The Making of History: The Different Faces of the So-called Revolution in Romania

Margit Rohringer

1. Memories of a Televised Revolution

I still remember the days leading up to Christmas 1989 very well. I was 23 years old, sitting in front of the TV in my native Austria with an East European émigré (from Slovenia). Tears welled up in her eyes as she watched the images of people who were presented on the news as having being killed during the uprisings in Romania. She told me about the harsh living conditions of her Romanian relatives who had lived all their life under the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu, the country's leader since 1965. It was the first time (and so far the only time) that I was convinced that I simply couldn't sit in front of the TV and do nothing. I initiated a collection of food and clothes, and I even co-opted my local church, which otherwise I had little inclination to work with, into my humanitarian mission. The response was huge.

Looking back at this time, I remember that my feelings were quite chaotic, and I even felt the need to write an entry in my diary to reflect them. Today I know that my writings were not able to do this adequately, and even now the task is unachievable. Now, when I confront myself with historical documents about the Romanian revolution that were created after the fact, I inescapably reflect on my memories regarding those days and try to understand why people, including myself, behaved as they did. My foremost intention in this essay is to explore the different ways history can be constructed by film, an exploration which at the same time should underline the basic elusiveness of historical truth in regard to the control of 'real' or 'factual' events.

The revolution in Romania is a particularly poignant example of this elusiveness. Just a few weeks after it had taken place, there emerged a soft criticism of the representation of the events in the media, and the picture of the revolution and the processes behind it emerged as being more complex than had first been assumed. It was mentioned for the first time that the dead bodies shown on TV were not all the result of the clashes. Later, the prevalent view became that the whole 'revolution' was a coup of Romania's secret police, the Securitate, and the old communist powers were still ruling the country, with only a change in the figurehead. The new leader, Ion Iliescu, was a high-ranking member of Ceauşescu's regime and was soon seen – at least by the more critical youth and by many intellectuals – as a traitor (at the time of writing, he is being investigated for crimes against humanity and abuses of power he allegedly committed during the revolution and in its aftermath). Despite these protests, Iliescu won an overwhelming victory in the presidential elections in May 1990.

"The poet Mircea Dinescu, introduced as a national hero, appeals to the army to join the people on the street"
(*Videograms of a Revolution,* 1992).

From the vantage point of a decade and half after these events, it is possible to examine different documentaries about the revolution in Romania, which again present a variety of truths and a variety of approaches to the same subject, focusing on different issues, personalities and periods and mostly using different sources to give evidence to their "stories." The role of film (including

documentary and video footage) in these portrayals is problematic. Film is often considered a form of "art." On the one hand, this means that it (mostly) strives to act as a mediator between different cultures, aiming for a more sensitive approach to social, cultural and political issues than mass media, which frequently has little interest in nuance and may be more concerned with conforming to a predefined ideology or consumer taste; on the other hand, film as art is still a highly constructed product that draws its power from its aesthetic appeal and thus its subjectivity. The selection and arrangement of footage for the representation of events is frequently accompanied by a number of different factors that imply, at least in part, certain interests of powerful institutions or individuals. In addition, what we qualify as truth depends not only on fundamental and objective qualities of how that truth is constructed but also on how we subjectively read those representations through learned patterns of interpreting the world around us, and these interpretive strategies that we acquire depend on contextual elements of time and place.

2, The Films and Notes on the Directors

In this essay, I would like to discuss three documentaries that deal with the revolution in Romania in 1989: *Piata Universitatii*/*University Square* (Stere Gulea, Vivi Dragan Vasile and Sorin Iliescu, 1991), *Videogramme einer Revolution/Videograms of a Revolution* (Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, 1992*),* and *Schachmatt: Strategie einer Revolution*/*Checkmate: Strategy of a Revolution* (Susanne Brandstätter, 2004). These three films provide different pieces to the puzzle of a potential discourse on the Romanian Revolution, stressing different – in part complementary, in part contradictory – insights into the same event. The directors all come from different backgrounds that inform their perspectives: Ujica and the directors of *University Square* are Romanians; Farocki lived in the States, but is mainly based in Germany; Brandstätter was born in Austria and grew up in the USA. All of the directors can be seen as figures who have gained a growing position in the field, especially in the 1990s.

