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Post-Heroic Revolution

Depicting the 1989 Events in the Romanian Historical Film of the Twenty-First Century

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The Twentieth-Century Filmmakers

Until the fall of the Ceauşescu state-socialist regime in 1989, Romanian historical film was populated by the typical heroic figures of nationalist second-world cinema. Enlightened kings, inspirational politicians, leaders of the underclasses, resistance fighters, dedicated workers, community builders, and intellectuals shaped the destinies of the collectivities they represented. The pre-1989 screen was a locus of celebrating audacious politics, cunning diplomacy, artful underdog war tactics, the spirit of sacrifice, artistic and scientific genius, and human solidarity. Even if these heroes were unsuccessful in their endeavors – a predictable outcome for second-world histories – moral justice was on their side, their redemptive deeds suggesting the way in which history should have developed and one's life lived.

After the fall of the communist regime, Romanian filmmakers abandoned heroic narratives. Three facts can be construed as reasons leading to this change. First, filmmakers looked for alternative ways of representing the past. They deviated from mainstream dramatic storytelling and from ''great men in crucial moments of history'' narratives and experimented with more artistic approaches, in which the protagonists' agency, sense of history, and bravery were called into question. Second, they sought new faces of heroism – because traditional ones, the ones that populate the galleries of nation states, had become uncomfortably connected to the regime's propaganda practices and Mao-style personality cult. Third, they were led by a certain perception – postmodern, but specifically Central European – that neither is history ruled by reason (and thus organizable into straightforward causal narratives) nor are its protagonists home-grown heroes, Romanian history being mainly shaped by international superpower actors such as the empires of the nineteenth century and the great war-makers of the twentieth: Germany, the Soviet Union, and the US.

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One can detect films and filmmakers trying to smuggle the mainstream historical narrative onto the post-1989 screen. One example is Sergiu Nicolaescu, director of the most popular historical films of the epics of the 1970s and 1980s. His projects – and those of a few others – were, however, exceptions (e.g., *Bless You, Prison*, directed by Nicolae Mărgineanu, 2002; *Carol I*, directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, 2009). Their efforts to include new faces into the nation's imaginary (such as the victim of the communist prison, or the modern-era monarch), acceptable though they were in the post-1989 context, collided with the public's heroism fatigue. The early post-1989 era was marked by a critical, often satirical cinematic rhetoric, focused especially on the state-socialist years of Romanian history, and favoring the destinies of ''small'' men and women. These films aimed not so much at truthfully reenacting the past as at using narrative to make sense of it. Films no longer expressed interest in the accomplishments of major players but preferred to return to the frustrations and suffering of the everyday person. The corrupt state-socialist world became a favorite target of sarcasm, and praise was bestowed on those who managed to stay clean of socialism's moral pollution.[1]

The Twenty-First-Century Generation

Yet this frantic (and excessive) early post-1989 manner of picturing the past gradually disappeared from the Romanian screen. As an ''artistic motor,'' extreme negative affect proved to be about as limiting as the grandiloquent rhetoric of the epics of the 1970s and 1980s. Among the films of the twenty-first century grouped under the label ''the Romanian New Wave,'' the few that addressed the past assumed a more contemplative and relativistic perception, not only blurring even further the distinctions between history's heroes, villains, martyrs, and pawns, but also questioning the legitimacy of filmmakers themselves to assume the role of moral judges of the past. They also paid more attention to cinematic style, especially to sound and camerawork.

Thematically, these films continued the earlier ''micro''-approach to the past but distilled it differently, through a new set of existential insecurities. To use a concept developed by Robert Burgoyne here (see Chapter 17), the films of the 2000s were artifacts of a different generational memory. The filmmakers of the twenty-first century were too young to have directed under state socialism and, since most of them were born in the early 1970s (Radu Muntean: 1971; Cătălin Mitulescu: 1972; Corneliu Porumboiu: 1975), they were less consumed by their complicity with the Ceaușescu regime than worried about their generation's uncertain identity in the post-Cold War jungle; that is, in the confusing universe of the slow but agitated dismantling of the socialist state, conjoined with a more general confusion generated by the transition from the Cold War order to that of global capitalism. Their representations were no longer shaped by a clear-cut, black-and-white ''anti-communism,'' but, as I have argued elsewhere, their films

balanced critical reconsiderations with nostalgia, put more accent on objects and material reconstructions of the days gone by, and gave preference to pictorial and aural authenticity rather than to parables (Parvulescu 2009). Stylistically, this new sensibility translated into a cinema of duration, contemplative hyper-realist visuals, slice-of-life plots, loose causation, bold (hand-held) camera, and scarce musical commentary. Past events were approached obliquely, dramatic and narrative turning points were avoided, the deconstruction of the hero continued, and satire was exchanged for either sobriety or indulgent humor. Minimalistic soundtracks stressed immediacy (and not distant comprehensive reflection), and their non-panoramic visuals constructed the past as arcane and elusive.

