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Television in Conflict:

The Romanian Revolution as Audiovisual Experiment

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Declaration

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Summary

This dissertation attempts to renew and expand the extant interpretations of the Romanian Revolution understood in its media dimension. Although numerous contributions have attempted to produce critical knowledge on this topic, we argue that the vast majority has been relying on the same restrained (and restrictive) mass of footage, thus inevitably leading to the ossification of this field of study. By adopting an innovating methodological framework based on a so far critically under-developed notion derived from French film theory, 'the trademark image', this research project aims to both synchronise the case study of the revolution with contemporary theoretical debates, and to reinvigorate interest in this particular topic in and of itself. Our thesis is informed by a flexible approach, whereas its main objectives remain similarly open to transversal interrogations. Given its original scope, it wishes to be both a critical re-actualisation of past knowledge from a seminal moment in the cultural history of media, and a speculative overture towards a larger, inclusive methodology which can aptly question present-day realities as well as unknown, neglected or forgotten aspects of the past.

One of the main points of interest of this dissertation, with regard to its case study, is the inherent transnational perspective which makes use of vernacular literature as well as highly updated bibliography belonging to a variety of fields of study and multiple languages (the main ones being English and French). As such, this research project will allow the apparently local reality of the Romanian Revolution to raise potential interest within the larger academic community. This intention is further substantiated by the corpus of the work itself: characterised by an across-media approach – one that positions television as its primary object while drawing on photography and cinema as genealogical and comparative frameworks –, this dissertation operates both with strictly theorised frameworks – such as an overview of the indexical paradigm in photography and cinema, using a variety of discourses and relevant literature combining theological, ontological, and technical understandings of the medium – and with close textual analyses of the actual footage. Unlike previous attempts to conceptualise the revolution in terms of a purely media event, we have adopted a meticulous method that involved consulting all footage accessible within the current state of the Romanian Television Archives – making no a priori discrimination between material that had been widely circulated and material that remained critically overlooked. Naturally, this posed several implications on the general optics of our

research, which favoured a focus on counter-imagery that has so far been overlooked by previous research. Moreover, our motivation has not been a detectivist one: our methodological openness towards images – neither fetishising them as transparent proofs of truth, nor automatically dismissing them as inevitable vehicles of manipulation – guided our analytical approach. This methodological even-handedness should not, however, be confused with political neutrality: as the research makes progressively clear, this project proceeds from a committed, politically situated perspective, seeking to restore overlooked counter-images to critical visibility and to argue for the emancipatory potential of experimental televisual practices. Drawing on this situated attitude, we have chosen to examine the audiovisual circuits which, at that moment in time, contributed to the creation of dominant narratives, and to uncover their aesthetic and ideological mechanisms. Finally, by separating trademark images – those audiovisual samples that have been retained by public conscience by virtue of their emblematic, easily decodable character – from their opposites – counter-images which express alternative meanings and operate according to different regimes of visibility –, we have aimed to unveil multiple competing discourses at play during the revolution, positing it as a complex, irreducible generator of footage that can serve in order to illuminate current conflicts and their respective media coverages.

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Introduction

'Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history.' – Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', thesis III

In her retelling of the Romanian Revolution course 'to those that did not experience it directly', historian Alina Pavelescu, who was 17 years old at the time, writes: 'From the evening of December 21st, the dominant feeling that I can remember is that of relief – finally I could enjoy my holiday. The shock on the next day, December 22nd, was all the greater when I woke up around noon by hearing a voice outside who was shouting in front of our apartment building: "Turn on your TV sets! Turn on your TV sets! The dictator has fled!"'[1] This rather supernatural voice encapsulates several theoretical trajectories that will be developed throughout this dissertation: firstly, the idea that *something* was – finally – being shown on TV in a 'country without images'[2]. Moreover, this was about the correlative intimation that, in order to witness history in the making and to pretend to understand it, one needed to actively engage with what was being shown on television. In other words, that one could be assured of the authenticity of events – of the fact that the dictator has *truly* fled – precisely because his flight was being televised, since the flight itself allowed for the emergence of live, free television.

Given the consolidated popular status of Romanian Television as a severely censored and heavily controlled media institution under the Ceaușescu regime, the sheer incentive to turn on the television set in order to participate in the broadcast of a *live* event must have seemed, for the regular Romanian citizen, incongruous, if not entirely absurd. Indeed, as subsequent chapters will explain, the revolution was the *locus* of numerous paradoxes, one of them concerning the brutally shifting status of television from a marginal, discredited social actor to an active agent of catalysing popular discontent[3]. The audiovisual

[1] Alina Pavelescu, *Revoluția din 1989 povestită celor care nu au trăit-o* [The Revolution of 1989 Retold to Those That Did Not Experience It First-Hand] (Bucharest: ART, 2024), 14. Our translation.

[2] This brilliant expression, which in its full form reads 'a country without symbol, without face, in short, without images', belongs to French film critic Serge Daney, and was coined for his article 'Roumanie, année zéro' [Romania, Year Zero], in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 428 (February 1990), 84. also available online (in our Romanian translation) at: https://futureast.blog/2020/05/12/o-traducere-inedita-din-serge-daney-romania-anul-zero/. Date accessed: 25. 07. 2025.

[3] For an orthodox conception of the ambivalent role played by television before and after the fall of Ceaușescu, see Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct. Histoire en différé* [Live Revolution. History on Replay], unpublished Master's Thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (1999), 'At this stage in the Romanian events [the flight of Ceaușescu], television has already played a dual role. Not only did it serve as a propaganda tool under the dictatorship, but it also contributed to the fall of the "Genius of the Carpathians" on 21 December 1989. Television, Nicolae Ceaușescu's propaganda tool, ultimately turned against him', 22. If not mentioned otherwise, translations from the French language are ours.

handling of the Romanian Revolution by the television – the topic of our research – proves to be a thorny question most notably because this medium has enjoyed a mitigated posterity in relation to the respective events. This ambivalent posterity, however, is essentially what makes this sequence within media history so insightful, since it opens multiple avenues for reflection concerning both televisual prowess and profound limitations of the medium, intertwined questions of revelation and manipulation, and the ontological nature of television as privileged provider of *live* broadcasts. Of course, pursuing this thesis on television within a Film Department is in itself evocative of larger tensions, shifts, and exchanges between cinema and other media, allowing us – via this illustrative case study – to conceptualise television both from a historical and a media point of view. As Francesco Casetti contends,

> [t]he cinema no longer manages all the conflicting stances that it used to control so well (or at least not in the same way). It can no longer effect the same mediations. These are instead entrusted to other media. Television, for example, works best as a mediation of geopolitical space, giving us simultaneously a sense of extreme localization and the awareness of a world scene.[4]

We argue that revolution in Romania allowed precisely such a crystallisation between a global interconnected culture and a local, very specific socio-political situation, positing this articulation between two radically opposed dynamics in a provocative light.

Preliminary Questions of Methodology

There are several motivations lying at the heart of this inquiry, and, of course, there are more ways than one to tackle its problematics. The central one stems from a personal longstanding engagement with the televisual imagery generated by the revolution, seen either as an alterity on French TV screens[5], or as self-representation on Romanian screens throughout this research project. As a Romanian citizen growing up in the aftermath of the December 1989 moment – what was named the post-communist 'transition' –, we were struck both by the degree of relevance and, indeed, impossibility to move beyond the

[4] Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century. Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 188.
[5] Victor Morozov, *Roumanie, année zéro : Représentations audiovisuelles de la Révolution Roumaine de 1989*, unpublished Master's Thesis, University Paris VIII Vincennes–Saint-Denis (2022).

revolutionary horizon for a large part of the population having experienced it first-hand, and by the lack of a corresponding literature that would keep up with the renewed popular interest that it continues to exert. Depending on which barricade one situates themselves, the revolution, as explained by the following chapter, is either mythologised or harshly discredited, eliciting affectively charged responses.

This research seeks to move beyond such interrogations belonging to the field of purely historical celebration, if not (as the event of the revolution fades away) sheer speculation. We argue with Jeffrey C. Alexander that '[t]heoretical conjectures about an invisible but truly determinative cause – a hard structural base underneath slippery symbols – seem plausible only if subjective references to such a putative reality can be found among actors' representations.'[6] In other words, since first-hand accounts do not represent a central source of documentation for our research – but rather an exception –, we have posited this project as an accumulation of distinct but connected, if not interdependent theoretical approaches based on a unique research material – the mass of televisual footage that has been collected during the revolution of December 1989, regardless of whether this material has actually been broadcast or not. Indeed, the main theoretical notion that this study advances is that of the 'trademark' image, that was proposed as a negatively-connoted visual category by the film critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma* magazine in the 1970s, at a moment when the advertising culture achieved the status of an ideal object to decipher from a semiotic, political, and aesthetical point of view.[7] Although usually translated in English as '*mark* image', we prefer the term '*trademark*' in order to retain its original marketing connotation and imply, whenever utilising it, a subterranean publicity vein. By adopting the trademark image as our central critical framework, our goal, then, is to analyse the mainstream representation of the Romanian Revolution and to categorise it via an interdisciplinary approach, in order to ultimately propose a more inclusive optics on the event. This will be achieved by taking into account the larger mass of footage that has been lying dormant in the Romanian Television Archives since the days it has been recorded for the first time.

Such an egalitarian approach towards the extant footage of the revolution, irrespective of their posterity, has deeply conditioned the research questions that this project

[6] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt. An Essay on Cultural Power* (London – New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), xi.
[7] Serge Daney, Serge Toubiana, 'Présentation', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 268-269 (July-August 1976), 5.

has sought to address. Mirroring our predilection for interdisciplinary methodology, which will be developed through several genealogical forays at a later stage, they concern disparate ideological and aesthetic territories that the televisual footage helps to open up. Our main goal for this research was to understand whether the consultation of all the available footage recorded by the Romanian Television personnel during those days of December 1989 presents a different picture of the revolution than the one that has been depicted by mainstream accounts: is the revolutionary momentum exclusively encapsulated in sensationalist footage conforming to a pre-conceived imagery – or are there several dislocating image regimes that the revolution actually generated, as a testament to its innovation potential? Given the audiovisual nature of our inquiry, we have tried to link the almost paranoid production of images during the revolution to a larger theoretical tradition of indexicality, in which visual traces play a significant role in the authentication of a given event. Moreover, we have actively countered simplistic accounts that minimised the creative input of the Romanian Television institution throughout its history under communism. This has ultimately led us to seek answers to a question that is both speculative, counter-factual, and heavy with the disruptive potential of political change: has the Romanian Revolution been a simple parenthesis in which popular discontent could be adequately relayed by the medium? Or has this event actually shown the way for an alternative, experimental television which could eventually be liberated from usual formats and attain an emancipated status as a viable audiovisual medium for creativity and social critique? Ultimately, given the fact that we consider our thesis as an intervention on the already parcelled out field of media studies dedicated to the Romanian Revolution, one of the main research questions was: can anything new be legitimately said about this media event at all?

One additional consideration needs to be addressed when employing the concept of the trademark image. It concerns the ample reliance on, and response to, available French scholarship on the Romanian Revolution that this research project implemented as a guiding framework. The reasons for this choice are multiple, both complementary to the above-mentioned professional formation in a French context prior to this dissertation, and pertinent to the global production of theoretical knowledge on the revolution itself. While Francophone references are by no means exclusive within the body of our research, such a preference actually points to their increased degree of relevance in this context, which partly stems from the intellectual proximity between Romanian intelligentsia and their

French counterpart at that time. Strategic geopolitical connections between French and Romanian authorities have been established immediately after the Ceaușescus' flight, as a subsequent broadcast analysis will detail at length. Furthermore, the rush with which French TV channels seized the opportunity to disrupt their usual coverage by incorporating extensive broadcasts of the Romanian context during those days, while typical for a more general, Western European attitude, was unprecedented (and unmatched) in its intensity, ultimately leading to the formation of a spectacular, if brief, Romanian news monopole that deserves additional theoretical scrutiny.

One of the central, if mostly implicit, methodological questions for our close textual analysis is naturally represented by the evolving understanding of archivist practices. In this sense, our inquiry pertains to the recent creative practice of archiveology as described by Catherine Russell via an engagement with and a critical transformation of Walter Benjamin's foundational archival approach. Drawing inspiration from the German theorist's writings as well as from various practical and theoretical texts conceived in the genre of found footage cinema, Russell contends that '[t]he unresolved histories and modernities lingering in the image bank are, in this sense, awaiting practitioners [and theorists] to bring them to life and allow them to speak.'[8] This attitude of revalorising marginal, forgotten, or neglected threads that exist as idle remains within the image archive, understood as a sensible site of contesting power relations, is entirely consonant with our own project. As we shall see, we privilege the method ascribing intrinsic potential to the entirety of the 'image bank', thus decentralising its ossified core – both from ethical and political equalitarian aspirations, and out of fidelity to the revolutionary history themselves, since the event occasioned an impassioned – if short-lived – democratisation of the available discursive scenes. Our methodological option for close reading of the available footage involves a complex process of revitalisation through aesthetical and political analysis, in order to produce an attempt at critical appropriation understood, according to Russell, 'as a form of borrowing that can open up new practices of writing history and conceptualising the future.'[9]

In itself, the visual archive as a political tool for unsettling hegemonic, normative narratives is an essential and complicated question, if only because it mainly concerns such

[8] Catherine Russell, *Archiveology. Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 15.
[9] *Ibid*., 16.

disparate, omnipresent yet hard-to-conceptualise entities as the images. In this sense, we consider the process of audiovisual investigation absolutely crucial for a larger understanding at all levels of our present epoch, arguing, with Victor Burgin, that

> [f]rom now on, images are, within society and between societies, a *material force* in the same sense that economical and political forces are. We cannot consider anymore that contemporary visual culture – the combined product of media and other spheres of production of images – constitutes a simple reflexion or a simple expression of the world we live in: it contributes to its construction.[10]

The conviction that the image should not be conceived of as a simplistic dematerialising agent, a micro-unit of the virtual world eventually leading, by catastrophic accumulation, to a loss of experiential authenticity, but rather as a possibility for direct intervention imbued with political potential that actively challenges and changes the configuration of our societies is central to our dissertation[11]. Burgin's contention finds an echo in Russell's Benjaminian conceptualising of archiveology when she states that '[u]nderlying much of the rethinking of archive-based arts after postmodernism is a recognition that images are constitutive of historical experience and not merely a representation of it.'[12] As our multiple, distinct forays in the televisual footage of the Romanian Revolution aim to demonstrate, images are an important factor to be reckoned with during any socially-motivated contemporary or recent event, altering everything from representations to mentalities, even going so far as coagulating in popular political tools.

Following Russell, we argue that only an extensive engagement that tries to grapple with the uncharted depths of the material may produce alternative critical knowledge by suggesting both a more contradictory representation of the events themselves, and – crucially – the potentiality, for television, to emancipate itself from recurrent formats. The title of our research, 'Television in Conflict: The Romanian Revolution as Audiovisual Experiment', wishes to highlight precisely the anomalous character of the events essentially

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[10] Victor Burgin, 'Introduction. *L'English Connection*', in *Formes d'idéologie. Écrits sur l'image* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2025), 17. Our underlining.

[11] A separate, but connected thread of investigation concerns, indeed, the theoretical attempt to reduce images (and the virtual culture) to a one-dimensional entitity, instead of acknowledging their perceptive density. As philosopher Élie During argues, '[v]irtual reality (the Simulacrum, as it was called back in the day) has nothing of a homogeneous medium in which we would only have to immerse ourselves passively, but is, on the contrary, infinitely operable. Multiply stratified, offering numerous points of contact and insertion, it represents an extension, an amplification of a complexification of reality, rather that this spectral double to which it so happens to be reduced', in *Faux raccords. La coexistence des images* (Nice: Actes Sud/Villa Arson, 2010), 106.

[12] Catherine Russell, *Archiveology*, 15.

understood in their media dimension. By tracing a larger history of both the Romanian Television institution and the (involuntary?) attempts to impose a more creative direction for the televisual medium, while also touching on its competitive status in the aftermath of the Revolution, we aim to posit the revolutionary broadcast as a miraculous parenthesis when the medium could function autonomously, with all the meaningful possibilities and pitfalls that arise in such a non-hierarchical context. In other terms, liberated from both the tyrannical state-control of the Ceaușescu regime and the future pressures to respond to free-market imperatives of competition and on-demand content, the Romanian television in particular and the televisual medium in general could experience in the days of revolution what we could call a laboratory phase: an experimental situation in which the television workers were confronted with unprecedented scenarios and were thus discovering on the go the potentialities of the audiovisual field[13]. In a noteworthy article, French film critic Serge Daney spoke about the 'tele-invention' of Romania.[14] This doubly-conditioned term must be understood literally. It is not just that the first 'free' images of a severely repressed country were beginning to surface in the West thanks to the liberalising of media communication; more importantly, the 'how' (per Jeffrey C. Alexander) of this apparition is inevitably linked to a trial-and-error practice of getting oneself familiarised with a medium that had so far been exploited in an inadequate, incomplete manner, and was now manifesting itself fully.

A second methodological clarification concerns the archival theory framework that underpins this research. While Russell's concept of archiveology provides this dissertation's guiding theoretical impulse, recent scholarship has substantially expanded the terrain of archival theory, particularly around the notion of the counter-archive. Paula Amad's theorisation of counter-archival strategies proves foundational here: Amad posits

[13] We differ, in this sense, from the nihilistic version expressed by Aguinalin in his account: "And yet, television would remain truly free from any subordination for only a few hours. Very quickly, it would once again become a tool of propaganda and manipulation, working exclusively for the benefit not of Ceaușescu's dictatorship, but of future leaders', 26. Other, more generous commentators, such as Valentin Nicolau, contend that '[t]he life span of the Free Romanian Television was under two months. In 1990, it had become once again a means of manipulation in the hands of those in power', in *TVR. Mărire și decădere* [TVR. Rise and Fall] (Bucharest: Nemira, 2009), 74. We argue, in any case, that the obligation of the 'future leaders' to perform in a social, political, and audiovisual climate that differed in any point from the reality that was still effective a couple of days prior to that meant that, regardless of any subordinating intentions, television remained a very difficult to control institution, since the representations themselves conformed to a new syntax. This is not to take any sort of responsibility away from the perpetrators of televisual manipulation, but rather to treat such incidents in an ontological perspective shaped by a media studies perspective in which the sheer idea of 'propaganda' (as opposed to a purist form of 'truth'?) needs to be culturally contextualised.
[14] Serge Daney, 'Roumanie, année zéro', 84.

the counter-archive as a site of resistance to official, institutionalised archival formations, one that privileges the overlooked, the marginal, and the quotidian against the prestige documents of dominant memory.[15] Indeed, in her overview of the dormant capabilities of the archive that are waiting to be mobilised for political purposes, she observes how 'film [possesses the] ability to record and store the raw data of routine experience, transient details, uneventful moments, ordinary gestures, and casual occurrences.'[16] In light of her claim, the non-broadcast and under-circulated footage recovered from the Romanian Television Archive in this dissertation can be read precisely as counter-archival material in Amad's sense: peripheral footage that was never institutionally validated as 'revolutionary', yet which carries profound aesthetic and historical significance precisely given its 'transience' and non-conformity to mainstream expectations.

The political dimension of counter-archival inquiries as polarising forces that illuminate tensions and gaps in the accumulation of historical knowledge and biases is further reinforced by the work of the Canadian research network Archive/Counter-Archive, whose ongoing investigations into community and activist video archives demonstrate the political stakes of recovering material that official archiving processes have overlooked or suppressed[17]. Brett Kashmere's writings similarly engage with the intersection of experimental media, archival appropriation, and activist image politics – a convergence directly relevant to this dissertation's treatment of counter-images as potentially emancipatory audiovisual gestures. Kashmere argues for a renewed archival approach akin to our own investigation of challenging dominant assumptions on the Romanian revolution, positing our research within a nexus of contemporary evolutions of archival debates:

> the "counter-archive" represents an incomplete and unstable repository, an entity to be contested and expanded through clandestine acts, a space of impermanence and play. Taken as an action, the term entails mischief and imagination, challenging the record of official history. Employed as an artistic strategy it pushes our archival impulse into new territories, encouraging critique and material alteration/fabrication, and emboldening

[15] Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
[16] *Ibid*., 5.
[17] See, for instance, their *Gendered Violence: Responses and Remediations* series, aiming to analyse the historical representation of conflictual gender disparity via updated analytical tools. Accessible at: https://counterarchive.ca/case-studies/gendered-violence-responses-and-remediations, date accessed: 18.02.2026.

> anarchivism. To counter-archive is to counter-act, to rewrite, to animate over. Consider it a take-and-give thing… a negotiation. Against the un-Commons.[18]

Furthermore, a note on the medial scope of our research is required here. Although this dissertation engages extensively with photography and cinema, while also touching at times on print media – drawing on their theoretical traditions to illuminate what is specific to television as a medium – this does not constitute an intermedial analysis in the strict sense established by scholars such as Lars Elleström, whose proposed analytical framework involves a sustained examination of the relations, transfers, and combinations between two or more co-equal media objects[19]. In light of this categorisation, we argue that the present research is more accurately described as proceeding from an across-media approach: one that situates television within a broader media-historical constellation, deploying comparative references to other media as critical lenses rather than as independent objects of investigation. Photography, for instance, functions in Chapters 2 and 3 as the genealogical scaffolding through which constitutive notions such as indexicality and image-as-proof are theorised, before these concepts are applied to the televisual footage of the revolution. This across-media framework allows for flexibility in the theoretical apparatus without asserting a false parity between media objects that are not equally subjected to close textual analysis in this dissertation.

A final, necessary clarification concerns the epistemological position from which this research proceeds. Following the established practices of situated knowledge and reflexive scholarship[20], it must be stated clearly that this dissertation is not a neutral inquiry: it is politically committed, personally situated, and shaped by the specific position of its author. As a Romanian researcher trained in French academic institutions and now working within an Irish university context, this project emerges from a transnational and to some extent diasporic perspective – one that is neither entirely 'inside' nor 'outside' the cultural and historical event it examines. The on-site engagement with the Romanian Television Archive, located within the very building that served as the symbolic epicentre of the revolution, was not only a methodological choice but also an act of personal and cultural reconnection. This positionality conditions what questions can be asked of the footage,

[18] Brett Kashmere, 'Cache Rules Everything Around Me', in *INCITE Journal of Experimental Media #2*, 2010.
[19] See Lars Elleström, 'Introduction', in Elleström (ed.), *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 1-8.
[20] See for instance Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 575-599.

which sequences attract attention, and what political stakes are assigned to the counter-images. The claim of methodological openness advanced above – making no discrimination between the prestigious and the overlooked, yet favouring the latter from a political perspective – does not imply disinterestedness. On the contrary, this research is motivated by a conviction that the recovery of counter-images constitutes a form of historical and political justice, and that the argument for experimental television as an emancipatory form is not merely a scholarly conclusion but a sustained intellectual and ethical commitment. Identifying this stance from the outset allows the reader to situate the research appropriately – and invites a critical engagement with its inevitable limitations.

Historicising the Television Medium

As a televisual event, the Romanian Revolution clearly represents something of a relic in the economy of our present times, with their digitalised culture and AI-generated imagery. (Given the speed of technological evolution, this observation has only become more stringent since the beginning of our research three years ago.) It sits uneasily within a long history of news broadcasting of revolutionary events, between the written press, photography, cinema, and the emergence of new media. At the time of the Romanian national uprising, in the late 1980s, television as a medium found itself at the forefront of media expansion, inaugurating a new age of hypervisibility[21]. Its enhanced immersive quality via the generalisation of live broadcasting technology, as well as the advent of satellite and cable television seemed to inaugurate a second, more promising phase for this medium that had been so far considered as an *ersatz* of cinema: smaller screens, smaller (philosophical, ideological) stakes, coupled with a derided popular appeal (see below). In this sense, for an international audience, the revolution inadvertently seemed to serve, at least in its initial phase, as a promotion for the capacities of a medium that was generally perceived as operating a comeback, with television workers willing to demonstrate a closer connection to information and reality while, proportionately, historical events were abounding and accelerating, from the Tiananmen student massacre (June 1989) to the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989).

[21] For an introductory survey on the history of television programming, see Michele Hilmes (ed.), *The Television History Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), especially section 'Programming: New Venues, New Formes', 95-121, detailing the evolution of television in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

This euphoric media climate was not meant to last. Not only, as a subsequent chapter will detail, the Gulf War of 1991 seemed to seal this optimistic period with a return to a redundant, obsessively uniform coverage, while the principle of satellite television itself seemed to certify American imperialist policies. But, by the early 2000s, television as a whole had already come to be considered 'old media', quickly replaced by the all-encompassing electronic imagery.[22] Not even ten years had passed since the Romanian events. This shifting, uneasy status represents one of the motivations behind this research. It highlights the paradoxical nature of television, a medium that found itself sandwiched between two larger cultural forms – the cinema and the Internet, or the analogue and the digital (audio)visual ages, respectively –, and was thus largely confined to derogatory uses while assuring by default a hasty transition between the two.[23] Indeed, there are two aspects which need to be considered when discussing television from the point of view of media history: the first one concerns the precarious status of television compared to cinema, or what film theorist Patrice Blouin names 'the cinematographic paradigm': in his study *Les Champs de l'audiovisuel*, he argues for the need to decentralise the cinematographic image – that he also critically deems 'the discriminant image' – in favour of an audiovisual 'sphere' that refutes all kinds of cultural hierarchies between 'good' and 'bad' objects, instead championing a radical equality between them[24]. Of course, Blouin's approach is by no means singular, or even original[25], yet it does have the merit to clearly formulate the

[22] For a comparative discussion between 'old' and 'new' media, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press/Leonardo Books, 2002), 65. See also Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (eds.), *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press, 2003).

[23] In his book *La Question video. Entre cinéma et art contemporain* (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2011), Philippe Dubois makes similar remarks about the quintessentially, inherently impure status of the video image, with which the television medium shares numerous characteristics. See especially his chapter 'L'état vidéo : une forme qui pense' [The Video State: A Form that Thinks], in which the author posits the video image as a transient, indeterminate, linguistically-uncertain stage of the circulation of images.

[24] See Patrice Blouin, *Les Champs de l'audiovisuels* (Paris: Éditions Musica Falsa, 2017). In his book, Blouin takes inspiration from film critic Louis Skorecki's transversal and idiosyncratic understanding of the history of images as the one who advanced, in his collection of reviews *Les Violons ont toujours raison* (Paris: PUF, 2000), the hypothesis that the Lumière brothers have in fact invented television. Regardless of the heuristic outcome of such an intuition, the phrase proved fruitful for Blouin as an incentive to imagine a fully integrated history of moving image formats, thus abolishing the nostalgic attitude implied in cinephilia, one that prevents the positive consideration of objects that are *a priori* treated as *ersatz* versions of the cinematographic image.

[25] One may argue indeed that the entire field of media studies, and the more recent (yet already abundant) interest in the new media have already accomplished the abolition of cultural hierarchies that Blouin preaches. On the other hand, what we are interested in here is a verbalised attempt at redistributing the shares of symbolic capital between cinema and discredited forms of the visible. For a discussion of the need, for cinema, to incorporate different kinds of 'foreign' imagery, see Dork Zabunyan, *Jacques Rancière et le monde des images* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2022). We have also argued for the need to decentralise cinema's hegemonic position in Victor Morozov, *Ecranomanie* (Bucharest: Imprint Matca, 2025). An anthology such as *Cahiers du cinema*'s Thierry Jousse (ed.), *Le Goût de la télévision* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2006) subtly implies the existence of a gap while also making a clear attempt to highlight a long lasting interest in television for its own sake.

need for a politically updated, inclusive history of the moving image that also renews aesthetical postulates by considering every medium both in its own right, as bearer of specificities, and as part of the global trajectory of visual culture. The theorist opposes his work to the axiological media discourses which have consolidated implacable views on media depending on their positive (print media, cinema) or negative cultural assessment. In other words, Blouin's analysis is pertinent for our own research since he also employs a film studies (and film criticism) formation, and his general target is the hegemonic discourse of the cinematographic aura that still permeates this field of study. Not only does he shift the focus towards other audiovisual objects, he thematises the strategic need to do so.[26]

On the one hand, then, we argue for the need to extract television from the shadow of the cinematographic image and to invest it with the same cultural certification that is granted to legitimised media objects[27]. On the other hand, we want to address the impression of outdated-ness that television seems to be facing since its popular appeal has been at least partly displaced, if not entirely substituted on a symbolic level, by the advent of the Internet and new media. This rapidly evolving media context has relegated television to the realm of affectionate media artefacts of the past. Somewhat ironically, television can thus be seen as reproducing the trajectory of cinema and currently finding itself entangled in a web of ideological positions that seem to prophesise its 'death', as Jérôme Bourdon and Camille Noûs deconstruct in their article 'Est-ce la fin de la fin de la télévision ?' [Is This the End of the End of Television?][28]. However, in spite of superficial similarities, there is a crucial distinction between discourses evoking the end of cinema and their televisual analogues: the former ones dwell in melancholia, while the latter ones, 'because of [television's] massive evaluation as "bad object"'[29], see this hypothetical end as positive news. In other words, the abandonment – from a production of theory standpoint – of television as an object of study, which constitute the ultimate horizon of Bourdon and Noûs's article, cannot be separated from what the two authors name the 'rising and triumph of hatred' towards this particular medium.[30] Although at the beginning television had been

[26] For a detailed discussion of Blouin's work, see Victor Morozov, *Roumanie, année zéro*, 30-36.
[27] Of course, the notion of legitimation (or the converse resistance, from the ruling classes, to legitimation) already evokes the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu. See especially his *La Distinction – Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1979).
[28] See Jérôme Bourdon, Camille Noûs, 'Est-ce la fin de la fin de la télévision ?', in *Le Temps des Médias*, no. 34 (Autumn 2020), 185-204.
[29] *Ibid*., 185.
[30] *Ibid*., 187-189.

positively assessed, notably with regard to its educative potential, it would soon be attacked, according to the two researchers, notably for its popular (*i. e.* vulgar) appeal, thus contributing to a preservation of the elitist *status quo*: 'it is possible that the dominant ideas on television were those of the dominant classes.'[31] Television's inferior symbolic status becomes, in light of this assessment, a political question.

In the second part of their essay, Bourdon and Noûs contend that the ancestral 'hatred' towards television has nonetheless evolved directly into a form of nostalgia. Television, according to them, becomes historicised as a medium, enjoying 'less importance' as a 'unique and specific medium': here we find the idea that 'a flow of organised genres in a programme format, regrouped on several channels and watched on a screen *ad hoc* is largely treated as *passée*'[32], dislocated by the process of free individual navigation between contents allowed by the generalisation of Internet at the beginning of the 2000s. As television becomes less prominent as a cultural form, its aura grows proportionately by positively re-evaluating and rehabilitating precisely those aspects that, during its apogee period, were decried: its popular appeal is nowadays seen as a factor of social cohesion (in opposition with the atomised digital media and its highly unregulated usages), while its relation to actuality as a journalistic platform – that may indeed have prevailed during an event such as the Romanian Revolution – is nostalgically superimposed over its public service component.[33] In other words, according to the two authors, television is nowadays perceived as an archival medium, as 'the traces of a precious collective history that need to be preserved.'[34] Yet, although television may now enjoy a resurgence of sympathy, this is arguably due to an inorganic 'museumification' of the medium, an attempt to operate a ceremonious indexation in the history of media that also signals its obsolescence. We, on the contrary, argue for the necessity to retrieve the investigated footage of the Romanian Revolution as part of a *living* and at times rebellious archive, by questioning and at times appropriating the material, endowing it with documentary and

[31] *Ibid*., 192. Bourdon and Noûs propose multiple causes to this 'hatred', among which one can find a 'structural frustration' due to the fact that, unlike cinema, which – for most of its history – implied a confined collective experience, television knows absolutely no closure – it is always readily available. One of the most interesting causes of dissatisfaction for our inquiry, however, is represented by the 'medium frustration', which considers the quintessential concept of live broadcast as 'inauthentic', since often times what is presented as unmediated live transmission is in fact the object of pre-staging, as was the case for the Romanian Revolution as well.
[32] *Ibid*., 195.
[33] As a subsequent chapter aims to demonstrate, the relation between journalists and the audience was, during the Romanian Revolution, highly contradictory and anything but straightforward.
[34] *Ibid*., 197.

communitarian value, in light of future potential usages. Although specifically intended for filmic practices, Russell's 'archiveological' impulse of extracting images from their immediate context for analysis and repurposing feels especially pertinent here: 'How and when does an image become a document?', she asks. 'I would argue that it does so as soon as it is excised from its narrative origins, or from its original 'documentary' form, if that is where it comes from.'[35] In a similar vein, this research aims to properly engage with television as an emancipated medium via a close textual analysis approach, in order to retrieve fruitful inconsistencies, experimental specificities and hidden potentialities which have emerged – only to be forgotten again – during the Romanian Revolution, positing television as a viable media reflection of history, our present, and the world at large.

Considerations on the Structure of the Dissertation

The revolution was a local political phenomenon that quickly became an international media event. As such, the present dissertation aims to propose an interdisciplinary approach as the best-suited option for describing the intricate nature of the situation. While our focus will be on the actual televised broadcast and on the entire mass of footage that has been recorded in its preparation, this research will also consider the transnational dimension of the event. The preferred method of a close textual analysis of the available footage to be found at the Romanian Television Archives will constitute the main principle of engagement with the actual images of the revolution, without excluding punctual resorting to historical, anthropological, and sociological theories. By closely reading the images, we aim to reveal their contradictory meanings and to posit the Romanian Revolution – and the multiple ways in which it was reflected, disseminated, and catalysed through the televisual footage it generated – as a site for incoherence, paradox, and invention.

The revolution has influenced an abundant production of literature, including (self-)theoretical accounts and works debating its media component. The literature review seeks to specifically analyse such writings by contextualising them both in relation to the original event, to their own moment of apparition, and to the present. We highlight the significance of a collective endeavour such as *Revoluția română televizată* [Romanian Revolution

[35] Catherine Russell, *Archiveology, op. cit.*, 27.

Televised][36], which not only aimed to reveal the significance of this event as a matrix for political media occurrences, but also operated a synthesis of indigenous and international media theories on the event. Thus, operating as a summarising account, this work offers an important foundation that both advances a relevant picture of the *televised* Romanian Revolution in its posterity, but also opens up several trajectories for further discussion. By acknowledging its status as an inevitable intermediate stage in this reflection – and by no means a conclusive report –, the literature review further attempts to define the theoretical frame of the 1989 moment as a contested case study on the critical capacities of television. Respecting this particular case of historicity allows for the conceptualisation of the revolution as a hopeful moment within a larger historical context also comprising the Gulf War of 1991, which significantly altered the critical response to the medium of television, influencing interpretations up to present-day works.

Whereas chapter 1 attempts to present a summary of key directions in relevant literature which conceptualised the Romanian Revolution as both a historically and socially significant juncture and a decisive media event, chapter 2 builds upon these preliminary findings, considering them as useful theoretical foundations for a specific angle of discourse. This precise angle that we opted for engages with French film theory and posits the critically under-developed notion of the 'trademark image' as a main theoretical framework for this dissertation. It proceeds by examining a series of official and renowned accounts on the meaning of revolutions, concluding on the difficulty to define them in the absence of enumerations of key sequences that intervene on its course. This leads us to the specific context of the Romanian events, seen as ideally conforming – as a regional exception – to such definitions. Borrowed from film and media criticism of the 1970s and concretely applied to the images of the Romanian Revolution, the notion of the 'trademark' – understood as an emblem that monopolises attention – critically engages with the assumption that a revolution consists of a series of 'strong' elements that need to be present, ultimately positing the need for a critical correlative: the counter-image that tackles the hegemony of iconic moments by introducing indeterminacy and stasis.

Chapter 3 pursues this reasoning by attempting to explain the over-reliance on, and transformation of, the image in a site of heated contestation during the Romanian Revolution. Constructed as a historical survey into the field of media archaeology, this

[36] Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovszky (eds.), *Revoluția română televizată* (Cluj: Editura IDEA, 2009).

chapter links the particular media context of Romania in 1989 to an intellectual tradition that associates the visible with interrelated notions of truth, authenticity, and realism. We argue that, since the revolution – a drastic, explicit change of regime – was seeking certification, the image was seen as sufficient proof in this process. This section is built around André Bazin's seminal text 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', yet expands in several directions – from a theological understanding of the image to a history of the gradual mechanisation of the media. A second axis is constituted by a historical reflection on the notion of the *image manquante* [the Missing Image], a paradigm of mourning and absence that has been established in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the traumatic discovery of the concentration camps, when the correlation between imagery and documentation becomes dominant on all levels of society, deeply influencing the juridical processes up to the present day.

Our main goal, however, expands on the historical dimension surrounding the revolution, in order to contextualise a synergic praxis for the future: as chapter 4 attempts to demonstrate, the particular attention that will subsequently be given to the close analysis of the images themselves serves our over-arching thesis in favour of what we call an experimental television. We argue that, by serving as a laboratory for different usages of television – as performative platform for free speech, as reportage organism, as agent of catalysing or, on the contrary, of manipulating popular discontent –, the revolution and the fall of the Ceaușescu couple have allowed for the significant, if short-lived, establishment of a truly free public televisual institution. This establishment may seem to have occurred in a radical void of pre-existing viable models – a miracle of sorts. However, such an assessment is only partly correct, and rather proves an inadequate assessment of the Romanian state television's history. Indeed, before entering its late, crepuscular stage during the Ceaușescu regime in the second part of the 1980s, the institution of television in communist Romania encouraged significant experiences – and even experiments, some of them under the form of transnational exchanges – as a critical social agent. Such experiences are profoundly at odds with the canonical image of a powerless, caricature-like institution at the mercy of the communist political power and reduced to the ridicule status of a Party media organ and an inert propaganda machine. Regular shows of the 1960s and 1970s – such as the renowned *Reflector* – demonstrate a motivated agenda of social critique that runs parallel to the Party ideology, often times proposing a conflicting worldview.

While this is true of the last years of Ceaușescu's rule, chapter 4 contends that, prior to this stage, television tested multiple possibilities of political reaction, if not creative output.

Following these distinct, but interrelated theoretical and historical inquiries that construct the foundations for a new exploration of a supposedly familiar material, chapters 5 and 6 actively engage with the televisual footage of the Romanian Revolution. As we have already mentioned, the novelty of our research is that, unlike most accounts which reached their respective conclusions based on a rather limited analysis of footage, our depth is significantly greater since we made no a priori discrimination between 'trademark' images and their counterparts – approaching the archive without presupposing the greater importance of the more widely circulated material, and accepting the selection constraints imposed by the archive's current state of indexation – thus providing a dialectical understanding of the archive as a site of contrasting meanings.

The process of accessing the Multimedia Archive at Romanian Television (Serviciul Arhiva Media și Documentare), located within the television building on Calea Dorobanților in Bucharest, deserves more detailed description, as both the material conditions of the archive and the selection methodology have directly shaped the research findings. Access was facilitated through institutional correspondence with the archive's personnel – in particular through the assistance of Andreea Mitrănuș, acknowledged in the preliminary pages of this thesis – and involved multiple research visits over the course of the doctoral period. Footage was consulted on-site via the archive's internal playback infrastructure, with requests organised according to broadcast date. One of the most significant methodological factors was the state of the archive itself: inadequately indexed by comparison with Western European audiovisual archives such as the INAthèque in Paris, it does not systematically distinguish between broadcast and unbroadcast material, and contains gaps in the coverage of certain dates. This structural limitation reinforced the qualitative, exploratory approach of the research, since a systematic or comprehensive survey of 'all available footage' in any absolute sense was not feasible. The selection of sequences for detailed analysis was guided by the central research question – the distinction between trademark and counter-images – and by aesthetic and theoretical criteria that emerged inductively through repeated viewings. The material conditions of the footage itself were also analytically significant: much of the unbroadcast material is, by virtue of its un-emblematic status, of noticeably lower technical quality, characterised by grain, colour instability, camera shake, and other marks of poor image resolution that, as the

subsequent analysis will demonstrate, carry their own theoretical weight in relation to Hito Steyerl's theorisation of the 'poor image' as a politically charged form[37].

In fact, by splitting the chronology of the events into multiple formal, aesthetical, and ultimately political branches that communicate permanently, we aim to provide transversal knowledge more apt to describe and analyse the time gap that separates us from the moment they occurred, in December 1989. Furthermore, our theorised distinction between iconic images which have endured the time that has passed since then, and are nowadays considered as a clichéd (or, on the contrary meaningful), immediately recognisable representation of the event, and counter-images that present a less easily legible image of it, aims to produce an updated reading of the revolution itself. The revolution, then, will be conceptualised as a media event that generated a singularly rich production of footage that confounds linearity. However, the chronology itself is evocative of larger transformations in the public understanding of the medium. For example, following his initial assessment of the 'tele-invention' occasioned by the revolution, Daney would rhetorically ask several months later:

> Why did Romanians fail so badly in the symbolic acts that should have allowed them to turn the page on Ceaușescu's chapter in their history without too much damage? To what extent was this failure exacerbated by the morbid way in which Western television stations operate? Is it not futile to expect even the slightest symbolic effectiveness from television?[38]

Assessing what happened between the first moments of televisual promise and this 'failure' of turning the page historically as well as audiovisually requires a transversal analysis that describes the formidable visual circulation of revolutionary imagery during those days. Despite its highly controversial and contradictory character, we argue that this footage was regrettably not discussed in its entirety, thus failing to produce an adequately rich canvas of discussion, which instead mostly focused on several key aspects.

Our conclusion, then, aims to inscribe the coverage of the revolution by the Romanian state television into a larger history of attempts to unsettle the habitual format of the medium. The outcome of such an attempt is not, by any means, purely speculative: although it does absolutely not downplay the political importance of the revolution by

[37] Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux*, Issue #10, November 2009, accessible online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image. Date accessed: 09.02.2026.
[38] Serge Daney, 'Nicolae et Elena lèguent leurs corps à la télé', *Libération*, April 26th, 1990'. Our Romanian translation of this text can be accessed at: https://futureast.blog/2021/12/21/o-noua-traducere-din-serge-daney-despre-revolutie/. Date accessed: 23. 08. 2025.

analysing the aesthetics of the broadcast in terms of a potentially experimental medium, our conclusion accomplishes the goal of our dissertation – inscribing the revolution within a history of radical media gestures that altered – deliberately or not, concretely or virtually – the course of audiovisual history. In order to close this theoretical circle, we revert to the prevalent discourse that frames television as a 'bad object', since we posit from the outset of this chapter that the argument that incites to the creation of a 'non-television', lamenting the current state of things, represents the insurmountable horizon of the ideological view on television itself. Thus, we aim to mark our difference by showing that such a 'non-television' actually existed and evolved in radically different contexts – and that it was allowed for by extant principles of the television itself, or invented within its clear coordinates, not by some miraculous alterity of television. The potential for subversion inherent in the Romanian Revolution broadcast, we argue, is not external to television – but is quintessentially televisual, as a testament to its contradictory powers that are still left to be explored.

Following this first opening which will comment on the ancestral desire to reform the televisual medium from within, a second opening will dialectically 'close' our dissertation: by linking this historical case study to present-day geopolitical conflicts – such as the Russian aggression over Ukraine or the genocide of the Gaza population perpetuated by Israeli forces –, we wish to highlight once again the continuity of political acts of rebellion, discontent, and emancipation, as well as the necessity to carefully study the various circuits of images that compose our contemporary visual culture and become crystallised in the coverage of such political events. The Romanian Revolution is not a passé situation sealed from contemporary concerns: on the contrary, it actively opens up multiple conversations with our present.

That said, a note regarding the stylistic composition of this dissertation needs to be added. As already made apparent in the first section of this introduction, this project has been constructed at the sometimes unstable core of multiple theoretical fields, including, but not limited to, history and media archaeology (to mention both established and recent developments). We have attempted to replicate this architecture – this point of intersection that constitutes our inquiry – by adopting a particular structure in which the main body of text is complemented, augmented, or even disrupted by an abundant section of footnotes. This formal option has been deemed adequate in order to suggest both the potential openings towards distinct research avenues that remain to be explored elsewhere, and the

degree of luxurious intertext that our research belongs to, thus tensioning the sheer concept of research *closure*. In other words, we have chosen to posit the Romanian revolution as a nexus of trajectories, as a seminal historical event that crystallises numerous interrogations, without proclaiming to solve them all. Another layer of text, then, develops in parallel with our main discussion: this demarcation is hardly hierarchical; instead, by recognising the necessity to synthesise and eventually *conclude*, it has been conceived with an avid, specialised reader in mind, transforming each chapter into a potential dissertation on its own.

Finally, we would like to briefly discuss a structural preference. As no reader will fail to observe, the tutelary figure of French film critic Serge Daney (1944-1992) traverses the entirety of our chapters, illuminating them in multiple capacities. Indeed, Daney is important for our research not only via his particular interest for the events of the revolution – but also through what – as he was writing in the generalist press of the 1980s and early 1990s – he came to represent for the recent visual culture. That period is important as it marked multiple historical shifts with the advent of the video format, the short-lived supremacy of the cable television, and the first sign of an advertising culture – all combined with a generally perceived decline of the cinema. Assuring the relay between cinema and television in his daily writings, Daney adopted a *sui generis* praxis that mixed cultural studies, a particular attention to films, and an all-encompassing curiosity for socio-political phenomena.[39] In fact, what is interesting about Daney's unstable position is that he managed to reconcile what is nowadays subsumed by the rather vague term 'media studies' and a form of classical cinephilia. As such, he truly represented a 'passeur'[40], a very lively synthesis between interdependent, yet somewhat mutually exclusive directions of audiovisual theory. Daney's work is only gradually being discovered by Anglophone readers.[41] Let us hope that his illuminating writings on the Romanian Revolution – which implicitly define a methodology of the cinematographic analysis that finds itself transformed into a conceptual media tool for the illumination of contemporary audiovisual

[39] A very insightful account of Daney's multiple passages between media can be found in James Tweedie, 'Serge Daney, Zapper: Cinema, Television, and the Persistence of Media', *October*, Vol. 157 (Summer 2016), 107-127.

[40] Daney himself coined the term. An in-depth discussion of it can be found in Serge Daney, *Persévérance. Entretien avec Serge Toubiana* (Paris: P.O.L, 1994).

[41] Recent translations of Daney's work demonstrate renewed interest in his writings. See for instance *The Cinema House and the World: The Cahiers du Cinema Years, 1962–1981*, trans. Christine Pichini (New York: Semiotext(e), 2022).

events – will also spark new theoretical directions and provide multiple crossings between distinct fields of study. This research attempts to step in that direction.

Chapter 1. The Romanian Revolution as Historical and Media Event

Literature Overview

This chapter aims to outline the key research directions that frame the understanding of the Romanian Revolution as a significant moment in the history of media. As a major historical and political event of the late twentieth century, the revolution has broad implications across multiple fields, from historiography to media studies, while the artistic and theoretical production that it generated – from films and novels to specialised commentary – is ever-growing[42]. To offer a comprehensive perspective on these intersecting domains, this study adopts a detailed analytical approach infused by continental thinking, focusing specifically on the unique characteristics of the mass footage produced during the revolution by the Romanian National Television, itself a contested and symbolic site throughout those preliminary days in December 1989, as a subsequent section will demonstrate. However, this is not a narrow, singular inquiry; rather, it is informed by an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates historiographical analysis (to contextualise the event within 20th-century history), television studies, and aesthetics. This section, therefore, provides an overview of diverse research areas explored in the dissertation by referencing a series of already existing works, while emphasising a film studies-based textual analysis for this scrutinised event.

This research draws upon a widely accepted argument considering this revolution to be the first occurrence of a live broadcast popular uprising[43]. Indeed, in their introduction

[42] At the time of concluding this dissertation, in September 2025, director Mihai Mincan's new feature *Dinți de lapte*/*Milk Teeth* had just premiered in the Orizzonti section of the Venice Film Festival, depicting the mysterious disappearance of a school girl in a crepuscular social climate preceding the Romanian Revolution. The revolution itself is not shown – it exists only as ellipsis, as a hole in the narrative tissue, leading film critic Andrei Gorzo to assimilate this film in the line of Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology'. See Andrei Gorzo, 'Ostalgie ca haunt-ologie' [Ostalgia as Hauntology], accessible at: https://www.filmsinframe.com/ro/festival-focus/dinti-de-lapte-venetia/. Date accessed: 29.09.2025. In any case, the film marked a significant shift in tone from previous indigenous cinematographic attempts to actively engage with the events of the revolution, either by depicting it as immersive, meaningless chaos (*Hârtia va fi albastră*/*The Paper Will be Blue* [Radu Muntean, 2006]), or by achieving a pretended summative picture (*Anul nou care n-a fost*/*The New Year that Never Came* [Bogdan Muresanu, 2024]).

[43] The concept of 'liveness' is in itself a complex field of philosophical, aesthetical and technical implications. For a detailed analysis of its history, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

to an important indigenous anthology dedicated to the media component of the Romanian Revolution, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovszky categorically state that, during those days of December 1989, '[a] revolution was broadcast and recorded live for the first time in 1989.'[44] Without elaborating, the two authors simply mention that 'the fact has been considered by many analysts as an inaugural event of a new era in the history of television.'[45] Among these 'analysts', the writers choose the example of French film critic Serge Daney, who, via his recurrent engagement with French media at the end of the 1980s, will also be an important source for our investigation. More to the point, by focusing on the transformations in global television enabled by satellite technology and reporting them regularly in the national press[46], Daney made significant contributions to analysing the media coverage of the Romanian Revolution as it unfolded live on French TV, thus nurturing a long-lasting geopolitical interest in the region by eventually covering the first cycle of free elections of the country in 1990.[47] His corpus of articles dedicated to the Romanian situation ranged from a quick analysis of the televised trial of the Ceaușescu couple to a broader theoretical examination of the montage and editorial choices made by Romanian Television during its broadcasts[48]. Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky highlight a famous passage from his seminal 'Romania, Year Zero', in which he contended that the Romanian live broadcast of the Revolution represents 'the baptism of fire' [*le baptême de feu*] of the televisual medium.[49]

It is generally considered, even beyond the field of media studies, that the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe represented a defining historical event. Vladimir Tismăneanu bluntly states that '[t]he revolutions of 1989 were, no matter how one judges

[44] Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Konrad Petrovszky: 'Introducere' [Introduction], in *Revoluția română televizată* [Romanian Revolution Televised] (Cluj: IDEA Design & Print, 2009), 42. Our translation.
[45] *Idem.*
[46] Between 1981 and 1992, the year of his death, Daney would work for the French newspaper (*quotidien*) *Libération*, even assuming the position of editor-in-chief for the cinema section and enlarging it through constant attention to different kinds of media.
[47] See especially, in chronological order, 'Les Juges et l'Assassin', *Libération*, December 27th, 1989; 'Roumanie, année zéro', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 428, February 1990; and 'Nicolae et Elena lèguent leurs corps à la télé', *art. cit*. The dates of these contributions demonstrate a willingness to engage rapidly with the media actuality. For his series of on the spot reportages of the Romanian elections, see 'Télé-chroniques roumaines', in *La Maison cinéma et le monde. Tome 3 : Les années Libé (1986-1991)* (Paris: P.O.L, 2012), 771-783.
[48] In the aftermath of the revolution, as the country was kick-starting the democratic process of electing a new president, Daney even produced reportages on site for *Libération*, thus mixing his passion for journalism with that of the traveller.
[49] Serge Daney, 'Roumanie, année zéro', 86. The full quotation states: 'If it was already clear by now that information belonged to the field of television, it still had not taken part – at least, not in Europe – in a *baptism of fire*.' (Our italics.)

their nature, a true world-historical event, in the Hegelian sense: they established a historical cleavage (only to some extent conventional) between the world before and after '89.'[50] This research, however, moves away from a univocal historical perspective on the events, aiming to tackle the events differently. The approach does build upon established historical accounts – it does not, by any means, consider the images in an abstract vacuum, but as products of several well-defined historical forces – but diverges by focusing not on uncovering factual truths, but on updating, describing, and theorising the so-called regime of visibility that this event has informally inaugurated through its mode of broadcasting. This research advocates for a more inclusive perspective on the televisual archive of the Romanian Revolution by highlighting a common tendency among both specialists and generalists to rely on what might be termed 'trademark images,'[51] 'symbolic images,' or 'iconic images'[52] – visuals that have achieved significant longevity and come to symbolise the revolution on their own, obscuring less emblematic, or even contradictory, coverage. In a later stage, this project aims to recover and analyse overlooked and atypical images, or counter-images, which offer more nuanced, ambiguous, and even unconventional representations of the revolution. As subsequent chapters will illustrate, these images provide a more complex and varied understanding of the event.

This methodology has been shaped by the empirical, textual, close analysis of images that deviate from conventional patterns of revolutionary imagery. We argue that, while a quantitative analysis can usefully indicate patterns and structures at play within the broadcast, it also solidifies preconceptions regarding a hegemonic representation of the events. Instead, these non-normative images help delineate the Romanian Revolution as an audiovisual experiment emerging at the intersection of two markedly different eras of media discourse: one that was heavily centralised, censored, and increasingly powerless in the face of actuality, and another that was barely consolidating, driven by capitalist market pressures that would only become prevalent in the aftermath of Ceaușescu's fall. This transition is elucidated in the complex account provided by Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and

[50] Vladimir Tismăneanu, 'The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences', in *Contemporary European History*, 18, 3 (2009), Cambridge University Press, 271.
[51] Serge Toubiana, Serge Daney, 'Présentation', *art. cit*. A translation that is available on the Internet privileges the term 'mark image'. See https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1468, translation by Stoffel Debuysere. Date accessed: 15. 10. 2024. We choose however to employ 'trademark' in order to maintain the advertising connotation that already exists in the original version, while also moving beyond it when necessary. An elaboration on this topic, and the cultural history of the trademark image, can be found in a subsequent chapter.
[52] An expression that can be found in Clément Chéroux, *Diplopie. L'image photographique à l'ère des médias globalisés* (Paris: Éditions Le Point du Jour, 2009).

Konrad Petrovszky, who explore the stakes involved in a medial inquiry of the Revolution, noting that:

> We begin, thus, with the preliminary observation that the common belief in the binarity *communist mass-media/post-communist freedom of speech* turns the transitional moment of the Revolution of 1989 into a blind spot for critical reflection.[53]

Despite more than 15 years having passed since their writing, this research recognises the persistence of this blind spot, with the period of the Romanian Revolution maintaining a somewhat singular, and inadequately addressed, status in media history (and in the field of televisual studies in particular), while also looming large, as a capital historical event, in the indigenous cultural horizon of debates. In this research, we observe, as a crucial starting point for our media investigation, how the transformation of televisual broadcasts during those days reflects the broader evolution of Romanian society, allowing for a deeper understanding of the external pressures that were being applied right from the outset of the revolution in terms of media conformation to Western powers and already established national news broadcasts. However, we wish to distinguish our approach from the two authors who, while recognising the noteworthy media character of the events, had recourse to a strict ideological framework for their observations. While such a framework was necessary in their (national, and rather uncharted) context – dominated by an all-pervasive, rudimentary anti-communist discourse that hindered the development of new critical knowledge from any areas associated with the political left –, we contend that this ideological fervour has now subsided[54], encouraging more flexible textual approaches to emerge as pertinent options for theoretical exploration. Although an ideological perspective can offer insights into the broader political forces shaping this reality, it falls short in addressing the inconsistencies, contradictions, and unexpected elements present in specific audiovisual productions which are more than simply conditioned by their immediate social context, and which represent our main focus of discussion.

The Romanian televisual institution enjoyed a mixed response even during the short period of the revolution, abruptly changing its status from a platform of the voicing of popular discontent – and, thus, an amplifier of the revolutionary echo – to that of enemy of

[53] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *Revoluția română televizată*, 29. Italics in original.
[54] Pursuing this PhD in an Irish, English-speaking university that is not, by any means, faced with similar censoring and self-censoring ideological contexts also made a dogmatic reading of the revolution somewhat less stringent.

the revolutionary cause, leading a series of commentators to cast severe doubts on its integrity. However, elsewhere in their account, Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky try to counter the prevalent – and, it must be said, simplistic in its radicalism – view of Television as an active agent of manipulation during those revolutionary days. They do so by relying on a similar argument to the above-mentioned one, in which the revolution is seen as a *sui generis* socio-political situation that abolishes any pre-existent patterns and requires immediate adaptability:

> Less often considered is the possibility that there were genuine intentions to bring order out of the spontaneous chaos, as well as the fact that the former TV broadcasters had suddenly found themselves in a new dramaturgy – one in which they began to oversell and overhype their own content. This occurred in a situation where the paradigm had abruptly shifted from centralised information flows to a more generalised exchange, characterised by multiple platforms for public discourse.[55]

While this overarching perspective is certainly pertinent, it serves primarily as a broad explanation – a description of a more general tendency. The diagnosis of this tendency is undoubtedly correct, yet it does not explain how it actually manifests according to the new discursive scenes (the television studio, the streets, the ancient spaces of the political power, each eliciting a specific broadcast treatment) that the revolution proposed. This research, on the other hand, seeks to *concretely* understand how this paradigm shift occurred – and how, once it occurred, it immediately translated into its polarising audiovisual coverage; particular attention will be given, in a subsequent chapter, to the history of the Romanian Television as a state broadcasting institution, precisely in order to dispel potential misconceptions over its role. By engaging with another 'blind spot' in the academic discourse on the Romanian Revolution – the textual analysis of the visuals, leading to an examination of the mass footage which lies at the crossroads of aesthetics, ideology, semiology, and technical possibilities – this dissertation follows Sylvie Lindeperg's concept of 'the way of the image' [*la voie de l'image*]. Lindeperg emphasises the need for a meticulous analysis of the moving image, remaining vigilant of its potential traps and double meanings. Rather than relying on sweeping, totalising arguments that claim to extensively cover a given topic, she advocates for a closer examination of selected footage, searching for what she terms the 'rebellious detail' – elements that resist rigid theoretical frameworks. This approach allows for interpretations that avoid generic and

[55] *Ibid*., 31.

ossified conclusions, maintaining a state of nuanced openness towards new readings. Lindeperg explains that 'following the way of the images means giving them the initiative again, paying attention to their whisper and to the labile signs that they deposit, starting from the premise that they do not actually reflect the historical event, but they are its witnesses and they carry its coordinates.'[56] This methodology does not aim to fit a corpus of moving images into a pre-existing theory by any means; rather, it seeks those details and 'labile signs' that reveal the image's resistance to straightforward interpretation, thereby fostering a new regime of visibility that this dissertation explores in depth. Theories and notions – such as that of the trademark image, which will be subsequently explored – will aim to channel the footage that will be analysed, without reducing its contradictory density.

