Capturing the Romanian Revolution: Violent Imagery, Affect and the Televisual Event

By Stefana Lamasanu

Department of Art History and Communication Studies

McGill University

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Table of Contents

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Abstract

On December 21, 1989, the communist regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu crumbled to its demise under the gaze of the video cameras filming the start of what was to become the 'Romanian televised revolution'. This dissertation analyses the visual representation of the fall of Communism in Romania, and more specifically, the mediatised footage of Nicolae Ceauşescu's execution, as it was broadcast in Romania and globally. The uprisings and the execution are examined here as a constructed "televisual event" (Morse 93) with important socio-political implications. One of the main assertions of this dissertation is that these images were produced and disseminated within an economy of emotions that circulated affect for political and ideological purposes. Furthermore, beyond their role as documentary representations and historical archives, these visuals offer a forum for discussing the way viewers experience a certain kind of pleasure in the consumption of violent images.

In order to better situate the object of study, the project begins with a broad overview of current ways of thinking about death imagery and its circulation, before presenting the specific historical and political context of the visuals of the revolution. Then, through archival research on the news disseminated during the revolution and after, the study provides an examination of the domestic and international media coverage of the events. Subsequently, in order to examine the interplay between media technology, politics, and the public, the images are examined as particular audiovisual texts with their own aesthetic

codes and style. Finally, the thesis considers the images as sites for the mobilization of affect, exploring their ethical and political implications, in their role as media performances.

Résumé

Le 21 décembre 1989, le régime communiste de Nicolae Ceauşescu s'est effondré devant les caméras. C'était le début de ce qu'on a appelé la « révolution roumaine télévisée ». La présente dissertation analyse la représentation visuelle de la chute du communisme en Roumanie, et notamment les images de l'exécution de Nicolae Ceauşescu qui ont été diffusées dans ce pays et dans le monde. Les soulèvements et l'exécution sont examinés ici comme un « évènement télévisuel » fabriqué (Morse) aux importantes ramifications sociopolitiques. La présente dissertation établit notamment que ces images ont été produites et diffusées dans une économie des émotions qui transmettait des affects à des fins idéologiques et politiques. Outre leur rôle de représentations documentaires et d'archives historiques, ces images sont aussi pour nous l'occasion d'aborder la question du plaisir que les spectateurs peuvent tirer de la consommation d'images violentes.

Afin de cerner notre sujet, nous commençons par un survol des théories actuelles de l'imagerie de la mort et de sa circulation, puis nous exposons le contexte historique et politique des images de la révolution. Nous compulsons ensuite les archives des actualités pour analyser la couverture médiatique des évènements en Roumanie et dans les autres pays, après quoi nous examinons les images en tant que textes audiovisuels pourvus de codes esthétiques et d'un style particulier pour étudier l'interaction de la technologie médiatique, de la politique et du public. Enfin, nous analysons les images en tant que sites de mobilisation

des affects en étudiant leurs répercussions éthiques et politiques de spectacle médiatisé.

Introduction

The following project analyses the highly mediatised footage of the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu, as it was disseminated during the 1989 Romanian revolution that resulted in the communist regime's demise. The uprisings, globally known as the 'Romanian Televised Revolution', were a construction of the domestic and international news sphere, a "televisual event" (Morse) with great socio-political implications. This study seeks to reveal these social ramifications, by analysing the visual reproductions of the execution and the revolution, and their production and circulation within a political and ideological economy of affect.

By analyzing the historical context of these visuals, their circulation by domestic and international media, and the viewers' reaction to them, it is possible to explore the ethical and the political issues these audiovisual texts raised. This is an important exploration to conduct, since the execution of the Ceauşescus has remained an unclear part of Romanian politics and public memory, and since significant debate has unfolded as to whether the sentence was unfair and hurried. The background of the execution was murky, and the revolution was and still is a controversial topic, having been called a neo-communist putsch, and the biggest lie of the century (Castex). The unexplained loss of revolutionaries' lives, the absence of the topic of the execution from public debate, and the ethical questions raised by the images of Ceauşescus' bodies remain unsettling, unresolved elements of Romanian politics that deserve further attention.

I have chosen the topic of study partly to make sense of my own memories of those wondrous, strange days that I experienced over twenty years ago in a provincial city of Romania. To a certain extent, this is a study of my encounter with these visuals on a small black and white television set, during tension-filled moments shared with those around me. It is an examination of the reaction to the sight of the dictator lying shot on a street, appearing through a cloud of smoke; it is an afterthought to the unsettling mix of fear, repulsion, and euphoria felt by my parents, my friends, myself.

These visuals have been momentous for those who experienced them, and their effects still linger in the fabric of the Romanian society, in its politics and everyday discussions, as I realized on my return to Romania after twenty years of absence. I was able to observe these latent effects as part of a research project undertaken in March 2010 in Bucharest, graciously supported by Professor William Straw and the Beaverbrook Foundation. During that time, I consulted sources available only locally, such as documents pertaining to Ceausescu's trial, and newspaper reports, in the National Library, the Institute of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, the Romanian Institute for Investigation of Communist Crimes, The Association 21 December, Grupul pentru Dialog Social [The Social Dialog Group], *Revista 22* [Magazine 22]. I interviewed politicians, among them the former president Ion Iliescu, the key figure of the revolution, former dissidents, survivors, artists, and activists. Through the Association 21 December, I interviewed a group of widows of fallen revolutionaries from

Timişoara, whose sad stories exemplify the emotional burden left behind by the events, in the society at large. The Association also allowed me access to the overwhelmingly large number of files on the victims of the revolution. In their office, staring at the walls covered with boxes filled with mostly neglected files, I truly started to grasp the immensity and gravity of my topic, the questions left unanswered about the victims, and the emotional scars left behind by the events. Coincidently, during my stay in Bucharest, the government declassified all of the revolution files ("Romania to Declassify Documents from Revolution"), raising hopes of finding some of those responsible for the victim toll of more than 1100. The reaction to this move was welcoming, yet tinted with the bitter knowledge that much of it was too late, indeed over twenty years too late.

Before delving deeper into the subject of this thesis, a brief introduction of the main case study is essential. The execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu occurred on December 25 1989, as a result of the overthrow of Romania's communist government. The toppling of the regime purportedly started as an unusual demonstration in Timişoara, a Northern Romanian city, with Hungarian minorities and Romanian students protesting against the government's attempt to evict László Tőkés, a Hungarian priest accused of anti-communist invectives. The protest turned into a wider anti-government demonstration taking over the city, with national security agents – the infamous organization called *securitate* [The Security] – and armed forces shooting participants on December 17. Today, official estimates cite 1104 deaths and 3552 wounded (Maierean 25), but those

responsible for these deaths and injuries have never been found, and the question of this responsibility remains one of the great mysteries of the revolution. News about the killing reached the Romanian people by word of mouth, and through Radio Free Europe,[1] and the events turned into a state of national-wide unrest. In an effort to settle the disturbance, Ceauşescu staged a support rally in the Square of the Republic, in Bucharest, the capital of the country, and gave what became his final speech on December 21. The unruly crowd abruptly ended Ceauşescu's speech, forcing him to recede from the balcony. In the next two days, the demonstrations outside Ceauşescu's palace, and in various other public parts of the city, became what can be called a revolution, with a reported death toll ranging from under a thousand to tens of thousands. During those days marking Romania's tentative and feverish opening to Western media, international reports reflected the reigning confusion, and the lack of transparency and verifiable information surrounding the events. After trying to escape by helicopter, the dictator couple was caught and immediately subjected to a summary trial that lasted 90 minutes, in the town of Târgovişte. Immediately after the sentence was declared, the Ceauşescus were shot by a firing squad in the annexed courtyard.

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[1] Radio Free Europe is an important institution in the dissident history of Romania (and that of other totalitarian countries in Europe), established with the support of the U.S.A. in 1950, for anti-communist education purposes. During the communist era of Ceauşescu, RFE was the main source of outside information and dissident voices.

The images of the execution were shown during the same night on the national television station, Televiziunea Română Liberă[2] (TVRL) [Free Romanian Television]. The station, which during the Ceauşescu regime had been the only one in the country, and strictly regulated by communist doctrine, had played a major role in producing and circulating the meanings of the revolution. In a manner that recalls John Fiske's description of television as "the bearer, provoker, and circulator of meaning" (qtd. in Smith et al. 529), the TVRL acted as an encoder of preferred (political) meaning, reproducing reality according to certain codes active within the Romanian society. Its studios became a political arena, populated by various contenders to the seat of power of the future Romania. The winners of this political authority contest were a group of 40 revolutionaries, dissidents, artists, writers, and former communists, who named themselves the Frontului Salvării Naționale (FSN) [National Salvation Front]. The group was lead by Ion Iliescu, who became the first Romanian president after the fall of communism and served two constitutionally-mandated terms from 1992-1996 and again from 2000-2004.

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[2] The station was called Radioteleviziunea Română (TVR) during the rule of Ceauşescu. On December 22 1989 the TVR changed its name to Televiziunea Română Liberă (TVRL) [Free Romanian Television]. Soon, however, after being accused of being a propaganda tool for the National Front Party, the TVRL abandoned the designation "Free", reverting to its previous name of TVR. Several name changes in the years after mirror the crisis of identity it went through trying to adapt to a democratic process. Today the station is still run by the Romanian state, and has reverted to the original name of Televiziunea Română [Romanian Television], or TVR. In this paper, I will use the designation TVR when discussing the institution during the communist or the post-revolution era, and TVRL when I refer to the station during the revolution.

The Romanian revolution was globally broadcast and widely discussed in academic and journalistic texts as an event impacting the technological distribution of revolutionary politics. These discussions centered mostly on the political mechanisms behind the revolution (Deletant, Portocala, Gross, Roper, Aubin, etc), contextualizing the events within the larger historical, economic and political situation of transitional Romania. The actual footage of the revolution has not been discussed in depth in scholarly texts, with the exception of writings by Margaret Morse, Hubertus von Amelunxen and Andrei Ujica, Konrad Petrovzky and Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, which have explained the images as attached to the larger political context of the uprisings and broadcasting practices. I did not find any studies directly focused on the visuals of the execution itself. Thus, as I seek to tie together writings on the topic of the revolution, its coverage, and its broader context, I hope to contribute to the discussion by providing a new analysis of the affective and political value of the execution images themselves.

In order to contextualize the footage of the Ceauşescus' execution, it is important to start by situating it against an appropriate theoretical background. Chapter one provides this link in the form of an overview of current ways of thinking about death and war images. In that section, I discuss how the images of dead bodies, or of those about to be killed, have been displayed and circulated traditionally by photographic media for public consumption, in the context of war and national conflict, but also in public displays of judicial action. Thus, I draw on scholarly literature on representations of death and war, and examine the ethical

dilemmas these forms of representation raise, such as those involving identification and sympathising with the victim, editorial bias, and the conflicting mix of attraction and repulsion elicited by photographs of violent death. Furthermore, I also review theoretical treatments of capital punishment, of the culture surrounding public executions, and of the execution of women. This last theme is particularly helpful for understanding the media's coverage of Elena Ceauşescu's execution. Finally, in order to situate the various theoretical currents examined in the context of practical cases, I turn to the examples of photographs of American lynching acts, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War (through the iconic photograph and footage of 'the Saigon Execution'), and Abu Ghraib, and discuss how these cases have been visually represented and interpreted.

Chapter two introduces and situates the main case study of this thesis, the Romanian revolution of December 1989, and its culminating point, the execution of the Ceauşescus. This section describes the historical and political context of the revolution, explaining the rigid censorship system set in place throughout all institutions and public spaces, which made it almost impossible for any dissenting forces to unite against the regime. The chapter also shows how the reign of the Ceauşescus was based on a portrayal of the couple and regime that differed in significant ways from the realities lived by the nation, a dissonance that explains some of the particular context of the revolution. Subsequently, I lay out the timeline of the "Televised Revolution", and discuss the scepticism that came to surround the events of 1989, and the enthusiastic, technophilic media coverage of

these events, on the domestic and international front. In particular, I focus on the first reactions of the press – newspapers, radio, television – not only in terms of the political drama which the press disseminated, but also discussing its role in shaping the Romanian revolution itself. As we shall see, the difficulty Romanians had in envisaging a regime change as an outcome of the revolution would spur the development of conspiracy theories.

Chapter three provides a look at the media mechanisms that affected the visual representation of the events. It begins with an overview of the Romanian press sphere, as it was operating at the time of the regime change. It highlights the extent to which communist dogma controlled, through state censorship and self-censorship, all aspects of Romanian journalism during the last decades of communism. Presenting this political background helps to partly explain why the transition to a democratic press sphere was a flawed phase. The communist programming of Romanian journalistic practice affected the coverage of the events, and resulted in exaggerated reports and a skewed representation of the revolution, both in domestic and international news. The chapter also explains the role of the TVRL as a tool for political and journalistic legitimization in the events of December 1989. In many respects, as I shall show, the television camera operated as an extension of the journalist in the coverage of the events. Furthermore, the TVRL became the nucleus of the revolution, symbolically and physically. As the nexus of political activity (Maiereanu, Deletant, et al), the TVRL became the principal forum through which the FSN conducted the

uprisings, explained them to the nation, and transmitted the experience of the revolution to the nation, into its living rooms. The analysis also takes into consideration the shock of the new aesthetics and technology brought by new reporting and journalistic practices.

Chapter four examines the revolution as a globally marketable, commercially viable product constructed by the news media. This section focuses on the selling power of the spectacular images circulated by the media networks. As we shall see, technophilic ideas about television's capacity to disseminate social progress intensified the circulation of these images. Furthermore, the chapter traces the afterlife of the iconic visuals of the revolution, the way these images have been preserved and reformulated in Romanian collective memory, through their invocation in commemoration practices and post-communist art and cinema.

Chapter five analyses the reception of the images of the execution of Nicolae Ceauşescu. It considers the way these visuals have become platforms for the production, distribution, and reception of affectual responses such as hate, fear, guilt, shame and disgust. The images, "repositories of feelings and emotions" (Cvetkovich 7), become iconic as they circulate within an 'economy of affect' (Ahmed), ultimately serving certain social and cultural practices. Finally, the chapter provides a textual analysis of the key visual moments of the events, thus

concluding the analysis of the revolution and its culmination in the death of the Romanian dictator and his wife.

On the one hand, these visuals disturbed, through the ways in which they captured death and pain; on the other, an element of thrill and satisfaction seemed inescapable. Their reception reveals a conflict that seems endemic to the consumption of death imagery. The final conclusion section analyses the unsettling and possibly incongruous pleasure that comes in the act of watching the killing, pursuing the affective analysis set up in chapter five through the prism of the concepts of iconophobia and the sublime.

Chapter One. The Iconicity of Capital Punishment

Since the December 1989 death sentence of the Ceauşescus was the result of political uprisings, it is appropriate that I situate these images within the larger socio-political discourse on war, death, and execution imagery. I will do so by mapping out previous visual treatments of death, exploring parallels between these images and other widely discussed violent images, such as the photographs of the American lynching acts of the late 19th and early 20th century, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, Abu Ghraib, and the execution of Saddam Hussein.

War and Death Imagery

This section provides an overview of the discourse on war and death imagery. More precisely, it offers a look at current ways of thinking about how photographic media display and distribute dead bodies for public consumption. As this section will show, much of the existing scholarly literature on execution imagery focuses on such themes as the spectacular nature of executions, the haunting quality of visual representation of these events, the ethical dilemma their photographic display presents to the viewer, the problems of identifying with and feeling guilt for a victim who is otherwise a despicable human being, and the unavoidable editorial positioning in the filming of such death.

In her analysis of execution images, Wendy Lesser comments on the ways in which photography and murder create a contradictory yet haunting effect when paired. She explains the dichotomy endemic to this relationship:

> *Photography focuses on surfaces, murder stems from and speaks to hidden depth; photography celebrates distance and removal, murder condemns the failure to interfere; photography is commemorative, murder seeks oblivion; photography freezes time, making a moment last forever, whereas murder creates irrevocable change. (Lesser 175)*

This "strange relation" (Lesser 175), the unsettling push and pull created by the photographic representation of violent death, is a theme that is continuously analysed in most works on the topic.

The majority of the cases I analyse present the viewer with appealing and arresting tableaux of death and brutality, aestheticized instances of death and brutality, resulting in an incongruous mix of beauty and fatality. In *Beyond Words*, a CBC documentary feature on photographers of war, this aesthetic and ethical conflict forms the centre of the discussion. Some of the photographers interviewed in the documentary approve the display of visual record; as one of them says, "where there are no images, there is no sense of history" (*Beyond Words: Photographers of War*). Others confess to censuring certain photographs of war casualties, because these border on the pornographic in their intimate revelation of war injuries and death, or, in one particular case, suggest religious

connotations by reminding one of the classic crucifixion tableau.[3] Indeed, as Lesser suggests, "a story about murder, whether real or fictional, is also, obliquely, a story about the existence or absence of God" (Lesser 17); the troubling mix of beauty and fatality seems to carry religious connotations.

The attraction to death imagery is one of the focal points of the scholarly literature on the subject. Just as I ask, in relation to my own analysis of the Ceauşescu's execution pictures, so Lesser wonders "why are we drawn to murder, as an act and as a spectacle? Who in the murder story are we drawn to – the victim, the murderer, the detective? Why, in particular, are we interested in *seeing* murder, either enacted or caught in the act?" (Lesser 3). Instead of using the terms 'attraction', or 'fascination', Lesser believes the experience is better designated as "'interest' ... signalling, in its opposition to 'disinterest', our involvement in the subject, our complicity in its ethical implications" (Lesser 3). This is because "interest [is] appropriately understated: 'fascination' or 'obsession', while accurate for some, overstates the general case" (Lesser 3). As Diana Shoos and Diane George analyse images of capital punishment, they also speculate about the motivations behind our attraction to these, as "the visual performs a markedly tricky function. Is it evidence that the guilty party has been brought to justice, or is it morbid curiosity at best, voyeurism at its most base?" (George and Shoos

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[3] The photograph depicts a suffering, possibly dying soldier being carried away by his two companions. Their trio formation suggests the classic crucifixion image, the reason for which this image, aesthetically qualified to become iconic, was rejected from the final editing. The photographer, despite describing himself as an atheist, explains that "you have to careful of how you frame your images" (*Beyond Words: Photographers of War*).

588). Thus, the high risk of fetishizing violence potentially lurks within death imagery. Also, we cannot forget that watching death visuals also means watching pain, as Michelle Brown explains:

> *The penal spectator ... by definition looks in on punishment and yet is also its author. In this looking, this subject acts as a bystander and outsider as opposed to an engaged participant or witness. She may stare curiously or reflectively, peer sideways from her peripheral vision, or gape and gawk directly, but the object of her gaze is inevitably other people's harm. (Brown 21)*

Hence, death imagery is a field complicated by the ethics of watching pain, and by questions of shame and guilt.

In her quest to understand this interest in the act of visualizing murders, and the ethical dilemmas related to this act, Lesser examines real and fictional murder and execution cases, because, she argues, the witnessing of real murder always relies on a fictional element. An execution has a certain staged quality, as the narrative format of the execution is close to a theatrical format and to classical tragedy in general. Through to the tragic character of its narrative, and its reliance on classical patterns of narrative, an execution involves and draws the audience into its spectacular and improbable story.

Despite the attraction of the spectacular, Lesser explains that the theatrical format of an execution results in a certain distance between the scene of death and

the viewers, a detachment that helps the audience to think of the execution as a fiction, unreal.

> *Theatrical spectatorship implies a certain paralysis, a certain recognition of one's inability to alter predetermined events. ... [However,] the theatre of murder, the witnessed execution, may have the opposite effect. By impressing on its audience members their helplessness in the face of the events, it forces them, out of moral self-protectiveness, to view the death as unreal – either that or suffer irrevocable shame, as Turgenev does. Whether the theatrical mode suggest paralysis as the appropriate response, or paralysis causes spectators to think of the event as mere theatre, is not clear; but there does seem to be a connection between the two. (Lesser 186)*

The setting of an authoritarian trial court, with its waiting execution squad, only enhances this staged and solemn feeling.

The narrative build-up to an execution can be considered another theatrical element. The act of killing, as Lesser argues, is an archetypal theatrical theme, as

> *murder is an ideal topic for theatre because the form is itself about being in the imminent presence of death. The Elizabethan name for actors – "shadows" – reflects this fact, linking them with the shades of the underworld as well as with the flickering figures who are, according to Plato, all we can know of life. (Lesser 194)*

Following this reasoning, we can say that the execution's dramatic narrative is constructed according to a highly watchable, dramatic narrative. The drama of the execution, magnified through these theatrical, staged setups, offers the spectator

the pleasure of watching an act that might not be palatable in another form. One could argue that the format and narrative elements of an execution closely resemble those to be found in a theatrical spectacle.

The capital punishment is recorded using an orderly format, transforming the act into an emotion-less scenario. Indeed, Lesser argues, "orderliness ... serves to make the execution unreal, it creates a distance ... it makes it difficult to understand that a life is being ended." It offers, as well, a "sanitized version of death" (Lesser 186), a process perceivable in the cases she analyses in her book.

Executions are constructed as sanctioned experiences through other methods, such as the portrayal of the criminal to be executed as a non-human and, more precisely, as a thing. When the executed is made a 'thing', it becomes unnecessary to feel pity, and when "the state ... executes a condemned man, [it] needs to view him as no more human than [the state] itself" (Lesser 64). What Lesser calls "thinginess" (Lesser 64) can be detected in the treatment of the execution and exhumation pictures of the Ceauşescus, further discussed in the chapter four.

A similar trope – beastification – offers the viewer a distance from the potential cruelty of the events being witnessed. The criminal can thus be treated with cruelty, without remorse. Indeed, as Shoos and George explain in their text on the death penalty visuals,

> *the body on display in this way is also a body unrevered. It is the proof that the "dangerous animal" has been successfully hunted and slain. Recent press photographs of Saddam Hussein's sons hunted down and killed by American troops suggest that this genre of crime photograph may well have its natural extension in today's press photographs of "manhunts" for those labeled war criminals. Certainly, the publication and distribution of those gruesome photographs was meant to demonstrate to stand as witness to these deaths. They would then be used as evidence in the Western press, at least, that this particular "danger" had been eliminated. Such images render any question of a trial or even of a death penalty entirely moot. (George and Shoos 598)*

This beastification trope was widely used in the news discourse surrounding the execution of the Ceauşescus. In many similar visual events, for instance Saddam Hussein's execution, the media's treatment of the executed also betrayed this tendency to portray the criminal as an animal. This method may help to assuage any feeling of guilt felt by those coordinating or watching the events, and emotionally remove the viewer from the scene.

Just as an execution may elicit guilt, as Lesser points out, so too may it provide pleasure to the viewer. Indeed, "there is, it must be acknowledged, a certain kind of pleasure to be obtained from feeling the anxiety of guilt, especially when it is someone else's guilt and can be sloughed off at will" (Lesser 67). Watching an execution may provide a sense of schadenfreude, but only because the viewer is ultimately reassured about his or her guilt. Shoos and George refer to the pictures taken by people at a lynching:

The images themselves were meant to argue guilt and thus promote the appropriateness of punishment. If "some of our best citizens" do not mind having their photographs taken at the site of such horror, then, these images suggest, how can there be a question of innocence? (George and Shoos 598)

Thus, the viewer is offered safe entertainment, and her or his unease with the images is mitigated through a variety of tropes, such as 'thinginess' or beastification.

However, while these ways of presenting a sanitized version of the execution are meant to emotionally distance the viewer, ultimately s/he still finds ways of sympathising and identifying with the condemned. Lesser points out that presenting a criminal as a thing is ultimately not an efficient way to relieve the viewer from feeling sympathy toward the criminal. Instead, "ironically, this technique increases our sympathy for the dying man ... [because] once we begin to view him as the victim of depersonalization, the condemned murdered instantly becomes more appealing. It is easier to identify with a victimized 'it'" (Lesser 64). At his/her execution "the murdered, for once, becomes a victim as well as a killer" (Lesser 8), and witnessing this reversal of scenario might, after all, provoke the viewer's sympathy.

Lesser concludes that "a televised execution would be doomed to failure as moral instruction. We would not ... feel that 'we' were responsible for the killing" (Lesser 232). On the contrary, execution visuals may distress viewers, she

reminds us, referring to the execution of Robert Alton Harris that took place in 1992, in California.

> *People dwell on what it means for people to be put deliberately to death, and it frightens them. They keep reliving it in their minds. The "images" of the execution afflicted us even though we didn't actually see it – a problem the newspapers self-righteously blamed on television. ... The images that plagued and frightened us were made up entirely of words. (Lesser 249)*

Besides providing distress instead of moral education, death imagery furthermore risks distancing itself from its original meaning, and consequently also risks being interpreted differently in new contexts. Indeed, one of the main themes surfacing in most of the scholarly literature on death imagery, especially that dealing with iconic visuals, is the risk of decontextualizing. Shoos and George point out how images can transmit different messages depending on their context:

> *Roland Barthes reminded us that the image is first and always polysemous. As such, images of execution function differently depending on where and how they appear, on who reads them and for what purpose, on who sends them in what context, and on the political and social climate in which they are produced. ... Barthes reminds us, 'The press photograph is a message' formed by 'a source of emission, a channel of transmission, and a point of reception'. (George and Shoos 590)*

Janika Struk also highlights the ways in which the interpretation of warfare photos is in fact a subjective task; pictures can distort the truth, especially when captioned or framed by false premises (Struk). As Susan Sontag explains, "the

problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs" (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* 89), since "photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* 81). Without context, the photograph can easily become a tool of manipulation. Sontag explains how "the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village [that] were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings. Alter the caption, and the children's death could used and reused" (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* 10). In order to situate an image properly, the viewer must ask what the link is "between images of execution - both state-sponsored and vigilante justice, their production and circulation, in particular and the larger public debates of which they are an inevitable part" (George and Shoos 589). The risk of decontextualizing is always present when politics shape the perception of images.

Examples

Discussions of specific examples of execution imagery raise the issues presented above and further introduce others. For instance, the risk of decontextualized meaning has been discussed in relation to the lynching photographs, the Saigon shooting, and Holocaust imagery. Another example invoked here is the execution of Saddam Hussein, which raises many of these issues with particular effectiveness.

Lynching Photographs

Lynching acts were mainly perpetrated in the American South, between the 1880s and the 1930s, and resulted in the death of nearly five thousand African-Americans. In many communities, lynching was a public event witnessed, recorded, and disseminated through photographs. These were mainly black-and-white, postcard-sized photographs of victims of lynching, the majority of whom were African American men. The photographs were kept safe over the years in "family albums, attic trunks,

Photograph from Bettmann/Corbis

and flea markets" (Apel 1), evidently kept as souvenirs. Their existence and display as souvenir objects still provoke questions about the politics of spectatorship.

The disturbing display of death imagery in lynching photographs brings to the fore the issue of decontextualized iconicity. Anthony W. Lee asks how it is

possible to "understand pictures that are ripped from their original places and times and assembled in an almost unrelieved display of murderous violence", and, further, "what attitude is proper when viewing and making sense of them" (Lee 4). Amy Louise Wood concludes that "in detaching images of lynching from local practices and transforming them into icons of oppression, antilynching activists unwittingly succeeded in detaching them from history itself" (A. L. Wood 269). In continuation of Sontag's thoughts, we witness in these photographs how the iconic power of the image can thrive independently of the original, the intended message of the capture.

The display as lynching postcards prompts one to wonder, as Lee does, what provokes "our curiosity, or rage, or moral revulsion, or feeling of loss, or demands for righteousness" (Lee 4), while still consuming them. Similarly, Dora Apel asks "why take photographs of atrocity and body horror? Who has the right to look at such photos? Is looking a voyeuristic indulgence, a triumphal act, or an experience in shame?" (Apel 43). The viewer confronted with pictures or video footage of the executions analysed in my thesis may still ask these questions, even if the cases do not represent the same kind of injustice and moral outrage as lynching photographs do. The answers to these questions lie, according to Lee, in a contextualized understanding of the pictures, and, according to Apel, depend on "who is doing the shooting and the looking [, since] it matters how and where the pictures are presented" (Apel 43). In order to explain the power relations between the complicit viewer and the perpetrators of violence, and understand the ethics

and aesthetics involved in this process, we must address questions of distribution and reception while situating the audiences for these images in their contexts.

A theme that continuously surfaces in analysis of lynching imagery is the way in which gender and sexuality are bound up with the punishment and display of the body, specifically of the black male body. Shawn Michelle Smith explains how the lynched body became sexualized, and represented punishment for the perceived sexual trespassing of the black male. Amy Louise Wood extends this discussion of sexual 'transgressions' across racial lines by drawing a connection between religion and lynching acts, interpreting such acts as a divine expiation of the profanity committed by black males versus the sanctity of white women. The Abu Ghraib controversy also illustrates this link between the sexualized, racial body and religion and politics. In 2004, photos of the torture of inmates in the Abu Ghraib prison committed by American military personnel traveled the world via the Internet, generating a global controversy. Both the Abu Ghraib photos and the lynching photographs shock through the display of the punished ethnic/racial Other; both provide opportunities for an in-depth examination of the photographic spectacle of victimized bodies and the implicated sexual politics. The links between the display of the dead body, punished for his alleged crimes, on the one hand, and deeply rooted religious and sexual beliefs, on the other, comes through with particular clarity in the analysis of such controversial photographs and of their circulation and power to attract. In such cases, sexual politics are intimately intertwined with visual representations of the victimized body.

Holocaust Photography

The contemporary analysis of war and death representation is continuously influenced by Holocaust photography, since, as Jasmine Alinder notes,

> *Holocaust images represent a watershed. The release of photographs of the victims of the Nazi camps in 1945 collectively exposed the public to unprecedented horrors. Although photography had been used to portray traumatic events since the U.S. Civil War, the publication of Holocaust photographs set a new paradigm for the photographic description of suffering, with shocking images of piles of human ashes, mounds of corpses, crematoria, ... dazed looks of barely alive skeletons, gaping pits of bodies. (Alinder 14)*

Holocaust photographs have been widely analysed for their spectacular appeal that often strips them of contextual information. The danger of such appeal is de-contextualization. Alinder reminds that "single Holocaust photographs are rarely able to stand for the total event, robbed [as they are] of any precise indexical status" (Alinder 156). Holocaust photographs have been, from their first appearance, "mined for their symbolic rather than indexical value, and ... were often reproduced interchangeably" (Alinder 156). Specificity and historic accuracy "did not matter as much as communicating the scale of death" (Alinder 156). The very element that makes photographs so powerful – their iconicity – can thus turn into a tool of distortion. Furthermore, as Susan Sontag explains, "chronic voyeuristic relation" (Sontag *On Photography* 11) can easily ensue from such facile, de-contextualized consumption of photography. According to her, "photographs do not explain, they acknowledge" (Sontag *On Photography* 111),

and facilitate an attitude that works against intervention, luring audiences away from information and narrative. To be morally affected by a photograph, Sontag argues, is to have a "relevant political consciousness"; otherwise, the photograph "will most likely be experienced as simply unreal or as demoralizing emotional blow" (Sontag *On Photography* 19), and the risk is that the viewer will be led away from a rational or critical awareness.

The Saigon Execution

Eddie Adams' Pulitzer Prize-winning photo, dubbed "The Saigon Execution", strikingly captures the act of a South Vietnamese police chief, Lt. Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, shooting a Vietcong. The execution occurred at noon on February 1st, 1968, and was photographed and simultaneously filmed by the NBC and ABC television crews, as well as by a Japanese film crew (Perlmutter 35). The still photograph of the execution of the Vietcong was shown on television later on the same day it was shot; the day after, colour newsfilm of the event was broadcast nationally. The impact of the photograph was felt on a massive scale, in part because at that historical point television was the principal source for news.

The photograph, now an iconic image of war in general, has been called "the perfect newspicture - the perfectly framed and exposed 'frozen moment' of an event which ... would become representative of the brutality of the Vietnam War" (Faas), and provoked attention and extensive media discussion. The iconic status of the picture was enhanced by the image's capacity to offer viewers and scholars a "zone of contested meaning" (Culbert 204). The photograph invited multiple points of view and references, offering different, even opposing meanings to people with different agendas. Interestingly, as Sontag explains, the photograph was, despite its status as an authentic, rare capture of a moment, staged so as to offer better photographic setup (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* 59). For some, this image became a symbol of the brutality of war and of

the antiwar movement of the 1970s. *The New York Times* reported that "this execution is credited with turning public opinion against the war" and that "the images created an immediate revulsion at a seemingly gratuitous act of savagery that was widely seen as emblematic of a seemingly gratuitous war" (Culbert 207). *Washington Post*'s obituary for Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the shooter, acknowledged that "the combination of photograph and newsfilm contributed to increased popular disillusionment with the war and opposition to the U.S. involvement" (Culbert 207). For others, however, even the photographer himself, the image was not meant to denigrate war or the shooter, but only to show the reality of warfare. It can be understood as an example of how symbolic value can overtake indexical value in certain photographs.

