

**MOVING IMAGES IN ROMANIAN CRITICAL ART PRACTICE  
AND RECENT HISTORY**

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**PhD Media and Communications, 2016**

***I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.***

## Acknowledgements

It is perhaps commonplace to say that a doctoral research is a journey. Nevertheless, I have only come to understand that this research project has been both a personal journey and an academic one in the final stages of writing, when paradoxically, there was little time for reflection. The time that unfolded between the moment when I was writing a tentative research proposal and the moment I am now in has been intense, incredible, invaluable and rewarding. I am convinced that I would have not experienced either of these without the support, attentive consideration and incredibly fruitful conversations with my supervisor, Dr. Pasi Väliäho. I started this journey under the auspices of his encouragements and could not have carried through without his relentless belief in my academic abilities. I would also like to acknowledge the support and inspiring encounters with Dr. Rachel Moore, always surprising and always refreshing. In different stages of this research, she has acted as a mentor and reader of my work, at the same time showing an empowering collegial attentiveness to my ideas.

An extended thank you goes to Prof. Sean Cubitt and Prof. Julian Henriques, for their general support within the Media and Communications department, their suggestions made for various versions of the text and their encouragement to experiment across-disciplines and with methods.

This research would not have been possible without the funding received from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the research exhibition in New Delhi, India would not have happened without the AHRC International Placement Scheme and Fellowship at Sarai CSDS.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the artists: Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, Joanne Richardson, Irina Botea, Ciprian Mureşan, Matei Bejenaru, Sebastian Moldovan, Marina Albu, Ciprian Homorodean, Ştefan Constantinescu, and Alexandru Solomon for making their work available and for allowing me to display their works in the research exhibitions. My gratitude also goes to curator Raluca Voinea for offering me the chance to publish in IDEA Arts + Society magazine and to artist Dan Perjovschi for being an incredible conversation partner.

To researcher and curator Vlad Morariu, who has read various versions of the text and has travelled most of this journey with me, I have to thank for his extraordinary ability to listen and empathize, and for the “madness of a decision” which I hope he never will regret.

Chris Collier, our work together and our exchanges have been, in the past six years, ever-expanding sources of inspiration and joy. Thank you for being an ally and part of my ventures, coming to my events and research shows and partnering up in long rants on class war, the future of art or the gentrification of Deptford and New Cross. In the last stage of this research, I particularly want to thank Chris Collier and Stephanie Moran for proofreading this document in very short time, an absolutely invaluable help.

I would also like to thank my family for their trust and care, and my friends Florina Tudose and Andreea Găzdaru for always sharing their endless energy resources with me when they were most needed.

## **Abstract**

This thesis approaches contemporary moving image artworks from Romania in order to critically revisit key events, moments and situations in the country's recent history. Responding to a gap in the literature on Romanian art, it addresses the relations between moving image practices and the socio-political transformations that have taken place in the country over the last three decades. This is achieved by considering the role of moving images in two major events – the Romanian 1989 revolution and the June 1990 anti-government protests – and by mapping critical moving image art practice from the communist period to the “postcommunist condition” and the context of post-2008 economic crisis.

In addition, this thesis investigates how moving image art can be used to assess the contemporary Romanian situation. The main argument is that responding to these recent transformations is an urgent political task, one which few artists have addressed themselves to date. A constellation of moments from the recent Romanian past is thus assembled in order to explore the possibilities of thinking and writing about history that are evoked through moving images. The analysis focuses on a selection of works by artists Ion Grigorescu, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, and, Joanne Richardson, each of whom have responded to this political task in a particular way.

## Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
ABSTRACT .....	5
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	6
TABLE OF IMAGES .....	10
INTRODUCTION .....	16
PRODUCING ARTICULATIONS WITH MOVING IMAGES .....	16
RESEARCH QUESTIONS EXPANDED. THEORETICAL GROUNDS AND METHOD .....	22
ARGUMENT AND CHAPTER OUTLINES .....	26
CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE AND LIMITATIONS .....	31
PROBLEMS RESTATED AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES .....	33
CHAPTER 1 : WORKING WITH ROMANIAN MOVING IMAGES .....	34
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	34
1.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.....	38
1.2.1 Groundwork: Defining Terms and Collecting Materials .....	38
1.2.2 Documents, Collections, and Archives.....	40
1.2.3 Researching with Moving Images .....	41
1.3 MOVING IMAGES IN RELATION TO ART AND POLITICS .....	43
1.3.1 Moving Images and the Politics of Gallery Spaces.....	43
1.3.2 Nightmares of Participation.....	48
1.4 WRITING WITH AND ABOUT MOVING IMAGES .....	55
1.4.1 Approaches to Moving Image Histories.....	55
1.4.2 The Concept of Event and Moving Images .....	58
	.6

1.5 CONCLUSION .....	62
CHAPTER 2 : HISTORIES OF MAKING MOVING IMAGES IN ROMANIAN ART.....	64
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	64
2.2 POLITICIZING MOVING IMAGE PRACTICES.....	66
2.2.1 Local Context and Histories .....	66
2.2.2 Traditions, Exceptions and Recuperations.....	68
2.3 MOVING IMAGE PRACTICES IN COMMUNISM: HISTORIES OF SOFT RESISTANCE.....	72
2.3.1 Studio Space and Private Experience: Ion Grigorescu .....	74
2.3.2 Collective Moving Image Experiments: Kinema Ikon .....	83
2.4 MOVING IMAGE PRACTICES IN POSTCOMMUNISM: HISTORIES OF ALIGNMENT .....	90
2.4.1 Communism as Rupture.....	90
2.4.2 Locally Aligned .....	93
2.4.3 Technology and Transition.....	96
2.5 CONCLUSION .....	103
CHAPTER 3 : MOVING IMAGE AND EVENT: 1989 .....	105
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	105
3.2 REVOLUTION-AS-EVENT AND ITS MOVING IMAGES .....	107
3.2.1 Fade In: Images and Political Subjects .....	110
3.2.2 Fade Out: A Global Event .....	117
3.3 VIDEOGRAMS OF A TELEVISED REVOLUTION .....	123
3.3.1 Media Historiography .....	124
3.3.2 Subject and Image.....	127
3.3.3 Street Images and Television Images.....	132
3.4 CONCLUSION .....	141

CHAPTER 4 : MOVING IMAGES OF POSTCOMMUNISM.....	143
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	143
4.2 COMMONPLACES OF TRANSITION .....	145
4.2.1 Transition as Ideology .....	149
4.2.2 Critically Assessing Postcommunism in Artistic Practice .....	158
4.3 MOVING IMAGES AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF PROTEST.....	163
4.3.1 “Two or Three Things about Activism” .....	163
4.3.2 Postcommunism, Media and Capital .....	175
4.4 THE POSTCOMMUNIST SUBJECT IN ROMANIA.....	180
4.5 CONCLUSION .....	185
CHAPTER 5 : MEMORY, INHERITANCE AND MOVING IMAGES.....	187
5.1 INTRODUCTION .....	187
5.2 TRACES OF RECENT HISTORY .....	189
5.2.1 Imagining Postcommunist Space in Transition .....	189
5.2.2 What Was Lost and What Futures Were Constructed .....	192
5.3 WHITHER MEMORY? INHERITANCE AS A TASK.....	197
5.3.1 To Be Before the Image .....	201
5.3.2 Fiction and Gesture .....	208
5.3.3 Gestures Speak of Forgetting, Loss, and Failure .....	215
5.4 BUILDING FUTURES ON CREDIT.....	219
5.4.1 On Why We Need to Talk about Labour .....	224
5.4.2 Returning Acts of Dispossession .....	229
5.5 CONCLUSION .....	236
CONCLUSIONS .....	238

APPROACHES AND AIMS .....	242
ROMANIA'S RECENT PAST AND MOVING IMAGE ART .....	247
FUTURE RESEARCH .....	253
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	255
ARTWORKS .....	271
FILMOGRAPHY .....	272
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH EXHIBITION IN LONDON, UK (2012) .....	273
APPENDIX B: RESEARCH EXHIBITION IN NEW DELHI, INDIA (2012).....	275
APPENDIX C: AUDIOVISUAL RESEARCH ESSAY ON THE 'MINERIAD' .....	276
APPENDIX D: TRANSCRIPT OF <i>DIALOGUE WITH COMRADE CEAUȘESCU</i> (1978).....	277
APPENDIX E: WORKS BY KINEMA IKON.....	280
APPENDIX F: STUDY OF IMAGES FROM THE 1989 ROMANIAN REVOLUTION.....	282

## Table of Images

Image 1 - Ciprian Mureşan, <i>Leap into the Void – After 3 seconds</i> , black and white photograph, 2004.....	34
Image 2 - Ion Grigorescu, <i>Dialog cu Tov. Ceauşescu/Dialogue with Comrade Ceauşescu</i> , 8mm, film still (1978). .....	75
Image 3 - Ion Grigorescu, <i>Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceauşescu</i> , Video / DVD, 22' 29'', (2007), film still. ....	79
Image 4 - Ion Grigorescu, <i>Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceauşescu</i> , Video / DVD, 22' 29'', (2007), film still. ....	80
Image 5 - 1995 Retrospective Film Exhibition of Kinema Ikon, Centre Georges Pompidou Paris, poster. Source: <a href="http://www.kinema-ikon.net">www.kinema-ikon.net</a> .....	86
Image 6 - Two different cameras recording the balcony at the Central Committee building in 1989, when Ceauşescu's speech was interrupted (left), and when the protesters occupied it and were waving the Romanian flag (right). Source: <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992). .....	112
Image 7 - Ceauşescu's 1968 televised speech from the Central Committee building, film stills. Source: National Film Archive, accessed online from the official video channel, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/ArhivaTVROnline">https://www.youtube.com/user/ArhivaTVROnline</a> . .....	112
Image 8 - Opening shot of the woman on the hospital bed addressing the camera directly. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992). .....	128
Image 9 - Cameras recording television screens. Still frames from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992). .....	131
Image 10 - Cameras recording people looking at television screens. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992). .....	131

Image 11 - Camera filming outside of a window in Timișoara, min. 3.37 to min 5.50. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992).....	133
Image 12 - Cameras in Victory square, filming the soldiers fire at an unseen enemy. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992).....	136
Image 13 - Camera pans from television set into the street, very likely at Romană square, Bucharest. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992).....	136
Image 14 - Cameras on high-rise buildings at University square, Bucharest. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992).....	136
Image 15 - Cameras filming on the streets of Bucharest from inside a moving car, near Unirii square. Film stills from <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992). ....	136
Image 16 - Short descriptions of the works made by Richardson and collaborators and included in the <i>Commonplaces of Transition</i> project. Source: <a href="http://www.dmedia.ro">www.dmedia.ro</a> .....	147
Image 17 - The Romanian city of Cluj, where right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar had street furniture and other objects painted in the colours of the Romanian flag. <i>In Transit</i> (2008), film still. ....	150
Image 18 - The archaeological sites uncovered in the city of Cluj, meant to “prove” the Romanian heritage and its long, historical legacy in this area. <i>In Transit</i> (2008), film still. ....	150
Image 19 - Philosopher G.M. Tamás speaks of how the Ceaușescu era was not a mutation of Soviet totalitarian communism, but a specific blend of local fascism and communism. <i>In Transit</i> (2008), film still. ....	152
Image 20 - Tamás on the specific ideology during so-called Romanian “communism”, <i>In Transit</i> (2008), film still. ....	152

Image 21 - Ion Iliescu claiming on National Television that the capital is under the siege of “fascist forces.” Source: <i>Piața Universității</i> , dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image, English subtitles added.....	166
Image 22 -“Nous sommes toujours avec la démocratie” / “We are always on the side of democracy” – statement made in French by acting Prime Minister Petre Roman during the events of 13 – 15 June 1990. Source: <i>Piața Universității</i> , dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image.....	166
Image 23 - Documentation photographs of <i>Monument (History/Hysteria 2)</i> (2007), Dan Perjovschi, courtesy of the artist .....	169
Image 24 - Archival footage from 13 – 15 June 1990. The man heads to toward the left and sees the miners, hesitates, and then they start to chase him. The images are shot at University square, in the same space where Dan Perjovschi did his piece seventeen years later. Source: <i>Piața Universității</i> , dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image. ....	169
Image 25 - An iconic image from the 1989 revolution. In Studio 4 of the National Television Station, a group of people celebrate their first "free" live transmission. Source: <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> , film still. ....	171
Image 26 - The group of people beaten up at the TV station by the army, in the same Studio 4, on June 13, 1990. After the group was aligned to be filmed, a voice in off said that "It won't work. We need to wash their faces, they are bloody." Then, they were aligned again (right). Source: National Television Archive Youtube channel, still images. ....	171
Image 27 – Ion Iliescu at the balcony of the Central Committee building, during the 1989 Romanian revolution. He appeared by side of army general Ștefan Gușă and declared that the army will protect and maintain “public order.” Source: <i>Videograms of a Revolution</i> (1992), still image.....	176

Image 28 - Iliescu calling on the intervention of the army against anti-government protesters occupying a central square. His televised address is delivered from the same balcony, in the Central Committee building. Source: <i>Piața Universității</i> , dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image, English subtitle added. ....	177
Image 29 - Computer generated image offering a possible view of the finalized construction of the National Redemption Cathedral. Source: <a href="http://adevarul.ro/assets/beta.adevarul.ro/MRImage/2011/02/12/50aa5fd07c42d5a6637c5710/646x404.jpg">http://adevarul.ro/assets/beta.adevarul.ro/MRImage/2011/02/12/50aa5fd07c42d5a6637c5710/646x404.jpg</a> .....	196
Image 30 - National Redemption Cathedral in early construction stages (2013). Photograph by Silviu Matei. Source: <a href="http://www.mediafax.ro/social/cum-arata-acum-catedrala-mantuirii-neamului-10676334">http://www.mediafax.ro/social/cum-arata-acum-catedrala-mantuirii-neamului-10676334</a> .....	196
Image 31 – Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, <i>Trăiască și înflorească capitalismul!/Long Live and Thrive Capitalism</i> , Periferic 8 Biennial, Iasi, 2008. Image retrieved from the artists’ website.....	200
Image 32 - Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, <i>Long Live and Thrive Capitalism</i> , Beirut Art Centre, part of “Meeting Points 7” exhibition, curated by WHW collective, 2014. Photograph by Mihaela Brebenel. ....	200
Image 33 - The small church is being moved to the new site, 200 meters away, documentation photograph. Source: <a href="http://www.rezistentanet.net">www.rezistentanet.net</a> . ....	202
Image 34 – The small church at its present location, between rows of high-rise buildings, the opening shot of the work. Film still from <i>Praful/The Dust</i> (2006), courtesy of the artists.....	203
Image 35 – Florin Tudor gathers dust at the present site of the church and fills his pockets with it. Film still from <i>Praful/The Dust</i> (2006), courtesy of the artists.....	203

Image 36 – Florin Tudor walks past the House of Science/Romanian Academy building, with his pockets full of dust from the original site of the small church. Film still from <i>Praful/The Dust</i> (2006), courtesy of the artists. ....	204
Image 37 - Tudor jumps the small fence of the House of Science/Romanian Academy building to deposit the dust from the small church, film stills from <i>Praful/The Dust</i> (2006), courtesy of the artists.....	204
Image 38 – <i>Văcărești</i> , dual-channel installation view, 6 Gyumri Biennial, 2008, documentation photograph. Retrieved from artists’ website.....	209
Image 39 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, <i>Văcărești</i> (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists. ....	212
Image 40 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, <i>Văcărești</i> (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists. ....	212
Image 41 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, <i>Văcărești</i> (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists. ....	213
Image 42 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, <i>Văcărești</i> (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists. ....	213
Image 43 - The small church from <i>Praful</i> in its current location between high rise socialist buildings, in 2009 – 10, with an additional neon cross. Source: <a href="http://www.rezistentanet.net">www.rezistentanet.net</a> .	217
Image 44 – The gesture of whittling a piece of metal in <i>Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value</i> , (2009) image still, courtesy of the artists .....	225
Image 45 - Fire burning the fluff in <i>Rite of Spring</i> (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, film stills, courtesy of the artists .....	230
Image 46 - The National Library of Romania, <i>Rite of Spring</i> (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, film still, courtesy of the artists.....	231

Image 47 - *Rite of Spring* (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor. Different postures and gestures of the child, film stills, courtesy of the artists.....235

## Introduction

### Producing articulations with moving images

In this thesis, I consider that moving images operate within and across social and political realms. The artist Hito Steyerl has suggested that these operations can be understood, on a broader level, through the notion of “articulation”, by which she intends “a montage of various elements – voices, images, colours, passions, or dogmas – in time and space.”<sup>1</sup> By using the notion of articulation, Steyerl (re)turns to the practice of montage, drawing from filmmaking and early montage theory<sup>2</sup> to understand “how is the political field edited.”<sup>3</sup> For her, it is fruitful to consider that the social and political might be observed and analysed in such a manner, according to operations that ultimately originate in filmic and artistic production. I will take up Steyerl’s proposition, namely that moving images provide a crucial means through which to understand the social and political. I will argue, alongside Steyerl that one can access an understanding of a socio-political event, situation or context through the notion of articulation as defined above. My research aims to develop from this notion, understood as a composition of elements from the social and political worlds, of subjects, and of moving images, to reflect on the context of Romania’s recent history. In doing so it asks two main questions: *How can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images?* and *What articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks?*

In order to answer these questions, I consider the role of moving images in recent Romanian history, which I revisit through a series of events, such as the 1989 revolution, or the June 1990 anti-government protests. In retrospect, these two events can be seen as nodal points in the country’s recent history, abundant in moving images, with a wide circulation across media and art platforms. These images have both documented

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<sup>1</sup> Hito Steyerl, “The Articulation of Protest,” in *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Steyerl employs here the notion of montage as it was envisaged by the early Russian montage theory of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. The belief that film, or moving images more extensively, hold, in this form of arrangement, the capacity to produce changes in the social world and thus the ability to carry political agency is at the centre of what Hito Steyerl carries forward from these theories. See Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writing of Dziga Vertov* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (London: Faber, 1943); Sergei Eisenstein, *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Steyerl, “The Articulation of Protest,” 78.

historical events, but they have also created *articulations* of these events – through their circulation and mediation. Apart from these distinctive historical and media events, this thesis considers a series of moments and situations, which stretch temporally from the 1970s to the present and are defined by the political configurations under which they took shape, rather than a clearly defined event. As it starts to become apparent, a view of history as a constellation rather than a linear progression of events is what the thesis aims to build upon. This view derives partially from theoretical propositions that support the transference or the lucrative exploration of film editing and montage techniques in the study of political and social fields (as Steyerl argues for *articulation*), of history (as Walter Benjamin famously seeks to do with the notion of *constellation*), or of art history (as Aby Warburg suggests with his Mnemosyne Atlas<sup>4</sup>).

Thus, the time and space of the past over thirty years in Romania – designated as “recent Romanian history” is not understood as the linear progression culminating in a cumulative contemporary, filled up by events, moments and situations. Rather, this time-space is edited together through returns and repetitions, and with a focus on selected small and large moments, events and situations, set together to potentially intensify each other.

The moments, situations and events are considered via a series of moving image artworks selected through a curatorial process. This process and the theoretical and methodological research will be detailed in Chapter 1. Thereafter, in Chapters 2 – 5, I will consider how this small number of moving image artworks can offer access to moments in recent Romanian history and pose relevant questions to contemporary negotiations of that pasts and the futures it promised to shape. Each chapter will focus on one aspect of the socio-political field in connection to moving images. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the conditions and possibilities of producing resistant or experimental moving image work during the communist period and the implications that scarcity, restrictions and limitation have imposed in the following decades. Chapter 3 will address the role of moving images in the televised revolution of 1989 and in particular, in

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<sup>4</sup> For a very clear and well researched description of Warburg’s Atlas and its role see Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*, Signale : Modern German Letters, Cultures, and Thought (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2012). In the rest of the thesis, however, I draw more on Didi-Huberman’s reading of Warburg’s work in relation to images and their capacities to haunt art histories. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’Image Survivante. Histoire de L’art et Temps Des Fantômes Selon Aby Warburg*, Paradoxe (Les\_Éditions\_de\_Minuit, 2002).

creating political subjects. Moving images in a period of transition, and how they could work to produce critical engagement with a “postcommunist condition” is the area covered in Chapter 4. Finally, the moving image as a way of opening up a certain inheritance will be the central interest of Chapter 5. This inheritance is made up of forgotten moments, individuals and groups from the recent past, and debt accumulated as unfulfilled promises of possible futures.

This list follows a relative chronology of historical periods or times covered by the thesis – communism, revolution, postcommunism, the contemporary context – yet the chapters themselves abound with links between these various temporalities and can also be read across and outside of a linear structure. If moving images create articulations of the socio-political field, then each of the chapters in this thesis acts as a fragment in a larger structure, best described as a constellation. The overall structure of the thesis follows the aforementioned temporal markers of recent Romanian history, yet elements within also connect across space and time, providing contextual information to understand how such a constellation might be formed.

The selection of moving image works brought together in the constellation that is this thesis have mainly circulated in gallery and museum spaces and they are concerned with artistic practice and how images shape memory, historical events, and the contemporary. I argue that a number of artists and groups (namely, Ion Grigorescu, Kinema Ikon, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, and, Joanne Richardson) have produced works that are here discussed for how they address specific moments or events in the recent past and the memory, promises and futures shaped in those moments or events and consequently, within the contemporary context. Through this selection, one can begin to consider the relation between moving images and the socio-political context of recent Romanian history.

Somewhat similar concerns have been notoriously taken up in filmmaking practices of young Romanian directors who have contributed to the development of what has come to be known as the “Romanian New Wave.” One can say that filmic productions such as Radu Muntean’s *Hârtia va fi albastră/The Paper Will be Blue* (2006), Cătălin Mitulescu’s *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii/ The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006) or Corneliu Porumboiu’s *A fost sau n-a fost/12.08 East of Bucharest* (2006) – all released around the same time – have each questioned, through narrative cinema how the memory and promises of recent Romanian past and its events have been

subsequently negotiated. Arguably, these films have revisited and reflected on the events through micro-situations and by building the narrative around individuals or small groups of (anti/non)heroes.<sup>5</sup>

However, unlike these cinematic productions, the moving image works presented in this thesis do not focus on narrative techniques and how images could narrate historical events, or on the ability of images to reflect and reveal “what happened.” Instead, a common feature of these works is that they challenge the capacities of images to create fully-formed and coherent narratives, to act as documents in the production of historical truth, or in the singular production of memory over a historical event or situation. I argue that by doing that, they open up a series of concepts, like gesture, imagination, and fiction, which complicate the recent past and conduce to highly relevant discussions on the capacity and political agency of moving images in the contemporary context.

The selection of moving image works employed in this thesis is heterogeneous, meaning that the works come from producers with various backgrounds and trainings (filmmaking, fine art and artistic practice, activist practices). They have been gathered together by the scope of the research, to answer the question of what can images do when considered in connection to historical periods and events, or in their ability to address the contemporary social and political conditions of Romania. Although some of these works (Kinema Ikon’s in particular) are placed and discussed within the field of “experimental art” and the debates around the role of the experiment in the work with moving images in artistic practice take central stage for parts of this research this is due entirely to how histories of Romanian artistic practice have been formulated. Thus, the impetus is to challenge those histories that situate and reduce the agency of images to experimental practices and instead to uncover different loci where the agency of images could potentially take shape. Here, the heterogeneous nature of the selection proves helpful. The collaborative work of Farocki and Ujică, for instance, proposes that agency be investigated at the intersection of filmmaking practice (documentary or fiction) and the conventions, faults and repetitions of the mediatic production of images. The

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<sup>5</sup> Of the three, Porumboiu’s ironic investigation of the events of 1989 and their nature echoed most profoundly with the local and International context of the time (the film won *Caméra d’Or* Prize for best first film at the Cannes Film Festival), whilst remaining in the logic that raised and debated, via a specific micro-situation (a TV show in Eastern Romanian city of Vaslui investigates live what holds true and not about the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1989 at a local level) the “true” nature of “what happened.”

practice of Kinema Ikon, continuously experimental in nature, veers towards composing and exploring the agency of images in the processes of their production and the experiment and they begin to focus more on the playfulness embedded in the affordances of technologies that make images, than the politics of using technologies and the outcomes these explorations produce. In turn, the experimental aspects of works by Ion Grigorescu make clear how he insists and returns to the troubling political, social and historical conditions which drive the production, and for him, I argue that the agency of images rests in the embodied possibilities of voicing out a position through and together with moving image work, given distinctive restrictive conditions. The work of Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor is embedded in their training in painting and their double bind with this form (disavowal and experiment) leads them to explore the agency of moving images at the intersection of their inability to reflect historical truth and their potential for composing critical formulations of historical events, moments and situations. Finally, Joanne Richardson's practice is collaborative in nature (works are made with D-Media collective) and driven by her activist background and the adapted call by Goddard towards "making film politically." The agency of images is in her work seen as directly connected to their ability to intervene and articulate the social and political spheres. However, this view is not kept in its entirety and the self-reflexive nature of her works displays a reconsideration of the dictum, especially as it requires coming to terms and folding into practice several political failures and myths associated with it (gender equality and ethnic discrimination being the most important for the Romanian context).

The variations in understanding and negotiating the agency of moving images come together in this thesis under the term "critical art practice." I refer to "moving images in critical art practice and recent history" in the title of this work, as a way to underline that the critical capacities of moving image works identified here lie precisely in the relationships that they establish with recent history. Given the presence and role moving images have held in articulating recent Romanian history, conversations around the nature, status and agency of images have been central to debates around history and politics, and how images hold weight in political and economic fields, often hijacked by one political power structure or another.

Therefore, the status of moving images in a critical form of art practice necessarily connects to this history – it refers in this case to the manner particular to the

Romanian context, in which artistic practice has reflected, with the use of moving images, upon recent historical and political events. To discuss the status of moving and recorded images as documents and as givers of a truth-effect is inextricably linked to questions of indexicality and temporality. In doing so, the debate opens around the capacities of the photographic image (moving or still) as indexical rather than representational. However, the indexical character of images is taken up here, as Mary Ann Doane notes, as an extended understanding of Charles Saunders Pierce view as “pure indication, pure assurance of existence” and I argue that the moving image artworks discussed have the ability to critically revisit recent history but are unable (nor do they intend) to uncover historical truth. Mary Ann Doane highlights that although the image “has been associated with the feverish desire to ‘warehouse’ the present, it is more frequently linked to a relentless assertion of pastness – a ‘that-has-been’.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, to critically revisit the recent past is to consider the capacity of images to leave traces of that past, but also to return and haunt the present and to urge the act of taking responsibility over that present. In turn, this means to produce articulations of the recent past using moving images. This is a shared concern of the works selected here and one of the reasons I consider this current selection is a way to open such critical articulations up for further investigation and interpretation, through the research process. However, I do not consider these works to belong to critical artistic practice solely due to their reception in spaces for the display of contemporary art. As I discuss further in Chapter 1, I contest the idea that moving images gain or start holding a critical role by entering the space of the gallery or museum. In turn, I do not consider that these works are critical by the sheer fact that they approach events, moments and situations of the recent past. Instead, I argue that their criticality rests on the works’ ability to investigate the status, role and agency of moving images in recent history and to open up critical interrogations of how the political field is edited, historically and in the present, via moving images.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 103.

## Research questions expanded. Theoretical grounds and method

As mentioned, this research aims to understand the recent socio-political situation in Romania via moving images and, as a result, is interested more broadly in the relation between art and politics. However, it is not a recent Romanian history *per se*, which I wish to write, nor the history of moving image art produced in Romania since 1989. Rather, I am interested in making an investigation into recent Romanian history *through* moving images, specifically those coming from the field of artistic production, but also linking with media images and various other archival footage. In other words, the question is how moving images have articulated the changing political space-time during the past twenty-five years.

Such an approach does, of course, have its limitations, as the selection of elements needs to be reduced to a small number, if the goal is to establish connections and relationships between image, event, social and political situations. The earlier notes about articulation, based on Hito Steyerl's reflection, and the understanding of the thesis as a constellation, point to a specific view of the research process itself as a form of montage. This is resonant with Benjamin's call in one passage from *The Arcades Project*, to "carry over the principle of montage into history,"<sup>7</sup> meaning more exactly, "to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components."<sup>8</sup> The process of cutting and editing together elements in this research has been directed by the research questions and the concerns diverging from them. In turn, refining the elements to compose such a constellation has, inevitably, left a number of artists, works and theoretical considerations unaddressed. The justification for the current selection of works and artists rests, equally, on their abilities to offer layers for a rich interpretation of recent Romanian history and their interest and concern with the role of moving images in articulating the socio-political field.

Furthermore, I have constructed a theoretical framework, which does not address and debate the full realisation of socialism or communism in Romania, and have chosen instead to treat this specific period in Romanian history as a lived experience. This implies that I will not consider in depth the controversial debates of the European

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, and Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).[N2,6], p.461.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Left, the New Left, or post-Marxism, but rather discuss what Romanian writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu calls the “philosophical bet” around the Romanian political situation: “the potential of [producing] a type of knowledge stemming from the historical experience of radical transformations occurring in a very short historical time.”<sup>9</sup> However, in order to expose via moving images, some of the transformations that occurred in Romania’s recent past, I have attempted to organise this thesis not as a historical account, separated into sections which together would be able to form a complete and contained narrative. Instead, the aim has been to forge, through a novel methodological approach, a framework that would allow to focus on specific moments, but also to map the larger transformations from recent history.

Chapter 1 covers extensively the methodology that led to the formulation of the two inter-connected research questions and to the theoretical framework of the entire project. One important aspect to mention is that throughout this research, the treatment of the two research questions is intertwined between the contemporary and the changes of the past three decades in the Romanian context. Yet to return now briefly to these two questions and clarify them individually.

Firstly, *how can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images?* This question refers to how moving images can be used as *tools* for research and for writing, instead of solely being *objects* of research. This approach was informed, in part, by the work of filmmakers and authors, such as Dziga Vertov, Guy Debord, Jean-Luc Godard, and Hito Steyerl – whom I have already mentioned. However, this research does not explicitly produce an overview of writings by these authors, nor does it engage with their moving images artworks, as such. Their influence has been in the choice of methodological approach and a certain ethos of working with images. Specifically, it draws upon the ways these filmmakers each afford images a force or agency in articulating the political.

Another influence in thinking through this question has been the work of Aby Warburg and his view of the history of art as a “history of ghosts.”<sup>10</sup> Aby Warburg

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<sup>9</sup> Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Pentru O Teorie Critică a Postcomunismului I (For a Critical Theory of Postcommunism I),” *IDEA arts+society*, no. 39 (2012): 158–61, p. 159, my translation. A shorter version of this article was published in English: Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism. Beyond Anticommunism in Romania,” *Radical Philosophy*, The Postcommunist Condition, no. 159 (February 2010): 26–32.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’Image Survivante. Histoire de L’art et Temps Des Fantômes Selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002).

provides a working method for getting close and using images as research tools, one of the most inspiring ways of thinking about the agency of images and how images can be used to approach intertwining histories.

The second question I ask is: *what articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks?* In my attempts to answer this question I have been partially inspired by Peter Osborne's reconsideration of the notion of the contemporary, outside of a historical periodization in stages, or organised around specific temporal markers given by historical events. Such would be for example, the periodization of contemporary art into three stages: art after 1945, art starting in the 1960s, and art after 1989. Osborne questions the notion of the contemporary as a particular articulation of space and time. He considers the term a philosophical concept which can inform on subjectivity, experience, and possibilities of common or collective action. Osborne points out that the contemporary is a fiction. More specifically, constructions in the contemporary are fictional because of the way in which the contemporary promises a shared time. The contemporary as a fiction also extends to the fact that, Osborne argues, "increasingly, the fiction of the contemporary is primarily a global or a planetary fiction."<sup>11</sup> This statement reconnects the contemporary as a philosophical proposition to the field of artistic production and to that of politics, by drawing together relations between events, moments and situations, and their effects on a global level. Artistic productions and politics both articulate these relations and reveal the contemporary as a global fiction. The contemporary as a global fiction also possibly re-connects political events and artistic production of the last five years with events of the past three decades, across geographical areas. For example, curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh has highlighted in an interview that:

"It [became] important to reflect on current artistic and political changes in the [Middle East and North African] region through the experience of Eastern Europe. (...) We're rethinking the ongoing changes in ways not limited to the past three years. We need to think about it in relation to events of the past fifty years,"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2013), 26.

<sup>12</sup> "Truth and Consequence," *Artforum.com*, accessed July 22, 2015, <http://artforum.com/diary/id=46481>, n.p.

In light of the recent waves of protests and revolutions occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, the statement by El Fetouh points to a need to understand current political events and contemporary art production in relation to larger spatial and temporal shifts. In a similar vein, the question and the task of how to discuss “what happened” over twenty-five years ago – in the revolutions of Eastern Europe and the “fall” of the socialist regimes – requires a survey of a longer period of time or at least an acknowledgement of and attentiveness to, a long *durée*. In this temporality, one can consider the transition from capitalism to socialism, the revolution, and the transition from socialism to capitalism. Ovidiu Țichindeleanu sees the two transitions as “connected, or interrupted by the year 1989.”<sup>13</sup> However, dominant constructions of the future, present or past of Romania often refer to 1989 as a break, or a point of rupture, having a “before” – socialism – and an “after” – capitalism, with the single recognised and significant process of transition occurring only “after” the “fall” of communism.

In order to understand what articulations of the contemporary socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks in Romania, this thesis rejects narratives which imagine present, future and past as stages, and 1989 as a rupture point. Instead, although it follows a relatively linear chronology in its structure, this thesis aims to consider events, moments and situations from the recent Romanian past in larger temporal frames and to draw arches and connections between them. In addition, the thesis developed its research framework from a set of practical exercises and practical investigations carried out with moving images. This form of research involved various types of work with images (exhibitions, editing projects, archival work) and has allowed for a form of *re-searching* – to repeat, to look again at the socio-political context and recent history of Romania, guided by a belief that moving images would aid in drawing these arches of relations between art, politics and events, to the foreground.

In short, in this research project, I reflect on artistic practices with moving images in order to understand what the role of these images is both in the contemporary and in the writing of histories.

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<sup>13</sup> Țichindeleanu, “Pentru O Teorie Critică a Postcomunismului I (For a Critical Theory of Postcommunism I)”:159.

## Argument and chapter outlines

In the early 1990s, the intention and political strategy of the new Romanian government was to perpetuate a state of urgency, an extension of the televised revolution of 1989. This intention was partially carried out through moving images, which were used to legitimate a type of narrative about 1989, as a moment of necessary rupture with the “old” regime. Moving images of this event functioned either to show the wrongs produced by Nicolae Ceaușescu and Romanian communism, or as inconclusive “proofs” of “what happened” during the event itself. Six months later, this context was complicated by the protests against the new government. June 1990 registered violent police and military intervention against protesters, the creation of rifts between sections of the population, the use of the communist bureaucratic apparatus to engage miners in violent action against protesters and in racist, targeted violence against Roma communities. These were central but not always acknowledged co-ordinates of this moment. The unusual implication of the miners, and a general sense of confusion shrouded this event. This state of confusion and urgency was in effect prolonged from the 1989 revolution and contributed in the long term, to limiting a newly opened range of possibilities for protest.

In addition to this configuration, a developing climate of strong state-supported anticommunism led to the constricting of imaginations regarding common action, influencing a generalised disengagement from radical politics in the twenty years following the revolution. A large number of artists and cultural producers retreated in formulae like “resistance through culture,”<sup>14</sup> which excluded direct political action, protest or activism, maintaining that making any type of art and cultural product was in itself an act of resistance. These aspects had two major implications that connected politics and artistic production: the problematic return to a “lost paradise” of a time “before” communism (mainly the inter-war period and the artistic avant-gardes of 1920 – 1940), and the construction of an imagined future, which was going to come “after”,

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<sup>14</sup> See the interview with Romanian curator and art historian Magda Cârnelci, where she states that Romanians have experienced a sort of shame, fear or embarrassment to engage with political issues after 1989. Magda Cârnelci and Daniel Cristea-Enache, “Am ieșit Cu Toții Din Comunism Cu Un Fel de Rușine, de Jenă de a Ne Apropia de Politic [We Have All ‘Come out’ of Communism with a Sort of Shame or Embarrassment to Engage with Politics],” December 8, 2013, <http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/13514/Magda-Carneci-Daniel-Cristea-Enache/Am-iesit-cu-totii-din-comunism-cu-un-fel-de-rusine-de-jena-de-a-ne-apropia-de-politic.html>, my translation, n.p.

at the end of the transition to neoliberal capitalism. Neither of these accounted for the harsh histories of precarity, dispossession and debt intrinsic to both the lived pre-communist past and the imagined postcommunist future. In fact, the “lost paradise” – a time and space of economic prosperity that was presumably attained in pre-1950 capitalist Romania and achievable again at the end of transition – had been riddled with the ghosts of racism, fascism and class struggle. In turn, the ideological promise of “transition” was that Romania would “catch-up” with Western economies but soon this projection faced the realities of the global economic crisis. By 2008, the results of a hasty privatisation of industries, the corruption of the political classes, and the overall impoverishing and destabilizing conditions of a debt economy were apparent across the country.

This is largely the context that the moving image artworks selected in this thesis reflect upon in different ways and open to critical reassessment. The work of Ion Grigorescu and Kinema Ikon bring up the role of the experiment and of experience in producing moving images in communist Romania, and as tropes used for writing recuperative histories of political art, in a need to align Romania with the art historical canon of Western Europe and of the United States. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică’s *Videograms of a Revolution* is an investigation into the 1989 Romanian revolution-as-event. The work resists and opposes using images to search for “the” truth about the event. Instead, it reveals relations between the acts of making and spectating images, and between the event as a historical and political moment. For Joanne Richardson, the drive to make moving images comes from Jean-Luc Godard’s well-known dictum that the goal is “not to make political film, but to make film politically,”<sup>15</sup> and from the need to investigate the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the “curious” time of Romania’s long period of transition. Finally, the works of Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor challenge one to perform the past and to imagine the future together with, or in the presence of moving images.

This selection is organised in chapters that serve as fragments and reflect on individual moments when moving images have been central to historical and political situations from recent Romanian history. From these fragments, the aim of the thesis

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in J. Hoberman, “Tout va Bien Revisited,” *The Criterion Collection*, accessed July 23, 2015, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/356-tout-va-bien-revisited>, n.p.

altogether is “to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.”<sup>16</sup> Images are the central element of each chapter: image in method, image in context, image in event, image in transition, and image in memory. The challenge of the construction is thus to articulate through these fragments the relationship between moving image art and politics in recent history, and in the contemporary Romanian context.

The first chapter deals with images in relation to methodology, including how I arrived at the research framework. This was informed by theoretical concerns around aesthetics and politics, but developed through practical projects involving the curation of moving images, editing archival images and analysing moving image artworks. The goal of this chapter is to outline possible ways of investigating recent history, through or alongside moving images. More specifically, in the Romanian context, this chapter questions the act of writing a history of moving image art, and in turn, engages in finding a way to address the recent past, via artistic practice with moving images.

The process of thinking and working through a series of methodological experiments is presented here. In the course of this process, the notions of space and time became integral to my thinking, guiding an approach to collecting and archiving of work, the research project and my writing. In fidelity to this experience, often, throughout this thesis, the term “space-time” is used, so as not to conflate the two, but to show the intricate relations between these dimensions.

In short, I have collated in this chapter, reflections stemming from practical ways of working with moving images, in a conversation with theories on political art, theories that include: the politics of gallery space, participation, the idea that the contemporary is a political project and, the relation between image and event. The aim has been to produce a framework for working with the moving image artworks of selected contemporary Romanian artists.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the historical conditions of making moving image art in communist Romania. The first part of the chapter aims to show how practices with moving images have been recuperated into recent Romanian art histories as histories of resistance. The second part considers writings on a particular type of moving image technology, video, as a medium of transition. Furthermore, it questions how Eastern

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N2,6], p.461.

European art historians and curators have imagined this medium to possess implied capacities for producing critical or political responses “after” communism. The idea that communism has produced an artistic and political rupture, and how notions of artistic experiment have been a way to synchronise local practices with moving images produced in the “West” are critically reconsidered. On one hand, I ask what the role of moving image artworks from the Romanian communist context is and I use the work of Ion Grigorescu and Kinema Ikon collective to do that. On the other hand, I ask what the relations between these works and recuperative narratives of resistance are. I investigate the specific question of how moving images have been used by art historical and political narratives to construct, in retrospect, the history of artistic practice in Romanian communism, as alternative and resistant. In response to these views, I insist on the need to conceive of histories of moving image art beyond their organisation into stages, or according to divisive categories like communist/postcommunist, “old” and “new” media, “Eastern” and “Western” practices.

In Chapter 3, the focus is on the revolution of 1989 as a political event, and equally, as a televised revolution. The images from the revolution and those created in the occupation of the national television station in Bucharest offer a rich situation to work with. The main question this chapter asks is: how can we work with the moving images stemming from an event like the 1989 revolution, when these have stepped outside of screens – the frames that supposedly held them inside one realm – and directly and abruptly entered the realm of the political? I answer this question by closely analysing the role of moving images in the event, as they were incorporated into *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică. Here, the central interest is moving images and their mediation and circulation, from the streets and squares, to television screens, to artworks, and to the spaces they occupy in collective imaginations. This chapter wishes to reveal the relations between image, event and political subjects. It is a fragment of the thesis, where I edit together the political event, its images and contextual histories, and the images from this selected artwork.

Chapter 4’s role is to critically address the construct known as the “postcommunist condition” and to ask what kind of subjectivity was created by the predominantly liberal views largely popular in Romania “after” the revolution. The overarching argument in this chapter is that the lack of an alternative tradition of the Romanian left during communism made way, after 1989, for growing radical

anticommunist narratives. I again raise the question of the role of moving images in the space-time of postcommunism, in relation to resistance, action, participation, and protest. I depart here from the works of media theorist, video artist and activist Joanne Richardson. Richardson asks how concerns about labour, activism and artistic production could be articulated, using moving images, to respond to the particular and specific conditions of “transition” and the so-called “postcommunist condition” in Romania.

The focus of Chapter 5 is on a selection of works by artists Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, which are powerful treatments of memory and of the inheritance accumulated from communism, transition and recent capitalism. Predominant Romanian anticommunist views read urban and rural space in the “aftermath” of the 1989 revolutionary event, as finally breaking away or exiting the status of abused totalitarian space. During the lived experience of Romanian communism, a weight from the abusive collectivisation of agrarian land and confiscation of (mostly urban and private) property has collected as inheritance and has been used mostly in liberal anticommunist narratives to promise a future where this weight will no longer be allowed. However, I argue that in Vătămanu and Tudor’s works, the “weight of expropriation” is made visible equally in the memory of communist space-time, the fragmentations produced by global capital, and the increasing demands around land ownership made by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Space and memory take up an interesting position in the artists’ works: ruins and decay are not an excuse for romantic recuperation, but a way to ask for engagement with the place this weight and inheritance hold in the city and in memory. To address this inheritance becomes thus a task. It involves multiple temporalities and these are made visible by Vătămanu and Tudor through gestures that conjure nonlinear, ghostly histories. Through their works, the artists raise the question of what images can do and consider the relations between what is remembered and what is forgotten in any given contemporary context.

## Contribution to knowledge and limitations

The method, the artworks selected and the literature this research rests upon are anchored in a framework that wishes to situate itself in conversation with contemporary debates around moving image art, but also to account for the specificity of the Romanian context. One of the particular aspects of this context is that the moving image practices of Romanian artists are an under-researched area and, with a few exceptions, the works of the artists whom I discuss in this thesis are not often encountered, in either academic or artistic writings. In any case, the works collected here have not, to my knowledge, been considered together before. In addition, the key methodological question of how to use moving images as research tools to address the particular Romanian context and situation further locates this study as unique within the field. My experimental approach to methods and my use of moving images in the research of recent Romanian history informed the selection of the artworks, and the development of the structure and of the argument in a way particular to this investigation. In relation to debates on artistic practice with moving images and the role of moving images in the contemporary, this research further opens up a discussion on the possibilities of writing recent histories, by considering this type of expression as central.

However, my non-systematic and experimental approach to history and to the history of art, in addition to the selection of these works in particular, to the exclusion of others, could be considered biased. My approach is essentially rooted at the intersection of film studies, art and visual studies, and I arrived at these fields from contemporary philosophy. There are possible critiques and limitations to each of these areas of study, and more importantly, limitations and restrictions in my reading of the works and authors included here, as well as a list of unaddressed secondary literature. For example, I consider authors like Jacques Rancière because of their influence in contemporary art and film studies, particularly their reflections on moving images. However, I step away from him in favour of texts less influential but more relevant for the context, like those of Romanian writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu of the notes and short texts of the artists themselves. Jacques Derrida's contribution to the framework is restricted to essential reflections from his *Spectres of Marx*<sup>17</sup> book. In fact, I address

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

only a limited range of concepts and ideas from his text, as I cannot do justice to the complexity and wide application of his philosophical system, nor to the abundance of responses and conversations stemming from his work on deconstruction. I also use the notion of montage via early montage theorists and texts by artist-writers as Hito Steyerl. Some reflections by Giorgio Agamben – much against Derrida – have proved valuable for moving thought forward, as he promotes non-linearity and montage in the work with images and in the writing of histories. Judith Butler, whose work I consider very briefly manages, of course, to read Agamben and Derrida together brilliantly – nothing that I aim, nor pretend to do here. Lastly, if with the above authors the route has been from contemporary philosophy to the contextual situation of recent Romanian history, Walter Mignolo's ideas on decoloniality and the decolonial option<sup>18</sup> made their way into this research via the same Romanian writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu. Țichindeleanu is one of the very few who deployed this theoretical perspective to engage the Romanian context and to ask questions about what would mean to decolonise imaginations rising from dominant narratives in recent Romanian history and art practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations (London: Duke University Press, 2011).

## **Problems restated and possible responses**

In this thesis, I begin from the premise that moving images are a means to interpret contemporary articulations of the socio-political field and useful tools for revisiting recent histories. In structuring and writing this work I resist a temporal and spatial organisation of recent history in Romania around the terms “post” or “former” (communism). Such an approach, I argue, imposes an understanding of recent Romanian history as a linear progression of events and moments, and of the Romanian subject as always moving forward, with this history. This view leaves entire moments, situations and subjects unaccounted for, their histories untold. Alternatively, the method of selecting moving images, and attentively considering the articulations they form around historical moments and places, means to develop splintered histories of the recent past, histories which also explain the relations and tensions between fragments in the contemporary. To develop these splintered histories of recent Romanian past, by linking moving images with socio-political and historical events and phenomena also means to draft a short history of the role of moving images, in the contemporary. The challenge has been to investigate and try to reveal what possibilities of thinking and writing about history, memory, politics and art moving images have to offer, in the contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism and the current ongoing economic and social crisis, driven by systemic precarity and debt. Thus, the aim here is not to produce an art historical overview of what contemporary moving image art in Romania *is*. Rather, to recapitulate, the goal is here double: first, to gain access to moments in recent Romanian history, via moving images, and secondly, to reflect on how moving image artworks can open up layers of the contemporary context.

## Chapter 1 : Working with Romanian Moving Images

### 1.1 Introduction



Image 1 - Ciprian Mureșan, *Leap into the Void – After 3 seconds*, black and white photograph, 2004.

Images from the 1989 televised revolution in Romania have made visible, at least for the non-socialist, Euro-American world, one of the places “behind the Iron Curtain.” Then, in the period following the revolution, images of Eastern Europe have helped build, for political purposes, the imagination of a renewed European space-time. These images, television images and images linked to imagination<sup>19</sup> – of both the revolution and its aftermath – have co-existed and have, at times, intertwined, in the recent past. Nevertheless, each type of image has also called up a *specific* understanding of space and time. On one hand, those from the Romanian televised revolution produced a repertoire of images of an “abused” and “broken” space, which had escaped from a “failed ideology.” These were the images of what was hidden behind “the wall” or behind “the Iron Curtain.” On the other hand, in relation to the projection of an image of renewed European space and time, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu draws attention to the fact that “the global sense of ‘Europe’ owed much to the transformation of the ‘former East’ into the image of a fictive past of Europe itself.”<sup>20</sup> Țichindeleanu believes in the necessity to renew both these sets of images, in order to produce “a self-standing location of knowledge with its own sense of time.”<sup>21</sup>

This relation between different kinds of images is something succinctly illustrated in Mureșan’s piece *Leap into the Void - after 3 seconds* (Image 1). The work is an attempt to renew the above two image sets – that of the broken space and that of a renewed Europe – and a response coming from the lived experience of recent Romanian history. In this work, a man lies down on the pavement, in 2004, on a street in the city of Cluj, Romania. Mureșan cites, with this image, French artist Yves Klein, and re-enacts Klein’s performance *Leap into the void*, from 1960. Or rather, Mureșan re-enacts the image of the performance, at a different time. His image is taken after the leap or after

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<sup>19</sup> Hans Belting argues that “whether pictures are moving or not, we need to animate pictorial technology of any kind with our imagination and our desires.” Thus, Belting considers that images are animated through the bodies of those looking at them, in a triad image-medium-body, and that images also shape our imagination. Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 29. In conversation with this approach, I refer above to the fact that images that have circulated on television screens during the Romanian revolution and thereafter, within a period called “transition”, have, in their own ways, shaped the imagination of the space-time of Europe, and of how Romania was going to be “re-integrated” into this space, through its accession to the institutional structures of the European Union.

<sup>20</sup> Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Decolonial AestheSis in Eastern Europe: Potential Paths of Liberation,” *Periscope/ The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier*, July 15, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, [http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aestheSis-in-eastern-europe-potential-paths-of-liberation/](http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-in-eastern-europe-potential-paths-of-liberation/).n.p.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

the event, as opposed to the original piece by Klein, where the subject is in-flight, arms stretched and hovering over the pavement. This is what happens three seconds after the moment captured by Klein in his photograph. This scene also happens sometime after local events – after the 1989 Romanian televised revolution, for example.

About this work, the same Țichindeleanu suggests that it is the visualisation of the much-awaited end of the Romanian transition to neoliberal capitalism. On another level, one can say that art has written the original piece by Yves Klein into its history, and that Mureșan's work calls up that history, in a different historical space and time. In a sense, with this still image, Mureșan quotes a certain Western history of art, recent Romanian history, and the short but prominent, recent history of images since 1989. In addition to these levels, one can take into account how the production of images is a form of production of time. The contemporary promises shared time and shared experience, whilst "history" can be, as Rancière proposes, "that time in which those who have no right to occupy the same place can occupy the same image (...)." <sup>22</sup> Holding both the contemporary promise of shared time, and the historical promise of shared images, Ciprian Mureșan's *Leap into the Void - after 3 seconds* superimposes the promised time – the time of the future, the imagined end of transition – with the time past, in recent Romanian history, and in what is known as "Western" art history. In the image by Mureșan, these temporalities are juxtaposed. However, not just for humorous effect, but also as a call to read the image as having something to say about recent history and artistic practice, in the 2004 Romanian context.

What I was faced with when I started to work on contemporary Romanian moving images was the need to juxtapose these "after" and "before" temporalities, and to question the idea that 1989 has been a point of rupture in recent Romanian history. In turn, this implied a decision to resist organising moving image art "after" 1989 and it required devising a methodological and conceptual framework, which would find new modes of addressing recent Romanian history and moving image practice. I consider that Ciprian Mureșan's image opens questions on how one can write about both history and art, "after" a certain socio-political moment. It thus resonates strongly with the overall goal of this project, of refusing to write a history of Romanian moving image art, defined and exhausted in reference to a single historical event.

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose, 1 edition (Polity Press, 2014), 13.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my research into a selection of contemporary practices with moving images that address recent Romanian history. The first section is a presentation of the methodological approach, and of how I arrived at two intertwined threads on which this thesis is constructed: to investigate the role of moving images in the contemporary, and to use moving images to write fragments of recent Romanian history. The second section covers the literature this research gravitates around, and the framework developed from both the literature and the methodology. It is an illustration of how the theoretical concerns of this project have been shaped and refined by practical ways of working with moving images. In the last two sections of this chapter, I discuss the role of moving images in writing histories, their role in the contemporary Romanian context and in Romanian artistic production. The aim here is to expand on the problematics raised by the two research questions, on writing histories of moving images, and of engaging with the contemporary.

## 1.2 Methodological Approach

This research departed from an interest in contemporary Romanian moving image art and from a more general interest in recent Romanian history. The initial stages involved collecting materials and documents, following histories and practices with moving images, and developing an online archive of Romanian moving image artworks.<sup>23</sup> My interest was driven by a need to understand the relations, very broadly, between art and politics, as they could be applied to moving images shown in gallery contexts. Ideas around spectatorship, participation, and the links between production and reception of images populated the first part of research.

However, my work with images started with processes of collection and archiving and has led to other methodological experiments and increasingly, to viewing images as research *tools*, in addition to them being the *objects* of my research. From this viewpoint, I developed a research method that involved a series of events in gallery spaces (See Appendices A and B). Overall, using moving images in exhibitions, screenings and other public events<sup>24</sup> influenced considerably the framework of this research. Different from a practice-based project, at least administratively and formally, this is primarily a theoretical investigation, but one that arrived at its research questions, structure and some of its observations, through practical work with moving images.

### 1.2.1 Groundwork: Defining Terms and Collecting Materials

In the first instance, I identified a need to clarify what moving image art was and how it could be defined for the purposes of this research. Residing in interdisciplinary spaces allows moving images to slide in-between academic and artistic fields and to occupy the realms of art, film or visual studies. The term “moving image art” is defined differently in literature on experimental cinema, avant-garde film or experimental film. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the advent of video and the widespread popularity of this

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<sup>23</sup> The research blog can be found at the address [www.romov.tumblr.com](http://www.romov.tumblr.com) and is an ongoing archival project that collects moving image artworks by Romanian artists, and related information and materials.

<sup>24</sup> Indirectly, the development of the research question was also informed by the events I have organised with the student-led Radical Media Forum (for example, a roundtable on the *Aesthetics and Politics of Moving Images*, a day symposium on *The Moving Image - Fiction and Gesture in the Contemporary* and a screening series titled *Imaginations, Ruins, Ghosts, and Sometimes Revolutions*). For details about these events, please refer to the blog [www.radmediaforum.wordpress.com](http://www.radmediaforum.wordpress.com).

technology amongst artists introduced new debates. The lines were drawn and blurred in this period, between experimental film, video art, artists' film and later, in the 1970s and 80s, between film installation, performance documentation as artist film, documentary film as artist film, expanded cinema or other terms aimed at describing different types and uses of the moving image outside of the cinematographic context.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, one common feature among these categories. The commonality refers to moving images produced and presented outside of the cinematographic space, for instance, in the space of the museum, the art gallery, in private spaces, in artists' studios or in film co-operatives, independent from networks of commercial film production and distribution. In the 1990s, with multiple uses of projection and the extension of spaces for exhibition, there was even more uncertainty, especially around how these new and old categories of moving images would be distinguished from one another and also, how they related to each other. This, of course, was only complicated by the digital production of moving images and by interactive installations, which came into play starting in the early 2000s.

This is an extremely concise overview of the multiple and variable practices that can be set under the umbrella term "moving image art." However, when looked at in relation to the contemporary complexity of artistic practices and the varied use of the terms,<sup>26</sup> there is a vast amount of overlaps, but also a lack of clarity around what can or cannot be considered moving image art. The term has, in recent years, come to account for this complexity of uses and the various modes of presentation and reception of moving images.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This is only a very brief presentation of the field, as the category of video art alone is a research area with a history of its own. See, for example: *Art Video: Retrospectives et Perspectives* (Charleroi: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1983); Stuart Comer, ed., *Film and Video Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009); Meigh-Andrews and Chris, *A History of Video Art. The Development of Form and Function* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Doug Hall and Sally Jo (Eds.), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990). As a practice with a long history, video art has also often been framed in large retrospective exhibitions, like the *Vidéo Vintage : 1963-1983 / Centre Georges Pompidou* (Paris, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> This complexity is reflected, for example, in the debates around various media used to create moving image works, the liberalization of the arts, the condition for achieving the status of artist, or the pervasiveness of moving images in online and offline spaces.

<sup>27</sup> More recently, the AHRC Artists Moving Image Research Network was founded in UK (2011) and, associated with it, the Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ) was launched in 2012. This is one of the very few academic platforms dedicated to the research of moving image art, named as such. "Artists' Moving Image Research Network," accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.movingimagenetwork.co.uk/>.

My working definition of moving image art offers, quite broadly, that moving image art is work with moving images displayed in art spaces: galleries, museums, or temporary spaces for reception. This definition does not refer to specific technologies of production, forms of installation and, for the purposes of this research, encompasses various uses of technology, media, and spaces for exhibition.

### 1.2.2 Documents, Collections, and Archives

An initial observation of Romanian moving image art reveals this area as a particular case, mainly because the debates above have not been so prominent in this context, due to the scarcity of moving image practices, but also, of collections and documents on this type of practice. There are very few resources and even less archives on Romanian moving image art, with perhaps the exception of ICCA (International Centre for Contemporary Art, former Soros Foundation), run by Irina Cioș in Bucharest.<sup>28</sup> However, ICCA had a broader focus on conceptual art, performance and multimedia art, particularly in the time before 1989. This state of affairs led to the need to create an online archive of moving image works by Romanian artists.<sup>29</sup> The collection currently includes twenty-three Romanian artists and over fifty titles, with links to those works available to view online. It also features a list of resources and links to documents about Romanian artists and their practices. Most of these documents have been produced by artists and curators from Romania or the Eastern European region, they have appeared on various online platforms,<sup>30</sup> or they can be found scattered in myriad resources and

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<sup>28</sup> "International Centre for Contemporary Art (ICCA)," Art Institution, accessed August 15, 2014, [http://www.icca.ro/resource\\_center.htm](http://www.icca.ro/resource_center.htm). On the website, the latest update for contacting ICCA states that "due to the sudden decision by local authorities, ICCA has to move from its current location. Therefore, starting November 26, 2007 the resource centre will no longer be accessible. We will reopen the public access in March 2008 in a new location that is currently being renovated." However, to my knowledge, this process has not been completed and I have not been able to visit the resource centre.

