On Media and Democratic Politics:
Videograms of a Revolution

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[In the same way in which it has been said that after Auschwitz it is impossible to
write and think as before, after Timisoara it will no longer be possible to watch
television in the same way.

Giorgio Agamben, Means Without End: Notes on Politics

Videograms of a Revolution (Videogramme einer Revolution), the 1992
film by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, details the five days in December of
1989 during which a popular uprising in Romania deposed and executed the
Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. The nascent revolt was first propelled
onto international television news by images of corpses reputed to be victims
of the army’s recent attack on anti-government protestors in the western town
of Timisoara. The bodies were laid out for display to the television cameras
and the images of the dead helped publicize the incident abroad. Although the
images were not seen on Romanian state television, reports of the massacre
spread the uprising through the capital of Bucharest and to other towns. It was
later disclosed that the bodies in the mass grave, although possibly victims of
state terror, had in fact been buried too long ago to be victims of the Timisoara
crackdown. On a larger scale, the fear and uncertainty surrounding the repres-
sive power of the fallen regime produced estimates of those killed in the upris-
ing that turned out to be grossly inflated. The confusion surrounding the rev-
olution, and the swiftness with which the army turned against the regime, led
many to suspect that the apparently spontaneous revolt had been a coup engi-
neered by dissident Communist generals and politicians. Although this inci-
dent and its international press coverage are only briefly cited in the opening
voice-over of the film, the questions it raises regarding the use and abuse of
images for politics, as well as the intersection of television, violence, and
democracy, all structure the terrain on which Videograms of a Revolution
unfolds.

Limited to the five days of the revolution that it explores in chronological
sequence, Videograms is constructed solely from recordings of Romanian
state television broadcasts and what was captured by nomadic video cameras
in and around the streets of Bucharest during that time. Long one-shot se-
quences from portable video cameras are inter-cut with images from state television archives, including both broadcast and off-air footage. Searching, unsteady cameras, distant or unclear subject matter, and technical difficulties are the rule. While the poor quality of the handheld camera footage attests both to the uncomposed actuality and occasional banality of the events, the general disregard for the codes and conventions of cinematography and television broadcast serves to highlight the sporadic efforts by television crews to reassert the professional norms of reportage.

The film turns on a spatial axis marked out by the state television station on one end and Central Committee headquarters, the government building that housed the Communist Party, on the other end. In staking out new political ground between the poles of media authority and political authority, the people of Bucharest occupy both their streets and their living rooms in a new way. While driving back security police still loyal to the regime and occasionally taking fire from unidentified snipers, the citizens of the capital quickly moved in to collectively occupy public space, asserting the previously illegal right to assembly. Many gathered in Palace Square outside Central Committee headquarters, the former site of state-sponsored pageants where just a day earlier, a disruption during an enforced pro-Ceaușescu rally had signaled the beginning of the revolt in Bucharest. As VideoGrams documents the TV broadcast van driving up to start filming the speeches, announcements, and debates being held on Ceaușescu’s former viewing balcony, the subtitles translate the call issued over the loudspeakers that is advocating a new enlightenment, truth, and transparency for the public sphere: ‘We ordered generators and spotlights. We shall turn the night into day in this square in a city which laid in darkness for so long’. However, when the filmmakers return us to the same scene a few hours later, the night is punctuated by gunfire and the flash of tracers, the spotlights chaotically scan the crowd and surrounding buildings for snipers, and soldiers fire into the darkness from a tank; as the speakers alternately call for the soldiers to stop firing as well as eliminate the remaining criminals, we learn that the promised illumination can bring with it unanticipated disruption, violence, and obscurity. The street, now populated with roving cameras, does not function solely as the space of political action, but plays host to new forms of popular visibility, manifestation and self-representation.

In the meantime, the televisions linking living rooms across the nation have also become part of the field of struggle. As families and friends gather around television sets to try to sort out what was happening, soldiers lay siege to the television station. After Ceaușescu had fled, students and workers quickly liberated the television station (see ill. 59 and 60). Far from a simply ‘reflective’ or ‘communicative’ medium, the interior of Studio 4 became an arena for on-screen takeovers, arrests; and decrees. In staging the revolutionary occupation
and armed defence of Studio 4, the new TV personalities were not so much reporting on outside events in the street as enacting, performatively declaring, a freed Romania.