The context in which this picture was viewed was marked by the extraordinary political and economic circumstances during which the image was circulated. As Shoos and Garden note,

> *it is a common precept that the visual carries the potential (or the threat) to uncover both the harsh realities of human suffering and the political machinations responsible for that suffering. The Vietnam War demonstrated that precept so clearly with its photographs and film coverage of summary execution, napalmed children, and dying soldiers that subsequent war policy has severely limited press access and suppressed images like recent photos of flag-draped American coffins. (George and Shoos 587)*

The journalistic coverage of the Vietnam War expressed a distinctive zeitgeist of the 1960s, and the New Journalism style pervasive at that time, and distinctive of the coverage of the events, was "particularly suited to war" (Moeller 327). The Vietnam War did not lend itself well to formulaic and narrative linear conventional reporting, according to Malcolm Browne, given that "there [were] too many uncertainties, too many shades of gray, too many dangers of applying English-language clichés to a situation that cannot be described by clichés" (qtd. in Moeller 327). This is why still images like "The Saigon Execution" appeal as means of representing these events, particularly because such images could become de-contextualized as a result of their iconicity, and offer multiple meanings and angles. "The politics of the war could transcend the politics of the camera operator" (Moeller 355) through photographs, through their flexibility in lending themselves to adaptation to different interpretations, making photographs particularly fit for the reporting of intense situations, like war, in which audiences seek to invest themselves emotionally.

Iconic images abound in times of war, as they lend themselves as an appropriate canvas for the emotions of audiences. Peter Braestrup recalls the visual media coverage of the Vietman war as "a mosaic of Vietnam in flames and despair, showing the Vietnamese as victims but seldom as fighters" (Braestrup and Burns 323). He explains the difference between the visuals as a vehicle of affect, rather than of narrative or information.

It was the ultimate horror story that you captured in living color.
But in terms of information it told you almost nothing. That's the
chronic problem especially for television and for the still photos, the
difference between drama and information. (qtd. by Culbert 207)

Braestrup's commentary exemplifies the fears provoked by the image, the fears that the image will do more harm than other narratives, and will invest its subject with a fetishizing, spectacular quality and affect, at the expense of pragmatic information other texts might be able to provide through more narrative forms.

Saddam Hussein

The official Iraqi video of the execution of Saddam Hussein, filmed by Al Massedy (the official Iraqi photographer) was played repeatedly on Al-Iraqiya, the Iraqi national television, several hours after the execution ("Hussein Executed with Fear in His Face"; Harnden), juxtaposed with images of national monuments, and with patriotic music replacing the original audio track. These sanctioned visuals were, according to Bakir, a continuation of Hussein's prior vilification, and were meant to "normaliz[e] his nonthreatening human (as opposed to deified or beastial) status, so minimizing the risk of turning him into a martyr and fuelling the ongoing insurgency in Iraq at the end of 2006" (Bakir 10). Meanwhile, the U.S. news media constructed a different image for Saddam, that of a beast:

The portrayal of Saddam Hussein as a captured beast was
controlled by the U.S. military, while sanitized footage of his
execution was staged by the Iraqi government and intended to

demonstrate that Saddam Hussein died "like all tyrants, frightened
and terrified" (in the words of the Iraqi Prime Minister). (Bakir 7)

Thus, the Iraqi portrayed Saddam in a sanitized way that was meant to emphasize his 'thinginess' (Lesser 64), while the American strategy for framing his capture and execution was to depict him as a beast. Both representations were meant to provide a guilt-free removal of the dictator, to allay the negative implications of watching death and offer, instead, an experience of schadenfreude.

The case of the video of the Saddam execution invites a discussion of the circulation practices in which images of death or controversial subjects are engaged. The international televised distribution of the illegal footage was based on each network's decisions as to whether or not this was material suitable for general viewing. Each decision was shaped by economic and aesthetic factors, and influenced by the editors' concepts of "public taste and 'appetite' for 'images of violence' (Peter Horrocks, Head of BBC Television News, as cited in Luckhurst, 2007) as well as their knowledge that millions of television license payers were watching them online (Luckhurst, 2007)" (Bakir 12). Part of the dilemma surrounding the footage was that it was difficult to define – was it "snuff film? Citizen journalism? Real-time history recording?" ("Execution Footage a Dilemma for Tv News"). The definition was provided by the media processing the images, and was tailored according to individual commercial interests. "In the end," one critic wrote, "any editing that news executives did was in the service of maintaining their brand" ("Execution Footage a Dilemma for Tv News").

Decisions as to what was visually appropriate, and as to the thresholds for visual representation and good taste, were affected by consumption demand.

The official video of the Saddam Hussein execution drew criticism for its questionable treatment of the dictator, and for potentially contravening the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. The unofficial version of the video, broadcast first on Anwarweb.net, and subsequently on web sites like PandaChute.com, YouTube, and Google Video, drew much more criticism and led to a call for a moratorium on the practice of capital punishment by *The Observer* (Helmore). The *Daily Mail* likened the video to an Al Qaeda beheading video (Owen), and *The Economist* called it a snuff video ("Hanging the Dictator"). Internally, the images bypassed a national state of emergency authorized by the Iraqi federal government for the purposes of monitoring communications (Bakir). Since only about 10% of Iraqis had access to mobile phones and only 0.13% had access to the internet (Alkhafaji) this was initially better controlled within Iraq than on the outside.

The use of the cell phone as a camera opens up a particular rich field of inquiry, as the medium invaded areas that were previously off-limits. Vian Bakir calls this intimate surveillance made possible by the cellphone camera a new form

of control – "sousveillance" (Bakir 8),[4] a way of reaching into spheres once taboo,
now instantly experienced on YouTube. These new practices

> *challenge traditional journalism's claim to authenticity and*
> *credibility precisely by showing that which the mainstream news*
> *will not show and thus rendering dubious the professional practices*
> *of selection, framing, and editing. (Andén-Papadopoulos 25-26)*

However, it is interesting to note that these practices "extend historical ideological
constructions around bourgeoisie performances of intimacy and family that were
initiated with the introduction of the Kodak camera" (Hjorth). The difference
however is that the intimate moments are the victim's last ones, and are now
displayed on the world stage.

Execution Literature

Today's punishment practices are rooted in the past; a contextualizing of
capital punishment seems pertinent here, in order that modern punishment
practices may be compared with their antecedents. Thus, this section will focus on
capital punishment, and more specifically, provide ways to engage with the
concept of public execution within my analysis.

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[4] "Sousveillance, in focusing on enhancing people's ability to access and collect data
about their surveillance, aims both to highlight the practice of and neutralize surveillance" (Bakir
8).

The Historical Context and Definition of Capital Punishment

Any discussion of punishment must acknowledge that punishment practices include cultural processes, and are, in turn, affected and shaped by the latter. In this respect, punishment can be considered a social institution,

> *composed of the interlinked processes of law-making, conviction, sentencing, and the administration of penalties. It involves discursive frameworks of authority and condemnation, ritual procedures of imposing punishment, a repertoire of penal sanctions, institutions and agencies for the enforcement of sanction and a rhetoric of symbols, figures, and images by means of which the penal process is represented to its various audiences (Garland Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory 17).*

As a social notion, modern capital punishment has been understood as a symbolic gesture rather than a functional instrument of crime control, with men and women being put to death so that particular powers and values might be seen to prevail.

The first laws policing capital punishment can be traced back to the Code of King Hammurabi of Babylon, around the 18th century BC. Early practices involved methods that are now practically extinct[5] or heavily condemned, such as beating the subject to death, impalement, crucifixion, drowning, immolation, and other such severe punishments. Historians suggest that attitudes toward punishment differed then, as people accepted it as part of life (Spierenburg). These beliefs started to change in the late 17th century, partly due to the unfolding

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[5] Exceptions still exits however, for instance, in places where Shari'a law allows for stoning, practice condemned by international organizations for human rights, like Amnesty International.

process of industrialization, resulting in a sweeping change in penal policy. Reforms started to make strides, surprisingly perhaps, in America first, "a fact that needs to be borne in mind when considering the position of the USA on the death penalty in modern times" (Hood and Hoyle 11), with Pennsylvania as the first state to abolish capital punishment in 1794 for all crimes except murder, followed by Michigan, which in 1846 abolished the method even for murder (Hood and Hoyle 11). The British government eliminated the death penalty in 1964, (Spierenburg), marking the beginning of a wider rejection of the practice in modern times.

We tend to think of the abolishment of capital punishment as a linear development, rooted in steadily changing sensibilities and a general liberalization of a society, as a symbol of the "progress in the civilization process" (Kudlac 17). However, it is interesting to note that, in fact, the support for abolishing the death penalty has always been in fluctuation, and has not followed a direct linear development. For example, some of the first examples of abolitionists reinstated the method later. Romania, one of these cases, abolished capital punishment by the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, along with other countries like Austria and Switzerland (Hood and Hoyle 11). The attitude of the U.S.A. toward the death penalty confirms this pattern. Initially, it led the abolitionist movement, as mentioned. In modern times, the support for the death penalty on the part of the American public was low during the mid 1970s, but rose noticeably during the

1990s, to a surprising high of 79.7 percent in 1994. Subsequently, support declined sharply and levelled off in 2004 to a lower 68.6 percent (Kudlac 141).

This example shows that we cannot think of abolitionism as a direct function of emancipation or the advancement of civilization. Indeed, as Boulanger and Sarat observe, the use of a "binary opposition between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' criminal justice" in Europe is unfounded, as "abolition seems to be rooted in European societies much less than the claim implies" (Sarat and Boulanger 33). In the case of Romania, for instance, it can be argued that political circumstances and the desire to belong to the European Council played a major role in the 1990 decision to abolish capital punishment (Hood and Hoyle 50), making this a political decision rather than evidence of a 'natural' socio-ethical progression.

Indeed, local political and ethical circumstances can be shown to shape ideas about capital punishment in isolation from global ideological tendencies. For instance, much literature implicitly or explicitly claims that the present-day U.S. system of capital punishment is an instance of 'American exceptionalism'. Lipset and Mark characterize the U.S. cultural disposition as based on a

> *relatively high level of social egalitarianism, economic productivity, and social mobility ... alongside the strength of religion, the weakness of the central state, the earlier timing of electoral democracy, ethnic and racial diversity, and the absence of feudal remnants, especially fixed social classes. (Lipset and Marks 16)*

These elements, they claim, resulted in the 'American Creed', rooted in notions of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire, a mix of elements that cultivated an atmosphere hospitable to the practice of capital punishment.

Franklin E. Zimring uncovered a statistical correlation between patterns of lynching in the 1890s and patterns of executions in the 1990s, pointing out that U.S. states with high rates of (illegal) lynching in the 1890s had high rates of (legal) executions in the 1990s, while those with low rates of lynching then have low rates of execution now. The cause, he argues, is a vigilante tradition "imbedded in the culture and experience of the United States" (Zimring 123) and based on an American belief in violent social justice (Zimring). Whitman also suggests that capital punishment is a result of a particular American cultural disposition, and not only a judicial act (Whitman 207). More specifically, Whitman believes that the U.S. practice of the death penalty is an extension of Puritan-based cultural traditions oriented towards the shaming and punishment of delinquents (Whitman). Garland takes issue with this culturalist version of American Exceptionalism and disputes the claim that the death penalty is an underlying cultural tradition (Garland *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory*). Instead, he suggests, capital punishment is a transient phase of penal policy (Garland *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory*

355),[6] "largely an expressive measure today, held in place chiefly by emotionally charged political considerations rather than by more instrumental concerns such as deterrent crime control," (Garland *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* 349) a phase that will eventually fade out. Despite divergences, these opinions buttress the idea of capital punishment as a cultural instrument.

The Public Execution

Another culturally relevant means of punishment that enters this discussion is the practice of public execution, which, despite being no longer widespread, can provide historical context for the ways in which we respond to current methods of capital punishment. One of the common threads through the cases presented in this study is their spectacular nature, the tendency to theatrical displays, a feature also shared by early public executions. According to Petrus Cornelius Spierenburg, the public execution of the *Ancient Régime* was constructed upon theatrical pillars – the actors, or executioners, the stagers, or authorities, the watchers, or "spectators at the scaffold", and the victims (Spierenburg). Philip Smith also draws attention to the latter's own dramatic performances, as he discusses the various roles the condemned men and women took on the scaffold-stage. As the martyr, the picaresque rogue, the gentleman, the

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[6] "A claim that capital punishment is kept in place by force of underlying and long-standing cultural commitments would have to explain why these determinants slackened their hold for most of the 20th century, ceased entirely for a decade after 1967 and then reasserted themselves with renewed and increasing vigour in the two decades after 1977" (Garland "Capital Punishment and American Culture" 10).

rake, the sympathetic victim, the victims sometimes had a transformative effect on the punishment narrative (Smith).

Other dramatic elements of the narrative of the penal system were "publicity and the infliction of physical suffering" (Spierenburg 200). As a "manifestation of [state] power", the drama of "physical punishment achieved a very direct sort of exemplarity ... public executions represented par excellence that function of punishment which later came to be called 'general prevention'" (Spierenburg 201). Thus, "executions were dramatized in order to serve as a sort of morality play" (Spierenburg 43). In fact, the word "actors" which he uses to denote the executioners, and "stagers", for the authorities, exemplifies the dramatization element inherent in the public execution. He recounts that "from an early date executions in Western Europe were dramas, ... spectacular plays with a moral" (Spierenburg 43) lesson, where orderliness and regulation were necessary, and scaffold were erected "in such a way as to be inaccessible to the public" (Spierenburg 44), as stages. At a later phase,[7] executions were conducted in a ritualistic manner, on a regular set and location, and certain practices were held prior to the main event. Spectators behaved differently before 1750, as Spierenbug explains, influenced by important changes from a preindustrial civilization to an industrial society. Sometimes, the ceremony started before the actual execution, often with the building of the scaffold and the other necessary tools, and was

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[7] More specifically, "during the last phase of preindustrial society in Europe" (Spierenburg 45).

transformed into a celebratory event[8] involving dancing, which may be read as a "subversion of the actual purpose of the death penalty" (Spierenburg 88).

Furthermore, a successful execution was one in which morality triumphed:

> *In the eyes of the authorities the staging of executions achieved its most beautiful form of ultimate success when it came to a kind of overall victory of the criminal. For this his co-operation was requited. He had to be convinced of the righteousness of his punishment ... of the wrongness of [his] own acts and the righteousness of [his] death ... The execution of a disbeliever was not a perfect one. (Spierenburg 59)*

We could assume that these practices are no longer existent; however, examples and parallels with such ritualized, almost celebratory past behaviours around the scaffold still can be found. One is the spectacle commotion caused by the 1998 execution of Karla Faye Tucker, conducted in Huntsville, Texas, which, it can be said "resembled the hangings of colonial criminals publicly executed or murdered three hundred years earlier" (Boudreau 187). The large vocal assemblies of opponents and proponents, the chanting of a crowd, the highly mediatised proceedings and carnivalesque atmosphere, and the victim's ultimate religious penitence and transformation are all elements inviting a comparison to

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[8] Since the act of being involved in the proceedings would make one 'infamous', this was a strategy a way to recruit enough workers, who were reassured by the authorities that they had not been tainted. It is interesting to note that later, a similar fear of association was observed -- in 1889, the electric chair had been implemented in New York, causing numerous complaints from the electrical companies fearing an association with the dangers of the electric chair. Spierenburg speculates these complains occurred because the companies "feared that electricity might become 'infamous,'" by association (Spierenburg 88).

earlier narratives, like those of a lynch mob gathering (Boudreau 200). The interest in her case illustrates, as well, that support for capital punishment is still present in contemporary U.S.A.,[9] despite the definite shift from public to private capital punishment executions.

Indeed, as Spierenburg explains, "the infliction of pain and the public character of punishment did not disappear overnight, both elements slowly retreated in a long, drawn-out process over several centuries" (Spierenburg viii). This process was made possible through changes at the level of sensibilities (Spierenburg),[10] along with political and legal shifts, he asserts.[11] One of the early factors leading toward the creation of a judicial system as we know it today in the Western world was the rise of territorial principalities in Europe, around the 12th century, a development that changed notions of freedom, which were revised[12] to mean the privilege of being allied to a central authority, the king. These relations introduced repression as a method of controlling, and the emergence of criminal justice, with corporal and capital punishment methods. Centuries later, the "disappearance of serious mutilation in the early seventeenth century" prompted a "decline of the physical element in punishment" (Spierenburg ix). At the same

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[9] As mentioned, the support for the method has fluctuated along the years, not decreased in a linear fashion, as perhaps expected.

[10] The term sensibility "refers to verifiable expressions of anxiety or repugnance and the question of whether these reflect a genuine concern for the well-being of delinquents or for that matter of anyone at all is left aside" (Spierenburg 184).

[11] Spierenburg bases his study on legal historians that have traced the 'birth of punishment', or the 'emergence of public penal law'; he invokes P. W. A. Immink, and Viktor Achter most extensively in the chapter "The Emergence of Criminal Justice" (Spierenburg 1-12).

[12] Before feudalisation, decentralized management of one's property was common.

time, imprisonment systems were developing, and, most importantly, urbanization and the formation of nation-states solidified. In fact, "the disappearance of public executions is related to the transition from the early modern state, whether absolutist or patrician, to the nation-state" (Spierenburg x).

Furthermore, middle-class sensibilities were changing, prompting an "emergence of an aversion[13] to the sight of physical punishment and a consequent criticism of the penal system" (Spierenburg 204), along with several other emerging modern sensibilities and ideas. Thus, this period witnessed "movements to abolish slavery, advance women's rights, ban alcohol, encourage healthy eating habits, improve the treatment of the mentally ill, and limit the use of corporal punishment" (Atwell 9). Several other scholars claim that public executions were abolished mainly because of the changing cultural sensibilities of 19th-century elites,[14] pointing in particular to the growing unease toward the visual and olfactory aspects of public hanging ceremonies. The combination of these developmental factors, legal and cultural, helped the ideological shift toward

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[13] This aversion, Spierenburg explains, "became manifest in the late eighteenth century and was a result of processes of conscience formation.... Originally, psychic controls were largely confined to a context on one's own group. Emotions and aggressive impulses were hardly restrained with regard to inferior classes." This situation changed "in the course of the early modern period [when] mutual dependence between social groups increased". Also, bureaucratic invisibility combined with increasingly impersonal rule, new social elements emerging were less suited to public executions. (Spierenburg 204-205). Furthermore, "publicity was needed because the magistrates' power to punish had to be made concretely visible: hence the ceremony. The display of corpses and the refusal to refrain from executions in the tense situation after riots. ... The spectators, who lived in a relatively pacified state but did not yet harbour a modern attitude towards the practice of violence, understood this [power]." (Spierenburg 201)

[14] Some examples were provided by Louis P. Masur in *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865*, and by Karen Halttunen in *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*.

privately meted forms of punishment. Thus, as "several aspects of life became privatized, disappearing from the public arena" (Spierenburg ix), punishment too became a private event, a move that furthermore solidified the increasing aversion to viewing public (Spierenburg 184). The transition from a public spectacle to a more private form of punishment brought, according to Michel Foucault, a sense of guilt and shame which was not there before:

> *Punishment had gradually ceased to be a spectacle. And whatever theatrical elements it still retained were now downgraded, as if the functions of the penal ceremony were gradually ceasing to be understood, as if this rite that 'concluded the crime' was suspected of being in some undesirable way linked with it. It was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them, to show them the frequency of the crime itself, to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration. (Foucault 9)*

This sense of shame has continued into modern times. Since 1996, public executions have been officially condemned by the United Nations Human Rights Committee as "incompatible with human dignity" (Hood and Hoyle 165), with the United Nations urging governments not to carry out these sentences in public. However, as illustrated by the example of Saddam Hussein, these sentences have been carried out, nonetheless, "in at least 19 countries or territories since 1995" (Hood and Hoyle 165). Some executions, like Saddam Hussein's, were privately performed, but became public through leaked recordings. The latest discussion

around this topic was provoked by a woman condemned to be stoned to death in Iran. Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani's case was particularly decried in the media, not in the least because the sentence had been imposed on her for adultery.[15]

Saddam Hussein's capital punishment was spectacular because it was recorded and broadcast, a rare practice. Amnesty International reported the last filmed execution to have had taken place in 2000 in Guatemala, although recording also occurred informally in April 2001, in Thailand, as reporters witnessed the execution of five prisoners by firing squad, an event that was partly broadcast on public television (Hood and Hoyle 167). Generally, however, televised broadcasting of executions is no longer deemed acceptable for Western audience. Yet, executions in the U.S. are arguably partly mediatised as the news media interviews prisoners, and witnesses watch executions. For instance, the capital punishment of Timothy McVeigh was witnessed by a few people through a television set in the room next to the chamber. The broadcasting of these events has become a contested area, and "the question of right of access, including televising of executions, has provoked considerable controversy" (Hood and Hoyle 167), especially within the news media industries, which may be affected financially by the regulations of visual representations.

The question of the visibility of capital punishment has been linked to the abolishing of the practice itself by campaigners against capital punishment like

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[15] At the time of writing this study, the case has been complicated by the newest murder charges laid against her.

Austin Sarat, who have argued that "the survival of capital punishment in America depends, in part, on its relative invisibility" (Sarat 191). Sarat and Boulanger insist that executions should be televised and made fully visible to the citizens in whose name and by whose authority they routinely proceed. They argue that executions in modern U.S.A. are strictly speaking 'public' events that sustain themselves by taking place in secret. They believe that

> *ghoulish or not, the public is always present at an execution. It is present as a juridical fiction, but as more than a fiction, as an authorizing audience unseeing and unseen, but present nonetheless. This is the haunting reality of state killing in a constitutional democracy. So long as there is capital punishment in the United States, the only question is the terms of our presence. (Sarat and Boulanger 205)*

The public should be allowed to witness executions as an exercise in taking responsibility for the events which they have collectively authorized. The transgressive act of televising state killing "would mean changing the terms of control, removing state killing from the bureaucratic domain, and recognizing its political configuration" (Sarat and Boulanger 206). Thus, televising executions on the nation's TV screens can be considered a political act.

Garland, on the other hand, is more hesitant about the public broadcasting of these sentences, because "such broadcasts could even serve to *normalize* executions, transforming them from awesome acts that are too disturbing to be shown into a subject for low-key public broadcasts that have little appeal to

viewers and no clear rationale" (Garland "Capital Punishment and American Culture" 473). Hood also points that

> *one cannot think of anywhere in the world where such shock tactics have worked. Indeed, the process of abolition had, in most countries, been marked by its removal from the public gaze into a secretive and eventually marginalized activity of the criminal justice ... It is possible that by making 'theatre' out of executions the public would brutalized too. (Hood and Hoyle 167)*

It can be deduced then that Sarat and Boulanger align themselves with a long history of iconophilic presumptions, as they believe that images might overpower the written or oral narrative of the execution itself. This hierarchical contextualization of the images will be discussed more in depth in chapter five.

Earlier, notably Neo-Marxist and Foucauldian studies of punishment culture have looked at punishment systems through the prism of class hegemony and theories of control. Today, as Garland explains,

> *it is no longer novel or controversial to observe that penal institutions are grounded in cultural values and perceptions (Downes, 1988; Garland, 1990, 2005; Wiener, 1990; Melossi, 2001; Simon, 2001; Vaughan, 2002; Whitman, 2003; Savelsberg, 2004; Sarat and Boulanger, 2005); that they are the sites of ritual performance and cultural production (Arasse, 1989; Gerould, 1992; Garland, 2002; Smith, 2003; Savelsberg and King, 2005) or that they give rise to diffuse cultural consequences quite above and beyond any crime control effects they may produce (Bender, 1987; Garland, 1991; Sarat, 2001). (Garland Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory 259)*

Thus, "after centuries during which capital punishment was a completely normal and self-evident part of criminal punishment, it has taken a life of its own in various arenas, which goes far beyond the penal sphere" (Sarat and Boulanger, editors' review), affected by local culture and politics.

Today's television and newspaper coverage of executions can be likened, as Boudreau does, to the 17th century church pulpit. These media channels act "as a source of interpretive authority on the case," with "the Internet assum[ing] the function once belonging to broadside publications: it represent[s], that is, the marketplace of public opinion with it unofficial, mass response to the execution" (Boudreau 201). The virtually convening public reminds Boudreau of "Habermas's description of a 'forum' where 'private people' congregate in public and 'read[y] themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion'" (Boudreau 202), a kind of public sphere. This relationship between the execution and the media covering it is stressed by Kudlac, who also points toward the media's role as a replacement for the visible gatherings in the town's court yard, which have disappeared in a proper sense since the abolishing of the public execution. Thus, "media reporting constructs rather than 'reflects' reality" (Kudlac 3). Generally, however, it can be said that executions, in the U.S. at least, pass without much fanfare. In fact, Kudlac claims, "ninety-nine percent of executions take place unnoticed by the public" (Kudlac 1), in accordance with the general direction toward the hiding of punishment practices.

Executions of Women

Since my study considers Elena Ceauşescu, it is important to place her execution images within a larger corpus of thinking about the punishment of women and the visual representations of these acts. My intention is to inquire as to whether her execution mirrored past cultural practices, and whether the way her execution was displayed pointed toward 'judicial misogyny' (Ballinger 10) or cultural misogyny in general.

A first look at the topic of women and executions may provide the impression that women are a minority in this judicial field, perhaps due to cultural taboos surrounding the killing of women. Kerry Segrave, who has studied the capital punishment of women in the U.S.A. and Canada during the period 1840-1899 found that, at least at the beginning of that period, "it was just not considered manly to execute a woman" (Segrave 1). This was the public opinion of the time; for example, a 1855 *New York Times* article states that "it will forever seem an ignoble and a cowardly thing for the State, through its armed officers and with all the military parade of an execution, to seize upon a woman and hang her by the neck until she be dead" (Segrave 5). Notwithstanding the confident tone of the 1855 article, this moral reluctance did not last forever. In fact, Ballinger refutes the idea that "state servants working within the criminal justice system were far more reluctant to hang women than men" (Ballinger 1). Instead, she declares, "a closer examination of this apparent discrepancy reveals it to be a misconception which has come about as a result of ... statistics .... Once this is

taken into account we find that women who had murdered an adult had less hope of a reprieve than men" (Ballinger 2). What is more, toward the end of the period studied by Segrave, attitudes toward women criminals seemed to lean toward a disproportionate incrimination of women. Segrave quotes an 1899 U.K. newspaper, *The Spectator*, which explains that

> *morally the woman who murders is often more guilty than the man. She is more trusted, her instrument – poison – is more treacherous, and she is almost invariably sober. She had, if anything, a keener conscience to overcome, and a natural impulse of pity for all physical suffering which she has to beat down before she can obtain the necessary callousness. (Segrave 15)*

Even if this tendency to essentialize a woman's 'natural' inclinations and define her crime as a deviance from her femininity is dated in today's terms, it still resonates in some rare contemporary practices. Examples still abound, such as that of the 2004 hanging of a 16-year-old girl, Atefeh Rajabi, in Iran, for "acts incompatible with chastity", or the public hanging of two prostitutes in 2001, in Afghanistan (Hood and Hoyle 150). The possibility of stoning a person to death because of adultery exists still in Middle East countries or Northern Nigeria, where Shari'a law is still obeyed, albeit infrequently, and where the "person being executed [is] buried waist deep, or to above the breast of a woman" (Hood and Hoyle 156), so as to hide body parts associated with one's sexuality and gender attributes.

Anette Ballinger studied the relationship between values surrounding femininity and capital punishment practices in an examination of the execution of women between 1900 and 1950. She grounds her research in a history of the practice, beginning in the Middle Ages, when men were predominantly hanged, a more respectable method of punishment, while women were burned, and often indecently displayed (Ballinger 12). She points toward the clearly gendered witch-hunt that swept Europe from the medieval through the modern periods, killing women for their social transgressions and deploring their sexuality. Ballinger's study discovered that only nine percent of all women convicted of murder were executed during the period she examines. She argues that these sentences were carried out not because the crimes were more important that those of the other 91 percent, but because these women transgressed gender role expectations in relation to sexuality, respectability, domesticity and motherhood.

In general, "throughout history", Ballinger argues, "themes around sexuality and conduct have been applied to criminal women, and have mobilised discourses which ultimately contributed towards the final outcome of their trials and punishments" (Ballinger 9). She discusses the possibility that voyeurism, tinged with sexual titillation, was a significant element during Victorian public executions of women. As an example she quotes Thomas Hardy, who witnessed the 1856 hanging of Elizabeth Martha Brown, and describes Brown's "fine figure ... against the sky as she hung in the misty rain, and how the tight black silk gown set off her shaper as she wheeled half-round and back" (Ballinger 33). Ballinger

quotes Hardy's bibliographer, Gittings, who believes that the rustle of the dress "had enormous sexual meaning for Hardy" (qtd. in Ballinger 33). Whether this association was a fact or not is irrelevant; what is relevant is that either Hardy or Gittings experienced the rustle of the dress as an erotic event. Ballinger recounts several such sexualized interpretations of the hanging female body, highlighting the link between public punishments and gender-specific treatment.

Diana George and Diane Shoos also suggest that voyeurism and sensationalism have been factors influencing the viewing of women's executions. They refer to the 1928 press photograph of Ruth Snyder, a woman executed in the electric chair, in the Sing Sing Prison, in the state of New York. Published on the first page of the *New York Daily News*, an early tabloid, the image provoked a sensationalism and controversial response over several consecutive days. George and Shoos highlight, through this example, that

> *what is so evident [in such visual representation] is a tension between the act of witnessing and the potential for voyeurism. The press photo of Ruth Snyder, for example, served initially as an act of witness to execution. However, uses of the photo over time have allowed voyeurism to override other ways of seeing and thus attenuated the photo's usefulness as witness toward political or critical ends. (George and Shoos 592)*

Again, we are reminded of the fetishizing and decontextualizing risks contained in death imagery.

Eventually, during the latter half of the 19th century, the capital punishment of women was moved from public spaces to behind prison walls, introducing a "more 'discreet' style of execution" (Ballinger 36), influenced, as

Ballinger shows, by a complex network of informal and formal social rules governing the status of women within private space. Particularly interesting is her focus on the punishment of the "ultimate deviant woman – the female criminal" (Ballinger 50), who was treated according to the degree of femininity she displayed. Thus, "what counts is whether the defendant is a 'good' woman – "loyal and loving, compliant and altruistic ... a faithful wife and mother whose sphere is the home, not the competitive arena of the marketplace" (Ballinger 51). While her research focused on late 19th century and early 20th century law practices, Ballinger concludes that many of these perceptions of gender relations still hold some currency, and that

> *a woman's conduct may come under closer scrutiny than her criminality, and in turn play an important part in determining the severity of her sentence. Those studying the social control of women are therefore not surprised to find that women who received the harshest punishment of all during the 20th century – death by execution – had stepped far beyond the boundary of acceptable female conduct and behaviour. (Ballinger 53)*

She also shows, invoking examples of mid-20th century women killers, that

> *women who fail to conform to traditional expectations in the areas of sexuality, respectability, domesticity and motherhood are more likely to be the victims of judicial misogyny with the consequent result that they receive harsher punishment that women who conform to conventional models of femininity. (Ballinger 329)*

Furthermore, "the focus on a woman's character and reputation becomes particularly noticeable in cases involving double trials which include a male and female defendant" (Ballinger 337). A very poignant case presented by Ballinger illustrates that these practices were at work even late in the last century: Zoora Shah, sentenced to life in 1993 in Britain because she killed the man who sexually and mentally abused her for years, lost her appeal in 1998.[16]

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[16] Eventually, in 2000, her case was reviewed and her sentence cut to 12 years from the previous 20, due to pressure from support groups and similar, newer judicial events ("Arsenic Killer's Sentence Cut").

