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Special Guest: Monica Filimon

Emotion, Diversion, and Memory in *Videograms of a Revolution (1992)*

The December 1989 uprising in Romania has been studied for its use of the televisual image to document, communicate, and generate meaning. The German film historian and director Klaus Kreimeier has argued that, "The medium, with its inherent dynamics and acceleration effects, became the catalyst, if not the catapult of political events."(I) Produced shortly after the events, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica's *Videograms of a Revolution* is a compilation of recordings, both official and taken by amateur cameras, intended, as Ujica has suggested, to "reconstruct the visual chronology of [those] days." (II) The film is primarily interested in reflecting the plurality of perspectives that exploded on December 21 and, in doing so, it intentionally underscores the gaps, disturbances, and interruptions that any act of remembrance and representation necessarily implies. Farocki, considered one of "cinema's most illustrious artist-archaeologists[s]," insists that the purpose of a picture is to point beyond itself, to that which cannot be represented, "'… [O]ne shows a picture as proof of something which cannot be proven by a picture.'" (III) It is in that which cannot be fully represented that I am interested: specifically, the use of cinematic techniques to indicate the profound changes in the perception and organization of urban places in 1989 Bucharest. I will suggest that various cameras, present in or around important squares such as the University, Victory, or Revolution Squares, have recorded the citizens' reappropriation of public spaces and their redefinition of the boundaries between visibility and invisibility. As a result, such spaces were consecrated as national *lieux de memoire*.

Having read Ujica's *Television/Revolution: The Ultimatum of Images—Romania in December 1989* (written in collaboration with Hubertus von Amelunxen, a photography historian and theorist), Farocki contacted him with the intention of adapting it to the screen. (IV) Ujica suggested they make a film about the "videograms" of the event, i.e. the many types of footage produced by official and individual cameras, and disseminated on national and international television or simply among people. (V) Like telegrams, these functioned not only to document, but also to send a message or a call for action. (VI)

The film moves with grace between the official recording of the last mass rally organized for Ceausescu (and at his orders) and amateur footage of the people's takeover of the television station, the new politicians' seizing of the Central Committee Headquarters, the reorganization of political and military power, and of the many street confrontations in Bucharest during the five days that followed the rally and up to Ceausescu's execution. For careful eyes well accustomed with the "new" faces, this reconstruction also exposes the disparity between the enthusiastic popular revolt and the apparently long-planned coup d'état unfolding within the Headquarters. A woman's impersonal voice analyzes various sequences, some of which are played in a loop, while others are frozen to permit the commentary to have its effect on viewers. Frames within frames, suggestive crosscutting between different locations, an excessive use of zooming (the amateurs' solution for close-ups), blackouts, and jump shots reinforce the constructedness of the images, their subjective rendering of events, and, ultimately, the importance of this film as a metatext. What distinguishes the narration of *Videograms* is, therefore, a preference for motion, for detailed editing, carefully added soundtrack and voiceover, and a fluid transition between the various camera operators.

Motion also defines the popular uprising *per se.* The 1989 fall of the Iron Curtain was gradual, as communist parties in central Europe eventually accepted the emergence of organized opposition and relatively free elections.

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In Romania, the totalitarian system had left no room for people's disapproval. Increasing economic pressures, suffocating surveillance, and the radical entrenchment of the Party had led to a paralysis of the public sphere, which functioned only as an arena in which the establishment transmitted its uncontested messages to its subjects. The undercurrent of discontent and, especially, the search for public recognition and validation of individual desire needed the smallest fissure in the system to explode it open; this "fissure" came in the form of Pastor Laszlo Tokes's opposition to his political eviction from Timisoara to another city. Although it does not document this moment, *Videograms* does register the spectacular moment when the fracture in the stagnant, ossified system was split wide open by the bustling, flowing energy of the masses.

A few theoretical points may be useful at this point. In *The Production of Space,* Henri Lefebvre argues that spaces may outlive their purposes and "become vacant and susceptible of being diverted and put to use[s] quite different from [their] initial one[s]." (VII) Such diversions, however, are usually temporary as the forms and structures within each space eventually return to their original designation, as Lefebvre suggests: "Diversion is in itself merely appropriation, not creation—a reappropriation which can call but a temporary halt to domination." (VIII) I would suggest that public spaces change their functions radically—though not completely—at historical crossroads. Furthermore, they may gain status as sites of memory when they are invested with the raw energy and emotion of the masses. In *Videograms*, such diversion of space is the result of the movement of masses and cameras gone rogue.

