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## Restaging the 1989 revolution: the Romanian New Wave

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**Abstract** Almost 20 years after the 1989 Romanian revolution, the subject is experiencing a powerful comeback in a number of cinematic reflections that are at the forefront of the so-called Romanian New Wave, including Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Radu Muntean's *The paper will be blue* and Catalin Mitulescu's *How I spent the end of the world*. This article seeks to establish some of the contributions that the New Wave is making to the reconstruction of the 1989 revolutionary moment, but also, and more importantly, to the renegotiation of Romania's present role in the local and global imaginary. The article offers a particular reading of these films as inspired by Walter Benjamin's writings on history and film, a reading that seeks to understand the careful temporal and spatial renegotiation of the revolutionary moment of December 1989, the key role that the technology of film has played throughout the course of the Romanian revolution and its aftermath, as well as the critical importance that the revolutionary moment continues to have for the way in which Romania imagines itself and is seen from abroad.

### Introduction

Almost 20 years after the 1989 Romanian revolution, the subject is experiencing a powerful comeback in a number of cinematic reflections that are at the forefront of the so-called Romanian New Wave, including Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Radu Muntean's *The paper will be blue* and Catalin Mitulescu's *How I spent the end of the world*. Alongside the movies embracing a revolutionary theme lie a number of other important contributions to the New Wave, focusing on both 'before' and 'after' the revolution, thus neatly bracketing, both spatially and temporally, the period of Communism as opposed to, but also in direct relationship to, the period of transition: Cristian Nemescu's *California dreamin'*, Cristian Mungiu's *4 months 3 weeks 2 days*, Cristi Puiu's *The death of Mr Lazarescu* and Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, adjective* are just a few examples. Released at a time when the revolutionary (and even transition) theme seems almost entirely exhausted by incessant TV talk shows, investigative commissions into Communism (or into the Revolution the Securitate), by disgruntled intellectuals, politicians and revolutionaries, these films are surprisingly refreshing. Although they have gained most of their acclaim at film festivals abroad, they are clearly targeting a local public, seeking to reopen, albeit on different grounds, a debate that many considered lost.

Focusing in particular on Corneliu Porumboiu, Radu Muntean and Catalin Mitulescu's films, this article seeks to establish some of the contributions that the

New Wave is making to the reconstruction of the 1989 revolutionary moment, but also, and more importantly, to the renegotiation of Romania's present role in the local and global imaginary. The article offers a particular reading of these films as inspired by Walter Benjamin's writings on history and film. This reading seeks to understand the careful temporal and spatial renegotiation of the revolutionary moment of December 1989, the key role that the technology of film has played throughout the course of the Romanian revolution and its aftermath, as well as the critical importance that the revolutionary moment continues to have for the way in which Romania imagines itself and is seen from abroad. Just like the films themselves, this article argues that current renegotiations of Romania's revolutionary moment have much more to do with concerns about the present than the past. These renegotiations seek to create new possibilities for action in a highly sceptical, disgruntled Romanian society that has stubbornly refused to engage with its past, and anything seen as belonging to it, for over 20 years now.

In an intellectual environment where debates on transitology seem to have run their course, new approaches to politics and international affairs, including the so-called aesthetic turn in International Relations (IR), provide a new methodological and empirical ground on which these discussions can be carried on, particularly at a time when the social impetus for it appears to have been awakened again for the first time since the revolution. Many of these films could be easily dismissed as belonging to a different intellectual terrain from that of the discipline of international affairs, but they provide a number of important insights into how the revolutionary moment, and what came immediately before and after it, continues to percolate into both the local and global imaginary.

### **Locating the Romanian New Wave: the aesthetic turn, cinematic IR and post-Communist studies**

If one reads the 'aesthetic turn' in IR as a methodological intervention that promotes a series of new grounds on which International Relations can be examined—from popular culture (Barker 1999; Blum 2000; Roman 2003) to literature (Bleiker 2001; 2009; Moore 2010) to museums (Sylvester 2008; Lacy 2008) to film (Weber 2006; Shapiro 2008; Carver 2010; Doucet 2005; Holden 2006)—then an examination of the Romanian New Wave fits loosely within the last grounding category. If one reads it as a critical theoretical intervention that belongs to a particular school of thought—whether poststructuralism with its focus on textualism, the more recent arts and politics movement with its focus on the philosophy of art or the more loosely structured group of academics that focus on the politics of representation (categories listed in Moore and Shepherd 2010)—then it would perhaps, once again, best fall into the last category.

As a methodological intervention, unlike the so-called Cinematic IR (Holden 2006)—or at least Holden's reading of the cinematic IR—this examination of the Romanian New Wave tries to make a much more modest claim about the contribution that films can bring to, in this case, our understanding of the Romanian revolution. The movies chosen are not 'critical'—as distinct from 'uncritical' ones—and my reading of them is not an attempt to 'decode' them in a way that would otherwise be unfamiliar to the more astute film audience. Instead, this examination points to the perhaps not altogether arbitrary choice of topic

(the 1989 Romanian revolution and the post-Communist transition), the approach to the filming technique (the so-called new minimalism/realism) and timing of their release (over 15 years after the revolution, under a generation of directors that came to adulthood around the time of the revolution). All these factors serve as a unique constellation to change the spatial and temporal domain on which the revolution is examined and remembered.

As an intervention in the so-called politics of representation, this examination tries to present these films not so much in terms of 'improvements they make to thinking through the predicaments of world politics or to resisting certain power relations' but rather as 'interventions [that] are political because they disrupt the accepted order of things' (Frost 2010, 435). As Frost argues in her attempt to distinguish, as well as draw a connection between what she calls 'performative and disruptive politics' and 'reflective and interpretive practices', the films are seen not only as a representation of politics but also as an 'enactment of a politics that prevaricates between sense and understanding' (433). They do not show any 'real' versus 'obscured' order of things, nor do they appeal on a purely intellectual/reflective level only. They are not 'pedagogical tools' (Doucet 2005) but rather hints, alternative spaces on which to begin an investigation, cards in a deck of ideas perhaps not dissimilar to Walter Benjamin's convolutes in his Arcades Project. These alternative spaces are not necessarily better than other points of beginning, nor do they necessarily lead to different conclusions. Their choice is simply justified by their availability, on the same grounds on which one would justify beginning this examination on the basis of a document, a report or a speech.