The Case of Contemporary Romania

Romania abolished capital punishment immediately after the execution of the Ceauşescus, in January 1990.[17] Hood regards the abolition that followed the capital punishment of the Ceauşescus[18] as a sign of "rejection of cruelties and injustices associated with totalitarianism" of the regime, "an appropriate way to respond to the demise of totalitarian regimes and to welcome democratization" (Hood 339). This change could well be interpreted as a remorseful gesture highlighting the importance of the last execution; the Ceauşescus were the last monsters to be killed. Another interpretation is that it was a political move prompted "by the desire ... to become members of the Council of Europe" (Hood and Hoyle 50). Indeed, Romania joined the Council in 1993, and the abolition was most probably driven by what Boulanger and Sarat call "the dynamics of regional integration", despite the post-communist tendency to "overwhelmingly support the death penalty". Indeed, they note, "it is safe to say that most government in the area abolished it less because of the 'human rights appeal' of abolitionism and more because of anticipated benefits of compliance with European norms" (Sarat and Boulanger 205). Petre Roman, one of the leading Romanian politicians of the FSN [National Salvation Front], who was actively involved in the revolution and trial of the Ceauşescus, asserted that the reasons and politics surrounding the decision to summarily execute the couple by firing squad without much

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[17] However, the capital punishment was abolished specifically only for crimes committed in peacetime.

[18] Under Decree Law of 7 January 1990 (Hood and Hoyle 28).

deliberation were based on a Romanian form of cultural and political exceptionalism (*Nicolae Ceausescu the Unrepentant Tryant;* Cyr and Leblanc; Brandstätter). Ironically, this claim of exception was no longer invoked a few weeks after the execution, when Romania abolished capital punishment, electing to give up any distinctiveness in exchange for a chance to belong to the greater European community. This only further emphasizes the cultural and political elements that bolster and affect practices of capital punishment in many ways.

Chapter Two. The Romanian Revolution, Its Context, and Media Coverage

Understanding the larger historical and political context within which the Ceauşescus were executed means revisiting the severe regime of censorship set up by Nicolae Ceauşescu, whose public image was deeply at odds with the actual opinion shared by the people, as this chapter will show. In order to provide a comprehensive tableau of the Ceauşescus' final moments, I will consider the political events preceding the sentence, the timeline of the "Televised Revolution", the scepticism surrounding the revolution, and the domestic and international media coverage of the events. All these factors contributed to shaping the way in which the Romanian revolution unfolded.

Historical and Political Context of the Execution

After decades of the Ceauşescus' draconian rule over Romania, the sudden political change of December 1989 seemed almost implausible both to observers at home and outside the country. Though the uprisings were part of the wave of crumbling Eastern European totalitarian regimes, their quick, drastic demise had been unforeseen, both at home and globally, given the difficult circumstances against which they fought. In fact, the surprise at their successful outcome was so great, when set against the Western world's failure to forsee the fall of

communism, that many domestic and international pundits concluded that these events must have been staged.

This scepticism was due in part to a defeatist attitude rooted in the pervasive and powerful censorship that had reigned over the pathways of information in Romania. Prior to the revolution of 1989, communist censorship had made dissent almost impossible, and had repeatedly eradicated all forms of earlier opposition. As a result, the Western public sphere did not believe a revolution was possible in Romania. For instance, Raymond Seitz, George Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Canada, declared in a December 1989 White House news report that he did not see any signs that Romania would follow the Eastern wave of revolutions, as it was immune to all the changes transpiring around it (Preda and Retegan 449). Similarly gloomily, one month before the revolution, Dennis Deletant wrote in *The Times* that Ceauşescu "will continue to dominate his country because the conditions for change in the rest of Eastern Europe ... do not apply in Romania's case" (Deletant "Cocooned from Winds of Change - Romania"). The reigning political control prior to December 1989 was so strong that such hopeless declarations were common. By presenting some of the historical background to the revolution, and noting, in particular, the context of censorship in which that revolution was born, I will explain some of the sceptical responses to and interpretations of the change of regime in Romania.

Censorship during the Socialist Communist Era of Nicolae Ceauşescu

The December 1989 upheavals in Romania were so uncharacteristic of political life in that country that their importance was initially dismissed by the Communist Party. Ceauşescu did not deem it necessary to postpone a state visit to Iran during the events, a sign that "at that time, neither the circle immediately surrounding the communist dictator nor the general populace imagined that the old order was threatened by these events" (Goldfarb 38). The advent of a revolution was seen to be almost impossible in a country where the communist regime, with its *"aura of invincibility"* (Kuran), exercised pervasive, unforgiving control and the isolation of all dissident movements.

An important challenge to a dissident movement was the lack of a supporting infrastructure. The circulation of anti-totalitarian literature through a samizdat network was non-existent compared to the activity of dissident set up in the surrounding countries. These neighbouring dissident networks operated under conditions that were similarly communist, only much milder. For instance, a 1984 decree made the official registration of typewriters and the submission of sample typed pages to the *militia*[19] compulsory, for the purpose of identifying all type-writer machines.[20] Literature and political information were severely censured.

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[19] Militia was the name of the Romanian communist police force.

[20] Rather than relying on an underground publishing movement, otherwise known as samizdat, dissident material circulated most widely as Xeroxed copies of originally handwritten documents, subsequently smuggled and distributed across the borders into Europe and often

Indeed, "the virulence of the repressions let by secret police forces was incomparably higher in Romania than in the other 'socialist' nations" (Boldur-Lăţescu 133). This explains in part the rarity of written dissent and the lack of a samizdat network in Romania. All revolt was stifled in its infancy, and its perpetrators were immediately isolated from their milieu in order to prevent any leak of information about opposition movements. These draconic measures resulted in a total smothering of national and, of course, international communication pathways. The only information readily available to the public across distances was propagandist material disseminated by the regime via its sanctioned channels – the national television and the party's newspapers. Locally, unofficial information was still circulating orally, but the migration of written material was largely non-existent.

The main alternative channel of national and international dissident news, one among very few such sources, was Radio Free Europe. This radio station created a transient, precarious verbal thread between dissidents, abroad and at home, and a domestic audience, circumventing the censorship tightly controlling print information. Through its dissemination of information otherwise not available on a national scale, and its support of a tamizdat network, Radio Free Europe is rightly considered to have played a major role in the 1989 events. It circulated through the fostering of vital revolutionary information, spurring the

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back into the country through various means, most safely through the waves of Radio Free Europe. This can be considered a form of tamizdat.

uprisings within the seemingly invincible regime of censorship and intimidation that reigned during Ceauşescu's dictatorship (Solomon).

The Public Image of the Ceauşescus

Nicolae Ceauşescu paired his regime of terror with a persistent control of his and his wife's portrayal, both at home and abroad. Although international relations with Romania changed according to global – mostly Western – political interests, the rulers were officially presented as an invincible parental couple. At the time of the execution however, the Ceauşescus were already regarded in a highly negative light, both on domestic and international ground. A process of vilification was already at work, setting in place the conditions for a particularly favourable reception of the news of their execution, both in Romania and abroad.

The official media portrayal of Elena and Nicolae was a manufactured visual show forced upon every Romanian citizen during the regime's rule. From pre-kindergarten classrooms to official offices, the walls of every institution in every corner of the country were required to be adorned with photographs of the couple. These were heavily altered and outrageously[21] embellished to the

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[21] This outrageous exaggeration and embellishment was of course the object of many sarcastic critiques, veiled or not. The Romanian dissident poet Ana Blandiana, among others, ridiculed the vanity of the leader in her work using hidden metaphors. Outside of the country, Salvador Dali is said to have sent a sarcastic admiration telegraph congratulating Ceauşescu on his excessive vanity, and on "introducing the presidential scepter" (Botvinick).

advantage of Nicolae and Elena, who were depicted as being decades younger than they were in reality.[22]

Nicolae created

> *an iconography of its own: the saturation of the country with*
> *touched-up, idealised portraits of the leader everywhere; scriptures,*
> *thirty volumes of his collected speeches on everything from*
> *agriculture, about which he knew little, to culture, about which he*
> *knew less; and rituals of worship, such that in years to come all*
> *artists, scientists, writers, poets and engineers would solemnly*
> *intone that the inspiration and guidance for their work had been the*
> *cobbler's apprentice with only primary school education [, i.e.*
> *Nicolae]. (Galloway and Wylie 28)*

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[22] For examples of the socialist realistic painted portraits of that time, see www.steidlville.com/books/719-CEAU.html

This façade was in stark contrast with the Romanian people's hatred of their leader. The final untouched video of the Ceauşescus being tried and executed was especially shocking to Romanians because of the discrepancy between the reality of an old couple and the sanitized public image they had cultivated for years, which had become engrained within the everyday Romanian experience until the end of 1989.

In actuality, the nation likened the dictator and his wife to monsters, both before and after their deaths. Nicolae was called Dracula, the Anti-Christ (Ottosen), and a modern-day Caligula (Teimourian). The poems circulating underground, on tamizdat networks, likened him to various animals, beastifying him, partly as a subversive means of expressing dissent, and partly to divest him of humanity.[23] His death was not bemoaned, but celebrated, even portrayed as divine punishment, "a mystical ... work of destiny, a sanction for having desecrated through demolition so many sacred churches" (Frunza 32).

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[23] Ana Blandiana (born 1942) was one of the dissenting poets who ventured and published such comparisons, only to be persecuted and punished by the regime until its fall. One of her works, *Cartea albă a lui Arpagic* [Arpagic's White Book], portrayed the dictator as a cat.

Elena too was perceived and portrayed as a monstrous figure. It was known that, in her quest for power, she had adorned herself with phony academic titles, such as a Ph.D. in industrial chemistry, followed by many honorary degrees in science awarded to her, presumably without merit, by accredited academic institutions such as the British Royal College of Chemistry. She was rumoured to be older than Nicolae, yet her officially doctored photographs offered "a less than life-like image. She [had] herself portrayed as a woman of 40, still fecund, but already a matriarch, able to give life, but also to take it. Her self-image is a combination of Ceres and the Snow Queen" (Almond "First and Last Lady? - Elena Ceauşescu"). Her femininity was constantly called into question, even for politically irrelevant reasons. The magnitude of the hatred toward her became obvious in the way she was treated in the trial and execution. For instance, the executioners claimed that more bullets were used for her than for Nicolae. Since Elena was less powerful than he was, at least publicly, some of the hatred toward her may point toward misogyny.

Internationally, however, the demonization of the couple did not date from the beginning of their reign. In fact, as unlikely as it now seems, Nicolae Ceauşescu was once favoured by Western leaders, before his draconian policies and their consequences for the Romanian people became impossible for the Western world to ignore. During the early years of his reign, Ceauşescu enjoyed a relatively high level of international approval, despite his totalitarian tendencies and Stalinist rule. Relations with the West were rather positive: Charles de Gaulle,

Gerald Ford, and Richard Nixon showed appreciation for his early anti-Soviet politics. Following Ceauşescu's stand against the Warsaw Pact during the Prague Spring riots of 1968, Nixon visited Romania in 1969, and like Ford, welcomed Nicolae on official visits to the U.S. in 1973 and 1975. In 1974, a treaty with the European Community placed Romania on the list of favoured nations, and in 1978 Ceauşescu received an honorary British knighthood from the Queen (revoked just before his execution). Queen Margaret of Denmark, in 1980, awarded him the Order of the Elephant. In 1980 a contract was signed between Romania and the European community securing the trading of industrial products. Romania was one of only two communist countries that participated in the Olympic Games of 1984 hosted by the U.S. Thus, a large part of Ceauşescu's rule, however internally ravaging, enjoyed popularity abroad.

One of the reasons for such alliances was the obscurity of Ceauşescu's rule: his policies and their results were hidden from international scrutiny. Even as late as April 1989, Ceauşescu was a murky subject, referred to in major news articles as "a strange man" ("Iron Rule in Romania"). Foreign press members would encounter many insurmountable obstacles if they wanted to report on Romania and Ceauşescu, which further impeded efforts to report on the country, and added to the element of obscurity surrounding Ceauşescu's reign (Kirk, Kirk and Răceanu). The journalist William Pfaff had suggested that there was a "conspiracy of silence, that somehow ... Eastern Europe at the height of the Cold War was excluded from the agenda" (qtd. in Kreisler) according to which Western

Europe and North America were operating. "As far as journalists were concerned, [East-Europe] no longer existed. It simply disappeared until the underlying developments [of 1989] began to reemerge" (qtd. in Kreisler). Pfaff was one of the few journalists, along with *The New York Times* correspondent David Binder, who sought to provide a more historically grounded understanding of Romania; the rest of the industry preferred the portrait of a titillating, exotic subject (Kirk, Kirk and Răceanu).

Most importantly, this alliance of tolerance made political sense above all in the atmosphere of the Cold War, as Ceauşescu was one of the few leaders in the Communist Bloc allied to the West, standing up to the Soviets and particularly useful as an ally to the Americans. Thus, as Chomsky notes ("Hot Type on the Middle East. Noam Chomsky Interviewed by Evan Solomon"), Ceauşescu benefited from the anti-Soviet culture pervasive at the time. In fact, at times, Ceauşescu's reign was even called a form of "relaxed communism ... suited to [Romania's] lack of economic and military muscle", a "nationalist, neutralist Communism" ("Eastern Europe: The Third Communism").

Indeed, one must ask, as Aubin does:

> *Why was this ogre and mass murderer recognized with a British knighthood, rewarded with most favored nation status from the United States for relaxing his emigration policies and improving human rights, and visited by French and American presidents, as well as other influential heads of state? The answer is simple: On the one hand, Ceausescu exploited some genuine expressions of*

Romanian nationalism and won favour in the West by cultivating his image as a maverick within the Wasaw Pact, the bad boy who often refused to do Moscow's bidding; on the other hand, Romanian deception and manipulation successfully diverted the West's attention from the repression and squalor that existed in Romania. (Aubin 3-4)

Political attachment to Ceauşescu and the obscurity surrounding his policies may explain why international criticism of his reign started rather far into the destruction he caused, and came late after the nefarious effects of his draconian censorship were felt.

In fact, Romanian-American ties had started to deteriorate progressively in 1978, when Ceauşescu started to revive the Stalinist governing style of the 1950s. At the same time, Rune Ottosen explains, "the enemy image of the Soviet Union had disappeared" within American culture, while

a new enemy image was introduced: the personified image of Ceauşescu clinging to power. This new enemy image was of course not unexpected. Ceauşescu was for many 'the ideal enemy': he was tyrannical in his ruling methods, unsympathetic in appearance and used communist rhetoric to defend his policy. (Ottosen 103)

Gradually, the political rhetoric changed, lead by the US, with the Reagan administration veering away from the harmonious relations of the seventies (Kirk, Kirk and Răceanu), to Ceauşescu's detriment.

As the years passed, and the regime showed its true colours outside of the controlled borders, and particularly in the months before the December revolution, British articles started pointing toward the fact that Romania was "the only country in Europe where hunger [was] widespread and malnutrition on the rise" (Banta). International media started to voice disapproval of the nefarious effects of Ceauşescu's state planning schemes,[24] his debt-reduction policy, and the generally poor record of human rights in Romania. Ceauşescu's honorary British knighthood and the Danish Order of the Elephant were revoked from him in 1989, in protest against his despotic rule and disregard for human rights ("Iron Rule in Romania"). Of course, the countries that were espousing similar ideologies kept a tight alliance with Ceauşescu all throughout his reign. North Korea, Zaire, and China are examples of countries that maintained strong ties with the Romanian dictator, and their censoring of the broadcasting of his execution testified to these alliances (Randall 638). In the West, however, the difficulty of obtaining real information and honest interviews frustrated the press (Gross "Exercises in Cynicism and Propaganda: Law, Legality, and Foreign Correspondence in Romania"), and further added to the negative image of the dictator (Kirk, Kirk and Răceanu 95).

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[24] "More than 8,000 of Romania's 13,000 villages are being demolished, often overnight, to create new "agro-industrial" towns" (Ellis).

The Historical Context Leading to the Execution

The rarity of dissenting events preceding the uprisings becomes easier to understand in the light of the stifling control of the Romanian communication sphere. Under Ceauşescu's total censorship, smaller uprisings foreshadowed the 1989 eruption of discontent, but were swiftly silenced. In general, the opposition consisted of a complex, fragile, transnational network of radio waves, hidden manuscripts and diaries, exile witness and anti-totalitarian literature, coded and metaphorical poems, and openly distributed protest letters in and around the country. The leading genre of Romanian dissident expression was the open protest letter. One of the noisiest condemnations of the Ceauşescu dictatorship, courageously conducted from within Romania, was the 'Goma scandal' of January 1977, provoked by an incendiary open and signed letter of protest addressed to Ceauşescu, denouncing the publication ban on Pavel Kohout's Charter of 1977. This and several other dissenting movements were immediately suppressed, often brutally, and the home arrest, the re-education,[25] and the disappearance of prominent dissidents were common intimidation tactics. The last instances of turbulence prior to December 1989 occurred in 1987 in the city of Braşov, where demonstrations denouncing the disastrous domestic results of Ceauşescu's international debt reduction plan were controlled immediately, resulting in around 300 arrests. These pre-1989 uprisings illustrate the severity of

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[25] In the Piteşti prison were held notorious re-education experiments, where political opponents were tortured. Records show hundreds of thousands of instances of abuse, death and torture (Ioniţoiu).

the communist regime; they were also responsible, to however small a degree, for the slow erosion of the regime's control, and for the building up of a dissenting movement.

In December 1989, a year after the Braşov incidents, discontent erupted again, to a more significant extent, in the city of Timişoara. There, Hungarian minorities were joined by students and other inhabitants of the city in protest against the imminent deportation[26] of Laszlo Tőkés, a Hungarian Lutheran minister accused of anti-communist actions. The *militia* and army intervened on December 17th and forcefully suppressed the demonstration, killing more than a hundred protesters. At that point, reports about the Timişoara casualties started to seep into other parts of the country, through Radio Free Europe. Over the course of the following days, amplified by the radio waves, the local protests turned into a state of national unrest, punctuated by several anti-government demonstrations across the country. The alarm was sounded, and it resonated strongly on the airwaves. The unmanageable size and perseverance of the crowd gathered in Timişoara was unheard of in communist Romania, and unsettling enough for Ceauşescu to return on December 20 from a three-day visit to Iran. On that day, he spoke in response to the events in Timişoara, denouncing the 'imperialist and terrorist forces' perpetrating acts of "a terrorist nature [that] were organised and unleashed in close connection with imperialist, irredentist, chauvinist circles, and

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[26] Isolation through forced relocation was a common tactic of controlling dissident elements.

foreign espionage services in various countries" (Hall "Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989 " 1079).

However, the reports of a high death count in Timişoara criss-crossed the country and reverberated into further unrest, transforming the nation's capital Bucharest and the national television station into the focal point of the rebellion. As the turbulence continued, Nicolae summoned a state-managed assembly on December 21 as a last attempt to settle the unusual disturbances. This was supposed to be the typical show of support, an orchestrated homage to Nicolae, the kind the nation had to endure on a consistent basis. He addressed the crowd from the balcony of his palace overlooking the Piaţa Republica (Square of the Republic). His choice of the Square of the Republic is significant – this was the same place in which Ceauşescu had given his most successful speech, in 1968, during which he condemned the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring. While the Square of the Republic served as the initial site in which Ceauşescu achieved his zenith of power and popularity, it also marked the place of his demise, providing symbolic book-ends to his reign.

The Televised Revolution

The main part of the revolution was documented by state television cameras set up in the square to record Ceauşescu's speech, and some independent, amateur video cameras. The uprisings spilled from the streets into the national

television station in Bucharest, where the leaders of the revolution had convened to report to the nation. As the events were supported and in part created by the medium of the television, they have been called "the Televised Revolution". Thus, it is relevant to analyse the events through the prism of audio-visual recordings, such as those provided in Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica's documentary film *Videograms of a Revolution*, or the news compilation *La Boîte Noire* (Cyr and Leblanc), broadcast by the Quebecois station TVA*, along with other amateur videoclips available online.

Videograms presents the ten days of the revolution through a mix of amateur footage, television camera footage, and archival stock film from the Ceauşescu era, elements woven together by the authors' commentary in the form of a voice-over. The film opens with the camera focusing on a crying, wounded woman who recounts her involvement in the bloody demonstrations of Timişoara, eloquently calling for help in the fight against the regime. The narrative then turns to the events unfolding in Timişoara through amateur footage showing, from afar, people marching in the streets of the city. The voice-over comments on the events unfolding in the background of the shot, functioning as a review of the film itself. This rejection of the standard presentational style of reporting mirrored, in turn, the power reversals occurring within the revolution itself.

The documentary focuses at length on the final speech of Nicolae Ceauşescu, as it was transmitted live by the Romanian national television. This is

the same footage as presented in other documentaries available on the internet, but the film by Farocki and Ujica provides wider coverage, and re-constructs the events through several angles. The video pieces together the unrecorded events that catapulted the revolution, by combining newsreel and home videos taped at the same moment, reconstructing a timeline of the events from different angles. Thus, the authors analysed the events – or what they call videograms –from several perspectives, through the mix of amateur and official footage.

We witness Nicolae's address, as he thanked the organisers of the demonstration – one he had staged himself, of course – and, also, the shouts rising from the crowd under the balcony, as the television camera began to visibly shake. Initially, Nicolae pretended to disregard the unrest from the balcony overlooking the Square, but the crowd below him became progressively restless. Isolated shouts and boos were heard. The noise became undeniable, prompting a confused Ceauşescu to stop his prescribed speech, in an unprecedented event, broadcast live on national television.

At that moment, the communist-controlled television station cut off live broadcasting. After a brief pause, the television viewers saw a red screen. As cameras continued recording live, the sound of the crowd was still heard, but the image was interrupted. Farocki and Ujica chose to dwell on the camera movement during the disturbance. While the live transmission was cut, the cameras were still filming, the lens pointed toward the sky, avoiding the crowds, and the sound track

still betrayed the discord in the crowd. Ceauşescu began to shout repeatedly 'alo' [hello] to the crowd, "as if", the voice-over muses, "there were a disturbance in the line" (Farocki and Ujica). The television broadcast image became a small red square in the corner of the screen; the rest of the screen showed the sky, filmed by the tilted-up camera avoiding the demonstrations occurring below it (the cameras were on the same level with the balcony from which Ceauşescu overlooked the crowd). After a few moments, the red corner square disappeared, and, as the narrator put it, the sound and image were once again synchronized and broadcast to the public. The screen then displayed a text announcing that technical difficulties had caused the halt in the proceedings.

The jarring dissonance between Ceauşescu's intended message and the discontented recipients is obvious in several sources, documentaries and amateur edited footage which can be found online, or as news compilations. One of them is *La Boîte Noire*. The compactly edited footage presents a brief overview of Ceauşescu's early ascendance to power, and goes on to present television images of the revolutionary events, shots of the demonstrators in Timişoara, lines of naked dead bodies on the ground, often the same footage also presented by *Videograms*. The documentary shows the dictator speaking on the balcony of the Square of the Republic, on December 21, as one can hear shouts rising from below him. A disoriented Ceauşescu is seen stopping in midsentence. The television camera recording these events was shaking as the shouts increased in volume, at the same time as Nicolae slowed down his speech and raised a hand to

calm the crowd, clearly worried. "Silence!" was heard from the balcony behind him. The compilation then cut to the footage of the helicopter in which the couple had fled, and showed people climbing over the balcony of the Party building. These are the televised accounts of the most crucial and iconic moments of the Romanian revolution, as recorded by the state television and assembled in documentary form.

The story of the revolution continues. On December 22nd, the demonstrations persisted and large crowds assembled in Bucharest's main square, locked in a standoff with the army. Ceauşescu attempted to give another speech from his balcony, but was immediately shouted at and retreated. Cameras capture the couple escaping by helicopter immediately after the speech, as they film from below, from the point of view of the crowd gathered in front of the palace. *Videograms*, along with other sources, shows the revolutionary crowd united in the square and the images of the chaotic assembly in the television studio, announcing that the couple fled.

The most serious assault had already begun the previous day, late in the evening of December 21. From this point on, the revolution continued to unfold on the television screen, followed at home by everyone who was not in the streets. The fall of Ceauşescu was announced on television by Ion Caramitru, a leading actor, and the dissident writer Mircea Dinescu. Caramitru recalls the rapid takeover of the television station as "surreal: I said: 'OK, let's take your APC to
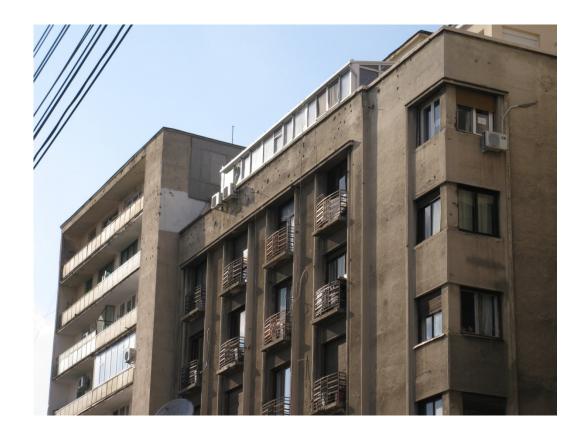
the television station, then,' which we did - the people marching behind - and went in. We got the transmission organised and then we made the announcement: 'You are free, Ceauşescu is gone'" (Vulliamy). The announcements that took place in front of the camera were passionate, the group presenting could barely control itself, journalistic and televisual conventions were not followed, as speakers addressed the camera simultaneously, without following a script. These were tumultuous moments; Maierean described the hectic atmosphere reigning in the studio:

> *The cameras moved constantly back and forth between the Square of the Republic and studio 4 of the television station, where some of the newly important people came to address the nation. Many of those who would become important in the post-revolutionary governing body appeared before the cameras making statements and announcements. In studio 4 of the television station, instantly renamed "The Free Romanian Television" ("Teleziviunea Romana Libera" or TVRL), everybody sent messages, appeals were made, and people were called to defend one or another building under attack by "terrorists". At the same time, the army was requested to defend the "revolution" and the citizens were constantly asked to remain calm and to preserve order (Maierean 27).*

Chaos reigned in the studio, as it did in the streets. The political future of the country was being organized in this atmosphere.

Over the following two days, demonstrations took over the capital. Fights erupted between what were thought to be isolated groups of the *securitate* and the army protecting the civilians and the television station, which had been occupied

by the leading insurgents and transformed into the nucleus of the revolution. Reports of gun fights were broadcast, and the Square of the Republic was the main scene of tension, with occasional shots being fired from invisible sources, aiming and hitting the buildings surrounding the main square and the television station. However, this account is doubted by Almond, who states that "although the buildings around it and on the other side of the street were gutted by gunfire and flames, the TV station itself was marked by only a few bullets." Other accounts differ, describing the TV station as "riddled with bullets" (Codrescu 97). Mark Almond believes that the potentially fictional "revival of fighting was necessary to clear the streets and to disperse the crowds, leaving the Front free to cement its control of the political situation," and that the "revival of the sounds of battle also helped to make the ever-increasing casualty figures seem more plausible" (Almond *The Rise and Fall of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu* 229). Rumours of discord between Ceauşescu and the army allegedly caused the crowd to start chanting "the army is with us!", and indeed, increasingly, the army began to side with the civilians.

The bullets are still visible on many buildings surrounding the Revolution Square, like on the one captured here (Bucharest, March 2010).

On December 23, while isolated instances of brutality from *securitate* forces were still occurring, the Ceauşescus were captured outside the capital, in the village where their helicopter had landed, and were brought into captivity to Târgovişte, a small nearby military base. On December 24, the most visible, televised figures of the events formed the FSN (National Salvation Front) and established a provisional government, lead by former communist and future president Ion Iliescu, claiming control of the revolution as the self-declared main revolutionary body. Uncertainty, confusion and terror were still prevailing in the

streets, and casualty numbers kept rising, despite the announced capture of the Ceauşescus.

Trial and Execution

On Monday, December 25th, Elena and Nicolae Ceauşescu were subjected to a secret trial held in the army base of Târgovişte. Immediately after sentencing they were executed by a firing squad in the annexed courtyard. The trial, short by any standards, lasted under 50 minutes. It began at 1:40pm; the sentence was announced at 2:47pm. A total of 90 minutes of footage covering these procedures is available, including the preliminary medical examination to which the Ceauşescus were subjected. The main arguments for the trial's brevity and secrecy put forward by the leaders of the events related to security, fear of loyalist reprisals, the background stress and the pressure of the ongoing revolution. In fact, Gelu Voican-Voiculescu[27] claimed that "Ceauşescu's death was the condition for the viability of our Revolution" (Ardeleanu, Savaliuc and Baiu 109). Petre Roman, who was a member of the FSN and thus partly responsible for the Ceauşescus' execution, argued in an interview that the FSN acted "perfectly in accordance with the Romanian people, who were happy about the death sentence" (qtd. in Cyr and Leblanc). "The reaction in the Occident was a little strange for us," Roman explained, "because the Occidentals were expecting a trial in perfect order with Occidental norms. But that was somehow asking the impossible" (qtd.

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[27] Gelu Voican-Voiculescu was considered by many to be the main designer of the execution (Marcu).

in Cyr and Leblanc). The sentence was pronounced by the chief prosecutor Dan Voinea, who later declared that "the proper punishment for a dictator is death, if one is to be just to the victims" (Voinea). He declared the couple guilty of the genocide of 60,000 Romanians and their punishment to be their immediate execution by firing squad.

The execution occurred at 2:51 pm, and was conducted by a military squad allegedly consisting of Captain Ionel Boeru, and Majors Dorin Cârlan and Octavian Gheorghiu, and several *militia* and military soldiers, none of whom were shown on the tape. The Ceaușescus were shot with AK-47s, from a distance of a few meters. The video camera following the couple into the courtyard did not record the actual moments of the capital punishment, and explanations as to the reason for this vary according to sources. Voican-Voiculescu declared that the couple was shot even before the order was given, even before they arrived at the execution wall. Ruxandra Cesareanu similarly states that the captain of the execution platoon shot before giving the actual order to fire (Cesereanu "Ceausescu's Trail and Execution"). The former prosecutor Dan Voinea explained in the interview I conducted with him that the shooting was quickly done, in under a minute, because the soldiers did not want to be filmed, as they feared repercussions and vengeance from the public (Voinea). Whatever the reasons, the camera recorded only the last seconds of the alleged shooting. The carrying out of the sentence was announced on television on Tuesday, December 26 1989, at 1:30am; no visuals were shown at that time, and the broadcasting of the tape was

delayed several times by the FSN, who had installed its main quarter in the television offices.

La *Boîte Noire* presented the proceedings of the death sentence in greater depth and showed the couple during the trial, cornered and facing the prosecutors. Gina Stoicu, a Romanian expatriate interviewed in the documentary, explained the pity she felt for the couple, who for the first time ever were visibly vulnerable. The video shows four soldiers handcuffing the Ceauşescus and taking them away, as Elena struggles feebly and calls out that they cannot do this. The voice-over of Gelu Voican narrates how the soldiers had brought the two into the annexed courtyard, had lined them along the wall and shot them at a three-meter distance, "and that is all" (Cyr and Leblanc). The camera was exiting the trial room at the same time as the shots were heard, and did not fire the shots from close up. Instead, at 14:09 minutes into the documentary (2:51pm actual time), all that can be seen is the camera advancing toward an open inner courtyard space, smoke rising from the ground in a corner against a wall struck by a shower of machine gun bullets, reaching the targets in a cloud of smoke. As the firing stops, the camera advances towards two mounds, presumably the bodies of the Ceauşescus. At that point (14:26), a cut switches to a medium shot of the dusty body of Nicolae lying awkwardly on the floor, with his mouth open; two men are flanking him: a soldier on his right, and a doctor taking his pulse on his left. The men leave, and the camera hovers over the scene for a few seconds to provide a medium - close-up shot of Nicolae's head and torso.

Only part of this footage was in fact shown on Romanian television in the early hours of December 26, after several hours of delays, which the FSN attributed to security reasons. The first few times the news of the executions was broadcast, the ten members judging the couple were not shown, nor were any images of Elena. Furthermore, a sound track to the images of the executed body of Nicolae Ceauşescu was only provided on the second broadcast, on the day after. The differences between these two television versions might seem unimportant, but are in fact quite significant to my textual analysis, and will be analysed in depth in chapter five. The way these images were chosen and manoeuvred for public broadcasting, the political operations in the television studio, depended on the political and social powers invested in the images. The political power of the visual medium was used as a catalyst in regime change, and the political impact of those images was amplified in this process.

Media Coverage

While the uprisings of December 1989 were documented with great fervour in the newly blooming democratic media sphere of Romania, the execution of the dictator was a topic less discussed. The response of the international media ranged from disapproval over the obscurity of the trial proceedings to an almost universal welcoming tone, based on cultural relativism, as we shall see.