<sup>29</sup> The online archive is accessible through the blog platform and can be found at [www.romov.tumblr.com](http://www.romov.tumblr.com).

<sup>30</sup> These included publications, catalogues and websites of the local former Soros Centers for Contemporary Art and the subsequent iCAN Network – International Contemporary Art Network. Other important resources are the Art Margins Journal (MIT Press) and the online platform "Art Margins Online Central and Eastern European Visual Culture," Online Journal, (1999 - ), accessed July 03, 2015, <http://www.artmargins.com/>. Local Romanian magazine *IDEA Arts + Society* has also contributed greatly in documenting and reflecting on recent Romanian history, in relation to contemporary artistic and cultural practices.

materials associated with local art shows,<sup>31</sup> biennials,<sup>32</sup> or large project or research-exhibitions, like Manifesta,<sup>33</sup> After the Wall/After the Fall<sup>34</sup> or Former West.<sup>35</sup> The blog and these documents constitute the initial background research on contemporary Romanian artistic practices with moving images. Eventually, the processes of selection, collection and archiving of research material has led to the necessity to work with moving images, in a manner that was not only reflexive, but also practical.

### 1.2.3 Researching with Moving Images

In August 2012, I organised a research exhibition in London – a pilot event in a series of methodological experiments. It took place in a pop-up gallery, for three days, in East London. Soon after this event, during an AHRC International Placement Scheme for postgraduate researchers at Sarai CSDS, New Delhi, India (October 2012 – January 2013), I created the second research event, within the *Sarai Reader Exhibition* curated by RAQS Media Collective. It was held in the Devi Art Foundation gallery, in Gurgaon, New Delhi, where a selection of Romanian moving images artworks<sup>36</sup> were shown, together with documentation and research material (detailed information and photographs can be found in Appendices A and B). The aim in both events was to investigate the reception of Romanian moving image artworks by local audiences. However, this aspect, as I will show in the next section, gradually faded as a research interest. Nevertheless, the events proved resourceful in different ways. Their role was to create the structure of the thesis as a constellation, and help navigate the complexity of the recent historical and political

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<sup>31</sup> See Judit Angel, "Romania - Exhibition Practice in the 90s," *International Contemporary Art Network*, January 29, 2003, accessed July 15, 2014, [http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text054e.html?id\\_text=22#anchor1](http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text054e.html?id_text=22#anchor1), n.p.

<sup>32</sup> "Periferic International Art Biennial," Art Institution, (1997 - 2008), accessed August 15, 2015, [http://www.periferic.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=54&lang=en](http://www.periferic.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=54&lang=en).

<sup>33</sup> See also publications associated with the art exhibition, such as Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova, eds., *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> BAK (basis voor actuele kunst), "Former West," Research Project, (2008 - 2016), accessed December 7, 2015 [www.formerwest.org](http://www.formerwest.org).

<sup>36</sup> The exhibition included artists Irina Botea (*Auditions for a Revolution*), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor (*Rite of Spring*), Ciprian Mureșan (*4'33''*), Sebastian Moldovan (*The Paris*), Ciprian Homorodean (*Hero Factory*), and Matei Bejenaru (*Battling Inertia*). Their works were shown by rotation on a TV screen installed in the gallery. A screening event of *Videograms of a Revolution* by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică was also organised, followed by a public discussion.

context of Romania. In addition, they directed me to the creation of a research framework which questioned the role of moving images. The questions that emerged from the research exhibitions were: *How can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images?* and *What articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks?*

In addition, the entire process of archiving, documenting and curating for exhibition purposes, contributed to selecting the artworks<sup>37</sup> discussed in the thesis. The first reason for making the current selection was to establish connections with the socio-political and historical context of the past twenty-five years in Romania and to respond in different ways, to the two research questions. Secondly, these works were selected for their capacities to open up conversations with a number of concepts, which this research is interested to investigate: experiment, experience, resistance, event, activism, postcommunism, transition, inheritance, memory.

Another form of working with images, which contributed to conceiving the entire structure of this thesis as a constellation, was editing archival footage of events from recent Romanian history (details about the conditions of making and the role of the audiovisual essay as a form of research can be found in Appendix C). In short, these various ways of working with images framed my approach to the field and contributed epistemologically to the development of this thesis: the research exhibitions opened up questions around the relations between art, politics, gallery space and participation, whilst the archive and audiovisual essay helped to transfer the notion of montage into writing and to imagine the structure of this thesis as a constellation. This process, together with the theoretical underpinnings of this research, are approached in the next section.

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<sup>37</sup> The first and second research exhibitions had different works on display and in this thesis only two works from those shown in both research exhibitions were included in the thesis (*Videograms of a Revolution* by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, and *Rite of Spring* by Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor).

### 1.3 Moving Images in Relation to Art and Politics

The entwined research questions – the role of images in the contemporary, and in gaining access to recent histories – developed from the above practical experiments with moving images. These experiments asked *how can moving images be used as tools for research?* Curating the research exhibitions was an attempt to approach this question and, during this experience, the relation between art and politics, which moving images provoke, became a central theme. This section represents an overview of reflections stemming from the practical experience, as well as from the writings of curators, artists and art historians, on this topic. It also reflects on a shift in interest, from spectatorship – something the project was initially concerned with – to a small selection of artworks, and their capacity to articulate the socio-political field. This conceptual shift did not occur simply from the reception to the production of works, but it was a move towards understanding moving images as important tools in accessing histories, and for engaging with the contemporary.

#### 1.3.1 Moving Images and the Politics of Gallery Spaces

What is the relationship between moving image art and the spaces where it is displayed? Investigating this question at the confluence of histories of contemporary art, museum studies, film and video art, reveals an interesting aspect: a widespread contention that critical, engaged, and ultimately politicized art was produced intensively in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>38</sup> This period when art questioned the spaces of exhibition, arguably creating

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<sup>38</sup> In the “Western” European context this period coincided, on one hand, with several radical social and (geo)political movements and, on the other hand, with the emergence of what came to be known broadly in the history of art, as institutional critique. Being critical of the exhibition space, as it is incarnated in museums or galleries and responding to the conditions of (non)participation experienced in art spaces became linked to the production of a specific kind of critical or political art. Artists' texts from the period hold varied positions in relation to these spaces of exhibition and the wrongs that these spaces perpetuate, with some having called for museums to be at best, “emptied and left as environmental sculpture[s].” (See Allan Kaprow, “Where Art Thou, Sweet Muse? (I’m Hung up at Whitney) (1967),” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2011), 54.) Others, like Daniel Buren, saw the museum as an asylum or shelter for a selection of works, a frame that needed to be critically approached and discussed. See Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Museum (1970),” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2011). In turn, Hans Haacke considered the museum a sort of engulfing container, “a superstructure for a ‘ready-made’”<sup>38</sup> in its form as Duchampian legacy (See Hans Haacke, “Provisional Remarks (1971),” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2011), 121.)

possibilities for participation and engagement for those who entered and were moved, troubled, or activated by its critical attacks against institutional space coincides with the transgression of moving images from one institution to another: from cinema, to the gallery and the museum.<sup>39</sup> This is a period in “Western” timelines of moving image art, which several accounts return to reflexively, sometimes critically, but mostly with admiration. The admiration is for the “entrance” of moving images in art spaces and consequently, the admiration fixes upon how moving images became increasingly present in spaces outside of the cinema. Thus, moving images arguably held a critical role in addressing the socio-economic and political conditions of an institution, and of the historical period in which they were produced.

Vis-a-vis moving image artworks and their potential to critically engage the art institutional space, Maxa Zoller observes that literature on this kind of art does not fall directly under what has been named institutional critique,<sup>40</sup> but rather, it “is based on an old-fashioned notion of the avant-garde, which 'conquers the enemy', that is, the institution.”<sup>41</sup> Works of moving image art, especially video art as a “novel” technology, but also film installations and projections, when in the art gallery, were arguably invested with capacities to produce critical modulations into space and hence, to critically open up political, economic or social issues.

Perhaps the military metaphor of the “second wave” moving image art avant-garde of the 60s and 70s<sup>42</sup> is also exhausted when trying to understand what critical capacities moving images hold in re-framing or re-configuring the gallery space into a

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<sup>39</sup> Tamara Trodd speaks of the confluence between two histories, in 1970s, when experimental and “gallery-based” moving images shared their histories for a while, especially in America, but also in the UK. See Tamara Jane Trodd, ed., *Screen/space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, Rethinking Art’s Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> In contemporary curatorial texts, these critical positions that art can hold against the institution have often been collected in historical waves of institutional critique. Up to five such waves are identified by Maria Lind in her article Maria Lind, “Contemporary Art and Its Institutional Dilemmas,” *On Curating, (New) Institution(alism)*, Lucie Kolbas, Gabriel Fluckiger (Eds), 12, (2011): 25–31.

<sup>41</sup> Maxa Zoller, “‘Festival’ and ‘Museum’ in Modernist Film Histories,” in *Screen/space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, Rethinking Art’s Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> This view comes primarily from film studies, where a first wave of this filmic avant-garde (sometimes also referred to as experimental cinema) is considered to have run between the 1920s and 1930s, when artists experimented with film and moving images. This period coincided with the historical artistic avant-gardes, especially Dada and Surrealism, and later, Lettrism and the Situationist International. See, most notably, Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939*, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*, 2nd ed ([Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire] : London: Palgrave Macmillan; BFI, 2011).

space for politics. Brian O'Doherty argues that the art gallery is a particular kind of spatial abstraction, traversed by political and historically constructed socio-economic forces. As one of the spaces directly shaped by the goals of modernity, the white cube – including the dark room inside it – is also inextricably tied to a particular relation with time. O'Doherty sees the physical space of the white cube as “unshadowed, white, clean, artificial,” abstracted and sanitized to the point that it seems to be in a “limbolike status”, and, whilst works of art in this space can be organised historically, one's sense of time is formalized and suspended: “Art exists in a kind of eternity of display and though there is lots of “period” (late modern), there is no time.”<sup>43</sup> Simon Sheikh<sup>44</sup> has noted that O'Doherty makes a relatively simple but important point: the gallery space is not devoid of political and economic tensions, the white cube as a project of modernism is an abstracted<sup>45</sup> exhibition space and it enters not only cultural, but socio-political and economic relations, producing surplus-value.

The gallery space, as a project of modernity, can also be understood in conjunction with the beliefs of modernist architects and city-planners, who imagined urban space as “an empty space, a space that is primordial, a *container* ready to receive fragmentary contents, a *neutral* medium into which disjointed things, people and habitats might be introduced,” according to Henri Lefebvre.<sup>46</sup> Gallery and museum spaces are closely linked to ideological, cultural and economic configurations, but the 1970s mark a particularly interesting point of return in this timeline, as a moment when (some) art was able to produce a difference in the repetitive production of this space, by being critical or political. As mentioned, this point of return coincided with the increased presence of moving images in these spaces. The discussion about re-staging

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<sup>43</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Sheikh, “Positively White Cube Revisited,” *E-Flux Journal*, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>45</sup> Henri Lefebvre constructs a body of work based on critically assessing the conditions for production of space and subjectivity, through capitalist abstraction. Lefebvre argues that the production of subjectivity is strongly connected to the administration, access, power and control over spaces. This leads him into reconnecting the production of subjectivity, through social class, directly to space. According to him, the formal or logical understanding of space in scientific terms (i.e. mathematical or logistical viewpoints) is not enough to produce a comprehensive landscape of what is at stake around spatial issues. One should address the conditions of production of space, in relation to social and political circumstances – essentially, his dialectical method asks to address the politics of space. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). See also Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 308, my emphasis.

space and breaking down the modernist rules of engagement, especially within cultural spaces, as well as aiming to produce engagement from spectators, are all recurrent threads in the writings on moving image art and experimental film.<sup>47</sup>

Simon Sheikh observes how the gallery space arguably holds a double, paradoxical potential, to both contest and confirm the capitalist logic by which space is produced.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the gallery space has its politics, as much as it has the potential to be a political space. As the gallery space is not a neutral, self-contained space, it is produced by established socio-political and economic relations, as much as it has the ability to produce new configurations of social and political relations. Taking up the resistant potential of the gallery space ultimately falls on critical or political art, whose existence is embedded in the same contradictions and paradoxes, between reinforcing established relations and producing novel ones. Particularly because of this central paradox in which political or critical art finds itself, fluctuating between autonomy and heteronomy, its capacities to contest established relations inside gallery spaces remain uncertain.

In the research exhibitions, I was working with contemporary art spaces, the politics of which, albeit very different in each case, needed to be addressed. Moreover, I was showing works from a particular cultural and historical context, which cross-referenced temporal and spatial frames, like the so-called historical avant-gardes of the

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<sup>47</sup> However, it was this particular confluence of art and moving image that was novel, as the presence of cinema was not entirely new to the gallery or museum, dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, when film screenings were run in spaces such as the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. At these events, the audience simply did not know “how to look” and “how to move.” These screenings opened a long history of disciplining and regulating spectators' behaviours to suit another institutional space (the public was expected to replicate the confined behaviour expected of museum goers, essentially different from the chaotic and loud behaviour of the cinema-goers of the time). Their behaviour overturned, quite naturally, the rules of engagement dictated by the white cubes. The latter space had been built under symbolic configurations of looking and moving, which in turn, created sameness of publics – an audience that needed to look and move in ways, dictated by the rules and constructs, which were encroaching that space. When the audience failed to do so, it was educated, disciplined. See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Routledge, 1995). Later, in the 1970s, O'Doherty criticizes the gallery for being a space that continues to enforce docility over the bodies of those entering it.

<sup>48</sup> Simon Sheikh, “Publics and Post-Publics. The Production of the Social,” in *Art as a Public Issue: How Art and Its Institutions Reinvent the Public Dimension*, Open : Cahier on Art and the Public Domain 2008/no. 14 (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008), 33.

1920s; video, performance and installation art<sup>49</sup> and their histories; and the events of 1989 and early 1990s, including the Romanian revolution and its televised character.<sup>50</sup>

In both London and New Delhi, proposing to have a conversation in the gallery drove visitors to ask many questions in return.<sup>51</sup> I initially tried to uncover in the works of contemporary Romanian art those moving images, which could be seen as critical or politicized art, and wanted to prove their political “status” via the experiences of those participating in the research setting I had created. This, of course, never happened as such. The conversations were set in contemporary gallery spaces, testing, in a sense, if galleries can act as spaces for dialogue. One of the dangers of this avenue, however, was to treat gallery spaces and my research ventures in them without addressing their politics and sometimes, even from a position that was divorced from the local, regional and global configurations constantly negotiated inside and around them. I had arrived at the gallery space via a concern with spectatorship and participation, which originated in texts claiming that the experience of gallery spaces is shaped and made critical by the presence of moving images. However, through my own experience gained from the research exhibitions, I became critical of these accounts and of my own position within the politics of gallery spaces.

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<sup>49</sup> I am referring particularly to works that have influenced my thinking, and stand at the intersection of architecture, art, and film studies, such as Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2006), Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, *Writing Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2007), Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York ; London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>50</sup> In the specific case of moving images which reference or include footage of the 1989 Revolution – *The Trial* (Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor), *Auditions for a Revolution* (Irina Botea), *Videograms of a Revolution* (Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică) – the most common responses from the audience referred to their personal memories of seeing or not seeing the images on television. When the works displayed did not offer any direct association to events or visual references, the visitors would speak about the format, texture, composition, and about what they could see was “happening” in the images.

<sup>51</sup> The questions asked ranged from the simple need to gain more contextual information, to direct questions – “Do you remember the time of the revolution in Romania?”, “How old were you then?” – but also, complex self-reflexive notes: “What ends up happening is that whenever we create a protest, we create the *mise-en-scène* or atmosphere... we create an atmosphere of protest (...) More like a scripted sort of thing... And I feel that we have been lingering on this script ... So, what is being moved? I was thinking of time. What is the nature of my time, our time?” - Discussion with K.M. held in Delhi, after viewing *Auditions for a Revolution* by Irina Botea.

### 1.3.2 Nightmares of Participation

This section outlines the various theoretical narratives, which were considered in preparation for the research exhibitions and afterwards, when reflecting on their outcome. One concept that started the reflection was participation, or more exactly, critiques brought to participation in contemporary art contexts. I discuss here some of these critiques and positions, which helped shape my experience with the research exhibitions, and have further allowed me to reflect on the specific Romanian context. One observation became predominant, in hindsight, about these research exhibitions: there was, on my part, an expectation to be able to know and “extract” what the moving image artworks showing in the gallery would “do” to spectators.

On one hand, this observation brought with it a series of reflections on the politics of gallery spaces, which I covered in the previous section. On the other hand, it pointed to how this research project could answer to critiques of participation, which have circulated in debates of recent years. Therefore, there was a need, stemming from these practical experiments, to discuss what these critiques are and how they could, first, relate to moving image art, and secondly, connect to the study of contemporary Romanian moving images.

In artistic practice and theory, participation has gained the status of “buzzword” after, as Dave Beech notices, it “went missing during the monetarist 80s only to return in the 90s as a description of relational art.”<sup>52</sup> With the return of the notion of participation and other terms associated with it, such as inclusion and engagement, critiques of the concept and its promises necessarily emerged. Art historian Claire Bishop tries to warn against the *Artificial Hells*<sup>53</sup> that could appear from relational art, and especially from not addressing the limitations of socially engaged artistic practice, or of participatory art. In 2008, Dave Beech writes: “Simply put, participation cannot deliver what participation promises. In both art and politics, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation.”<sup>54</sup> In 2010, Markus Miessen reflects on “the nightmare of

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<sup>52</sup> Dave Beech, “Include Me Out!,” *Art Monthly*, no. 315 (2008), p.1.

<sup>53</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Beech, “Include Me Out!”, p.2.

participation.”<sup>55</sup> Having long wanted and hoped for participation, the term became ubiquitous in declarations of artistic and architectural projects, yet most people are often neither included, nor taking-part in these forms of art. Thus, the accusation brought to participation is that it produces false claims for social or political change. In the worst case, the buzzword is only re-appropriated into circuits of global capital, through large structures of funding, unpaid work, and hopes of gaining cultural capital.<sup>56</sup>

A considerably influential critique of participation in artistic practice comes from Jacques Rancière, an influential contemporary writer, who has reflected extensively on the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Aesthetics has a crucial political role for Rancière, as it can re-organise partitions of the sensible, and of the level of participation in seeing and doing. The goal of Rancière's theoretical project is to step away from both historical and metaphysical conditions of thinking about art, and lay out an “aesthetic regime”, where art is identifiable “as a mode of sensible being specific to its products.”<sup>57</sup> It is under this premise that Rancière understands and uses the term “aesthetics,” to mean a certain modality – referring to the modes of seeing and doing specific to art. By having this trait, aesthetics is given a new function or agency, it does not refer to the sensible *per se*, yet becomes a mode of configuring the given in the sensorium. For Rancière, aesthetics refers to new distributions, new ways of seeing and doing, and ultimately being, and it is able to urge these reconfigurations in relation to politics, works of art, knowledge or education.

His term “aesthetics of politics” refers particularly to this stance, in which aesthetics has the role of reconfiguring the sensible, revealing new abilities for speech

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<sup>55</sup> Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (New York: Sternberg, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> A very recently published book by Anthony Gardner covers in detail the relation between participation and the arguable democratization of postsocialist art, particularly through a heterogeneous selection of artworks and through a fully-developed conversation between writers like Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Nicholas Bourriaud, and Claire Bishop, nothing that I claim to do here. Gardner’s work is an extensive study, which argues that the “the attempted reappropriation of democracy from the grip of imperialism has risked buttressing and legitimizing the very politics it seeks to challenge.” Furthermore, the work calls for a necessary critical evaluation and caution in the use of any terms connected to the transformations that occurred over the past twenty-five years, such as sovereignty, nation, people, and especially the term democracy. The adjacent term participation – as a political notion linked to participative democracy and equally, as a term deployed extensively in art contexts and discourse could possibly also feature on this list. In addition, as Gardner states, in the postsocialist context of art from Eastern Europe, the “aesthetic of democratization proves to be fundamentally problematic.” See Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 66.

and visibility, to political subjects. In art,<sup>58</sup> the term “politics of aesthetics” means, for Rancière, the reconfiguration of the sensible through artistic practice. In other words, aesthetics is a mode of creating new ways of seeing and doing; it enables the creation of an aesthetic subjectivity which is performed in a moment of experience. In this sense, different from the formulation of a community and a “we” that would be the result of the aesthetics of politics, the politics of aesthetics essentially allows for the reconfiguration of the sensible through practices, instruments, and relations considered to belong to the arts. Notwithstanding, this reconfiguration does not “give voice” to a collective, but makes the collective visible, on the fabric of common experience.<sup>59</sup>

Rancière’s analysis is based on a classification of regimes of art: representative, ethical and aesthetic. What the ethical and representative regimes have in common is that they subscribe to the cause-effect logic of thinking about art and the social world. They are associated to two major thinkers: the ethical regime of art, considers Rancière, subsumes art to the question of images, and follows an understanding of art informed by Platonism, whilst the representative regime of art follows the Aristotelian distinction between *mimesis* and *poiesis*. In the Platonist version, the imitation of forms of knowledge, which have truth value, achieve the status of art, whilst others can only attain the status of appearances, simulacra containing no truths. In the Aristotelian logic of thinking about the arts, the cause-effect relationship is again set in motion, particularly through the correspondence theory of truth. There are various forms of art, essentially imitations or representations of world, but the test is their correspondence with the “real”, therefore the test of their truth value is their *poiesis*, the criteria to distinguish what makes some art forms corresponding imitations, and not others.

Critical contemporary art, Rancière believes, is caught up or trapped somewhere between these regimes, and employs them as pedagogies. He asserts that relational

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<sup>58</sup> Rancière stresses that our present understanding of the term “art” is a concept dating only as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He also distinguishes between three types of philosophical avenues of thinking about art, which are not necessarily historical (although it could be argued that his examples point to a certain history of art): the representative, the ethical and, finally, the aesthetic regimes of art. See Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London, New York: Continuum Books, 2010).

aesthetics<sup>60</sup>, in particular, “rejects art's claims to *self-sufficiency*,”<sup>61</sup> in other words, it rejects art's autonomy. However, relational aesthetics, for example, “dreams of *transforming life*”<sup>62</sup> and therefore, aims for heteronomy, yet it also claims to be “part” of life, and here lies its paradoxical status. In this sense, relational aesthetics is caught between two ways of thinking about art, yet holding to the belief in a cause-effect relationship between art and life, which, as seen until this point, Rancière dismisses completely. However, as relational aesthetics accepts that the goal of transforming life through art is over-ambitious, art is left with changing micro-worlds, producing micro-political situations. Relational aesthetics wants “to recreate bonds between individuals, to give rise to new modes of confrontation and participation”, but does so by proclaiming “art's new modesty”<sup>63</sup> – art cannot change the world, but it can change a world, a micro-world. Rancière, in turn, takes this argument further, by claiming that it is not micro-worlds that art can and should intervene into, but that the problem which needs to be addressed is the whole construction of a “real world.” He considers this construction a “fiction”:

It thus appears that art does not become critical or political by 'moving beyond itself', or 'departing from itself', and intervening in the 'real world'. There is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art. (...) The real is always a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction' (...). What characterizes the mainstream fiction of the police order is that it passes itself off as the real (...).<sup>64</sup>

Any construction of the “real” is therefore not dismissed as simulacra, but it is considered “fictional”, meaning, in turn, that any fictional construction offers the

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<sup>60</sup> The terms “relational art/aesthetics” have been coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in his book-manifesto. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002). The subscription by figures of the contemporary artworld to ideas about relational aesthetics has been received critically in the past decade and a half. One of the main critical arguments is that this type of thinking about art overwrites dissensus or reduces it “to a consensual storytelling post-produced for this trans-media theatre of the *little form*, accommodated by the relationally revisited space of the gallery.” See Eric Alliez, “Capitalism and Schizophrenia and Consensus: Of Relational Aesthetics,” in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>61</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 21, my emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 19–20.

<sup>64</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, 148.

possibility of its destruction and replacement, by any other fiction. In that sense, the text mentions the “police order” as a fictional construction whose authority lies in the fact that “it passes itself off as the real.” In other words and to return to the discussion on art, Rancière’s point of view is that the world that relational aesthetics claims art modifies or intervenes into is just a specific mode of seeing and doing, which art should reconfigure, not make “minor” corrections to. What Rancière objects to is the consensual character of relational art, and he is adamant that any movement towards political art can only be made through disagreement, or dissensus, because consensus means precisely that the sensory is given as univocal. Political and artistic fictions can produce dissensus, by hollowing out that “real” and multiplying it in a polemical way.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the “real”, as already mentioned above, is a fictional construction and this multiplication is essentially a way of showing this. For Rancière, artistic practice that makes this multiplication visible is truly critical or political.

However, as Hito Steyerl notices, with “Rancière’s democratic solution: there is no noise, it is all speech,”<sup>66</sup> there is the risk of creating a situation where “everyone is monologuing incessantly, and no one is listening,”<sup>67</sup> especially in contexts where engagement and part-taking becomes the goal, and not the means. She continues with an interesting visual metaphor: “Aesthetically, one might describe this condition as opacity in broad daylight: you could see anything, but *what* exactly and *why* is quite unclear. There are a lot of brightly lit glossy surfaces, yet they don’t reveal anything but themselves as surface.”<sup>68</sup> This is indeed the risk. “What is to be seen” should not replace the question “What is to be done?” In her work, Steyerl reflects intensely on various modes of image production, including those which stand outside of the realm of art, and function to produce fictional constructions, which, when dismantled, do not reveal anything, but remain “glossy surfaces.” In turn, focusing more on cinematic and artistic forms of image production, Rancière tries to bring back the image to its political potential, by thinking a “third stage of cinema”, which he understands also as the work with images outside of the cinematic contexts, in the realm of art:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>66</sup> Hito Steyerl, Hito Steyerl. Politics of Post-Representation, interview by Marvin Jordan, DIS Magazine, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/>, n.p.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. n.p.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. n.p.

(...) the third stage of cinema's will to art, as well as its sense of history, would surely involve reversing the original relationship and making images the appropriate medium for making words heard, wresting them from the silence of texts and the lure of bodies that claim to personify them.<sup>69</sup>

Clearing the noise or the gloss, the image can make "parts with no part" visible, Rancière suggests. He believes in images that are able to perform this visibility, and he believes this is a need, an essential political need to "speak", which images hold in a particular way. From this belief, a series of questions open, for him: "what can history do, what can the cinematographic image do, what can they do together in the face of the revisionist will and determination to deny what was, to pretend it never happened?"<sup>70</sup> Images, the answer might be, have the ability to multiply what is seen and question various orders, by revealing them as fictions. However, Rancière's ideas about the role of images is connected to spectatorship, and to the capacities spectators have, to stand before the image in an emancipated position, and discern between these fictional constructions.

As noted at the beginning of this section, my experience with the research exhibitions has moved the focus from spectatorship towards the role of images in articulating histories and in reflecting on events, memory and subjectivity. For example, in Chapter 3, I ask how moving images articulate the socio-political field and memory around the 1989 Romanian revolution. The most common approach to this event has been to try and understand "what happened." This view has implied that images hold the ability to show or reveal some truth or truths about the event, and implicitly, about the world. However, if one understands the real as a fictional construction, then one makes a re-turn to the image, not as a revealer of truths, but as "a fragment of the real world", like Hito Steyerl suggests:

How about acknowledging that th[e] image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously couched in affect and availability, a fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears—a perfect embodiment

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<sup>69</sup> Rancière, *Figures of History*, 44.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

of its own conditions of existence? As such, the image is—to use yet another phrase of Walter Benjamin’s—without expression. It doesn’t represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other—a thing like you and me.<sup>71</sup>

What does it mean, then, to work with images as having the ability to articulate the socio-political field, not through their way of “picturing” the social and political, but through their abilities to compose between spaces and times, and through their capacity to create subjectivities? My work with images, and in particular, with collecting, archiving, and curating, for lack of a better term, research exhibitions with the moving image works of contemporary Romanian artists, has led me to ask these questions. Therefore, I have moved away from concerns around spectatorship, of what images “do” to their viewers in gallery spaces, and towards asking questions about the role of images in the recent Romanian past. Consequentially, two entwined research questions emerged from these reflections: *How can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images?* and *What articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks?* This approach involves working with moving images as elements that offer access to recent Romanian history, whilst opening a debate around the contemporary Romanian context.

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<sup>71</sup> Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me,” in *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 51–52.

## **1.4 Writing with and about Moving Images**

This project, as mentioned in the introduction, resists identifying a category of Romanian moving image art “after” 1989, by considering the Romanian revolution as the marker for a new stage in moving image practices. Instead, to complicate the recent past and to explore the possibilities of understanding the contemporary socio-political context of Romania, through moving images, have been the two themes emerging from the practical work in the research exhibitions and the subsequent reflections on critical art, politicized art, and participation. From these considerations, more specific issues emerged, particularly on how to write about Romanian moving image art using various possible meanings of the notion of event. These specific themes are presented in the following sections, along with how they contributed to the development of the research framework.

### **1.4.1 Approaches to Moving Image Histories**

In Eastern Europe, histories of moving image art have often been in conversation with existing Western narratives, either to oppose, compare or catch-up with the former. For instance, comparative studies called for art histories of this region to be written by comparison not only with Western practices, but also with different areas and countries belonging to this geographical space. This method was developed and sustained by, amongst others, late Polish art historian and critic Piotr Piotrowski, who saw the need for comparison particularly relevant within Eastern Europe, as he argued that “(...) what is lacking, in particular, is comparative studies on the region in the field of our discipline. I am talking about the discipline of art history as a phenomenon, not necessarily art, because, quite frankly, there are so many exhibitions and catalogues.”<sup>72</sup> How would this history of moving image art look like? Would it mirror or reflect other histories of video and media art? Not only is it difficult to compare or strive to draft a synchronous history of artistic practices in Eastern Europe in relation to its “Western” counterpart, but also,

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<sup>72</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Provincializing the West*, interview by Edit András, August 10, 2012, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/5-interviews/691-provincializing-the-west>, n.p.

I believe that it constitutes a challenge to compare each of the spaces in the region, for a myriad of reasons, which stem from particularities of each context.<sup>73</sup>

In her essay “Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context”, Marina Gržinić is concerned with similar issues. In response to what she considers the most common categories into which Western contemporary video and media art have been organised (“conceptual, body and performance”), Gržinić proposes a “different history of video and experimental film in the world, taking experimental film and video productions from Eastern Europe as its centre.”<sup>74</sup> Grounded in a Marxist critique of Western imperialism, especially in the notion of “accumulation by dispossession” that she reads through David Harvey’s work – as the East’s dispossession of “historical, theoretical and epistemological grounds” – Gržinić moves from the recurrent centre-periphery argument, to a third aspect: the “re-politicisation of the field of video in general.”<sup>75</sup> She reconsiders the period between the late 1980s to the mid-2000s and the events where video, film, and media had a crucial role. Then, she proposes a contemporary history of moving image art that has at its centre the political relation between world events and moving images. For her, the goal is not solely to compare different moving image practices, in various former socialist spaces – which, at times can prove very interesting and fruitful – but to imagine a history of moving image art through another lens. As such, the categories Gržinić initially identifies as directing and organising the history of moving image – conceptual, body and performance – can no longer stand as working categories, as they emulate problematic Western views onto Eastern art practices.

For this research, resonating with these concerns is the risk of producing a self-colonising history of Romanian moving image art. This has been a methodological preoccupation and translated into a need to account for the entangled territories onto which the politics of space and time have been enacted through around Romanian art theory and practices. Romanian moving image art has been written very frequently

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<sup>73</sup> For example: the risk of being seen as a 'catch-up' modernism or recuperative history, the particularity of various histories of the areas and states in the region, the asynchronous development and access to moving image technologies or forms of artistic work and institutional structures.

<sup>74</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context,” in *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 -2009*, ed. Edit András (Budapest: Ludwíg Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 19–20.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

either into histories of resistance to communist oppression and censorship conditions; as comparisons with technological developments in the “West”; or by focusing on concepts like nostalgia and trauma.<sup>76</sup> More specifically, recuperative histories returned to the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and to Romania’s artistic legacy in that moment; comparative histories turned to the 60s and 70s, and read subversive and political actions in Romanian art as parallel to those in the “West” and other Eastern European countries; lastly, views on nostalgia followed, most commonly, the revised cultural obsession with memory observed by Andreas Huyssen.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, the “transitional stage” into capitalism was often presented as a race and as a movement towards the integration into temporal and spatial frames of the European project, and as integration into the global relations of capital. In Romania, this narrative was coupled with strong anticommunism and consequently, with a negative reading of communism as a failure, or else, a time-space sealed in recent history as a *faux-pas*. I will expand on the production of subjectivity in postcommunist space-time in Chapter 4, and on issues of memory and inheritance, in Chapter 5.

In response to some of these narratives, this research is driven by the challenge to radically imagine histories of moving image art, which are neither comparative, nor recuperative. I stand closer to Marina Gržinić’s approach and see moving images acting as a central element, a meeting point for writing both art histories and fragments of recent Romanian history. This position is also grounded in a refusal of linear chronologies and an approach which privileges the close reading of a small number of examples, out of which a constellation can be built. Moving images produced by Romanian artists can act as entry points into recent history and each of the following chapters discusses a selection of artworks in the socio-political and historical context of their making. Each chapter is thus a fragment of recent history, revisited through moving images. It is important to specify that I do not consider moving images to have a role of

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<sup>76</sup> I discuss some of these views and associated works in Chapter 2, such as Alexandra Titu’s use of the concept of “experiment” for writing the history of Romanian art as resistant and exceptional. See Alexandra Titu, “Experimentalism in Romanian Art after 1960,” *International Contemporary Art Network*, January 29, 2003, accessed May 12, 2013, [http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/textc074.html?id\\_text=24](http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/textc074.html?id_text=24). One such comparative study is Adrian Guță, “East Side Story,” *Observatorul Cultural*, January 2005, sec. Arte Vizuale. *Arta Cultural alternativa*(II), accessed May 12, 2013, [http://www.observatorcultural.ro/ARTE-VIZUALE.-Arta-\(cultura\)-alternativa-\(II\)\\*articleID\\_12523-articles\\_details.html](http://www.observatorcultural.ro/ARTE-VIZUALE.-Arta-(cultura)-alternativa-(II)*articleID_12523-articles_details.html).

<sup>77</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

truth producers or holders of unquestionable truths about events or situations in recent Romanian history. Neither do I compose this constellation from an iconoclastic position, distrusting images to the point where they become simulacra. Instead, I understand each moving image artwork in my selection as offering access to moments in recent history, particularly because they act in this undecidable territory between true and false, and redistribute, as Rancière offers, our sense of “what happened.”

In short, what I revisit in this thesis is recent Romanian history, with the help of moving images. This is an act of imagination, aimed at decolonising common narratives about recent histories and against linear or comparative histories of moving image art.

#### **1.4.2 The Concept of Event and Moving Images**

Writing about Romanian moving image art and recent history requires addressing and discussing the notion of “event” and its specific implications for the context. Communism as a lived experience – as it has been in Romania – needs to be understood as a specific experience of time, of space, and of history. Consequently, the “fall” of communism can be seen as an event in this experience, and there are multiple ways of interpreting it. In neoliberal and neoconservative views, this event has been read as a break with a historical stage, as the end of history – most notably through the writings of Francis Fukuyama.<sup>78</sup> In critical theory and contemporary Marxist thought, the “fall” has posed the problem of a loss of horizon, a loss of shared time and space.<sup>79</sup> In this research, the concept takes on several meanings.

Firstly, the event can be considered something which “has happened”, a historical and political event. In this case, the 1989 revolution in Romania was a historical and political event, which coincided largely with the dissolution of the Eastern European political structures of state socialism. This event is thus not just a historical event that

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<sup>78</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: H. Hamilton, 1992).

<sup>79</sup> One example is the valuable analysis that Nancy Fraser performs in Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997). However, the idea of the “fall” of communism being linked to the loss of horizon is developed in the collection *On Horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh, and Jill Winder (Utrecht : Rotterdam: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst ; Post Editions, 2011). In particular, an extensive engagement with the notion of “communist horizon” is explored in this collection by writer Jodi Dean. See Jodi Dean, “The Communist Horizon,” in *On Horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh, and Jill Winder (Utrecht : Rotterdam: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst ; Post Editions, 2011), 34–52.

“happened”, but also one that leaves us with the problem of how to relate and engage with communism as lived experience, and with its memory. Jacques Derrida’s text *Spectres of Marx*<sup>80</sup> speaks to this context – particularly in response to Fukuyama but also in how it chimes with the present, contemporary situations, especially after the 2008 economic crisis. He calls for the spirit of Marxism<sup>81</sup> to be understood “in the plural and in the sense of spectres”<sup>82</sup> and to afford these spectres space and time into the present, into the contemporary political project. The impetus is not to dismiss, silence or seal the past, but, as Derrida says, “to sort [these spectres] out, critique, keep close by, and allow to come back.”<sup>83</sup> What is at stake in keeping the spectre of Marxism close is the need to “continue to be inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marx or of Marxism,”<sup>84</sup> to rally and perform “a kind of counter-conjuration, in the (theoretical and practical) critique.”<sup>85</sup> The ultimate aim is to “renew this critique, and especially to radicalize it.”<sup>86</sup> In short, Derrida claims that regardless of our position to Marxism, “we cannot not be its heirs.”<sup>87</sup> This impossibility should not be a constraint, but a reminder to always keep close and yet always renew a critical spirit, which speaks of conditions of inequality, economic oppression, violence and struggle, existent in the long history of humanity, and in the contemporary. I consider in this research that revisiting Romanian communism as a lived experience and the 1989 revolution in the contemporary is a way of accepting this inheritance, and of taking responsibility over this task of inheriting the past. The approach to my analysis of works by artists Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor in Chapter 5 is strongly anchored in this consideration.

Secondly, the concept of “event” can be understood as a form of inquiry into how political subjects are produced. We can consider the formation of a political subject as

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<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*.

<sup>81</sup> In this particular chapter of the text, “Wears and Tears”, Derrida differentiates only very slightly between the spirit of Marxism and the spectre of Marx. Although he remains characteristically ambiguous, he considers that the spirit of Marxism ought to be dissociated from other spirits. Marx treated the concept of the ghost, whilst in this section Derrida calls for the spirit of Marxism to be perpetually called up, precisely in a collective process of self-critical, radical recognition of being its heirs.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 109.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

an event. This leads to connections between historical and political events, and the production of subjectivity. The revolution unfolded as a historical event and within it, political subjects emerged. This process was visible in the images of the revolution, especially through the role of video cameras on the streets, but more importantly, with the national television producing a constant flow of images. In these images, one could see what Andrei Ujică has called “a planetary film,” a live revolution with crowds in the streets, dramatic escapes in flying helicopters, live arrests, a trial and finally, an execution. In addition, what one could also see in the images was the emergence of a new political power and the opening of possibilities for political action. In Chapter 3, I discuss the relationship between image, event and those making and watching both the revolution and its images, as they appear in the work of Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). In Chapter 4, I follow some of the main actors in the revolution to another event, the 13 – 15 June 1990 anti-government protests, which challenged the elections and the new state power.

Finally, moving images mediate events. Artworks use moving images to compose, re-compose and deconstruct historical events and in doing so, they create experiences of those events. I look at how Romanian moving image artworks perform these compositions not to find out “what happened” or to find “the truth” about an event or a historical period. The aim of working with moving images as tools for research is to understand how to engage with the contemporary via, as Derrida would say, the inheritance of past events.

Engaging with past events in the contemporary means to engage with the losses, fictions and horizons produced, or dismantled by these events. Two main losses marked the time-space reductively labelled “after” 1989, as philosopher Peter Osborne suggests: “‘communism’ as the horizon of historical communism (...) and ‘revolution’, as a horizon of expectation of revolution has been dissolving in advanced capitalist and colonial societies.”<sup>88</sup> In addition, the loss of these horizons, Peter Osborne considers, did not lead to a generalised loss, but took place concomitantly with the restitution of capitalism as a “horizon of endless accumulation (...), politically coded in economic terms as the progressive freedom of ever-greater consumption.”<sup>89</sup> This view is supported by other

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<sup>88</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2013), 209.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

writers, like Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh and Jill Winder who, in the introduction to a collection of essays *On horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, address the omnipresence of “the totalizing horizon of economic expansion and consumption of the contemporary common project of globalized capitalism.”<sup>90</sup> The declared goal of this editorial project is to rethink, through the work of contemporary artists and theorists, the notion of horizon as a critical instrument for emancipatory work.

However, an insistence on the language of loss implies that possibilities to create common thoughts and experience are increasingly diminished or muffled. Furthermore, the loss of horizons also means a loss of common ground to stand on and share. Moreover, it is not just the notion of horizon that requires critical reassessment, but also, Peter Osborne argues, the concept of contemporary itself “is problematic, in a more fundamental sense, because of its attribution of unity to the temporal mode of the present, however hypothetical, as such.”<sup>91</sup> If one considers, as Osborne suggests, the contemporary as a shared time (and space, although not necessarily physical space), then “the contemporary” can be or become dialectical. As such, it could be used to enact a negative critique, but it can also be useful as a performative construct, leading to timely ways of devising possible counter-actions. The contemporary as a negative utopian idea is a disavowal, and more specifically, a disavowal from politics. On the other hand, as a positive idea, the contemporary brings forth two concepts, which could potentially have direct involvement and implication in the world: productive imagination and operative fictions. For Osborne, all constructions of the contemporary are fictions. For him, fiction has a role to play in the contemporary because, in a positive sense, fiction can be used to challenge the “real”, which is not a fixed form in the social, aesthetic or political world, but a space which presents itself always with the possibilities of being fictionalized. In the negative sense, fiction can impose “ways of seeing” on the world. However, this organisation can also be challenged, by redistributing ways of seeing and doing, if we take a cue here from Rancière. Moving images can be used to create fictions, and to trigger productive acts of imagination. Investigating the contemporary with moving images is possible if we consider that moving images have the ability to fictionalise the distribution of what can be seen and done.

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<sup>90</sup> *On Horizons*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> The article by Peter Osborne is part of the same collection, yet this quotation comes from the updated version of the text. See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22–23.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter acted as an overall presentation of the methodological and theoretical framework of this thesis. The practical work with moving images – screenings and curating research exhibitions – was coupled with the initial theoretical preoccupations, around the politics of gallery space, participation, moving images as critical art, and the role of images in producing articulations of the political field. The original interest in the capacities and possibilities of moving images in gallery spaces was shaped by the practical exercises and the reflections stemming from them, presented at length in this chapter.

Experimenting with moving images as tools for research has been a formative step in refining the research questions and process. From a need to resist writing about recent Romanian history in a linear or chronological fashion, I arrived at an understanding of moving images as useful entry points in accessing recent history. Then, the first research question took shape: *How can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images?* This question offered the criteria for selecting artworks from those collected in the archive. The selection process involved turning to artworks that could offer the opportunity to resist reductive narratives about recent history. The artworks included in this thesis thus offer the opportunity to open for critical re-assessment, the memory and imagination around key moments and events. Revisiting recent Romanian history can also be a way to understand the contemporary socio-political context of Romania, and this process can also be explored through moving image artworks. Thus, the second theme and research question emerged: *What articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field are produced by moving image artworks?*

In this way, accessing the inheritance left by moments and events from recent history in the contemporary, through moving image artworks, became the main aim of this research. To this end, I argue that moving images artworks offer the opportunity to understand current, contemporary situations and can act as important tools for accessing recent history. The works selected and discussed in the next chapters critically assess transformations in this past, including the lost horizons and promises of the communism period and of the time preceding it, but also the lost horizons and lost promises of the contemporary. In the context of contemporary Romania, such an exercise is necessary because of the myriad superimpositions with socio-political

implication, which have been produced in the past three decades in artistic practice, urban space, in histories, and in imaginations.

In short, these two roles of moving images – in accessing and actualising histories, and in understanding the contemporary – are intertwined. This entanglement implies that moving images can be vessels for accessing recent Romanian history, but also for understanding the configurations of a contemporary Romanian context. Consequently, this involves producing research with a belief that both these roles of images contribute to an attempt to decolonise the imagination over this space called Romania and the artistic moving image practices coming from it.

## Chapter 2 : Histories of Making Moving Images in Romanian Art

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of practices with moving images in the context of Romanian communist space-time and highlights the connections with the period of so-called “transition” to capitalism. I look particularly at the works of artist Ion Grigorescu and the collective Kinema Ikon, as two examples stemming from the 1970s and continuing in different forms, into the contemporary art context. On one hand, the aim is to ask *what kinds of histories have been written in Romania around these practices*. On the other hand, the connected question becomes: *how do these histories reflect the socio-political transformations of recent Romanian history?* This chapter thus offers a brief historical perspective on Romanian art from the communist period and connects this history of making moving images to the period of “transition” and “postcommunism”, which I discuss at length in Chapter 4.

In the first section, I consider the local Romanian context and how some moving image practices have been framed by Romanian art historians, post-factum, as the unruly exceptions which resisted the communist regime. An insistence upon the scarcity of works made “before” 1989 and the recuperation of a few exceptions as politicized art, “after” the “fall” of communism, has had a series of implications. On one hand, such recuperations, mostly written in the first two decades after 1989 often return – problematically – to Romania’s connection to the historical avant-gardes and to the time “before” communism. On the other hand, these histories support the cultural, political, and economic models associated with economic transition and with the transition from socialist realism to contemporary art.

The second section focuses on the conditions of moving image production in communist Romania, as they can be observed in two modes of artistic practice. These modes are those of the solitary artist, and of the cohesive collective, both experimenting with moving images and arguably, making political works. In addition, these modes are associated with two types of spaces: the individual space of the studio, where the artist turns the camera on her/himself, performing in that space a type of private resistance; and the collective work and private screening events of a group of people who experiment together with the medium, from a paradoxical position which is clandestine, but only possible because of their connection to art institutional structures. I argue that

these modes of working with moving images during the communist period were later recuperated in Romanian curatorial, academic and artistic narratives as (subtle) “modes of resistance.” These narratives contribute to building a problematic connection with some of the historical European avant-garde movements which Romania claims heritage from, like Dada or Surrealism. However, these recuperations are often withdrawn from the revolutionary projects and radical politics that largely defined such movements.

The idea promoted by initiatives like *Transitland*, that video was a global medium and a medium of transition is investigated in the third section. I discuss this contention alongside a summary of the consequences external funding structures have had in Romanian arts, such as the (Open Society) Soros Foundation, who established a particular agenda in Eastern Europe, promoting the transition to contemporary art as the counterpart to the political and economic transition. I argue that in the dominant Romanian narratives, one can identify a tendency to align Romanian artistic practices from communism and from the period of transition to those of other former socialist countries and more generally, to the practices and narratives of the region.

## 2.2 Politicizing Moving Image Practices

The role of this section is to provide a short overview of the context and conditions of working with moving images during communism, and the subsequent changes occurring in the first two decades that followed. These are discussed in relation to how Romanian moving image practices have later been politicized in various retrospective narratives.

### 2.2.1 Local Context and Histories

The development of video and more generally, moving image art in the communist period was described by some Romanian cultural critics and curators as a gap in the country's art history, a time-space of separation or isolation. The issue of isolation referred not only to access to resources and technology, but arguably also to an interruption in the tradition of artists' investment in radical politics. Artist and activist Joanne Richardson observes some of the particularities which characterise the Romanian context in this respect. She argues that there was a strong relation between the type of communism which steered towards totalitarian rule and the scarcity of critical, alternative, and underground positions in political, cultural, or artistic realms. Richardson sees the particular non-existence of an alternative left in communist Romania as a link to understanding political practices with moving images, or more specifically, the lack of such practices. She notes that "unlike other communist countries, Romania had no alternative left, no counter culture and no tradition of experimental film or video."<sup>92</sup> She continues to highlight that there were implications of this condition on a larger scale, because "festivals of experimental film like the ones in the 1960s in Yugoslavia, or a movement like the Czech new wave, or a state studio like the Hungarian Bela Balazs, which produced politically provocative, experimental films during the 1970s and 1980s, were unthinkable in the Romanian context."<sup>93</sup>

In contrast to Richardson, writers like Alexandra Titu or Adrian Guță focus on the exceptions to the general scarcity of moving image art during communism. These authors favour the exception, and look for individual examples to set in tune with larger artistic movements in the region, like the ones Richardson mentions above. Other views,

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<sup>92</sup> Joanne Richardson, "Memoirs of a Video Activist," 2006, accessed May 12, 2013, [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors3/richardsoncontext3.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/richardsoncontext3.html), n.p.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., n.p.

such as that of artist and architect Iosif Kiraly, one of the members of subREAL, propose a more nuanced approach to Romania's recent art history, where "the artists and the artistic experiments of the period of communism should not be idealized or overestimated. Nor should they be derided and dismissed."<sup>94</sup> He warns against the pitfalls of searching for synchronicity with the region, but equally, with Western art, which have often produced quite derisory comparisons, like those between "Romanian painter Corneliu Baba with the American Andy Warhol during the '60s, or, in the 1970s, [comparisons of] Geta Brătescu with Bruce Nauman."<sup>95</sup>

However, most Romanian art critics, curators and historians who were active in the communist period and who belong to the same generation as Kiraly, share the view that Romanian communism was a time and space when the engagement of the arts with political issues was difficult, if not impossible. Some approaches return to the 1970s and 1980s in Romania, with the goal of finding the "resistance in and through culture and art", a phrase which implies "softer" actions of dissent, in times when radical opposition seemed to be impossible.<sup>96</sup> Magda Cârnelci, art critic and curator active in the Romanian art scene in the 1980s and currently professor at the University of the Arts in Bucharest, states in an interview from 2013: "We have all come out of communism with a type of shame, feeling uncomfortable to engage with the political."<sup>97</sup> This shame is arguably what follows as a consequence from the obedience, during communism, of artistic and cultural production. This state was then arguably carried over from communism into the postcommunist period. However, throughout this interview, Cârnelci speaks only of the role and duties of intellectuals in cultural production and considers that engagement in political issues does not necessitate direct action or activism, but rather "discrete"

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<sup>94</sup> Iosif Kiraly, "Interview with Iosif Kiraly," by Ileana Pintilie, Art Margins Online, July 2, 2009, accessed May 12, 2013, [http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=182](http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> A television series bearing the name "Resistance through Culture" has been airing for the past three years on one of the Romanian national television channels, TVR2, with the declared goal of investigating and documenting the work of the cultural and artistic producers who "chose to resist all that communism meant either by retreat into pure cultural production, or by a visible resistance," as producer Alexandru Munteanu has declared. "Rezistența Prin Cultură [Resistance Through Culture]," *Rezistența Prin Cultură [Resistance Through Culture]*, ongoing 2013, accessed September 09, 2015, <http://www.tvrplus.ro/emisiune-rezistenta-prin-cultura-351>. This phrase has also been largely popularised by local writer Andrei Pleșu, through a cultural publication entitled "Dilema Veche."

<sup>97</sup> Magda Cârnelci in an interview with Daniel Cristea-Enache, Cârnelci and Cristea-Enache, "Am ieșit Cu Toții Din Comunism Cu Un Fel de Rușine, de Jenă de a Ne Apropia de Politic [We Have All 'Come out' of Communism with a Sort of Shame or Embarrassment to Engage with Politics]." n.p.

interventions. She suggests that in Romania, the impossibility to position oneself in accord with an ideological status<sup>98</sup> impairs direct political engagement, thus the intellectual is left with the option to respond with cultural and artistic productions. In my opinion, this approach is open to criticism, as it promotes elitism and encourages a retreat into individualism, and consequently a retreat from engagement with radical politics.

Therefore, the question raised in this chapter becomes whether it would be possible to think the history of moving image art in Romania before 1989 other than as a lack of political engagement, or as a catch-up second-wave avant-garde which becomes, by virtue of its own nature, subversive or resistant, or otherwise, silently attuned and slowly developing alongside its former socialist or Western counterparts?

### **2.2.2 Traditions, Exceptions and Recuperations**

In general, the scarcity of works from the communist period has been interpreted in two ways. The first performs repeated returns to a few exceptions and to some modes of working with images, and considers them resistant. In particular, two modes of making images – the individual experience of working in the artist studio and the collective playful experimentation with technologies – have been recuperated by writers like Alexandra Titu, especially in the early 2000s, and imagined as artistic “modes of resistance” during communism. The second interpretation contrasts this period of scarcity with a period of abundance of works, in the first decades after the revolution. Needless to say, conditions of production, access to information and materials, tools and resources, all changed after 1989. At the same time, access to spaces of exhibition for moving image art extended to new galleries, museums, but also through the use of urban spaces. This, of course, was the case in Romania as much as in other areas of Eastern Europe. Unsurprisingly, in the postcommunist context, moving images became more present in the exhibition and gallery space when more accessible means of production and distribution existed. Artworks were no longer clandestine, no longer

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<sup>98</sup> This impossibility rests heavily, Cârnelci argues, on the continuous transgression of Romanian political parties between ideological grounds, for example, in the case of very unlikely governmental coalitions, which have sometimes brought together right and left-wing parties.

exceptional and they were thought to be part of the next stages of political transformations that the country and the nation were undergoing.

However, the notion of “transformation” should be separated from that of “transition” as a concept organising the political, social, artistic and cultural production “after” 1989. “Transition” became an ideological term, deployed to legitimate two separate stages: the projection of a future characterised by continuous growth, development and accumulation, and the memory of a communist past that should be permanently left behind. This view over transition influenced how moving image histories were written into before/after stages, bound to overcome each other as one passed and the next took its place. Nevertheless, this separation was performed, as it frequently happens, only retrospectively. An example is Kinema Ikon collective and the stages it underwent, as they were harnessed in writing by their founding member, in 2005.<sup>99</sup> In his texts on Kinema Ikon, George Sabău felt that he witnessed “the genre’s [of video] explosion after 1989, especially under the form of video-installation.”<sup>100</sup> A common drive for such retrospective accounts, which partition histories of Romanian moving image into stages, is to see the period after 1989 as a flourishing of works, and thus to connect the political and economic transition with a state of abundance in moving images.

Working with a narrative where the fall of communism constituted a break in Romanian art history, writers like Alexandra Titu believe that the first decade “after the fall” was prolific in Romania for reflecting on art and the limitations imposed on it by the communist period, especially through critical articulations against the tradition of Socialist Realism. Furthermore, she argues that the 1990s were “dominated by an intensive engagement of art in politics,” and that this period functioned as “the first signs of escape from the post-war crisis of cultural imprisonment.” In her terms, “this break-out was unavoidable” and involved “the liberation of the image from the servitude of representation.”<sup>101</sup> In her approach, the history of Romanian moving image art has problematically been connected to the issue of scarcity versus abundance, and with that of radical political engagement versus resistance through cultural production.

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<sup>99</sup> The text was written to accompany a retrospective exhibition of the works at the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest the same year. See George Sabău, “A Contextual History of Ki,” *Kinema Ikon*, 2005, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://kinema-ikon.net/>.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>101</sup> Titu, “Experimentalism in Romanian Art after 1960,” n.p.

This narrative was organised on dichotomies and broadly stated that, if the communist period was a void, a black hole in the history of moving image art, then postcommunism was a period of abundance. In addition, thinking in “stages” about recent history and about the history of moving images in particular, meant that communism was a finished stage, a whole or gap which had been escaped from or overcome. Being over or breaking out of communism meant one could make political art about it. This type of narrative explained the 1990s as a period of liberation and one of access. Then, on these two grounds alone – no longer being under censorship and having gained access to technology – most of the works with moving images made in the 1990s have been retrospectively given as examples of political art.

Attempting to politicize moving image practices was common in documents produced between 1990 and late 2000s, yet it was not the only view. Proposing a critical approach, Joanne Richardson argues that the period after 1989 did not mark serious changes in the production of video works and “there was no big flowering of experimental film or activist video”<sup>102</sup> until the mid-2000s. She considers the reasons for this scarcity to be accessibility to materials and technology, but more importantly, “prohibitive costs and the lack of a tradition.”<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the artistic, cultural and institutional contexts specific to Romania (precisely due to the strong Socialist Realist influence in teaching techniques and practices which favoured other media, such as painting) could be identified as having offered little opportunity for Romanian artists to work and experiment with moving image media, a trait that nevertheless continued after 1989:

(...) film and video production was confined to the school of theatre and film or to a few art departments, with dreadful professors and archaic technologies. Things are not significantly different today [2006]: most people still have no access to video production, aside from a few artists. And among artists, video remains one of the least popular forms of expression.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Richardson, “Memoirs of a Video Activist.” n.p.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. n.p.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. n.p.

Richardson's statement is grounded in an approach which assesses transition critically and is thus not driven by the adamant desire and effort to write the moving image history of postcommunist Romania as a period abundant in political art. In contrast, accounts like Titu's present a few examples of work with moving images in communist time-space as resistant modes of engagement with a political regime of censorship. Then, by contrast, they imagine the time and space of transition and the histories of moving images in postcommunism as becoming open, abundant, critical or political. In the following section, I discuss how the practices of some artists working during communism have been re-aligned to the historical avant-gardes in order to support such claims made about their political or critical capacities. Then, I argue that the majority of reflections on moving images in "postcommunist" Romania were based on the need for alignment with the "region" of Eastern Europe, or the "former communist/socialist countries" and with "Western" politicized practices with images. I also consider what Marina Gržinić argues is the "ghetto situation that establishes a simple geography as the only specificity of the medium from Eastern Europe."<sup>105</sup> In her view, the political and technological transition following the fall of the Berlin wall did not bring the proliferation but the disappearance of practices with video and experimental short film. I will elaborate on these issues, describing how local/regional synchronicity was searched for in Romanian histories of moving images, and how one could situate these practices in relation to global responses to a period of technological and political transformations.