Brandstätter's newest film is *Richterin/Rule of Law* (2005). The film confronts the collision of our conception of right and wrong versus this conception within another society, here in Kosovo (though we would not normally have used the term Kosovo before 1989). The most well-known

director is Harun Farocki. After *Videograms*, he did several socially critical films, among them *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik/Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), in which he takes the title of the Lumière brothers' film and looks for similar moving-image representations of the subject produced later on, from scenes from a Charlie Chaplin film to footage of Siemens workers heading for a 1934 Nazi rally. His films are often called essay films, partly because narrating and discussing political or social issues are closely linked in his works.

Ujica is best known for his *Out of the Present* (1995), a film for the most part recording Cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev's life on the Russian space station Mir and interspersing these images with footage of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which occurs during Krikalev's stay on board from 1991 to 1992.

Gulea, in addition to *University Square*, made another film on the Romanian Revolution, *Stare de fapt/State of Things* (1989), which portrays a couple, a doctor and his assistant, caught up in and afflicted by crime during the revolutionary days. Vasile and Iliescu have continued to work extensively in film but as cinematographers, and *University Square* remains the only significant work on which they have acted as directors.

3. Characteristics of the Material and the Chosen Approach to It

Since the tumultuous year of 1989, documentary film and video have become one of the most important sites for critical debates related to the reformulation of national history, collective memory, and personal identity (Portuges 108). These recent debates determine new ways and norms of historical representation in the visual media and at the same time discuss which approaches can now be qualified as manipulative or counterproductive. Even more importantly, these debates try to quantify the degree to which there exists a synthetic relationship between film and history.

Rosenstone and others state that in a world where images have become increasingly omnipresent, the new potential in the realm of "visual history" should not be ignored any longer, but nutured. He argues that history "is always a series of conventions for thinking about the past" (Rosenstone 12). As a consequence, Rosenstone further asserts that film cannot be measured by the same criteria as literature but has its own specific potential and intrinsic qualities in dealing with

history. Film "utilizes elements other than the written word: sound, vision, feeling, montage" (Rosenstone 11). The fact is that representations of the historical past shown on film are usually more complex than those described in written texts (Rosenstone 11).

In order to understand the different approaches of these three films with regard to their complexity and the fuller consequences for the meaning/messages of what they represent, this article considers the production of the sources the documentaries draw on, the usage of these sources (including narrative construction and the application of aesthetic means), the current context of the film's historical coverage and also of their releases, how the makers perceive the role of documentary film and the different contents/messages. Last but not least, this analysis will look at the represented region(s) which is/are addressed in the films and how they conceptualize the revolution as either a matter concerning the Romanian State or a wider array of players within the frame of the new developing power system in the world at the end of the Cold War. In analyzing the different approaches in this respect, I will take into account different constructions of identities that were offered to the masses in order to ensure their support.

Before I start with the analysis of the films, I will provide a sort of synopsis of each, which at the same time should give the reader to a general idea about the nature of narrative construction of the single films. I will try to give insight into the films' "stories" as far as possible chronologically, offering an order of the different plots of the films in the way they convey a more or less comprehensive picture of a revolutionary and post-revolutionary period of history.

4. The Making of History

Videograms: "Private History" on Screen

The filmic approach used by Farocki and Ujica in *Videograms of a Revolution* can be described, to quote Thomas Elsaesser's description of Farocki's whole oeuvre as a "mosaic, in which the overall shape is determined by circumstance as much as by design" (Elsaesser 9). It shows the "story" by dividing it into different chapters (a device also used by *Checkmate*). *Videograms* is a condensation of 125 hours of video material from various cameras that captured the events of the revolution between the 21st and 26th December 1989. We are confronted with unsettling scenes

throughout the film from the heart of the action, with the major moments presented from multiple perspectives.

The film starts by informing us that on December 17, the Securitate fired on the army and demonstrators who had gathered at a regime-organized rally to show support for Ceauşescu. The multiple perspectives are presented in such a way that at first we watch TV news reports that give us the impression that it was a successful show of support for the dictator, with people applauding. The commentary lets us know that, in short, the TV is lying. We then see images recorded by private video cameras, and these are shown without editing. Here we are witnesses of riots and can hear the sentence "someone is shooting." The voiceover informs us at which point the TV stopped showing the events. The censored part recorded Ceauşescu's request to the people to calm down and his mentioning that he thinks that this is a provocation. In the TV news, the sound only comes back when Ceauşescu continues his speech on the balcony, asking his people for integrity and sovereignty of Romania. We then see the action in parallel: In a red frame inset at the corner of the screen we watch the TV news, while the full screen reveals the uncensored recording. Then a repetition of these scenes follows, and the commentator analyzes what we have seen.