The government officials, army generals, and dissidents who had gathered inside the Communist Party headquarters – to form new political parties, consolidate the interim government, and address the crowd gathered outside – quickly turned on television sets to watch the transmission of events in the studio and in the streets (see ill. 61). Inside, roving video cameras captured the deliberations going on within the Central Committee building. The democratic expansion of the political here unfolds with the horizontal interpenetration of the system of politics and the system of (tele-visual) representation.

In his analysis of media and politics in Romania during the uprising, Jean Baudrillard has written:

"[T]he moment that the studio became the focal point of the revolution [...] everybody ran to the studio to appear on the screen at any price or into the street to be caught by cameras sometimes filming each other. The whole street became the extension of the studio, that is, an extension of the non-place of the event or of the virtual place of the event. The street itself became a virtual space. How to manage this paradoxical situation? When all information comes from television, how can the thousands of television viewers be at the same time in front of the screen and in the places of action?"

Baudrillard goes on to oppose what he calls the 'liberation of the image' to 'human liberty'. Here, the penetration of tele-visual recording and broadcast into the event and its actors – the so-called death of the real at the hands of the virtual – entails for Baudrillard the destruction of both historical reference and an active, free, and conscious political subject. Behind this argument about 'the liberation of the image, its total mobility, its total disconnection and projection in the space of virtuality and simulation' (68) lies a traditional, Enlightenment model of the political subject. Political action, for Baudrillard, requires a free, unified, conscious agent who can know, control, and master the images that represent his or her place in the world. However, once the image of this subject exceeds his or her grasp, free to be transmitted and repeated across the globe, politics and responsibility become impossible. For Baudrillard, once the subject can no longer appropriate the images of his or her life, 'historical consciousness is struck down' (63).

As VIDEGRAMS replays the events of the Romanian revolution, the images do indeed become 'nodal points of uncertainty [and] undecidability' (63), oscillating between revolution and coup, faked and real, in and out of control. However, rather than pre-emptively decrying the 'confusion in real time of act and sign' (64), VIDEGRAMS offers no hasty conclusions; instead, it explores
what this confusion might mean for politics and publicity. Refusing to simply oppose the 'liberated image' to 'human liberty', the film investigates the relation between historical agency and the virtualisation of the event by asking how images might condition the extension of democratic demands. Specifically, the film poses questions regarding: one, the relation between the political actor and spectator, viewing and acting; two, the indeterminate nature of the democratic demand; and three, the historical event and its (tele-visual) representation.

**Witness**

The film begins with a direct address to the viewer. Wearing a cast that runs from her hand to her shoulder, a woman lets out short cries of pain as she is lowered onto a hospital bed. Although, as we soon learn, she is waiting for two bullets to be removed from her body, the pained expression on her face changes when she notices the video camera hovering by the bed. She confirms that the camera is rolling and concentrates on speaking through the pain (see ill. 62). She gives her name, Rodica Marcu, and describes how she was attacked by the secret police. A witness to political violence, she has survived to report on the state's repressive arresting, shooting, and torturing of demonstrators in her town of Timisoara. Continuing the protestors' demands for freedom, bread, and happiness, she has a message of solidarity for the rest of Romania: Remember the dead and continue the revolution!

First, a message, an address, a report from a democratic revolution returns from the past of a European communist nation-state and its imminent collapse. The double injunction to remember the fallen and to continue the revolt, nominally addressed to her fellow revolutionaries, has been rerouted to the viewers of the videotape. The addressee is undetermined, the receiver put into question, and the viewer's response remains equally unfixed. The electronic circuit of the woman's declaration posits both revolutionary and spectator at the place of the viewing subject.

The structure of this videogram clearly troubles any idealisations of revolutionary praxis as the re-appropriation of an alienated subjectivity unified in knowledge and action. Here, the conscious, acting revolutionary subject is caught on film, frozen, extended, blurred, and most of all split, cut through by artificial prostheses, mediated and linked to the rest of the collective by technics and telematics. If **Videograms** links something like the open possibility of democracy with the circulation of the tele-visual image, both seem tied to the expropriation of the subject, and a disruption in the continuity between
knowledge and action. Rather than Baudrillard's lament that the priority of images in constructing the subject 'out in the street' results in tele-visual indifference and apathy, VIDEGRAMS explores the difficulty of a subject that is neither clearly a passive spectator nor an active revolutionary. Challenging such a dichotomy, both the viewers of the film and those featured in it assume the position of witness, structured by an unmasterable force or image that precedes them and interrupts the verities of conscious knowledge. In this disruption of clear boundaries between self and other, image and event, the witness is called to a response or action that is never guaranteed.  