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<sup>105</sup> Gržinić, "Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context," 17.

### 2.3 Moving Image Practices in Communism: Histories of Soft Resistance

This section addresses the conditions of production for moving images in communist Romania through the analysis of two examples, that of artist Ion Grigorescu, and that of the Kinema Ikon workshop. As already mentioned, a small number of Romanian moving image artworks have been produced during the communist period, unlike in some of the other former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The two examples I have selected are thus exceptions to this situation, with their exceptional character also being commonly, but partially, tied to the fact that the “experimental, quasi-activist production [of these works] was completely clandestine,<sup>106</sup> and thus, they were not public or not shown to a public until after 1989. These few works made in the communist time-space are exceptions also because they were not nearly enough to establish a tradition of alternative and underground productions, systems of exchange and spaces for collective and inter-disciplinary work. For curators like Maria Rus Bojan, the clandestine character of works like Grigorescu’s engaged critical or political reflection, and they arguably created forms of soft resistance to the regime, in a time characterised by the impossibility for political action.

I discuss the conditions that led to the history of moving image art in communist Romania to be written as the history of the exception. Then, I consider if and how the exceptional status of the works could be what confers them a critical position in relation to the historical and political conditions of their production, the spaces where they were made, and the types of practices involved in their making. I depart from one of Richardson’s notes, who gives two examples that can be extended to two types of what she calls “quasi-activist” practices in communist Romania – Ion Grigorescu and the private, solitary experience of the artist working in their studio or apartment, and Kinema Ikon, representing the collective practices of artists experimenting with the medium of film, by sharing knowledge and skills in a space, independent from the art institution or academy, but making use of the latter’s resources. In the case of Grigorescu, the artist was the solitary figure of resistance, whose work with technology aimed to translate their own experience through and into the image, with no prospect of an audience. In the second case, the group of artists working together arguably

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<sup>106</sup> Richardson, “Memoirs of a Video Activist.” n.p.

experimented constantly with technologies, having each other as audience or even organizing private screenings for close circles of friends.

These two models of producing work were also differentiated by how they responded to the political conditions of their time: whilst the solitary artist frequently turned the camera on her/himself, alone in the studio or apartment, the collective of individuals working together followed the model of the workshop, testing out the mediums' possibilities. The first was focused on experience, the latter, on experiment. They appeared to be the exception to the rule that Romanian moving image was lacking alternative, underground practices. In addition, in terms of how these works were produced, they were examples of working with two distinct types of spaces of production: the individual practice in a space like the studio/apartment, and the collective practice of a group, outside of an institution, but somewhat affiliated and using its resources to make experimental artworks. As noted, these practices were hidden, less-known or shown in the period when they were made, and only discussed later, when they were also instrumental in constructing a specific recuperative approach to critical and political moving image art.

There are also specific reasons why these two examples are relevant to analyse more closely. On one hand, Ion Grigorescu is one of the most well-known Romanian artists working during communism, and his video work from that period shows how his studio/apartment became an alternative space for moving image production. I am interested in investigating if the theme of everyday subversion through personal experience can be considered an act of resistance to the historical and political situation, and how, when Grigorescu's work was arguably resistant, a heritage belonging to the avant-gardes has been, retrospectively, connected to his practice.

On the other hand, with Kinema Ikon, the collective nature of how they produced works, their use of institutional space (the art university) for meeting, learning, and display of their film and video works situated them as a centrepiece in narratives claiming that the experiment functioned as a resistant practice during communism. They are an accessible example to approach, because the longevity of their experience, and the assiduous, diligent self-documentation and self-archiving of their practices has left researchers with valuable materials to use for investigating into the group's history.

Lastly, I consider how these two different modes of image-making have constructed a specific imagination of what images can do, and of what Romanian moving

image art has been in the communist period, especially in light of how these practices were written retrospectively, as belonging to larger histories of resistance.

### 2.3.1 Studio Space and Private Experience: Ion Grigorescu

In exhibition catalogues, art magazines, reviews and other writings, Ion Grigorescu is often presented as one of the grounding figures of Romanian contemporary art, especially in the areas of experimental film and performance/body art. I will discuss Grigorescu's moving image work made during the communist period, particularly one work, which Joanne Richardson considered was part of the few political or "quasi-activist" examples from that time. *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu* (1978)<sup>107</sup> is a filmed performance, staging a conversation between the artist as himself, and the artist as Nicolae Ceaușescu. The images show the two, standing an unbalanced, imperfect split screen, sometimes their faces or their words overlapping (See Image 2). This is achieved through a triple exposure of the film, giving an unstable quality to the images, almost a ghost-like impression.<sup>108</sup>

In Grigorescu's *Dialogue* there is no sound, only images. Because it is a silent work, *Dialogue* creates a very interesting play on its very premises of existence as a construction – it turns precisely what should be the central part of the work, namely speaking, into writing. Furthermore, this is a type of writing with film, embedded in the image but very hard to follow, as the letters are blurred and seem scattered on the screen. The work becomes "difficult" to show even in contemporary exhibition contexts, as "the text is not legible even to those who speak the language."<sup>109</sup> Often, art galleries

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<sup>107</sup> Ion Grigorescu, *Dialog Cu Tov. Ceaușescu/Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu*, 8mm film transferred to DVD, black and white, silent, (1978).

<sup>108</sup> Klara Kemp-Welsch presents in detail, courtesy of the explanations received directly from Ion Grigorescu, the technical process of how *Dialogue* was made: "Grigorescu had to perform the dialogue one character at a time, re-exposing the same reel of film on both occasions. The black background ensured that only the part of the film with a figure was exposed on each occasion. He recorded one side of the dialogue and then reloaded the film into the camera and exposed it once more to record the next part, on the other side. The last step was to add text by typing the dialogue onto thin "indigo" paper – making the words into holes before exposing the film to light for a third time, this time through the paper." See Klara Kemp-Welch, "Impossible Interviews with Ceaușescu: Ion Grigorescu and the Dialogic Imagination," in *Ion Grigorescu: Omul Cu O Singură Cameră/ The Man with a Single Camera*, ed. Alina Serban (Berlin: Sternberg Press, ERSTE Foundation, Asociația pepluspatru, 2014), 161.

<sup>109</sup> Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger, "Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger", August 29, 2009, accessed May 12, 2013, [38.org/files/wyoming-transcript-ion-grigorescu-anders-kreuger.pdf](http://38.org/files/wyoming-transcript-ion-grigorescu-anders-kreuger.pdf). n.p.

and museums where the work is shown make the text available in print, separately (Appendix D).

In an exhibition from 2008 in Stockholm, the work was described as “a fiction, not only because he [Grigorescu] is performing a role, but also due to the fact that the conversation and the criticism as such are a total fiction in a rigorously controlled society.”<sup>110</sup> The fictional character of the work is understood in this account, as a direct consequence of the clandestine aspect of the work, of the fact that it could not be shown for many years, out of fear of a repressive regime and because such an act of communication would have never been possible.

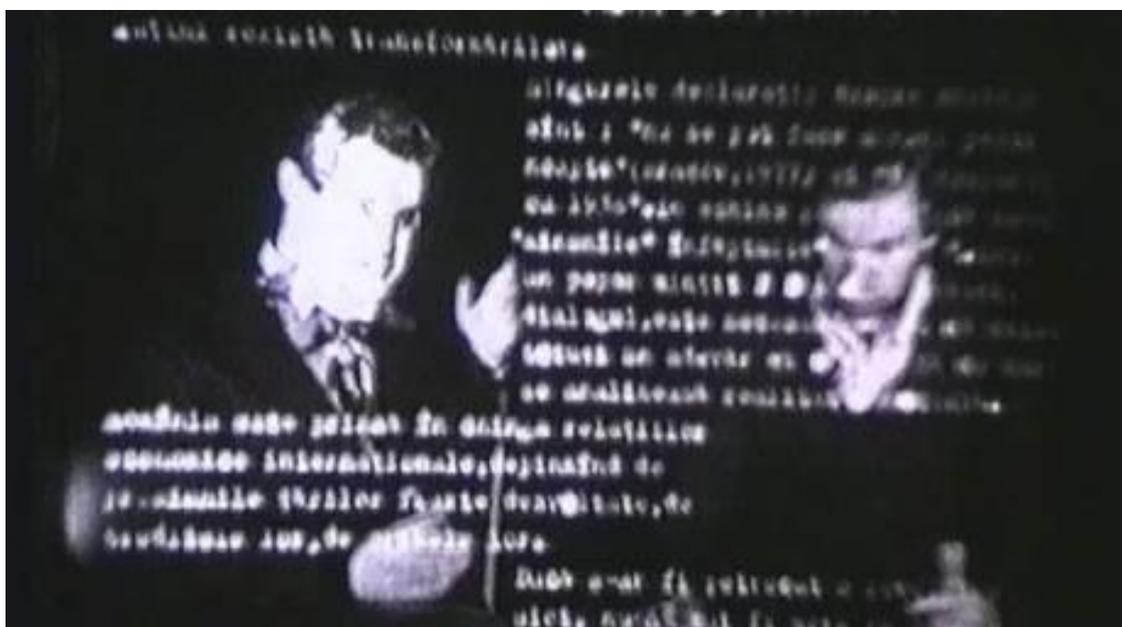


Image 2 - Ion Grigorescu, *Dialog cu Tov. Ceaușescu/Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu*, 8mm, film still (1978).

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<sup>110</sup> *Between the Images. Imaginable Experiences for Future Memories* exhibition was held in 2008, part of Xposeptember. The project was initiated by the association Stockholm Fotofestival and funded by IASPIS, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://www.xposeptember.se/archive/2008/>.

I argue that fiction, in this case, is a composition that is neither true nor false, and can open possibilities to perform a conversation, the act of speaking. In an interview in *IDEA Arts + Society* magazine, Ion Grigorescu was asked by curator Hans Ulrich Obrist what, if any system, did Grigorescu want to construct with this dialogue, what kind of utopian system had he imagined, that would stand between capitalism and communism? To this, Grigorescu replied quite abruptly: "In any case, don't expect to find a system! I proposed a dialog, the simple possibility to speak."<sup>111</sup> What Grigorescu performed with this work was a type of writing with images. Without the words, the work created an experience of the specific, lived communist context of Romania and of the impossibility of this conversation to happen in the given context. It played with fiction to construct a space where Grigorescu could negotiate his capabilities of becoming a (speaking) subject. This dialogue was only possible in the work, in the congruence of two spaces: that of the artists' body and that of the cinematic space produced by film, which allowed Grigorescu's double as Ceaușescu to exist simultaneously with his own image as the artist-interviewer.

The work offered the possibility to reference and bring together several spaces: the social realities of everyday urban space of that historical moment, the space of the studio merged with domestic space (since his apartment was also his studio), the media space where the image of Ceaușescu prevailed and, finally, even the oneiric space ("Well, Ceaușescu has also appeared in my dreams quite a lot. When you live for 20 years with this propaganda, Ceaușescu becomes a kind of Alter Ego").<sup>112</sup> It was a composition that worked with fiction to produce this dialogue and through it, Grigorescu as a subject living the particular experience of communism, under Ceaușescu's regime.

Grigorescu appears wearing a mask of Ceaușescu's face and performs the artist-as-Ceaușescu, haunted by that image constantly mediated through television, print media, or artistic practice (painters were often commissioned to make portraits of the head of state). In the end, Grigorescu can have this dialogue by producing a fiction and by embodying the image that haunts him. Marina Gržinić observed that "the functioning of Socialist societies involved a painful recourse to psychotic discourse, in an attempt to neutralise the side-effects of pertinent interpretations and productions through hiding,

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<sup>111</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, Suzanne Pagé, and Mircea Cantor, "A Conversation with Ion Grigorescu," *IDEA arts+society*, 2006, <http://idea.ro/revista/?q=en/node/41&articol=391>.

<sup>112</sup> Grigorescu and Kreuger, "Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger", n.p.

masking and renaming history.”<sup>113</sup> I would argue that the psychotic is, in *Dialogue*, not a sign of the pathological, but a means linked to the role of fiction in opening the lived experience of communism, through moving images. In this case, moving images allowed the traces of psychosis to create this fictional situation, and the impossibility to act to be transported, not into disavowal from politics, but into showing the absolute necessity to speak. However, Grigorescu makes clear that what he was enacting, by opening up possible Alter Egos, was not of schizophrenic nature, because the acts of a schizophrenic implied, at the time, a certain level of freedom, the freedom of being “an open dissident”<sup>114</sup> who “will be put away and medically treated.”<sup>115</sup> In contrast to the schizophrenic, the psychotic nature of the conversation he was having with Ceaușescu was as perturbing as his memories of one of Ceaușescu’s speeches, where Grigorescu remembers hearing the president of the Republic encouraging the crowd to sing *The International*, and then, whispering “if anyone remembers it!”<sup>116</sup> Outside of categories of truth or falsity, this memory, Grigorescu explains, was a trigger for him in understanding how being asleep was a desired state for the public of Ceaușescu’s speeches, and how “being awake” and speaking or moving, being in one’s own body offered a faint possibility to produce any critical position whatsoever. He ties this memory to 1974, a moment when he also “sensed that it was time for photography, basing myself [on] this very state of anaesthesia”<sup>117</sup> and from this is a moment when he started focusing his practice on film and photography.

In 2009, in another interview, this time with curator Anders Kreuger, Grigorescu mentioned that “[i]n a very politicized movie called *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu* that I made in 1978, I discovered only later that I had a strong resemblance to Ceausescu’s son.”<sup>118</sup> The previous note about his dreams, Ceaușescu as his alter ego, the resemblance to Ceaușescu's son and him wearing Ceaușescu’s face as a mask are part of his individual, solitary, and psychotic experience of a political regime. In the same interview, Grigorescu suggests that these superimpositions acted as a means for

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<sup>113</sup> Gržinić, “Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context,” 19.

<sup>114</sup> Ion Grigorescu, diary entry dated December 11, 2014, reproduced in *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Grigorescu, “A Version of Memory.”

<sup>116</sup> Ion Grigorescu, diary entry dated November 11, 2014, reproduced in “A Version of Memory,” trans. Alex Moldovan, *IDEA arts+society*, 2006, n.p.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Ion Grigorescu, “Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger”, n.p.

becoming some sort of engaged observer, both creating and acting in his own experiences. In fact, Grigorescu had imagined himself as an independent artist, making work freely and returning to his own body as a site of action, and to the “imaginary talk with the political regime”<sup>119</sup> that he enacted in his studio. When he speaks of how he experienced communism as an artist, he uses the term “independent” again, to refer to an artist who was not interested in selling or exhibiting his work. Therefore, he considers himself an artist who arguably experienced an autonomy from the art market and the politics of display. He also appreciates he was an artist who experienced everyday spaces freely, who could “take a tram to go about the town to show real poverty in the neighbourhood where the working class really lives”, or could explore the studio space. In his case, the home as his studio and here, the explorations led him back to his own body: “Or, he can just stay in his studio, but in fact I didn’t have a studio, so I could just stay at home and take nude photographs of myself.”<sup>120</sup> The city and the home/studio space have been central to Grigorescu’s work in the 1970s. In these spaces, he focused on his body and on a personal way of engaging with politics, and he found that moving images allowed him to produce fruitful fragmentations of both spaces, as he notes in a recent interview.<sup>121</sup>

The initial *Dialogue* referred to what concomitantly, the acknowledgement and defiance of the impossibility to act or speak, could open. Grigorescu returned to it almost thirty years later to make a second moving image work, *Post Mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu* (2007). This showed two oversized masks, one of Grigorescu, and one of Ceaușescu, having a conversation on the premises of the former House of the People, currently hosting the Houses of Parliament, and the National Museum of Contemporary Art (See Images 3 and 4). This time, the relationship between the two was further complicated by Grigorescu-as-Ceaușescu, because Ceaușescu had been executed during the revolution, after a hastened trial. Thus, Grigorescu was performing himself as a free

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<sup>119</sup> Grigorescu, “A Version of Memory.”

<sup>120</sup> Grigorescu and Kreuger, “Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger”, n.p.

<sup>121</sup> This interview is part of a series of filmed interviews with artists, curators and cultural producers from Romania, titled *Mărturii XXI- Revisitând trecutul/ Testimonies XXI – Revisiting the Past*, a project by Galeria Nouă, Bucharest. In a conversation with curator Magda Radu, Grigorescu speaks about his reasons for working with film: first because he was captivated by the internal logic of moving images, and then, by the ability to slow down movement and to fragment spaces, with this medium. Grigorescu, Ion and Magda Radu, *Mărturii XXI - Ion Grigorescu*, filmed interview, 2012.

speaking subject in a dialogue with himself, as the ghost of what was haunting him when he was not free to speak. The masks were disproportionately larger than the bodies of those who wore them, the situation itself seemed to have grown out of proportion precisely because the dialogue, the possibility to speak and make oneself visible as a speaking subject remained a problem that needed to be addressed.



Image 3 - Ion Grigorescu, *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, Video / DVD, 22' 29'', (2007), film still.

By 2007, after a long period of economic and political transition, Romania had entered the structures of the European Union and the forms of psychosis, linked equally to the recent revolution and to capitalism had been embodied and normalized into postcommunism, and into contemporary art. Grigorescu's "postmortem dialogue" is a performance about how political subjects of postcommunism were expected to speak, to form a civil society, to perform the "public sphere", to "catch-up" without looking back. This work establishes a relation to both Grigorescu's practice during communism (some of it apparent in *Dialogue*) and with the time-space of communism altogether. Grigorescu declares his aim with the second work to be two-fold: "to reveal Ceaușescu as he is going through his judgement after his death and to try to understand what is

happening nowadays.”<sup>122</sup> Part of what was happening in 2007 was visible in the setting itself. Ceaușescu’s megalomaniac construction had been taken over by the Parliament, and partially, by a museum of contemporary art. In addition, soon after this work was made, the Orthodox Church was going to start building a grandiose, equally maniacal “Cathedral of Redemption”, on the same premises. I discuss this complex layering at length in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, Grigorescu’s *Post-mortem Dialogue* opens up a conversation about the inheritance existing around these spaces and their histories. “What misery, one says about an Eastern country. They lived in socialism! Oh, no. In communism! Oh, no. In totalitarianism!” – the person wearing the Grigorescu mask says. This line points to the confusion around how the recent past was sealed off in plain sight, even before knowing and attempting to deal with the memory of its historical, political and ideological implication.

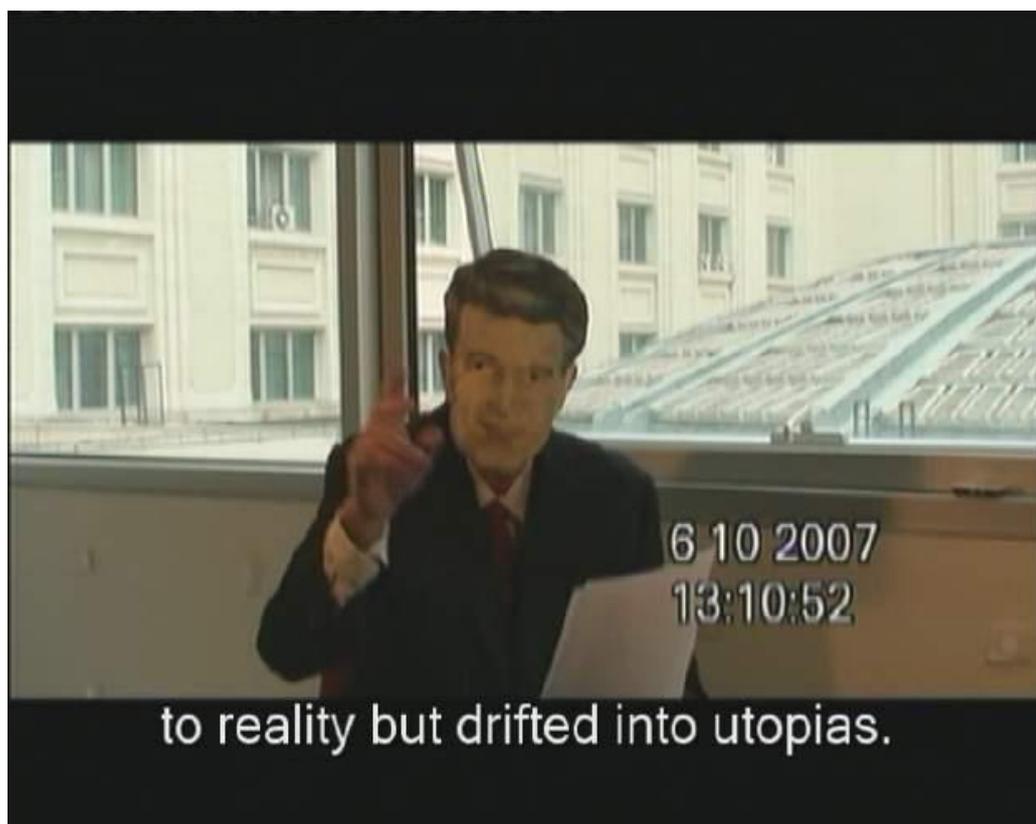


Image 4 - Ion Grigorescu, *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, Video / DVD, 22' 29", (2007), film still.

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<sup>122</sup> Grigorescu and Kreuger, "Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger."

Overall, what is apparent in both of Grigorescu's works discussed here is the necessity to re-address recent histories, to constantly revisit and complicate them. This short treatment of his moving image practice was meant to point to larger issues, namely to how Grigorescu's works have been read as resistant and political art, and recuperated to write the history of Romanian moving images as a history of soft resistance to an oppressive communist regime. These narratives of resistance have often been aligned to alternative histories of former socialist countries, integrated and re-circulated into the art market. As mentioned, Grigorescu claims to occupy, in this dynamic, a position between participant and observer: "Even if my work is exhibited in so many places, I somehow have the advantage that I don't speak English. So I just stand back and don't take part in any discussions and keep my ideas for myself, just like in the old times."<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, he appears highly aware of these shifting currents, and especially of approaches which aim to make him into an avant-garde figure, or more specifically, into the Romanian counterpart to the Polish or Yugoslavian retro-avant-garde. He rejects such attempts in an interview with curator Maria Rus Bojan: "In my solo exhibition in Warsaw, they installed the retrospective as if I were part of the Polish avant-garde, active and present in the 1970s, constituted and theorized, which never existed in Romania."<sup>124</sup> Curator Maria Rus Bojan later invited Grigorescu to be part of the 2011 Romanian Pavilion at Venice Biennale<sup>125</sup> and presented him as an iconic figure

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<sup>123</sup> Ion Grigorescu in Grigorescu and Kreuger, "Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger", n.p. In 1992, Mladen Stilinovic made the work *An artist who cannot speak English is no artist* (text on variable print media). About this work, Gržinić says that it reveals the double bind of the capitalist art system, where exclusion and segregation are at its core, but where self-exclusion or distancing do not oppose capitalist normalizing processes. In fact, what is interesting to note is that the phenomenon of apartment art and working with small groups of friends that Stilinovic was himself involved in, has been criticized as a movement that has later produced "the institutionalization of friendship." See Nataša Ilić, "Dear Art, Yours Sincerely," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 55.. Grigorescu's cautiousness could be read as a tacit understanding of the complexity of how his works move and act as elements in either recuperative histories, or into the global exhibition circuit and the art market, which he nevertheless has been part of for quite a while now.

<sup>124</sup> The exhibition was *Ion Grigorescu, In the Body of the Victim 1969-2008*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland (curator: Kathrin Rhomberg), 2009. My translation of the original text, reproduced here, in Romanian: "În ce privește expoziția mea personală de la Varșovia, ei au instalat retrospectiva de parcă așa fi fost din avangarda poloneză, vie, prezentă în anii 70, constituită și teoretizată, ceea ce nu a existat în România." See Maria Rus Bojan, "Venetia Post Scriptum. Maria Rus Bojan in Conversatie Cu Ion Grigorescu [Venice Post Scriptum. Maria Rus Bojan in Conversation with Ion Grigorescu]," *CriticAtac*, October 7, 2011, <http://www.criticatac.ro/10501/venetia-post-scriptum-maria-rus-bojan-in-conversatie-cu-ion-grigorescu/>, n.p.

<sup>125</sup> The Romanian Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> International Biennale in Venice in 2011, curated by Maria Rus Bojan and Ami Barak was titled *Performing History* and featured works by Ion Grigorescu and artist duo Anetta Mona Chișă & Lucia Tkáčová. About Grigorescu, a press release states that "The project focuses

of the Romanian avant-garde. This collaboration made visible some of the core contradictions between the curators' intentions and the artists' positions upon the theme of the exhibition, which was titled *Performing History*. Although I will not present in detail this case, I will just make the observation that Grigorescu sometimes rejects the claim that his works are political and re-routes his practice back to his subjective experiences: "After 30 years my critics start to make the connections and say [that] in fact the works are connected through politics. What I'm trying to do is to separate politics from my artwork and try to make it a process of self-discovery."<sup>126</sup>

In short, some accounts and projects, especially by Romanian writers and curators, have recuperated Grigorescu's work with moving images during the communist period as exceptional and resistant to the regime. I argue that these narratives aimed to create continuity and a sense of tradition between practices with film, photography and performance from Romania and the art movements of neighbouring socialist countries. Whilst I reject this recuperation of Grigorescu's work as the grounds to argue for a Romanian tradition of resistance, I find his moving images and his texts and interviews immensely valuable to discuss in relation to recent Romanian history and to contemporary Romanian art practice, because they openly reflect on a series of complicities and paradoxes. The first refers to how can one define and understand political art during the communist period. Grigorescu refuses to call his works political in the way that his critics have tried to argue, but his two dialogues with Ceaușescu clearly are forms of critically engaging with the historical and political conditions of two different moments in Romania's recent past. The second problematic is that, whilst acknowledging that a tradition of politicized practices did not exist in Romania, the exception of solitary artists like Grigorescu becomes a route to argue for a discontinued tradition, and for building narratives of alignment with both the former socialist, Eastern European "region," and a tradition of Western practice. This leads to a third set of complex, entangled relations, between the experimental nature of Grigorescu's practice, and its capacities for resistance and dissidence from the regime.

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on the essential role played by the work of Ion Grigorescu (born in 1945), an iconic figure of the avant-garde attitude in Romania, in the re-reading of history. (...) A forerunner of the conceptual and performative use of the body as an artistic medium in Romania since the early '70s, Grigorescu is also one of the very few Romanian artists who have radically and conceptually illustrated contemporary concerns in perfect synchronicity with his time." "Performing History," Romanian Pavilion at the 54th International Art Exhibition — la Biennale di Venezia 2011, (2011), <http://www.performinghistory.ro/>.

<sup>126</sup> Grigorescu and Kreuger, "Conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger", n.p.

As I will show in the next section, some Romanian curators and writers argue that playful experimentation with moving image technology in periods of scarce access and various other restrictions is what makes a moving image work political.

### **2.3.2 Collective Moving Image Experiments: Kinema Ikon**

The second example I consider is the group Kinema Ikon, whose activity has had a long history, stretching across three generations, commencing in the 1970s and continuing in a different way as contemporary practice. Kinema Ikon can be considered a multimedia workshop rather than an artists' group, with works signed both under individual names, and as the collective Kinema Ikon. In a text from 2005, George Sabău, one of the founding members of the workshop, identifies three stages in Kinema Ikon's history, spanning over forty years: "experimental movie (1970 – 1989), mixed media (1990 – 1993) and, from 1994 on, exclusively hypermedia works, on CD-ROM, on the internet, and interactive installations."<sup>127</sup> Sabău offers in his text a very detailed account of all three stages, including names of all the people involved across times, a depiction of the atmosphere of working collectively in the last two decades of communism, the media and materials used and their provenance, the relations the workshop had with art critics, exhibition spaces and institutions, focusing particularly on the first two stages he was most involved in. His declared goal with this text is "that the reader interested in the contradictory field of experimental creation to correctly perceive the interesting story of a completely atypical group."<sup>128</sup>

What could be the contradictions in the field of experimental creation that Sabău speaks of? Kinema Ikon is an interesting example firstly because of the nature of the space where moving images were produced: the workshop. The workshop model implied collective efforts, in a group where individuals exchanged knowledge and practices. And despite the fact that not all pieces produced in the Kinema Ikon workshop were signed by the entire group, the work space would have been collectively shared. The workshop, as the studio, or the scientific laboratory, is arguably a space for study, for experiment, and in the case of Kinema Ikon, a space for shared experiment. As this

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<sup>127</sup> Ikon Kinema, "Kinema Ikon. vol.1," 2005, accessed December 5, 2013, [http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki\\_35\\_1?e=4490280/8672286](http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki_35_1?e=4490280/8672286), n.p.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

is not unlike other conditions of working collectively, the contradiction and atypical situation can only be here the ideological context in which the works were produced. How was this space for collective experiment possible in communist space-time?

In the catalogue of Kinema Ikon's exhibition in Paris from 1985, the collective is presented as functioning on a "tripartite structure": the school of art teaching cinema theory and culture, the ciné-club called "Atelier 16" where documentaries were made, and the "experimental film atelier." The first two were essentially a part of the Art University in the city of Arad, whilst the third was actually the experimental workshop where thirty people (artists, musicians, architects, technicians, etc.) worked together. The cine-club was the only admitted form of organization that would have been supported by the state, thus allowing the workshop to exist clandestinely.

About the experimental period whose duration overlapped communist time-space, Sabău makes a series of notes. Firstly, he situates their work on 16 mm film from the 1970s and 1980s as "being formally and stylistically close to the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and to the cinematographic Euro-American avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>129</sup> This influence points to a development of Kinema Ikon's film and moving image practices, which could be seen as asynchronous to both art and film histories familiar in accounts of Western traditions related to such experiments. The experimental films made by Kinema Ikon belonged, according to Sabău, "to all the categories of the genre: direct interventions on film, dynamical abstractions, chromatic processing, dream-like essays, special effects collages, dys-narrative essays, ciné-verité and lyrical documentaries."<sup>130</sup> In the 1985 catalogue, a line states that the previous four years of their moving image practices, i.e. 1981 – 1985 had been marked by "preoccupations on artistic recuperations of the real with recourse to strategies of combining fragments".<sup>131</sup> This avenue had been explored in the tradition of French experimental film of the 1980s, which the text equates largely with a European tradition of the experiment with moving images, and which, they note, had been in turn

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<sup>129</sup> Ikon Kinema, "Kinema Ikon. vol.1," 2005, accessed December 5, 2013, [http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki\\_35\\_1?e=4490280/8672286](http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki_35_1?e=4490280/8672286), 8.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> "Kinema Ikon 1985," 1985, [http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki\\_85?e=4490280/8672313](http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/ki_85?e=4490280/8672313), exhibition catalogue, text in original: "Ce qui marque les dernières années ce sont les préoccupations concernant la récupération artistique du réel par le recours aux stratégies combinatoires des fragments.", n.p, my translation.

influenced by a continuation of underground practices of the 1920s (Appendix E contains film stills of Kinema Ikon works).

These retrospective histories written by Sabău aim to stress the particular way of making moving images: experimenting collectively in a time-space of multiple restrictions yet working with an ethos of the experiment belonging to both the “historical” avant-gardes (1920s), the 1960s, and 1980s underground. But Kinema Ikon is an interesting case not solely because of the nature of the space where the works were produced and this relation to the experiment, but also the works’ reception. As noted by Joanne Richardson and emphasized by Sabău himself, “during the seventies and eighties, the Kinema Ikon experimental movies were not subject to public projections in Arad, they were shown ‘privately’, at the workshop”<sup>132</sup> Therefore, the clandestine, private spaces where moving images were produced and where they were seen coincided. The works circulated in a closed-circuit, with limited funds and materials, and shown to inter-disciplinary, eclectic circles. To an extent, these aspects seemed sufficient to argue, in retrospect, that it was an alternative and oppositional structure that subversively opposed the regime, a type of struggle from within. Apparently, according to members Călin Man and George Sabău, the reason they made 62 experimental films was because they had used remaining film stock from the 62 documentaries allocated stock within the “Atelier 16” structure, officially affiliated to the Art School in Arad, where Sabău was teaching. Moreover, the space of the workshop was, one could say, overlapping with the space of the art school, as most of the processing and editing facilities were there. Therefore, one could perhaps say Kinema Ikon was an alternative space, not directly opposing the institution, but subverting it simply by producing work within the given conditions. However, the collective form of production and the clandestine nature of what was made was not enough to connect Kinema Ikon’s practice to radical politics of opposition or with any alternative or avant-garde movement.

Sabău’s own position to the political or resistant aspect of the experimental works is that members shared a dislike of the communist regime but that their work was interested in the experiment as an artistic preoccupation disconnected from politics. In two separate instances he remembers a question from a member of the audience at

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<sup>132</sup> Kinema, “Kinema Ikon. vol.1,” 8.

Kinema Ikon's retrospective screenings in Paris (1995), asking "How come that in a regime you considered totalitarian you could freely [sic] produce anticommunist movies?" In the text from 2005, he responds clearly to this question:

No author in no film proposed such an objective, in the first place because this would have been fatal for the workshop's destiny, and, secondly, because the group members were simply preoccupied with the relevance of new audio-visual expression. Therefore, it was not about cultural dissidence – all the dislike of the *ki* members towards the communist system taken into account – but a workshop open to young artists from various domains, and having the vocation of experiment upon cinematographic language [sic]."<sup>133</sup>

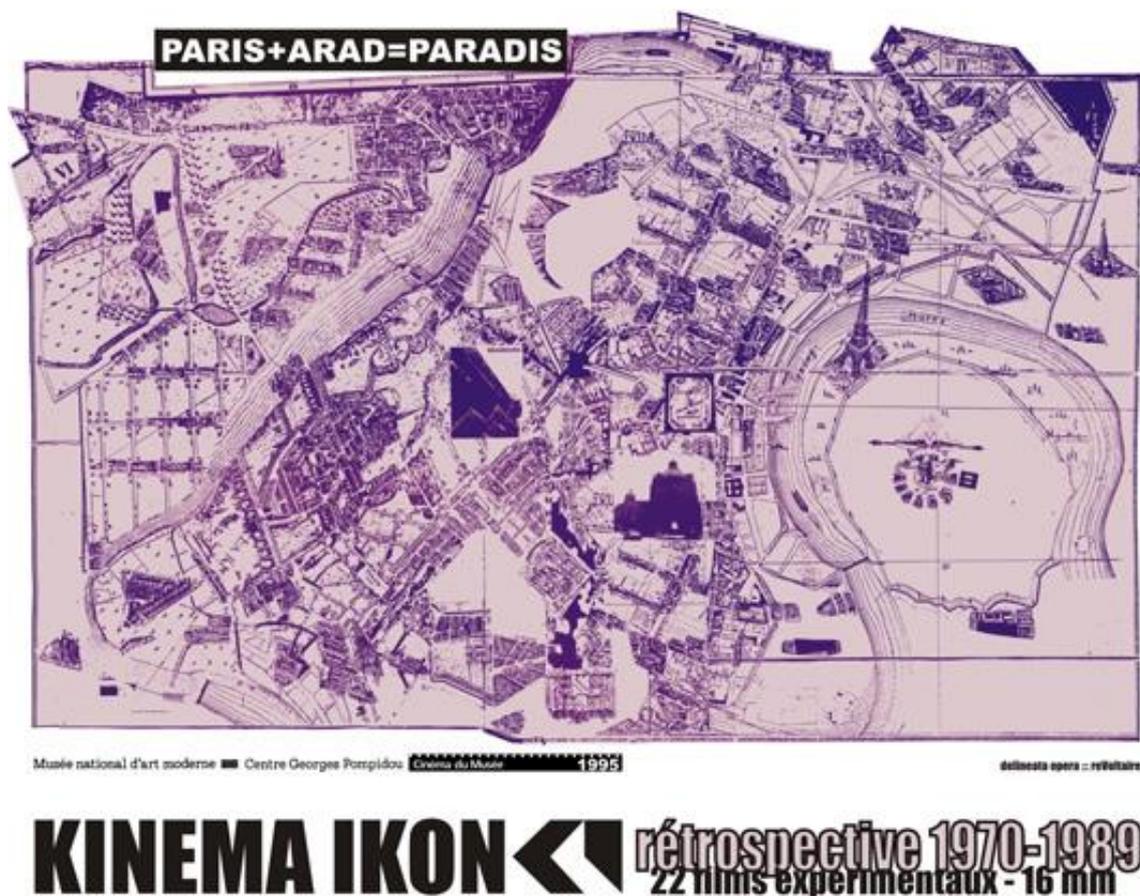


Image 5 - 1995 Retrospective Film Exhibition of Kinema Ikon, Centre Georges Pompidou Paris, poster. Source: [www.kinema-ikon.net](http://www.kinema-ikon.net)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 18.

In 2010, in a catalogue documenting the “experimental film period,” Sabău returns to the same question and supports his answer with similar arguments about the impossibility to act politically, and how this could have jeopardized the entire existence of the workshop, adding that:

the marginal position of the kinema ikon group, before and after December '89, present day included, is due, mainly to the programmatic refusal of complying to the trend of contemporary art, which, in its turn, and also programmatically, considers, through its representatives, that militancy is of the first importance – be it social, ecological, feminist, antiracist etc. – (...)<sup>134</sup>

His rejection of “militant activism” in favour of “experimental playfulness” is performed through a generational argument – he is grounded in the position of the so-called 80s generation that he is part of, a generation disillusioned by radical engagement with politics.

In an interview from the same year of the retrospective event, a younger member of Kinema Ikon and one of Sabău's students, artist Călin Man (born 1961) proposes to by-pass this narrative of repression/activism in the history of Kinema Ikon, together with “all the theories of yesteryear.”<sup>135</sup> He considers their 2010 retrospective event in similar generational terms, as “a retrospective, a recuperation, a resetting, a reminder for us or maybe a novelty for the young generation.”<sup>136</sup> Part of a generation of artists, which curator Cosmin Costinaș called the “Soros kids”<sup>137</sup> - which “can be defined through its obsessive relationship, again a real fetishism, with the new media, newly discovered and often used as a weapon in their arguments with the old establishment”<sup>138</sup> – Man seems to share with Sabău a general distrust in activism and

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<sup>134</sup> Ikon Kinema, “Kinema Ikon 7010,” 2010, accessed December 12, 2013, [http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/kinema\\_ikon\\_7010?e=4490280/8672295](http://issuu.com/kinema-ikon/docs/kinema_ikon_7010?e=4490280/8672295), n.p.

<sup>135</sup> Călin Man, “Kinema Ikon,” trans. Juraj Gigac, *Remake Magazine. Special Issue on Media Art History*, 2012, 39.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>137</sup> The term refers to the strong influence of the Soros Foundation in Central and Eastern European cultural and artistic landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s, when it acted as the main funder of institutions and exhibitions. I will be discussing these aspects in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

<sup>138</sup> Cosmin Costinaș, “A New Generation and New Fetishisms in Romanian Contemporary Art,” *Umelec Magazine*, 2004. n.p.

militancy and a view over the history of Romanian moving images as something that is passed to the younger generation through the fetishizing “power” of singular examples of experimental playfulness.

In the decades following 1989, the work of Kinema Ikon entered, Sabău and Man both agree, a new stage of creation, informed by the workshop’s previous experiences but nevertheless contextually different. Referring to the workshop space and how information, techniques and influences were shared and carried into the next stage, Călin Man says: “Each of us had “sources” and the workshop was the place where news and novelties were shared. I, personally, thought that Dadaism was the way to follow. Which I duly did.”<sup>139</sup> On one hand, in other accounts, practices and histories of moving images seem to skip over the time-space of communism and return to the historical avant-gardes. In this case, Dadaism acts as a direct link to a tradition of making art which connects to Romania mainly through the figure of Tristan Tzara, but also a line of local Dada experiments. On the other hand, new media technologies and media installations are perceived by these authors as suitable for lending themselves to playful experiments. However, both connections problematically disengage from militant or revolutionary politics, which the historical avant-gardes and current manipulations or appropriations of media technologies both open. The main point Man and Sabău are defending is the continuation of an experimental tradition, carrying the work of Kinema Ikon into a new stage of exploration with media technologies. Their argument seems to be that this experiment should continue, using “new” media, a tradition of playing belonging to the early avant-gardes, yet eschewing other strong traits of these movements, i.e. their engagement with revolt, transgression and *détournement* of technology and its uses.

Nevertheless, in the period immediately following the 1989 revolution, Kinema Ikon made a turn in its engagement with the political situation of the time: they were instrumental in setting up a Club for Social Dialogue (following an imported French model) and were funded to start an opinion publication called *Conversația* (*The Conversation*). The other objective of the Club for Social Dialogue was to offer free legal

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<sup>139</sup> Man refers to [revoltaire.net](http://revoltaire.net), a play reference between Cabaret Voltaire and the term ‘revolt’, a work in progress, which includes new media, mixed media and inter-media works, films and installations. Călin Man participated with works by re:voltaire in the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, showing *alteridem.exe\_2* a “hypermedia” installation, in 2003.

and logistic assistance to the free trade union movement, which they carried on for a while but their engagement with – using Sabău’s terms – “revolutionary effervescence”<sup>140</sup> quickly faded against the background of intense political changes and events.<sup>141</sup>

After this “stage”, Kinema Ikon produced “hypermedia” works, the group had its first retrospective exhibition in Paris in 1994, then one in the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC) in 2005, and relatively recently, in 2012, the collective received a permanent space at the Museum of Art Arad (MoAA) which they organized as a “wunderkammer.” The works of its members continue to this day the line of playful experiments, yet the period that is explored mostly from the history of the workshop seems to be their works made during the communist time-space, particularly framed as hidden and possibly holding political potential, under labels like “esoteric underground.”<sup>142</sup> In the next part of this chapter I discuss how these recuperations have been performed by local critics.

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<sup>140</sup> Kinema, “Kinema Ikon. vol.1,” 28.

<sup>141</sup> An event that contributed, overall, to the loss of trust in radical politics and direct action were the June 1990 anti-government protests, when the police, army and then groups of miners attacked the protesting crowds and dispersed the occupation of the central square of Bucharest. I cover extensively in Chapter 4 the conditions and implications of this event.

<sup>142</sup> I refer here to 2012 illustrated presentation given at The Observatory in New York by Ioana Selejan. The short text about the presentation clearly frames Kinema Ikon’s work as “a prime example of the avant-garde art resistance movements operating within the confines of the totalitarian state.” See “Kinema Ikon’s Esoteric Underground, Romania 1970-1989. An Illustrated Presentation by Ileana Selejan,” December 7, 2012, accessed August 30, 2015, <http://observatoryroom.org/2012/11/06/kinema-ikons-esoteric-underground-romania-1970-1989-an-illustrated-presentation-by-ileana-selejan/>.

## 2.4 Moving Image Practices in Postcommunism: Histories of Alignment

Having presented two modes of moving image practices in communist Romania, I now ask where, on a larger, regional or global scale, did the need to politicize these practices come from? I cover the reasons why this need for alignment emerged in Romania, and how this need was supported by larger narratives about technology, transition and new institutional structures in Eastern European, former socialist countries.

### 2.4.1 Communism as Rupture

Earlier, I quoted Joanne Richardson's observation about how the scarcity of practices with moving images in the Romanian context was linked to a weak alternative, experimental, and underground tradition. Richardson has argued that this situation was particular to Romania, among other post-socialist countries. Nevertheless, similar considerations seem to apply to Bulgarian experimental film and video art, as suggested in an essay written in 2000, by artists Iara Boubnova and Luchezar Boyadjiev. The two authors argue that in the Bulgarian context, the "late development" of video and moving image culture could be a consequence of not only restricted access to technology or the influence of censorship (one of the two most common explanations for the scarcity of video art in Romania as well), but also a somewhat delayed larger movement of alternative media. Boubnova and Boyadjiev consider that "the massive artistic attraction to video and other new media came later, in 1989, coupled with alternative underground practices."<sup>143</sup> In turn, Slovenian artist and theoretician Marina Gržinić sees this commonality between Bulgaria and Romania to be related to the countries' places in the "first line" of totalitarian rule. Thus, these two countries have arguably "suffered a delay of a whole decade in developing art connected to electronic media, including the use of the video medium as a social tool" and "this delay was due to the repressive nature of the Communist State in these countries, which included an almost bloodthirsty control of art and cultural productions (...)."<sup>144</sup> A few observations could emerge from all these accounts. These views are formulated in response to other reductive

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<sup>143</sup> Iara Boubnova and Luchezar Boyadjiev, "The State of Video Art in Bulgaria," *Art Margins Online*, September 26, 2000, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/419-the-state-of-video-art-in-bulgaria>, n.p.

<sup>144</sup> Gržinić, "Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context," 25.

presentations of video and moving image art in communist countries, which state quite simply: there was little or hardly any video art in communist countries of Eastern Europe because there was no or hardly any access to the means of producing film or video, namely film stock and video cameras. Alternatively, state censorship functioned as the umbrella explanation for the scarcity of moving image art. Whereas both of the above – scarce access to technology and harsh censorship – did have an influence on Romanian moving image art produced during the communist period, and they restricted many artists from making work using media technologies, another reason which can explain the scarcity was the lack of an alternative tradition. As mentioned already, this is a tradition of alternative, radical or underground film and art making that sits in relation to politics.

On one hand, the very notions of alternative and underground frequently appear in Western art history as a tactic, a way to circumvent mainstream state or commercial routes, via independent spaces for production and display. Most of these spaces often presupposed or involved forms of solitary or collective work, like film co-operatives and artist-run spaces.<sup>145</sup> The tradition of alternative, political art is thus linked to the spaces where works were made. In the Romanian context, the fact that some artists or groups, like Ion Grigorescu and Kinema Ikon worked in clandestine spaces to produce experimental works, was deployed to construct recuperative histories of Romanian moving image art, where their clandestine and experimental character has been interpreted as a token of their political status.

On the other hand, in alternative and underground movements of former socialist countries in the Eastern European region, the space of the apartment or the studio were central to enacting forms of resistance, as was the case with apartment art in the USSR and ex-Yugoslavia. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, these practices of making and exhibiting art inside of apartments continued into the 1990s, into the post-socialist period, when they were connected with the legacy of resistance coming from the historical avant-gardes and continuing into what was later labelled the retro avant-

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<sup>145</sup> The most common examples are the film avant-garde movements of the 1960s, where the collective efforts of filmmakers have produced alternative structures for production and distribution of experimental works, such as The Filmmakers Cooperative in New York that Jonas Mekas initiated, the London Film-makers' Co-Op. See Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*; A. L. Rees, ed., *Expanded Cinema : Art, Performance, Film* (London: Tate, 2011); Stuart Comer, ed., *Film and Video Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009); Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

gardes.<sup>146</sup> For some artists working with film and performance art, it was important to step away from the apartment, and to see public space<sup>147</sup> as the scene where resistance and politicized art could happen. Marina Gržinić argues that artistic practice in public space “by-passed” the tradition of “Western” conceptual art of the same period (1960s and 70s), as the move or intervention of art into public space was unavoidably, a move into the political.<sup>148</sup>

These traditions were very weak in the Romanian context and thus, the issue of a rupture in the history of moving image art in Romania becomes that of a rupture with both a certain alternative left culture, as Joanne Richardson notes, and implicitly, with a certain imagination of how spaces and practices can allow critical, resistant engagement with politics, through the use of the body and performance, media technologies and in particular, of moving images. Thus, it is explainable how the two exceptions discussed in the previous section, the collective and experimental work of Kinema Ikon, and the work with images stemming from Grigorescu’s individual experience of his home could later become part of narratives about subversive, resistant, or political art made in Romania “before” 1989.

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<sup>146</sup> This movement of the retro-avant-gardes was identified in the practices of artists like Mladen Stilinovic, a major figure in Croatian art, Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and its division IRWIN from Slovenia, and the 80s Malevich from Belgrade and Ljubljana. The term was first used by Peter Weibel in the leaflet of the 1983 exhibition of Laibach Kunst and then developed and picked up by other artists, curators, and writers. For example, see Marina Gržinić, “Synthesis: Retro-Avant-Garde, Or, Mapping Post-Socialism in Ex-Yugoslavia,” *Art Margins Online*, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/component/content/article/258-synthesis-retro-avant-garde-or-mapping-post-socialism-in-ex-yugoslavia->. or Marina Gržinić, *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism & the Retro-Avant-Garde*. (Edition Selene, 2000).

<sup>147</sup> For example, Mladen Stilinovic’s work from the 1970s with a collective called ‘Group of 6’ that organized exhibition-actions in public space: “Mladen Stilinovic,” Artist website, (n.d.), accessed 16 July, 2014, <http://mladenstilinovic.com/texts/an-artist-is-not-to-follow-the-tramway-tracks/>.

<sup>148</sup> She argues that socialism and communism were “psychotic spaces” but in different from the way in which capitalism configures spaces characterized by “constant becoming, change and re-invention of identities.” Essentially, akin to other authors writing about the notion of psychosis and lived communism, she argues that the difference stands in the non-existence of the art market in communist and socialist spaces, but understood as the primary mediator of these neurotic processes in capitalist space. In contrast, in socialist conditions, the effect of art interventions and performances in public space most commonly imply “over-identification”, and are strongly connected to ideology. The fact that actions in these spaces are regulated by ideology makes artistic intervention enter the realm of the political and by-pass the market, or the continuous process of change and becoming which the capitalist neurosis invites with its public spaces. Marina Gržinić, *Re-Politicizing Art, Theory, Presentation and New Media Technology* (Wien: Schlebrügge, 2008), 19.

## 2.4.2 Locally Aligned

Several Romanian critics and curators, especially those forming their practice in the 80s, seemed to feel the necessity to produce narratives of alignment and attunement to art histories in other East European countries, and to Western histories, to a certain degree. These accounts generally emphasize that, despite the comparably scarce history of film and video production in Romania, the very few works made – at least in the nearly two decades between 1970 – 1989 – have been instrumental, together with other types of art (performance, conceptual art), in representing Romania within underground or alternative art, belonging to a larger, Eastern European, former socialist context. Moreover, this narrative about alternative art that was in some form or another political in its resistance to the communist regime has often been placed in alignment or continuity with larger cultural and artistic currents, like the second-wave avant-gardes, conceptualism, and postmodernism.

### 2.4.2.1 Experiment, Underground, Private

The “experiment” is a central concept taken up by Romanian critic and writer Alexandra Titu. She proposes to re-read the history of Romanian art produced during communism as a history of the experiment. She bases her argument on the premise that communism had created a form of isolationism in Eastern European artistic productions, Romania included, where “any creation which is nonconformist charges itself with political meaning, implicit or declared.”<sup>149</sup> By naming the studio of 1970s Romania one of the primary sites for experiment, she suggests that collective action and experimentation with technologies are the main areas connected to resistant, political or alternative forms of artistic production. In this sense, “experimentalism” is further linked to the development of a “late” postmodernist tradition into postcommunism, which sees artists naturally traveling from experimental film, to video and installation art:

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<sup>149</sup> Titu, “Experimentalism in Romanian Art after 1960,”n.p.

The artist's film also becomes an important area for the experiments (filmography) of the Sigma Group, with the cinematographic installation Multivision, the films of Șerban Epure, Ion Grigorescu, of Geta Brătescu, Wanda Mihuleac, Radu Igaszag, Olimpiu Bandalac and of the experimental group Kinema Ikon of Arad, led by Gheorghe Sabău, etc. In a natural way those working with film begin to become preoccupied in the 1990's with video art, which wins ground. More and more artists opt for this medium (Geta Brătescu, Radu Igaszag, Alexandru Solomon, the subREAL Group, Sorin Vreme, Marilena Preda Sânc, Josef Bartha, Laszlo Ujvarossy, Matei Bejenaru).<sup>150</sup>

This catch-up art history based on the imagination of experimental, underground productions, or alternative forms of organization becomes both a way to continue tradition, and to support the contemporary and up-to-date practices of artists, working “in a natural way” with the “new” technologies, like video, and thus aligning themselves with practices performed regionally, and in “Western” art.

In another account, Adrian Guță makes a case for the alignment of Romanian art history (fragmented and undocumented) with International, but most specifically “Western” histories of art, through the creation and recuperation of documents, sources upon which entire histories can be built. He also considers that Eastern European art in communism shared a particular quality that made it resistant or political: precisely its underground, alternative nature, its closed-circuit, its “privateness.” He uses the publication *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, published by MoMa New York at the time he writes his article,<sup>151</sup> not only to situate Romanian art in a tradition of alternative and underground experiments, but also to underline the political character of these works, and as such, to argue for two types of continuities. Firstly, he assigns a place to Romanian art in Eastern and Central European art histories, only recently “discovered” or excavated from the underground after the “fall of communism.” Guță covers this first point by claiming that “the art we call alternative has been and still is, therefore, significantly present in its multiple facets, throughout almost five decades in former ex-communist countries in Europe.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Titu, “Experimentalism in Romanian Art after 1960.” n.p.

<sup>151</sup> Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl, eds., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002).

<sup>152</sup> Guță, “East Side Story,” my translation, n.p.

Secondly, he argues for continuity between political or politically engaged art produced in communist spatio-temporal contexts and after, in the time-space of postcommunism: “the critical dimension did not disappear after 1989, either taking form in relation to the totalitarian past or by referencing the sensitive issues of the 90s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>153</sup> The goal of this line of argumentation is to acknowledge that the scarcity of alternative, politicized art existed both in communist and postcommunist Romania, but that the small number of exceptions can be aligned temporally, to show that there was a line of continuity of response and resistance to the different political situations, which Romania has undergone in recent history. In a sense, Guță tries to map this weak tradition of what he calls alternative art, and to present it developing on a longer period of time, in tune with stronger traditions and Eastern European histories.

#### **2.4.2.2 A Search for Alignment with the “Region”**

This tendency for alignment with a “region” made of Eastern European, post-socialist spaces is rooted essentially in a comparative method: looking for similarities but also specificities amongst Eastern European countries and then, trying to situate them in relation to Western artistic traditions and currents, in order to contest or overcome an East-West division. I argue that these tendencies occurred amongst Romanian writers partially because the larger “region” was producing documents and histories about itself in this key, attempting to situate itself in relation to “Western” histories. By the time the *Primary documents* publication came out, a series of research projects, conferences and exhibitions<sup>154</sup> had addressed, framed, and deconstructed art from Eastern Europe, under the shared ethos of dissolving the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War, however, arguably reinforcing a margin or periphery view, or producing a sort of European Orientalism. It seems, that the comparison was carried out between Eastern Europe – geopolitically and economically “integrated” with the West – and a margin that has just translated slightly further, in the global South or even, perhaps outside of named cardinal points.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example: *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe*, 1995; *The Body and the East*, 1998; *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, 1999.

However, the criticism these larger projects stand open to, be they exhibitions or collections of documents, is that they sometimes write their histories precisely by replicating their “Western” counter-parts. About the Primary Documents publication, Martina Pachmanová<sup>155</sup> suggests that the effort might be one of finding singularities, and not that of alignment to “Western” art histories, of differentiating an art paradigm created on specific social and political conditions. Yet, the same reviewer observes a deep problematic in “the predominance of attitudes emerging from avant-garde and experimental practices and the presentation of art” alongside “the editors’ apparent preference for conceptualism and performance art,” posing the risk of “replicating one art historical canon with another.”<sup>156</sup> In turn, Guță does not seem to be highly preoccupied with these aspects, but rather he considers that this source points to and supports the argument he is making, about the underground networks of collaborative artistic work and the political dimensions that can be read in such alternative forms of collaboration. The way in which Guță writes his long article – as an extensive inventory in which he makes sure to mention all the names, works and spaces of contemporary Romanian art up to the time of writing – could be read as a response to what Pachmanová observes is “the disproportion between documents devoted to art in single countries.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, Guță might be presenting a fresh series of documents, meant perhaps to complement the primary sources on Romanian art – very scarce indeed in the collection – and to create continuity with both the primary sources on Romanian art, and a certain preferred account of Eastern European art as resistant, political, and alternative.

### **2.4.3 Technology and Transition**

Globally, the first two decades after 1989 have been characterized by changes in media technologies and re-engagement with moving images in artistic practices. Video, as one of these media, had an important part to play in how the changes occurred, and also a paradoxical relationship to this period. On one hand, video was a political and global

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<sup>155</sup> Martina Pachmanová, “The Double Life of Art in Eastern Europe,” *Art Margins*, June 30, 2003, accessed December 8, 2015,

[http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=289:the-double-life-of-art-in-eastern-europe&catid=112:book-reviews&Itemid=104](http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=289:the-double-life-of-art-in-eastern-europe&catid=112:book-reviews&Itemid=104).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

medium. Accounts of the transformations taking place after 1989 were constructed in connection with claims that art (video, media art and installation art specifically) found the space(s) and freedom to re-engage with politics. On the other hand, worldwide access to this medium and its heterogeneous use created an imperative need to see “video in the 90s as a hybridized domain deserving of treatment that preserves its discontinuities and multivocality.”<sup>158</sup> From practices emerging in Eastern Europe, to the resonances in the history of video in relation to performance art in the U.S. but also in Japan (in the work of Tetsuo Kogawa, for example), to its emergence in China, and to its role in continuing the tradition of the “testimonio” of the 1960s in Chicano experimental filmmaking,<sup>159</sup> video was again, in the 1990s, a central medium for artistic and political production.

#### **2.4.3.1 *Transitland*: Video as a Medium of Transition**

Within this context and specifically in relation to Eastern Europe, *Transitland* (2009) is an example of a large project that reflected on the revival of video in the 1990s. Looking at the changes of the previous twenty years, the *Transitland*<sup>160</sup> project understands this long period as a transition, where “the genre [of video art] has the capacity of generating political issues and concerns, and thus stimulates transformations to happen.”<sup>161</sup> This engagement of video art with politics in a transformative manner was coupled with arguments of a “boom” in the use of this technology, but also extended to other moving image media. For this project video was thus understood in broader, but also slightly confusing terms as “video films being represented or screened within art and exhibition context.”<sup>162</sup> The reason is that media technologies had encountered a lot of changes and the artists working initially with video, in the 1990s, shifted to other moving image technologies, to using installation and projection, analogue film, or digital media.