Filmed TV-image showing Nicolae Ceauşescu during his speech at the balcony of the Central Committee on December 21, 1989 (*Videograms of a Revolution,* 1992).

Ultimately, the violence escalates, and events accelerate rapidly with a TV news announcement of the suicide of the Minister of Defence, and then footage that supposedly shows the Ceauşescus fleeing. We see an appeal broadcast by the director of the national television station to the masses to prevent further bloodshed, while the poet Mircea Dinescu, introduced as a national hero, appeals to the army to join the people on the street. The film then focuses on Ion Iliescu as he prepares plans to establish a new political party with which to dominate the political scene in post-Ceauşescu Romania. Meanwhile, the shooting continues and confused media reports variously blame terrorists and traitors. At the end of the film, a TV reporter informs us that Ceauşescu and his wife have been executed, and we are shown their corpses.

The source material for the film, as already mentioned, was produced at the time of the actual events. The footage was largely shot by amateurs operating independently using private means (with some footage by professional TV cameramen), the creators acting as their own producers and working without a script or an idea of how these images would be used or what they would mean. The intention was simply to witness the events as they developed from one moment to the next, with the consciousness and hope that this material will become an important source of history; as such the footage represents a multitude of individual viewpoints. There is no distance from the history the images describe, as the creators are part of it.

The other level, which has to be strictly distinguished from that of the production of the sources itself, is how the makers of the final product of *Videograms* are using their raw material. In contrast to the amateurs, they had time to reflect on the processes going on before, during, and after the so-called revolution. They were in a position to choose which sources they would use and how they would edit them for their final product. They could also think about strategies of representation, what function documentary film is meant to fulfil, who the audience of these images will be, and how they will place them in the context of the continually rewritten history of this part of the world. They probably felt more responsible for their decisions (or at least, should have done) compared to those who were simply recording what was going on before their eyes. The creators of the final product share with the audience a period of reflection (though theirs is a significant shorter one than ours) which the creators of the original footage cannot.

The fact that the original sources of the film are amateur videos has further consequences. The images in *Videograms* have a totally different feel in comparison to the professional shots of *Checkmate* and to a great extent also those seen in *University Square*. In *Videograms*, we see as close as the lens will allow. The camera shakes, and we are often presented with behind-the-scene views that were never intended for the public to witness, such as the preparation of speeches and events. The ability to hide a small video camera under the jacket or behind the back allowed the amateur film-makers to record events a larger, more professional crew might not have gained access to.

The comparison of amateur footage and official TV reports offers evidence of *how* history is created, enabling viewers to reflect on what the processing of events by the mass media can mean. The time counter at the bottom of the amateur video images allows us to monitor how time is being shaped for us and what temporal relationship events have to each other. The editing also hints at the fact that the cameras were not always on – i.e., were not omnipresent – by separating segments with a black screen rather than flowing continuously forward. Even the TV images shown, although they do not have the rawness, the immediacy or the access that these amateurs obtained, are still less manipulative, less consciously constructed than in *Checkmate* or *University Square*, as we shall see. As such *Videograms* leaves more space for free interpretation for the audience than the films we are about to discuss.

Nevertheless, *Videograms* is not entirely without manipulation. Beyond the overall narrative construction, one significant distortion of reality is the indirect suggestion that the cameras are independent from their operators. One chapter title reads “A camera investigates the situation,” rather than “A cameraman investigates the situation.” Sometimes we are confronted with an exaggeration of the “pure witness” character of the amateur cameras, for example, when the camera stops and shows a frozen picture of what, a voiceover informs us, is the fleeing Ceauşescus. But for the viewer, the reality of this statement is not apparent from the images alone, as the camera is just too far away for a definite identification, making it an imperfect witness to the scene. Aesthetics are also used to bolster the film’s claims to being historical material, as shots of the Securitate Chief and the Chief of the General Staff turn from colour to black-and-white. While this does not contradict the truth, it certainly sits uneasily with other aspects of the construction of the film that seem designed to leave

interpretation of the images open to viewers. Intriguingly, neither *Videograms* nor *Checkmate* translate the words of the Ceauşescus in passages showing their interrogation. This apparent value judgement by the film-makers on the validity and worth of the Ceauşescu's words in relation to those of other participants raises questions about their objectivity and intentions.

Yet the main intended message of *Videograms* has less to do with the revolution per se and more to do with the construction of history itself. In my opinion, it fulfils this aim to a very large extent. By choosing a self-reflexive approach, Farocki and Ujica force the audience to reflect on the recording of historical events. But at the same time we need to be aware of the fact that the approach the directors chose does not enable them to integrate processes that are happening outside the field of vision of the video camera's lens.