Shot through by death, turned to address the living, the woman in the video tells her story to the spectator, perhaps transmitting the reality of the trauma and igniting a revolutionary spark. But the fact that both the 'actors' and viewers of the video are positioned as witnesses does not place them at a symmetrical level of exchange and recognition. Because this image from the past carries with it an uncrossable temporal lag that separates it from our present, any response the viewer offers to this image will come too late; no matter how many times the image is replayed, the viewer and the survivor do not see eye to eye.  

Even as it attempts to bridge this gulf, VIDEGRAMS builds this temporal break into its formal structure. This scene of testimony is the first thing the viewer sees, preceding the title and the credits that mark out the body of the film proper. Similarly, after the credits for each camera and footage source have rolled by at the end of the film, an unexpected scene of direct address to the viewer appears: this time, a man is speaking, surrounded by other citizens, workers, or friends. Looking at the camera, he describes the repressive conditions of the regime, the economic hardships, all the money stolen from the people, the ethnic and social divisions fostered by the government, and begins to cry as he speaks of the relatives and children from so many different families who have died. Before concluding, he asks that people 'never forget to support each other because that's what life demands of us'. By placing these two scenes of witness at the margins of the film, outside the narrative arc of 'historical events', Farocki and Ujica demonstrate to what extent this testimony inhabits another time, irreducible to the linear unfolding of historicism.

Past Images

Secondly, the time lapse that opens up between the enunciation and its reception gives the message the appearance of anachronism: what claims could this message stake on the present? What could the call for democratic revolution
in the twilight of a Stalinist regime have to do with politics in the age of globalisation?

One might respond by stating that since democracy has been fully instituted and realised here, in the US, Europe, and the ‘West’, since the age of globalisation bears no historical similarity to crumbling Cold War Romania, the message is anachronistic in the sense of pure distance, non-relation, total and forgotten past: that woman cannot possibly be talking to us.

But the image remains. Lingering, it persists in addressing each new viewer, soliciting anyone who chances across it; we rest unsure about who it is she’s talking to. The structural anonymity of the viewer of this videotaped message as well as the indefinite nature of the speaker’s demands – bread, freedom, happiness – exceed her specific historical past. As Claude Lefort has theorised, the democratic invention is a symbolic mutation in the political order whose force derives precisely from its indeterminacy, the uncertain and contestable character of the foundation and institution of the social. Etienne Balibar has similarly argued that the democratic equation of equality and liberty in the rights of man and citizen enacts an indeterminacy or ‘hyperbolic universality’ that exceeds its particular referent: the practical meaning or effects of the demand for freedom or happiness are never fully instituted at a historical moment, whether past or present.

No longer wholly distant from the past invoked by this image, the present suffers its uneasy persistence, its recurrence, its anachronism. Returning from the past to disturb the proper boundaries of the present and its politics, the witness’s address carries an injunction that divides the receiver between the past and the future, between remembering the dead and continuing the democratic revolution. This message from the past does not simply arrive at the present, but arrives to divide the present, dislocating the current, actual, or proper forms of democracy, whether limited to electoral representation or the unchecked expansion of neoliberal markets. Along with a certain debt to the past and the dead, this videogram’s heterogeneous temporal structure invokes a democracy of the future, a democracy to come that disturbs what we think we know to be the present.

‘Video-gram’

Thirdly, this introductory scene plays out the structure of the videogram for the viewer, as well as the way this structure conditions historical events. Etymologically linking image and writing, the presentation of the image as a ‘videogram’ asks the viewer to remain attentive to both the visual specificity of
the moving image and the importance of its ‘textual’, discursive, or institutional frame. Seen as a mark or a trace, the videogram possesses its own singular qualities that are nevertheless inscribed in broader systems of production and circulation; the image appears only when mobilised across a network of historical references, visual and non-visual alike, which condition and partially govern it.