In other words, using the term 'audiovisual experiment' to qualify the broadcast of the revolution does not signify a renunciation of politics, nor does it placate a frivolous interpretation over a historically impactful reality. Instead, it affirms the priority given here to the politics of the image, which are not pre-determined, but transcend univocal disciplines. While considering ideological perspectives, this research addresses a gap that has been largely overlooked: by describing what can actually be seen (and heard) within the image, it integrates the political into the visual frame. This approach seeks to fulfil and advance the intention articulated by Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky at the outset of their collective endeavour, which we also share. They stated that:

> in an effort to critically revisit the celebration of the event, this volume is not intended to explain the 'reality' of the 1989 Revolution, but rather to re-explore the possibilities that emerged during this propitious historical moment, before the establishment of normative narratives, overcoded symbols, and rigid directives [mots d'ordre] – at a time when the world as we knew it appeared to dissolve for good, and fundamental differences were briefly revealed or radically challenged.[57]

In this research, I argue that the most effective way to 'repopulate (sic) the possibilities that emerged during this propitious historical moment' is through a non-pre-determined perspective on these images. The term 'experiment' embodies potentiality, promises, mistakes, and failures – an approach that defies established patterns –, while at the same time renouncing the fatalist conception of television as an undignified medium. Politically, this is also relevant. The days of the revolution were more than just a fleeting

[56] Sylvie Lindeperg, *La Voie des images* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2013), 11.
[57] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *Revoluția română televizată*, 50.

parenthesis on the way to a new established political regime; we argue that they represented a moment of radical public engagement in media creation, which, though rapidly concluded, would significantly influence its future trajectory. Analysing this period requires abandoning preconceived frameworks, as these frameworks become inadequate when confronted with such a profoundly arresting event as the (any) revolution. For television technicians and workers that were mobilised during those days, this crisis necessitated learning and adapting in real time, starting anew, from scratch, as their retrospective intimations suggest[58]. This methodology thus also serves as an ode to them, establishing a horizontal relationship between ourselves as researcher and their on-site perspective. This perspective is not one of simplistic immersion (as this would prevent the acquisition of critical knowledge), nor is it condescending or fully distanced. Given that their eventual alignment with televisual patterns was largely unconscious, it would be reductive to confine their perceptive, often times intuitive approach within an established framework. This, ultimately, is the conclusion reached by Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky, although it has not been fully realised in practice:

> If 'the truth of the revolution will never be known', as is often claimed, it is because every revolution pushes the boundaries of meaning, challenges entire paradigms of thought, and alters modes of engaging with the political. In the case of the 'televised revolution', we witness the formation of a new regime of truth, establishing fresh fundamental distinctions between true and false, real and ideal, legal and illegal. These distinctions are not necessarily determined through discourse alone but may also be *shaped by the regime of visibility of images and the interplay between image and discourse*.[59]

Without aiming to theorise it, the two authors inadvertently adopt a conception of the image that has been popularised by philosopher Jacques Rancière, and which will also guide this research. According to Rancière, the image represents a connection between the visual and the verbal[60]. He argues that 'there exists a kind of visible [du visible] that does not make an image, there are images which belong entirely to words. But the most current regime of the image is that which stages a relation between the speakable and the visible, a

[58] For a contribution that brings together a multitude of personal accounts from television workers that handled the broadcast during the revolution, see Direcția de logistică și memorie, *Viziune tele. 40 de ani de televiziune* (Bucharest: Televiziunea Română, 1996).
[59] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *Revoluția română televizată*, 50. Our italics.
[60] For a discussion of the image as a unit of meaning that it would be mistaken to associate exclusively with the visual, see, for instance Patrice Blouin, *Faire le Tour. Voir les Jeux* (Paris: Lanceur, 2010).

relation that is simultaneously based on their analogy and on their dissemblance.'[61] Such a conceptualisation of images is repeatedly referenced by Christa Blümlinger in her assessment of Harun Farocki's praxis, as, for example, a foucauldian 'becoming, changing, and mutation which is accomplished "medially", in the in-between, in the "disjunction of seeing and speaking".'[62]This critical assessment will allow the present research to incorporate elements that could otherwise be seen as para-visual at best, such as the speeches surrounding the actual images that have been recorded and broadcast during the revolution. It should also be mentioned that, by 'image', we understand – unless otherwise specified – 'moving imagery', even if, at times, still images of the revolution will be brought into discussion when needed, as part of the broader production of representations that the revolution has generated over time. While delineating the differences and specificities between still and moving images is beyond the scope of this research[63], a subsequent chapter will specifically focus on the similarities between the photographic medium and its cinematographic corollary in more detail, as part of an enlarged media history of representations.

We consider this approach, which also incorporates textual elements when necessary, to be pertinent precisely because the actual course of the Romanian Revolution – the official chronology of events[64] – has sparked intense debates. Efforts to definitively establish the truth of those days have proven largely inadequate and futile. Shortly after the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu, leader of the Romanian Communist Party, on December 25th, conflicting theories emerged, casting a shadow of national unease, guilt, and mistrust that persists to this day. Furthermore, the Romanian Television, which had previously helped to foster and catalyse a collective sense of popular uprising, but also, as will be further explored, to provide tangible proof of the revolutionary actions, began to be accused of manipulating facts and acting as a counter-revolutionary agent – a charge that remains prevalent. Herein lies a fertile paradox, which will constitute one of the main guiding lines of our research project: the immense gap between the idea of a historical event that was

[61] Jacques Rancière, *Le Destin des images* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2003), 15.
[62] Christa Blümlinger, 'Harun Farocki ou l'art de traiter les milieux', in Harun Farocki, *Reconnaître et poursuivre* (Courbevoie: Théâtre typographique, 2017 [2002]), 14.
[63] For a detailed account of this comparison, see Philippe Dubois, *Photographie & Cinéma. De la différence à l'indistinction* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2021).
[64] A generally trusted synthetic account of the events can be found in Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), especially chapters 'The Overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu' and 'The Bloody Bacchanalia', 54-143.

broadcast live and delivered without delay around the globe, in a situation of powerful visibility, and the volatility of the mere concept of truth. As Mihai Iovanel points out,

> this series of unexplained events from Romanian history [is centred on] the recent anti-communist revolution of 1989 – the foundational event of post-communism, all the more obscure in spite of it being a media event that was broadcast in the entire world. For almost three decades after the moment of December 1989, there has not been a standard theory on the event; the heterogeneity of its bibliography is perplexing.[65]

This research, then, contends that the search for truth remains too elusive – and even epistemologically irrelevant – for its purposes[66]. But it considers this dead end of reflection rather significant, given the transformation, in Romania, of the 'official' narrative of the revolution into an obsessive grail. When outlining the main compensatory goals for their work, Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky noted that '[e]ven for the "witnesses" and "direct participants", in spite of the quantitative accumulation of information, questions still dominate answers, and the ways of raising questions remain strikingly similar.'[67] By somewhat diverting attention from what has always been scrutinised counter-productively, this research would like to shift focus towards new, more provocative areas to be mapped by critical thinking. In other words, liberated from the burden of illusory completeness, this dissertation aims, in the following chapters, to provide a new reading of the events based on the *available* footage consulted in its entirety. It considers the audiovisual materials deposited in the Romanian Television archives as the basis for multiple theoretical speculations, for the creation of renewed trajectories that link them to recent, inter-connected academic disciplines, thus positing their dual character of both local, exceptional event, and integral part of a broader conversation.

At this stage, however, it is important to examine the Romanian Revolution as a historical site that generated polarising interpretations. A comprehensive, though partly outdated, examination of these opposing explanatory theories can be found in Ruxandra

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[65] Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii romane contemporane: 1990-2020* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020] (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 244.

[66] For a comparative researcher's perspective on the 'Arab Spring', see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt. An Essay in Cultural Power*, *op. cit.* Alexander states in his introduction: 'To assert that something hidden beneath representations is what really caused the revolution – a more "really real" material or demographic reality – is just that, an assertion. Theoretical conjectures about an invisible but truly determinative cause – a hard structural base underneath slippery symbols – seem plausible only if subjective references to such a putative reality can be found among actors' representations', xi.

[67] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *op. cit.*, 49.

Cesereanu's *Decembrie '89*.[68] Cesereanu's work offers a meticulous examination of the dominant doctrines contending for influence in shaping the interpretation and essence of the revolution. Her taxonomy identifies three principal ideological 'factions': the 'purists', who assert the authenticity of a victorious revolution, emphasising the revolutionary nature of the events and the role of the masses in overthrowing the communist regime; the 'conspiracy theorists', who argue that the revolution was not a spontaneous popular movement but rather an external coup disguised as an insurrection, suggesting that the real forces behind the events were external actors with their own agendas; and the 'hybrid theorists', who incorporate elements from both extremes, acknowledging the complexity of the revolution, recognising that both internal and external factors may have played a role in shaping the outcome. While there are numerous fervent advocates for each stance, a comprehensive analysis of this profound schism is beyond the scope of this research. Cesereanu's book, in any case, is notable for reflecting on, and thematising the persistent debates and uncertainties that have surrounded the revolution, highlighting how these differing viewpoints have influenced the collective memory and historical narrative of the event. Following this exposition of personal interventions according to an 'internal logic'[69], Cesereanu also affirms her belonging to the 'hybrid' camp, hastily arguing for the mixing of revolution with a 'camouflaged coup d'état which was expedited by circumstances.'[70] This positioning is not defining for our investigation, yet it subtly points to the empirical impossibility of rationally opting for any clear, trenchant interpretation. This relativist perspective allows us to invest more flexibility in our audiovisual inquiry, the images themselves encouraging contradictory responses, since they are themselves caught into an abundant, at times incoherent flow of actions.

However, it is noteworthy that a prominent academic figure in the study of the Romanian Revolution, Dennis Deletant, introduces a subtly altered perspective on the matter, intriguingly resonating with Cesereanu's tripartite classification. He asserts, at first, that

[68] Ruxandra Cesereanu, Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții [December 1989. Deconstructing a Revolution] (Iași: Polirom, 2009). In her book, Cesereanu also includes a useful preamble of the few social signs of unrest – among which the most important ones remain the strike of the miners in Valea Jiului in 1977 and the uprising of the workers of a tractor factory in Brasov in 1987 – that may be said to have anticipated the revolution of December 1989.
[69] *Ibid*., 62.
[70] *Ibid*., 215.

> in December 1989, the vast majority of the Romanians felt that they were captive in a political regime that could not be overturned by any democratic way, which meant that the only possible way to change it was through violent means. The bloodshed was caused by the loyalty that several elements of the Romanian Army and the Securitate [the fierce Romanian secret police] showed toward Ceaușescu. … Many of the victims were in fact victims of friendly fire, given that the Romanian soldier was badly equipped and badly trained in order to control the masses. … So this fight for power caused the bloodshed and ultimately the victory of what we could call second-tier communists who organised themselves in the National Salvation Front [the ad-hoc governing body that emerged during the confrontations of December 1989 and would self-impose itself as the force ensuring the national transition towards democracy under the leadership of Ion Iliescu, first elected president of democratic Romania][71].

This rather orthodox perspective arguably places culpability for the revolutionary carnage squarely on the shoulders of pro-Ceaușescu partisans who obstinately delayed the process of change towards capitalism through an ill-fated, criminal act of perseverance.

In this transformative process, television indeed played a pivotal role, as Aurel Codoban articulates. Codoban asserts that '[t]elevision assumed the tangible form of a revolution, despite it being based on spontaneous occurrences and incidents; functioning as a semiotic system, [television] transmuted the polysemic symbols of these events into a coherent discourse.'[72] This perspective underscores the critical function of television in shaping and framing the narrative of the Romanian Revolution.

Codoban's observation highlights how television perceived as a system to decipher, converted the chaotic and multifaceted symbols of the revolution into a structured and coherent discourse. This transformation was essential in creating a unified narrative that actively resonated with both national and international audiences. The role of television, therefore, extends beyond mere broadcasting; it intensively participated in constructing the revolutionary reality and influencing public perception. This observation was also

[71] Oral intervention in the documentary film *Jurnal de Romania. 1989* (Carmen Lidia Vidu, 2021). On the particular history of the National Salvation Front (NSF) and its post-revolutionary negotiation of popular legitimation and popular accusations of coup d'état and opportunism, see, among others, Peter Siani-Davies, 'The Council of the National Salvation Front', in *The Romanian Revolution, op. cit.*, 191-230. Nowadays, the NSF is commonly held responsible for the (feeling of) confiscation of the spontaneous popular uprising, while Iliescu remains a highly polarising political figure commonly understood to embody the social failure of the national transformation into a democratic government.

[72] Aurel Codoban, 'Condițiile de posibilitate mediatică ale unei revoluții' [The Conditions of Media Possibility of a Revolution], in Konrad Petrovszky, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (ed.), *Revoluția română televizată* (Cluj: IDEA, 2009), 67.

advanced by media practitioners and theorists Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică in their seminal audiovisual work *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), in which they include multiple instances in which the television cameras, hardly operating on a spontaneous basis, actually stage the reality in front of them, such as the mere fact of a news reporter battling through multiple takes. This simple, yet symbolic moment cuts the pretention to transparency that was repeatedly voiced during those days; it posits the broadcast as construction, as mediation of a discursive reality.

Building on Codoban's analysis, this research will then further explore how television not only mediated but also actively contributed to the construction of revolutionary meaning. By analysing the audiovisual materials and their contextual discourses, this study aims to reveal how television's role as a semiotic system shaped the portrayal and understanding of the Romanian Revolution, offering insights into how media can transform spontaneous events into coherent narratives.

Different Interpretations of the Role of Television during the Revolution

A comprehensive examination of the myriad commentators who align with one interpretation or another – whether viewing the Romanian Revolution as a genuine popular uprising or, conversely, as a covert coup serving the interests of global geopolitical powers—falls beyond the scope of this section. This limitation stems from the sense of redundancy that permeates a more or less abstract, if not irrational, theory that has repeated, with only slight variations, since the events themselves unfolded. The ongoing discourse surrounding these interpretations is relevant to this dissertation primarily because it emphasises the inherent ambiguity of a widely broadcast and meticulously scrutinised event, both nationally and globally, as well as the stagnant stage in which it finds itself at the moment. There is a feeling of resignation about this event, which seems to have encouraged many hypotheses but now has dried up, in urgent need to be revived.

Moreover, while the research does not seek to adjudicate between competing historical interpretations of the revolution's authenticity, a task that lies beyond both its scope and its evidence base, it is worth noting that adopting an entirely sceptical or cynical attitude – such as Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of the Timișoara mass graves as a

'simulacrum' of reality[73], aligning with his broader thesis on the collapse of the real into hyperreality[74] – threatens to diminish the genuine merit, courage, and risks taken by those who actually protested in the streets, together with the positive outcome of their acts. To do so would be to disregard the human element at the heart of any revolution, in Romania or elsewhere, where individuals courageously oppose an unjust regime. Baudrillard argued that

> [t]he actors and the media sensed obscurely that the events in Eastern Europe had to be given credibility, that that revolution had to be lent credibility by an extra dose of dead bodies. And the media themselves had to be lent credibility by the reference to the people. Leading to a vicious circle of credibility, the result of which is the decredibilizing of the revolution and the events themselves.[75]

In this absurdist and dialectical trajectory that he highlighted – the extra push for credibility ultimately leading to the complete loss thereof –, he was both correct and condescending. It is easily understandable, in retrospect, that the double revelation concerning the massacre – as breaking news and as proto-fake news – stimulated the crowds into divergent sentiments of terror and anger, implication and deflation. At the same time, one must seek to depict the bigger theoretical picture that such a media gaffe belongs to. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, such an over-reliance and blind confidence in a visual representation – in *any* image – stems from a coagulation of contextual factors; even without taking them into consideration, it can be attached to a respectable intellectual tradition that we will explore. Thus, while scepticism serves as a useful analytical tool, it

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[73] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Timișoara Massacre', in *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 54-63. An important city and economic centre in the West of Romania (near the border with Hungary), Timișoara enjoys a special status in both the official and the mythological narratives on the Romanian Revolution, since it is there that the first popular revolts ignited soon after December 15th as a means to prevent reformed priest László Tökés to be relocated. A few days later, as the local protests transformed into a nationwide uprising, the city once again became the source of press scrutiny as the macabre news of the discovery of a mass grave full of tortured bodies nearby reached editorial boards and pressrooms in Romania and internationally. As the revolutionary events were superseded by an indeterminate transitional phase, it was soon revealed that the news was nothing more than… fake news – a journalistic exaggeration, the bodies belonging in fact to a morgue in the city. Baudrillard, who, as a French citizen, had an uninterrupted media access to those terrifying, sensationalist images which were broadcast by French television channels even more often than their Romanian counterpart text is, of course, explicitly dealing with this event, symptomatic as it seems for his larger thesis of the real world being transformed into an all-encompassing simulacrum. A synthesis of multiple French journalistic reactions regarding the Timișoara revelation, which in retrospect appears to be both comical and lacking in basic deontology, can be found in Serge Halimi, 'Les Vautours de Timisoara' [The Vultures of Timisoara], October 2000, available online: https://www.acrimed.org/Les-vautours-de-Timisoara. Date accessed: 12.06.2025.

[74] See, for a conceptualisation of hyperreality, Jean Baudrillard, 'Precedența simulacrelor', in *Simulacre și simulare*, trans. Sebastian Big (Cluj: IDEA Design & Print, 2008), 5-34.

[75] Baudrillard, *ibid.*, 57-58.

must be applied with care not only so as to avoid undermining the very real human struggles that underpin historical events, but also in order to problematize what at first seems like a univocal reality.[76] The false revelation of the mass graves only served to complicate audiovisual matters; the baptism of fire that Daney was referring to also implied the quick absorption of media rules by the television workers.

We find this passage from Baudrillard as crucial in marking a turning point regarding both the course of the revolution and the participation of television – from collective hope and euphoria to their negative counterpoints. The passage raises a crucial point regarding the intersection between the different interpretations of the Romanian Revolution and the role of television as a potential tool of manipulation during December 1989. Rather than aligning with any singular perspective – be it a genuine, 'purist' uprising or a conspiracy – the interest lies in how television, a previously dormant force, was suddenly liberated at a pivotal moment: Ceaușescu's flight. Capturing this moment live became the first symbol of the free state, of the triumphant revolution, generating the first 'trademark' image of the events. This framing introduces a fascinating dimension to the analysis of the revolution's media coverage, where television becomes a catalyst for shaping, and potentially distorting, historical events. A balanced assessment was provided by Aurel Codoban, who stated that

> [m]ass communication media, particularly television, are not mere instruments for recording and transmitting reality; they are, in fact, fundamental in creating it. In the context of the Romanian Revolution, the public's hunger for visual images and the tendency to exonerate television as a neutral medium led to a misunderstanding of its role. Romanians often viewed television's reality-creating power not as an inherent trait of the medium, but as a result of political interference in an otherwise innocent tool of mass communication. This perception reflects a broader failure to recognise the intrinsic influence of media in shaping reality, rather than merely reflecting it.[77]

Baudrillard's contention, in any case, was both more radical and less nuanced. He argued that, by producing this rough imagery that quickly turned out to be a mere fabrication, the revolutionary broadcast only submitted to the inevitable machinations of

[76] Even Baudrillard, in an uncharacteristic moment of *prise de conscience*, conceded: 'The moralists of war, the keepers of the great warrior values, should not be sad: war is as atrocious as ever, *even if it is nothing but a simulacrum*, there is enough suffering from carnal wounds, and the dead and the old combattants justify those who come after them.', in *Simulacre si simulare* (Cluj: IDEA Design & Print, 2008), 32.
[77] Aurel Codoban, 'Condițiile de posibilitate mediatică ale unei revoluții', 69.

the television medium[78]. Baudrillard's attempt to forge a purely negative and clearly systematic assessment of television may have lost their actuality now, yet during the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s they were fashionable. In one of the numerous exegesis of his work, a commentator even borrows his scornful discourse to produce a very large condemnation of the Romanian events: 'Romanians too [like Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein] were able to make a perfectly immoral and mystifying use of them [of media and information] (from our point of view).'[79] Baudrillard represents a paradigmatic example. It can certainly be argued that his global dismissal of the Romanian events – and, as we will see, of the geo-political contemporary scene altogether – has influenced an entire line of thought[80].

For instance, French researcher Philippe Aguinalin's work, though now clearly dated, provides an extreme case that exemplifies this view. Aguinalin's assertion that the Romanian Revolution was a manipulated spectacle is emblematic of what Ruxandra Cesereanu classifies as the 'conspiracy theory.' His claim that '[s]tarting from December 21 […] we move from a shortage of images to the "revolution" in a continuous manner, but also, from the popular uprising in Timisoara to the fabricated "revolution" in Bucharest'[81] reflects a deep scepticism towards the televised portrayal of the revolution (obvious even from his usage of quotation marks when referring to the revolution). These two hypostases may indeed be connected: a trend of image-phobia establishes itself, correlating mediated visibility and falseness. For Aguinalin, the very act of televising the event becomes synonymous with manipulation, suggesting that once the images began to flood the screens, the authenticity of the revolution was immediately compromised. Regardless of its validity, this viewpoint, while perhaps radical, sheds light on the broader historiographic climate of the late 1990s, when such scepticism was prevalent among theorists of the image. The usual paradox is at play, however: while attempting to be critical towards the mere idea of imagery, this paranoia seems to be infused by a similar magical thinking that enjoys no factual support.

[78] For instance: 'All the media live off the presumption of catastrophe and of the succulent imminence of death', in Jean Baudrillard, 'The Timișoara massacre', *art. cit.*, 55.
[79] Steve Redhead (ed.), *The Jean Baudrillard Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 113.
[80] A crystallised formulation of his argument can be found in 'The Timișoara massacre': '[the] image raises the problem of its indifference to the world, and thus of our indifference to *it* – which is a political problem. When television becomes the strategic space of the event, it sets itself up as a deadly self-reference, it becomes a bachelor machine. The real object is wiped out by news – not merely alienated, but abolished. All that remains of it are traces on a monitoring screen.', *art. cit.*, 56.
[81] Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct. Histoire en différé*, Paris Sorbonne 1, 1999, 19.

The language, in this case, is more than indicative for a situation of mise en scène of the revolution. Aguinalin himself will make use of the word a bit later, when he concludes:

> As a consequence, those involved in the putsch, future leaders of Romania, have succeeded, thanks to Television and its mystifying images, in upstaging a civil war destined to endanger the Romanian Revolution that ignited spontaneously in Timisoara. Through this mise en scène, the people involved in the putsch rose to power in a legitimate manner at least apparently, because they seem to be, in fact, the saviours of the Romanian Revolution and not the usurpers of a spontaneous popular movement.[82]

Thus, following a general moment of collective joy, television would soon begin to be regarded as an agent of manipulation, losing its status as one of the main driving forces of the revolution. Aguinalin's perspective, while virulent in its conclusions, is by no means singular or accidental; in fact, in the first decade of the aftermath of the revolution, such heated examples of paranoia also hide a certain disillusionment at how the televisual medium turned out to be, after holding such promise. Yet this does not have to obscure the fact that, for a series of media scholars and theorists, the role played by television during the Romanian events was rather an exceptional one. As already mentioned, for French film critic Serge Daney, this was the actual 'baptism of fire for television', a proper 'tele-invention of Romania':

> There had to be Tiananmen and most importantly the events of the end of 1989 (a well cracked iron curtain and an actually demolished Berlin Wall) for it [the television] to be *tested* for the first time. … And yet, it was in Romania, a country without symbols, without face, *bref*, without images, that things happened to be, in all respects, passionate. It was there that the baptism of fire took place.[83]

Daney's contention is taken out of an article published for the *Cahiers du cinéma* magazine in February, 1990 – and probably elaborated sometime in January; it is, in other words, a hot take, clearly datable as such given the author's enthusiasm regarding the events and their televisual broadcast. For Daney, it is during the Romanian revolution – confronted with the unpredictable character of the events and assuming the position of a live relay of information – that television as a medium comes into its own[84]. While singular in its

[82] *Ibid*., p. 87.
[83] Serge Daney, 'Roumanie, année zero', 84. Date accessed: 11.09.2025.
[84] Daney begins his article by attempting to offer a summary of his disillusionment with regard to cinema's capacities to report *à chaud*, in other words to maintain his relevance as a quick, pertinent response to History. He argues that this respectable, ancestral position is now being fulfilled by television. This optimism was not meant to last, however: already the rumours of crass staging of sensationalist imagery were, by the time the

optimism with regard to the major historical opportunity that the Romanian Revolution inaugurated for television as an audiovisual medium, this view is representative of larger, mostly French, intellectual current of thought. As Daney summarises later on in his article, by relying in such a significant manner on the power of images (power of propaganda, of dissemination of content, of encapsulating popular affects), it is adequate to 'read' the events of the revolution in terms of their media evolution: 'It is as if everybody had suddenly become *film critics*. Not out of a cinephile spirit, but because the need became urgent. As if, in front of the inversed film rolls of Ceaușescu's trial, the bare notions of freeze frame, slow-motion, *hors-champ* or ellipsis were not only style figures, but also information to decipher (with their inherent possibilities of lie, illusion, or omission).'[85] What Daney aims to sketch out in this passage is really more of an adaptable approach than a strict method. Although this approach is not yet formally institutionalised, it shares many of the coordinates of media history, media archaeology, and visual studies at large, while also borrowing from semiology and anthropology and combining them with a formation of classical cinephilia[86]. What Daney's gaze – and our purpose to transpose it within this dissertation as a guiding framework – advances beyond the above-mentioned disciplines is a cinematographic conscience. Without abstracting or de-politicising the events in question, it understands, following Daney's example, that there are key aspects to be communicated about them that can only be accessed via an engagement with the language, conceptual tools, and overarching postulates of the cinematographic analysis. In other words, to borrow from Antonio Somaini's summarising phrase dealing with Eisenstein's enlarged reflection on the history of art,

> It is *from the point of view of cinema* that every previous art form has to be considered. This means that the gaze of the film director and film theorist who turns to history has to be constantly oriented toward different directions at the same time:

article was written, casting a shadow over the transparent merits of television. Daney's hope was substituted by melancholia and even resentment when, by the end of his life, the Gulf War televisual coverage (1991) annihilated any form of meaningful engagement, from the medium, with the generated imagery – any hope of a progressive use of the medium. For a more detailed explanation of the Gulf War moment, see below.

[85] *Ibid*, 85.

[86] On the strict discipline of an anthropology of images, see Hans Belting, *Pour une anthropologie des images*, trans. Jean Torrent (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), and Emmanuel Alloa (ed.), *Penser l'image II. Anthropologies du visuel* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2015).

the *present* in which previous art forms are examined, the *past* from which they are extracted, and the *future* in which they could be reinterpreted and reactivated.[87]

This point of view of cinema favours, in our case, a close textual analysis of the images. Special attention will be given to how these images were edited together. We argue that the audiovisual realm is not merely an illustrated message, but a sensible, dense experience which needs to be assessed accordingly.

What Daney also makes apparent in his condensed formula of the 'country without images' is an additional perspective: for a nation (Romania) whose access to television and 'free' information was severely obstructed for decades, the fact that the image either contains, reflects, or obscures the truth, and thus has to be carefully handled, is not only new – it is completely radical. Daney is an important figure of this heated debate because he possesses the intellectual flexibility to acknowledge, within one single essay, both the positive role of television as a genuine progressive agent which accelerated change by comforting a population in distress, and a factor of manipulation. Yet the nuance lies in the fact that, for a (media) historian, reality is not a transparent, given element, it is a cultural construction[88]. In the same article Daney adds: 'How to live with images? Perhaps by not expecting from them too much or too little *truth*. Without fighting against their necessary ambiguity.'[89] Such a balanced account of the inherent (limited) capabilities of the medium, even though soon to be refuted by the monotonous, imperialistic coverage of the Gulf War in 1991[90], is also symptomatic for a turning point in media history, one that was not so

[87] Antonio Somaini, 'Cinema as "Dynamic Mummification," History as Montage: Eisenstein's Media Archaeology', in Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini (eds.), trans. Margo Shohl Rosen, Brinton Tench Coxe, and Natalie Ryabchikova (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 84.

[88] The phrase and essay title belonging to media theorist and practitioner Harun Farocki 'It is high time that reality begins…' also resonates strongly in this context, in *Reconnaître et poursuivre* (Courbevoie: Théâtre typographique, 2002), 38-50.

[89] Daney, 'Roumanie, année zero', *art. cit.*, 85.

[90] While the topic of the media coverage of the Gulf War of 1991 goes beyond the scope of our discussion, it is important to acknowledge it since, from a retrospective analysis, it constitutes the second movement – the negative face – of the Romanian Revolution. We have already established how the revolution inaugurated a context of optimism as to the powers of the medium. The Gulf War seems to extinguish that particular intellectual vein. By the time, 24h news had already been institutionalised by TV channels such as CNN, although this hypervisibility – as we contend was the case for Romania too, albeit in a much harsher manner – translated into a repetitive offer. The most severe (and successful at the time) critiques of the media mechanisms of broadcasting the Gulf War came from Paul Virilio, in *L'écran du desert* (Paris: Galilée, 1991) and, obviously, Jean Baudrillard, whose book title *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), paraphrasing a famous play by Jean Girodoux, achieved symbolic status, raising polarising responses. Little read but copiously referenced, the book only consolidated Baudrillard's status as a prophet of the image-world or, on the contrary, as a nihilist, arrogant intellectual who, according to an obituary by Philippe Corcuff, did the opposite of a philosopher, since he 'advance[d] a preconceived idea [the so-called strangulation of reality by the image] to which reality should correspond', in 'Jean Baudrillard n'a pas eu lieu, par Philippe

quick to condemn the medium itself, but wished to engage with its contradictions and limitations.

At the moment of the Gulf War, philosopher Paul Virilio most notably contended, 'the ruse of war is as old as war itself, except that today it is located within the image.'[91] Ignited less than two years after the Romanian Revolution, the Gulf War was deemed by Virilio 'the first totally electronic war'. He posited that it epitomised 'the war transfer from the actual to the virtual.'[92]

A more reconciliatory claim on the realistic expectations one should have from the television screen is reflected by Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky's view on the need to consider 'the possibility that there were genuine intentions to bring order out of the spontaneous chaos, as well as the fact that the former TV broadcasters had suddenly found themselves in a new dramaturgy'.[93] Indeed, this theoretical position marks a clear shift from previous partisan, one-sided contributions, proposing a more nuanced understanding of the ambivalent role of television as historical agent. As the authors contend, 'the post-communist slogan "cu televizorul/ați mințit poporul" [through television/you lied to the people] reflects this position of seeing television as merely a means to manipulate and produce disinformation, a distortion of the truth in the streets, a deformation of reality.'[94] Partly at least, then, their own contribution aims to mitigate such visceral, resentful reactions that coloured public consciousness in the heat of the revolutionary moment.

Echoing Daney's initial thoughts on its media character understood as essence of the revolution itself (and on the necessity to resort to perceptual tools that were 'prepared' by a cinephile upbringing), film theorist Jean-Louis Comolli wrote almost simultaneously

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Corcuff', *Le Monde*, 17. 03. 2007, accessible at: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/03/17/jean-baudrillard-n-a-pas-eu-lieu-par-philippe-corcuff_884398_3232.html. Date accessed: 12. 08. 2024. For another ironical (but more general) refutation of Baudrillard's school of thought on the de-realisation of the world, see Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010): 'Between a computer screen and a television screen, the only space in which events in general and war in particular can take up room is a screen-like space, the space of virtual reality. That which could not take place did not take place except on the screens of simulation. To assert that non-being cannot be has always been the favourite pastime of sophists', 44. Daney himself, in his otherwise more nuanced, quasi-daily close readings of the events of the Gulf War, experienced a similar sense of resignation. His more theoretical contributions, such as the distinction between 'image' (as a micro-unit dedicated to alterity) and 'visual' (as the simple verification of a technical equipment) bear the trace of that dire televisual context. See, for instance, 'La guerre, le visuel, l'image', in *Trafic*, no. 50, 439-445.

[91] Paul Virilio, *L'écran du désert* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 73-74.

[92] Paul Virilio, *La Machine de vision* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 141.

[93] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *op. cit.*, 31. This claim echoes the advice of Daney to not expect 'too much or too little truth' from the image in general.

[94] *Idem.*

in a private manner (to be published only 15 years after the facts): 'The sinister couple of the Ceaucescus [sic] is gone with the wind of a revolution that has a lot to do with the images of a revolution.'[95] In other words, by the time the successors of the Ceaușescu couple were imposing a new political order in Romania, the feeling that the revolution in Romania could be encapsulated – as general meaning, but also as course of events – in its images had already become a recurrent event among distant observers. The outcome of this revolution seemed to rely less on the actual events, and more on this '*querelle des images*' [image quarrel][96], thus arguing for a decisive role played by the media coverage of the revolution in its ultimate success. A subsequent chapter will further explore the almost obsessive reliance on, and investigation of, audiovisual images during those days – both from their producers (the Romanian people, essentially) and from their receptors (Western audience) –, by highlighting a strong intellectual connection between the concept of the visible and that of truth.

Daney's meticulous examination of the Romanian Revolution aligns with a broader sentiment that became palpable during those tumultuous days. It seemed that the Romanian people swiftly recognised that, after decades of existing in what was deemed to be 'a country without images', they had been thrust into the centre of global media attention practically overnight. In effect, the heavily centralised situation of audiovisual media in Romania during Ceaușescu's reign allowed for rare moments of recognition from, and engagement with, Western audiences, or their producer counterparts.[97] The revolution had transformed Romania from a visual periphery to a media spectacle, with the world watching its every move. Philosopher Vilém Flusser's rather cynical observation captures this shift: 'Think about what might have happened had the images rebelled against history not in

[95] Jean-Louis Comolli, *Voir et Pouvoir* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2004), 48.
[96] See Raymond Bellour, *La Querelle des dispositifs* (Paris: P.O.L, 2012).
[97] Although an exhaustive discussion of the uses and structures of the Romanian Television and the Romanian Cinematographic Studios is clearly beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to reference the existence of such documentation. For a comprehensive analysis of the situation of television up to 1983, see Alexandru Matei, *O tribună captivantă. Televiziune, ideologie, societate în România socialistă (1965-1983)* [A Captivating Tribune. Television, Ideology, Society in Socialist Romania (1965-1983)] (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2013), and Silvia-Cristina Baumgarten, *Televiziunea română sub* Reflector. *Divertisment, propagandă și ideologie în Republica Socialistă România în perioada anilor '70* [Romanian Television in the Spotlight. Entertainment, Propaganda, and Ideology in Socialist Romania during the Seventies] (Bucharest: Mega, 2023). For a historical discussion about the organisation of the cinematographic industry during the same period, see Bogdan Jitea, *Cinema în RSR: Conformism și disidență în industria ceaușistă de film* [Cinema in Socialist Romania: Conformism and Dissidence in the Film Industry during Ceaușescu's Reign], (Iași: Polirom, 2021). By thoroughly engaging with Matei's book, this discussion will be further pursued in a subsequent chapter which will seek to highlight the experimental nature of the revolutionary broadcast – a crisis situation – in comparison with the scarcity of the censored footage during the communist regime in Romania.

Romania, but in the United States or in Japan. This happy conjuncture allows us to consider the Romanian events as an experiment that verifies the power of the images.'[98] Flusser's comment invites a provocative reflection on the nature of this 'experiment', suggesting that Romania, by virtue of its perceived geo-political insignificance on the global stage, became a testing ground for the power of images to challenge history itself. Following a brief moment in which the televisual image seemed to accurately reflect history – to relay information, as Daney put it – audiences witness a powerful reversal which causes public trust to change into distrust. Flusser's argument mirrors the widely accepted theory that images during the Romanian Revolution not only mirrored reality, but actively created it[99]. Flusser's statement thus carries an ironic undertone, implying the condescending status of Romania as a playground for this experiment, since there the socio-political consequences would not be as serious for the global *status quo* as they might have been in more prominent leading nations like the United States or Japan.

This notion of the 'experiment' diverges from the one previously discussed. While earlier, the term 'experiment' was associated with potentiality, failure, and unpredictability, here it takes on a different meaning—one of game or play. Flusser's framing presents the Romanian Revolution as a kind of media rehearsal, a controlled test of the power of images to shape historical narratives. This raises an unsettling implication: that the images themselves were less concerned with faithfully representing the revolutionary moment than with exercising their ability to manipulate and transform reality. In this light, the revolution becomes less a genuine political upheaval and more a performance mediated and shaped by the local media apparatus, as it was reflected in a globalist culture. And the fight for visibility transforms itself into a performative ritual[100], as Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz observe in their fundamental account of televised historical events: 'The televising of public

[98] Vilém Flusser, 'The Power of the image', in Hubertus von Amelunxen and Andrei Ujică (ed.), *Television/Revolution. Dar Ultimatum des Bildes* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1990), 117.
[99] A fairly widespread argument, this is explored, among others, by Andrei Gorzo in his study, '*Videograme dintr-o revoluție*'. *Un studiu critic* [*Videograms of a Revolution.* A Critical Study], Bucharest, LiterNet, 2016, 9, accessible online: https://editura.liternet.ro/carte/328/Andrei-Gorzo/Videograme-dintr-o-revolutie-Un-studiu-critic.html. Date accessed: May 07th, 2025.
[100] On the particular topic of revolution and performativity, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt. An Essay in Cultural Power*, *op. cit.* Echoing a situation that Romanian revolutionaries discovered and exploited as the events unfolded, Alexander asserts that: 'But even with a stage – like the streets and squares of Cairo – social performance needs access to the media of mass communication. Without distributive power, the revolution cannot have interpretive power: it cannot project to audiences who remain at one remove from the immediate face-to-face.', 67.

occasions must meet the challenge not only of representing the event, but of offering the viewer a functional equivalent of the festive experience.'[101]

The notion of a 'balkanist assumption' also plays a significant role in shaping how the Romanian actors internalised their own roles during the revolution. This assumption, rooted in long-standing Western stereotypes of the Balkans as a region of volatility, irrationality, and perpetual otherness[102], influenced not only how Romania was viewed from the outside but also how Romanians themselves began to perceive their participation in the revolution, as well as their media representation. As Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky note,

> during those days of December 1989, the gaze from the outside ('what will the world say?') had right from the outset a formative function of the affects – both regarding fears of self-exposure and regarding the maintain of loyalty and security. Referring to Western authorities remains until today [2009] a current practice. But even in the countries of Western Europe, the images of revolution have penetrated according to several models of perception: live broadcasts have been accompanied by commentaries that were brimming with stereotypes, clichés and preconceived opinions.[103]

While neither author explicitly references such attitudes, Western media coverage of the Romanian events frequently conveyed a condescending perspective. A notable example is a special edition aired on the evening of December 22 by the French TV channel Antenne 2, which featured several disparaging remarks about the Romanian people. In one segment, over images of the newly designed Victory of Socialism Boulevard – a stretch of brutalist architecture leading to the Palace of the Parliament – the voiceover rhetorically asks, 'Can one imagine a more crazed, grotesque political regime?' Shortly after, a brief clip from the final Communist Party Congress, held just weeks before the revolution, is described as showcasing 'one of the last official images of a robotised people.'[104] These examples are not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, they highlight a larger thesis that would become prevalent in the years to come when talking about the Romanian Revolution, which

[101] Daniel Dayan, Elihu Katz, *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 78.
[102] See, among others, Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds.), *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: The MIT Press, 2002), and Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[103] Țichindeleanu, Petrovszky, *op. cit.*, 47.
[104] Antenne 2, Spécial Roumanie, December 22, 1989, presenter: Daniel Bilalian. For a more in-depth analysis of the French broadcast of the Romanian Revolution, see Victor Morozov, *Roumanie, année zero*, 68-79.

concerns the unequal power relation between Western journalists applying preconceived frameworks to this event, and the Romanian people which was subjected to their biased gaze.

In other words, this external gaze – an awareness of how Western audiences and authorities were watching – had a dual impact. On one hand, it heightened fears of being judged or misunderstood, creating a pressure for Romanians to manage their image carefully, to deliver a self-representation that conformed to external expectations. On the other hand, it arguably fostered a sense of conditioned responsibility, if not self-colonialism[105], particularly in ensuring that the revolution would be perceived as legitimate by global powers. Even after the revolution, as the authors note, referring to Western authorities remains a common practice in Romania, reflecting a deeper need for external validation that persists well beyond the revolutionary moment. The quote also confirms that Western viewers did not experience the revolution as a neutral or unmediated event. Instead, the revolution was framed within existing narratives of the Balkans as a space of instability, reinforcing the very assumptions that Romanians were keenly aware of as they acted on this global stage. This interplay between internalised self-consciousness and external expectations highlights the performative dimension of the revolution, where Romanians were both agents and subjects of a televised spectacle that was, in many ways, dictated by external perceptions.

To conclude this section, aligning with Serge Daney's nuanced reflection on the ambivalent nature of television, Romanian film critic Andrei Gorzo echoes a call to move beyond the fruitless obsession with an 'implacable truth.' He criticises the entrenched belief in conspiratorial interpretations, particularly those that view television as a mere tool of manipulation. Instead, Gorzo emphasises the dual capacity of the mediated image: not only

[105] This thread traverses visual post-communist representations and their reception in Romania. One such exemplary critique can be found in Florin Poenaru, 'Râs, lacrimi și priviri coloniale' [Laughter, Tears, Colonial Tears], *CriticAtac*, November 15th, 2010, accessible at: https://www.criticatac.ro/ras-lacrimi-si-priviri-coloniale/. Date accessed: 10.05.2025. In this article, Poenaru was tackling the films of the so-called New Romanian Cinema – an informal artistic movement initiated by Cristi Puiu's 2001 *Marfa și banii* (*Stuff and Dough*) which proved to be highly sucessful on the Western festival scene between 2005 and 2010, and even beyond that year – in what he perceived as a strategic self-deprecating mode that appealed to Western audiences by depicting Romania as a malfunctioning country. Although not properly engaged with as a text, the ignition point for this essay seems to have been Andrei Ujică's celebrated found-footage documentary *Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (*The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*), in which the years of his reign are told through a montage of official audiovisual footage (recordings both private and public). For a more detailed perspective on Poenaru's argument (and its refutation), see Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* [Things that Cannot Be Said in Any Other Way] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012), 287-297.

to document reality but also to actively shape historical transformations. He remarks, 'we are not, by any means, obligated to adhere to such extreme scenarios [of almost religious belief in a conspiracy linked to the obscure manipulations of television] when we notice that the mediated image not only records a reality, but also creates historic transformations.' [106]

This recognition of television's generative role invites a more complex understanding of its revolutionary potential and inherent flaws. Rather than dwelling on the binary of television as either a manipulative force or a passive recorder, this dissertation will explore the medium's capacity to reconfigure the visible, particularly in moments of profound crisis like the Romanian Revolution. Moreover, by imposing its powerful crisis pattern on the televisual medium, the Revolution itself initiated a new age for the media. Television, in this sense, is neither purely malign nor wholly revolutionary, but a force that – however imperfect – played a significant role in shaping the outcome and legacy of the revolution. In Daniela Mustata's words,

> [a]lthough the impact of different media on revolutions has been recognised, historical accounts have discussed the media mainly in regard to their ability to disseminate information, mobilise the masses or legitimise social actions. The case of Romanian television in the 1989 revolution shows that television's agency went beyond this.[107]

Quasi-Live: The Medium of Television Faced with Media Events

Indeed, we have already noted how television, in this instance, was not merely a passive conduit for information but an active agent in the reconfiguration of collective perceptions and expectations of what it could offer. This Romanian Revolution – uniquely 'televised' – became a moment of profound reassessment of the role and power of media in mediating history. In this light, a seemingly modest comment from TV presenter Rachid Arhab on December 22, 1989, takes on new significance. His remark that viewers were witnessing 'a formidable acceleration of history' that they experienced 'quasi-live' encapsulates the immediacy and paradoxical detachment that the medium of television can create. However, Arhab's comment also foreshadows deeper and more complex questions

[106] Andrei Gorzo, '*Videograme dintr-o revoluție*'. *Un studiu critic* [*Videograms of a Revolution.* A Critical Study], Bucarest, LiterNet, 2016, 9, accessible online: https://editura.liternet.ro/carte/328/Andrei-Gorzo/Videograme-dintr-o-revolutie-Un-studiu-critic.html. Date accessed: May 07 2021.
[107] Daniela Mustata, '"The Revolution Has Been Televised …". Television as Historical Agent in the Romanian Revolution' (2012), *Journal of Modern European History*, 10(1), 94.

about the role of television in shaping not only the narrative of the Romanian Revolution but also broader historical consciousness. What does it mean to experience history 'quasi-live'? How does the medium of television, with its blend of immediacy and mediation, challenge traditional understandings of historical authenticity? These questions invite a critical reassessment, pushing the conversation beyond the Romanian case toward an exploration of television's fundamental role in framing, accelerating, and sometimes obscuring historical events. Although literature on this topic abounds[108], the unprecedented Romanian situation – as described by Daney and others – defies norms of media coverage of historical events in Western societies. As Dayan and Katz contend,

> The independence and ultimate professionalization of the media in the United States, and in others of the Western democracies, make it less likely that a political regime can transform a public event into a frenzied political spectacle, even if the public were willing. Indeed, television may be said to 'contain' public events in several ways. The most elementary of these is that television keeps people at home. Even to ask whether media events might be considered political spectacles is to make the assumption that television is capable of whipping up a frenzy. Social movements take place outside the home, not inside. We are suggesting, in other words, that television depoliticizes society, both because it keeps people at home and because it contributes to the false illusion of political involvement.[109]

The two authors' argument deserves closer consideration. It can be argued that the Romanian Television achieved, since the start of its revolutionary broadcast on December 22nd, 1989, the rigorous opposite of what Dayan and Katz describe. On the one hand, given the lack of professionalization and the anterior functioning in a severely controlled system, the revolution achieved the status of spectacle very rapidly. On the other hand – and this is crucial –, television actively took part in the event: instead of keeping people home, it stimulated them to rally in the streets. Moreover, as we argue in a subsequent chapter, its broadcast served as popular relay for disseminating information, thus certifying and authenticating the ongoing existence of a social event. In other terms, instead of

[108] For a phenomenological inquiry in the field of electronic communication that posits television as capable of restructuring spatio-temporal relations, see Stephanie Marriott, *Live Television. Time, Space, and the Broadcast Event* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007). For an account of television broadcasts of history as a cohesive social agent responsible for the creation of national identity, see Ann Gray and Erin Bell, *History on Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). For a discussion of media events as ritualised collective experiences, see James Curran and Tamar Liebes (eds.), *Media, Ritual, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[109] Daniel Dayan, Elihu Katz, *Media Events*, *op. cit.*, 59.

depoliticising the revolution, it conflated its representation, arguably transforming it into a nationwide uprising that was broadcast internationally.

In the context of this revolution, the medium's ability to generate new forms of understanding, even while blurring the lines between fact and manipulation, suggests that television did not just broadcast the revolution – it became an essential part of its success. The acceleration Arhab speaks of is not just a temporal compression, but a transformation of how history is lived, perceived, and understood in real-time, definitely raising profound implications for the ontology of television itself.

Yet this claim, which arises from a far less complex or 'contaminated' understanding of television, merits deeper analysis. The year 1989 still echoes a historical moment when live broadcasting could be equated with truth, honesty, and fact – a view that reflects a simplistic, one-dimensional conception of the medium that could have stemmed from the Romanian's people lack of engagement with live broadcasting and unscripted political situations[110]. As a different chapter will explore at length, this has to do both with the visual component of the medium, and with its live element, which only exacerbates intensity. At that time, the act of witnessing events on television as they happened in the streets could act as synonymous with experiencing a radically unfiltered version of reality. This belief reflects a broader cultural assumption that live television coverage provided direct, transparent access to history as it unfolded.

As Andaluna Borcila argues, however, this belief is based on a significant illusion. She writes, 'the main promise made by television to its spectators, in general, and by television news, in particular, (and which, needless to say [sic], is an illusion), is a realist one: it promises a *live* meeting (read: unmediated and immediate) with *reality* and *history*.'[111] Borcila's insight highlights the inherent contradiction in the medium's claim to authenticity – what television presents as 'live' is always already mediated through its own representational codes.[112]

In the context of the Romanian Revolution, this illusion of immediacy was crucial. Viewers, both in Romania and around the world, were drawn into the events with the sense

[110] As a subsequent chapter will demonstrate, long before December 1989 the television workers had received clear instructions for diversion should an unplanned event distort the course of the broadcast.
[111] Andaluna Borcila, 'Debutul televizual al postcomunismului' [The Televisual Debut of Post-communism], in Petrovszky, Țichindeleanu, *op. cit.*, 194. Our translation.
[112] Also see Jacques Derrida, Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

that they were participating in a collective miraculous experience as it happened, unaware of the complexities and manipulations underlying the broadcast. The assumption that what was being televised was an unmediated reflection of reality allowed the medium to exercise a kind of narrative control over the revolution, shaping not only what was seen but also how it was interpreted.

This view is further addressed by Peter M. Spangenberg, who adds an additional layer which alludes to the status of the Romanian Revolution as an extraordinary popular moment: 'In [such] moments of coordination of the collective experience, the impression of the *authenticity* that the media allows for is naturally imposed behind the backs of spectators.'[113] Spangenberg's argument reveals how, during pivotal historical events, the media can swiftly create an illusion of authenticity, one that spectators often accept uncritically. This vision also presupposes that television, even when it appears to act as a platform for collective experience and to speak on behalf of the people, often serves other, conflicting interests. In doing so, it falsifies its original promise of delivering authenticity, instead replacing it by a compromised 'authenticity contract' per Gunn Enli[114].

This vigilance against over-reliance on the supposed purist 'nature' of any given medium plays a crucial role in shaping a more nuanced media ecology, where the relationship between technology, content, and audience is understood as complex and multifaceted. On the contrary, a 'catastrophist view' of the media aims to confront any instance of trust in any given medium. The catastrophist stance, which gained prominence in the early 1990s, was largely a reaction to the intense media coverage surrounding two key events: the Romanian Revolution and the first Gulf War. Jean Baudrillard's above-cited essay on the mass graves of Timisoara, encapsulates the essence of the catastrophist view. In his analysis, Baudrillard argued that the Western media's portrayal of the Romanian Revolution had been deliberately manufactured or manipulated, thus turning the revolution into a spectacle for a global audience. This was very consonant with his overall disillusionment on the capacities of television when confronted with media events:

[113] Peter M. Spangenberg, 'O completare la istoria televizată' [Addendum to Televised History], translated by Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu, in *Revoluția română televizată*, 60.
[114] Gunn Enli, *Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality* (Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2014). Also useful as a seminal account for the understanding of the televisual medium as (fallaciously) mediating between several conflicting social actors is Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008 [1988]).

> Television inculcates indifference, distance, scepticism, unconditional apathy in our minds. Through the becoming-image of the world, it anesthetises the imagination, provokes at the same time a revival of the trauma which sickens and a burst of adrenaline which leads to total disillusionment. Television and the media would make the real dissuasive, if it would not already be like that. And this fact represents an absolute progress in the conscience or in the cynical unconscious of our era.[115]

Baudrillard's famous assertion that 'the Gulf War did not take place'[116], discussed previously, epitomises this critique. The idea of television transforming the actual events into media circus reached a culmination of paranoiac intensity during the conflict of 1991. Baudrillard was not denying the physical events of the war – nor could he be said to dwell extensively on them – but instead was arguing that the media's representation of the conflict – especially through televised broadcasts – turned the war into a spectacle, more of a media event than a grounded reality[117]. The global audiovisual output, for the first time in history, allowed a local political and military event to be experienced in real-time by people across the world, creating an illusion of participation and engagement that was disconnected from the reality on the ground.

Summarising the entire spectrum of arguments against the proliferation of images in contemporary society is beyond the scope of this section. However, it is important to recognise – as shown in the introduction – that many of these arguments originated from within the cinematic paradigm, which perceived other forms of audiovisual media as threatening. This dissertation aims to counterbalance the dominant discourse that associates television with degeneration and decline. Daney's perspective is particularly valuable here, as it positions television as offering a potential advantage over cinema, specifically in its responsiveness to historical events[118]. Daney's argument highlights the need to overcome the blanket dismissal of images, advocating for a more balanced understanding. As Georges Didi-Huberman pointed out, 'supposing, as Paul Virilio or Jean Baudrillard do, that we live in an "inferno of images", means both exaggerating the situation and underestimating it.'[119]

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[115] Jean Baudrillard, 'Gropile commune din Timișoara' [The Mass Graves of Timisoara], translated by Veronica Lazăr, in *Revoluția română televizată*, 150.
[116] See Baudrillard, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).
[117] Naturally, Guy Debord's highly influential *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967, 1st edition) found a simplistic continuation in Baudrillard's thinking.
[118] He also adds: 'Could it be that a new ship called *Television and History* is leaving the harbour today?', 'Roumanie, année zero', *art. cit.*
[119] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Remontages du temps subi. L'œil de l'histoire, 2* (Paris: Les Éditions Du Minuit, 2010), 104.

This is largely due to the fact that 'such a stance reduces the world to an "apocalyptical" idea which blocks the possibility of critical knowledge in favour of abstract paranoia.'[120] It risks reducing the world to an 'apocalyptic' vision, favouring abstract paranoia over substantial analysis.

This debate extends beyond theoretical boundaries and touches on our fundamental relationship with historical events, influencing how we experience them as spectators on both aesthetic and political levels. It also raises questions about the potential for political action within events that leave tangible traces, such as the Romanian Revolution, which instigated significant state reform. For thinkers like Baudrillard, such potential seems largely negated.

Dork Zabunyan's inquiry is particularly relevant here: How can we avoid the catastrophist argument that 'generally collapses the moving image on the terrain of the spectacular alienation, and as a consequence on that of a loss of reality for those who actually try to transform it?'[121] This perspective suggests that a critical engagement with the media's role in historical events should not be reduced to a sense of disillusionment or apathy but rather should strive to understand how images can both reflect and shape political realities, while also advancing new aesthetical propositions for the future. The Romanian case study aims to show that the role played by television within the event cannot be reduced to univocal stereotypes, but instead follows a rich, even contradictory evolution that deserves closer inspection.

Conclusion

By discussing a panoply of responses that the Romanian Revolution – understood as a media event – triggered both in its immediate aftermath and in contemporary readings, this literature review outlines theoretical trajectory that will be deepened in subsequent chapters. We underlined the importance of this case study as being generally considered the first popular uprising to be broadcast live on television, thus achieving a seminal status in the history of media. Particular attention has been given to the exemplary shift between those contributions that considered the Romanian Television as a progressive agent that catalysed popular discontent and desire of change, and those that, on the contrary, perceived

[120] Victor Morozov, 'Roumanie, année zero', 26.
[121] Dork Zabunyan, *L'Insistance des luttes* (Grenoble: De l'Incidence éditeur, 2016), 11.

it as a source of manipulation that ultimately discredited the entire revolution – with these two polarised attitudes sometimes coexisting within the same articles. Such a panorama of oppositional reactions also underlines the complex historical evolution of the event itself, as well as the crucial challenge it represents for researchers attempting to shed light on this matter. The revolution became both the site of affirmation of televisual specificities – notably, live broadcasting and the capacity to inform large audiences through rapid response to actuality – and of alarmist discourses which tried to resist an apparently pervasive tendency of the 'becoming-image' (per Baudrillard) of the world. Another critical debate evoked the divide between television as a privileged *locus* for authenticity and transparency and its corollary – television as a deceptive means that only gives the illusion of participation while actually de-politicising the world.

An effort has been made to mitigate such negative, extreme conclusions by highlighting the conceptual density of the revolutionary imagery and observing the philosophical discussions that it supported. We argued, following Daney, Țichindeleanu, and Petrovszky, that the impact of television needs to be assessed according to the historical context of its operation, transforming its promises and potentialities, as well as its limitations, into a media investigation that opens broader themes of conversation. As subsequent chapters will show, the Romanian Revolution broadcast needs to be connected with both a long, sinuous genealogy of 'authentic' imagery, and the most recent – and even future – realities of the audiovisual realm, since, by its exemplary quality in both positive and negative outcomes, it constitutes a model for analysis of political events in a highly connected world.

Chapter 2. Towards a Conceptualisation of the Trademark Image

This chapter contends for an examination of the pivotal role played by emblematic audiovisual sequences – such as street confrontations, the flight of the dictatorial Ceaușescu couple by helicopter, and their subsequent trial – in the global dissemination of the events surrounding the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. It will proceed in a dual manner. It commences by underscoring how prevalent definitions of revolution often represent it as an amalgamation of incremental, gradual occurrences, rather than advocating for a unifying conceptual framework. Consequently, the aim is to elucidate the alignment of the Romanian events with the broader trajectory of revolutions in modern history – not only, as we will see throughout this dissertation, to critique its conformation to sensationalist models, but also to reveal its critical potentialities for an alternative direction of broadcasting. Subsequently, the chapter endeavours to introduce the concept of the trademark image as the principal analytical framework for examining those moments of the revolution that have endured in cultural memory since December 1989, exerting a lasting influence on the collective perceptions of this historical event among diverse audiences. By positing the trademark image as a conceptual elementary unit that both conforms to mainstream expectations from the revolutionary event as it has been inscribed in popular memory and challenges definitions of the photographic specificity, this chapter aims to account for the highly polarising force that television images acquired during the Romanian Revolution.

An Overview of the Attempts to Define a Revolution

In a rarely seen documentary that is still accessible on the Internet, titled *1989. Jurnalul unei revoluții* [1989. Diary of a Revolution] by director Carmen Lidia Vidu (2020)[122], the distinguished historian and academic, Dennis Deletant, attempts to encapsulate the significance of the Romanian Revolution as a pivotal historical event. Of particular interest is the required concision of his commentary, which overall holds an informal tone, addressing a non-specialised audience primarily consisting of film enthusiasts and, even more likely, individuals who directly experienced the events in question. Given the nature of this 55-minute documentary, featuring a diverse array of interviewees, including actors, journalists and other Romanian intellectuals assigned with

[122] Accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9pUCGHnYP8. Date accessed: 23. 05. 2025.

the task to elucidate the revolutionary events as personal and biographical experiences, the selection of researcher and expert Dennis Deletant is remarkable. His intervention is supposed to offer a neutral and authoritative perspective on the Romanian Revolution ensuring objectivity, detachment, and a certain theoretical approach towards the facts; having no first-hand experience during those tumultuous days of December 1989, he is sought after for his impartial input, acting as an 'expert'[123]. Deletant's inevitable distance from the events underscores his role as a neutral point of view, tasked with defining the broader cultural and historical implications of this transformative period. His intervention deserves to be quoted at length:

> The Romanian Revolution captured so much international attention because it was the only Revolution in Eastern Europe which, at the time, in the minds of many lived up to the name of revolution. By that I mean it had those elements of bloodshed, sadly, of violence on the streets, of tanks, of, of course, the execution of both Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena. All of these factors led to Romania occupying the headlights in the broadcast media throughout the world over Christmas and the New Year of 1990[124].

This oral intervention is of particular interest precisely because it is destined to a general audience. In this account, Deletant makes use of multiple elements which are related to the concept of the revolution. These elements belong to different categories: some are simple nouns which participate in a sort of décor ('tanks'); others resemble a certain kind of themed imagery ('bloodshed', 'violence on the streets'); yet others belong to a series of decisive events which are recurrent in most revolutionary scenarios ('the execution' of the leaders). A basic sensible universe can be designed from this brief intervention, in which a revolution could conform to a pattern only if it produced a particular regime of content supported by certain clearly recognisable elements, such as military equipment, and if it included a distinct sequence of events that encompass the conventional expectation of the tumultuous change of regime.

In 1996, Peter Siani-Davies chose to scrutinise the events of December 1989 in Romania through what he describes as a global 'theoretical view' on the events.[125] Given

[123] On the notion of experts as an integral part of the so-called System of Information with a clear function of speaking on behalf of the speechless subject, see Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2009).
[124] In *Jurnal de Romania*, *op. cit.*
[125] See Peter Siani-Davies, 'Romanian Revolution or Coup d'état? A Theoretical View of the Events of December 1989', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 1996), 453-465.

the immediate emergence of uncertainties regarding the unfolding course of the revolution, turning to theoretical literature on the very concept of revolution seemed not only timely but imperative. This undertaking, naturally, arose from the ongoing debate that pitted supporters of the revolution against those who questioned its legitimacy, and which ignited almost immediately after the death of the dictatorial couple[126]. In this article, Siani-Davies contended that 'elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and in marked contrast to Romania, the events were so lacking in the violence and tumult usually associated with "true" revolutions that a whole new class of seemingly oxymoronic epithets was coined to label them with names such as "velvet revolution" and "negotiated revolution".'[127] The text highlighted the complexity of categorising these events of December 1989 and emphasised the need to consider the specific context, motivations, and outcomes when applying labels such as revolution or coup d'état. In assessing this specific classification difference, Siani-Davies considered various factors. These included elements such as 'mass mobilisation, widespread violence, spontaneous establishment of revolutionary institutions, breakdown of the revolutionary coalition, and subsequent intense struggle between the revolutionary contenders on the streets of Romania's cities.'[128] These factors, according to most interpretations[129], were notably prevalent during the tumultuous days of December 1989, providing the Romanian events with an exceptionalism status, a degree of intensity unparalleled in the region.

However, grappling with the inherent complexity of crafting a definitive and universally applicable definition for revolution, particularly given the rare and context-dependent nature of such occurrences, Siani-Davies encountered a formidable challenge in conclusively affirming his inquiry. This sense of dissatisfaction was further compounded by the recognition that existing definitions of revolution often lean towards either a more or less simplistic enumeration of constitutive elements (as illustrated earlier)[130] or hinge on

[126] Politician Radu Portocală published in 1990 an influential demystifying account of the events of December 1989, which he downgraded to the status of coup d'état plotted according to external influences, thus shifting the accent from popular uprising to conspiracy theories. See Radu Portocală, *Autopsie du coup d'État roumain* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1990).

[127] Siani-Davies, 'Romanian Revolution or Coup d'état? A Theoretical View of the Events of December 1989', 453. Also see Laszlo Bruszt, '1989. The Negotiated Revolution in Hungary', *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 2 (July 1990), 365-387.

[128] *Ibid*., 459

[129] See for example Konrad Petrovszky, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, *Revoluția română televizată*. At the other end of the spectrum (that of journalistic and eyewitness accounts), see Radu Portocală, *Căderea lui Ceaușescu* (Bucharest: Mediafax, 2019).