As a last important theme in my analysis of *Videograms*, I would like to address the question of identity and identity construction, an area in which the film also differs from the ones still to be analyzed. By identity construction, I mean the way players in the revolution tried to manipulate the self-conception of Romanians in order to ensure support from both them and external parties in the political scrum for power. Each film has a slightly different perspective on this and each film looks at identity construction with a different emphasis on two levels. The first level refers to the motives and ongoing identification processes of the (in this case Romanian) people or masses that need to be addressed. The other level is that of international players, who also had an interest in the outcome of the revolution. *Videograms* emphasizes the first level; *Checkmate*, as we shall see, is focused on the second level, while *University Square* is somewhere in between.

The people in *Videograms* who initiate the revolution are trying to bring it to a peaceful end, using slogans like "Let us save Romanian honor!" or "Let us determine the re-birth of Romania." In comparison to most other former communist states, Romania shows a more nationalist stance in its self-conception during the post-war period – even in the pre- Ceauşescu era of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej at the beginning of the 1960s, when in national discourse autarky was proposed as a strategic goal.[1] Nationalism was not apparent directly, even though the regime-sponsored view of history had constant references to the great heroes of Romania (Gilberg 51). Rather, this nationalism was evident

[1] Already under the rule of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej the so-called "declaration of independence" of 1963 became an important step towards the quest for autonomy and consequently economic autarky

in "those elements of political discourse that were left out of official speeches and documents" (Gilberg 48-9). The films discussed here show active identification with this national construct. We can assume that the quest for political and economic independence fostered by Ceauşescu had left its impact on at least the older generation of the time of the revolution. *Videograms* shows the Christmas Eve celebrations of a family on national TV, identifying the scene with national values. One middle-aged male family-member speaks here – full of pride and with tears in his eyes – of the brotherhood of a brave people of a wonderful country.

Videograms, most probably because of its approach of using mainly amateur video footage as sources, is the most local film of the three films. Even Pastor László Tökés, who was a leading figure of the revolution in Timişoara and perhaps the best known "player" internationally is not mentioned in it at all.

Dead bodies identified as Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu shown on "liberated" national TV following their "supposed" execution (*Videograms of a Revolution,* 1992).

Checkmate: History Made and Told By Big Players

I would agree with Benedict Anderson's view that since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms and Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance. More contentiously, Anderson suspects that in the 21st century revolutions and similar movements will be dominated by an internationalist order

(Anderson 2). This very challenging statement needs yet to be proved by history, but it mirrors the geopolitical outlook of *Checkmate*, the most complex and the newest of the three films under discussion here.

Brandstätter in *Checkmate* shares much source material in common with *Videograms*, including archival TV reports dating from the time of the revolution, but while *Videograms* uses its source material to focus on the internal opposition and on national figures, *Checkmate* augments this contemporary material with interviews with key international players that were recorded 15 years after the events themselves. This leads to two important differences between *Checkmate* and *Videograms*. Firstly, the gap between the years of production for Brandstätter's film (made in 2004) and Farocki and Ujica's (1991) is crucial, and as such it might be as responsible for the world view of the film as the sources themselves. Secondly, *Checkmate's* use of international figures lends to it a very different perspective from the localized one of *Videograms*. Indeed, the very title *Checkmate* refers to the film's constant allusions (both verbal and visual) to the revolution as chess game played out between interests in the US, Germany, Hungary and the Soviet Union rather than between Romanian politicians, the army, the Securitate and the Romanian people. Although Brandstätter integrates voices of political figures and private persons inside Romania, by giving priority to these external players, *Checkmate* offers the main message that the revolution was orchestrated from outside Romania and mostly by the intelligence agencies of Western countries.

Checkmate starts with the images that *Videograms* culminates in – the execution of the Ceauşescus on Christmas Day 1989. The story is thus developed retrospectively, sketching out the details of events that lead to the 25th December. In this respect, *Checkmate's* analytical sweep is much broader, taking in the pre-1989 history of Romania and the fate of Romania under Ceauşescu's rule. Step by step, we gain knowledge about Ceauşescu as a historical figure, his rise to power in 1965, the independent course he took that led him away from Soviet influence (he refused to allow Romanian troops to participate in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and his version of 'national' communism.[2] The West welcomed his independent streak in foreign policy with loans, so in

[2] Actually the communist dictatorship had drawn on traditions of a glorification of the Romanian history and the Romanian people as a homogenous body since its takeover after World War II, but after the death of Gheorghiu-Dej in March 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu as the new party-leader and (by December 1967) president of Romania

the 1970s Romania's economy was strong. However, the West fell out with Ceauşescu, and in the 1980s the loans were frozen and Romania suffered extreme poverty as a result.