While the plural ‘videograms’ in the title relates to the inscription of the image in this historical field, the word also invokes the transmission of images, as in the sending of telegrams. By suggesting that all images bear an address, the videogram calls attention to the function of interpellation in the image. The videogram we receive is not simply an inert historical record of past events and circumstances, but also serves to solicit viewers to look, to identify, to act in the present and future. Addressed to an unseen other, the videogram aims to hail a viewer; although the significance of the image is not given in advance, it nevertheless confronts the viewer with questions of response and responsibility.

The circulation of this message and the questions it poses are possible only through the technical apparatus of video recording, storing, reproduction, and transmission that, in capturing sound and image, cuts them off from their speaker. As Derrida has emphasised, the errancy of this message does not merely befall it later, after the message has been spoken or delivered. Instead, the camera inhabits the very act of enunciation with a rupture, a spacing that breaks the image into the successive, pixellated scan lines of electronically coded light; it is not only a question about what effects the arrival of these videograms offer us today, but how this tele-technology of spacing, delay, and reproduction determined, divided, or conditioned the historical event or utterance. This could be rephrased by asking what it means not only for politics to happen on TV, but also what it means for politics to happen for TV.

If the function of television is to move images (or vision) through space, in a potentially endless transmission, video recording, as opposed to television, performs a temporal function that holds back, delays, captures, and stores the image in its decomposed form. The video recorder not only provides for the fragmentation, storing, and repetition of the apparently irreversible temporal flow of ‘live’ TV, but the portable video camera also extends and diffuses this recording function beyond the television studio (previously only possible with film). The emphasis on the ‘videogram’ draws on both of these qualities to consider images at the level of discrete message, enunciation, or interpellation, before they are fully saturated and managed by the 24/7 multi-channel flow of television under late capitalism.

At the same time, Farocki and Ujica deftly cut between the street and the living room, the political conference and the television studio, further explor-
ing the temporality of the event and its transmission through the spaces of the image’s broadcast and reception (see ill. 63 and 64 show a pan from Ceaușescu on television to the crowd in the street, connecting the space of the image to the place of its reception and to the locus of action).¹³ The film qualifies the apparent neutrality and homogeneity of the endless, one-way television transmission by contrasting it with the many specific and situated television sets on which it is received. By frequently grounding the televised image in its different sites of reception, *Videograms* does not only outline the limits of the image, what is excluded or marked off by the edges of the TV set. It also links the broadcast image to other spaces and contexts, showing how the broadcast is never a single present instant, but always appropriated by and inserted into other visual economies; *Videograms* often shows how the look pushes back against the screen of the TV set, focusing on viewers scrutinising the image or cameras pointed at the television, appropriating the broadcast for new ends. While this attention to the ‘spacing’ of video in broadcast troubles any unitary meaning that would be carried by the videogram, it also disrupts the ideology of so-called ‘live’ transmission that requires the simulation of a unified, instantaneous visibility that signifies cognitive availability, symmetry, and equal exchange.¹⁴

**Old News**

In addition to exposing the transmission to the different sites of reception that relate, rework, or relay it, *Videograms* submits the immediacy of video to other trials, sometimes repeating the same event from multiple points of view and often replaying a shot with a new narration or analysis. By showing what is discarded or cut out of the finished product, the viewer peeks in on the means of image production. In one section, we see four different versions of an American journalist trying to deliver his sound bite to the camera with just the right amount of ambient gunfire, all the while looking nervously over his shoulder between takes. This comparison not only suspends the perceptive immediacy of transmission, but undermines the knowing confidence and authority of the newsman by looking closely at how the ‘live’ news is planned, programmed, and produced for certain effects.

Keeping the larger context of the global tele-visual market in mind, this film is ‘yesterday’s news’ in two ways. First, in a literal sense, the film is composed of the raw material that goes into the production of television news. Under the profit structure of tele-visual flow, the news must continuously manufacture urgency in order to generate the experience of the ‘live’ broadcast and stimu-
late consumer desire. The waste product of this fantasmagoric co-presence is the disposable daily transmission itself. Farocki and his collaborator Ujica were able to compile the huge amount of footage in the film only because it was no longer useful for international news outlets like CNN. Videograms uses the storage capabilities of the video archive to haunt the mechanized instantaneousness of transmission, performing a historical lag in the broadcast that stages the return of the discarded past, critically disturbing the forgettable self-sufficiency of ‘live’ television and the version of history it promotes.