The technology of film—by this I literally mean the use of a film camera as opposed to, for example, photography—is treated as unique only to the extent that: (1) it has played a key role in the initial representation of the Romanian revolution—with most Romanians experiencing the revolution live on TV, along with the rest of the world, as opposed to out in the streets; and (2) it has served as a tool to enhance both the memory and consciousness of the so-called 'moment' of the revolution (what happened during 16–22 December 1989) by recording, reproducing and restaging images that could perhaps only now gain legibility. As such, this examination does not seek to argue that there is something inherent in the technology of film per se that makes it necessarily relevant or unique to IR, but rather that in particular contexts, at particular points in time, constellations of ideas, techniques, times and spaces can come together in the expression of a film. And when this happens, this unique moment, what Benjamin calls the 'now-time', becomes a door through which the past, present and future can merge in a unique understanding. This is not a 'sublime' moment of transcendence (Shapiro 2006) that puts us 'beyond the bounds of [the] natural or sensory world' but rather, as Hozic argues, the sublime as grounding experience, where we 'understand [our] place in the natural world, and by accepting [our] limitations [find] the way to live [our] li[ves] as a moral person' (2006, 964).

An examination of the Romanian New Wave is relevant to IR not because it represents a 'critical' or 'unique' aesthetic intervention, but rather because it provides an opportunity to reexamine the impact that the 1989 Romanian revolution continues to have on the Romanian transition, how we see and interpret the post-Cold War world and how we utilize the concept of post-Communism to describe a series of different types of political change: from ideological change to

institutional, social and economic change. Looking at these otherwise classical tropes in IR—revolution, ideology, change—through film should be seen more as an intervention that does not necessarily privilege film as a methodological tool, but rather sees it as a useful alternative when the subject and context addressed justify it. For each empirical claim can be justified through a number of different ‘scientific’ or as we like to call them, methodological tools (Jackson 2010). This is not to dismiss the important arguments made in support of using film as a legitimate IR methodological approach (Weldes 2003; Shapiro 1999; Weber 2006), but rather, quite the opposite, to acknowledge them as interventions that have been very successful in establishing it as a legitimate alternative.

### A ‘New? Wave’?

The New Wave label recently placed on a series of films produced by Romanian directors, can and has certainly been challenged (Scott 2008). The films, although offering some thematic similarities, are quite different both in their scope and production. Most of the directors, although familiar with each other, would not consider themselves part of the same school (Calinescu 2006; Blaga 2008; Mezincescu and Dinca 2006). The label is very much a product of the unexpected success that many of these films have had on the international film festival circuit, which exposed them to an unintended global audience. The New Wave is an artificial creation that places many of these films clearly outside of their initial intentionality: targeting small local/national audiences. Instead, the idea of a ‘new’ ‘wave’ insinuates both that there is something radically different about these films and that they form part of a moving whole that deserves not only an international recognition, but also a historical classification. It is in this particular context that the Romanian New Wave enters the global imaginary—how Romania, and its Communist/post-Communist experience is imagined/perceived from abroad: the movies, although shown individually, are inevitably presented as part of a larger whole, a body of work that together, seeks to present a coherent story about Romania’s transition from Communism to post-Communism.

This coherence is justified not only on the basis of a shared international success, but also a perceived similarity in methodology imposed perhaps much more so by the limited financial resources available to young directors in Romania and Eastern Europe in general (Iordanova 1999; 2002), than by a deliberate choice to abide to certain stylistic rules. The methodology is often described as following a deeply minimalist/realist style, enforced by long shots, limited editing, a documentary-like atmosphere and a focus on a familiar everyday environment such as unremarkable cityscapes and interiors (Hofman 2007; Kaufman 2007). The scene is formed by familiar characters in recognizable circumstances (Livizeanu 2007). These characters tell the story of the average Romanian, navigating the events in the years just before, during and after the revolution. Perhaps what binds the films together, more so than a coherent style, is their point of reference: 1989 becomes the ultimate framing mechanism for understanding Romania’s past, present and future.

Audiences abroad, from film festivals to film openings, have offered the Romanian New Wave unexpected opportunities: financial ones, but also opportunities to redefine the context in which their films would be interpreted.

With a clear majority of their audience abroad—*12:08 East of Bucharest* had an audience of about 15,000 at home compared to over 40,000 in France alone (Stojanova and Duma 2007)—these films are slowly expanding their interpretative horizon to address not only a local, but rather a global audience. Although the films focus on 1989 mostly as a local experience, their international audiences are experiencing them as either a complement or alternative to what they saw as the first revolution to be televised live. The ability of international audiences to relate to these films took many of the directors by surprise, hinting that for them 1989 was seen as a unique and private experience of the Romanian people, rather than an international event.

This has helped redefine the original intentionality of these films: aimed mainly at disgruntled local audiences for whom the moment of the revolution has become a painful reminder of abuse, corruption and private interest led appropriation with the intent of rescuing 1989 from this current negative context. The films have instead mainly reached international audiences who are now better able to locate the perceived 'exceptionality' of December 1989 in a more fluid historical context, and better able to assess the different and sometimes similar ways in which the televised revolution was experienced 'at home' and abroad.

The technology of film plays a key investigative role here, in which its abilities are both mocked (particularly in *12:08 East of Bucharest*) and relished. In this sense, these films help to emphasize the extent to which representations of the revolution through the technology of film have played a key role in shaping both the local and global imaginary surrounding Romania.