Towards the end of the 1980s Ceauşescu opted not to follow Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reform plans, commonly identified by the phrases *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), and instead decided for isolation from both the West and the East. *Checkmate* paints Ceauşescu as an obstacle in the West's plans for the countries of Central Europe to become aligned with the West through organizations such as the EU and NATO and through the reunification of East and West Germany. The film offers the view that the revolution was part of a strategy by international players to achieve a wider post-Communist geopolitical realignment of the Central European states.

The most dominant talking-heads of the film are former members of Western intelligence agencies, the leader of the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation in New York and people inside Romania and Hungary who promoted the Hungarian reform course, including the ethnically Hungarian Calvinist pastor László Tökés from Timişoara. An interview with him, arranged by the leader of the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, László Hámos, carried out by an American television crew and shown on Hungarian TV in July 1989, is described as the beginning of the end.[3]

The film suggests that intelligence agents were acting undercover as diplomats who travelled to the Eastern Bloc countries to meet with influential figures and promoters to turn them against the regime in Romania. One important channel in the effort to sway opinion on the other side of the Iron Curtain was Radio Free Europe. During the revolution, this channel broadcast the shooting and screaming and reported about 60,000 victims. Later it was clear that many of bodies shown had not been victims of the violence and today it is usually thought that the true figure is closer to 1,000.

Brandstätter maintains that the masses were additionally manipulated by professional provocateurs in the streets who were trained in the West. Gheorge Ratiu, the leader of the section

---

pursued "national communism" with even greater vitality than his predecessor (East & Pontin 156). The film *The King of Communism: The Pomp & Pageantry of Nicolae Ceauşescu* (Ben Lewis, 2002) is a testimony to this glorification of Romanian history, especially how the arts were utilized in the numerous public shows intended to boost popular support for Ceauşescu's rule.

[3] Transylvania was formerly part of Hungary, but became part of Romania after World War I. The Romanian census speaks of about 1.7 million Hungarians who live in Romania; Hungarian estimates put the figure at 2 million (East & Pontin 154). Minority rights for Hungarians in Romania have been a constant source of strain between the two countries. The official Romanian policy, especially at the end of the 1980s, was to settle ethnic Romanians in Transylvania, where the biggest part of Hungarian minority lived, thus to attempt to alter the ethnic balance of the region. This was by many Hungarians received as anti-Hungarian policies (East & Pontin 158).

Interior of the Securitate in 1989, admits in an interview, that the Securitate had information about these preparations in the West. In the end, he states, everybody thought the other side were the terrorists.

Chairs left behind in the room, where the trial of the Ceauşescus was held, after the couple was executed (from publicity material for *Checkmate,* 2004).

As with *Videograms*, a useful starting point in approaching *Checkmate* is a discussion of the production and usage of sources, especially when considered in comparison to *Videograms*, with which it has some marked differences. *Videograms* creates the impression that the cameras speak for themselves and yet the order of what we see, though it consistently moves forward chronologically, is artificially set. Thus, the editing of the footage is the dominant form of construction. *Checkmate* rather constructs its "story" from talking heads. While in *Videograms* the image dominates, in *Checkmate* the commentary rules over the images. So, in *Checkmate*, one danger can be that the leading role of the narrative as a chronological and logical 'story' might override 'facts' that do not fit in with the chosen narrative perspective, or that the teleological approach to history fosters the belief that there is, without any exception, a direct causal link between the present-day state of things and concrete past events (Iordanova 4).

However, *Checkmate* counterbalances its external viewpoint with a philosophical question that is closer to the immediate action: whether it is justified to risk human life for political aims. For example, Brandstätter conducts an interview with a couple whose son was killed during the

revolutionary days, after Ceauşescu was already out of power, asking them as afflicted ones, if the price they personally had to pay for the so-called freedom, can ever be seen as a justified one. The couple's answer is no. In contrast, a former leading officer of the French intelligence agency comes to the conclusion that a revolution can only be successful if there are enough victims. This officer also has the role as main analyzer of the strategy of the revolution that the film tries to prove. On the content level, this contrasting of voices at different levels stresses the responsibility of the key international players for the tragic results of the revolution.