Thus the events of the film are also ‘yesterday’s news’ according to a neoliberal historicism that, whether or not it proclaims the events of 1989 as the ‘triumph of capitalism’, still uses ‘the present’ to justify the restriction of the democratic imaginary to its Western electoral form, and to underscore the ‘inevitability’ of corporate globalisation and the privatisation and ‘self-regulation’ of markets. By confining itself to footage filmed within the five-day chronology of the revolution, Videograms refuses the confirming perspective granted to the historian by hindsight, instead returning to history in order to think it as an event, open to uncertainty, change, possibility. This investigation of the tele-visual event works to register the performative force of the revolutionary declaration or what Walter Benjamin called ‘messianic time’. Derrida describes the messianic appeal as ‘that irreducible moment of the historical opening of the future [that] is always revolutionary’.

At the same time, in order to keep the future open, the messianic never fully arrives, but hesitates. By exploring how the event gets photographed, frozen, cut up, and apportioned, Videograms asks how the image can affect media spectators with the force of revolutionary time.

The film puts itself in a critical relation not only to television but also to the history of documentary film, especially the appropriation of cinéma vérité and direct cinema for broadcast journalism. What Videograms does not do is oppose the ‘truth’ of the mobile, nonprofessional street videographer to the mystifications of mass media. The proliferation of handheld cameras throughout the course of the film does work to subvert the attempts to control television through centralised transmission. However, since the film’s limited time frame does not show us the effects of the revolution, it does not assert, but rather asks if the decentralisation of media technology is equal to its democratisation. Nor does this automatically favour the portable camera with greater veracity. While the cameras in the studio are limited by location, and a centralised transmission allows for greater programming and control, the image-gathering power of the cameras in the street is compromised by chance and bodily danger.

What is more, the material from which the film is composed is limited to the camera movements of those who have gone before, the documentarian’s
willed omniscience is limited and broken; the lopsided, out-of-focus action in the corner of the frame remains in continual tension with the eye of the spectator that seeks to unite looking with knowing. Left to deal only with the available, incomplete images, documentary is treated as found footage. What emerges is something like a model of historical knowledge premised on the fact and the limit of the camera already being there to structure the event. Not only do images have their own historical force and legacy, but history itself becomes bound up in how we read it through images, with all the limits, blindness, and risk of abuse and falsification this entails.  

The Screen: Between Insurrection and Constitution

just as the revolutionary subject is partially constituted through his or her spectatorship, so the excessive moment of revolutionary politics that VIDEORAMS captures only occurs in and against the remaining institutional order of the state, pre-existing power structures, and emerging efforts to construct a new constitutional politics. As Etienne Balibar has theorised, the instability engendered by the democratic declaration of the identity of man and citizen, in the rights of man and the rights of citizen, results in the oscillation between what he calls insurrectionary and constitutional politics, between permanent, uninterrupted revolution and the state as institutional order. The co-presence of these incommensurable forms of politics is evident in VIDEORAMS. This is most obvious in the behind-the-scenes footage of army generals and communist party members directing troops, organizing supplies, and forming new political parties. Here, the revolutionary faction is wholly contaminated by members of the ruling government who seek to establish their legitimacy with the people, often by way of visibility on television. Since democracy only functions because its outcome is not predetermined, the extension of equality and liberty under these compromised conditions becomes a question of hegemony. If these videograms transmit images of a revolutionary democratic imaginary, they also make it clear that the practical extension of this imaginary only comes at the cost of political struggle on unsure representational terrain.

VIDEORAMS, then, investigates the tele-visual image as a condition of politics. My thesis is that the radical intervention of the film occurs in the overlay of the citationality of the tele-visual image with the groundlessness of democratic politics. The ‘citationality of the tele-visual image’ simply means its ability to be cut up, reproduced, reassembled, and recontextualised in transmission. With ‘groundlessness of democratic politics’, I follow Lefort in maintaining that ‘democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the
markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and to the basis of relations between self and other." With democracy, power resides within the people rather than being concentrated in the dictator or single-party apparatus. At the same time, the identity of ‘the people’ must always remain a question; maintaining the indeterminacy and open-endedness of democracy prohibits one group from laying claim to society or ‘the people’ as an integral whole to the exclusion of all others. The legitimisation of social antagonism renders society opaque to itself.