Among these films of the twenty-first century, three focused on the December 1989 events in Romania – what is known as ''the Romanian Revolution,'' when people in the cities of Timisoara and Bucharest took to the streets to protest against the state-socialist regime. These revolts caused the fall of the Ceauşescu regime and its replacement by Romania's new ''democratic'' elites. They also marked the end of state socialism in Europe and, for many historians and intellectuals, the bloody conclusion of a bloody century.[2] The three films, all released in 2006, are Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (*Hârtia va fi albastră*), Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau nu a fost?*) and Cătălin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (*Cum mi-am petrecut sfârşitul lumii*). As the ''I'' in title of the latter film suggests, they participate in the construction of a twenty-first-century generational image of the end of the twentieth. I argue, however, that this construction is not only informed by the collective sensibility of its makers, but also influenced by the exceptional nature of the historical event it is designed to present. Each of these films employs different narrative strategies and audiovisual effects to reconstruct the 1989 moment. *The Paper Will Be Blue* reenacts a fragment of the event and relies on realism; *12:08 East of Bucharest* stages a debate around the revolution in a provincial town and uses irony; *The Way I Spent the End of the World* narrates a build-up to December 1989 and emphasizes emotion. Yet all these three acts of memory are marked by the chaotic and manipulative aspect of the event; by the way in which the Romanian 1989 was produced in televisual discourse, by the controversy surrounding revolutionaries, and – not least – by the long period of social and political disappointments in the post-state-socialist era.

Making Sense of the Event

The Paper Will Be Blue approaches 1989 in hyper-documentary fashion, showing it as if it were experienced by a participant. Its almost 3-minute opening shot immerses the viewer abruptly into the past. No credits, no music, and no other overturing tropes precede it. The mise-en-scène is realistic and fashioned from a low and unstable angle, suggesting the perspective of frontline cameramen who take cover behind an improvised barricade, or behind the wheels of a car. It is

an outdoor scene representing an event that took place in the early hours of December 23, 1989. Nothing moves in the foreground. In the gray light of dawn, an armored vehicle is stationed in the middle of a street, its back to the observer, occupying most of the frame. In the background a tank is facing the vehicle, and, on the extreme left of the screen, undistinguishable silhouettes of soldiers scurry alongside the tank as they try to get in contact via radio (asking for a password) with the silent vehicle in the foreground.

The soldiers' voices are drowned in birds' chirping and other sounds – noises that locate the scene on the outskirts of town. Nothing else happens. The convention of a real-time, un-edited take is established. A long minute passes before there is movement at the center of the frame. The back door of the vehicle opens and two young men jump out. They are recruits serving in police intervention units. One is dressed in uniform, the other in a civilian winter jacket. They seem in good moods, a little stiff from sitting inside the vehicle, but they conclude they have passed the threshold of exhaustion and happily light up their cigarettes. As they smoke and chat, they don't seem to trigger any reaction among the soldiers next to the tank. Yet the soldiers are casually backing away, occupying defensive positions. Suddenly the tank fires on the armored vehicle. Nothing in the soldiers' body language anticipated this aggressive move. The shower of bullets that kills the two police recruits and the personnel inside the vehicle seems to have come out of the blue.

All this is included in the initial take of the film. Opening credits follow, and the narration takes us back to the evening that precedes the incident, establishing the investigation format of the plot and implicitly promising to provide an explanation for the killing witnessed in the prologue. The story then unfolds during the night of December 22, that is, after Ceauşescu had fled Bucharest and intense street battles ensued, leading to the deaths of almost a thousand people all over the country – victims, almost all, of friendly or accidental fire. The film's protagonist is the young man, Costi, wearing the civilian jacket. He is not in his police overcoat in the prologue because the night before he gave it away. He has defected from his patrol unit with the goal of defending the national TV station, the vital center of the revolution, against alleged Ceauşescu loyalists – terrorists, as they were called in those days.

Leaving his unit, Costi wanders the streets of Bucharest, joins a group of revolutionaries, receives a gun and ends up using it. He fights not against Ceauşescu loyalists, but against another army unit, and wounds a soldier. When he informs the leader of the group about what happened, he is arrested under the suspicion of being himself a terrorist and is threatened with summary trial and execution. Costi manages to persuade his captors that he is not their enemy; he is set free, stops home to see his mother and his girlfriend, and returns to his unit. His armored vehicle resumes its patrolling mission. Later on the vehicle is stopped at an army checkpoint. Costi and another soldier exit for a smoke. The film ends with the same images with which it began. Once again we see how Costi and the vehicle's personnel are massacred.

The investigation cannot reconstruct a causal chain of events leading up to Costi's death. The film's narrative thus resembles a chronicle. It is an amassing of episodes, linked to each other through the passing of time and through their common protagonist. The story does not develop a dramatic conflict; it is not clear what or (even less) whom its main character is fighting for. The story does not transform the hero, nor does the hero transform the world around him. Yet the film offers explanations as to why Costi is killed; but it articulates them differently, not so much through the rhetoric of a modern historian who looks for reason at the center of history, as through the contemplative–descriptive wording of a chronographer who accepts that transcendent and – at least in part – unintelligible forces link events. Expressed in the format of cause and effect, Costi is killed *for the same reason* as many others like him died in those days. He is the victim of the confusion that governs moments of social unrest, when chaos and irrationality, exaltation and paranoia seem to be the main motors of history. Costi is the victim of suspicion and miscommunication between the army and police units. He dies *because*, during that night, everyone saw terrorists everywhere, *because* untrained people had access to weapons, which they used without restraint, perceiving reality as a war zone and themselves as the nation's heroes.

A scene showing Costi in search of the hot spots of the revolution best illustrates the anarchic predicament of December 22. Another long take, not static and factual but dynamic and subjective, envisions the event from Costi's perspective. It is a night scene, recorded almost in black and white. Framed in a medium-close shot, Costi's profile occupies half of the frame. With the mobile camera behind him, he walks in a boulevard in downtown Bucharest that has been transformed into a battleground. He is disoriented, and also intoxicated by the hyperactivity around him.

