Romania. The lag of the provincial town is actually representative of the larger issue of the temporal inadequacy between Romania as a whole (and most of the countries composing the former Soviet Bloc) and the Western hemisphere, which for this purpose had to be caught up with and offered a theoretically clear, yet hardly practicable road to follow. As Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovsky notice:

In the live transmission of an event for the televised news bulletin, simultaneity and delay together structure the framework of the transmission itself. In the cultural history of postcommunism, the perception of a specific delayed temporal regime continuously denies the *local dimension of the present*, whose events have already occurred [in the West] (...) The postulation of an *allochronic temporal perception*, disconnected from the present, and yet territorialized in the space of the former communist bloc, recoded as the belated periphery of the centrality of the globalized world, thus facilitates the import and the production of symbols and ideologemes of the coloniality of power. (Țichindeleanu and Petrovsky 2009, 35)

Jderescu and his fellow citizens are going through a crisis of legitimacy, from which stems the desire to verify the political existence of their community within the wider framework of the revolution. Narratively, the main problem they face is the clarification of what happened in the main city square on December 22 at noon; but on another level, their biggest weakness is simply that they do not own any images. Their only ammunition consists of words and those – again echoing Flusser's radical evolution theory – are hardly effective once the reign of the visual has been reinstated by none other than the Romanian revolution, the event which they long so much to have participated in. Significantly, the only element that is used to illustrate the debate is the studio background, a still image of the outside of the town hall. In the

heat of the discussion, the three men turn and point towards it, trying to localize Mănescu's contested whereabouts, but the image remains inert, uncooperative. Jderescu may want to control the framing and the movements of the camera, yet not all televisual images are created equal – his are not nearly as impactful as the ones that flooded Romanian small screens on December 22, 1989, even though they may be similarly inconclusive; they constitute neither proof nor a form of acme of the present.

Going back to the issue of the hierarchy between speakers and viewers, while the televised debate in *12:08 East of Bucharest* begins by focusing in on the timing of Mănescu and his comrades' arrival in the main city square, quickly enough their intentions and their very presence is called into question by a number of audience members that use the call-line to give their own version of events. Thus, Mănescu's status as an expert and as a revolutionary is tarnished, and the silent audience becomes, on the one hand, protagonists of alternative versions of Mănescu's narrative, and on the other hand, a tribunal. Similarly, the other guest, Emanoil Pișcoci, is denied authority from the start by Jderescu, who openly manifests his displeasure with having to invite someone with no other credentials than being conventionally "old and wise", and later also by his own admission of having totally lacked revolutionary drive.

An alternative vertical model is reestablished, however, by two phone interventions: the first is that of Costică Bejan, former member of the secret police and one of Mănescu's alleged aggressors, now converted to a successful businessman, who icily forbids anyone to make reference to his past again, under the threat of judicial action – an order that Jderescu hastens to enforce on set, demonstrating that the lid that was pledged to be lifted from over the crimes of the former regime is still very much in place. Without stating it overtly, *Videograms* also implied, through the circular trajectory of the cameras' unique perspective, that the established order was not suffering a structural, but a combinatorial change; that the passivity of the viewer was not abolished, yet the offer of ways to exercise it was expanded and thus the *illusion* of participation was heightened. Whether it was planned or not, the Romanian revolution was certainly seized by those who knew that to conserve power sometimes means to divert it and even to transfer it for a short while.

In *12:08 East of Bucharest*, the second phone call to introduce a new power balance is considerably less aggressive than the first, using an

altogether different strategy to redirect the debate. While all interventions from the public (with the notable exception of that of the Chinese owner of the general store, who is swiftly told not to interfere in an issue which only concerns Romanians) have damaged Mănescu's legitimacy, the aural presence of an older woman who quietly states that she has lost a son during the December events works as a soothing balm administered to all those present in the studio; she informs everyone that it is snowing outside, symbolically opening the frame beyond the technical possibilities of the cameras.⁵ The new hierarchy thus constituted is not based on power, but on suffering; the woman's intervention serves to remind the three characters that the revolution is not only a theoretical construct that they are trying to define and localize, but a real event that took lives. More critically, Porumboiu's inclusion of such an emotionally laden phone call in his script may also hint at another function of mass media during and in the wake of the Romanian revolution, as described by Peter Gross:

As a result [of the fall of the regime], the newly freed Romanian mass media in December 1989 served mainly as outlets for releasing pent-up feelings, for national and individual catharsis and for the circulation of rumours. In their first months of liberty, mass media became a gigantic psychiatrist's couch where Romanians could for the first time vent anger against their oppressor and tell their stories of suffering and humiliation, of shattered hopes and dreams and of future aspirations. (Gross 1996, 27)

Again, Farocki and Ujică's *Videograms* springs to mind, especially its affecting introductory sequence that featured an injured young woman on her hospital bed recounting her and her fellow protesters' ordeal and whose account, seesawing between hysteria and messianic fervour, is scattered with inaccuracies. Pârvulescu describes the efforts of the camera to fuse with the body it is filming, hiding its mechanical and

⁵ Interestingly, in the television footage in *Videograms*, one can see how the traditional framing is considered too narrow for an event characterized by chaotic mass movements and shifting centres of interest. Therefore, the field of vision is opened up as much as possible, revealing the otherwise unseen auxiliary elements that support the television spectacle, such as the overhead lights and the studio rigging. In *12:08 East of Bucharest*, these para-elements only appear during the ad breaks, when the camera is left unchecked, but a generational conflict develops instead over the young apprentice cameraman's desire to film hand-held, an aesthetic which clashes with Jderescu's more traditional conceptions.

conceptual materiality behind the organic, instinctual life it is trying to replicate:

The camera remains close to the wounded body, attempting even an extreme, yet blurred, close-up on a scratch/wound on the demonstrator's face. It aims to obtain a statement from the very materiality of the revolutionary's flesh, a statement that (...) never truly takes shape. The camera lets the body of the demonstrator occupy most of the frame, desperately aiming to replicate in the *mise en scène* the way in which the bodies of demonstrators have occupied/flooded the streets of revolted Timișoara. Yet this drive to anchor historical causality in the body of the protester remains unconvincing, suggesting the limited agency of the photographed body. (Pârvulescu 2013a, 357-358)

If the myth of television as a vessel for an unaltered, popular truth was heavily contested in the immediate aftermath of the Romanian revolution, it was replaced with an equally unnuanced condemnation of the medium as an intrinsically manipulative agent. Porumboiu hints at both narratives in *12:08 East of Bucharest*, portraying television as both a vernacular means of expression – as most audience interventions are slices of anonymous, lustreless lives rather than relevant testimonies on a historical event – and a mechanism that reinforces existing omertà surrounding the continuities between the Communist dictatorship and the subsequent democratic regime. Therefore, without ever explicitly engaging in a dialogue with Farocki and Ujicá's essay, Porumboiu's film takes over its main themes, observing the changes that arise when dislodging the televisual mechanics of the representation of the revolution, both temporally and geographically. It thus “closes a loop engendered by *Videogramme* (...): the Romanian revolution lived on the spot, in the immediacy of the moment, subsequently moves in the collective imagination and becomes a subject of remembrance” (Morozov 2019, 115).

Representing the revolution and watching its representation – unsolved issues

Few Romanian filmmakers, excepting those responsible for the first wave of films made in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, were confident enough to believe that they could find the appropriate discursive and aesthetic modalities to represent the events of December

1989. This may, of course, be a direct consequence of the overabundance of audiovisual material which exuded from the television screen, invading both public and private spheres.⁶ Obviously enough, the wealth of audiovisual documents that now accompanies any major contemporary event does not deter subsequent representational endeavours, but the Romanian revolution was an unprecedented situation, a “baptism of fire” (Daney 1990, 84) not only for the medium of television, but also for fictional depictions of modern, technologized revolutions on screen.