All in all, *Checkmate* acts as a sort "day of reckoning" (as does *University Square*), trying to pin accountability on certain groups in its own ideological battle. The "truths" offered to the audience back up their predisposed view that somebody is to blame for what happened and they should be held responsible by history. Generally speaking, the more professional the production of a film, the more manipulative it is, even with the best of intentions. Brandstätter wrests control from the viewer by having commentaries start before the images switch to show the face of the speaker. This mismatch of sound and image masks the identity of the speaker, which can cause a certain amount of frustration in the viewer as the full significance of what it being said may only become apparent when the identity of the person speaking is revealed. Brandstätter also uses the device of showing the faces of the talking heads much bigger when they are giving final statements or when what they said should be taken as undoubtedly truthful and/or very important.

On paper, it is evident that of the three films *Checkmate* reads most like a political thriller. Watching the actual film, the feeling is even more accentuated, as *Checkmate* adopts not only a common narrative trope of political thrillers – an international conspiracy between colluding intelligence agencies – but also the stylistic devices that are associated with the genre. Brandstätter applies brisk editing and short takes to heighten the viewer's emotional response, a strategy that is, in my view, sometimes misused as "shock-treatment."

Comparisons to political thrillers are also apparent in the use of sound, another sort of manipulation, and one that is an important part of almost any kind of film. In *Checkmate* we repeatedly hear dramatic and threatening music when the chessboard is shown at the start of each

chapter. Conversely, after the so-called revolution, when many people believe that they have now got their freedom and democracy, cheerful music is added.

Emotions are also reinforced by the inclusion of visual symbols or icons (something an amateur cameraman recording events as they happen is unable to do). Thus, in *Checkmate* we often see birds flying across the sky when we are confronted with the desire of the people for freedom and democracy. Several times, when we hear about dark channels and those who betray the wishes of the people, we will see a homeless dog in the streets. This dog becomes a symbol for a creature that doesn't belong to a family/nation, which doesn't have a home/state anymore, and thus nothing to defend or protect. As this creature has not got anybody to whom it can prove its loyalty, it will simply not act in a loyal manner. *Checkmate* seems to associate the status of a dissident it features, the Romanian writer Stelian Tănase, with the West and its values; Brandstätter on one occasion shows him in front of an advertisement for a Western brand of washing powder.

The most conspicuous use of symbolism is that of the chessboard itself. Of course, the chessboard, with its black and white imagery, has an aesthetic appeal and acts as a narrative structuring device. However, on the symbolic level, one of its functions is to represent the divide between black (evil) and white (good). At the end of the film the Black King (Ceauşescu) is lying at the bottom of the screen, while the White King (the West) is standing at the right corner of the chessboard, having a rather good position to control the game from (almost) outside its boundaries. Brandstätter uses black and white in other manipulative ways. She employs a specific usage of the black and white images when she briefly shows the fake victims of the revolution. The image resonates with the pictures of corpses from the concentration camps of World War II, leveraging a learned pattern of using visual imagery to predispose the audience to a particular emotional and intellectual viewpoint.

Black and white is also used for archive materials showing Romania's history, although this is a less problematic use as it reflects how the images were shot rather than any post-production manipulation of the image. However, there is a tension created between the color images and those in black and white. The monochrome pictures evoke the historical nature of events and confer on them an artificial authenticity that color images do not possess (it is interesting to note, for example, that color

footage exists of the liberation of the concentration camps of World War II, but it is rarely shown as it is less powerful than similar black and white footage that subtly suggests the stamp of history's authority in the viewer's mind). Thus, converting the images of the dead bodies to black and white is doubly manipulative in that it tries to validate those images by comparing them to historical archive material, in addition to evoking our visual understanding of the Holocaust.

Even if *Checkmate* seems to be the most "propagandistic" film in terms of offering its own sort of truth by applying extended manipulations in order to heighten the emotive level of the audience, at the very end the viewer discovers, that s/he has to find still his/her own answers and interpretations, which in the end leaves a certain space for negotiation about the "final truth." In that sense, it cannot be completely aligned with traditional TV documentaries, which most often follow a standard and supposedly clear storyline that leads the viewer to a single truth. However, the style of *Checkmate* does show some influence in this direction, perhaps a result of the co-producers, which are mainly European TV-stations.[4]

Focusing also here on the addressed region in the film, the trans-national network against Ceauşescu presented in *Checkmate* can be described as "post-national," operating beyond the boundaries of the nation, as a "trans-local social action" ensured by the launching of mass-mediated sodalities (Appadurai 8). Hámos, who obviously emigrated from Hungary to the USA, had, if we can rely on *Checkmate*, a very big influence on the international media. Further proof of how powerful, and at the same time trans-national, such mass-mediated sodalities can be is the statement of an expert on intelligence agencies in the same film, who observed, that Ceauşescu was presented more than he was as a positive figure around the globe (especially in the West) at the beginning of his political career, and later on he was internationally presented as an absolute devil, as a second Hitler.