The subjective perception of the event is furthered by the focus of the image. What is captured with clarity is not the image of streets swarming with revolutionaries, but Costi's shoulders; that is, not the event itself but the protagonist's awareness of it. Yet, even if the scenery is blurry, the viewer can distinguish what is happening. Cars and trucks carrying revolutionaries pass Costi. Soldiers and civilians scurry around, warm up around fires, debate events, spread rumors, and gather around radios to listen to the communiqués of the new power. Costi advances slowly through this swarm, stopping here and there, overstimulated, struggling to process what is happening.

If the visuals of this sequence depict the event as something obscure and chaotic, the scene's obtrusive soundtrack augments the event's incomprehensibility. Through the opaque mise-en-scène, the revolution becomes predominantly a soundscape, a frenzied world of calls and rumors, speeches and protests, screams and military commands, mixed with the sounds of gunshots, car honks, and clanking of armored vehicles. This background noise not only reconstructs the event, but also translates the agitated inner state of the participant. From the street's flux of indistinguishable chatter, calls emerge to defend the radio station under attack,

anti-Ceauşescu protests, and the voice of Romania's future president reading a revolutionary program on the radio. Someone announces that terrorists ambushed the government building. Military personnel shout orders. Revolutionaries call on people to join them, and an emotional cry pierces through the din: ''Look with what they are shooting at us!''

The scene establishes a contrast between sight and hearing. The former represents the faculty of reason and comprehension; the latter, affect and manipulation. This contrast becomes more evident if one compares this scene with the prologue, with its crystal-clear, static, evidential, real-time cinematography and a mostly non-signifying, reflexivity-inducing soundtrack. Here the visual predominates; the narration unfolds in the third person, and the cinematography is observational and evidence-producing. The scene that shows Costi searching for the revolution reverses this signifying pre-eminence of the visual over the aural suggested in the prologue. Its images are obscure, it is told in the first person, and its atmosphere is one of intense passion and confusion. The prologue is unemotional; its observational aesthetics are linked to factuality and veracity, while the battleground scene builds on haunting sound, on rumors, on agitation.

The battleground scene is also the first in the film *to show* the revolutionary landscape. So far Costi, whose unit has patrolled the outskirts of Bucharest, has only been exposed to the sounds of the event, or has heard about it on the radio. Most of the film time has shown him sitting crouched and bent in the narrow and uncomfortable armored vehicle, whose interior is used by the filmmakers to convey the remoteness of its personnel from the realities outside. In its cocoon-like interior, the unit can only speculate as to what is happening outside, on the basis of the scarce and conflicting information that trickles in, raising Costi's desire to step out into the open and join the revolutionary action.

The contrast between the prologue and the depiction of Costi's first revolutionary adventure suggests that a critical history of 1989 must engage not so much with the visuals of the revolution as with its sounds and passions. It is not rational choice, reflection, and deliberation that determine the actions of revolutionaries. They seem rather to be driven by a call, by a determination to act heroically and to fight Ceauşescu's loyalists. Yet research conducted both by scholars and by governmental committees on the Romanian 1989 has shown that these loyalists did not actually exist: not one single person captured during 1989 has been sentenced for terrorism, nor does any fit such a profile (Siani-Davies 2006: 225). This research established that the street battles that developed in Bucharest between December 22 and 25, 1989 were either cases of friendly fire or part of a hunt for imaginary enemies. The research was not, however, able to explain – or perhaps it resisted explaining – what caused these street battles. Was it sheer chaos, the destructive drives of a frustrated body politic, or a cynical manipulation orchestrated by the new power elites in order to propel themselves as leaders of the revolution and to legitimate their own takeover?

The blurriness of *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s revolutionary décor, its dark-grey lighting, and the predominance of sound all suggest that the subjective perception

of the event was conducive to heroic misrecognition. In the absence of truth-revealing images and of clear representations of what one is supposed to do in a revolutionary context, imagined scenarios informed by affect and rumor were fabricated. In the agitated days of December 1989, individual and social imaginaries dramatized the event as in a Revolution Movie – one based on previously consumed representations (most of them cinematic) of pivotal historical events and on the live revolution broadcast on national television. These imaginary and televisual representations produced the profiles of the enemies of the revolution and suggested how to act against them.

The Televisual Factor

As an ideological apparatus designed to render reality intelligible, Televiziunea Româna (TVR), the national television network, was also instrumental in mediating revolutionary misrecognition. *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *12:08 East of Bucharest* critically engage its contribution of sounds and images to the Revolution Movie. *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s website, http://www.hirtiavafialbastra.ro/en/the-movie.html, emphasizes the film's polemical position against the dramatized televisual representations of 1989. The website aims to distance the film from other visual history-writing formats, which it regards as rendering the event spectacular. In this respect, it reminds viewers that *The Paper Will Be Blue* ''is not a History Channel type [*sic*] historical perspective.'' The film is inspired by an actual event (''in which two armored squads of Interior Ministry troops that went to protect a military unit were accidentally butchered''), but its way of articulating history takes a stance against straightforward, closure-providing, and often sensationalist depictions of 1989 (''history-channel''-like). Moreover, as a feature film, *The Paper Will Be Blue* assumes its role of presenting history subjectively and distances itself from the spectacular objectivism of the commercial documentary. If its visuals are truth-bearing, it is because they recount the event as a participant in the revolution might have experienced it (Costi's point of view), and not by adopting impersonal explanatory narratives.