Porumboiu’s *12:08 East of Bucharest* is symptomatic of the tendency of Romanian cinema to obliquely approach the process of the birth of national democracy. Instead of attempting to restage events that seem to have acquired a definitive shape through their televisual broadcast, many films elaborate on the gaps in representation in the TVRL footage, speculating on the attitudes of the passive spectators behind their television sets – as in Cătălin Mitulescu’s *The Way I Spent the End of the World/ Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii* (2006) – or on the trials and tribulations of a young soldier that joins the insurgents before being mistaken for a “terrorist”, as in Radu Muntean’s *The Paper Will Be Blue/Hârtia va fi albastră* (2006). Even if most of these films articulate some ideas concerning the role of images in framing history in the making, Porumboiu’s film may well be the most medium-conscious, as it struggles with issues such as the discrepancy between visibility and truth, the disparity of fields of view obtained from different (both physical and ideological) standpoints and the power relations that govern media operations. It addresses the revolution through its crystallization as a piece of a collective identity that was hastily constructed on unsteady foundations and in accordance with an unassimilated programme, thus becoming a historical event which is neither completely claimable, nor entirely rejectable. Undoubtedly, *12:08 East of Bucharest* benefits from the advantage of hindsight, the film having been shot not only fifteen years after the Romanian revolution,

⁶ However, as *Videogramme* demonstrates, the television footage is only a part of the images whose production and circulation were unleashed even before the effective installation of the new democracy. Amateur filmmaking was an important component of the cultural policies of the Communist regime, but it was heavily regulated and encouraged to be practised collectively, in a controlled environment, usually at the workplace, thus becoming a way of developing a figurative, accessible form of ideological discourse that seemed to stem “from below”. The same type of filmmaking fulfilled the role of active witness during the revolution, emerging from behind the curtains of the windows, climbing on balconies and roofs and finally descending to the streets, as Farocki and Ujică recount, in order to *watch* rather than *be watched* – and this is where this category of materials crucially departs from the television footage.

but also at the end of what is known as the *transition stage* – the hazy, complex period in which Romania’s transformation into a “true” democracy was enacted, marked by its integration into the European Union in 2007. Porumboiu’s film underlines the fact that this transition took place at varying speeds, affecting the provinces and the major urban centres in different ways, and had developed on unconflicted past injustices.

It could be convincingly argued that *12:08 East of Bucharest* is a representation of the state of post-revolution, which is certainly a more easily assignable label for the transition period than “revolution” for the actual incidents of December 1989. Steven Roper, for example, argued as early as 1994 that both general and structural theories of revolution failed to cover the entire spectrum of events that culminated with the toppling of the Communist regime, and I have already mentioned the tenacious belief circulating in the Romanian public sphere that its revolution was “stolen” or even integrally fabricated by second-rank Communist leaders, thus bringing into question two of the three tenets of the revolutionary event, namely its being a “class uprising” and its resulting in “[an authentic] change in the political institutions and regime” (Roper 1994, 402).

But the reality of the revolution is directly related to its existence as a media event. The question of the nature of the revolution can therefore be encapsulated in another: if the media event itself is indisputable, was there also an *hors-cadre* and to what extent was it also controlled by the same forces that staged the television spectacle? The answer is not what matters here, but the fact that, for once, the steady reference point is the media object, while the shifting term is the historical truth. Audiovisual works that address the Romanian revolution inevitably get inscribed into this complex patchwork of mediated facts and media truths (which may indeed be truths as long as they are kept within their own systems of reference). They are forced by the very nature of the situation they thematize to scrutinize their own means of expression.