One of the opening sequences is revelatory in this sense. On December 21, 1989, in response to the violent protests in Timisoara, Ceausescu ordered a massive rally and, while addressing a seemingly tame crowd, he was shocked to hear, over the recorded applause on the loudspeakers, the much louder booing of the people in front of him. At first, the organized crowd is motionless, obedient, and dotted with red banners that indicate devotion to the Party and the Leader. It is important to note that the place itself is the center of power and surveillance: the massive, silent buildings that surround—and contain—the participants host the government (on one side), the Party (on Ceausescu's side), a famous hotel, the University Library, and the infamous Securitate (this particular building was known as a center where prisoners were tortured). These structures seem to function as gates against the flight of the masses. The static shots of the crowd, the clean cuts between frames, and the steady images of the official camera, like the building themselves, represent the regime as unflinching, in control, unbreakable.

A few moments later, everything changes. Ceausescu thanks the organizers and this one more masquerade of power—the pretense of having the consent and approval of the people—is the spark that sets the masses in motion. The first indication of change is the invasion of the medium shot of the dictator by unclear, yet roaring sounds coming from the crowd; the second is the faltering hand of the camera operator, who, one may imagine, turns his head to the source of the sound; the third is the breaking down of the image followed by the red screen and its "Live Broadcast" inscription. In the very text of the film itself, movement, defined as "disturbance," is the effect of the voicing of emotion off-screen. At the time, such minute changes in broadcast indicated the vulnerability of the power establishment and may have emboldened the masses further. Benjamin Young has aptly remarked that the minute the regime cannot control its image it has,

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in fact, made room for alternative images and voices.

And they do not fail to appear. The first such "rogue" observer is the television camera that records the rally "more out of curiosity than resolve," as the voiceover suggests later. What the intermittent images reveal is the dissolution of the mass into distinct crowds, some exiting the square right by the Securitate building, some gathering at the door to Ceausescu's Party headquarters, ready to get to his balcony. The horizontal movement of these pools of people is in contrast with the vertical bulkiness of the buildings, indicating the incongruity between the people's fluid will and the stiff, fixed position of power. Furthermore, the breaking up of the mass is a visual representation of the different voices that can make up a democracy: individuals follow up their own desires and instincts rather than being driven by the one will of the controlling power. The rogue camera, itself acting "out of curiosity," i.e. out of personal desire, has managed to confer upon these different expressions of will the visibility denied them by the script of power.

This is the first moment when the space of adulation for the regime is diverted into (or reappropriated as) a space of visible opposition and free expression. It is also the space where power has been demystified and exposed as weak and replaceable. The desire of the masses, their refusal to participate in what James Scott would term the "public transcript" of the regime, i.e. its official discourse and expectations, has opened up the actual space of this square to the future, creating the first pocket of open resistance to power. The emotion that has pushed individuals into action surges dramatically as the Ceausescus flee by helicopter and more and more citizens join those who stay, continuing their protest overnight and under fire by unknown terrorists (whose identities have remained unclear to this day). A place of official parades under the Communists, this square would become a site of memory—marked as such by its new name (Revolution Square) and the soaring monument dedicated to the victims of those days—in the post-1989 years. The Revolution Square, surrounded by buildings that have preserved an official status, has, eventually, preserved part of its function as a space for political demonstrations and it is now used for the organized rallies of different political parties, most of which are looking to exploit its affective value in support of their agenda.

A second space depicted, in this case, by a very decisive, private camera is that of the University Square. Leaving the rally in protest, rivers of participants flow down one of the major boulevards in Bucharest only to gather, eventually, in front of the University, where they occupy one of the major intersections of the city. Zooming out of the small screen of a television, this second rogue camera is much bolder in its moves even if it does not go into the street yet. It pans left and right, zooms in and out, and even cuts between different moments, trying frantically to capture everything and returning to the screen in a frenzy of excitement, partial disbelief, and even joy at confirming that what appeared as a minor disturbance in the official broadcast was, in effect, the beginning of the end for the regime. This handheld device is the first unofficial witness of the revolt; like the people on the street, it moves out of desire and with some enthusiasm, revealing the gradual flooding and reappropriation of official public spaces by the masses. Later on, the same camera will mark the first direct confrontation between the people and the tanks of the regime. Like it, almost one hundred other cameras would invade the streets, recording all they can with liberating fervor, panning over the crowds, moving with them, or depicting the backstage where power dissolves and is born again. Like the Revolution Square, the University Square has become a lieu de memoire, consecrated as such by the emotion-driven crowds and by the victims fallen to yet unknown bullets. Unlike the Revolution Square,