But even though *Checkmate* doesn't present the process of the so-called revolution as a mainly national or local product, the film addresses regional and local identities, for example, when giving insight into the territory question regarding Transylvania and into the minority rights discussion of ethnic Hungarians living in Romania (Hungarians living in Transylvania were treated poorly under Ceauşescu). Despite the fact that we learn in *Checkmate* that the West tried not to install a nationalistic

[4] *Checkmate* is a co-production of arte, ZDF, 3sat, ORF, Parallel 40, Duna TV, TV Romania and Magyar TV, developed with the support of the MEDIA Programme of the European Community.

oppositional network, but an anti-Ceauşescu and pro-democratic one, we can assume that without access to those people who fought predominantly for their regional and national interests, the international players probably wouldn't have been that successful. In *Checkmate*, scenes show certain historical events with the masses singing the national anthem. National symbols and national flags are continuously present during the revolutionary process. The background against which we see one expert on Romania is a typical Romanian castle and we can hear church bells ringing while she gives her view of the revolution. Church bells are also heard when it is said that the media of the West, such as the BBC, Radio Free Europe, German Wave and others, provide a sort of free media in the East during the Cold War. In that case free media and the "democracy" of the West are associated with a state of religious freedom. Finally, it appears quite artificial and exaggerated when an army general in *Checkmate* admits that he sympathized with the opposition movements and a picture of Jesus can be seen in the background.

University Square: The Day of Reckoning with the (Personal) Past and the (Personal) Present

Last but not least, let us enter yet a short discussion of the film *University Square*. *University Square*, in my view the least complex but maybe the most touching film, focuses on the protest especially of the intelligentsia of Romania and the violent repression of anti-communist demonstrators by the police and miners from Valea Jiului (the Mineriad) on University Square in the revolution's aftermath. From the point of view of narrative structure, we can summarize that *University Square* is a cross between *Videograms* and *Checkmate.* It also uses amateur-footage and by that is partly image-driven, but nevertheless the talking heads do have the last word. But the talking heads of *University Square* come from inside, nearly all of them coming from Romania, including artists, journalists, scholars and politicians and non-governmental organizations. In addition, members of the Student League are introduced at the start of the film and invited to comment on the revolutionary events and Romania's past as such. We soon learn that at the end of December, a natural solidarity of all the youth was created, which was later on called the University Square Phenomenon. The intelligentsia expresses their solidarity with the youth and lets us know that it is asking for moral principles and a "free Romania in a free Europe." Their general conclusion was that the members of

the new government (after the now so-called "palace revolution") only presented themselves as socialists and democrats, but were (still) communists. Some of the young people are on hunger strike. An uncensored amateur video (which also appears in *Videograms*) appears to prove that Iliescu knew about the plan of the coup. The end of the film shows footage from foreign news bulletins, which in part confirm their views.

At the beginning of the film *University Square,* there are black and white images showing the masses at the University Square. As in *Checkmate*, these images here are meant to refer to an important "historical event," existing as a proof for now and forever. The stamp of authority is also present in that the Romanian Ministry of Culture's name appears in the film's credits (it financed the film). In addition, the credits reveal that the producer is the distinguished and internationally recognized Romanian film director Lucian Pintilie.

At the end of *University Square* we read the following text on the screen: "A film dedicated to the memory of all Romanian fighters against communism." This ideological message is clear throughout. Again similar to *Checkmate*, this film constructs a sort of day of reckoning. The crucial difference here is that *University Square* was already made in 1991, which means the evidence offered differs a lot. There is still room for overlap, though, and, for example, a dissident who talks in *Checkmate* also appears in *University Square*.

University Square can be seen as apportioning blame on two levels. The first on the entire story-level told by the film deals with the last six months and focuses on the struggle for "real" freedom after the "fake" revolution, and the second and even more dominant one compared to *Checkmate*, is the reckoning with the dictatorship of communism of the last five decades. This can be seen, at least in part, as a consequence of the directors' national identity. As Romanians, the directors of *University Square* were naturally much more afflicted by the communist past and thus more interested in reviewing their history on a local level and reflecting on their personal past.