The technology of film is crucial not only for marking December 1989 as one of the pivotal moments in which Romania entered the global (contemporary) imaginary, but also as the moment in which a crucial local imaginary was formed, one that was going to continue to rely on the technology of film to represent Romania's collective historical and contemporary experience. 1989 marked the beginning of Romania's obsession with television: with one of the highest rates of cable TV access in the Balkans, at 79 per cent (Staff writer 2007), Romanians have developed a love-hate relationship with the medium: although TV is constantly present in most Romanian households—many of the interior scenes in the Romanian New Wave feature a live TV in the background—the reliability of the information it transmits is almost inevitably challenged, creating a sense of constant frustration and indignation. It is interesting that the potential rescue should come from a series of films that are not afraid to mock the abuses through which the medium that they themselves use has been subject to, particularly when it comes to representing the Romanian transition.

### **About the revolution, yet not really about the revolution**

Each of the three films that this article focuses on deals specifically with the topic of the Romanian revolution, but all three directors identify the present rather than the past as their main concern. They are part of a new generation of film-makers whose point of departure is not the Communist past but rather post-Communist capitalism, making 'their art . . . subject to a different set of cultural and economic conditions [that] they and we view . . . from a new global vantage point' (Livizeanu



2007). Their films blur the edge between documentary and fiction, 'using the cinema as a tool to investigate reality with documentary-like specificity and moral depth' (Gorzo in Livizeanu 2007). Their minimalist model,

recurrent use of long shots; lateral framing of tableaux-like compositions . . . ; minute scrutiny of everyday, often non-spectacular details; a consistent refusal to use any score except some additional musical citations at key moments

along with theatrical *mise-en-scène*, extreme close ups and symmetrical openings and closings (Nasta 2007) serve to blend 'story time, historical time . . . and the audiences' suspended reception time . . . into one single, strong emotional state' (Nasta 2007).

Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* takes place on the 16th anniversary of the 1989 revolution and is centred on a local TV show that seeks to determine whether there was or not a revolution in Vaslui, a small town east of Bucharest. The criteria for determining the answer is based on whether the demonstrators of Vaslui went into the street before or after 12:08pm, the time when Ceausescu left the Communist Party building in Bucharest after being booed by protesters. The film is inspired by an actual TV show that the director watched in his home town of Vaslui. The action centres around the three main characters, Jderescu (the talk show host and owner of the local TV station), Mr Piscoci (his first interviewee—a retiree who has been playing Santa Claus at Christmas time for all the kids in Vaslui) and Mr Manescu (his second interviewee—a high-school history teacher and notorious drunk).

It is Christmas time, and the concern with the revolution in Vaslui ranks about as high as Jderescu's worry over securing the two interviewees he promised to have, interviewees that seem to have other commitments: Mr Piscoci is searching for an appropriate Santa Claus costume and Mr Manescu needs to borrow some money to pay off his drinking debt and calm down his wife who expects him to bring his full salary home. Jderescu, a former engineer turned journalist, begins the show with an introduction inspired by his last-minute search for inspiration in his dictionary of myths:

[m]any of you are probably wondering why we are putting together this show, with this theme, after such a long time. Well, I think that, just like people mistook the Fire for the Sun in Plato's myth, it is my duty as a journalist to make sure that as we came out of one cave, we didn't enter another one, a bigger one, in which we again mistook a great straw fire for the sun. I say that there is no present without a past, no future without a present. That is why, the clearer the past, the clearer the present and future. On the other hand, Heraclit used to say that we people cannot swim in the same waters twice. I say, my dears, let's try to dive back into the same river that was 16 years ago, for the sake of the truth, for a brighter future. (Porumboiu 2006)

Despite his stutter, Jderescu, just like the other interviewees and people calling into the show, appears to stumble upon something that is being increasingly challenged in the transitology literature: the 'exceptionality' of the revolutionary moment itself. Jderescu urges his guests to remember what were they doing around 12:08 the day of the revolution, and while their responses are constantly challenged by those who call into the show, another story emerges: a story that underlines both the seemingly mundane nature of that day in December, 16 years ago, as well as the later need to turn it into something exceptional. 22 December

1989 marks a key moment of change in Romania's history, and the day itself became invested with a significance tied to specific actions—demonstrating, being out in the streets, being on TV—that, if and when missing, dilute not only someone's claim to have participated in the revolution, but also their claim to a postrevolutionary identity.

And yet the narrative of the film unfolds unperturbed by the perceived radical change brought about by December 1989: the symmetrical long shots of Vaslui at the beginning and end of the movie that are meant to portray the city before and after the revolution reveal no change, just the same poverty-stricken environment lit up by the same street lamps that turn on and off in orderly sequence from one end of the city to the other. The TV studio, in which most of the film is shot, is reminiscent of the TV studios in which the 1989 revolution itself unfolded: improvised, disorganized, with jiggly camera work that zooms in and out and flops up and down at the most inopportune moments. The comedic irony of the set up and the characters that inhabit it inevitably leave a different tint on what is otherwise portrayed as a very serious topic: the 1989 revolution and the questions surrounding it appear almost as a joke, an opportunity to distract oneself from the otherwise obvious lack of change.

Porumboiu describes his film as not really being about the revolutionary moment itself, but rather how that moment still percolates in people's minds today (Chirilov 2007). In that sense, Porumboiu is much less concerned with the past itself as he is with the present. For him, the danger lies not in failing to find out the 'truth' about what happened during the revolution—an obsession that has informed much of the academic work on post-1989 Romania, which Porumboiu seeks to effectively erase by erasing the very word revolution from the Romanian film title—but in the self-manipulation of our own unique memories in order to fit a particular narrative. It is these personal experiences, this calm that sits upon Vaslui even at a moment of great unrest, that he is trying to recover, and along with it, give people a much needed peace of mind, a sense that they need not necessarily have been out in the streets before 12:08 on December 1989 in order to have stepped into the future.