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however, the University Square continues to be a space of open dissent and private citizens' opposition to the state. It was most famously declared a "space free of Communism" in 1990, when young people occupied it for several months demanding a radical change in politics and politicians (they had realized that the second tier of the Communist Party had, in fact, used the spontaneous 1989 uprising to stage their coup and take over the country). This particular site is part of an international constellation of similar sites, from the Tiananmen Square of 1989, to the more recent Tahrir Square, Taksim Square in Turkey, or today's Maidan Square in Kiev, which function to challenge the establishment, often motivated by idealistic notions of truth, justice, and honor.

What are the dominant emotions of the masses? What pushes them into action? One of the first "requirements" of the masses captured in one of the videograms is the call for free elections. Freedom, truth, and Ceausescu's removal are soon demanded on the streets. One of the most poignant early moments is the singing of a 19th century hymn—it would become Romania's national anthem in 1990—that conjures Romanians to "wake up from their sleep," take action against their enemies, and recover their pride as a nation. In a particularly poignant scene, shot from inside a moving car, a few unknown young people discuss the fall of the regime. The vehicle moves along one of the busiest boulevards in Bucharest, toward University Square, along with the many passers-by who greet each other with a joy like that of war victims who acknowledge their common suffering and welcome their deliverance. Several types of emotion converge at this point. The radio initially broadcasts a call for the death penalty for all major actors of the previous regime, which indirectly signals the absolute rejection, the almost raw hatred of the communist regime that leaves no room for second thoughts. The program then features a nationalist song that commends Romanians for their ability to withstand all enemies. Ceausescu's regime cultivated such highfalutin nationalism, but, at the same time, humiliated the individual: praised for their courage on national television, people kept silent and scrambled for food in their private lives, constantly self-censoring their thoughts and words for fear of being caught. "We were afraid of an idiot," the man in the car states. In a later sequence in which soldiers are firing at empty buildings where they have been told that secret enemies have found shelter, the voiceover commentary points out that fear had been used as a weapon against possible revolts in a country in which "[t]ime froze. The basic movement was that of idling; the basic emotion—the inertia of fear." The voice of the man in the car betrays shame at having participated in his own humiliation by "an idiot"; at the same time, he acknowledges those who died defending their public opposition to the regime. Honor comes from visibility, from the courage to render inner thoughts and emotions visible to the authorities. It is in search of honor and as an expiation of the guilt of having accepted the regime passively for many years that people were moved into action. The freedom they demanded was the freedom from posing, from constantly masquerading/assuming the subservient position demanded by the regime. It was not by chance that the events were sparked by Pastor Tokes's public admission of opposition to the Party.

Videograms of a Revolution is, thus, a film about the coming into visibility of a people, the emotions that moved them into action, and the gradual reappropriation of public spaces as a result of a nation's push for freedom and the self-esteem that comes with it. It is also a film about the diversion of specific public spaces such as the Revolution Square or the University Square into lieux de memoire by means of their centrality to the 1989 events, having witnessed, the bloodshed, and thereby acquired symbolic

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visibility as a result; these are the spaces where memory preserves an affective connection with the past. Farocki and Ujica's excellent choice and editing of the material—the result of an intense research work—can only further enhance the aura of these sites.

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Notes:

I. Klaus Kreimeier, "Enlargement of the Field of View: About Videograms of a Revolution," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books/Raven Row, 2010), 180.

II. Rob White, "Interview with Andrei Ujica," *Film* Quarterly 64.3 (Spring 2011): 68.

III. Harun Farocki, "Dialogue passage by 'Robert' from Before Your Eyes—Vietnam," qtd. in Thomas Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 12.

IV. See Benjamin Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics: Videograms of a Revolution," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 251.

V. White, "Interview with Andrei Ujica," 67-68.

VI. White, "Interview," 68.

VII. Henri Lefebvre, "Social Space," in *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 167.

VIII. Lefebvre, "Social Space," 168.

IX. Young, "On Media and Democratic Politics," 257.

X. James Scott defines "public transcript" as a description of the "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate," pointing out that both parties "tacitly conspire in misrepresentation." James C. Scott, "Behind the Official Story," in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.

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