Let us be clear about what the (potentially global) circulation of the televisual image means: it does not signal the transparent, communicative intimacy of the global village or the world without borders. Nor does it realise transnational capital’s disembodied ideal of the unhindered, instantaneous circulation of currency, images, or commodities; there is no transport that is not transformation. The possibility that tele-visual images circulate cannot be separated from the institutional circuits that legislate and regulate, edit, select, frame, and distribute those images. VIDEGRAMS demonstrates how the analysis of media must be central to the practice of radical democracy: the successful exercise of democratic rights requires not only drawing on the rhetoric of political theory, but also accounting for what makes a sensible image. This includes codes of representability, entry conditions into the media, access to technological resources, cultural translation, and the limits of the visible.

Similarly, as democratic questioning shakes existing, crystallised social relations, it is accompanied by attempts to stabilise this indeterminacy, whether through the founding of democratic social institutions or otherwise. The economic hardships suffered by the people of Romania after 1989, as well as the violent nationalisms that returned to persecute many Romanian ethnic minorities, point out how the revolution faltered on both the issue of building new social institutions and reforming the nation state. Not only was the new regime that promised to bring order and rule of law to Romania less democratically inclined than it had claimed, it was populated by ex-Communist politicians, secret police officers, and army generals who had manipulated the events to gain legitimacy as ‘democratic leaders’. These image circuits entail static, interference, errancy, and opacity that not only plagues, but constitutes the intelligibility of the social; the response to this unreadability is not necessarily progressive, and the advancement of a radically democratic politics is by no means guaranteed.

Baudrillard formulates the risk in this global circulation of images by asking, ‘Why would the image, once liberated, not have the right to be false?’ Rather than apathy or indifference, the voice-over and editing strategy of VIDEGRAMS, like the rest of Farocki’s oeuvre, shows how the ethico-political
response to this risk requires a practice of critical reading that does not determine the fate of the image in advance. This responsibility would attend both to the production, framing, and reception of the image in a circuit of political calculation, as well as to its singularity, its strange unsubstantial materiality, and its otherness.

**Direct Transmission**

Like the film’s first scene of testimony, the events in Bucharest on December 21, 1989, also begin with a direct address to the camera (see ill. 65). This time, the dictator Ceaușescu is making a live, televised speech to a massive state-organised rally a few days after the repression of protests in Timisoara. In the middle of a sentence, he worriedly looks toward a disturbance out of frame (see ill. 66). As shouts are heard, the camera shakes and static tears through the image just before the television cuts to a blank red screen with the title ‘direct transmission’ (see ill. 67).

The closed circuit of power that would connect Ceaușescu to his audience in an unmediated fashion has been interrupted and the transparent representation of the nation in his figure has been replaced with an opaque obstacle. In one sense, the blank screen indexes how the identity of people not defined in relation to the totalitarian state, that is, in popular resistance to the government, can appear only as the limit of intelligibility for that apparatus. In another sense, this paradoxical image, both visual interruption (the blank screen) and the assertion of continued live transmission (the title), tells us something about the structure of television.

In fact, this technical difficulty could be seen as pushing the latent contradictions of television to their extreme. According to Mary Ann Doane’s account of the temporal structure of television, this image combines the two apparently incompatible temporal modes – flow and discontinuity – on which television operates. For Doane, ‘catastrophe’ is the unexpected interruption that television’s realism of temporal continuity cannot assimilate, at least not immediately. Rather than the regulated, modulated punctuality of news flashes and ads for the newest, hottest commodity, catastrophe on television inflicts a traumatic shock resistant to the ideology of liveness, of which the loss of signal is the most disastrous. In the pre-programmed and minutely calculated flow of television, only when the signal is unexpectedly broken, lost, or terminated can it really be immediate, instantaneous, truly ‘live’ or ‘direct’. The condition that guarantees television’s referential connection to events is in fact its failure to broadcast at all. Doane sees the coverage of catastrophe in the
Illustration 59: VIDEOGRAMME EINER REVOLUTION