Radu Muntean's *The paper will be blue* is also inspired by the director's personal experience of being a young army recruit at the time of the revolution. The film seemingly engages with perhaps one of the most disputed subjects surrounding the Romanian revolution: the role of the Romanian army during the revolution, and the source of the violence that left thousands of demonstrators and bystanders dead. The film focuses on the main character, Costi, a young army recruit who is caught by the revolution three months before his release. He deserts his platoon in order to go and defend the television tower<sup>1</sup> and in the process is caught in a number of different tragicomic situations, while his lieutenant and the rest of the crew spend the night of the revolution looking for him. Costi gets confused for a terrorist after being caught in a fire exchange and is taken in to be interrogated along with a gypsy, accused of being a foreign spy. After being

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<sup>1</sup>The tower was one of the first official buildings to have been taken over by the demonstrators and was being fired upon as the revolutionaries gathered there were trying to address both a local and international audience via a free broadcasting medium.



released, Costi finally rejoins his platoon in the morning only to be killed while taking a cigarette break outside his tank.

The film is shot in a similar minimalist/realist style to Porumboiu's, featuring also a symmetrical opening and closing that suggests we are traversing a similar temporal loop, except that this time the film's action is revealed at the end to have been a flashback. We literally end where we begin, with the past, present and future once again blurring into a *mélange* that forces us to reconsider their boundaries. Filmed mainly in the dark, the action, sound and camera work appear all murky. The hand-held camera shots force us to experience the action as if we were there, watching, engaged in the action ourselves, guarding our heads from the bullets, sneaking between buildings and cars, trying to make sense of the overlapping sounds of the radio, walkie-talkie, telephone. We are almost forced to follow Costi as an accomplice, whether we agree with him or not. We are always one step behind him, but, unlike him, appear to survive the final blow. His enthusiastic attempt to protect the television tower ends in a useless death. His defence of liberty, while heroic, appears ridiculous, just like his death.

Muntean explains the purpose of his film as restoring 'the balance between the authenticity of those moments and how ridiculous they seem today, 15 years later' (Paun 2006). He argues that it is important to somehow allow people to relive those moments, those emotions:

[i]f I manage to teleport people back in a flash-back that's convincing enough to draw out their emotions and to make them think about those moments and what they felt back then, but not like you do when you think of a crazy subject that was explained very poorly both by the newspapers as well as Romanian TV in the last 16 years, then that means I did my job and created a film worth seeing. (Muntean in Paun 2006)

Restoring the sense of authenticity has little to do with discovering the 'truth' about the revolution for Muntean. Instead, it refers to the need to trust one's own memories and feelings at the time, not as naive or unreliable, but rather as legitimate and truthful to oneself. Rescuing the moment of the revolution from its current negativity is a task that Muntean deems essential, and film for him is the ideal medium for the renegotiation of those moments, despite its previous abuse of the subject of the revolution:

I'm perfectly aware of the fact that, in principle, the Romanian spectator is tired of movies that deal with, either directly or indirectly, the 1989 December revolution. My intention is not to discover the truth about the revolution or the terrorists but to tell the story of those people. It is crazy night in which the army receives orders from poets and actors through the TV, people are called upon to defend the TV tower with their bare hands, the military receive mixed signals, the civilians are distributed guns on the basis of their ID, and the gypsies are arrested as Arab terrorists. The film will be, like the revolution itself, a tragicomedy. (Muntean in Staff writer 2006)

Catalin Mitulescu, a Romanian director living abroad, is also exploring the dangerous effect of the negativity and hatred that surrounds the moment of the revolution. For him, being stuck in this hatred means never really being able to move on, a permanent return to a particularly bleak interpretation of a period that he at least is able to recall as still full of charm and family warmth. The film *How I spent the end of the world* is shot through the eyes of two children, Eva and her

brother Lalalilu, and mainly shows how they experienced the last year of Ceausescu's dictatorship. When Eva and her boyfriend accidentally break a bust of Ceausescu in their school, a series of events unfold that see Eva transferred to a reformatory school where she meets Andrei, the son of two dissidents. Together they begin to train for their escape to the West across the Danube, and Lalalilu, a seven-year-old boy, prepares revenge by planning to kill Ceausescu during a planned visit to his school.

The film acts as a nostalgic retelling of a time that, although challenging, was also full of positive moments, of high expectations and ambitious dreams. Mitulescu describes his intentions as:

I wanted very much to see a film about the Ceausescu era. I really wanted to see this film, to see the era, because we're different, we lived in those times and have those memories. At one point the revolution came over us, everything was very agitated and we got lost. All going backs now are followed by hatred, by things unresolved, by conflicts unresolved. I wanted a film that would tell the story of my childhood, my adolescence, that would tell of those times and the happiness and sadness that came with them. (Mitulescu in Mezincescu and Dinca 2006)

Shot mainly outside, in a rural-like setting and a much warmer natural light, reminiscent of sunny and hot Romanian summers, Mitulescu's film anchors itself much more clearly in a prerevolutionary past, that, although frustrating, is also full of love and familiarity, the excitement of planning and dreaming an escape to a 'West' that could hardly be imagined. The transition from the past to the future is metaphorically symbolized through the element of water: the crossing of the Danube onto the 'other' side, the intense cold-water training in the abandoned bathtub to survive a winter crossing and, finally, Eva on board a giant cruise ship on a foreign sea. Unlike in the movies of Porumboiu and Muntean, the revolution, although also confusing and unexpected, is marked not by a temporal loop that suggests nothing has changed, but by a temporal memory loop—this time marked through Eva's memory—that suggests that although things have changed, perhaps for the better, the past need not necessarily be full of regrets.