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<sup>158</sup> Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds., *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.xvii.

<sup>159</sup> These are examples compiled in the *Resolutions* anthology, with dedicated texts discussing the particularities of each of these situations at length. Ibid., p.xvi.

<sup>160</sup> *Transitland* was a curatorial and editorial project that included a travelling exhibition and an anthology of texts brought together in a reader. See Edit András, ed., *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 -2009* (Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009).

<sup>161</sup> Edit András, Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

However, the extension of the term video was aimed to bring the project closer to concerns on how moving images, art, and, political and social changes have come together, in recent history.

In the preface to the *Transitland* reader, video, in this broader understanding, was conceptualised by editor Edit András as the medium of transition. This premise was based on the argument that “in the past few decades, video has become one of the most important artistic means of documenting social and political change.”<sup>163</sup> This belief consequently organised the show and acted as one of the criteria for selection and inclusion in the archive. Moreover, the over-arching goal of the archival and curatorial project was formulated in rapport to existing materials and archives from Western Europe and the United States. As such, practices with moving image and discussions about these practices from Eastern Europe were framed often as invisible, being in the shadow, the grey zone, or the ghetto of art criticism and artistic practice. The sphere of video in particular, having arguably been “taken over” by views on media technologies, especially around access and distribution of content, had placed, in Edit András’s view, the onus on the medium and not on the content of works, at least in the first decade after 1989. Therefore, András argued, the second decade from 1989 was characterized by a shift, where “art historians and art critics [from the region], not necessarily specialised in the (not-so-new-anymore) media, media research or activities, have begun to interpret video art.”<sup>164</sup> Arguing for a turn in how moving image practices have been incorporated into artistic discourse, András did not, however, separate the twenty-year period from 1989 to the time of publishing this document, into two separate stages, but considered the two processes where video was central – transition and transformation.

However, not distinguishing clearly between the two terms – transition and transformation – becomes problematic when approaching the anthology as a whole. Not surprisingly, the texts included are themselves such heterogeneous artefacts of this twenty-year process, that it seems they elude the terms transition or transformation altogether. We can perhaps read the name *Transitland* to suggest the difficulties in fixing both the process of transition, and the transformations occurring in the varying local

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<sup>163</sup> Barnabas Bencsik, “Publisher’s Preface,” in *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 -2009*, ed. Edit András (Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 7.

<sup>164</sup> András, “Editor’s Preface and Acknowledgements,” 10.

contexts. Heteronomy, locality and acute attention to specific contexts is what the texts in the reader seem to suggest,<sup>165</sup> overall, and this is also the biggest strength of the project. In her own contribution from the reader, Svetlana Boym characterises 2009 as a cultural moment that made visible “a conflict of asynchronous modernities, of various projects of globalization that are often at odds with one another.”<sup>166</sup> The situation is, of course, different for all the spaces included in these processes of transformation and they cannot be simply brought together by the prefix “post.” However, some aspects could be considered common in most post-socialist countries. Already in 2000, Geert Lovink, media researcher and theorist, signalled that “in Eastern Europe the impact of the so called globalization, new economy and so on was much more drastic and more on the surface, precisely because of the specific conditions, which left those countries more vulnerable to changes.”<sup>167</sup> One of the reasons for this acceleration might have been, suggests Lovink, the fact that transition was an ideological mystification, which veiled the entire process in wishful thinking, both in what local economies, artistic practice and political development were concerned. He considered this was a “procedure of political mythology” and that transition played a double role politically, and in contemporary art.

The Romanian transition to neoliberal capitalism, as an integration into the global market and systems of production, has had its counterpart transition in art practice, understood as the transition into contemporary art. Transition into contemporary art thus held the meaning of a certain escape from the ghetto, an escape from the provincialism of communism, a manifestation of the clandestine and the hidden into the open, in exhibition and institutions that promoted and sustained this move. In Romania, with the conditions of production and reception having changed and access to technology having been facilitated through external funding, the exhibition landscape of moving image art shapeshifted. A liberal media environment developed and arguably, extended access to means and technologies for producing film and video

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<sup>165</sup> The book includes contributions by practitioners, cultural theorists and art critics like Marina Gržinić, Boris Groys, Boris Buden, Keiko Sei, Miklós Peternák, Konstantin Bokhorov, Călin Dan and Mihnea Mircan, amongst others.

<sup>166</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Modernities Out of Sync. The Tactful Art of Anri Sala,” in *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 -2009*, ed. Edit András (Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 79.

<sup>167</sup> Geert Lovink and Călin Dan, *SubReal and Romanian new media arts*, October 2, 2000, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://geertlovink.org/interviews/interview-with-calin-dan/>, n.p.

art, installation and “new” media projects<sup>168</sup> led to the expansion of contemporary moving image practices.

The first major moving image art exhibition of the early 1990s was *EX ORIENTE LUX – The Light comes from the East*, curated by Călin Dan in a space called Dalles Hall, in 1993, in Bucharest. This exhibition was frequently referenced as a landmark in Romanian video or moving image art history after 1989. Various texts about the show,<sup>169</sup> even if at considerable distance from one another, select and reiterate that it has been a premiere in the Romanian context and a symbol of the transition into a new economic and political period of production. In the piece that Călin Dan writes for the *Transitland* reader, “Media Arts Get Media Free: a Small Anthology of Older Views”, he says of the event, a decade and a half later, that it was consonant with the idea of stepping into a new stage, the initiation into a period marked by the term “post.” He writes about the media environment of the time, and how video art reflected the broader, political transition that Romania and the entire region were undergoing: “In Romania, the media environment turned from an ideological desert (ante-December 1989) into a complete jungle (post-).”<sup>170</sup> However, he considers that “the social arguments in which I wrapped the whole project were wishful thinking,”<sup>171</sup> reducing possibilities of what video art can do, or better, could do at the time, to the thought that “At best, video art is a (pious) lie meant to prove that, even in the context of new media, art continues to play a role in

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<sup>168</sup> A brief timeline of landmark moving image exhibitions and events in the 1990s and mid 2000s could include: **September 1994** – Judit Angel (part of Kinema Ikon) curates a national exhibition entitled *ART unlimited srl* – art museum, Palace of Culture, urban spaces, Arad; **June 1995** – *INTER(n)* – artistic interventions in urban space by eight visual artists (Matei Bejenaru, Sorin Vreme, Lia and Dan Perjovschi, Sandor Bartha, Călin Man, the subREAL group – Călin Dan and Iosif Kiraly), Arad; **1996** – Judit Angel curator – *The Museum Complex* exhibition, Arad Art Museum (video installations, photography etc by artists from Austria and Romania); **1999** – Judit Angel curates *After the Wall*, Stockholm, Moderna Musset; **2002** – *Preview* exhibition at Kalinderu MediaLab (space of mnac – National Museum of Contemporary Art), Bucharest; **2003** – *Periferic 6* – Art Biennial (started in 1997 as a performance festival) holds a considerable section on Video art from Romania and Moldova, Iași; **2004** – National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest opens in wing E4 of the Houses of Parliament, former Houses of the People, Bucharest; **2005** – Kinema Ikon has a retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.

<sup>169</sup> George Sabău includes EX ORIENTE LUX in the timeline of moving image art which he drafts, and two texts by Călin Dan feature in both publications mentioned before, *Primary Documents* (2002) and the *Transitland* reader (2009).

<sup>170</sup> Călin Dan, “Media Arts Get Media Free: A Small Anthology of Older Views,” in *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 -2009*, ed. Edit András (Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 132.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

our civilization.”<sup>172</sup> Such statement seems to downplay the hopes and recuperations of other accounts, such as Alexandra Titu’s, which departs from ideas about video as a medium of transition and in its use by artists, in politically engaged practices.

#### **2.4.3.2 Self-colonization against Provincialism?**

*EX ORIENTE LUX* (1993), as well as the next two major exhibitions which followed – *01010101* (1994, Bucharest) and *MEDIA Culpa* (1995, Bucharest) – were organised with the help of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art.<sup>173</sup> This centre was based in Bucharest and was supervised by the same Călin Dan, art critic, curator, and editor of local *Arta* magazine. According to Dan’s text in the *Transitland* reader, the premises and concepts which structured *EX ORIENTE LUX* were not aligned to George Soros’s ideas and beliefs, the latter having been sceptical of the project, especially its engagement with “new” media and new technologies. Surprisingly, *01010101* followed as a second show, directly referencing programming language and digital technology and themed: “Artistic Discourse – a Reflex of Community’s Problems.” Sabău notes in 2005, with admiration, that the latter was “a communicational event, by phone, fax, e-mail (!) from Arad, Brasov, locations in Bucharest, Iași, Oradea, the Tăușeni-Cluj village, and Zalău.”<sup>174</sup> The third exhibition at the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art was curated by Aurelia Mocanu and by that point, Călin Dan had been replaced by Irina Cios in the role of director of the centre. The last of the three major shows, it took a critical stand toward media practices of the time and their ethical and political involvement with the newly formed parties.

Funding from the Soros Foundation came through centres set in place not only in Romania, but in other 19 cities in the region (Bucharest, Riga, Kiev, Vilnius, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Sofia – all established in 1993) and had functioned as an instrument to implement the “transition” into contemporary art. It seemed that what the Soros Foundation had offered at the time was an institutional space and framework for artists to organise exhibitions and financially and structurally supported the making of “experiments” with new media, as well as strongly contributing to the production of

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Abbreviated CSAC, later CIAC.

<sup>174</sup> Sabău, “A Contextual History of Ki.”

documents, mainly exhibition catalogues and small publications. These writings showed the contradictory threads mentioned throughout this chapter. On the one hand, they claimed a sort of synchronicity and continuity with a *geist* present in underground, clandestine spaces before 1989, which aligned local Eastern European histories to a larger spirit of the experiment in the region, itself also connected to experiments in “Western” art of the 60s and 70s. On the other hand, the way in which exhibitions were curated and staged, and publications written, displayed an insistence on the rupture with the “old” (regime, media, technology), yet being adamant of the idea that these centres allowed for the experiment to continue, to “foster the active, theoretical spirit, in which the local cultural syntheses are prepared.”<sup>175</sup>

In the name of emancipation, the Soros Centres for Contemporary Art implemented the transition to a cultural model of an open society. As Octavian Eșanu (founding director of the Soros Centre in Chișinău) later reflects, the contradictions above are only apparent, as:

Contemporary art, often regarded as the true successor of the classical avant-garde, was called upon to replace the closed societies’ outdated and ostensibly bankrupt ideals of socialist realism, concerned as they were with a truthful depiction of the process of domestication of history.<sup>176</sup>

The model of an open society was based on Soros’ own political affiliations with the writings of liberal philosophers like Karl Popper, and saw contemporary art of the “West” as a model for openness and emancipation. Consequently, the function of these centres was to act as instruments of transition to a capitalist cultural model of production and reception. In this sense, one can possibly say that the need to escape provincialism had turned into a form of self-colonization that can only be identified post-factum.

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<sup>175</sup> Titu, “Experimentalism in Romanian Art after 1960.”

<sup>176</sup> Octavian Eșanu, “The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: The Managed Avant-Garde,” in *Speaking of a Gap Can Cause Doubles* (Iași: Periferic 8 Biennial for Contemporary Art/ Art as Gift, 2008), 4.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In order to understand the contemporary artistic context of Romania, I have identified a need to trace some of the moving image practices in the communist space-time. However, the role of this chapter was not to produce an overview or a history of Romanian moving image art during communism, but to consider how these histories reflect the socio-political transformations from recent Romanian history.

Moving image practices in Romania during communism were generally scarce and this allowed some of the local narratives to argue that a few exceptional works were resistant and political, mainly because of the clandestine conditions of their production and reception. Of these clandestine practices, two models were discussed: the individual and solitary work in the studio of artist Ion Grigorescu, and the collective experiments of the Kinema Ikon workshop. They have been incorporated into narratives about moving image art production and Romanian moving image art history, in the period of “transition” and “postcommunism.” These narratives, I argued, aimed to recuperate, retrospectively, such models as forms of soft resistance to the communist regime, therefore as political art. Most of these claims, I suggested, focus on the experiment, on experience, and the ability of these exceptional individual artists or collectives to use the medium of film in order to out-manoeuvre restrictions in access and technology.

Ion Grigorescu largely rejects these narratives of recuperation, some of which have retrospectively portrayed him as a member of a Romanian counterpart to avant-garde movements in other socialist countries, which in Romania never existed as such. What is apparent in his works, especially in his own return to the images he made in the 1970s, is the call to re-address recent history, to complicate and constantly revisit it.

In turn, Kinema Ikon produced documents of their activity and wrote their own history into stages, clearly breaking away with the communist period after 1989, into both “new” media and towards an ethos of the experiment anchored in the historical avant-gardes, like Dada or Surrealism. However, if the group showed some enthusiasm and direct engagement with politics in the early 1990s, then soon after, their activity retreated completely from politics, activism or direct action.

The experience of the solitary artist and the collective experiments of a clandestine group were picked up in those narratives aimed to write the history of

resistant and political art from Romania. The use of moving images to produce experiments during communism was interpreted in later accounts, like Alexandra Titu's, as continuing naturally in the 1990s, by engagement with "new" image making technology, like video, and later, digital media.

I argue that what stood behind these narratives was a need for alignment, which was double: to align locally with other Eastern European, former socialist countries, and an alignment with "Western" histories and practices with moving images. In the first case, claims that video was a global medium and the medium of transition in Eastern European artistic practice fuelled this need and were consistent with a narrative where experiments with film during communism continued with the work of video, in the period of "postcommunism." In the second case, using "new" media technologies, like digital media, reinforced ideas that a tradition of playful experiments was being continued, and connected Romanian practice to the European avant-gardes, due to a need for synchronicity with "Western" contemporary art. However, this link was only made with the experimental nature of these avant-gardes, even whilst occulting the revolutionary politics of these movements, particularly because of a certain "shame" and disillusionment to engage with politics, both during communism, and in the first decade after the 1989 revolution.

In addition, the institutional structures and consequent ideological framework of the centres of contemporary art set up throughout the former socialist region by the Soros Foundation sustained some of these approaches. Furthermore, these structures functioned to direct the overall transition into contemporary art, imagined as a new stage, which necessarily implied a rupture with the "old", be that media technologies or artistic practice. Thus, as Octavian Eșanu pointed out, the local histories of alignment reflect the view that contemporary art was the rightful continuation of the avant-gardes and socialist realism was only a mistake which needed to be sealed up.

In the next chapter, I discuss the 1989 Romanian revolution, an event that arguably marked a break in recent history, and the moving images created during this event, as they are used in a work by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution*. In Chapter 3, I return to the "postcommunist" period and the years after the revolution, to address the implications of the 1990 anti-government protests for the growing distrust in radical politics, along with the role of moving images in charting the following period of "transition."

## Chapter 3 : Moving Image and Event: 1989

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the images created in the 1989 Romanian revolution and the role they have played in the events of that time. I am concerned here with the relations established between images and subject formation in what was frequently labelled a televised revolution. Within this event, images were created through several means: through the occupation of Studio 4 of the National Television station in Bucharest, by independent video cameras filming in the streets and squares, and by cameras filming in spaces where the political structures were being re-organised, like the Central Committee building. What is of interest in these images, I argue, is how they articulate the socio-political field around the event. I thus ask *what is the role of moving images in the 1989 revolution and how can this event be approached via moving image art?*

In the first section I discuss how moving images of the 1989 revolution have “stepped outside of screens” and have circulated worldwide. By this, I mean that the images of the Romanian 1989 revolution recorded the event, as much as they created the event, through their circulation. The images exited the frames that supposedly held them inside one realm – of media and television – and entered various circuits of production, mediation and verification. This situation was particular to the 1989 Romanian revolution because of the entangled relations between those making and those viewing moving images of the event. More exactly, on one hand, images were created as the revolution unfolded and were spectated at the same time, and on the other hand, in the images, one can see individual and collective political subjects emerging in front or behind cameras. These images and the process of filming have mediated how participants were politicized by the event. I thus read, alongside a small number of authors, these images as an opportunity to re-think the capacities media technologies have in relation to politics. In other words, I am interested in the circulation of images in and around the revolution-as-event, and in how their mediation could potentially produce political subjects.

In the second section, I look closely at Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică’s *Videograms of a Revolution*. This work is used here singularly and not in conjunction with other works from Harun Farocki’s rich repertoire of moving image practices, or the rest of the documentary practice of Andrei Ujică because this collaboration plays a

particular part in negotiating the 1989 Romanian event in terms of the role of images and media technologies through an artwork. I believe that *Videograms* takes a specific avenue of investigation into the capacities of archival images to build what can be called media historiographies. In addition, *Videograms of a Revolution* also marks an interesting turn, as I will develop in this chapter, in the late Farocki's practice in the art context, whilst maintaining an interesting formalised distinction and separation between films and installations (as his work is still structured on his website and *Videograms* features under the "film" section). This turn to the art context of exhibition and production also coincides with a larger turn and preoccupation of the art world with the use of images as documents, considering their rapid proliferation, circulation and mediation in several global events in the late 1980s and the 1990s. In turn, for Ujică, *Videograms* was a first step in what later was an extended practice with archival images and their use, contextualization and the problematics these images raise in the field of documentary filmmaking. He has developed these aspects most notably in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), where he briefly returns to the 1989 screen events and the screened memories of this event, through the use of home movies of the Ceaușescu family, alongside other archival images. However, whilst for both filmmakers there are clear continuations of these interests in moving images for producing media historiographies, it is *Videograms* which remains both a form of writing with images and a solid contestation of the possibilities of such histories to emerge, thus a valuable object and tool for research in relation to the concerns of this thesis. Images' capacity to document the event and to show or help viewers retrospectively recompose "what happened" is not the goal of my inquiry into this work. I discuss, nevertheless, the narrative of searching for truth in images because it has been one of the most common and influential views on the topic. However, I do not subscribe to this narrative and the potential role of images as documents of a historical event is not the focus of this reading. Instead, I argue that *Videograms* shows how the images of the Romanian revolution became mobile, how they circulated in and out of the event, and how their mediation reverberated between those in front of cameras, speaking and performing their protest, and those viewing images live on their television screens.

### 3.2 Revolution-As-Event and Its Moving Images

I have covered briefly, in the first chapter, how the notion of event is important for this research. Firstly, I understand the event as something that has happened, as a historical and political event. In that sense, the 1989 Romanian revolution was an event. It was a historical event that reconfigured the political order of the country, but also connected Romania to broader re-configurations occurring in world politics, with the “fall” of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and with the end of the Cold War. The 1989 Romanian revolution-as-event can thus be an opportunity to understand how this local political and historical moment was connected to shifts in global power relations. Secondly, this event has been a televised revolution and the source of moving images, which have circulated worldwide. A particular aspect was that the subjects involved in this event were making moving images about it and simultaneously watching the images they had produced. Thirdly, the 1989 revolution has been widely labelled a spectacle, or rather, a spectacular display of violence through moving images. This “flood of images contributing to the spectacle”<sup>177</sup> has later been accused of not being able to provide any solid evidence about “what had actually happened”<sup>178</sup> – implying or presuming that spectacle does take on that function successfully. In addition, the violence of the situation in Romania in 1989 was perceived by International media and some cultural theorists as singular and different from the “symbolic”, “soft”, or “velvet” revolutions occurring at the same time, in the rest of the former socialist, Eastern European countries. In other words, the moving images of this event were expected to stand in accord with mediatic conventions of “live” transmissions, particularly because of their televised nature. In these conventions, moving images needed to abide by a specific truth regime where media images showed the event “live” and thus acted as proofs, or as witnesses to the events. The incapacity of images to prove “trustworthy” thus led philosophers like Baudrillard to question the nature of the 1989 Romanian revolution itself, as a historical and political event. Later on, this became one of the most common approaches to the 1989 moment in Romania: a media spectacle where images had circulated unbound, unreliable, producing a simulacrum of a political event.

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<sup>177</sup> Eva Kernbauer, “Establishing Belief: Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, Videograms of a Revolution,” *Grey Room*, no. 41 (2010): 70.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

These views have been nuanced, however, by local responses, through dossiers and collections of essays, such as Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovsky's edited book, *Romanian Televised Revolution: Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*.<sup>179</sup> In their introduction to this collection, the authors open up the event and its possible meanings, at the intersection of politics, capital, and media technology. They also draw a very useful Foucauldian-inspired genealogy<sup>180</sup> of the truth regimes used to address the 1989 Romanian revolution and its images. The first such regime is one centred on "evidence", or the "witness", which I have touched upon. This regime follows a "logic of evidence", by which still and moving images from the revolution, as well as witness and participant accounts of the event are used to establish and legitimate an understanding of what the truth about this moment was. This way of finding truth is defined by a need to find (legal) proof, and thus the event is subjected to a trial where evidence can be provided from documents. In this line of argumentation, when considered as documents, moving images prove unreliable. Furthermore, Țichindeleanu argues elsewhere<sup>181</sup> that this regime of truth has been applied on an extended scale, to recent Romanian past, by performing the "trial of communism." This trial, he continues, has been carried out both by institutionalising anticommunism, and through a type of cultural production based on the same "logic of evidence." One end point of this so-called "trial" was a strongly titled *Final Report (on communism)*, published in 2006 by a presidentially appointed commission and led by neo-conservative writer Vladimir Tismăneanu.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, eds., *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, trans. Alistair Ian Blyth, Alexander James Samuel, and Karsten Schoellner, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011).

<sup>180</sup> Michel Foucault's notion of "genealogy" as a method for gaining historical perspective sets out to uncover relations between knowledge, subject and power, by tracing historical documents, events, and discourses and revealing the influences of those relations in the present. It was developed throughout Foucault's works, but the method is discussed most explicitly in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, World of Man (London: Routledge, 1989). and in Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>181</sup> Țichindeleanu, "Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism. Beyond Anticommunism in Romania." n.p.

<sup>182</sup> The finality implied in the title is something the authors in the collection bring forth for reconsideration, as the political weight of declaring communism over and publishing a 'final' judgement on the entire period is considerably problematic. The report is available online, see "Raport Final [Final Report (On Romanian Communism)]" (Bucharest: The Presidential Commission For the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, 2006), accessed December 8, 2015, [http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT\\_FINAL\\_CPADCR.pdf](http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf). I return to this report in the next chapter, where I argue that it is necessary to critically discuss similar proclamations, as well as the entire so-called "postcommunist condition."

In the second regime related to 1989 in Romania, Țichindeleanu and Petrovsky further argue, truth is obtained through a certain type of questioning, essentially ineffective because it doubts the very nature of the event, the distribution of roles, and the means through which one could determine degrees of involvement and participation of various actors, in the revolution. The most common questions posed in this logic have been, in fact: “What is a ‘revolution’?”, “Did ‘the terrorists’ exist?”, or “Who were those people shooting at ‘us’?”<sup>183</sup> This second regime uses an argument based on the dichotomy between visibility and concealment, which, under a claim of revealing the concealed, produces an essentially non-emancipatory approach that speaks of an “us” as a concept meant to produce a sense of belonging or solidarity, but ultimately void of a referent. It is in fact a circular and self-referential argument, a perpetual form of questioning which, trying to find out what the event “really” was, avoids it almost completely.

Finally, Țichindeleanu and Petrovsky propose, there is a third regime of truth, which most essays in the *Romanian Televised Revolution* collection try to work with: that the revolution was “a problematic event that cannot be (dis)solved in its after-the-fact explanations.”<sup>184</sup> Any pertinent view of the 1989 Romanian revolution requires, in their opinion, adopting this applied Foucauldian perspective in order to understand truth in an event framed by media; in other words, to scrutinize the relations of power between media technology, capital, and politics, during the event and in the time following it.

Unlike the strong reliability on evidence and witnesses of the first regime, or the continuous questioning of the second, understanding the Romanian revolution of 1989 through a relational approach could produce novel meanings of it. The following section looks at the local relations, compositions, and configurations established between moving images and those producing them, in the communist period and in the first days of the revolution. Then, I place the historical event and its moving images in the historical context of its time, as a televised, global event and discuss how it was presented in various International narratives about the “fall” of communism.

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<sup>183</sup> Petrovsky and Țichindeleanu, *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

### 3.2.1 Fade In: Images and Political Subjects

In order to understand the revolution as event, one needs to take into account what happened “before” and “after”, not in the sense of stages following one another, but as connected fragments. Let us take a step back from the events of 1989 and look at the types of images produced “before”, at how they were spectated, and how they might offer pathways for analysing and understanding the images from the revolution.

In the lived experience of communist Romania, one would encounter two types of moving images. On one hand, there were the intermittent – usually for less than two hours daily – moving images coming, in their single-channel form, cancelling any traces of “other” possible moving images and implicitly proclaiming themselves as the only truth-images. Intrinsicly and completely belonging to one single body, one institution, even broadcast from a single location; no transgression, no appropriations, no space to refute their validity. They were aired by the National Television Channel, from the television station in Bucharest. The live events they were mediating mostly covered mass rallies or party assemblies. So far, this unfolds as the old and very familiar scenario of oppression and censorship, of totalitarian principles applied to media practices, under several forms of state control. Nothing unexpected seems to arise here.

On the other hand, there were ways to subvert the reception of state televised images. One of them was through the sensitive and sometimes dangerous,<sup>185</sup> but always collective actions of neighbours from a community. The claims one could make about the political power of these seemingly meaningless subversions cannot go beyond their relatively minor character, not least because the images intercepted were from either Bulgaria, Ukraine, or Russia and not incredibly dissimilar to those already accessible. Nevertheless, the nature of the images hijacked through such collective methods was interesting: grainy, decayed, unreliable and ghostly. In a way, the opposite of the images transmitted and state-controlled.

In fact, one can identify three types of media images in Romania before the 1989 revolution: firstly, images in full colour,<sup>186</sup> state transmitted and lasting only for a few hours per day; secondly, the fleeting, grainy, decayed interference-image; and lastly, in-

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<sup>185</sup> This action involved reaching the rooftop of nine or twelve storey housing estate towers to slightly adjust the position of an entire building's TV aerial.

<sup>186</sup> Colour broadcasting started in Romanian Television in 1982, the decade that also marked the reduction of air time to a few hours a day.

between these, for most of the “unoccupied” air time, static. The latter, with a hardly perceivable movement, looked like undecided matter, like iron fillings polarizing around magnets.

Then, in the time leading to and during the days of the revolution, suddenly, there was an explosion of moving images. They came from the streets, houses, and even the TV station and they multiplied, like in a hall of mirrors. First, in the live disruption of the fixed, state-emitted image. This disruption was also performed collectively and this time not by moving a TV aerial, but via moving bodies. During the initial moments of the revolution in Bucharest, the first attacks against the political power were also the first acts of subversion of state-emitted moving images. These subversions were produced by a mass at a rally in one of the central squares of Bucharest. Usually inert and obedient, the public present at Ceaușescu’s speeches was now moving and shouting over his voice. However, the movements of the public were hardly visible in the images. They were mostly reflected on Ceaușescu’s body and face, in his televised image, as he was speaking to the camera. The state television camera operators insisted on keeping the image fixed on the speaker or moved to the sky when disruptions occurred, refusing to pan to the crowds – most likely because they were respecting directions from the studio. Perceived by Ceaușescu himself, in his live televised speech, the movement of people in the square appeared in the images as a technical fault, as a glitch in the transmission stream, or as a trepidation created by a ghostly interference. To this ghost and not to the crowd, whom he could not imagine could move or speak against him, Ceaușescu kept asking for a reply, as you would do on the line of an interrupted telephone call: “Hello?! Hello? Hello!”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> These images of Ceaușescu and his calls are part of the work *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), where Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică analyse Ceaușescu’s riveting gaze and offer the suggestion that his reply seems to be to a disturbance on a telephone line. More broadly, this particular piece of footage has circulated widely on Romanian and International media channels after the revolution, and it is now available in different versions online, on video-sharing platforms.

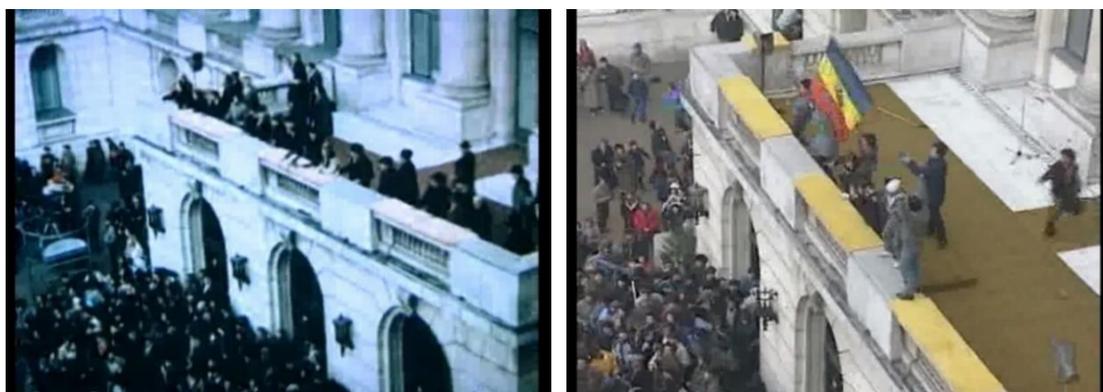


Image 6 - Two different cameras recording the balcony at the Central Committee building in 1989, when Ceaușescu's speech was interrupted (left), and when the protesters occupied it and were waving the Romanian flag (right). Source: *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).



Image 7 - Ceaușescu's 1968 televised speech from the Central Committee building, film stills. Source: National Film Archive, accessed online from the official video channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ArhivaTVROnline>.

In 1968, from the same balcony, Ceaușescu held his gloriously televised moment of opposition to the U.S.S.R's proposed invasion of Czechoslovakia (See Image 7). These moving images marked a turn in building his personality cult, showing not only the leader speaking to the general committee or addressing a television audience, but Ceaușescu speaking live to the mass assembly. Twenty-one years later, the same space would hold the last televised speech Ceaușescu ever made, marking the beginning of what was to become a televised revolution.

Initially, Ceaușescu was delivering his speech to a “mass of individually separated spectators,”<sup>188</sup> according to Aurel Codoban. After a while, this mass started to form in front of his eyes as a collective of moving and speaking individuals. He could not conceive this interruption from the crowds, this act of taking over his speech and taking over his space in the televised images. This collective of individuals had interrupted Ceaușescu’s speech and they had hijacked the moving images transmitted by the state television. The movements and the unrest of the crowd became visible in the images transmitted by the state television, which obstinately fixated on Ceaușescu talking at the balcony. The movements of the crowds reflected in Ceaușescu’s awe and in the glitches, the fluctuations, or the shakings of the camera. The images of the interrupted speech were a mirror to the movements displaying collective discontent. These were the initial images that made visible how Ceaușescu’s power had started to be disrupted. This was the first in a series of disruptions created by crowds or individuals, which continued to emerge in images in different situations during the revolution: in the squares, on the streets, in the television studio.

Making images during the events or intervening in processes of making images – in the televised speech and later, through the take-over of a studio in the national television – became acts of disruption, through which those participating in the events could speak back; they could become speaking subjects. These interference-images produced in the event vary, but most of them are momentary interruptions, fleeting images of a scene, situation, someone speaking to a camera, someone speaking from behind a camera. In a sense, they have some of the characteristics of the hijacked images from the communist time-space. They are decayed, grainy, ghost-like images and some

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<sup>188</sup> Aurel Codoban, “The Media Conditions of a Revolution,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 75.

of them have been re-transmitted, shuffled and re-watched, forming a mix-tape of the Romanian revolution. In addition, because of their circulation, mixing and repetition, some of these moving images shaped the memories and imagination around what the Romania revolution-as-event has been.

When set in contrast with the images broadcast normally by state television, which reduced the experience of lived communism to a few hours of formalised coverage – the images of the revolution have been interpreted by following a “logic of evidence”, as “real” images, mediating the strongly lived experience of a historical event. They were indeed powerful and affectively engaging images. One could only assume they were reflecting the powerful, emotional, affectively engaging events of those found in intense situations in front of the camera, as well as behind it. They were the records of a revolution, more or less accurately showing what was happening, as well as inscribing the debris generated by the event – often in the form of images hard to make sense of, showing random acts, postures and gestures. If anything, this debris could function to validate further their authenticity – they were quite naturally confusing images, taken in haste and from the midst of a violent event, from inside a revolution. However, this narrative turned on its axis, when some of the images which seemed real “disappointed” and exposed their inability to accurately document the event and to produce evidence about what had happened.

What had actually happened in the square, from the point of disruption onwards? Was the disruption actually set up for the benefit of a *coup*, was there actually a “real” revolution in Romania? This is the position which functions under the logic of the second regime of truth identified by Țichindeleanu and Petrovzsky, based on the repetitive questioning of the “real” nature of the event. This position can be identified in some of the cultural productions of historians, sociologists or political scientists, where, for example, from the morphing child of the terms *coup-d'état* and revolution came the specific Romanian term “loviluție.”<sup>189</sup> Nevertheless, it seems as valid from these accounts that 1989 in Romania was a revolt, a fully-fledged revolution, or a half-orchestrated confusion that culminated in overturning the regime. The views of writers like Baudrillard and his distrust in the political context to be capable of producing any

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<sup>189</sup> These accounts are summarized in one of the many books on the 1989 revolution. See Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția Unei Revoluții* [December '89. The Deconstruction of a Revolution] (Bucharest: Polirom, 2009).

valid, true and powerful event whatsoever further legitimated similar local positions. Baudrillard dismissed both the Gulf War and the Eastern European revolutionary movements as belonging to the “logic of weak events,”<sup>190</sup> or simulacra generated via static or moving images – an interpretation which could be included in his overarching position of distrust in grand narratives.<sup>191</sup> On the other hand, Jürgen Habermas, the well-known German theorist of the public sphere has dismissed the moments as “catch-up revolutions,”<sup>192</sup> events *en route* to democracy. By extension, in this logic, the validity of images from the event was rendered futile when the validity of the events themselves was questioned.

Why then, would the images of the Romanian revolution be of any interest? First, because these moving images produce the event in a specific way and they create a reality of the event, which can be used to revisit and critically assess recent Romanian history. Then, I argue that overall, in the various types of images from this moment, one can observe people participating in the revolution and recording the event they are making, at the same time. This relationship with the event through the image can open up interesting debates about what it means to be a political subject. The images from the 1989 Romanian revolution show people participating in acts of protest, in disruptions, and very likely considering their actions central and of their own making. Those captured in the images lived the situation, they created their own positions as speaking subjects, they created their own moving images for the first time, and they watched these images live, as the event unfolded. Four years after the December revolution, Slavoj Žižek provides a short reflection on this aspect:

The masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest “experienced” the situation as “open”...they participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995).

<sup>191</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>192</sup> Referenced in Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*.

<sup>193</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 2.

His argument is constructed in Lacanian fashion, to support that the hole<sup>194</sup> that was cut in the Romanian flag represented the absence of the master-signifier, the space that allowed and actually required the subject of the postmodern age “to occupy all the time”<sup>195</sup>, even when the new order (the “new harmony”) stabilized itself and rendered invisible the hole as such. As it happens, Hungarians also cut a round hole in their flag, where the national emblem used to be, but the images of the revolutionary Romanian flag had a wider circulation. One could speculate that Žižek uses this cue particularly because of the abundance of televised images around the Romanian event and as such, his reading makes a slight return to the image and what images could reveal, when they are revisited.

This is an aspect debated in a dialogue from 1990 between Hubertus von Amelunxen, Charles Grivel, Georg Maag, Peter M. Spangeberg, and Andrei Ujică,<sup>196</sup> where they acknowledge the role of images in critically assessing the political and historical implications of the 1989 revolution. These media historians, theoreticians and/or practitioners have discussed the configurations of time, space, subjects, and the movement apparent in images of the Romanian revolution, and their implications for local and International media landscapes. This type of interest was quickly lost when images from the event came under the interrogation of various truth regimes, eventually rendering them invaluable as tools for research. As a consequence, the distrust in images’ ability to stand and act as documents for establishing truth had shifted the onus to text, and in Romania’s case, to the search for truth in written documents. This move away from images was supported and legitimated by institutions that set out to investigate “the” truth about the revolution and the communist regime. These investigations did, however, have a specifically anticommunism agenda.

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<sup>194</sup> Žižek speaks of “the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out,” presumably meaning here the Romanian coat of arms, which featured golden wheat stalks around the edges, a mountain scenery with pine trees and a bright shining sun, an electric power plant and a blue river. Indeed, the communist red star is present on the coat of arms, but only small on top. Of all the socialist states who signed the Warsaw pact, most of them either did not have any emblems or coats of arms on their flags (Poland and Czechoslovakia) or had ones with no direct reference to socialist symbols (Bulgaria). The rest (East Germany, Soviet Union, Hungary, Romania and Albania) did bear the socialist emblem on the flags or had only some elements or symbols. See Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Grivel et al., “Time and Screens. Hubertus von Amelunxen in Conversation with Charles Grivel, Georg Maag, Peter M. Spangenberg and Andrei Ujică,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrovszky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 123–47.

Moving image artworks like Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) and a series of other works by Romanian artists<sup>197</sup> re-compose the historical event, the mediatised event and its images, and the individual and collective subjectivities made visible at the meeting point of these co-ordinates. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss these compositions, as they appear in *Videograms of a Revolution*, focusing specifically on the relation between image, political event and subject formation, which the work interrogates. However, prior to this analysis, there are some observations to be made about how the 1989 revolution-as-event can be situated within larger shifts and changes happening at the time, at a global level.

### 3.2.2 Fade Out: A Global Event

As a televised and highly mediatised event, the Romanian revolution has produced an abundance of images. As mentioned, the truthful nature of these images or their capacity to reflect the truth about the situation remain aspects out of direct focus for this research. Instead, the relation between moving images, the emergence of political subjects and the role of this event on a global scale provokes an interesting field for discussion.

The collective acts of hijacking the TV aerials, which took place in a community of neighbours, had moved onto a different scale, to disrupting the live transmission of the state television, during Ceaușescu's last televised speech. This interruption, discussed in the previous section, was followed by the occupation of the state television building by protesters who started transmitting live from one of the studios. Both of these acts of disruption were precarious, in the literal sense of the term, as not held in place, uncertain or dependent upon a degree of chance. Moreover, these actions were performed without a clear sense of what moving images would be produced, how they would "look like", or what role they would have. Most of the moving images that have circulated globally at the time of the 1989 Romanian revolution came from the occupied state television.<sup>198</sup> The images produced in Studio 4 reflected a state of confusion and

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<sup>197</sup> See Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, Mini DV and 35 mm, 2006; Dan Mihălțianu, *La Revolution Dans Le Budoir*, 1999; Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Procesul/The Trial*, film, 2004.

<sup>198</sup> There were also a great number of camcorders (for the time and accessibility) on the streets, filming the events, some of these collected and compiled in Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution*. However, most of the archival footage that has circulated widely in International media was produced in the television studios, or by the television station.

were incorporated in International coverage that supported a continuing Cold War binary. For example, Margaret Morse draws attention to how one U.S. news presenter considered the “low-tech take-over of the Romanian state television in Bucharest”<sup>199</sup> as a surprising, almost archaic move on the part of the protesters. The argument was that the decision to occupy the television station was asynchronous with a time of global “popular access to technological means of capturing, storing, and distributing images – the camcorder, the VCR, the portable satellite dish, and the computer”<sup>200</sup> – presumably all media technologies which, in the view of this presenter, were instruments for social change. One of the explanations for this act of attacking, conquering and occupying the television station was that it was perceived as one of the sites of power of the Ceaușescu regime. As previously mentioned, televised transmission was limited before 1989 and exclusively state-controlled, thus any disruption, intervention or subversion of the TV station meant a direct attack on the regime and an act of undermining its power. However, with the use of the label “low-tech”, the coverage clearly displays the United States’ position to this space as backward, lost in time, standing behind the Western wall of technological advances and of social emancipation.

As a televised event, the Romanian revolution became a global moment and its images have circulated quickly around television stations of the world. At the same time, the Romanian revolution was a global event because it was entering a cycle of political events and (moving) images of street clashes, protests, and military actions of the time. In particular, 1989 marked the U.S. invasion in Panama, the protests in Tiananmen Square, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the first free elections in Chile and in Brazil. In a continuum of time and an overlapping of spaces, these events can all be seen in dialogue with each other, informing and completing the re-organisations of the global political, military, and economic orders. Rethinking the Romanian televised revolution in relations to global power structures also requires one to rethink the relations between moving images produced in the event, Western mediations of these images, and the dynamics of power and capital. For instance, if the televised Romanian revolution was considered and presented as a “just cause” by U.S. media, these were exactly the same

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<sup>199</sup> Margaret Morse, “The Turn,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Refrlections (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 195.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

terms used to legitimise the U.S. invasion in Panama of the same period. Moreover, apart from the general Eurocentric and colonialist portrayal of the events, as the violent acts of a barbaric or plainly primitive people,<sup>201</sup> Andaluna Borcilă signals that U.S. media reflected a “narrative about the triumph of capitalism that [wa]s staged around the site of Romania: the triumph of this technology of seeing over impenetrable and inaccessible Romania.”<sup>202</sup> The primitive people were also those who used the “low-tech” approach to take-over broadcast and hijacked transmission, partially because of their lack of access to other means of mobile and networked image production.

An interesting aspect to note is that some of these transmissions from the television station had been live and authentically so, whilst others later leaked the “rehearsed” versions from which selections were made, edited, and aired. In fact, what was easily noticeable in the postures and gestures of those making these images was that they were either unaware or highly aware of the cameras – they rehearsed their revolutionary poses, they stepped into the frame, or left it suddenly. Overall, when revisiting the images from Studio 4 there is a sense that participants had both inhabited their roles as revolutionary subjects and effectively performed these roles, in the hope that “Western” media would see them. Those who came on air in front of cameras seemed charged by what could be called “the quasi-sacrality of occidental media”<sup>203</sup> acting as a guide in producing the images of what a revolution would look like. The people in the images were weaving postures and gestures in front of cameras, and into the histories and archives of global images of protest.

At one moment, the confusion was increased by urgent appeals, directly addressing viewers through their TV sets – “Come and defend the television station! It is our national asset.” These stand in the memory of the televised revolution, alongside instructions given to those who would soon go on air, caught on camera rehearsing their

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<sup>201</sup> Morse, “The Turn.”

<sup>202</sup> Andaluna Borcilă, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, and Konrad Petrovsky, “The Televisual Debut of Postcommunism. Andaluna Borcilă in Dialogue with Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovsky,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, ed. Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovsky, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 201.

<sup>203</sup> Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Capital, Politics, and Media Technology: Making Sense of the Romanian Revolution,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to a Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 47.

positions as “live” revolutionaries – “Mircea, pretend you are working!”<sup>204</sup> Whilst living the situation and becoming a political subject implied the promise of change and transformation, the uncertainty and confusion around how this political subjectivity needed to be performed showed the potential illusion of the promise, which will become fully visible in the “postcommunist condition” and during the long “transition” to capitalism.

Furthermore, from November to the New Year’s Eve of 1989, various televised images from the Berlin wall circulated widely around the world and featured groups of people, flowing and floating in and out of focus, in and out of camera range, in growing groups, cheerfully breaking down the physical barriers between East and West, on the backdrop of tunes by David Hasselhoff. Televisions worldwide aired and repeated these images in a montage, a “mix of supple, ineluctable crowd shots,” allowing, as McKenzie Wark notices, the “humanist swell of ‘the people’” to be pictured “sans tanks.”<sup>205</sup> Alongside these images, others unfolded: those of the soft or velvet revolutions of Prague for example, which offered, as Eva Kernbauer states, “an imagery that remained within the realm of the symbolic.”<sup>206</sup> On one hand, these “sans tanks” images and the symbol-images of revolutions which remained bloodless, produced (tele)visual repositories of what the peaceful collapse of communism looked like, especially as seen through International media platforms. They were meant to show the “falling upon itself” of the Eastern bloc, the crumbling of an ideology known for the careful programming and control of images, amongst other aspects, which was now facing the inability to resist. Moreover, this inability to resist had become visible live, with these images. This portrayal was that of a collapse of a symbolic order through images which were already working towards the soft accumulation of media documents in favour of the “winning” order. In a sense, the soft or velvet revolutions in most East European countries and the images thereof functioned as arguments for the “natural collapse” of

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<sup>204</sup> This is one of the calls that can be heard from behind a camera, when the revolutionaries who had taken over Studio 4 of the television station were preparing to go live. The call features in archival footage and is edited in Videograms. It has also often acted in support of the argument that these appearances and the entire event had an unreliable, false or staged quality.

<sup>205</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events*, Arts and Politics of the Everyday (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>206</sup> Kernbauer, “Establishing Belief: Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, Videograms of a Revolution,” 73.

the socialist regimes, an expected and fluent coming into “normality” of this part of the world.

However, these images and the narrative associated with them followed on from a contrasting set of images: the violent images of the camcorder and televised/televsual Romanian revolution, for example. This mix of images featured plenty of tanks, snipers, corpses, people running aimlessly on streets, wounded bodies, blood smeared 80s jumpers, images cascading in incoherence, never to a background of soothing, happy tunes like Hasselhoff's, but rather accompanied by the sounds of random shots being fired, with an echo, in large, open squares. The sound was bad and the quality of these images, even worse. As Andaluna Borcilă noted in a dialogue with Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky, with these moving images circulating between worldwide television networks, “Romania entered the news as a counter-site to the changes happening at the Wall.”<sup>207</sup> These images too, worked to portray the “fall” or “collapse” of a socialist regime and seemed to unfold according to their mediatic function, as visual documents of a political event. However, their flow was neither coherent nor, arguably, reliable. Their opposition to the images from the Wall, for example, in the violence contained, made them enter a circuit of verification. In other words, the images and the events the images represented became the scrutiny of mediatic verification; the truthfulness of the images as documents and the truth they contained became the focus of Western mediatic, political and critical inquiry.

Moreover, Romania meant not only the physical space of violent struggles on the streets, but a former “communist” site, over which “the West” was gaining access and visibility; and this was conferring techno-political legitimation to the forthcoming transition to democracy and capitalism. Țichindeleanu and Petrovszky formulate this in clear terms: “The 1989 events were the preface to the re-integration of East European nations in the capitalist world system, or arguably their tendential integration into the semiperiphery or periphery of the Third World.”<sup>208</sup> Those out on the streets in 1989 in Romania were not viewed as propelled in an emancipatory condition of their own making, but watched to see if they would manage their transition into capitalism, or if they would collapse after the “fall.” The political subjects emerging in the 1989 event

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<sup>207</sup> Borcilă, Țichindeleanu, and Petrovszky, “The Televisual Debut of Postcommunism. Andaluna Borcilă in Dialogue with Ovidiu Țichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovszky,” 201.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

were tele-mediated and re-configured in moving images circulating in International media, not as speaking subjects, but as victims caught in a violent moment, different from the soft and cheerful situation, which would follow until 1992, at the Berlin Wall. In Romania, this kind of construction marked a postcommunist identity defined by trauma, which still pervades in most political, cultural and artistic views, even today. Moreover, in the transitional period, when these struggling political subjects would not “perform” as expected, it was accounted to the same traumatic and simplistically labelled “communist past”, and to the trauma induced by an unfortunately violent event – the revolution. In addition, in case of “lagging behind”, interventionist structures like the International Monetary Fund would conveniently be legitimated to offer aid to those struggling with the transitional process.

Due to the global implications behind the revolution of 1989, addressing the role of images in the event becomes an important, disregarded and discredited pathway to use for understanding this moment in recent Romanian history. Ignoring the televised nature of the situation and its relation to global power relations foremost implies the “negation of the revolutionary event” and strengthens the idea that the “fall” was a “normal process”, and that it was naturally followed by the “dismantling of a pathological political concept,”<sup>209</sup> namely communism. This normalisation should be resisted and in turn, the event and its moving images should be accessed as a way to open up questions and critical assessment of a period in recent history, which has often been sealed off, or dismissed as resolved by reductive narratives. I consider, in the next part of this chapter, how artworks can use moving images to revisit and re-compose historical and political events and by doing so, create necessary re-evaluations of those events.

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<sup>209</sup> Petrovsky and Țichindeleanu, “Sensuri Ale Revoluției Române între Capital, Politică și Tehnologie Media” (Meanings of the Romanian Revolution, between Capital, Politics, and Media Technology), 33.

### 3.3 Videograms of a Televised Revolution

*Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică does not pursue a critical inquiry into the relationship between image and event in a dualistic, real versus virtualised fashion. “Establishing belief” is the short title of one of the many reflections on *Videograms*, which investigates the role of images in producing a spectacle around the event. Eva Kernbauer, the author of above article considers that *Videograms* reflects considerably Farocki's signature approach, to generally question the role, capacities, and critical value of images. However, she argues that *Videograms* displays no direct response to the general “iconoclastic mistrust of images”<sup>210</sup> around the Romanian revolution and that the work remains, in her view, “strangely aloof to the premises of media critique.”<sup>211</sup> On the other hand, she observes how Ujică's influences stemming from documentary filmmaking bring to the work a reliance on images as documents able to narrate the historical event, which seemingly clashes with Farocki's general practice. In light of what she considers to be these paradoxical aspects about the work, she finally argues that the images of the Romanian revolution proved insufficient as documents attesting for the political event. This, because images were arguably created in excess and in this excess, there was little information about “what had happened” to sustain a solid critical inquiry of the events.

I would argue that “establishing belief” is not the scope of *Videograms of a Revolution* and that any assertion about “the role of images as agents of historical documentation”<sup>212</sup> can be sustained not by following a logic of evidence, or by questioning the nature of the event, but by understanding the Romanian revolution in its relation to history, politics, media, and capital. My interest in *Videograms* is not centred on the capacity of the work to narrate the event or provide proof of “what happened.” On the contrary, I suggest that *Videograms* offers a reading of the event at the intersection of its mediatic and (geo)political implications, through the way it works with moving images as tools for observation and investigation.

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<sup>210</sup> Kernbauer, “Establishing Belief: Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution*,” 81.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3.1 Media Historiography

The 1989 Romanian revolution had its *début* as a media event. Before Ceaușescu's televised speech was interrupted by the crowds voicing their discontent, a series of images of corpses from the city of Timișoara, where the first protests started, were aired on International media channels. These were graphic images that travelled quickly in the media, producing awe and presenting Romania as a spectacularly violent counter-site to the Berlin Wall. After their wide circulation, these images proved not to be of the recent victims from the 1989 protests staged in Timișoara, but of the exhumed dead from a pauper cemetery. With their disputable truth, these images of dead bodies framed the beginning of the Romanian revolution as a media spectacle. This was going to be the way in which the revolution would also "end", with images recorded at Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu's trial having had an equally disputed validity. As mentioned, this mistrust in images and in their ability to produce valid information about the event became a recurrent approach.

Nevertheless, whilst Baudrillard<sup>213</sup> for example, showed strong distrust in the event precisely because of the images from Timișoara, Giorgio Agamben considered that the same images raised questions of visibility and "speakability." He claimed that this media spectacle, in its "hasty" and farcical *mise-en-scène* resonated with Debord's predictions from the *Society of the Spectacle* and the *Commentaries* books. By stating that "[I]n the same way in which it has been said that after Auschwitz it is impossible to write and think as before, after Timișoara it will no longer be possible to watch television in the same way,"<sup>214</sup> Agamben asks *how* can we speak and *what* can we say about the images coming from this mediatic space? How do we look at these images and what kind of subject does our looking produce? The focal point of these questions is other than the relation between event and image in terms of spectacle or simulacrum, as was the case for Baudrillard; it is about how we look at images and what kind of subjects are produced, both in the images and in the acts of looking.

Complementing these questions raised by Agamben, Didi-Huberman argues that "there exists no image that does not simultaneously implicate gazes, gestures, thoughts"

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<sup>213</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Timisoara Syndrome: The Télécratie and the Revolution," *Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory 2* (1993): 61–71.

<sup>214</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, *Theory out of Bounds*, v. 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 81.

and that “it is especially absurd to try to disqualify certain images on the grounds that they have supposedly been 'manipulated.'”<sup>215</sup> Looking at images pertaining or connected to an event yet coming from different spaces (mediatic, political, social) requires an acute and attentive work on the image which asks questions of knowledge, power, and violence. In particular, Didi-Huberman feels that Farocki's practice shares these concerns about power, violence and knowledge with many others before him, from Adorno and Horkheimer, to Foucault, Deleuze, Debord and Agamben, but that “Farocki tackles them from the vantage point of specific and intensive observation: all these phenomena of self-destruction today – today admittedly as much as yesterday, yet more than ever – involve a certain work on images.”<sup>216</sup> Admittedly, Didi-Huberman reaches this conclusion after reading one of Farocki's earlier works, *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), but I believe that the same questions and specific and attentive observation are visible in the work with Ujică on the images of the Romanian revolution.

*Videograms of a Revolution* has been described as a documentary, a film and an artwork on different occasions, but it is referred to on Farocki's website, in a text co-signed with Ujică, as “a new media-based form of historiography.”<sup>217</sup> By definition, historiography is “the study of the writing of history and of written histories”<sup>218</sup> and etymologically refers to the coming together of *historia* (narrative, history) and *graphia* (writing). Thus, *Videograms* becomes a declared study of “writing” with moving images of the event. It explores what narratives can be composed with moving images from different co-ordinates of the 1989 Romanian revolution – in the street, at the television station, or the Central Committee building. The work specifically and intensively observes what these physical spaces become when they are being “written” into history, with moving images. It does not assume the role of writing the history of the event, does not intend to produce a narrative of the event as such, but to observe and explore what histories could and have been written with these images. In my opinion, there is no paradox or a clash of practices between Farocki and Ujică, as Eva Kernbauer has

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<sup>215</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “How to Open Your Eyes?,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman, Kodwo Eshun, and Nora M. Alter (London: Koenig books, 2009), 39.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>217</sup> “Harun Farocki,” Artist website, accessed February 25, 2014, <http://www.farocki-film.de/1992eg.htm>.

<sup>218</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at <http://www.oed.com/>.

suggested. Instead, I believe that precisely because of Ujică's work with the documentary form and Farocki's method of investigating with images, *Videograms* is able to be the historiography that it claims to be: an inquiry into possibilities of writing histories with images, and a reflection on how these histories reflect structures of power and distributions of looking.

When considered retrospectively, the 1989 revolution-as-event and the images thereof come across quite clearly as a turning point in the history and politics of media technologies. This turn occurred, on one hand, with changes in access to means of production and distribution of images and, on the other hand, in how this narrative of access and easy distribution has charged media technologies with presumed capacities as instruments for social change.<sup>219</sup> In addition, technological and political developments from the late 1980s and early 1990s have been linked to a re-emergence of artist documentary practices. Hito Steyerl points to how the technological changes of this time constructed a turn of consumers into producers/makers of images, and that this turn was reflected in practices with images. Furthermore, Steyerl underlines the importance of the development and proliferation of the new image formats (video included, but extending to the mpeg and jpeg formats), which led to a "mobilisation of images." According to Steyerl, these movements and the question of how subjects are produced by images had started, around this time, to increasingly become an area of inquiry in art practice, especially through the documentary form.<sup>220</sup> The early to mid-1990s also saw the move of experimental filmmakers from cinematic spaces of production and exhibition, towards the gallery space. These filmmaker-artists were particularly the ones whose experimental practices had become harder to explore in the film industry. Farocki comments on this situation and supports Steyerl's seemingly speculative note with an account on the reception of *Videograms*:

People often ask me why I 'left' the cinema to enter 'the art space.' My first answer can only be, I had no other choice. When my film *Videogramme einer Revolution*

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<sup>219</sup> Note here the previous statement of an US presenter who was intrigued by the "archaic" recourse of Romanian protests at occupying the television station, at a time when a wide range of media technologies were commonly used and presumed to be destined for such purposes.

<sup>220</sup> Hito Steyerl, Former West Research Interview, interview by Maria Hlavajova and Charles Esche, February 11, 2010, <http://www.formerwest.org/ResearchInterviews/HitoSteyerl>.

(*Videograms of a Revolution*, with Andrei Ujică. 1992) opened in two Berlin cinemas, there was one person in each cinema on the first night.<sup>221</sup>

As the Romanian revolution was one in a series of camcorder/televised and later, digital, pixelated revolutions, and as the politics of images were at a turn, artistic practices with images coming from political events needed to be discussed as both localized examples, and in relation to larger, globally changing modes of production and reception. What is more, the political changes involved in the “fall” of socialism as it was “seen on TV” were part of a turn in how we perceive, relate to and embody images. Within these larger sites of change, but also of the intersection of practices coming from media, documentary, and art, *Videograms* emerges as the acute and necessary work on the image signaled by Didi-Huberman. Instead of situating the power of the image in its ability to “present” the event, *Videograms* starts a series of questions on how we look at, and what we do with images. Most importantly, it asks the essential question of what do images do when they are mobilised, when they step out of their frames, outside of screens. And this, I believe, continues to be a pertinent question now, as much as it was two decades ago.

### 3.3.2 Subject and Image

One way in which *Videograms* answers the question of the role of images is by showing how, in the revolution, political subjects are formed in front of and behind cameras, by filming the events and part-taking in them at the same time. The work opens with an example of the relation between the camera and a subject. The opening shot is a direct address to the viewer. Someone is speaking into the camera, the sound pierces strongly, together with the image of a wounded woman, on a hospital bed. In this opening scene, the woman is not sure she can speak; she asks how will she be recorded – “Is the camera recording both image and sound?” This form of address is directed at the camera operators, who reply and assure her that she can speak and it will be recorded fully. It will be aired on television, for the whole nation to see, they encourage her (See Image 8). In turn, her address is also to the viewer, as they are set in the position of witness to

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<sup>221</sup> Harun Farocki, “Cross Influence/Soft Montage,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman, Kodwo Eshun, and Nora M. Alter (London: Koenig books, 2009), 74.

the formation of this woman as a speaking subject. She is becoming a speaking subject through and within the image and through our looking at her perform this act of speech. She is the one to address the camera before anything else happens in the shot. How does a viewer respond to this form of address?