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Illustration 63: VIDEOGRAMME EINER REVOLUTION

Illustration 64: VIDEOGRAMME EINER REVOLUTION
profit-driven corporate media of the West as a mechanism for television's internal justification and self-legitimisation: first, information is only valuable when it is threatened with impending destruction or obsolescence; second, television's calculated flow is 'proven' to be indexically tied to events in the world, shoring up its authority in the interpretation of events. However, rather than fragmented consumerism, the poverty of censored television broadcasts during the totalitarian regime in Romania saturates this catastrophe with the political context of control and resistance. In a desperate attempt to hold onto power, the regime tries to censor its own loss of control.

As the technological catastrophe stages the limits of television, the blank screen also registers the moment at which the Ceaușescu regime began to topple, driven by the nascent revolt to efface its own image. When Ceaușescu's visage returned to the television screen after the shouts and movement of the crowd that had interrupted his speech had died down, the repetition of his image also involved an alteration in its significance. No longer the enforced visibility of the legitimate ruler, it became the image of a weakened, insufferable tyrant, its broadcast energizing the popular revolt in Bucharest. The moment his image becomes ungovernable, when the totalitarian image is exposed to errancy, interruption, and re-signification, is also the moment at which the disruptive vision of democratic society emerges as the loss of the single position of power that dominates society from the outside. To maintain democratic questioning would mean keeping the 'people' and their institution in society open, subject to the unsettling circulation of images beyond their context and intended function. At this moment, the direct transmission of the will of the people can never be transparent or totally fixed. The locus of power becomes, as Lefort says, the image of an empty place, here flickering across television.

Acknowledgement: Thanks are due to Benjamin Buchloh, Ron Clark, Rosalyn Deutsche, Tom Keenan, Yates McKee, and my colleagues at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program for their input and support.

Notes

1. First picked up by East German and Yugoslav news agencies, the figure of 4500 dead in the Timisoara massacre, buoyed by images of bodies being exhumed from a gravesite, was later amended by Romanian doctors and international aid workers to a few hundred. Of the two dozen bodies uncovered in the pauper's cemetery in Timisoara, some appeared to have died of natural causes, while others had been bound with wire or bore the marks of torture, perhaps dumped there by the secret police before the uprising (Mary Battiata, 'Death Toll Doubts Raised in Romania',
Washington Post, 28 December 1989, final ed., A1+). At the peak of the revolution, Romanian television was reporting 80,000 dead; while the new government insisted that 60,000 had perished, hospital workers and international sources later estimated numbers in the low thousands (Amit Roy, ‘Death Toll Put Under 10,000 Romania’, Times [London], 31 December 1989). Despite the ‘faked’ or ‘fraudulent’ character of the images and the casualty estimates, we might ask how they bear witness to both the real and imagined terror instilled by the Ceauşescu regime. As Videograms makes clear, these numbers attest, in a different way, to the amplified paranoia and sense of loss that accompanied the fall of the regime; the hunt for missing bodies and disappeared relatives continued after the uprising. Contrary to Marx, these revolutionaries were not content to let the dead bury the dead. For a reading that claims ‘Marx knew very well that the dead never buried anyone’, see Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 114, pp. 174-175.


3. ‘Film mixes fiction and reality in a projective form, while television abolishes all distinctions and leaves no place for anything other than a screenlike perception in which the image refers only to itself [...] it raises the problem of the image’s indifference to the world and thus that of our virtual indifference to both the world and image [...] [Television images] are virtual, and virtuality puts an end to both positivity and negativity and thus to all historical references’ (Baudrillard, p. 62). ‘[W]hen TV becomes the strategic space of the event, it becomes unconditional self-reference’ (63). And later, ‘The Gulf War only reinforced this feeling of having been dragged so far into simulation that the question of truth and reality can no longer even be asked, so far into the liberation of the image that the question of freedom can no longer be posed [...] Television teaches us indifference, distance, radical skepticism, unconditional apathy’ (70).