The website also disavows the war-mongering role played by TVR during the December 22 events. In conjunction with the film, it complicates discussion of the veracity of the visual by offering a 15-minute video-chronology of the December 21 and 22 events in Bucharest – a compilation of materials coming mainly from the national television's archive. The chronology includes images of the December 21 street protests, the December 22 moment of Ceauşescu's departure, the storming of the Communist Party headquarters, the first televised messages of the revolutionaries, and the subsequent gun battles. Most importantly, however, the chronology includes video footage of frantic and often conflicting appeals made, live on TV, by Romania's new political figures, television personnel, various army, police, and secret service officers: appeals to soldiers, policemen, and civilians to come and defend the national television station, which was allegedly

under attack by terrorists. These appeals agitated the population and increased the bloodshed.

Besides bolstering the historical value of the film, the chronology also gestures toward the historiographic advantage of cinematic reenactments over documentary compilations of televisual flows of images: the source of such superiority is film's capability to be self-reflexive. This, of course, is a claim that legitimates any historical project. What complicates the discussion is the deconstructive effect of reenactments. They de-ontologize images and remind viewers that televisual traces of the revolution are not the revolution, but representations of it – a simple truth, which, however, has often been forgotten, both during those days and later, as such traces were uncritically included in documentaries about 1989. Most of the images in TVR's archive cannot serve as historical evidence, since a very good part of their content is misleading. More important is, however, the fact that, in spite of being audio*visual* documents, most of them, especially the images taken after December 22, are only visual mediations of sound. They show men talking into the camera of a television studio, delivering ''communiqués to the population.'' And, since their content is mostly inaccurate, they matter only as display of all sorts of affect – panic, indignation, incertitude, suspicion, and enthusiasm. They are in fact sound (deception/affect) masquerading as image (truth/representation).

This observation harks back to the image/sound dialectic constructed by *The Paper Will Be Blue*, and calls for a corollary. The image becomes sound and its contours melt into non-indexical signification when they are no longer associated with an observer. The television footage aired from the studio is sound because it was taken as footage of the revolution itself and not as a subjective, affect-injected perception of the revolution. The bodies on air, calling people to defend various public institutions, were perceived as voices of the revolution and not as media, themselves retelling what they have seen – and often what they have been told was happening. In contrast to these images, the sequence exploring the streets in revolt foregrounds Costi's perception because, as the text on the website argues, for *The Paper Will Be Blue* not to be a film of the history-channel type – that is, for it not to be a film in which the image is used mainly as a medium of sound – the film has to ''recreate the emotion of those days from the point of view of ordinary people who participated in the events.'' Any visual representation not connected to the consciousness that perceives it becomes, in the particular context of 1989, sound. If the visuals of the scene remain blurry, it is because Costi is only a witnessing consciousness; he is as disoriented as most of the people were in 1989.[3]

A Drama without Heroes

The deceiving ontology of the televisual footage – coupled as it was with the irrational dramatism it triggered and with the reality of the friendly fire and of the absence of an enemy – calls for a discussion of how to address the historical agency

of revolutionary fighters. Most inquiries into what caused the friendly fire and who ordered it have remained inconclusive – just as they are in *The Paper Will Be Blue* (Siani-Davies 2006: 176–180). Since the Romanian post-December 22 revolution has only heroes and victims, but no perpetrators, its memorialization needs to address the puzzling predicament of offering the status of hero to individuals who fought against imaginary enemies and defended objectives that never truly came under attack. In the obscure and rumor-dominated days of the revolution, its post-December 22 heroes fought an absurd war and died absurd deaths. How must one define heroism and historical agency in this context? How can one salvage the dedication of these men and women from irony and evaluate the historical change they caused?

As expected, the acknowledgment, in the Romanian public sphere, of the post-December 22 bloodshed has been hesitant and marked by rationalizations. Revolutions are a main repository of national heroic mythology, and Romanian public memory of the late 1990s and early 2000s was not – it still is not – prepared to include victims of friendly fire in its pantheon: heroes who might have been at the same time (accidental) perpetrators, or who lost their lives because they were victims of public hysteria or cynical manipulation. Among all the urban sculptural monuments of the revolution deployed throughout Romania, none explicitly addresses the predicament of heroes fallen in a battle without enemies. This is where *The Paper Will Be Blue* intervenes – as a monument: not one carved in stone, but one inscribed on the medium of film. As the representation of these heroes' deeds and deaths generates more questions than answers, more openings than closures, more reasons to challenge one's simplistic perception of history than to indulge one's taste for historical canonization, the film remembers these unusual yet real protagonists of history.

The Paper Will Be Blue shows that, in the chaotic context after December 22, every revolutionary fighter could have been, like Costi, both a hero and an antagonist, both a revolutionary and a terrorist, both victim and perpetrator. As one review of *The Paper Will Be Blue* suggests, the only discernible force to which Costi (and most victims of friendly fire) was sacrificed – that is to say, his true antagonist – was a socially ingrained image of revolutions as events of intense antagonism and drama (Meale 2006). The review quotes Mao Zedong's famous saying that a revolution is a revolution only if it is violent. As social rituals of passage, revolutions have to mark, often with blood, a radical rupture from the past. From this perspective, armed conflict plays an important role in rendering an event revolutionary. It brings in the drama and the sense of redemption that is missing from a *coup d'état* or a transfer of power. What Eisenstein did when inventing, in *October*, the storming of the Winter Palace to make his fresco of the revolution more credible[4] is staged on December 22 as a historical event. Since this chapter assumes that the ultimate *metteur en scène* of the 1989 street battles is ideology itself (which triggers identification with [and misrecognition in] the spectacle of the revolution), the question that still needs to be answered is this: How can one address the issue of

agency if history's protagonists do not play a direct part in political change, but act in the spectacle that renders this change legitimate?