But fact remains that finally in all three films we are confronted with national and/or religious manifestations of identification processes, offered as an important part of the identity building needed to ensure a base of homogeneity within the national opposition movements. In all of the films, we are confronted with the fact that the church is part of the opposition and so we can say for every one of

them that the belief in god is implemented as a basic source of the identity construction process and especially an important element for opposing the (atheistic) communist power.

We can conclude that religion at that time was used (or re-activated) in order to nurture notions of individuality as well as collectivity, the latter finding its indirect expression also in the manifestation of national identity. The defenders of the National Salvation Front, especially the older generation, let us know that they do not want people from abroad who want to bring capitalism. By doing so, they also show their desire for national integrity.

At the very end, we have to be aware, that the identity constructions are not only related to the films' concrete representations of the past or present time, but also to its addressed audience in the future. The creators of a film communicate with its potential audience, and by that with its identity, usually from the very start of its production.

5. An Attempt to Locate the New Potential of Visual History

Apart from the specific question of identity construction in the films, I have tried to show various ways film can "construct" history. But even though I have tried to demonstrate how film does this, it should not mean that film should be ignored as meaningful mediator between different periods of history and cultures. We only have to be aware of its constructed nature and the elusiveness of historical truths and to know, independent of that awareness, how to communicate and engage with film nowadays, to identify its function newly in a changing world and changing media environment. In spite of the filmmakers' highly constructed versions of the truth about the Romanian revolution, we are simultaneously invited by the films discussed here to question and revise their understanding of history by seeing the film not as a final statement about "real history," but primarily as a "vehicle" for thinking about our relationship to the past (Rosenstone 1995). This thinking about the past always includes a process of remembering certain events and feelings we have had towards them (even if we did not experience them personally, but were told about them). The aim could simply be to understand better and better with the passing of time experienced and/or communicated events in the past as well as in the present.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities:Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso, 1991.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis, Minn.; London: U Minnesota P, 1996.

East Roger & Jolyon Pontin. *Revolution and Change in Central and Eastern Europe.* Rev. ed.. London: Pinter Publishers Ltd., 1997.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Introduction: German Cinema in the 1990s." *The BFI Companion to German Cinema.* London: British Film Institute, 1999. 3-26.

Erickson, Steven A. *In Theory…Harun Farocki's Challenging Documentaries Take an Unorthodox Look at European Life. Time Out*. http://www.timeoutny.com/video/212/212.video.farocki.open.html (26 June 2005).

Gilberg, Trond. *Nationalism and Communism in Romania: The Rise and Fall of Ceauşescu's Personal Dictatorship.* Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1990.

Hueser, Rembert. "Nine Minutes in the Yard. A Conversation with Harun Farocki." *Senses of Cinema*: http://sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/21/farocki_huser.html (26 June 2005).

Iordanova, Dina. "Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation." unpublished manuscript.

Portuges, Catherine. "Home movies, Found Images, and 'Amateur Film' as Witness to History." *The Moving Image*, Fall 2001. 107-125.

Rados, Antonia. *Die Verschwoerung der Securitate: Rumaenien's verratene Revolution.* Hamburg: Hoffmann u. Campe, 1990.

Rosenstone, Robert. *Visions of the Past*: *The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1995.

Filmography

Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik/Workers Leaving the Factory. Dir. Harun Farocki. Werner Dutsch, 1995.

The King of Communism: The Pomp & Pageantry of Nicolae Ceauşescu. Dir. Ben Lewis. BBC, 2002.

Out of the Present. Dir. Andrei Ujica. Facets Multimedia, 1995.

Piata Universitatii Romania/University Square. Dir. Stere Gulea, Vivi Dragan Vasile, and Sorin Iliescu. Parerea Ta, 1991.

Richterin/Rule of Law. Dir. Susanne Brandstätter. Aichholzer Filmproduktion (in coproduction with Envision Film), 2005.

Schachmatt:Strategie einer Revolution/Checkmate: Strategy of a Revolution. Dir. Susanne Brandstätter. LOOKS Medienproduktionen GmbH, 2004.

Stare de fapt/Sate of Things. Dir. Stere Gulea. Parerea Ta, 1989.

Videogramme einer Revolution/Videograms of a Revolution. Dir. Harun Farocki & Andrei Ujica. Facets Video, 1992.

Note to the Reader

This essay was first published in *Post Script. Essays in Film and the Humanities*, Vol. 26, 3 (2007).