In all three audiovisual elements analysed in the present article, revolution is the missing subject. In *Videograms*, the means of production of the images go through a revolution of their own, the development of which the spectators are following more than the political events they are supposedly recording; the two authors refrain from commenting on the content of the archival material they assemble, focusing instead on its physicality – its standpoints, its trajectories, the

interaction of the camera with the bodies that surround it, either behind or in front of the lens – and on the political frameworks it sets up. In *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Porumboiu tightropes on the verge of the absurd, placing the issue of the (in)visibility of the Romanian revolution at the core of a debate that is supposed to validate or invalidate the legitimacy of an entire community left at the margins of the successful transition to democracy. This debate is destined for television, only this time the medium proves incapable from the very beginning of offering a limpid, cohesive version of the events, dissolving into the indeterminacy that is in fact specific to the use which the Romanian New Wave, to which Porumboiu belongs, makes of the medium of cinema. Lastly, *December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut* reframes the historical material 30 years after the facts, posting it on a platform which is well-known for being a matrix of fake news and conspiracy theories, inviting contemporary viewers to watch the images with the benefit of historical hindsight, but forgetting that they are themselves caught into the fraught context of post-communism. We therefore watch this material through the double prism of the platform on which it is posted and its associated patterns of image consumption, and of the other audiovisual products which have reworked the original televisual transmission since its first airing. Once again, it is the revolution itself that becomes more muddled as more mediatic filters are applied to it.

Conclusion

The Romanian revolution had already received many interpretations before normality was even restored on the streets of Bucharest and the country's first democratic government was elected. With this article, my aim has been to avoid adding my own contribution to the overly ambitious theories of (mediatic) everything inspired by the events of December 1989. Instead, I have found it useful to first scrutinize various media objects belonging to different audiovisual regimes individually and then weave them together, all of which address the Romanian revolution and are conditioned by the earthquake it caused in the power relation between politics and images. We have observed how issues of representation, authoritative voice(s), oscillation between hierarchical and non-hierarchical, dialogical and homiletic, polymorphic and monomorphic media models engaged in dialogue and expanded each other with the occasion of these parallels. Such an exercise may not lead to the uncovering of historical evidence concerning the factual events of

December 1989, but it uses the medium's own tools to reflect back upon itself; it stays clear of exhaustive explanations, yet points to processes of *making* – making images, making revolutions, making history – which, despite their very different scale, can eventually coalesce and prompt operations of *making sense* of past collective traumas and ongoing national identity crises.

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Filmography

A fost sau n-a fost [feature film] Dir. Corneliu Porumboiu. 42 km Film, Romania. 2006. 89 mins.

Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii [feature film] Dir. Cătălin Mitulescu. Strada Film, Les Films Pelleas, Romania, France, 2006. 106 mins.

Hârtia va fi albastră [feature film] Dir. Radu Muntean. Multimedia Est, Romania. 2006. 92 mins.

Videogame einer Revolution [feature film] Dir. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică. Bremer Institut Film & Fernsehen/Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, Germany/Romania. 1992. 106 mins.

Descendentes Mediáticos da Revolução Romena: Uma análise comparativa

RESUMO A revolução romena de dezembro de 1989 foi um acontecimento político, um acontecimento mediático e um acontecimento mediático-teórico. Provocou uma quantidade impressionante de especulações sobre a mera possibilidade da história sob as novas condições mediáticas, que reduziram as suas imagens a um desfile de sintomas da tendência cada vez maior da política para a espectacularização e até para a autoaniquilação. Em vez de tentar desenvolver uma teoria igualmente abrangente sobre a representação audiovisual do facto revolucionário, o presente artigo concentra-se em três objectos mediáticos diferentes realizados após 1989: (1) o ensaio documental *Videogramas de uma Revolução*, de Harun Farocki e Andrei Ujică; (2) o clip do YouTube December 22, 1989 Romanian Revolution Uncut; e (3) a longa-metragem de ficção *12:08 East of Bucharest*, de Corneliu Porumboiu). Estas obras são analisadas de forma transversal e em pares variáveis, com enfoque na sua linguagem audiovisual concreta, em ligação com questões como estratégias discursivas e de manipulação, tentativas de legitimação histórica e modelos mediáticos hierárquicos. O objetivo é transformar estas obras em pontos de acesso oblíquos, mas mais empíricos, às implicações do estatuto dos acontecimentos de dezembro de 1989 como a primeira “revolução televisionada” de pleno direito na memória colectiva, bem como nas posteriores reformulações audiovisuais desse momento histórico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Revolução romena; revolução televisionada; política dos média; mediatização da política; retórica visual.

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