Meale's (2006) review also emphasizes that, by the very act of trying to tell the story of the victim of a deadly combination of ideology and social chaos, *The Paper Will Be Blue* would not have been able to write history other than of an anti-heroic brand. He astutely surmises that a connection exists between an anti-heroic depiction of history and the circular plot structure of *The Paper Will Be Blue* (which recalls the hermeneutic circle), and that this is the only way of making (narrative) sense of a chaotic and antagonist-lacking event such as the Romanian December 1989. But, in order to broaden the analysis of how to conceive of heroism and agency in the context of 1989, we should first pay attention to another film dedicated to the same event.

12:08 East of Bucharest

12:08 East of Bucharest is also set up as an inquiry into the past. It is, however, a fiction film, yet one that aims to reflect on how the revolution is remembered in the Romanian public space. Unlike *The Paper Will Be Blue*, *12:08 East of Bucharest* is concerned mainly with events that happened before Ceauşescu's overthrow. The title's 12:08 p.m. is the time at which Ceauşescu's helicopter leaves the presidential palace, thus marking the victory of the uprising. In the film, this moment is regarded as dividing the revolution from post-revolution time. The question that *12:08 East of Bucharest*'s inquiry aims to answer is that of the Romanian title of the film: *"A fost sau nu a fost?"* – which means "Did it happen/exist or did it not?" and is asked in relation to the revolution in a Romanian city east of Bucharest. In particular, the Romanian title translates into a question about whether people protested against the regime *before* or *after* 12:08 p.m. – whether the demonstrators contributed to the fall of the regime or took the streets only later, their protests being then only a part of the revolution's celebration.

12:08 East of Bucharest is set 15 years after the revolution. The viewer is no longer immersed in history, as s/he is in *The Paper Will Be Blue*. The event is not shown, but only discussed; and where else could this discussion take place than on television, the medium that created the live revolution! The film reenacts a local network talk-show, debating whether pre-12:08 p.m. demonstrations took place in the city or not. A revolutionary participates. Calls from eye-witnesses are taken and the discussion heats up. Yet the truth cannot be established. After an exhausting debate with moments of viciousness and humor, the only conclusion the talk-show is able to draw is that, in the larger scheme of things, whether people protested or not against the regime in this provincial city wouldn't have made a difference anyway.

This conclusion calls into question – from a different perspective, yet with converging outcomes – the issue of historical agency. As in *The Paper Will Be Blue*,

the question whether revolutionaries have changed history or have just been actors in its spectacular rendering is asked in here too. The perspective is different because in the other film Costi enters and acts in the very eye of the storm, whereas here the revolutionaries act on the margins. But both cases point to the futility of revolutionary action. In Costi's case, it is friendly fire; in the case of *12:08 East of Bucharest*, it is the provincial predicament of its actors. History does not articulate the will of these marginals directly. Political decisions are taken somewhere else; revolutionary manifestations only legitimize them, thus expressing not so much the will of the people but a celebratory *post factum* identification with these decisions.

Historian Tony Judt's *Postwar* (2005: 631–633) surmises, like so many other histories of Eastern Europe, that the main factor of historical change in the region was Gorbachev's policy of perestroika and glasnost. The rest was a domino effect. When analyzing the case of Romania, Judt voices the widely accepted theory that the street revolts would have had no chance of success had not the regime's secret police, the Communist Party's second echelon, and younger apparatchiks passively supported them (629). The fall of the regime was no revolution but a *coup d'état* – what Romanians themselves call *o revoluţie de palat*, a seizure of power inside the presidential palace – and, some historians speculate, even the street demonstrations would not have happened and would not have gained such breadth had there not been secret service agents – it is believed from the KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti / Committee for State Security) – to provoke the mob and stimulate their actions.[5]

How much agency did the revolutionaries have, then? *12:08 East of Bucharest* does not aim to come up with an answer. Yet it puts an astute twist on the question, a twist that is symptomatic of ways of rethinking history so as to escape the relativistic conundrum of provincial nations, experiencing themselves as deprived of self-determination. Even if spectacular and with minor contributions, provincial revolutionary activity is recuperated as having effect, if not in or on the past, then in or on the present. One cannot topple governments from somewhere east of Bucharest; but one can change the way one experiences history. It might not matter whether, in that eastern city, people took the streets on December 22 – whether revolution happened in its main square or not. The past is, after all, ambiguous and subject to interpretation, and a few minutes earlier or later might indeed not have mattered for the fall or survival of Ceauşescu's regime; but these minutes matter for the present (and the future), as courage and altruism can change a community's perception of itself.

As in the case of memorial sites of the revolution, heroism, the film suggests, can play a redemptive role. Yet the difference between the film's approach and an official monument is that the film's retrieval of heroism can afford to remain not coupled with historical agency, since its public symbolism is limited. The suggestion is that dignified participation in an event is in itself worthy of praise. Even if you act, like Costi, in a ''movie'' of the revolution, even if you demonstrate in an insignificant province avoided by history (that is, in a typical locus of

post-history), your revolutionary gesture still matters. It matters not so much in a modern, twentieth-century understanding such as presented in the mainstream historical film, but in a postmodern way, as a way of finding meaning in one's historical irrelevance.