[130] Another example: 'Protests *invariably* involve the deployment of the power of the state against the "people" to exert different degrees of control, violence and lethality such as we saw in the former communist

their outright negation. There seems to be an impossibility to define protest actions from within, in accordance with their own cultural specificities, instead having to resort to a pre-existing model – an archetypal collective disruption – that each new occurrence either conforms to, or rejects. Consequently, the trajectory of this investigation found itself at an impasse, as the scrutiny of these elements took on an almost absurdist quality, reducing the profound actions of the people, which are inherently composed of multitudes, to a mere checklist of criteria. Instead, it became evident that revolutionary masses, while frequently drawing inspiration from historical antecedents – particularly, as Siani-Davies contends, from the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions – engage in unconscious actions that defy easy categorisation by any predetermined agenda; such, we can argue, was the case in Romania, with television images broadcasting the live invention of a free nation, as well as its performative appearance in front of the camera. Thus, Siani-Davies' exploration culminated in a contradictory conclusion: the Romanian people's departure from a strict adherence to a pre-existing model could paradoxically serve, within future debates, as a testament to the authenticity and credibility of the foundation of this mass movement, which developed in an autarchic climate.

Both Deletant and Siani-Davies approach the analysis of the Romanian Revolution by adopting a method of basic deconstruction, wherein they break down the complex event into various constituent autonomous elements. Their objective is to scrutinise the revolutionary nature of the Romanian Revolution by examining the interplay of these distinct elements, their eventual model of coagulation. In their assessment, they propose that a true revolution necessitates the amalgamation of sequential components. This implies that the ultimate transformative nature of a revolution – the certification of such a status – lies not in isolated incidents but in the collective unfolding of events over time. It is the cumulative effect of these interconnected elements that defines the revolutionary character of a historical episode. Therefore, the shared perspective of Deletant and Siani-Davies presents the Romanian Revolution as a complex and interconnected series of singular essential occurrences, each playing a vital role in shaping the larger narrative of a revolution. Eva Kernbauer critically echoes this process, positing Romania's status of

regimes in Europe in 1989', Jim Aulich, 'Reflections on Protest and Political Transformation since 1789', in Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 279. Our emphasis.

exceptionalism in the region as the scene of violent events, as well as their conformation to popular expectations from a revolution:

> The Romanian Revolution was the spectacular final act in the series of collapsing communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. While most of these collapses allowed for an imagery that remained within the realm of the symbolic – the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia, the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall marking the beginning of the German 'Wende' (turn) – the situation in Romania was perceived as exceptional. It provided the full classical revolutionary scenario: a country oppressed by a despotic tyrant; protests; violent suppression; riots verging on civil war; then the revolution's victory and the dictator's flight, arrest, trial, and execution.[131]

Such explanations, tailored for different audiences – either for the general public or for a specialised readership – underscore a similar concern that arises when proposing a general definition for a revolution. The question of why the events in Romania can be legitimately catalogued as a revolution poses certain difficulties for the commentators as, once again, it implies the prescription of general rules based on singular occurrences. While enumeration, a prevalent method, persuasively encapsulates the concept for broad audiences, its effectiveness relies on the integrity of each event in the chain. This method's success lies in its apparent comprehensiveness, but it also opens the door to potential falsification as it lacks an overarching concept. In other words, this explanation is dependent on the authenticity of every link within the larger narrative of the revolution. Yet one may legitimately question the pertinence of such a definition. That is due to the contradiction between a classification that seems to encompass the whole sequence of the revolution broken into smaller, detachable, more easily observable components ('mass mobilisation, widespread violence, spontaneous establishment of revolutionary institutions', etc.), and its inherent reductionist approach. Indeed, one is left with the impression that the sense of a revolution – its certification – is exclusively relying on its most visible and decisive moments, on a concentrated, immediately legible version of the event itself. It is however questionable that such a theorisation may do justice to the complexity of the revolution itself and, most importantly, to its main actors: the protesters. Recent history has demonstrated[132] that only rarely do the events of a revolution conform

[131] Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 53.
[132] For an analysis of the Arab Spring as catalyser of popular discontent via platforms such as Facebook or YouTube, see Zabunyan, *L'Insistance des luttes: Images, soulèvements, contre-révolutions*, 53-64. Alternatively, see Dork Zabunyan, 'Arab Springs and Impersonal Images', translated from French by Lucy

to this pre-established framework. Often, the interpretation of things is rendered hazardous, if not vain, by the unfolding live events, which are paradoxical, unclear, sinuous, and lack the sense of continuous legibility. In this sense, Siani-Davies' struggle to achieve a satisfying conclusion is enforced by the revolutionary course in itself, one in which it becomes very complicated to disentangle the 'truth' of the historical moment. The desire to reduce the events of a revolution to a clearly understandable pattern is more than questionable when the outcome is the flattening of a popular struggle according to summarising models. In fact, as Emirbayer and Goodwin conclude in their review of *Debating Revolutions* by Nikki R. Keddie,

> most revolutions … have not been (and never will be) predicted for the simple reason that they are the largely unintentional results of the complex interactions of a large number of choices made by potentially numerous relevant actors over a sometimes lengthy period. As a result, if even one of these choices were different from the one actually made, a revolution might not occur.[133]

In her classic account, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt offers a distinct definition of the revolutionary event, asserting that 'only where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution'[134]. This assertion effectively addresses a broader perspective of revolutionary events by engaging with philosophical concepts such as 'violence' and 'liberation' without clearly contextualising them, thereby making it applicable for general use. However, she also employs the theoretical framework of pre-existing imagery. She writes, for instance, that

> [t]he notion of an irresistible movement, which the nineteenth century soon was to conceptualize into the idea of historical necessity, echoes from beginning to end through the pages of the French Revolution. Suddenly an entirely new imagery begins to cluster around the old metaphor and an entirely new vocabulary is introduced into political language. When we think of revolution, we almost automatically still think in terms of this imagery, born in these years – in terms of Desmoulins' *torrent revolutionnaire* on whose rushing waves the actors of the revolution were borne and carried away until its undertow

Pons, MAY Revue, accessible here: https://www.mayrevue.com/en/revoltes-arabes-et-images-impersonnelles/#revoltes-arabes-et-images-impersonnelles-n-6. Date accessed: 14. 06. 2024.

[133] Mustafa Emirbayer, Jeff Goodwin, 'Review: Symbols, Positions, Objects: Toward a New Theory of Revolutions and Collective Action', *History and Theory*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Oct., 1996), 362.

[134] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 35.

sucked them from the surface and they perished together with their foes, the agents of the counter-revolution.[135]

Arendt highlights how the French Revolution introduced a new set of metaphors and vocabulary into political language, shaping our understanding of revolution ever since. This vivid imagery of the uncontrollable, almost metaphysical force sweeping actors along its course until its undertow eventually claims both revolutionaries and their enemies alike, has profoundly influenced how we conceptualize revolutions, embedding the idea of an unstoppable, tumultuous process in our collective consciousness.

Arendt then goes on to explore the by now-classic distinction between revolution and other forms of protest, such as coup d'état. Although this discussion deserves ample space and has polarised Romanian public opinion for decades[136], it goes beyond the scope of our dissertation. Instead, what is sought after here is whether the insistence on audiovisual coverage of the revolutionary events, as well as their general treatment in terms of imagery and representations might have been influenced, deliberately or not, by the collective memory and mentality of the concept of revolution in its modern sense. The author's implication can be profitably pursued up to the dates of the Romanian Revolution: the French revolution's cultural legacy, which has by now achieved symbolic, even folkloric status, has undoubtedly permeated contemporary televisual representations as well.

However, it is important to recognise the widespread tendency to define the concept of revolution through enumerative attempts not only when conforming to, but even when challenging hegemonic narratives. We must therefore avoid the risk of presenting a univocal depiction of the symbol as a mere compromise suitable for theoretical classification. Enzo Traverso's work, *Revolution: An Intellectual History*, not only aims to redefine the cultural concept of revolution using 'dialectical images' but also develops a theory on the necessity of symbols within the infrastructure of any revolution. Diverging significantly from the aforementioned theories, Traverso argues that revolutionary symbols have the capacity to be neither (or more than) a strategy of commercial cynicism – where

[135] *Ibid*., 48-49.
[136] See for instance Peter Siani-Davies, 'The Revolution after the Revolution', in: Duncan Light and David Phinnemore (eds.), *Post-Communist Romania. Coming to Terms with Transition* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), or Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct. Histoire en différé*, Aguinalin's somewhat biased interpretations ultimately suggest that there was no revolution in the true sense of the word in December 1989 in Romania.

events are simplified into sensationalist imagery for easier consumption – nor an ideologically opportunistic method to control potentially rebellious meanings or interpretations. While acknowledging the distorting potential inherent in generating convenient symbols from specific, concrete events – 'The transformation of an event into a symbol passes through multiple mediations which can modify its meaning'[137] –, Traverso also views this act of symbolisation as a privileged means of collective transmission and an effective way to ensure the preservation and accurate representation of the character of revolutionary events. The reference to universally accepted symbols thus becomes a marker of communitarian cohesion.

Traverso further analyses symbols such as the barricade, the red flag, and revolutionary songs, not as tools to lock the counter-intuitive events of uprisings into a stable narrative, but as 'practices and objects, ephemeral and transitory though they are, which commemorate revolution as a trans-historical and transnational experience, sometimes turning into common objects, practices or rituals'[138]. Originally, popular uprisings like the Paris Commune were not meant to be attached to any national or nationalist folklore but served as moments to express a political feeling of solidarity. The symbol, by definition, acts as a universal, easily accessible, and immediately legible mark. Its usage can help restore a collective history of political struggle that can be shared by anyone, regardless of nationality, race, or ethnicity. Although the symbol may suppress some of the vitality and contradictions inherent in popular movements, it simultaneously helps reconnect with the international, universal, and inclusive character of any revolution.

There is, of course, an inherent danger in relying exclusively on symbols to convey the meaning of an event, that of subsuming its significance exclusively to an emotional engagement. This danger will be further explored throughout this dissertation by exploring a sensationalist and vindictive type of imagery. For the moment, it suffices to say that an excessive reliance on the spectacular elements of historical occurrences – Traverso contending that '[i]f the barricade has so profoundly impacted the spirit and is enduringly engraved in collective memory, this was always by virtue of its both anonymous and spectacular character'[139] – can lead not only to the mystification of the event itself but also to its ossification. The antithesis of a relevant, critical act of remembrance is stagnant

[137] Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 186.
[138] *Idem.*
[139] *Ibid.*, 187.

commemoration[140]. However, one need not resort to a Manichaean opposition between symbols and those images that resist any act of recuperation and transmission. As Dork Zabunyan points out, the relationship between them is far less straightforward than it seems, with transfers between these two types of imagery occurring frequently: 'the specificity of the slideshow is precisely its ability to extract from a clichéd image an image that is no longer a cliché, or to perceive a clichéd image in such a way that it ceases to be one, thereby jutting out from the indistinct flow of images'[141]. In other words, symbols, while powerful, can become static and lose their critical edge, turning into mere commemorative icons devoid of the dynamic, transformative energy they once embodied. On the other hand, images that resist easy recuperation can retain their disruptive potential, continually challenging dominant narratives and encouraging deeper reflection on the events they represent – yet they also pose difficulties in appealing to a larger audience. This nuanced interplay between symbols and resistant imagery underscores the complexity of how revolutionary events are remembered and interpreted. According to Traverso, symbols like the barricade or the red flag encapsulate collective memories and shared values, facilitating the transmission of revolutionary ideals across generations. Yet, they also risk simplifying and sanitizing the raw, often chaotic nature of revolutions. Resistant imagery, by contrast, can provoke ongoing engagement and reinterpretation, keeping the revolutionary spirit alive and relevant – not by popular uniformity, but by specific reactualisation. Traverso's and Zabunyan's insights reveal the need for a more sophisticated approach to revolutionary symbolism, one that acknowledges its two-fold potential for both preservation and distortion, critical renewal and schematic readings.

One of Zabunyan's most important implications is that a stereotypical image may transform entirely when displaced from its usual framework and estranged, even allowing for contradictory readings: the meaning of an image is never entirely predetermined[142]. It is important to note that a stereotypical image may transform entirely when displaced from its usual framework and estranged. This phenomenon is evident in the symbolic images of the Romanian Revolution used to compose *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), a found-footage film by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, based on the events of December 1989. When these images were screened outside of their original televisual realm, for the

[140] See, for instance, Dork Zabunyan, *L'insistance des luttes*, 33-52.
[141] Dork Zabunyan, 'Arab Springs and Impersonal Images'.
[142] This attitude towards the undetermined character of any particular image can be traced back to Serge Daney's writings at the end of the 1980s, see *infra*, Chapter 2.

purposes of a pioneering found-footage film with critical virtues, they acquired a different usage and significance. The shift in context elicited a different audience response, one more akin to sceptical cinephilia than to predatory journalistic practices. This new mode of engagement perhaps facilitated their transformation into symbols. By presenting these images within a cinematic framework, Farocki and Ujică enabled viewers to perceive them not just as documentary evidence but as evocative symbols open to interpretation and reflection[143].

On the other hand, another recurrent argument within these two interpretations revolves around the contrast between the collective peaceful transition of most Eastern European nations from communist to capitalist regimes and the distinct case of Romania. At different moments in their intervention, both Deletant and Siani-Davies mention this idea that Romania was able to garner global attention due to its *sui generis* tumultuous and convulsive shift in ideology, setting it apart from the smoother processes observed in practically all the neighbouring countries. There is more to this idea than the simple comparison between a singular case of upheaval and a collective trajectory of organic transition that could be observed in the other communist nations in Eastern Europe. What is in question here is not so much the adequacy of the term 'revolution' when applied to other simultaneous and neighbouring contexts, but – more crucially for our study – the fact that the unprecedented media highlight of the Romanian Revolution across the globe, unlike that of the adjacent contexts, may well have been facilitated by its apparent conformity to conventional expectations of the generic revolutionary course itself: a bloody event catalysing popular discontent, which resulted in a trenchant, abrupt change in political regime.

In fact, the already noted striking coherence between the Romanian Revolution fulfilling most conventional definitions of the revolutionary concept – from the death of the tyrant to the overarching civil war imagery – and its supremacy within media broadcasts deserves closer scrutiny, since it represents more than mere cultural coincidence. The level of interdependence between its particular production of images and all-encompassing cultural representations of the revolution is not to be neglected. In other words, what could potentially be more interesting for the media researcher is not the actual *truth* of the

[143] On the process of utilising heterogeneous materials within the cinematographic format in order to achieve a pedagogical reflections on the politics of the gaze, see, among others, Dork Zabunyan, *Jacques Rancière et le monde des images* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2022).

revolution – the deceptive answer to the inevitable question: what happened? – but the subtle ways in which the televised images of the revolution have enforced a certain representation of the event according to a pre-established truth, even steering it, at times, towards a pre-imposed meaning. Simply put, it is not yet clear – nor will it ever be, probably – whether it is the images themselves which have led to the confirmation and certification of the revolution, or the revolution has generated a typical imagery resulting from the events themselves. In the context of those heated days, the question of the prominence of the images – as a micro-unit that achieved a remarkable importance in its aftermath – becomes central to our research, and will be theoretically addressed in the following chapter. Simplifying for the sake of brevity[144], it is because the state television had endured decades of censorship and strict control and was merely beginning to experience the freedom to report – and the pitfalls that are implied by this freedom – that its broadcasts were particularly fragile, open to contestation and, more importantly, to falsification.

We have already underlined how it is usually counter-productive to establish the sense of a revolution according to pre-designed formats or patterns. Thus, noticing how a certain image of a historical event may *pre-exist* the consummation of the facts themselves is of utmost importance. During that context, this has led to multiple contributions which have contested the achievements of the Romanian Revolution altogether[145]. The object of that contestation will be the subject of another chapter. For the moment, it suffices to shift the angle of discussion and abandon the teleological interpretation of the revolution. Our interest is adjacent to that interrogation, yet does not completely identify with it. Instead, what we seek to answer is whether the televised broadcast was already conforming to an internalised cultural model when informing live about the revolution. As if between what was happening in front of the cameras and what had happened before, in similar occurrences which had not been broadcast, could form an ideal, albeit involuntary, overlap.

This is by no means a refutation of the idea of a Romanian Revolution igniting, under the form of a spontaneous popular revolt, in the city of Timisoara mid-December, 1989. Instead, by comparing the available footage of the Romanian state television from

[144] The complex question of Romanian Television's history and its relation to the revolutionary institution that was formed by its simple rebranding in December 1989 (The Free Romanian Television) will be addressed in a subsequent chapter.
[145] A useful summary of this contentious debate can be found in Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89. Deconstructia unei revolutii* [December '89. Deconstruction of a Revolution] (Iași: Polirom, 2009).

those days with the one that was broadcast in a country like France[146], the aim is to uncover the decision – be it voluntary or subconscious – of journalists to align the then-present events in Romania with the expectations of a general audience which moved beyond the national confines. This objective goes deeper than, yet is not at all unrelated to, mere questions of orientalism, self-colonising practices[147] and sensationalism, or to a Western gaze discovering 'a country [from the East] without images'[148] (to borrow film critic Serge Daney's effective phrase), to imperatives of marketing that the satellite television in Western Europe was already facing at that moment. By criss-crossing the representations and definitions of the concept of revolution in cultural memory, collective mentalities, and specialised literature with its actual televised image, this chapter attempts to pose, at the core of this joint process of public information, legitimation, and persuasion, the *trademark image* as the micro-unit which infused this televisual representation of the revolution, imposing its standard reading.

The Trademark Image as Conceptual Framework

The trademark image [*l'image de marque*] retains the expression specifically coined by *Cahiers du cinéma* critics and then-editors-in-chief Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana in 1976 for a special number of the magazine.[149] It should once again be noted that we have chosen to translate the French term by 'trademark', instead of the more common 'mark' in order to retain the double connotation of the original, as both a significant image in theoretical terms, and a reference to the proper advertising culture of brands and tags. This also places the practice of voracious consumption of sensationalist imagery within a critical horizon of commodified culture. To go back to the original source, this expanded edition addressed a timely issue in the audiovisual realm, thoroughly examining the infiltration of

[146] Naturally, this decision is supported by more factors than a personal and autobiographical trajectory prompted by my recent engagement with the French televisual broadcast of the Romanian Revolution, which resulted in a Master's thesis under the supervision of Dork Zabunyan. More generally, this is due to the cultural significance that this historical event from Eastern Europe has managed to acquire right from those days of December 1989, which witnessed the monopolising of French TV channels by the Romanian incident, as well as the massive engagement of intellectuals – which will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter – with what was being shown on television. This has culminated in several formidable accounts of how the revolution was broadcast in terms of media/audiovisual coverage, such as Marie Menant's definitive article 'Bucarest 1989, optique et politique, histoire d'un différé', in *Bucarest, une histoire sans fin ?* (2023), 119-141.

[147] On this particular topic of Romanian self-colonising practices, see Adrian Cioroianu, 'The Impossible Escape: Romanians and the Balkans', in Dusan I. Bjelić & Obrad Savić (eds.), *Balkan as Metaphor*, 209-234.

[148] Serge Daney, 'Roumanie, année zero', *art. cit*.

[149] *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 268-269, July-August 1976. The special dossier dedicated to trademark images can be found pages 5-39.

the television screen – commonly perceived as a socialising and integrating agent in post-war Western society[150] – by what is now referred to as 'brand positioning' and 'consumer culture'[151] and the widespread influence of the advertising industry. The question of whether the visual medium, particularly the moving image, has actively facilitated and propelled the rise of advertising is a secondary consideration. The magazine's interrogation at this juncture was more ideological than ontological, also involving several punctual incursions into aesthetics rather than broad ethical questions. However, the motivation behind this special theme extended beyond a mere desire to confront the contemporary transformations of the moving image. It signalled the gradual return of the magazine to more immediate concerns that interwove formal and political considerations in unexpected ways. This shift followed a period of intense Marxist and Leninist readings that had pushed the editors' focus away from the actual world of contemporary images and deeper into abstract theory.

In this sense, a dossier dedicated to the trademark image proved to be highly opportune. It provided the magazine's staff writers with a platform to blend their enthusiasm for theoretical debate with a focus on the actuality of the (small) screen. Advertising was an ideal field for theory, since it was treated with disdain by both aesthetical and ideological readings, and was thus generally neglected by commentators in spite of its crucial role in society – in other terms, of its hypervisibility. The focus on advertising thus meant a form of political intervention. By transcending the classical, conventional structure of the cinematic paradigm, this approach offered greater possibilities for unconventional thinking directed toward the most pressing present and future, rather than dwelling solely on the past. Additionally, it avoided the potentially irritating sense of nostalgia and loss inherent in cinephile culture, as the object of scrutiny was an as-yet-theoretically-uncharted visual territory. Although advertising had been present in French society – and on French television – at least since the aftermath of the Second World War, it had remained a sort of a dark spot of reflection stemming from the cinematic analysis field. In other words, engaging with advertising culture meant rekindling a form of curiosity, and even a curiosity for a certain avant-garde form, while maintaining the theoretical foundations that prevented

[150] See for example Jean-Samuel Beuscart, Thomas Beauvisage, Sisley Maillard, 'La fin de la télévision ? Recomposition et synchronisation des audiences de la télévision de rattrapage', *Réseaux*, 2012/5, no. 175, 43-82.

[151] See for example Dana L. Alden, Jan-Benedict E. M. Steenkamp, Rajeev Batra, 'Brand Positioning Through Advertising in Asia, North America, and Europe: The Role of Global Consumer Culture', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan., 1999), 75-87.

a descent into mere cinephile impressions when discussing visual aspects. Moreover, it allowed the writers to focus on a marginalised fringe of the audiovisual realm that, within the cinematographic paradigm, had not prompted adequate, systematic surveys before[152]. In any case, this fusion of a theoretical (Marxist-Leninist and psychoanalytical) critique persisting from *Cahiers du cinéma*'s most politicised period and a gaze that reacquaints itself with a form for aesthetic pleasure is decidedly innovative for its time, and constitutes a model for a theoretical engagement with new media. As such, it deserves thorough analysis. As Daney and Toubiana write,

> [w]e have always suspected, at *Cahiers*, that the advertising cinema was not the indignant margin of cinema, but its truth. The hegemonic cinema, as they say, aims first and foremost to manage 'trademark images'. Those are the responder's (financial), the referent's (taken for the real) of the good cause (to re-serve) or of the mother-house […]. *The hegemonic cinema never attempts anything beyond advertising for its off-screen space.*[153]

Although slightly abstruse, this quotation relates to a larger endeavour consisting in the assimilation of the *entire* 'hegemonic' cinema – that of the industry, characterised by the employment of mainstream narrative procedures and aesthetic options – within the realm of the trademark image. As such, the film critics believe that the dominant cultural forms are complicit with advertising operations: the off-screen space here refers to the society at large, governed by a capitalist regime which both annihilates the political struggles advocated for by the magazine, and obscures the domination processes used against the lower classes.

Thus, we could argue that the strategy employed here operates in a remarkably ingenious, effective manner. Not only because it suddenly operates a shift from the contained realm of advertising to that, which can be more crucial since it is more culturally recognised, of cinema. But also because it establishes both continuity and novelty via a break from traditional modes of film consumption. Continuity is evident in its recent history where the magazine served as a vanguard of political thought applied to images. Simultaneously, it introduces novelty within a field that, lacking 'good objects' (few political films were deemed satisfactory by the magazine, leading to a self-contained

[152] Although the *Cahiers du cinéma* had initially been subtitled 'Revue du cinéma et du télécinéma' [Magazine of Cinema and Telecinema], the 'télécinéma' field had been subsequently abandoned. Without ever losing interest in television – most notably, number 118 features a *dossier* dedicated to the medium –, the editorial board had never before invested the field of reflection on advertising.
[153] Serge Daney, Serge Toubiana, 'Présentation', *art. cit.*, 5. Emphasis in the original.

approach), had to either create new ones or renew interest in 'bad objects'. By situating itself at the convergence of multiple forces – financial considerations (always someone at the other end making the request for the advertisement), aesthetic elements (the illusion of reality granted by the moving image), and ideological aspects (what are the objects being advertised?) – the trademark image becomes the focal point of audiovisual reflection at a moment when the ideals of May 68 gradually lose prominence. As Pierre Eugène contends,

> Daney and Toubiana summarise all the previous battles of the *Cahiers* against the financial imperialism, the lie of the representation (referent meant to signify the real), the false political struggles (devoid of risk, opportunist because arising too late, already won or already lost, too distant or too vague) or the hermeneutical *auberge espagnole* (those interpretations which, because they relate to 'everything', always favour the common sense).[154]

This is a good moment, for the likes of Serge Daney, to rethink their intellectual heritage as French (and global) society enters a melancholic historical phase which witnesses not only the demise of political utopias[155], but also the restoration of a regime of visibility which maintains a much closer, if insidious, relation to capital. From this perspective, the choice to focus on a dossier about the trademark image becomes entirely understandable. It explicitly addresses the contradiction within visual content that involves questions of authorship, spectatorship, and craftsmanship while operating on the level of merchandise. However, the significance of the trademark image, as defined by the writers of Cahiers du cinéma, in our discussion lies precisely in its ability to transcend the confines of the advertising industry. As evident, the dossier's argument endeavours to achieve more than a mere analysis of a singular type of visual content[156] by proposing a cartography of a contemporary larger symptom. The trademark image thus becomes a visual tendency which overcomes its initial framework and allows for a reflection of *any* kind of image. More than its content, what matters here is the *sensibility* that is being promoted; more than its

[154] Pierre Eugène, *Exercices de relecture. Serge Daney 1962-1982* (Paris: Éditions du Linteau, 2023), 308.
[155] Indeed, up until 1974, the magazine aimed to act as a sort of mediator between the masses and those films which were deemed appropriate for screenings and subsequent collective discussions/debates between the members of the editorial board and workers within factories, members of political syndicates, etc. Numerous events of this sort were organised between 1972 and 1974, see also Antoine de Baecque, *Cahiers du cinéma. Histoire d'une revue* 1959-1981, tome II (Paris: Éditions Cahiers du cinema, 1991).
[156] For example, one that attempts to sell an object and as such is part of a clearly defined marketing operation, etc.

immediate context, what is of interest is its relative *function*. The definition that is given by the critics at *Cahiers* attempts to encircle it from multiple dimensions:

> Its [the trademark image's] future as image? To become, within the crazed circulation of signs, a stop, an emblem, a signature, a stimulus. A sort of solidified power, a domination node [*nœud*]. Its function? To occupy a tick box, the place of a link within a chain, to prevent any other image to be seen.[157]

This definition delineates the role of the trademark image as something which *stands apart* from the entire array of similar content. It can impede the flow (act as a stop), accelerate or divert it (function as a stimulus), or serve as its distinctive encapsulation (emblem). For the magazine, these attributes of the trademark image carry weight. In a somewhat critical evaluation of its influence, they position the trademark image as something that not only monopolises the view by 'preventing any other images from being seen' but also by arresting meaning. In essence, the stop, emblem, signature, and stimulus are variations of the primary operation of centralizing meaning, forcefully guiding our gaze until it aligns with the intended interpretation. The trademark image opposes ambiguity, movement, and plurality. As Pierre Eugène explains, 'the trademark image not only marks the image itself by a definitive signalised trait, but also that which, predator, *prevents the existence of other images that do not possess the same hermeneutical fixity*.'[158] From this perspective, such an image not only arrests the gaze by means of its conclusive character, but also chases other less categorical samples of visibility, thus achieving both a consolidation of meaning (one absolute version of a certain event) and its impoverishment (no other counter-image possible). The merit of this definition lies in its openness to interpretation. It can be comprehended quite literally, as in the case of a frame, but it also extends to something broader, encompassing everything from sequences and chains of events to the customary representations and functioning modes within a given artistic medium. As Pierre Eugène states in his aim to relate the trademark image to multiple spheres of human activity,

> the trademark image is, simultaneously, the emanation of dogmatism, the mediatisation of *doxa*, the poster and the armed branch of the political power when it comes to the field of the imaginary, the placement under constant supervision of any testimony, the cancelling

[157] Daney, Toubiana, 'Présentation', 5.
[158] Pierre Eugène, *op. cit*., 309. Emphasis in the original.

of the struggle in name of a false social reconciliation and, in its ultimate consequences, a homogeneity that eliminates singularities.[159]

Certainly, we can contend that trademark images are fundamentally those images that convey a message which is visible, clear, and potent enough for its interpretation to be readily accessible and readily embraced. These are visual units that can be easily reduced to a univocal message. Eugène also suggests that such an image also trades on emotion. He goes on to quote Daney, who states that their ultimate effect lies in a certain 'indetermination which allows me to get a grip [arrimer] directly onto this image and to forget what it signified for the other and how it affected her/him'[160] Yet this is also the moment for the magazine to explore the paradoxes that such an image may carry. Eugène considers this image to 'cloak the facts with a meaning that is supposedly spontaneous, without depth, ready to be consumed'[161]. This characterisation transforms it into a hermeneutical tool in its own right. With this re-evaluation, the entire history of cinema, for example, can be re-examined and reconsidered, focusing particularly on those instances that challenge or subvert a regime of visibility seemingly tailored for the production of trademark images. Its significance is further underscored by the period in which it emerges – one that attempts to come to terms with the accelerated fusion of advertising culture into the realm of art. In the seventies, the marked difference in nature and modus operandi is distinct enough to warrant closer scrutiny.

In the same issue, Daney also wrote a critical assessment of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972), which consisted of moving images recorded by the filmmaker during an official trip in Mao's China. While globally rejecting Antonioni's project as an aestheticisation of the Chinese people's political struggle, Daney includes a laborious demonstration centred around the notion of the trademark image. On the one hand, he condemns the official criticism from the Communist Party that the film had received on the basis that it had not conformed to the image of the country. Daney favourably resumes this creative attitude by stating: 'It does not reproduce the official, emblematic image of the square, its "trademark image"'[162]. By steering clear of dominant representations, the film renews them, retaining a crucial part of artistic freedom, thus

[159] *Ibid*., p. 315.
[160] Serge Daney, 'Notes sur *Underground*', *Cahiers du cinéma,* no. 276 (May 1977), 47-48, included in *La Maison cinéma et le monde,* tome 1 (Paris: P.O.L, 2001), 198.
[161] Pierre Eugène, *op. cit.*, 309.
[162] Serge Daney, 'La re-mise en scène', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 268-269, 20-26.

marking an essential point in what should be a specificity, if not a task, of any artistic practice: that which seeks to question and counter any rigid image. Since the Chinese authorities expect from Antonioni to reproduce with high fidelity their own staged reality of China – something that he deliberately fails to achieve –, they automatically devalue, in Daney's words, the mission that one rightly expects from art. This is where the Chinese Party – despite the film critic's own momentary sympathies – is wrong: in expecting documentary to act as a sort of re-staging, a recording of a pre-arranged reality.

Daney also provides a series of partial synonyms for the trademark image: 'congealed, blocked, repressed'[163]. By daringly going against his own political dogma and overtly critiquing the Chinese government, he evokes the trademark image by juxtaposing it with a form of propaganda that stifles any sort of vivacity or spontaneity. He then envisions two axes that tend to favour the apparition of trademark images. Within cinema, he believes this tendency resides in naturalism, camouflaged under its fallacious pretence to mirror reality. This aspiration inherently possesses a totalitarian expectation: the idea that there is a single method to capture the real, thereby imposing a certain homogenised imagery.

Outside the realm of cinema, Daney pinpoints advertising as the main generator of trademark images. While this might seem self-evident, it is clear that this second option remains favourable insofar as its repetitive mechanism, which promotes familiar, commodified images, does not conceal its commercial intentions. Advertising openly embraces its purpose of persuasion and commodification, making its creation of trademark images more transparent and, in a sense, more honest. This contrasts with the insidious nature of naturalism in cinema, which claims to depict reality while subtly enforcing a specific, often reductive, viewpoint.

This exploration will subsequently lead Daney to formulate a theory of the image as distinct from the visual – a plausible successor to the trademark image – during the Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s. According to Daney, there is a capital distinction to be made between the image and the visual, according to the presence – or lack thereof – of any form of *otherness* in what it is shown. Drawing from CNN's revolutionary live and continuous broadcast during the Gulf War in 1991, he frames the visual as 'the operation

[163] *Idem.*

in which one merely checks the proper functioning of a technological device',[164] opposing it to the exemplary image of the unknown rebel who faced the tanks during the Tiananmen Square massacre in June, 1989, since that specific picture depicts the confrontation of two forms of otherness[165] – two antagonistic forces coupled through the potential of the visual medium. This distinction represents a necessary development of the classification of the trademark image, since it also envisions a positive alternative, a way of overcoming the contradiction of an image which substitutes itself to anything else, thus creating a ceremonial version of the facts which excludes the acquisition, through dialectical methods, of critical knowledge.

On the other hand, advertising will also resurface in his writings from the late eighties, albeit not in the same detached-from-the-cinematic-realm form that he explored in 'On *Salador*'. More and more, he will attempt to uncover the growing part of advertising *within* the cinema, as he will forge a clear demarcation – and outright incompatibility – between the two[166]. Confronted with a form of melancholia, any sort of optimism as to the creative, even disruptive progressive potentialities of the trademark image will have disappeared by then.

More to the point of our own investigation, Daney discusses in the aforementioned article the role played by the image – understood as communication, as identity – within any political struggle, by placing himself on the people's side. Lucidly, he notes the ample contradiction which encircles any people's fight for emancipation as soon as it attempts to produce what he calls a 'good' image[167]. This intention is suspect from the outset for Daney. He argues that '[w]e know how a people that fights is forced to make an image of this fight, a *good* image. Each prolonged struggle makes a trademark image for itself, a flag, a symbol towards its own identity.'[168] This is an important point to consider[169], as it effectively seems

[164] Serge Daney, 'La guerre, le visuel, l'image' [The war, the visual, the image], *Trafic no.* 50, mai 2004, 439-445.
[165] Photograph by Jeff Widener for Associated Press, June 5, 1989.
[166] See, for example, his harsh criticism of Jean-Jacques Annaud's *L'Amant*: 'Falling Out of Love', trans. Steve Erickson, *Libération*, 31 March 1992, accessible in translation here: https://sergedaney.blogspot.com/2019/07/falling-out-of-love.html. Date accessed: 20. 09. 2025. In this article, Daney develops an illuminating – and highly sarcastic – analysis of how the options of mise en scène (specifically the close shot) of *L'Amant* conspire to present a shoe belonging to one character as *the* shoe, an advertisement for a brand of shoes, by borrowing from the usual promotional syntax of advertising and creating a break in the narrative. Date accessed: 16.06.2024.
[167] Daney, 'La re-mise en scène'.
[168] *Idem.*
[169] Another important aspect as far as the depiction of political struggles is concerned is represented by the insistence on the figure of the individual hero, as noted by Dork Zabunyan: 'Generally speaking, this is the

that revolutionary peoples are confronted with the aporia of manufacturing a self-image which goes beyond the limitations of the trademark image – in other terms, which defies the rigid rules of propaganda.[170] Unknowingly, Daney exposes in this passage the paradox that will confront Western observers during the events of December 1989 in Romania: the lack of credibility, for a Western gaze that is by now used to any tricks of the imagery, to believe in the *good* image that the Romanian people have forcibly manufactured from themselves. For a cinephile gaze, any departure from the quintessential rebellious nature of the image, as necessary and justified though it may be, will inevitably taste like treason. One should only consider the by-now famous strategies of Romanian Revolutionaries to operate a re-staging of their own image in the Romanian Television Studio 4. This moment of the intrusion of mise en scene (with its own rigours and unexpected self-awareness) within the frame of a purely documentary, unscripted situation, will be analysed by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică in their found-footage film *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). Yet such an occurrence is by no means singular in the broadcast of the Romanian events. This point will be further explained in subsequent chapters.

Trademark Images in the History of Media: A Series of Case Studies

In any case, this investigation of the *Cahiers du cinéma* film critics marks a preliminary endeavour within the realm of cinematic reflection to formulate a theory surrounding the visual output of the advertising industry, which only grew in the years since. This exploration extends both within its defined boundaries and beyond, providing a framework adaptable to various contexts. The intent to diversify its meanings is, as we have observed, apparent from the outset. The concept of a visual inscription, evolving over time through repeated usage to attain a status allowing it to represent more varied and contradictory meanings, resonates with the idea of the symbolic image, as Traverso, among others, would posit it in his inquiry on the transmission of revolutionary memory. Clément Chéroux delves into this process, examining how an image can ascend to the status of an

danger that awaits any representation of revolutionary commitment and its consequences: the act of limiting the memory of a struggle by summoning the figure of the hero, which has the effect of relieving the commitment of any genuine power – the power of being impersonal, and therefore elusive, without being reduced to the reassuring identification of a name that excludes all others.', in 'Arab Springs and Impersonal Images'.

[170] This, in itself, was also Susan Sontag's dilemma when travelling to Vietnam as a leftist American: how to accept the Vietnamese propaganda, as long as it was *justfied*? See 'A Trip to Hanoi', in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009 [1969]).

emblem for a specific topic, using the historical moment of the Holocaust as an illustrative example. Dealing with the topic of man-made atrocity, he contends that 'such images [which manage to achieve emblematic status within a given field of knowledge], when reduced to a kind of symbol of the absolute horror, were melted into an immense reservoir of the visual infamy, in which it was enough to dig in order to illustrate "the horror of camps" or "the barbarity of the Nazis.'[171] He then goes on to exemplify this tendency by evoking the amalgam operated by an edition of the newspaper *L'Humanité* dating from April 24, 1945, 'which presents on its front page an article on Birkenau illustrated by a photo of Bergen-Belsen with the legend *Ohrdruf* [the toponymic reference of another German settlement].'[172]

Chéroux aligns with a similar school of thought that perceives the trademark image not solely as an indicator of the depletion of meaningful content associated with a specific event but also, perhaps more disconcertingly, as a carrier of factual inaccuracies and disinformation. Investigating another symbolic photo of the Holocaust[173], he argues that 'the object that is documented by the picture is the very opposite of what is symbolised by it.'[174] It appears that the trademark image is also characterised by improper contextualisation and generic, widely applicable readings, which make it suited for appropriation and imprecise reproduction. Writing on Chéroux's larger understanding of the symbolic image, Keilbach and Wächter suggest that

> [p]hotographic records can turn into symbolic images if they are constantly reused. Chéroux describes this transformation as a loss of identifying features because mass reproduction causes the details of time, context, and actual motif to be less and less precise. Therefore, the pictures lose their content of information and become symbols of more generic abstractions, like 'evil' or 'the Holocaust.'[175]

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[171] Clément Chéroux (ed.), *Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazi* (1933-1999) (Paris: Marval, 2001), 15, quoted in Christian Delage, 'Mémoires des camps', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, No. 72, Numéro spécial: Image et histoire (Oct. - Dec., 2001), 143. My translation.

[172] *Idem.*

[173] A famous photograph taken by Sergeant Oakes of the Allied Forces after the liberation of the camp in Bergen Belsen, depicting their methods of gathering the dead bodies that still remained on the premises in order to bury them.

[174] Chéroux, *Mémoire des camps*, *op. cit*., 16, quoted in Judith Keilbach, Kirsten Wächter, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust: On the (IM)Possibility of Depicting Historical Truth', *History and Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Theme Issue 47: Historical Representation and Historical Truth (May, 2009), 70. The authors' translation from German.

[175] *Idem.*

Another consequence of the cultural prominence gained by the symbolic image is that it becomes easily identifiable and also one-sidedly 'legible': its meaning becomes confined to a single, dominant interpretation. The consequence is the transformation of the content of an image into a perfectly decipherable material[176], which also favours manipulation and mystification, as Keilbach and Wächter argue that,

> their permanent recurrence in different contexts and usages results in several meanings overlapping one another. Paradoxically, this leads to diminished referentiality of the photographs, as they are no longer perceived in the materiality of their depiction. Their transformation into symbolic images turns the photographs into objects suitable for popular and artistic processing because their high profile assures that they will be recognised when cited […].[177]

This immediate identification effect was also unfavourably referenced in the writings from the *Cahiers du cinéma* dossier, serving as a clear instance of forceful imposition of meaning from external pressures such as financiers, dominant classes, and the mainstream film industry. However, the primary difference between Chéroux's perspective and that of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics lies in their understanding of the implied temporality associated with the trademark/symbolic image. According to Chéroux, an image can only gradually attain the status of the symbolic, with its significance shaped by how people utilise it. In contrast, for the quoted film critics, the capacity of an image to function as a trademark – obscuring and adorning everything around it – is somewhat inherent, reliant on its basic properties, regardless of how frequently it is used or how popular it becomes. For them, a trademark image can manifest instantly, independent of any context other than the most immediate one, as the crucial judgment of its nature lies less in its lasting impact on the audience (consumer, moviegoer, or televisual spectator) and more in its relationship with the other images within the chain to which they all belong. Their interrogation encompasses both established items of cinephilia – such as the photo of Jane Fonda posing alongside Vietnamese citizens that Godard and Gorin have explored in their 1972 medium-length film *Letter to Jane*, in which a certain image becomes the synecdoche of colonialism – and cultural objects which cannot pretend to the same legitimate status. Such is the case, for example, of an advertisement for the French cooking

[176] For a refutation of the conception of the image as a decypherable unit, a legible unit, see Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Specator* (London: Verso, 2009), and Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge [Mass.]: Polity, 2016).
[177] *Idem.*

oil *Salador*, which was the pretext for Daney's already mentioned important theoretical contribution titled 'Sur *Salador*' and subtitled 'Cinéma et Publicité'.[178]

For the purposes of this examination, we find it essential to consider and retain both dimensions, as they play a critical role in evaluating the role of the memorable sequences within the broader framework of the Romanian Revolution – precisely those visual signs which have become synonyms to the revolution itself, seemingly containing its entire meaning. Thus, our interest leans, in the first place, towards the temporal dimension of the trademark image – how an image, essentially similar to any other in its ontological qualities, becomes inflated over time through abusive usage until it manages to replace, on its own, a whole array of other similar images. But this implies a deeper investigation into the mass of images of the Romanian events, since we are interested in the 'spatial' dimension of the trademark as well – and particularly how these images, within the context of televised broadcasts, differentiate themselves from other material that deviates from expected norms. We have already noted how, in this context, we prefer the term 'trademark image' over 'symbolic image' as it implies an indeterminate quality, akin to a play on words, referencing the risk of commodification inherent in this kind of iconicity. This is due not only to the polysemy of the term 'trademark', but also to the relation, the position that is established for it. Specifically, it highlights the impossibility of deciding between an image of a certain trademark (the 'theatre of war', the 'civil conflict') and an image that, in itself, becomes a trademark. Here, the term 'image' encompasses two distinct but interconnected directions: as a visual singular element understood in its literal sense (an image from a sequence, for example) and as representation (the image of the revolution in media).

Dealing with a similar concern, Chéroux advances the term 'icon' in order to describe and analyse the uniformity of the media landscape that covered the 9/11 moment worldwide, leading to both an impoverishment of visual traces of the moment, a strategic curation of photographs to be used by the general press, and the subsequent imposition of a certain imagery in relation to such a violent event[179]. Chéroux proposes the notion of 'diplopic syndrome' in order to ascribe the process of repetition, redundancy, and saturation that led to the transformation of the media coverage into a machine of reproduction. By

[178] Serge Daney, 'Sur *Salador*', *Cahiers du cinema*, no. 222 (July 1970), 39-43. Accessible in its English translation here: https://sergedaney.blogspot.com/2019/06/on-salador.html.
[179] See Clément Chéroux, *Diplopie. L'image photographique à l'ère des médias globalisés : Essai sur le 11 septembre 2001* (Paris: Le Point du jour, 2009).

isolating, via quantitative research, six recurrent visual categories ('the explosion, the cloud, the ruin, the plane, the panic, the flag'[180]), Chéroux aims to delineate a paradox which is highly resonant for our own investigation: that of a historical event marked by hypervisibility – resulting in an abundant production of visual representations – which, at the same time, translates medially into a severe lack of variety. The quantitative analysis also constitutes the pretext for an important historical foray: indeed, as Chéroux highlights, the 9/11 event led to what he terms 'inter-iconicity', a rhetorical procedure in which icons of the past were deliberately or even unconsciously replicated by present-day coverage. This, according to the author, is especially true for the photographs depicting the ground scenes of the catastrophe, which resemble a specific historical moment, that of Pearl Harbour. As such, 9/11 was immediately inscribed into a narrative of social cohesion and national supremacy, while also being certified as a significant historical moment by its constructed relation to similar occurrences of the past: as the famous photograph of the three firemen installing the American flag among the rubble became one of the icons of the 9/11 sequence, it could only evoke the famous war photograph of Iwo Jima. Chéroux traces the history of this iconic photograph that quickly came to symbolise American resilience and patriotism in the face of adversity, acting as a community force during the Second World War, and thus unravels its multiple layers, revealing, behind its surface, a clear marketing operation, with the photograph becoming the fruit of a carefully conducted operation of mise en scène.

It is remarkable that Peter Geimer's study of the techniques and procedures that ensure the act of conveying realism in painting, photography, and cinema also deals with the Iwo Jima iconography at large. Geimer also employs the term 'icon' to describe 'these images with a strong impactful power, without [however] taking into account the religious origin and stake of this formula.'[181] The reasons for the rapid accession of this image to iconic status are to be found, according to Geimer, in the fact that 'no useless iconographic detail comes to disturb our attention from the soldiers' choreography, which condenses and reduces the message of the photograph to an easily graspable formula'[182], while also adding the absence of distinguishable facial traits as a supplementary incentive to universal

[180] '"Diplopie", de Clément Chéroux', in *Le Monde*, October 15th, 2009, accessible: https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2009/10/15/diplopie-de-clement-cheroux_1254140_3260.html. Date accessed: 13. 07. 2025.
[181] Peter Geimer, *Les Couleurs du passé*, trans. Jean Torrent (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2023), 138.
[182] *Ibid.*, 139.

identification. Hence, Geimer reproduces the reasoning of the *Cahiers du cinéma* film critics, building his postulate of iconicity on the correlative procedures of simplification and universalisation. He critically assesses the evocative power of such images by resorting to Roland Barthes's notion of the 'overconstructed image' – an image that is too neat to produce any 'effect' on the spectator, with the interest 'that we experience for them not surpass[ing] the interval of an instantaneous reading; it does not resonate, it does not trouble, our welcome is closed too early on a pure sign'.[183] The reversal of the interpretation by way of a paradox is here apparent. The shocking photo, as Barthes named it, misses its target precisely because it is over-constructed, leaving nothing to the unpredictable, closing all free interpretations and controlling the meaning by absolute force. While specifically meant to impress the viewer, such photographs refuse any sign of 'ambiguity, [of] the delay of depth'[184], achieving a demonstrative function that creates a barrier. Barthes's hypothesis is significant beyond the consubstantial debate of the trademark image, the icon, the pure sign. By alluding to what, in any photograph, is meant to fascinate the gaze, he opens an alternative trajectory for the medium, one that might actually indicate the specificity of photography as a site for contingence and inscription of reality[185].

Photography as a Site for Transience and Ambiguity

In the concluding remarks to his *Short History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin notes:

> The camera becomes smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture transitory and secret pictures which are able to shock the associative mechanism of the observer to a standstill. At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literarises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate. Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been compared with those of a scene of action. But is not every corner of our cities a scene of action?[186]

This is not just a technological prophecy that evidently proved true, but also an important concise reflection on the capacity of the photographic camera to capture the

[183] Roland Barthes, 'Photos-chocs', in *Mythologies* (Paris: Points, 2014 [1957]), 99, quoted in Geimer, *ibid*., 140.
[184] *Ibid*., 141.
[185] This particular point will be studied in the next chapter.
[186] Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography' (1931), trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13 (Spring 1972), 26. A newer translation, by Esther Leslie, prefers the term 'crime scene' instead of 'scene of action'. See Walter Benjamin, *On Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).

'transitory' and the 'secret' pictures (a newer translation opts for the terms 'fleeting and surreptitious') – understood here as an intrinsic property of the medium. Benjamin's own sentiments towards this evolution are rather ambivalent: he notes that this future proliferation of images which will organically deal with ever harder to grasp realities will have to be accompanied by 'captions' so that their meaning remains intelligible, and not 'stuck in the approximate' ('stalled in vagueness', per the newer translation). 'Approximate', 'vague' – it is almost impossible to indicate a possible connotation for these terms according to Benjamin. While a nostalgic reading may point out a feeling of loss as compared to the first visual documents – and their almost immediately legible message –, it is important to note how, elsewhere in his essay, Benjamin also alludes to the inherent possibility of photography to become the site of the fixation of reality, with this possibility being so strong and intimate that it even overcomes the intentions of the photograph:

> However skilful the photographer, however carefully he (sic) poses his model, the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it.[187]

In other words, Benjamin contends that there is always a residue, within each photography, that defies the 'careful pose', as well as all the precautions that have been taken in ensuring an adequate, contained photographic *dispositif*. Photography thus becomes a site for transience: a door opens through which, according to Benjamin, it becomes possible for this absolutely controlled trace of the past to communicate with the future, to be transitive. One is left to wonder, then, whether this 'tiny spark of chance' that represents the passage of 'reality' through the picture, and its slight alteration precisely due to that passage, is not indeed a constitutive property of the photographic process at large. Multiple theoretical contributions on this matter allow us to argue in favour of this hypothesis.

André Bazin was arguably the most ardent defender of the photographic capacity to inscribe the autonomous, unscripted flow of the world even in the most carefully composed artistic processes[188]. In one of his most famous articles, 'The Evolution of the Language of

[187] Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography' (1931), trans. Stanley Mitchell, Screen 13 (Spring 1972), 7.
[188] A detailed analysis of Bazin's ontological conception of photography will be provided in the following chapter.

Cinema', Bazin proceeded to a prescriptive conception on cinema, favouring directors who minimised the rhetorical contribution of 'the expressionistic procedures of montage' in their attempts at conveying cinematographic meaning. He argued that in such films, 'reality lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of the police.'[189] Clearly Bazin favoured indeterminacy, a trait that he perceived as inherent to the cinematographic apparatus. He championed a cinematic direction – culminating with the Italian neo-realist films – that refrained from imposing a univocal interpretation to the viewer, thus reducing the sensible richness of the image to a clear-cut message. From this argument, depth of focus – as exemplified by films directed by Orson Welles or William Wyler – emerged as a potential element of filmic syntax capable of restoring this indeterminacy – Bazin uses the term 'ambiguity' –, of the spectator being 'called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice.'[190] As Andrei Gorzo noted, 'analytical montage not only encourages in the spectator a passive mental attitude (they only have to follow the guide [of the mise en scene]); it also tends to "destroy the inherent ambiguity of any reality".'[191] The French author would find in neo-realism a summation of his own perceptual understanding of cinema[192], which is based on the *intrinsic* dual property of capturing a transparent reality that is already existent and of encouraging a phenomenological perception of that reality, of constructing a way of inhabiting that complex reality that allows for 'a minimum of personal choice'. Tracing Bazin's conception of realism and the inherent ambiguity presented in the cinematographic medium, Gorzo presented a normative – and very thorough – understanding of filmic realism that transformed the accumulation of ingredients (depth of focus, lack of editing, long takes) into a technical formula – a list of prerequisites – allowing for the manifestation of realism.

Siegfried Kracauer is also commonly understood as a proponent of a realist theory on cinema in his famous work *Theory of Film*, which carries the subtitle *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. This, as Miriam Hansen has shown by studying the multiple drafts and sketches that Kracauer prepared for his book over a period of two decades and through a

[189] André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 27.
[190] *Ibid*., 36.
[191] Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012), 27.
[192] Bazin would argue, on the subject of Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1945): 'Events are not, in themselves, signs of something, of a truth that the directors would try to convince us of, but they preserve their own full weight, their own singularity, their own ambiguity of facts.', quoted in Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel*, *op. cit.*, 179.

constant process of rewriting[193], is based on a limited engagement with this philosophical work. In his preface, Kracauer does write that '[f]ilms come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality'[194] – without adequately theorising the volatile notion of 'reality'[195] –, also adding:

> If film is a photographic medium, it must gravitate toward the expanses of outer reality—an open-ended, limitless world which bears little resemblance to the finite and ordered cosmos set by tragedy. Unlike this cosmos, where destiny defeats chance and all the light falls on human interaction, the world of film is a flow of random events involving both humans and inanimate objects. Nor can the tragic be evoked by images of that flow; it is an exclusively mental experience which has no correspondences in camera-reality. . . .[196]

Although such a radical opposition between 'tragedy' – with its inclination towards closure and control – and the historical trajectory of cinema as an open-ended medium concerned with transience and the hardly graspable facts of life seems simplistic in retrospect, it does posit a continuity in Kracauer's thinking on the materiality that is accessible through the mechanical means of inscription. In his earlier essay 'Photography', Kracauer contended that, beyond any fixed meaning that the neutral photographic image may try to impose, beyond even the affect that hits the viewer when looking at what he terms the 'memory-image' – that is, the intimate, deeply charged image of a relative –, there will be a surplus of meaning that cannot be adequately assessed: 'Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage'[197]. In other words, photography includes a part of excess, unlike the 'memory-image' which only treats the essential, precisely that which can be transformed into meaning. Commenting on the transition – usually perceived as degrading – between traces and garbage, Aleida Assmann considers that 'thanks to their "devotion for the insignificant", garbage is transformed, for the historian of culture…into information.'[198] In the case of our investigation, 'garbage' thus becomes a useful notion for investigating discarded histories

[193] Miriam Hansen, '"With Skin and Hair": Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), 437-469.
[194] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Preface', in *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), ix.
[195] Miriam Hansen has shown, in her investigation, that Kracauer had departed originally from a material understanding of the filmic inscription, eventually resorting to the less conceptualised notion of reality.
[196] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 'Preface', x.
[197] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), 426. A more in-depth analysis of Kracauer's photographic discussion, with an accent of the relation between photography and history via the process of detachment of significant instances can be found in Peter Geimer, 'La photographie comme inventaire general', in *Les Couleurs du passé, op. cit.*, 130-135.
[198] Quoted in Peter Geimer, *ibid.*, 137.

present in the images of the revolution, as well as structural aspects which no longer present immediate appeal – thus revalorising an entire subaltern thread of visual production.

The question of the 'utility' (or lack thereof) of what can be found within the resulted product traverses the theoretical debate on the means to achieve realism in man-made works. Roland Barthes, for instance, proves to be particularly insightful were we to consider his larger intellectual trajectory. Although his last work may be considered as an evocative and emotional investment on the terrain of affectively-charged photography – the trace, in this sense, becomes not only a theoretical property of the artefact, but a sign of life (and passing), a form of ultimate certainty –, earlier writings point to a much more sceptical engagement with what is commonly understood as reality and its transposition into works of art. Dealing with writings by Flaubert and Michelet, he writes, in a well-known essay from 1968 – ten years before *Camera lucida*, which will be briefly explored in the following chapter – that notations regarding the detailed surroundings where the action takes place 'are scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disconcerting, they seem to be offered to a sort of narration *luxury*, so prodigal as to give away "useless" details and to raise in certain places the cost of narrative information.'[199] Such a remark is significant because it posits resemblance, if not realism – one of the key concepts in the indexical photographic theory –, as a calculated operation rather than an organic given. In other words, indeed, an effect, a technical trick which can be achieved according to a specific formula. Barthes's text, to be sure, does not concern only literary works: in his study of *l'effet de réel*, Peter Geimer transposes the observation that '[a]dditioning useless details produces an *effet de réel*, or what we could call a "referential illusion"'[200] to historical realist painting, photography, and even cinema[201]. Although this discussion may seem only parallel to our historical survey, it actually demonstrates the possibility of quick manipulation in art that wishes to pass as easily recognisable realist pattern – an *ersatz* of the real. But it also clarifies Barthes's preference for photography since, as we have already explored previously, according to theorists like Bazin or Kracauer, photography and cinema facilitate the inherent accumulation of such 'useless details' by the sheer properties of the medium. In other words, while Barthes seemed to

[199] Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', quoted in Peter Geimer, *Les couleurs du passé*, *op. cit.*, 50.
[200] *Ibid*., 53.
[201] This principle also resonates in Philostratus' ancestrary conception on a primitive version of the technique of *trompe l'oeil*, as quoted by Dubois: 'Faithful to the truth, painting shows us a drop of dew suspended from a petal: a bee sits on the flower; I would not be able to say whether it is fooled by the painting or it is us who are fooled by believing that it really exists', in Dubois, *La question vidéo*, *op. cit.*, 30.

struggle with the entirely fabricated effect of real in a medium such as literature, photography encourages it by its sheer mechanical, automatic inscription.

This allows us to develop our final considerations on the nature of the photographic privilege of the indeterminate, insignificant detail by relating to a larger – indeed, as long as the history of cinema – debate which has ignited, according to commentators, already by the time the Lumière short film *Repas de bébé* was projected for the first time. The history is well-known: for a part of the audience, rather than focusing on what was being depicted centre stage – the eponymous action of a baby being fed by the parents –, what proved to be of interest was the background showing the leaves of the trees dangling in the wind. François Albéra has approached this illuminating ontological controversy to a debate between the panes of the image, while also linking this popular amazement to the capacity of cinema to figurate movement.[202] This is undoubtedly correct, yet fails to account for a parallel debate that is illustrated by the case study, precisely that between what seems central, meaningful, action-driven, causal – and what, on the contrary, is transient, meaningless, neglected, full of hidden potentialities. We argue that, much like trademark images help to monopolise attention and obscure potential subterranean, less iconic moments, so this debate underscores a constitutive tension in cinema between the presence of the contingent and the controlled *dispositif* of the mise en scene.

By aligning our considerations with the curiosity and attention of film critics from the seventies, who, faced with the diminishing political ideals, critically engaged their theoretical apparatus to assess foreign objects, we acknowledge the same legacy that, in less than 15 years, would significantly expand the domain of the visible and challenge preconceived notions in media history. The trademark image, functioning as a micro-unit that presents a cohesive, unitary meaning and attempts to embody and sell it by eliminating any form of contradiction, will stand as a major impediment against plurality. We understand the trademark image as an audiovisual sample which both conforms to hegemonic, preconceived, or generally accepted impressions, theories, and interpretations of a given historical event – in our case, the uprising of the Romanian people –, and acquires a summative, emblematic, even definitive function within the corpus of images that constitute, or allude to, the event in question. However, as we will see, its dominant position will ultimately – by way of meticulous analysis and research – be overcome by the

[202] François Albéra, 'Le Cinématographe dans le mouvement : Une métaphysique des feuilles', in *1895*, no. 87 (2019), 34-63.

heterogeneous, unpredictable, and challenging images of the event under scrutiny, in our case, the Romanian Revolution.

The theoretical examination of the trademark image is not at all unrelated, even in its original context, to the question of television. As Pierre Eugène states, '[French] television, still under the state's supervision [at the moment of the *Cahiers du cinéma* dossier] … is, in almost its entirety, the instance of creation and mediatisation of the trademark images, and especially those of the political power.'[203] As subsequent chapters aim to demonstrate, it is necessary to test the limits of this recurrent condescending view on television, to expand the critical apparatus that recognises a creative possibility for the televisual medium, in order to reveal its hidden capacity to produce something else than mere trademark images that will be used forever and ever, becoming more abstracted, more severed from their original context with every new iteration.

Conclusion

This chapter has been constructed along two main axes. On the one hand, an effort was made to highlight a recurring pattern of most available critical definitions of the concept of revolution, specifically an accumulative procedure involving 'key' moments that ultimately characterise the quick formation and enduring posterity of the mental image of such an event in public consciousness. It could be easily ascertained that the Romanian events have duly conformed to such imagery – so duly that a legitimate question arose, on whether the resulting images of bloodshed and intense armed confrontations were the transparent secretion of the facts themselves, or rather the visual component was so reminiscent of a certain kind of imagery associated with revolutionary contexts, that it automatically imposed a certain preconceived interpretation of the facts. This question cannot be addressed in the corpus of our dissertation, which is not historical, but belongs to a visual studies perspective. In any case, attempting to answer it involves the investigation of a parallel, very abundant thread of secondary literature that was influenced by the revolutionary events.

However, the question needs not only to be asked, but also to be critically engaged with on the terrain of media studies. Because it implies that the images, immaterial as they

[203] Pierre Eugène, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

are, hold a certain power to materially shape the historical events themselves[204]. In order to provide an adequate framework for addressing such images, we have advanced – in the second axis of our argument – the notion of 'trademark'. This notion carries an important historical value associated with debates that sought, throughout the 1970s, to envision a post-classical cinephile approach to what we may now legitimately call 'new media'. Its main source was, naturally, advertising, yet its applicability largely surpasses this constricted field: this is testament both to the all-pervasiveness of advertising language in our visual culture, and – more crucially – to the ambivalent power, both critical (towards a fetishist cinephile approach) and submissive (towards the 'marketing' pressures of the acquisition and maintaining of visibility by the images), that lies in the concept of the trademark.