His film again, is not really about the revolution, but rather 'a nostalgic kind of recovery therapy' (Chirilov 2007) All three directors are careful to point out that their films are not really about the revolution; so why this reluctance to engage with the revolution? As Chirilov asks: '[w]hat is wrong with making a film about the revolution?' He suggests that taking on such a subject is perhaps too much of a burden, particularly at a time when people are simply tired of talking about the revolution (2007). And yet, these films are particularly successful at what they set out to do: engage with the revolution, but not really. Perhaps the reason for their success is that they manage to move the question of the revolution on a much more familiar terrain: that of the everyday, the familiar. Adina Bradean (2007), a researcher of Romanian film practices, argues that:

[a]s lived by the film community, post-socialism was a puzzling time when imagined futures were directly dependent on remembered pasts, and particularly on the actions taken in response to those pasts.

Perhaps what these movies teach us is that it is not just the film community that experienced postsocialism as dependent on a particular way of remembering the past, but rather an entire society.

Both academic discussions as well as popular culture have committed the revolutionary year of 1989 to a series of emblematic times and spaces, two of which have perhaps been most prominent: the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 and the (first) televised Romanian revolution in late December 1989. It is these particular times and spaces that later provided a most fertile ground for academic explorations as well as political campaigns that searched for ‘the truth’ of the revolution: ‘the truth’ was to be uncovered by rediscovering and replaying exactly what happened within these spaces and narrow timeframes—who was present and who was not, what were they doing at critical times during the uprising, what kind of evidence do they have to prove their claims.

The revolution thus emerged as: (1) a historical event that seemed clearly bounded by a specific spatial and temporal frame: in the case of Romania, the Timisoara main square and Opera House, the Bucharest main square, the Communist Party Headquarters and the Television Tower, during the period of 16–22 December; (2) an event that was captured, represented, investigated and remembered through the technology of film, the medium thus playing an essential role in how the revolution and memories of the revolution continue to be experienced; and (3) an exceptional turning point that was imbued with a series of high expectations about what the future would look like. Each of the three films addressed in this article seeks to challenge both the spatial and temporal assumptions about what constitutes the revolution, the role of the technology of film and images of the revolution as less of an ‘investigative’ tool, and more of a ‘recovery’ tool, and the expectations embedded in the moment of the revolution itself as a necessary turning point towards something better. They do so by presenting a view of history that is in many ways similar to Walter Benjamin’s reading of history. The remainder of this article will seek to present a parallel reading of these films and Walter Benjamin’s view of history in order to underline the films’ potentially radical impact on rethinking the Romanian revolution.

### **The revolution in time and space**

The idea of change often hinges on a series of clearly identifiable moments and spaces—whether revolutionary spaces, or spaces of dissidence—that become imbued with the promise of a hidden meaning to be later uncovered. This assumption lies at the basis of much of the studies on transitology, where ‘critical moments’ and ‘critical spaces’ emerge as key sites of examination. Part of this is perhaps a result of how research is conducted—one needs to begin somewhere and focus on something—but also, a result of the methodological constriction imposed by a rigid understanding of concepts such as ‘Communism’, ‘democracy/democratization’, ‘transition’ and ‘revolution’. Calls for widening the meaning of such concepts are certainly not new (see Wydra 2007), yet new methodological innovations to fit these more fluid understandings are few and far between. If Communism and democratization do not correspond to neatly divided temporal spaces (before and after the revolution) then how is one to address them without focusing on a set temporal and spatial arena?

Philosophical explorations of the experience of ‘shock’ (Pusca 2007), ‘rupture’ (Moore 2009) and ‘a breach in understanding’ (Bleiker 2006) offer a potential alternative by turning to psychology, literature and art in order to address change

more as a rhythmic back and forth that, while influenced by particular events, derives its driving force from a much wider field of life experience—whether it be a nonexalted, normalized ‘everyday’ or the unique excitement of literature and art. Yet, even such explorations continue to rely on the assumption of some kind of linear progression and division between the past, present and future, thus placing change, even this new ‘rhythmical’ change as I call it, in one of these three temporal (and spatial) domains. By doing so, they invariably limit not only the possibility of interpreting ‘past’ change but also the possibility of continuing to have an impact on it. One theorist, who has managed to break our philosophical dependency on the neat division of the past, present and future, has been Walter Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin’s reading of history is best reflected in his dialectical understanding of the relationship between the past, present and future. For Benjamin, the past acts, if one is to use a Heideggerian term, almost as a standing reserve for both the present and the future. The past, however, does not emerge as a linear progression of events that culminate into a present, but rather as an accumulation of images, acts and memories that can be called upon to justify and inspire particular actions within the present. Benjamin describes revolutionary moments—key moments to which revolutions are generally ascribed, such as the storming of the Communist Party building in Romania—as key invocations of particular images and memories of the past that are used to imagine and inspire a different future. Thus, for Benjamin, unlike most scholars of revolutions, revolutionary change is not a moment of culmination of a series of incremental changes, but rather a key moment of remembrance, a ‘full-moment’ (Lowy 2005, 95).

It is within these moments that history comes alive for Benjamin. When talking about the French revolution, he remarks both on its ability to draw from the past—in ‘view[ing] itself as Rome reincarnate’ (1968, 261)—but also on its ability to introduce a new way of living the present and looking at the future—through the introduction of the modern calendar which ‘presents history in time-lapse mode. . . basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays’ (261). The moment of the revolution thus is the ultimate ‘full moment’, ‘concentrate of historical totality’, ‘constellation linking the present and the past.’ (Lowy 2005, 95) As Lowy remarks, revolutions are in this case not the locomotive of word history, but rather quite the opposite, the emergency break, the moment of arrest, the moment of invocation of the past and reflection (66).

Just like revolutions emerge as invocations of the past, Lowy argues that the memory of the revolution is itself, in turn, also invoked ‘in a moment of supreme danger, [when] a saving constellation presents itself linking the present to the past’ (2005, 45). The memory of the revolution is thus also in itself a potentially revolutionary moment at a time of great danger in the present. It is within this context that the three films addressed here are read as critical to rescuing the 1989 revolutionary moment from its current negativity and, along with it, the spirit and image of an entire country. By restaging the moment of the 1989 revolution in a much more forgiving and familiar everyday context, the films manage to diffuse a series of unrealistic expectations about how the revolution came about, who were its main initiators and what the revolution was supposed to bring in terms of change.