Presenting an overview of the immediate domestic response surrounding the execution is challenging, since the last days of December 1989 marked the chaotic end of news censorship and the birth of a democratic Romanian media sphere. This period of rapid transition meant that many news organizations launched during this period disappeared quickly without leaving any traces; meanwhile, newly emerging newspapers and other journalistic materials were not properly organized and archived. The official media covering the events within Romania were few at that time: one national television channel, accompanied by the regional radio stations and local newspapers. Until the last moment these were completely and rigorously controlled by the Communist Party, and a complete transition to a democratic journalistic practice could not be expected within hours.

During the first two days of the events taking place in Timişoara, the Romanian press agency Agerpres did not disseminate any news of these events, nor did it report anything about the large protest demonstrations that had been taking place outside the country, like the one on the 18th outside the Romanian embassy in Budapest, where 25000 Romanian refugees and Hungarians gathered (Dorin 189). In this instance, the Communist Party had been warned by telegram (Pungan), but the news were never broadcast. The first few days were marked by silence on the media front, and until the 22nd of December, the leading national newspapers avoided the subject of Timişoara or any uprisings. On that day, *Scînteia* [The Spark], the central communist newspaper, printed on its first page Ceauşescu's speech at a meeting of the PCR (The Romanian Communist Party)

that had taken place the day before, while it devoted the second page to various speeches by workers' leaders. The fourth page discussed the technical and industrial progress and modernization of the country. The fifth page highlighted a congratulatory telegram from the minister of defence Valise Milea, addressed to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and more precisely to the military general Le Duc Anh, on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Vietnamese Army.

At the same time, *România Liberă* [Free Romania] pointed to the disturbances indirectly, while still preserving a communist stance: the second leading article, entitled "A Strong Position in Favour of the Defence of the National Sovereignty and Independence", condemned the 'provocative terrorist and fascist' actions occurring in Timişoara. In another article, Ion Besoiu, an actor and theatre director, confessed his emotional support of the "justified position of the Party and our State toward the hostile attitude of certain reactionary circles that have given in to hooligan acts with a fascist character during the 16th and 17th of December in the city of Timişoara" (Ștefănescu 25). Other editorials, such as "The Free and Independent Path of Socialism" and "Let us Act with all of our Responsibility", expressed the same kind of support for the socialist unity of the country (Ștefănescu).

On the 23rd, after the flight of the dictator and his wife, the tone of the national press had definitely changed, but, interestingly, it still upheld widely

socialist ideals. The first number of *Scînteia Poporului*[28] [The People's Spark] had appeared – a temporary re-naming of the old *Scînteia*. In its leading article "Long Live Liberty, Long Live Response!", the newspaper discussed Ceauşescu's downfall directly, however it also stated that the downfall was propelled by "freedom, democracy [that] have been firmly supporting socialism, [and] the honest, pure principles of socialism". It also affirmed that "no one shouted down with socialism, but down with Ceauşescu's dictatorship". A break with the Ceauşescu regime was emphasized, but not a clear one with communist ideology.

The TVR became the main source of information about the events, and also became the physical and symbolic space of the revolution itself. On December 20, the usual broadcasting schedule was already modified, as Ceauşescu addressed the people during the evening, to dismiss the "international and terrorist actions by imperialist circles and foreign espionage agencies" that attempted to "provoke disorder and destroy the institutions" (Ceauşescu *Nicolae Ceauşescu's Speech, Broadcast on National Radio and Television Stations*). At 10:51am, "without any announcement on the radio, the television station starts operations at an hour that was unusual to the audience. But after the events of Timişoara, after those of the day before in Bucharest, this program was to be expected. A whole nation was waiting for it" (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 19). The announcer started with the declaration of a state of emergency following

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[28] Once again, *Scînteia Poporului* changed its name to *Adevarul* [The Truth], on December 25 1989.

the events, a decree announced four times throughout the day, as backdrop, the static image of the TVR emblem, accompanied by the sounds of a "mobilizing march" (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 20). On that morning, Ceauşescu organized his final demonstration of support, with 100 000 workers brought out of the factories to hear him speak (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 40). From December 21, 1989, 11:46:30, until January 3, 1990, nothing had been recorded in the log books of the Romanian television station, an absence of management that mirrored the state of chaos reigning during those days.

After the Ceauşescus fled by helicopter, the newly renamed Free Romanian Television (TRVL) continuously reported all new information regarding the fleeing dictator. About a half hour after their escape, the Yugoslav press agency Tanjug reported they were on their way to China, information that was re-broadcast on the Romanian television; not long thereafter, the television announced, twice, that the dictator was caught, and had escaped again (Brucan 228). The conflation of the television medium and politics explains why the television often reported unverified rumours, thus fostering

> *a state of panic instead of acting as an informational environment.*
> *On the 22nd of December 1989, the format of the transmission from*
> *studio 4 of The Free Romanian Television and, alternatively from*
> *the Square of the Republic, had no regular or predictable structure.*
> *The on-camera news read by the reporters was interrupted by short*
> *speeches from the revolutionists in the studio. Most of them started*
> *without any introduction and had no coherent structure. The newly*
> *created picture confirmed that people were in a hurry to transmit*

everything they kept inside "untold" during the "golden era.
(Maierean 27)

During the night of the 25th, still images of Ceaușescu's head were shown on television, excerpted from the filmed sequence of the execution.

A full broadcasting of the events had been continuously delayed, as "the provisional government could not decide what to do with this precious record of events before a fuller showing... Petre Roman... slept that night with the master videotape taped to his body," according to Brucan's account of the events (Brucan 199).

Once the execution was announced publicly, the reactions ranged from a lack of commentary at the domestic level, to a mildly condemnatory but largely understanding international response. In general, one can argue that the "Romanians, who have demonstrated in the thousands against Ceaușescu's

authoritarian leadership since he was deposed last Friday, did not react openly to the news of his execution" ("Tv Says Fighting Delays Ceausescu Execution Tape Screening"). The same article observed that "the televised announcement that the Ceauşescus had been executed surprised observers who had expected to see the ousted dictator put on public trial" ("Tv Says Fighting Delays Ceausescu Execution Tape Screening"). The brevity of the proceedings was shocking for most of the world watching.

Internationally, the events were reported first by neighbouring Eastern European news agencies, which became the basis for most of the Western coverage in the early days of the events, due to geographical proximity. Another source was radio, in particular RFE (Radio Free Europe), whose ties with Romanian dissident information were already deeply established over decades of dissident communication over the airwaves.

Despite the travelling signs of revolt, even as the events were unfolding, Western media still distrusted that change could occur in Romania. However, once the reports of large casualty numbers began to trickle out from Eastern press, the international news media started to concentrate on the events. On December 19, Radio Moscow and the Russian press agency TASS discussed the events of Timişoara, confirming the tensions, and stories of cadaver-filled trucks started to circulate globally. The first international news about the Timişoara uprisings were brought to Vienna and Budapest by travellers who were returning from Romania,

by students, tourists and emigrants, whose testimony was immediately picked up by various radio stations across Europe. For example, AP, transmitting from Vienna, relied on the story of a "young Hungarian who declares that he has many relatives working as doctors in Timişoara's hospitals. He declares that in one hospital alone there were 250 dead, most children. Around 30% of the dead were ethnic Hungarians, the rest Romanians" ("Romanian Envoy in Hungary Says Ceausescu Execution Was Justice"). From this point on, the stories and numbers escalated into the thousands, tens of thousands, and higher.

On December 25, as the news of the execution was made public, AP announced:

> *The National Salvation Committee had announced over the weekend that it would put the Ceauşescus on trial and impose severe punishment. It was not immediately clear why the committee pledging to restore democracy in Romania chose to put the Ceauşescus on trial in secret and execute them immediately. (Aubin 153)*

On the next day, December 26, CBS and NBC reported the execution, and broadcast images of the dead body of Nicolae Ceauşescu. The crowd was shown waving the Romanian flag without the communist emblem in its centre, as well as snapshots of bloodied protesters, mass graves and mourners.

On December 27, *The Times* took issue with the method of punishment to which the Ceauşescus had been subjected:

The rough justice meted out to the Conducator underlines the difference between Romania's rebirth in tragedy and the peaceful revolutions elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Even in Bulgaria, President Zhivkov is to be tried according to due process. The Ceausescus, by contrast, were court-martialled in proceedings lasting only two hours, and executed, for genocide and other crimes, on the spot. On the face of it, it is not an encouraging portent for the future that they should have been tried according to their own standards under a law promulgated by the dictator himself. There is little reason, however, to disbelieve the explanation advanced yesterday by Mr Petre Roman, Prime Minister in the newly-formed Council of the National Salvation Front. His claim that the Government acted on army intelligence that members of the Securitate were planning to free Mr Ceausescu cannot be proved."("Reborn in Blood ")

However, the tone was not fully damning, and, in keeping with the general Western news coverage, it allowed for a degree of cultural relativism[29] which presumed that Romania held different attitudes towards capital punishment than the West.

Indeed, in general, the main Western media channels adopted a tone of quiet acceptance, invoking cultural relativism, or related the news as a victory of democratic values, a celebration of the Cold War's triumph over communism. On December 27, Reuters quoted the Romanian ambassador to Hungary who "hailed

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[29] Here, I am referring to the principle based on Franz Boas' idea that "civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative" (Boas 62). In simple terms, "cultural relativism is the form of moral relativism that holds that all ethical truth is relative to a specified culture. According to cultural relativism, it is never true to say simply that a certain kind of behaviour is right or wrong; rather, it can only ever be true that a certain kind of behaviour is right or wrong relative to a specified society" ("Cultural Relativism").

the execution of dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife Elena as an historic moment for Romanian justice and pledged to support the ruling National Salvation Front" ("Romanian Envoy in Hungary Says Ceausescu Execution Was Justice"). In the USSR, Michail Gorbachov offered his support for the just cause of the Romanians, "in the interest of peace and socialism" (Cojocaru). Furthermore, representatives from Bulgaria, FDR, Czechoslovakia, France, Mandred Woerner from NATO, and Margaret Thatcher from Great Britain, among others, offered their support and congratulations.

The Guardian reported that the anti-Christ had died, quoting the words of the Romanian radio announcer who originally uttered them, echoing and thus subtly sanctioning the joy prevalent in the Romanian coverage. The rest of the 670-word article reported on the proceedings in a favourable way, describing the execution as a piece of "evidence that an era had ended, that the most turbulent and violent of the revolutions which collapsed communism across Eastern Europe during 1989 had achieved its immediate objective", a virtuous, but "grisly task of avenging the years of increasing poverty and repression". The article continued to describe the couple's trial: "Ceausescu appeared almost calm, even occasionally smiling, though he looked gaunt, elderly and unshaven. Elena by contrast was forlorn, staring dully in front of her and not reacting when her husband briefly patted her leg" ("Television Shows Last Hours of the 'Anti-Christ'. Romania's President Nicolae Ceausescu and His Wife, Elena, Are Executed by Firing Squad"). It shortly described the gory display of Nicolae's body, while Elena's

body was only mentioned as an afterthought: "A close-up revealed the fallen Ceauşescu, his eyes open, the right side of his head stained with blood that also spattered the stone wall. The other body was that of Elena". The last words she exchanged with the executioners were mentioned: "We want to die together, we do not want mercy," and "'I was like a mother to you.' 'What sort of a mother were you, who killed our mothers?' one soldier replied." The article did not question directly the legitimacy of the court, but did reveal a global mistrust in the proceedings:

> *Several countries criticised Romania's new leaders yesterday for executing Ceausescu and his wife without a public trial and said free Romania should live by the rule of the law. The strongest criticism came from the US. 'We regret the trial did not take place in an open and public fashion,' said a US statement on Monday. Britain was more sympathetic. 'It was a civil war situation and the normally accepted standards of legality hardly obtained at the time. Although one may regret a secret trial, at the time it was not really surprising,' said a Foreign Office spokesman. ("Television Shows Last Hours of the 'Anti-Christ'. Romania's President Nicolae Ceausescu and His Wife, Elena, Are Executed by Firing Squad")*

The BBC also mentioned the U.S.A.' reaction being one of regret; the U.S.' brief announcement following the execution ("1989: Romania's 'First Couple' Executed") reserved in-depth comment on the events, only stating that the tyranny of the dictator had ended and that the news of the execution was received with joy by Romanians who were now free to celebrate Christmas.

Other sources discussed a general unease with the proceedings, but in a rather mild tone:

> *Several nations and the human rights group Amnesty International criticized Rumania's new leaders today for executing former President Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, without a public trial, saying a free Rumania should live by the rule of law. But there were also expressions of understanding of the treatment meted out to the Ceausescus, and the country's new Government gained increasing international support. ("Upheaval in the East: Foreign Reaction; New Bucharest Government Supported Despite Criticism")*

Meanwhile, the Dutch government declared itself 'concerned' and expressed hope that "the high principles of the rule of law will find their place in the new Rumania for which so many have fought to the utmost," but it also stressed that Ceauşescu was responsible "for the inhuman suffering inflicted on the Rumanian people" and said it was "willing to take into account the possible connection'" between this punishment and the end of "the senseless bloodshed" committed by the dictator ("Upheaval in the East: Foreign Reaction; New Bucharest Government Supported Despite Criticism"). Many other reactions were rather permissive as well, grounded in cultural relativism: the Soviet Foreign Ministry called the execution an internal affair, a decision that "has probably been made taking into account the aspirations and will of the Rumanian people". In Britain, an unidentified Foreign Office spokesman declared forgivingly that normally accepted standards were difficult during "a civil war situation"

("Upheaval in the East: Foreign Reaction; New Bucharest Government Supported Despite Criticism"). The most critical stances were those espoused by French media (*Le Monde*).

In the U.S.A., George Bush saluted the downfall of the dictatorship, and supported Romania's transition to democracy, while regretting the dramatic events. *The New York Times* relied on the words of the sociologist Pavel Campeanu, operating at the time in the U.S. on a Fulbright grant, who stated that

> *it had been necessary for the trial to be held quickly and in secret, and to be followed immediately by the execution. Otherwise, he said, bloodshed by the Rumanian security police might have gone on longer and Mr. Ceausescu might somehow have managed to regain power (Pace)*

The *NYT* further espoused Campeanu's relativist stance:

> *'In the United States now there is a danger of over-concentrating on the formal aspect of the trial. It is wrong to concentrate on the formal aspect of the trial of the dictator at the time of a revolution. Any revolution is not very respectful about laws, because a revolution is the suspension of laws, is violence.' And so the violence of the execution, Dr. Campeanu contended, 'was an answer to his violence,' to the bloodshed by Ceausescu Government forces in the preceding days. (Pace)*

The reaction from Russia was described by Western media as ranging from positive to neutral. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Vadim Perfilyev, quoted by Reuters on December 26, stated that the execution "probably took into account

the aspirations and will of the Romanian people" ("Ceausescu Execution Reflected People's Will, Soviet Spokesman"), while Bob Abernethy from NBC News asserted that "no official reaction here to the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, but informally, one Soviet official says he wishes there'd been a more formal trial" ("Newscast: Soviet Union Has No Official Reaction to Ceausescu Execution"). In the meantime, China, coping with the consequences of the Tiananmen Square street protests of June 1989, and other communist countries like Zaire, blocked the free flow of information surrounding the execution (Randall 638).[30] Officially, it kept a diplomatically neutral stance, stating that it "follow[ed] the events with interest" (Ștefănescu 30) and while it hoped for further collaboration with the Romanian people, it considered the events an internal issue.

A Contested Revolution

An overview of the news reports of that time confirmed that the reporting on the events of December 1989 was not consistent. In particular, the casualty numbers varied wildly in media reports in those days, from under a thousand to tens of thousands of victims, while the actual number is now thought to be just over one thousand. Ultimately, and despite their nebulous origins, these events

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[30] This is an example of the "demonstration effect", a term by which Samuel P. Huntington means that people living in one country under authoritarian rule learn about democratising trends through the international media. As Huntington suggests, this kind of impact would be most significant for countries drawn relatively late into the process of democratisation. For example, he explains that Albanians watched East European revolutions on their TV screens in broadcasts from nearby Yugoslav and Italian stations, and that influenced their politics (Huntington).

transformed into the genuine revolutionary movement that mobilized people into the streets and resulted in the dictatorship's demise; nonetheless, the initial causes were widely debated, immediately after the events. Partly, this was due to the high improbability that such dissent would succeed; after all, previous attempts had been brutally suppressed without much ado with the help of the all-pervasive censorship and action of the *securitate*. Another reason for the distrust had been the unreliable reporting and media coverage of the events, which contributed further to the feeling that the events were less than a genuine revolution, but possibly a manipulation.

Exaggerated Numbers

Later investigations showed that the initial numbers of casualties had been gross exaggerations. One investigation, conducted by a group of students from the Timişoara Mechanical Engineering School, concluded that during December 16 and 17, 130 people were shot to death and about 700 were wounded; these numbers were not as shocking as those reported previously, and sounded like light casualties when compared to the figures circulated. The figures are still subject to debate, years later. In 2007, the newspaper *România Liberă* revealed that 72 people were killed, 253 wounded between December 17 and 18, and during the night of 21-22 December 148 were injured, out of which 51 died (Cristea). An exact accounting of the victims of December 1989 is still missing, with the official numbers today having stabilized around 1100. The 2006 entry in *The Encyclopaedia of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* reveals that

a parliamentary commission concluded in 1995 that 1,104 died in the revolution throughout the country (162 between December 16th and December 22nd, and 942 in the days following Ceausescu's flight). In Bucharest alone 543 persons were killed and 1,879 injured. ("Romania")

Despite being horrific, these numbers are far from the 60 000 victims used to inculpate the Ceauşescus. During the events, the figure of 60,000 was widely circulated by domestic and foreign media (Shafir), despite its nebulous origins.

A 1991 collection of media reports from those days, entitled *Revoluţia Română Văzută de Ziarişti Americani şi Englezi* [The Romanian Revolution, as Witnessed by American and British Newspapers], reveals that early reports relied on unverified testimony claiming hundreds of dead lying in the hospital, of which the majority were children. Eastern European press agencies, like Tanjug, and Eastern European radio stations were often the initial reporters of this testimony. Reputable newspapers, like *El Pais*, disseminated these stories further, focusing on spectacular, gory rumours about acid attacks on children and citizens (*Revoluţia Română Văzută De Ziarişti Americani Şi Englezi* 8). Reuters joined in the reporting of thousands of dead, and a global chain of unverified reports and inflated numbers was created.

On December 19, *The Times* reported that "Romanian police fired "indiscriminately from automatic rifles" on thousands of demonstrators rampaging through Timişoara on Sunday night, where "hundreds of people were

falling on the pavements in front of [the] eyes"' of "a Yugoslav tradesman who witnessed the attack", and of "Mr Radislav Dencic, a graduate of Timişoara University who was visiting a friend when the disturbances broke out". The article cites them speaking of "columns of soldiers moving into town on Sunday, [and] shots ... being fired from machine-guns and from helicopters flying low over the crowds" (Trevisan "'Hundreds Fell' as Timisoara Police Opened Fire"). Another *Times* article, written on the same day, relied on the words of "Two Syrian medical students at Timisoara hospital [who] told the French news agency Agence France-Presse they had seen at least 1,000 bodies in the morgue on Sunday" (Trevisan "Slaughter Fear as Romanians Dare to Protest"). The next day, the *Times* wrote about "reports by reliable foreign eye-witnesses [that] put the death toll at more than 400 and speak of a "brutal massacre" of children" (Trevisan "Witnesses Describe Massacre of Children - Romanian Unrest"). These inflated numbers were mainly provided by Eastern European news agencies like Tanjug whose wires transmitted rumours as facts, and reported a possible death toll of up to 2000 deaths on December 20.[31]

Austrian television quoted a witness in Timişoara as having seen trucks carrying "cubic metres of bodies" (Trevisan and Beck). On December 19th, ABC and CBS quoted "a Western diplomat" who claimed that "Tiananmen was nothing

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[31] Tanjug informs of unconfirmed accounts of 2,000 killed men, women and children: "Witnesses claim that police are taking the arrested demonstrators to central Timisoara square, where they beat them up and stabbed them with bayonets before shoving them into lorries and driving them away, no-one knows where" (Trevisan and Beck "Romania Deaths May Reach 2,000 - Troops Reported Bayoneting Protesters in New Clashes").

compared to Timisoara" (Aubin 148). NBC reported being told that "the blood was so thick in the streets that it had to be hosed down" (Aubin 148). UPI, relying on several Eastern European sources, stated that "East German television said there were so many dead that security forces had to haul them away to mass graves" (Aubin 148). On December 22, both ABC and CBS broadcast images of the mass graves purportedly by way of the Romanian television, "from which we [ABC] obtained all these pictures, [and which] had declared itself free after all these years of censorship" (Aubin 151). Reuters described these as

> *grisly pictures of disfigured corpses [Romanian television] said*
> *were found dumped in mass graves in the western city of Timisoara,*
> *where security forces this week massacred thousands of anti-*
> *government protesters. Barbed wire bound some of the bodies of*
> *men, women and children. The body of one small child lay on top on*
> *an adult corpse. (Aubin 151)*

On December 23rd, *The Times* reported about "the bodies of 4,600 people, apparently buried hastily after being shot ... found yesterday in a makeshift ditch outside Timisoara where, reports have said, more than 4,000 people were massacred in the past few days" (Law). At the most hyperbolic moment of the revolution's coverage, on December 25, Hungarian Budapest Radio reported 70,000- 80,000 deaths and claimed that the number of the injured had reached 300,000 (Aubin 151).

These numbers were increasingly refuted as the coverage unfolded. Bernard Kouchner, the French state secretary for humanitarian affairs, and the

International Herald Tribune reported a much lower figure of 776 deaths, on the
27th and the 29th of December 1989 respectively (von Amelunxen and Ujica 23).
In January 1990, the German television station RTL Plus quoted Romanian
doctors claiming that the mass graves were often filled with bodies of people who
had died of natural deaths, transported from a local morgue. As Codrescu wrote,

> *even after the Western reporters had reached areas where the*
> *purported battles raged, the news continued to present the situation*
> *in the same way. A French reporter, Michel Castex... admit[ed] to*
> *having been completely taken in, in spite of his experience. Two*
> *decades of war in Lebanon had not produced as many victims as*
> *were claimed for Romania, yet he did not--for an unconscionably*
> *long time--question these reports. (Codrescu 198)*

Subsequent analyses continued to highlight the missing information and the
possible manipulations existing in the domestic news reports. On January 25,
1990, the ABC correspondent Peter Jennings admitted to faulty coverage:

> *A television station in Luxembourg reports tonight that what we*
> *were seeing at one of the most incredible moments in the Romanian*
> *revolution may not have been real. You may remember the pictures*
> *of a mass grave in the city of Timisoara. We were told at the time*
> *that they were filled with thousands of victims killed by the*
> *Romanian secret police. A Romanian pathologist from Timisoara*
> *now says the bodies actually came from the city morgues and were*
> *laid out as part of some 'sinister theatre' as she puts it. (Aubin 156)*

The early inflated numbers reported by national and international media were
accompanied and bolstered by gory images of lines of dead naked bodies lying in

the street of Timişoara, allegedly dug up from mass graves that the *securitate* used to bury the victims of their retaliations.

Another striking image from that time was a photograph of a woman with a baby lying on her stomach, who the news media claimed were shot by a single bullet. Later these photographs were also found to be unrelated to the events of December, and staged for the most part: the bodies were in fact found to be bodies missing from the local morgue, and not in any way caused by the *securitate*'s brutality. Andrei Codrescu writes this about the mother and baby picture: "A woman who had died of alcoholism had an unrelated baby placed on her for video purposes. Someone made a neat hole in both bodies" (Codrescu), presumably for shock value. The images, which were eagerly circulated without initial proof of

their veracity, first by domestic media channels, then by the international news, were disseminated in order to sensationalize these numbers. This misuse of this iconic photograph illustrates how such strong visuals can be manipulated, and removed from the context they are circulated in.

Furthermore, the video of the execution was, and still is, heavily controversial. Antonia Rados argues that the Ceaușescus were shot on their way to the execution court, and executed for a second time for the filming of the execution, although they were already dead (Rados). Other theories claim that Elena was dead prior to the taping, at least three hours ahead of the recorded shooting, due to the already coagulated blood on the body and her pronounced rigidity. According to Loic Le Ribault both corpses seemed to have exhibited signs of beatings prior to their death, thus, he stipulates that the televised capital punishment was in fact a re-enactment (Le Ribault). Indeed, many theories have contradicted the official video. For instance, according to the declaration of the witnesses, and the visuals themselves, the bodies should have received numerous bullets (Simpson),[32] however, the video shows the victims' corpses to be relatively undamaged, with only two visible cranial bullets wounds. Several other inconclusive elements point toward either a manipulated staging of the shooting for the purposes of filming, or witnesses' claims that are simply unreliable.

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[32] This is the confession of one of the soldiers, Carlan, who shot the couple: "'I put seven bullets into him and then emptied the rest of my magazine into her head... Bits of her brain were spattered here on the floor,' he added, surveying the cracked cement beneath a wall still pockmarked with bullet holes. 'Then people from all directions started shooting'" (Simpson).

Western newspaper articles also immediately expressed doubts about the execution procedures, especially after April 22, 1990, when the tape was broadcast globally in its entirety, calling attention to the possibility of a staged execution. The *Baltimore Sun* called the tapes fake (Schemo) while *Reuters* quoted Loic Le Ribault to bolster their accusations of fraud ("French Expert Says Ceausecu Execution Film Rigged"). *Le Monde* pointed out that Elena's body was not displayed on television until Wednesday, while the Romanian television establishment excused the delays by invoking the obscene character of her death.[33] What is more, the tapes of the execution and trial were available and watched outside Romania for the first time, in France, the day before they were broadcast in Romania (Brandstätter). The execution was first viewed in its entirety on April 22 1990 on the French station TF1, followed by other French stations.

In May 1990, A2 started to ask questions about the mysterious circumstances surrounding the flight of the Ceaușescus, the deaths reported, the purported terrorist attacks, and the vanishing of the *securitate* apparatus. In general, as Aubin states, the American media presented an exaggerated report of the revolution (Aubin). The Western European and specifically the French media seem to have handled the coverage with more analytical discernment that their

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33 "Enfin, en ce qui concerne le sort d'Elena Ceausescu dont, jusqu'à mercredi, aucune photo n'avait été montrée, accréditant ainsi auprès de certains la thèse qu'elle était toujours en vie, la télévision roumaine a montré des images de son corps supplicié, expliquant le retard apporté à le faire par le fait que, étant tombée à terre jambes écartées durant son exécution, ces photos avaient un caractère obscène "("La Revolution Roumaine. Témoignage sur L'exécution de Nicolae Ceausescu. Les Soldats ont Tiré avec Acharnement").

American counterparts (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory;* Aubin; Cesereanu *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucţia Unei Revoluţii* [December '89. Deconstruction of a Revolution]), who relayed without questioning non-credible sources and relied on inherently flawed media organs. Due to their fundamentally communist nature, built over many years of oppression, the East European news agencies' "primary purpose was to spread propaganda or disinformation", and the Western media did not take that into account (Aubin 159).

In April 1990, *Libération* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* added critical commentaries to their previous December 1989 reporting of the events, highlighting possible misreporting. In February 1990, the Romanian army released a count of the casualties: 270 dead and 673 wounded. The next month, another count of 22 dead and 37 wounded was released by the Romanian Air Force (Aubin 153). The brutal images and the inflated body counts served, according to Aubin, the FSN's "interest to create confusion... [to make] Ceausescu look as bad as possible... [and thus] to gain in the eyes of the Romanian public" (Aubin 158). *Le Monde Diplomatique* described the events "without doubt the most important deception since the invention of television" (Aubin 162), and Castex called them "a lie as big as the century" (Castex 160).

Many questions were raised, from the first days of the revolution, as misreporting and lapses in proper coverage were discovered:

Was Nicolae Ceausescu overthrown by a popular uprising or a well orchestrated coup d'état that led to a continuity of communist elite power in the guise of the National Salvation Front (FSN)? Did the army and/or Ceausescu's secret police (the Securitate) participate in a conspiracy that helped to precipitate unrest, enabling the anti-Ceausescu party apparat to slide into positions of authority? (Nelson 864)

These uncertainties have yet to be answered, and the lack of responses has only prompted the rise and development of numerous conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Theories

The uprisings of December 1989 were immediately identified by the media as a revolution. However, once the initial euphoria and shock over the deaths subsided, the initial media reports came, increasingly, to be doubted, and the label 'revolution' itself was put into question. Instead, the events were called a fraud, a neo-communist putsch, a lie. Rumours of a Soviet-enabled coup abounded, and still do. The consensus remains that the events constituted what Tismăneanu called a 'derailed' revolution (Tismăneanu 2). For him, "whether the term "revolution" is the most appropriate to describe these changes is of course an open question." However, he concludes that "what is beyond dispute, at least among the authors present in this book, is the world-historical impact of the transformations inaugurated by the events of 1989 (Tismăneanu 4). Many, like Katherine Verdery and Gail Klingman, have argued that "some form of popular uprising was necessary to end the Ceauşescu regime, [and] a coup alone would

not have overthrown him," (Verdery and Klingman) thus granting credibility to the interpretation of the uprisings as a revolution.

Still, while the results may have been revolutionary, controversies over the causes of the events have put into question their designation as a 'proper' revolution. A 1995 survey showed that "only 50% [of the Romanian population] believed the events in December 1989 were a revolution, and 24% believed the events were carried out by foreigners" (Roper 60). Many journalists and analysts were, and remain, convinced that the December uprisings were conspired, guided, or at least benevolently permitted by Soviet intelligence agencies.

Ruxandra Ceseareanu has divided the different theories interpreting the events of 1989 into three categories, which the first comprising the purist idea of a genuine revolution. The second category favours alternatives, conspiracy theories, and the third offers the concept of a hybrid between a coup d'état and a revolution. Not surprisingly, the politicians who formed the FSN – Ion Iliescu, Petre Roman, Gelu Voican-Voiculescu – are purists. Iliescu strongly denies these conspiracy theories as egotistic calls for attention, as indicative of a lack of respect for the Romanians' sacrifices, an offence to the Romanian Revolution and its victims (Iliescu and Tismaneanu). His view, and the official stance, was that there was "no structure – a system had fallen and the society needed restructuring", and so he had to step in to help, at "a moment's inspiration" (Iliescu and Tismaneanu 191), in order to "overcome as quickly as possible that

moment of confusion, of power void and possible anarchy" (Iliescu and Tismaneanu 498). Outside of the political power sphere, the purist argument is supported by Miodrag Milin, Laslo Tokes, Lorin Fortuna, Claudiu Iordache, Traian Orban, Marius Mioc, Iosif Costinas, George Seban, Adiran Dinu Rachieru, Ana Blandiana, Adrian Marino, Horia-Roman Patapievici, Petre Mihai Bacanu and Stelian Tanase.[34] Some of them believe the events in Timişoara were a pure revolution, while Bucharest hosted a coup d'état (Iordache, for example), thus almost embracing the hybrid concept.

On the other side, a theory of an external complot is supported by several figures, starting with Nicolae Ceauşescu himself, as can be deduced from the trial transcripts. Furthermore, Radu Portocala, Filip Teodorescu, Ilie Stoian, Alexandru Sauca, Angela Bacescu, Valentin Raiha, Toader Stetco, Tana Ardeleanu, Răzvan Savaliuc, Ion Baiu and Teodor Filip, are some of the public figures behind this theory. The idea of an internal complot is sustained by Liviu Valenas, Michel Castex, Gerard de Selys, Elisabeth Spencer, Serban Sandalecu, Calin Cernăianu, and Antonia Rados. Juliana Geran Pilon is among the analysts who argue that the events were, in fact, a putsch planned in inner communist circles (Pilon). Similarly, Anneli Ute Gabanyi, interviewed by RFE, explains that

> *what happened after December 21 (or perhaps even beginning on*
> *December 16) was a putsch, a coup d'état prepared over a long*

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[34] Many of these names consider the revolution a pure movement of the people, corrupted however by some politics. Cesereanu provides a more detailed analysis of the individual contributions.

period of time by several groups and circles interested not so much in a change of regime as in a transfer of power to a counterelite with a different stance toward the Soviet Union from within the Romanian Communist Party, the army and the Securitate; and internationalist pro-Soviet group. (qtd. in Ratesh 84)

Finally, the idea of a hybrid between a revolution and a coup d'état is supported by Iulian Vlad, a former chief of the *securitate*, Stefan Guse, Dumitru Mazilu, Silviu Brucan, an ideologue formerly associated with the FSN, Doina Cornea, Cesereanu herself, Alexandru Paleology, a Romanian ambassador to France, Mihnea Berindei, the scholar Vladimir Tismăneanu, who believes in a mix of spontaneous revolution and an intraparty anti-Ceauşescu conspiration, Gabriela Adamesteanu, Emil Hurezeanu, Sorin Rosca-Stănescu, Catherine Durandin, Victor Frunza, Andrei Codrescu, Edward Behr, Constantin Sava and Constantin Monac, Nestor Rates, Aurel Perva and Carol Roman, among many others.