Image 8 - Opening shot of the woman on the hospital bed addressing the camera directly. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992)

Reading this opening shot as a video-gram (linking image and writing), Benjamin Young offers:

By suggesting that all images bear an address, the videogram calls attention to the function of interpellation in the image. The videogram we receive is not simply an inert historical record of past events and circumstances, but also serves to solicit viewers to look, to identify, to act, in the present and future. Addressed to an unseen other, the videogram aims to hail a viewer; although the significance of the image is not given in advance, it nevertheless confronts the viewer with questions of response and responsibility.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Benjamin Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics: VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION," in *Harun Farocki : Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 251.

Young's proposition to read the image as taking on the Althusserian function of interpellation could be very compelling, but does that mean that the image hails the viewer with the force of a law, asking her, like the policeman, "Hey, you there!?" Or does the woman in the image do so? What is the locus of this power? Is it in the image, in the sight of the wounded woman with half of her body in a cast? Young appears to suggest that what hails the viewer is not what she sees in the image – significance remains in the site of undecidability – but the call of the image to be looked at. This view assumes that a form of writing with the image was produced and it is then animated by a voice, which demands the viewer to turn around, face the image, and be ready to make sense of it. In turn, it could imply a form of responsibility essentially rooted in guilt. Does "turning around" or turning our attention and sensations to the image as viewers, imply an acceptance of this guilt? As Judith Butler observes, interpellation theory holds the premise of a certain "readiness to accept guilt to gain purchase on identity"<sup>223</sup> and it "is linked to a highly religious scenario of a nominating call that comes from God and that constitutes the subject by appealing to a need for the law."<sup>224</sup> Butler also notes that accepting the Althusserian scene, where interpellation is essentially "exemplary and allegorical" implies that "it never needs to happen for its effectivity to be presumed."<sup>225</sup> In this first shot of *Videograms*, we, as viewers, are rather witnesses to a reverse form of interpellation. The woman in the shot is addressing the camera: "Hey, you there! Are you filming me speak?" In turn, the viewer could be said to be confronted with a call that addresses the camera, but does not address anyone in particular. In a way, this call is for the whole "nation" to see and hear, as the voices behind the camera had suggested – a rather undefined collective presumably forming at the same time, during the events. In turn, we have the possibility to be, as viewers, addressed by a subject which is forming in her movement, in her act of turning to the camera and of speaking. However, that does not necessarily mean we should and would feel responsible for her, or for the situation. On one hand, as pointed out by Butler, the Althusserian interpellation has its effectiveness in its potentiality, meaning that it does not need to happen to be effective. On the other hand, in this case, the ambiguous site of the emergence of political subjects

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<sup>223</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 109.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

overlaps, for an instant, in passing, with the creation of the moving image, and the unfolding of the political event. As viewers, we are presented with this movement of the image and of the subject, as they meet in the historical and political event.

What, at this meeting point between image and political subjects being formed should make us, as viewers, become more than witnesses? What, in this logic could, except a form or variation of guilt, turn this choice of looking at the images into an ethical situation, where response and responsibility come in? One answer might come from Jacques Rancière, for whom, against Althusser, interpellation is only apt to explain religious subjectivation. For him, the question is one of visibility or rather, of what can and cannot be seen: "Move along, there is nothing to see here!" says the policeman instead. As a consequence, "politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving-along" into a space for the appearance of the subject."<sup>226</sup> Young seems to support this view somehow, by considering that the formation of subjects, in front of the camera and in front of the viewers of images, is what is evident in this scene and throughout the work. The plural videograms in the title thus reads as multiple "entries" and their traces where "(...) the conscious, acting revolutionary subject is caught on film, frozen, extended, blurred, and most of all split, cut through by artificial prosthesis, mediated and linked to the rest of the collective by technics and telematics."<sup>227</sup> Placing the formation of the subject in the space of visibility is then achieved with the aid of moving image technologies: the cameras record events on the streets, in the main locations, but more importantly, cameras record people producing and watching images, subjects coming into formation and watching themselves traveling through that process, on screens. There is a great deal to be seen in the images, for the viewers, but more specifically, for those who are making themselves visible in the images, like the woman on the hospital bed. Thus, the makers of the images are moving in and out of camera range and in and out of the image, and these movements coincide with their emergence as subjects.

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<sup>226</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event* 5, no. 3 (2001), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html).

<sup>227</sup> Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics: VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION," 248.

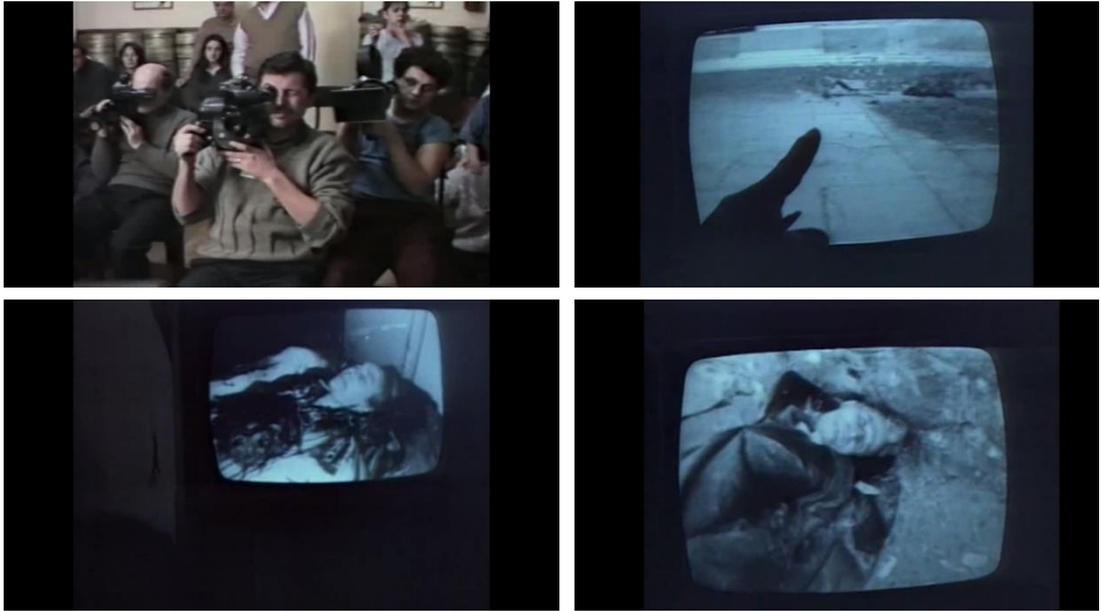


Image 9 - Cameras recording television screens. Still frames from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).



Image 10 - Cameras recording people looking at television screens. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992)

### 3.3.3 Street Images and Television Images

One can read *Videograms* as a composition between these spaces of “moving along” where subjects emerge, a composition with images that reflects the formation of political subjects as a Moebius strip, continuously moving, for both the subjects in the image, and for us as viewers. *Videograms* brings together moving images coming from video cameras filming in the streets and squares, peaking outside of apartment windows, and images produced inside two key places in Bucharest – the national television building, and the Central Committee building. These images trace three spatial co-ordinates that intersect and at times, blend into one another – the space of the street or square, the television, and the spaces where people are watching the event on screens. In each of the co-ordinates the cameras enter spaces, start producing images, and we see how subjects are forming, blending and mixing with these images.

In addition, *Videograms* works with two main types of images, those coming from camcorders filming on the streets, in private houses, or in the Central Committee building, and the images produced at the television station, after its take-over. Benjamin Young has argued that *Videograms* does not “oppose the 'truth' of the mobile, non-professional street videographer to the mystification of mass media” but “rather asks if the decentralisation of media technology is equal to its democratisation.”<sup>228</sup> In a way, Young challenges a view that was partially reflected in the intervention of the U.S. presenter, who considered that independent production of images is a political act in itself. By extension, what Young questions is the view that the circulation of images through video or other, newer media technologies had intrinsic democratic and emancipatory characteristics, in opposition to the “low-tech” occupation of the TV station, and to the choice to broadcast and circulate images using a hijacked but essentially centralised mode of production.

In *Videograms*, images from various independent camcorders were gathered by Farocki and Ujică after the event and edited together. On the streets, in the lived moments and situations of the revolution these cameras had most likely been concerned with recording “what happened.” Yet, what happens in the images is not

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 253.

always eventful; sometimes either “nothing” seems to happen, or the image needs someone to turn an attentive eye to it, to perform a close act of looking, to animate it. The makers of these images might be concerned with recording or documenting the event, but these are not, *de facto*, moving image-documents of the event. Let us take note of some of the characteristics of these images. Firstly, the cameras are either mobile or fixed and the images they produce incorporate in the frame only what was available from the angle, possible for the technology and for the lens to capture. Secondly, these cameras create images of the event other than those presented by the state television, or those produced in Studio 4 of the television station, when taken over by protesters.

Thirdly, in *Videograms*, images collected from camcorders are most often accompanied by voices, as voice-over narration and other commentary inserted by Farocki and Ujică, or as the original voices of those who stood behind the cameras. In addition to placing them on a map of the event’s spatial co-ordinates, the presence of these voices animates the images in symbolic relations with processes of decision-making, the content of addresses made live on state television, the imagination and emotions of those behind cameras. For example, the images following immediately after those of the woman wounded on her hospital bed come from a camera filming outside of a window in the city of Timișoara, where the first protests began. This is where the voice-over commentary commences. The image is dominated by a strong hue of blue, and it seems, at first, more or less eventless. Nothing “happens” in this shot and we are told there is an event, yet it can hardly be perceived in the background. This seamless inaction in the frame imposes the need to pay close attention to the image. The voice-over gradually unfolds a short account of the previous protests from Timișoara, and then turns to the image itself. It points to the micro-event inside it, a movement in the background, very small and blurry.

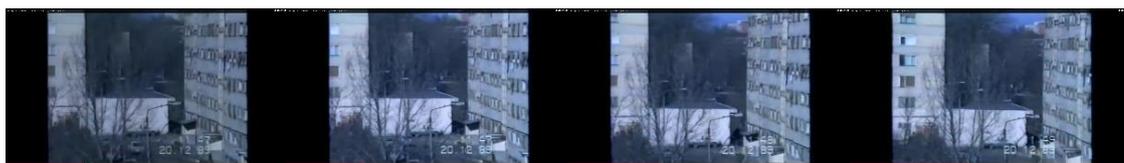


Image 11 - Camera filming outside of a window in Timișoara, min. 3.37 to min 5.50. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).

The script reads:

At the time and place inscribed in the image [11.48, 20.12.89], from the window of a student dormitory in Temeschwar [Timișoara], an amateur video camera records demonstrators moving towards the centre of the city. The camera is in danger. It has remained upstairs to continue filming. Crowd chance reverberates; at times, clearly discernible. The image in the blue wintry-light is divided. The walls in the foreground and the action in the background pertain to different temporal frames. The image is unequally divided. The major portion is occupied by the foreground, which is not the focus of attention. The event has been shifted to the background. The camera gets as close to the event as the lens allows.<sup>229</sup>

These uneventful images call up the “fake” images which had circulated widely in International media, the images of the dead of Timișoara. As already mentioned, those images had been presented as images of dead protesters fighting the vanguard lines of the revolution, yet they later proved to be staged, with the use of corpses collected from a pauper cemetery. The powerful impact of those images, especially due to their wide circulation in International media had produced a regime of visibility where, as Agamben noted, “the true was, by now, nothing more than a moment within the necessary movement of the false.”<sup>230</sup> The voice-over mentions these images, but they are not shown. Instead, this long take is intentionally that of an uncertain event and in this uncertain image, we are, as viewers, in the regime of visibility opened by the circulation of unverified and unverifiable frames. We rely on the voice-over to narrate the event, we are situated purposefully in the undistinguishable space between true and false, in front of this image. Moreover, this image points to how the power structures and power relations in the revolution had proved, upon later investigations, to be as uncertain and unpredictable as its images.<sup>231</sup>

In Bucharest, the footage from cameras taken to the streets, with the help of voice overs and other commentary, can be used to draw the main spatial co-ordinates

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<sup>229</sup> Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution*, 35 mm, video, 1992, min. 3:38 – 5:54.

<sup>230</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, 81.

<sup>231</sup> I discuss this aspect in more detail in Chapter 4, and this reoccurrence, in images of the Romanian revolution, of actors, poses, gestures, which can be identified six months later, in the anti-government protests of June 1990.

of the event. The city, re-designed by Ceaușescu, boasted long, wide boulevards that offered good aerial perspectives. Based on how the images in *Videograms* are organised, one can map out the position of these cameras, from the television station to three of the main squares, on a vertical axis that cuts across the city. A camera operated by a running man travels from the television station to a nearby car, shaking. It passes a tank, and the self-declared reporter joining the cameraman urges the camera to turn to it. A car starts driving and the cityscape unfolds, with the two men speaking alongside the images. We can imagine their trail on the wide boulevard linking the television station to Victoria square. Here, there is another camera, taking shelter on the steps of an underground station, showing running passers-by and armed soldiers occasionally firing their weapons (Image 12). Further along the wide boulevard, one camera pans out from a television set inside of an apartment to the streets, just after the transmission of Ceaușescu's last speech had been disturbed, very likely at Romană square (Image 13). Then, a camera on the roof terrace of a high rise building in Universitate square; the same camera a few blocks further, again on a roof terrace; another one pointing to the ground, at night, in chaotic running movements (Image 14). Further into the city, at the very end of the long central boulevard crossing the centre, at Unirii square, another camera films the cheering crowds from the window of a moving car. The conversation between the three passengers records their stream of consciousness: "I cannot believe we were afraid of a tyrant!" says the woman driving the car (Image 15).



Image 12 - Cameras in Victory square, filming the soldiers fire at an unseen enemy. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).



Image 15 - Camera pans from television set into the street, very likely at Romană square, Bucharest. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).

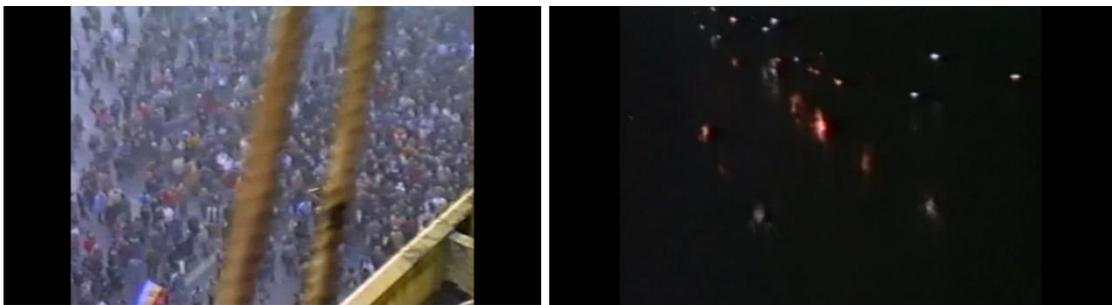


Image 14 - Cameras on high-rise buildings at University square, Bucharest. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).



Image 135 - Cameras filming on the streets of Bucharest from inside a moving car, near Unirii square. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).

Through the voices of those behind the cameras, these images mark the emergence of a new visibility. They were animated by the imagination of those living the events. Furthermore, the voice-over added by Farocki and Ujicǎ acts as a scaffold for the voices of those participating in the events to become noticeable within *Videograms*, by allowing them space to unfold, alongside the images. In relation to this, Benjamin Young contends that "the street, now populated with roving cameras, does not function solely as the space of political action, but plays host to new forms of popular visibility, manifestation and self-representation."<sup>232</sup> This process of self-representation was messy, muddled with uncertainty, with darkness, and with fear. Sometimes, in the streets and in the squares, crowds were flowing and clearly celebrating. At other times, the promise of clarity seemed very far. During the night, uncertainty took over. At one point, a television van entered the square next to the central Committee promising to light up the area, but that never seemed to happen and the square, long fallen into darkness was soon lit only by sparks of firing shots and by the angry cries of those filming the violence from a distance (Image 14, right). From their voices, it seems that the same persons who were celebrating the ending fear of Ceaușescu also filmed this dark, violent scene. The voice-over narration from *Videograms* mentions that "[i]n the nights' darkness, the cameraman wanted to assist the images with words." These people made themselves visible as presences behind the cameras, as speaking subjects. In this way, they animated the images they filmed and thus participated in the event up close, challenging the relationship between event, image, and their presence in both. The people behind the cameras were not producing documents, nor were they identifying with images. Rather, they took part in them.

By adding the voice-overs and in the overall usage of footage from camcorders, *Videograms* makes visible how, as Hito Steyerl argues, the image is "not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously crouched in affect and availability, animated by our wishes and fears. (...) It doesn't represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like you and me."<sup>233</sup> *Videograms* shows the role of images in the event and in how subjects emerged either in front of cameras, speaking and performing their protest, or behind them, co-present with the images. The images

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<sup>232</sup> Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics: VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION," 246.

<sup>233</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 52.

themselves did not have the role of fixed documents, but they offered access to the event and to this process of subject formation. In this sense, what is made visible in *Videograms* is how the images of the Romanian revolution became mobile, how they circulated in and out of the event, and how they contributed to creating the political subjects who were producing them. Moreover, for those outside of Romania, watching the images of the event and watching the subjects being formed in the images, the process was both including and alienating, or as Charles Grivel comments, those watching became, in fact, “exotics in front of a screen.”

We sat in front of a screen with the idea that somewhere in the world there was a people, a place with a 'primitive people' still in harmony with their time and with a historical event such that they could really do something and accomplish something for us. This people would be witnesses for us- as if we were all exotics in front of a screen.<sup>234</sup>

As mentioned before, there were the two types of image-production processes in the 1989 Romanian revolution that are composed in *Videograms*. On one hand, a camcorder revolution caught on video cameras (professional or belonging to individuals who took them out on the streets) surfing and recording movements and situations they encountered. On the other hand, after it was taken over by the revolutionary groups, the national television station became an “image-machine” presenting viewers with culprits, catching subjects rehearsing their political positions and possibility of speech on air, and sometimes calling out viewers directly and explicitly: “Do not sleep! Take to the streets! Come along and protect the television station, it is our national asset!” This takeover of the television space and of the images produced there constitutes a large part of *Videograms*. Young argues that when images from Studio 4 are introduced in the work, “the film turns on a spatial axis marked out by the state television station on one end, and the Central Committee headquarters, the government building that houses the Communist Party, on the other hand.”<sup>235</sup> Along with these two main sources of images,

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<sup>234</sup> Petrovsky and Țichindeleanu, “Time and Screens. Hubertus von Amelnunxen in Conversation with Charles Grivel, Georg Maag, Peter M. Spangenberg and Andrei Ujică,” 126.

<sup>235</sup> Young, “On Media and Democratic Politics: VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION,” 246.

interspersed, are images from the streets, images from cameras recording television screens, or cameras recording people watching television screens.

Arguably, all these forms of image-production aimed to capture the event. However, as *Videograms* makes apparent, neither the images coming from camcorders, nor those produced in Studio 4 of the television station had recorded the event. Moreover, rather than acting as documents for establishing truth(s) about the event, I have argued that these images imposed a different way of looking. This way of looking was tied not only to a mistrust in images, but to a tension caught somewhere in between the event itself, its images, and the reception of these images.

The television center taken over by rioters in Bucharest is an image machine that presents political corpses, the non-dead of the old regime: Ceaușescu's son Nicu, the interior minister, the head of the secret service and an agent from the Securitate, whose face is wounded. Their presentation becomes a media execution. The 'last camera' shows the real corpses of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu. What is to be seen in the image – exists.<sup>236</sup>

What comes across in the images from Studio 4 is an on-screen take over, which itself constitutes a series of filmic takes, shots where performances in front of cameras leak outside of the frame, into politics and history. The cameras start recording prior to going on air and continue to record after. The transmission goes live when people are still preparing on set. The time and frame of transmission is no longer fixed, framed. Young believes that "the questions it raises regarding the use and abuse of images for politics, as well as the intersection of television, violence, and democracy, all structure the terrain on which *Videograms of a Revolution* unfolds."<sup>237</sup> This approach to images is announced in the beginning of the work, in a short voice-over line: "General expectancy – the certainty of evil – created a pattern of perception in which the corpses of a pauper cemetery could be confused with those of the rebellion."<sup>238</sup> The way images are created in the event and the ways of looking at these images require addressing the spaces that

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<sup>236</sup> Klaus Kreimeier, "Enlargement of the Field of View. About 'Videograms of a Revolution,'" in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman, Kodwo Eshun, and Nora M. Alter (London: Koenig books, 2009), 185.

<sup>237</sup> Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics: VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION," 245.

<sup>238</sup> Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution*, 35 mm, video, 1992, min. 4.28 – 4.38.

are formed in-between structures of power, patterns of perception and the formation of subjectivity. The actual spaces present in the images, where bodies (dead or alive) act and enact the movement of agency, power and history become linked to the symbolic spaces of media and politics. The images themselves are not to be treated as documents, but as means for navigating within these views, attentively noticing where political subjectivity emerges.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed an important event in recent Romanian history, the 1989 revolution as a historical, political, and a media event. As a televised event, the Romanian revolution was connected to moving images produced in and around it. I have argued that the 1989 revolution-as-event and its moving images should not be expected to act as documents, proof or witness to “what happened” and that this search for truth in images is not an avenue that can offer much interest. Following on from this observation, I have used an approach to the event, which asked what role did images and image technologies have to play in 1989, in Romania.

Moreover, this event and the moving images thereof were globally linked to other political and historical events happening around the same time, like the US invasion in Panama. The 1989 Romanian revolution was a media event that symbolically framed – especially because of the wide circulation of images – how the “fall” of communism, in its bloody and messy unfolding, looked like. Seeing 1989 as a point of rupture was then ideologically used in International media to visualise the end of the Cold War, and to show Romania as the violent counterpart to the soft or velvet revolutions of other former socialist countries, and to images from the Berlin Wall.

In the local context, the confused nature of the event led to unending pursuits to understand what had “really happened”, often via moving images. However, the different types of images produced in the event – from independent video cameras, from Studio 4 of the television station, or from the Central Committee building – showed a great deal of confusion and were soon abandoned as unreliable sources for finding “the truth” about the revolution.

*How, then can the event and these entwined relations be approached via moving image art?* First, by acknowledging that apart from any truth-value or capacity to show “what happened”, the images from the revolution also show subjects making the event and the images thereof, at the same time. I have argued in this chapter that the work *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică makes visible these relations between images and the production of political subjects. First, *Videograms* shows how people became politicized in the revolution, how they participated in making the event, making the images of the event, and simultaneously witnessing these processes and watching them, as they took shape on their television screens. The work

refuses to understand the relation between image and event in terms of spectacle or simulacrum, and in turn questions the role of moving images in producing subjects, both in the acts of making and of looking at images.

Secondly, *Videograms* works with moving images in order to engage with recent history and investigates ways of writing narratives about the revolution. It is not the case that the work writes the history of the event with moving images, but it explores the coordinates of this event, and what histories could be and have been written with these images. Therefore, this work is central to understanding the role of moving images in the revolution, in the formation of political subjects, and in how the new political power emerged after the event. These aspects are all visible in the moving images from cameras filming in the streets, the images produced by the occupation of Studio 4 of the Television station, and in images from the Central Committee building, the centre for debates and political decision-making. Furthermore, the approach that Farocki and Ujicá take to making their work is situated at a turning point in the history of media technologies and their relation to politics, and at a time of shifts and turns occurring in artistic and documentary practices with images.

*Videograms* brings together various types of images and makes apparent how, extending outside of the event itself, these images entered a circuit of mediation and had further historical and political impact in the next decades. By extension, it shows, as I will present in the next chapter, how the same political actors present at the Central Committee gain and hold governmental power in the first decade of the 1990s. It also shows how the political subjects formed behind cameras roving the streets will continue protesting against the new government, only to be silenced and violently repressed in June 1990. Overall, this work further points to how the revolution and its images were used for the political and economic profit of the new regime, and how they functioned to legitimate an essentialist and anticommunist narrative, in the period of “transition” and “postcommunism.”

## Chapter 4 : Moving Images of Postcommunism

### 4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to consider the concepts of “transition” and of the “postcommunist condition” in the Romanian context. I ask how a critical position towards both of these concepts could be formulated. More specifically, the question I pursue in this chapter is *how can moving images be used to open critical perspectives on transition and postcommunism?* For this purpose, I look at the works of artist and activist Joanne Richardson and of the D-Media Collective,<sup>239</sup> which stem from the aim to investigate relations between media, art, and politics, and to critically re-assess the Romanian postcommunist space-time.

This chapter approaches three of Richardson’s works with moving images, each opening up one aspect of the concept of postcommunism: the political and economic transition to neoliberalism, the possibilities of protest and activism in postcommunism, and the issue of postcommunist subjectivity. Each of the three sections in this chapter departs from one of Richardson’s works and extends the discussion to the abovementioned, larger issues. The works, all made between 2007 and 2008, are part of the *Commonplaces of Transition* project. They retrospectively reflect on changes of almost two decades prior to their making, and are an active struggle to not let the “postcommunist condition” be fixed in recent history, but wish to complicate and decolonise it, especially from anticommunist views dominant in Romania in this period.

In the first section, I approach the connections between transition and postcommunism, starting from the *Commonplaces* project and surveying the views it situates itself against, namely transition as a forward movement and as a way of instrumentalising time for political purposes. The central thread of this project is the need to critically assess postcommunism, a theme which also arises for a number of other academic and artistic initiatives that are presented here briefly. The work *In Transit* (2008) is discussed in more detail, as an example of what this act of critically assessing postcommunism might “look like.”

In the second section I ask why, in the period generally labelled as Romanian “postcommunism” was a weak tradition of protest and activist action established and,

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<sup>239</sup> Joanne Richardson, “D Media Collective,” accessed July 27, 2015, <http://dmedia.ro/>.

by extension, a weak practice of using moving images for political or activist purposes. Richardson's work *2 or 3 Things About Activism* (2008) documents some instances of Romania's short history of protest, direct action and activism, spanning almost two decades (1990 – 2008), and maps out the independent initiatives, organisations and institutions of that period in a self-reflexive manner. Using this work about the recent history of Romanian activism and Richardson's previous observations from *In Transit*, I turn to the protests of 13 – 15 June 1990, to understand how they contributed to weakening Romanians' trust in common political action. In this moment, one could identify an atmosphere of urgency and confusion which started during the revolution, via media, and was purposely prolonged into the 1990s. In the short term, this use of media by the government proved politically profitable, as it legitimated the new political order. The violent character of the June protests and the general confusion around "what happened" arguably contributed to eroding Romanians' trust in the possibilities for protest in the next decades. In the long term, the general anticommunist context and the confusion around the June events have also proven economically profitable for the newly instated power, as relations between media, capital and politics had strengthened in the first decade of postcommunism, especially supported by the privatisation of state industry and property.

Finally, the focus of the third section is the postcommunist Romanian subject, whose "condition", Richardson's works reveal, was dependant very much on her ethnicity, gender and economic status. Here, the last of the *Commonplaces of Transition* works, *Prekarious Lives* (2008) is considered in order to open up a conversation around what a postcommunist subjectivity might mean, and how it could be revisited critically. I argue that overall Richardson's work with D-Media collective was instrumental in updating and critically assessing notions like "precarity", from a feminist, local perspective, highly self-reflexive and aware of the risk of producing self-colonising narratives.

## 4.2 Commonplaces of Transition

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in the time-space broadly labelled Romanian “communism”, there was very little work with moving images which could be considered activist. This was due to censorship, lack of access to technology, but also the lack of a strong tradition of such actions and a weak possibility for them to develop throughout this period. I have already covered some of the exceptions, such as the work of Ion Grigorescu or of the collective Kinema Ikon, and shown how their exceptional nature was recuperated as politicized art in the first two decades after 1989. I also mentioned how this lack of activist moving image work during communism was often hastily considered in contrast with the postcommunist period, when there was arguably an abundance of works. These recuperative acts were performed by local critics and curators and have often acted in support of an agenda that aligned moving image practices from Romania to Eastern European practices and histories, and with those from Western Europe, and the U.S.

Joanne Richardson counters views such as the above by arguing that the weak tradition of making moving images that engaged with political issues during communist Romania actually extended into postcommunism. She considers the reason to be a generalised disengagement of artists and, more generally, of the Romanian society, from politics, protest and activism. Her observations reflect the situation in 2008, after the country’s integration into structures of the European Union and, previously, into NATO, and at the beginning of a global economic crisis. What Richardson observes, retrospectively, is that the disengagement from politics in postcommunism was supported by transition as an ideology, and by the governmental agenda on the “postcommunist condition.” Her intention, at the 2008 moment, was to excavate into this “postcommunist condition” and to criticize and counter dominant narratives on transition. She declares about her moving image works that they “reflect an ongoing interest in globalization, nationalism and post-communism, and manifest a critical perspective toward the status of documents, history, and memory.”<sup>240</sup>

Richardson is a Romanian-born artist who immigrated to Austria with her family when young and, later, to the U.S, and returned to Romania in the early 2000s.<sup>241</sup> Her response to the Romanian context of the mid-2000s was rooted in her experiences as

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<sup>240</sup> “Joanne Richardson,” accessed July 27, 2015, <http://subsol.c3.hu/joanne/bio.html>.

<sup>241</sup> Joanne Richardson, *In Transit* (D-Media, 2008), <https://archive.org/details/InTransitDMedia>.

an artist and activist, and her memories of living for a very short period of time in communist Romania. At these junctions, Richardson's position on the "postcommunist condition" was also a response to the Romanian media landscape of the time (owned and run by media tycoons, with some political power), and to the dominant political narratives (neoliberal and anticommunist). The work with D-Media collective,<sup>242</sup> which she helped set up, was founded on a belief in independent audiovisual production (taking ownership over the means of production), in activist action, and in sharing information via open source and copy-left platforms. She was one of the founders and a member of the editorial collective *Indymedia Romania*, and founder and editor of *Subsol*, a webzine focused on media art and activism.<sup>243</sup> The materials she wrote were distributed via these local platforms or on larger, regional ones, such as the *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (eipcp.net).<sup>244</sup>

Richardson's belief was that the concepts of "transition" and that of "postcommunism" needed to be critically assessed, from the perspective of the lived, local specificities of the Romanian context. One of the larger D-Media projects, *Commonplaces of Transition* (2007 – 2008) was organised in collaboration with Videoaktiv (Germany), Interspace (Bulgaria) and KSA:K (Moldova). It was interested in opening up "a critical dialogue about the meaning of transition and other alternatives to simply 'catching up' with the global market" and was dedicated to "represent[ing] postcommunism from the inside."<sup>245</sup> The use of the term "commonplaces" in the title implied its double meaning, as "common places" in the sense of geography or territory, and as "commonplaces," deriving from an understanding of transition as an ideology. Within this project, Joanne Richardson made three works together with collaborators from D-Media: *In Transit*, *2 or 3 Things about Activism* and *Precarious Lives* (See Image 16).

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<sup>242</sup> "D- Media began in 2002 as an informal group and since 2003 has functioned as an NGO for the production and dissemination of digital culture. Aside from workshops, conferences and other events, the videos produced from 2004-2009 constitute the group's most substantial activity. Most of the videos are available online." <http://dmedia.ro/> accessed April 25, 2015.

<sup>243</sup> "Subsol," accessed February 8, 2015, [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/index.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/index.html).

<sup>244</sup> "European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies," accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.eipcp.net/>.

<sup>245</sup> Joanne Richardson, "Commonplaces of Transition," accessed April 25, 2015, <http://dmedia.ro/04video-commonplaces-e.htm>. n.p.



**In Transit. 30 min, 2008**

Video by Joanne Richardson

In collaboration with Liviu Pop and Stefan Rusu (animations, camera)

A diary of a journey through space and time, composed of subjective impressions of the present and childhood memories of the past. While traveling across Romania in the year of its EU accession, the narrative reflects on the postcommunist transition, the re-writing of history and the relation between images and memory



**Precarious Lives . 43 min, 2008**

Video by Joanne Richardson

In collaboration with Andreea Carnu and Nita Mocanu (animations, camera)

Documentary mixing archival footage depicting women's labour over the past century with ten portraits of Romanian women working today. The video challenges the dominant discourse about precarity and its disregard of differences based on gender and of economic disparities between the first and third worlds of Europe.



**2 or 3 Things about Activism. 73 min, 2008.**

Video by Joanne Richardson

In collaboration with Marius Stoica and Nicola Zambelli (editing, camera)

A counter-documentary about activism in Romania that simultaneously questions the difference between making a film about politics and making a film politically. While various protagonists discuss their views on activism in Romania and its historical context, the voiceover reflects on the motivations behind the video.

Image 16 - Short descriptions of the works made by Richardson and collaborators and included in the *Commonplaces of Transition* project. Source: [www.dmedia.ro](http://www.dmedia.ro).

All three works are reflections on the Romanian transition, ignited by the idea that postcommunism needs to be approached critically. They address three connected issues stemming from this period of transition, and are all intended to offer a critical angle on the local and specific context of Romania. *In Transit* (2008) questions transition as ideology but also the act of transiting spaces, both geographical and ideological, or even spaces belonging to memory. Activism and its role and capacities in the Romanian postcommunist context, particularly around the time of the country's accession to political, economic and military structures, like NATO and the European Union, are the focus of *2 or 3 Things about Activism*. The issues of precarity, gender and economic inequalities that the Romanian transition has disregarded are taken up in *Precarious Lives*. Each of the works can be considered, retrospectively, as a document from a moment in recent Romanian history. Richardson's need to investigate "the status of documents, history and memory"<sup>246</sup> is reflected in the style in which the works from *Commonplaces of Transition* are produced. They start from the present, the time when they are made, and have investigative, documentary, or essay-film characteristics, through which they excavate into recent history: they include interviews, archive footage, documentation footage from events, and voice-over narration. These techniques bring the works closer to research than to art, or, at least, allow them to transgress spaces of exhibition, between art, research, and activism. This seems to be a clear intention of the project, as the works have been exhibited in different educational and "art spaces"<sup>247</sup> and there is, potentially, a wider circulation of these images as they are made fully available online to stream or download. All these aspects make the images interesting documents, especially as the content of the artworks is intended to reflect on the local and specific temporal and spatial co-ordinates of postcommunism in Romania.

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<sup>246</sup> "Joanne Richardson."

<sup>247</sup> The works were screened on a tour, from September 2007 - October 2008, in: Timișoara (Project Space), Belgrade (Kontext Gallery), Novi Sad (Kuda), Zagreb (Multimedia Institute, HDLU), Budapest (Central European University, Studio of Young Artists), Vienna (qu[e]er Beisl), Bratislava (InfoPolice), Prague (FAMU), Berlin (Globale Film Festival), Tallinn (Art Academy), Copenhagen (Overgaden, Mikrogalleriet), London (Mute, RampART), Helsinki (City Library). Richardson, "Commonplaces of Transition."

#### 4.2.1 Transition as Ideology

*In Transit* investigates the intertwining nationalist and consumerist co-ordinates of the postcommunist period in Romania, as they were visible in 2007-2008. Its description reads that “the narrative reflects on postcommunist transition, the re-writing of history and the relation between images and memory.” Using a mix of archive media footage from the 1989 Romanian revolution, the protests of 13 – 15 June 1990 (which I will cover in the next section), still images from her personal collection, and new footage, Richardson aims to challenge the idea that transition is a forward movement, something which neoconservative anticommunist narratives have supported. In order to do that, she works in a self-reflexive manner, with her personal memories and family archive, with facts about the current economic situation of several major cities in Romania, with historical material, interviews with contemporary philosophers, and her own voice and very subjective position in the context. In doing so, she makes *In Transit* a work which flows between several image-documents and various types of information, and between temporalities and spaces.

One thread which the work follows is the role of the Daco-Roman heritage<sup>248</sup> in supporting both the communist ideology, very specific to the Romanian context, the nationalist right-wing views re-emerging in postcommunism, and the process through which this heritage finally blended with neoliberal consumerism. These superimpositions are progressively developed throughout the work with the use of montage. The layers are made visible, for example, in the images from Cluj, where right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar had used the city as a canvas to paint in the colours of the Romanian flag (Image 17) and where, in order to emphasize the city’s Daco-Roman origin, he had ordered archaeological sites to be opened, and the ruins to be exposed through glass screens (Image 18). Then, at a later time when the city was run by a liberal mayor and investments in real-estate started pouring in for a short while, the largest shopping mall in the country was being built in the same city of Cluj, and Daco-Roman ruins were found in its foundations. The decision, one would normally say surprisingly,

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<sup>248</sup> The Romanian myth of origin is founded on the Dacian people, who faced the sieges of the Roman Empire, but who are considered the “founding fathers” of the nation, a people often portrayed in nationalist recuperations as mystic, but technologically advanced. This myth was at the root of Ceaușescu’s convictions about Daco-Roman continuity, as much as it has been a point of return for both right-wing nationalists before 1945, and as it is the trope reoccurring in contemporary conservative, nationalist narratives.

was not to cease building the mall, but to incorporate an archaeological museum within its premises. With this incorporation, and the paint in the city by then chipping away and showing the colours of the Romanian flag again, the superimpositions were clearly visible.



Image 17 - The Romanian city of Cluj, where right-wing mayor Gheorghe Funar had street furniture and other objects painted in the colours of the Romanian flag. *In Transit* (2008), film still.



Image 18 - The archaeological sites uncovered in the city of Cluj, meant to “prove” the Romanian heritage and its long, historical legacy in this area. *In Transit* (2008), film still.

“All nationalisms are built on myths of origin, but the Romanian one is even more mythical,” says Richardson at the beginning of this montage of elements from *In Transit*. This is not only visible in the postcommunist right-wing or neoliberal moments from recent Romanian history, but manifests as a re-emerging trope, over a longer period of time. To show this continuity and deeper connection, Richardson uses material from an interview with philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás,<sup>249</sup> who argues that Romanian communism was not based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology, but on a theory of Daco-Roman continuity (See Images 19 and 20). Tamás is adamant in referring to specific local aspects that prove that calling Romanian communism a form of Soviet totalitarianism is not correct. In fact, a heavy proto-nationalist baggage shaped Romanian communism considerably, and especially Ceaușescu’s interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. Moreover, Tamás also reminds us of Romania’s fascist past, most notably visible in recent history around the Iron Guard and the military dictatorship<sup>250</sup> of Ion Antonescu, under whose rule Romania had been before communism.

In a succession of images from *In Transit* Richardson traces the sudden appearance of the Daco-Roman ruins in the mall to these connections with Romania’s nationalist communism and, previously, to its fascist past. These pasts meet for a moment in 2007: when Romanian transition had been declared over, flows of foreign capital entered the country, a museum lived inside a mall, and the national flag appeared from layers of paint in the urban furniture. Unsurprisingly, this thread was going to be enriched just one year later, by one of the most recent crisis of capitalism.

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<sup>249</sup> In this context, Tamás was a very suitable person to speak about the city Cluj, and the tensions between this Daco-Roman heritage and the history of the main city in the region called Transylvania, which has been transferred and historically disputed between Hungary and Romania, since the Treaty of Trianon, in 1920. It was under Hungarian occupation again in 1940, when it was “given back” to Romania, by Hitler. Tamás grew up in this city, in a family of Hungarian Jewish Communists and has reflected extensively on the lineages of entwined Romanian foundational myths and nationalism, the fascist pasts of both Hungary and Romania, and the more recent form of what he calls “postfascism”, present in current capitalist societies of both countries. See G. M. Tamás, “Words from Budapest,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 80 (April 2013): 5–26; G. M. Tamás, “On Post-Fascism,” *Boston Review*, June 1, 2000, <http://bostonreview.net/world/g-m-tam%C3%A1s-post-fascism>, or the recent publication on postfascism and anticommunism. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, *Postfascism și anticomunism. Intervenții filosofico-politice [Postfascism and Anticommunism. Philosophic and Political Interventions]*, trans. Teodora Dumitru and Attila Szigeti (Cluj: TACT, 2014).

<sup>250</sup> A fascist legionary movement which began in 1927, the Iron Guard became part of the Romanian government, until 1941, when most of its members were sent to political prisons. The military dictatorship, which followed in Romania, started an alliance with Nazi Germany and this was a period in Romanian history, riddled with anti-Semitism, pogroms and extra-territorial concentration camps, most of them run by the Romanian army.

On the backdrop of this crises, what resurfaced in a “post-postcommunist” Romania were all these traces of nationalism, postfascism (in Tamás’s term) and the insertions of capital, all merging with one another.



Image 19 - Philosopher G.M. Tamás speaks of how the Ceașescu era was not a mutation of Soviet totalitarian communism, but a specific blend of local fascism and communism. *In Transit* (2008), film still.



Image 20 - Tamás on the specific ideology during so-called Romanian “communism”, *In Transit* (2008), film still.

*In Transit* untangles threads in recent history as much as it contributes to complicating reductive views, which imagine 1989 as a break from one state (communism, socialism) to another (neoliberalism, capitalism). Most commonly encountered as the well-known neoconservative phrasing of Francis Fukuyama,<sup>251</sup> the end of socialism became “the end of history”, from which point there was only one other conceivable stage: capitalism. In this linear view, temporality was subsumed to the progressive accumulation of “forward movements.”

In the Romanian context, Vladimir Tismăneanu, one of the neoconservative leaders of the commission investigating the crimes of communism, was an influential producer of similar accounts about recent Romanian history. He wrote that “looking back and thinking forward”<sup>252</sup> needed to become the two types of movements and attitudes to have in postcommunism. More exactly, “back” was the communist period, failed and left behind, whilst “forward” was a “thinkable time”, a time to imagine and aspire to, in the future. He read the prefix “post” in postcommunism as if it described a measurable time, which was going to begin at a given moment, when the transition was over. Passing from a state of “looking back” to “thinking forward” was, in this interpretation, a way of seeing history moving towards a new end. “Looking back” did not imply engaging with the communist past, but leaving it behind, and “thinking forward” meant that change had the quality of being planned and predictable. Change and transition became temporal blocks that organised movement from one state or stage to another. For example, according to Ralf Dahrendorf, postcommunist countries could reach “full democracy” under the temporal rule of six – six months required to reach political democracy and the rule of law, six years for the conversion to a market economy, and sixty years allocated to the emergence of a civil society.<sup>253</sup> Similarly, “regime transition theory” and the “index of democratization” developed by Tatu Vanhanen<sup>254</sup> were examples of this instrumentalisation of time. For authors like

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<sup>251</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

<sup>252</sup> Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismăneanu, eds., *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000). Introduction, n.p.

<sup>253</sup> Quoted by Jacques Rupnik, “On the Two Models of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans,” in *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, ed. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismăneanu (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>254</sup> “The study is based on Vanhanen’s earlier comparative studies of democratization and on his evolutionary theory of democratization, using empirical data on 147 states, including all East European countries. This failure to make correct predictions for East European countries challenged Vanhanen to experiment with different combinations of his explanatory factors. The results show that if these

Tismăneanu, Dahrendorf, and Vanhanen, instrumentalising time meant producing change according to timetables, to stages of transition,<sup>255</sup> and to movements that were quantifiable.

Whether stemming from orthodox political science, geopolitics, or the intersection where a type of sociological or cultural studies aligned, however, to more conservative approaches, later incarnations, informed by these ideas, shared a teleological character, where a scientifically foreseeable end point of transition into democracy could be determined. This brought such approaches in alignment with the technocratic valences of neoliberalism, disregarding specific local, spatial and temporal rhythms of development, and foreclosing diversity, by offering a “one fits all” model of transition. But most importantly, as critic and philosopher Boris Buden observed, what these ideas suggested was that “the question of the future in postcommunism [wa]s considered as already answered.”<sup>256</sup> Progress, in these anti-Marxist views, was not brought forward by revolution. Rather, the events of 1989 were re-conceptualized as “rebirths,”<sup>257</sup> new beginnings, which allowed building on empty grounds. The passage from one state/stage into another was made towards an envisaged goal, as if “the transition to democracy start[ed] as a radical reconstruction out of nothing.”<sup>258</sup> Thus, understanding the 1989 revolutions as rebirths also allowed seeing postcommunist space as an empty, razed ground, a space where building anew was fully legitimated. Consequently, the space after 1989 became “the landscape after the battle,”<sup>259</sup> an exit point from communism, a space ready for the next attack, or, in the most positive version, a space for “fighting for a public sphere.”<sup>260</sup>

In a more nuanced approach, Krishnan Kumar believed that the space of Eastern Europe has historically been caught in-between empires on one and the other side of a

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alternative combinations of explanatory variables had been used, in addition to the original combination, it would have been possible to anticipate democratization in Eastern Europe on the basis of 1980 empirical data.” Geoffrey Pridham and Tatu Vanhanen, *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

<sup>255</sup> Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communism: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>256</sup> Boris Buden, “Children of Postcommunism,” *Radical Philosophy*, The Postcommunist Condition, no.159 (February 2010): 18–25, p.22.

<sup>257</sup> Rupnik, “On the Two Models of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans.”

<sup>258</sup> Buden, “Children of Postcommunism.”

<sup>259</sup> Rupnik, “On the Two Models of Exit from Communism: Central Europe and the Balkans,” 14.

<sup>260</sup> Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Fighting for the Public Sphere: Democratic Intellectuals under Postcommunism,” in *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, ed. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 153–75.

fault line, acting as a buffer zone.<sup>261</sup> However, this “unbearable burden of history”<sup>262</sup> Eastern and Central European countries might have shared fell short of factoring in local specificity, and implied that this space in the world had reached such uniformity as consequence of a certain political and economic dependency on stronger states, or from a shared ideology. This uniformity, Kumar argues, was also observable in “the case of Latin America”, an observation which leads him to suggest that the three-world ordering, made obsolete by the end of the Cold War, was replaced by a centre-margin or centre-periphery spatial composition and worldview. This spatial re-organisation might also be unable to fully account for the particular contexts and histories of the countries in question. The risk of using this geographical argument is that it can privilege spaces and disregard the people who inhabit them. Often, the postcommunist subject, is imagined as “caught” or “trapped” in these time-spaces, forgotten, disillusioned and pessimistic, unprepared and un-emancipated, waiting, on the backdrop of a ruined scenery, for foreign investors.<sup>263</sup>

In Romania, authors like Tismăneanu have remained adamant in flattening out the space-time of postcommunism into generalising views and, as mentioned, had a key role in dismissing from critical re-evaluation the entire period “before” 1989. Tismăneanu also played a crucial part in establishing a strong climate of anticommunism in Romania, having a key role in the *Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, and as one the editors of the *Final Report* (on communism)<sup>264</sup> of 2006. This commission and its *Report*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, have been criticised for their problematic connections to governmental and

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<sup>261</sup> Romania, for example, has been considered, in the socialist period, a buffer zone between the U.S.S.R. and Western Europe. Previously, in the time of the Ottoman Empire, it held the image of a space in-between Christianity and Islam. See, for instance, this view supported in the influential work of Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster hardcover ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

<sup>262</sup> Krishan Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals*, Contradictions 12 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 240.

<sup>263</sup> On the question of (dis)illusionment in post-1989 Romania, see Anca Mihaela Pușcă's treatment of subjectivity produced in times of transition as “lagging-behind”, coupled sometimes with nostalgic fascination with positive memories of communism, and a pessimistic approach to the future in Anca Pușcă, *Revolution, Democratic Transition and Disillusionment: The Case of Romania*, Perspectives on Democratic Practice (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). See also her approach to the concept of ruins and space in postcommunist time, in Anca Pușcă, “Industrial and Human Ruins of Postcommunist Europe,” *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2010): 239–55; Anca Pușcă, “The Aesthetics of Change: Exploring Post-Communist Spaces,” *Global Society* 22, no. 3 (July 2008): 369–86.

<sup>264</sup> See Chapter 3 for the initial mention and context in which the report by Tismăneanu was considered, especially in relation to the revolution of 1989.

political structures, the conditions of its writing, the arguments proposed, and the premises – especially about truth – which they rest upon.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, authors like Ruxandra Cesereanu problematically link the *Final Report on Communist Dictatorship in Romania* with the *Final Report on the Holocaust* from 2003, commissioned by president Ion Iliescu. Cesereanu argues that the reports have the joint role of investigating a traumatic recent history, produced by “the extreme left totalitarianism between 1944 and 1989” and “the extreme right totalitarianism between 1940 and 1944,”<sup>266</sup> respectively.

Whilst fully acknowledging Romania’s violent fascist past and the specific violent configurations of what came to be known as Romanian “communism”, critical positions to the conflation of the two hope to engage with both pasts through larger constellations of moments, events, and situations. This is something Richardson aimed to do with the montage sequence from Cluj, discussed above. In her moving image artworks, Richardson wishes to complicate reductive views of both these pasts, and to counter the concept of “transition”, especially in how it has been linked to ideology and used for political and economic gain of several right-wing and liberal governments, in postcommunism. In one reflexive note from *In Transit*, Richardson states that “postcommunism is not a new stage of history” and that a limited view of postcommunism demands “a categorical rejection of communism, a purely emotional condemnation, without analysis, without reflection.” Key moments in recent Romanian history should, thus, be addressed critically, anchored in a commitment to decolonise an imagination of time organised in blocks, which, when internalised, “takes the place of remembering,” as Joanne Richardson continues to say in the work.

In this vein, the Romanian revolution of 1989, as a moment in recent history, was part of a longer temporality, linked to the fluctuation of local rhythms, and not outside of them. Equally, it is important to see “transition”, as Ovidiu Țichindeleanu argues, as a concept emerging and changing *during* communism, alongside its counterpart *in* postcommunism, where it was often, just a stage towards integration into democratic, political and economic European structures of governmentality. Thus, a critical approach

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<sup>265</sup> Vasile Ernu et al., eds., *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale Raportului Tismăneanu / The Illusion of Anticommunism. Critical Readings of the Tismăneanu Report* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2008).

<sup>266</sup> Ruxandra Cesereanu, “The Final Report on the Holocaust and the Final Report on the Communist Dictatorship in Romania,” *East European Politics & Societies* 22, no. 2 (May 1, 2008): 270–81, doi:10.1177/0888325408315764.

to postcommunism re-frames how we understand what happened “after” the event. This is a political task, which urges to revisit the so-called “condition” as a lived experience, and not as a *malaise* that needs to be overcome. Therefore, a critical theory of postcommunism calls for a different understanding of time, space and subjectivity, of what local movements imply and involve. In addition, re-assessing postcommunism also means to ask for a re-evaluation of what can stand for documents of the communist period, as well as for the postcommunist one.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> At times, examples of critical forms of inquiry into the “postcommunist condition” have combined the art exhibition and conference formats. See *Interpol* and the associated publication Eda Čufer and Viktor Miziano, eds., *Interpol: The Art Show Which Divided East and West*, trans. Neil Davenport and Jasna Hrastnik (Ljubljana : Moscow: IRWIN ; Moscow Art Magazin, 2000).. See also *The Postcommunist Condition* (2004) project, led by Boris Groys, which explored the “different conditions for the functioning of art” created in an Eastern socialist space, characterised by the absence of an art market. Such projects meant, one way or another, to fill a cultural gap between East and West which, as Groys argues, cultural and postcolonial studies were unable to account for. See also the associated publication Boris Groys and Anne Von der Heiden, “The Postcommunist Condition,” Research Project and Exhibition, (2004), [www.postcommunist.de](http://www.postcommunist.de).

On the other hand, the long-term project *Former West* (2008-2016) proposes to reflect upon the changes brought in contemporary art and theory by the landmark event of 1989, also by engaging “in rethinking the global histories of the last two decades in dialogue with post-communist and postcolonial thought”, therefore, following a more open-ended ethos. See

Although contradictions may appear between these initiatives, the connections and similarities are also quite visible, and not only because many of the same names can be read across these projects, but in how such initiatives propose to rethink postcommunist time and space. Often, these projects involved artistic productions and associated publications. Concerns with a renewed conception of postcommunism come across clearly in the books, readers and catalogues, which respond to conversations started by art exhibitions or biennials. Examples include *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005) and IRWIN and Saint Martins College of Art and Design, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Afterall ; distribution by MIT Press, 2006)- a survey of artistic works in Eastern Europe and a wide collection of essays. See also Adrian T. Sârbu and Alexandru Polgár, eds., *Genealogii Ale Postcomunismului [Genealogies of Postcommunism]*, Refracții (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2009), initially an *IDEA Arts + Society* magazine dossier, then a book-length collection of critical contributions responding to the theoretical and publishing approach of *Documenta 12*.

#### 4.2.2 Critically Assessing Postcommunism in Artistic Practice

The process of rethinking postcommunism has been, at times, coupled with the search for synchronicity among other political and artistic formulations designated by the prefix “post”, mainly postmodernism and postcolonialism.<sup>268</sup> Such initiatives are, commonly, based on a view that there is a real danger in asynchronicity, because it is capable of “undermining local histories of autonomy.”<sup>269</sup> In that sense, cultural and artistic production in postcommunist time did not happen “after” or, *in lieu* of socialist realist art practice from communism, but in a time both continuous with modernity, and in dialogue with its own context of production. However, a danger rests, equally, in searching for synchronicity with a historical time before the Cold War, and before the “rupture” which socialism arguably produced in European art history.<sup>270</sup> As noted by art writer and curator Simon Sheikh, the risk, in this second case, is to enact a “catch-up modernism”, a process that the geographically defined Eastern bloc has to go through, as if “communism was out of time.”<sup>271</sup>

In some accounts, postcommunism becomes a condition somewhat similar to postmodernism, and the so-called “failure” of communism confirms the faith lost in grand narratives, whilst a new found age of free-floating signifiers offers the backdrop for artists to create politicized art during transition. Ales Erjavec, for example, considers that the specific conditions of postcommunism were very fertile for critical artistic production, allowing “this politicized postmodern art to emerge in what often were unexpected places: in impoverished Romania, for example, where food was so scarce

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<sup>268</sup> This is based on an argument which sees postcommunism to “have much in common with postcolonial theory, cultural, gender and identity studies.” See Forrester, Zaborowska, and Gapova, *Over the Wall/After the Fall*, 27. Furthermore, this idea is often present in the literature on film studies, especially in world cinema and memory, and to a degree, in an approach to art where, for example, the “postcommunist identity is [seen as] essentially hybrid.” See Cristian Nae, “Between Post-Communism and Postmodernism: On the Aesthetics of Post-History in Romanian Art after 1989,” 43. Such views can be traced back to the writing of well-known cultural studies figure of Homi Bhabha. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>269</sup> Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism. Beyond Anticommunism in Romania,” *Radical Philosophy*, The Postcommunist Condition, no. 159 (February 2010): 26–32, p.27.

<sup>270</sup> In other words, against the view of some art historians that there would be two different European art histories who parted at some point around 1945 and that art produced in Eastern Europe would be fundamentally different than art produced in Western Europe. See, most notably Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. Caroline Saltzwedel and Mitch Cohen (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>271</sup> Simon Sheikh, “What Remains? - Chto Delat?, Post-Communism and Art,” in “What Remains? - Chto Delat?, Post-Communism and Art.” in *Chto Delat?* Catalogue (Kunsthalle Baden-Baden: Walter Koenig, 2011).

that the subREAL group<sup>272</sup> in 1991 exhibited it as rare artistic artefacts.”<sup>273</sup> This view links postcommunism with late postmodernism, and is partially shared and nuanced by Romanian writers. Whilst Erjavec speaks of the first decade of postcommunism, Cristian Nae considers that the use of images from communism in recent contemporary Romanian art is at once a critique of neoliberalism, and a self-ironical reflection on an “off-modern, post-historical re-evaluation of the past.”<sup>274</sup> Moreover, Nae feels that “as the last stage of the absorption into a post-communist aesthetics of post-history, another version of the global postmodern style [was] itself absorbed into postmodernism or the cultural logic of commodity culture.”<sup>275</sup> This statement ultimately suggests that the politicized art and artists, which emerged in the very first years of Romanian postcommunism, have, as the avant-gardes did previously, “passed into history – or sometimes were absorbed into the international art market.”<sup>276</sup> The reflections of Boris Groys are useful here to nuance further some of the observations Nae makes about Romanian postcommunism, and especially his last note on the art market. Groys considers that, because “the postmodern sensibility strongly dislikes—and *must* dislike—the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of Communism,”<sup>277</sup> and it demands aesthetic diversity as the primal condition for a market's existence, in the end, what the “postcommunist condition” reveals is not a return to the art market, but “rather a revelation of the highly artificial character of the market itself.”<sup>278</sup>

Overall, these views show how reclaiming or recuperating “postcommunism” as “postmodernism” leads to the need to face both of these periods, and equally,

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<sup>272</sup> Erjavec is referring here to the work *Alimentara* (1991) by the group subREAL, an installation which quoted the shelf displays in Romanian grocery stores during the communist period, when only a few items were repeatedly stacked on shelves, for display. Of the Romanian artists and the works produced by Romanian artists after 1989, the subREAL group is the only one quoted and briefly discussed in the book, under a sub-heading to a larger section by Miško Šuvaković, “Art as a Political Machine. Fragments on the Late Socialist and Postsocialist Art of Mitteleuropa and the Balkans,” in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 90-135.

<sup>273</sup> Ales Erjavec, ed., *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>274</sup> Cristian Nae, “Between Post-Communism and Postmodernism: On the Aesthetics of Post-History in Romanian Art after 1989,” in *Romanian Cultural Revolution - Documentary*, ed. Adrian Bojenuiu and Alexandru Niculescu (Romanian Cultural Institute, 2011), 44.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> Erjavec, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, p. xvii.