Just like Benjamin, the films question the idea that historical time should necessarily follow a political time directed towards happiness—progress (Hamacher

2005, 38) or that revolutions should necessarily bring about only positive change. In the films, the restaging of the 1989 revolutionary moment is not meant to re-create a missed moment of opportunity that would explain the unfulfilled present, but rather quite the opposite: to represent an opportunity fulfilled to the best of people's abilities at the time. As such, the films clearly suggest that current invocations of 1989 should no longer appear as opportunities to somehow 'correct the miss, to do the undone, to regain the wasted and actualize the has-been-possible' (39). In this light, the Romanian obsession with recovering the 'truth' about the 1989 revolution—particularly through a recovery of the exact times, spaces, actors and acts of the revolution—appears as nothing but a futile attempt to correct something that perhaps was never really mistaken.

Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu each reject the possibility of locating the revolution in a clear and exact past. They suggest that the revolution is not bounded by a set timeframe and space, but rather by a much looser framework in which the prerevolutionary past and the postrevolutionary present come together. The present plays an essential role in their movies, for although exploring the topic of the revolution, each of their movies seems ultimately more concerned with the present, as the current moment of danger: their worry is the negative aura that surrounds the memory of the revolution, an aura that threatens to deny particular memories of the past and with them the possibility of being at ease in the present. By invoking the moment of the revolution and reaching back into the past in order to explore the source of this negativity Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu recover a series of everyday events that repaint the revolutionary past in a broader spatial and temporal timeframe, thus taking some of the pressure off the revolutionary moment as exceptional.

By suggesting that this 'exceptional' label has forced us to significantly narrow down the spatial and temporal terrain of our investigation of the revolutionary moment, they propose instead that we turn to a series of 'unremembered' personal pasts to understand the extent to which the revolution was imagined and experienced differently. These unremembered pasts, explored as slices of everyday life that depict moments before, during and after the revolution, are meant to introduce the present as the real moment of choice, the true 'revolutionary' moment. For the three directors, the present is once again catastrophe bound and it is only by invoking and rescuing the revolutionary past from its negativity, that the present can turn to a different future. In this sense, the revolutionary moment that these films deal with is perhaps not so much the moment of 1989, but rather an inhibited present that finds it easier to blame the 'transition' on the faults of 1989 than on itself.

The time and space of the revolution are challenged on at least two different terrains: (1) the terrain of the past, whereby the global imaginary of the revolution as attached to very specific times and places is undermined by a different imaginary that revives forgotten everyday spaces and moments; and (2) the terrain of the present, whereby the 'revolutionary' moment is reinterpreted to address a current moment of danger and the need for an interruption and reassessment 'now' as opposed to 'then'. Placing these two past and present revolutionary moments side by side, the films create an interesting constellation that places the burden of 'change' on the present as opposed to the past: the current moment of danger cannot be solved by attempting to discover 'the truth' about the 1989 revolution through a minute examination of exactly what



happened, when and where, in order to understand what went wrong at the 'original moment of change'. The 'derailment' did not occur at the 'origin', but rather throughout the transition and, as such, the present is at least equally responsible as the past. If, as Benjamin suggests, a revolutionary moment should not be understood merely as an uprising, but rather as a moment of pause and reassessment, then these films both beg for and seek to instigate a present revolution in themselves.

The frustration over the missed opportunities of December 1989 appears to have spilled over into an obsession with clearly identifying the source of change: who is responsible for the 1989 revolution? Who were the 'doers? The need to question the identity of the 'doer' has more often than not been read as a practical need to weed out the 'nondoers' who claim to be 'doers' and celebrate instead the *real* 'doers'. Perhaps the wider fear is the possibility that a majority of Romanians were in effect 'nondoers' and, as such, a historical disappointment that cannot really be restored or rewritten. The hatred of the 'nondoer' who claims to be a 'doer'—conveniently read mainly as the current political elite—has also, or so the films seem to suggest, turned into a hatred of oneself.

The trap of the 'doer' versus the 'nondoer' is set on the one hand by what constitutes 'doing' or 'notdoing' and, on the other, by attributing 'change' to a very specific set of actions. For Porumboiu, the 'doer' versus 'nondoer' dichotomy is explored on the one hand by whether one was out in the streets demonstrating on 22 December and, on the other, by whether they were out in the streets before 12:08 or after. For Muntean, the dichotomy was explored on the one hand by whether the soldiers had joined the popular demonstrations, thus disobeying state orders, or not and, on the other, by whether they had contributed to the critical defence of the television tower. For Mitulescu, the dichotomy was explored on the one hand by whether one had the nerve to oppose the Ceausescu regime before it fell and, on the other, by whether they would apologize or face the consequences when the opposition was discovered.

Unlike the established Institute for Totalitarian Studies, Institute of the Romanian Revolution, the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, or Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, all designed and funded by the Romanian state as investigative tools into the Communist past and the revolutionary moment, the films explore the 'doer'/'nondoer' dichotomy in a more flexible context, in which the 'nondoers' are also accepted as credible participants, and the 'doers' are questioned as the necessary origin of 'change'. For the three film directors, this is essential in order to recover a sense of identity that is not necessarily linked to December 1989, but rather what came before and after. For Porumboiu, the before and after are not necessarily so radically different, at least not in the case of his home town of Vaslui. In an interview with Andrei Cretulescu, Porumboiu explains why, in his film, the characters cannot find the answer to the question of whether there was a revolution in Vaslui or not:

[the answer] doesn't exist because I don't believe in history with capital H, just in personal/individual histories. Which is exactly what interested me in this film. After the revolution, the history books will only show two or three heroes, two or three villains, but never will it show the view from below where the grass grows... I rather think that there was no transition. (Porumboiu in Cretulescu 2007)



If there is anything that Porumboiu teaches us, it is that there is no ‘moment’ (singular) or ‘space’ (singular) of the 1989 revolution, but rather a multitude of moments and spaces; that the celebration of change need not necessarily be dependent on an ability to clearly anchor that change in a particular moment in time and space; and that the ultimate public/collective event of the revolution is also a very private and emotional one that continues to deeply affect the individual as well as collective sense of self-worth. It is perhaps precisely this present loss of self-worth that Porumboiu, as well as Muntean and Mitulescu seek to recover through a different invocation of the past.