Even twenty years later, anti-revolution theories and rumours have not dissipated. Still today, "there is disagreement about whether what happened then was really a popular revolution or a disguised anti-Ceausescu coup from within the communist elite" ("Romania's Long March"). Many domestic and international analysts still regard the events as a fraud, and revisionist denial has been strong; for example, a 2009 *London Observer* retrospective is tellingly entitled "It was Impossible to have a Revolution in Romania. So it had to be Staged" (Vulliamy). Susanne Brandstätter's 2004 documentary about the fall of

Nicolae Ceauşescu, *Checkmate*, narrates the Franco-German conspiracy theories circulating ten years after the events (Brandstätter).

This chapter has shown that while "the Romanian revolution made for great television," (Aubin 159), to a great extent, the Romanian revolution *was made by* television, and by the Romanian and international news media in general. The exaggerated reports and manipulated imagery have resulted in a media event based on different theories. The creation of yet more rumours, and exploration of the many conspiracy narratives abounding are logical consequences of this televisual construction.

Chapter Three. The Journalistic Context

Romanian Journalistic Practices before the Revolution

The claim that the Romanian press was fully controlled by the communist regime and served the primary purpose of propagandist education is not a controversial one. As it operated under the Communist Party's press law of 1974/77, which sought to "establish party control over the entire press, legally linking it to the politics of the party, to raise the people's consciousness and to thwart the development of any liberal tendencies" (Cismarescu 83), the press became an explicitly propagandist tool. Its institutions had been reduced drastically over the years, partly because of tightening ideological control, but also because of the new debt-reducing politics pursued by Nicolae Ceauşescu, which aimed to reduce energy consumption across the country. By the end of the 1980s, the entire country relied on only 36 daily newspapers, nine national and local radio stations, and one television station, broadcasting over two channels. Channel 1 was operating over 90% of the country, and Channel 2 reached 18% of the population around Bucharest, both broadcasting only three hours per day. The dogmatic content was understandably unpopular; only 22% of the population watched television regularly, and 43% of Romanians read newspapers, with radio holding the highest percentage of followers, 69% (Gross *Mass Media in*

Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory 13).
Justifiably, within the impoverished context of the Romanian media institution,
the pursuit of journalistic ideals was an unrealistic ideal.

Indeed, the definition of a Romanian journalist did not rest on the same
ethical and professional guidelines as that of a Western journalist. The Romanian
journalist was, by Ceauşescu's demand, "a communist fighter", a "party activist"
(Ceauşescu *Raportul Cu Privire La Dezvoltarea Economica-Sociala a Romaniei
in Urmatorii Ani Si in Perspectiva La Perfectionarea Conducerii Planificate a
Societatii Si Dezvoltarea Democratiei Socialiste, La Cresterea Rolului
Conducator Al Partidului in Edificarea Socialismului Si Comunismului, La
Activitatea Internationala a Partidului Si Statului* 249-50), a functionary, rather
than a provider of news. The journalist of the time was "a kind of 'bureaucrat'"
who "must have no personality at all... must possess the ability of transcribing *ad
litteram* the orders received from the Press Department of the Communist Party...
and must be endowed with a professional mask to hide their own feelings and
ideas" (Manea). Worse yet, he or she was operating as an ally to a media industry
that had become "an instrument of moral genocide" (Ionescu). Gross defines this
type of journalistic practice as limited to

> *feeding the personality cult surrounding ... Ceausescu ... ; revealing
> and explaining party-state policies; carrying out politico-
> ideological education or indoctrination, propaganda and agitation;
> mobilizing for regime-defined economic, social, cultural and
> political goals; and defending against and pre-empting foreign*

attacks of conditions in Romania or on the nation's or regime
policies. (Gross Mass Media in Revolution and National
Development: The Romanian Laboratory 20)

In sum, as Paul Lendvai explained, the journalist's work consisted simply in providing any stories related to the life and activities of the Ceauşescus (Lendvai 87).

The education of the journalistic work force was academically impoverished, often only consisting of a high school diploma, or a diploma from the Communist Party's highly doctrinaire Stefan Gheorghiu Academy of journalism (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 14). Moreover, professional and ethical standards were defined and prescribed, with serious punishment awaiting any transgression. Censorship was applied from the top, in forms of prescriptions as to what news articles were to be published, but also, more insidiously, imposed from within, as self-censorship, or "self-responsibility". Furthermore, it was internalized in a culture of "mutual surveillance", "collegial censorship", and "collective leadership" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 17). As a result of these methods of indoctrination and control, the Romanian journalist has "had to learn to cover up real, meaningful, truthful information" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 15); "overall," Gross declares, "Romanian journalism completely disappeared as a profession by the end of the

1970s" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 16). Journalism was all but dead at the time the revolution occurred, having been displaced by doctrinaire, sycophantic reporting.

Mirroring this transformation, the Romanian journalist employed a language entirely made up of communist formulas, a highly dogmatic, wooden, codified mode of expression. As Vaclav Havel explains, this way of communicating had constructed "a world of appearance, a mere ritual, a formalized language deprived of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality" (Havel 47), the limited world of the Romanian communist journalist.

The result of these control methods, imposed through the institutions of the press, was a metaphorical level of interaction and communication with the public that mirrored all other interactions between the public and the regime. The Romanian public no longer expected authentic news reporting, since it considered all news, and the affiliated institutions, to be a part of the Party's constructed reality, an appendix to the regime. As Gross points out, "Romanian audiences... were unaccustomed to making demands on media and to being discerning consumers" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 28); this translated into a lack of connection between the public and the press institutions.

Furthermore, the Romanian media sphere was strictly contained within the country. Outside press was not available for domestic consultation, and contact with foreign journalists was not tolerated. Even news from ideologically close countries like China were censured; for example, the Tiananmen Square massacre was never discussed officially, and Russia became practically absent from the news once it had instituted glasnost policies (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 21). During the last years of the regime, the few foreign journalists who had overcome the numerous barriers to entering Romania were submitted to communist censorship and hindered in their endeavours (Lendvai), and many of them were expulsed after attempts to talk to dissidents. As a result, the foreign correspondent was a largely absent figure in Romania, and the domestic industry was sealed off from any contact with a Western perspective. Given the impoverished situation of the Romanian press, complications were bound to occur in the news coverage of a sudden regime change.

Romanian Journalistic Practices during the Revolution

The Romanian revolution occurred at a "dead angle of critical reflection" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu 29), between the binary thinking that divided the communist mass-media from post-communist freedom of expression. This transition space was fraught with gaps that, as Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu infer, were ignored, in favour of a technophilic celebration of a victory of democracy. Hopes and desires for immediate democracy and emancipation were favoured

over a sober look at the contextual difficulties of the transition. This explains some of the disappointment experienced after the initial euphoria had dissipated.

"New" Media, Old Language?

During the revolution, the Romanian press was still operating according to the old ways, at least temporarily, as exemplified by the use of dogmatic, communist-style language. Indeed, the Romanian press continued to relate its news to the public in the same propagandist tone used until then. The language it employed was an example of communist vestiges, of the perpetuation of ideological elements well into the transition. For instance, during in the days after December 22, the appellation 'comrade' was still used in the dialogues conducted in front of the television screen, albeit often immediately corrected, and the long, meandering metaphorical sentence style of the past was still employed. As Gross points out, this failure to change language entirely was understandable:

> *Once the tyrant fled and the communist system crumbled, journalists were able to immediately move away from adhering to the communist codes and laws imposed upon their work, but not from the language and old journalistic methods and concepts. Instead of reporting, and activism akin to that of communist journalism became the dominant journalistic mode, the time for divergent ideologies and politics. (Gross Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory 27-28)*

When examining the newspaper articles published in the first days of the uprisings, at the cusp of change, it becomes evident that they still employed the

communist style of reporting, using hidden metaphors. Examples abounded: on December 17, an emergency communiqué of the Communist Party, which was broadcast on the radio, "reject[ed] with great determination" the "reactionary, imperialist circles against socialism, aiming at destabilizing socialism and weakening its stand," (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 31) but never clearly stated the reason for such alarm. On December 18, the newspaper *Scînteia* called for a "consistent promotion of the rule of communist law", and for the "spirit and letter of the law to be applied in every field and every circumstance" (Ratesh 191), without mentioning directly the uprisings. Other examples, enumerated at length in chapter two, employ a similar tone: *România Liberă*'s article, tellingly titled "A Strong Position in Favour of the Defence of the National Sovereignty and Independence" condemns the 'provocative terrorist and fascist' actions, late in the events, on December 22nd.

The next day was marked by a symbolic adjustment in rhetoric, as several newspapers modified their names to reflect their commitment to new times. Changes in newspaper names abounded, but they were first and foremost symbolic, metaphorical changes, expressions of nationalistic pathos and utopian desires. So, *Drapelul Roşu* [The Red Flag] became *Renaşterea Bănăţeană* [Banat's Renaissance], *Drum Nou* [The New Route] switched to *Gazeta Transilvaniei* [The Transylvanian Gazette], and *Scînteia Tineretului* [Youth's Spark] transformed into *Tineretul Liber* [Free Youth]. *Scînteia* [The Spark]

became *Scînteia Poporului* [The Folk's Spark] (and days later, changed its name again to *Adevărul* [The Truth])*, but, despite its celebration of the fall of Ceauşescu, was unable to shed communist ideology fully. Its leading article "Long Live Liberty, Long Live Response!" directly discussed Ceauşescu's demise, but stated that it was propelled by "freedom, democracy [that] have been firmly supporting socialism, [and] the honest, pure principles of socialism". The language and tone remained faithful to the previous socialist reporting style, employing formulaic and long-windedly metaphorical, a profusion of celebratory adjectives, and the same keywords, such as liberty, socialism, freedom, overused before the change of the regime. What is more, "the same men who had accused people from Timisoara and Cluj of being hooligans and 'street Arabians' or 'tools of a foreign agency (either the CIA or the KGB) now came out praising the revolutionaries suffering 60 000 deaths during the December events" (Man). Of course, many newspapers did immediately discard past ideology in an honest manner, but it is safe to say that the industry required ideological and professional adjustment, as it passed through the "dead angle of critical reflection" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu 29) of the post-revolutionary period.

Live Televisual Documentary: A Break in Aesthetics

To view the fall of the Ceauşescus was shocking, not only because the visuals of the old fragile couple were different from their manipulated image, but also because they confronted the viewer with the uncensored reproduction of reality, with drastically different aesthetics, not experienced prior to the fall of

Ceauşescu's reign. Until the television broadcast of the dictator's fall, the image of the Ceauşescus was constructed according to a Socialist Realist tradition, to function as a propaganda instrument. In fact, all expressive forms, whether related to art, news, literature or cinema, were considered tools for furthering communist and socialist ideology. The unpolished images of death were already shocking enough, as Romanian television had been traditionally very selective about the images it broadcast. Media censorship during the dictatorship had been extreme – no images of nudity, sexuality, or violence were allowed in the press, and movies were altered so as to provide only the tamest visuals. The unedited images of an elderly, scared couple about to be executed, shown on television on the night of the 26[th,] were especially shocking to Romanians.

The change in technological documentary and journalistic practices was also drastic. Videotaping had not been widely available to the general public, and television news had been highly staged, which means that hand-held camera filming was not an established practice within the limited and controlled traditions of Romanian reporting. In fact, the beginning of the televised revolution, Ceauşescu's speech, was recorded with the help of new technology, namely betacam, as Farocki explains:

> *The two-inch VTR technology which had gone out of use in the countries of Western Europe ten to fifteen years before was still there in the television studios. Romania's first betacam was to be found in the film department of the Central Committee and had been acquired to be focused on the Ceausescus: on their receptions and*

his speeches. The advantage of beta technology lies in the compactness of camera and recorder and in the resulting mobility. The Ceausescus only did things which had been established down to the last detail in protocol, and if anything deviated from it, it was not to be shown. Did the regime acquire a mobile camera because it suspected the future would bring unforeseeable changes? We have included shots from this protocol camera in our film: the scene on the morning of December 22, 1989, as the crowd was thronging in front of and into the Central Committee building while books and pictures were flying out of the windows and from the balcony, was recorded by this very beta camera. It had been positioned on the third floor of the side wing in order to record the organized captive audience in its entirety. (Farocki)

The technology was new, and so were the aesthetics associated with it. It can be argued that, while the shaky, low-tech video images did not provide the viewer with the classical suture of seamless Hollywood-style editing, they nevertheless achieved a particular aesthetics of immersion, signalling to the viewer that they were watching unedited, unusual, and live events. Everything was new in this scene: the live movement of the camera, the unedited aesthetics and the events themselves. The camera shook as Nicolae shook too, and then panned up to the sky, one could say reacting in accordance with prior censorship practices. The leader, always in control, lost his authority over the crowd, and the recording technology reacted to this crisis, as the camera turned to the sky to hide the failure. Ultimately, it returned to reveal the crowd below, and so opened the new narrative of the revolution – continued by the cameras of the TVR studio.

Ceauşescu's last speech, a media event – a "ceremony in real space staged for televisual transmission" (Morse 217) – was transformed into a televisual event:

> *when a media event … is disrupted or gets out of control, it can become one or more televisual events, often marked in the flow of images on-screen by such things as wobbling and mobile framing, freeze-frames, masking, and 'snow'. The revolution, the uprisings, and, in the light of subsequently compiled evidence, the coup d'état in Romania commenced during a media event on December 21, 1989, televised from the square in Bucharest in front of party headquarters. (Morse 217)*

After this transformation, the events were easy to manipulate from the televisual platform which, in a way, had created them.

As the revolution continued on the screen, broadcast from within the television studios, the cameras recorded civilians rushing onto the premises to tell their story of the revolution. The television programme became a chaotic mix of live testimony speeches, off-screen sounds and voices, people moving in and out of the frame of vision, and presenters not following any scripts, allowing anyone to cut in with the newest information from the street.

In the days after December 22, as the revolution spilled into the news room of the TVRL, the daily television programme consisted of a chaotic stream of live announcements. The news reporting that took place during those days was in fact better defined as a mix of autobiographical testimony, news narratives, and

public appeal interventions (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 44) which emphasised the central role of the television station consistently. Passionate announcements abounded, such as Mircea Dinescu's appeal to the people to "not leave your television sets! They are very important…. Workers, intellectuals… come to the Romanian Television. We will put together a declaration for the people" (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 46). News was reported but also analysed and interpreted on the spot. The speakers legitimized themselves as speaking subjects by explaining how they had suffered under the Ceauşescu regime. Through these narratives the television station, acting as a political platform, constructed a sense of solidarity, and a homogenizing, anti-Ceauşescu, pro-freedom narrative. The speakers and their stories provided a "strategy to legitimize the uprising of the masses" thereby inciting them to "react immediately before the danger" (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna 52-53), calling upon citizens to defend the station, or other possibly endangered spaces.

In the words of Margaret Morse, these rough scenes "made viewers into on-screen protagonists of the revolution" (Morse 218) and disrespected the normative formal codes used in television news, according to which only news anchors and pundits retain narrative authority. In the television broadcast of the Romanian revolution, chaos entered living rooms across the country, through the television screens, just as it had taken over the streets.

The broadcasting of the events then catapulted the media sphere into a position of power, such that it became "an essential ingredient of the reawakening and re-empowering" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 29) of the nation, as Dinescu's appeal to the nation to stay in front of their television sets proves. More specifically, and significantly, it became a tool of "psychological realignment" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 29). Gross explains:

> *As a result [of the fall of the regime], the newly freed Romanian mass media in December 1989 served mainly as outlets for releasing pent-up feelings, for national and individual catharsis and for the circulation of rumours. In their first months of liberty, mass media became a gigantic psychiatrist's couch where Romanians could for the first time vent anger against their oppressor and tell their stories of suffering and humiliation, of shattered hopes and dreams and of future aspirations. The media, in great measure occupied with exercising their newfound freedom and providing an outlet for the suddenly freed multitude of individual voices, failed to serves as a forum for constructive discussions of contemporary problems and solutions and as an avenue of credibly informing audiences of developments. (Gross Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory 27)*

This is particular obvious in the case of television, which became, quite visibly, a therapy centre for people walking in and offering their testimony in the most emotional manner. Romanian media became an affectual repository, and those seeking power operated within this newly formed affective economy.

These first days in which the media became a public forum were experiments at reconnecting with the public. The Romanian population had rejected the news media for two decades. The press had meant a disconnected, untrustworthy world of communist propaganda:

> *Romanian audiences were not used to an indigenous media other than the communist ones. They were unaccustomed to making demands on media and to being discerning consumers. As Prime Minster Teodor Stolojan pointed out in 1992, the Romanians had to learn 'how to react through and because of the press.' According to many in the Romanian press, it was difficult for audiences to trust the journalists who for 43 years had had to deceive them (Gross Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory 28)*

These were crucial days, during which the Romanian people were exercising a first attempt at re-appropriating their public sphere. They were engaging in an emotional reconnection with media language and reporting practices, and were rejecting previously-known reporting formulas and norms in favour of emotions and a deep connection to what was being felt at the moment, from a personal perspective, rather than dictated from above.

Because of this emotional investment in the media, and particularly in the television station and broadcast medium, these also became a forum propitious for those who were creating policy and a political future of the country, a space for political manoeuvrings.

On February 4, 1990, barely a month after citizens had defended the television building with their presence, thousands returned to protest the manipulative role of television. Distorted reports on ethnic conflicts in the heavily Hungarian Transylvania region and slanted reporting of the country's first free elections "underscored the state media's capacity for bias, distortion and character assassination" (Gallagher 10). Those sentiments were echoed by Longworth (Longworth "Romania's Free Tv Scrapes up Broadcasts"), who wrote that "while state-run radio presents opposition voices, state-run TV is widely considered a one-sided voice for the government and its ex-Communist leaders from the National Salvation Front" (p. A29). In 1991, as state television was seeking foreign capital for assistance in a $250 million revamp, opposition politicians were accusing it of "pro-government bias and inciting riots" ("Romanian Television...," 1991 Romanian television seeks 250 million dollar revamp. (1991, April 15). The Reuter Library Reports.). (Mollison)

In fact, the television station's power was so great that it affected – and even decided – the iconic location of the revolution. As explained in chapter two, the uprisings had originally started in Timişoara; in this city, the uprisings had the most impact, the victims were most numerous, the fighting real. Yet, Bucharest is the official, internationally designated space of the revolution, precisely because the televised revolution took place in Bucharest, not in Timişoara, the latter which arguably merited designation as the iconic site of the revolution. This transfer of authority has always brought friction between the two cities, as I realized at the meeting of the GDS (Grupul pentru Dialog Social), where the survivors of the revolution confronted these old complexes and frustrations, twenty years after

their occurrence[35]. It is important to highlight this transfer, because it speaks to the authority invested in the medium. The process of television broadcasting brought another layer of meaning and, more importantly, political credibility to the place where the TVRL operated and constructed the televised event. The media event, transformed into a televised event, created the revolution, in that it provided a location for the events, a televisual location.

As the Romanian news sphere became the new public sphere, its political power became stronger, a reason, perhaps, for the widespread journalistic failures and misreportings. The exaggerated numbers became a tool to ensure the success of the FSN, who had orchestrated the execution. The French magazine *Le Point* was one of many news outlets that claimed that *securitate* documents proved the reported numbers had been inflated in order to boost the political success of the new ruling body ("Les Cinq Actes D'une Manipulation"). The initial numbers reported could be considered a spectacular excuse for the execution, a backdrop against which the quick proceedings were presented in a more favourable, morally sustainable light.

While the reasons for inflating the numbers were partly political, and originated on the domestic front, the Western media were not devoid of blame for the inflated reporting. Although they were channelling rumours, not fabricating

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[35]During the GDS discussions, citizens of Bucharest admitted to be carrying complexes about this 'unfair' status of revolutionary city, while Timişoara citizens admitted to feeling slighted and frustrated. (*Annual Convention: Premiul Grupului Pentru Dialog Social Pentru Anul 2009* [the 2009 Award of the Social Dialog Group].)

them, they eagerly participated in the circulating of unverified rumours. Still, this rush to report unsubstantiated numbers showed a desire on the part of the global Western media to present the upholding and success of Western ideals, and a need to produce images of the dead as an alternative to these ideals. Stearns asks:

> *who were the Western media serving ...? Certainly they were serving their own obscene desire for fresh revolutionary events, fresh in the sense of prepackaged food with no expiration date. What better way for those in the West to convince themselves that their own revolutionary ideals were alive and well than to find evidence of another freedom revolution in their own viewfinders?(Stearns)*

The execution of the dictator couple was read as a symbolic removal of the evils of communism, especially by the American press, who readily attached a symbolic value to its visuals. On January 7, 1990, *The New York Times* wrote that "it was not enough to remove Mr. Ceauşescu from office. He had to be exorcised from Romanian life, his body displayed before the people in an electronic-age version of a public execution, his sins put before Romanians so they could see for themselves the awfulness of it all" (Matus). This of course, was the American interpretation of what the Romanians needed at that time, and it perhaps projected a desire for redemption for the sins of any non-communist atrocities. Thus, the goal behind this uncontrolled flow of distorted reporting was to produce a spectacular image of the triumph of democracy and the definite crumbling of a non-democratic regime's evils.

Of course, the vilification of the Ceauşescus occurred at home too, and their execution was even described as a divine intervention (Frunza 32). Tellingly, one of the first announcements in Romania was to declare that the Anti-Christ was dead. As Ottosen points out, there is a link between the earlier, partly politically-shaped portrayal of Ceauşescu and the later media coverage around the revolution.

> *It is remarkable how quickly the image of Ceauşescu in the Western world changed from 'the favourite member of the Warsaw Pact' to 'Satan', 'Dracula' and 'Hitler'. For years Romania enjoyed favourable loan and trading conditions, cultural exchange, etc., with the USA and EC as well as other Western countries. The Norwegian government even awarded Ceauşescu the order of St. Olav for honourable service to the 'fatherland and mankind'. Ceauşescu's human rights record was not much better during this period; but at this point the Western world had more important enemies to fight, and Romania was given favourable treatment for being the 'weakest link' in the Warsaw Pact. Such hypocrisy is one thing; more interesting for my discussion is whether there is a connection between the demonization of Ceauşescu and the uncritical use of inflated death tolls. Could it be that when the demonization goes far enough the critical threshold gets lower? After all, 'Satan', 'Dracula' and 'Hitler' are capable of almost anything, aren't they? (Ottosen)*

Indeed, as Cesereanu explains, an unbiased news analysis "should be "devoid of literary, folkloric or mystical projections, only at the level of political deeds. However, since he was hyperbolized as a 'monster', 'vampire', 'ogre', of course the dictator could be assassinated in an absurd, cartoon-like or extremely brutal

style, without respecting the laws" (Cesereanu "Ceausescu's Trail and Execution"). The concepts of 'beastification' and 'thinginess' (Lesser 64) must be considered here. Indeed, as explained in chapter one, by watching the victim as a thing, or a beast, the viewer is relieved of the guilt of watching gruesome pictures of death, and so, "render any question of a trial or even of a death penalty entirely moot" (George and Shoos 598).

The Romanian Revolution: An International Narrative Collaboration

As Western media representatives became involved in the process of reporting on the Romanian revolution, they began cooperating with a media sphere that was just waking up from decades of censorship. Hours before the uprising, the press institution in Romania was the Communist Party's appendix; as the events began, its workers were suddenly exercising free will and supplying information to their Western counterparts. The partnership resulted in skewed representation of the events, partly because each side was interested in conveying different values to the public" the Romanian journalist was providing a forum for national pathos and emotional expression, while the Western journalist saw in the events a story ripe for consumption.

The story of the Romanian revolution attracted Western media attention because it provided spectacular elements well suited to a commercial news structure, which relied on shocking elements for consumption. The majority of Western media representatives applied classical methods of journalism, and the

story of the Romanian revolution fitted well with their methods. Western journalists sought material that was to transform the events, by "appl[ying] formula work routines," into "hard news/soft news/spot news/what a story!" (de Burgh and Bradshaw). The Romanian revolution provided journalists with material to construct the category of "what a story!", of which, De Burgh explains, there are four types:

> *the especially remarkable event*
> *victims*
> *community at risk*
> *ritual, tradition and the past. (de Burgh and Bradshaw 23)*

These types were all represented in the story of the Romanian revolution, for the benefit of a Western audience. The ultimate fall of communism and the death of a dictator, almost caught on tape, provided an "especially remarkable event"; strong visuals of dead "victims" and images of abandoned orphans circulated continuously on television; the danger of the stray shootings was putting the Romanian "community at risk"; and, lastly, these events were embedded in "ritual, tradition and the past" because they occurred during Christmas, and furthermore engaged in the formation of myths.[36] Indeed, the Romanian revolution provided appealing material, spectacular elements that were easy to construct into sellable stories.

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[36] The formation of myths evident in the coverage of the revolution will be explained and developed further in the next chapter.

The news story needed to be catchy, especially for the American public, as the footage of the Romanian revolution competed head-to-head with the United States' invasion of Panama. And catchy it was, "the thrilling spectacle of the overthrow of a dictator beamed live by satellites across the world" (Dobbs). It was a spectacle that thrilled by providing analogies with Nazism and necrophilia:

> *Devant cet alignement de corps nus suppliciés, devant certaines expressions lues – " des mètres cubes de corps", "des bennes à ordures transportant des cadavers" ... – d'autres images venaient inévitablement à la mémoire : celles des documentaires sur les horreurs des camps nazis. C'était insoutenable et nous regardions tout de même comme par devoir, en pensant à la phrase de Robert Capa, le grand photographe de guerre : "Ces morts auraient péri en vain si les vivants refusent de les voir". (Ramonet)*

Le Monde Diplomatique's Ignacio Ramonet quotes the most frequently circulated media commentaries on the images of the revolution: "cubic meters of bodies,"[37] and "garbage trucks carrying cadavers" are lines taken out of the media discourse accompanying the images of bodies ubiquitously televised during these days. He points to the fact that journalists required strong images to represent evil's dramatic demise, images which "served to ratify the function of television in a world where one tends to replace reality with a staged production," (Ramonet 3) a world where dead bodies are unearthed from cemeteries and lined up in the street in order to be "offered to the necrophilia of television" (Ramonet). "We've

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[37] This phrase was used by *The London Times*, on December 20 (Trevisan and Beck, "Romania Deaths May Reach 2,000 - Troops Reported Bayoneting Protesters in New Clashes").

forgotten, he continues, "that today, televised news are essentially an entertainment, a spectacle, one that feds on blood, violence, and death" (Ramonet). In this quest to provide entertainment, television was the ultimate selling point for commercial journalism, and so, perfect for American consumption.

Covering the execution of a dictator in a country difficult to access brought geographical and cultural challenges, and demanded flexible journalistic practices and strategies. Journalists had to resort to unverified and incomplete sources, while catering to the demands of a large public glued to the television; this particular context prompted a heightened reliance on "adjunct technologies." The access to Romanian ground was blocked from December 18 until the borders were opened again on December 22, which certainly made it difficult to cover the revolution. Journalists were not able to see the actual death of Ceauşescu. Exact information about many of the surrounding events was lacking, and speculations, provided by unreliable neighbouring Eastern European press agencies, circulated as facts. Western media did not have the same access and authority as Romanian journalists. As a result, the former resorted to legitimizing practices of journalism, to "formal guidelines that made the establishment of their authority all the more critical" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 50).

The visual and narrative chaos of the Romanian revolution was difficult to accept for American news formats. The images of screaming people looking straight into the television screen, not paying attention to the anchor, their narrative overflowing and dominating the anchor's or pundit's authorities amidst uncoordinated movement resulted in breaches of aesthetics and authority, disturbing broadcasting norms (Morse). The disruption would have been easier to digest, perhaps, if made spectacular, and if the chaos in the streets of Bucharest and Timişoara had been more television-friendly, a more regulated, 'telegenic' kind of chaos.

It is not surprising then, as Radu Portocala reveals, that the televised revolution was in fact censored and shaped in a more telegenic manner for the international market. The transmission of the images of the revolution was relayed by a Zagreb television station and rebroadcast globally from there. This, argues Portocala, was an illogical, even dubious mode of retransmission, since Romania could have sent its own transmission globally. Through this relay point, the images were censored to ensure a more orderly narrative. Many chaotic images, of the sort one would expect given the atmosphere that ruled during those days, were removed from the air, and replaced with the emblem of the Zagreb station. Thus, the global consumption of the revolution was, in fact, manipulated, and restricted. The reasons for this puzzling censorship have not been determined (Portocală 100-01), but it may be interpreted as an attempt to apply certain television norms, to render the unpredictability of live narrative more manageable.

American media organizations had already experienced the challenge of fitting the unexpected live accident into proper journalistic norms. If we seek parallels between the coverage of Ceaușescu's execution and the manner in which another death, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, was reported, similarities abound. Fifteen years before the Romanian revolution occurred, the assassination of John F. Kennedy changed the way news, especially news about heads of state, were constructed. As Barbie Zelizer explains, the assassination "threw the boundaries of appropriate journalistic practice into question" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 49), as it provided journalists with the challenge of covering live murder, fostering, consequently, a new way of reporting. Before the assassination, the long-established journalistic practice of following the president's body had offered "news organizations a way of routinizing the unexpected" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 49). For reporters, covering the president's live whereabouts had meant having to organise unexpected events into a set news formula. However, in the aftermath of the live, televised assassination, the phrase "covering the body" changed its meaning to "covering the *dead* body". Reporting the unfolding death of Kennedy had "called for behaviour that lay outside the bounds of formalized journalistic standards" and for certain "strategies of

improvisation and redefinition" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 50).

In this respect, the international media's attempt to set a "collective frame for establishing authority" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 55) in Romania was not unlike the way American media organizations behaved in their coverage of the assassinations of Kennedy and Oswald. In fact, all three of these cases changed the role of the journalist, placing him/her in the foreground, along with the television set, which became part of the actual events in the Romanian case. Zeliger explains how the American media and their representatives (journalists, reporters) "ha[d] assumed responsibility for ... the [Kennedy] assassination story" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 50), as they were part of the narrative process, by being on the premises, and witnessing the proceedings – the live assassination of Kennedy, and subsequent shooting of his murderer, Lee Harvey Oswald. This participatory character of the media was also evident during the Romanian uprisings, particularly through the TVRL, which played an active role in the unfolding of the uprisings and change of power, as a witness (albeit incomplete) to the execution and as a link to the population who was not present, their proxy in these events. In this case, the authority of the journalist, more specifically of the television camera, was uncontested. In all these cases of the coverage of death, we

witness a certain conflation of the journalist, and by extension a conflation of the recording technology with the events covered.

This conflation is evident in the way the television camera, and the institution itself, the TVRL, were heralded as a principal actor in the events. As the revolution unfolded, it suffused the Romanian television station with a particular status of power. The TVRL was called the "motor of revolution" by its own personnel (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* 37). Silviu Brucan, a leading figure in the events, claimed that "truly, television was the revolution's decisive factor" (Brucan 217). Reporters from the outside agreed and were happy to emphasize and circulate these technophilic messages; for instance, *The New York Times* declared that Romanian "sovereignty, it seemed, was reduced to the ability to convey what was happening outside the studio door" (Kifner "Rumanian Revolt, Live and Uncensored"). Indeed, these emotional investments mirrored a global contemporary belief that "the sad truth of the TV age is that if there's no video, it didn't really happen" (Alter). Television had become the ultimate witness.

Indeed, the eye of the television camera had become an essential tool of legitimization of the reporter. However, this switch of authority was not as revolutionary as media declared it was; after all, this conflation occurred already fifteen years earlier, as the American media covered Kennedy's assassination, where "the adjunct technologies used by the journalists [i.e., the television camera

and the microphone] authenticated them as eyewitnesses through various replays of the incident" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 61) In the case of Ceauşescus' execution, the camera was recording as an independent body; its presence was an attempt at conveying unmediated representation, and witnessing the creation of history. What is more, the camera which filmed the execution of the Ceauşescus can be said to have had participated, or reacted, through its movement. This participation of the "adjunct technology", as the proxy of the journalist, was not unlike the participation of the journalists who happened to be in close proximity to Oswald at his assassination, and thus became "embedded in the story's retelling" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 61). However, at the Ceauşescus' death sentence, the presence of the camera affected the narrative to a greater extent. As the camera did not record the entirety of the execution, it failed to provide a verifiable representation, and instead influenced the formation of other possible narratives of the story, i.e. conspiracy theories.