The trademark image was deemed to best encapsulate the contemporary reality of the fading acuity of the Romanian revolution, of its fixation exclusively through several consensual and highly representative sequences. Following Pierre Nora's noteworthy argument, we could also contend that this debate concerns the tension between 'history' and 'memory'[205] and their mutual influence. This being said, we tend to differ from Nora's enthusiastic endorsement of memory as an 'affective and magical' rapport to the past, and its severe assessment of history. We consider that, precisely because memory, according to Nora, 'only accommodates those facts that suit it'[206], the transformation of the revolution into an affective site that generates an emotional response and even a personal involvement has also led to its over-reliance on trademark images. That is also because the voices of the participants themselves, which have been the subject of several works of archiving in the early 1990s, have since then been coagulated into a single, uniform version that tends to occlude any sort of specificity. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed contends elsewhere, we may conceive of the memorial version of the Romanian Revolution in terms of stickiness: according to her, 'signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that 'use' *becomes* intrinsic; it becomes a form of signing[207].' Stickiness, in itself, is not to be understood pejoratively – much like the trademark does not

[204] On the particular topic of the Romanian revolutionary events, see Andrei Gorzo, *Videograme dintr-o revolutie. Un studiu critic* (Bucharest: Editura LiterNet & Societatea Culturala NexT, 2016). On the topic of revolutions in general, see Dork Zabunyan, *L'insistance des luttes*, *op. cit.*

[205] See Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 7-24.

[206] *Ibid.*, 8.

[207] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 91.

necessarily imply hegemony, but rather is an indication of the present times. Yet the domination that sticky words and trademark images enjoy within discourses calls for their re-evaluation and ceaseless questioning.

What, then, is the opposite of memory? 'History', argues Nora, 'is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer'; 'because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism.'[208] Indeed: although Nora perceives these traits as purely negative, as a departure from the community ties, we argue that history allows for positive action. By exploring and uncovering trademark images, we aim precisely to restore hidden meanings and forgotten instances of the Revolution, to revitalise the significance of the event, to prepare it again for a rite of transmission to future generations. This chapter sought to achieve this task by also including a brief discussion on the intrinsic photographic properties that, according to some theorists, favour ambiguity and contingence. Our optics, then, is both retrospective and prospective: we argue that a more inclusive approach towards visual culture in general can generate new hypotheses and enrich previous interpretations with relevant critical knowledge.

[208] *Idem.*

Chapter 3. A Genealogy of the Image-as-Proof Notion

The portrayal of the Romanian Revolution on television marked a global turning point, not just in media history but also in the broader context of visual storytelling. This aspect warrants a thorough investigation. Aligning the theoretical perspectives developed after the event with a wider view of how information was relayed to the people throughout the revolutionary course is indeed a crucial aspect of our analysis. This approach will help clarify the significance of relying on audiovisual elements during the revolution to validate its outcome. In fact, it is important to address here the insistent reliance on moving images not only as a means to relay information, but also as a preferred – albeit unconscious at least in part – method to instil authenticity in the facts of the revolution, thus aiming to their certification beyond doubt. We argue in this chapter that in the initial, most energetic and contested days of the revolution, the televisual broadcast became a key element in the course of the events, with its footage transformed into a guarantee of truth in a much more significant manner than the case of the written press, for example. This will lead us to examine a long-lasting, if not prevalent, theoretical tradition in the Western world which develops a direct correlation between the image, be it moving or still – understood as mechanical inscription of reality without the help of a human agent –, and the aspect(s) it depicts. Indeed, a common jurisprudence established in the early years of the democratisation of the still photographic image highlighted 'as self-evident the necessary concordance between this image and its object, thus confirming the current conception: the photography finds in the automatic exactitude a quasi-absolute force of *proving* [probation].'[209]

This chapter thus aims to inscribe the sudden emergence and prevalence of audiovisual coverage during the Romanian Revolution in a larger conceptual discussion dealing with the capacity of photography and cinema – approached here as theoretical precursors and comparative frameworks, rather than as co-equal media objects of analysis – to objectively, even ontologically inscribe a given reality that once stood in front of the

[209] Christian Phéline, 'L'image accusatrice', *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, No. 17, 1985, 80, quoted in Christian Delage, *Filmer, juger. De la Seconde Guerre mondiale à l'invasion de l'Ukraine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2023), 29. Emphasis in the original.

camera. In this way, we argue for the conceptualisation of the revolution as a historical event that enforced, then infringed the limits of the credibility of the image, thus generating – as we will see from the controversies which will be analysed in a subsequent chapter – a more complex regime of visibility for the televisual screen. The hypothesis that will be followed here is that – either from lack of experience or out of excessive confidence – images were trusted to ascertain the truth of the revolution without means of precaution as to their potential rhetorical gaffes, simplistically conceived as they were as transparent purveyors of information. In other words, images found themselves instantly legitimised through condescending and naive misconceptions as docile carriers of factuality. Given this line of thought, it is precisely this over-reliance on the understanding of the image as automatic evidence of the revolutionary course of events that contributed both to its rhetorical journalistic excess (examined in chapter 2 through the framework of the trademark image), and to its subsequent disqualification as credible source of information (examined in this chapter through the heavily relayed information of the mass graves in Timisoara, ultimately revealed to be proto-fake news). Inscribing the television broadcast of the revolution within this conceptual debate will allow us, by means of a series of case studies, to investigate historical occurrences which led to a temporary consensus as to the intrinsic realist capacity – indeed, identity – of the photographic image, as it was shaped by the cultural history of the medium.

We are nowadays faced with the reality of successive waves of democratisation of the electronic image – both as consumers and producers of content – via the Internet (something that came to be generally known as 'new media'[210]) and, even more radically, of the generative artificial intelligence technologies, both of which have dealt a decisive blow in recent years to the pre-eminence of this evidential paradigm[211]. Conducted from

[210] On the emergence and conceptual classification of new media, Lev Manovich's seminal account *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press/Leonardo Books, 2002) proves particularly valuable. In his attempt to trace the origin of new media in older, even primitive technological forms that actually embody, if not predate, the cinematographic medium, he states: 'the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to nineteenth century pre-cinematic practices, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated. At the turn of the twentieth century, cinema was to delegate these manual techniques to animation and define itself as a recording medium. As cinema enters the digital age, these techniques are again becoming the commonplace in the filmmaking process.' With regard to the loss of ontological indexicality that this technological transformation entails, he goes on to argue, '[c]onsequently, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a sub-genre of painting', in *The Language of New Media*, *op. cit.*, 250.

[211] By 'evidential paradigm' we are intentionally alluding to Carlo Ginzburg's renowned *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (London: Radius Books, 1990), in which he advanced a new epistemological model for the study of history based on Morelli's findings and hypotheses. As it will become clear throughout this chapter, though, the aim of our discussion is somewhat more restrained, if connected: it also revolves around the notion of

such a contemporary vantage point, this analysis will aim to highlight a nowadays minority, even anachronistic tradition, ultimately leading us, in concluding this dissertation, to ponder its relevance for present theoretical discussions of the visual culture. However, before reaching that point, this chapter will focus extensively on this neglected and even ridiculed attitude given its 'grandfatherly' tone (per Miriam Hansen), its pretention of outdated normativity – judging by today's standards of media literacy. Broadly speaking, this attitude consists of entrusting the image with the status of proof. We will aim to trace the complicated genealogy of this intellectual tradition, going so far as to isolate it from its natural and indeed omnipresent correlative, that of distrust and scepticism towards the authenticity of the image, while always keeping in mind the simple lesson that 'false and falsehood could not prosper elsewhere than on the terrain of authenticity and its problematics'[212]. In doing so, we hope to retrieve the dialectical richness of such a theoretical paradigm which has massively influenced the thinking about, and understanding of, mechanically produced visuality since the first photographic attempts of Nicéphore Niepce in the 1820s and the daguerreotypes of Louis Daguerre several years later, and which, we argue, was still operational in the Romanian context of the 1989 revolution.

Of course, one must always stay vigilant and ensure proper historicising – as the fundamental indexicality of the image could not mean the exact same thing at the beginning of a new medium and at the end of the 1980s, at a time when photography, cinema, television, and video practices were already highly established. Yet going beyond a linear history of media seems in this case particularly pertinent for several reasons: on the one hand, the apparently virginal mass-media landscape in Romania at the time of the revolution (we use the term 'apparently' since, as chapter 4 will hopefully amply demonstrate, the Romanian Television was not simply an inert institution devoid of any artistic or social ambition) accounts for a general thirst for information and content; on the other hand, the harsh repression and deprivation of basic human rights that the Ceaușescu regime coordinated resulted, in turn, into an excessive and brutal transition to a form of nascent democracy which overlooked media protocols and precautions altogether, a desperation of overruling the communist regime at any cost. It is, then, important to both situate the analysed writings in their own immediate context (one made of constricted

trace, yet it seeks to analyse it only with regard to how it is actualised by the audiovisual medium. We could however argue that the '*indice*' – a French term that usefully connotes two consubstantial meanings, both index and clue – is the notion that illuminates both inquiries.

[212] Hans Belting, *La vraie image* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 92.

paradigms, conjunctures, material factors) and in a tense relation to present-day theories. Furthermore, by tracing a transversal lineage of thinking and placing it into historical perspective, we attempt to bridge the gap separating the field of media history and that of media archaeology. In other words, we posit that, within the series of ruptures and discontinuities that compose the history of media, there exists a 'vast [common] genealogy', a recurrent urge throughout history to assimilate the visual component to a form of evidence. This led us to believe that, paraphrasing Antonio Somaini, a potential answer – certainly not the only one – as to why images become the *locus* of incessant debates during the Romanian Revolution needs to be 'based on an "archaeological" understanding of culture as the coexistence of various different historical "layers".'[213] Although at first sight explaining a very particular context – the case of communist Romania – through recourses to a large, overarching, transnational time span may seem counter-intuitive, our contention is that such speculative observations which adhere to contemporary fields of audiovisual inquiry and link peripheral case studies to a broader conversation while also avoiding linear, teleological readings, can generate critical knowledge.

André Bazin's Ontological Argument: 1. The Mechanical Component

We can assert that, within the realm of reflections on photography, André Bazin's writings were among the first to fully articulate – and from there, to champion – the implication of its mechanical nature in a coherent manner. He understood photography-as-a-medium through a markedly teleological lens, arguing for its inherent ontological superiority on painting as a progressive means that was capable of bringing the arts closer to the ideal of transparent realism[214]. It is important to note that Bazin wrote in a context

[213] Antonio Somaini, 'Cinema as "Dynamic Mummification," History as Montage: Eisenstein's Media Archaeology', in Naum Kleiman, Antonio Somaini (eds.), Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, 27.

[214] It should be noted that, for all the visionary and pioneering statements that constitute Bazin's philosophy, his concept of the 'myth of total cinema' inadvertently came to enjoy a mitigated posterity. In the eponymous article, Bazin would crystallise his teleological conception of the medium, rhapsodically conceiving of its future apex as a stage when cinema – and mise en scene – become superfluous, as the reality itself is allowed to be 'cinefied' through technical progress. See André Bazin, 'The Myth of Total Cinema', in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray, 2 Volumes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23-40. Such a conception would be misappropriated by the audiovisual industry and transformed, with each new technological advancement, into what Philippe Dubois terms 'the newness as an effect of discourse', that is, according to him, a complete ignorant reversal of Bazin's theories, a marketing argument, a promotional strategy: 'Amnesiac, the newness discourse completely occults everything that can be regressive in terms of representation (occultation of the aesthetic in favour of the technological), or it represses the eminently traditional character of certain big questions that were asked since the beginning, for example the question of

where photography had not yet been institutionalised as a formal subject of study. Consequently, his intention was not to generate a comprehensive and systematic body of theoretical knowledge on the subject. Instead, he was using the format of the critical essay as a work-in-progress theoretical elaboration, an incessantly developing laboratory keen on incorporating his personal canon of film directors – his favoured tastes – into a specific, unitary intellectual and technical tradition[215]. His theory on the fundamental qualities of the photographic image can thus be seen as an attempt to forge an encapsulating concept, a common technical denominator from which to develop a thought on a specific cinematic sensibility, while also countering a certain modernist tradition that was aiming to uncover the specificities of the cinematographic art in opposition with other means of expression. Advancing a particular technological determinism – every new technical progress (sound, colour, large screen format, etc.) would bring the moving image closer to its true nature –, Bazin inversed the question of specificity on its head. He specifically opted to deem as worthy of attention – indeed, as conforming to the inherent historic trajectory of the cinematographic *dispositif* – precisely those artistic traditions (with the notable exception of Orson Welles) that explored expressive avenues opposed to the avant-garde movements[216]. These avenues privileged a reduction of montage emphasis, a recurrent use of the sequence shot coupled with depth of field, and an overarching cinematographic 'impurity' which adhered to the above-mentioned formal-prerequisites[217].

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the real (and of realism), or that of analogy (mimicry) [mimétisme] or that of the matter (materialism)', in *La Question video*, 55. A similar contention is made, albeit from the ontological ground previously invested by Bazin himself, by Lev Manovich, who also points to a radical reversal brought about by new media: '"Realism" is the concept which inevitably accompanies the development and assimilation of 3D computer graphics. In media, trade publications and research papers, the history of technological innovation and research is presented as a progression toward realism – the ability to simulate any object in such a way that its computer image is indistinguishable from a photograph. At the same time, it is constantly pointed out that this realism is qualitatively different from the realism of optically based image technologies (photography, film), for the simulated reality is not indexically related to the existing world.', in *The Language of New Media*, *op. cit.*, 168.

[215] A common critique that was voiced especially in the politicised, theory-heavy context of the revisionist 1970s is that Bazin's idealist conception of the cinematograph may have overestimated the medium's realist essence, or indeed he may have deliberately neglected, if not entirely debased, filmmakers belonging to different, less 'transparent' artistic traditions, ranging from German expressionism to the Soviet school of montage or the avant-garde practices in general.

[216] For a critical assessment of Bazin's limited understanding and discussion of the avant-garde – and, more generally, of the *Cahiers du cinéma* line that he actively influenced –, see Erik Bullot, *Sortir du cinéma – Histoire virtuelle des relations de l'art et du cinéma* (Geneva: MAMCO, 2013), especially his chapter 'Défense de l'avant-garde', 77-110.

[217] We must however be very careful not to commit an oversimplification for the sake of coherence. Indeed, Bazin was noted to be ecumenical and fair in his appreciations and critical assessments, and the entirety of his written articles – which evidently exclude his multiple endeavours in the area of cine-clubs, mediation, oral pedagogy, etc. – reveal a vast panoply of interests which go beyond the already established posterity of the *What Is Cinema?* collections. These articles can be found in Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (ed.), André Bazin,

Bazin's argumentation is vital because it crystallises this intellectual tradition with unprecedented coherence. His theoretical approach followed multiple threads. On the one hand, it focused on the potential of photography – which Bazin considered, as we saw, highly positive – to evacuate any kind of subjectivity from representation, thus achieving a superior capacity to 'lay bare the realities':

> The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the [existing] realities [sic]. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflexion on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, are able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.[218]

The idea of the 'impassive lens', contrasting with the highly active paintbrush which is controlled and dependent on the painter's human action, is one of the major achievements of photography according to Bazin: it allows for a more faithful relation with reality, a more direct access to its core, one which is inaccessible to painting, 'an inferior way of making likenesses, an *ersatz* of the processes of reproduction.'[219] As the film critic writes in another passage, 'for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time, in other words, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man' who takes part in the 'proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind'.[220] In this sense, although between the human agent and the 'model' there now seems to be an additional element – the mechanical instrument –, for Bazin this should instead be read as the abolition of any form of subjective, personal, fallible mediation. The argument, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, the mechanical apparatus of photography – which anticipates the cinematographic *dispositif* – allows for a transparent inscription of reality on the physical support by virtue of technical and chemical properties. On the other hand – and these two stages are deeply connected –, it allows for the dispensation, indeed the overcoming of the human factor which, according

Écrits complets (Paris: Macula, 2018). For an effusive portrait of Bazin, see François Truffaut, 'Il faisait bon vivre', in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 91 (January, 1959), 25-27. For a discussion of Joubert-Laurencin's concept of 'Bazinisme' as sum of clichés on André Bazin's thinking, see *infra*.

[218] André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', translation by Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960): 7.

[219] *Idem*, also quoted in Judith Keilbach, Kirsten Wächter, *art. cit.*, 55.

[220] Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', 13.

to Bazin, was more of an obstacle, a mere transitory phase, on the global artistic arch towards full automation, a moment in which the world and the art depicting it would end up coinciding.

Accustomed to these properties which have become fully accepted since Bazin had started its process of rehabilitation, we should not fail to emphasise how idiosyncratic and even radical this view was when placed in its context. Here, Bazin attached himself to a vast intellectual humanist tradition which considered the human element in relation to the fact of gaining knowledge through the act of observing the nature – except that it inverted its initial postulate, thus advancing what was in 1946 a paradoxical view on the relation between humans and mechanical procedures[221]. As Mark J. P. Wolf points out,

> [t]he notion that observation could be performed through the mediation of instruments did not find immediate acceptance; Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, deprecated the microscope, the use of which he did not consider to be direct observation. In *Instrumental Realism*, Don Ihde writes that seventeenth-century Aristotelians objected to Galileo's telescope, and Xavier Bichat, the founder of histology [...], distrusted microscopes and would not allow them into his lab.[222]

Of course, this is especially applicable in the case of artistic practices, where accounts which denounce the use of the instrument as contrary to the means' of the artist were prevalent since at least the generalisation of the scientific atlas.[223] Bazin's, then, was

[221] Naturally, parallels with a contemporary alarming and cliché-ridden tendency lamenting the gradual – indeed, almost total in the context of generative AI technologies – loss of human input in the creative process are very easy to draw. If anything, this is a recurring intellectual posture that was voiced during the transition of the art product and techniques from materiality to immateriality, from painting to video and the electronic image. See for example Charles Baudelaire's severe attack on the process of mechanisation accomplished with the advent of photographic techniques: 'I am convinced that the wrongly applied progress of photography has largely contributed, as, for that matter, have all the purely material progresses, to the depletion of the French artistic genius, which is already very rare. … If it [photography] is allowed to step over the field of the impalpable and of the imaginary, over everything that is only worthy because man [sic] puts passion in it, then woe is us!', quoted in Philippe Dubois, *La Question vidéo*, *op. cit*., 59. For a more general, comparative discussion of the evolution of the image in terms of its materiality, level of resemblance, and technicality, see Dubois, *ibid*., 53-76. At the same time, lyrical exaltations of the machinist power were not exactly a novelty either, frequent as they were in the futurist manifestos and overall avant-garde practices from the 1920s. In this sense, see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974). Significantly, 1946, the year of Bazin's essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' is also the year of the publication of Jean Epstein's tardive appreciation of the cinematographic camera *L'intelligence d'une machine* (1946: Paris, Jacques Melot).

[222] Mark J. P. Wolf, 'Subjunctive Documentary: Computer Imaging and Simulation', in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 275.

[223] It should also be noted that, in fact, conceptions of the nineteenth century regarding the use of photography for scientific means were more contradictory than this overview allows us to comprehend. As Jennifer L. Mnookin explains, '[i]n the second part of the nineteenth century, two competing paradigms governed the understanding of the photograph. One emphasized its ability to transcribe nature directly, while the other

a standpoint which clearly opposed itself to the dogma of the ontological incompletion – and as such falsity – inherent, according to its detractors, in any image obtained using an instrument ('the instrument does not indicate what it does not see', as Wolf summarises this point[224]). On the other hand, as Philippe Dubois points out in his summary of the artistic and philosophical comprehension of the image throughout the ages under the 'humanist/machinist' section, there existed mechanisation even long before the apparition and democratisation of photographic devices, in the likes of the *camera obscura* or the *tavoletta*, among other optical tools (*technè optikè*) that were perfected from the XVII century and subsequently transposed – not without controversy – within artistic practices such as painting[225]. Dubois argues that what changes radically in this technical history of the medium is not the entire creative process, since the *camera obscura* had already automated its first stage, which 'captures, pre-figures, organises vision" – but its second stage, the stage of 'proper inscription, of *recording*'[226]. The author argues that

> [w]ith photography, the machine does not limit itself to pre-see anymore (this was the old optical machine, type 1), it also *inscribes* the image (this is a new 'machine', type 2, a chemical type this time, which joins the first one), by means of photosensitive *reactions* of certain materials which record *by themselves* ('naturally') the visible appearances that are generated by the luminous radiations.[227]

Automation, then, represents according to Dubois a gradual process that had been underway long before the advent of photography, which only radicalised it. Writing in the 1980s, at the moment of another important technological media mutation – the democratisation of the video image –, and placing the matter into a larger theoretical debate

highlighted the ways in which it was [still] a human representation. From the first perspective, photography was viewed as an especially privileged kind of evidence; from the second perspective, photography was seen as a potentially misleading form of proof. Although there was forceful support for photographs as evidence, both in the cases and in the periodical literature, there was also grave concern about this novel form of proof. The doctrine that emerged from this marriage of enthusiasm and unease was a peculiar one, a precarious balancing act not wholly internally consistent', in Jennifer L. Mnookin, 'The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy', *Yale. Journal of Law and the Humanities* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 4-5.

[224] *Idem.*

[225] For a discussion of the usage of the *camera obscura* as a tool that was intended to facilitate the act of framing, and thus immediately igniting heated debates over the loss of human agency, see Jonathan Crary's definitive account *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge [Mass.], London: The MIT Press, 1992), especially his chapter "The Camera Obscura and Its Subject", 25-67. See also Philippe Dubois, 'L'ombre, le miroir, l'index', in *La question video, op. cit.*, an overview of the historical layers of the image, where he contends that 'the *camera obscura* was nothing else than a "mechanical" refinement of the drawing with the shadow of the lover in the fire-lit room. The principle stays the same, it simply has been slightly codified, "cubified", put into a box', 37.

[226] Philippe Dubois, *ibid*., 57. Emphasis in the original.

[227] *Idem.*

over the humanist vs. machinist divide does not however invalidate Bazin's theoretical intuitions, it only complicates them. Bazin himself was not at all unfamiliar with the matter, although he mentioned this conceptual continuity only in passing, considering the perspective in painting as 'the first scientific and, in a sense, already mechanical system'[228]. Four decades before Dubois, as the French film critic would come to reflect on that topic, the argument had mutated towards the field of artistic photography and cinema, which, in general, were deprecated by being unfavourably compared to the act of painting, and its active human engagement. However, instead of perceiving the 'inescapable subjectivity'[229] inherent in the act of painting as an automatic reason to achieve superiority and distinction (to borrow a useful concept from Pierre Bourdieu), Bazin adds another criterion for this comparison: the 'likeness', the degree resemblance to the model. By using this framework, it appears as evident that the painter's brush cannot compete with the photographer's camera – and this, despite the latter's *objective* (thus, presumably inferior) quality. According to him, photography allows for the surpassing of 'Baroque resemblance' and the achievement of 'identity with the model'. Indeed, as Bazin contends,

> the essential factor in the transition from the baroque to photography is not the perfecting of a physical process (photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of color); rather does it lie in a psychological fact, to wit, in completely satisfying our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part. The solution is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it.[230]

The question of the growing *immateriality* of the image by means of mechanical reproduction was of course a pressing concern within the European intellectual landscape as cinema was becoming a hugely popular attraction. Walter Benjamin's well-known account of mechanical reproduction addressed a symmetrical point in this discussion over the loss of subjectivity in the artistic process, but chose to approach it by questioning notions of originality, copy, and aura[231]. We consider his choice of predilection significant: the subsequent section will investigate the 'aura' of photography by analysing its ancestral relation to the sacred.

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[228] Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *art. cit*, 5.
[229] *Ibid*, 7.
[230] *Ibid*., 4.
[231] See Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

André Bazin's Ontological Argument: 2. The Theological Component

This 'appetite for illusion' of humankind is a capital point in our discussion. In effect, Bazin anticipates here two continuations which will reach new culminations allowed for by the evolution of technology. They concern both a new regime of hyper-visibility that intensifies our direct relation to reality, which will be rendered gradually possible by the apparition of lighter, cheaper, faster recording equipment, and a continuous perfectibility of the illusion guaranteed by the photograph and enhanced with every new technological progress, until it becomes a marketing argument. Yet this idea also ties into the larger debate concerning the image-as-truth, the image as bearer of order amidst chaos, which was prevalent in discussions surrounding images from the Holocaust, as we will succinctly explore them in the second part of this chapter. It is important to emphasise the irrelevance of the technical quality of the image, in stark contrast with its *mechanical origin*, which in turn is capital. A brief parenthesis is required at this moment. It is important to note that the exact same argument was also reiterated by Susan Sontag in her seminal essay *On Photography*, as Mark Dorrian argues:

> When, in her classic 1977 collection *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggested that we would happily forgo even the most fully achieved painted portrait of Shakespeare for a single faded photograph, she was highlighting not just the belief in the verisimilitude of the photograph, but also the commitment to its uncanny consubstantiality with what it pictures.[232]

Clearly indebted to Bazin's terminology, she contends that '[h]aving a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross.'[233] This paradoxical argument suggests that there is no loss of credibility – and, as such, of *faith* – due to the failure of the physical process of the true inscription. On the other hand, the sheer personal engagement of a human agent is enough to instil doubt, a doubt which cannot be overcome even by the most virtuosic artisan: 'No matter how skilful the painter…the fact that a human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image.'[234] Sontag's writings on photography at the end of the 1970s – coupled with the quasi-contemporary musings of Roland Barthes in a similar vein (see below) – helped re-institute the indexical identity of

[232] Mark Dorrian, 'Transcoded Indexicality', *Log*, No. 12 (Spring/Summer 2008), 105.
[233] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 154.
[234] Bazin, *art. cit.*, 4.

photography, at a time when such considerations would already seem anachronistic. Bazin's theory – which essentially follows two directions: the higher degree of resemblance allowed for by the mechanical apparatus, and the higher degree of credibility implied by the evacuation of any human engagement in the process – was here prolonged with high fidelity. It is noteworthy that Sontag employs metaphors borrowed from the spiritual field. This is by no means at odds with Bazin's own Catholic upbringing and conflictual religious identity, not to mention his frequent reliance on religious analogies.

This point is more than anecdotal. Bazin's use of metaphors linked to a spiritual understanding of creation goes beyond a mere personal taste or affinity. They allow for a subterranean connection with the religious origin of the belief in the image. This aspect deserves additional consideration. We will depart from one of the most commented religious metaphors in his writing, that of the Holy Shroud of Turin[235]. Bazin discusses it in terms of 'features alike of relic and photograph'[236]; in other words, in functions as both imprint of the model – there had been physical contact between Christ's face and the fabric – and visible, but immaterial trace; as Belting would formulate it, the fabric is both a 'medium of contact' and a 'visual medium'[237]. Bazin's intuition and reliance on an analogy of holiness is correct in that religious debates held under the influence and surveillance of the Catholic Church all throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had posited Christ's body as a contested territory for authenticity and belief, culminating in debates that have deeply affected both artistic practices and public consciousness. The most thorough examination of discourses around 'the true image' and of the *Corpus Christi* as a supreme *locus* of truth can be found in Hans Belting: 'The Incarnation doctrine gave unprecedented importance to Christ's body, since it had been the only image in which God made Himself visible to humans: it was in a certain way the "true image", albeit not one resembling to the physical images.'[238] Elsewhere, replicating Bazin's discussion of the Holy Shroud of Turin, the author discusses the primitive scene of Saint Thomas the Apostle approaching and touching Christ's chest by conceiving of the wound as 'not only evidence of the reality of

[235] An in-depth discussion of this metaphor can be found, for example, in Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012).
[236] Bazin, 'Ontology', *art. cit.*, 8.
[237] Hans Belting, *La vraie image*, *op. cit*, 85. All the translations from this work are ours.
[238] *Ibid.*, 102.

the flesh', but also 'of the effective death that took place, thus raising new questions on the nature of what is presently offered to the sight of the apostles.'[239]

This adjacent discussion is relevant to our overarching inquiry since the theme of 'the true image' builds on implications that would be re-evaluated by Bazin and others in the 20th century. Belting explains that the imagistic problematics developed in relation to Christianity – and the fact that they led to an enormous body of theoretical work that could not revendicate the exhaustion of its contradictions – essentially stem from Christ's dual nature as Godly substance and human incarnation. Images were charged with the task to make believers see – to give shape, according to strict guidelines, to Christ's terrestrial appearance, while also highlighting his 'distinction', his superior nature.[240] In this sense, images depicting Christ's face and body enjoyed an ambivalent status: on the one hand, they were supposed 'to bring evidence as to Christ's corporeality'[241]; on the other, they dealt with a miraculous character and, as such, 'they had to demonstrate…that they were truer than all the other images and could thus pretend a special kind of cult.'[242] Vast rhetorical forces were being employed in order to demonstrate these image's authentic – even supernatural – character, while at the same time, as Belting states, belief was generally understood as an imperative prerequisite, the absence of which would make the venerating such images contradictory, if not incomprehensible.

Yet there is another important aspect that needs to be addressed in this specific context. The discourses surrounding such images and pointing out their non-human origin belong to an old tradition which according to Dubois is 'mythical or sacred'[243], and which concerns the so-called 'acheiropoïêtes' images (*sine manu facta*). Indeed, the myth of the image that was made without human intervention – evocatively illustrated also by Bazin's namechecking of the Holy Shroud in Turin – became the theme of a highly contested debate that would eventually be translated in the realm of mechanically produced images in the 19th and 20th century discussions. Belting chooses the writings of Biblical scholar Eusebius to exemplify the common orthodox understanding of the *Corpus Christi* as a kind of image that was to be distinguished from any kind of 'normal' image: Eusebius 'describes Christ

[239] *Ibid*., 138.
[240] This vast topic largely goes beyond the scope of our discussion. For an in-depth theoretical analysis of this spiritual context, see Hans Belting, *La vraie image*, *op. cit.*, especially the chapter 'Le masque et la personne du Christ', 71-116.
[241] *Ibid*., 75.
[242] *Ibid*., 84.
[243] Philippe Dubois, *La question vidéo*, 39.

in his relation to God as 'an unconceivable image, alive with the living God', and as such completely different from 'terrestrial images' that are always devoid of the substance of that which they represent.'[244] We could reasonably argue that, for a visual representation to achieve the superior status of a *true* image, the fact of its genesis as devoid of any intervention from the human hand would quickly be perceived as a necessary condition. Writing from an evolutionary perspective going from such religious debate to the advent of the immaterial video image, Dubois revealed the striking continuity of the acheiropoïête paradigm that could be signalled all the way to Bazin's writings from the late 1940s[245] (and, as we have briefly discussed, to Sontag's from the late 1970s). In other terms, an underlying religious assumption is to be found within the main argument of this theoretical debate which concerns not only the autonomous truth or authenticity that is thought to be inherent to the image, but also the transfer of affect – of belief – that is required from the viewer in order for the image to accomplish its function. This became all the more apparent during the events of the Romanian Revolution, with the sudden flow of images emerging from a context of severe lack of visibility (see below on the discussion of the lacking image during the Holocaust), thus endowing the broadcast with a miraculous quality absolutely compatible with spiritualist readings of the image.

In any case, to conclude this section, Belting presents this general environment as one that effectively keeps active numerous ties to contemporary debates – as, indeed, the historical period (lasting for several centuries) when the foundational paradigm concerning debates on the authenticity of the image was durably posed. At the time, according to Belting, the collective frenzy to discover, or be in contact with, supposedly authentic relics or images imprinting or depicting Christ has led to the creation of a powerful symbol: 'The creation of this face, which people wanted to authenticate by any means thanks to the traces left by the true body, has actually led to an autonomous image that was soon meant to become, in Western culture, the standard of iconicity and the model of the face.'[246] In other words, we could say, without risking to distort Belting's reasoning in a reductive manner,

[244] Belting, *La vraie image, op. cit.*, 81.
[245] Dubois quotes a specific passage from Bazin to illustrate his thesis: 'Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective character of photography. … The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed .and by way of the purpose he has in mind. Although the final result may reflect something of his personality, this does not play the same role as is played by that of the painter. All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.', in 'Ontology', *art. cit.*, 7, quoted in *La Question vidéo*, 58.
[246] Belting, *La Vraie image, op. cit.*, 116.

that Christ's face – which really became a motif throughout the centuries – is an image in more ways than one: firstly, as, of course, visual trace; secondly, as a strictly codified and immediately recognisable representation that was reproduced with minimal variations within different contexts (both artistic and religious). This 'autonomous' quality that Belting was referring to transforms Christ's face into what we might otherwise term 'a trademark image', according to our own framework that we are developing throughout this dissertation. During one of the final visual sequences belonging to the actual broadcast of the revolution, the controversy that was sparked by the truncated recordings of the Ceaușescu mock trial, immediately followed by an overwhelming insistence – indeed, an obsession – with filming the actual dead bodies of the dictator and his wife in close shot, can be legitimately linked by analogy to a mystical understanding of the image that represents the ruler's body[247].

André Bazin's Ontological Argument: 3. The Indexical Component

It is currently necessary to develop further Bazin's conception. As a seminal figure within the history of the moving image, his thoughts have not only been amply spread, but also severely truncated. In this sense, Hervé Joubert-Laurencin could deem this tentative of compressing Bazin's reflection – which encompasses more than 2.700 newspaper articles – into a series of precepts that not only act as a limitation of his ideas, but also as a way to falsify them, as '*bazinisme*.'[248] This highly critical view of any attempt which fails to historicise Bazin's interventions by abusing a few of his most well-known quotations is echoed by Daniel Morgan in multiple instances when advocating for a more thorough engagement with Bazin: 'A closer examination of more of Bazin's critical writings on individual films will expand and transform the parameters of our understanding of how his realism works.'[249]

Yet what interests us for the purpose of this chapter are equally those 'standard readings' of Bazin's writings, as Morgan calls them – or the part of his thought which belongs now to an easily accessible, albeit highly incomplete, résumé of his work. This is because the ideological implications of the image-as-proof concept lie in a series of

[247] For a comprehensive account of the centuries-long debates over the iconography of the rulers, see Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi* (Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1981).
[248] Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, *Préface* to *André Bazin. Écrits complets* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2018).
[249] Daniel Morgan, 'Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics', 446.

assumptions which have been generalised only after the generalisation of Bazin's conceptions. By this I certainly do not wish to exaggerate the circulation of Bazin's ideas outside the perimeter of cinephilia and film studies, which is, by all accounts, fairly limited – but I do mean to observe how a certain line of thought which had to impose itself over previous outdated arguments by countering them *on their own terrain* and thus strategically overemphasising its scope to the limit of paradox had become, merely a couple of decades later, common knowledge. This idea is emphasised by the opening of an article which claims that '[t]he particular relation between reality and photographs results from the nature of the latter's technical production: photographs are, *as we all know*, products of physical and chemical processes.'[250]

The majority of critical acts of engagement with Bazin's idea of the ontology of the photographic image have used Charles S. Peirce's framework of semiology. Peirce's defining taxonomy between icon, index, and symbol represents the shared origin – or, for anterior discussions, the common summative argument – of numerous photographic, filmic, and media theories. An indexical theory of the image, as we will see still proves relevant for contemporary discussions. As Peter Geimer contends, '[e]ven if subsequently the programmatic distinction between the "analogical" and the "digital" was relativized, the paradigm of the trace has remained, up to the last two decades, an integral part of the debates on photography.'[251] Summarising this argument that was generally deducted from Peirce's theory, Morgan argues that 'as a sign, a photograph mediates between the object (the referent) and the interpretant (the viewer); more simply: the image stands for the object in some relation to the viewer.'[252] In this sense, Peirce advances three kind of signs which can describe the relation between the object and the sign: the icon, the index, and the symbol. It is by now largely held that in Bazin's interpretation, the photographic image pertains an indexical relation towards the object. The index is defined by Peirce as

> something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object.[253]

[250] Judith Keilbach, Kirsten Wächter, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust', 55. Our emphasis.
[251] Peter Geimer, *Les Couleurs du passé*, trad. Jean Torrent (Paris: Macula, 2023), 113.
[252] *Ibid*., 4.
[253] Charles S. Peirce, 'Logic as Semiotics: The Theory of Signs', in *Philosophical Writings*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2011 [1955]), 99.

Of course, the act of superimposing Bazin's conception of the photographic image and Peirce's account of the index can only amount to the forcing a certain axis of interpretation on it.[254] However, as a standard reading of this seminal contribution, this should be further explored. As Peirce famously contends elsewhere ('this resemblance [between photographs and the objects they represent] is in fact due to photographs which have been produced in such circumstances that they were forced to correspond in detail with nature'[255]), one must always pay attention to the context in which a photograph has been taken – as we have seen in the previous chapter, Kracauer would always insist on the historicity that is automatically inscribed in the photograph, that is, in the act and general surrounding context that led to the realisation of the photo in question[256]. Peirce's implication thus highlights the consubstantiality between the photograph as the physical result of a chemical operation and the act of its realisation, which will only prove more and more problematic as the history of media – and history as discipline – will move forward. The hesitant transfer of belief towards a photograph according to (and depending on) the specific conditions that allowed it to be made is one of the most current attitudes nowadays, with the viewer made aware – or deliberately manipulated – about the origins of a photograph. These falsified origins were the centre of several major controversies during the Romanian Revolution, stemming from an indexical nature that was taken for granted – or thought to be – by the television personnel[257].

Before analysing those images at length in a subsequent chapter, it might be useful to borrow Morgan's provisional conclusions on the photographic theory deducted from Peirce's index notion:

> If the relation between object and photograph is indexical, three things follow. First, a photograph refers to an antecedent reality that is, as it were, 'behind' the image. […] There is an ontological distinction between the object and the image: although the car is in some

[254] Daniel Morgan explores the inadequacies of this theory in his re-reading of Bazin, 'Rethinking Bazin', *art. cit.*, which takes into consideration numerous mainstream arguments regarding a 'popular' understanding of his theories.
[255] Charles S. Peirce, quoted in Philippe Dubois, *La Question vidéo*, *op. cit.*, 41.
[256] For a developed discussion of Kracauer's theory on photography, see Peter Geimer, *Les Couleurs du passé*, *op. cit.*, especially 130-142.
[257] Another very useful notion here is Hito Steyerl's '*documentality*', which she defines as the "permeation of a specific documentary politics of truth with superordinated political, social and epistemological formations. Documentality is the pivotal point, where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa. In Steyerl, 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth', accessible at: https://transversal.at/transversal/1003/steyerl/en. Date accessed: 27. 03. 2025.

> sense the cause of the photograph, they are not the same kind of thing. Our speech doesn't always make this distinction, but we know it to be there.
>
> Second, the event or object to which a photograph refers is in the past. This is a general feature of indexical signs […] On this model, a photograph is a record of how something (an object, a scene) looked at the time the image was taken; it is a direct record of a past state of affairs
>
> Third, for us to read a photograph correctly, we have to be aware of how it was produced, aware of its status as an indexical sign. We believe that a photograph is an accurate indication of the presence of objects in front of the camera at a past time not because of criteria of resemblance but because we know how the image was generated. Our knowledge enables what Bazin describes as 'the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith'. If we understand the process of production—the fact that there is a direct relation between image and object—we will be able to say with certainty that what we see is faithful to what was there.[258]

Highlighting this development does not only allow us to examine a well spread example of 'bazinist' theory, but also to explore the foundation of a whole array of theories which consider the indexical relation of a photo to the object depicted as a defining trait. For example, Keilbach and Wächter quote Philippe Dubois as a promoter of an understanding of the medium based on its indexical property, saying that it generates a feeling of 'the world being inscribed onto a light-sensitive surface.'[259]

It is clear, by judging from the entire corpus of his selected works, that Bazin, when writing *Ontology*, was not simply assessing the neutral merits of a given medium. In a way, he was advocating for his own cause, one that would coherently champion the filmmakers 'who put their faith in reality' over those 'who put their faith in the image.'[260] This fragment, which has also lead to a form of 'bazinisme', allows Bazin to explain, however, that his understanding of the image, here, encompasses 'everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented.'[261] As such, the word acquires a different meaning than its general sense: image, here, is what is opposed to reality – in other words, artifice. From this perspective, we can see that Bazin was consistent in his preference for a

[258] Daniel Morgan, *art. cit.*, 448.
[259] Philippe Dubois, *Der fotografische Akt: Versuch iiber ein theoretisches Dispositiv* (Amsterdam and Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), 54, quoted in Keilbach and Wächter, *art. cit.*, 55.
[260] André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles: *University of California Press*, 2005), 24.
[261] *Idem.*

form of transparency of the artistic procedure: in his own view, the filmmakers who had 'faith' in reality actually worked *according* to the inherent data of the medium, respecting its capacity to record and transpose on the screen the object depicted in front of the lens in a completely 'passive' manner. This was an example of another paradox at the heart of this reflection: for it stated that those artists willing to accomplish the creative potential of the medium they were working in had to do *less* in order to achieve this goal.

The Image Between 'L'effet de réel' and Objectivity

A final example of our brief overview, which is noteworthy because of its radical view of photographic indexicality, concerns the conception of Roland Barthes. In his elegiac work *Camera lucida*, he opts for a celebratory theoretical endorsement of the transparent relation between reality and photograph by virtue of its – indispensable, according to the author – indexical character. Writing in the aftermath of his mother's passing – moreover, writing in order to console from that painful autobiographical event – , Barthes reflects on the eerie impact of the photographic album, an artefact which attests of the existence of the past, by arresting time and capturing, through stillness, a fragment of the vital flow of the person in front of the camera. He argues that 'every photograph is a certificate of presence'[262] and conceives of the photographic image as a confirmation that 'the thing has been there' [*ça a été*].[263] Barthes' conception is however a bit more ambiguous than a simple, direct correlation between photography and the certification of presence. To the extent that such a position is indeed applicable, Derrida evokes the word 'authenticity' to describe it in a more adequate manner:

> He [Barthes] says that we are under the impression that the photographic effect […] consists in placing us directly, undeniably, in front of a past which *has been present*, the past as it *will have been present* itself, so that, all of a sudden, it [the photograph] acquires the force of the authentic testimony: not of the proof, but of the irrefutable testimony. Photography, unlike painting and literature, seems to have captured within itself, outside itself, in the apparatus outside the apparatus, something which has been there once.[264]

[262] Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida. Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 87.
[263] *Ibid*., 76.
[264] Jacques Derrida, Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision. Entretiens filmés* (Paris: Éditions Galilée/Institut National de l'audiovisuel, 1996), 110.

It should be clear by now that the conception of photography as quintessentially realistic belongs to a respectable intellectual tradition, with deep implications for the history of media. However, this privileged connection between photographic image and objective reality goes beyond the field of visual reflection. This is most visible in its growing importance and use within the legal apparatus. This discussion evokes Susan Sontag's appreciation that 'photography furnishes *evidence*. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it.'[265]

On the other hand, Barthes proves to be particularly insightful were we to consider his larger intellectual trajectory. Although his last work may be considered as an evocative and emotional investment on the terrain of affectively-charged photography – the trace, in this sense, becomes not only a theoretical property of the artefact, but a sign of life (and passing), a form of ultimate certainty –, earlier writings point to a much more sceptical engagement with what is commonly understood as reality and its transposition into works of art. Dealing with writings by Flaubert and Michelet, he writes, in a well-known essay from 1968 – ten years before *Camera lucida* – that notations regarding the detailed surroundings where the action takes place 'are scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disconcerting, they seem to be offered to a sort of narration *luxury*, so prodigal as to give away "useless" details and to raise in certain places the cost of narrative information.'[266] Such a remark is significant because it posits resemblance, if not realism – one of the key concepts in the indexical photographic theory –, as a calculated operation rather than an organic given. In other words, indeed, an effect, a technical trick which can be achieved according to a specific formula. Barthes's text, to be sure, does not concern only literary works: in his study of *l'effet de réel*, Peter Geimer transposes the observation that '[a]dditioning useless details produces an *effet de réel*, or what we could call a "referential illusion"'[267] to historical realist painting, photography, and even cinema[268]. Although this discussion may seem only parallel to our historical survey, it actually demonstrates the possibility of quick manipulation in art that wishes to pass as easily recognisable realist pattern – an *ersatz* of the real. But it also clarifies Barthes's

[265] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, *op. cit.*, 5, quoted in Jennifer L. Mnookin, 'The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy', 2.
[266] Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', quoted in Peter Geimer, *Les couleurs du passé, op. cit.*, 50.
[267] *Ibid*., 53.
[268] This principle also resonates in Philostratus' ancestrary conception on a primitive version of the technique of *trompe l'œil*, as quoted by Dubois: 'Faithful to the truth, painting shows us a drop of dew suspended from a petal: a bee sits on the flower; I would not be able to say whether it is fooled by the painting or it is us who are fooled by believing that it really exists', in Dubois, *La question vidéo, op. cit.*, 30.

preference for photography since, as we have already explored in the previous chapter, according to theorists like Bazin or Kracauer, photography and cinema facilitate the inherent accumulation of such 'useless details' by the sheer properties of the medium. In other words, while Barthes seemed to struggle with the entirely fabricated effect of real in a medium such as literature, photography encourages it by its sheer mechanical, automatic inscription. However, before we move on, a supplementary consideration is needed for the specific case study of the Romanian Revolution. Among such reality effects, recent contributions mention also the poor resolution of the image, which will be one of the determinant aspects taken into account for our counter-images section, alongside the 'live' component of the event. Indeed, as Birgit Richard argues in her discussion of YouTube '*do it yourself*' aesthetics of the digital era (which are not at all unrelated to our own discussion),

> The misleading 'ideology of authenticity' as a cultural consensus is based on the poor quality of the recording tools with their low resolution, as well as the presentation in small windows on the computer screen, which conspire to create 'a look of everyday life'. This effect implicates the intriguing promise of authenticity based on the photo-realistic principle (cf. Richter´s term, 'realistic styles'), which is still valid for the moving images of online video. But this discussion is of less relevance with regard to the unique art forms and techniques that are established by amateurs and professionals. Also people with no professional educationin the field of art production are testing new forms in this laboratory for moving images, which they generate from materials of everyday media and pop culture. All producers always act within the frame of their aesthetic socialisation.[269]

Hence, the importance of debating whether the 'democratic' poor quality inscribed on the image by the aging technology during the revolution ended up being commodified and instrumentalised as a promotional tool for the cause of the revolution, or, as was the case for counter-images, became an obstacle to their immediate legibility. An additional necessary angle into this debate concerns the concept of objectivity. We have already seen that Bazin championed the abolition of subjectivity by means of a mechanically reproduced image. However, in their definitive account on the intellectual history of this term, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison contend that objectivity cannot be understood without its perfectly opposite term, subjectivity. The idea that 'the objectivity has been created to deny the subjectivity, so the emergence of objectivity necessarily corresponds to the emergence

[269] Birgit Richard, 'Media Masters and Grassroot Art 2.0 on YouTube', in Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (eds.), *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to YouTube* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 142.

of a wilful subject, a self which would endanger scientific knowledge.'[270] This stark contrast – and even outright compatibility – between the two terms allows us to close the circle of the mechanical component of photography as an automatic generator of truth by exclusion of any human component, which was also highlighted by Bazin. In Daston's and Galison's phrase, 'obsessed and alarmed by the subjective character of their own representations, scientists were able to find an ethical-epistemic consolation in the mechanical image, thanks to whom they could realise the supreme act – eliminate their will – or have recourse to methods and machines that did not imply the use of will. Thus, they could be certain that no form of intelligence would disturb the image.'[271] It appears indeed that the image is solicited precisely by virtue of its kinship with reality, in a domain in which access to truth remains a constant cause of debate. As Ira Torresi argues, 'mechanically or digitally acquired images tend to be accepted as evidence more uncritically than verbal testimony – as something that is harder to manipulate than words and is less prone to bias or distortion since, according to a commonly held misperception, it is generated by a machine rather than a human being.'[272] The legal and administrative apparatuses generate a culmination of the theories linking the image and the truth, by automatically assuming that their mechanical origin guarantees the impossibility of human manipulation, and 'produce naturally objective and independent evidence that reinforces the search for the truth.'[273] As it will become clear in the next chapter, manipulation was of course highly spread even before the general democratisation of post-production tools, not to speak of the coming of AI generated imagery. Yet the argument that an image, via its visual support and its mechanical act of generation, already imposes a higher degree of credibility may last even beyond current developments of generative technologies.[274]

[270] Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, *Objectivité* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2012), 48. Our translation.
[271] Ibid., 163.
[272] Ira Torresi, 'The Photographic Image: Truth or Sign?', in Anne Wagner, Richard K. Sherwin (eds.), *Law, Culture and Visual Studies* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 125.
[273] Glenn Porter, Michael Kennedy, 'Photographic truth and evidence', *Australian Journal of Forensic Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2012): 183.
[274] See for example *SoraAI*, OpenAI's new generative tool that has been presented in February, 2024, thus renewing the discussion around images, falsification, and manipulation. Also see Vahid Pooryusef and Lonni Besançon, 'What is Sora? A new generative AI tool could transform video production and amplify disinformation risks', *The Conversation*, February 20th, 2024, accessible at: https://theconversation.com/what-is-sora-a-new-generative-ai-tool-could-transform-video-production-and-amplify-disinformation-risks-223850. Date accessed: 29. 03. 2025.

The Missing Image. From the Lack of Evidence to the Use of Visual Elements as Juridical Proof

This being said, the historical context in which Bazin conceived what would later be recognised as his 'somme théorique' – the work that synthesises a significant portion of his theoretical concerns, primarily understood as affinities – is not, in itself, without significance. Published in 1946, his seminal essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' explores a novel relation to images that was also prompted by the then still very recent events of the Second World War. Particularly noteworthy was the West's revelation, or lack thereof, of visual evidence of the Holocaust. Although such revelations may have been at the time unknown to Bazin, it is undoubted that his essay is published in a historical contingency preoccupied by questions of mourning, guilt, and reparation. Gilles Deleuze contends that due to the war and the existence of concentration camps, there exists at that point in history a severe rupture in the trajectory of cinema that instigates a different conception of what we should anticipate from images:

> After the war, then, a second function of the image could be expressed through a new question: what can we see on the image? Not 'what can we see *behind* an image [as was the case during the classic age of cinema]', but rather : can I bear witness [*soutenir du regard*] that which, in any case, I already see and which takes place on a single level?[275]

Though apparently this constitutes a secondary discussion within this chapter, we must not downplay the significance of the revelation concerning the scale of concentration camps on the generation of filmmakers and image theorists and practitioners that was contemporaneous with the establishment of the image-as-proof paradigm.[276] This moment not only initiated a period of reflections about loss and the necessity of indelible inscription

[275] Gilles Deleuze, 'Lettre à Serge Daney : Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage', in Serge Daney, *Ciné journal* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1986), 6.

[276] One should look no further than Jean-Luc Godard's elegiac reflection on the incapacity of cinema to inform on the concentration camps, as it is deployed in his *magnum opus Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998). On this same topic, we could also mention the centrality of the concentration camps – as a symbol for the experience of the 20th century – in Serge Daney writings on Godard (and himself). Clearly belonging to the same generation (he was born in 1944 and would thus come to the realisation of the existence of the Holocaust via subsequent critical gestures such as Alain Resnais' seminal documentary *Night and fog* [1955]), Daney believes that Godard's fragmentary, historically-infused practice, starting in the seventies and culminating in the colossal cinephile recaps of the late eighties, was determined by the existence of the concentration camps: 'we can see that [his] politics are in fact a kind of *morals*. There is indeed, throughout this century, "one" event. Which is to say unique, metaphysical, nodal. And this event is the concentration camps. […] Godard's politics has [thus] nothing to do with the 'concrete' engagements of the seventies and with the language games that were supporting them. This is because the words are lacking there where we did not know how to see', 'Godard, morale, grammaire', in Sergio Toffetti (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard* (Turin: Centre Culturel Français de Turin, 1990), 17-18.

in subsequent cinematic works – a period that would only intensify as live recording techniques gained momentum in France and beyond[277] –, but also, from the outset, introduced a new kind of image to be conveyed through photographic and cinematographic mediums. This image had the formidable task of confronting, exposing, and restoring the 'inhuman' presence:

> Filming the camps implied a new cinematic language. This was not a question of choice, but of an obligation that found form only in cinema's reduction to its ontological power: to film a man, frontally, in a long take-the factual presentation of an intervention that was minimal because impossible, recording the visible. To film the camps meant filming the inhuman. Through a surely unconscious logic, all these films lingered long over the faces of both living and dead, as if searching for the justification of the act of filming. All these faces that gaze out at us may be what is essential in these films, what we shall not forget.[278]

In Bazin's article, the absence of any reference to the recent World War II and the Nazi extermination plan is partly understandable due to the limited and incomplete information available at that time. The sheer shocking nature of the facts surrounding the war and the Holocaust led to widespread disbelief, prompting many to question the basic layers of credibility and objectivity. During this period of collective scepticism, the role assigned to the photographic image suddenly became crucial, an integral part of a societal debate. It was tasked with serving as a purveyor of truth by reaffirming and proving the existence of concentration camps. This task involved utilising individuals whose presence could be regarded as undoubted and credible. This choice was not merely an individual artistic preference but was conceived as a fully implemented documentation policy.

The historical context, characterised by the still unprocessed aftermath of the war and the gradual revelation of the Holocaust, influenced the perception and function of images. The incompleteness of information and the need to establish undeniable truths in the face of collective disbelief shaped the way photography was employed to document and convey the harsh realities of the time. Hannah Caven states that

> [t]he cameramen were particularly scrupulous about recording the names and occupations of those [from the outside] who visited the camps [in the aftermath of their liberation]. They

[277] Pierre Eugène describes this 'neurotic', 'obsessional' period 'marked by the awakening of the Jewish memory and of a much bigger importance given to justice (new trials) and to media information (uncovered scandals)', in *Exercices de relecture, op. cit.*, 340-341.
[278] Nicolas Losson, 'Notes on the Images of the Camps', trans. Annette Michelson, *October,* Vol. 90 (Autumn, 1999): 34.

> attempted, where possible, to photograph inmates with people who had recognisable authority. For example, when the local German officials visited, mayors were photographed next to emaciated inmates, so that the picture was further corroborated as truth, in the eyes of the public, both British and German, but especially German.[279]

As Georges Didi-Huberman explains, 'the *truth* of Auschwitz, if there is any meaning at all in this expression, is as *unimaginable* as it is unsayable. If the horror of the concentration camps defies imagination, how necessary *every image* dragged out of this experience will become!'[280] Naturally, this is due to the *visual* capacity of the image to give shape to the unseen. Yet the power of an image goes beyond the mere act of making the invisible visible; it lies in its capability to document specific elements such as gestures, intricate details, and the complex operations of institutions and organisations, such as the Nazi extermination process of Jews, and thus act as documents for further reference. Moreover, audiovisual proofs also presented the precious advantage, compared to subjective accounts essentially belonging to the persecuted population, of emanating directly from the Nazi apparatus or 'proceeding from reports effectuated afterwards by the Allies from certain segments of the Nazi politics of "aggression".'[281] The footage thus occasioned a direct confrontation between the accused and their own audiovisual production. In the age of mechanical reproduction, such footage was believed to serve as the most trustworthy record, either capturing and preserving nuanced aspects that might otherwise have been overlooked or forgotten over time, or presenting the unavoidable documentation of the Holocaust as it was carried out by the perpetrators themselves. It became a tangible and authentic trace.

This is a debate in which the photographic image plays a pivotal role, allowing for the articulation of the above-mentioned terms – a manner of giving visibility to what is destined to disappear, to inescapably vanish – by virtue of its inherent properties. Thus, Wolf argues that the capacity of the photographic apparatus to preserve the image was a valued property from its earliest stages. He notes that

> [p]hotography, as a source of instrumental realism, differed from prior instruments because of its ability to store an image. The viewing of entities using telescopes, microscopes, and other technical apparatuses was done in real time, an unbroken link between subject and

[279] Hannah Caven, 'Horror in Our Time: images of the concentration camp in the British media, 1945', in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, No. 21 (2001), 207-253.
[280] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), 39-40.
[281] Christian Delage, *Filmer, juger, op. cit.*, 129.

> observer, both physically present at either end of the link. The camera, as a system of lenses, was similar to the telescope and the microscope, but it had the ability to record the images seen, saving them for later examination, even after the subject was gone.[282]

Expanding on this interpretation, we posit the hypothesis that the stark exposure of the extensive atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their allies throughout Europe – a disquieting revelation that, as we have noted, would necessitate decades for comprehensive understanding – marks the inaugural moment when humanity becomes consciously and decisively confronted with the capacity of the photographic and moving image to, in Wolf's terms, 'bridge the gap between *documentation* and *observation*.' Not because these capabilities were previously unknown – as we shall observe, photographic practice held particular value, albeit with some controversy, in its scientific applications during the earliest years of its larger application. However, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Western societies grapple with the distressing realization that a global event – a global atrocity – may indeed go unrecorded. Tracing the history of the implementation of audiovisual and still footage in the courtrooms in the aftermath of the Second World War, Christian Delage highlights the lack of precision prevalent in descriptions about the Nazi system before the end of the war. He notes that

> the use of the word 'atrocities' to qualify the crimes committed by the Nazis evoked the memories of the First World War, when myth, propaganda, and war crimes had been mixed to the point of spreading confusion. […] The Nazis had encouraged the memory of this confusion, even going so far as to instil belief in the so-called 'model' camps meant to deny 'propaganda on the atrocities'.[283]

In the absence of tangible traces, there is already a genuine risk that the event itself might dissipate. Yet the stakes, in this context, were even higher, as they implied the act of debunking Nazi propaganda and exposing the truth about their acts, which was difficult to conceive. Delage goes on to quote a testimony from Chief United States Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials Robert H. Jackson who, echoing and combatting a general attitude in his opening speech during the trials, admitted to having been one of those 'who heard most of the stories about atrocities during the war with doubt and scepticism.'[284] These

[282] Mark J. P. Wolf, 'Subjunctive Documentary: Computer Imaging and Simulation', in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 276.
[283] Christian Delage, *Filmer, juger*, *op. cit.*, 79-80.
[284] Opening speech, *Procès des grands criminels de guerre devant le Tribunal International* [Trial of the War Criminals in front of the International Court], *Débats*, t. 2, Nuremberg, 1937, 139-140, quoted in Delage, *idem.*

considerations are by no means entirely disconnected from the Romanian Revolution context. Indeed, on the international scene, one of the most controversial sequences of this event was represented by the false mass graves of Timisoara, which were instrumentalised in order to paint an apocalyptic image of the pain and suffering – which were real, but vastly exaggerated – of the Romanian people. One should note, however, the appeal to an imagery of physical torture and deprivation (bodies left on white sheets, etc.) that is perfectly compatible with the public consciousness of the Holocaust archives, and which too few were disposed to question, for fear of passing for negationists. This potential connection has been addressed, for example, by commentators who argue that

> the forgetfulness of the mass graves rather evokes the manner in which the Nazis have conceived of the genocide of European Jews, by systematically attempting to erase its traces, which were however partly exhumed by the Allies. This telescoping of the memories of communism and Nazism is partly explained by the insufficiency of the awareness or the belief in the reality of the existence of the goulag or the Nazi camps in the moment of their functioning.[285]

In any case, a discernible correlation begins to surface between the act of photographic recording and the act of certifying, of verifying the truth of what has been recorded.[286]. In an era where mechanical means allow for a 'consubstantiality [of the photograph] with what it pictures'[287], this becomes the preferred mode of documenting and archiving the past, since it overcomes the need for human agency understood as fallacy. This opposition between the subjective, highly distorting character of witnesses and the pretention of complete accuracy of visual documents is a long-lasting epistemological opposition. Even before the war, in the 1930s, an action plan handed to American soldiers mentioned the fact that,

> the human memory being defective and the objects representing conviction pieces that are subject to decomposition, alteration, or loss, it is important to proceed to recording of the event at the moment when it is taking place under a form which, whenever possible, allows it to constitute an acceptable proof of its reality.[288]

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[285] Christian Delage, Vincent Guigueno and André Gunthert, 'Le vrai et le faux : de Timisoara à Bucarest (1989)', in *La Fabrique des images contemporaines* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 2007), 41.
[286] *Idem.*
[287] Mark Dorrian, 'Transcoded Indexicality', *Log*, No. 12 (Spring/Summer 2008), 105.
[288] [Instruction], without date, archives of the OSS, NARA, RG 226, E 133, B 125, F 1077, quoted in Christian Delage, *op. cit.*, 135.