### **The revolution and the technology of film**

Film has always closely accompanied both the events of the Romanian revolution, as well as how we remember and analyse the revolution. It was the technology of film and live television that made the revolution possible in the first place, but this same technology has been blamed for turning the moment of the revolution into an event forever suspect (Baudrillard 1994). It is then perhaps surprising that the attempt to rescue the memory of the revolution, and more importantly, what came before and after it, should also make use of the technology of film. This section of the article will try to examine the relationship between the technology of film and history in light of the ability of film to negotiate change, rescue and reveal historical memory, and bracket and frame unusual spaces and temporalities.

In his 1935 essay on ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, Walter Benjamin argued that ‘the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence’ (in Benjamin 1968, 222). As the ultimate modern form of human perception, the technology of film has accompanied and helped capture the transition towards a new mode of existence, one in which we have become distant, distracted and curious spectators to our own existence. Benjamin is particularly fascinated by the ability of film to guide us collectively into an unconscious—and perhaps now increasingly conscious—examination of ourselves. As he sees it:

a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man...The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin 1968, 237)

According to Benjamin, the camera’s ability to introduce new fields of vision and as such new views on familiar spaces, slow or speed up movement, allows us to experience both space and time differently from unmediated human perception. The camera captures history in the making, at its key moments of arrest when decisions are taken that change what Werner Hamacher calls the continuum of time and intentions (2005, 53). The camera and technology of film itself does not serve to decipher the events that it captures, but merely to reproduce them at a point in the future when the images captured attain a new legibility. The camera thus functions as an enhanced memory and consciousness through which the past and the future come together in the present. The film’s ability to capture both ‘reality’ as well as ‘restagings of that reality’ allows it to play with the meanings that historical moments have acquired, but also, perhaps more importantly, it

recreates important moments in the past that have been, for one reason or another, ignored or forgotten.

If, as Benjamin argues, history does decay into images, then the possibility of recreating historical images is an essential tool for recovering what was lost or denied in the memories of many. The restaging of the Romanian revolution through the three films discussed here forces a reassessment of past and the suspicion that surrounds it and, through it, a reassessment of the present. Perhaps what is most important about these restagings is their ability to reassess and redirect the origin of change away from the streets and main squares where demonstrators gathered, away from the television tower, and into people's living rooms. Change is in this sense celebrated less as an opportunity created by those out in the streets and more as an opportunity realized through a shift in perception. The films do not so much seek to rewrite the past, but perhaps to point out that the past does not have legibility at the time of its occurrence—and as such, seeking to reexamine it through the eyes of the past makes little sense—but rather only in the present or future. As Hamacher (2005, 52) explains:

[t]his turning to the past, which gives the past a belated direction, a turning that directs and judges the past, has though, a double meaning. First, the present, if it is one, does not make claims of the future, but is present along as that upon which the past makes demands: present is always present *out of* the past and present *for* the past. And second, the past not only has in this present its intentional object but its intention comes in it to a standstill: what-has been shines in the present, if it is one, and unites with the Now of its cognition.

The technology of film, through its ability to depict a particular past in front of a present audience, emerges as the ultimate tool for revealing or questioning the intentionality of past events. The three films present 1989 not as a moment of 'great' change, but rather as one of confused intentionality, in which the demands on the future attain a highly personal nature: from a desire to escape to the West, to a desire to share the enthusiasm of the demonstrating crowd and achieve a sense of self-worth. The films clearly suggest that the social and political significance of 1989 that was acquired during the event itself was for the most part sustained through a particular depiction of the moment but also through the presence of a global audience that located the event in a global context, for the most part foreign to Romanian audiences.

The three films try to imagine how this significance could be read differently by creating an imaginary recording of what the private, everyday environments must have been experiencing at the time. This imaginary recording seeks to counter-balance the excessive images filmed on the streets and in the Romanian Television tower during the revolution in order to, first, rebuild a sense of trust in the medium of film itself and, second, suggest a different reading of the intentionality of the revolutionary moment, one that perhaps would sit much less comfortably with the global imaginary at the time.

Whereas Baudrillard sees the excessiveness of the Romanian revolution—as a staged event and ultimate simulacrum—as inevitably leading to the 'demystification of the news and its guiding principle' (1994, 60), and through this, the possible demystification of the technology of film and other virtual technologies, the Romanian New Wave suggests quite the opposite: that this excessiveness has led to a love-hate relationship with the technology of TV and film, a relationship that

needs to be salvaged from directing the public in an increasingly gloomy addiction to a 'search for truth' that is doomed for failure. The solution for them is, however—perhaps not surprisingly for film directors who make a living by exploiting the technology of film—not a rejection of TV and film as simulacrum, but rather a celebration of TV and film as providing the cure for the problem they created in the first place.

This faith in the technology of film for the Romanian New Wave is, however, not based on the film's ability to capture and enframe any kind of ultimate truth, but rather, quite the opposite, the film's ability to capture a healthy diversity of experience that could restore a much needed sense of ease to a public that has concentrated so much of their collective angst on a very specific idea/image of the revolution as captured during the week of 16–24 December 1989. By diffusing this collective angst, the Romanian New Wave hopes to restore a new sense of collective optimism as well as perhaps a healthier relationship to the media of film. As one of the most 'wired' country in Europe when it comes to cable TV, the Romanian public needs to learn to trust this technology, not only to entertain it, but also to allow it to better negotiate change. By playing on humour, nostalgia and a more relaxed timeframe of events surrounding the Romanian revolution, the Romanian New Wave may be just the antidote that recovers the revolutionary moment from its current gloom and gives the collective a new sense of purpose.