The coverage of the Kennedy assassination succeeded in emphasizing the role of the media as consoling mediators; journalists turned into "agents of unification and reassurance" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 62), emotional authorities, honourable supporters through the mourning process. Simultaneously, as television journalism "veered away to ensure privacy" (Zelizer *Covering the*

Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory 63), it became an example of good taste, a silent partner through the moments that demanded silence. In this way, Zeliger claims, journalists manipulated the attention of the audience away from their journalistic lacunae, as to "compensate for the unroutinized and unpredictable conditions and pressing institutional demands for information" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 228). This sort of emotional compensation was also obvious in the coverage of the Romanian revolution. As mentioned before, Western reporting focused on the interpretation of the events, more than on their investigation, which was hindered by geographical and political constraints. Perhaps, in a way, Western media compensated through its technophilic, celebratory tone, for the lack of investigative journalism. Technology, specifically television, helped to "stabilize ... the incomplete nature of professional practice" (Zelizer *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* 66) by providing an affectively appealing story about the death a communist enemy, bolstered by horrifying images of lines of victims lying on the street, and orphans in dire conditions.

Given the difficulty of providing an academic definition of journalism (Bovée), and the fluidity of the various practices that this umbrella term is taken to designate, clear distinctions between Western and Eastern European journalistic practices are not available. However, the analysis provided in chapter

two points toward biases to be found in the coverage provided by both sides, albeit in different ways. For instance, after December 22, Romanian television news "fed directly on the street, on rumours, and on revolutionary pathos" (Shinar and Stoiciu 246). On the other side, the Western coverage betrayed a celebratory pro-democracy tone and, furthermore, capitalistic motives:

> *the Western news media, shaped by the liberal and social responsibility models, ... "the media of money", have been run by a capitalist ideology, and by rules that emphasize sensationalism, efficiency, competition, and speed, all under the ideological auspices of the freedom of the press and the basic rules of news-value: The Present, The Unusual, The Dramatic, Simplicity, Action, Personalization and Results. (Shinar and Stoiciu 246)*

Thus, Shinar and Stoiciu conclude, "the images of the revolution in the Western media were the product of a newly found compatibility of the euphoric reporting style typical of the disruption of Eastern European journalistic traditions, with the expectations and attitudes of Western editorial desks" (Shinar and Stoiciu 245).

As the Western news media were reporting, they were also celebrating the victory of Western-style democracy. This bias resulted in a celebratory tone at the expense of in-depth inquiry, and provided the public with "mere exposure journalism" (de Burgh and Bradshaw 15), rather than investigative journalism, thus failing to "question the factual bases upon which significant assertions are made", and "challeng[e] an official account", actions which define "investigative journalism" (de Burgh and Bradshaw 15). What was missing in this partnership

was investigative journalism, whereby, according to Hugo de Burgh's definition of the term, to goal was "is to discover the truth and to identify lapses from it in whatever media may be available" (de Burgh and Bradshaw 6). Perhaps some of the conspiracy theories abounding could have been considered instances of investigative journalism marginalized by official accounts of history. Western journalism failed to investigate further behind the many conspiracies, while Romanian journalism practices were not strong enough to deliver publicly responsible journalism. Several scholars have pointed to these shortcomings (Gross, Aubin, Tismaneanu, Shinar and Stoiciu, etc). However, the Western media itself avoided discussing its faults and responsibilities, and did not return to the coverage and its problems, with only a few exceptions, mainly those of French journalists (Castex, Portocala, Ramonet).

Once the execution images were aired, the reports began to 'taper off' and possessed the "air of follow-up reports" (Aubin 38), despite the airing of information that could have lead the networks to a deeper investigation. January 12th, according to Aubin, "marked the end of the [American] television story of the Romanian revolution," (Aubin 42) despite the unfinished nature of the events. ABC recognized only on January 25, 1990, that it had made mistakes in the reporting, with Peter Jennings stating that "the most incredible moments in the Romanian revolution may have not been real ... [but instead, were] part of some 'sinister theatre'" (Aubin 43). Thus, to repeat Aubin's deploration:

In the end, the Romanian revolution made for great television… But many significant element of the story were misreported or ignored entirely by the U.S. media. For instance, at the most fundamental level, was this a true 'revolution' or was it instead the seizure of power by a group of 'reform' communists whose methods varied little from those of their predecessors? American journalists never provided an answer." (Aubin 3)

In other words, the Romanian revolution could have been an opportunity for investigative journalism – an opportunity that was, unfortunately, ignored in the pursuit of news entertainment.

Chapter Four. Revisions of the Past

This chapter analyses how the iconic visuals of the Romanian revolution have been reused and understood in post-revolutionary Romania, and how these revisions and reformulations of history have been shaped by politics and market forces.

Televisual Economics of Capturing the Past

The fall of communism in Romania has been a highly mediatised event, and, arguably, to some degree, a construction of news discourse, a 'televisual event' (Morse). The television broadcasting of the uprisings lent them a singularity that was repeatedly emphasized in the literature on the topic. In general, the importance of the Romanian television station was continuously noted in popular and academic discussions of the events. More specifically, the TVRL was declared vital as a provider of social cohesion and protection, and its function as a provider of a nationalizing and globalizing technology was continuously emphasized. The media's role was lauded in a technologically deterministic way presenting democracy in direct relation to technological progress. "Videocracy has replaced the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu", the news announced, and television was hailed as "the real seat of power" (Kifner "The Airwaves; Rumanian Revolt, Live and Uncensored"). The political and commercial mechanisms at work behind the cameras offered another point of

interest, but by and large, the commentary was characterized by a technophilic stance.

One of the most suggestive indicators of the extent to which the revolution was formatted by television video technology is provided by a 1990 British advertisement for Sony Hi8 camcorders,[38] printed in *The Romanian Revolution, Live (Tatulici and Televiziunea Româna)*. The large-print title of this ad – "Capture the Revolution" – is particularly arresting, as it accompanies a photographed scene from the Romanian revolution. At the bottom of this advert, the book editor Mihai Tatulici commented, in Romanian, "We won't sell our country! However, others don't mind doing it..." This text further confirms my assumption that this image is, indeed, of the Romanian revolution. Whether or not this is the case, however, is less important than the meaning this image holds for the editors, and more important still is the way in which the advertisement presents the revolution as an image that must be captured. This ad stands as perhaps the most obvious and direct metaphor for the televisual event that was the revolution. It candidly highlights the mediatised, technological construction of the events, and notes both their selling power and the medium's role in rendering change global and disseminating progress.

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[38] A google search of the products advertized shows they were marketed in 1990; this date coincides with the print date of the book that displays the undated, unreferenced advertisement.

The advertisement is in black and white, but presumably this is because the Xerox photocopy printed in *The Romanian Revolution, Live* was reproduced in black and white. The image quality is poor, but clear enough for the viewer to distinguish a scene of the street uprisings in front of what seems to be the party headquarters. Civilians and soldiers caught in movement are visible, in front and on top of a large vehicle, and crowds on the top part of the photograph can be seen gathered closely on the balcony, next to waving flags. The image is presented as a capture of a television screen with its corners rounded off, thus imitating the oval shape of a television set typical of the 1980s or 1990s. The center of the image is framed in white lines, so as to emphasize the most photogenic part of the scene, the focus of the camera's attention. This middle part *is* the revolution, the part that is worth capturing and selling for Sony and the news professionals targeted by this ad.

The movement is most condensed in this framed section of the image, where the visually exciting elements appear: agitated faces and someone crouching on the floor, presumably taking care of a wounded civilian. The rest, the space outside the delineated centre, can be removed from the narrative. It carries additional documentary value, in this case the symbols Hi8 REC and numbers that may designate the time or the date (14-39-20) are visible respectively in the top and bottom corner outside the white margins. These additional professional details are not part of the finished, saleable product, and are not intended for the imagery's ultimate audience. In a way, these marginalia recall the contextual information about the uprisings that was left out from the media construction of

the events, in a decision that seems motivated by the shock value of the news. Even though at the time news on Romanian television did not have a commercial value, as the capitalistic modus operandi was just starting to develop, the most shocking images were widely disseminated domestically, and more sellable internationally. The advertisement can be read as a metaphor for the management of the events, for the way in which events were based on the framing operations of the television camera and decision as to where to draw the white borders.

Chris Marker commented on the commercial value of the Ceauşescu trial in his eight minutes long video piece *Detour, Ceausescu* (Marker), in which he mixed footage of the trial with commercials suitable to the segments: for example, he inserted footage of a detergent to show its symbolic links to cleaning the blood spilled in the revolution. Through this montage, Marker criticizes the hypocrisy of French television in pretending it would not profit from the footage and not run advertisements during the times in which it was broadcast. In fact, Marker seems to declare, the very televised character of the event rendered it a product of the commercial structures of the global television industry.

The aspect of the television medium most emphasized in the coverage of the revolution was not its selling power, however. Rather, domestic and international sources immediately heralded television's vital role as a symbol of the revolution. In an article published on the 25th of December 1989, the *New York Times* proclaimed the TVRL the "symbol of the revolution" (Kifner

"Romanian Army Gains in Capital but Battle Goes On"). A month later, the *Chicago Tribune* named it "the tool of revolution" (Longworth "In Eastern Europe, Tv Was the Tool of Revolution"). Silviu Brucan, one of the main players of the events, stated in 1992 that the events constituted the "first Revolution in history occurring *through* and *at* the Television" (Brucan), thus presenting the television medium and institution as integral elements of the events. The importance of the medium in the construction of the events was widely emphasised in the years that followed, and a celebratory, technophilic tone ran through most of the early writing on these visual images.

Furthermore, the TVRL, along with the television medium itself, were viewed as elements of social cohesion and tools for protection of the nation. In 2006, Razvan Theodorescu, a historian, politician, and the director of the television institution from 1990 to 1992, explained that the previously highly censured medium abruptly became the main provider of information, protection and cohesion to the nation, as the revolution unfolded. He went so far as to state that the Romanian revolution owed almost everything to the TVRL. As a collaborator with Iliescu's regime and a former director of the TVRL, Theodorescu exemplified the official interpretation and account of the mediatised events. For him, television was the very "symbol of freedom", benefiting from a solid "capital of trust" that reached beyond national borders. Despite the exaggerations and the rumours circulated, the trust invested in the institution was not damaged; in fact, these were, according to him, "absolutely normal

considering the context of the emotionally exacerbating tension reigning, and the context of a wondrous and unique situation" (Theodorescu 47). Thus, according to Theodorescu, the special circumstances excused the television's misuse of trust. Despite its failures, the TVRL's authority and responsibilities were deemed intact by many of those involved in the televising of the events, for years after the events.

These laudatory opinions were not universally shared, however. Immediately after the events, the various political mechanisms behind the cameras were repeatedly analysed in several critical works. In 1991, Nestor Ratesh, former director of Radio Free Europe's Romanian broadcasting branch, described the Romanian television institution as a politicized provider of information, used as a political platform by the NFS through what proved to be "one of the deftest moves by the group of dissidents and politicians poised to fill the power vacuum" (Ratesh 48). The political forces in operation within the television medium and institution are a topic discussed in depth in the collection of essays *Revolutia Romana Televizata: Contributii la Istoria Culturala a Mediilor* [The Televised Romanian Revolution: Contributions to the Cultural History of Media] (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu).[39] Petrozsvky and Tichindeleanu, the editors of this collection, acknowledge the "dead angle of critical reflection" observable immediately following the events of December 1989, in which communist mass media were

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[39] This collection partly repeats content from *Television - Revolution, das Ultimatum des Bildes: Rumänien im Dezember 1989* (von Amelunxen and Ujica).

abruptly confronted with post-communist and democratic principles of freedom of expression. At the level of practice, the transition was not a smooth one, according to the collection editors.

From its televised platform, the revolution created a new public sphere, in which actors and institutions fought for political power. Part of this construction relied on the media, which did not acknowledge its own technical and historical conditions and the principles on which they were based. Petrozsvky and Tichindeleanu argue that the nascent media sphere in Romania and by extension, the public sphere that bloomed during the Ceauşescu's fall, did not genuinely disseminate revolutionary information and ideas, but transmitted instead standardized content, passive reception, and the promotion of the new ruling party. In fact, they argue, the events help us realize that the television medium, the "object-symbol of the transition" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu) suffered from a "chronic incapacity to sustain a discursive dialogue, the fetishist attachment to one direction only", and that these qualities translated into a political bias. Thus, "one of the most common ways of *making sense of the relationship between television and the political events of the Revolution of 1989* is to consider television as a simple instrument serving occult powers" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu). They are not the only commentators drawing attention to the biases of the television – Ruxandra Cesereanu, among others, reminds us of the rumours and paranoid sentiments spread by the TVRL (Cesereanu *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucţia Unei Revoluţii* [December '89. Deconstruction of a Revolution]). In

fact, it might be argued that the TVRL became a paralegal force. The post-Decembrist slogan "Cu televizorul/ Ati mintit poporul" [Through television/ You've lied to the people] (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu) best mirrors the public's disillusionment with the medium and the revolution itself.

At the same time, Petrozsvky and Tichindeleanu caution, to consider television as a tool of manipulation means to dismiss the performative elements of history, and presupposes the possibility of another, 'purer' narrative of history. To regard state television as an instrument of influence would set up a binary between the lies of the communist past and the truth of Western capitalism, which, they argue, is an artificial, flawed binary. Instead, they remind us, we must consider the ways in which the old TV announcers entered into the entirely new "dramaturgy of selling" paradigm, wherein "a multitude of tribunes of public address" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu 31) were suddenly operating, a brusque change from the tightly controlled, centralized information distribution apparatus that the TVRL had been for decades. The transition itself if important to analyse then, rather than setting up reductive binaries.

Furthermore, Petrozsvky and Tichindeleanu claim, the events of 1989 "*revolutionize the concept of the revolution* as it was known at the end of the twentieth century" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu 33). It is important when discussing the reaction to the images to remember that these were received as a revolutionary factor in the process, such that the medium and the institution of

television not only precipitated a revolution, or a collective action,[40] but moreover created a new concept of revolution, that of a televised, globally marketable one.

Petrozsvky and Tichindeleanu argue that the events of 1989 created a crisis of the occidental paradigm, wherein "the televised revolution seems to mean a moment of entry into posthistory, where any distinctions between real history and virtual history are dissolved" (Petrovzky and Tichindeleanu 5). In a similarly technologically deterministic way, Vilém Flusser interprets the Romanian revolution as a media event and a sign of a new epoch in which technical images would be the triggers of political action (Flusser). When discussing the Romanian events, Friedrich Kittler declared that a revolution is no longer the domain of lawyers or educators, but of mediatised technology acting for the sake of media technology (Kittler).

A countervailing, socially deterministic strand observable in the discourse surrounding the events of 1989 posits that the events signalled a radical change in the use of the television medium. The abrupt changes in Romanian television reporting, brought about by the extenuating circumstances of a war-like state of chaos, caused an undoing of traditional television modes, reporting norms and narrative authority, as Margaret Morse notes (Morse). Theodorescu also reminds us of the special technical conditions that produced the disarray of the uprisings: the absence of collaboration between the various elements of the studio, and the

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[40] For a discussion of this concept, see Richard Andrew Hall's "Theories of Collective Action and Revolution: Evidence from the Romanian Transition of December 1989".

lack of communication and coordination between the general control desk, the broadcast studio and the magnetoscope services. According to him, these factors produced a moment of creative chaos that enabled democracy to rise in a new way.

Over time, the exaltation over the liberating powers of the media, and the radical shift in media use subsided. The generally confident and technophilic tone became increasingly pessimistic as time went on. For instance, in 1996, Peter Gross had declared himself "optimistic about Romania's mass media's positive evolution in the next decade or two", which, he declared, "ha[s] the potential of reaching the same advanced level as the strongest and best of Western European mass media" (Gross *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory* xiii). In 1998, however, Gross revisited his optimism, conceding that the "Romanian media are free but not autonomous.... [and their] influence in remaking society, politics, and political culture is minimal, tending to reinforce instead of helping evolve a shaky status-quo that is based on few principles" (Gross "The First Years. A Reappraisal of Romania's Media" 5). A few years later, in 2004, David Berry doubted the possibility of a democratically sound post-communist media sphere in Romania, in the light of the ideological history in which these media were rooted. His introductory statement succinctly expresses my own misgivings about the state of Romanian post-revolution media. "What we cannot do," Berry states, "is simply assume that Romania either is or

can develop a democratic system purely on the basis of the collapse of Romanian communism" (Berry vii).

My own brief review of the authoritarian communist past of Romania shows that the sudden creation of genuinely democratic media was at best unstable. Berry goes further back in time, to 1878, the inception of Romania as a nation state, to highlight the country's long history of state interference in culture and public life. In fact, he states, the "historical absence … of a universalised democratic tradition in Romania over a long period of time …[sets] a framework for development post-1989" (Berry ix). He claims that "Romania has never experienced a thoroughgoing enlightenment project in its entire history," (Berry ix) a factor that certainly does not support a quick emancipation of national media. In fact, Berry rejects the idea that 1989 brought about a radical shift in the media sphere, a discontinuity with previously oppressive methods. Instead, he states,

> *December 1989 was not a cut-off point in historical terms; it was not a detachment from history, but a continuation of that which preceded it. The idea, therefore, that post-1989 and the introduction of a new media system gave rise to a new consciousness, knowledge and new forms of understanding is a seductive one. (Berry ix-x)*

It is not, however, an idea that can withstand scrutiny. The important point, declares Berry, is that the events of 1989 "represent a *dialectical continuation* of the past," (Berry x) where

> *a continuation of a class system with clear social distinctions … has*
> *affected the shape of media and cultural development through*
> *ownership by a privileged minority and the occupation of the*
> *political and business spheres of the ruling class that govern the*
> *overall directions of Romanian post-communism. (Berry xiii)*

In other words, the pervasive corruption in the system makes a truly democratic press impossible.

Visual Reformulations

This section examines the "public (re)formulations of the Romanian 'revolution'" (Tileaga 369), focusing in particular on commemoration practices, and the way the collective memory of the events has been visually remediated, through examples from the post-communist art and cinema sphere.

Public and Formal Commemoration Practices and Collective Memory

The collective attempt to come to terms with the terror of the Ceauşescu dictatorship has resulted in certain themes resurfacing in visual popular and artistic narratives of the past. One can argue, as Tileaga has, that post-communist examination of the past has been expressed through the discussion of other themes whose relationship to this past has often been indirect (Tileaga). First and foremost, the narrative of the crimes and pain of the communist era was repeatedly used, from the very first moments of freedom, via live, unprompted testimonials given on television by a stream of civilians. Naturally, other forms of

expression, such as the cinematic forms I will analyze in the next part, have also taken up this subject. *Tales from a Golden Age (*Mungiu), for instance, is a collection of personal narratives from the late communist era, the latest internationally acclaimed film on the subject to emerge from Romania. The international popularity of films about late communism was spurred with the success of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Mungiu) and was certainly also a result of the international film festival industry demanding similar narratives, portraying communism from the point of view of a regular citizen. Films treating other subjects were successful on the Romanian domestic market, but less so with international audiences, a fact that points toward an international selection process that favours themes having to do with personalized looks at communism and the post-communist transition.

As noted, while questions persist concerning the authenticity of the revolution itself, the Ceauşescus are themselves the focus of their own conspiracy theories. A popular story circulating after the execution claimed that the dictatorial couple was in fact alive, hiding in Cuba, and that their doubles had been executed instead ("Exclusivitate Nicolae Ceausescu Este in Viata Si Locuieste in Cuba").[41] Another example of such deviation from official history is a blog that presents itself as written by Nicolae Ceauşescu himself, from Cuba ("Nicolae Ceausescu: Blog Tovarasesc De Europarlamentar"). V.A. Stănculescu

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[41] Also, a YouTube video of a discussion with a man who looks and claims to be Nicolae Ceausescu's brother, who claims the latter lives in Cuba ("Sensational! Ceausescu Traieste!").

explains this persistent doubles' theory as a legend created by the people's justified fears, the same fears that also permitted the creation of a hyperbolized vision of the Ceauşescus ("Nicolae Ceausescu: Blog Tovarasesc De Europarlamentar; Timofte).[42] Another particularly popular fake news story involved a blog posting a photograph of Nicolae holding an ipod in an awkwardly visible photoshop-ed alteration ("Exclusivitate Nicolae Ceausescu Este in Viata Si Locuieste in Cuba"). The accompanying article describes Ceauşescu's alleged lifestyle and his choice of music, in the form of a discussion with the former dictator himself. Interestingly, this fake news piece was posted on a blog promoting voting participation. These examples, and particularly the last one, stand as evidence of the ways in which conspiratorial explorations of history function as exercises in national and political identity formation.

Many, like Portocala, still maintain that the visuals of the execution were in fact constructed for the official narrative of the proceedings. He, along with many others, claims that the couple was killed before the video was shot. Indeed, many conflicting elements points to the possibility of manipulation of the bodies and a reconstruction of the capital punishment. The answers to these allegations are important, but not available; in the meantime, their significance lies in the way

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[42] The regional newspaper *Monitorul Neamt* quotes Stanculescu: "Anyway, the problem of the doubles remains nebulous. I believe that it was actually a legend generated by our fears, justified, which made up attribute these people [the Ceauşescus] hyperbolic dimentions. [De altfel, problema sosiilor rămîne nebuloasă. Cred mai degrabă că a fost o legendă generată de spaima nastră, justificată, care adeseori ne făcea să atribuim acestor persoane dimensiunile unor personaje hiperbolice] (own translation) (Timofte, "Dosare Necenzurate: Sosia Lui Nicolae Ceausescu Si Cacealmaua De La Tîrgoviste").

these images have served to mediate questions surrounding the political transition of the country.

These narrative and visual explorations can be understood as popular commemoration procedures, since "commemoration includes public rituals of remembrance and individual acts of recollection", but also "public debates over the meaning and significance of historical events" (Turner 206). Thus, the public constructs conspiracy theories as an indirect way of commemoration; meanwhile, the governing body presents a formal commemoration discourse that reframes the revolution as disconnected from "controversial particulars ... [, thereby] delegitimizing criticism" (Tileaga 359). Consequently, popular memory and formal memory are not always the same, as the latter is engaged with controlling rebellious representations of the past in order to secure political recognition for the ruling body and construct an authoritative version of the past. If one wonders who is "allocated the privilege of definition and how other possible versions or sources of possible disjunctive information are ruled out" (Tileaga 365), the answer is: the political authorities. Their version of the past, the official history, is stabilized through commemorative practices, while other versions are marginalized and delegitimized.

In the context of Romania, such formal commemorative discourses are central to transitions, "not a mere adjunct to nation-building, but central to it" (Tileaga 208). As Barbara Miztal notes, providing a "unitary and coherent version

of the past," (Misztal 127) is in fact a clear objective of such commemoration practices. We witness this link consistently in the construction and transmission of representations of the revolution, and especially in the commemorative speeches given by former president Ion Iliescu in the years after the revolution, which sought to impose one notion of the nation based on the revolution and to repudiate other ways of defining either the nation or the revolution. A struggle over the definition of the nation and the legitimacy of its leaders is visible in the way the official, consecrated pro-revolution perspective stands against the conspiracy theories which are popular in public forums. In this struggle, we find examples like those discussed above, such as the voting-encouraging blog that circulates images of Ceauşescu alive in Cuba, which participate in the process of nation-building in a manner opposed to that of the official political sphere, with its denigrating stance against conspiracy theories.

Coping with the totalitarian past and understanding its demise have furthermore led to the construction of a mythical aura around the revolution and its actors (Deletant "Review: Myth-Making and the Romanian Revolution "). In fact, it can be argued, as Mihai Coman does, that the mass media reported - and constructed- the revolution through the creation of a dramatic mythological narrative, based on an established Western symbolic system (Coman 169). Thus, Coman explains, through the dramatic narratives circulating in the press, accompanied by shocking and emotional photographs, the media presented a binary scheme of symbolic themes. The events were explained as the fight

between light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, the nation versus the leader, and the young versus the old.[43] Certain visual mythical symbols were circulated widely, like candles, or the Christmas tree – a ritual tree for Christmas, but also used instead of a cross to mark the dead. The result was a dramatic narrative based on an established Western symbolic system (Coman 169), which, it can be argued, understood the events within an archetypally religious Christian narrative whereby, at Christmas, youth vanquishes darkness.

Friedrich Kittler has offered an interesting mythological comparison between the execution of the Ceauşescus and that of Vlad Tepes, one which resonates, albeit indirectly, with popular comparisons of Ceauşescu with the famous Dracula. One legend has it that the latter was killed by his own court, as he returned from a battle for which he had dressed in the enemy's gear, in order to infiltrate the enemy. Thus, explains Kittler, the Ceauşescus, dressed in bloody furs, faced their last televised transmission as a reincarnation of Dracula, and were similarly killed by their own court, but in a televised ritual (Kittler). Other visual symbols were introduced into the iconographic mythological repertoire of Romanian popular culture. The Romanian tricolour flag, the recurrent symbol of the revolution, is visible everywhere. Another powerful visual trope is the helicopter that took the Ceauşescus away from the last rally, used for instance in

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[43] Chapter two provides a discussion of the way these images engendered mythical associations, whereby failure is equalled with a demented dictator and negative cultural references, and is positioned against the vigour of the young and the revolution.

films such as Mircea Daneliuc's *Patul Conjugal* [Conjugal Bed] and Lucian Pintilie's *Prea Târziu* [Too Late].

The archetypal symbolic narrative requires a sacrificial ritual, whereby "malefic polarized violence surrounding the victim metamorphoses, through immolation, in positive violence" (Coman). As Coman argues, modern societies have embraced symbolic sacrifice, conducted through juridical and media tools, which takes the place of archaic mystical elements, with mass media as the high priest of the solemn ritual. In the Romanian case, he notes, the sacrifice was too literal, the death of the villain too real. The effect was unsettling, and frustrating. The sacrifice was anticipated for decades, but, ultimately, it was delivered furtively and incompletely, in an anti-climatic manner excluded from mass media rituals. Following Coman's analysis, it makes sense to conclude that the sacrifice needed in the symbolic narrative constructed was not fulfilling in its truncated version, from a juridical point of view, but unsatisfying, as well, in its visuality.

Furthermore, in the light of this theory, it can also be argued that the desire to complete the mythological construction that was the revolution resulted, partly, in skewed representations and expectations. Evidence of such unmet expectations may be found in the response to Ujica's film. It was initially received with strong opposition from Romanian viewers, who found his representation of the events to be less heroic than their own memory constructions, according to the prominent artist, intellectual, and GDS member Dan Perjovschi. Perjovschi, whom I

interviewed in March 2010, explains that Ujica, a Romanian émigré living in Germany at the time, "was able to see other things" than those seen by the Romanians living in the country, and that the film reflected these things. When it was shown at the Goethe Institute in Bucharest, in 1994 or 1995,[44] Perjovschi recalls how "the Romanian viewers were horrified, scandalized" denying that Ujica's version was 'their' revolution. The domestic filmic reproduction of the events employed highly heroic tones to portray the events, which explains the difficulty the local audience had to accept another, non-heroic, version of the events. Instead of a "reality intellectually analysed and contextualized", like Ujica's, "a passionate rendering" had been favoured and available. As a result, the audience did not "understand" a passionless version, and reacted by asking Ujica to reshoot the film, as Perjovschi remembers, laughing at the irony. This was an understandable coping mechanism, he admits, since "the trauma was great" and "the dead had to be explained somehow" (Perjovschi).[45]

Revisiting the Past through Art

In *Remembering to Forget*, Barbie Zelizer describes the process of mourning after a traumatic event as consisting of three phases: "forgetting to remember," "remembering to remember," and finally, "remembering to forget" (Zelizer *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* 163). The process of mourning begins with a "period of high attention", followed

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[44] An exact date is not available; here I am relying to Perjovschi's estimate (Perjovschi).
[45] Another factor would be the differences between the local and the international ways of reporting and documenting the events, which I analysed in chapter two.

immediately by scepticism about the extent of the trauma suffered, during which time the "frame for bearing witness [becomes] highly formulaic," prompting "survivors [to] learn to keep their experiences private" (Zelizer *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* 160). At this point, the process of "forgetting to remember" (Zelizer *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* 163) begins, a form of dissociation from the past "that returns as the repressed in destructively painful psychological and social ways" (Stiles). The second phase of "remembering to remember" is marked by memorializing and re-experiencing the past in several ways.

Contemporary art historian Kristine Stiles wrote in 2005 that Romania was in the first phase of processing a painful history, in which it "forgets to remember" (Stiles) the transition from its totalitarian past. She offered this phase in contrast to current ways of thinking of the Holocaust, whereby, she declared, "by continually memorializing the Holocaust (in museums, books, and international culture), the world remains locked in "remembering to remember" (Stiles). In the third phase, while 'remembering to forget,' a population heals enough to no longer need to repress the past, and becomes psychologically healthy enough to consciously decide to 'remember to forget,' namely to let go of the past (Stiles). That was not yet the case with Romania (of 2005), Stiles noted, since it had not yet learned to remember.

Up to today, the Romanian post-communist art scene mirrors this blindness to the past, with few artists engaged in discussing the communist era or the revolution, and practically none addressing the execution in the decade following the revolution. Perjovschi is one of the few exceptions, and Stiles reviews one of his projects addressing the general blindness toward the past. In 2003, Palatul Parlamentului[46] [Palace of Parliament], the third largest building in the world after the Pentagon and the Chicago Merchandise Mart, "the architectural atrocity that is a reminder of the not as-yet-unmasked *securitate* [surrounded by] abandoned spaces haunted by the hungry dogs" (Stiles), inaugurated the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) within its walls. Perjovschi was one of the artists invited to participate and exhibit at the opening exhibition of the MNAC, entitled *Romanian Artists (and not only) Love the Palace?!*. Instead of exhibiting, Perjovschi produced a statement and emphatically refused to exhibit his work. His act can be read as a participatory act, a performance in itself. His artistic gesture or work, then, was a refusal to approve the choice of the Palace as a site of the MNAC, a refusal to forget about the past, to forget about the communist icon. The building, a reminder of the past hidden in plain sight, despite its monstrous size, is a symbol of the "unresolved history of suffering and loss so vividly displayed in the desolate landscape surrounding this monster building," (Stiles) throwing a large shadow over the capital. In other words, "the history of the place hurts" (Guta). Perjovschi's project then became

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[46] The building was initially, during its conception in the Ceausescu days, called Palatul Poporului – the Palace of the People.

an act of resistance to the first phase of 'forgetting to remember', through his decision to remember and acknowledge the visual representation of the past.
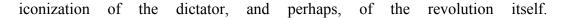
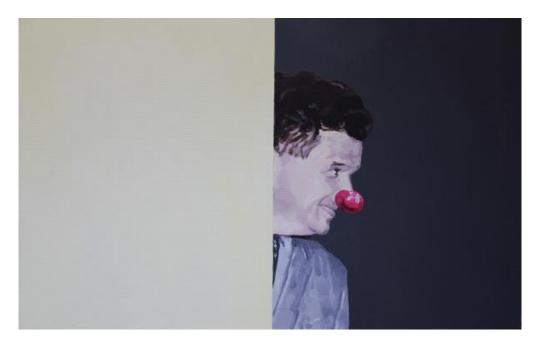Stiles explained the significance of Perjovschi's act in relation to the iconic building:

> *The association of contemporary art with the very building that signifies the former dictator's most heinous acts seriously compromises artists' ability to comment critically on the state and its social, political, and cultural practices and policies. By participating in the MNAC - located in the bowels of Palatul (Poporului) Parlamentului - contemporary artists become complicit with the state both in the present and also, by association, in the past.... Palatul Poporului is an international symbol, and because it is the symbol of Romanian national traumatic experience, how it is used effects how Romania recovers from its history of abuse. In this regard, survivors of trauma must learn to "articulate the values and beliefs that the trauma destroyed," (Coombes 178) in order to rebuild their systems of belief. Thus recovery requires that a story be repeatedly told about the history of Palatul Poporului as a primary means "for reconciliation with repressed material."(Herman 175)... The Perjovschis's refusal to capitulate to the installation of contemporary art in the "Palace" must be understood as a public service of remembrance that articulates the values and beliefs destroyed by everything represented by Palatul Poporului and for which they mourn. (Stiles)*

Thus, since "Romanians remain tied to the past, in part because national rites of remembrance and mourning have not taken place" (Stiles), the result of this reluctance to process the past, arguably, is that the Romanian contemporary art

scene – during the first decade of the 2000s, at least – was marked by a silence on the subject.