This last statement is specific to the Romanian films of the twenty-first century discussed in this chapter and to the new generational sensibility they express. This different perception of history is also a reaction to debates in the Romanian public sphere. The sometimes vicious contestation that the revolutionary encounters in *12:08 East of Bucharest* is a reflection on the negative public image that revolutionaries have gained in the post-1989 era. Given the political capital and the compensation offered them by law, dubious figures claiming to be heroes of the revolution have emerged in the post-1989 public space. Some have cynically exploited their political capital to gain wealth and/or political positions, raising questions of altruism and dedication around the myth of the 1989 revolutionary. A recent interview with Doru Mărieş, the president of one of the revolutionaries' organizations, reveals the contested status of the revolutionary in the Romanian public sphere. Symptomatic of this predicament is Mărieş's claim that as many as 10 percent of the individuals who have been offered the status of revolutionary were actively engaged in the repression of the revolution before December 22 (Mărieş 2011: 6).[6]

Not only the revolutionaries' historical agency, but also the reasons that drove people into the streets come under question from a historiographical point of view. *The Paper Will Be Blue* suggests that the driving force of 1989 was anti-regime frustration and, after 12:08, manipulation. All revolutionaries presented in *The Paper Will Be Blue* are dubious figures – hot heads driven by obscure passions. Their revolutionary excitement does not originate in genuine political will but in identification with the image and the attitude of a revolutionary and in the excitement of transgressing from reality into a dramatized version of it. With the exception of Costi, whose dignity originates in his naïve but honest perception of the event, there is not a single heroic and dignified revolutionary in *The Paper Will Be Blue*. Not even courage and bravery are positively presented, as they are often the outcomes of violence-spurring exaltation.

Marginal History

The two films' pseudo-investigative plot structure shows the elusive nature of the historical event they aim to represent. Their ambiguity is enhanced by the way in which its post-12:08 television broadcast transformed the revolution. For this reason, another common feature of *12:08 East of Bucharest* and of *The Paper Will Be Blue* is that they do not include video or television footage, as many historical films with higher intellectual stakes do, but they prefer to remain "pure" reconstructions, engaging the event cautiously and remaining aware, as is shown

in the discussion of the chronology posted on *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s website, that the images of the revolution do not represent the past itself. In fact, *12:08 East of Bucharest* is so cautious with regard to representation that it offers only a reconstruction of an effort to reconstruct the revolution. If *The Paper Will Be Blue* is a site of memory and a commentary on the reality of revolution, *12:08 East of Bucharest* is a commentary on the act of remembering and on efforts to establish the truth about the past.

Another common feature of these two films is that both intertwine reality and fiction, suggesting that, when it comes to a postmodern sensibility – one that is aware of the constructed nature of historical discourse – the boundary between history and fiction becomes flexible. But this overlap of reality and fiction is also a trait of marginal historiography. First, because, in the margins, exemplarity is more important than actuality. Second, because, given the lack of sources, establishing the historical truth about marginal events is difficult. Third, because, as we saw in the debate staged in *12:08 East of Bucharest*, accuracy of detail is not relevant. Fourth, because the question of historical truth is complicated by misrepresentations of reality (the Movie). Fifth, because, in its live broadcast form, as seen by most Romanians (and by the whole world), the revolution was a mixture of reality and fiction, actuality and fabrication. Sixth, and of greatest interest here, because marginal history is also small history: the history of people with small destinies and limited agency, of people without identities, living in cities without names, for whom History happens in a different ontological milieu, to which they have access only via media or imagination.

The third film about the Romanian 1989, *The Way I Spent the End of the World*, thematizes this marginal existence of the politically irrelevant, whose perception of history can only be personal, limited, and thus embodied and intertwined with the imaginary. Unlike the previous films discussed here, which focus only on one day of the December events, *The Way I Spent the End of the World*'s story spans the whole year of 1989, dwelling on its characters' past in order to contextualize the meaning of 1989, referred to in the title as the ''end of the world.'' The theme of provincialism is also addressed here. *The Way I Spent the End of the World* focuses on the everyday life of a working-class family surviving the last year of state socialism at the outskirts of Bucharest and, by extrapolation, of history. The ''other world,'' the world of the struggle for power, the world where History happens, can, from there, only be dreamed of, imagined, or (at best) watched on television. The film's opening sequence already establishes this relationship with the political. It shows a dream sequence, in which Laliu, a schoolboy, meets Ceauşescu. Several other dream sequences provide an imaginary escape from the characters' provincial universe. The most revealing one for this chapter is a sequence depicting the way in which Laliu and his friends make sense of the December 1989 events.

The revolution is presented in the last segment of the film's second act. The news about the revolt against the regime reaches the family and the neighborhood via television. Various family members, representing diverse age groups – children,

adolescents, parents, and grandparents – perceive the news differently. For the parents, the news is mind-boggling, thrilling, yet comprehensible. They are enthusiastic about the future and feel proud about their nation. For their teenage daughter, who has no stakes in the political future of Romania, the revolution means a chance to finally leave the country and settle in the West. Their elderly neighbor, who happens to be part of the persecuted Roma minority, regards the fall of the regime with the caution of the eternally oppressed, for whom political change may open the door for renewed discrimination. The grandfather's reaction is even more interesting, because he seems too old to understand the change. He believes the television is broken and tries to fix it.