In fact, as Didi-Huberman points out in the footsteps of Annette Wieviorka[289], there exists within the field of history a certain 'distrust' (the word is from Didi-Huberman[290]) towards the accounts of survivors, irrespective of their written or oral component, which are 'by nature subjective and destined to inexactness.'[291] In the midst of that mourning period, the image becomes clearly connoted as a marker of veracity, as a bearer of exactitude among a territory of subjectivity. Hannah Arendt could thus argue that,

> [f]or lack of truth, one can however find *instances of truth*, and in fact these instances are all that we have at our disposal so as to bring order in this chaos of horror. These instances emerge unexpectedly, like an oasis in the desert. They are anecdotes and they reveal, in their brevity, what this is all about.[292]

Of course, one must historicise this reflection on the certifying power of the image, so as to respect its integrity and evolution. In fact, Arendt wrote about the capacity of the photographic medium to anchor truth – to 'reveal what this is all about' – in 1966, at a moment in history when it became clear that the slim visual material on the Holocaust was forever going to be 'everything that we have at our disposal.'[293] On the other hand, Jackson contrasted the mediated character of the subjective testimonies with the direct access to proof that visual footage allowed for: 'The documents, if their authenticity had been established, could speak for themselves.'[294]

On the other hand, the use of moving and still images made during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust that were assigned as justice documents is without precedent. As such, the way images achieve their pivotal role in the act of documentation and remembrance of the Holocaust is due to an intuition regarding the ontological properties of the visual medium, which were highlighted on the spot, as the trials of the Nazi war criminals went underway. For some commentators, the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is less clear, and visual documents do not necessarily have the privilege of the

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[289] Cf. Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 14.
[290] Didi-Huberman, *op. cit.*, 48.
[291] *Idem.*
[292] Hannah Arendt, *Auschwitz et Jérusalem*, trans. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy (Paris: Deux temps Tiercé, 1997 [1991]), 257-258, quoted in Didi-Huberman, *op. cit.*, 47-48.
[293] Or, as Didi-Huberman argues, 'They have towards the truth they attest about a fragmentary and incomplete [*lacunaire*], but they really are 'everything that we have at our disposal' in order to know and to image the concentration life from within', *op. cit.*, 48.
[294] *Justice Jackson's Story,* Transcript of Tape Recording Taken by Dr. Harlan B. Philips, Oral History Research, Columbia University, 1952-1953, Jackson Papers, RHJ 190, quoted in Delage, *Filmer, juger*, *op. cit.*, 126.

latter. ‘This anteriority [to any sort of guide with regard to a potential usage of the images as proof]’, as Delage contends,

> should have allowed the moving image to fully deploy its singular qualities which were contradictory only on a surface level: mechanical recording of a present moment destined [to be consumed] by a future spectator. Because a film is always addressed to someone, and because a creator knows very well that he/she can only proceed to a staging of what he/she is being allowed to see, the fidelity of the act of taking images lies les in a certain technical attribute and more in the fact of assuming this subjectivity while also guaranteeing its truth value.[295]

Furthermore, contrary to Jackson’s optimism in relation to visual documents and their inherent capacity to act as proofs, Telford Taylor voiced doubts even before their large-scale implementation in courtrooms around the world. Interestingly enough, he even countered Jackson on what he had valued as ultimate superiority of the documents – their incapacity to talk, and thus, to falsify by way of mediated subjectivity:

> [f]or sure, the capacity of testimony of any witness is subject to attacks, but that of a document also is. A document cannot speak and consequently cannot be summoned to a counter-interrogatory session, but it can, of course, be attacked in different ways. He can be refuted or countered by witnesses, by other documents, or by any other kind of proofs. There is, I believe, no more reason to try to judge this file only with documents than there are to judge it only with witnesses.[296]

Bazin could not have been aware of all these ontological implications at the time of his writing, two decades prior to Arendt and, even though simultaneous to Jackson, in a rather different context. Therefore, the argument put forth here is not teleological. However, it does acknowledge that, even when writing with different objectives, various theorists can arrive at similar conclusions by engaging with a broader historical discourse. We have already discussed as noteworthy how Bazin's text ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, which laid the groundwork for a reflection on the photographic image still widely used today, was imbued with terms from the religious sphere (also explicable given Bazin's biographical proximity to Catholic milieus). These terms were also prevalent

[295] Christian Delage, *op. cit.*, 132.
[296] Telford Taylor, ‘Memorandum for Mr. Justice Jackson, and the Board of Review. Subject: Order of Proof, Use of Witnesses, Use of Motion Pictures and Related Subjects’, November 3, 1945; Jackson Papers, RHJ 111, 1-2.

in the discourse on the Holocaust: 'belief', 'doubt', 'face', and 'man'[297], amongst others, heavily punctuate what is still then perceived as belonging to a spiritual class of elements. Indeed, during the same historical period, discussions about the photographic image often explicitly linked it to notions of resemblance, truth, and trust, emphasising its mechanical properties that inherently mitigate the risk of inaccuracy.

Conclusion

The previous chapter has underscored the intrinsic link between the unfolding of the Romanian Revolution and the utilisation of trademark sequences, aligning its trajectory with analogous historical occurrences and emphasising a particular type of imagery that was deemed capable of conveying the emotional load of the event. This chapter has aimed to prolong this reasoning by trying to relate the insistent usage of images during the revolution, as well as their immediate transformation into a contested site of authenticity, performativity, and power, to the larger theoretical paradigm of indexicality, that is, of the image as 'guarantor' of truth[298]. An effort has been made to elucidate and explain the pronounced dependence on the audiovisual component, notably its quintessential televisual treatment, by resorting to close textual analyses of theoretical positions belonging to the indexical tradition. We have conceived of this chapter as a theoretical foundation, a framework that contextualises and speculates on the Romanian situation, a nation that has been largely isolated from intellectual debates concerning the avatars, creative possibilities and risks of the imagery in general and of the television medium in particular[299]. Thus, a

[297] See Nicolas Losson, *Notes on the Images of the Camps*; Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. by Stuart J. Wolf, (New York: Abacus, 1987); Serge Daney, 'Le Travelling de *Kapo*', *Trafic*, No. 4 (Autumn 1992), 5-19.

[298] For a developed evolutionary reflection on the visual image in relation to the displacement of cinema to the white cube of the gallery around ideas of (lack of) authenticity and (loss of) materiality, see Dominique Païni, *Le temps exposé. Le cinéma de la salle au musée* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2002).

[299] A regularly updated *chronique* of the televisual offer in France at the end of the 1980s, including commentary on political debates, tennis matches, and films, can be found in Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du zappeur* (Paris: P.O.L, 1987). Daney would subsequently publish a second anthology of texts largely devoted to the medium of television, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à mains* (Lyon: Aléas, 1991), in which notations on films coexist with articles on the Romanian Revolution and the Gulf War. Regardless of their theoretical merits, these works are of utmost importance nowadays since they aptly reveal a global textured panorama of televisual phenomena that elicited nuanced, reflexive, even cynical responses from analysts that were becoming familiar with television's rhetoric and formats. We argue, in a subsequent chapter, that such an intellectual engagement with television was simply impossible in Romania's case, essentially for lack of an adequate offering from the available state television programmes, which could have prepared the population for such an unpredictable scenario. The popular engagement with television in Romania followed much steeper attitudes, going from total disbelief and suspicion to general adhesion to again prevalent discreditation.

subsequent chapter will specifically apply such findings to the striking case study of communist Romania, in which this sudden hypervisibility has been preceded by an absolute lack of media coverage and a draconic state control of media institutions, while, at the same time, generating a subterranean flow of non-conformist imagery that needs to be theoretically addressed.

Delving into the conceptualisation of the mechanical inscription of reality, an attribute uniquely associated with the photographic (and moving) image, which has cultivated an enduring reputation as a purveyor of authenticity, trust, and truth, this chapter has sought to understand the possible theoretical reasons why this historical event – which occurred in simultaneity with the global advent of satellite cable TV – had to have recourse to the audiovisual component to certify its course. Although its global iconicity stemmed from a felicitous historical conjuncture centred on the worldwide democratisation of satellite cable TV, its reliance on the audiovisual component remains crucial to conceptualise since it announces a model for the future.

This chapter was structured around André Bazin's seminal essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in which he advanced a clear argument in favour of the mechanical reproduction of reality in photography and then in cinema. Although a number of commentators legitimately approached his overall conception by linking it to Charles S. Peirce's fundamental taxonomy between icon, index, and symbol and arguing for Bazin's indexical conception of the medium, we have aimed to delineate his findings across multiple axes of interpretation. We have thus inscribed Bazin's 1946 argument into a larger evolutionary history of the mechanical perfectibility of the image and positing the photographic stage as an yet intermediate status on the way to complete mechanisation and dematerialisation which seems to be attained by the advent of generative AI technologies. We have also discussed Bazin's main line of thought in connection with a religious argument instilling since the Middle Ages the fundamental distinction between images that were made *sine manu facta* and man-made representations of the superior entities, thus inauguration a long lasting – indeed, still actual – ideal for the progressive evacuation of subjectivity in the act of producing and conceiving of the visual. According to this interpretation, Bazin's argument becomes but one conclusive step in the larger tradition of religious imagery which had anticipated technical debates by confronting them with a theological absolute. In this sense, the indexical argument has been discussed as an overarching concept which makes use of concepts of resemblance and objectivity. We have

tried to show how these concepts are contingent and depend on cultural assumptions that change themselves over time. Writings by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag have provided the actualisation of Bazin's ontological beliefs way beyond the context of post-war catholic cinephilia.

This context in itself is important to discuss. Proceeding from Bazin's already mentioned essay, a second part of this chapter was symmetrically dedicated to understanding how, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and its traumatic lack of traces, the concept of the 'missing image' [*image manquante*] has managed to shape public consciousness around the need to index and provide visual proof as a viable means to certify a given reality. We argue that this was a prevalent concern for the newly established authorities of the National Salvation Front that emerged as a leading force during the confrontations in December 1989, as their own political success was dependent on a clear break from the past regime[300]. On the other hand, partly due to the same excessive importance that they quickly acquired in a context of radical lack of visuality, the same images became the *locus* of sensationalism and immoderation. The fear of missing images greatly shaped the audiovisual treatment of the Romanian Revolution, positing it as a vestige of an era of unstable, scarce media coverage of political events, while at the same time inaugurating a period of prime-time hypervisibility and disproportion.

Drawing from these preliminary findings, the next chapter will establish a solid correlation between the Revolution's emphasis on television and the Romanian people's imperative to garner credibility in the eyes of Western audiences, *via* a reliance on exotic and Balkanist tropes and a semblance of (self-)colonialism. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate however by recourse to close textual analysis of the televisual footage recorded during the revolution, the relation between trademark images and images which do not conform to pre-existing conceptions of the revolution is extremely complex. A second part of our investigation will further explore the use of trademark sequences – with their adequate regime of visibility – during those days of December 1989, while subsequent discussions will aim to elucidate the part of the televisual treatment which did not align with such clear-cut imagery, thus bringing the course of the Romanian Revolution into a much more fertile reflective terrain

[300] See, for instance, Petre Roman, *Despre pasiune în vremuri de libertate* [On Passion in Times of Freedom] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2017). The first Romanian prime-minister after the fall of Ceaușescu, Roman was one of the main ideologues of the National Salvation Front.

Chapter 4. Romanian Television in Context

We have already had the opportunity to understand that television played a pivotal role in the unfolding of the revolution, with its treatment of revolutionary days being generally celebrated as groundbreaking. It managed to achieve such symbolic status both as an institution – Studio 4 of Romanian Television becoming the epicentre and quintessence of the moment, the clearest sign of the paradigm shift that took place in just a few days – and as a medium *per se*. The capacity of television, at the end of 1989, to broadcast live reports to the entire world ensured that the Romanian Revolution would persist in public consciousness well beyond its immediate unfolding. According to Peter Siani-Davies, 'Being the most violent of the events that transformed Eastern Europe in 1989, the revolution was also one of the most important sources of images of communism in the region.'[301] In other words, during those days, a fortunate congruence occurred between medium and message – to borrow the now-commonplace phrase of theorist Marshall McLuhan –, this being the main factor that transformed the event into one with global resonance. It was not the only factor, however.

This chapter provides a brief history of Romanian Television before the popular uprising of December 1989. This historical foray proves necessary to better contextualise the revolutionary events as they were framed by the broadcasting institution. This chapter will not involve original research on pre-revolutionary TV, but an overview of available investigations on this matter. This choice is explained by a number of reasons: on the one hand, since our own archeological interest lies in the already exceptional and highly varied material of the Revolution, it aims to posit a larger historical analysis as the dialectical foundation for that short, highly intensified span of time. In any case, we will seek to illuminate relevant fragments of televisual history from the vantage point of revolutionary Romanian TV, and not as a self-contained period of time. On the other hand, it is important, for the purposes of our research, to delineate structural findings based on the few already existing theoretical approaches of that period, since we aim to provide an understanding of perceptions and mentalities on Romanian revolutionary television, and of how they may have influenced the reading of the televisual revolutionary broadcast itself. The aim of this chapter is not to add to the mass of available knowledge – but to highlight how it shaped

[301] Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, 27.

and structured public assumptions of television, and what it is indicative of in terms of public conscience of that institution.

This chapter will explore, however, a past far less uniform than the commonplaces of critical discourse suggest. Without denying the evident gap between it and much better-prepared Western televisions – both in their close relationship with political actuality and in exploring alternative creative possibilities for the medium[302] – and the usefulness of comparative analysis, this section seeks to move beyond the exclusively subordinated relationship with Western Europe that prevails when discussing the historical merits and limitations of this institution, aiming to highlight elements of interest from the communist past of Romanian Television: not so much as prefigurations or precedents of the actual broadcast during revolutionary days, but as a more accurate contextualisation of their possibility.

The mass of available knowledge alluded to earlier needs supplementary qualification. Indeed, with regard to the methodology of this chapter, we have limited its scope to an overview of the available literature on the topic, leaving a potentially useful archival research for future analysis. This was largely due not to reasons of structure, but because the academic treatment of the question of *historical* television in Romania is in itself calling for a larger societal debate. Simply put, while texts on present-day media landscape abound, inquiries on its communist avatar are few and far between, thus leading to the preservation of preconceptions and the utilisation, as we will see, of outdated conceptual frameworks. While the aim of this chapter is not to redefine the archival research process of the media past, it is however meant to outline several structural fallacies which still infuse contemporary discourses on television in the ex-communist economies of Eastern Europe.

Obviously, this study of Romanian Television's history is relevant to the current research because, without reducing the relationship between communist society and television to a one-to-one reflection, it considers television to be an important societal indicator, illuminating ideological, political, and social aspects through its working practices. As Alexandru Matei states in his own account of the history of Romanian Television during communism,

[302] A brief, non-exhaustive history of such creative possibilities will be traced in the following chapter.

> [the shows studied] are the result of a project significant both from a technical or aesthetic, intrinsically televisual point of view, and from a perspective external to television (as a political and social project of propaganda structures created and directed by the communist party), as they reference a certain type of cultural order visible in the structure of programming (a clue in itself) and render perceptible a certain 'official ethos'.[303]

Another major factor in the magnitude of the Romanian Revolution lies in the special status of Romanian Television as a mass communication institution. One of the elements that continually sparked renewed interest among foreign commentators in those days was, without doubt, the spectacle of the extremely rapid – even brutal – transition of the institution from a press organ rightly thought to have been, at least in recent times, entirely subservient to the regime's interests – used in the latter part of the 1980s as a fertile tool for constructing and disseminating Ceaușescu's personality cult – into a popular information outlet dealing with an unscripted situation for the very first time. Representative of this line of thought is film critic François Niney's assertion in *Cahiers du cinéma*:

> But it is also the case that [Romanian television] did not simply set itself up as the herald or cheerleader of a new power. It established itself as a key symbol and weapon in the struggle for a form of democracy—not representative, but direct. It did so by transforming itself, almost instantly, from an instrument of propaganda, isolation, and denunciation into a public space (covering all the mass gatherings, with Studio 4 taking the shape of an agora) and the public's eye within private committees.[304]

Akin to the hyperbolic tendency that we have alluded to, Niney presents a uniform image of pre-revolutionary television, likening the overnight transformation of Romanian Television to a kind of miracle. According to his view – which is representative of a significant portion of Western commentators and viewers – television becomes, at the end of December 1989, the opposite of what it had been only days earlier, magically signifying, through synecdoche, the brutal regime change and the obvious transition toward democracy. In a previous chapter, we have already described ways in which 'democracy' – understood not only as a political regime but also as an ethical value – could be conveyed through audiovisual syntax choices, such as the inclusion of cameramen and moderators within a single frame: this shift in the audiovisual broadcast was palpable and, to a certain

[303] Alexandru Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, 30.
[304] Francois Niney, 'Roumanie : La révolution révélée', in *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 428 (February 1990), 79.

extent, strategic. But Niney's approach, precisely because it is symptomatic of a widespread current of thought at the time[305], deserves broader discussion. Not because, at its core – especially considering the outlet where it is expressed, a reputable French cinephile publication –, it constitutes a falsehood, but because it radically oversimplifies Romanian reality and the existence of television up to that point, which was by no means monolithic. The goal is not to make an apology for the lacks and underperformance of television as a medium and institution in Romania during the 1980s – clearly, in the years leading up to the revolution, Romanian Television had indeed experienced numerous regressions, and the gap with regional counterparts like the USSR or the Yugoslav television had become insurmountable – but rather to highlight a more detailed context that allows for concrete analysis of events beyond vague, immediate reactions.

Niney's simplification could be attributed both to the general limitations of the journalistic format and to the particular, indeed very early moment at which he was writing – only a few months after the events –, as well as to a more general state of ignorance about Romania, a 'country without images' (Daney), totally disconnected from regional and continental communication flows up to that point. Nevertheless, consulting the few works that have undertaken an analysis of the history and evolution of Romanian Television over the decades reveals how this cliché, rather than eventually giving rise to more nuanced overviews, has only become further entrenched. Peter Gross, for instance, resorts to a monotonous and uniform depiction, composed of a few easily recognisable traits, to represent the state of the media under Ceaușescu:

> As a result [of all-pervasive censorship] journalism and journalists utterly failed to survey the Romanian or global environment for their readers, listeners, and viewers. Only the ruler's views and visions of society and its many facets were presented, destroying any norms of truth and reality. [...] Censorship and self-censorship did away with any notion of seeking out accurate and complete information for purposes of presenting a truthful panorama of Romanian society in all its facets. Truth was that which served Ceaușescu and his regime, thereby the Orwellian lie was firmly entrenched, along with the language

[305] And even later on: Delage, Guigueno and Gunthert write (in 2007) that '[t]he *incredible* had occurred: the state television, put to sleep by years of submission to the authorities, was becoming the involuntary witness of their undermining. Thus, in Romania as elsewhere, the curiosity to see it transform into a forum that reported in real time on the events which were happening in the country was great.', in *La Fabrique des images contemporaines*, *op. cit.*, 35. Our underlining.

> designed to serve it, in every so-called news, feature, analysis and opinion piece that was published and broadcast.[306]

We have chosen to dwell on this passage from a book published in 1996 because, in its triumphalist simplicity, it makes the ideological stakes of this discursive operation perfectly transparent. Clearly, Gross's book is an unnuanced indictment of the country's situation under communism; from a media perspective, Gross reduces things to a national sinecure populated by incompetent or corrupt individuals. In fact, very soon after the revolution concluded, highlighting the chronic underdevelopment of Romanian Television, as well as its infamous past of obedience towards the rulers, became mandatory as part of a strategic, paternalistic operation by Western commentators. We must recall that, once the hesitant and delayed broadcast of images from the parodic trial of the Ceaușescu couple emerged, television ceased to be both 'witness' and 'catalyst' – to use Niney's own terms, both of which had, at least for a time, positive connotations: the first ensuring a 'professional' neutrality in line with Western televisual standards, the second expressing the role of popular dissemination played by the images. Afterwards, its reputation rapidly declined, becoming a *bête noire* for any kind of justifiable popular aspirations. Immediately after the revolution, as a new government body (led by the controversial National Salvation Front) was scrambling to fill in the power void, television ceased to signify transparent transcription and grassroots encouragement of the events. In a radical operation of reversal, it ended up being popularly associated with a major source of manipulations, more an obstacle to truth and the affirmation of revolutionary goals than a sympathetic vehicle for them.

In this sense, the recent (at the time of the revolutionary outbreak) propagandistic past of television becomes not just a plausible explanation for the hesitations and understandable mistakes of an institution forced to reform on the fly, in the middle of a crisis; in a shrewd tactical operation, it rapidly achieved the status of retrospective premonition, a sufficient logical explanation that accounts for a televised trajectory marked not so much by naivety or inexperience as by the pursuit of hidden goals – reaching a deal with former communist leaders and representatives of the secret police apparatus eager to retain power after Ceaușescu's fall. In this sense, the highly critical assessment drawn by former Romanian Television Director Valentin Nicolau of the immediate aftermath of the

[306] Peter Gross, *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* (Ames: Iowa University Press, 1996), 18.

revolution within the Television institution proves to be very instructive[307]: in order to summarise his thesis, Nicolau argues that the Romanian Television institution was maintained in a severe state of underfinancing and underperformance, coupled with an unclear legal status, in order to allow for the powers that be to control information. The author contends that '[a] public television that is weak, disorganised, with a financial deficit, is so to the advantage of the political ruling class, which can in this way control it, blackmail it, manipulate it. Interim and instability have been a means to fill in the legislative void'[308]. While the voicing of such dissatisfaction – which clearly stems from a personal, direct engagement with the institution, as well – may be reminiscent of paranoid discourses attempting to explain any social failure by having recourse to conspiracy-like theories, it does point out several shortcomings that the aftermath of the Revolution did not immediately solve.

However, this rhetorical strategy can also be seen as part of a broader attempt by Western neoliberal democracies to assert their supremacy and political hegemony over Eastern European peoples who actually demonstrated their visionary sight by liberating themselves from their despotic rulers, as Boris Buden has amply shown[309]. By presenting a monolithic and catastrophic landscape – according to Peter Gross again, 'overall, Romanian journalism completely disappeared as a profession by the end of the 1970s'[310] – this vision sought, even if unintentionally, to delegitimise and discredit the new institution, suggesting an underlying continuity responsible for the not-so-innocent blunders committed during the revolutionary days. But the causes of this situation are nothing short of simplistic, even simple-minded: Gross claims that, in the years and decades leading to the revolution, the mix of censorship and self-censorship generated the country's catastrophic media condition, although this mechanism was by no means unique to

[307] See Valentin Nicolau, *TVR. Mărire și decădere* [TVR. Rise and Fall] (Bucharest: Nemira, 2009), especially chapter 'Gestiunea publică a televiziunii după 1990' [The Public Management of Television After 1990], 103-113. Nicolau also attempts to explain the dramatic shift in public opinion of the Romanian Television in his aptly titled sub-section 'De la consens national la lipsă de credibilitate' [From National Consensus to Lack of Credibility], 74 and *infra*.

[308] *Ibid*., 103. This contention is also congruent with Dana Mustata's neutral historical overview of the national television in the aftermath of the revolution when, she argues, '[i]ssues of political interferences and a lack of a proper local public criticism maintained the Romanian broadcaster within the political discourse of the communist regime', 'Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism', in Timothy Havens, Anikó Imre and Katalin Lustyik (eds.), *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 60.

[309] Boris Buden, *Zona de trecere. Despre sfarsitul postcomunismului*, trans. Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu (Cluj: Tact, 2012), especially 39-56.

[310] Peter Gross, *Mass Media in Revolution*, *op. cit.*, 16.

Ceaușescu's rule – it had been instituted more crudely as early as the 1950s, with the Soviet-backed rise to power of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and his draconic regime. Nor, as we will have the chance to discuss, was censorship the only factor that television personnel had to manage: conflating it to catastrophic proportions can, on the long term, only mystify a reality of social and political relations. An equally essentialist explanation comes from Michael Shafir, who, when discussing the pre-revolutionary period, attributes the collective national abandonment and obedience not only to external, repressive forces, but to the very nature of the Romanian people: 'he emphasised the lack of a tradition of autonomy in Romanian political culture, as well as the deep-rooted inclination of peasants toward submission, based on resignation and fatalism born of mysticism and Orthodox religion.'[311] Shafir's explanation relies on a generic condescension that tries to explain structural political observations through a metaphysical recourse; like Gross's, it fails to account for the great courage – unique in the region in light of the violent shape it took – demonstrated by the Romanian people, who imposed through their rebellious gesture a dominant image of the revolution.

Similar aspects can be revealed about the functioning of television during the revolution days. Overall, the untrained television staff acted responsibly and rose – despite lacking viable models or precedents and relying on outdated technology – to meet the moment's demands[312]. In this sense, our thesis differs in two respects from the depiction outlined so far. On the one hand, if we have shown interest in those moments of the televised broadcast that deviate from the usual, recurring treatment aligned with the expectations typically delivered by Western television, this is less out of a moralistic impulse to denounce the missteps of a medium newly restored to its full expressive power, and more to underline their remarkable sensible richness – their capacity to present intrinsic aesthetical and political value precisely through deviation from the norm, and to open an alternative path for television as a medium. On the other hand, through the emphasis on the heroic work of the staff, we have maintained the awareness that neither the paradigm of an absolute break from the past nor that of perfect continuity is operational for describing what happened in December 1989; neither hagiography, nor condemnation seem viable as

[311] Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution, op. cit.*, 47.

[312] For a first-hand account from the inside about the sinuous course of events, see Teodor Brateș, *Explozia unei clipe. 22 decembrie 1989, în Studioul 4* [The Explosion of a Moment. December 22nd, 1989, inside Studio 4] (Bucharest: Scripta, 1992). Brateș became one of the most recognised and iconic figures of this revolution, assuming – after a long period of absence – the moderator position in the highly contested space of Studio 4.

methods of describing the television's workings in those days. On the contrary, the adaptation of broadcasts to the new context occurred more intuitively, haltingly, showing great resilience and inventiveness, in an attempt to repurpose, through bricolage and wit, a communist infrastructure onto a reality that defied all preset scenarios.

However, this condescending perspective on Romanian television that we have described earlier – isolated either in a fatalistic binary or in a corrupt form of stagnation – is not solely the preserve of foreign commentators on Romania's situation. In a work of historical analysis of the Romanian Television that includes an element of pro domo argument, TV producer Valentin Nicolau describes the institution during communism in a categorically negative phrase: 'During the communist period, in the Socialist Republic of Romania, television was governmental and party-run, an instrument of propaganda and ideological manipulation.'[313] Nicolau's critical perspective is easy to decode: he presents television's development teleologically, in terms of its lag behind Western broadcasters and audiovisual services, seen as the ideal of properly functioning mass media. In this perspective – which reflects the broader anticommunist stance of mainstream political analysts – the communist period of Romanian television is seen as an analogue to the Communist regime in general: a simple historical aberration placed between the parentheses of the country's democratic destiny, devoid of any intrinsic cultural or institutional value. This vision reduces the entire activity of Romanian Television during the communist period to a single, totalising form of subjugation from ideological control, omitting or minimising the nuances, ambiguities, and even moments of creativity or passive resistance that existed, even within the strict limits imposed by the regime.

Certainly, one could argue that Nicolau is not aiming to produce a rigorous historical account; his goal is rather strategic, more akin to marketing than to critical analysis. On the other hand, precisely because it is so succinct, his account can easily be subsumed into a familiar thesis, one that presents the transition of Romanian Television from a centralised monopoly to the impulses of the free market as an inevitable progress – thus confirming the critical abandonment of its pre-December operational period, an era that remains insufficiently theorised. In fact, what is truly striking is that, with only a few exceptions, theoretical contributions on the subject are virtually absent. All the more

[313] Valentin Nicolau, *TVR. Mărire și decădere*, *op. cit.*, 33.

reason, then, to view the few attempts at theorising the history of television as ideologically charged, even if unintentionally so.

The Romanian Television's History between Critical Invention and Political Control

In his historical work that explores the history of television through a close reading framework, Alexandru Matei attempts from the outset to question, if not disturb, this prejudice from a left-leaning perspective:

> One must not fall into the trap of the cliché that Romanian Television was a cardboard institution during the communist period. For years, television represented, more than a mere echo, an alternative to the official political discourse, at a time when the phrase 'official discourse' actually covered a plurality of controlled registers, references, and styles.[314]

Matei's assertion is welcome, although far from radical. He does not seek to invalidate critiques of Romanian Television's operation during the final years of communism – indeed, the author himself aligns with those critiques: elsewhere, he states that 'between 1973 and 1983, we witness the progressive subjugation of Television to the political – and soon, personal – demands of Ceaușescu.'[315] The year 1973 is a crucial one in the history of Romanian Television, which at that point had reached a peak. Since its introduction in 1955, it had experienced uninterrupted growth, evolving from a 'romantic and rudimentary' stage to establish itself as a vital, modern, and formative public media institution – one that altered the everyday life of an increasingly wide audience, for better or worse. However, it is indeed remarkable that both Matei's survey of Romanian Television and Daniela Mustata's – which is to say, the most important and valid inquiries on this particular topic to ever come out on an indigenous level – posit from the outset the need to provide the reader with an adequate methodological framework that does not replicate Western European assumptions. Speaking on a regional level, Mustata, who has dedicated numerous studies to the question of historical analysis of the Romanian Television, argues that the course of development as well as the political context in which the institution evolved requires an adapted method of investigation:

[314] Alexandru Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, *op. cit.*, 52.
[315] *Ibid*., 38.

> Emerging television histories of Eastern Europe are vulnerable to two potential dangers at the moment. One is to become embedded within taken-for-granted Western conceptual frameworks and rationales, which will fail to account for the historical and political specificities of television in these countries. The second one is to consider television in former Soviet Bloc territories simply in opposition to Western television, which leads to generalizations that are in fact reductive and limiting. Considering former communist television through questions of political control and all its variations (e.g. submissiveness, challenging, circumventing or subverting) implies that complex, dynamic histories are being reduced to and reiterate Cold-War political divisions between the West and the East, privileging yet again a Western-centric historical grasp.[316]

This point is capital for our present research. It is thus required from any analyst that preconceived ideas limiting the action scope of Romanian (even 'communist') Television to 'propaganda' be questioned in light of outdated geo-political patterns. Furthermore, Matei's and Mustata's parallel documentations of the Romanian Television are not exactly definitive, nor do they aim to be. Indeed, both authors are alert to the scarcity of previously-conducted inquiries on this topic, to the rather obscure, hard-to-access sources that are needed to pursue it, and to the relative lack of interest in dealing with television as a medium[317]. It is telling that since their quasi-simultaneous completion almost fifteen years ago, no new historic research was added[318]. Hence the need to extract the Romanian Television from a binary vision which would posit it as a uniform negative to its Western counterparts, but also to engage a process of revalorising the history of this national television in itself. Accordingly, the aim of our research consists of highlighting alternative possibilities against the normative model for this medium, which have been largely crystallised – willingly or not – during the revolutionary days. Largely crystallised, but not at all exclusively: this subaltern tradition of a creative, self-critical, democratic television was by no means the specificity of the sole 'revolutionary' broadcast, even if

[316] Daniela Mustata, 'The Power of Television: Including the Historicizing of the Live Romanian Revolution', unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2011, 3-4. It should be mentioned that Matei's and Mustata's works differ both in tone and in scope: the former privileges close textual analysis and attempts a reconciliation between academic rigour and popular book formats, while the second one, clearly a specialised reading, offers an in-depth structural and historical analysis of Romanian Television resorting to Latour's actor-network theory. Mustata makes a similar case for surpassing a 'politically reductionist' approach filtered through standard notions of political control and state censorship, instead 'point[ing] out…the fact that television should be looked at through looser political filters, at times even abandoning presumptions of relevant East–West differences', 'Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism', *art. cit.*, 48.

[317] A more in-depth discussion of this aspect can be found in the introduction of this research.

[318] With this in mind, local Romanian research within the media studies is hardly sufficient on any given topic, even though one can notice gradual improvements *via* solid partnerships with Western academic institutions in the last years.

during those days, Romanian Television faced a massive reconstruction which in itself was highly stimulating, although it eventually led to mitigated results. The revolutionary broadcast was singular given its intensity and frenzied amount of unprecedented situations it had to deal with. Yet this was not the only moment when Romanian Television attempted to divert state control and to provide its audience with an exigent broadcast. A detailed retracing of its entire history evidently falls beyond the scope of our research: instead, we seek to pose the foundations for a series of case-studies of conscious subversion of televisual norms. This method will allow us to posit in a subsequent chapter that, far from a mostly negative assessment of Romanian Television's workings during the revolution, the broadcast of those days actually imposed a meaningful – if short-lived – critical approach towards the usual aesthetic and political regime of the televisual medium. We argue that the history of Romanian Television is far more complex and equivocal than the prevailing triumphalist West-centred accounts – and that the Romanian Revolution encouraged a full-scale model of a *different* television which otherwise can be traced and documented throughout the history of the medium only through isolated, unrelated, and even arbitrary occurrences.

Conflictual Trajectory: A Brief Overview of the Stages of Development of Romanian Television

We have already pointed at the flourishing communist period of the Romanian Television which reached its apex around the year 1972. Following this upward trend – ever more daily programming, more television sets in Romanian households (in 1967 alone, 147,000 televisions were manufactured), etc. – television reached, in 1973, a daily broadcast total of around ten hours, the maximum figure for the communist period, from which point a steep decline would follow. Matei himself interprets these numbers in terms of a kind of liberalisation by default: 'Censorship played a major role, but at this level of output, lapses were inevitable.'[319] Moreover, and significantly, Matei ends his research not on the eve of the December 1989 Revolution, as one might expect from a history of Romanian Television under communism, but in 1983, for purely pragmatic reasons:

> Given that after 1973 nothing remarkable – ideologically or politically – diverts the course of TVR's history, that all major strategic changes in the field had already taken place, and

[319] *Ibid*., 305.

> that the only unpredictable factor remaining was the personal involvement of the Ceaușescu couple in the institution's functioning (after 1977, even this unknown disappears: everyone clearly knows that their interference is unlimited, that a presidential decision could lead to the complete dismantling of Television), I concluded that by choosing 1983 as the terminus of my investigation, the reader would not be misled.[320]

The historical cut-off chosen by Matei is representative of the idea that from 1983 to the end of 1989, Romanian Television underwent a complete regression – aesthetic, ideological, and technical – making it simply unworthy of critical analysis[321]. Not only, as the analysis concludes, had any degree of unpredictability – generally a crucial stimulus for research – been evacuated in favour of total servitude; not only had the institution's structure and operational mode been fully entrenched, with the end of communism merely worsening and degrading them; but, even more so, in its final years under communism, television abdicated its core missions as an institution of public service [322], becoming a discredited routine in the eyes of the public.

It is worth recalling that, driven by Ceaușescu's self-destructive impulse to repay the country's external debt through drastic energy-saving measures, television broadcasting was reduced in the 1980s to just two hours per day in the evening (Gross mentions three hours), which led to a growing disinterest in this medium – only 22% of people reported watching television regularly[323]. Moreover, TVR 2, launched in 1968 and made a daily channel in 1972 at the peak of Romanian Television's operations, was shut down entirely in 1985 and would only resume broadcasting after the revolution. Yet the situation in terms of public reception has always been contrasted for the Romanian Television. Both Nicolau and Matei & Sorescu-Marinkovic suggest, in their respective studies, that by the year 1965 and the inauguration of Ceaușescu's regime, almost ten years after the advent of television

[320] *Ibid.*, 39.
[321] Among the few extant researches on the topic of *historical* Romanian Television, it is noteworthy that Silvia-Cristina Baumgarten adopts a similar temporal framework, arguing that '[t]his study concludes at the end of the eighth decade [of the 20th century], thus marking what we consider to be the golden era of Romanian Television, an interval which has coincided both with its apogee from a technical and publishing point of view, and with the beginning of its fall prefiguring the disastrous transformation of the eighties', in Silvia-Cristina Baumgarten, *Televiziunea Română sub* Reflector. *Divertisment, propagandă și ideologie în Republica Socialistă România a anilor '70* [Romanian Television in the Spotlight. Entertainment, Propaganda, and Ideology in the Romanian Socialist Republic of the Seventies] (Cluj-Napoca: MEGA, 2023), 8.
[322] For a discussion of the possible engagements between the audience and television as a medium focused on the creation of social cohesion, national identity, and on the dissemination of news, see David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[323] Reported in Valentin Nicolau, *TVR. Mărire și decădere, op. cit.*, 24-25.

in Romania, although 40% of the country's territory was covered by transmission, barely 500.000 subscriptions – or 3% of the total population – could be registered[324]. This, however, was before what is commonly held to be the Romanian Television's 'golden age', in which the institution underwent an important process of technical updates and diversification of programmes[325].

In other words, the peremptory judgments applied to communist-era television through sweeping aphorisms are not necessarily incorrect, but rather incomplete. They may be applicable, at most – and even then, not without rigorous analysis, however tedious it may seem when applied to a seemingly inert and uniform object of study – to the final phase of communist television. But they cannot account for the much more contradictory and less linear evolution of an institution that represented more than just a litmus test of the political regime that sought its total subjugation.

Therefore, our analysis has so far proposed a more attentive rereading of the institution's past, starting from the premises of a more complex media hermeneutics – one that takes into account the material, technological, and aesthetic specificities of television as an apparatus of meaning production. Instead of a unidimensional history of propaganda, we might imagine a stratified history, in which institutional, political, but also aesthetic and technological elements coexist in productive tensions. This approach allows not only a more faithful contextualisation of the revolutionary moment, but also a critical reassessment of the role of television in authoritarian societies – beyond the simplistic dichotomy between 'truth' and 'lies', 'freedom', and 'control'.

It is well-known that, before the actual foundation of the Romanian Television, the medium represented, not unlike the ideal of sound or colour cinema during the silent era, a form of utopia[326]. This was also the case in Romania. Several Romanian contributions on television studies thus quote prominent writers and intellectuals of the 1920s and 30s as anticipating the televisual broadcast: prose writer Mihail Sadoveanu argued in 1926 that

[324] *Ibid.*, 23. Also see Alexandru Matei and Annemarie Sorescu-Marinkovic, 'The exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television and its implications', in *Panoptikum*, no. 20 (27), December 2018, 178. With regard to the effective distribution of this coverage, the two authors additionally point 'a high imbalance between urban and rural regions and between the country's provinces.'
[325] *Idem.* Also see Silvia-Cristina Baumgarten, *Televiziunea Română sub* Reflector, *op. cit*.
[326] For a selection of pioneer theoretical contributions to the beginnings of the cinema, see Daniel Banda and José Moure (eds.), *Le cinéma : Naisance d'un art (1895-1920)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

> soon we will have alongside the radiophonic device the device which will show us images and movement. The thing has already been realised in laboratory. Tomorrow we will have it in front of our eyes, in our room. And images, like sounds, are as immortal when compared to infinity in time and space.[327]

Poet Tudor Arghezi made a similar argument less than six years later, in a markedly lyrical and convoluted phrase: 'as film seeks its voices, the radiophonic seeks images… Spontaneously, as film gets closer to the radiophonic, the radiophonic goes towards film and we will have, in parallel with sound film, filmed music.'[328] Of course, in the absence of a consolidated national cinematographic infrastructure[329] and of its correlative filmic discourse, such intimations towards the possible future of a moving image personal/individual device resemble more a series of anecdotic bursts of incidental visionary qualities than any sort of coherent, coordinated thinking about the properties of the audiovisual medium.[330] Indeed, the theoretical developments in the field of the moving image were erratic at best in the Romanian context of the thirties – while, at the same time, a public service of high definition television was already being instituted in the Great Britain and taken as a reference point by a number of Romanian commentators[331].

Following several punctual and uncoordinated experiences of image transmission before the Second World War[332], the first experimental television transmitter is installed in

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[327] Quoted in Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, *op. cit.*, 50.

[328] Quoted in Pavel Câmpeanu's sociological analysis (written under Ceaușescu and heavily burdened by jargon) of the medium, *Oamenii și televiziunea* [People and Television] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1979), 11.

[329] For an all-encompassing historical analysis of the Romanian national cinema from its beginnings to 1950, see, amongst others, Bujor T. Rîpeanu, *De la „L'Indépendance roumaine" la „Sovromfilm"* (Bucharest: Oscar Print, 2025).

[330] In his very brief overview of the pre-history of television in Romania, Câmpeanu does mention, for the year 1935, the publication of a journalistic article in the *Radio* magazine titled 'Televiziunea ca factor de cultură' [Television as Culture Factor], thus presaging the coagulation of a sociological local interest in television. Even before that, in 1926 and 1928, two important, if rhapsodic, inquiries into the utopian possibilities of 'broadcasting fixed and animated images, at a distance, with the help of electricity', were made by physician George D. Cristescu (associated with the pioneering Laboratory of Acoustics and Optics of Bucharest) and collected in his work *Problema televiziunei*. Halfway between the lonely inventor mythology and the modern community of scientists, Cristescu attempted to design an apparatus that was capable of 'decomposing the image in a tenth of a second at the most, changing into a band of light with varying intensity, and then another [apparatus] which can realise the inverted operation with the same velocity', in *Problema televiziunei* (Bucharest: Tipografia I. Copuzeanu, 1928), 26. This argument is quoted, alongside a comprehensive overview of Cristescu's claims and ambitions, in Octavian Baltag, 'Din istoria televiziunii în România. Priorități internaționale', *Buletinul Muzeului Științei și Tehnicii 'Ștefan Procopiu' Iași*, Anul 8, no. 8, 2014, 106.

[331] For brief comparisons between the British and the Romanian Television case studies, see Pavel Câmpeanu, *Oamenii și televiziunea*, *op. cit.*, 9-10, and Valentin Nicolau, *TVR. Mărire și decădere*, *op. cit.* For a general discussion of the European post-war broadcasting landscape, see Burton Paulu, *Radio and Television Broadcasting on the European Continent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967).

[332] On these experiments, both theoretical and practical, see Octavian Baltag, *op. cit.*

Bucharest in 1955, while the first broadcast will take place on December 31st, 1956. These landmarks already belong to the Romanian communist era, and thus fall under the 1949 decree postulating 'a broadcasting monopoly to a state enterprise directly controlled by the government', per Paulu[333]. Yet the situation was not so clear-cut in the form of a reclusion from any Western cooperation. Symbolically, the first live emission of the Romanian Television takes place in February 1957, during a recital by French star Yves Montand[334]. On the other hand, in the initial years of its functioning, television belonged to the same regulating organism as radio, together forming the 'Romanian Radiotelevision' [Radioteleviziunea Română][335]. Yet according to historian Daniela Mustata, although under the government's supervision, this configuration allowed for some manoeuvring space for the broadcasting institution, as its control was mediated by a special organism, the Radio and Television Committee of the Council of Ministers. It is only later on, starting in March 1971, that this intermediate regulating organism will be transformed in the National Council of Romanian Radio and Television, directly responsible towards the Party's Central Committee. The oblique relation between the Radiotelevision institution and the political power was now becoming a rapport of direct subordination.

This positioning under the direct *tutelle* of the political authorities emphasises the beginning of a new stage in the history of Romanian Television. Indeed, according to Mustata, '[t]he initial placement of *Radioteleviziune* under the Radio and Television Committee of the Council of Ministers – a government apparatus – marked the most decentralized phase of the broadcasting institution in Romania.'[336] This period of about fifteen years coincided with a so-called golden age for television: not only, as we have seen, the number of broadcasting hours kept on increasing, but the technical capital of the institution was reinforced, while the symbolic importance of the medium as a decisive agent – 'a social and political power which was [at this point] impossible to neglect.'[337] Analysing the multitude of factors that led to this situation falls beyond the scope of our dissertation, yet we could point out a favourable mix of professional personnel that was initially formed in the radio branch of the newly founded Radiotelevision, a climate of relative social stability, a *bon enfant* atmosphere within the institution, as well as a momentary lack of

[333] Burton Paulu, *Radio and Television, op. cit.*, 57.
[334] For a development of these experiences, see Pavel Câmpeanu, *Oamenii și televiziunea*, 12.
[335] This historical overview is largely based on Dana Mustata's comprehensive account of the stages of development of the Romanian Television, in 'The Power of Television', *op.cit.*, 62-65.
[336] *Ibid*., 64.
[337] Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, 53.

sustained interest from the political factor, given the still hesitant and restrained impact of television. In this sense, Matei summarises this positive period by arguing that

> during this period of armistice between social and ideological representations voluntarily formulated and prescribed by the political power and the representations which were made and broadcast by professionals of the audiovisual press according to their own vision, knowledge, and convictions, Romanian Television grows, conquers media space and becomes a social phenomenon. Alongside several other public arts – literature, pop music, and film – Romanian Television knows after 1965, for several years, a development that is unique in its history before December 1989 and a public authority that it will never regain subsequently, not even after December 22nd, 1989.[338]

The evident accelerated success that television enjoyed among audiences is more than an empirical observation, as it was quickly corroborated by the communist power itself. Matei quotes Dumitru Popescu, nicknamed 'Dumnezeu' [God], the chief officer responsible of the propaganda department under Ceaușescu, as saying:

> Television…is the type of press with the highest circulation in Romania. Judging by the 1,3 million subscribers [in March 1970], we can surmise that the programmes are being watched each night by circa 5-6 million citizens. This is a colossal audience… Thanks to television we can realise the unmediated presence of society – with its huge and inexhaustible problematics – in the foyer of the citizen, in the private life of any individual.[339]

It is no coincidence that such a remark was closely followed by a reinforcing of the political control on the television organism. Indeed, the shifting status of television describes a stabilisation following a series of initial explorations, culminating in a total loss of agency. Mustata proposes a classification for this three-part trajectory by advancing 'institutional regimes: the *regime of experimental visions*, the *regime of hegemonic tensions* and the *dictatorial regime*.[340]' This is also congruent with the larger political plan of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was enjoying at that time a favourable consensual opinion as an autonomous leader within Eastern Europe, seeking to confirm his independence from the Soviet Union and the decisions of his servile predecessor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. In order to achieve his goal, television is naturally seen as a fundamental channel of propagating the ideology and vision of the national leader, an amplifying *caisse de*

[338] *Ibid*., 67.
[339] Quoted in Matei, *ibid*., 53-54.
[340] Mustata, 'The Power of Television', 64.

resonance which can help the establishment of a new age of submission. According to Mustata, this historical moment sees the correlative diminishing autonomy of the Romanian Television; following a period of liberalisation, the institution undergoes a steady process of centralisation which 'peaked in the beginning of the 1980s when Ceaușescu's personality cult crystallised.'[341], thus leading to a so-called dictatorial regime for television, in a dire national context marked by steep economic decline and the correlative reinforcement of Ceaușescu's personality cult.[342] Until that decade – we remember that Matei opted for concluding his investigation in the year 1983 –, the institution still aspires to remain in contact with the latest technological tendencies. As we have noted during our commentary of the Romanian Revolution images, references to the aged, inadequate technology that the television personnel had to work with were abundant. However, this was not always the case. As the visit of Burton Paulu, writer, in 1974, of *Radio and Television Broadcasting in Eastern Europe*, amply demonstrates, the facilities of the Romanian Television institution were up to date with contemporary standards at the beginning of the 1970s. Indeed, at that moment, the construction of the new television site in an upscale neighbourhood of Bucharest – precisely the buildings that were one of the most contested sites of the 1989 revolution and which still function as the location of present-day Romanian National Television – had just been finalised (in 1972), having taken around six years to complete. Paulu explains that the new centre for television has been equipped with Western facilities.

Indeed, as Mustata explains in the first attempt of a technological history of the Romanian Television, even during the communist regime (and, most strikingly, even during Gheorghiu-Dej's highly repressive rule) the institution had found itself actively approaching Western telecommunication industries and trying to secure commercial partnerships. This resulted in a prolonged relation of dialogue and unilateral imports, if not dependency on Western materials and technological expertise. This point in itself is more than sufficient for a refutation of simplistic claims of sheer antagonism between Eastern European televisions and their Western counterparts. Throughout the first decades of functioning under the communist regime, it appears as evident that the decision-taking committee of the institution, as well as the political power at large, were willing to engage

[341] *Idem.*
[342] For a more detailed discussion of the 'dictatorial regime', see Mustata, *ibid*., 77-80.

in an intense process of alignment with Western technical standards[343]. (The process would be continued during Ceaușescu's politics of distancing from the spheres of influence of the Soviet Union, then ultimately halted.) Of course, this would not have been possible without the emergence of several figures capable of achieving that task of mediation between Romania's interests and the West. One such figure is, according to Mustata, Silviu Brucan, appointed vice-president of Romanian Television in 1962[344]. Constructed from various sources – mainly first-hand accounts from colleagues and collaborators, as well as a short first-person memoir –, Brucan's portrait emphasises the various skills needed to efficiently navigate geopolitical waters as decision maker for the television institution. Transiting between the function of an apparatchik and that of a clever negotiator, Brucan has initiated a number of significant evolutions, both technical and ideological, for the public television. Mustata argues that, '[a]ppointed as president of television due to his friendship with Gheorghiu-Dej, but also for his professional experiences in the West and his opening towards American television, Silviu Brucan was nothing like the man in the service of state power.[345]' On the contrary: finding himself in charge of a still nascent public service, he understood the possibilities of growth that were reachable; he thus became the creator of a consolidated model of television. This was not just a matter of personal intuition; after a

[343] As Mustata shows extensively, this process is by no means punctual, but rather covers most of the interval between the creation of the television public service and the last years of Ceaușescu's reign: 'two outside broadcasting (OB) vans imported from Poland between 1970-1972 and used for transmissions of small importance, 4 OB vans manufactured in Romania between 1979-1981, but improved with equipment imported from Philips Netherlands (they were used for complex propaganda broadcasts, such as the patriotic music festival *Cantarea Romaniei* transmitted from different cities in the country). The list also mentioned: 3 OB [outside broadcasting] vans imported between 1975-1980 from Bosch West Germany and RCA USA, which were used for live broadcasts and recordings of official events of Communist Party officials. Electronic recordings were performed with thirteen magnetoscopes and cassette players acquired between 1969- 1979 from Ampex USA and Sony Japan. For post-production of presidential broadcasts, Romanian television used equipment imported in 1975-1979 from the West German company Arnold Richter. For post-production of other material, the equipment used was acquired between 1960-1974 from Bolex - Switzerland, ARRI and Steinbeck West Germany. In the transmission sector, the telecinematographic installations were acquired in the late 60"s-early 70"s from Bosch West Germany, Ampex USA, Sony Japan and Thomson France; newer equipment was acquired between 1983-1985 from Bosch and Rank England.', in *The Power of Television*, *op. cit.*, 32. Furthermore, as it turns out, the collaboration between Philips, a pioneering Dutch company in the field of telecommunications, and the Romanian state vastly precedes the advent of the communist regime, since even during the individual experiences of the 1930s they are shown to be present in Bucharest, see Sonja de Leeuw, *De man achter het scherm. De Televisie van Erik de Vries* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008). Philips also directly participated in the acquisition and development of colour broadcast technology by the Romanian Television.

[344] We have already seen that, once belonging to the close circle of the Ceaușescu apparatus, Brucan (1916-2006) will fall from grace with the regime, even signing, in March 1989, the famous 'Letter of the Six', a severe critique of the Ceaușescu administration that was released to the public by the BBC and Radio Free Europe. A highly controversial figure, he will then prove himself instrumental in the crucial first hours of the revolution, steering its course towards the creation of the FSN, the National Salvation Front which soon after assumed the governing of the country.

[345] Mustata, *The Power of Television*, *op. cit.*, 66.

stint as Romanian ambassador in the US, Brucan had already acquired the skills to be fluent in the English language, which he amply used in his new capacity. According to staff at BBC, Brucan received very favourable reviews while on a three-week working trip at the British institution in December 1964. He was known for his seriousness, diligently watching BBC programmes and laying the foundation for several commercial partnerships.[346] We must, however, emphasise that Brucan was merely an active exponent of a far more general tendency within the Romanian Television, willing – at this moment in its history – to engage in all sorts of activities of mass professionalisation of its personnel and even openness and transparency towards its Western counterparts[347].

Ultimately, Brucan quit his position upon the beginning of Ceaușescu's reign, yet the tendencies he helped reinforce were continued by his successors, especially Tudor Vornicu and Octavian Paler, the former a *touche-à-tout* with an overarching curiosity, the latter an intellectual, both of them having at that moment just returned from their diplomatic missions from France and Italy, respectively[348]. In the beginning of the 1960s, Mustata argues, Romanian Television 'was driven by professional relations (which also included transnational exchanges), rather than by political relations.'[349] This becomes all the more apparent in the overall strategy of the television institution – or rather in the lack thereof[350]. Having started broadcasting only a few years before, it was still trying to acquire the necessary equipment for ensuring adequate transmissions. In this context, adopting a coherent ideological position could only come in second place. Following Brucan's pioneering transnational exchanges, Vornicu and Paler would accomplish the transformation of the Romanian Television into a fully professionalised institution. It is during their mandate that the programmes will reach a degree of richness never equalled in communist times. Yet one must remember that the relative young age of the institution and

[346] On the agreements between the BBC and the Romanian Television, see Musata, 67 and beyond.
[347] According to Paulu, these collaborations included foreign footage shot on Romanian territory and cross-broadcasting: 'In 1963 camera teams from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Japan, and West Germany came to Rumania (sic) to make films and more recently Rumania drew up a television film exchange agreement with the United Kingdom… By 1964 Rumania was exchanging broadcasts with sixtyfive countries in all parts of the world, and on July 4, 1965, Rumanian television, under the terms of an agreement with the United States, broadcast a film about the music camp at Interlaken, Michigan, which was supplied by tlie United States government.', in *Radio and Television Broadcasting on the European Continent*, *op. cit.*, 137.
[348] After the revolution, Paler would eventually become a revered actor of the Romanian civil society and an appreciated, if derided for his arguably self-help tones, intellectual and writer.
[349] *Ibid*., 68.
[350] In a stark contrast with the habitual black-and-white, condescending portrayals of institutional policy making during communist times, Matei argues that 'The social agenda of the Romanian Television of the 1960s is free of dominant ideological accents and, hence, of any political and ideological direction', in *O tribună captivantă*, 87.

the overall liberalisation of Romanian society under Ceaușescu contributed to this reality of unexpected creative freedom. This period coincides with what Mustata terms 'the regime of experimental visions', a highly significant concept characterised by a 'collective exploration of a new medium' [351]. This idea of an 'exploration – indeed a utopian context – posits this initial period as one marked by trial-and-error experiences, with the main mission of television still debatable, not yet subordinated and diminished, reduced to the status of an ideological amplifier. As Mustata argues elsewhere, 'in the age of scarcity, television had yet to claim its identity, form and social role.'[352]

Although posterity has judged Vornicu's (1926-1989) legacy with ambivalence[353], the programme director undoubtedly left a solid mark on the history of the Romanian Television, actually highlighting some of the limits and possibilities of the still young medium. Listing and analysing his various inputs as a programme maker for the television is beyond the scope of this survey. Suffice to say that some of the formats he encouraged, like the investigation reportages *Transfocator* and *Reflector* constitute even today deontological standards for a socially-motivated television show; their main team (Carmen Dumitrescu[354], Stefan Dumitru etc.) can be said to have done a valuable work of social input. These kinds of programmes – to which we can add titles like *Telecronica economica* or *Pentru noi, femeile*) – not only kept the public institution in line with contemporary realities ranging from the construction of new dormitory neighbourhoods to the traffic situation, but they also allowed, during the sixties, for the voicing of acute social critique[355]. In this sense, one can see the realisation of such social investigations via the medium of television, immensely successful audience-wise as they were, as indicative of both an

[351] For a discussion of Mustata's understanding of the term, see 'The Power of Television', *op. cit.*, 64-71.
[352] Dana Mustata, "Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism, *art. cit.*, 48.
[353] On Vornicu's shady past as a Securitate informer, see for example *Cațavencii* 'Tovarășul Tudor, mare Vornic al Securității', a satirical article tendentiously linking his capabilities as a TV investigator with those of a Securitate officer. Accessible here: https://www.catavencii.ro/tovarasul-tudor-marele-vornic-al-securitatii/, July 12th, 2023. Date accessed: 02. 08. 2025.
[354] In communist Romania, she was close to a star status: 'Carmen Dumitrescu remains the best-known figure of the incisive, nagging for the interviewee, reporter of the era', in Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, *op. cit.*, 388.
[355] In his study *O tribună captivantă*, Matei actually details a series of such instances in which the show managed to allow for unscripted reactions from those who were interviewed. Not only did such reactions occur in the moment of shooting, but they were tolerated and integrated in the final edited version, thus leading to a situation of veritable self-critique. The joking, ironic tone of the reportage did not shatter this impression. (Matei's research is particularly useful given the close analysis procedure he applied to an otherwise poorly analysed footage.) One can measure the impact of such moments – which were more than mere subversive hints – by watching several important Romanian arthouse films of the 1980s (when censorship was profoundly reinforced), most notably *Proba de microfon* (Mircea Daneliuc, 1980), in which the main character, played by the director himself, is a cameraman working for the national television on investigation shows dealing with public delinquency. The take on the severely punishing national politics for such minor offenses as those discussed in the film – speeding, etc. – is overtly critical.

apparent lack of strictness from the political authorities at that time, surprisingly willing to engage in a process of self-critique and even satire, and the flexibility of the televisual format itself, which was not yet fully subordinated to the political agent.

Only a few years later, however, plans were being made for a coordinated strategy of control and (self-)censorship to be applied in contexts of unanticipated social disturbances. These plans were still operational during the 1989 revolution, and their almost ridiculous rigidity – which only made them more obvious to a critical eye, easily uncovering the sheer reality they were desperately trying to mask – became fully apparent during Ceaușescu's ill-fated balcony speech on December 22nd, 1989, as emphasised by Farocki and Ujică's commentary in their found footage documentary *Videograms of a revolution*[356]. As such, this discussion of the televisual beginnings and golden age in Romania is by no means abstract when ultimately tackling the revolution; on the contrary, it deeply resonates as valuable indication for a medium that was posited as crystalliser of social realities, thus being called to mediate between the power and the people. By November 1975, the Securitate had drafted a series of control measures over live broadcasting, thus fully regularising the response to a hypothetical situation which would eventually occur in a dramatic fashion in December 1989. According to Mustata, a roundtable that was specially organised for circumscribing this matter on November 18th, 1975 actually debated over, and thematised, the most efficient ways for the political factor to interfere with live television. Mustata argues that, by enshrining this possibility of resorting to harsh, explicit censorship measures against live televisual footage as a viable scenario, the Romanian politicians implicitly recognised 'the status of live broadcasting infrastructures as a central actor in the power relations surrounding Romanian television.'[357] The growing Party supervision, coupled with a general social repression,

[356] In her survey of the Romanian Television, Mustata argues that the convenient explanation of technical fallacies of the material was still being brought up in post-communist times, reminiscent in this sense of political intrusion over the broadcast – another instance of a modus operandi that was specific to television under Ceaușescu's reign but was carried on by inertia for many years after his fall. See Mustata, *The Power of Television*, *op. cit.*, esp. 42-43.

[357] *Ibid*., 48. In her overview, Mustata offers a comprehensive account of the measures that were being decided upon at that moment. These range from strict indications given to cameramen in order to detour the cameras from the main point of attention to the presence, in the OB van, of a state-approved editor in charge of taking control of the situation if needed. It also posits, within such a crisis scenario, the centrality of the centre for distribution and control, from where adequate still images could be provided instead of unsatisfactory live material. See Mustata, *op. cit.*, 48-49. This discussion which took place in 1975 is a clear indicator of the growing social and political importance of Romanian television: the political power shows signs of both weariness and opportunism with regard to the audiovisual medium, understood as a vehicle for propaganda which needed to be strictly handled according to clear guidelines.

marks a significant change in the course of Romanian television, from a status of relative autonomy towards what Matei deems 'the most absurd mass-media institution in Europe.'[358] It is this very recent memory – from the vantage point of December 1989 – of a powerless media actor subservient to the Party ideology in general and to the personality cult of its leader in particular that will sharply influence the public conscience during the revolution in creating a monolithic image for this institution. Hence, both the explosion of joy in the miraculous transformation of the television headquarters in the main catalyser for popular uprising and its subsequent – and no less brutal – fall from grace, uncovered as a so-called counter-revolutionary agent of manipulation, have been largely predicated on a period of televisual impossibility. In the last years of Ceaușescu's reign, television was reduced to a declarative and ornamental function.

Although the post-revolutionary period surpasses the scope of our general theme, it is important to note several aspects pertaining to the functioning mode of the Romanian Television institution in order to better frame our working hypothesis. Once again, this hypothesis postulates the revolutionary broadcast – and the *de facto* establishment of the Romanian *Free* Television – as a short-lived period of media invention and experiment, and thus requires additional precisions on how this 'parenthesis' closed once again as soon as the new political order was installed firmly in place.