<sup>277</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 150.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

“communism” and “modernity”, with the aesthetic and political consequences of artificiality as their “double debacle.”<sup>279</sup> Instead of producing comparative reflections between postmodernism and postcommunism, writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu suggests, the question can be how one can decolonise the “postcommunist condition”, a space-time locked violently into recent history, and “instrumentalized as the regional articulation of the coloniality of power in the former socialist bloc?”<sup>280</sup> His view is influenced by “decolonial aesthesis”, a theoretical project that sees identities and differences constantly re-appropriated in “altermodernity” – a term which designates a temporal frame that is not characterized as following from postmodernity, but as responding to modernity. “Altermodernity” often fails to attend to local diversity, and re-iterates a process through which identity is colonised into flows, circuits, pertaining to capitalist structures. In turn, “decolonial transmodernity”, as *The Decolonial Aesthesis Manifesto* proposes, “has endorsed identities-in-politics and challenged identity politics and the self-proclaimed universality of altermodernity.”<sup>281</sup> From this perspective, Țichindeleanu proposes a “decolonial postcommunist project”, which would attain “the

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<sup>279</sup> Susan Buck-Morss provides an extensive treatment of the two “uncannily similar” modernities of capitalism and communism. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000). On the other hand, Bruno Latour asks the infamous question-proposition “What if we have never been modern?” His observations lead him to argue that the “miraculous year of 1989” rendered critically invaluable the scepticism of postmodernity. Whilst it is well-known and very interesting how Latour’s conceptions have evolved from this point onwards, they are not the reflections of interest here, but the connection which seems to be set between the ‘postcommunist condition’ or the possibility thereof and a wider understanding of a postmodern, globalized and postcolonial situation, a preoccupation of scholars in cultural studies and critical theory. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10. See also Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>280</sup> Țichindeleanu, “Decolonial Aesthesis in Eastern Europe.” n.p.

<sup>281</sup> *Decolonial Aesthesis Manifesto*, signed by Allana Lockward, Rolando Vasquez, Teresa Maria Diaz Nerio, Marina Grznic, Michelle Eistrup, Tanja Ostojic, Dalida Maria Benfield, Raul Moarquech Ferrera Balanquet, Pedro Lasch, Nelson Maldonado Torres, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Miguel Rojas Sotelo, Walter Mignolo. The project of “decolonial aesthesis” aims to re-route the conversation from identity and representation, to modes of producing knowledge and visibilities which are embodied, refer to the senses, as well as to sense-making. The aim of the “decolonial aesthesis” project, as it is apparent from this manifesto, the varied backgrounds and practices of its signatories, and the few dossiers and special editions published so far on the topic, is to resist and re-write both the existing flat ways of seeing identity, and the multiplicity of entangled and always moving instances of history, that have been appropriated as commodities around the globe. However, it is questionable how and why, this “pluriversality”, as a form in which any locale is characterized by diversity, since it is one of the many universals, would need to become a “planetary project”, as the manifesto suggests. Resource available online “TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute,” *TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute*, accessed April 26, 2015, <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/>.

historical task of decolonizing the imaginary”<sup>282</sup> not as a symbolic task, but rather, as the work of “materially bridging the sense of another world, beyond modernity/coloniality.”<sup>283</sup> This act of “decolonising the imaginary” requires continuously re-inscribing and re-articulating new regimes of visibility, accounting for both historical and contemporary conditions of cultural and artistic production. This necessity implies a constant, critical re-assessment of the so-called “postcommunist condition”, of “transition”, and of key moments and events in recent history.

What I consider common and valuable in the above views, but nevertheless distinct and diverse, is an urge for critical assessment, through artistic practice, of what a “postcommunist condition” means. Joanne Richardson’s *In Transit* calls for such a re-evaluation of transition, in its intimate links to neoliberal ideology and its rejection of the communist past. The work, as much as the entire *Commonplaces of Transition* project, contributes to this task of “decolonising the imaginary” that Țichindeleanu speaks of, first by countering the notion of transition as a blanket term and ideological tool, with local accounts, specific to the Romanian context. As transition is part of a time and space often covered by the other largely problematic term “postcommunism”, Richardson’s aim is to respond critically to two aspects that have affected Romania during this period, namely an instrumentalised view of time, and a prescribed image of the postcommunist subject, as always needing to catch-up, to look ahead to the integration into neoliberal, economic, political and military structures. Richardson uses moving images to assess these two aspects, in order to understand the contemporary Romanian context. Thus to revisit, critically, both transition and postcommunism and their consequences in the recent past becomes a radical act, because that period strongly shaped the contemporary. Richardson achieves this from a self-critical position, between memory and distant observation, and produces documents which neither vilify, nor nostalgically gloss over recent history. This becomes an act of opposition to the dominant blend of anticommunist, neoliberal narratives. Her decision to return to Romania was based on her perception of the context as open and ripe for radical engagement with the “postcommunist condition” through moving images. The necessity to investigate recent history in Romania was her critical position towards

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<sup>282</sup> Tichindeleanu, “Decolonial AestheSis in Eastern Europe.”, n.p.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., n.p.

postcommunism, often imagined generically, as a space-time which occurred “after” communism. With Richardson’s position as a Romanian immigrant and a self-reflexive researcher, these necessary investigations were carried, arguably, from within. Furthermore, to acknowledge one’s own position helps shape not only a critical approach to postcommunism, but moves towards what Richardson, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard, declares her aim to be: to make film politically. In that sense, the entire *Commonplaces of Transition* project acts as an example of how to re-assess postcommunism critically.

### 4.3 Moving Images and the Possibilities of Protest

One way to critically assess the Romanian postcommunist time-space is by revisiting landmark events. As discussed in the previous chapter, the 1989 revolution is such a moment. In this televised event, moving images played a crucial part, especially by showing how people were making and spectating images at the same time, and how, in this process, they appeared in the moving images as acting subjects, part of a historical event. Six months after the revolution, the anti-government protests of June 1990 marked the violent start of the Romanian political and economic transition, and of a “postcommunist condition”, driven by anticommunism, racism and growing distrust in radical political action. The archival footage from this next major event in recent Romanian history shows protesters and other groups being violently attacked by army and police forces, and then by workers from the mining valleys.

In 2007 – 2008, Richardson’s *Commonplaces of Transition* critically maps out the Romanian postcommunism, which had been strongly influenced by the revolution, the June protests, and the entire period of transition. With *2 or 3 Things about Activism*, Richardson expands on a note from *In Transit*, where she says that after the protesters were chased off from the streets of Bucharest, in June 1990, “these streets are still empty, even today.” How did the June 1990 events influence, in the following two decades, the possibilities to engage in direct action and activism, in so-called postcommunist Romania?

#### 4.3.1 “Two or Three Things about Activism”

The work *2 or 3 Things about Activism*<sup>284</sup> offers a glimpse into how young Romanians’ subjectivity had formed during the lived experience of postcommunism, shaped by dualities and contradictions. Some of these contradictions manifested between holding on to positions informed by the local context, and following counterpart models of resistance, observed in Western countries. Others involved an inherited distrust and rejection of communism as ideology, and the desire and imagination for common action and activism. The people interviewed in this work were asked their views on activism,

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<sup>284</sup> The title is most likely a quotation of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). The work also starts with a reference to Godard’s famous dictum about “making film politically.” Joanne Richardson, *2 or 3 Things about Activism* (D-Media, 2008), [https://archive.org/details/Two\\_or\\_Three\\_things\\_about\\_Activism](https://archive.org/details/Two_or_Three_things_about_Activism).

and they were often presented, or they referred to themselves as activists – when they did not associate this word with the communist legacy, and with terms like “Party activist”, which, for them, held negative connotations connected to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The actions of the interviewees and the ways in which they refer to themselves are trapped between an imagined perfect situation, where state power is dissolved into either civil disobedience or anarchy, and NGO-informed narratives, which recognise the need for state regularization in areas like education or healthcare, but are more or less imported models and narratives. Overall, the interviewees appear equally trapped between declared cynicism in radical engagement with the entire political Left as perceived at the time in Romania (“To say you are a Leftist is a disaster” says one of the interviewees), and between critically assessing their complete disengagement from any political position as a failure. The interviewees’ answers appear in accordance with Richardson’s own reflexive voice-over note about the drive to make the work. She mentions that “It started with a five-year failure of activism. I wanted to think that the failure was not mine, but of the context.”<sup>285</sup> Richardson’s initial perception of Romania, when she returned, was that the context was ripe for radical politics, and for working with moving images to engage with those politics. In the above note, she re-considers this position, and speaks of her failure with activism, which she wanted to account to the same context. For Richardson, the Romanian postcommunist time-space had this paradoxical character, of being open and ripe for radical politics and yet also the ground for failure of engagement with politics. The work *2 or 3 Things about Activism* tries to investigate this paradox, and to show how the possibilities of critical, activist and resistant action in the so-called Romanian “postcommunist condition” became, by 2007, restricted to the isolated efforts of a few disconnected small groups, or to individuals. Where, in recent Romanian history, could the reasons for this paradoxical situation be traced back to?

In order to gain some understanding of the context, and the generalised disengagement from activism that Richardson observes in 2007, one can revisit, guided by her work, a landmark moment in recent Romanian history – the protests of 13 – 15 June 1990. The events of these days can offer access, at least partially, to the context which led, in the long term, to a growing distrust in the capacities of protest and direct action.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

In fact, *2 or 3 Things about Activism* continues Richardson's critical investigation from *In Transit*, where she connects the events of June 1990 to the revolution and engages briefly with the problematic presence of Ion Iliescu, as a major actor, in both events. The protests of June 1990 had a specific significance in recent Romanian history, first, for how the state responded, in an extremely violent manner, towards the protesters and other groups of the population,<sup>286</sup> and secondly, as an unresolved and confusing event, which contributed to shaping a certain distrust in protest in Romania, in the following two decades of cynical, anticommunist neoliberalism. It should be critically reassessed as an important moment in recent history, and its meaning integrated in the contemporary context.

The moment occurred after the first democratic parliamentary and presidential elections promulgated the National Salvation Front (NSF) and Ion Iliescu the winners. Protesters had gathered in the University Square in Bucharest, contesting the validity of the parliamentary elections, and of Ion Iliescu's position as elected president. They were questioning the legality of the elections, considering that the short time taken to prepare them led to having only two candidates and only two newly founded parties. To counter the occupation of this central square, Ion Iliescu ordered the police to intervene. When that failed, he called in the army. However, what created the distinct character of these events were not only the violent clashes between police or army and those on the streets, but president Ion Iliescu's additional call, to the workers in the coal mines of Jiu valley, to "re-instate" order in the city. The need for this intervention was, according to him, justified by the fact that the demonstrations had been "overtaken by obscure, fascist forces,"<sup>287</sup> whose goal was to undermine the democratic system brought about by the revolution. Thus all actions, including the call to the Romanian miners, were intended, in his view, to "defend democracy."

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<sup>286</sup> Approximately 1300 persons were wounded and 100 persons died in these events, as declared by the investigations carried out throughout the years. Urged by the European Court of Human Rights, the Romanian Supreme Court recently re-opened (March 2015) the trial investigating the crimes against humanity produced during the events of 1990. In this trial, acting president at that time, Ion Iliescu stands the risk of being brought to court. Raluca Ion and Cristian Andrei, "Curtea Supremă Redeschide DOSARUL MINERIADEI Din 13-15 Iunie 1990. Reacția Lui Ion Iliescu [The Supreme Court Reopens the 'Mineriad' File. Ion Iliescu's Reaction]," *Gandul.info*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.gandul.info/stiri/curtea-suprema-redeschide-dosarul-mineriadei-din-13-15-iunie-1990-reactia-lui-ion-iliescu-13953805>.

<sup>287</sup> According to a television address by Ion Iliescu in June 1990, archival footage. See Image 24.



Image 21 - Ion Iliescu claiming on National Television that the capital is under the siege of “fascist forces.” Source: *Piața Universității*, dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image, English subtitles added.



Image 22 - “Nous sommes toujours avec la démocratie” / “We are always on the side of democracy” – statement made in French by acting Prime Minister Petre Roman during the events of 13 – 15 June 1990. Source: *Piața Universității*, dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image.

A linear account of these events would support that miners arrived in the capital and violently assaulted any person on the street who appeared to be a protester, including women and children. Then, that the miners broke into and devastated the headquarters of the political parties of the opposition, some of the University's buildings, and the Architecture School, next to the central University square, which was occupied by protestors. In these actions, professors and students were injured. The pretext of these aggressive interventions was a search for incriminating evidence, like weapons or foreign currency, which would arguably prove the anti-democratic nature of the protests. The miners then posed with this "evidence", in front of cameras, and finally planted rows of colourful flowers in the central square. Then, on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1990, they all left, but not before being delivered a thank-you speech by president Ion Iliescu.

One could read this linear account in archival footage from the events as a semi-cohesive narrative. However, what is also visible in the images taken by independent camera persons or gathered from newsreels, is not a fluent narrative, but a confusing event.<sup>288</sup> At the beginning of *2 or 3 Things about Activism*, Richardson states that making film politically means to "intervene in political struggles and to provoke questions and self-reflection." A critical re-evaluation of this event, which was surrounded by uncertainty and confusion, can contribute greatly to provoking questions about recent history. However, if artworks using images of the 1989 revolution were quick to take shape, and have occupied the imagination of Romanian artists,<sup>289</sup> critical works using archival footage of June 1990, commonly known as the "Mineriad" (from the term "miner"), are scarcer.<sup>290</sup> Nevertheless, there are some examples from the area of performance and theatre, which I consider briefly in this section, for their role in making the two aspects, which are less visible in archival footage, more clear. One aspect challenges biased accounts of the event which created, in the long run, a division between two of the categories involved in it, the miner-workers, and the protesting student-intellectuals. Another aspect, neither easily visible in the archival footage, nor

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<sup>288</sup> See Appendix C for the audiovisual essay which works with these moving images and reflects on the confusion in the event.

<sup>289</sup> Works like *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), Dan Mihălțianu's *La Revolution Dans le Budoir* (1999), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor's *The Trial* (2004), Irina Botea's *Auditions for a Revolution* (2006) offer different approaches to 1989, especially because the televised revolution ended epically in Romania, with a televised trial and an execution.

<sup>290</sup> To my knowledge, there is only one documentary film made about this. See Stere Gulea, Sorin Ilieșiu, and Vivi Drăgan Vasile, *Piața Universității - Romania*, Documentary, (1991).

always acknowledged in dominant narratives, is that the state intervention against protesters was doubled by racist violence against Roma minorities.

In a performance-action by artist Dan Perjovschi, performers re-enacted a selection of gestures from the events. In *History/Hysteria 2* (2007) performers sat in the main Universitate square, with one “protester” and one “miner” standing still, sometimes facing each other and at other times in confrontational postures. Curator and writer Raluca Voinea considers that this work “was an antimonument which, instead of delivering a definitive statement, called attention to the biased position from which most accounts of the troubled postcommunist history of Romania have been given. The work was thus an appeal against judging based on selective memory.”<sup>291</sup> In his piece, Perjovschi did not fix any meaning to the event, he only slowed down and stilled the remembered postures and gestures of violence. Perjovschi explains that:

In 1990, students and miners were among the strongest political bodies. In 2007, they all vanished. After 17 years, my view (our views) on the events got more nuanced and the big picture bigger... For a decade the miners were the “black sheep” of Romanian democracy. Now nobody cares. This is why the “monument”. That’s why the non-action. Two living sculptures side by side, face to face, back to back, 3 days about 8 hours per day. No podium, no postament, passer-by perspective, marginal location within the square.<sup>292</sup>

In the tradition of performance and video art equally, Perjovschi experimented with duration and with the presence of bodies in the same spaces where the protests took place, but almost two decades after. The bodies from the public square moved only as their corporeal functions would require, essentially remaining *tableaux vivants* of violent gestures (Image 23). Their apparent lack of movement became a comment on the relationship between these two actors from the protests, the miner-workers, and the student-intellectuals, an opposition often hijacked to serve either the anticommunist political agendas or a stereotypical de-humanisation of the miner as a brute, in opposition to the democratic and elitist status of the student as an intellectual.

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<sup>291</sup> Raluca Voinea, “Public Space,” in *Atlas of Transformation*, ed. Zbyněk Baladrán and Vít Havránek, Pap/Chrt edition (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2010), n.p, accessed 14 December 2015, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/public-space/public-space-raluca-voinea.html>.

<sup>292</sup> Dan Perjovschi, email message to author, September 23, 2014.



Image 23 - Documentation photographs of *Monument (History/Hysteria 2)* (2007), Dan Perjovschi, courtesy of the artist



Image 24 - Archival footage from 13 – 15 June 1990. The man heads toward the left and sees the miners, hesitates, and then they start to chase him. The images are shot at University square, in the same space where Dan Perjovschi did his piece seventeen years later. Source: *Piața Universității*, dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image.

Perjovschi's work also resonates with the archival images from June 1990 in the way there seems to be, in the latter images, an uncanny sense of performance in the bodies of those on the streets, in both the miners and the protesters. What leaks from the images, in the postures and gestures of those caught in front of cameras, is an apparent uncertainty over what was happening (Image 24). Thus, slowing down the movement and focusing on a single gesture has the potential to allow one to reflect on how these images have shaped the meaning and imagination of the events. And perhaps to ask questions about what kinds of performances were enacted in front of camera and on screens, for what audiences and for whom the confusion was profitable.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1990, when a group of people headed for the television station and were arguably about to force their way on air, a decision was taken to interrupt transmission for 40 minutes.<sup>293</sup> This was reminiscent of the constant interruptions to broadcasts, during the revolution, it created a state of panic and increased tension around the events. The group of people who reached the station was soon met by the army, forced into the building's basement, and heavily beaten.<sup>294</sup> They were then filmed in Studio 4, which played an important part in the revolution, yet it is not clear, from the archival footage, what the purpose of these images was (See Image 26).<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Răzvan Theodorescu, the former head of the National Television station, named in that position by NSF but not a party member, declared that the decision to interrupt transmission was not taken by him, but by the Minister of Communications, army general Ștefan Pintilie and his adjunct, Andrei Chirică. Ana-Maria Onisei, "Secretele Mineriadei /Răzvan Theodorescu: 'Dumnezeii Mamii Voastre, Oprim Transmisia!'" [The Mineriad Secrets/Răzvan Theodorescu: 'God Damn It, We Interrupt Transmission!']," *Adevarul.ro*, accessed September 22, 2015, [http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/secretele-mineriadei-razvan-theodorescudumnezeii-mamii-voastre-oprim-transmisia-1\\_50adeefd7c42d5a66399a708/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/secretele-mineriadei-razvan-theodorescudumnezeii-mamii-voastre-oprim-transmisia-1_50adeefd7c42d5a66399a708/index.html).

<sup>294</sup> The same Răzvan Theodorescu has argued that he was threatened and forced, by a group of people, whom he claims were not protesters, but wanted to reach Studio 4 of the Television Station and make live televised statements. He claims that before long, a certain army general named Manea arrived, seized the group, and took them to the basement of the building. Andrei Luca Popescu and Clarice Dinu, "Răzvan Theodorescu: 'Covingerea Mea Este Că Nu Ion Iliescu a Chemat Minerii'. Cum a Trăit Fostul șef Al TVR 'Rușinea Națională' Din 13-15 Iunie 1990 [Răzvan Theodorescu: 'My Belief Is That Ion Iliescu Was Not the One Who Called on the Miners.' How Did the Ex-TVR Director Experience the 'National Shame']," *Gandul.info*, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.gandul.info/interviurile-gandul/razvan-theodorescu-covingerea-mea-este-ca-nu-ion-iliescu-a-chemat-minerii-cum-a-trait-fostul-sef-al-tvr-rusinea-nationala-din-13-15-iunie-1990-14441992>.

<sup>295</sup> The moving images made available online, by the official National Television channel, on Youtube, have no adjacent commentary. The footage is clearly edited and the sections which exist do not make a coherent narrative. The role of the camera for most of the filming seems to be to document the process of randomly questioning those in the group for their identities, affiliation, and intentions. Most of the people the camera turns to have already been assaulted and are clearly injured. They are confronted – by a voice off-camera – with various accusations, like destroying state property, or throwing Molotov



Image 25 - An iconic image from the 1989 revolution. In Studio 4 of the National Television Station, a group of people celebrate their first "free" live transmission. Source: *Videograms of a Revolution*, film still.



Image 26 - The group of people beaten up at the TV station by the army, in the same Studio 4, on June 13, 1990. After the group was aligned to be filmed, a voice in off said that "It won't work. We need to wash their faces, they are bloody." Then, they were aligned again (right). Source: National Television Archive Youtube channel, still images.

cocktails. The images also show banknotes and ammunition, presumably found on those detained there. When in front of cameras, some of those questioned are held by soldiers at gunpoint. The cameras have a peculiar role in the images from Studio 4. They seem to be used to produce mugshots of a selected number of individuals. The cameras zoom in on the assaulted faces, before and after they have been cleaned of blood. Then there is a cut to a final scene, where a seriously wounded man is getting medical assistance and the sequence ends abruptly.

If the revolution of 1989 in Romania was a “planetary film”<sup>296</sup> – featuring all aspects of a political uprising and culminating in a televised execution – as Andrei Ujică suggested, then what followed, particularly in June 1990, was the sequel to this film. The state of emergency mediated by the National Television station during the revolution was used as a tactic, which the new government returned to in the June protests against them. This state was produced by confusion around what was happening, with televised addresses of the president and prime minister claiming that “obscure forces” had undermined state democracy. Overall, the urgency and uncertainty around what had happened during those three days had particular consequences for the Romanian postcommunist context. During the postcommunist period these protests and the images thereof have been hijacked from many sides and used to perform the necessary idea of history, required by the narratives that they were supporting. As mentioned above, media coverage of the events most commonly portrayed the miners as dark brutes who were “programmed” to have recourse to violence. The solidarity that their group possessed from working in the harshest conditions had been used by the state to mobilise and control the flows of violence against those in the streets. The protesters, in turn, have been portrayed in the media as the intellectuals who suffered the beating and abuse of the brutes from the mines. This account created a worker-student/worker-intellectual opposition which functioned extremely well in supporting the anticommunist approach to the “postcommunist condition.”

Apart from the divide between students and miners and the declining image of the miner in the postcommunist period, a connected and often overlooked aspect of the events was that of racial violence. This aspect was explored in a recent political theatre play, *Capete Înfierbântate (Heated Heads)*.<sup>297</sup> The work proposes to revisit the time-space of 13 – 15 June 1990, in order to reveal the so-called “Mineriad” as an event in

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<sup>296</sup> Andrei Ujică in Grivel et al., “Time and Screens. Hubertus von Amelnunxen in Conversation with Charles Grivel, Georg Maag, Peter M. Spangenberg and Andrei Ujică,” 129.

<sup>297</sup> Mihaela Michailov and David Schwartz, *Capete Înfierbântate (Heated Heads)*, Theatre play, 2009 - ongoing, <http://capeteinfierbantate.blogspot.co.uk/>. The title of the play is taken from an interview the directors conducted with former president Ion Iliescu. The research for the play included several interviews with political figures, leaders from University Square, people illegally arrested, and witnesses to the events. In its earlier versions, the work included, along with the monologues developed from these interviews, a series of video interventions, composed of archival footage from the television station, excerpts from international reports, and press coverage of the time. However, by 2015, when it ran last, the moving images have been extracted, Schwartz and Michailov explaining that they felt the images “cluttered” the work and added confusion. (Personal conversation in Q&A session, with the playwright and the director, April 1, 2015, Bucharest).

recent history which requires re-evaluating. The play is part of a larger research project and other public events, stressing the overlooked fact that in June 1990 Roma minorities had clearly been targeted and that this aspect, along with the other violent actions, opens up questions of state accountability for the physical violence, imprisonment and abuse suffered by those involved in the events.<sup>298</sup>

The racial targeting was possible because of the confusion and the sense of emergency created at the time. As previously mentioned, statements about the need to ensure and protect democracy, under threat from these alleged “fascist” forces, were commonly heard on National Television (Images 21 and 22). In Iliescu’s and Roman’s public addresses, fascism and communism were essentially compressed as one, equally dangerous ideologies lurking in the dark corners of society, ready to overtake the power of the new order, and undermine the democratic state. However, the government made use of its knowledge and remaining control over the bureaucratic apparatus, still in place from the communist period, to mobilize and control the miners. The latter had not been happy with their working conditions during communism and had been kept under strict surveillance and control by the Ceaușescu government, through the Romanian Secret Information Services,<sup>299</sup> since a large miner’s strike in 1977. The new Iliescu government used the televised calls against fascist forces and the “attack” on the TV station to justify the violent intervention of the army, and then of the miners, against protesters.

In the longer run, what emerged was an intricate web of stereotyped categories in opposition: the miners were constructed as essentially violent brutes, assaulting the intellectuals protesting i.e. workers were set against intellectuals; the Roma assaulted in these events were portrayed as small business owners out to cheat the law (labelled in colloquial terms “bișnițari”), but also as communist supporters (in both cases, they were beaten and arrested unlawfully); the communists (whoever they were) were set against the anticommunists (both the intellectuals and the miners had identified with this position); finally, there were also the “obscure fascist forces” Iliescu and Roman warned and tried to defend against, and those forces were a mutating category – members or supporters of the opposition parties, protesters, or generically, Roma, could

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ruxandra Cesereanu, “Greva Minerilor Din Valea Jiului, 1977,” *Revista 22*, February 21, 2013, <http://www.revista22.ro/greva-minerilor-din-valea-jiului-1977-1051.html>.

have taken this role. In any case, violence was the recipe for solving all contradictions, and for any confusion arising from them.

The days of 13, 14 and 15 June 1990 unfolded as an obscene display of brute force; but more than this, they resembled, in uncanny form, the totalitarian displays of power common to the old regime. In addition, they produced a sense of confusion around “what happened”, which, in connection with an anticommunist agenda, contributed to a growing distrust in possibilities for protest and common action, in the postcommunist period. For example, the groups in the central square responded to president Iliescu calling the protesters “rascals”, with a line from a song written for the occasion by Cristian Pațurcă, the *Hymn of the Rascal*. Its lyrics tellingly sounded as follows: “Better off a rascal, than an activist/ Better off dead, than a communist.”<sup>300</sup> The outward rejection of communism, Iliescu’s call against fascist forces, the attack on opposition parties using the miners, and the racist attack on the Roma minority, all contributed to sustaining later mystifications, confusion and scepticism around the event.

Furthermore, as Richardson expresses in her *Memoirs of a video activist* text, this scepticism was “partly due to disinformation campaigns before 1989 that assured the ‘left’ would be understood simply as the *de facto* power of the communist apparatus”<sup>301</sup> but was also “influenced by a new mystification about ‘postcommunism’ by those who came to power.”<sup>302</sup> For instance, as a consequence of June 1990, the general image of the Romanian miner deteriorated very fast and was soon followed by the decay, due to privatisation, of the entire coal industry. In turn, the Roma targeted by the random acts of violence remained largely unacknowledged as victims in mainstream accounts and histories of the event. Alongside these mystifications and omissions, there was a process of normalisation, which can be understood both as normalising a strong rejection of communism (“better off a rascal, than an activist/ Better off dead than a communist!”), and a pathological desire for normalisation into neoliberal time and space. As I will discuss next, Richardson’s investigation from *2 or 3 Things about Activism* shows how

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<sup>300</sup> These lyrics now stand on a plaque in University square, with the word ‘communist’ in red, showing how influential they were in shaping an image and imagination of those events and linking unmistakably June 1990 to a rejection of communism as a whole.

<sup>301</sup> Joanne Richardson, “Memoirs of a Video Activist,” 2006, accessed April 24, 2015, [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors3/richardsontext3.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/richardsontext3.html), n.p.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

this context, in which June 1990 played an important part, eroded possibilities for collective, common action in the anticommunist, liberal-oriented, and racist climate of the so-called “postcommunist condition”, through mapping the state of Romanian activism in 2007.

#### **4.3.2 Postcommunism, Media and Capital**

As discussed above, archival footage from June 1990 reveals connections with the revolution of December 1989: one actor, Ion Iliescu, who appeared in the images from the revolution, was also a key figure during the 1990 protests. In televised images from 1989, Ion Iliescu stood at the balcony of the Central Committee building with army general Ștefan Gușă by his side, to proclaim taking over state power through the National Salvation Front (See Image 27). The presence of the general not only supported his statements, but introduced a form of potential violence in his speech through the power of the army, which Iliescu used to legitimise the political power of this new establishment. On the balcony, Iliescu spoke of organizing forces and “maintaining public order.”<sup>303</sup> The army was used to give re-assurance that order will be reinstated, yet one of the interests of this newly formed power was to maintain a state of urgency and confusion whilst appearing to attempt to resolve it. What Iliescu did, in that first public speech, was what Jacques Rancière<sup>304</sup> would call a form of distribution of what could be seen, sensed, heard, known. His interest was to impose a new order, to sit in front of the cameras, and imply that the National Salvation Front was the sole political power, supported by the army and able to organise the events at hand, the images of these events, the protagonists, and the spectators, to distribute what can be seen, heard, and known about the event. (See Appendix F)

The same Ion Iliescu was a key figure in June 1990, when he spoke again from the same balcony. He made a public address in which he called on the intervention of the army to stop the anti-government protesters, rascals who, according to him,

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<sup>303</sup> Calls like “The army is on our side” were common at some point during the revolution. Whose side was that or on whose side had the army been on before, if not on “our” side, remained unquestioned at the time and the springboard for much speculation afterward. The call was meant to ensure that “order” and “stability” were going to be imposed and that this intervention was legitimised and necessary, because of the unstable situation at hand.

<sup>304</sup> See Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics.*, Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

endangered the stability of a democratic life painstakingly earned through the revolution. The same Ion Iliescu ran two presidential mandates, between 1992 – 1996 and 2000 – 2004, when the majority of state assets were privatised to foreign investors. These events must be understood in relation to the use of violence for political and economic gain. Soon after, the state aligned itself with neo-conservative narratives about transition and postcommunism, narratives often disguised as reformist, while supporting a strong anticommunist and anti-activist ethos. In addition, the call to privatise all national assets soon rang loudly in adverts running on Romanian television sets.



Image 27 – Ion Iliescu at the balcony of the Central Committee building, during the 1989 Romanian revolution. He appeared by side of army general Ștefan Gușă and declared that the army will protect and maintain “public order.” Source: *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), still image.



Image 28 - Iliescu calling on the intervention of the army against anti-government protesters occupying a central square. His televised address is delivered from the same balcony, in the Central Committee building. Source: *Piața Universității*, dir. Stere Gulea (1991), still image, English subtitle added.

A sense of generalised distrust in protest and in common political action that followed on from June 1990, alongside a general rejection of communism as a failure of the past, and this new connection with global capital through privatisation, all worked in symbiosis. In addition, a prolonged state of urgency and confusion from the time of the televised revolution extended through the first decade of the 1990s, and contributed to these layers working together. It proved politically profitable in the short term and economically profitable in the longer term, when calls from media channels asked Romanian citizens to participate in the dismantling and selling of state property to private owners. Romanian writer Bogdan Ghiu advances the complex argument that “the revolution was the belated post-territorial and post-colonial geostrategic recuperation demanded by the new (...) configurations of capital.”<sup>305</sup> These new configurations of capital that Ghiu speaks of demanded action from those watching the free television stations, but not in the same way action had been called for in direct cries during the days of the revolution (for example, “Come and protect the television station, it is our national asset”). Now, the calls came in the form of adverts and they asked for

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<sup>305</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “The Unconsumated Revolution - a Dream of Consumerism,” in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to the Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrowszky and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 215.

“democratic” participation of individuals in the processes of privatisation (“Nation is action. Be part of the privatisation!”).

During the events of 13 – 15 June 1990 a state of confusion had legitimated armed intervention against protesters, presented as the need to protect the hard-earned democracy from mysterious “forces” threatening it. Throughout the following decade the “nation” was called forward to play its part in the realisation of what was going to be a long process of transition. The nation was called to go into action via the television i.e. was given the feeling of inclusion, through the act of consumption. Buying stocks or bonds in privatised factories, for example, was one of the ways in which participative democracy and building a capitalist market were concomitantly carried forward in this period of transition.

In the installation *Ready Media* (1995), Kinema Ikon collective, mentioned in Chapter 2, uses media coverage from Romania gathered during the five years from the revolution, to produce a montage. A television advert included in the work calls citizens to participate in the “race for privatisation” against the backdrop of males in business attire pursuing an actual race on a track field. This advert is juxtaposed with coverage of strike actions taken by employees of different recently privatised factories across the country, and selected interviews with Ponzi-scheme initiators, soon to become bankrupt banks, as well as images of a news presenter comparing state debt to an inebriated or a drug dependent person, most likely referring to the International Monetary Fund’s loan to Romania as a “developing” country. The didactic nature of the *Ready Media* work, an aspect recognised in retrospect by one of its makers,<sup>306</sup> does not obstruct the role of the artwork as document and as one of the extremely few reflections of the period, on the relationship between political power, capital and media. This relationship, and especially the connection to transition and to what later came to be known as an entire period of postcommunism was not explored extensively by Romanian moving image artists during the 1990s. Nonetheless, in retrospect an observation surfaces about this period: the relations between political power, media, and the (im)possibilities of protest visible in June 1990 only became stronger through an added link forged between media technologies and capitalism. Television was the main medium for information. It had been central to the revolution and was the medium that made the dictator’s end

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<sup>306</sup> George Sabău, “A Contextual History of Ki,” *Kinema Ikon*, 2005, <http://kinema-ikon.net/>, n.p.

visible on screen and available for multiple re-runs. Media channels calling their spectators to take part in the race for privatisation was an extension of the calls to protect the TV station launched during the revolution, and an extension of the state of urgency perpetuated during the 13 – 15 June 1990 events, when the president had called for action against the fascist forces threatening the country's democracy.

In short, the new power structures addressing citizens via television during the revolution and assuring them that order would be maintained were the same that responded with violence against protesters and targeted violent attacks towards Roma minorities in 1990. Then, the same figures and power structures carried forward their influence and knowledge in neoliberal media configurations, in its relations to capital. This is not to say that it was a well-thought out machination of a single individual or group, but only an observation of how re-occurring figures and patterns influenced the relationship between media, capital and the possibility of resistant, activist action, or of sustaining critical reflections on these relations through artistic practice. This is the paradoxical context from which the postcommunist time-space developed in Romania, that Richardson encountered in mid to late 2000s through her practice with the D-Media collective. Her self-reflexive notes from *2 or 3 Things About Activism* show that she feels she had only managed to “gloss over the real reasons, desires and impulses which drive activism,”<sup>307</sup> particularly because of the inherited paradoxes, confusions and complicities existent in the recent Romanian past which can, in part, be made apparent when one event, such as the June 1990 protests, is re-visited closely.

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<sup>307</sup> Joanne Richardson, *2 or 3 Things about Activism*.

#### 4.4 The Postcommunist Subject in Romania

One very important aspect of the works included in Richardson's *Commonplaces of Transition* is that together they reflect on how, in retrospect, a postcommunist Romanian subject can be understood, what this subjectivity is like, and what its specific characteristics are. Overall, what her project outlines about Romanian postcommunist subjects is that they are from ethnic minorities, gendered and precarious. As worker or artist, migrant or local, this subject is shaped by past and current violence against them, from all of these co-ordinates. The subject in postcommunist time-space is thus critically reviewed by Richardson to stand at odds with transitologists' ideas of the subject which has to move, to develop, to keep up, and to reform. Richardson rejects this image of the postcommunist subject who moves "forward", regardless of their condition. She enters a conversation with writers who, like her, ask for this view to be critically assessed, and to acknowledge the struggles of those who are not counted or left on the margins, in processes of state-run, economic and political development.

Boris Buden, for example, speaks of "the children of postcommunism" as a consequence of the liberal ideology that saw postcommunist subjects as infantilized, immature, un-formed or not-fully-formed subjects. Paradoxically, those same people who produced (soft, velvet, or violent) social movements of protest, were later seen unable to "keep up", to adapt to change. After participating in a major historical event, as the 1989 revolution was, these postcommunist subjects were treated like children, as if they needed training and education into the workings of democracy.<sup>308</sup> Buden criticizes this "catching-up" movement of liberal politics and infantilizing of the postcommunist subject, whilst Boris Groys imagines postcommunist experience as "life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time"<sup>309</sup> and the postcommunist subject, as coming "from the end of history, from posthistorical, postapocalyptic time, back to historical time."<sup>310</sup>

This raises the question: is then, as Klara Kemp-Welch notes, "the former-East doomed to eternal self-analysis?"<sup>311</sup> How can the postcommunist experience be

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<sup>308</sup> Buden, "Children of Postcommunism."

<sup>309</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, 154.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>311</sup> Klara Kemp-Welch, review of *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009*, by Edit András, *Art Margins Online*, June 1, 2011, accessed October 21, 2011,

critically addressed, recognising differences and alternative histories, yet without the recurrent claim of building identity through difference? Writers like Maja and Reuben Fowkes argue that, more recently, the question of difference was partially re-routed, at least within artistic production, towards a sense of belonging to an “artistic multitude living precariously in transnational communities around the globe.”<sup>312</sup> However, this appreciation opens up another problematic, as these transnational artistic communities face being read into two essentialist cul-de-sacs. The first is linked to state-supported agendas for multiculturalism, which reduce local differences to a need of multiple voices filling institutional spaces, as it is common in the majority of museums, galleries and state funded projects to do. At the same time, although indeed living precariously around the globe, the “artistic multitude” is frequently the category in the name of which spaces are being transformed and appropriated in the logic of capitalism, via processes of gentrification and regeneration or through art fairs and biennials. I will not pursue here a critique of either of these two avenues, as it would be impossible to do them justice, but aim to note how these issues connect to *Precarious Lives*, Richardson’s study from 2007, making it an important work to return to in the contemporary context.

One of the self-reflexive voice-over monologues from the work brings Richardson to the question “Why postcommunism?” She responds: “Because this is the given context and we wanted to see how a foreign theory could explain it.”<sup>313</sup> *Precarious Lives* (2008) was made with the hope of nuancing a pervasive idea increasingly influential at the time, in which “the cultural worker has become the model precariat, the new subject of history.”<sup>314</sup> To nuance this model of the precariat in the Romanian context, is to ask, for example, how a “postcommunist” female subject is, or better, has always been, precarious, and how can this precarity can speak of the long history of gender inequality which travels from the contemporary Romanian situation into the recent past. Richardson states, in *Precarious Lives*, that “many university-educated experts now work in conditions common to women across time: at home, with

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<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/4-books/628-edit-andras-qtransitland-video-art-from-central-and-eastern-europe-1989-2009q-book-review.>, n.p.

<sup>312</sup>Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, “Contemporary East European Art in the Era of Globalization: From Identity Politics to Cosmopolitan Solidarity,” *Art Margins Online*, September 29, 2010, accessed January 24, 2011, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/598-contemporary-east-european-art-era-globalization-identity-politics-cosmopolitan-solidarity>, n.p.

<sup>313</sup> Joanne Richardson, *Precarious Lives*, 2008, <https://archive.org/details/PrecariousLivesDMedia>.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

unpredictable hours, with periods of inactivity, without contracts, without rights. The idea of a common precarity ignores the inequalities that place some workers in conditions of disadvantage."<sup>315</sup>

What then, does it mean to be a precarious subject in the "given context" of Romanian postcommunism? Interviews with Romanian women composing *Precarious Lives* remind one of the gender inequalities pervasive in the recent communist past, like criminalised abortion and the unequal division of domestic labour, as much as they reflect the condition of women in postcommunism. Richardson continues, in *Precarious Lives*, to argue that, "as a noun, 'precarity' does not exist. It is an adjective, modifying subjects, changing through circumstance. To understand what it means to be precarious, we must invert the theory, starting from our lives."<sup>316</sup> This position invites us to revisit conversations and theories about precarity from the local, specific and heterogeneous perspective of the lived experience of communism, and of postcommunism. Thus the Romanian postcommunist subject, Richardson suggests, has been shaped by these specific conditions of her time, and those of recent histories. Her memory of these inequalities was not erased with passing into postcommunism, she was not "catching-up", but she was not travelling backward against the flow of time either, as Groys imagined the postcommunist subject. Whilst Groys refers in his text mainly to the Russian context, Richardson shows in *Precarious Lives* that the lived experience of Romanian communism had not been, for women, a future they were travelling back from, into postcommunism. Instead, the female subject in postcommunism lived her history of inequality and precariousness in the time leading up to the radical break imagined as "the end of history", and then, lived another recent history, riddled with migrant labour and with equal precarity. Her precarious condition has remained a constant in this flow of temporality.

*Precarious Lives* is part of the *Commonplaces of Transition* project but was also contextualized differently in a collection titled *Young, Female, Precarious* (2008) compiled by D Media, Candida TV and Ak Kraak (Germany). When presented in this collection, the work is accompanied by two other videos, *Made in Italy*<sup>317</sup>, and

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> The work "traces the connections between 16000 Italian companies delocalizing to Romania and two million Romanian workers migrating to Italy. Rather than present a unified story, it shows the contradictory perspectives of Italian entrepreneurs, trade union leaders, workers and migrants in Italy."

*Precarious, whether you're working or not.*<sup>318</sup> This collection, the few works by Richardson with D-Media, and those of a female art collective h.arta, are an essential and itinerary critique of precarity coming from the Romanian context. They are necessary works because they attempt to speak from a feminist perspective to the specific postcommunist context of Romania. In this case, *Precarious Lives* responds to how the notion and concept of precarity was experienced by women, thus linking and continuing, in the Romanian context, a tradition of feminist positions, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa's<sup>319</sup> critique of the Italian "autonomia."<sup>320</sup>

Ovidiu Țichindeleanu considers that overall the concern of some of the works by Richardson and those of h.arta, is to ask "how could one talk about feminism and gender-related issues avoiding copying a 'Western paradigm and, at the same time, talk about local problems without imprinting exoticism onto oneself?"<sup>321</sup> This two-fold question chimes with some of Richardson's notes from *In Transit*, which acts as an overarching critical reflection on the process of Romanian transition. The subject of postcommunist Romania remained relatively unsure when this transition started, but she was informed it had ended around 2007, with Romania's integration into the structures of the European Union.<sup>322</sup> From that point, the Romanian postcommunist subject has had a recognised experience in this space of "the unresolved political problem,"<sup>323</sup> which is Europe – in migrant, moving, or fixed co-ordinates. Privileged somewhat, by comparison with migrants from the global South, who die at Europe's shores (Lampedusa or Calais), the Romanian postcommunist subject was no longer in transition, she was told, when the "integration" into European structures occurred. She

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h.arta collective, "Feminisme.ro," Artist website, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://feminisme.ro/evenimente.php?id=23&lang=en>.

<sup>318</sup> The work is "an impressionistic history of precarious work and its unequal impact upon men and women in Germany." Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "The Door to the Garden: Feminism and Operaismo" (Operaismo a Convegno, Roma: available online, 2002), <https://libcom.org/library/the-door-to-the-garden-feminism-and-operaismo-mariarosa-dalla-costa>.

<sup>320</sup> The most prominent and influential contemporary figures are, of course, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. See, most notably, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2006). See also Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (Brooklyn, N.Y. : London: Autonomedia ; Pluto, 1991).

<sup>321</sup> Țichindeleanu, "Decolonial AestheSis in Eastern Europe."

<sup>322</sup> The mayor of Timișoara announced publicly the end of transition in 2007 in a celebratory moment, in the public square where the revolution of 1989 had its beginnings. Cited in Joanne Richardson, *In Transit*.

<sup>323</sup> Étienne Balibar, "World Borders, Political Borders," *PMLA*, no. 117 (2002): 13.

was free to move, to work, and to travel. At the same time, the arguable integration was precisely into this unresolved problem, a time-space with a dark history of slavery, into the violent flows of European modernity, and its more recent fascist pasts. Romania, too, has had these dark histories of violence, and Richardson discussed some of these traces in the work *In Transit*, as much as they were visible in June 1990. Violence also partially legitimated political and economic structures throughout the period of transition. Racism, dispossession, gender inequality, precarity, sometimes nationalist recuperations of a Daco-Roman past are not divorced from, but continuous with, the communist period, and were equally present in postcommunism.<sup>324</sup> Joanne Richardson intended to make these connections and continuities visible through the entire *Commonplaces of Transition* project, as well as to question the specific inequalities and abuses produced in the period of Romanian postcommunism.

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<sup>324</sup> There is a note Joanne Richardson makes, based on an interview with philosopher G.M Tamas about communism in Romania being based on a blend on Marxism-Leninism and forms of proto-nationalism, which saw Romanian man (sic) as the sole subject of history in Richardson, *In Transit* (2008).

## 4.5 Conclusion

In Romania, the state of urgency created through images shown on television was perpetuated beyond the time of the revolution of 1989. It re-occurred in violent interventions against protesters and targeted racial attacks against roma during the events of 13 – 15 June 1990. Broadly, against the backdrop of an anticommunist narrative of transition and the recuperation of a dark space-time of modernity, shaped by violence and shrouded in elitism and divisive politics (worker vs. intellectual), this generalised state of urgency contributed to diminishing the trust in activism, and eventually to generalised cynicism shaping the postcommunist experience.

This context was specific to Romania and the necessity to address postcommunism critically stemmed from it, also in relation to how it had been theorised in other countries of Eastern Europe, but more acutely in relation to a right-wing ideology blending nationalism, anticommunism, and transition as a movement towards development and integration, aimed at suppressing or forgetting a vilified past.

In a time of crisis or at landmark points in recent history, the 1989 revolution and the events of 1990 return as issues and factors holding intense power over the Romanian context. There is a necessity to investigate these events in key moments: soon after Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007, around the economic crisis of 2008, or again in the present. The planetary film which unfolded during the revolution continued with smaller instalments – episodes where media images, images of protest, or ideological images were tied together in this notion called "transition" and in this "condition" called "postcommunism." Then, the process of privatisation, foreign investments and ultimately global capital arguably brought Romania, as a geographical space imagined as long sedentary during communism, into movement, transitioning into development and further, ideologically, into economic, political and military structures such as NATO and the E.U. When this happened, some proclaimed the transition over. No one proclaimed postcommunism over. Few recorded how the end, or for that matter, the beginning of transition had affected workers, women, and roma. Some artistic projects, small independent productions with moving images, addressed local co-ordinates, opened the links forged between art, media and activism, and also questioned their own grounds, means and position of speech.

Joanne Richardson's work with D Media collective was one of these necessary responses, aiming to produce compositions with moving images, which help rethink the space-time constellations of postcommunist neoliberal Romania by recourse to its rhythms, flows, and specificities. Revisiting and questioning events and histories is an act of imagination, an attempt to critically assess the postcommunist condition in a time of its own "post", allowing for connections to be made visible and new ideas to appear.

What legitimated the Ceaușescu regime and Romanian communism was not just a reading of Marxism-Leninism, but a problematic turn to the Daco-Roman ancestral heritage of Romania, something which has returned in recent years as revived myths of origin. At times, this revival in nationalist narratives is coupled with anticommunism and with a strong revival of Christian Orthodoxy – validated by its oppression during communism, and state supported. Moreover, this condition is complemented by fierce neoliberalism, racism (individual and institutional) and thus, what settles in is a form of generalised cynicism and distrust in political action. Departing from Richardson's work, I have explored, the possibility of formulating a critical position towards the postcommunist condition and the postcommunist subject as they have been imagined in liberal ideology. In the Romanian context, this act of looking and searching for a different angle refers to, as writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu suggests, "the historical task of (...) rebuilding alliances, against the dissemination of cynicism, ethnocentric nationalism, and postcommunist racism."<sup>325</sup> Accordingly, the project of critical theory and artistic production is to decolonise this long history of recuperative narratives, be they around economic, ethnic, or national regeneration.

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<sup>325</sup> Țichindeleanu, "Decolonial AestheSis in Eastern Europe." n.p.

## Chapter 5 : Memory, Inheritance and Moving Images

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on moving image works by Romanian artists Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, selected because they offer a powerful treatment of recent Romanian history.<sup>326</sup> These two artists work with and through the memory of lived communism, but also with the recent memory of capitalism and with the consequences of the 2008/2009 economic crisis. Their moving image art echoes the artists' wider practice with painting, installation and performance, and these intersections enrich the meanings of the works, especially in relation to memory. Their references to Socialist Realist techniques in painting, inherited from training during the communist period, is set in conversation with modernist aesthetics. Their installation and performance work shows a great capacity to avoid ruinophilia or to produce nostalgic recuperations and instead questions recent Romanian history, contemporary events and transformations, at local and global levels. Their work with urban space and their resistance to linear histories of the recent past can easily be observed throughout their various practices. Yet this aspect becomes particularly visible in their moving image art. In the works selected in this chapter, Vătămanu and Tudor ask how power relations and economic structures interfere in urban spaces, in building monuments and constructing memories, and they interrogate these relations through images.

In the first section I discuss how, in communist Romania, violence was exerted over spaces, such as the abusive collectivization of agrarian land, and the confiscation of (mostly urban) privately owned property. By contrast, during transition, urban and rural space were presented by the new regimes as free from the “wrongs” of expropriation and abuse. Space in the “postcommunist condition” – either as a historical notion or as material space – was imagined as if it had broken free from, or exited the status of abused totalitarian space, which it held during communism. This narrative needed to be contested and I argue that in Vătămanu and Tudor's works, the continuity of abuses and expropriations is made apparent, as a long history of violence over urban space, stretching from the communist experience, to the contemporary fragmentations

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<sup>326</sup> Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Praful/The Dust*, 16 mm, DV, 2006.; Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Văcărești*, 16 mm, DV, 2006; Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value*, film, 2009; Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Rite of Spring*, 16 mm film, transferred on DVD, 2010.

that spaces in Romania have suffered. The first wave of violence was the result of a nationalist reading of Marxism-Leninism, whilst the latter series of fragmentations have mainly been brought about by the neoliberal insertions of global capital into the Romanian landscape, and have been legitimated by transition. My intention is to extend the argument developed in Chapter 4, on how the Romanian transition as ideology has produced a specific context and vision of the recent past. In particular, I am interested in how the new political orders have presented themselves in contrast with a “communist past”, and how, as a consequence, this latter period has been sealed off from critical engagement. In addition, I explore how this view over the past had informed the way the future was imagined, with capitalism as the only horizon conceivable “after” the revolution, or “after” communism.

In the second section, I ask *how is one to live with the inheritance of an unresolved past, which is not only an issue of memory, but a political question*. Seeing the space “after” communism as a razed ground meant new structures of power were legitimated to build on it. However, these structures could only be sustained by a programmatic erasure of that past, by sealing it off, or vilifying it without analysis. This logic of forgetting needed to be countered with the labour of memory. I argue that the inheritance of the recent Romanian past can be addressed through memory and through the politics of urban space. I discuss two of Vătămanu and Tudor’s works, which open an aspect of this inheritance through a gesture. Each work performs the labour of memory, and takes responsibility over recent history.

The third section asks *what the implications of building a future on credit are*, something which the predominant postcommunist narratives in Romania have supported through a logic of promise. The promise was the full integration into political and economic structures of global capital, whilst the credit was the inheritance of the past not dealt with. This logic implied that the future can be built from scratch, from this empty ground left behind after the revolution. I thus propose to see inheritance not solely as an accumulation of past violence over urban spaces and communities, but also as an accumulation of promises of projected futures.

## 5.2 Traces of Recent History

### 5.2.1 Imagining Postcommunist Space in Transition

As mentioned in the previous chapter, never closely “looking back” and instead, always aiming to “think forward” became the grounding postcommunist guidelines, which arguably offered Romania, just escaped from “paralysing” communism, the possibility to “catch-up.” Forward movement in transition meant “catching up” with democracy, building a public sphere and public spaces, economic development, change and liberation. However, this could only be possible by constructing (understood both symbolically but also, literally, as building) on a razed ground, one supposedly left behind by totalitarian rule. These were some of the tropes of transition, a rite of passage that necessarily involved demolition and destruction of all the remains or traces of the past, in order to construct anew.

Yet the process of violently erasing and building over was admittedly never destructive in any way. This was due to an understanding of space during the “postcommunist condition”, as something which surpassed or exited communism. Moreover, the symbolic and material space of Romania was imagined by postcommunist power structures as an aftermath, in ruins. The ruins were the “fault” of a failed ideology and so, there was nothing to destruct. In short, the underlining argument was that one cannot destroy a landscape which is already an aftermath, in disarray. Since one could not destroy already razed ground, building on this ground became fully legitimated.

This approach was essentially rooted in anticommunism – as argued by authors like Ovidiu Țichindeleanu<sup>327</sup> and as I have outlined in the previous chapter. The implications were that it had not only rejected “any strains of progressive thinking implying models of social or collective action” but also “any attempts to critically negotiate the memory of the communist past together with its preceding history and subsequent transition,”<sup>328</sup> as curator Cosmin Costinaș suggests. One might add that this condition also severed any possibility to see the space of postcommunist Romania other than as a razed ground, an aftermath needing complete reconstruction. Most often,

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<sup>327</sup> Țichindeleanu, “Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism. Beyond Anticommunism in Romania.” n.p.

<sup>328</sup> Cosmin Costinaș, “The History of Us All,” in *Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor*, ed. Cosmin Costinaș and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2009), 31.

reconstruction in postcommunism was pursued as totalising monumentalism. In Bucharest, for example, the square where the Central Committee used to be – the place where Nicolae Ceaușescu held his last televised speech, and where Ion Iliescu called the intervention of the army in the June 1990 protests – was renamed *Revolution Square*, and a *Memorial of Rebirth* was raised in its centre. The memorial was set up by the Institute for the December 1989 Romanian Revolution,<sup>329</sup> also the producer of documents, conferences and symposia taking a specifically anticommunist position to recent Romanian history. This is just one of the examples of how the institutionalisation of anticommunism occurred through memorials, monuments and re-shaping of public squares, all supporting the committees investigating the crimes of communism to see to it that their views took “concrete form.”

With the dictator already hastily trialled and executed during the revolution, what these institutions were enacting was the trial of communism itself – as a time in recent Romanian history, but also as a way of thinking about history.<sup>330</sup> In the so-called transition period following on from 1989, alongside this trial, what had once been abusively collectivized and nationalised (turned into state property) was steadily becoming private property: the state was quickly losing spaces in “the race for privatisation.” However, it was not just the state which was losing abusively owned land and property, there was also a collective loss of public spaces, especially in the face of fierce development led by private businesses. Moreover, with the influence of monumentalising anticommunism, there was a loss of property over memory, and over possibilities of negotiating this memory of communism other than as a linear history of oppression and expropriation.

In the longer term, this implied that the entire period of Romanian communism had come to be understood as a hiccup, a time-space that was not to be spoken about, unless in terms of trauma, or how to avoid or skip it altogether, in favour of any given

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<sup>329</sup> *Institutul Revoluției Române Din Decembrie 1989 [The Institute for the 1989 Romanian Revolution]*, accessed October 22, 2015, <http://irrd.ro/>.

<sup>330</sup> With this move towards an anticommunist narrative, not only the crimes of a historical period in Romania were investigated, but the very notion of communism was put on trial. The name of the website where the proceedings of this trial were made publicly accessible translated directly as *thetrialofcommunism.com* ([www.procesulcomunismului.com](http://www.procesulcomunismului.com)). The reductive statements and reports released by the committee in charge of this process have recently been called into question, as serving a strong anticommunist narrative and therefore, contributing to an ideological agenda, instead of acting as independent investigators. See Țichindeleanu, “Towards a Critical Theory of Postcommunism. Beyond Anticommunism in Romania.” n.p.

historical period that preceded it, or one promised to come in the future. Unsurprisingly, as Romanian curator Cosmin Costinaş observes, “the seal that had been placed over the communist period reconnect[ed] us unproblematically with the period immediately before 1947, taking up the history of Romania from that point on as if nothing happened, except a horrible but only vaguely remembered, nightmare.”<sup>331</sup> Returning to the “pre” communist period, to a time-space of the “before” further contributed to understanding communism as a wasted or lost time, a gap in the historical and cultural development of Romania. It was a very dangerous ground to perform recuperative acts on, as it linked the promise of a future to an unchallenged pre-communist past, riddled with nationalist movements, right-wing, fascist and conservative figures in both social, political, philosophic or artistic realms. Aiming to repossess “lost” temporalities became the foundation for destruction of the recent past, and for constructing an imagined future reached in theory only when the purge was complete, with the transition finalised. Therefore, this view implied that what could be constructed in the present was only done with the promise of a future. But what was going to happen exactly remained always in the realm of the unspoken, as a promise. This logic could be observed in how the Romanian transition to capitalism was framed. In this period, both the religious and political narratives around transition implied that Romania had suffered a trauma during communism, and that the acts of violence, dispossession and abuse were not present “before” communism, and would not be allowed in the stages “after” communism. The promise of a better future and a blissful forgotten past worked together in two ways – for the Orthodox Church’s agenda (the future of redemption and regaining of a lost paradisiacal space-time<sup>332</sup>) and to legitimate any actions during transition (the future of neoliberal capital and European integration).

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<sup>331</sup> Costinaş, “The History of Us All,” 32.

<sup>332</sup> For example, in the Revolution Notebooks produced by the Institute of the 1989 Romanian Revolution, the role of the Memorial of Rebirth was to “actualise the lasting significance of the December 1989 revolution: unity through faith in God and the capacity for devotion and sacrifice.” This note signals the intimate connection of such government initiatives with the Romanian Orthodox Church, notable even from the name of the monument and the reference to “rebirth.” “Caietele Revoluției/ The Revolution Notebooks” (Institutul Revoluției Române din Decembrie 1989, 2005), 37, No 1 (50), last accessed October 22, 2015, <http://irrd.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/caitepdf/caiet%2050.pdf>, my translation from the Romanian original.