Only Laliu and his schoolmates have an active perception of the event. They fictionally overcome their predicament of pure spectators to History. For them, the disruptions on television happen because Laliu, allegedly participating in the event, has hit Ceauşescu with his slingshot. Fabrication compensates for the lack of historical agency; but it is important to notice that, even if only through imagination, the children are the only characters in the film who are able to overcome their predicament of spectators.

Conclusion

In retrospect, *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s gun-battle scenes, the shooting from the windows, the crawling on the sidewalk, the sound of bullets, the heavy breathing, and the tough war-talk need not be interpreted as an artistic effort to depict realistically revolutionary action, but as a deconstructive pastiche. The enthusiastic way in which its characters misrecognize themselves as heroes of the revolution reflects the thrill of Romania's return to history. A once politically passive community is given, in 1989, the opportunity to fight for noble causes such as freedom, social justice, and democracy; and the mainstream heroic historical film has made its contribution by influencing the way this community has understood and reacted to the challenges of its times – by imprinting its memory with frescos of revolutionary conflict and with ways of acting in such agonistic predicaments.

The films discussed in this chapter dialogue with this process of misrecognition. For them, the last Romanian heroic epic, with its display of idealism, grand passions, and providential men, has taken place right in the streets of Romania's cities and was broadcast live on TVR. This Revolution Movie differed from the heroic epics of the 1970s and 1980s only in two ways: it was not a reenactment but a live show; and the deaths of its actors were real. It had its beginning in the announcement of Ceauşescu's departure; its climax in the desperate calls to defend the television station; and its dénouement in the broadcast of the footage of the trial and the execution of the Ceauşescu couple (edited, ironically, by Sergiu Nicolaescu himself: Manu and Mincan 2010). It had its protagonists: the revolutionaries and the country's future political elite; its antagonists, the terrorists; and its thousands

of extras who died and killed each other in street battles, but of whom it was said that they ''made'' the revolution.

In order to challenge the logic of this epic, *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s plot is circular and inconclusive; *12:08 East of Bucharest* does not show the revolution, but creates a verbal reenactment of it; and *The Way I Spent the End of The World* avoids factual and dramatic story-telling by mixing reality and dream sequences. All three films display anti-heroes as main characters and tell the stories of men and women whose participation in the revolution, if there was any, had no influence on its outcome. All three films suggest that 1989 was a strange, surreal, or utterly absurd event, at best elusive and subjectively perceived; and none of these films has an ending that offers its viewers the closure that would establish a victorious episode in the nation's history – something that the execution of the presidential couple was so instrumental in doing in the Revolution Movie.

The revolutionary misrecognition of 1989 is suggestively depicted by the Romanian American writer Andrei Codrescu, who visited Romania immediately after the fall of the Ceauşescu regime. In his book *The Hole in The Flag* he presents a first-hand encounter with revolutionary excitement. An astute observer, he notices that a revolution is not only a fight with the demons outside (the terrorists), but also a battle to exorcize the ones inside. Codrescu realizes that – as *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s website and the *I* in the title of *How I Spent the End of the World* emphasize – December 1989 was, significantly, a subjective experience. His memoirs point to a double cinematic identification process. Not only did the revolution feel like a movie for its participants; seen from outside, it also looked like one:

> Watching the Romanian revolution on CNN, people all over the world were struck by just how *revolutionary* the Romanian revolution was. The scenes they were seeing were reminiscent of the French and Bolshevik revolutions' living tableaux. The people atop tanks with their arms stretched in the victory sign, banners behind them . . . The tricolor armbands, the headbands . . . (Codrescu 1992: 105)

If reality has become movie-like and revolution-making has become a performance, no surprise that some of the first people to appear on television were writers, actors, and other show-business people. A key role in the development of the December 22 events was played by none other than the most acclaimed director of historical epics of the Ceauşescu era: Sergiu Nicolaescu, who later published a history of the Romanian revolution.[7] Codrescu himself acknowledges that, once he joined the revolutionary groups within the television, he experienced the intoxication of the moment and witnessed his transformation into someone else. His disbelief was suspended; his sense of irony anesthetized: ''I wanted to believe then – as did the entire world – that the Romanian revolution had been a completely spontaneous and brilliant event'' (Codrescu 1992: 105).

Codrescu is transformed into a revolutionary: ''One of them gave me a tricolor armband. I put it on proudly, feeling like Arthur Rimbaud on the barricades of the

Paris Commune'' (106). He does not engage in gun battles but performs, in front of the television cameras, the part of the intellectual. Codrescu notes ironically that, once the camera points at him, his desire to act revolutionary overwhelms him: ''I tried not to appear too moved and keep myself from bawling like a baby. But it was a close call'' (107).