The post-communist stage of the Romanian Television's evolution is commonly understood within a larger, regional phase of transnational efforts with regard to European integration. In this sense, the politics of the institution can be seen to resume an approach that has been utilised in what Mustata termed, following John Ellis, 'the scarcity era'. The results, in this second, post-revolutionary stage, proved mitigated. On the one hand, the television was forced to handle what Valentin Nicolau considers 'a lack of journalistic professionalism' which became apparent as soon as the 'objective necessity for media to reflect other realities than the Revolution, the Ceaușescu family, and the past' was being felt by the population.[359] Indeed, the institution found itself in a dire situation from a technical point of view, forced to utilise heavily outdated equipment. On the other hand, to aggravate matters, the legal status of the institution remained unclear for a very long period of time. While a new, updated Audiovisual Law was promulgated rather early on, in 1992 – second only to the Czech Republic among all the countries in the region –, the lack of an

[358] Alexandru Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, *op. cit.*, 53.
[359] Valentin Nicolau, *TVR. Mărire și decădere*, *op. cit.*, 75.

adequate legislative frame for the public institution meant that it continued to function in a legal void ('through a special decree' per official formulations[360]) up until 1994. Yet the Audiovisual Law liberalised the televisual communication market, signalling *de facto* the advent of an era of varied offerings and competition for audiences and contents.[361] Nicolau argues that this indeterminacy was deliberate, part of a plan by the political power to benefit from the confusion and impose its will over the television institution.

The television institution itself was scrambling to obtain a more favourable view among the masses, and was thus appealing to Western counterparts, aiming to diversify its broadcast according to transnational tastes.[362] This also meant that the national broadcast itself, as Nicolau suggested, became redundant, unable to keep the pace with the events of the local political landscape, improvising and adopting hasty solutions in order to remain relevant. This interim climate became very transparent in June 1990, during the *Mineriada*[363], with the live broadcasting playing once again a central role in the international dissemination of the events, 'alerting [the world] to the country's democratic handicaps.'[364]

While the post-communist status of public Romanian television, leading to the integration within a formatted contemporary media landscape of immediate consume and infinite offerings, goes beyond the scope of our discussion, it was important, for the sake of our historical media overview, to mention several shortcomings which have been maintained from the communist period, even worsening as the transition to democracy proved shallow and problematic. The period of experiment that the Revolution seemed to encourage was once again sealed, as the Romanian Television was grappling with its past, with its present lamentable state, and seeking a new identity for a revitalised European broadcasting landscape.

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[360] *Ibid*., 104.
[361] *Idem.* Nicolau also cites the incipient inauguration of a private channel by the exiled dissident and presidential candidate Ion Rațiu, who argued that 'the idea of an audiovisual 'alternative' became, unsystematically, empirically, even as an utopia, the principal battle of those that are unsatisfied by the Ratiotelevision institution.'
[362] See Mustata, 'Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism', *art. cit.*, 60-61.
[363] A peaceful protest in Bucharest led by the civil society was severely repressed when then-president Ion Iliescu ordered the intervention of miners from Valea Jiului. For a recent historical account of the event, see Cătălin Ranco Pițu, *Mineriada s-a născut la Revoluție* [Mineriada Was Born during the Revolution] (Bucharest: Litera, 2025).
[364] Mustata, *art. cit.*, *idem.*

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to provide a brief, transversal history of Romanian Television during communist times, prior to the outbreak of the revolution. It followed Daniela Mustata chronological taxonomy: the *regime of experimental visions*, the *regime of hegemonic tensions*, and the *dictatorial regime* in outlining a historical trajectory that was far from being without contradictions[365]. While an in-depth discussion of the three phases was beyond the scope of our research, particular emphasis was placed on the first period, which historians agree on viewing as both matrix for the years that followed, but also an important source of collective experiments and explorations within a nascent audiovisual medium, under the guidance of several important figures bridging the political and the creative factors. Focusing on this early period in Romanian television's history was essential for a number of reasons: firstly, since those first years of functioning inevitably established a framework, a referential model which allows for comparative analysis with the many subsequent changes brought to the institution; secondly, because those years are unanimously perceived nowadays – after multiple televisual experiences in both communist and post-communist times – as a positive example of the creative and (self-)critical capacities of the medium, even (or especially) under the communist regime; and thirdly – and most importantly for our overarching discussion – since those years witnessed the complex establishment of clear-cut formats from scratch, thus inevitably taking on the allure of experiments. They represent a reservoir of possibilities, in which a social agenda could be juxtaposed to local entertainment, the medium allowing for the flourishing of surprising ideas. Given the context, television became experimental by virtue of its yet fragile history: the medium itself was unregulated, still deprived of its mannerisms, norms and future pressures. We should however be careful not to exaggerate the stake of such experiments, conflating them to the status of dissent: if a margin of movement was indeed allowed for by either the lack of interest from the political factor or the willingness of the personnel to test the limits of the medium (or both, at least during the first years of its history), they were less the expression of a conscious attitude against the regime, and more

[365] For a similar approach, see Alexandru Matei and Annemarie Sorescu-Marinkovic, 'The exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television and its implications', *art. cit.* The two authors divide a four-stages taxonomy for ascribing the evolution ('or, more precisely, *in*volution') of the television institution in communist Romania: "1) the romantic phase (1958-1965), characterized by rarity, experiments and shows; 2) the expansion phase (1965-1973), marked by socialization, everyday life, mass culture; 3) the phase of compromise (1974-1982), where ideology and entertainment were in a fragile balance; and 4) the agony phase (1983-1989), marked by the ubiquity of Ceaușescu's personality cult, where we can only speak about TVR survival or, with maybe a more apt metaphor, hibernation', 187-188. Silvia-Cristina Baumgarten also builds upon this classification in her 'Introducere', in *Televiziunea Română sub* Reflector, *op. cit.*, 9.

of a playful, indeed pioneering sensibility acting in a contained audiovisual basin. Quickly after that basin started spilling – that is, the television became impactful on social trends and attitudes, it was heavily restricted and politically instrumentalised.

We described the alternative history of television by providing instances from an interconnected televisual history – both technological, social, and formal. We believe that, in the absence of any of these components, the discussion runs the risk of mystification. Resorting to such an interdisciplinary framework was pertinent since one of the main aims for dwelling on such a large historical topic – within a research that is largely concerned with the aesthetics of media reportage during a very precise historical event – was precisely proving that the Romanian television absolutely did not act in a geo-political vacuum, if not downright opposition towards its Western counterparts. On the contrary, the foundation and initial transformations of the institution – even going to the end of the 1970s – are the result of a series of partnerships and consistent collaborations with Western televisions and telecommunication companies, such as Philips, longstanding provider of equipment for the Romanian television. Indeed, the reputation of the Romanian Television is based on a truncated vision of its sinuous history, if not on a balkanist misunderstanding. It is a commonplace tendency to reduce all of its activities to the purely negative status that the institution had achieved during the last years before Ceaușescu's fall, when it had effectively been diminished to a mock institution and a powerless celebratory showcase for the Party and its leader.

For the purposes of our research, the term 'experimental' used by Mustata is highly symptomatic and deserves far more consideration. Before consolidating into its normal rhythm, television evolved into a multiplicity of unorganised models; thus, its eventual course is the result of both arbitrary decisions and conforming to hegemonic models. This dissertation seeks to retrieve instances when precisely that hegemony was contested, by choice or by accident. The *regime of experimental visions* creates a precedent for the acute crisis that the institution had to negotiate in a very tight timeframe during December 1989.

Chapter 5. Analysing the Trademark Images of the Romanian Revolution

Considerations on the Available Footage and the Romanian Exceptionalism

Thus far, this study has sought to understand the persistent reliance on audiovisual representation by both participants in, and commentators on, the Romanian Revolution. In the previous chapter, this phenomenon has been connected to a broader Western intellectual tradition which assumes an intrinsic link between visual imagery and the authenticity of the reality it depicts[366]. It is now essential to situate this historical event within its immediate media context: on the one hand, the global democratisation of satellite television; on the other hand, the first moments of a national democratic usage of the television medium. As we have implied, the specific emphasis (both within live commentary and retrospective contributions) on imagery when dealing with the Romanian Revolution reflects a subconscious prioritisation of visual perception as a primary channel for processing information and, at the same time, for generating significant impact on the audience[367]. However, it is crucial to account for the alignment between Romania's specific socio-political conditions and the global media landscape of the late 1980s.

This chapter aims to concretely apply the already devised framework of the trademark image to the actual televisual footage recorded and largely broadcast during the Romanian Revolution. While the separation between trademark images and counter-images (to be analysed in the following chapter) is partly conventional and ultimately empirical, essentially based on the retrospective fortune that the former ones enjoyed within mainstream representations in favour of the latter ones, we argue that such a clear, almost binary disposition serves to define different regimes of visibility and different narratives for one and the same event. The pedagogical charge of our classification thus confronts a hegemonic optic of the event with a subterranean potentiality, a negative face that becomes

[366] Needless to restate, that link between photography and reality has been progressively disrupted in the past three decades, with the arrival of video, digital, and AI-generated images. In this sense, the Romanian Revolution as an object of media history scrutiny is pertinent since it sits at a significant historical junction that saw the gradual, if not brutal, reduction of the indexical paradigm in the production of images.

[367] For a developed discussion on the prominent role of visual stimuli in human perception, see Jacques Aumont, *The Image*, trans. Claire Pajackowska (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), especially chapter 'The Main Approaches to Visual Perception', 32-36. This being said, with only a few exceptions, we chose to focus our attention to television since, compared with written or audio press, the audiovisual treatment of the Romanian Revolution thematised ontological questions of visibility beyond the norms of the medium. An analysis of how the French written media have dealt with the Romanian Revolution can be found in Ioan Suhov, *La diffusion par la presse française de la revolution roumaine de 1989 : Enquête sur une surmédiatisation atypique*, unpublished Master's Thesis, Université Paris 8 Vincennes–Saint-Denis, 2022.

evocative of the limitations and alternative possibilities contained in the televisual medium. This is not to say, of course, that trademark images are simply less interesting for analysis by virtue of their well-known posterity. Nor do they always construct a different history of the event than other, previously unseen materials recorded by television. On the contrary: the interplay between emblematic and confusing, obscure imagery is what gives the revolution its specific audiovisual texture. We are not aiming, in this sense, to separate what originally came across as imbricated, but to provide multiple crystallisations of this imbrication wherever possible. Ultimately, by recounting two times the same 'story', we aim to pave the way for an analytic process which engages notion of incompleteness and sketch to present plural views on history and favour inclusive perspectives that remain attentive to the politically-driven mechanism of occluding some realities in order to privilege others. As such, our hypothesis may serve in the future for other case studies in which the visibility of a historical event has been actively constructed by both spontaneous and calculated media interventions[368].

The quasi-visionary terminology employed by Serge Daney in his seminal article further underscores the confluence of factors that heralded a new era in television broadcasting, particularly the unprecedented real-time mediation of historical events. Daney observed that 'while it was clear that information was now in the domain of television, it had not – in Europe, at least – had a real baptism of fire. It took Tiananmen and especially the events at the end of 1989 (the Iron Curtain was cracked, and the Berlin Wall was torn down) for it to be tested for the first time.'[369] Daney's observation is indicative of the desire to situate the Romanian Revolution within a larger historical environment, marking television's emergence as a central medium for witnessing and legitimising political upheaval in what was a regional, if not a global, shift.

Other commentators similarly highlight the temporal convergence of the revolution with broader historical and cultural dynamics. The global dissemination of the revolution via satellite relay, amplified by its coincidence with Christmas, heightened its emotional resonance and symbolic power. As one analysis by Peter Siani-Davies notes:

> Through international relay images of Romanian Revolution were spread to the four corners of the globe with the fact that it coincided with Christmas apparently heightening its appeal. The starkly black and white picture of a victorious people overthrowing the most iniquitous

[368] The potential existence of such a historical continuity was demonstrated by Dork Zabunyan in his *L'insistance des luttes, op. cit.*, in which several remarks on the Romanian Revolution were updated in order to critically approach the popular revolts commonly known as the Arab Spring in 2011.
[369] Serge Daney, 'Roumanie, année zero', 84.

of dictators and, then, securing a hard fought victory against his evil henchmen played to the emotions and hearts of a watching world.[370]

According to Siani-Davies, this particular timing occurrence contributed to shaping both the domestic and international perceptions of the revolution. While such justifiable, yet purely empirical, explanations may challenge the ambient enthusiasm of what Ruxandra Cesereanu identifies as the 'purist' interpreters of the Romanian Revolution[371] – those willing to accept unquestioned its entirely spontaneous nature –, this does not amount to a denial of the uprising's legitimacy or a cynical critique of its essence. Instead, these observations seek to elucidate the ideological conditions that made the enduring legacy of the revolution possible, both as a media spectacle and as a noteworthy historical event[372]. In fact, as we have briefly touched upon in a previous chapter, Romania came to represent, by the force of things, a fertile exploratory ground in relation to a worldwide interconnected communications environment brought about by satellite television and its structural shift towards an economy of commodity production[373]. The major interest elicited by the Romanian case is empirically explainable both by the master narrative of the end-of-communism, since the Romanian Revolution took place in the continuity of other similar, if less contentious, regional events, and by Romania's exceptionalism as a severely repressed nation that fuelled speculations. This exceptionalism[374] has conditioned both audience's response to the Romanian crisis, and the actual handling of the audiovisual production from the moment when the actors involved understood the necessity to expose their cause internationally. Furthermore, the fact that the event ended up being mainly relayed on television – a medium that had not played any significant role in the Romanian people's information circuits in the previous years, as it was reduced to a propaganda vehicle – occasioned a transformation that was deeply emblematic, announcing a potentially larger media paradigm.

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[370] Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of 1989: Myth and Reality – Myth or Reality?* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2016), 95.
[371] Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89*, *op. cit.*
[372] It should be clear by now, *une fois pour toutes*, that the heroic nature of the event – as seen both through individual and collective acts – is not meant to be questioned or relativised. Potential relevant doubts may be raised, however, regarding its media coverage – and the worldwide success it encountered, which is telling for the overall ideological architecture of satellite television.
[373] Nicholas Garnham makes several important claims on this topic in his *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: SAGE, 1990).
[374] To be clear, we use this term in a rather concrete way, to differentiate the bloody events in Romania from smoother transitions from communism to capitalism elsewhere in the region, without any larger ideological agendas behind, such as Lucian Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* [Why Is Romania Different?] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012), which has imposed a subtly nationalistic and essentialist take on Romania's national destiny.

These interconnected factors collectively contributed to the elevated status in the global imaginary of the Romanian Revolution, ensuring its continued prominence as both a mediated event and a defining historical moment, for causes which are distinct, yet interdependent. This brief categorisation serves an additional purpose within the scope of our inquiry: it provides the basis for a focused textual and visual analysis of specific data – namely, the footage disseminated by Romanian television during the revolution. Through this approach, aesthetic analysis will be intrinsically linked to, and indeed made possible by, an overarching ideological framework. As outlined in the introduction, the manner in which Romanian and international – mostly French – TV channels chose to depict the situation proves telling for a larger discussion of the post/self-colonising European landscape. Indeed, as Siani-Davies suggests,

> The visual images produced worldwide interest in Romania and a tremendous sympathy which was afterwards cemented by poignant tales of appalling hardship…The heroic image of the revolution, as it was portrayed on the TV, and these feelings of condolence for a country that had experienced so much pain the past fused to produce perhaps rather excessive expectations of the new regime on the part of the outside world.[375]

While Siani-Davies' analysis remains cogent, our perspective departs from his by arguing that the so-called 'heroic images' – which we propose to reconceptualise as trademark images – exerted influence not merely in the post-revolutionary aftermath or in shaping international perceptions of Romania's political transition. Rather, these images operated through self-legitimating narrative mechanisms that profoundly shaped the revolution as it was unfolding. Crucially, this imagery was not mediated through retrospective interpretation alone; it was experienced in real time by participants, constituting both a register of perception and an active force in the configuration of the events themselves. Emerging in the very midst of revolutionary temporality, these images were not only products of the revolution but also agents in its formation. We have already seen the importance of addressing a fundamental question: What does a trademark image of the Romanian Revolution imply or depict, and what kind of regime of visibility does it activate? Answering this question requires a sustained interrogation of how these materials were organised, curated, and presented.

[375] Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, *op. cit.*, 95.

For the purposes of this investigation, it is necessary to establish the empirical parameters of the material consulted. The primary methodology of this research is qualitative and interpretive: it proceeds by close textual analysis of audiovisual sequences, guided by the theoretical frameworks developed in the preceding chapters, and makes no claim to statistical or quantitative completeness. The temporal framework that follows – spanning December 18th to December 27th – provides a structural scaffold for the analysis, not a quantitative data set. Wherever possible, we have adhered to this framework, previously established in our analysis of French broadcasts of revolutionary imagery. Although it is now known that the first signs of popular discontent ignited in the city of Timisoara (Western Romania) by mid-December, the news had only propagated internationally with some delay, which explains the lack of indexed material on Romanian topics in France's INAthèque archive. Certain adjustments were thus required due to the absence of Romanian television material predating Nicolae Ceaușescu's final speech from the balcony of the Central Committee on December 21st[376].

The choice to designate December 27th as the concluding date for 'revolutionary' broadcasts stems primarily from comparative considerations with French coverage. This date symbolises the closure of the revolution's live mediatisation phase and the onset of a transitional period towards a new political regime. While our analysis will occasionally extend beyond this temporal boundary, we argue that December 27th represents a critical juncture. It comes a few days after the trial of the Ceaușescu couple (December 25th, with

[376] Amateur footage documenting revolutionary events did exist prior to December 21st, as the found-footage documentary *Videograms of a Revolution* compellingly demonstrates. Indeed, while the sequence of Ceaușescu's speech arrives early on in the film (around the 7-minute mark), the film itself opens, following a prologue with a wounded woman chanting the need for change from a hospital bed, with a brief sequence filmed from an apartment block in Timișoara, whose ultimate intended audience was most likely private. The respective sequence captures a popular procession that appears to mark the early stirrings of collective uprising. This footage is notable not only for its rarity but also for its almost abstract quality, resulting in a significant double framing operated by the surrounding apartment blocks: the poor technical resolution renders the image spectral, reducing the revolution to a ghostlike impression of protestors relegated to the backdrop of the image, whose mere existence is hard to certify. Farocki and Ujică rightly discern the possibility of the revolution in the fragile, bare *sign* of a people marching. (Also see, on this topic about how to address figuratively the question of a people, Pierre-Damien Huyghe, 'Un people manque', in *Vertigo*, 37(1), 2010, 44-50. The scarcity and fragmentary nature of such footage imbue it with a symbolic significance that transcends its technical limitations, offering a glimpse into the precarity and nascence of revolutionary sentiment. However, while these early visual records provide valuable insights into the initial manifestations of popular discontent, the distinct ontological regime of these images – marked by their low resolution and fragmented, distant perspective – renders a comprehensive inquiry at this level challenging. On the one hand, their ambiguity, while evocative, limit their capacity to serve as definitive historical documentation. Instead, they demand interpretation not only as records of events but as images that manage to prefigure the broader aesthetic and ideological constructions that would come to dominate the revolutionary narrative. On the other hand, as we will discuss later, the strict relegation of the point of view to a secure outpost, very far away from the action and barely daring to record it, suggests an observer that is yet to liberate themselves from the repressive communist apparatus.

several special editions dedicated to the event in the coming days), which arguably represents the last important 'revelation' of the revolution, and the one which, through its debatable media treatment, will stir additional doubt with regard to the spontaneous character of the events. Although the shift in power was immediately perceptible following Ceaușescu's escape by helicopter on December 22nd, it is in the days that followed that the contours of a nascent political order became more distinctly visible, ultimately becoming fully apparent towards the end of the year.[377] It must however be said that our present discussion does not follow a chronological course, instead adopting a non-linear trajectory that aims to eventually highlight patterns and transversal insights that regulated (if such a term is adequate for a nascent and purely intuitive broadcast) the media coverage of those days.

By maintaining this temporal framework, we also aim to situate the Romanian broadcasts within a broader comparative and historical context, highlighting their dual role as both a chronicle of revolutionary events and a mediated spectacle. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the interplay between the local unfolding of the revolution and its framing for international audiences, offering valuable insights into the broader ideological and media transformations at play during this pivotal period.

Evidently, while references to Romania continued beyond this period, our analysis focuses on the period ending December 27th, as this date marks a critical juncture in the inscription of the revolution within what we term 'trademark images'. By this point, the visual narrative of the revolution, shaped by the selective and mediated circulation of images between Romania and Western audiences, had already been firmly established. This selective framing was instrumental in constructing the revolutionary imagery as both a spectacle and a site of ideological projection.

Although a more exhaustive analysis of the post-December 27th references could yield valuable insights in itself, it lies beyond the scope of this discussion, which follows a clear temporality. Our thesis – that the essential mechanisms of televisual image construction and their circulation had fully matured by this date, with upcoming coverage

[377] To be precise, the French national media archives have catalogued 293 entries related to the Romanian revolutionary events between their first mention – on December 18th, during the *Antenne 2* 1 PM news and the TF1 8 PM news – and the closing date of December 27th. The intensity of media coverage grew exponentially in the days that followed, reflecting the escalating significance of the events. From only two notable mentions on December 20th, the frequency increased to four mentions on December 21st and reached a significant peak of fifty-five entries on December 22nd. By December 26th, there were 52 indexed mentions, followed by 42 on December 27th, reflecting a proportional fall of interest.

emulating previously established models in the space of only a few days – provides a foundation for further exploration in subsequent research, which could extend to the long-term impact and evolution of these mediated representations.

Throughout this chapter, our working hypothesis aims to show how the action of monopolising TV news broadcast, both in Western Europe and, obviously, in Romania, with the revolutionary topic was essentially accomplished not by providing a multiplicity of points of view and a diversity of footage[378], but by forcing a repetitive coverage based on iconic imagery that would come to embody an easily exportable version of revolution. For the most part of its coverage of the revolution, the Romanian Television thus endorsed the largely hegemonic model of, in the words of Jacques Rancière,

> [t]he mainstream media [which] do not drown us in a torrent of images bearing witness to the massacres, mass displacements of populations and other horrors that make up our planet's present. On the contrary, they reduce their number, taking great care to select and order them. They eliminate anything that might go beyond the simple, redundant illustration of their meaning.[379]

Describing by these words what he names 'the System of Information', Rancière thus attempts to tackle a common anguish that, as we have seen in a previous chapter discussing Baudrillard, took over a large part of the intellectual community with the advent of satellite, uninterrupted television. He argues that the problem lies not in the multiplicity of images, but in their redundancy, with the System of Information arranging a straightforward, indeed quasi-implacable disposition between those who are speaking (the experts), and those who are spoken for[380]. Broadcast redundancy, given its reliance on a few familiar images, only consolidates the System of Information. We contend, then, that the reliance – both by Western media and by local outlets – on trademark images that have since then ossified into emblems, icons, and symbols of the revolution has perpetuated the System of Information as it is described by Rancière. While the task of any researcher is to

[378] The thread which, throughout those days, led from an official, unique, state-controlled gaze to a plural landscape of amateur, emancipated points of view has become a *lieu commun* of academic discourse right from the outset (the main narrative in *Videograms of a Revolution* recounts precisely this atomisation of perspectives). Also see Andrei Gorzo, *Videograme dintr-o revoluție. Un studiu critic* (Bucharest: LiterNet & Societatea Culturală NexT, 2016), 7. However, it must be said that this diversity of gazes has had a lesser impact on the televisual format, less inclined (in the absence of adequate machinery) to embody radical changes after an initial shift towards a new augmented rhythm of production. Since the topic of the revolution remains rather sensible, much of the amateur footage that has been recorded in December 1989 remains as of yet classified (when it is not simply lost for good).

[379] Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008), 106.

[380] An in-depth analysis of the System of Information can be found in 'L'image intolerable', in *Le Spectateur émancipé*, *op. cit.*, 93-114.

deconstruct and ultimately counter such simplistic dispositions that the media employ in order to impose a certain ideological narrative, if not consensual worldview[381], our research postulates the correlative importance of closely describing and analysing such mechanisms – precisely those that generate trademark images in favour of any other less consensual ones – in order to envisage alternative possibilities and radical strategies to resist. Insisting on the trademark images of the revolution is not meant to reinforce them once again – on the contrary, it represents the first level of subversion, the virtuality of critique.

Emblems, Icons, Symbols: An analysis of Dominant Visual Narratives of the Romanian Televised Revolution

This section will focus on identifying and analysing the dominant visual paradigms that shaped televised representations of the Romanian Revolution. It will examine moments where there appeared to be a seamless alignment between content and form, audience expectations, and the media's delivery[382]. It argues that certain images not only conformed to conventional notions ingrained in the public conscience about the idea of revolution, but actively constructed the event as a mediated spectacle, modelling it for the purpose of easily recognisable representation and worldwide exportation. The vast majority of images that will be discussed in this section are well-known at least to Romanian audiences, and even international ones that have followed the mediatised image of the revolution. They have benefitted from a cultural aura, being used (sometimes even redundantly) in documentaries and commemorations and become ingrained in the popular public conscience. In contrast, the subsequent chapter will turn its attention to the absences, irregularities, and omissions within this same footage – those inconsistencies and ruptures that fall outside the standardised template of televised revolution. As contemporary commentators such as Serge Daney observed in the immediate aftermath of the events, the initial optimism surrounding the potential for an alternative to the mainstream model of television during those revolutionary moments was swiftly overshadowed by disillusionment, as soon as it became clear that the revolution and its media coverage were subjected to the same risks and pitfalls as any other televised events.[383] However, we will demonstrate that, given the

[381] For a global critique of the media consensus, see Jacques Rancière, *Chroniques des temps consensuels*.
[382] Cf. *supra*, Pierre Eugène's discussion of the advertising image (*image de marque*, trademark image) in terms of 'the cancelling of the struggle in name of a false social reconciliation and, in its ultimate consequences, a homogeneity that eliminates singularities.' This absence of obstacle between a normative regime of visibility and its delivery is the site of production of trademark images.
[383] In this sense, his seminal article 'Roumanie, année zero', operates this transition between a utopic televisual broadcast (in the third paragraph, after contending the 'baptism of fire' of television on Romanian

particular historical occurrence that we have so far described, the onscreen representation of the Romanian Revolution during those pivotal days was far from monolithic. Instead, it was characterised by contradictions, constantly teetering on the edge of radically different tonalities. This fragmentation and volatility were inevitable, given the nascent state of Romanian Free Television, which had only just shed its outdated, state-controlled structure and lacked the time to establish a coherent framework for its operations[384].

This resulted in a remarkable balancing act between two opposing models. The first was rooted in dominant representations, shaped by long-standing conventions of Western televisual imagery, which sought to frame the revolution within familiar and universally legible tropes of uprising, heroism, and liberation. As Siani-Davies argues,

> by producing the fury and unbridled passion usually associated with revolution, the second phase of the process, after the flight of Ceaușescu, helped define the events in the eyes of the participants and a watching world, transforming what, until then, had been the violent overthrow of a tyrannous leader into a 'true' revolution replete with new images and symbols.[385]

We differ from such a commonly held interpretation that Siani-Davies is highlighting by going against this preconceived, normalised 'truth' of the televisual broadcast – since truth here equals an uncritically accepted narrative. Hence, the second model that was made apparent during the Romanian Revolution, although more marginal and even unorthodox, was imbued with a political undertone derived from the privileging of counter-narratives, as well as an experimental quality that emerged from the inability to fully control the flow of information or the visual grammar of the broadcasts, further enhanced by the aging technology. This paradoxical tension between adherence to familiar narratives and the chaotic immediacy of the events themselves produced a televisual textured landscape that could be deemed revolutionary – or at least experimental – on a formal level as well. This duality not only reflects the transitional state of Romanian television but also underscores the broader ideological and aesthetic uncertainties of the time.

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territory, he pursues: 'Indeed, we have just witnessed the tele-invention of Romania', in Daney, *op. cit*., 442. Whereas, further down the text (tenth paragraph), he argues: 'Of course, there will always exist, in the midst of events […] a hurried triviality that transforms the 'big moments' of History in terrible, deceiving, inevitably deceiving spectacles.' This sentence marks a second direction for his text, in which he lucidly analyses the deception brought about by the broadcast.

[384] Chapter 4 will expand on the history of the institution.

[385] Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, *op. cit.*, 409.

While a linear account of the revolution may illuminate key developments, it cannot fully capture the aesthetic regime imposed during those days. Beyond chronology, this research adopts a comparative methodology that combines visual, textual, and contextual analysis. It seeks to work on a systemic level, tracking recurring visual motifs, narrative structures, and thematic patterns across multiple sources – mainly archival footage from the Romanian Television Archive, but also, whenever possible, international news coverage. This is pertinent because what we have called trademark images has evidently been the result of both an outside gaze and its internalised logic by Romanians. By examining how these patterns were replicated across multiple days, the research investigates the processes of selection, framing, and repetition that shaped a cohesive revolutionary narrative. Furthermore, this methodology draws upon interdisciplinary perspectives, incorporating elements of media studies, semiotics, and visual culture analysis. It scrutinises not only the images themselves but also their production, dissemination, and reception, asking how aesthetic choices – such as framing, camera movement, or sequencing – intersected with ideological imperatives.

It must again be emphasised that the image of Nicolae Ceaușescu delivering his final speech to an increasingly restless crowd constitutes the first widely recognised official image of the Romanian Revolution.[386] However, before delving into a deeper analysis of this pivotal moment, it is crucial to consider the imagery that preceded it. Such an analysis highlights the near-total absence of visual footage from Romania in the initial stages of the uprising. On December 18th – the first day when mentions of Romania were documented in France – no contemporaneous footage was broadcast from within Romania itself. Instead, French television relied on a combination of its own archival materials and indirect visuals to construct its narrative. Archival generic images from the city of Timișoara, the reported starting point of the revolution, were used to supplement the lack of current footage. These images referred to events surrounding the attempted eviction of the Protestant pastor László Tőkés on December 15th, whose defiance against the regime had sparked widespread dissent on a national level, offering a model to the masses.[387]

[386] This idea is also endorsed by Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, who argues: 'Even if almost all aspects of the so-called revolution in Romania have been subject of heated debate, there is one fact which seems to be uncontested. Ceaușescu's public address on the 21st of December, for which large numbers of workers were brought to the capital, and which was transmitted live on television, unleashed the protests and precipitated the regime's demise', in 'The Revolution Will Be Performed. Cameras and Mass Protests in the Perspective of Contemporary Art', Acta Univ. Sapientiaa, *Film and Media Studies*, 10 (2015), 9.

[387] Reference to the protests in Brasov, 1987 ('two years too early') that were quickly dismantled by the authorities.

Meanwhile, newly recorded visual samples from the Hungarian-Romanian border, still a heavily controlled frontier, began to surface, providing a tentative glimpse of the mounting tensions and a possible break of the information blockade.

French television also employed stark visual contrasts to frame the unfolding events, utilising a straightforward emotional rhetoric. While forbidden images from Timișoara – the off-screen space suggested by graphics, maps, statistics, and audio commentary – hinted at the as of yet unportrayable hope, resistance, and the possibility of a new order, they were juxtaposed with black-and-white footage from the 14th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, held in late November 1989, just a few weeks prior to these incidents. Depicting Ceaușescu as he presided over a vast assembly of applauding party loyalists and forcefully reasserted his dominance, these scenes quickly achieved a symbolic resonance in light of subsequent events – a choreographed display of obedience and control that stood in sharp antithesis to the unprecedented scales of popular protests then brewing across the nation. The use of these contrasting visuals served a dual purpose: to highlight the profound division between the regime's façade of stability and the reality of mounting popular unrest[388], and to contextualise the revolution as an ideological rupture from the oppressive imagery of the past.

This interplay between conspicuous absence of live footage, generic archival materials, and mediated imagery (operatory materials in need of an expert interpretation from political analysts, etc.) underscores the role of external media in shaping the early visual narrative of the revolution. In the absence of contemporaneous footage from Romania, Western broadcasts filled the void with symbolic and interpretative imagery, prefiguring the revolutionary spectacle that would soon emerge on Romanian television screens. The same strategies were evident on French television two days later, as editors worked to construct a compelling narrative about a country 'caught in the grip' of dictatorship. On the one hand, they relied on whatever footage was available to solidify this depiction. Archival images of an eerily empty Timișoara – specifically its central square, which was rumoured at the time to be the site of confrontations between protesters and the Army – were shown devoid of any visible activity, evoking an atmosphere of desolation and suppression. These visuals were juxtaposed with an emblematic imagery of rural Romania, such as an unpaved, muddy street ('uliță' in Romanian) where a solitary woman,

[388] Although, at that time, the positive outcome of the revolution was not certain. In retrospect, however, these images also reinforce the thesis of the caducity of Ceaușescu's rule, which seemed to be essentially – at this point – performative, waiting for a sign of dissent.

draped in a scarf ('batic'), walked slowly, in a resigned posture. This scene, rich in connotations of poverty and hardship, reinforced the narrative of a nation mired in deprivation and misery, while also providing a gendered bias for the Western gaze, and confirming initial expectations of textbook balkanism from the Romanian situation[389]: the revolution, in this case, proved particularly exciting since it rendered visible a significant Other. French television seemed to employ these evocative visuals not merely as reportage but as a tool to emphasise the unavoidable dichotomy between 'before' and 'after' – a rhetorical simplified structure that heavily draws upon a hallmark of revolutionary propaganda.

Ceaușescu's Last Televised Speech

December 21st marked a pivotal moment in the revolution, as the national television abruptly proceeded to shift to the newly established Romanian Free Television, initiating its first 'revolutionary' broadcast. Daniela Mustata, who provided the finest work to date on the Romanian Television as a historical institution[390], succinctly summarises the troubled progress of the national TV broadcast delivering Ceaușescu's last speech, capturing its pivotal role in the unfolding of the revolution:

> The transmission started as usual, showing panoramic views of the masses gathered to cheer for Ceaușescu on the balcony of the Central Committee building. Twenty-four minutes into the dictator's speech, the event was disturbed by shouts from the crowds, which eventually caused the transmission to be interrupted. The broadcast was resumed minutes later with an image of Ceaușescu looking visibly troubled and anxious. It was the first time that audiences at home had had confirmation of the anti-Ceaușescu revolt on public television.[391]

Moreover, a close, almost pedagogical, analysis of this sequence is developed in the voiceover of *Videograms of a Revolution*. That film sequence reveals the tension between the live, uncontrollable nature of the event and the rigid protocols imposed on the camera crew, underscoring how unanticipated moments of disruption exposed the limitations of

[389] See Maria Todorova's historical account of the metaphorical – and politically connoted – term 'Balkan', in *Scaling the Balkans. Essays on East European Entanglements* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2018), esp. 86-90.
[390] See in this respect her unpublished PhD dissertation, 'The Power of Television: Including the Historicizing of the Live Romanian Revolution', 2011.
[391] Dana Mustata, '"The Revolution Has Been Televised … ». Television as Historical Agent in the Romanian Revolution', Journal of Modern European History, Vol. 10, No. 1, Media History after 1945 (2012), 80.

state control over the televised image. As documented[392] and also addressed by the voiceover, the cameramen were instructed to 'pan to the sky if anything unexpected occurred.' This directive, intended to erase visual signs of unrest, inadvertently highlighted the centrality of television as an ungovernable player in the revolutionary drama, while also confirming the important status of the televised image within the clash of forces that was established during those days.

It is no surprise, then, that this sequence became emblematic of the revolution. The televised syntax itself encoded the uprising: the stark contrast between shot (Ceaușescu's isolated figure, dominating the frame) and counter-shot (the indistinct, collective presence of the Romanian people) created a symbolic visual grammar for the repartition of power during Ceaușescu's era. Nicole Brenez argued that a similar demarcation was at play in the larger communist order. Her words connote this audiovisual sequence as an extraordinary synecdoche for a spectacular choreography between the communist leader and the people:

> On the one hand, the actors of History, those holding the microphones and the sceptres (Ceaușescu, communist dictator, had actually manufactured one for himself), on the other hand, the extras, that is the peoples on their leash, whose excellence in the dramaturgy of happiness proves to be proportional to their subjugation.[393]

As Jacques Rancière would contend, the simultaneous presence of leader and populace within the same image broke the conventional boundaries of authoritarian representation, paving the way for encompassing the new order of dissent and democracy. Indeed, given its almost didactic separation (shot-counter-shot) between the tyrant and the people which was then disrupted by the popular force, this broadcast sequence would become so symbolic of the revolutionary movement itself, that it would end up embodying Rancière's large definition of history: 'History is the time when those who do not have the right to occupy the same square can occupy the same image.'[394]

A close analysis of the moment is revealing of the audiovisual capacity of catalysing popular dissent. The gaze of Ceaușescu, once imperious, is visibly shaken, but the source of his unease remains obscured, insistently maintained in the off-screen space. Subjected to official constraints, the camera fails to seek the origin of the crowd's agitation, and this

[392] *Ibid.*, 80-85. An in-depth discussion of the established broadcasting protocols in case of social disruption can be found in chapter 4.
[393] Nicole Brenez, *Manifestations* (Grenoble: De l'Incidence Éditeur, 2020).
[394] Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l'Histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), quoted in Marie Menant, 'Bucarest 1989, optique et politique, histoire d'un différé', in *Bucarest, une histoire sans fin ?*, edited by Marie Menant and Philippe Simon (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais, 2023), 131.

ambiguity injects a sense of mystery and unease into the broadcast[395], which will be exploited in the coming days according to antagonistic interests. The disruption of the televised image becomes a synecdoche of the broader revolutionary turmoil: the interruption of order in the visual narrative mirrors the collapse of political order in reality. It is as if the possibility of revolution could only be confirmed when inscribed within the visual medium itself – when the image, a tool of propaganda, was destabilised to reflect the highly inflammable energy of rebellion, thus acquiring a sort of concrete presence. Ceaușescu and the rumour in the crowd belong to the same dramaturgy: from this point onwards, it actually becomes irrelevant whether or not there were indeed signs of dissent within the crowd; regardless of them, Ceaușescu's disorientated figure not only encouraged the manifestation of such dissent, but certified it. By imposing draconic standards for the broadcast personnel which did not allow any form of flexibility in case of the unpredictable, Ceaușescu falls into his own audiovisual trap, becoming the victim of a rigid articulation of the image and the sound, the on-screen and off-screen spaces. This is not to say that, in the absence of this audiovisual moment, the revolution would not have taken place – instead, we are simply pointing out how this paranoid control only made the popular discontent even more apparent, offering it a nationwide platform.

[395] Coincidentally, it is noteworthy that 2024 saw the release of *Anul Nou care n-a fost* (*The New Year That Never Came*), a Romanian feature film directed by Bogdan Mureșanu, which takes place in the days leading up to Ceaușescu's infamous final speech. The film, which could be summarised as a collection of trademark vignettes from communist empirical experiences (desperate illegal border crossing, demolition of old neighbourhoods, etc.), culminates in a depiction of the mass rally, viewed from the perspective of one of the central characters, who attends alongside his colleagues. Mureșanu diverges from the familiar televisual framing of the event by focusing exclusively on the invisible 'counter-shot' – the view from below, from within the rally itself, offering an individual (anti-)heroic perspective rather than portraying the crowd as a unified collective. In the film's climactic sequence, the character lights a firecracker as a joke, inadvertently generating movement and disturbance among the gathered crowd. This playful and irreverent interpretation of the pivotal moment reframes the ignition point of the revolution, lending a personal and contingent quality to what is often seen as a monumentalising historical event. Mureșanu's choice to humanise the rally in this manner challenges the dominant narratives of historical determinism that tend to overshadow individual agency. The film's ending, both comedic and somewhat blasphemous, takes on additional significance given its critical acclaim, including awards at the Venice Film Festival, which points to the respectable, auteurist character of this creative enterprise. By injecting humour and ambiguity into one of the most iconic moments of the revolution, *Anul Nou care n-a fost* interrogates the often rigid dichotomy between purist interpretations of the revolution and the speculations of conspiracy theorists (cf. Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie 1989*, *op. cit.*). It also reflects on the passage of time and the ways in which history is remembered, contested, and reinterpreted in its main trademark sequences. This perspective is also useful for our inclusive perspective guiding the present research: through its relativist approach, the film invites audiences to consider the elasticity of revolutionary narratives and the multiple ways such events can be understood – not only as grand, coherent historical phenomena but also as moments shaped by individual actions, coincidences, and even absurdities. This alternative lens enriches our understanding of the revolution, highlighting the layered complexity of its legacy in Romanian cultural memory.

Jacques Rancière's analysis of this moment amplifies its decisive weight within the economy of the revolution, contributing to the idea of a hybrid media event, both spontaneous and catalysed by the televisual medium:

> The camera's destination has changed, and its images overlap those taken behind other windows, converging at the central point where official TV footage shows the *Conducator* haranguing his usual audience, interrupted by the spectacle and the dissonant noises coming from the far end of the square. In Bucharest, in December 1989, say Harun Farocki and Andrej [sic] Ujică, something unprecedented happened: cinema does not simply record the historical event, but creates that event.[396]

A comparison with the original footage preserved in the Romanian Archives reveals that Farocki and Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* retains a significant portion of the material but deliberately excludes moments that, from a dramaturgical perspective, could be deemed redundant. The original footage does not necessarily convey a different narrative; rather, it features additional protagonists who symbolise the same disconnect between the placard-holding, ostensibly orderly masses and the speakers presiding over the rally. In the original, complete version, before Ceaușescu's infamous speech, another apparatchik denounces the 'anti-constitutional, antisocial movements [of Timișoara] and their agitators', a declaration followed by two workers – a young man and a woman – delivering scripted proclamations of loyalty: 'We will work to defend the country'. Even before Ceaușescu steps forward, his discomfort is palpable, with his gaze shifting uneasily to the left and right, betraying an internal agitation. Yet even our attention to his gestures might have been influenced, apart from the obvious significance of the moment, by the pedagogical methodology that has been developed in *Videograms of a Revolution*.

In this sense, Farocki and Ujică's editorial decisions do not alter the essence of this sequence but instead amplify its underlying tensions, distilling the footage into a more concentrated and intensified form and complementing it with a commentary on the backstage decisions made in the editing room. By adhering to a clear cinematographic syntax filled with suspense, they render the dynamics of the rally more immediately legible, emphasising its dramatic arc. The image of Ceaușescu scrambling to reassert his authority already possessed the latent potential to become emblematic; Farocki and Ujică's intervention simply accentuates its symbolic stake, considering the revolution as a transformative event both for the social sphere, in the streets, and for the media scape.

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[396] J. Rancière, « L'inoubliable » [The Unforgettable], with Jean-Louis Comolli, in *Arrêt sur histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1997), 58.

The Rise of Amateur Filmmaking

Immediately after this sequence, and in order to emphasise the dual nature of the December 1989 revolution as both a historical rupture and an audiovisual turning point, Farocki and Ujică integrate an amateur video, recorded by Paul Cozighian, that encapsulates the event's symbolic resonance. While this sample does not actually represent televisual footage, its rhetorical importance in the economy of the media coverage cannot be overestimated. In this striking sequence, an amateur filmmaker records their television screen broadcasting Ceaușescu's ill-fated final speech. As the transmission falters amidst technical disruptions, the camera pans away from the television toward the window, revealing rows of protestors marching in the streets below, likely heading toward an assembly point. This simple yet powerful gesture captures a profound narrative of liberation: in Gorzo's words,

> an independent video camera (that is, handled by a powerless citizen, an amateur, not a Romanian Television operator), which initially filmed the TV screen (that is, reproduced the gaze of the official camera) allows its own gaze to glide…towards the window. And, in doing so, it captures a different history than the official one, which the dictator is trying to write using the film camera of the state television.[397]

It comes as no surprise that Farocki found this piece of footage so evocative, that he chose to isolate it in his short video *Schnittstelle*/*Section* (1995)[398], this time equalling it to a synecdoche for the act of filming itself, not just for the audiovisual history of the revolution. Indeed, in his video, the German filmmaker attempts to replicate this panning shot in order to insist on his own work, perceiving it as both an elementary physical gesture (using one's own hands to effectuate the film work) and as the imperative basis for the spiritual act of filmmaking, which is, according to him, a radically emancipatory one[399]. The moment carries an iconic quality since it crystallises the necessary passage from one type of gaze (official, centralised, propagandistic) to another (emancipated, personal, alternative), positing the process of subjectivisation as an crucial task of the filmmaking

[397] Andrei Gorzo, *Videograme dintr-o revoluție. Un studiu critic*, *op. cit.*, 8.
[398] This was precisely Farocki's first commissioned piece for an art exhibition. The footage of the revolution marks a turning point in his career from the black box of the cinema theater to the white cube of the gallery, since *Videograms of a Revolution* represents his last film to benefit from a theatrical release.
[399] Christa Blümlinger argues for the importance of manual work – and of the hand-as-videographic-tool – in Farocki's practice. See 'Penser les gestes, à partir de *Section* (*Schnittstelle*)' [Reflecting on the Gestures, from *Section*], in *Harun Farocki : Aux bords du documentaire* (Paris: P.O.L, 2022), 49-62.

practice. In fact, this shot could be said to carry its own internal montage within the act that the amateur filmmaker realises[400]. Indeed, as Ruchel-Stockmans argues,

> [t]wo different modes of image-making appear crucial for the shaping of the events: the television – as a medium and a site of power struggle – and the amateur, hand held camera. In the course of the revolution, the television is transformed from being the instrument of the authoritarian propaganda to a site of struggle in the effort to topple down the dictatorship. The amateur, or semi-professional, camera joins in to register the events from the public and the private perspective, intuitively foreseeing a future for such images.[401]

This sequence, as read by Farocki and Ujică, redefines the role of the camera, framing it not as a passive observer but as an active participant in shaping history. The amateur filmmaker's decision to pivot their gaze is not only an act of individual agency but a symbolic rupture with the monolithic authority of state media. It marks the transition from a controlled, top-down narrative to a fragmented, polyphonic view of the revolution – a moment where the audiovisual medium ceases to merely document the spectacle and becomes an integral part of the revolutionary process itself. By juxtaposing the official televised footage of Ceaușescu with the amateur's off-screen reality, Farocki and Ujică not only reveal the dissonance between state-imposed narratives and grassroots action; as Blümlinger contends, they especially 'ascertained the locus of the historical event'[402]. In other words, the camera's movement becomes a metaphor for the broader historical shift: a populace reclaiming its autonomy, rejecting passive consumption, and participating in the creation of a new collective story. Ruchel-Stockmans contends that '[f]rom that moment on, all facets of the event, private or public, are being filmed by the participants themselves. The resulting visual records are direct, random and ubiquitous, giving the spectator the sense of having an access to the events in an unaltered form.'[403] This assertion seems however overly optimistic: as our analysis of lesser known televisual footage will prove, the hypervisibility of the event will not translate accordingly into a diversity of equitable perspectives, but will ultimately serve to cement a master narrative of the heroic revolution, leaving aside potentially incoherent, yet rich, visual samples.

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[400] We are alluding to Christa Blümlinger's remark that "in Farocki's work, the consideration of the image as symbolic form is only the first step. The true distinction happens through *montage*, an essential operation between image and image, word and image, sound and image: a process which brings us step by step towards thinking", in *Cinéma de seconde main – Esthétique du remploi dans l'art du film et des nouveaux médias* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2013), 320-321.

[401] Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, 'The Revolution Will Be Performed. Cameras and Mass Protests in the Perspective of Contemporary Art', Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies, 10 (2015), 8.

[402] Christa Blümlinger, 'Harun Farocki ou l'art de traiter les milieux', 12.

[403] *Idem.*

Studio 4 as a Symbolic Forum for the New Democratic Order

The image of the indoor TV studio is the first that the audience encounters within the new socio-political order. Every actor of this disorderly oratorical moment wishes to highlight the radical shift from what was before, unveiling the lie that was the basis of the Ceaușescu regime and presenting themselves in a completely new, more favourable light. A presenter goes so far as to address a '*mea culpa*' to the audience for all the years, during the communist regime, in which 'people could see [him] voicing all sorts of [obedient, propagandistic] news and communiqués.' The initial moments of 'free' television are marked by a paradoxical energy – on the one hand, a celebratory openness to diverse perspectives; on the other, a palpable sense of collective frenzy and disorganisation, as the immaterial screen becomes a performative scene. The atmosphere oscillates between democratic optimism and chaotic overexposure, as the space of the broadcast mirrors the uncertainties of a nation dealing with its own actuality on the go.

What mainstream memory has preserved from this early phase of restructuring, marked by its nascent democratic organisation, is the emblematic moment when dissident poet Mircea Dinescu and actor Ion Caramitru, surrounded by a small group of supporters, declared emphatically: 'Am învins!' [We have won!] The iconography of this scene is particularly revealing: a famous photograph captures Dinescu and Caramitru standing side by side, their hands raised in victory signs, bathed in the blinding glare of a studio projector that is not yet adjusted for the proper lighting conditions. This bright light serves not only to illuminate their faces; like many such media moments from these days, it solicits a hermeneutical excess, achieving a symbolic quality that suggests the protagonists' desperate plea for visibility and legitimacy, a striving for recognition within this transformative historical moment.

The unedited footage from the Romanian Archives paints an even more chaotic picture. Dinescu, who had rapidly become one of the revolution's most recognisable figures, is seen arguing off-camera with an unidentified individual about Pastor László Tőkés, whom he calls 'this Magyar and Romanian hero.' His high profile throughout the live transmission positions him as a central figure orchestrating the unfolding narrative. Amidst speeches from antagonistic artists like conceptual painter and videographer Ion Grigorescu and populist filmmaker Sergiu Nicolaescu, workers, civilians such as 'Matei Ioan from Prahova county', and politicians such as Gelu Voican Voiculescu (who would

later – when the collective euphoria turned into resentment against the failures of the revolution – be accused of having plotted the coup in advance), Dinescu repeatedly takes command of the moment. It must be said that, during those days of dramatic changes, the traditional roles of broadcaster and audience were no longer fixed but were now conceived as fluid positions, fostering a space where those who appeared on television and their home viewers could, in theory, switch places. This newfound flexibility manifested in the unprecedented diversity of voices and faces brought to the screen: people from radically different social groups or factions found themselves sharing the same space to make allocutions, announcements, or declarations. [404] One particularly striking instance captures him abruptly interrupting an army general with the words: 'Let it be, bless the revolution', holding a cross aloft in his hand. The atmosphere takes on an almost liturgical tone as Caramitru declares, 'Christ is grand, cherish Him', while a bishop solemnly reads from a small slip of paper. This unorderly mixture of religious fervour, theatricality, and political urgency, amounting to a rather comedic tapestry of social strata, encapsulates the frenetic energy of the newly liberated studio space, turned into a platform that was theoretically open to anybody. A different moment captured on the same day again shows Dinescu arguing, this time with a representative from the Romanian Army, who states that 'Nobody has shot the civilian population', while a man surges from the off-screen space and shows him a bullet. Dinescu concludes, in a self-reflexive manner: 'We do not know how to handle freedom yet.'

During the same live broadcast from Romanian Television's Studio 4, the speaker announces: 'We ask everyone that, not long ago, signed those appeals, those letters [for national reforms], to come and make their voices heard – we are waiting for them!' This raises important questions about the fragile distribution of power during this period – specifically, the allocation of time in front of the camera. For a brief time, this distribution seemed to convey a more democratic share of visibility, where antagonistic factions of society were granted equal access to the public eye. However, we must consider whether this process extended beyond the surface, representing more than an exaggerated, transient version of a regular television talk show. Did this momentary openness signify a lasting transformation of the televisual regime, or was it merely a parenthesis – an outburst of

[404] Another illustrative example concerns one of the last sequences dating from December 22nd, a mathematician, a sports coach and Gelu Voican Voiculescu, the soon-to-be-named Prime Minister of the Petre Roman Government (1989-1990), appeared in quick succession to deliver messages regarding the uncertain fate of the revolutionary events.

collective enthusiasm prompted by the revolution – within an otherwise stabilised and conventionally hierarchical media structure? While many bitter subsequent accounts seem to imply the latter, more pessimistic version[405], these broadcasts did reveal early signs of an alternative model for the distribution of speech and visibility[406]. In this nascent model, the revolutionary fervour allowed for the articulation of voices that had long been silenced. This temporary suspension of traditional media hierarchies moved closer to the ideal of participatory democracy, offering a glimpse of what awarding recognition to those who had been deprived of it for decades might actually look like. It demonstrated, however fleetingly, the possibility of a media landscape that mirrored the egalitarian aspirations of the revolution itself, with the moderators actually privileging speeches from dissidents, anonymous citizens, and intellectuals[407].

[405] Even the rather conciliatory retrospective commentary on the day of December 22nd, 1989, as it was experienced in the studio by Teodor Brateș in *Explozia unei clipe* (Bucharest: Scarpa, 1992).

[406] While the format limitations of television prevented the actual fulfilment of such a promise beyond the first revolutionary days, we encounter such an ideal of free speech and the preliminary coagulation of a civil society made aware of its own agency in Laurențiu Calciu's documentary *După revoluție*/After *the Revolution* (2012), a key text for understanding the Romanian people as it was confronted with the still very recent legacy of the communist regime, the hazy days of the revolution, and the uncertain democratic path lying ahead.

[407] Of course, this distribution seems somewhat comical, if not scandalous, in retrospect – and its actual progressive outcome should not be overstated. One should look no further than the presence of Sergiu Nicolaescu, a compromised film director noted for his *grand spectacle* nationalist period pieces who took part in an ambitious ideological operation of protochronism – a glorifying distortion of the Dacians' history. For more insights on this topic, see Bogdan Jitea, *Cinema în RSR. Conformism și disidență în industria ceaușistă de film* [Cinema in the Romanian Socialist Republic. Conformism and Dissidence in the Ceausist Film Industry] (Iași: Polirom, 2021).

Figure 1. A crowd of revolutionaries inside Studio 4. Centre-Stage: Future president Ion Iliescu. To the right: an unknown figure enters in close-shot.

The Revolution in the Street

Another distinctive fault line explored by television broadcasts on December 22nd concerned the depiction of street scenes. We have already discussed how the live transmission of Ceaușescu's last speech on December 21st imposed a strict dramaturgy: the leader, isolated in a close-up shot, contrasted sharply with the vast, undifferentiated crowd of workers shown in the counter-shot – a carefully disposed distribution of visibility in which the individuals themselves remained undiscernible due to the distance, a mass of people forced to take part in a national enterprise of personality cult. Jacques Rancière's symbolic reading of this revolutionary moment – the abolition of the visual and symbolic demarcation between the people and their leader, who, under the revolutionary sign, could now occupy the same image – finds an intriguing continuation in the broadcasts of the newly established *Free* Romanian Television, which began full operation on December 22nd. This shift marked a turning point in both the aesthetics and the ethics of representation.

No longer constrained by the rigid, hierarchical audiovisual compositions of the old regime, the Free Romanian Television began exploring the dynamics of public space and collective action. Street scenes, which were previously either ignored or mediated through strictly controlled (and mostly propagandistic/pedagogical) imagery, now became central to the narrative of the revolution. The camera ventured into spaces it had previously

shunned or depicted only in idealised terms: crowded squares, impromptu demonstrations, and even moments of conflict and chaos, all of which would have been unconceivable a day before. It attempted to pursue this goal of pertinent engagement with the Romanian crowds filling the streets – so much so that the rigid mise-en-scène of Ceaușescu's speech, faithfully broadcast just one day earlier, quickly became a relic of a bygone political order. That static, authoritarian composition, was replaced by a dynamic and spontaneous visual vocabulary that captured the euphoria of collective liberation, even at the cost of redundancy (the same image being shown over and over, for lack of alternatives – everything had to be designed from scratch) or confusion (contradictory information, facts that were later proved to be aberrations[408]).

Conforming to the archetypal image of euphoric rupture from the previous totalitarian order[409], such sequences became emblematic of the revolution as a whole: the people, finally free to occupy the streets, expressing their collective joy and newfound agency. The immediate rise of this imagery to a trademark status speaks to its emotional resonance and its ability to distil complex historical processes into a single, universally understood symbol. It also underscores television's central role in shaping and amplifying revolutionary myths. On the other hand, during the initial encounter with the imagery of democracy unfolding in the streets on December 22nd, the first emblematic postures of the revolution begin to emerge. From a closer perspective, we see people chanting, dancing, and shouting declarations like 'We are not leaving.' Among these scenes, one of the most

[408] The most famous of these aberrations – and arguably the most offensive – naturally concerns the 'mass graves of Timisoara' to which we have repeatedly alluded, a false information used to boost the number of casualties for a sensationalist effect. Soon enough, these mass graves turned out to be filled not with tortured victims of the Securitate forces, but with bodies taken from a nearby morgue. See for example the *mea culpa* dossier composed by the *Libération* journal and titled 'L'histoire vraie de Timisoara' [The True Story of Timisoara], published several months after the facts, on April 4th, 1990. In that dossier, reporter Marc Semo, in charge of the initial article about Timisoara, which had mentioned the existence of 'an unnameable massacre of 4630 bodies taken from a land that the Conducator has never knew how to fertilise, except with the blood of his own people!' (*Libération*, December 23rd, 1989), told the story of this fake news from his own perspective: 'Since any kind of communication had become impossible [between Semo, who was in Romania, and the journal's headquarters in Paris], Dominique pouchain, then head editor, decided in Paris to add at the beginning of my article, trusting the information that he heard on television and read in agency missives, an apocalyptic description about thousands of aligned dead bodies.' Although this event, as we have seen in a previous chapter, prompted numerous Western commentators to cynically question the authenticity of the revolution itself, it must be said that this information was less prominent on Romanian channels – unlike intertitles stating that the water from country wells has been poisoned, etc. – than on French channels, for example, where it was largely circulated to immense popular emotion. Similar to *Libération*'s updates next spring, journalistic conscience would proceed to a series of analyses. Multiple perspectives on the topic of journalistic *mea culpa* regarding the Romanian case can be found in *Roumanie, qui a menti ?* (Paris: Reporters sans frontières, 1990).

[409] Also see the by then famous imagery of the Berlin Wall destruction in GDR, with its symbolic charge of citizens taking part in the demolition process with their own tools, no matter how artisanal.

enduring symbols of the revolutionary days takes form: individuals mounted on trucks, elevated above the crowd. These moments capture a joyous, liberated crowd – people smiling for the camera and waving flags stripped of the communist emblem. There is an evident, albeit unconscious, emphasis on codified gestures, with each action – be it the waving of a flag or a raised fist – acquiring a symbolic resonance, immortalising the euphoria and determination of those days. Another recurrent scene involves opportunist politicians – such as disgraced Party member Ion Iliescu, who would become the first president of democratic Romania – addressing the crowds from a balcony and having recourse to aphorisms: 'Unlimited power is dressed in pathology.' It is worth analysing such sequences of address to the people with the dictator's last speech. Whether intentionally or not, they present a far more dynamic – albeit somewhat precarious – mise en scène. The rigid demarcation between those speaking from above and the crowd below has dissolved. In its place, a form of frustrated, yet hopeful dialogue emerges, marked by direct participation: politicians are no longer untouchable figures but are shouted at by the very people they address. The broadcast reflects this newfound possibility of fluidity, oscillating between wide shots capturing the collective movements of the crowd and close-ups that focus on individuals speaking in turns.

In these broadcasts, the crowd was often no longer a faceless mass filmed from a distance but a collection of individuals with distinct voices, actions, and expressions – or, on the contrary, a collective force expressing a united euphoric chant. The Romanian people was now the protagonist of its own narrative, at least on a theoretical level. This transition carried both the promise and the burden of democratic representation. The crowd, often fragmented and unpredictable, challenged the televisual syntax that had long been used to uphold order and authority. As the Free Romanian Television broadcasted these scenes in real time, it began to negotiate a new visual language – one that sought to capture the fluidity, intensity, and contradictions of revolutionary action. In this context, the street scenes of December 22nd symbolise more than just the events of that day. They reflect a profound transformation in the way television could engage with history: no longer as a distant observer of officially accepted narratives but as an active participant in the creation and dissemination of collective memory.

We have already discussed how Romanian Television's Studio 4 became, from the first moments following Ceaușescu's departure, a symbolic space of the revolution: according to some commentators,

> with the occupation of the building that hosted the state television, particularly its principle studio, No. 4, and the improvisation of a permanent antenna, the opposing forces [to the communist leaders] would affirm their will for the transparency of debates accompanying direct action, symbols of the re-establishing of the freedom of speech and, more generally, of a democratic process.[410]

In its rapid transformation into a democratic tribune – a stage for exposure and the accumulation of symbolic capital – it proved to be both immensely popular and deeply contested. This transformation introduced a new, volatile dynamic where the very act of appearing on screen became synonymous with gaining visibility, influence, and fame. Inevitably, this model encouraged heated and often exaggerated interventions from speakers who excessively dramatised the unfolding events, feeding into the confusion and uncertainty of the moment.