### **The revolution between the 'exceptional' and the 'everyday'**

By locating the revolution in the realm of the everyday, Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu seek to dispel its exceptional status and, as such, the need for its exceptional treatment. The revolution, for them, was equally an individual affair as it was a public one, and, by focusing on these individual experiences, they could reveal a familiar environment to which the average individual could relate. By dispelling the idea that the revolution was an event that occurred purely in the public realm, the films help to not only legitimate a series of private experiences of the revolution, but also accord them equal significance, thus encouraging audiences to perform their own personal archaeology of how they experienced the revolution, without dismissing the familiar and nonexceptional experiences they had at the time as irrelevant.

This attempt to recover the everyday is a trend that has also gained significant ground in the social sciences. Inspired by earlier phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Levinas, Patocka and Schutz, as well as Marxists such as Lefebvre and Debord, the movement to rehabilitate the everyday has been thriving in contemporary French philosophy, through people such as Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Jean Luc-Nancy (Mihali 2007).

A student of Nancy, Ciprian Mihali seeks to apply this rediscovery of the 'everyday' to Communist and post-Communist Romania, by arguing, in many way along similar lines as Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu, for the importance of an 'archeology of communist daily life' in order to uncover the everyday as an essential realm of resistance, not just during Communism, but also during post-Communism:

everydayness was the place where communism has left the deepest traces also because it was the last refuge for the unprotected in his public, political or

professional life. And the fall of communism hasn't led to the disappearance of these traces but to their keeping as routines and inertia to protect individuals and communities from daily convulsions, or to show them off as open wounds whenever exhibiting them as weaknesses, insufficiencies or prejudices could bring the smallest profit by stirring up the westerners' compassion. (2007, 2)

Mihali is highly sceptical of the extent to which such an archaeology can be conducted by government appointed institutions, since they are almost entirely focused on condemnation and finding guilty parties. For him, a different archaeology of everydayness is needed, one that would focus on the continuities, and gaps, created post-1989, continuities and gaps that sustain to a large extent the social (in)stability of Romanian society today.

Mihali identifies sovereignty and precariousness as the two extremes under which 'everydayness' is suspended either through encroachment of the state or through encroachment of nature, and is quick to point out that our celebration of the postrevolutionary recovery of the everyday is perhaps premature, for:

if sovereignty and precariousness invest excessively today the life of millions it is because life itself is looking for everydayness with meaning and is constantly mobilized—by the illusion of sovereignty to be found again and the fear of precariousness to be avoided. (Mihali 2007, 4)

The postrevolutionary liberating potential of the everyday, for Mihali, is lost in the illusion of sovereignty as well as the continuation of precariousness. This is perhaps precisely the source of the postrevolutionary angst that Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu identify, although, unlike Mihali, they seem to believe in the authenticity of the prerevolutionary everyday, an authenticity that has perhaps been lost after the revolution, but can potentially be recovered through a restaging of both the revolutionary moment and what came before it.

Mihali seems much more sceptical of such a possibility as, for him, there is no authenticity to recover: instead, we merely see a continuation of oppression of the everyday in different forms, perhaps more dangerous ones for they are less visible. He gives the example of the crucial role that TV has been playing in the lives of Romanians since 1989, giving a false sense of refuge in an imaginary world of soap operas and celebrations of material good life, as well as the example of health-care 'reform' that has left an entire older generation begging for their right to continue to live by denying them access to easy health care and medicine. The recovery of the 'everyday' for Mihali does not lie in any kind of return to a previous, more nostalgic 'everyday' of the prerevolutionary or revolutionary period, but rather in an awakening to the realization that the 'exceptional' moment of 1989 was perhaps not quite so exceptional. In either case though, a return to the 'exceptional' moment of 1989 is required, for different purposes: if Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu seem convinced that the recovery of the 'authentic' and positive emotions that surrounded December 1989 at the time is crucial for instilling a new sense of positive thinking, Mihali believes that a return is perhaps warranted by the possibility of seeing essential and problematic continuities between Communism and post-Communism. In both instances, however, a restaging of the revolution seems key to uncovering both the revolutionary as well as the potentially oppressive character of the everyday. Film, both as a technology as well as a performance, is perhaps the best mechanism for allowing this restaging to occur.

## Conclusion

This article has looked at the role that the Romanian New Wave—through three of its main representatives: Porumboiu, Muntean and Mitulescu, and their movies on the Romanian revolution—has played in reinterpreting the revolutionary moment in order to ease the sense of collective angst and restore a much needed sense of collective optimism. By looking at how these three movies have stretched the spatial and temporal ‘bracketing’ of the Romanian revolution in order to diffuse the tension surrounding it, introduced elements of the ‘everyday’ in order to limit the ‘exceptional’ status of the revolution, and used the technology of film in order to offer a different interpretation of ‘realism’ as detached from a search for a single ‘truth’, the article has tried to argue for the potential of the New Wave to reset the contested nature of the Romanian collective relationship with ‘reality’ as mediated by the technology of film and TV.

Turning to the work of Walter Benjamin, the article has sought to offer a particularly reading of his writings on history, photography and film as a potential methodological alternative to current explorations of the concept of ‘change’. It argued that his dialectical reading of the past, present and future as well as his insights into the possibilities of the technology of film have, to a large extent, found an expression in the Romanian’s New Wave exploration of the subject of the Romanian Revolution. It is hoped that by reading these films through Walter Benjamin’s methodological framework, the article was able to offer a complimentary alternative to current debates within the so-called ‘cinematic IR’ and ‘the aesthetic turn’ in IR.

## Notes on contributor

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