Once he can perform Rimbaud, his identification is complete, cathartic. He recounts how, when speaking on television, he realizes that his words/language no longer belong only to him, but they seem to be borrowed from the linguistic pool of heroic movies, from the very script of a revolution:

> I had said the words ''democracy,'' ''the Ceaușescu tyranny,'' ''Radio Free Europe,'' ''Romanian language,'' ''revolution.'' Those were words that for the greater part of my childhood had belonged to the language of silence. Not only had I said them aloud now, but I had said them on television before the entire country I once had to leave. (Codrescu 1992: 107)

The symbol of the Romanian Revolution, the flag with a hole in it (that is, with the symbols of the communist state cut out), also appears – not as a book title, but as an image – on the cover of Slavoj Žižek's *Tarrying with the Negative*. Among the many interesting insights on the work of ideology developed in this book, two are of interest here. The first, indirectly addressed in Codrescu's memoirs too, pertains to the significance of the hole – what it means to have an absence and not a presence at the center of political action and national identity. The second refers to the subliminal drives that led revolutionaries to cut the hole in the flag.

Žižek argues that one of the greatest sins of the Eastern European communist regimes, Romania's in particular, was the fact that they arrested their populations' enjoyment of the political, forcing persons to be nothing but executants of a master plan in which – at least during the 1980s – almost nobody believed in anymore. This ''theft of enjoyment'' (Žižek 1993: 201) best distinguishes the communist regimes of Eastern Europe not only from the western liberal democracies, but also from other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, such as Nazi Germany. The latter's ideologues understood the importance of enjoyment for political life, its disciplining function, and astutely offered it to the state's subjects via mass rituals, the excitement of celebrating racial and national communion, the cult of the hero – and, I would add, the ongoing war preparations, the war itself (at least its first years), and the Holocaust.

The 1989 removal of the symbols of the communist state from the flag should be interpreted in this context of arrested enjoyment. They have been scissored out not only because they were emblems of a contested regime, but also because their placement at the center of the flag symbolized the arrest of political enjoyment into a narrative that no longer triggered social identification (Žižek 1993: 1). In his book's introduction, Žižek surmises that the revolutionaries' enthusiasm was over the hole itself. They celebrated contestation itself – which, in turn, revealed the

arbitrary foundation of political legitimacy. Their gesture pointed to the existence and functioning of the symbolic order. Their contestation captured ''the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief passing moment, the hole on the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible''; that is, when the political order was ''not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project'' (1–2).

Yet my analysis of the twenty-first-century films about 1989 reveals that this passing moment never existed, and that the revolutionary post-12:08 enthusiasm was not, as Žižek argues, an experience of radical negativity. The hole in the flag was ''filled'' by the very act of cutting its symbols out. Both the demonstrations against the regime and the battles to defend the revolution's achievements triggered not the enthusiasm of dis-identification (the radical negativity Žižek talks about), but the identification with a revolutionary performance. The Romanian revolution proves how constructed and how imitative anarchy actually is. The population's revolutionary excitement that led to and followed Ceauşescu's departure was not a celebration of the hole itself, not an act of ''tarrying with the negative,'' but the cathartic exhilaration caused by misrecognition.

The revolution, with its demonstrations, barricades, and gun battles, became complete only once its actors felt, reasoned, and behaved exactly as in the mainstream heroic historical films of the Ceauşescu era. This identification would not have been a problem in itself, had it not triggered an outcome of almost 1,000 deaths and, as Žižek himself acknowledges, had it not led to the manipulation of the population into mistaking a *coup d'état* for a revolution (''ultimately it had to do with a coup of Securitate, the Communist secret police, against itself, against its own signifier'' 1993: 1). Most importantly, however, this misrecognition signaled an incongruous situation. The enjoyment of cutting out the hole in the flag, of toppling a regime, felt also like a return of the same, as it reproduced images and scenarios of war and revolution socialized by the very same ideological apparatuses of the regime that the revolutionaries aimed to depose.

Notes

1 One such film, which even includes the 1989 moment, is *Fox – Hunter* (dir. Stere Gulea, 1993), an adaptation of an autobiographical writing by Nobel-prize writer Herta Müller.

2 The notion of the short twentieth century is developed (among others) by Eric Hobsbawm (2001).

3 I have written somewhere else about the contrast between subjective/embodied representations of 1989 and ideologically constructed objective/disembodied ones (Parvulescu 2013).

4 I discuss this issue in conjunction with Robert Rosenstone's (2006: 66–69) analysis of *October*, in a study dedicated to the documentaries about the 1989 revolution (Parvulescu 2013).

5 There are several other theories that construct agents of the Romanian revolution. They are intelligently inventoried in Cesereanu (2009).

6 In the Romanian public sphere, heated debates and strange legislation tried to pin down what it means to be an agent of history and to "acknowledge [and compensate] the heroes–martyrs and the fighters that have contributed to the victory of the Romanian revolution in December 1989." The Romanian state passed a series of laws in which it tried to define the legal category of the revolutionary; the latest one was on July 12, 2004, as the three films discussed here were in their pre-production phase. This legislation became the ultimate codification of the revolutionary spectacle against which these three films take position. Simply put, the law defined the historical agency that caused the overturn of 1989. It distinguished between: (1) *hero-martyr of 1989*; (2) *wounded fighter*; (3) *retained fighter* (arrested in December 1989); (4) *fighter with special merits* (those who "have mobilized and led groups or crowds, have built and defended barricades against the forces of repression of the totalitarian communist regime, have conquered objectives of vital importance for the resistance of the totalitarian regime and defended them until the trial of the dictator in the cities where they have fought for the victory of the Romanian revolution, as well as those who have documentable actions against the symbols of communism in the December 14–22 period"); (5) *participant in the Romanian Revolution* – honorary quality (Legea nr. 341 din 12 iulie 2004).

7 Nicolaescu has also directed a substandard thriller set during the Romanian 1989: *15* (2005).

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