Television, which inevitably assumed in the final years of Ceaușescu's regime the status of a monolithic instrument of state propaganda with strictly vertical communication following a period of exploration and social critique, as a previous chapter attempted to expose, began to exhibit the possibility of horizontal interaction and interchangeability; the collective willingness to move away from the ossified structures of the past became immediately legible within the syntax of the medium.

In many ways, this televised 'crowd' became a synecdoche for the broader revolutionary process of popular involvement on the political scene. It encapsulated the tensions, aspirations, and contradictions of a society undergoing rapid and transformative change. As such, Studio 4's transformation into a prototype of the talk show model – complete with its inherent dynamism and contestation – prefigured a new paradigm for media and governance alike, where the once-unilateral flow of information gave way to plurality.

Audiovisual Vigilante Practices

The indoor space of the television studio achieved an almost sanctified quality in contrast to the chaos reigning outside, presenting itself as a haven of clarity amidst the surrounding turmoil. On December 23rd, one presenter mentioned 'the heroic actions of the soldiers who defended this institution…' This narrative of antithesis – between the clear-sighted individuals speaking from within the studio and the chaotic scenes outside, which

[410] Christian Delage, Vincent Guigueno and André Gunthert, 'Le vrai et le faux : de Timisoara à Bucarest (1989)', in *La Fabrique des images contemporaines* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 2007), 35.

were depicted as warlike – quickly took hold and would remain a defining trope of the broadcasts throughout those days. We must ask ourselves, however, whether this rhetoric did not help to conflate a factual bit of information – there were indeed guerrilla war scenes around the television – into a paranoid discourse which transformed the newsperson into a martyr under siege, and projected the news itself beyond any possibility of doubt or critique. Whether, in other words, by doing this, the presenters have also protected themselves against any possibility for their claims to be legitimately countered or at least factually verified.

However, even this theoretically stable façade of the studio space was not without its visible cracks (not to speak of the implicit ones, when previously accepted facts started being corroborated as fake news). One important moment of this kind occurred rather early on December 22nd, the first day of proper broadcasting by the Romanian Free Television. The incident involved the sudden emergence in front of the camera of Nicu Ceaușescu, the dictator's son and then-mayor of the city of Sibiu – a contested site of revolutionary fights. Dragged in by two men, with a visible bruise on his forehead, Nicu became the focus of a brief but violent exchange. Those present in the studio greeted him with scorn and ridicule, calling him the 'inheriting little prince' and making disparaging remarks like 'be careful that he doesn't start doing monkey business' and 'we are wasting time listening to him.' The camera, in a moment of sensationalist fervour, zoomed in on Nicu's eyes, emphasising his vulnerability and humiliation. Yet despite the brief intensity of the spectacle, the moment quickly passed as one of the many eerie intermezzos that those days occasioned on television.

Another similar incident occurring on December 23rd should be mentioned, as it eventually became one of the most discussed moments within the gates of Romanian Television. Unlike the previous day, December 23rd was relatively calm for television, dominated by monotonous sequences of speakers reading the news and representatives from various social groups – students, film directors[411], and others – sharing heartfelt communiqués with audiences at home. From an audiovisual point of view, this day marked the consolidation of a hastily established news TV channel format. Most of the recorded footage unfolded indoors, with only a handful of outdoor sequences hinting at a simmering tension between the interior safety of the studio and the unpredictability of the streets – a

[411] Constantin Vaeni reading from an old book that a teenager gave to him on the way to the studio and seeing in this act of sharing a book a symbol of the fight for democracy.

dynamic to which we will later return. However, at one moment, the normal flow of information was disrupted by the unannounced appearance of a man with blood on his face, echoing in an intensified manner the intervention of Nicu Ceaușescu the day before. This man was accused of being a terrorist. The scene unfolded in an almost burlesque manner: as soon as he stated his name as Dan Marin, a supposedly former world champion member of the Romanian handball team, someone angrily interjected, 'He's lying!' Marin went on to explain that he currently worked for the Ministry of Internal Affairs but did not have a gun with him, contrary to the collective allegations. Those around him began searching on him and did find a weapon, to which Marin clarified somewhat uneasily that he had never used it against another person. He was then escorted back to the offscreen of the television camera. The action on TV resumed abruptly, with a pan shot that revealed three moderators asking for silence, then synthesising emphatically: 'the building of the television is in danger, circled by these enemies.' No further proof was given to this admittedly grave accusations professed against Marin.[412]

This short sequence carried such an emblematic quality that it was also included in Farocki and Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* as a paradigmatic example of how popular anger manifested as vigilante practices during those tumultuous days, even appealing to lynching attempts in the desperate quest for an immediate form of justice against those who, for years, have enjoyed the privilege of power.[413]

These sequences of sudden interruption, in which popular discontent was concretised against people serving as scapegoats (be they legitimate or not), represent more than mere exceptions. The striking similarity between these moments – where impromptu popular trials erupted with physical consequences – suggests they were not just coincidences. Judging by the doubts regarding ethical questions that have been raised by the handling of the Ceaușescu trial from a few days later – to which we will return shortly

[412] Siani-Davies argues that television played a crucial role in creating the narrative of terrorists holding on to the old order: 'Around 21.00 [on December 22nd] – *again following the appearance of images on the television* – rumours that terrorists were in the vicinity seem to have started to circulate alongside the, by now familiar, fears that water supply had been poisoned and industrial plants have been mined.', in *The Romanian Revolution, op. cit.*, 297.

[413] Wrongly accused and subsequently rehabilitated, Dan Marin would be remembered as the only 'terrorist' from those days that was ever shown on television, symbol of the confusion reigning in December 1989 and bearer of a tragic aura due to this prejudiced iconicity. See for example Ina Maria Stoica, 'Povestea a (sic) singurului "terrorist" arătat la televizor în decembrie 1989. Cum a ajuns un campion mondial de handbal desfigurat, scuipat și sechestrat' [The Story of the Only 'Terrorist' Shown on TV in December 1989. How a Handball World Champion Became Disfigured, Spitted On and Sequestered], accessible at: https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/povestea-a-singurului-terorist-aratat-la-2401359.html. Date accessed: December 26th, 2024.

–, these brief occurrences achieve the status of an eerie but disquieting precedent. Television, in these instances, became the arena that crystallised this emergent dynamic: a hurried, brutal exchange of agency between individuals who, under the former regime, have been thought to belong to opposing sides. This reconfigured power relation relied on television to affirm the people's justified thirst for redemption and, controversially, to legitimise the use of unorthodox methods to impose it. Simultaneously, these moments underscored the volatility of the nascent format of news television. Yet it must be reminded that, during those revolutionary days, everything within the television studio carried a provisional quality, as well as a desire for unprecedented sensationalist images. The live nature of the broadcasts was pushed here to extreme and ethically debatable consequences, creating a radical openness to unpredictability, even *faux pas* that would be excused – up to a point – by the urgency of the broadcast. Operating without precedent, in a raw understanding of its mission of public service, the studio's permanently shifting structure absorbed any external element, emphasising its experimental and transitional character.

Related to such occurrences, on December 24th, Romanian television aired a scoop concerning Zoia Ceaușescu, the daughter of Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu. Unlike the previously discussed instances of live interruptions, this case involved a more carefully crafted montage designed to serve primarily as an accusatory spectacle. It was presented as a reportage on the 'arrest of yet another member of Ceaușescu's clan,' with the voiceover from the studio playing a critical role in framing the event and directing the viewer towards the intended inflammatory conclusions. The imagery, devoid of inherent commentary, was mediated entirely through the presenters' editorialised remarks, underscoring their authority to define the narrative. 'We will supplement the commentary of those who made the arrest with our own from the studio', the moderators explicitly declared, cementing their control over how the footage was to be interpreted.

Not that there was any ambiguity about it: the segment began with an iron gate adorned by the Romanian flag, its communist emblem conspicuously cut out. This opening shot, rife with symbolism, suggested an intentional mise en scène, emphasising the shift in power dynamics, while also ensuring a minimal structure, a clearly legible opening for the sequence, etc. The voiceover introduced the scene: 'Zoia Ceaușescu, a prisoner in her grandmother's house.' The remark was obviously ironic. The footage showed Zoia encircled by paratroopers, with a tracking shot revealing the courtyard and its surroundings. 'We will now see the little garden the lady has made for herself... Maybe not Versailles, but still', the voiceover quipped, blending sarcasm with disdain. A close-up revealed luxury

items, including wristwatches, cash, and brooches, as the narrator sneered, '[t]he dramatic fate of being forced to choose between so many wristbands, so many brooches, while at the same time having your phone tapped.'

This concept of a back and forth interplay between video and audio was the structuring principle of the montage. Overall, the reportage employed a starkly brutal *dispositif*, pairing the imagery with a voiceover laced with irreverent, derisive commentary. The broadcast transformed moving images into a form of provisional court, enabling hasty, succulent judgment and symbolising the moving into a new political order. By creating a detached hierarchy between sound and image, the montage inscribed a pedagogical narrative aligned with the moment's political stakes. The sarcastic commentary intensified as the camera zoomed in on Zoia Ceaușescu holding her dogs on leashes. 'Look at this face', the narrator remarked. 'This member of a dictatorial clan has been an alcoholic for the past six years. She must have been drowning the sorrows of poverty – but only in whiskey, the only beverage she could tolerate.' The tone turned even more scathing as the camera lingered on her face in close-ups: 'Look at her closely. Terminally alcoholic. She's clearly not lacking insolence, like any rich kid profiting from the sweat of Romanian workers and peasants.'

The reportage pursued on the same tonality. What might have been dismissed as a misogynist gaffe (regardless of the incriminated person's wrongdoings) in a conventional broadcast context was here normalised and even celebrated, as the silent images enabled the voiceover to impose its narrative unbridled, to clearly win this battle where suddenly visibility paved the way to public shaming. These critical remarks simply observe a process that was defining during those days – it is not up to us to question its historical validity, but only to highlight a newly attributed function for the audiovisual broadcast. As previously stated, the footage itself became a *locus* of power transfer, where fantasies of retribution were projected while class divisions of the communist era were paradoxically reaffirmed. This audiovisual vilification of a formerly privileged figure quickly became a symbol of Romania's transition toward democracy, underscoring the complex interplay of justice, spectacle, and ideology during this transformative period. In fact, the articulation between image and commentary became a sort of payback operation in which those who, for years and decades, have been reduced to the part of 'extras' (per Nicole Brenez) in this grotesque saga, were now allowed to get a form of audiovisual revenge. The production and circulation of images, to which anyone was now entitled, contained the possibility of historic justice.

It was essential to discuss this moment in greater detail, as it very clearly shows the Romanian Television's intent to position the moving image as sufficient proof of accusation. While the stakes in this particular instance were not exceptionally high – Zoia Ceaușescu's relationship with the dictatorial couple itself was reportedly strained, even as she benefited from her privileged genealogy[414] – the ambition to use visual media by itself as a form of trial is telling. This approach underscores a broader effort to weaponise the image in the service of revolutionary justice. The hasty documentation of accusations against the Ceaușescu family, one day later, marked a critical turning point, influencing attitudes toward the legitimacy of revolutionary actions both domestically and internationally. Deprived for decades of comprehensive and transparent broadcasting, the Romanian people lacked the collective experience (and/or lucidity) necessary to wield it effectively, even as they demonstrated an unrelenting thirst for visuality – a scopic desire that often transgressed ethical boundaries. As argued in a previous chapter, this fervour for visual documentation represents a kind of *degré zéro* of an intellectual tradition that equates the image with truth, the barthesian '*ça a été*' – a concept epitomising the photograph's ability to confirm existence – arriving precisely at a moment when doubts about the inherent authenticity of images were beginning to proliferate worldwide. This paradoxical interplay of an emerging faith in the image and the growing scepticism of its veracity, between the urgency to act in retaliation and use visual samples as accusatory spaces and the retrospective need to meticulously index everything via image documentation, speaks to the specific historical and cultural conditions of the Romanian Revolution.

The sequence concluded back in the studio with an evocative insert: a close-up of winter globes, followed by the moderator's solemn commentary. 'Meanwhile, our brave soldiers who are defending us here so that we can address you eat from these tin cans penetrated by terrorists' bullets', they declared, as the camera zoomed in to reveal a tin can of processed meat, ostensibly torn. Despite the evident fact that the can seems to have been damaged by something other than a bullet, the analogy was potent. 'This is the food that this odious regime is forcing us to eat even in its last agonic moments', the moderator continued.

[414] See for example Alexandru Ionescu, 'Viața tumultuoasă a Zoiei, singura fiică a familiei Ceaușescu' [The tumultuous life of Zoia, the only daughter of the Ceaușescu family], *Historia*. Accessible at: https://historia.ro/sectiune/portret/viata-tumultuoasa-a-zoiei-singura-fiica-a-572069.html. Date accessed: 23.03.2025.

Here, the rhetoric transcended the merely informational, becoming deeply emotional and deliberately evocative. It tapped into the popular anger that had begun to resurface – anger that, after the initial moments of disbelief and euphoria, was once again directed toward the remnants of the old order. The moment also emphasised a broader, implicit rhetorical stance that had pervaded the broadcasts since December 22nd: the continual need for moderators to reaffirm and reactivate the collective narrative of struggle and redemption, the legitimacy of the popular fury, as it gave signs of receding. This performative dynamic, oscillating between documentation and emotional appeal, became a defining feature of the revolutionary broadcasts, serving as both a cathartic outlet and a tool for the renegotiation of national identity.

The newsperson thus emerged as a sort of *bricoleur*[415], someone piecing together available resources, even incorporating input from the participants, in order to maintain the machinery of information dissemination as effectively as possible under chaotic conditions. Indeed, multiple signs of this bricolage with the unpredictable flow of events can be observed even at the most basic level. In general, this aspect has since been highly exaggerated or even depicted as a journalistic failure on a deontological level, since a retrospective gaze over these events often risks slipping into *post-factum* condescension[416]. This critique arises, in part, because an opposing temporality has emerged since then in constant tension with the journalistic immediacy of live information: that of long-term analysis and reflection. For instance, the declaration, 'This is why we are very careful with the information we are giving you, the audience', uttered shortly after Marin's departure by one of the three moderators, ostensibly stands in contrast to the eventual revelations concerning mass manipulations by the journalists[417]. Hindsight reveals that the period was marked by frequent errors and the dissemination of fake news[418]. A few hours later, within the same studio, another moderator declared in a self-reflexive manner, yet full of authority, '[o]ur broadcast is going on; we suspend it only when we deem it necessary, either to

[415] On the question of bricolage and journalism, understood as a practice of collaboration, repurposing, and remediation that is crucial for an age of digitisation, see Mark Deuze, 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture', in *The Information Society*, Vol. 22, 2006, 63-75.
[416] An exemplary demystifying take on the events can be found in Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct, histoire en différé* [Revolution live, history on replay], unpublished Master's Thesis, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1999.
[417] See for example Marc Semo (journalist for *Libération*), 'Le faux charnier de Timisoara : l'histoire d'un dérapage médiatique', in Catherine Durandin (ed.) *Roumanie, vingt ans après. La « révolution » revisitée* (Paris: DiploWeb, 2009), 34-37.
[418] For an over-arching discussion on the matter, see Marie Menant, 'Bucarest 1989, optique et politique, histoire d'un différé', *op. cit*.

protect our aging technology or to decide upon the news we consider essential to transmit.' Since then – and even in the immediate aftermath of the revolution – numerous accounts, ranging from objective statistical analyses to public *mea culpa* statements, have underscored the inadequate responses of certain journalists during those critical days. Rather than neutrally and relevantly informing the population, their professional choices contributed at times to widespread disinformation, intensifying an already volatile situation. This disparity reveals the fragility of their claim to careful curation of information amidst the chaos.

Our purpose here is both more modest and more transgressive. It lies outside the scope of this research to attempt a quantification of the responsibility borne by journalists in the transformation of the Romanian people's euphoric liberation into a prolonged procession of remorse and uncertainty. To do so would place us in the uncomfortable position of passing judgment on a moment of profound crisis – one that defies evaluation through the standards of a regular, stable context –, and one that could not be witnessed personally. This is why the term 'audiovisual experiment' comes to mind so readily, as an etiquette which allows for a positive re-evaluation of the hesitancies and mistakes that have been committed in that short span of time, according to different criteria which emphasise the creative radical possibilities of failure.

This is not to suggest that responsibility should never be assessed – on the contrary, future juridical and historical inquiries must actively work to uncover the latent truths of that period, shedding light on aspects that have remained obscured.[419] However, the focus of this work is complementary to such efforts. It seeks to historicise the footage it examines, proposing an alternative perspective from which to interpret these images. By juxtaposing them with the prevailing, stabilised broadcast model that this revolutionary moment inadvertently disrupted, it highlights an emergent framework: one in which the television studio transformed into a modern-day agora. In this space, anyone, even those unaccustomed to occupying positions of visibility or iconicity, could step forward and speak, at least in theory.

During those days, the video camera was not merely an instrument to delineate visibility from off-screen obscurity, nor to distinguish those who could speak from those who had to remain silent. Instead, it mobilised a sort of innocence, a voluptuousness of

[419] A recent example of updated plural historical interpretations on the revolution, testament of its rich posterity, is Anneli Ute Gabanyi, Alexandru Muraru, Andrei Muraru, Daniel Șandru (eds.), *Revoluția din 1989. Învinși și învingători* [The Revolution of 1989. Losers and winners] (Iași: Polirom, 2020).

doing things for the first time, significantly bringing forward postures and voices that had never before been seen or heard on Romanian television as if this new presences were part of its task. This openness to literally uncharted visibility propositions was emblematic of a broader cultural and political rupture, marking a moment when the very structures of representation were being renegotiated in real time.

It is a widely shared opinion, both in Romania and in Western societies, that during the communist period, information was subject to systematic manipulation and control, ultimately rendering it the exclusive privilege of a narrow elite that monopolised power.[420] Television functioned as a poor medium of communication, decidedly undemocratic in its structure and intent. By contrast, what strikes contemporary gazes that are used to a polished version of the televisual broadcast about the footage from the revolutionary days in Romania is not just the new mass of information being shared but the raw humanity – a humanity that had been oppressed and held hostage until basically the previous day – captured within the images: untidy poses, weary faces, and hoarse voices strained from shouting their hope and joy. From December 22nd onwards, the scene is usually filled with coughing, verbal incoherence and mistakes, frequent comings and goings, and moments of spontaneous decisions stemming not from a fantasised generosity towards unscripted realities, but as a means to quickly adapt to the constraints and stakes of the situation – such as when a presenter relinquishes their chair to a guest before stepping out of the frame. The sheer multiplicity of figures, voices, and gestures suddenly being recorded highlights a striking inadequacy in the infrastructure inherited from the communist era. The television apparatus, built to support the controlled singularity of a regime, was ill-equipped to handle the democratic flood of simultaneous interventions. In response, this nascent democratic television had to adapt resourcefully, repurposing the 'old technology' that one presenter was referencing to accommodate the dynamic new realities of post-revolutionary Romania within the rigid framework of a system previously designed for maintaining a dictatorial status quo.

From this perspective, one particular moment proves telling. Late on December 24th, at the close of one broadcast, the five presenters stood in a single line facing the camera, wearing armbands with the Romanian flag. This poignant moment, alongside its solemn mise en scène of the bodies within the frame, echoed the unprecedented multiplicity of

[420] A more nuanced discussion of this aspect can be found in the previous chapter related to the history of the Romanian Television.

figures that the camera – and the studio's physical infrastructure – could only accommodate uneasily. One presenter even went on to remark: 'This relatively numerous presence, which was highly unusual at the Romanian Television – though not the Free Romanian Television that we are now – represents only an apparent aspect. Joining us backstage in the technical sectors were tens of colleagues, each and every one of them working with abnegation and selflessness.'

This statement reflects a dual intent. On one hand, it underscores a democratic aspiration to credit every individual contributing to the broadcast, presenting an alternative to the rigidly hierarchical structure that characterized the institution under the former regime. On the other hand, it highlights the emergence of the journalist as a quasi-messianic figure – a transformation that paradoxically introduced a new verticality. By elevating the journalist's role as a central authority, this approach redefined the relationship between the presenters and the audience, subtly reinstating a hierarchy even as it sought to dismantle the old one. This attitude aligned with the broader climate that we have sought to deconstruct so far, shaped by the geographic position of the Television building – situated amidst armed confrontations –, the scarcity and difficulty of obtaining reliable information across the country, and the television studio's emerging role as a unique space for pluralism.

This fact was underscored at the conclusion of the December 24th broadcast, when one of the presenters even offered an apology on behalf of the Romanian Television, stating: 'Regarding today's relative scarcity of images, it must be acknowledged that the unfavourable conditions outside [specifically the fighting around the Television building] prevented our film crews from continuing their work, forcing them to return due to the situation.' Establishing the precise causes of this decision falls beyond the scope of this research. However, its consequences in terms of audiovisual coverage are noteworthy: December 24th became a day dominated by debates, exchanges, and communiqués addressed to the people, featuring a broad spectrum of participants. These ranged from students and prominent dissidents, such as Doina Cornea, to politicians eager to capitalise on the unfolding events, such as Ion Iliescu and Petre Roman, future president and prime minister, respectively. This, in turn, implied that, from December 22nd to December 25th, the population had to rely, in terms of visual coverage of the street scenes, only on a relatively redundant loop of footage being replayed again and again.

On December 23rd, several shots taken on the previous evening were broadcast for a second time. However, now they functioned less as conveyors of explicit information and more as evocative figures of speech – as, already, trademark images synthesising the course

of the revolution. Amid the predominance of studio footage – of the 4 hours and 25 minutes indexed in the Television Archives for that day, only a handful of minutes depict outdoor scenes – these images clearly stood out by their brevity and their intensity. They appeared near the end of the broadcast, following the now-established dramaturgy of news readings interspersed with interventions from representatives of civil society, which managed, in the space of only two days, to become a routine.

The montage of these street scenes was brief yet striking. It began with night-time images of people shouting one of the slogans of the revolution, 'We are not leaving', holding their palms up to the camera, in a remarkable, quasi-performative symbol of solidarity and resistance, that we have already discussed. These were followed by scenes of teenager-like soldiers perched on tanks, extending gestures of camaraderie – or at least showing no desire to conform to their military duties in any way – with the celebrating crowds. Suddenly, the tone shifted: a rapid succession of dark, chaotic visuals depicted buildings engulfed in flames while gunfire resounded in the background. These obscured and barely legible images evoked the disorientation of urban warfare. The montage then returned to jubilant street scenes, juxtaposing moments of collective joy with unsettling depictions of violence, and then, once again, to the extended, yet abstract, scenes of gunshot. Even though rather brief, the moment made consistent use of the alternated montage as a figure to create meaning.

A transitional image tied these sequences together: an interior shot from a neon-lit corridor where soldiers and civilians, armed with various weapons, appeared to be preparing for confrontation. Yet, the montage avoided clarifying the relationship between the two moods, offering no clear information on the topographic relation between the two sequences composing the montage. The broadcast offered no additional meaning, forcing the viewers to assess this ambiguity by themselves. This alternation between celebration and conflict was effective in instilling fear, suggesting that even amidst the apparent liberation in the streets, unseen battles raged in the off-screen space. The possibility that such audiovisual rhetoric may have infused the depiction of revolution with an additional layer of tension and adrenaline, even at the cost of projecting a distorted reality on the screens, may not be overestimated.[421]

[421] Siani-Davies further emphasises this conclusion: 'The TV also played a more nefarious role in the revolution. It served to confuse lines of communications offering an unreliable and excitable interpretation of events at a time when a calm and more reasoned approach was required, spreading images of the chaos in Bucharest and fear of the threat posed by the *Securitate* to the four corners of Romania. Many of the local vigilante groups took their cue from the TV, and the renewal of fighting in Timisoara, Brasov, Craiova and

One day later, on December 24th, during an evening broadcast, one speaker remarked: 'I hope you are becoming accustomed to the sequences that are being broadcast by the Romanian Free Television, which on the one hand illustrate the joy in some cities in the country regarding this historical victory of the Romanian people, but also the moments of confrontation, of clash with this so insidious enemy.' This statement is particularly revealing, as it shows the moderators themselves acknowledging an empirically observable pattern in the broadcast content, implying that the editorial choices behind the previously discussed montages may have been more deliberate than coincidental. It is by no means exaggerated to see their words as a verbal rendition of the syntax of the alternated montage.

Moreover, the language that was used warrants close attention. The term 'insidious enemy', left vague and undefined, evokes the spectre of an almost supernatural, transcendent evil. This rhetorical choice strays far from journalistic deontology, which generally demands clarity and precision. While the existence of an 'enemy' is not wholly imaginary – given the documented confrontations and civilian casualties during the revolution –, this highly rhapsodic language suggests that journalists may have consciously amplified the dramatic intensity of the situation. Rather than merely informing the public about the unfolding events, they appear to have projected a heightened sense of a fateful, almost mythic struggle, fuelling the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that pervaded those days.

The course of events unfolding in the streets was more dramatic and far less predictable than the curated broadcasts in the studio. The first street scenes captured on film took place after dark on the evening of December 22nd. While a more detailed analysis of these sequences will follow in the next chapter, it is essential to note their defining characteristics: owing to the precarious state of the available technology, these images resisted becoming iconic. The footage, often grainy and poorly illuminated, revealed very little; its content, save for a few discernible shapes under dim projectors, remained ambiguous. In these scenes, audio took precedence over video, serving as the primary narrative guide, while the visuals were largely static. This imbalance created strange and disorienting effects, as when a voice called for the formation of a passage corridor, its source remaining unidentified by the camera. In these moments, the images did not merely

other cities seems to have been directly related to the appearance of images of conflict from the capital', in *The Romanian Revolution*, *op. cit.*, 96.

document events but evoked a broader atmosphere, defining a space – the square as a site for revolutionary events – rather than a specific action.

The Audiovisual Sequence of Ceaușescu's Trial

In itself, the sequence depicting Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu's hasty trial represents one of the most enduring trademark moments of the revolution, as well as the starting point of a 'deflation' (per Serge Daney), the ignition of a questioning, doubtful commentary that led, both in Romania and abroad, to the partial delegitimising of the revolutionary process. The media treatment of this trial only helped fuelling scepticism, often times leading to the embittered adoption of a demystifying – but usually no less partisan – stance on the events, which have gradually come to be perceived, by a segment of the analysts, as irrefutable proof of a stolen revolution, a pre-planned coup d'état, a continuation of the communist rule under different designations[422]. Although such negative assessments of the revolution in general, and the role played by television in particular, seem excessive[423] in retrospect, they do signal certain instances of deontological misconduct from both the improvised leaders of the revolution and the no less artisanal media handling of the events. And while some of these misconducts can be excused, since they appear as ingenuous attempts at making sense of an unprecedented socio-political reality via outdated technologies and protocols, others call for closer critical scrutiny, since they were being considered, from the outset, as potentially serious threats for the new democratic order.

So emblematic has the trial become since its execution on December 25th, that it led, among other means of penetration within public conscience, to numerous repurposing acts in the artistic field. In 2009, theatre artist Milo Rau proceeded to a re-enactment of the sequence, including the tense exchanges between the dictatorial couple and their ad hoc judges[424]. Played by well-known Romanian theatre and cinema actors – Victoria Cociaș,

[422] We are once again pointing the reader towards Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct. Histoire en différé*, *op. cit.*, and Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții*, *op. cit.*, for representative accounts (either endorsed explicitly or, in Cesereanu's case, discussed analytically) of this scepticism.

[423] As Christian Delage, Vincent Guigueno, and André Gunthert point out, 'the sometimes radical critique of the media seems as ideological as the malfunctions that it seeks to denounce. Indeed, in Bucharest, if we agree to consider that television did play a role, this role cannot be reduced to a will to manipulate', in *La Fabrique des images contemporaines*, *op. cit.*, 32.

[424] See *The Last Days of the Ceaușescus. Re-enactment of the Ceaușescu-Trial*, whose ambition of detailed re-actualisation of the historical moment is made apparent right from the presentation text: 'Only recently did those soldiers and citizens involved break their silence, making an *exact reconstruction* of this original event

Constantin Cojocaru, Constantin Drăgănescu, Alexandru Mihăescu, Eugen Cristian Motriuc and Mircea Rusu – the show obviously superimposed two different regimes of spectacle: one that is based on a factual, rigurous re-enactment of the footage, and one that mitigates it by appealing to popular figures asked to embody a radical alterity (beloved star Cociaș playing the role of public enemy Elena Ceaușescu, etc.). The other instance of incorporation of the trial footage within an artistic process is even more symptomatic for the trademark quality of the event. It concerns the found footage film *Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu*/*The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (Andrei Ujică, 2010). Indeed, the movie opens with the communist leader as he is seated in the improvised dock. At one point, he gazes upwards towards the ceiling – and this significant gesture is repurposed by Ujică and transformed into a 'classical Hollywood'[425] device that announces the beginning of a flashback (which is represented by the uncommented flow of chronological official footage depicting Ceaușescu's rule, this flow being the actual film). Of course, the procedure is highly satirical: far from any wandering reflexive impulses, a consultation of the actual archival material depicting the trial confirms that, at that moment (and repeatedly afterwards), annoyed by the lack of understanding shown by his interlocutors, Ceaușescu actually rolled back his eyes in resignation and anger. In itself, this gesture possessed no meditative connotation – it was pure exasperation from the part of a disgraced leader who was being confronted for the first time with unresponsive, disobedient, even scornful subjects. In the radical spirit of archiveology practices, Ujică isolates a rather harmless, in any case negligible, gesture, revivifies it, and transforms it into an clutch device for the ignition of fiction.

While the sequence in itself has become iconic – even integrating a sarcastic, if not morbid, Romanian folklore[426] –, it is remembered and alluded to nowadays only via its most sensationalist episodes. Describing it *in extensor* proves however more challenging, precisely because of its rather absurdist dramaturgy. Indeed, a large part of the exchange between the judges and the accused couple can be resumed as a textbook dialogue of the deaf, with Ceaușescu repeatedly stating that he does not recognise this court and that he

of European unity possible', accessible here: https://international-institute.de/en/the-last-days-of-the-Ceaușescus/. Date accessed: 26. 08. 2025. Our underlining.

[425] Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel*, *op. cit.*, 303.

[426] It is interesting to note that, at the beginning of Radu Jude's film *"I Do Not Care if in History We Go Down as Barbarians"* (2018), when a theatre director meets her unprofessional actors, one old lady starts mocking Elena by herself, parodying her desperate and unsuccessful plea towards the young soldiers who were tasked to take her in charge so as not to be tied, pathetically imploring: 'Shame on you, shame on you, I brought you up like a mother'.

only wishes to respond to the Great Popular Assembly (Marea Adunare Populară), while the judges address counts of, amongst others, 'genocide', 'grave crimes against the Romanian people', 'acts of diversion', 'undermining [*subminare*] of the national economy', etc. The faces of the judges are briefly shown, although, according to several Western commentators, such quick glances, in the absence of any explanatory discourse, were hardly enough to legitimise this trial. The deontological lacks were even critiqued from an audiovisual standpoint as demonstrating the fallacy of the media coverage and, in this sense, inadvertently proving the missing credibility of this juridical process. Serge Daney thus argued, in the aftermath of the trial:

> Paradox: once we see, for the first time, a dictator who has lost his power and is about to lose his life, very soon we no longer want to see him, in fact. We want to see those who are judging him and who are entitled to do so, but not necessarily to remove him from the frame. The hors-champ is a resource of the imagination that we must never leave to its own devices. Last night, we missed the image of these off-screen judges, whose only elbows or shoulders we glimpsed from time to time. And this time, the freeze frame no longer had the value of an absolute signal, but was merely a poor contrivance to prevent us from seeing those whom we could hear. The act that consisted of improvising this trial and recording it is, therefore, only a half-act. It is as if the judges were too close to continue compromising themselves, even in the background of an image, with them.[427]

Although the trial footage that Daney is referring to represents a highly truncated montage taken from the entire mass of images depicting the procedure, consulting it can hardly be said to bring any form of consolation from a representational ethics perspective. The sequences that we discussed in a previous subsection, regarding a form of popular revenge inscribed in the production of images, are also pertinent here. Although Ceaușescu systematically refuses to engage with the committee on their accusatory terrain – at one point he is asked, using the colloquial second person (singular), to stand up, which he refuses, explaining: 'When I would go into factories I would stand up to discuss with the workers' –, his office lawyer asks the court: 'We only have one demand: that you take a decision which does not have the character of a vendetta.' Ceaușescu himself takes additional (but futile) precautions: 'please write for the record: I do not recognise the accusations that are brought to me'. Following this intense, but inconclusive exchange in which no party seemed willing to make any concessions, and which also forced the accused dictator to have recourse to an arsenal of resigned, exasperated, fatigued poses (including

[427] Serge Daney, 'Les Juges et l'Assassin' [The Judges and the Assassin], *Libération*, December 27th, 1989.

sarcastic laughter and impulsive hand movements), the committee rises and sentences the couple to death. We see the soldiers struggling to tie their hands while they scream – then, following an ellipsis, we see them standing their backs on the wall, from the point of view of the execution squad. The shot itself is very confusing, due to the conjugated action of the aging technology of recording and the gunfire itself.

Then, a long sequence starts in which the operator films the two dead bodies, approaching them through repeated zooms and camera movements. This moment serves as both identification process, certification of the act of killing itself and, presumably, the need of satisfying the scopic drive towards the two corpses of the tyrants[428]. Eventually they are covered with two kaki blankets. Following another, shorter, ellipsis, we see Elena Ceaușescu's dead body being brought inside, tied up, with the judges around it. The camera zooms in repeatedly on her face, almost obsessively, unveiling a bruised eye and the hair sticky with blood. The same protocol – indeed, a hasty ritual – is observed for the corpse of Nicolae Ceaușescu, until they are both put in their respective coffins and covered with a white sheet. No ambiguity remains following the camera's insistent scrutiny of the bodies: the act is accomplished, and the outcome is proven with the help of the camera, confirming the general rhetorical intention that we already discussed, as it was voiced by subsequent detached commentators:

> During these days preceding Christmas and the end of the year holidays, which are generally considered as a 'ceasefire', it was most likely urgent to assert the legitimacy of the Romanian 'revolution', to be assured that this unique chance of putting an end to the dictatorship would not be missed, to make a witness, if not a guarantor of the fulfilment of this liberation movement, out of the international community.[429]

Following this procedure, these images have been largely circulated in several formats. This hesitation has sparked widespread controversy, definitively altering the credibility of these symbolic acts. As Daney argued ironically, a scarcity of Romanian images from the pre-revolutionary era found itself supplanted by a no less striking emphasis on sensationalist footage which, far from offering a durable viewer consolation, only fuelled doubts, scepticism, and legitimate critiques:

> If we could hold a grudge against Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu for how badly they governed Romania during their lifetime, we can only congratulate their corpses for how

[428] On the intricate relation between the ruler, their body, and their portrait as a privileged locus of power and erotic attraction, see Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi*, *op. cit*.
[429] Christian Delage, Vincent Guigueno, André Gunthert, *La Fabrique des images contemporaines*, *op. cit.*, 38.

> often they appear – and with real success –on television. On Monday evening, they stunned us again with their great professionalism, with which they despised the pale extras who, once again, shot them.[430]

By wishing to produce such frenzied visual certifications of their acts with the evident hope of (self-)persuasion of their legitimation, Romanians fell into a trademark image textbook trap: the fact of conforming so diligently to a pre-written script actually served to undermine their artisanal protocols and actions. Habituated to witness worldwide news, the Western viewer could not be expected watch this spectacle without cynicism by prolonging this presumption of innocence for the Romanian people indefinitely. This, however, is where counter-images intervene: for, if they were not accounted for properly at that time, they paint a less straightforward picture of a spontaneous set of actions which defy revolutionary patterns and express a newfound specificity.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illuminate provocatively an already well known (at least for Romanian audiences) segment of footage from the Romanian Revolution. Unlike the next chapter, which will address precisely that imagery which has been – deliberately or not – obscured and often forgotten, this chapter engaged with what we have chosen to call trademark imagery, in other words, footage that is characterised by its hypervisibility. The need for describing and attempting to theorise both this trademark material and its subsequent public endurance, instead of simply devalue it because of its mainstream appeal which ultimately led to ossification, comes from the necessity to conceptualise such imagery. We find it important to engage in an interdisciplinary approach which considers aesthetical, ideological, and historical mechanisms that have facilitated the prominent role that such footage played in the construction of collective memory. Indeed, such prominence is not achieved through one-dimensional explanations, but is the result of conjugated actions and a general conformity to popular representations of revolutionary events.

Throughout this chapter, we have dwelt on the last televised speech delivered by Ceaușescu from the balcony of the Central Committee; on the first apparition of a private sphere of filmmaking gestures liberated from the official point of view; on the Studio 4 as an unstable symbolic space that coagulated the hopes and disillusions of a new democratic regime and saw the transformation of live broadcasts into performative spaces; on the street

[430] Daney, 'Nicolae et Elena lèguent leur corps à la télé', *art cit.*

scenes depicting a uniform, sometimes impersonal, and generic image of collective joy; and, finally, on acts of popular rage as they were consummated through the sheer possibility of image production, whose most crystallised demonstration could be found in the hasty trial of the Ceaușescu couple.

This focus on several important themes, Leitmotivs, and structural broadcasting choices has allowed us to isolate several dominant affects ranging from outbursts of resentment to popular euphoria that have helped translate the public interest topic of 'the end of communism' into a highly universal, heated, and emotional spectacle[431]. Moreover, we have tried to show how some of the deontological fallacies of these broadcast, explainable given the unpredictable charge of the moment, have contributed to a mitigated image of the overall revolutionary outcome. The trademark footage of the revolution itself does not present a homogeneous image of the events; furthermore, this impression can only solidify when put in the context of the entire mass of recorded footage (some of which has never been aired publicly), in which the revolution may veer closer to a looser causal chain of popular gestures of discontent, if not – at times – to a form of confusing non-event.

Chapter 6. Rebellious Ashes of Time: Counter-Images of the Romanian Revolution

Devising a Theoretical Approach for the Analysis of Counter-Images

There are multiple angles which allow for the conceptualisation of counter-images, understood here as the (audio)visual samples that stand in opposition to the emblematic, easily decodable trademark imagery. In an age characterised by a multiplicity of

[431] As explained in a previous chapter, the Romanian case represented a sort of climactic apex in a regional dramaturgy of political shifts. One should compare such intense, contested footage with Sergei Loznitsa's *Sobytie*/*The Event* (2015), a montage of the putsch from August 1991 that led to the end of the communist rule in the USSR whose main tonality is that of stasis, expectation, de-dramatisation. In other words, the complete opposite to the more immediately appealing footage of the Romanian events.

audiovisual circuits and an unprecedented image production and consumption cycle, the question of the 'material' properties of the image has once again become crucial, prompting analysts to seek ways to decentralise the univocal progressive march towards novelty, consumerism, and an idealised standard of visuality. This, then, is a radically contemporary debate, resurfacing with acute relevance within a market economy which is flooded by digitalised and AI-generated visual samples. Yet recent theoretical findings and approaches can also serve a pertinent situation and reassessment of the counter-images that have been recorded (and often times neglected, abandoned, or forgotten) during the Romanian Revolution – while allowing these images to illuminate contemporary critiques of the visual culture in return.

Of course, probably the most important attempt at devising an alternative regime of visibility by championing subaltern types of imagery is represented by Hito Steyerl's essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image'[432], which has itself become somewhat iconic among theorists and practitioners of the image for providing an adequate, articulated, political statement on a potentially radical economy of visual information. Arguing in favour of degraded images, understood as the 'lumpen proletariat' belonging to 'the class society of appearances', Steyerl displayed the possibility of such images to articulate, through their irrepressible motion, a collective counter-experience that values dispossession and resistance[433]. In fact, by positively revalorising precisely those aspects which had been rigorously argued against by both the voracious marketing of the corporate industry of technological giants and the capitalist orthodoxy[434], Steyerl's seminal text has produced the impulse for new fields of study that see in the production of degraded samples and detritus of the digital culture a communitarian strategic opportunity whose concrete applications concern ecologist practices as much as they do anticapitalist stances[435]. Indeed, as Antonio Somaini and Andrea Pinotti argue,

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[432] Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux journal*, No. 10 (November 2009), accessible at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image. Date accessed: 03. 08. 2025.

[433] Such an intuition will be more systematically pursued and collected in her *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2012).

[434] Steyerl argues that '[t]he poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all.', 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *art. cit.*

[435] See, for example, Marcello Vitali-Rosati, *Éloge du bug. Être libre à l'ère du numérique* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2024), in which the bug, the technical error and the general refusal to conform to technical and optical standards becomes a methodology for digital freedom. Also see Sean Cubitt's genealogical account *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Techniques from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge [Mass.]: The MIT Press, 2014). On the particular field of study of image resolution and the subversive capacity of low

> In this hierarchical iconic landscape characterised by a continuous race towards high definition – a race in which the parameters change incessantly since today's high definition is meant to become tomorrow's low definition –, the 'poor' images present specific traits. Thanks to compression and to the lightness of the files which are encoded according to the parameters of compression formats (JPEG, PNG, TIFF, etc.), they are capable to circulate, to be shared, and have a 'plasticity' which is superior to that of high definition images. These are malleable, unstable, constantly moving entities that are submitted to an indefinite series of migrations, manipulations, decoding and recoding processes, shares and disseminations, appropriations and repurposes which often times degrade them, but which, at the same time, thwart any attempt to limit their circulation and defend their copyright.[436]

In her essay, Steyerl argues that this category of the poor image is the apanage of the digital technological environment, although the aesthetic properties described by both her text and Somaini's and Pinotti's assessment clearly demonstrate that it is operational when considering the Romanian Revolution as well. Indeed, as we will see in subsequent sections of this chapters, questions of plasticity and abstraction[437] become relevant when describing the confusing televisual footage produced in this specific historical and technological circumstance. As perceptive theory has long established, the lower the resolution of the image – that is, the poorer its nature –, the more vibrant, almost three-dimensional in its pixellising core it becomes[438]. Such as paradox was plainly visible during the revolution, the image assuming an eerily inappropriate character more akin to video art than regular televisual broadcasts, disturbing the usual regime of the medium, which began to encourage exhibitionism on a large scale in the West of the eighties, according to John Caldwell[439], who coined the term 'televisuality' in order to describe it. Moreover, the notion of a 'caressing image', as advanced and conceptualised by Laura U. Marks, becomes fully pertinent in this case, consolidating the contradiction between the supposedly sensational character of the events and, at least partly, the quasi-soothing feeling procured by some images[440]. In fact, although at first such contemporary theories may seem largely

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definition images, see Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini, *La haute et la basse définition des images. Photographie, cinéma, art contemporain, culture visuelle* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2021).

[436] Antonio Somaini and Andrea Pinotti, *Culture visuelle. Images, regards, médias, dispositifs* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2022), 249.

[437] Steyerl argues that '[t]he poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming', in 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *art. cit.*

[438] See Somaini and Pinotti, *Culture visuelle, op. cit.*, 20-83.

[439] See John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2020), especially 108.

[440] Although Laura U. Marks's reference point is video, her considerations are fully operational for our case study, allowing us to conceive of the counter-imagery of the revolution in previously underdeveloped areas of study. She argues that '[h]aptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into

disconnected from our case study, they serve to fundament theoretically and historically the context of proliferation of such non-conformist imagery within the revolutionary broadcasts as an attempt, no matter how involuntary, to question, if not actively disturb, the System of Information as described by Jacques Rancière. Indeed, by shifting the audience's focus from regular sensible distributions between those who speak and those who are spoken for towards questions regarding the materiality, texture, aesthetics of the image, and by privileging minority narratives instead of master, hegemonic overviews, such samples act politically at the level of a redistribution of power and of alternative, more inclusive and radically decentralised presentations of historical events.

Of course, focusing on the unexpected aesthetics of a TV image does not automatically mean a devaluation of its politics[441]. On the contrary, the question is largely political, and allows us, on the one hand, to extract the televisual from the (very ideologically motivated) consensus of a 'low' medium, an inferior, popular, distrustful substitute for cinema. On the other hand, privileging other, previously unseen images carries with it an inherent emancipatory potential. We have opted for the term 'counter-images' precisely to underline the oppositional optics which largely governs our method. This option also relates to what Nicholas Mirzoeff defines as 'countervisuality', a politically infused notion served to address the colonial, exploitative, and extractive heritage of visuality, and provide an intersectional corrective to it. Mirzoeff conceives of visuality as

> the claim for the right to look. It is the dissensus with visuality, meaning 'a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it.' The performative claim of a right to look where none exists puts a countervisuality into play.[442]

Such a political definition of countervisuality is perfectly applicable to our case study, naturalising a legitimate need to produce alternative elements of visibility of a given situation. This also ties in to what Steyerl conceives as the critical potential of poor images

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depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus. The video works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what it is she is beholding. Haptic video resolves into figuration only gradually if at all, instead inviting the caressing look I have described.', in *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.

[441] For a comprehensive account of the potentialities and hidden pitfalls residing in an aesthetical analysis of television, see Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (eds.), *Television Aesthetics and Style* (New York – London: Bloomsbury, 2013), especially Sarah Caldwell, 'Television Aesthetics: Stylistic Analysis and Beyond', 23-47.

[442] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

to become sites of circulation, collectivity, and resistance against capitalist hierarchies of visibility, of distribution between 'good' and 'bad' images. In fact, when applied to the Romanian Revolution, counter-images define this event as strikingly non-spectacular, shifting its main affects from a sensationalist self-colonising show to a collective field of vision in which the unstable, improvised live feed became a material force precisely thanks to its limitations. So radical is, at times, this incomplete, interrupted, and raw character of the footage, that it becomes not only abstract, but unintelligible, which is indeed either a grave deontological accusation for any television worker, or a great opportunity for an alternative televised model. As Eva Kernbauer comments,

> [m]any of these unreadable images are generated by the belief that an event is somehow 'documented' by the mere fact that a camera is pointed at it. The voice-over commentary helps to contextualize the clips but cannot make them 'speak.' Often the cameras seem utterly useless in documenting what has happened in fact. An informed eye (in this case represented by the directors' commentary) is necessary to reconstruct – or at least guess at – he actual events depicted. In order to be able to generate visibility, the video documents must first be inscribed into the cultural and technical processes of producing evidence.[443]

Finally, one last 'ontological' consideration on the nature of television needs to be addressed in relation to what has just been said. This concerns, of course, the 'liveness' prerogative of the televisual medium, which has structured television studies since the times of André Bazin. In her critique of Herbert Zettl's by-now conventional account of liveness[444], Jane Feuer argues that the idea of flow is nothing more than a convention, pure rhetoric exploited by television for marketing purposes when, in fact, the coverage that it usually presents the viewer is fragmented:

> Flow as such is neither natural nor technologically determined. It is an historically specific result of network practice: 'flow charts' are constructed by network executives prior to being reconstituted by structuralists. Flow, as a seamless scanning of the world, is valorized

[443] Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, *op. cit.*, 62.

[444] Herbert Zettl argues that '[w]hile in film each frame is actually a static image, the television image is continually moving, very much in the manner of the Bergsonian duree. The scanning beam is constantly trying to complete an always incomplete image. Even if the image on the screen seems at rest, it is structurally in motion. Each television frame is always in a state of becoming. While the film frame is a concrete record of the past, the television frame (when live) is a reflection of the living, constantly changing present. The live televised event and the event itself exist in the same present. This is impossible with film. But as a record of the past, film affords us great control in the re-creation of an event. . . . Obviously, the filmic event is largely medium dependent, while television in its essence (live) is largely event dependent.', in 'The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics', *Journal of the University Film Association*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 1978), 3. The idea of a permanent 'state of becoming' for each televisual frame remains, despite the time span separating present-day from the moment of Zettl's writing, highly operational for understanding the fascination elicited by the Romanian Revolution.

> at the expense of an equally great fragmentation. Television exploits its assumed 'live' ontology as ideology. In the concept of live television, flow and unity are emphasized, giving a sense of immediacy and wholeness, even though network practice belies such unity.[445]

Writing prior to the events of December 1989, Feuer could not foresee the irruption of a media event which would indeed monopolise the worldwide scene, even reaching a point of absolute suture in Romania, on a state television where no obstacles – no advertising, no competition channels – could interrupt the flow of images. In fact, while it remains evidently crucial to demystify marketing operations serving to mask ideological inclinations by normalising them – television being regularly seen as a transparent tool precisely because of its 'liveness' prerogative –, this in itself cannot account for the complexity, indeed the density of the live events in Romania. Rather, as we will see in the subsequent sections, counter-images contradicted the famous paradigm of sensationalist live imagery by instilling different, paradoxical temporalities and at times barely discernible contents. If such moments did not alter durably the televisual system, they nonetheless point to the virtuality of an experimental broadcast, the possibility of criticising the TV apparatus from within.

Applying the Counter-Imagery Framework to the Romanian Revolution

In general, the Romanian Revolution is evoked today as a decisive historical moment that marked a profound rupture in national continuity. As we have seen, the emblematic images of the event – from Ceaușescu's escape by helicopter from the roof of the Central Committee to the inconclusive footage of the trial, which would eventually signal a shift in public perception regarding the media's treatment of the revolution – have amplified this dramaturgy of replacing the old order with a new one, consecrated not only by the events themselves, but also by the audiovisual transformations that accompanied it. The dictator's forced departure, as well as his corpse, which was used not only as evidence but also, in a way, as a self-sufficient justification for a hasty execution, served as a means of legitimising the necessity of 'turning the page'. Nuanced judgement and careful consideration of culpability were deemed unrealistic; they were supplanted by brutal acts of retribution, embodied not only in the radical images of the Ceaușescu couple's physical

[445] Jane Feuer, 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television. Critical Approaches – An Anthology* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), 16.

elimination but also in the heated, at times violent televised exchanges that recorded these events as they unfolded. Analysing that moment retrospectively, the detailed televisual reports discussed earlier – in which members of the dictator's family, as well as ordinary citizens suspected, rightly or wrongly, of continuing to collaborate with the old regime and its secret police, were subjected to aggression by a crowd now legitimised in its fury and overlooking a juridical apparatus – appear today not only as a deserved and long delayed form of popular revenge over its tyrannical leaders, but also as the documented expression of cathartic rituals, serving a primarily performative, spectacular role rather than that of a genuine informational platform[446].

Interestingly, such televised sequences were far more difficult to export than the universally heroic imagery, free of ambiguity or topographic anchors, which reassured international audiences and legislative bodies of the revolution's orderly progress, yet they are not at all devoid of interest. On the contrary – studying the entirety of a televisual archive, including what seems irrelevant from pragmatic points of view – has been a legitimate scholarly practice for some time now. In fact, what could be overlooked or suppressed in the urgency of the moment returns, in retrospect, with new evocative power. Indeed, as Wolfgang Ernst contends, 'immediate electronic broadcast [facilitated by live television] also makes possible the inadvertent recording of material that may seem significant with hindsight.'[447] It goes without saying that our interest in such lesser-known imagery stems not from an absurd effort to delegitimise a necessary and glorious movement, but to underline a strategic mechanism of selection – a 'curation' of material depending on the intended audience. For instance, the strictly local potential of these public shaming scenes – featuring, as targets, some well-known political figures whose ostentatious lifestyles had fuelled widespread collective resentment – determined their status as (only) national trademark images. The course of the revolution was thus justified by the very satisfaction of immediate impulses for moral compensation.

This is just one instance in which Romanian decision-makers ensured the export of a polished image of the revolution while simultaneously providing domestic audiences with

[446] Such instances were also complemented by unprecedented direct address sequences to what was then perceived as a ubiquitous enemy: see, for instance, on December 22nd, the reaction of moderator Teodor Brateș exclaiming over the recurrent image of young people mounted at the back of a truck: 'Maybe in this 12th hour will these Securitate workers return to reason, will they understand that they need to serve the people…' Compared to present-day protocols, such practices seem strikingly bold, if not downright aggressive.

[447] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 107.

the raw material necessary for a long-awaited release of confined frustrations. Moreover, until the revelation of the trial footage – which, in the eyes of many Western commentators, served as an awakening of conscience –, the Romanian media coverage of the event was largely self-governed and improvised, responding strictly to circumstantial needs of, and calls for, mass mobilisation. If we have chosen to categorise these broadcasts as an 'experimental' direction for television in general, it is due to the ability of those producing these images – whether out of sheer inexperience or the gradual formation of an awareness of the medium's historical role in disseminating information and legitimising struggles – to push the boundaries of conventional, regulated television practices. After all, when considering the entire body of recorded and broadcasted images from those days of profound societal restructuring, the newly formed picture of the revolution becomes far more complex. It ceases to conform to pre-established narratives tested in other geographical and historical contexts, instead acquiring its own specificity; furthermore, it no longer aligns with a triumphalist tone, one that would depict the Romanian people's break from communism solely as an inexorable march from a rigid and repressive political regime toward an enlightened and inclusive one. Precisely because the Revolution unfolded in a virgin media landscape, where television had never been tested in a context other than strictly controlled political indoctrination, it became a case study in the possibilities, limitations, and abuses of television's role in reflecting a historical event from scratch, in the absence of any pre-validated models.

Before delving further into examples of what we consider counter-images to the dominant tendencies of inscribing the revolution within historical templates and international expectations, it is necessary to clarify more precisely what we mean by this visual category. It already seems evident that such images are predominantly understood in negative terms, as lacking something that trademark images possess: an immediate appeal, a sense of easy recognition by anyone, a facility for exportability that renders them generic, illustrative, and universally applicable, a predisposition to synthesise – through simplification – the multiple interpretations encouraged by an event, while also attenuating contradictions.

Consequently, the counter-images discussed in this section generally prove more difficult to decipher, poor in resolution, and disdainful of any sensationalist content. Their low aesthetical qualities make them unsuitable for long-term posterity. However, it is essential to perceive these images beyond this globally shared negative condition, extracting them from the binary relationship they maintain with trademark images.

Counter-images do not exist solely to negate the interpretative directions imposed by trademark images, or as mere alterity; rather, they participate in reflecting the same event through diverse modalities. They complete a picture that has thus far reached us in a truncated form, impoverished by the loss of the sensible plurality of the ways in which it was initially perceived.

As such, the insistence on these images fulfils a political function, focusing on the minor, the overlooked, the neglected; yet this endeavour is not exclusively driven by a militant agenda so much as by a historically grounded concern – to restore a reality transfigured by the passage of time while remaining faithful to the viewer's initial experience of the revolutionary moment, which was not unidimensional but marked by contradictions, even disorienting[448]. Indeed, the very distinction between trademark images and counter-images within this study is more a matter of convention and readability than a rigid, exclusionary classification, since any historical event is represented audiovisually by their entanglement.

As we have seen, the elevation of an image to the status of a trademark image depends on numerous ideological, aesthetic, and social factors. A trademark image always aligns with the dominant ideology, but the actual interplay of these factors follows unpredictable patterns. Moreover, this study argues that the media treatment of the revolution deliberately sought to generate such an imaginary – one that, while constructed, was not entirely antithetical to democratic representation: in broad terms, any image can become a trademark image. On the other hand, it remains unclear how many of today's forgotten images failed to attain iconic status merely due to historical contingency.

The Romanian Revolution thus marks a pivotal moment in European history, one charged with enough affective intensity to foster the emergence of such images (comparable only to those of the Berlin Wall, but otherwise unmatched in their intensity at a regional level). However, reducing events to their trademark visual identity means inscribing them within a ceremonial framework, fixing them into immutable coordinates. Counter-images, by contrast, seek to remedy this reification of the past by introducing an element of mobility, fluidity, and play into its representation. The critical endeavour of unearthing counter-images aligns with a broader strategy of redefining the past in

[448] In a film such as *Hârtia va fi albastră*/*The Paper Will Be Blue* (Radu Muntean, 2006), this disorientation becomes the modus operandi of the film as a police unit navigates through the hours of one revolutionary night that is rendered archetypal by the restrained mise en scene. The film manages to convey the reigning confusion of late December 1989, so much so that it ends up embodying a relativist stance in which the revolution can be subsumed to chaotic acts of rebellion.

accordance with a political will to give voice to ignored destinies and marginal stories[449]. Ultimately, this approach seeks to subvert the dominant mechanisms of mass media in order to propose a more egalitarian historical inquiry – one concerned precisely with such aspects that were overlooked by standardised news bulletins reproducing fallacious social hierarchies and imbuing certain images with cultural capital.

The fact that television had ventured during those days into uncharted territory – precisely the territory it had been kept away from under the centralised control of information – while simultaneously seeking to maintain its status as the authority on information, only further strained an already fragile broadcasting operation. There are numerous moments when reporters – those mediators between televised discourse and the audience – reveal uncertainty, hesitation, and the fallibility of live reporting. From the now-classic statement on December 22nd, 'Never before has so much been broadcast from such a television studio', which only crystallised the unprecedented nature of the situation, to 'We give you the information as we receive it; we don't have time to verify it', uttered during the same broadcast, the news anchors were tasked with ensuring coherence at all costs, yet sometimes were unable to do so. Nonetheless, the image they presented seemed far removed from the triumphalist narratives that sought to depict the revolution as a unidirectional march toward progress, with all things planned in detail. The message featured above appears to be merely a radicalisation of a Leitmotif of those days, with moderators repeatedly emphasising the paradigm shift that had occurred not only in television but across the entire media infrastructure, including the print press. As one journalist noted: 'We are keeping you updated throughout these days on the actions that our colleagues in the written press are also carrying out in a continuous flow, at the highest and most intense pulse.'

This becomes even more striking if we consider the moment when the poet Mircea Dinescu, one of the revolution's trademark figures, after his now-famous speech leading a chorus of revolutionaries chanting 'We have won!', is recorded again in the television

[449] As we have already seen, a crucial point of reference on the necessity of decentralising master-narratives can be found in Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2002). Elsewhere, the philosopher argues: 'The distribution of the sensible is the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. [...] It is what determines the fact of what is seen and what can be said about it, what is heard and who is capable of seeing and saying, what is visible and invisible, what can be heard and what cannot.', in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2003), 12. Thus we can see that it is by going in the overall sense of the revolution – a reconfiguration of the common world according to new principles of distribution – that we can achieve privileging minor stories instead of hegemonic, ossified interpretations.

studio alongside actor Ion Caramitru, stumbling over his own words. At that moment, someone off-camera shouts, 'Take it easy, Mircea!', to which the poet, irritated by the interruptions, exclaims: 'We still don't have the practice of freedom!' But it is not certain whether this was a reproach meant for his comrades, or a rhetorical exclamation: hardly had he invested the open space of the free televised studio, that he was already imposing a certain vertical order[450].

This continuous hesitation was accompanied, as we have seen, by a desire to overemphasise the rupture from the past. As early as December 22nd, when Ceaușescu's departure from the Central Committee headquarters was still very recent and the succession of events still speculative, an army general took the floor, calling on the people to 'contribute to the capture of those who have engaged in acts of vandalism.' Immediately, he was interrupted by a voice from off-screen: 'Say it: of the tyrant, of the tyrant!!' The general duly corrected himself: 'The tyrant, the tyrant – well, didn't I already say that!?'[451]

The explicit intrusion of the off-screen into such sequences suggests, on the one hand, the liquefaction of the boundaries between those who had the speech prerogatives, the visibility, and ultimately the power, and those who had to remain in the shadows, keeping silent and obedient. In terms of media syntax, such a moment represents, literally, the strict opposite of the situation that had played out barely a day earlier, when the audiovisual coverage had carefully maintained a separation between the country's leader and the people he addressed, acting out the impossibility of their coexistence. For once, the revolutionaries could occupy the same image, to paraphrase Rancière. What we see here, at the level of a metaphor embodied by the video transmission, is an inconceivable scene until that moment, in which the off-screen exerts pressure on those within the frame, influencing their actions and compelling them to adopt a unanimously accepted stance. In other words, the general turmoil – the entire broadcast is characterised by disorder, with

[450] One of the key image analyses to be found in *Videograms of a Revolution* concerns the moments of rehearsal preceding the revolutionaries' claim that 'We have won!', which contradicts the theory that perceives in such moments a purely unstaged, transparent rendition of actual moments. This claim is very strong precisely because the moment has been saluted for its ingenuous, spontaneous feeling: although the (self) mise en scène was inevitably minimal, it still was present, slightly altering the result.

[451] We will restrict ourselves to a limited curation of such moments of undisciplined exchanges, since they should suffice for the advancement of our thesis, namely the necessity to observe such occurrences in order to understand the fragility of the free speech influx and the novelty of seeing it stammering, scrambling in its early days, captured by an otherwise strictly governed medium as television. For a complete transcription of the televised studio exchanged from December 22nd, see Mihai Tatulici (ed.), *Revoluția Română în direct* [Romanian Revolution Live] (Bucharest: Televiziunea Română, 1990), 19-130.

the recurring action being that of people speaking over one another – translates a new, dynamic, and shifting state of affairs.