An interesting trend is illustrated by Dragos Burlacu's paintings, realistic renderings of Nicolae Ceauşescu in intimate or at least casual, familial situations. For instance, the one below captures the dictator playing the clown. Burlacu's paintings are reformulations of photographs from the newly available photographic archive of communism. His method of revisioning the past reminds one of Ujica's latest film, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceauşescu*. Both authors reformulate Ceauşescu's image in a way that removes it from the Romanian collective memory in which he is remembered as a beast, or demon. This new shift may perhaps indicate a nation getting ready to review the past, and the spectacular, mythical persona created by the dictator himself and by the coverage of the revolution. We may witness here the destruction of old icons, the de-

iconization of the dictator, and perhaps, of the revolution itself.

One of the steps involved in this deconstruction of iconic history may be to acknowledge and display the visual remnants of a communist past. This practice seems indeed to be more widely present than artistic critique. In 2009, the National Museum of Contemporary Art displayed an entire gallery of paintings of the dictator and his wife in various official poses, in the Soviet Realistic kitsch style that was once a familiar sight. The difference from the original exhibition of these works is that they were now hung diagonally, off-centre, or upside down, in order "to make clear that the show was not actually a tribute" (Kimmelman). This show stood as evidence of a new chapter in the development of Romanian art, one marked by the direct display of communist kitsch and nostalgia pieces. In an act similarly dedicated to historical narrative, in December 2009, a theatre play re-enacted the trial and the execution of the Ceauşescus, to great success. The

documentary theatre piece was created by the International Institute for Political Crimes, as part of their interdisciplinary project of combining theatre, visual art, film, and research in order to re-enact historical events. The new found interest in all things related to Ceauşescu was also particularly evident at commercial and political events[47]. Nostalgia for the past started to spread around the middle of the last decade, perhaps as a precursor of the second phase, that of "remembering to remember" (Stiles).

One area in which this interest has grown and been displayed, increasingly, from 2005 on, is within Romanian cinema. Romanian films are increasingly visible on the international film market, and their treatment of communism has been a popular selling point during the last decade. Production prior to 2001 was weak and not notable, due perhaps to the need to readjust to lost decades in which film production had been heavily controlled. Some authors argue that "the events of the December 1989 revolution left an ideological void, filled previously by the political imaginary of the Ceausescu regime" (Adamson 121). While the year 2000 was the low point in film production in Romania, as no productions were released that year (Dulgheru), 2001 marked the beginning of a fruitful period dubbed the "Romanian New Wave", with *God Kisses Us on the Mouth Every Day* (Dragin) as the first internationally acclaimed Romanian

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[47] 41% of Romanians would vote for Ceausescu; 49% declare him a good leader; 87% follow the latest deshumation procedures, 71% don't believe "he deserved his fate" ("Ceausescu ar fi Reales cu 41% din Voturi daca ar Candida la Presedintie"). Other clear signs: In July 2010, the Socialist Alliance Party (Partidul Alianţa Socialistă) recently changed its name to The Romanian Communist Party (Partidul Comunist Român) ("A Reaparut Partidul Comunist Roman")

festival entry,[48] and later productions like *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Puiu) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Mungiu) succeeding on the international film festival circuit. Films like *The Way I Spent the End of the World (*Mitulescu)*, The Paper will be Blue* (Munteanu), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (Porumboiu), and the latest in that line of success stories, *Tales from a Golden Age* (Mungiu), present nostalgic pastiches of images and footage from the late period of Ceauşescu's regime.

Generally speaking, cinematic reformulations of the past embrace subjective points of view, and eschew questions about the transition and the authenticity of the revolution in favour of presenting personal struggles, painted against the background of the revolution. In Catalin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World* the last scenes incorporates newsreel footage of battles between protesters and police, but only as a backdrop to the main stories of the main protagonists. Perhaps the most radical personal perspective is offered in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceauşescu*, which relies on from Ceauşescu's own home-video footage collection to present a benign look at the dictator, from his own perspective, at least through the images the dictator kept of himself. Ujica explains his latest work as a

> *new subgenre of historical film, to try to show that today we are in a situation where the corpus of images about major contemporary events and personalities is sufficient to allow us to reconstruct*

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[48] Awards at several international film festivals, such as those of Bratislava, Rotterdam, Istanbul, Cairo.

history. There's a level of irony in the title, but for me it was the only possible perspective. This was an archive of images commissioned by Ceausescu and by his propaganda machine, and if you try to make a film using these images, you can make this film only through his eyes. (qtd. in Lim)

More and more, the image of the dictator and by extension that of the fall of communism are loosened from formulaic narratives.

Some of these movies address the inconsistencies of the official version of the revolution, through their stories. For instance, Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* directly addresses the rumours of terrorism paralysing the capital during the revolution. The protagonist of the film, a *militiaman* who deserts his regiment in order to help the revolutionaries, is caught within absurd allegations of terrorism. The military paranoia reigning during those days leads to his meaningless death. This story line expresses the overwhelming disappointment and frustration experienced by those who were directly touched by the events, and who struggled to believe in the revolution but were never given answers about the actual causes behind the many fatalities.

Similarly, *12:08 East of Bucharest* (Porumboiu) presents the revolution as an uncertain event, through the prism of a small town. The TV station in the provincial city of Vaslui commemorates the revolution's 16th anniversary through a live phone-in programme centered on the question of whether there were any protesters in the town square before Ceauşescu lost power at 12:08, a time

marking the temporal divide between genuine revolutionaries and followers. Unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion, the film shows how memories change over time, and how everyone has their own personal version of the revolution, even if it is more limited than those experienced by the actual fighters of the revolution. The film serves as a metaphor for the futility of discussing the validity of the revolution (Iordanova). In the same way that the general public discourse on the topic is ultimately unsatisfactory, the film's own discussion never ends. Instead, evidence is thin and opinions differ; the conversation veers away. The pettiness and drabness of everyday life has taken its toll and now, seventeen years later, questioning the events no longer really matters. Life has gone on; today's concerns prove ultimately more pertinent than secondary issues like memory and historical record.

While the Romanian fiction film market is currently riding a wave of success, the domestic documentary film field is marked by difficulties. These challenges are explained by Alina Bradeanu as resulting from an instilled fear in the propagandist powers of the documentary film, after decades of the medium being used that way. The few documentaries that have emerged are thus perhaps even more interesting to consider, given the ideological restraints they fight against. Also, unlike fiction films, documentaries remember the past by posing questions about the veracity of the events, pointing to different scenarios and possibilities, and explaining the spectacular horrors of the dictatorship to a receptive global audience.

Children of the Decree (Iepan), a German and Romanian collaboration, illustrates well the lurid spectacle provided by Romania to the international market in the aftermath of Ceauşescu's death. Toward the end, the documentary presents shockingly disturbing footage of children in calamitous conditions in hidden orphanages, the tragic result of an anti-abortion decree put in place in 1966 by Ceauşescu. The visuals of the couple at their trial are juxtaposed with this footage, as a visual response to the horrors just witnessed, to the question of responsibility toward these children. We hear Elena Ceauşescu protesting against the soldiers fastening her hands, addressing them as children she had brought up. The film continues with propagandist material representing a happy childhood acoustically supplemented by songs sung by young voices, and a smiling Nicolae waving to children. Following are images of the Ceauşescus' corpses lying on the floor after their execution, accompanied by the numbers of the victims claimed by the 1966 decree, before the final credits roll. These spectacular juxtapositions have the function of shocking the audience, but furthermore, they set up a theatrical binary. The images contrast young and the old, birth and death, abandoned children and the old, powerful Ceauşescus. The result – a mythical contrast between evil and good – is a trope often used in documentaries about communism.

Schachmatt: Strategie einer Revolution (Brandstätter) uses this trope as well, as it reconstructs the events of December 1989 through the metaphor of the

chess game. The mixed-production[49] documentary establishes a clear divide between black (evil, or communism) and white (good, or Western democracy) chess pieces, and presents the revolution as a strategic game played by international interests with the goal of achieving a wider post-communist geopolitical realignment of the Central European states as an end to the Cold War. This metaphor was recently also used in a CNN report, in which children abandoned as a result of the decree of 1966 were likened to chess pawns (Magnay). Perhaps as a way of emphasizing its own political authority, *Checkmate* relies on talking heads, and verbal commentary and expertise provided by specialists rather than presenting the amateur footage available from the events. Meanwhile, the German - Romanian collaboration *Videogramme einer Revolution* (Farocki and Ujica), a documentary already discussed in previous chapters, prefers to let the historical footage take over the verbal commentary and 'dictate' the story. It is a visual reconstruction of the events in Bucharest, as it collects amateur footage from these days presenting it as the unofficial point of view of the citizens. The film betrays a tendency to suffuse technology with social value, as it suggests that the cameras are independent from their operators. For instance, a chapter is titled "A camera investigates the situation," thereby lending the narrative authority to the camera rather than to the camera operator. Other

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[49]*Schachmatt: Strategie einer Revolution* is a German, French, Austrian, Romanian and Hungarian production.

lesser-known Romanian documentaries[50] also employ visual reconstruction of the events, mainly in order to present conspiracy theories and spectacular revelations. These are generally productions of lower budget employing decidedly tabloid aesthetics; they typically have ephemeral distribution on television and continue their lifespan online.

The main interest of documentary films was the reconstruction of the events of December 1989, understandable since "reconsideration of the past was an expression of the larger processes of social remembering and accountability that characterized Romania in the 2000's" (Bradeanu 45). However, as Bradeanu notes, is important to remember that "national communist stories with an international appeal also were a response to the interest of foreign broadcasters in presenting lived experiences of Communism" (Bradeanu 45), well illustrated by documentaries such as *Children of the Decree*, which presents the topic of orphan children – which arguably resonates with a global interest in adoption – along the story of the Romanian revolution. The 2009 CCN retrospective commemorating the revolution's 20th anniversary focused on the same topic as a means to understand the transition and update the audience on today's situation in Romania (Magnay). This global support for stories about the transition is present in fiction films as well. The end of *12:08 East of Bucharest* symbolically and likely

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[50] Many of these explorations are produced by the television channel B1TV and are aired on the polemic talk show *Nasul* [The Godfather]. Two popular examples are *20 de Ani de la Revolutie. Reconstituirea Executiei lui Ceausescu* [20 Years from the Revolution, The Reconstruction of Ceausescu's Execution] or *Adevarul despre Nicolae Ceausescu* [The Truth about Nicolae Ceausescu].

accidentally foregrounds the idea that there is foreign support for the notion of a successful revolution: the only one making a supporting phone call validating a revolution in the town of Vaslui was in fact the foreigner, the Chinese shop-owner, while the locals displayed indifference at best.

The examples I highlight are difficult to compare directly so as to map the factors that have produced the differences between them. The lack of representation of the revolution in the art industry is not easy to balance against the success of that same subject in the film world. However, in the cases I have examined here, several factors play a contributing role with respect to these differences. In the case of the art world, financial and political restrictions play an immense role. In the case of the MNAC, the political ties to the past are too apparent: the museum is physically linked to the House of the Parliament, and so to the communist past. Perjovschi's decision to boycott this structure points to the difficulty artists experience when performing within this politically charged network, and when considering the past from a non-political point of view. In the case of the art market, questions arise as to what is displayed, what is reconsidered, what intellectual understandings of the revolution have emerged, what are its symbols and how visible they are. In contradistinction, we find the more successful market for films, with its profitable and high-profile international film festival opportunities and an international desire for stories revisiting communism. Ironically, the international market supports the development of works that revise and reproduce the past, amidst the emergence of new ways of

subsidizing cinema, while the more hermetic domestic art field is tied down by local politics and attempts to monopolize and officialise definitions of the past.

The examples analysed in this chapter show that the visual reformulation of revolution is to a certain degree still controlled within a network of politics of representations. The images of the revolution, their circulation, and remediation within the creative realm are as much subjected to national politics as they are shaped by international markets. The art world discusses the revolution in reticent ways; those who do approach the subject however, like Perjovschi, might have to engage in a political struggle against official ways of controlling the image of the past. However, the reformulations in the realm of creative expression show a desire to move toward a deconstruction and maybe even a destruction of old icons and past experiences.

Chapter Five: Affect Formation and Circulation

Beyond their role as documentary representations and historical archives, the visuals analyzed thus far raise questions about what it means to partake in the distribution and consumption of violent images. These images become ethical events in themselves, a means by which we might come to understand how pleasure is associated with trauma, or how we mitigate and derive affective benefit from the production and circulation of such controversial visuals. In this chapter, I examine visuals as platforms for the production, distribution, and reception of emotions such as hate, fear, guilt, shame, disgust, forming an economy of affect through which the images attain iconicity. Furthermore, I highlight the repulsion and attraction these images provoke, and how these reactions might be read as instances of iconophobia and the sublime.

Affect

Charles Altieri has defined affect as a loose umbrella term for emotions referring to "the entire range of states that are bounded on one side by pure sensation and on the other by thoughts that have no visible or tangible impact on our bodies" (Altieri 2). For him, affect may be further defined as an "immediate mode of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension" (Altieri 2). For the purposes of this chapter, emotions and affects may be substituted for each other, on the basis of the above definition,

with the proviso that I consider both terms social constructs, such that "emotions [and affects] should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices" (Ahmed 10) directly linked to the surrounding society and its politics.

I argue here that visuals of the Romanian revolution – in particular, the images of the dead Ceauşescus, as well as certain iconic photographs taken during the uprisings – circulated within what Sara Ahmed has termed an 'economy of affect', or an 'affective economy'. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Ahmed provides a discussion of "affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects of objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (Ahmed 8). She argues, in other words, that the circulation of objects – in my case, the visual representations of the Romanian revolution – produces affects "as social and cultural practices" (Ahmed 10). Affective economy, then, is a "social and material, as well as psychic" (Ahmed 46) concept and is based on a "circulation of objects [that] allows us to think about the 'sociality' of emotion" (Ahmed 8). Following this logic, this chapter is an exploration of objects, or cultural texts, as "repositories of feelings and emotions" (Cvetkovich 7), objects which, alongside their iconicity, serve certain social and cultural practices. Thus, the iconic visuals that constructed the tableau of the revolution, with its flags, its corpses lining the streets of Timişoara, and Ceauşescus' dead bodies, can be explored in terms of how these circulated accompanied by certain emotions or affects.

Icons

Recollecting the Romanian revolution of 1989 might prompt televisual memories of the executed Ceauşescus, the tricolour flag with the Communist emblem cut out, or the dictator's helicopter flying away from his headquarter. For the Romanian public, these are the foremost icons of the revolution. Other striking images at that time were the dead naked bodies lined up in the streets of Timişoara, allegedly dug up from mass graves that the *securitate* used to hide the victims, and a photograph of a woman holding a baby, allegedly shot to death by a single bullet, mentioned in chapter four. During and after the days of the revolution, these images circulated widely in the domestic and international news media, accompanying the clearly overstated numbers of fatalities reported by national and international media.

What makes an image iconic? According to Hariman and Lucaites, iconic images

> *work in several registers of ritual and response. ... They are objects*
> *of veneration, ... they are reproduced widely and placed prominently*
> *in both public and private settings, and they are used to orient the*
> *individual within a context of collective identity, obligation, and*
> *power. (Hariman and Lucaites 1)*

Icons bear political weight. As images of flags, youths protesting in the streets, and the executed bodies became emblems of the revolution, they circulated as a political currency used "to orient the individual within a context of

collective identity, obligation, and power" (Hariman and Lucaites 1) within the political market that formed immediately in December 1989. In fact, as Hariman and Lucaites explain, icons can easily become "fragmentary representations of events that reinforce dominant, totalizing narratives; artfully manufactured sentiments ranging from patriotism to grief used to justify state action" (Hariman and Lucaites 2); hence, they serve political and ideological purposes. Iconic photographs "provide an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (and inaction) can be constituted and controlled through visual media" (Hariman and Lucaites 5). Consequently, when analysing which photographs became iconic and how they are circulated, we also analyse the politics behind the media circulations of the images.

As regards this study, icons

come to represent large swaths of historical experience, ... they acquire their own histories of appropriation and commentary, [and] they have more than documentary value, for they bear witness to something that exceeds words. Objects of contemplation bearing the aura of history, or humanity, or possibility, they are sacred images for a secular society. (Hariman and Lucaites 1-2)

Because of the power of authority and meaning invested in them, iconic images can serve as historical reference points across time. For instance, after Saddam Hussein's death sentence, the images of Ceauşescu's execution served as comparisons, and provoked the discussion of the latter's execution, especially

within Romania but internationally as well.[51] Perhaps such a comparison was prompted by the similar shock of witnessing the filmed execution of a demonized figure. Many other similarities could be noted, such as between the televised inspection of a scruffy Saddam Hussein and the medical examination of the freshly captured, dishevelled Ceauşescus. In fact, these two sets of visuals share several aesthetic elements, such as a tabloid-like representation of events, spectacular judicial circumstances, and similarities between the two dictators and their methods of ruling.[52]

Other such comparisons with iconic figures can be made. Tariq Ali, for example, contrasted Saddam Hussein's court proceedings – and, here, I make an extension to the trial of the Ceauşescus – with the trials of Nazi criminals after World War II, claiming that "Nuremberg was a more dignified application of victor's justice, [while] Saddam's trial has, till now, been the crudest and most grotesque" (Ali). Furthermore, Siddharth Varadarajan, reporting for *The Hindu*, compared the filming and circulation of Saddam's execution video to the display

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[51] Here are two examples of popular comments on the blogosphere:

"The capture of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein—from the Romanian perspective, in December of all months!—inevitably evoked comparisons even in the international media with the fall of the Ceausescu regime in December 1989. In Romania, Hussein's capture touched off comparisons between how Hussein will face real justice and how the Ceausescus were summarily tried and executed on Christmas Day 1989" (Hall "Romania December 1989. Doublespeak: The All-Too-Familiar Tales of Nicolae Ceausescu's Double").

"Those who wanted Hussein, somehow, to be hanged elegantly should compare his treatment with that of other doomed tyrants. Hussein's final chapter may have been uncomfortable, but it sure beat the demise of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu" (Murdock).

[52] Noam Chomsky notes that "Ceausescu ... was a tyrant perfectly comparable to Saddam Hussein. He was overthrown in 1989 by his own population, while he was being supported by the current incumbents in Washington, and that continues" (Chomsky).

of the lynching photographs of the American South in the early 20th century, thus denouncing the moral corruption of these images as entertainment pieces (Varadarajan). What is more, both Ceauşescu and Hussein were likened to Hitler, another iconic figure, in a gesture which, following Giyoo Hatano, "illustrates how people try to understand a novel phenomenon by referring to the instances in their past experience that they think are most similar, and how their reactions to the phenomenon are mediated by their analogy" (Hatano). Similarly, images of the recent exhumation of Ceauşescu's graves brought Saddam Hussein's name back into the sphere of Romanian news. Iconic images can thus act as mediators of experiences, rendering such experiences meaningful through their resonance with prior common elements.

The desire to provide a spectacular image of the revolution and to render the reported casualty numbers visible, in an iconic manner, resulted in skewed visual representations of the revolution, with the media circulating images of bodies that were, in fact, unrelated to the uprisings. Once these images were verified, and found to be misrepresentations, they came to represent the biggest media lie in the history of television (Castex). Before their value and meaning changed, however, these were the icons and symbols of the revolution, and despite the controversy, or precisely because of it, they have become anchored in Romanian history, important visual markers of changes in the political and social fabric of the country. Internationally, they were circulated widely and repeatedly during and after the Revolution, and continue to be disseminated, on occasion, as

symbols of the fall of tyranny. This is an example of how the icons transform feelings into fetishes, "through the erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (Ahmed 11).

Thus, the process of iconic formation may often involve destruction; this was the case in Romania, where old symbols were destroyed, and others re-appropriated through iconicity. The Romanian flag, for example, was refashioned by the revolutionaries and re-appropriated from its communist past, by cutting out the crest of the communist party from its middle such that a hole came to stand for the past. The ubiquitous portraits of the *Conducator*[53] and his wife were defaced and destroyed in various ways, in full visibility. Ultimately, the icons of the leader himself, whose portraits had unwillingly become the basis of a visual cult, had to be destroyed in a ritualistic way, in order to make space for new icons. The execution of the most hated and prominent symbol of the old power had become a symbol and icon of the revolution itself.

The image of the flag, waved around the streets of Timişoara and Bucharest, immediately became imbued with significance as it appeared at these momentous times of change. Indeed, signs become icons as they circulate at particularly significant moments in which they become suffused with an initial affective capital, determined by the historical importance of the moment.

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[53] Romanian term used to address Nicolae Ceauşescu, during his regime, meaning (supreme) leader.

Subsequent circulations and uses of these images increase this initial capital and strengthen the affective value of these signs.

Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economy, on which my analysis is based, incorporates an account of the ways in which affect circulates and increases in value. For her,

> *emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation ... objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as psychic field ... [whereby] affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become. (Ahmed 45)*

Once signs are suffused with an initial affective capital, this capital can only increase with their circulation, as Ahmed explains, facilitating the process of iconicity.

Repetition and wide exposure are immensely helpful elements in the process by which iconic status is formed, as Gunthert explains using the example of the Abu Ghraib visuals:

> *The iconographic repetitions and exchanges between the press and television channels had already organized the multiple occurrences of these visual documents as news: with the evolution of the electronic network, the Internet became a third actor in this*

redundancy, which contributed to the production and repetition of such icons. This aspect is particularly true of the photographs of the Iraqi prison from their first diffusion through three concurrent media and, constituted as evidence, inevitably helped the images to become monuments. (Gunthert 108)

In the case of the Romanian photographs, national television repeatedly circulated the visuals as central pieces of information, again and again, with or without commentary, throughout the course of events. Every repetition magnified the initial affective capital of these images, adding layers of meaning, tension, affective 'value', and facilitating their conversion to icons.

Following Sara Ahmed's adaptation of a Marxist reasoning, we can observe in this case how the original value of an object being circulated (here, the symbolic visuals) not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases in its magnitude and value, through repetition and wide exposure. This movement converts the object into affective capital. As the image of the flag and other images circulated constantly during these bloody and liberating times, their affective value grew within the economy of emotions constitutive of the Romanian revolution, thus solidifying their iconic status. As a result, the flag became a synonym of the revolution, and the images of the dead dictator a synonym of the fall of communism, especially in the eyes of the international media.

Another important factor in this conversion is the aesthetic character of the subjects chosen, as Gunthert explains, again using the example of Abu Ghraib visuals:

> *It is clear that the best candidates for canonization were the simpler images (the hooded man, the leashed man, the prisoner threatened by dogs), those whose subject matter is easily identifiable and could best act as emblems (the martyr, the torturer and the victim, helplessness in the face of violence). In contrast, photographs of too many subjects, with too much going on in the background or of situations needing interpretation were more difficult to remember. (Gunthert 109)*

Images such as that of the dictator and his wife facing an invisible jury, scared, literally cornered, or those of corpses lined up in the street, and of course the close-ups of Nicolae's head lying in the dirt of the street were effectively retained in the collective memory. Often, this would also result in a binary representation pitting good versus evil, and the formation of myths, as discussed in chapter four. The easily digestible aesthetics that accompanied the strong narratives behind the photographs facilitated their iconization.

In Romania, one of the results of the affective economy created by the circulation of iconic images was a new concept of national identity. The domestic visual news industry destroyed and discarded old icons of the communist past, and initiated a radical aesthetic change by providing new, arresting images and ways of recording them. For decades, the Romanian viewer was offered only

propagandist fare mostly made up from retouched photographs of the smiling dictator couple in various static scenes. As Perjovschi recalls in his interview, the Romanian public did not know any other aesthetics, and photography and other visual media were always employed in such formulaic, mainly functional ways (Perjovschi). Suddenly, the public was shown the visual antithesis of what it was used to seeing. The shock of seeing the dictator and his wife brought in front of judges, looking frightened, replaced the experience of ubiquitous happy portraits. These were burned and broken by angry feet in the streets, and new photographs replaced them: unedited footage of ordinary citizens in chaotic, scary, and euphoric scenes full of movement. Flags were refashioned, their communist insignias cut out, and people were dancing on tanks, symbols of terror. The un-retouched images of common people, some dead, some terrified, or jubilant, replaced the static, soporific scenes that had been offered for years.

These active replacement narratives constituted radical, enunciative visual acts after decades of (visual) submission, and their circulation in the news was a significant moment, facilitating an immediate investment of affective capital in these images. The images immediately meant pleasure, power and belonging. This recovery or discovery of a Romanian national identity was strongly accentuated in the wide circulation of the images, which worked to add additional layers of affective value to these signs and their initial cultural and affective capital. These images became icons. The radical shift in the dominant aesthetics of the country helped redefine the meaning of the "nation," providing new symbols of the

destruction of the past (a refashioned flag, for example), and new icons through which the Romanian people came to be redefined as an active, brave, and united crowd.

An image becomes invested with an initial affective capital, then, when it is circulated during certain meaningful moments; repeated ulterior circulation within an affective economy increases this initial capital, resulting in an icon. Icons bear political weight, serve as historical reference points across time, and are deemed authoritative replacements for the events they represent, even if they risk distorting, decontextualizing and fetishizing the narratives they represent. In the case of the Romanian revolution, icons served as ideological tools, serving as visualizations of the revolutionary change of regime, promoting a sense of nation building.

Circulating Affects

It might be claimed that the spectacular images of the Romanian revolution promoted a particular political direction. The affective economy surrounding the images produced and circulated emotional currencies which were valuable politically and ideologically, such as hate, fear, disgust, and guilt. In particular, one can argue that the dominant group of the revolution, the FSN, benefited from the circulation of the images, drawing upon them as a way to construct and reach a unified nation that would respond positively and collectively to the political changes ahead.

The available still images of the execution footage, notably the still shots of the couple lying dead on the ground, were repeatedly shown on all national media, in such a way that they served as visual reminders of the hatred felt for the couple. They were the modern televised equivalent of the severed head held up to the crowd at *Ancient Régime* beheadings, symbols of justice and revenge being served by the governing bodies in charge.

Managing this affect entailed the formation of a united group, because hatred, Ahmed explains, "work[s] as a form of investment; it endows a particular other with meaning or power by locating them as a member of a group, which is then imagined as a form of positive residence in the body of the individual" (Ahmed 49). The people were consolidated as a unity through this hatred and drawn in new political directions as pain and desire for revenge propelled the revolution.

The leading group had only to address this hatred, to provide catharsis and a resolution of this sentiment, arguably through the execution. The FSN presented the images as a form of charitable offering to the nation, the proverbial sacrifice of the body. The killing of the dictator was presented as a necessary deed prompted by love for the nation, an act of kindness extended from the new governing body to the people, a protective gesture. However, the entire video of the execution was not shown on Romanian television for months after the event, and only shown after being broadcast in France, in 1990. Insofar as the eyes of the

nation were shielded from the execution itself, and the actual act of shooting the dictatorial couple was omitted, this form of 'televised sacrifice' ultimately became complicated and unfulfilling.

As a result, the initial hatred was repressed, and transformed into frustration and guilt, with the images withheld from public discourse, as explained in the previous chapter. The issue would only resurface at particular times, such as Saddam Hussein's execution, and, more recently, as the bodies of the Ceauşescus were exhumed. The manner in which the new visuals of the exhumed corpses were disseminated is particularly interesting in that it allows us to analyse how the initial hatred had developed over the intervening years.

The bodies of the Ceauşescus were exhumed in July 2010, more than 20 years after their death, in order to answer, through DNA testing, persisting questions around their authenticity. The pictures of the exhumed corpses were distributed online, in a visual follow-up to the execution pictures provided 20 years ago. The first set of pictures of Ceauşescus' bodies, the 1989 stills, were displayed in a subdued manner, with delays, and furthermore, presented as a necessary revenge for and of the people. The recent visuals, in contrast, have been presented within a sensational spread, in the news magazine *Libertate,* as a lurid spectacle, an "exclusive" tabloid show of death with captions of scandalising

appeal that note, for instance, that Elena "Ceauşescu[54] had engraved teeth". To a certain degree, this photo recalls Saddam Hussein's dental and medical examination images, circulated around his arrest. The new Ceauşescu photographs are displayed in a collage next to the original captures of the execution, so that the resemblances can be better noted. Yellow and orange arrows and texts point to the similarities, in a tabloid-style "before and after" spread (Vaihan). So, we see a 1989 photograph of Nicolae Ceauşescu lying dead, with his silk scarf hanging off his neck, and another picture of him being led to his execution, wearing his astrakhan fur hat. Between these two pictures, we see a large insert of Nicolae's recently exhumed corpse, wrapped in the same scarf and next to the fur hat. The article's title is a sarcastic exclamation: "How well Preserved is Uncle Nicu's Hat!" The lurid, carnivalesque display, in a "before and after" tabloid story, reminds one of the lynching postcards circulated in the ante-bellum American Deep South, as both cases reveal commercial motivations and the taking of pleasure behind the consumption of images of death.

It is in this spectacular way that the images of the execution, subject for so many years to controversy, partly hidden and repressed from collective memory, have resurfaced recently. The trajectory of the images of hated figures, killed in a way that inhibited a real catharsis, and may even have induced guilt, ends in a circus-like display twenty years later, when the initial unease at the killing is no

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[54] The original term, "Ceauşeasca", translates to a slightly demeaning feminine version of Ceauşescu.

longer there. At this point, the popular newspaper deems it acceptable to mock the dictator and demean the two figures, no longer the sacred symbols of power, nor the focus of hatred, but rather the objects of unceremonious mockery and disdain.

At the beginning of the revolution, the public feared the communist regime's henchmen. Within days, however, a new alarming figure was emphasized in the news – the evasive terrorist figure. Through images like those which showed dead bodies lying in the streets, the news media circulated another affective currency, fear. Rumours of terrorist activities and hostile action from unidentified pro-Ceauşescu agents were heavily discussed on television. To date, however, no proof of such action has been uncovered.

This type of fear can be considered fear "mediated by love" (Ahmed 74). Ahmed explains this as fear mediated through a discourse of empathy, solidarity, and protection offered by the ruling groups and the media. Thus, the media promoted fear, through images of alleged victims, but, alongside these visuals, they also offered a discourse of unity and of force directed at an enemy. The images of corpses in the street – victims of rumours rather than of actual terrorists – were tools within this affective dissemination. The nation was offered protection and cohesion against the source of fear, which was engendered by the same body offering the solution to the fear.

Ahmed explains that "fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others" (Ahmed 69). The 'others', here, were the

invisible terrorist force, or alternatively, those whose presence expanded to the point of political control, i.e. the FSN. Meanwhile, the public was restricted in its movement, worried about the risks of stepping outside their homes. During days filled with rumours of terrorism, the streets of Bucharest were silent, with its citizens hiding from terrorism and invisible dangers. In fact, Timişoara's population was fighting while Bucharest's population was paralysed by fear, a contrast which, according to historians and survivors, resulted in a guilt complex carried by the capital's citizens over the last twenty years.[55] At the same time, the FSN was actively setting up a political platform from within the building of the TVRL. Through the manipulation of the population's fears, and of other affective currencies available through the circulation of the visuals, the FSN was in fact building its program and a new national identity.

Similarly, 9/11 also exercised an impact on social and national identity, shaping the American nation through fear. After 9/11,

> *the nation [was] [re]constructed as having prevailed through refusing to transform its vulnerability and wounds ... into an affective response of fear, a response narrativised as 'determination by terror', rather than self-determination. (Ahmed 73)*

As Ahmed explains, the effort to resist being controlled by fear – itself still a reaction to fear – united and strengthened the American nation. The manipulation

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[55] This was in fact one of the incendiary topics discussed in the meeting of GDS, which I attended in March 2010 (*Annual Convention: Premiul Grupului Pentru Dialog Social Pentru Anul 2009* [the 2009 Award of the Social Dialog Group]).

of fear, even when directed at the refusal to give in to fear, can be a trope bolstering the idea of a nation, propagating and highlighting values beneficial to the ruling groups. This happens because the experience of fear unites, often through certain visual symbols. In the wake of the events, Ahmed notes,

> *experiences of fear became lived as patriotic declarations of love, which allowed home to be mobilised as a defense against terror. If subjects stayed at home, then homes became transformed into the symbolic space of the nation through the widespread use of [the] American flag… [which] we can consider… a sticky sign,[56] whereby stickiness allows it to stick to other 'flag signs', which gives the impression of coherence (the nation as 'sticking together'). (Ahmed 74)*

The Romanian "sticky sign", in the domestic struggle against terrorism, or on the in the construction of a new nation through the removal of the previous regime, was the television set, through which an entire nation-audience was connected and made to 'stick together'. In the streets, the sticky signs were the tricolour flags with their missing centers, through which the nation redefined itself as a new, active community able to excise from itself that part of its past it no longer wanted.