## 5.2.2 What Was Lost and What Futures Were Constructed

In terms of urban space, what was also lost in postcommunist Romania was the ability to connect the historical traces of Ceaușescu's project of urban reconstruction with the de- and re-construction and rapid fragmentation of space, which occurred in the period of transition and thereafter. David Harvey's idea about how capital functions as "accumulation by dispossession"<sup>333</sup> applies best to postcommunist Romania during the long process of privatisation and commodification of public assets. However, dispossession also took place during the communist period, fuelled by Ceaușescu's regime, which imagined Romania entering a stage of rapid development, growth and urbanisation. This implied that the violent agrarian collectivization was followed by brutal appropriation and reconstruction of urban spaces, until the "Golden Age" was to be reached, modelled aesthetically and politically after the North Korean project which Ceaușescu was emulating. In 1950, Decree 92 stated that housing property of former bank and industry owners, as well as those working in the commercial sector, be handed over into state possession. After the revolution, a period of legislative uncertainty around property rights ended with the government passing law number 10, in 2001. This law continues to regulate the restitution of confiscated and nationalised property as "natural" restitution, in its initial or original form, if possible. In other words, this law allows individuals to claim ownership of properties confiscated between 1945 and 1989<sup>334</sup> and, if the property still exists, to regain it fully. In the 1990s, if the property had been demolished, claimants were offered "shares in enterprises intended for privatisation."<sup>335</sup> At present, if a claimant acts on the grounds of this law and the property no longer exists, a monetary compensation is offered after the value is estimated. However, if the property exists and is inhabited (most times by impoverished communities), the property is returned to the legal owner and evictions leave the former

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<sup>333</sup> See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London, New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>334</sup> The law stipulates the specific dates of 6 March 1945 – 22 December 1989 (the first date coincides with the first law on nationalizing property, law 187/1945, whilst the second date marks the 'beginning' of the revolution). Monitorul Oficial, accessed August 3, 2014, information retrieved online from [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htm\\_act\\_text?id=66426](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm_act_text?id=66426).

<sup>335</sup> Lavinia Stan, "The Roof over Our Heads. Property Restitution in Romania," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 2 (June 2006): 182.

inhabitants in long bureaucratic loops before social housing is provided by the state, essentially depriving the evicted of their basic housing rights.<sup>336</sup>

During communism, Nicolae Ceaușescu carried vast projects of demolition, like that of an entire area he renamed the Civic Centre of Bucharest where the House of the People is situated. At present, this building hosts the Parliament and one of its wings has been transformed into the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC). In the Southern area of its vast empty premises, the Cathedral of National Redemption<sup>337</sup> is currently being built in front of the palace, superimposed like a poorly executed computer generated image (See Image 29). According to the official website of the Orthodox Church, the cathedral had been initially planned for construction after the Independence War in 1881, when Romania was proclaimed a monarchy, and again after the First World War.<sup>338</sup> After 1989, a few different places in the city became possible locations, but the lot next to the Parliament and Contemporary Art Museum was the selected final destination for an incredibly high, partially state-sponsored expenditure.

The way in which the Romanian Orthodox Church argues for the necessity of this Cathedral, especially in relation to the communist past dismisses the entire history of Romanian communism mainly because of the abuses and restrictions exerted on religion. The Church then uses this situation to claim and re-appropriate urbanism and architecture in the name of religion. In a text from the project's "History" section on the website, Gheorghe Vasilescu argues that "the majority of Bucharest's historical monuments are architectural compositions constructed on the axis of churches, showing once more that nothing lasts in Romania that is not sacred."<sup>339</sup> Here, the messianic narrative of the Orthodox Church proclaims the profane character of communism, declaring, for its own gain, communism once more dead and a failure, twenty-five years after the revolution. Moreover, this argument re-instates the same

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<sup>336</sup> The effects of forced evictions extend to 2015. Some aspects of this process have been covered in a recent special number of the Political Art Gazette, a Romanian platform and publication, addressing issues at the intersection of art and politics. See "Gazeta de Artă Politică [Political Art Gazette]," Newspaper, accessed September 16, 2015, <http://artapolitica.ro/?p=1933>.

<sup>337</sup> "Your gift for eternity," as the official website of the Orthodox church announces, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.catedralaneamului.ro/>

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Gheorghe Vasilescu, "Noua Catedrală Patriarhală – Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului. Documentar istoric," 2010, accessed 22 April, 2015, [http://www.catedralaneamului.ro/upload/documente/istoric\\_catedrala\\_mantuirii\\_neamului.pdf](http://www.catedralaneamului.ro/upload/documente/istoric_catedrala_mantuirii_neamului.pdf), n.p., my translation from Romanian.

juxtapositions as the anticommunist narratives, inserting a claimed sacral element into the profane urban space. This insertion is like a filmic superimposition, the layers become confusing with some elements in the background sometimes more dominant, whilst at other times the foreground takes over. The complicities between power, state and religion are made apparent in a farcical way, in the computer generated images of the project (Image 29), through this simple superimposition. They come across in the layers, in the faded grandiose construction that haunts a landscape that is supposed to have collapsed on its own with the “fall” of communism. Equally, the image shows how the church, in the need to build over, to reclaim a space that is considered erased, but is obviously not so, writes over this space in an almost maniacal manner, relying on legitimation coming from transcendental powers yet rooted materially in state support.

In Romania, anticommunist views have not only proclaimed communism dead, but they have also enchanted transition with imagined possibilities for “change” and “development.” Moreover, anticommunism has facilitated a constant return to the time-space before communism, in the midst of rampant neoliberalism, blended with orthodoxy. On the backdrop of a weak alternative leftist and activist culture that Romania – compared to other Eastern European countries – had during communism, and with the conditions of the early 1990s making it hard to build a strong one, non-political readings of the historical avant-gardes, of problematic local philosophers inclined to fascist or orientalist views, like Emil Cioran or Mircea Eliade of the pre-communist period often re-emerged in cultural and artistic production.<sup>340</sup> In a crude way and perhaps without intention, the computer generated image (Image 29) and the documentation photograph from the construction site (Image 30) point to how superimposition may be a useful mode for making visible the artificial layering and contradictions of memory and politics in the contemporary Romanian landscape.

How is one to live with the inheritance of this recent history? This is the question I am concerned with in this chapter and the question I have also identified as guiding the selected moving image artworks of Vătămanu and Tudor. In their approach, the

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<sup>340</sup> See some of the playful experiments of Kinema Ikon (Chapter 2) that claimed they were linked to a tradition of Romanian Dadaism, yet eschewed from critical of political engagement with the socio-political context when they were made (early 2000). On the other hand, the revival of Emil Cioran implied an “anti-modernist nativist rhetoric, vitalist and violent reading of history” whilst the work of Mircea Eliade offered the opportunity to mix the anticommunist discourse with an “essentialist and archetypal view of culture.” See Costinaş, “The History of Us All,” p.32.

artists are driven by a necessity to unseal the communist time and space, in order to reveal or make visible this historical period and its continuity with the contemporary context. David Riff believes that almost all the work of Vătămanu and Tudor “is saturated with a 'nightmarish weight' of expropriation that has much to do with the present regime of neoliberalism, as with the national communist dictatorship that preceded it.”<sup>341</sup> The space-time articulations the artists perform by and through this weight work with spaces lost abusively and violently (acts of dispossession from communism and neoliberalism equally), and with temporalities shared in collective memory. David Riff further clarifies that Vătămanu and Tudor’s work does not just stop to reflect or show “a passive weight to which one resigns, as is the case in so many 'works of mourning'.”<sup>342</sup> Instead, their work is concerned with a history of struggle against erasure, violence, and abuse over spaces and communities. In that sense, identifying and layering the different forms of dispossession of land and property is a way of understanding how dispossession accumulates for the benefit of ideology, be that nationalist communist or neoliberal. Their work aims to open the seal over the communist period and refuses mourning, but recalls the histories of suffering and struggle of both past, present and future.

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<sup>341</sup> David Riff, “The Wrong Version of Capital?,” in *Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor*, ed. Cosmin Costinaș and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2009), 83.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.



Image 29 - Computer generated image offering a possible view of the finalized construction of the National Redemption Cathedral. Source: <http://adevarul.ro/assets/beta.adevarul.ro/MRImage/2011/02/12/50aa5fd07c42d5a6637c5710/646x404.jpg>

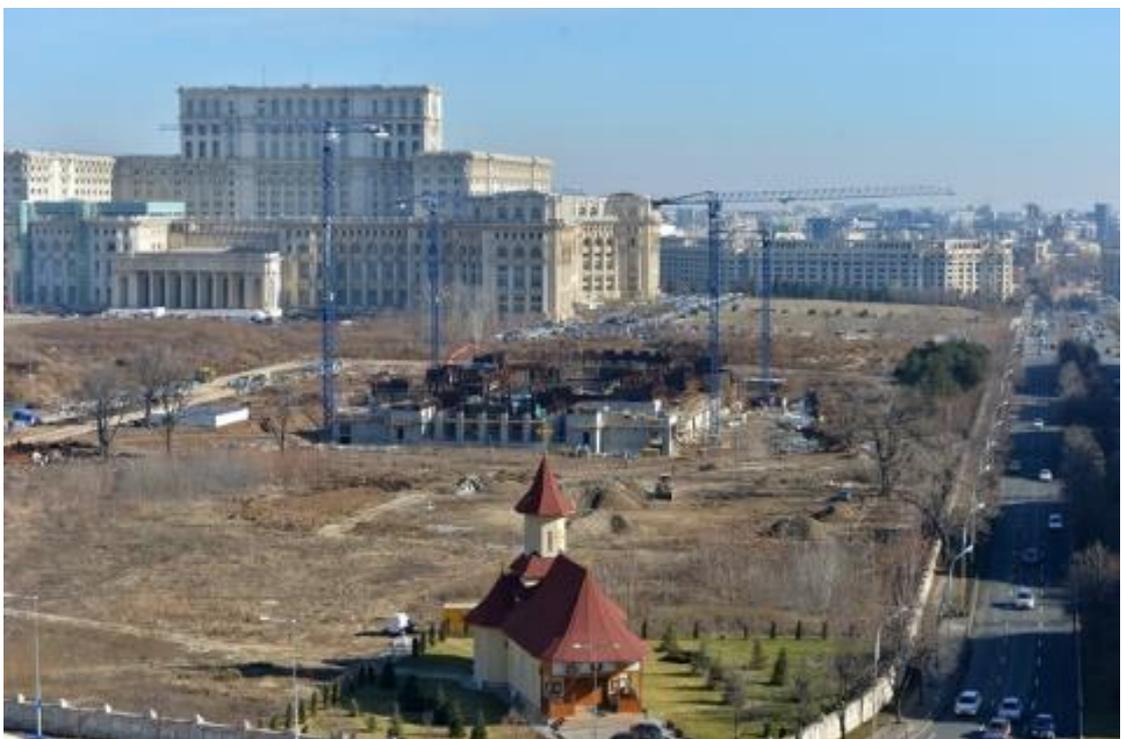


Image 30 - National Redemption Cathedral in early construction stages (2013). Photograph by Silviu Matei. Source: <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/cum-arata-acum-catedrala-mantuirii-neamului-10676334>

### 5.3 Whither Memory? Inheritance as a Task

In their works, Vătămanu and Tudor call forward an often silenced history of struggle: over urban space, housing, and the struggle over constant dispossession of material goods and memories. In recent Romanian history, these struggles have mostly been latent, yet they often became apparent in moments of crisis. One such moment occurred towards the end of the transition to capitalism. The future promised by transition had been built by erasing the recent Romanian past, particularly the communist past. In addition, it soon became clear that this long period of transition was not going to culminate with the promised prosperity, but that it would finalise with the repercussions of a global economic crisis. In the time leading to that crisis, the artist duo had responded to the history of violence and to the erasures that some spaces in Bucharest have suffered, both in the communist past and in postcommunism. The artists thus addressed the inheritance of recent Romanian history, in order to lift the seal put over memory, and to show the struggles contained in these spaces.

The question of inheritance, especially the inheritance of Marxism can, of course, be situated in a larger historical and cultural context. In 1991, in a moment after the “fall” – of the Berlin Wall, of communism, of the Soviet Union – with *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida revisited the well-known start of *The Communist Manifesto*,<sup>343</sup> which says that the spectre of communism is haunting Europe. He remarked that the writings and positions emerging around the failure of communism in the 1990s “(...) often ha[d] the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work.”<sup>344</sup> Derrida warned that these maniacal and ritualistic incantations proclaiming communism dead only pointed to the fact that there was an inheritance which required dealing with. In particular, Derrida considered that “[i]nheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task. It remains before us just as unquestionably as we are heirs of Marxism, even before wanting or refusing to be, and, like all inheritors, we are in mourning.”<sup>345</sup> The issue of mourning here is different from the triumphant mourning phase mentioned above and it means that, as inheritors, we need to face the task that the weight of inheritance poses. In other words, it means that

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<sup>343</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Pluto Press, 1848), 31.

<sup>344</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 64.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

what needs to be done is to pay attention and to listen to the “ghost” making us aware of unresolved issues, the spectre of communism, which has always been there and will be present, for as long as the inheritance is not taken responsibility of. According to Derrida, the spectre must be called forth and its haunting of the present should be acknowledged. As Fredric Jameson noted, for Derrida, a problem arises in “a world cleansed of spectrality”<sup>346</sup> as that is essentially a world without a past. As a consequence, for Derrida, the political task and the responsibility is to approach and deal with the ghost of Marxism. In the Romanian context, the ghost is that of the lived political regime under Ceaușescu, with its local formula, steering away from Marxist thought,<sup>347</sup> and into a form of nationalist communism that left a strong mark on recent history. The inheritance of nationalist communism has been present in the past thirty years, regardless of the manic efforts of both the transitional and religious discourses, to dismiss and ignore it. Conjuring the ghost of this past means to start a conversation with it. This is important because when occulted or repressed, when not invited for a conversation, ghosts haunt indefinitely.<sup>348</sup> *To conjure the ghost is to take responsibility over the task of inheriting the past.* Herein lies the necessity: in the act of addressing the ghost, in the act of taking responsibility over what has been inherited.

The practice of Vătamanu and Tudor has the ability to converse between these two planes: the larger inheritance of Marxism, and the inheritance of the lived form of nationalist communism as it was experienced in Romania. For instance, in one of their installation works they invert a slogan to superimpose various spatial and temporal frames, from the specific Romanian context, to larger debates, critiques and events in the contemporary global neoliberal context, where the weight of this larger inheritance is also present. The work is a banner which, in its English version (2009) reads “Long Live and Thrive Capitalism”, an inversion of “Long Live and Thrive Communism.” On one level, with this inversion, the artists make apparent how, as expressed by Derrida in 1991, jubilatory incantation has proclaimed that “Marx is dead, communism is dead,

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<sup>346</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Michael Sprinker, *Radical Thinkers* 33 (London: Verso, 2008), 58.

<sup>347</sup> David Riff argues that paradoxically, in Romania, the nationalist discourse presented itself as “a ‘good’ creative Marxism”, especially through International policies of “non-alignment”, when in fact, and irreversibly from the beginning of the 1980s, Ceaușescu’s regime focused heavily on the “trope of the nation.” See Riff, “The Wrong Version of Capital?,” 82–83.

<sup>348</sup> Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 35–36.

very dead, and along with its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices. [The incantation] says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here's to the survival of economic and political liberalism!"<sup>349</sup> More than that, with this inversion the artists ask what is the role of memory in the writing of histories, and where can the act of maniacally chanting the death of communism take one, in the contemporary situation of neoliberal capitalism? In the first version of the work, the text was in Romanian (2008, Image 31) and the artists declared on their website that it "reflect[ed] our personal experience [of] liv[ing] in two antagonist political systems in the same country in the course of the last 30 – 40 years."<sup>350</sup> This first version was displayed at Periferic 8, a small biennial in the city of Iași, Romania. Then, the English version appeared at Frieze Art Fair, London, in 2009. Recently, in the contemporary complicated world of conditions, moments and situations often simplistically defined by the prefix post (postcommunism, post-"Arab Spring", and post-economic crisis) Vătămanu and Tudor created the newest version of the work, in Arabic (2014, Image 32), which showed at Beirut Art Centre. The existence of these versions and the context of their display shows how the weight of inheritance of lived communism, of the struggles central to Marxism (property, labour, value), and the maniacal chant to dismiss this inheritance have both returned throughout recent history, especially in moments marked by important events, instability or crisis. It also considers how the inheritance of Marxism asks to open the layers of history and memory, which have accumulated over time. However, in addition to this, the work shows how the lived experience of capitalism, as it unfolds, haunts the contemporary, through the accumulation of various promises that in fact, turn into an accumulation of acts of dispossession.

In the two works discussed next, Vătămanu and Tudor ask how can one take responsibility over this complicated inheritance of recent history, at different moments in the contemporary. In particular, the works refer to recent Romanian history and are centered on two gestures. I argue that these are gestures against forgetting, but also forensic gestures. These gestures conjure ghosts of the unresolved histories of the

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<sup>349</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx : The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 64.

<sup>350</sup> "Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor," Long Live and Thrive Capitalism, accessed July 27, 2015, [http://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/traiasca\\_capitalismul.htm](http://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/traiasca_capitalismul.htm).

places in which they are performed, and make clear that the inheritance of recent Romanian history is a task and a responsibility.



Image 31 – Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Trăiască și înflorească capitalismul!*/*Long Live and Thrive Capitalism*, Periferic 8 Biennial, Iasi, 2008. Image retrieved from the artists' website.



Image 32 - Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, *Long Live and Thrive Capitalism*, Beirut Art Centre, part of "Meeting Points 7" exhibition, curated by WHW collective, 2014. Photograph by Mihaela Brebenel.

### 5.3.1 To Be Before the Image

In 2006, the artists made two works with moving images, *Praful/The Dust* and *Văcărești*, filmed performances in two separate spaces in the city of Bucharest. I discuss them together because I consider that both works provoke the need to address a history of maniacal erasures and abuses of urban spaces in the communist period, during postcommunism, and which have continued into the contemporary. The artists visit two sites, emblematic for the changes experienced in the recent past, and they critique how the histories of these spaces have been suppressed.

In *Praful/The Dust*, Vătămanu and Tudor focus on the area where the monastery Schitul Maicilor was demolished, in 1982, and a small church was transported nearby, in order to make way for the communist administrative and civic centre, and for the House of the People, currently the Parliament building (Image 33). Before the demolition, the monastery and the small church used to be on the land just opposite from the House of the People. A building was erected there and envisaged to host an institution dedicated to science and technology. In 2006, at the time the artists made this work, the unfinished House of Science accommodated some of the offices of the Romanian Academy, but seemed generally derelict and decrepit. This space and this building feature in the background of the work *Praful/The Dust* (Image 37). However, the opening shots show the current site of the church, as it looked in 2006, flanked by rows of socialist high-rise concrete buildings, appearing in the glowing yellow hues of the film (Image 34). This soothing yet saddening yellow light bathes the scene and, along with the specific 16mm grainy aspect of the film and its silence, sets the atmosphere, which is one of contemplation and expectation for something to happen. Tudor carefully fills his pockets with dust at the site and starts moving against the background of the city (Images 35, 36). He walks parallel to the House of Science and Technology/Romanian Academy, this “little sister building” of the House of the People, with similar architecture to the imposing construction across the street. He steps through the high grass of its disregarded premises and empties his pockets at the original site, where the small church stood before its removal in 1982 (Images 36, 37).



Image 33 - The small church is being moved to the new site, 200 meters away, documentation photograph. Source: [www.rezistent.net](http://www.rezistent.net).



Image 34 – The small church at its present location, between rows of high-rise buildings, the opening shot of the work. Film still from *Praful/The Dust* (2006), courtesy of the artists.



Image 35 – Florin Tudor gathers dust at the present site of the church and fills his pockets with it. Film still from *Praful/The Dust* (2006), courtesy of the artists.



Image 36 – Florin Tudor walks past the House of Science/Romanian Academy building, with his pockets full of dust from the original site of the small church. Film still from *Praful/The Dust* (2006), courtesy of the artists.



Image 37 - Tudor jumps the small fence of the House of Science/Romanian Academy building to deposit the dust from the small church, film stills from *Praful/The Dust* (2006), courtesy of the artists.

Performed with slow movements, the shots of the walking body focus on the torso, waist and upper legs, centring on the pockets full of dust. The soft movements and the sense that one is witnessing a ritual are doubled by a detached, cold, forensic interest in the material carried over, and in its recipient – a human body. What could this gesture mean?

On the surface, the gesture of raising dust from the ground and taking it back to the ground, albeit to another area, can have the immediate connotation of the religious passage through death, and can recall the incantation “from dust to dust.” However, as David Riff observes, the artists are not simply “enacting an ‘ashes to ashes’ discourse of national mourning (and subsequent national redemption).”<sup>351</sup> Instead, Riff considers, the work is highly self-conscious of the conditions and context of its production, and of the gesture’s own embeddedness in the space where it is performed. It avoids both a sense of nostalgia and any need for reclaiming the space through rebirths. I argue that the gesture moves away from incantation and mourning also because it does not look for reconciliation with recent Romanian histories of violence and abuse. Instead, the aim of the gesture is to open the inheritance of the site where it is performed. An entire church was moved from one space to another, and the dust beneath it was stirred up. This dust can be moved and stirred up again, in search of what it has to reveal about the history of that place. The dust, the remains left behind, can provide information about the space, its history and its memory. Thus, this gesture acts against forgetting, and to reveal the layers of erasure, which are contained in this site and which, by stirring up the dust, can be remembered.

However, the gesture can also be read as a form of searching. Tudor’s slow and attentive movement and the camera’s detached, cold interest in the action of collecting and transporting the dust bring a forensic aspect to the gesture. In other words, dust can act as evidence in this excavation into the history of the two sites – where the small church stood, and where it is currently – and it is gathered as forensic proof to show “before a forum” (from Latin *forensis* – “of or before the forum”<sup>352</sup>). Gathering this evidence is performed in front of a camera, and it is recorded in the images. The camera,

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<sup>351</sup> Riff makes this observation about both *The Dust* and *Văcărești*, the work I will discuss in the next part of this section. See Riff, “The Wrong Version of Capital?,” 86.

<sup>352</sup> “Oxford English Dictionary” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Oxford English Dictionary, Also available at <http://www.oed.com/>.

and subsequently, the image, register the gesture, and might also register what could emerge through its performance. Filming the gesture means mediating it by images, for spectators to be before it. The images of Tudor carrying the dust are presented to spectators. The latter are set before the images, where they see the gesture and the evidence; they become the forum to which the evidence is presented. What is asked of spectators is to stand before these images because, as Didi-Huberman notes, “[w]henver we are before the image, we are before time.”<sup>353</sup> Firstly, this can be interpreted as images’ ability to work with temporality – to collapse past, present and future. The time when the church was dislodged was the “time of the crime”, a time when Ceaușescu, driven by megalomania and nationalist myths, maniacally erased, dislodged and built anew, in this area of Bucharest. The 2006 moment when the artists made this work was the time of both maniacal sealing off and writing over this inheritance of Romanian communism. The first was presented as a necessary evil within the transition to the “Golden Age”, whilst the latter was part of the long transition to imagined economic and political prosperity. Both worked as promises and projected futures which were not fulfilled – the first was interrupted by the 1989 revolution, whilst the promises of transition were soon exposed to the realities of the 2008/2009 economic crises across Europe.

When one is before the image, they are before all of these temporalities. Raising the dust opens up the inheritance of the site, and if we follow Didi-Huberman again, because “there exists no image that does not simultaneously implicate gazes, gestures, thoughts,”<sup>354</sup> those watching become part of a forum. However, the forum does not have the task to solve the “case.” In *Praful/The Dust*, the search is not for truth or reconciliation with the crime or sin of dislocating the small church from consecrated ground. Instead, “[I]ike the poor illiterate in Kafka's story [Before the Law (1914 – 15)], we are before the image as *before the law*: as before an open doorway.”<sup>355</sup> This is a paradoxical but fruitful inversion: the evidence is presented before spectators as before a forum or the law, and in turn being before the image is like being before the law. Being the forum means being able to judge or engage with the image, whilst at the same time

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<sup>353</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” in *Time*, ed. Amelia Groom, trans. Peter Mason, Documents of Contemporary Art (London : Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Gallery ; MIT Press, 2013), 34.

<sup>354</sup> Didi-Huberman, “How to Open Your Eyes?,” 39.

<sup>355</sup> Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” 34.

being before the law means to be accountable, to take responsibility for what one sees and judges from the images. This is the wager that is being put forward in *Prafu/The Dust*, through the inversion and this is why, although the gesture has a forensic aspect, the search for evidence is not performed at the original site. Instead, dust is collected from the current site and this gesture is filmed. As mentioned, collecting and depositing dust are, on a primary level, acts against forgetting, in other words, ways of accessing the past, yet they also bring forward the mania, promises of futures imagined and never arrived. However, the goal is not to find or show hidden truths about this inheritance, or to reconcile abuses and violence exerted over the site of the church, but to deal with all the temporalities, to enter a conversation with this haunted urban space. An unresolved inheritance haunts any given present moment and asks for its presence to be acknowledged. This spectre challenges one to take responsibility for inheriting this past. Furthermore, it demands to engage with the image and with the evidence that there is, in fact, a weight in this inheritance and that the task is to take responsibility over it. The meaning of the gesture of raising the dust is to enter a conversation with the spectres of the recent past and to speak of the violence, erasure and unfulfilled promises trapped in that urban space.

I have argued that the gesture in *Prafu/The Dust* has a certain role, meaning, and value. Its primary role is to remind that this site in Bucharest concentrates the sealed temporalities of unresolved recent pasts, and the promises of never accomplished futures. Another role of the gesture is to act as a forensic tool, to search the site and bring the images of the gesture and the search before a forum, for judging. In turn, being before the images means to be before time and before the law, that is, to be held accountable, and thus, the gesture's meaning is to face one with the spectre that haunts these sealed sites and sealed temporalities. The value of this gesture in the contemporary context is that it shows the need to treat the inheritance of recent Romanian history as a task, which should be engaged with responsibly.

### 5.3.2 Fiction and Gesture

Both the religious and transitional narratives dominant after 1989 in Romania have focused, very crudely, on blaming the recent communist past for faults in the postcommunist present, and have promised a future based on sealing off this entire space-time. The period following the December 1989 revolution has been a time when Romania built its future on promises – the redemptive promises of the Orthodox Church, and the promise of economic and political development of transition. As a consequence of the unfulfillment of these promises, as early as 2006, it was becoming clear that these futures were in fact riddled with the inheritance of the recent past, which haunted, unresolved. As in *Praful/The Dust*, the central gesture in *Văcărești* (2006) holds a basic role against forgetting. Moreover, it interrogates and searches through various fictions that form the history of this site, and calls forth spectres that speak of the heavy inheritance present in this space.

*Văcărești* is a filmed performance in which Florin Tudor traces, with string and small wooden poles, the site of the former Văcărești Monastery, built between 1716 and 1722, and demolished in 1986, by the Ceaușescu regime. The redevelopment was intended as an artificial lake, with water sourced from Dambovița River, a hydrological project designed for flood prevention. Paradoxically, faults with the draining system made the surrounding areas flood when it was first tested, so the entire project was already in limbo before 1989. Poor administration and selling off the land to a private owner who neglected it, became the perfect conditions for the space to remain, so to speak, “off the radar”, for the next 15 years. This was still the case in 2006, the time when the artists made the work. The images show Tudor tracing the outline of the former Văcărești monastery in a concave space, by this point almost completely covered in vegetation. At the time, the area was waiting to become a large commercial centre, but some of its pasts were noticeable: “there are socialist ruins, a cheap market, a local community of Roma living in impoverished housing, an empty lake and big empty spaces.”<sup>356</sup> The commercial potential of the area, due to its proximity to the city centre, seemed, for a while, to win. A shopping mall was indeed built on one edge of the concave space, whilst the former lake itself continued to be left unattended. Gradually,

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<sup>356</sup> “Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor.”

vegetation and wildlife took over completely, and the area now has the role of urban sanctuary, regenerative and redemptive opportunity to claim care for the natural in urban space, which was all that time suppressed under rubble and concrete. What is more, currently, on another edge, new real-estate developments have emerged, taking full advantage of the wild scenery, whilst inside of the concave space a few impoverished communities are still housed precariously on the premises, disturbing the view of those on the higher floors of the glass buildings.

“It’s like a whole community of people doesn’t have the ability to link with their own pasts”<sup>357</sup> – the artists said about this space in an interview. How are we to live with these recent histories and equally, how are we to live with the present and the future(s) of this site? This is the question Vătămanu and Tudor ask through their performance, and their gesture of tracing the ground is first of all, a gesture against forgetting that these histories exist. However, the intention is not solely to expose the various historical aspects of the site. Instead, the aim is to make clear that the temporalities that make up the inheritance of the site are not linear, but have run in parallel and are superimposed one over another.



Image 38 – *Văcărești*, dual-channel installation view, 6 Gyumri Biennial, 2008, documentation photograph. Retrieved from artists’ website.

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

The work is filmed with two cameras (digital and 16 mm) and we can assume from what we see and hear in the images that Mona Vătămanu operates the 16 mm camera, whilst the digital camera films continuously throughout the performance, operated by a third person who gives Florin Tudor directions for planting the wooden poles.<sup>358</sup> The digital camera has the role of recording the performance: something is happening in front of it, and a person is behind it to record the events, in “real” time, for the entire duration. The images produced by this camera do not seem to contend that they would do anything else but “show” that there is something happening. The camera makes its presence felt, by little shakes and moves. The person behind it also makes its presence felt, in the cold of a January day, when the hands shake and one can hear the sound of nostrils sticking to each other. There is someone behind this camera, and at intervals one can hear the sound of their breathing. Sometimes they sing to pass time. The intention to show the superimposition of temporalities is apparent when the digital image produced by this camera, an image that runs in long shots, is interrupted by 16mm footage of the same scenes, flickering for a short while, and then fading away. The sound of the running mechanical camera is strong and piercing, and it still lingers in the digital image for a few seconds after the image associated with it disappears. The 16mm camera intervenes and makes its presence felt in the flow of the digital image; it interrupts and breaks this flow. Its role is not about recording. This other camera has another role. It brings in a different temporality, and the image it produces is grainy and ghostly. Its presence there feels uninvited, but necessary somehow just as Florin Tudor’s presence and this action are there uninvited but stir up the place.

The gesture Tudor performs is not about retracing the monastery’s place on the ground in order to produce a monument, be it even a very subtle one that would soon disappear under the snow. Marking the space with string reminds of the process of building an architectural foundation, yet this construction is not intended to ever lift from the ground. To claim to build a monument in this space would be a claim as fictional as any previous claims over the ground – for instance, the claim that this would be a sacred space belonging *de facto* to the church, the claims made by Ceaușescu’s actions, or equally, the economic and ecological claims currently visible in the space. In turn,

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<sup>358</sup> The assumption is based on the fact that we can see Florin Tudor tracing the ground and we can hear a male voice from behind the digital camera. In the gallery space, the work is most often a 2-channel installation (See Image 35).

what the gesture does, is stir up this space, remind one of the unresolved histories and the fictions exerted over this space. In other words, what the gesture of tracing the ground in *Văcărești* shows is that there is a set of fictions superimposed on the site: the religious fiction, the Ceaușescu-era fiction, the contemporary fictions of this space, either as potential retail development or as self-preserved, ecological system. These fictions have been composing, but also destructing or de-composing each other, as the artists point out in the same interview:

Before the church [Văcărești] was actually demolished in 1985, the site was used for filming scenes for the movie *Noi, cei din linia intai* [*Us, the Front Line*] (1985). Under the pretext of World War II verisimilitude, the director used real explosions to destroy a chunk of our history. The socialist ruin that supplanted the monastery survived until very recently, when it was in turn razed to make way for a commercial centre.<sup>359</sup>

The church had thus been destroyed initially as a consequence of a fictional film wanting to be a close re-enactment of a historical moment. Then, the maniacal erasures of the communist projects destroyed the area completely, in the name of equally fictional futures of a prosperous era of socialist development, or the “Golden Age”. Both acts of demolition were abusive and violent, and “destroy[ed] a chunk of our history,” as the artists say. However, the interesting aspect that connects them are these fictions. Furthermore, during the film mentioned above the marble cross of the church, the sign of the sacred space of the monastery, was also destroyed. Supported by strong anticommunism, the sacred was the central element upon which the Orthodox Church later claimed urban spaces. Nevertheless, the sacred was a fictional construction because, in this case, the church had not always been a sanctuary – from the mid nineteenth century to 1973 functioning intermittently as a prison. It is thus not a history of the place that Vătămanu and Tudor are tracing on the ground, but rather they are carrying out the task of making visible the existence of these fictions.

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<sup>359</sup> Mihnea Mircan, “Like Metal and Water: An Interview with Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor,” in *Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor*, ed. Cosmin Costinaș and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2009), 100.



Image 39 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, *Văcărești* (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists.



Image 40 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, *Văcărești* (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists.



Image 41 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, *Văcărești* (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists.



Image 42 - Florin Tudor traces the ground with string, *Văcărești* (2006), filmed performance, film still, courtesy of the artists.

In his journey, Tudor produces some literal cracks and breaks in the space. As it is January, the water infiltrations at the bottom of the lake are frozen. When walking on them, Tudor slowly and carefully tests their sturdiness, one foot at a time. The ice sometimes breaks under his feet; the careful gesture of trying to sense and test the ice works to increase tension towards a small crash and this, of course, produces a moment of relief. It is by no means a built tension, the actions and the gestures are “natural” and the digital camera does nothing to accentuate them; it merely sometimes seems interested in these gestures. The editing does not emphasize these gestures beyond how they unfold, and the 16mm image interventions are not timed to come before or after these breaks. However, some moments are more intense than others, especially when at the same time one can hear the voice behind the camera giving directions, there is a drilling 16mm sound interruption, and the ice breaks under Tudor’s feet. The gesture of tracing the ground can be seen as a performative gesture of calling forth spectres. One is before these images of Tudor, following his movement and being set, from time to time, before the spectres of the space, through the ghostly apparition of the 16 mm images. Being before the image is like being before an open doorway, Huberman continues in his analogy to Kafka’s story. Yet in the story the doorway is in a sense a fiction – it is created just for the person who was waiting to enter it, and it was there only because this person existed. Furthermore, the door was shut without them passing through it. In *Văcărești*, the fictions that the images produce and the fictions they enter into, or that they compose, become doorways. To what? What space and time would we be found in, when passing through the open doorway that these images of Tudor open? In this case, being before the open doorway means being before an image, which collects all the temporalities and all the fictions of this site. Thus, “entering” through the door, that is, through the image is not what is important. Rather, the gesture of tracing the ground in *Văcărești* produces an event for those standing before the image. Filming this gesture of tracing the ground holds an expectation that the spectres in this space will be engaged in a conversation about all of the fictions contained in this site, be they religious, communist, transitional, or ecological. Therefore, the event already happens through anticipation of the appearance of this spectre. And where is this anticipatory performative possible? In a space created specifically for whoever stands in front of the image, wanting and wishing to go in, but not being able to. The image opens a space of this kind because images are, if we follow Huberman, “objects that are temporally

impure.”<sup>360</sup> Being before the image as before time links the image with the moment the spectre appears. In turn, being before the image as a forum is to observe and to judge these fictions. In addition, it is the state in which the spectator is put, to be before the image as before the law means equally, to be held accountable or responsible for these fictions, as parts of an inheritance. To be before the image is to see the promises upon which multiple futures of that space were built and the traces they left at the site.

### 5.3.3 Gestures Speak of Forgetting, Loss, and Failure

One interpretation proposed for the gestures in both *Praful/The Dust* and *Văcărești* was that they were performed against forgetting. Talking about these two works, the artists said they have “engaged the idea of the monument at its degree zero – to enact the simplest connection to those places, to not forget.”<sup>361</sup> In other words, to not forget the configurations in which space and memory are linked to history and politics, and to reveal as much as possible about these power relations.

In Romania, the “fall” of communism was equated with the fall of ideology, and further, with the idea that the only possible way to develop was by moving forward. However, this movement determined a series of processes of selective remembering and partitioning of what can be remembered from what should become and stay forgotten. Thus, memory became a place for political struggle, especially as the transitional and religious narratives had a specific investment in the production of anticommunist memory, in order to legitimate their own promises of the future. Furthermore, apart from the temporal aspect evident in any work with memory, one of the grounds where this struggle over and with the politics of memory has been carried out was in urban space. Vivianne Rehberg says of Vătămanu and Tudor’s works that they “focus on architecture and urban space, destruction and rebuilding, shifting sands and tracing lines, and the political implications of historical erasures and reconstructions.”<sup>362</sup> The artists perform this work with moving images, urban space and architecture to bring

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<sup>360</sup> Huberman’s idea is informed by Warburg’s practice with images and the specific ability to break and intervene in temporality. When one sets out to create this history of images, the most appropriate method to treat these objects is to acknowledge that the history of images is a history of ghosts, something that Aby Warburg did already in *The Mnemosyne Atlas*. See Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism.”

<sup>361</sup> Mircan, “Like Metal and Water: An Interview with Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor,” 100.

<sup>362</sup> Vivian Rehberg, “Mapping the History of the Present,” in *Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor*, ed. Cosmin Costinaș and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2009), 64.

into question the entangled territories of memory and the politics thereof. Rehberg notes that the prevalence contemporary art has afforded to temporal tropes for understanding history and memory needs to be complicated, especially if artists, critics, and academics alike, are to account, in this specific case, for the complexity of postcommunist time-spaces. Rehberg suggests that thinking space-time in contemporary art should address the politics of memory by turning to both temporal and spatial tropes. Whilst concepts like (n)ostalgia and melancholy are useful for the politics of memory, Rehberg warns against the risk that these would “exclusively regulat[e] post-communist experience and aesthetics.”<sup>363</sup> The work with memory is a work with temporalities, yet that must necessarily be coupled with work on spaces and spatiality.

Nevertheless, any considerable “turn” of contemporary art in engaging with memory through architecture and urbanism stands open to a series of criticisms. Georg Schöllhamer, for example, observes that architecture “has become for contemporary European art since the early 1990s a central reflection medium on the relationship of politics and aesthetic work.”<sup>364</sup> Schöllhammer suggests that most works of art that follow this turn and claim to be political, criticise the globalized and fragmented spaces of neoliberal capitalism and make it their goal to expose “the quantitatively altered topology of late modernism under the conditions of corporate culture (...), a culture that tends to cover up all emancipatory potentials of autonomous form.”<sup>365</sup> What then arguably grounds the political aspect of these works is that the artist(s) can make visible power relations, and thus enable art to take part in an emancipatory process of re-reading them as sites of memory and of culture. However, Schöllhammer appreciates that Vătămanu and Tudor manage to escape these approaches but indeed react to social and political issues by “always emphasiz[ing] the fictional and constructed character”<sup>366</sup> of context or a situation.

What is particular about the case of urban space in Bucharest, apart from the insertions and fragments of neoliberal capital, is the force of the Orthodox Church in its

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Georg Schöllhammer, “The Masters of the New Cities,” in *Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor*, ed. Cosmin Costinaș and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2009), 55.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

endeavours to appropriate urban spaces in the postcommunist period, through recuperation of sacred spaces and righteous “pasts”, which had before been abused or suppressed. These fictional constructions of the past were structured on anticommunist narratives and presented as forms of resistance against forgetfulness. This started with the transitional reconciliation in the first decade after 1989 and has been revived in the last years, especially around 2014, a date marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Romanian Revolution. The number of churches built in Romania in the past ten years increased considerably because, very crudely put, communism was oppressive to Christian Orthodoxy. Equally, the popularity of figures – priests and monks – who were imprisoned during the communist period has also increased and they are often portrayed by the church and Romanian media as dissidents and figures of resistance.<sup>367</sup>



Image 43 - The small church from *Prafu* in its current location between high rise socialist buildings, in 2009 – 10, with an additional neon cross. Source: [www.rezistenta.net](http://www.rezistenta.net)

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<sup>367</sup> Individual figures, such as monk Arsenie Boca (who happened to train in painting at the monastery which was demolished at the site shown in *The Dust*) have had particular attention from media and editorial projects, dealing specifically with his violent religious persecution and imprisonment during communism.

Nevertheless, simply exposing these general relations between globalizing and fragmenting capital, and the fictions of the religious narratives through art, with a belief in emancipation, is just as presumptuous, because showing a set of power relations does not produce an effect on the political configuration of spaces, nor of histories. However, Vătămanu and Tudor's works manage to become more than a reflection that calls for "not forgetting" in order to make viewers aware of the politics of memory. They do more than remind one how the chant against the wrongs of communism was sung by the Orthodox Church to obtain leverage on decision-making over sites of urbanism and architecture.<sup>368</sup> They speak of the entwined trajectories which shaped these sites and conjure spectres who urge against any simplified narrative of failure and loss. The inheritance of the two sites from *Praful/The Dust* and *Văcărești* is approached in its complex intertwining with inherited narratives around failure and the loss of horizons. Narratives about the failure to build resistance during communism, the anticommunist terms of transition that claimed communism itself as a failure, and, in more recent times, the failure to respond to transition when it was producing further acts of erasure are brought together in these works. The projections of a successful end of transition needed to be critically reassessed, especially in a moment when a forthcoming economic crisis was about to make visible, once more, the pitfalls of a debt economy. Then, the failure to build an alternative left culture with the role to lift the seal from the lived experience of the specific form of Romanian communism needed to be reckoned with. In addition, there was the failure of contemporary art to perform a political function and its courtship of politics leading to circular politics of memory. Again, all these failures are suggested in the works and in my reading they are to be taken as inheritance, therefore opening up the failure in its multiple guises and compositions where they appear as tasks, and as responsibilities. In this sense, conjuring means to allow ghosts to haunt. In the particular case of the two works discussed, allowing the ghost to haunt is to ask what is the role of memory now (memory of wars, communism, orthodox pasts, capitalism), i.e. how are we to engage with these inherited fictions and constructions, in the contemporary context?

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<sup>368</sup> This relates back to my mention, in the introduction, of the ways in which the Orthodox Church constructs and legitimates its power over the space where they intend to build the National Redemption Cathedral, as a sacred space and righteously belonging to the Church, and 'returning' in its property after a time of unjustifiable absence.

## 5.4 Building Futures on Credit

The present builds its own monuments on credit, a credit we will probably need to pay back quite soon.<sup>369</sup>

This is a statement the artists made in relation to the struggle over urban space, architecture and memory. As I have shown previously, in Romania urban space has been altered in various ways by the promises of the communist, religious, transitional, and neoliberal narratives. For example, in the so-called “transitional” period, the promise of a prosperous urban space was considered fulfilled by building new real-estate developments. However, these insertions of capital through either privatising existing spaces or building on empty ones was performed on credit – the transitional narrative was promising a future it was not able to fulfil and ignoring the inheritance of recent history, for example the rows of socialist high-rise buildings and other Ceaușescu-era projects left unfinished. At times this narrative acted as if the ground on which they operated was empty or razed, when in fact they were adding to a series of inherited sealed off memories and unfulfilled promises. In other words, the existing histories of urban space had not been dealt with nor were the spaces considered lived spaces, inhabited by communities, holding memories and lived experiences. In the Văcărești area, for instance, the artists made visible the fictional character of the promises forgotten with a gesture of tracing the ground where the monastery used to be. This gesture was not intended as the foundation to building yet another monument on credit, as the monumentalising drive of the anticommunist and religious agendas had done there and in other parts of the city, like the *Cathedral of National Redemption* or the *Memorial of Rebirth*. Instead, the question the artists raised with the gesture was: what is the credit that any intervention in the space – aiming to build or erase – needs to account for?

This question can further be extended to ask what it would mean to think not just in terms of monuments, but that entire futures have been built on credit in the recent Romanian past. To ask this question means to interrogate the very logic of debt and promise. “What is a debt, anyway? A debt is just the perversion of a promise. It is a

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<sup>369</sup> Mircan, “Like Metal and Water: An Interview with Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor,” 100.

promise corrupted by both math and violence,”<sup>370</sup> David Graeber points out. During transition, the promise was the full integration into political and economic structures of global capital, whilst the debt was the inheritance of the past, sealed off and not dealt with. The violence which perverted the promise was to be found in urban spaces, but also in struggles over labour and the series of expropriations and dispossessions, depriving entire communities of basic housing and human rights. These acts of violence were apparent in Romania as much as they became increasingly visible globally. By 2009-2010, the crisis of late capitalism or the fact that capitalism is recurrently in crisis was made evident by the economic crash and the bail-outs of banks by governments in the United States and Europe, the effects of which, soon reverberated to Romania. The expansion of the crisis itself seemed to model the expansion of capitalism to new markets. In the 2008 introduction to a new edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, David Harvey writes a concise history of this crisis, in relation to labour:

Two billion proletarians have been added to the global wage labour force over the last 20 years – the opening of China, the collapse of the erstwhile Communist Bloc and the incorporation of formerly independent peasant populations in India and Indonesia as well as throughout Latin America and Africa playing a crucial role. A no-holds-barred corporate capitalism has re-emerged over the last 30 years to take advantage of this situation.<sup>371</sup>

One hundred and sixty years on from when the *Communist Manifesto* was written, as Harvey notices above, the survival of capitalism through its extension to ever new markets to encompassing new spatial configurations, an expansion by dispossession, or in Harvey’s own words, an “accumulation by dispossession” – of land, labour, rights – continued to make a wide array of subjects across the world precarious and, by then, the crisis evident. Yet, whilst capitalism seemed to re-emerge from this crisis ever more powerful, let us remember once more the start of the *Communist Manifesto*: “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.”<sup>372</sup> This is what

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<sup>370</sup> David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Updated and expanded edition (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 391.

<sup>371</sup> David Harvey, “Introduction,” in *The Communist Manifesto* (Pluto Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>372</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 31.

Derrida returned to in 1991, in his conference address *Spectres of Marx* and partially, I have argued, this is what Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor also return to: asking where are these two spectres now, those spectres of unfulfilled promises of both communism and capitalism? This question holds central to the artists' work with moving images, but also in their installation, painting or performance pieces.<sup>373</sup> After the lived experience of communism and the rapid accumulation and dispossession of land and housing that occurred in Romania in the mid-2000s, 2009 and 2010 saw the aftermath of the economic crisis, and with this moment, some preoccupations returned in the work of Vătămanu and Tudor. They engaged once more with the inheritance of recent past, the spectre of lived Romanian communism, and that of a lived transition, in a moment when the crisis was clearly taking the place of capitalist promised prosperity. The credit both of these promises were built on, and the violence with which they have been carried out haunted ever more powerfully the 2009 present the artists worked in.

In this moment, they returned to listen once more to spectres of unfulfilled promises, and their use of a certain type of images also returned. The grainy 16mm film from the previous works returns in two new pieces, *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* and *Rite of Spring*. Why the return, and what could it mean? Georges Didi-Huberman considers that the history of images is anachronistic and that images themselves are temporally impure objects to work with.<sup>374</sup> In his incursion into Aby Warburg's works Huberman speaks of the "ghost-image" (*l'image fantome*), an example of how the image creates temporal interferences, and how images are or become temporally impure objects of study, in themselves. Didi-Huberman believes that, for Warburg, the ghost-image "weaves between long *durées* and critical moments, latencies without time and violent resurgences."<sup>375</sup> By navigating temporalities in such a way, the ghost-image achieves a very important task: that of "anachronizing" both the present and the past. More exactly, the survival element in the image and from the image has the capacity to

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<sup>373</sup> See the example of the banner "Long Live and Thrive Capitalism" (2008, 2010, 2014) discussed in the previous section, or in the installation of small sand bags, in the Romanian pavilion of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennial, in 2008, which accompanied the video installation *Praful/The Dust* and, as David Riff observes, "seemed to contain all the mud of real socialism's agonizing 'transition' to real capitalism and vice versa, all the accumulated dirt." Riff, "The Wrong Version of Capital?," 87.

<sup>374</sup> Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," 37.

<sup>375</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L'Image Survivante. Histoire de L'art et Temps Des Fantômes Selon Aby Warburg*, 87. My translation.

“pulverize all chronology in the *durée*.”<sup>376</sup> Elsewhere, Didi-Huberman clarifies this aspect of how a ghost-image works, by going back to the work of Aby Warburg. A ghost-image functions mainly on the Nietzschean concept of *Nachleben*, meaning “afterlife” and “survival”, which refers “(...) precisely to the powers to *adhere* and to *haunt* that reside in all images.”<sup>377</sup> Huberman clarifies that this is not solely a case of rebirth, influence or a return, but that:

(...) *a surviving image* is an image that, having lost its original use value and meaning, nonetheless comes back, like a ghost, at a particular historical moment: a moment of 'crisis,' a moment when it demonstrates its latency, its tenacity, its vivacity, and its 'anthropological adhesion,' so to speak.<sup>378</sup>

Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor make images in times of crisis, surviving images which will come back and haunt, for as long as the accumulated debt from recent history is left unpaid. This does not mean that the artists make images with abilities to universally respond to questions around labour struggles or economic systems, at one point in history or another. Instead, the images that they make emerge as necessary commentaries in crucial moments. In a text accompanying the latest solo exhibition of Vătămanu and Tudor in Bratislava (2015), curator Judit Angel mentions that these artists have often been referred to as “historiographers of the present” and situates them as one of the last generations to have first-hand memories of communism, as well as witnessing the “general dissolution brought about by the unfulfilled expectations of the system change.”<sup>379</sup> As historiographers of the present, Vătămanu and Tudor respond to two moments of crisis, in 2009 and 2010. The gestures in *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* and *Rite of Spring* focus on the struggle over labour, expropriation and dispossession. These two gestures are repetitive, and both playful and painful. In *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value*, the gesture is bringing a piece of metal to almost nothing, and in *Rite of Spring*, it is that of setting fire to spring fluff, gathered on the streets of Bucharest. I will argue

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid. My translation.

<sup>377</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p.xxii, my emphasis.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> “Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor,” [Http://sk.tranzit.org/](http://sk.tranzit.org/), accessed March 24, 2015, <http://sk.tranzit.org/en/exhibition/0/2015-02-13/mona-vtmanu-florin-tudor>, n.p.

that these gestures refer to the violence onto which the Romanian futures have been promised, and perform a specific kind of labour with memory. The works in the previous section focused on the sites, the ground of memory and the physical ground in the city, whilst these two works are centred on historical flows of violence around labour and housing. The struggle over labour and housing stands at the core of the Marxist project, was violently distorted and abused in the lived communist experience in Romania through a form of nationalist communism, and is a central issue that needs to be addressed in the contemporary context, which is the consequence of repeated neoliberal violent fragmentations and acts of dispossession. In the two works discussed in this section, either students or children perform a gesture. What these gestures have in common is their political stake: to address the debt that has been added in recent history, through promises perverted by violence exerted over various subjects. More specifically, in the case of Romania, increasingly precarious labour conditions (including migrant labour) and the violent acts of dispossession, continuously affecting the same communities, are often linked to racial and class violence.

#### 5.4.1 On Why We Need to Talk about Labour

In pre-1989 Romania, students were required to take manual labour classes, involving mainly knitting for girls and wood and metal work for boys. But at the end of the year, students were required to buy back their own manufactured objects, the price rising proportionately with the complexity of the carving or piece of knitwork.<sup>380</sup>

By buying the products of their own labour, the young Romanian students were arguably being taught a lesson about the value of the products they were making, as they were acquiring a skill, thus their task of making the objects was intended as part of a pedagogical task. In *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value*, this pedagogy is broken down by Vătămanu and Tudor into a single gesture, which is repeated, over and over again, until a piece of metal is reduced almost entirely to shavings. With the repetition, the artists not only show the oddity of this pedagogy, but, as Cosmin Costinaş observes, the work “asks some fundamental questions regarding labour, profit, and materiality and gets down to the bottom line – universally shared throughout systems or historical moments – a certain history of struggle.”<sup>381</sup> The struggle refers to a particular situation and a moment in Romania, but extends to larger conversations on global economic systems.

The title of the work coincides with the title of the artists’ solo exhibition from 2009, at the Basis Voor Actuele Kunst in Utrecht, a show which was included as a research exhibition in the ongoing Former West project.<sup>382</sup> The artistic and research goals of Former West are to address the contested space and time of “post 1989”, and the space-time of an equally contested or contestable notion of a “former” Eastern European communist bloc. Within this context, Vătămanu and Tudor’s exhibition opened a conversation around labour and value in a so-called “former West” condition, but in relation to their lived experience and their practice in changing economic situations, in Romania. The gesture is part of a pedagogy informed by what we would largely term the communist ideology, but it is a direct reference to waged labour and

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<sup>380</sup> Costinaş, “The History of Us All,” 33.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>382</sup> BAK (basis voor actuele kunst), “Former West.”

the production of value, as it was regulated and managed in communist Romania as much as it is a global contemporary concern. The struggle over labour includes, for example, questions around divisions of labour, work and leisure time, and about who had and has the right to these times. The work points to the violence of abusive labour conditions, accumulated equally in the promises made during the two transitions in recent Romanian history – the transition to socialism, and that to capitalism. It responds to the violence exerted against conditions of labour and labour rights in the Ceaușescu period, as much as in the time leading up to the economic crisis, including issues related to migrant labour. Thus, it also suggests that this credit does not weight heavy only on Romanian history, but also on labour histories of the “West.”



Image 44 – The gesture of whittling a piece of metal in *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value*, (2009) image still, courtesy of the artists

In the images the artists follow closely, with their camera, a hand performing the gesture of whittling a piece of metal (Image 42). What do these images want to do? Their role is to express how changing conditions of labour have been experienced, remembered or forgotten. The abstract gesture is meant to speak of the relations between the production of memory and the production of value in the context of recent

Romanian past, where these relations have been largely shaped by changes in the economic and political systems. They focus on the hand performing and repeating the gesture. The images, through their texture, return one to the historical moment in Romania where this gesture was initially performed, as a way to discuss the promises it contained and the credit it generated. The artists obstinately deconstruct this specifically Romanian pedagogical experience, and the gesture is performed as if in the hope to uncover some hidden algorithm of how the relations between labour and value were determined in this historical context. However, the 2009 moment in Romania when the work was made, had been built on credit and the credit was partially labour. More exactly, any adult working in the last ten years leading to the revolution had been made vicariously liable for the foreign debt that the Ceaușescu regime had incurred. When Ceaușescu decided to pay off this debt, the living and working conditions deteriorated seriously. This violence was added to the forthcoming violence produced by transition, a promise of a future built on unlawful privatization, Ponzi schemes, and generalised corruption. By 2009, migrant labour was the credit onto which another future had been built – promised to be a “truly” capitalist future, fully integrated with European promises. Most Romanians travelling to spaces of the so-called “former West” inhabited the precarious roles of migrant workers. During transition, the harsh labour conditions from the communist period had been remembered maniacally, in anticommunist narratives, yet other aspects, such as secure employment or stable wages and the role and importance of unionized forms of organisation had been systematically repressed, under the promise of a better future with higher incomes and the ability to cross borders freely. However necessary in themselves, these latter replaced and undermined the first, for the benefit of neoliberal capitalism. This suppression was added to the credit that accumulated in recent Romanian history.

The gesture in *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* points, on one hand, to the pedagogy of the task, and on the other, to the retrieval of the memory of this task. This memory belongs to the moment in Romanian history when students were required to take manual labour classes and buy back the manufactured objects. This memory of performing the gesture is what the artists decide to address. Then the task becomes, for the artists, to perform this gesture again and to film it, to capture it in images. The memory of performing this gesture of whittling the piece of metal is also a collective memory, perhaps a memory inscribed in the body. The artists themselves, having been

young adults during the communist period, are very likely to have performed that exercise and to have that memory. In post-1989 Romania, the Home Economics class continued to include this task, but it was performed without having to buy back the product of one's own labour. On one hand, in the work, the memory of performing this task is taken to the limit of the absurd, with the metal being whittled until there is almost nothing left. What is the value of the piece then? The piece can no longer be sold or if it is sold, it will be sold on the promise that it would incur value in the future. The gesture thus calls forth ideas around the cryptic or absurd functioning of both the communist and capitalist economies. On the other hand, the gesture opens the memory of manual labour and the materiality of labour, increasingly dominated in the contemporary by abstracted modes of production and immaterial forms of labour.

Another issue the work brings up is the profit or yield that images can have, through the production of memory. This is a political process – to produce memory using images creates surplus value. This, however, is not economic value as such, but it is value for a narrative or ideology, which can turn into profit, as for example in the capitalist accumulation of value from art markets. Thus, the need to talk about labour, struggle and inequalities also becomes the need to talk about this type of labour, namely the artistic labour which is being put into the production of memory. The production of memory is a political process that necessarily needs to be taken apart. In *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value*, the artists respond to the production of memory in the communist and neoliberal narratives. In their response, they use images and gestures to produce their own labour with memory. Their artistic labour with memory is necessary to counter a uni-dimensional type of memory production. For instance, in the transitional logic of memory production, the wrongs of the communist space-time offered ground for the entire experience to be vilified, and the forthcoming time – the promise of what was to come – to be reinforced. Vătămanu and Tudor work with moving images to produce a memory that reflects the continuities in this history of struggle over labour conditions in Romania.

Yet, what is the value which is called into question here, by repeating this gesture? It is the memory of all the forms of violence onto which various futures were built, the credit that has accumulated in the past fifty years, in Romania and elsewhere. Tracing and remembering this credit is valuable if one wishes to engage in any way with a contemporary situation of debt and crisis. As “historiographers of the present”,

Vătămanu and Tudor excavate, from a given present moment – in this case, 2009 – into the recent and more distant pasts. They perform this excavation through a gesture, which does not simply re-enact the initial gesture, nor does it annihilate it. The piece of metal is whittled repeatedly, recalling the “absurdity of the economic measures of state-run socialist economies.”<sup>383</sup> The artists resist the finality of the initial gesture – to make a product from this labour. In the end this gesture does not, as the initial gesture did, result in a product which in turn can produce exchange or surplus value. Yet, neither is the piece of metal entirely destroyed. Cosmin Costinaş suggests that the work points to issues around “waste and losses of the expanding neoliberal capitalist [system]”<sup>384</sup> and this is visible in how a small remnant of the piece is deliberately left in the vice. There remains something of the initial piece and the gesture leaves behind a significant number of metal shavings, a lot of traces, and a lot of waste. The framing is narrow and it leaves much outside of the shot, including every metal shaving which falls out of sight, out of the image. This spillage is never followed by the camera, the latter remains fixated on the hand and on the piece of metal until the end, when the shot becomes larger, only to release the human element out of it, who eventually walks out, to the right. This obstinacy of the camera to stay with the gesture is as absurd and alienating for the viewer.