It should be evident by now that we chose to highlight these moments not to diminish the actual prowess of the revolutionary event from the comfortable distance of the present. On the contrary, by underlining these hesitations and minor diversions, we aim to observe the real-time development of new roles and formats for television, while also emphasising the spontaneous – and therefore error-prone – nature of the media revolution throughout its course. The protagonists of the moment had to learn how to interact with an unscripted and uncensored television as the events themselves unfolded at a rapid pace.

As a corollary to these moments of uncertainty, we must also mention the explicit efforts of news program producers to dismantle old hierarchical structures, encouraging a more egalitarian distribution of recognition. A paradigmatic example is the moment when the television camera pans to reveal the technical crew – usually hidden behind the scenes – in a gesture of acknowledgment for their work in the public service. This moment is immediately commented on with irony: 'Thank you, but let's not pat ourselves on the back here.' In fact, this remark encapsulates an ontological tension that governed television during those days – between the desire to transform it into a friendly, accessible institution that rejected rigid vertical power relations, and the need to preserve its credibility, if not its authority. The peak of this state of apparent relaxation – or, at the very least, of astonishing conviviality – is reached in another press review segment on December 24th, when the initial intensity of the broadcasts begins to give way to ironic, even nihilistic, attitudes. The object of the reading is a satirical newspaper featuring headlines such as: 'Academic titles for sale, diplomas at a reduced price'; 'Trading a country for a mouse hole', referring to the state in which dictator Ceaușescu had left Romania. One of the moderators even allows himself to react to these headlines with a casual 'Nasol!' [Too bad!] – a slang term that signals a normalisation of workplace interactions and the passage towards a different social era.

This relaxation is one of the main trajectories of the general attitude of journalists, but not the only one. An antagonistic approach is represented by the laments and almost embarrassed apologies addressed to the Romanian people regarding the technical limitations imposed by the television infrastructure. One of the reporters, in the same televised broadcast from December 24th, declares: 'We ask that no one gets upset with us; the conditions we are working in are very limited.' The more general journalistic attitude fluctuated, thus, throughout those days between a form of self-mockery towards the

profession and, especially, towards the national condition of Romanians, and a contrary form of glorification of the reporters' work, embodying what French film essayist Gabriel Bortzmeyer would perceive, in a different context, as a characteristic trait for the Romanian national historiography: that of the victorious victim[452]. One paradigmatic example occurred in the closing minutes of this same televised broadcast: Five moderators stood in a line, all wearing the Romania armband: 'We will show you everything that can be presented these days' / 'Regarding this, since we were poorer in images today, even the outside conditions didn't allow us, our filming teams had to turn back because of the situation around the television station.' He pursued: 'This relatively large presence, unusual for the informative shows of TVR, not the Free TVR that we are now, is only an apparent aspect. Alongside us, in the technical sectors, there were dozens and dozens of colleagues, each worked with devotion and selflessness.' On the one hand, the phrase highlights a shift in the television landscape at that time. It emphasises how the station's usual format was disrupted by the context. The contrast between *TVR* (the state-run television, which would soon return as the official name of the channel) and *TVR Liberă* (a liberated version from the past, willing to explicitly sanction this post-revolutionary transformation) suggests a conscious effort to project the image of the station adapting to new political realities. On the other hand, the statement, on the surface, represents a tribute to the efforts of the invisible technical (and usually unacknowledged) staff, emphasising their commitment under trying circumstances. But it can also be read as an implicit attempt to elevate the journalistic endeavour despite the technical shortcomings mentioned earlier. There is a notable juxtaposition between the acknowledgment of limitations and the glorification of the work done under these constraints, potentially seeking to garner sympathy or admiration from the public[453].

Moreover, a close examination of the studio broadcasts reveals that the newly established patterns – reading official statements, making appeals to the nation, followed by news bulletins read by presenters – are interspersed with all sorts of stumbles, errors, and moments that verge on the comedic, as participants grapple with the new media language. At one point, an electrician is brought into the studio and declares, 'We have

[452] See Gabriel Bortzmeyer, 'Les trous de l'archive. À propos des films de Radu Jude', in *Trafic – Almanach de cinéma* (Paris: P.O.L, 2023), 23-31. On the 'paradoxical posture of the victorious victim', see *ibid*., 28.
[453] For a reflection on the role of the journalist as mediator between the state and the people, see John Corner, 'Mediated Politics, Promotional Culture and the Idea of "Propaganda"', *Media, Culture, Society* (2007), Vol. 29, No. 4, 669-677.

worked for years like oxen', a statement that is immediately framed by the moderator: 'These are the words of a worker, spoken as he knows how.'

In a related moment captured the same day, Dinescu engages in a conversation with a representative of the Army, who repeatedly asserts, 'No one will fire on the people', and 'The Army has not fired on anyone.' He is abruptly interrupted by a citizen in the studio who holds up a bullet, prompting a chaotic overlap of voices. In such moments, the television studio takes on the air of a burlesque gag, fundamentally at odds with the habitual standards of press institutions, in which everyone is encouraged to bring their own version of the facts. Indeed, these televised sequences become the documents of a convulsive birth of a new television regime.

Finally, as a conclusion to this sub-section dedicated to the events taking place in the Romanian Television Studios, we would like to mention an apparently trivial sequence from the course of the broadcast, but which makes explicit the potential of this televisual medium to later serve as an archive of the history of Romanian television. Indeed, one of the commentators states: 'Every sequence you are watching is a unique document that will find its place in the annals of this memorable revolution that we are all living through – in the truly golden film archive of Romanian television.' It is doubtless that, in retrospect, the revolution's televised coverage has far exceeded its immediate, national scope and has become emblematic in the study of global media's role in socio-political change. It calls attention to the idea that, while on-site moderators and reporters may have seen the revolution's televised coverage as simply a significant moment in the history of Romanian television, it has since evolved into a crucial part of the world historical narrative about media's role in political transformation and the dissemination of revolutionary moments across borders.[454]

Back on the Street

During those days, as we have seen, broadcasts oscillated between the enclosed space of the studio and the streets. At times, the transition between news programs unfolded in ways that were absolutely perplexing: on December 23rd, at the end of a press review from the GDR saluting the revolutionary process, the screen suddenly turned blue, stamped

[454] As we have seen, retrospective accounts and reassessments of the journalistic activities during the revolution abound, ranging from the triumphalist to the collective *mea culpa*. For an overview of the latter, see Philippe Aguinalin, *Révolution en direct. Histoire en différé*, remains the exemplary sample. Among the generous supply of memoirs of those involved in broadcasting the events, of particular interest is the work of moderator Teodor Brates: see for example *Explozia unei clipe, op. cit.*

with the TVR logo, while the full version of the Romanian national anthem *Trei culori* [Three colours, a reference to the Romanian flag], still in official use from the communist period, played in the background.

This overlapping of symbols belonging to antagonistic eras – especially considering that *Trei culori* would soon be replaced by the new anthem *Deșteaptă-te, române* [Rise up, Romanian, still in use in 2025], relegating it to the status of a relic of the old order, cherished only by nostalgic people – functions as a kind of media literalisation of the surrounding chaos, a synecdoche of the broader social upheaval. Naturally, for a significant period, the symbols of the democratic order coexisted with remnants of the old regime – one should only remember numerous trademark sequences involving the destruction of Ceaușescu's omnipresent official portrait –, even provoking a vengeful, condescending attitude toward any artefact that might recall the past.

In general, however, the newly liberated Romanian Television used logos and on-screen inscriptions (intertitles) in a far less ambiguous manner. In the early days, employing a rudimentary technique, it displayed public interest messages and intertitles in an outdated, artisanal written form on the screen: 'THE WATER IS POISONED IN SIBIU, TIMIȘOARA [important Romanian cities].' Undoubtedly, such warnings – which within just a few days proved to be unfounded rumours – contributed to public alarm by spreading baseless speculation, although they were surely treated with less solemnity than the French counterparts when confronted with the news of the mass graves of Timisoara. Later, as Ceaușescu's shadow seemed to recede in favour of a clear victory for the revolutionary forces, the television station marked this shift by aligning itself with the protesters through messages that were sometimes redundant: 'THE COUNTRY IS ONE' or even duplicating audio content: 'APPEALS TO THE NATION.'

However, beyond the evident urgency of those first days, which led to a need for multiple modes of clarification regarding the unfolding events, what emerges – somewhat inadvertently – from these examples is the outdated nature of the equipment used, as well as the Romanian television's inability to adequately meet the public's thirst for information. Even at the time of their appearance, these inserts were already obsolete, bearing the mark of a broadcasting direction that was experimenting with various available technical possibilities to ensure its message reached a population unaccustomed to crisis situations.

Outdoor shooting continued to represent an obstacle for television. Firstly, on a basic level, filming in natural light, especially at night, proved challenging for the aging equipment in use at the time. Added to this was the lack of experience among personnel

who, until then, had worked exclusively in controlled environments. If television had fulfilled any function during the Ceaușescu era, it was a pedagogical one – disseminating a model of good practices for the people on a large scale and serving as a social control instrument.[455] However, during those days, the entire conception of televised reporting had been turned upside down: not only did it have to cover an unforeseen crisis without any pre-written script, but it also had to document the revolt, the rebellion, the citizens' takeover of public spaces that had previously been tightly regulated. This explains why the street became both an iconic element – present in numerous photographs that have since gained emblematic status in capturing the revolutionary fervour (people standing on trucks, waving flags from which the Ceaușescu-era coat of arms had been ripped out, crowds of citizens roaming the streets, etc.) – and, in terms of moving images, far more resistant to the closed environment of the television studio.

We have already seen that much of the street footage, whether acquired or filmed by international news teams, aimed to sustain an updated war imagery transplanted onto the streets of Bucharest. From soldiers filmed as they fixed their sights on an invisible target to burning tanks and vehicles, these scenes were often shot with telephoto lenses that compressed the depth of field – or, conversely, using an immersive style, capturing the action alongside soldiers engaged in combat. These images exude a sense of fear and confusion, made all the more acute by the vagueness of the altercations' target – random, exiled to the *hors champ*, reduced to the status of a spectre. Such images became iconic, contributing to a narrative that framed the Romanian situation as a large-scale bloodbath. This critique, once again, does not seek to deny the reality of those events, nor – above all – the over one thousand victims recorded during those days, as doing so would risk aligning with the partisan camp of those who downplay both the victory and the sacrifices of the revolution from the comfort of peaceful times. Rather, it seeks to observe how media coverage of the situation relied on endlessly looping vague information, illustrated by

[455] Moreover, the documentary – as a cinematic genre – had taken on, during the communist dictatorship, within the 'Alexandru Sahia' Studio, the explicit role of educating the Romanian people. 'Auteur' documentaries were extremely few in number, while the bulk of production focused on films with educational potential, while the mass audience was directed to education – yet hardly adventurous in terms of audiovisual syntax – programmes such as the longlasting *TeleEnciclopedia*. It is no wonder that, from *Reconstituirea* (Lucian Pintilie, 1971) to *Probă de microfon* (Mircea Daneliuc, 1980), a respectable and influential tradition of Romanian artistic fiction aimed to subvert these propaganda films and embrace a self-reflexive attitude, questioning both the mission of the reporter/documentary filmmaker and the conditions of existence of the entire cinematic apparatus – as well as the notions of creativity and free will – within an intensely centralized production system. On the role of the TVR as agent of dissemination of proper socialist conduct, family values and class consciousness, see Mihai Coman (ed.), *Manual de jurnalism* (Iași: Polirom, 2009).

'striking' moments devoid of a solid referent. Moreover, the vocabulary in circulation during those days – including the omnipresent notion of alleged 'foreign terrorists' sent by the Ceaușescu regime to restore his rule – never materialised into rational explanations[456]. It is well-known that the arrest of meaning in favour of an almost mystical intensity is a hallmark of revolutionary moments[457]. However, hindsight has done nothing but discredit such claims, relegating them largely to the realm of chimera. With the passage of time, it seems increasingly likely that we witnessed a multi-directional – though not necessarily coordinated[458] – attempt to instil panic, both through sensationalist imagery and through a discourse aimed at asserting the existence of invisible, omnipresent threats.

It was precisely the interplay of these elements – the empty proclamations of the TV studio hosts, the cameras' inability to capture the enemies of the transition to democracy, and the statements of those involved, including field reporters who assured viewers of the necessity of these confrontations – that created the overwhelming effect of a full-fledged state of siege, which ended as arbitrarily as it had begun.

As we have seen in two brief sequences included by Farocki and Ujică in their film *Videograms of a Revolution*, some moments that appeared to reflect the unpredictability of the situation were, in fact, staged versions of it[459]. Access to the full footage recorded during those days tells a slightly different story about both the revolutionary impulse and the supposed purity of the television medium. While it would be excessive to claim outright that the events of the Romanian Revolution were orchestrated with an eye toward their media potential, it would be almost a truism to recognise in them a blend of spontaneity and mise en scène. This impurity is the very *modus operandi* of television. Yet during those

[456] There were racist-filled rumours that these terrorists belonged to the Liberation of Palestine Front.
[457] See for example Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L'oeil de l'Histoire 1* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), in which the philosopher analyses the capacity of images to critically exert a disruptive force over the present instead of simply reflecting it. Also see Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988).
[458] For a discussion of the confusing atmosphere between several centres of military command in Bucharest during the revolutionary days, see Harun Farocki, 'Je ne m'y reconnais pas dans Bucarest', in *Reconnaître et poursuivre* (Courbevoie: Théâtre Typographique, 2002), 55-63. A close reading of the regulations and orders received by television personnel during the first moments of the ill-fated speech delivered by Ceaușescu can be found in Dana Mustata, '"The Revolution Has Been Televised …"'.
[459] This performative dimension of a revolution broadcast that was otherwise made to seem completely spontaneous is detailed at length in Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, 'The Revolution Will Be Performed. Cameras and Mass Protests in the Perspective of Contemporary Art', Acta Univ. Sapientiae, *Film and Media Studies*, 10 (2015), 7-23. Her argument proves particularly insightful for our purposes since it operates a connection with another found footage film consisting of revolutionary material, *The Pixelated Revolution* (Rabih Mroué, 2011), dealing with Syrian civil war amateur depictions. This parallel also helps establish an evolution in amateur footage and the available technology when confronted with situations of conflict, providing fertile ground for anchoring the discussion around the Romanian Revolution within contemporary debates on the nature of poor image, etc. (see infra).

days of popular effervescence and media innocence it was precisely the poor understanding of the medium's possibilities that led both directions to be exaggerated: either a total, nihilistic rejection of what was shown, or an equally uncritical acceptance of everything being broadcast.

However, the coexistence of these striking images with much more chaotic and confusing visual samples, capable of eschewing univocal narratives, is nowhere more evident than in the night-time scenes captured outdoors. Taken as a whole, these moments serve as a corollary to the daytime scenes, reinforcing and intensifying the idea of a city held under siege by occult forces, and feeding into the same narratives oscillating between conspiracy and factuality. While the present-day viewer may find it evident that the concept of the invisible, yet omnipresent enemy was accentuated in the night-time scenes, this was due more to poor technology – incapable of properly rendering colours and dark contours – than to any adherence to an actual reality.

Although, starting from December 22nd, several night-time broadcasts took place in Bucharest's public squares, detailing them separately would be redundant for the purposes of our thesis. In general, the format of a brightly lit podium surrounded by an indistinct crowd in the darkness was ubiquitous. The camera movements made the few light bulbs streak across the screen: the equipment was so old that, in these moments, the screen resembled a canvas where colours blended, the light sources liquefied into an abstract visual landscape, with the lens's capacity to process new images proving insufficient. In these moments, the viewer relied primarily on audio information, though its exact source remained uncertain: it could originate from within the frame or from an unseen location. Of course, many of these recordings were not publicly televised: they served more as an archive of historic documents which is now buried in deep layers of time. However, their presence in the television archive is significant; their mere existence is enough to indicate a tension in the possibilities of the medium, between full exposure and hypervisibility and a feeling of the occult. The experience of watching these images is disorienting, discordant, creating an amalgam between the awareness of investigating TV footage and the empirical sensation of witnessing a contemporary piece of video art: there is a clear disjunction between the visuals and the sound, which is filled with fragmented speeches and incoherent dialogue, while the visual component, which is static and hazy, points to an existential stasis rather than an action-packed event. In fact, as we will see right below, the mere fact that such unconventional imagery that is evocatively precisely by its total lack of 'essential' information can coexist with dramatically charged footage is telling for a moment in

televisual history which saw the testing of multiple broadcast possibilities, some of them clearly antagonistic in their goal or aesthetics.

Figure 2. Night-time speeches in front of the Central Committee, December 22nd, 1989

Figure 3. Same scene, different angle. The crowd is barely discernible, an amorphous mass lost in the low resolution image

The apex of this sense of confusion was reached on the night of December 22nd. A very long, static shot is shown; in the depth of the frame, illuminated by a spotlight, stands an imposing building. The camera does not move. A voice shouts, 'The army is shooting at the Palace!' and, indeed, moments later, gunfire can be heard from an indeterminate location, on an unclear trajectory. Additionally, the distance between the camera and the source of the gunfire, as well as the risk faced by the camera operators, is difficult to determine. No other voice punctuates the moment in the following minutes: for about 50 minutes, the static frame is animated solely by the sound of gunfire. At one point, the spotlight is directed at the camera lens, creating a blinding glare that makes visibility even more difficult: a few people flank the bottom edge of the frame, a truck full of protesters briefly appears. Yet, the citizens do not seem alarmed – or, at least, not as much as one might expect, given the simultaneous gunfire, which only adds to the eerie feeling. This shot results in a radical loss of bearings, plunging the entire broadcast into a deep sense of the uncanny. Occasionally, the camera pans across various building windows, revealing another burning building before returning, attempting to fixate on an indiscernible objective, its movements erratic and aimless. What exactly is happening? Impossible to

say: the bullets seem like a kind of refrain, completely dematerialised, while the television camera – left recording, almost abandoned – conveys a state that appears vastly different from the turmoil and intensity of the daytime. Without discounting a significant degree of danger, it abstracts it, turning it paranoid rather than incarnated. The entire moment seems choreographed around stasis, suspense, and waiting. The narrative appears to have exploded entirely – there is no causality here, replaced instead by pure, anxiety-laden duration. In place of the previous rush of events, a paradoxical calm seems to have settled over the nation. The shot appears to confirm that the action is happening elsewhere.[460]

[460] Once again, we use this term in a positive understanding owing to the plastic qualities of the transmission. Naturally, we feel close to Hito Steyerl's important discussion of the poor image. Although her main focus is the cinematographic image and its digital evolution and degradation, her discussion is also pertinent for envisaging an alternative possibility for television. We would like to repeat her original perspective: 'The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.', in 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux*, Issue #10, November 2009, accessible online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/. Date accessed: 21. 03. 2025. This is not meant to occlude potentially negative understandings of abstraction processes at stake, such as the one outlined by Patricia Spyer in her assessment of Ernst Jünger: 'Jünger described this deracinating effect of mass media – the abstraction of the event from particularities of time and space, its transformation into a dislocatable, exchangeable, circulatable, repeatable, serialized entity or, in Marxist terms, its commodification or definition in terms of exchange value, and, relatedly, the subordination of the event to the fact of its mass-mediability – already in 1934, the year of the Nuremburg (sic) rallies. If at this relatively early moment Jünger could write of the production of an event for a planetary broadcast, then it goes without saying that the movement of global capital and the explosion of televisual possibilities owing to the communications revolution have, if anything, only aggravated and magnified the processes of which he spoke.', 'Media and Violence in an Age of Transparency', in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 159. This ambivalent understanding of the term 'abstraction' felt particularly telling since it underlines the evolution of a critical approach towards visibility: in an era of hyper-visibility and enhanced media intelligibility, it is precisely the abstract quality of footage that allows for the broadcast to acquire an uncertain, contradictory status.

Figure 4. Additional night-time footage from the Romanian Television Archives. December 22nd, 1989 - liquified effect

It is difficult to determine whether this sequence, totalling nearly an hour of footage, was aired even partially on television[461]. Despite our efforts, poor indexation meant that we were never able to determine exactly which footage was broadcast. Although this may feel like a weakening of our argument and its limitation within the coordinates of theoretical speculation, ultimately, this is rather irrelevant to the thesis at hand and does not diminish its output: watching the totality of the rushes is indicative of the capacities and virtualities of the medium as they were being intuitively negotiated during those days. Separating the footage that was broadcast from that which ultimately was not would have only served to radicalise the argument; more important is the *concept* of this void that the television camera captured, contrasting with the overall heated image of the moment and with the general expectations of how a revolution should unfold.[462] The term 'experimental

[461] Indeed, the only available TV programme for those days that is kept at the TVR archive is the one established prior to Ceaușescu's flight, thus implying an absurd difference, if not a blatant discrepancy, between the communist propagandistic agenda and the resulted freestyle programme.

[462] Once again, in this sense, such a perceptual framework brings us closer to a documentary like *The Event*, already discussed in the previous chapter, which uses archival footage to depict the attempted coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. With its antithetical title, the film ends up describing, through images that cultivate a sense of stasis, expectation, and silence, a non-event, adopting a contre-pied attitude toward

television' takes on its full weight in such a moment, as it contrasts with the habitual use of the medium and instead resembles a contemplative, quasi-abstract video sample. Such moments are so rare that, for a keen observer, they stand out in the fabric of the broadcast. For example, in 1981, upon the conclusion of his term as the President of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing spoke one last time, then rose from his chair and exited the frame, while the camera continued to record the empty space he left behind. Commenting on this moment, Serge Daney wrote:

> ... television, like disco, like our brain, must give the feeling that it never stops, without ever giving us the feeling of duration. Television does not last. Emptiness, an emptiness that lasts, silence, a silence that settles in, is horror, abomination. So, with his empty shot, Giscard, at the very last moment, breaks something of television's false sense of well-being. ... The empty shot, emptied, still full of the echo of the actor's presence–like the residue of a crime after the criminal has left–feels like a filmmaker's trick to us.[463]

In other words, by drawing attention to its own duration – a trait exotic to television in Daney's slightly condescending view, which thereby aligns it with a form of cinema, and thus with respectable art – the Romanian television broadcast becomes conceptual, penetrating a different regime of visibility than the usual one. Instead of the feeling 'that it never stops', that is, instead of the program schedule, diversity, and sensationalism, the broadcast here develops an autonomous content rendered in real time, uninterrupted, in which no clear action comes to animate the scene. Deliberate or not, the objective of this moment seems simply to be the creation of an unsettling atmosphere.

current media images. On the contrary, *The Event* presents the coup as an almost immanent experience, in which curiosity about the new world collided with fear, oppression, and an unspoken need. In such a case, the archival images retain all their indeterminacy.

[463] Serge Daney, 'Un rituel de disparition (Giscard)', in *Libération*, May 21st, 1981.

Figure 5. An almost abstract shot featuring a streetlight in close shot and the hollow flag, symbol of the revolution, behind

'On Christmas, We Have Got Our Ration of Freedom!'

The execution of the Ceaușescu couple on Christmas Day, along with the profound feeling of liberation – after a long period of repression of religious symbols and cults – gave the days of the Revolution an almost mystical charge. The new interpenetration between social and professional groups connected to the religious sphere and other social categories became visible as early as December 22. Thus, following an emphatic speech by the experimental artist Ion Grigorescu, who wished Ceaușescu to live on 50 grams of salami a day, an army general was interrupted mid-speech by Dinescu and Caramitru, who, holding a cross, reassured him in a falsely conciliatory and superior manner: 'Let it be, just bless the revolution.' The two made a victorious sign with the cross and declared: 'Christ is born, glorify Him!' Behind them, Patriarch Teoctist of the Romanian Orthodox Church read a message of support for the revolutionary cause. The moment continued with a recently released prisoner, who stated: 'Two hours ago, when I was released from prison, the first thing I did was kiss the Romanian soil.' This reveals the social transformations toward which both the privations and oppression under communism, and, in particular, the

revolutionary moment of liberation, led – encouraging the coagulation of anti-secular attitudes and nationalism through an overtly conservative discourse.[464]

On a more general note, as we move further in time from Ceaușescu's escape by helicopter and his subsequent trial and execution, in the crucial period between December 22nd and December 25th, such religiously charged symbols become increasingly prevalent in TV broadcasts. References to God's blessings punctuate the speeches of those invited to the studio, but even visually, these symbols become a habitual sight. On December 24th, as an interlude between various programs, a Christmas carol begins off-screen. The visual component then unfolds into a rudimentary montage sequence, in which Byzantine icons are interwoven with close-up shots of decorated fir branches, even including an icon of the anti-Ottoman voivode Stephen the Great, reclaimed by all nationalist narratives as an important Romanian military leader. The screen displays 'Merry Christmas!' in Hungarian and German as well, suggesting the cessation of the widespread ethnic discrimination perpetrated by the Ceaușescu regime[465]. The moment extends with more and more carols, but the technical level of the broadcast is very low – there is significant sound distortion, and the singer's voice fluctuates between thin and deep tones in an almost caricaturesque, parodic modulation, as they perform the well-known carol 'Linu-i lin și iară lin.' [Soft is the flax, and soft again] Over the image of the fir branch, multi-coloured text appears: 'The Account of Humanity: account number 1989', though it is unclear how donations could be made to this account or to whom the funds would later be directed. The juxtaposition may seem incongruent, but it describes a necessary moment of national unity, marking an aftermath: it can be said with certainty that such materials already participate in a new media and social order where religious symbols are acceptable, if not encouraged, yet again.

[464] The seeds of extremist, messianic nationalism, preached these days by an increasingly legitimized faction of the Romanian political class, must be sought beyond the revolutionary days, towards the protochronist period encouraged by Ceaușescu's nationalist turn. However, there is no doubt that the revolution also provided an important platform for the expression of mystical attitudes that had been suppressed until then. For an in-depth analysis of nationalist narratives during Ceaușescu's regime, see Filip Sebastian Boicu, *Cultural Discourses in Ceausist Romania: The Hero-Mirror Mechanism*, University of Nottingham, 2014, unpublished PhD thesis.

[465] An encompassing overview of the repression apparatus developped during the Ceaușescu regime can be found in Monica Ciobanu, *Repression, Resistance and Collaboration in Stalinist Romania 1944-1964* (New York: Routledge, 2022). Alternatively, see Stefano Bottoni, 'Finding the Enemy: Ethnicized State Violence and Population Control in Ceaușescu's Romania', in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2017, 113-135. For a particular discussion of the Hungarian minority status in Romania in the aftermath of the revolution, see Adrian Ivan, 'Minority Issues at the End of the 20th Century and the Beginning of the 21th Century. Case Study: The Hungarian Minority from Romania', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, No. 92, 2013, 426-431.

This perspective also applies to the Orthodox service – the first officiated at the Romanian Patriarchate after Ceaușescu's departure – broadcast live in its entirety on public television 'and also relayed on the radio' on December 24th, 1989. Beyond the oddity of including such a niche program – which today would more likely be found on a specialised television channel – on a state-subsidised television station, the choice is explained not only by the consecration of this transitional period toward a new democratic political order through the symbolic foregrounding of the religious element, theoretically banned by the Ceaușescu regime. Its public practice before an entire nation is a clear indicator of the establishment of a post-communist social era. However, this service has perhaps an even more significant role. It serves as a necessary moment of cohesion and calm amid chaotic days. In other words, it marks the need for a pause, a respite from the rapid pace of events, establishing a hiatus from the inflamed socio-political actuality. It serves as a repair of the social fabric and a break from the usual rhythm of the broadcast. Thanks to multiple superimpositions – between church objects (miter, censer) and the actual unfolding of the service, but also between the officiants' faces and the candlelight – the direction contributes to immersing this moment in a peaceful, almost liquid, warm and golden ambiance, creating a safe space removed from both the fast-moving time and the chaos outside the church.

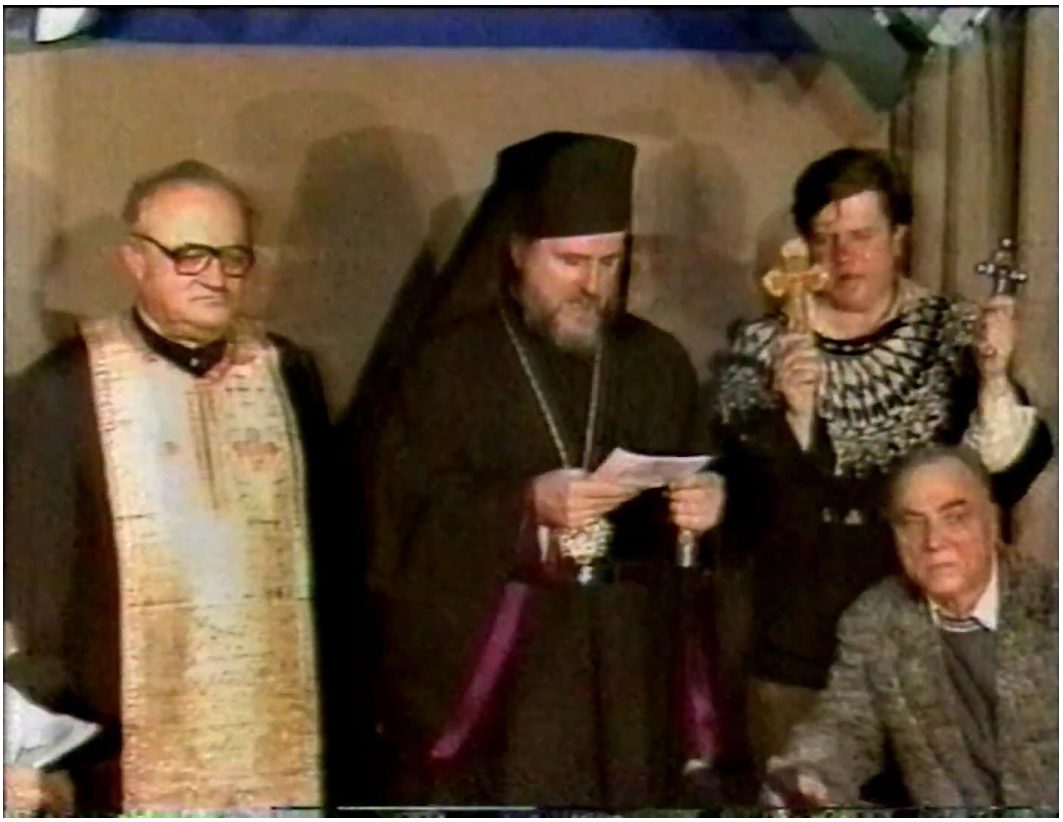

Figure 6. Religious figures and symbols demonstrating the end of the communist regime

Such an observation, however, demands historicisation, as comparable instances of religious service broadcasts were observable across diverse European televisual contexts of the era. This phenomenon is inscribed within a broader epistemic field delineated by what José Casanova identifies as a defining structural transformation of the 1980s:

> Religion in the 1980s 'went public' in a dual sense. It entered the 'public sphere' and gained, thereby, 'publicity.' Various 'publics' – the mass media, social scientists, professional politicians, and the 'public at large' – suddenly began to pay attention to religion. The unexpected public interest derived from the fact that religion, leaving its assigned place in the private sphere, had thrust itself into the public arena of moral and political contestation.[466]

Positioned at the threshold of his inquiry, Casanova's formulation underlines the extent to which religion, hitherto relegated to the private domain, reasserted itself as a discursive force within the symbolic economy of public life. Among the precipitating factors he identifies, the emergence of the Solidarity movement in early 1980s Poland stands as paradigmatic, marking a critical juncture at which religious discourse acquired renewed legitimacy within the public sphere. This reconfiguration, in turn, offers a salient interpretive framework for understanding the re-sacralisation of the Romanian media scape following Ceaușescu's flight from the Central Committee building on December 21st, 1989. In this context, the re-emergence of religious signifiers on national television may be construed as symptomatic of a broader socio-cultural and ideological mutation – one in which the sacred is reintegrated into the post-totalitarian public imaginary partially by equating religious freedom with a newly achieved form of liberation.

Yet this reading is not uncontested. In contrast, Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors propose a more circumspect view of the mediation of religion in the late twentieth century, arguing that '[i]n the 1980s, religion and electronic media were by and large seen as belonging to different spheres (belief and the culture industry), with the notable exception of American televangelists, who were, however, dismissed as hopelessly conservative, even ridiculous by critical public opinion'[467]. From this vantage, the resurgence of religious imagery is less a return of the repressed than a re-articulation of the sacred within the logics of mediatisation and commodification[468]. Consequently, the renewed visibility of religious

[466] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.
[467] 'Introduction', in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, *op. cit.*, 1.
[468] With regard to this discussion, Meyer and Moors pursue: 'Simultaneously state television has acknowledged the importance of religion, and in programs such as Ramadan riddles, religion makes its appearance in the realm of commerce and entertainment', *ibid.*, 2. Although they specifically discuss the situation of present-day (2006) Egypt, it is by no means unrelated to the shifts which occurred in the

motifs on Romanian television may be read not solely as a reaction to ideological rupture, but also as a symptom of the shifting modalities through which belief is negotiated, performed, and circulated within late-modern media ecologies.

This stasis must, however, be understood differently from the already extensively discussed moment of suspension on the night of December 22nd. That pause served to maintain a general, ongoing state of tension, acting as a reminder that the hyper-visibility of the event was not total, that shadowy areas persisted, and that bullets enjoyed the gift of ubiquity. Two days later, the pause affirms that the very temporality of the revolution has become more relaxed – that decoupling the audience spread across the country from the urgency of information, in the name of a communal activity, has once again become imaginable. Paradoxically, by moving away from the flow of powerful images, television here returns to its mission of bringing the audience together as a collection of reunited individuals[469], linking each household to a spiritual current that sets Romania on a new trajectory. Thus, the service becomes a ritual marking a new stage in the country's development.[470] We can measure the rupture between the communist televised propaganda and the new televised symbolic order by analysing the secularised footage that director Andrei Ujică and editor Dana Bunescu have compiled in their seminal *Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010). In this meticulously edited archive film, drawn entirely from state-approved and officially choreographed recordings, the portrayal of the leader and his entourage is strikingly devoid of any religious iconography or ritual. Religion, here, is not actively suppressed as much as it is entirely absent – a missing image whose very lack

Romanian mediaspace immediately after December 21st. An echo of this entanglement between religion, mass media and market economy on the local scene can be found in Mihai Coman, *Mass-media, religie, spatiu public* (Iași: Polirom, 2020).

[469] The seminal contention that media events 'are events that hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience' is useful for understanding how an occurrence such as the televised revolution reflected itself through an appeal to popular unity, in Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1. Futher on, the authors argue that '[a]udiences recognize them [the media events] as an invitation – even a command – to stop their daily routines and join in a holiday experience. If festive viewing is to ordinary viewing what holidays are to the everyday, these events are the high holidays of mass communication', *idem*. Also see Paddy Scannell, 'For a Phenomenology of Radio and Television", in *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 45, Issue 3, September 1995, 4-19, for a comparative discussion on how the conditions of intelligibility can be achieved historically with regard to media of mass communication, especially: "But the peculiar feature that distinguishes institutional interactions on radio and TV from other institutional contexts is that they are designed for absent listeners or viewers', 16.

[470] In Benedict Anderson's well-known terms, such moments are integral to the formation of imagined communities: mediated rituals like these produce a sense of simultaneity and shared affect across dispersed viewers, enabling citizens to imagine themselves as part of a unified national body — precisely at a time when the coherence of that body was being renegotiated. See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

acquires a telling, diagnostic quality. This absence speaks volumes about the ideological architecture of the regime's visual culture, and underscores the extent to which the post-revolutionary symbolic order – often marked by a renewed and encouraged visibility of religious references – would contrast with the state-imposed atheism and visual uniformity of the preceding era. Between armed confrontations and the impending revelation of the hasty trial of the Ceaușescu couple, this sequence offers viewers the appearance of regained stability.

Conclusion, or a Kind of Epilogue

One of our main working hypotheses within the previous chapter concerned the conceptualisation of the Ceaușescu trial as one long trademark sequence shifting from the memorable dialogue of the deaf to the lacerating struggle between Elena Ceaușescu and the young soldiers in charge to, finally, the actual execution, followed by the close, obscenely voluptuous scrutiny of the two bodies by the camera. We must now return to this larger sequence, or better said, to its epilogue – which, in a sense, represents the conclusion of the entire revolutionary process. The footage we are about to describe records the actions that took on December 30th, 1989, five days after the trial[471]. From the interior scenes with the two tied bodies covered by white sheets (described in the previous chapter), the image cuts to a winter landscape in a cemetery. A hole is currently being dug. 'Isn't it too small?', somebody asks by the side of the hole. 'They will exhume him, these guys…', somebody else answers jokingly, anticipating the ironic evolution of the dictator into a piece of national folklore, if not a memorabilia trophy. This is the only social comment – a subtle allusion to a hectic status quo – in this entire scene. Other than this, the sequence is eerily silent, with the falling snow creating a quasi-home movie halo around this burial act of minimal, intimate proportions. A processual sequence becomes imbued with a certain ineffable quality. Breaking the aesthetic regime of the chaos and uninterrupted noise and movement that the previous days naturalised on the TV screen, this sequence is almost dreamlike, instead of being coldly procedural. The first coffin is put into the ground. Then the same operation follows for the second one. 'Nobody said how they should rest.' The diggers themselves seem puzzled by the sheer absurdity of this burial act of the dictator and his wife that they are accomplishing: so neutral, so normal, yet so immense in its broader

[471] This footage actually represents the closing sequence of the 101320 RRD cassette (non-digitised).

implications. Who gave them this command? And what does it mean for the symbolic order of the country? ‘God rest their souls.’ ‘Done.’ Cut to a black screen.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, we have discussed the televisual footage of the Romanian Revolution from a variety of angles. In itself, this footage is significant because it represents the *locus* of a paradox: several segments of it have become so iconic and omnipresent worldwide at the time of their production (end of December 1989) that they have led to their own hypervisibility. Other parts of this footage, on the countrary, have remained obscure and neglected, at times remaining rarely unused, if at all. This discrepancy meant that the entire mass of televisual material on the revolution encourages plural readings and determines the necessity to employ multiple, interdisciplinary approaches in order to re-actualise it and provide innovating interpretations. This is because this footage is both overly discussed (leading to redundancy and saturation) and severely overlooked (leading to, practically, the same consequences, yet also pointing towards the possibility of critical re-usage and creative re-appropriation). In order for this dissertation to remain relevant, challenging, and respect the dual nature of its case study, we opted for the discussion of both directions, specifically emphasising the contradictions and fruitful potentialities that are inherent to the Romanian Revolution media coverage.

It follows from this that our thesis contributes to a historically crucial thread within the academic field of media studies of the revolution, one which however has remained stagnant in the past years. This can be partly explained by the above-mentioned feeling of saturation: the impression that, from the early contribution of *Videograms of a Revolution* (Harun Farocki & Andrei Ujică, 1992) and the theoretical literature that accompanied it to recent illuminating summaries[472] of that media debate, 'everything has been said'. This thesis aims to counter such a defeatist conclusion not by avoiding its main working material – the already famous images of the dictator delivering his last televised speech, the Studio 4 scenes, etc. –, but by reconceptualising it and placing it into a different, previously untried, constellation of references and theoretical approaches. This attempt was further consolidated by an additional layer of footage which has so far remained critically under-developed: such comparative close textual analyses between the hypervisibile emblematic

[472] Amongst which the one operated by Eva Kernbauer in her *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, *op. cit.*, 50-70, remains fundamental.

televisual sequences of the revolution and its hidden, at times aberrant media excrescences demonstrates the value of a synergic gaze which takes into consideration political, technical, and aesthetic qualities of a given material, while ultimately implying the incomplete nature of certain previous academic discussions. Indeed, our research wishes to depict a more inclusive image of the televised revolution, potentially destabilising parts of its previously naturalised assumptions. In this way, and also by virtue of the situated speech that has been explicitly acknowledged in the methodological introduction to this dissertation – that of a Romanian researcher navigating between French and Irish academic environments, working on-site within the national archive of self-determination –, the thesis contributes to contemporary debates by highlighting the important potential of the Romanian Revolution – of its key lessons and of its contradictory televisual meanings – to render intelligible contemporary media events for the present-day reader.

Core findings

By adopting a multidisciplinary theoretical approach, this dissertation has posited the particular event of the Romanian Revolution against a perpetually shifting academic backdrop, demonstrating its pertinence for contemporary debates. Significant insights have been transposed from French film theory, history, theory of photography, semiotics, media archaeology, amongst others, in order to provocatively illuminate our dissertation topic. Although it essentially aims to update interpretations on the revolution, at a macro level the thesis brings important tools for the re-conceptualisation of key notions such as iconicity, visibility, and liveness in relation to the field of television studies.

Chapter 1 outlines the main directions taken in research literature on the revolution with regard to its media dimension. It proceeds both by highlighting important previous accounts on the topic and by pointing their insufficiency where relevant. This chapter also allows for an imperative delimitation from historical partisan accounts which pretend to access a supposedly factual truth, while actually ignoring essential structural considerations that significantly impact even the possibility for such a truth to exist in the first place. Thus, we feel completely solidary with Linda Williams's seminal assertion, 'It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths.'[473] Although Williams was

[473] Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary', in *Film Quarterly* (1993), No. 46 (3), 13.

obviously talking about documentary cinema, we argue that the Romanian Revolution as a site that generated a significant media exposure actually served as an illustration of this thesis, which in itself is by no means relativist – on the contrary, it implies the need for considering multiple factors when assessing the authenticity of a certain given reality, which Farocki and Ujică will also do in their own found-footage filmic investigation. Indeed, *Videograms of a Revolution* is not a detectivist attempt, but one that comments on the multiplicity of image circuits and on the mechanisms that create a certain visibility within a historical event.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the French notion of '*image de marque*', that we propose to translate as 'trademark image', in order to retain its original advertising-related connotation. Firstly conceptualised during the heated polemics that accompanied the politisation of French film theory in the 1970s, the trademark image has since then faded from academic discussions, lacking proper theorising. We argue in need of its actualisation, attempting to trace its genealogy through decisive historical debates, including the instrumentalising process of employing particular images from given contexts (for example, the Holocaust) in order to reflect larger and more imprecise meanings. This framework is deemed pertinent by firstly analysing comparatively certain definitions of revolution, in itself a very slippery term, isolating a common tendency to present it as an accumulation of key sequences to which the Romanian Revolution audiovisual production will conform. We scan the political horizon of media events in search of potential academic usages of the trademark images as analytic tool and theoretical lens for highlighting particularities of visual circulation, including, but not limited to, the big-budget French author cinema of the 1980s and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with the goal of delineating important formal traits and assuring a historical continuity. Finally, we expand on the paradoxical usage of negative traits (such as low quality images, movement, blur) as clearly legible (yet absolutely questionable) signs of authenticity in order to unveil a new complexity for the trademark image in an era of consumerism and idealised technical standards.

Chapter 3 pursues this theoretical debate by seeking to critically address not only the unprecedented mass of footage recorded by the Romanian state television following a period of scarcity and control, but also the transformation of this footage into a contested force, a sufficient power of certifying, legitimising or, on the contrary, incriminating the revolutionary events. We link this collective attitude to a larger theoretical paradigm that

draws a clear direct connection between the image and the reality it depicts, transforming the former into an indexical trace (per Peirce) of the latter. This historical overview allows us to include commentary on religious dogmas of presence, incarnation, and the cult of the true image, on the intrinsic mechanical properties of photography, and on subsequent debates positing the image as authenticity guarantor. This survey is important not only for the particular case study at hand, but also in light of recent transformations presupposed by the advent of a digitalised audiovisual culture and the democratisation of generative artificial intelligence tools (the latter ones having actually been contemporary to the present research, which only serves to show their immense speed of evolution).

Whereas chapters 2 and 3 extrapolate theoretical approaches pertinent to the revolution by tracing larger transversal genealogies, chapter 4 grounds the research and explores the rather sinuous past of the Romanian state television. The motivations behind such a chapter are multiple, but can be subsumed to a general surprising lack of literature exploring this topic, which still awaits its researchers. Thus, the chapter can also be read as an overview of the available discourse dedicated to the institution, as well as a critique and corrective of several simplistic assumptions (both international and indigenous) related to the core missions that television fulfilled during the Ceaușescu regime. Our hypothesis is that, far from being a mere propaganda organ serving to disseminate the ideology of the Communist Party, in its first decades of existence the Romanian Television had assumed a social critique vocation, if not that of a creative laboratory that ran in parallel to official discourses. Rather than creating a rhetorical overlap between its miraculous freedom during December 1989 and its previous years, which consolidated the status of a powerless, ridiculed state institution, it is more pertinent to seek precedents of its experimental broadcasts in several shows, emissions, and general trends that it helped popularise in the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapters 5 and 6, then, actually engage with the entire mass of footage that is being kept at the Multimedia Archives of the Romanian Television through a close textual analysis approach. Each of them defines its proper trajectory through the mass of footage and the days of the revolution, presenting separate findings while also cultivating rhymes, coincidences, and significant overlapping sequences, attesting to the multiplicity of readings that such an event could generate. Particular attention is given to several apparently insignificant details that such images often contain, yet which remain overlooked by most researches. The goal is to offer these images renewed visibility and to

imbue them with different possibilities of legibility. The footage is filtered through relevant literature, while the counter-images (as we have chosen to term them) are also discussed through a contemporary optics, demonstrating their potential to illuminate present-day readings of 'poor images' and an overall degraded media production to which they constantly point. These chapters also represent an implicit opening towards the possible formulation of a radical, alternative programme for television as a medium, occasioning multiple instances of uncanny sightings, of non-conformity to the usual preconceived ideas on the TV image. Instead of being a confined topic, the discussion of the Romanian Revolution as media event serves as an indication of the heterogeneous intuitions and erratic virtualities lying dormant within the basic conceptions of the medium. The revolution sits at a critical juncture in the philosophy of media, readily unveiling its poetic potential for aberration, stasis, and incoherence, and becoming part of a speculative history of media turned towards creative failure, incompleteness, and perpetual potentiality.

In fact, an implicit thread of our dissertation, which develops throughout the chapters, concerns archival appropriation, re-purposing, and re-mediation. This already mentioned creative practice that Catherine Russell calls 'archiveology'[474] is consonant with what we have constantly termed an 'experimental television', since it carries undertones of the essayistic, the speculative, and the counter-factual which we have also mobilised in our investigation. This approach also demonstrates the penetration of the mainstream by such subjective, imaginative filmmaking practices that could be said to inform our own research at least as a horizon of possibility, and clearly show the reciprocal influence of the recent archivist environment. As Russell contends,

> [s]hifts in experimental and documentary film practice are of course consistent with, and run parallel to, dramatic shifts in the form and function of the archive itself, which has moved from a closely guarded site of curated documents to the various open access sites of digital archives both 'official' and 'unofficial'. Archival film practices need to be recognized as creative engagements with this new social role of media storage.[475]

Indeed, it could legitimately be argued that our option of integrating the televised Romanian Revolution within different theoretical configurations is as evocative of this event's historical importance as it is of present-day conversations and concerns. Through

[474] Catherine Russell, 'Introduction to Archiveology', in *Archiveology. Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, *op. cit*., 11-34.
[475] *Ibid.*, 27.

this dissertation, we sought to update the perspective on this case study and contribute to its inestimable legacy – both as a political shift affecting today's social landscape and as a media juncture which remains relevant within contemporary audiovisual flows. This active engagement with the archive becomes even more pressing in the Romanian context, which is clearly confronted with under-financing issues. The mere preservation of archival traces remains crucial given such volatile circumstances. One of the adjacent objectives of this dissertation, then, implies alerting on the fragility of the televisual archive and the need to produce active efforts, through means of pressuring the authorities in charge, in order for it to achieve supplementary visibility. As was proved by this thesis, some of its findings have been mitigated by the lack of a proper indexing system – similar to those available in Western Europe institutions tasked with preserving the televisual memory, such as the INAthèque in Paris – which have prevented the formulation of certitudes as to what images were effectively broadcast during those days. Although the main research question has not been impacted by this situation, this drawback points to the vulnerability of this media memory and its dependence on concerted cultural politics destined to valorise such a precious audiovisual heritage, especially when it is so inscribed in the national narrative of liberation.

Thus, it would not be wrong to also read this dissertation as an implicit manifesto for the encouragement of archival experimentation – and, first and foremost, of archive preservation through consolidated strategies meant to disseminate their importance at all levels of the audience, from a very young age. This conforms to the more explicit project of re-positioning the televised Romanian Revolution within current academic conversations by producing a transnationally oriented work written in English, with careful consideration of vernacular materials. Naturally, our interpretation, based on a specific theoretical approach derived from an intersection between (essentially) film and media studies, is but one of the possibilities that this historical and media event opens for researchers. Indeed, although discussing a past event, this thesis aims to provide hints at future directions for research, belonging to a wide array of disciplines.

Towards an Experimental Television

'The concept of an experimental television might seem an oxymoron to many', writes Laura Mulvey in her introduction to *British Experimental Television*[476]. And it is true that, when engaging academically with the medium of television, and even more so when doing it within a Film Department by mobilising a film studies formation, one implicit question insistently appears. This question is highlighted in a passage from Matei's survey on the Romanian state television. At one point, the author writes: 'Another rhetorical question could be asked: could television have adopted a different style, could it have followed a different destiny, so as not to reach this quasi-anomy in which it bathes nowadays?'[477] This question is significant for several reasons. On the one hand, it links two rather unreconciled attitudes: one of profound disappointment in the medium's usual paradigms, and another one of hope for a different television. On the other hand, by allowing this openness towards counterfactual histories, Matei's quote implicitly speculates on the possible radical avatars of television, either unrealised, or interrupted, or, yet again, purely virtual. Our thesis is that the Romanian Revolution accidentally penetrated this territory. By arguing for an experimental quality of the broadcast during those days of December 1989, we do not take anything away from the actual political events that occurred in the street, nor do we wish to abstract the broadcast itself from the violent situation it depicted for the sake of a rhetorical twist. On the contrary, we argue that, precisely because this broadcast had to deal with the constraints of the moment, and to make do with an unprecedented spontaneous situation, its outcome was revolutionary, testifying both to the authenticity of the facts and to the under-developed potential of the medium itself.

We have already seen, in our introduction, how a large part of the work on television, especially when it comes from a film studies perspective, carries condescending undertones. Our thesis was constructed both by recognising potentially useful transversal readings between the cinema and the television (such as Daney's frequent crossings), and the inherent danger that lies in an approach which considers television as simply the double negative of cinema. One of the most clear illustrations of such a conception comes from Deleuze who, in his summarising letter to Serge Daney, ponders on the film critic's function as a critical relay between cinema and television, in a period (mid-1980s) when

[476] Laura Mulvey, 'Introduction', in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton (eds.), *Experimental British Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 1.
[477] Alexandru Matei, *O tribună captivantă*, 35.

the hybridisations between the two were becoming more frequent and more unstable, generating a crisis for classical cinephilia. Deleuze argues that

> television, in spite of important attempts often belonging to great filmmakers, did not seek its own specificity in an aesthetic function, but in a social function, power and control function, the reign of the medium shot which refuses any adventure of perception in the name of the professional eye. With the result that, when an innovation does appear [on TV], it can [only] be in an unexpected corner, in an exceptional circumstance.[478]

Elsewhere in this letter Deleuze similarly argues:

> probably this second stage of sound cinema [that concerns the modernist singular achievements of challenging filmmakers from the 1970s] would never have been born in the absence of television, it is television which made it possible; but this is because television itself gave up on most of its own creative possibilities, and didn't even understand them.[479]

Detailing television's 'own creative possibilities' would clearly go beyond the scope of this conclusion, yet it seems important, at this point, to underline the intricate question of medium specificity in light of this experimental television discussion. What is of interest here is the idea that an experimental television would both assume televisual properties and go against them – that is, against what Mulvey names, in her introduction, television's 'stable reception'. It is by disturbing this 'stable reception' that television would be able to both counter dominant disdainful attitudes in relation to cinema and invest a radically under-developed terrain. In fact, precisely because the usual television paradigm presents such a regular evolution, it becomes possible to trace moments in which television behaves contrary to what is expected from it. This is what Deleuze has in mind when he speaks of 'exceptional circumstance': it was the case, for Daney, when ex-president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing left the presidential office, while the television camera continued to record an empty chair. It is, for us, the moment (just to given an example) when the Romanian TV cameras record, during night-time, a barely discernible crowd, compressed by the poor technical standard of the image. In other words, the void that those cameras recorded, creating a rupture in the revolutionary iconography, had to be theoretically

[478] Gilles Deleuze, 'Optimisme, pessimisme, et voyage: Lettre à Serge Daney', in *Ciné journal*, *op. cit.*, 8.
[479] *Ibid*., 7.

addressed by positing them against the dominant paradigm of the trademark image. Mulvey argues that

> For the concept of experimental television to work, the programme has to detach itself from the surrounding flow. Flow tends to favour an aesthetic of smooth, almost invisible temporal transition, whereas experiment draws attention to itself and to the language of television, catching and then holding the 'distracted glance'. From this perspective, television incorporates a double look: a distracted glance that can become fixed and absorbed. This 'fixed' look has nothing in common with the entranced gaze associated with narrative cinema; it represents a discerning, receptive interaction with a particular programme.[480]

The case of the Romanian Revolution was such an extraordinary occurrence that it puzzled commentators, since it seemed to allow for a renewed influx of historical time – and of a social sphere – to enter the small, dispersed screens of television sets around the world. In fact, the 'fixed and absorbed glance' discussed by Mulvey was, in this case, also motivated by a fashionable subject – the end of communism – and an orientalist curiosity towards an exoticised otherness. In this sense, such counter-imagery in which it suddenly became hard to orientate could also serve an emancipatory objective in which, instead of total spectacularisation, television would become an irregular scene for collective action. Matei's claim is relevant for our present discussion since it posits the possibility for television to be critiqued and improved *from within*, using its own mechanisms and (counter-)paradigms, instead of placating an exterior discourse that is usually borrowed from a film studies perspective. When Deleuze spoke about 'great filmmakers' investing the terrain of television, he also addressed this existence of an alternative television that such experiences demonstrated. Similarly, Michael Cramer contends that '[filmmakers such as] Rossellini, Watkins, and Godard' did not 'reject what [television] was, but rather [wished] to find within both its existing manifestations and the broader cultural conditions it had created the raw materials for imagining what it could be.'[481] Cramer favours the term 'utopian television' in order to describe the pedagogical and federating possibilities perceived in this medium by such artistically-oriented filmmakers.

[480] Mulvey, 'Introduction', 3.
[481] Michael Cramer, *Utopian Television. Rossellini, Watkins, and Godard beyond Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix.

Another key example at hand for an alternative practice of television is represented by the French *téléaste* Jean-Christophe Averty, an important figure who revolutionised the medium in the 1960s through his irreverent tastes and fusional creativity. Although describing his plural techniques and interests would clearly go beyond the scope of this section, we must allude to what Anne-Marie Duguet perceives as his key contribution, namely the fact that 'Averty engages the aesthetic question on the terrain of the television itself, replaying it from within, engaging it in its own exhibition.'[482] In a similar vein, Paule Palacios-Dalens speaks about Averty's preference for television (instead of cinema, a much more logical avenue for any creative spirit even in the 1950s) as 'a utopian space filled with possibilities', which the television practitioner sought to transform into 'a terrain of experimentation'[483]. Indeed, the mere interest – both as praxis and as academic study – for the field of television seems incompatible with an awareness, if not a specific curiosity, for the 'aesthetic question', partly because – at least at that time – the television format was transient by excellence, not meant to endure, like the already developed aural conscience of cinema. Yet it is precisely on this low-brow, constrained terrain that Averty's plural practice developed into 'an aesthetics with no equivalent in the context of television'[484]. Averty's importance lies in the fact that he exploited the medium's potential for its own, demonstrating its ability to accommodate stylistic excess and even personal signatures.

Contributions such as that of Godard and especially that of Averty could serve to better contextualise the aesthetic territory of television on which the Romanian Revolution constituted a sort of involuntary rupture. However, we would like to stress the fact that, unlike Averty's conscious practice, the impact of the Romanian Television broadcast was even more subversive in relation to the paradigm of the trademark image since its outcome was purely spontaneous, thus avoiding any attempts to transform it into a commodity. In any case, this future research direction remains to be attempted, mirroring Mizoeff's claim on a 'history from below in all senses [that] recognized that its task was to create and alternative mode of historical identification for the (would-be) revolutionary, entailing the creation of a countervisuality.'[485]

[482] Anne-Marie Duguet, *Jean-Christophe Averty* (Paris: Dis voir, 1991), 20.
[483] Paule Palacios-Dalens, *Godard Averty. Petit et grand écran* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'œil, 2024), 16.
[484] Duguet, *Jean-Christope Averty*, 5.
[485] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 223. Naturally, Mirzoeff is referring to the context of imperial and colonialist practices for visuality. Yet the political undertone of his assessment colours such a counter-history of the televisual alternative form that is elevated to cultural status.

Closing remarks

This dissertation has constantly attempted to link the Romanian Revolution case study to a transversal, non-linear history of situations, practices, gestures, theories. Instead of depicting a sealed off environment, it sought to multiply the connections to events past and present. This option felt pertinent not only because of our own historiographic attitude that wishes to avoid precisely the feeling of non-communication between such case studies, but also because the revolution could be profitably inscribed into a continuity of ruptures that affect our society up to the present day. The Romanian Revolution broadcast thus could be seen to take part into a larger history of media evolutions, illuminating a specific context while also providing insight into other similar case studies that can be found on this temporal axis, either before or after December 1989. Since we conceive of this moment as participating into an ever complexifying pattern of media circuits and audiovisual flows, we consider that present day conflicts and crises can be legitimately conceptualised through recourse to key theoretical findings occasioned by the Romanian situation, which was among the first to intervene with force, in real time, on media transmitters everywhere. Referring to the current aggression of Ukraine by Russia, Dork Zabunyan argues:

> We find the events that take place [in Ukraine] by nonchalantly following a breaking news thread on our phone, by mechanically turning on the television set, or by leafing distractedly through the pages on foreign politics of a journal….Our perception of the war on the Ukrainian territory is inseparable from this iconographic ensemble of an edifying recurrence.'[486]

What can be said from this observation is that we can find even nowadays a similar media configuration to the one discussed throughout this dissertation, except it has multiplied in the same way it has de-territorialised, filling numerous screen formats. Even more, the displacement gesture in which Farocki could see a personal sign of dissent and emancipation has become banal: everybody produces images while consuming in their turn. Thus, the circuits of visibility become even more entangled between mass-media organs and personal accounts on social media. The democratic advent of AI that this dissertation witnessed in real time only complicates the matters further. This problem is both interrelated to our topic and certainly too vast to be discussed here. Yet, all this re-

[486] Dork Zabunyan, 'La guerre en Ukraine a bien lieu', *Trafic – Almanach de cinéma* (Paris: P.O.L, 2023), 330.

configured environment is characterised by the persistence of a series of ontological questions that we have systematically alluded to. And while it is absolutely fascinating to trace and describe their new avatars – subject to change from day to day at this stage –, we argue that the essence of these media-oriented philosophical debates practically remains unchanged, eventually acquiring a renewed interest, only to fade away again from public conscience, in a repeated cycle. Kernbauer argues for a similar understanding of television's place in today's visual culture – far from obsolescence, it critically illuminates digital evolutions:

> Activity instead of passivity, participation instead of one-way communication, politics instead of entertainment, all in a long overdue gesture of politically emancipating the much-maligned, private, feminised mass media: this is the potential political scope of image production the Romanian Revolution evokes; these are the hopes periodically awakened and disappointed in the digital age. To this day, video and television – as well as their contemporary successors, the internet and social media – permanently set us in active mode. 'Liveness' has been replaced by 'online' connection, as an apparatus of constant mutual affirmation of presence and contact.[487]

While the challenges that these recent audiovisual evolutions pose are by no means insignificant, they also demonstrate a vitality of the audiovisual studies domain, since they are found at the centre of transformations altering daily life. One of the objectives of this dissertation has been to operate a reconsideration of the 'high' and 'low' assumptions of television and the visual culture in general, attempting to contradict alarmist tendencies of the 1980s which equalled the proliferation of the images with the end of civilisation. Although prudence is required, we would like to end this dissertation on a positive note, highlighting the relevance of inclusive inquiries on the Romanian Revolution for the present-day visual environment and the film studies field in particular. Such an inquiry is informed by contemporary theoretical advances, while in its turn providing insight into past hopes, mistakes, limitations, and virtualities that, as Benjamin would say, are never lost to history.

[487] Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, 65.

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