However, the community was hindered in its desire to take full responsibility for the removal of its past as the culmination of the revolution, the execution of the dictator, was done in secrecy, hidden from the public. In this

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[56] A sticky object, according to Ahmed, is an object infused with emotion, affective value.

section, I want to explore the feelings of regret that may have resulted from the removal of the execution from the public space, namely shame or/and guilt.

In the interviews I have conducted, and in every day conversations about the events, I have sensed a lack of expressing guilt regarding the execution. However, I believe that shame, guilt, and regret are not entirely absent as forms of affect, but perhaps expressed in an indirect manner. For instance, regret might have been expressed in the form of superstitious beliefs. The execution was conducted on December 25, Christmas day, a fact which prompted some to interpret the events as blasphemous, giving rise to a curse which would explain the financial and political difficulties experienced since.

The difference between shame and guilt lies in the trespassing of law, as Donald L. Nathanson explains:

> *Whereas guilt refers to punishment for wrongdoing, for violation of some sort of rule or internal law, shame is about some quality of the self. Guilt implies action, while shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question. (qtd. in Ahmed 105)*

The speedy trial and virtually hidden execution of the Ceauşescus could well have produced both guilt and shame, as various shortcomings in the trial and its aftermath involved violations of the law.

Indeed, these acts did cause guilt insofar as they were seen to have trespassed both legal and divine laws. Cirlan, one of the main executors, admitted

to having had to repress his guilt at his imminent act: "I was about to kill the president, but I told myself to act without thinking, especially from any judicial point of view" (Vulliamy). Thus, he feared the execution to be legally unjust. Likewise, the superstition that the Christmas day execution brought a curse upon the nation expressed the fear that divine rules had been trespassed, that the guilt possibly felt by those who had orchestrated the trial had become, perhaps by extension, the guilt of the nation as a whole, now expressed as superstition.

In *It Snowed after the Execution*, Viorel Domenico interviewed the eight executioners and officers responsible for the shooting of the Ceaușescus. The book claims that the 'lynching' of the couple was the result of psychological pressure coming from the authorities, the FSN, whose decision to hasten the trial, and hold it in secret, was prompted by the desire to avoid responsibility and a legal process (Cesereanu "Ceausescu's Trail and Execution" 184). Furthermore, once the executioners were manipulated into killing the couple, they were punished indirectly by the people. In fact, they were "ostracised" for years and decades after the act, as Cirlan recalls, in an interview conducted in 2009 for *The Observer*:

> *Ever since then all I have wanted to do is to study philosophy and law. To understand what I did, legally. I was a petty officer obeying the orders of a general, who killed a man after a fake trial. I killed Ceausescu on Christmas Day, but the decree setting up the court was signed on the 27th, by which time he had already been dead for two days. Only that night did they show the bodies on television.*

None of our movements that day left any paper trail at all. The man
I killed was the dictator they all said they hated, but they ostracised
me forever afterwards, all the same. Iliescu does not like me, the
press blamed me in some way for the unfairness of the trial and for
firing all my magazine. The politicians kept their distance from the
whole thing, and I was sacked by the Ministry of Defence in 1998.
(Vulliamy)

Their treatment betrays signs of unease with the execution act. I believe the executioners were in fact mitigating figures, filters for the absorption of shame and guilt, instruments of indirect shaming and social valves for affective unease.

It seems pertinent, at this point, to mention the practice of hanging in medieval and early modern Europe, and the rituals surrounding the figure of the executioner during that period. While the public's attitude toward public capital punishment might have been positive or indifferent, the hangman, paradoxically, was received in a negative light. As Spierenburg explains, "the expressions of the populace's contempt for hangmen can be grouped into three categories: physical harassment and insults, avoidance of contact and spatial restrictions placed on executioners" (Spierenburg 17). The executioner was kept at a distance from the populace, considered infamous[57] and impure, and became an instrument enabling the audience to enjoy executions at a morally safe and clean distance. Ceauşescu' executioner himself compared his act to those that had occurred in medieval France: "I knew all about the French revolution, the guillotine, and felt that I had

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[57] "The executioner is counted among the unehrliche Leute (infamous people)…. Hangmen have been connected with infamy from the very beginning [of their trade]" (Spierenburg 16).

done something similar" (Vulliamy). Furthermore, Ceauşescus' executioners convey the sense of being victims of indirect social persecution in their interviews. They were kept at a metaphorical distance from the public, removed from public service, and endowed with a sense of infamy, factors that warrant comparison with the status of the executioner in earlier centuries.

The hostility toward the hangmen could be read as a case in which "a subconscious rejection of the system of physical punishment was transformed into a reaction of hatred towards its active agent" (Spierenburg 23). Another way of understanding it is to see "the hangman [as] the symbol of forbidden vengeance." Since the public felt "a repressed desire to kill the delinquent with one's own hands … but private vengeance was forbidden, ... the desire to kill was directed towards the hangman instead" (Spierenburg 23). Furthermore, "the emergence of the hangmen meant the substitution of public for private vengeance" (Spierenburg 28), which was the case in the execution of the Ceauşescus, who possibly – indeed, likely – would have been executed by the crowd, as General Victor Stănculescu, one of the main figures in the proceedings, believed[58]. As mentioned before, the execution was considered a "substitution of public for private vengeance," (Spierenburg 28) but also, as the FSN had claimed, a form of protection of the people. Whatever the reasons, the executioners who carried out

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[58] "It was not just, but it was necessary. If we had left it to the people of Bucharest, they would have lynched them in the street," notes Stănculescu ("Ceausescu Execution 'Avoided Mob Lynching' ").

acts of vengeance were the recipients of the public's anger and, to this extent, punished for their shameful acts.

As may have been the case in many medieval executions, there was an element of pleasure in watching the Ceauşescus' being executed, further prompting shame in the modern viewer. The feeling of pleasure felt at the broadcasting of the execution runs counter to the principles of a modern humanist education that dismisses capital punishment. The sight of the execution, and the guilt of experiencing pleasure at this sight, combine into a confusing experience, as a result of which shame imposes itself as a cultural means by which modern humanist ideologies are endorsed. Some of the controversy surrounding the dissemination of Ceauşescu's execution images and the other visuals analysed here may be a result of the ways in which they induced shame. A similar kind of cultural shame, perhaps, underlay the controversy that ensued after 9/11 was labelled by philosopher Slavoj Žižek a great spectacle, and understood by Damien Hirst as an artwork devised for visual impact.

Furthermore, the capacity to kill a man, or to accept the killing taciturnly rather than condemning it, may trigger shame because it puts into question the self-recognition of those committing the act or condoning it. The people of Romania were in fact able to do to Nicolae what he did to many, and to be silent about it. Since "shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (Ahmed 107), the affect was

negated, or at least mitigated, by the people's belief that they were in fact following the rules laid out by Ceauşescu himself. The belief that Nicolae had designed his own demise, and the laws that permitted his acquittal, was widespread, and still is (Voinea). Thus, it was an act designed by the dictator himself – as Kittler pointed out, just like Dracula, Nicolae was symbolically sacrificed by his own people, as a result of his own strategizing.[59]

As no wrongdoing has been officially recognized in the trial of the couple, or in the manner by which the sentence was carried out, it became inappropriate and unnecessary to discuss any feelings of shame or guilt. Thus, apologizing for or acknowledging the serious problems of the execution and the trial were never purposefully sought out. Most Romanians cannot see his death as anything but justice in the face of the atrocities he committed, the murders, imprisonment and mass poverty he caused. Without a need for recrimination, any residual shame or guilt feelings that may exist were not publicly discussed. Nevertheless, there are signs that contradict the public negation of any shame or guilt feelings toward the execution of the dictator and the popular tendency to consider the proceedings a necessary evil. Minor, recent developments point toward a renewed interest in the trial and execution, and a sense of guilt toward the rushed proceedings. For example, the superstition that the execution resulted in a curse still circulates.[60]

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[59] As mentioned in chapter four, is said that Vald Tepes came home dressed in the uniform of the enemies, as he was returning from mission of spying on the enemy. His people did not recognize him, and killed him.

[60] Dorin-Marian Cirlan: "As a Christian it is a horrible thing to have to take someone's life — and that on Christmas Day, that holy holiday" (qtd. in Boyes).

Also, in July 2010, years after the now deceased daughter of the dictator had demanded it, the corpses of the Ceauşescus were exhumed; these developments show a revival of interest in the circumstances surrounding the execution.[61]

Disgust was another emotion that appeared to circulate within in the economy of affect created in the aftermath of the revolution. In the months that followed the execution, photographs of the torsos of Ceauşescus were briefly broadcast, but the actual shooting was only partially filmed, and the entire footage was only shown much later, the reasons invoked being the display of gory death in these images. In the first few years following the events, images depicting the focal point of the revolution, that is the execution of the dictator, were almost absent from public debate. For a long time, one could note a certain reticence, avoidance, indifference, and perhaps disgust toward these images. Likewise, the international coverage did not dwell on the images in detail, but only mentioned them briefly, and ceased mentioning them after a short period of coverage. This reticence to describe the execution might betray a desire to keep a distance from events that were difficult to understand and accept for Western ideology and judicial system, but might reveal, as well, a sense of disgust towards these gory pictures.

This absence can be understood as a form of freedom from the prior oppressive propagandist imagery promoted by the communist regime, and

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[61] More examples on this topic can be found in Chapter Four.

explained in chapter two. But it can also be understood as an act of recoiling from intense proximity to the object of disgust. Indeed, distancing requires proximity, a link that is "crucial to the inter-corporeality of the disgust encounter" (Ahmed 85). Ceauşescus' death confronted Romania with its own demon in an uncomfortable, televised close up. Here was an old fragile couple, lying dead on the stone pavement, no longer shown in the frozen-in-time propaganda images that had served the nation for decades. The result was a pulling away, metaphorically, at all levels of the society.

The images of the couple that circulated prior to December 21st 1989 hermetically sealed the Ceauşescus in their early fifties, and were displayed in all official public spaces, such as the front walls of classrooms and offices. Nicolae's televised speech on December 21 destroyed this pattern of circulation by showing the subject alive, in a non-scripted manner, his face in a new expression of disbelief, his authoritative mannerisms blocked, and his hands raised in confusion in midair. This was a moment in which the so-far hermetically sealed subject was undone, and brought closer to the audience. A live broadcast of the subject was in itself an unusual occurrence, and the derailing of the events off their script, combined with the close-up of his failure, resulted in the destruction of the icon that Ceauşescu had built over years and the start of the revolt.

The next set of images of the dictator made available were those of his dead body, bloodied and dirtied, against a back-alley wall. Ceauşescu had been

for decades a subject presented visually from afar, unattainable, and at great distance from the audience. Then, as the December events unfolded, he was presented in an intensely intimate fashion, up close; finally, he was displayed as a dead body. The reaction was understandably one of shock and disgust, causing a prolonged removal of these images from the television screens of the nation. As Ahmed states, "disgust brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence" (Ahmed 85). Indeed, the televised encounter with the dead dictator and his wife had an undeniable and unsettlingly corporeal quality, as the screens of the nation displayed their body. The iconic images of the dead bodies had become infused with disgust, sticky with affect in Ahmed's words. "Stickiness," she declares, "becomes disgusting ... when the skin surface is as stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us" (Ahmed 90). In the case of the dead bodies of the couple, these words can be taken literally: the stickiness of these images comes from the blood and dirt that cover the corpses. They became sticky, literally, through the spilled blood, as well as metaphorically, by transmitting affect and sticking to the collective memory; their stickiness connected everyone watching through hatred, guilt, shame, and also disgust.

It is worth noting that, on the first occasions on which the TVRL broadcast the news of the execution, the bodies of the Ceauşescus were shown only above the waist. Furthermore, in the first broadcasting of the news, only a still photograph of Nicolae's head and torso was shown; Elena's body was invisible,

yet her execution had been announced as well. The excuse for keeping Elena's body out of sight was the obscene character of her display. This management of the images reveals a hierarchical display of body parts, whereby only parts above the waist are shown. Lower parts are hidden and perhaps deemed dirtier and more disgusting than those above the waist. This corporal division is a sign of power relations, whereby the reproductive organs must be hidden, and the "carnivalesque[62] body" (Bakhtin) of an always "fecund... matriarch" (Almond "First and Last Lady? - Elena Ceauşescu")[63] is to be kept away from public display.

According to this hierarchical, gendered display, the female body was judged as more inappropriate for show than the male body, perhaps even more disgusting. Judicial practices respecting this hierarchy continue to exist. As I mentioned in chapter one, stoning a person to death because of adultery is still practiced in some countries of the Middle East or Northern Nigeria that follow Shari'a law, such that the "person being executed [is] buried waist deep, or to above the breast if a woman" (Hood and Hoyle 156). In such cases, the body parts associated with one's sexuality and gender are hidden, particularly if they are female. In this light, the fact that Elena's torso was not broadcast on the first

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[62] Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque signified "the taste for crude laughter, bad taste, excessiveness (particularly of bodily functions) and offensiveness. It celebrated a temporary liberation from recognized rules and hierarchies and is tolerated because, once people have been allowed to let off steam, those norms can be re-established" (Wells 337).

[63] As discussed in Chapter Two, Elena projected "a less than life-like image. She [had] herself portrayed as a woman of 40, still fecund, but already a matriarch, able to give life, but also to take it. Her self-image is a combination of Ceres and the Snow Queen" (Almond "First and Last Lady? - Elena Ceauşescu").

versions of the execution coverage, while Nicolae's was, becomes more meaningful.

Disgust is, unsurprisingly, tied to visibility, gender, and body politics. Not only was Elena's body hidden from display as the viewers were shown the execution, but her treatment was arguably different as well. Her body disgusted the executioners more than his, as their testimonies reveal. Here are three of the soldiers commenting on the arrival of the dictator and his wife at the Târgovişte garrison, where their execution was expected:

> *Our 'mother the heroine' also descended. Very upset. But, how can I say this, not upset from suffering, but from arrogance, in a repulsive way... She looked like she would think: How can all this happen to me? You could read contempt on her face, while he looked mild, beaten by life and overwhelmed. He made you pity him, while she provoked repulsion... (Domenico 102)*

> *He appeared. He was not recognizable: white as the wall, messy hair and unshaved. But, perfumed; he smelled nicely. ... Unlike him, who smelled like he just came out of a spa, she smelled badly, strongly like urine and dirt, like a rotten egg. (Domenico 102-03)*

> *She was certainly Elena: ugly as Mother of the Forest,[64] an old hag with good clothes on herself. And while he smelled like perfume, she*

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[64] A Romanian folkloric figure, an old, ugly woman living in the forest. In itself an interesting comparison as it draws parallel to a mythical misogynist construction that vilifies powerful women, with Elena being the most powerful, as old witches.

emanated a strong, insupportable stench, so bad that it turned your

stomach inside out. (Domenico 105)[65]

These recollections point toward a heightened interest in Elena's hygienic and bodily condition; the visceral reaction of disgust to these is a salient element. There are references to her national status as mother, and to the mythical figure of the Mother of the Forest, an old woman living alone in the forest, ugly, capable of ruses and changes of shape. The misogynist construction encompasses the classical feminine scapegoat of patriarchal hatred: the ugly witch who tricks men by shape-shifting into an attractive woman, and who lives without the company of a man, outside of society.

Here, I recall Ballinger's thoughts about women executions:

Women who fail to conform to traditional expectations in the areas
of sexuality, respectability, domesticity and motherhood are more
likely to be the victims of judicial misogyny with the consequent
result that they receive harsher punishment that women who
conform to conventional models of femininity. (Ballinger 329)

Indeed, Elena was no ordinary woman, but the prototype of the communist woman. She was fecund, but non-sexual. The Romanian woman of the communist era was not allowed to make decisions about reproduction; in the case of an unwanted pregnancy she had to give the child to the state. The woman, and her reproductive system, belonged to the state. While Elena projected herself as a mother figure, she was not accepted as such: her last interactions with her

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[65] My own translation from Romanian.

executioners betray that rejection. The moments are recorded in most of the footage of the trial and execution: as she is being lead away to her death, Elena asks complainingly how they can do that to her, when she`s been a mother to them. One the soldiers questions her back bitterly: "what kind of mother kills her children?" ("Television Shows Last Hours of the 'Anti-Christ'. Romania's President Nicolae Ceausescu and His Wife, Elena, Are Executed by Firing Squad"). Elena's death is a death of a woman "who fail[s] to conform to traditional expectations in the area of ... motherhood" (Ballinger 329).

It is also interesting that Nicolae is described as a victim when juxtaposed to her. This was a common trope to be found in the public narratives and descriptions of the couple, as I explain in chapter two, and further points to the ways in which Elena had become a scapegoat for some of Nicolae's actions. It is also apparent that the executioners showed a strong interest in punishing Elena, in what seems to be a disproportionate manner, based on claims that more bullets were shot into Elena's body.[66] These cannot be considered accidental, meaningless claims; indeed, they point to Elena's status as a scapegoat and a figure of hatred and disgust.

Ahmed reminds us that "disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent" (Ahmed 84).

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[66] Cirlan, one of the soldiers who shot the couple confessed: "'I put seven bullets into him and then emptied the rest of my magazine into her head ... Bits of her brain were spattered here on the floor', he added, surveying the cracked cement beneath a wall still pockmarked with bullet holes. 'Then people from all directions started shooting'" (Simpson).

She quotes William Ian Miller: "'Even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing "double-takes" at the very things that disgust us'" (qtd. in Ahmed 84). There are push and pull forces at work within the affect of disgust, forces which make us look while wanting to turn away at the scene of something revolting. These "contradictory impulses of desire and disgust" (Ahmed 84) can be further explored through the notions of the sublime and iconophobia.

However painful the visuals were in their revelation of the undignified vulnerability and death of old age, they also inspired an unsettling element of pleasure, whereby the horror of watching the act of killing was combined with a hidden and conflicting pleasure, a thrill and desire for revenge or thirst for the spectacular. This unsettling affective combination raises the question of whether this ambivalence – the rejection and distrust felt toward these images – can be partly understood as an instance of iconophobia, and whether the pleasure in the consumption of death can be usefully discussed as a case of the sublime experience.

Conclusion

The media circulating visuals of death face certain ethical questions that are not always present when death is reported in non-visual media. The visuals I analyse in this section were deemed unsuitable for public display, like the other comparable examples I bring up through the paper – the photographs of lynching, the Holocaust, the Saigon Shooting, Abu Ghraib. Some of these images were not immediately sanctioned for circulation by official media channels, but only broadcast after a presumably intense debate about the ethical limits and political power of such graphic visuals. Thus, the images I analyse were deemed to possess a political force greater than that of a written text, a belief that leads us to the concept of iconophobia.

Iconophobia

Iconophobia is a fear of images, the belief that images are more dangerous in their transmission of affect than other non-visual media. Discussions of iconophilia are rooted in issues concerning the religious politics of the image, often emphasizing a "mistrust [in] an image because there is no guarantee that it will capture and convey the appropriate aspects of divine reality" (C. S. Wood). The scholarly literature concerning the term is dominated by a concern with religious doctrines and, in particular, with the idea of iconoclasm, an idolatrous

religious trespassing facilitated through the image (Gamboni, Caviness, McClellan, etc). *The Encyclopedia of Religion* defines iconoclasm as the

> *intentional desecration or destruction of works of art, especially those containing human figurations, on religious principles or beliefs. More general usage of the term signifies the rejection, aversion, or regulation of images and imagery, regardless of the rationale or intent. (Apostolos-Cappadona)*

This "rejection, aversion, or regulation of images and imagery, regardless of the rationale or intent" characterizes the phenomenon of iconophobia. The hostility toward certain images is then partly driven by a fear of imagery in general, of the idolatrous, profane qualities of the visual representation, of image intruding into sacred places – or in this case, intruding into places of political power.

For a study of the original relationship between vision and religious politics, I turn to Antonio Marazzi, who states that "the whole history of human thought could be rewritten in terms of the confrontation between the eye and the mind" (Marazzi 89). Maintaining that prevalent text-vision conflicts are representative of the social conflicts from which they stem, Marazzi offers an anthropological history of vision, and especially of mental images, as a powerful force in cultural and religious wars. In 757 for example, the Orthodox Church pointed to the incompatibility between worldly materiality and the ineffable image of the mind, condemning "the pictorial representation by profane hands of those things that the heart alone believes and the mouth confesses", and claiming

that "divinity... cannot be captured by capturing created flesh" (Marazzi 91). This denunciation was not just the expression of a divine conviction, but also a political strategy driven by "animosity towards the monastic movement" (Marazzi 92), in particular toward the monk Stephen the Younger. The statement was a symptom and symbol of the political separation between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. Much earlier, in the 3rd century AD, Plotinus stated in a similar vein that "those who give themselves up to 'the visions of the eyes' will become blind in their intelligence... [and] will live only with shadows" (Marazzi 93). This Platonic logic was eventually dismissed by Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church, whose ideas about "teaching the illiterate, instilling in the memory the mysteries and examples of the saints, arousing emotions with more force than words could do" (Marazzi 93) helped implement the educational dissemination of religious images and anagogia,[67] another politicized step in the conflict between image and the text. The history of thinking the visual seems to be steeped in religious connotations.

Both the television medium as a whole, and the Romanian television industry in particular, were seen to be endowed by various sources with mystical powers. In an article written for *The Revolution Notebooks*, the monthly publication of the FSN-supported Institute of the Romanian Revolution, Theodorescu claims that TVRL created, through a series of "iconographic

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[67] "The ecstasy of the soul in the contemplation of divine things, as in the case of images" (Marazzi 93).

hypostases", a new "iconography of freedom", in particular an "iconography of the compact group" (Theodorescu 45-47).[68] The choice of these words is particular interesting as it endows the television industry and medium with religious connotations. Following Theodorescu, the television created icons and "iconographies" linked to hypostasis,[69] so that, according to him, there was a divine or sacred quality to the televisual aesthetics of the revolution. The crowd that gathered in the studio was not just a group; it became an icon of a "compact group" that dictated the entire television scene, and the revolution. It created an "iconography", an ideology and symbolism to be transferred to and used by the audience. Theodorescu's theological understanding of the events and his emphasis on the sacredness of the visual forms are exemplary of official narratives concerning the change of regime.

Like the media coverage, both domestic and international, Romanian official portrayals of the events often employed, and still do, a technophilic tone, assigning to the disseminating medium supernatural powers. A mystification of the visual was indeed apparent in the reception of the images, warranting a discussion of iconophobia. If the non-violent images of the revolution were discussed in a reverent tone, it was perhaps logical, then, that that the images

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[68] Also see chapter four.

[69] *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines hypostasis as originally meaning "substructure, support. Then it came to mean something real and objective as opposed to a mere appearance or abstraction. In Scripture it usually means moral support, assurance, conviction, e.g., in Heb 11.1: "Now faith is the substance [ὑπόστασις; Vulgate: substantia] of things to be hoped for ..." (cf. Heb 3.14; 2 Cor 9.4). In patristic writings it was first used about the Trinity. Origen speaks of three hypostases in God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Carmody).

showing violence and gory death were feared. These images were removed from the public discourse in the first few years after the revolution, when the emotional power of the events was pervasive within the development of a new national culture. Moreover, the power of the images was also understood to be political, and any iconophobia was likely a result of the political power invested in these images. The images of the revolution were manipulated, subject to much controversy and conspiratorial narratives, and removed from the public space initially by the FSN. Initially, their use could be understood as a political manoeuvre, and the control over these images was presumably rooted in the conviction that they would have an effect on the masses. The trial of the dictator was initially shown partially and the images of the corpses were withheld for days from national broadcasting, based on excuses that never proved valid. This manipulation of the images may be considered a form of iconophobia, if it relies on the belief that images hold superior power of persuasion over other non-visual media.

Indeed, within domestic and international discourse, both journalistic and not, we find the revolution, and the imagery that accompanied it, discussed in what might be considered technophilic ways. Chapter four, which analysed the reception of the events and its images, explained how the entire coverage of the events, visual and non-visual, was marked by a technophilic tone, which gave the television medium the capacity to shape society. But, while the execution photos were treated in an iconophilic way, through the attribution of supernatural or

superior powers to the visual, this was not how the events were covered. In fact, the events were generally covered sporadically for years. Perhaps the audience needed to process them through visual and non-visual paths before discussing them publicly. In recent times, the topic seems to have become more easily approached, as we have seen in chapter four.

The Sublime

While ambivalent reactions to brutal images may be discussed in relation to the notion of iconophobia, these responses may simply be part of a longer history of reactions to intense visual representations of ineffable situations. It may then be more helpful to approach the difficult mix between attraction and repulsion at the heart of these images in light of the concept of the sublime, with its designation of a particularly intense,[70] unsettling aesthetic experience.

The notion of the sublime came into discussion in the 18th century, as a concept describing the affective conflicts inherent within certain aesthetic experiences. At that time it was part of an inquiry into aesthetic values, with examples of sublime subjects including the awe-inspiring raging of the sea (Edward Burke). Today's term has kept its original (Kantian) emphasis on the unsettling marriage of mutually exclusive sensations like pleasure and horror, generated by representations of grotesque or traumatic phenomena that provoke

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[70] Massumi likens affect to intensity: "Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static-temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it" (Massumi 86).

terror within attraction. Another Kantian understanding of the term which is pertinent here is that of the sublime as experiencing the limits of our ability to comprehend. Both Kant and Lyotard situate the sublime at the edge of human conceptual powers.

Postmodern conceptualizations of the sublime follow the themes established by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, adding to those a sense of the impossibility of representation. J.F. Lyotard engages with Kant's 'extra-artistic' notion of the sublime by bringing it back into the realm of arts, and by identifying Kant's moral sublime with the poetic sublime analysed by Burke, thus completing a circle.[71] The result is an "idea of sublime art conceived as a negative presentation, testimony to the Other that haunts thought" where "what arrives in the place of [an impossible] representation is in fact the inscription of its initial condition, the trace of the Other that haunts it displayed" (Rancière 133). For Lyotard, this dualistic nature of the image called to represent trauma is akin to the dialectic between the aesthetic of the beautiful and the aesthetic of the sublime, whereby the aesthetics of the sublime is a "witness to the fact that there is an indeterminacy" (Lyotard 101). In current discourse,[72] the sublime experience no longer points "to an object *beyond* reason and expression, but rather to 'that *within* representation which nonetheless *exceeds* the possibility of

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[71] Kantian understanding of the term the sublime points to the experience of the limits of our ability to comprehend. Both Kant and Lyotard situate the sublime at the edge of human conceptual powers.

[72] Contemporary thinkers – Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, Milbank – provide new insights into the term along this theoretical path.

representation'" (Shaw 4), a sublime experience that I investigate in the cases studied in this paper.

Beauty, terror, and death are among the most effective sources of this aesthetic intensity, and are thus at the root of the notion of the sublime. Indeed, the definition of 'the sublime' points to an unidentifiable, inexpressible mix of beauty and horror experienced when faced with instances of trauma, as well as of ecstasy, and the impossibility of emotional and intellectual processing of such moments[73]. The viewer encounters the sublime when s/he witnesses the marriage between that which is unrepresentable – the traumatic, the painful – and that which brings pleasure or extreme beauty.

Beauty and the monstrous unite within the sublime. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, which defines beauty as a global quality that "'irradiates' and moves us", explains that "when human desire and delight go beyond their proper limits, human creations become monstrous. ... Instead of harmony, integrity, and splendor, the one-sided endeavor to create human 'beauty' results in the monstrous sublime of death and destruction" ("Beauty"). Rainer Maria Rilke described the experience of beauty "as 'nothing but the beginning of terror,' implying that, in the act of emotional surrender or identification, man lays himself open to a force over which he can exercise little control" (Newman). Thus, beauty

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[73] The postmodern sublime, however, "is a signifier for what which exceeds the grasp of reason", no longer "defined by its intimations of transcendence but rather by its confirmation of immanence, the sense in which the highest of the high is nothing more than an illusion brought about through our misperception of reality" (Shaw 3).

and terror come together on occasion in an intense experience, to produce the unsettling – appealing and repulsive – experience of the sublime.

Death is a moment particularly ripe for the experience of the sublime, as "the mortal condition and the moment of perishing are always at stake when the sublime appears" (Shaw 9). As viewers of death imagery, we become excessively aware of our own present aliveness – thus, we are re-comforted by our own momentary escape of death, while we are fearful of its possibility and image. This conflicting mix of pleasure and pain points to Burke's definition of the sublime, which relies on a sense of "delight in sublime terror so long as actual danger is kept at bay" (Shaw 54). Witnessing death is indeed an experience of the ultimate sense of danger, and viewing the execution of a hated dictator may be the ultimate blend of spectatorship danger and of pleasure. Punishment is also vulnerable to eruptions of the sublime, since "like sex, death and religion, punishment is a field of human activity that is vulnerable to eruptions of the primal, the mysterious, and the awe-inspiring, to the emergence of powers *understood* as being beyond human control" (Smith 172). Thus, these brutal images may invoke an experience of the sublime, with its pleasure deeply combined with terror, within a larger unpleasant experience of these visuals.

If we attempt to imagine how the images of the execution were experienced by the Romanian television viewer in December 1989, we observe several disturbances and gaps in the visual representation of the revolution,

phenomena that are interesting to analyse in the light of the concepts of iconophobia and the sublime.

The first two days showed the Romanian viewer two slightly different versions of the trial and execution of the couple. The first version was broadcast late at night on December 25, after the death of the Ceauşescus was solemnly announced by the anchor. It consists of partial footage of the trial and the execution, broadcast without the recorded sound. The lack of an audio track had a significant impact on the reception of the footage, immediately adding the kind of tension that arises when one must watch a terrible event in total silence, and thus be aware of oneself, and one's movements and breathing. Here, the image takes over, arrestingly, while the absence of sound upsets the entire tableau and adds to its uncanniness.

Furthermore, another gap occurs between the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels of the narrative: the camera cannot turn around quickly enough to film the shootings, so the 'climax' of the filming never occurs. Only a smoke cloud veiling the killing is visible, before parting like a curtain to reveal the tableau of death, onto which the camera moves in, zooming. The bullets entering the bodies and the wall behind them are replaced and metonymically represented by the dust cloud left behind, slowly lifting from the corpses to reveal them to the camera, proving that the killing did happen, however implausibly, and *almost* within our grasp. This *almost* experience, the absence of the main act, is important. The

manipulation of the camera "faithfully rendered the dynamics and rhythm of the events" by trying and failing to be there, by being a "kind of performative act and a televisual event" (Morse 59). The scene is re-constructed and presented to the nation as it was witnessed by the camera, pointing towards missing the visual climax.

While the moments of death were never filmed, so never visually documented, the sounds of the firing were heard by the public on the morning of December 26, when the TVRL showed the second version of the events, a reconstructed 'totality' of the sound/image footage. At this time, the images broadcast on the day before were presented with the sound added. However, the sounds only point even more strikingly toward the missing act, the non-representable, to an experience that will be forever desired in its totality by the camera. We hear sounds, but wonder if anything really occurred. To paraphrase the recent cinematic mediation of this absence, analysed in the previous chapter, "a fost, sau nu a fost?" – was there something, or was there not?[74] (Porumboiu).

We have understood at this point that absence is a reoccurring element, indeed, it was a thread running through the entire discourse surrounding the December uprisings and their visual representation. The coverage of the events lacks transparency, figures and statistics are still missing, and the events were arguably absent from the public discourse, or at least were lacking serious

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[74] The phrase can also be translated as "Did it happen, or did it not?" or, more literally, "Was it, or was it not?"

analysis, for the first few years after the revolution. But, the most important absence to point out is that of the climax of the revolution itself. This absence of an event already difficult to understand only points toward the experience of the sublime, with terror and pleasure united in an unsettling experience of that which cannot be expressed – here, literally, the events were never reproduced and expressed through a medium, only hinted at.

Silence marks the initial soundless rendering of the events viewed on television, and points toward the unsettling sublimity of the event, of terror overtaking the pleasure. In Ujica and Farocki's documentary, the lens turns around to film the people watching the footage on a television set. The crowd is silent at times, applauding at others, approvingly and tensely absorbing the images. There is an overall uneasy sense of relief and joy following the announcement of the execution, but a few seconds after the faces of the couple are shown, following a couple of approving exclamations occur, a voice can be heard asking for the TV set to be turned off, just before the scene fades off. More violence is no longer necessary; the meaning of the images has been absorbed by the viewers in the room, as well as the viewers of the video. The joy the viewers felt at the revenge is superimposed to the terror and unease of watching death. As the man asked to turn the images off, he declared in fact that the images reached a point of saturation and tipped over into the grotesque, into excess, into sublimity.

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