5. Shoshana Felman writes that ‘the task of testimony is to impart [...] a firsthand knowledge of a historical passage through death, and of the way life will forever be inhabited by that passage and by that death’ in such a way that this history and its passage touches, concerns, contaminates all who hear it (Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History [London: Routledge, 1992], p. 111). In a different context, Derrida relates this experience of death to the image and the archive when he writes that ‘the living present is itself divided. From now on, it bears death within itself and reinscribes in its own immediacy what ought as it were to survive it. It divides itself, in its life, between its life and its afterlife, without which there would be no image, no recording. There would be no archive without this dehiscence, without this divisibility of the living present, which bears its specter within itself. Specter, which is also to say, phantasma, ghost [revenant] or possible image of the image’ (Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, Echographies of Television, trans. Jennifer Bajorek [Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002], p. 51).
6. ‘The wholly other – and the dead person is the wholly other – watches me, concerns me, and concerns or watches me while addressing to me, without however answering to me, a prayer or an injunction, an infinite demand, which becomes the law for me: it concerns me, it regards me, it addresses itself only to me at the same time that it exceeds me infinitely and universally, without my being able to exchange a glance with him or with her’ (Derrida, *Echographies*, pp. 120-121).

7. Recalling Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, Cathy Caruth writes that there is ‘an inherent latency within the experience [of trauma] itself’ so that ‘the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time’. This split within immediate experience, ‘the fundamental dislocation implied by all traumatic experience [...] is both its testimony to the event and to the impossibility of its direct access’ (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996], pp. 8-9).


10. For Derrida, anachrony invokes ‘what must (without debt and without duty) be rendered to the singularity of the other, to his or her absolute precedence or to his or her absolute previousness, to the heterogeneity of a pre-, which, to be sure, means what comes before me, before any present, thus before any past present, but also what, for that very reason, comes from the future or as future as the very coming of the event’ (*Specters*, p. 28). This division or disjuncture in the present is the possibility of justice, which is not without its risks; later, he states, ‘anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary’ because it ‘calls upon death to invent the quick and enliven the new, to summon the presence of what is not yet there’ (p. 109).

11. See Derrida, ‘Signature, Event, Context’, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 8-9. *Videograms* catalogues a long list of technical difficulties that structure the development of the revolution. Beginning with a camera too far from the event to be very informative, the film focuses on the interruption of Ceauşescu’s televised speech (the voiceover notes that Ceauşescu responds by shouting ‘allo, allo’ into the microphone ‘as if there were noise on the line’), a minister repeating the government’s resignation to the crowd because the television cameras were not turned on the first time, televised speeches from the Central Committee balcony cut short or shot through with static, as well as an entire section called ‘attempted broadcasts’.


14. Deborah Esch writes, ‘Often the illusion of instantaneity is motivated by a vested interest in erasing from the image the multiple, heterogeneous times that went into its production, positioning, and eventual reception. But these constitutive distances, or differences, cannot be represented in the photograph; rather, the passing of time, and the time of its own passing (as image of the past) can only be figured there. Thus we are called upon to search the image for precisely what it occults: the differential times that characterize the medium’s structure and effects’ (In the Event: Reading Journalism, Reading Theory [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999], p. 2).

15. Specters, pp. 167-168. For an account of the way that the temporal lag in the return of the past also involves a singular urgency in the ‘here-now’, see Spectres, pp. 30-31

16. As the camera pans across a room packed with people watching a television, some pointing their own cameras at the screen to record the announcement of the capture, trial, and execution of the Ceauşescus, the voice-over in Videograms observes, ‘Camera and event: since its invention, film has seemed destined to make history visible. It has been able to portray the past and stage the present. We have seen Napoleon on horseback and Lenin on the train. Film was possible because there was history. Almost imperceptibly, like moving forward on a Moebius strip, the side was flipped. We look on and have to think: if film is possible, then history too is possible’.

19. Baudrillard, p. 68. Earlier, he observed, ‘Absolving the real event and substituting a double, a ghost event, an artificial prosthesis, like the artificial corpses of Timisoara, testifies to an acute awareness of the image function, of the blackmail function, of the speculation, of the deterrence function of information’ (Baudrillard, p. 65).

20. But can the punctual discontinuity of catastrophe continue to hold out the promise of the opening of a democracy to come? While we may witness the temporary loss of control or the breakdown of the ideology of immediate referential authority from broadcast news, what would an extensive democratization of (televisual) media and technology look like?