The alienating experience of how value of objects, of actions, of our own work is produced is perhaps something recognizable in contemporary situations, and can be extended to the workings of large economic relations, which are increasingly defined and conducted in cryptic and virtualized ways. The 2009 moment when Vătămanu and Tudor open this inheritance up is a moment of crisis originating in “Western” spaces, one of the most recent crises of capitalism, seemingly unexplainable to non-specialists because of the level of encryption of financial algorithms. To this moment, they add the texture and memories of a space and time belonging to communist Romania, but the gesture remains one that speaks of the past and the present inasmuch as of possible futures – of labour and of processes through which value is produced.

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<sup>383</sup> Costinaş, “The History of Us All,” 34.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 5.4.2 Returning Acts of Dispossession

As a form of writing the history or histories of the present, *Rite of Spring* can be read as a work about the struggle over class and racial violence. It speaks, with moving images, about the credit onto which the 2010 Romanian present had been built. A history of violence over people, places, memories and spaces is recalled in the images through the gesture of young children burning poplar fluff on the streets of Bucharest. On their website, Vătămanu and Tudor offer that this gesture resonates with a series of moments and situations around the world, from “the fires in the French *banlieues* in recent years [2005], the perpetually deported and repatriated Roma people throughout Europe” to “this year’s [2010] uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East.”<sup>385</sup> However, these instances are not lamented, and instead, the sparks and small fires, the artists suggest, connect to the idea that each of these individual moments has worked as “a catalyst of change to existing orders.”<sup>386</sup> The gesture, in turn, has the potential to open the histories of these times. In the Romanian context, the work and the gesture call up a history of struggle over housing conditions, dispossession, and the possibility of making oneself emerge as a subject in moments of change in the political order, like the Romanian revolution of 1989. Nevertheless, the artists’ comment also suggests that the moments of change, which the gesture conjures, are not trapped solely in the Romanian context, and that they converse with other temporalities and spaces, where these conditions of oppression may spark movement and action. Spectres of these moments are present in *Rite of Spring*, through the gesture, to speak of the history and the present of struggle, of a local and global inheritance of erasures, acts of dispossession and returning acts of abuse; a debt which needs to be paid back soon.

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<sup>385</sup>“Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor,” *Rite of Spring*, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/riteofspring.htm>.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*



Image 45 - Fire burning the fluff in *Rite of Spring* (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, film stills, courtesy of the artists

The opening images of Vătămanu and Tudor's work show fluff from poplar trees, fallen on the ground, moved by the wind, unsettled, swirling. Immediately after, in the following shots, this fluff is set on fire and it burns through the length of the image – no information is given about who or what created that fire (Image 43). The fire repeats: it starts from the left hand side and burns through the image, then starts again, from the right. The fire's movement, as if driven by spontaneous combustion, points to the existence of something driving it, calling it up. A ritual – given the name of the piece – might be what we are seeing in the images. Soon, it becomes apparent that we are not the only ones looking at this ritual and being captivated by the travelling fire. First, shadows appear around the burning fluff. Then, on the side of the street, fires are travelling near the boardwalk and children's silhouettes and feet start to populate the images. They seem to have been called forth by the fire, to witness its travelling movement. They crouch and squat over the boardwalks, and follow the disappearance of the fluff under the fire's ability to consume. They are witnessing this action unfolding. Nevertheless, there is an uneasiness in the images, which points to the fact that these children might have a more complicated status than witnesses to this fire burning, and to this ritual.



Image 46 - The National Library of Romania, *Rite of Spring* (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, film still, courtesy of the artists.

However, it is not clear yet what the role of the children is. What follows in the work is a series of long shots of burning fluff, intersecting with images of a building, flickering in the background. This is most likely the National Library of Bucharest (Image 44), left unfinished – an architectural project of the last decade of the Ceaușescu regime, known as the “Victory of Socialism” Boulevard, extending from The House of the People and into the Eastern part of the city. At the time Mona Vătămnu and Florin Tudor made the work, this building was decrepit, suspended in time. If this is the building, then we know that the surrounding areas may be home to entire families from communities occupying nearby nationalised houses, and that the children might be from these areas. In this case, a history of dispossession, violence and precariousness is what haunts these sites. The communities of that area – mostly of Roma ethnics – have suffered re-location and the destruction of their homes during the development of the “Victory of Socialism” project, under Ceaușescu. Furthermore, a similar crisis of dispossession and precarity surrounded this community in the “prosperous” decades following the revolution, when real-estate developments flourished in the area and properties were regained, through the new legislative acts. During this period, however, buildings of the former communist projects were left in limbo states, as was the case with the National Library building. In this work, only for an instance, the children and this building intersect. At a time of economic crisis, when both the architectural projects of a megalomaniac socialist

imagination, and those of a pathological neoliberal ambition for abstraction were visibly defeated (at least for a moment), the children and the building became visible. They were part of an inheritance of recent past, as the precarious entities, rising from under the spring fluff, which is burnt by fire.

It is possible that the work by Vătămanu and Tudor takes its title from Igor Stravinsky's opera, *Le Sacre du Printemps/Rite of Spring*. In the iconic and original 1913 ballet choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, the main protagonist dances herself to death in a sacrificial ritual. She is consumed in her own movement, and the sacrificial dance is meant to conjure the God of Spring. Even if the Vătămanu and Tudor's *Rite of Spring* does not refer directly to Stravinsky in the sacrificial aspect of the ritual, it does most likely bring to the foreground the question of a return. Spring can be such a time for returns: the return of rites, the return of revolutions, the return of the subject, or that of the image. Earlier, I proposed to read the children's gesture of burning fluff as a ritual, as they appear, for an instant, in the images. This is not a sacrificial ritual or a rebirth, as was the case in arguments onto which the Romanian Orthodox Church had claimed rights over urban spaces, based on their supposed sacred status. Instead, this return is in fact of the violence, which was already there, but covered, unseen. The fluff is so light that it manages to burn completely and it reveals that underneath it there was always already something else. The children make their appearance in the images, but them, their families, and the communities they belong to, have always been there, inhabiting less visible spaces, being subjected to abuse and violence. The work stresses the necessity to speak of the precarious position of these children, who have been through repetitive acts of dispossession, and about the buildings in the background, as artefacts reminding us of a heavy inheritance, which requires speaking about.

However, the work does not aim to show these children as victims, nor does it launch into presenting the remnants of an inheritance of violence in ethical terms. The children in these images perform an act, and the camera is interested in it. By filming the children, the artists do not aim to record the ritual, but rather, the camera is interested in the gesture. Neither do the children perform in front of the camera. Instead, with the camera there, there is the implication that the children can become witnesses to their own gesture, to their own appearance, in the images. This construction shows the children as precarious subjects, and this is facilitated by the fire and more exactly, by the gesture of setting fire to the fluff. The fire plays an interesting

role in these images, it consumes the fluff and thus destroys it. At the same time, the children make themselves visible in the space of this act of consumption. Furthermore, the fluff is the only element sustaining this fire – the fire consumes the fluff and hence, it perpetuates. Suddenly, at the end of a fluff line, the fire is exhausted. But beneath the fluff, with the aid of the fire, green leaves are visible, yet they had always been there, as were the children. In fact, the children soon reveal to be those who initiate these fires, repeatedly leaning over the fluff with lighters, to re-start them. The children are initiators of the fire and witnesses to it, but they are also witnesses to the decay of urban space, to its erasure, to the insertions which appear in it, and to the returning acts of dispossession, including those against them. Every year, the fluff clutters the urban space close to where they live, it clutters the streets; and every year, the children make it disappear. The repetitive gesture of burning the fluff makes them more than witnesses to these changes in the urban space. In the gesture of burning the fluff, they make themselves visible.

Whilst *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* had referenced the credit and violence accumulated from the struggle over labour, *Rite of Spring* speaks of the inheritance which comes with state, ideological or economic violence. However, the images that compose the work are eerie and poetic, and seemingly, they do not make a direct comment on violence. What we see in these images are small children setting fire to poplar fluff, on the streets of the city. Yet, whilst following the children through central Bucharest, this work calls forth spectres arising from repetitive acts of abuse, both in the lived experience of Romanian communism, as well as in the moments leading up to and following immediately after the 2008 economic crisis. It also calls into question the acts of abandonment, and the precarious conditions of living of certain communities, like the Roma, who have been and still are the disregarded minorities onto whom this type of abuse has been exerted. The demolition projects from the Ceaușescu period, several changes in property law after 1989 and urban neoliberal redevelopment, all repetitively rendered these communities (mostly Roma) vulnerable. These are part of longer histories that resurface, often in times of crisis. For instance, dispossession is just one of the returning acts of violence against the Roma population, it is part of, and can be traced back to Romania's history of slavery, as far as the 14<sup>th</sup> century and as close as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Records of boyars and the Christian Orthodox Church holding Roma slaves

are widespread across what was then Wallachian territory.<sup>387</sup> This history of slavery, dispossession, forced eviction and abuse is the history of violence these communities have faced, an inheritance that haunts the present. In this particular area where *Rite of Spring* is filmed, it is the communities living in nationalised buildings, some Roma, some not, who have been evicted, re-settled and faced multiple situations where their right to housing was threatened. These abuses were the credit onto which better futures were promised, of a “Golden Age” or a successful integration into economic and political structures, as a capitalist, developed country. As it became clear in recent history, both promises had always been riddled with violence and the futures, the platforms for accumulating debt. This situation, when critically addressed, can spark change, movement, and reignite struggles and this is what *Rite of Spring* offers is a possibility contained in each given present.

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<sup>387</sup> Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 27.



Image 47 - *Rite of Spring* (2010), Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor. Different postures and gestures of the child, film stills, courtesy of the artists.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on the moving image works of artists Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor to ask questions around the complicated inheritance of the communist period and the more recent past, that of neoliberal accumulation. The past, I argued, is not only an issue of memory, but a political question, specifically where the inheritance of recent Romanian history is concerned. The transitional and religious narratives, both very powerful in the first two decades after the revolution of 1989, shaped a common understanding of the communist past. The entire period was left unaddressed, and thus repressed. These narratives also implied a promise of a future. Within this logic of promise, which is also a logic of debt, the Christian Orthodox Church built and legitimated its power over urban space, presenting certain areas as sacred spaces, therefore necessarily belonging to the church. Such was the case with the National Redemption Cathedral, built on the premises of the former House of the People, the first currently obstructing the latter, or wishing to “write over” it in a maniacal manner. Superimposing the cathedral onto a landscape already dominated by the heavy communist past was performed as if the land was empty, and therefore sealed off in plain sight an entire history which still required reckoning with. On the other hand, the transitional narrative of the first decade after 1989 had equally contributed to seeing the communist past as a *faux-pas*, a gross mistake in Romanian history, and has henceforth considered urban spaces as razed grounds, spaces without history and meaning, perfect for privatisation, real estate development, and generally ready to welcome global capital. All these layers, too, contribute to the inheritance I discussed in this chapter.

I specifically considered inheritance, via Derrida, not as a given, but as a task. One way of opening up this inheritance, is through acts of conjuration. To conjure ghosts from the past means to take responsibility over inheritance. This led me to argue that the layers mentioned above need to be addressed and dealt with, and the task needs to be performed in the present, but also, through labour with memory.

I also considered how the selected moving image works of artists Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor produce a historiography of the present and engage in the labour with memory. Moreover, their work takes on the task of opening up the heavy inheritance of a recent past. To take up this task of labour over memory means, on the

one hand, to counter and to question memory production belonging to a certain narrative – be it communist, neoliberal, or religious. On the other hand, it means to question the promise made by these narratives, and consequently, to critically address and politicise the debt left to pay from one stage to another, always a debt lived and experienced cumulatively in a given present. I selected two moments as “the present”, which the artists chose to reflect upon: 2005 – 2006 and 2009 – 2010.

The first moment made evident, in the artistic work, the labour over memory in the inheritance visible at that point, about the communist past, and the promises of the religious future. The present of 2005 – 2006, investigated in the works *Văcărești* and *Praful/The Dust* speaks of the memory and experience of urban space in the capital of Romania, of the collective inheritance over it being shaped by traces of violence and abuse. In this historiography of the present, which is performed with moving images, one aspect becomes visible: what was built at any given moment in the past was built on credit, by ignoring the past and present and projecting into the future. This is the common promise held by the communist project of the Socialist Victory Boulevard, the neoliberal imagination which followed the transitional logic, and the eternal redemption promised by having faith in the Christian Orthodox church.

The second moment, the present of 2009 – 2010, was shaped in the works *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* and *Rite of Spring*, and speaks of the memory, future and experience, of the inheritance and promises around issues of labour and inequality. Here, the process of performing a historiography of the present made visible the same communities of impoverished and precarious individuals affected throughout the communist period and after a capitalist crisis. The same communities of Roma ethnics, for example, have been and still are the ones affected by expropriation, relocation, evictions, or precarious work conditions. These pertain to the long histories of slavery, violence and abuse, an inheritance which, in time of crisis comes back to haunt. The gestures in the works *Plus Valoarea/Surplus Value* and *Rite of Spring* conjure ghosts and these acts of violence and dispossession are made visible: they return and ask to be addressed.

## Conclusions

This thesis has brought together narratives on contemporary moving image practices and the socio-political context in Romania with critical theoretical perspectives on political and historical concepts like “transition” and “postcommunism”, in an effort to revisit recent Romanian history and to provide new readings of key events, moments and situations. I have been interested in answering two intertwined research questions: *how can recent Romanian history be approached via moving images and what kinds of articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field have moving image artworks produced?*

These questions have been shaped by an interest in the relationship between history and moving image art and by the larger issue of how artistic practice can interrogate history, politics and art, by producing articulations of their relations. The research also departed from the initial observation that moving images have played a particular role in Romania’s recent past and in the shaping and negotiation of events and situations belonging to this past. An interest in the inability of moving images, as Didi-Huberman observes, to represent historical events, but in turn to open up ambiguous yet fruitful relations between historical truth and artistic practice has driven my explorations in the process of performing this research. The work with research exhibitions in London and New Delhi aided the negotiation of my position as both curator and researcher of moving images. In addition, these exhibitions contributed to selecting those practices, which I considered best enacted this tension between the political and critical roles of moving images in contemporary artistic practice and their role in the circulation, mediation and verification of historical truth, especially when connected to mediatic events, like the Romanian televised revolution or the protests of June 1990.

In particular, the revolution of 1989 was a global, historical and televisual event, which was lived and even acted through its visual recording and live transmission. Immediately after the revolution, another event, the anti-government protests of June 1990 marked Romania once more as a site of political struggle within and through media images, both locally and internationally. However, my aim has not been to only treat these two events in their historical importance or to focus exclusively on their relation to mass media and how they have mediated history through moving images. In addition

to these aspects, I have taken into account an extended role of images in these events, which is made apparent when one accepts that images are in fact characterised by an inability to represent the truth or to completely document actions and events and to present facts, as the mediatic relationship would want to hold up. In the artworks selected in this thesis, this inability of moving and recorded images to unveil historical truth is made clearly visible. However, this inability does not cancel the images, nor does it render them invaluable or simply, noise. Instead, what is also made visible in the works selected here is the capacity of moving images to act as traces of the events, situations and moments they are unable to represent. In fact, that aspect awards the artworks discussed in this thesis the possibility of becoming critical of recent history and potentially becoming forms of political art. They negotiate the relationship between historical truth and moving images and they do so not by considering the images as truth-producers, but as traces that form articulations around historical, political and mediatic events and a wider series of moments and situations from recent history. The artworks are thus selected for a common characteristic: they employ the inability of moving images to represent events by further complicating the role and validity of images as truth-producers, whilst nevertheless opening reflections on the contrived relations between history, truth and images in the contemporary. The complications thus produced are fruitful in critically assessing recent historical events and contexts, conducing to the creation of a constellation of relations between art, moving images and history. At the same time, the selection of case studies discussed in this thesis is the result of a continuous negotiation between the fields and disciplines of film, art history and artistic and curatorial practice, as they are reflected through my roles as researcher trained primarily in the field of film, screen and media studies and that of curator of moving image art in gallery spaces.

As a moving image researcher, one of the reasons and drives for pursuing this study was the scarcity of existing academic work focusing on moving image art from Romania, and especially of research that connected moving image practices to the social and political transformations that the country has undergone in the past three decades. In response to this gap, I have first acted as a collector and curator of moving image art, coming to understand, from the research exhibitions and the heterogeneous encounters these have facilitated, that moving image artworks can, first and foremost, offer access to several moments in recent Romanian history. Working with this observation, my aim

has been to bring a selection of these moments together into a constellation, thus proving a counter-image to the organisation of recent history into linear stages. This understanding of history as a linear progression, by adding up stages of development and always striving to catch-up belongs to the Romanian postcommunist understanding of transition to neoliberal capitalism. This transition, as I have stressed throughout the thesis, similar to the transition to communism, stretched over an incredibly long period of time and was more focused on the promises of what transition would bring when it would finally be over, than what it brought in the long process when it unfolded. Thus, the term transition was a promise of something to come in the future and a problematic currency in exchange of which many under-privileged groups have had to suffer. The works collected in this research come from artists, individuals or collectives and have been chosen for their ability to open up and articulate this specific socio-political context. I have paid particular attention to how these works have reflected on historical events and situations from Romania's recent past, and also how they have disputed dominant ideas about this past, particularly in relation to contested and problematic concepts like "transition" or "postcommunism." As mentioned above, towards the former I have formulated a highly critical position and have produced throughout the thesis an account of how, in a historical continuum, its problematic use in mortgaging the present has been detrimental to certain groups, especially in connection to gender and ethnic minorities. The latter concept, that of "postcommunism" opens a larger debate, as outlined in Chapter 4, mainly around how this concept can be useful to assign or to describe a period of historical, political and social changes, whilst at the same time standing the risk of encapsulating with a blanket term and thus erasing, the specificities of the regional and local contexts of the spaces and times which it is supposed to address. In particular, in its specific usage in the Romanian context, the term "postcommunism", as argued by writers like G.M. Tamás, was charged and identified with anticommunist discourse as much as it has contributed, through an imagined reconnection with the time and space "before" Romanian communism to the resurgence of (post)fascism and the rise of nationalist discourse, sometimes in connection to the issue of daco-roman continuity. In particular, this latter type of understanding the nation is what has in fact resurged not from a period before communism, but as a trope equally present in Ceaușescu's specific reading of Marxism-Leninism. These complications stem from the specificity of the historical and political

context of Romania and constitute an opportunity to critically address the concept of “postcommunism.” Indeed, “postcommunism” can be used as wider arching term which allows, as Boris Buden has made apparent, to start performing a critical evaluation of a time and space defined by and reduced to the prefix “post.” In short, the use of the term “postcommunism” is first of all operational but in fact it becomes productive precisely because it opens up the problematic ideological ties between “postcommunism” and “transition” or what followed and was legitimated in this time-space designed as “post”, as much as it makes visible how subjects and local specificities are blanketed under the violence of continuously needing to “catch-up”, most commonly with neoliberal capital and democracy.

## **Approaches and aims**

As I made apparent in Chapter 1, on a theoretical level, this thesis has departed from debates in contemporary art and philosophy to ask how moving image art and politics are connected. This route led to investigating the role of moving images in gallery spaces and more broadly, the role of politicized moving image practices in the contemporary. In the course of this research I came to the conclusion that one of the key roles moving image artworks play in the contemporary is in accessing and actualising histories. Gradually, the research started to focus on the powers that artworks have to critically evaluate the recent past, and more broadly, on the possibilities that moving images offer for thinking about history, memory, and politics. As a result of the research exhibitions, I came to understand as critical the artworks that politicized the relationship between moving images and recent history and questioned the ability of images to hold historical truth.

Surveying the Romanian context from the perspective of a moving image researcher and curator has required developing a specific practical approach to artistic work with moving images. Here, there are no dedicated archives of moving image art and no consistent academic literature on this type of practice to consult, apart from heterogeneous material collected in exhibition presentations and catalogues, artists' websites and online magazines, generally short-length and scattered information. In response to this context, a large part of the initial research stages consisted of collecting, organising and bringing together all the moving image artworks traceable and available, on an online platform, and making a list or archive of works, available for later reference and public access. This stage in the research process was a way to think through the collection or archive gathered, in parallel with developing reflections on the theoretical framework which these works could fall into or which they resisted. This was one of the stages where the negotiation between my roles as researcher and curator took place, and with it, the awareness that the material had its own voice. To bring the theoretical framework, research, and curatorial practices together meant to use what the material offered as threads and to weave further on an already complicated recent Romanian history. Thus, the intention was to lower the risk of turning these entwined threads into flat or linear histories in an attempt to make them clear or to cancel the ongoing tension and negotiation of problematic issues and concepts arising from these histories, such as

“postcommunism” or what constitutes critical or political artistic practice with moving images.

The aim has thus been to avoid writing the history of Romanian moving image art in parallel with recent Romanian history because I had wanted to connect moving images with the socio-political context and events of the past thirty years. Instead of writing about either recent Romanian history, or the history of recent Romanian moving image art, I have considered recent history *through* moving images, focusing in particular on how contemporary Romanian moving image art has accessed, as well as critically assessed, the recent past.

As mentioned, I came to follow this approach after carrying a set of methodological experiments as a curator of moving images. These involved designing two research exhibitions that aimed to investigate how moving images displayed in the gallery space are, or how they become politicized, for their spectators. However, this approach was soon confronted with its own limitations, as it was imposing upon the situations created in the research exhibitions, upon the works shown in these galleries and the conversations with visitors, pre-established ideas about the nature of art and spectatorship developed through the theoretical framework. Nevertheless, these methodological experiments directed the research, via the self-reflexive process that they triggered, to understanding moving images not as a means to politicize spectators in the gallery. Instead, I came to see these artworks as a vehicle for myself as researcher to have access to the relationship between recent political and historical moments and how moving images negotiated instead of trying to represent them. Thereafter, based on these experiments and what arose from them, a revised understanding of the political potential of moving image art emerged. Artworks using images as traces of political events and moments do not necessarily politicize their viewers. Rather, their political role is their ability to complicate historical situations and facilitate the return to these historical events and moments, creating multiple entry points, for the future access of history.

The research focused on how recent Romanian history can be accessed via moving images and what articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field have moving image artworks produced. In addressing this two-fold problematic, I have, on one hand, considered moving images as particular “tools” for research, and I have used both artistic and documentary images to revisit two large, landmark events –

the 1989 Romanian revolution and the June 1990 protests. On the other hand, by seeing moving images as elements partaking in recent Romanian history, producing local and global relations between subjects, and political and economic structures, I have gained a type of access to the past that made visible how these relations have unfolded over large periods of time. Using this understanding, my aim has been to critically engage in a conversation around issues that have dominated recent Romanian political, social and mediatic landscapes, as for example, is the notion of “transition”.

When transition is not exclusively understood as a process of rapid change and development towards a stage of neoliberal capitalism, but as a construction and a promise through which economic and historical debt has been incurred, then its counter-part in the so-called communist past i.e. the notion of transition as a promise of a future “real” socialism – becomes equally problematic. This view, in turn, nuances the essentialist organisation of recent Romanian history into two stages – “before” and “after” communism, as dominant Romanian narratives and commonplace opinions have made the separation. Moreover, events like the 1989 Romanian revolution become nodal points, yet other events equally offer themselves up for critical re-evaluation, like the June 1990 protests. Equally, contemporary moments and situations necessitate this critical visitation and moving images are a tool that can perform it, because of their ability to account for complex relations between temporality and spatiality.

In order to reveal what articulations of the contemporary Romanian socio-political field moving image art has produced, I have focused on the works of Ion Grigorescu, Kinema Ikon, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, and, Joanne Richardson. The constellation that these artworks are able to form incorporates questions which are at the core of this project: the abilities or inabilities of images to facilitate political subjects to address, to mask or to embody recent history; image-making through experimental uses of technology and the limits of this practice as critical and political response to a political regime; the status of mediatic images as documents and their potential functions in negotiating events; the role of images in investigating the contemporary through artistic practice; and the capacities and limitations of images in activist, collective practice. The constellation thus formed aims to revisit and decolonise – in the sense presented above, to critically readdress – dominant contemporary Romanian narratives and an imagination of the recent past as a divided, broken temporality. Through these works, I have approached the recent

Romanian past and have come to understand the contemporary context as a consequence of a series of rapid transformations of over thirty years. Furthermore, by creating this constellation I have considered the need to critically address this “inheritance.” I have read these works by opening up the memory of recent events and situations by recognising local histories of struggle and by fighting for a shared time in the contemporary of all these events. Some of the artists – Richardson, Vătămanu and Tudor – also call out against contemporary forms of cynicism, racism and violence, which are reverberations of forms of abuse and oppression traceable in different instances of the recent Romanian past.

Throughout this study, I have also aimed to make visible connections between artistic practices of working with moving images, and how recent histories of Romanian moving image art have been written. I have pointed out how the process of politicizing moving image practices from the so-called “communist period” was pursued in retrospect, “after” 1989, in the hope of aligning Romanian art to the legacy of resistant and subversive art in the region, and in Western Europe. This revisionist project had worked well with the ideological traits of the transition period, which saw the movement towards contemporary art as a necessary stage, following on from Socialist Realism. This division of art practice and art history into stages had contributed to the production of generalising arguments, in favour of further divisive categories, like “old” and “new” practices with media technologies, or “before” and “after” communism. It had thus sealed off the communist period as either a moment of failure, or as a period of scarcity followed, in contrast, by one of abundance in engaged and politicized art practice during the “postcommunist” time. As a response to this understanding of the history of Romanian art, my aim has been to develop a constellation of various temporalities and types of works with moving images, in order to show a continuity in threads, themes, and preoccupations in the older and more recent Romanian artistic practices. For this, I have considered artists and practices that extend from the 1970s to the contemporary (Ion Grigorescu, Kinema Ikon) together with practices of artists trained and coming of age during the communist period but prominent in contemporary art contexts (Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor), and of those whose practice and education was informed by their experience in different artistic and cultural contexts or from their collaborations in International artistic and academic fields, but who are not currently active in a contemporary artistic context (Joanne Richardson, Andrei Ujică). This constellation has

left out from the written research some of the works which were included in the research exhibitions, like those of filmmaker Alexandru Solomon (*Capitalism, Our Secret Formula*) and contemporary artist Irina Botea (*Auditions for a Revolution, Out of the Bear*). Solomon's work in the realm of documentary filmmaking and his latest publication<sup>388</sup> dealing with representations of memory in documentary film are welcomed additions for understanding the context, uses of moving images and Romania's recent political and economic past. However, his works do not cross into the field of art and artistic practice with images, where the same questions that documentary filmmaking raises are taken up in a different way. In the collaboration with Harun Farocki, Andrei Ujică brings his expertise as documentary filmmaker and his knowledge and interpretation of the Romanian context and sets it in dialogue and in contagion with Farocki's practice with images, which from *Videograms* onward becomes more clearly orientated towards understanding the role and status of images, as they circulate and are mediated in contemporary culture. This choice of artists and works thus supports the aim to create connections and continuities in practices with moving images in various historical periods. On the other hand, Irina Botea's fascinating work *Auditions for a Revolution* was included only in the research exhibitions. That is because the current written constellation would be unable to discuss, given the aims already set out, the complex issues brought up by the use of re-enactment in Botea's work. In my opinion, *Auditions* addresses the language of the events of 1989 by understanding images both as carriers of the theatrical language of narrative cinema, and of the theatricality inherent in the immediacy invoked by the language of media. However, there is a delay in both these languages, as the work shows through the obvious delay in how the US-based student performers react when asked to deliver their lines in Romanian, a language they do not speak or understand. Thus, a complete reading of the work would have gone beyond the scope of this research and was therefore left aside for further future consideration, which would require a deep analysis of the relationship between language, events and images in contemporary mediatic, filmmaking and artistic practice.

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<sup>388</sup> Alexandru Solomon, *Reprezentări Ale Memoriei în Filmul Documentar [Representations of Memory in Documentary Film]* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2016).

## Romania's recent past and moving image art

As a reading of recent history, this thesis has aimed to bring together a succession of moments – the 1970s and 1980s communist period, the 1989 revolution, June 1990, the period between 2007 and 2008 when transition was officially declared over, and finally, the period following the 2008 economic crisis. Although the organisation follows a cumulative, chronological pattern, my ambition has been to question reductive narratives around recent Romanian history and to show continuities throughout historical periods and moving image practices. For this purpose, I have revealed connections between moments across different periods. For instance, I have suggested that Richardson's *Commonplaces of Transition* project from 2007 can be set in conversation with the local changes in 1990s Romania, as they are, for instance, made apparent in the montage work *Ready Media* by Kinema Ikon. Or, between the work of Ion Grigorescu in his studio, making a fictional *Dialogue with Ceaușescu* and the possibilities to speak as a political subject that are revealed through the mediation of images, in both Ujică and Farocki's *Videogrammes of a Revolution* and in Richardson's *Two or Three Things About Activism*. The selection of artworks and these emerging dialogues are also partially traceable in the research exhibitions and in how these events afforded a conceptual mapping to be superimposed on a constellation of moving image works collected in the archival period of research. The superimposition was productive as this approach has led me to engage with a history of Romanian moving image art not driven by the need to align this history with the "region" of Eastern Europe, or with "Western" artistic practices and to connect the "experimental" with the critical or political potential of moving image practices, like writers Adrian Guță and Alexandra Titu have respectively done. Instead, this method using superimposition and montage allowed to produce less disciplining histories, like I have argued are the histories and narratives of alignment predominant amongst a considerable number of Romanian art historians and critics. I suggest that this alignment needs to be dismantled and the imagination of the recent past and the recent history of moving image art are equally in need to be decolonised, as writer Ovidiu Țichindeleanu suggests.

I have thus accessed the history of moving images through moments and situations that problematized recent Romanian past and recent histories of Romanian art in one way or another. For example, I have discussed the role of images in relation

to media and economy, or the ability of images to articulate political events and actions of protest. Furthermore, my position has challenged narratives in which moving image practices from communist space-time were seen as exceptional examples of politicized art practice and I have also critically addressed the narratives that extended the political notion of transition to contemporary art – a consequence of the liberal governmental agenda enforced through cultural institutions active and influential in Romania between 1990 and mid-2000s, such as the Soros Foundation. Against this, I have argued that transition in Romania has been a particularly malign economic and political concept. The values associated with transition – catching-up, forward movement, vilifying of the recent past as a failed period, sealing off the lived experience of Romanian communist space-time from its specific characteristics and from memory – were transferred to cultural and artistic production, a tactic that impeded most artistic practices from engaging in a nuanced way with the recent past.

Moreover, this transference of values also produced a drive to experiment with “new” media technologies, mostly eschewing traditions of underground, radical politics. In short, I have argued that the idea of alignment that transition had promoted worked only one way – aligning or rather, being incorporated into economic and political structures of power in the area, across Europe and the world (NATO, E.U., etc.) and aligning to an idea of contemporary art that promises integration with the positive aspects of the global art market, yet eschews problems around unemployment, precarity and disengagement of the artists from politics and politicized art practice.

A key aim of the thesis has been to consider the ways in which the relationship between artworks and historical events in Romania has ordinarily been understood. In the case of *Videograms of a Revolution*, for instance, I have entered a conversation with authors like Eva Kernbauer, who argues that, because of their uncertain quality and role, images from the work gain a certain authenticity. In response to this view, I have suggested that the aim of *Videograms* is not to reveal “what happened” or to establish belief in the images, or in their authenticity. In contrast, in my view, *Videograms* has demonstrated the powers of critical work to uncover the relations between moving images and the socio-political implications that the event opened. *Videograms* creates an argument about how political subjects were formed and “mediated” by moving images during the event. This makes the artwork an example of how moving images can be used to revisit recent history, in order to offer space for interpreting political

subjectivity, not only in the original Romanian context, but also in subsequent uprisings, protests and revolutions.

The 1989 revolution and the following anti-government protests of June 1990 have been treated in this thesis as two crucial moments from recent Romanian history, which needed to be critically revisited, so as to comprehend the processes of transformation that occurred in Romania in the past three decades. However, the “fall” of communism hasn’t been considered here a distinct moment, marking a historical threshold between “after” and “before.” Instead, I have argued for the need to critically assess the relations and connections between Romanian communism and postcommunism. Indeed, I have pointed out how past events, moments and situations have troubled the present as an “inheritance” in need to be dealt with, through artistic means. For this purpose, I have followed Joanne Richardson’s artworks, which reveal the urgency to address the memory of the communist period, and to identify specific aspects that connect different moments and histories to each other. Richardson shows how the Daco-Roman heritage, for instance, constitutes such an aspect – a founding myth that was used, during the Ceaușescu regime, to justify an ideology not entirely Marxist-Leninist, but instead deeply rooted in nationalism, echoing thus, a pre-communist, fascist Romania. Richardson’s works remind us that these myths, and the fascist and nationalist inheritance has resurfaced strongly in the so-called “postcommunist condition”, and more recently, in the contemporary context.

Another example is the influence of the Orthodox Church which, together with the founding myth about the Daco-Roman national heritage, has become increasingly present and powerful in recent years in Romania. This renewed power of the Orthodox Church has functioned in accord with the general anticommunist narratives dominant in recent Romanian history, and it has also been complementary to the neoliberal agenda of sustained accumulation by dispossession. In short, the repression of religion and of the institution of the church during communism shifted to state support and tax privileges being offered during the anticommunist period. This situation extended to the current day, when a partially state-funded National Redemption Cathedral is being built on the premises of Ceaușescu’s former House of the People, currently shared by the Parliament and the National Museum of Contemporary Art. Together with the long-term ethnocentric nationalism amongst the Romanian people, the rise of the Orthodox

Church as a powerful institution has become evident in the contemporary Romanian context.

I discuss this context through the history of erasures, abuses and evictions blended together in urban space, and in the sites and buildings from the city of Cluj, in Richardson's work *In Transit*, and those from Bucharest's city centre, as they are made visible in the works of Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor. The long history of slavery, racism and the general struggle over housing and labour rights of the Roma population in Romania are apparent in the erasures and evictions these communities suffered in Bucharest and elsewhere, meant to create space for Ceaușescu's megalomaniac constructions. The same communities were met with abuse and violence in the June 1990 anti-government protests, when, accused of being communist supporters and illegal street vendors, they were the target of racial attacks by armed miners, controlled by the new government. More recently, both the Orthodox Church – reclaiming its spaces from the communist erasures – and private owners – reclaiming their property from the state – have inflicted a new wave of evictions and abuses on these communities. Throughout Europe, travelling as migrant workers, illegal or not, these communities have faced generalised institutional racism and deportation, and thus, by 2007, the prospect of Romania's integration into European structures brought the symbolic and the ideologically reiterated end of transition, but also the integration into a Europe that is, as Étienne Balibar has argued, an "unresolved political problem."<sup>389</sup>

Throughout this research, the aim has been to connect several events and moments in recent Romanian history, in order to chart the various formulations of the Romanian political subject, as it is made apparent in moving image artworks. With regard to the latter aim, I have paid attention to Ion Grigorescu and his moving image practice during communist space-time. In *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu*, Grigorescu imagines a political subject able to speak to power, and to address the experience of lived Romanian communism, through the perspective of the artist as himself, and, simultaneously, as Nicolae Ceaușescu. This double position was later picked up again and inhabited once more by Grigorescu in 2007, when he enacted a *Post-Mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, on the same contested premises which hold the House of the People, the Parliament, and the Contemporary Art Museum, and where the National

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<sup>389</sup> Balibar, "World Borders, Political Borders." quoted in *The Manifesta Decade*, 13.

Redemption Cathedral is currently being erected. The speaking subject imagined by Grigorescu in 1978 became, in 2007, both a real possibility and an impossible prospect. This is visible in how the masks were enlarged, oversized to the point that it was difficult to carry their weight on one's shoulders: the performance of the artist as himself, as a free speaking subject, was burdened by the inheritance accumulated in the recent past. How can one conceptualise and narrate this inheritance?

The 1989 Romanian revolution produced subjects who were capable of creating a historical event, so as to change their conditions. However, soon after that hopeful moment, the anti-government protests of June 1990 and the response of the new government defeated these subjects with violence, by setting miner-workers against student-intellectuals, creating thus rifts and divisions between parts of the population. From this point onward, the ideology of the so-called period of "transition" to capitalism and the related "postcommunist condition" saw the subject as a child of sorts, as Boris Buden has suggested with the notion of "children of postcommunism". By this, I mean that the postcommunist subject in Romania was no longer the subject speaking to power and the political subject from the revolution, but a subject who needed to move forward, to evolve and develop fast, and to forget.

Concurrently, in the 1990s, video was imagined by various Romanian artists and curators (e.g., Călin Dan) as a medium for transition. This view was shared across the Eastern European region, as it is made apparent retrospectively, in large projects like *Transitland*. If video, and by extension, moving images were the media of transition, then what they could partially document was, in fact, this fast-forward movement imposed on subjects in postcommunism, this pressure to become or to learn how to be a democratic subject, and the pressure to become a consumer. Thus, by the end of the 2000s, when the transition was declared over and Romania became part of the economic and military structures of Europe, the inheritance of these rapid transformations and the inability of some subjects and spaces to "catch-up" became apparent. Moving image artworks like those made by Joanne Richardson with D-Media Collective from Cluj, or Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor's works documenting sites in Bucharest, make visible the communities and the subjects who were caught in the transformations and destructions of this long process of transition – the Roma, the women, the migrant workers. These were the subjects who did not always manage to "catch-up" with the development, the ones who were affected in radical manners. But

as the transition was hardly recognised as a destructive process, these precarious subjects often remained out of sight, and their struggles only scarcely documented. This inheritance is discussed throughout the thesis, and particularly in the last moment covered in this research, when the children start appearing in the images of Vătămanu and Tudor's *Rite of Spring*. Their ambiguous relationship with the fire, as both witnesses and its initiators, shows their precarious condition in the urban space, and in recent history. These children as subjects are part of a larger inheritance, which the main artworks discussed in this thesis adopt the task of articulating, in specific ways.

## Future research

Overall, this research contributes to the scarce literature on Romanian artistic practice with moving images and establishes connections between this practice and the rapid transformations occurring in recent Romanian history. It also charts the importance of different moments, situations and events, and how they shaped the Romanian subject and their engagement with politics. This study critically assesses recent events and moments, in order to understand the transformations of Romanian subjects, in the revolution, the so-called period of “transition”, and in the “postcommunist condition”, as much as by the recent economic crisis. Furthermore, it outlines the struggles of some Romanian subjects, like the workers, women, Roma or children. The act of critically assessing these events and moments in recent history contributes to decolonising imaginations about the past and to better understanding the contemporary context. From these moments, I aimed not to draw conclusions about the entire Romanian artistic practice with moving images, but to create a few points of access and to offer a possible reading of these complicated layers of recent Romanian history, as much as to provoke a renewed understanding of the relations and connections existing between groups of people, events, and situations in the contemporary Romanian context.

This thesis constitutes an initial study of a considerably under-researched area. There is a strong necessity to open up the field of Romanian moving image practice further, and possibly extend this research to other moments in recent Romanian history, to a larger number of works, and a bigger selection of artists. In particular, Joanne Richardson’s and artist duo Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor’s works – if read from the specific contemporary Romanian context, but in relation to global conditions of artistic and cultural production, and the political and economic events of recent years – can offer scope for further investigation into the abilities of moving images to articulate the socio-political field, situations and events around the world.

Another future development is to take into account, alongside moving images, other types of artistic practice, which approach recent Romanian history and emblematic events and moments belonging to this history. In this respect, this research can be set in conversation with works of theatre and performance, practices which are currently growing in Romania, in the initiatives of contemporary artists and directors. The works of Irina Botea and Ciprian Mureșan, some of them included in the research

exhibitions, together with the work of *Platforma de Teatru Politic (The Political Theatre Platform)* could contribute substantially to extending the project of revisiting and critically assessing narratives from recent Romanian history, and reshaping imaginations about the recent past, as well as the present.

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## Appendix A: Research Exhibition in London, UK (2012)

In the space, various files, books, dossiers, conceptual maps and diagrams were displayed, bringing together some of the theoretical threads of my research and the possibilities to think Romanian moving image art.

With the kind support of artists Marina Albu, Irina Botea, Ștefan Constantinescu, Ciprian Homorodean, Sebastian Moldovan, Mona Vătămanu, Florin Tudor, and Alexandru Solomon, some of the works I identified and archived online were shown in the gallery, thus offering the possibility to speak to the visitors about their encounter with these moving images.

The works on display throughout the day were shown in the three arches where the research material was also displayed. Each of the arches created separate viewing spaces where several works were projected, on a loop. The choice to pair works together was done according to two considerations, their length and very broadly, their treatment of a topic. Hence, the projection in the first arch was showing *The Paris* (2006) by Sebastian Moldovan, *Rite of Spring* (2010) by Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, and *Hero Factory* (2010) by Ciprian Homorodean, the common theme identified between them being their treatment of space in the so-called “postcommunist” Romanian landscape and their reflections on the changes in architecture and urbanism, local culture, and minorities. The projection in the middle arch incorporated two works, *The Trial* (2004-2005) by Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor and *Out of the Bear* (2006) by Irina Botea, both taking up themes around the figure of the Ceaușescu couple in the time of and after their trial and execution. In the final arch, the works *Auditions for a Revolution* (2006) by Irina Botea and *Acvilele Albe* (2010) by Marina Albu were projected, the first dealing with re-enactment of the images of the 1989 revolution, and the second with an imagined community of artists and researchers.

Along with these, various materials were displayed, mostly collecting ideas and research notes presented for access and discussion with the visitors. In each of the three evenings the research exhibition was on, screenings of longer works were organized: *Kapitalism: Our Improved Formula* by Alexandru Solomon, *Passagen* (2005) by Ștefan Constantinescu and *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, followed by moderated discussions with the visitors.

Documentation of research exhibitions in temporary gallery space, Victorian Vaults, East London (August 2012).



Research materials displayed in the gallery space

## Appendix B: Research Exhibition in New Delhi, India (2012)

Documentation photographs of the research studio at Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, New Delhi, India. Part of the AHRC International Placement Scheme at Sarai Centre for Developing Societies (CSDS) and Sarai Reader 09 Exhibition, curated by Raqs Media Collective (October – December 2012).



Display and setting- discussions with visitors



Documentation photographs of the research materials on display

## Appendix C: Audiovisual Research Essay on the ‘Mineriad’



Audiovisual essay, created during the AHRC-funded training *Reducing the BBC Archive*, co-organized by UCL and Open City Docs (March 2014), London.

With this exercise, I turned to archival footage from 13-15 June 1990 and tried to make sense of these images, and what they had to show. Driven by a sort of necessity to perform this close work with the images in order to establish my own position, I was putting together the event, whilst at the same time, trying to break it down, to decompose it. In short, what I was doing was researching with images, and what I had obtained from that research was a preliminary set of observations. I worked with images from Romanian and International media, and those shared online by independent cameras filming the events, to produce a montage. I slowed them down, marking points when heads would turn, when arms were raised, bats lowered on a body, an old man waving to the miners, altogether with the gestures accompanying the political addresses made on television. I was not interested in “what happened”, but in composing through temporalities of the event. In performing this work and accumulating information from other sources, I started drawing connections between moving images, event, and the possibility of protest, which had been so drastically shaped by 13-15 June 1990 and further sustained by the climate of anticommunist, liberal-oriented, racist postcommunism, which followed in Romania.

## **Appendix D: Transcript of *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu (1978)***

The script of Grigorescu's *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu (1978)*, translated by Dana Chetrinescu Percec, accessed July 16, 2014, retrieved online from <http://subversive.c3.hu/en/Ion%20Grigorescu.php>.

"If the people cannot rule they should at least criticize!

I: In the last days you were speaking about the people's content.

Ceaușescu: Yes, there is a content created by the stimulated consumption, sometimes by the lack. We are creating needs where the man is easiest to be scared – at food. However the country is hierarchized so that those who live in villages should be the most starved, but are accustomed to endure; their civilization, is it still existing, is not based on food, nor on other needs from today services. It's simply a handicap with which we are fighting and will not be set on the progress way by equalizing the level of the country and the town. It is a matter of economic objective laws.

I: These 'objective laws' result from too simple speculation: who is exploited in the newest relations – the proletariat, would be destined to defeat exploitation and to be the future leader, but now reality changes: the proletariat is too bound to the bourgeoisie to invent something else than exploitation.

Ceaușescu: We are those who suppressed property of the means of production.

I: You did anything but pushed by your bourgeois materialist side; exploitation is more complex: on 2nd March 1978 at 8 o'clock a.m. I saw two women pushing a full bin with mud – and juxtaposed the two or three visits at the presidential palace in the same day, where militia pulled the begging children's ears. Woman delinquency is very high – we can speak about pauperization. Of course there is no legal property but 'Carpati' trust with buildings, workshops and technical equipment, there are tenths of orders that submit all the enterprises to the trust's needs, a lot of people are employees in this trust in slave conditions, not in the sense they don't have access to this fortune, but these people are bought and sold for life. What I mean by owning their lives is the party's own 'jurisdiction' outside the law, trials without public or defenders, and to the fact that the

debts accumulated like that hide a capital punishment. Too many people passed through prison.

Ceaușescu: Only few men resist transformations!

I: The only statements about people are: 'one cannot perform miracles overnight' (Brasov, 1978) and 'in comparison with 1938...' But the poets are singing only miracles made over night. Our dialogue, the dialogue is necessary because nevertheless there is a truth and a science with which one analyses the social reality.

Ceaușescu: Romania is fastened in the girth of the International economic relations, and dependent of the pressure of the very developed countries, on their credits or crisis.

I: If a revolution would take place here would we go on the path the other countries are? That is 'progress', 'ware', 'accumulation', 'investment'.

Ceaușescu: We make an original experience in original conditions, where the anarchy itself co-operates in planning. 'Progress' doesn't mean the capitalist one! Maybe the revolution doesn't exist because the town was crushed by our most agrarian economy. Your proposals of anti-capitalism (no to accumulation, no to the progress) not only will lead to misery and general decay, inasmuch would be in economic isolation, but it NEGLECTS even which is SOCIALISM: the GUARANTEE OF THE STABILITY (which could be your dream about the lack of progress) on the path of collective responsibility on the enterprise and its proportion.

I: At least would seem to the people that you wish a capitalism for all: you encourage the property of the apartments, autos, furniture, household apparatus, you are trimming the town with stores. What stupefies those who follow you and strive to understand why you sustain the system's superiority is your behavior of great capitalist – you are always speaking about economy, inspecting business, asking discipline, you are a great employer thirsty of speculations in a stock exchange to whom you are the only investor, you only see men as unhappy meanwhile you throw them in the circuit labor-buying power, proletarians-consumers.

Ceaușescu: I don't understand why you don't observe the qualitative difference between our today society and the one in the very developed countries when they were in the situation you are speaking about. Poor peasantry and industrial proletariat from the outskirts and often the middle of the town, the broad masses of men ruined by exploitation, war and economic crisis ARE TODAY RAISED UP TO THE LESS TWO STEPS, they live in a block of flats with reasonable cleanliness and minimum house comfort. To attain this end we had to give them some work, in other words to offer a source of honest and continuous income featuring to climb up the social hierarchy. Which is the aim of these salubritization and moral economy? We really are a society based on economy, whose values are at first material ones.

I: You are the exponent of a minority – the suburb one and will remain as such because the services will always constitute in the stipulated system a majority beside the working class. You overlooked the people's yearnings, disinterested in economic efforts, they are rich people in spite of your vision. A richness you don't know and what is worst, you are destroying it unconsciously. There was material richness and today the food is a kind of rubbish. There was a social richness. Today the people's unity is only a slogan. Social classes are deeply disunited, working is repulsive (in fact the conditions; there is a confusion between labour and its conditions). In services there is corruption, so that the general atmosphere is antisocial. The intellectuals who were about to rebirth in 1968-70 and were a social richness, are now deviated – they are people who repeat texts by heart. Our real phenomena became non understandable, the intellectuals have no connection with the workers, they don't defend them, they aren't solidary not even between them. Romania has no intellectuals yet – strange pre-consciousness of the party – 'the new man will come' the party said. This is why one demolishes so much around us."

## Appendix E: Works by Kinema Ikon

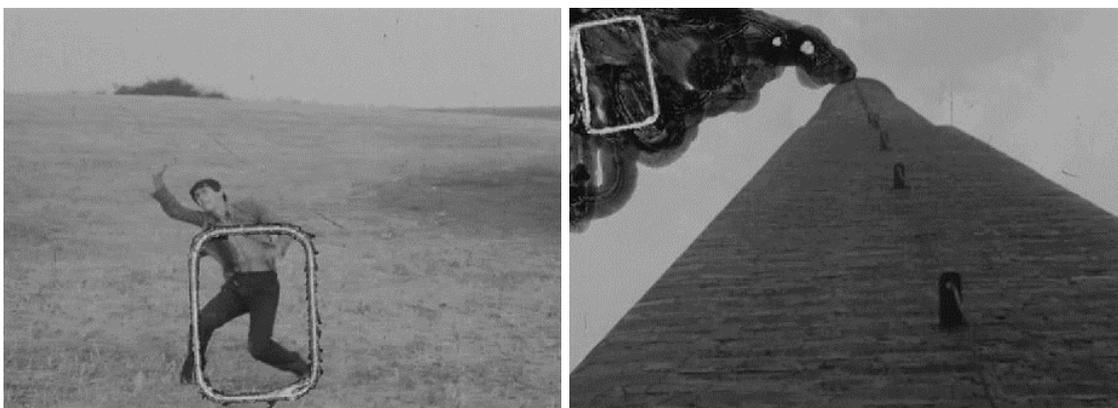
A selection of film stills from works by Kinema Ikon, made before 1989, retrieved from their website ([www.kinemaikon.net](http://www.kinemaikon.net)). An extensive list of all Kinema Ikon works made between 1970 – 2010 can be found in the catalogue “Kinema Ikon 7010,” last accessed August 2, 2015.



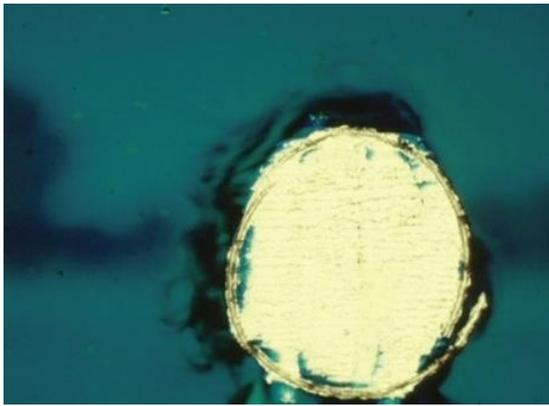
George Sabău, *Ipostaze Simultane*, 1970, 16 mm, b&W, 3' 00''



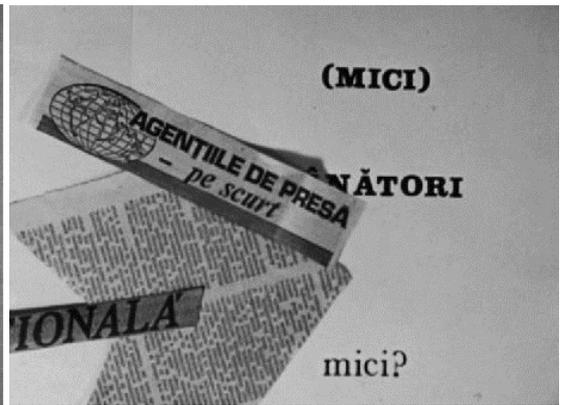
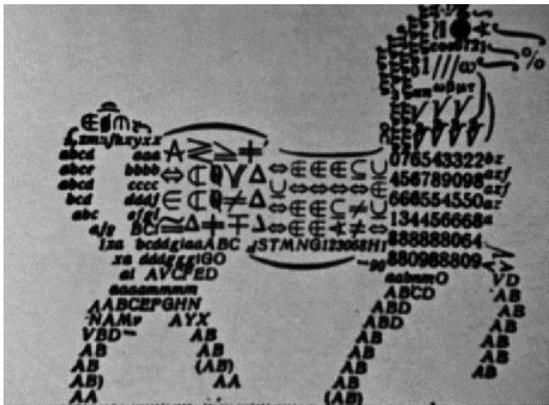
Florin Hornoiu, *Navetiștii*, 1975, 16 mm, b&w, 7'23''



Ioan Pleș, *Efecte de împrăvărare*, 1978, b&w, 4'43''



Emanuel Țeț, *Vânătoare de păsări*, 1980, 16 mm, color, 6'55''



Romulus Bucur, *Nu trageți în pianist*, 1984, 16mm, b&w, 3'31''



Roxana Cherecheș, Viorel Simulov, Liliana Tradabur, *mise en écran*, 1989, montage film, b&w, 16mm, 6' 51''

## Appendix F: study of images from the 1989 Romanian revolution

In December 1988, a camera was present in the Central Committee building and recorded how, in two separate rooms, two groups of people were forming new political parties and setting their agendas for taking hold of state power. What is evident in these images is a state of urgency and confusion, which was prolonged in the June 1990 events and is visible in images (Images and quotes are from *Videograms of a Revolution*).



Archival footage from the Central Committee headquarters during the 1989 revolution, the room where decisions were made about the name of the party soon to take political rule over Romania. Film stills from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).

“Sssst! Hello! Get out if you need to speak! We need to concentrate in here, this is impossible!” sounds an off-camera voice in the room where a new political order was about to be drafted. Ion Iliescu stops talking and takes off his glasses, irritated, then continues.

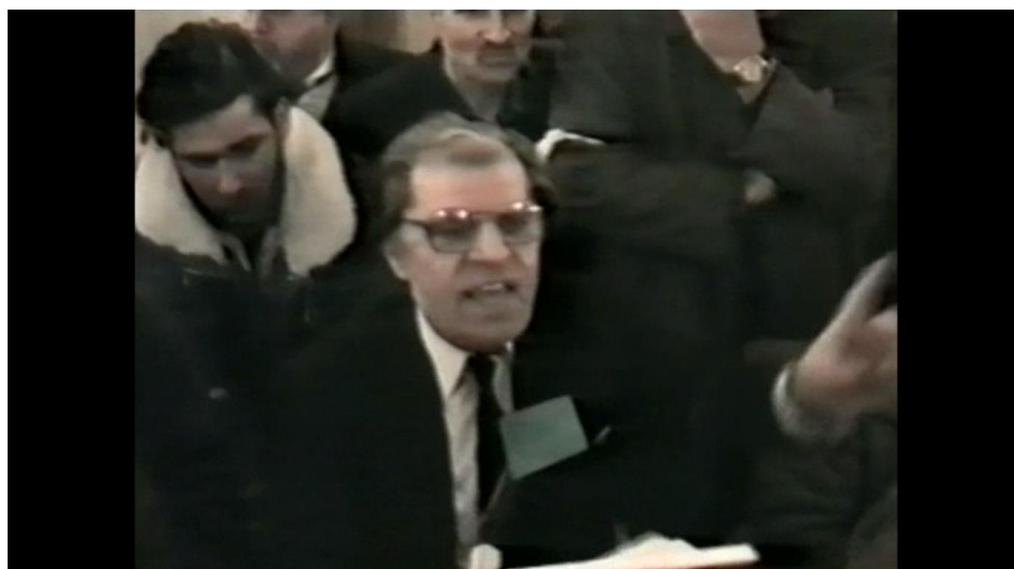
In an image that shows no faces, but only gestures, a voice from the right hand side can be heard and there seems to be an unspoken common agreement that the meeting be adjourned. “Mr. Iliescu, excuse me, but 'salvation' is not the right word; it is linked to a *coup d'état*... Better use (The Front) of National Democracy.” intervenes another voice. To this, Petre Roman suggests: “Comrade Iliescu, when I spoke about this, I called it 'The Front of Popular Unity’”... The camera turns to the person who spoke before but couldn't be seen. There is a debate between what the terms ‘democracy’ and ‘salvation’ mean, and the camera moves confusedly from right to left, following the voices of speakers. One of these voices, in the background, disassociated from a body, or a face - as most voices in this scene are - says the following line: “We cannot use 'The Front of (National) Democracy, the word 'democracy' was used before!” To another

suggestion, Petre Roman replies: “Not an organ of the party and the state; that sounds like hell!”

In the midst of a cacophony of voices, finally, agreement is reached: “That's what I said”... “We'll leave it at that, then!” [It is probably an agreement over the name of the political body, which will take interim-power over the country, The National Salvation Front (NSF/FSN i.e. Frontul Salvării Naționale)].



Iliescu reads the decisions reached by The Front of National Salvation, on what the new power structures will be. *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), film still



Mazilu reads out his ten-point programme in the name of the Civic Forum. *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, film still

In parallel, counter figure Dumitru Mazilu (above) holds a similar meeting, and reads out a ten-point program to a large group of people. Then, late into the evening, Mazilu and Iliescu take turns to address the people in the square next to the Central Committee headquarters, from the same balcony where Ceaușescu gave his last televised speech a few days before. Their addresses are captured by cameras of the national television and aired live. Mazilu is there to make his programme public, chanting loudly the demise of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Iliescu appears at the balcony to announce that “the organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are now subordinated to the army. We now have only one force for maintaining public order.”

The difference in the level of power between the two forms of address is visible in the images: Ion Iliescu appears at the balcony with army general Ștefan Gușă by his side, the presence of the general supporting his statements and legitimating his political. Moreover, just a few days before these two addresses, from the same balcony, Ceaușescu gave his last televised speech, which included the first recorded images of how his political power was subverted by the crowd. One could perhaps create a triple superimposition of images and figures addressing the crowd from the same balcony. Iliescu and Mazilu give their speeches, but the trace of Ceaușescu, who had been interrupted in his address shortly before, and only managed to flee from the roof in a helicopter is present as well. His recent presence in the balcony organised the responses of those speaking about the new order. Mazilu chose to address the trace, whilst Iliescu, perhaps too aware of this presence and the co-temporality shared with the trace, chose to ignore it. Perhaps because The National Salvation Front party which Iliescu had just set up was trying to enforce a linear temporality on the revolution. By refusing direct reference to the trace in this first public address, they were constructing, for now, the images of the present. They were not returning – not even for a minute, to the very recent past, still lurking in that same balcony.