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Nous Sommes Toujours Avec/ We Are Always With (2014):
Provisional Title for a Study Film

Yesterday, I screened a study film. In a tent, at Open City Docs festival.

It was a work with archival images, gathered from Youtube footage. The event: the 13-15

June, 1990 protests in Romania, known as the Mineriad.

This was an experiment of working with images. It was an attempt of doing research using

images, through images, and together with images.

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- end of credits -

Image, Media, Event

Violence was present in media images following the events of the revolution, and in the streets, especially in the 1990s protests against president Ion Iliescu and his newly formed

political party, the National Salvation Front, which was then in power. In these protests, of which the 13-15 June events were the second in the series, international media focused again on Romania as a site of intriguing violence: against the protesters in the University square, Ion Iliescu had called the police, the usual intervention with force. When that failed, he called in the army. But what made Romania the focus of international media once more was not just these violent clashes between police or army, and the demonstrators, but Iliescu's call, in June 1990, of the workers in the coal mines of Jiu valley, to 'reinstate' order in a city that had been, according to him, "overtaken by obscure, fascist forces" whose goal was undermining the democratic system brought about by the revolution.

The miners arrived in the capital on the 14th of June 1990. When they got to University square, the occupation tents of the previous night had been cleared by the police, so the miners violently assaulted at random, persons they came across, including women or children. They also broke into and devastated the headquarters of the political parties of the opposition, some of the University's buildings, and the Architecture school next to the central square of Universitate. Professors and students fell victims to their wooden bats. The pretext was they were looking for weapons, foreign currency, incriminating evidence that would prove the antidemocratic nature of the participants in the protests. The miners posed with foreign banknotes, typewriters, and weapons allegedly found on these sites, in front of filming cameras, and planted rows of colourful flowers in the central square. Then, they all left, but not before being delivered a thank-you speech by president Ion Iliescu. These are the image co-ordinates and the imaginaries shared about the events. Yet, both their incredibly violent and highly confusing and confused nature is evident in the moving images taken by independent camera persons, or gathered from local and international news reels.

At the same time, during these events, President Iliescu and Prime Minister Petre Roman - two familiar figures from the images of the revolution - were regularly coming on air on the national television station, making statements about the need to ensure and protect democracy under the threat of these 'fascist' forces.

Throughout, the supposedly freed and now democratic national television remained shockingly silent about what was going on in the streets, and this determined an attempt by the protesters at occupying it. However, this time it proved less attainable than it had

during the revolution, and the demonstrators were quickly pushed away.

Note on editing: the types of images used – Youtube footage from people filming with their video cameras, and media footage of the speeches given by Iliescu and Roman.

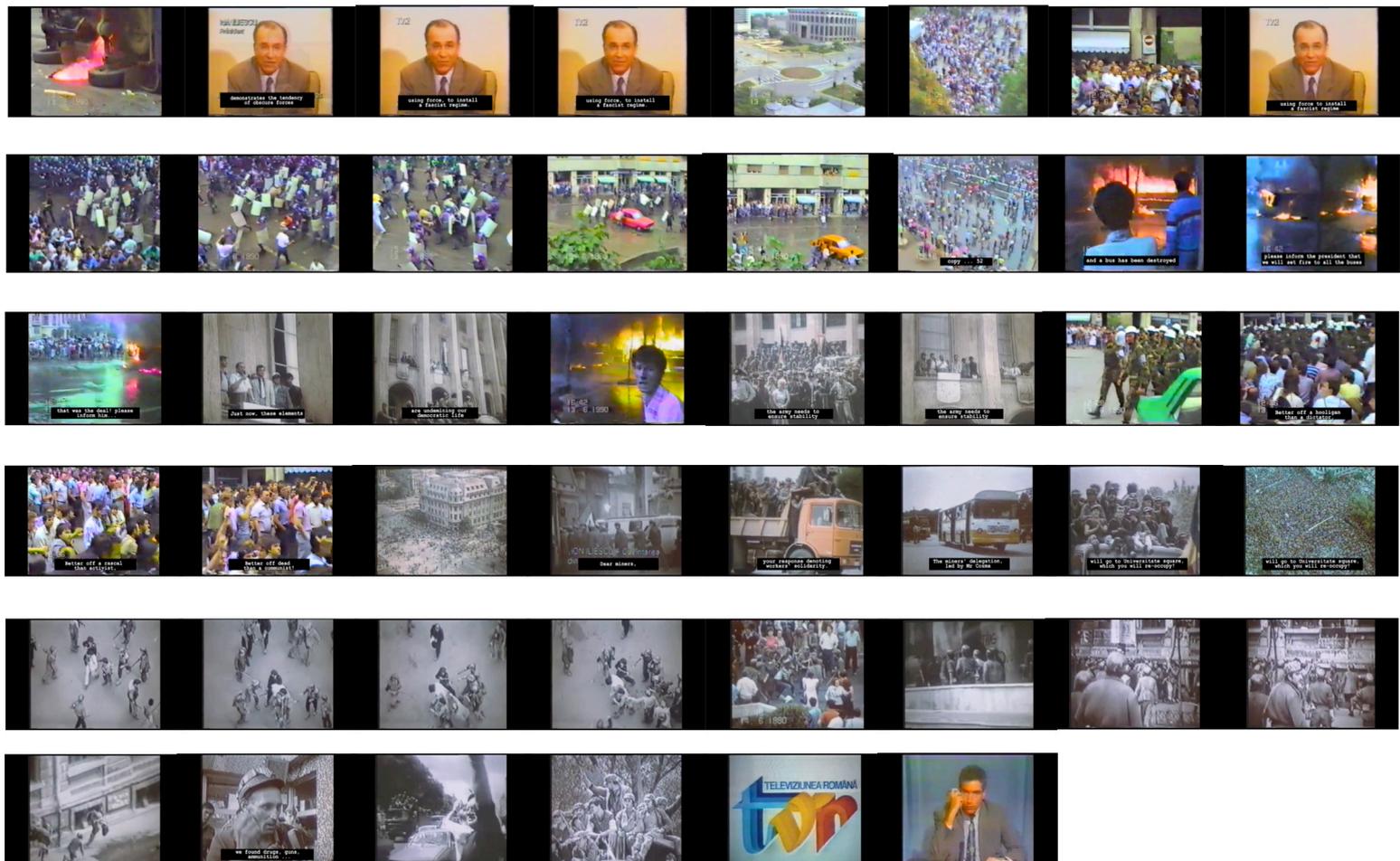
(2'28") Study-film voiceover on image of burning truck, repeated, slowed down:

“The video images are poor. But vibrant. The colours are piercing the screen.

Red, Yellow, Blue. Coincidentally, the colours of the Romanian flag.

Soon, the images will fade into hues of greys, the square, the people, their faces.

The faces of those attacking them.”



Still frames of *Nous Sommes Toujours Avec* (2014), Mihaela Brebenel

(5'23") Voiceover, black and white images of beatings:

“Students. Miners. Workers and students. The word ‘solidarity’ is used.”

“Whenever we are before the image, we are before time.
(...) we are before the image as *before the law*: as before an open doorway.”

(Georges Didi-Huberman, 2003)¹

The Possibility of Protest

All these events unfolded in an obscene display of brute force but more than this, they resembled, in uncanny form, an imagination of the totalitarian displays of power common to the previous regime. In addition, they aimed at producing a sense of confusion that led, in the longer run, to a distrust in militancy and protest, often associated with a distrust in leftist politics altogether. To president Iliescu calling the protesters 'rascals', the groups responded with a line from a song written for the occasion by Critian Pațurcă, the *Hymn of the Rascal*, its lyrics quite tellingly sounding as follows: “Better off a rascal, than an activist/ Better off dead, than a communist.” Moreover, with the majority of the protesters being students or more broadly, pertaining to the educated, intellectual population of the city, this violent response from the new, supposedly democratic government only offered the background and support for the rise of an elitist approach, that of “resistance through culture.” This formulation was rooted in a mistrust in leftist politics, and a denunciation of direct activist and collective forms of organisation. As Joanne Richardson expresses in her *Memoirs of a video activist*, this scepticism was “partly due to disinformation campaigns before 1989 that assured the ‘left’ would be understood simply as the *de facto* power of the communist apparatus”² but was also “influenced by a new mystification about “postcommunism” by those who came to power.”³

Alongside these mystifications, there was a process of normalization, which can be understood both as normalization of a strong rejection of communism (“better off a rascal, than an activist/ Better off dead than a communist!”) and a pathological desire for normalization into neoliberal time and space. Bogdan Ghiu considers that “the obscenity kept on haunting the media imaginary, but only in forms that were benign, correct and accepted, politically inoffensive and economically profitable.”⁴ The obscenity refers not just to the violent quality of images broadcasted, but specifically to processes of extension and

normalization of the state of exception that had been broadcast live during the revolution. A state of confusion emerged in the revolution and was prolonged in the years that followed. In it, violence was legitimized and also proved to be, first politically, then economically, profitable.

Slowing down the image

One work with movement and images made around the events of the 1990 Mineriad is a performance-action by Dan Perjovschi called *Monument (History/Hysteria 2)* (2007), which had performers sitting in the Universitate square, one performing a student or protester, and the other a miner, standing still, sometimes facing each other, at other times, back to back. About this work, curator and writer Raluca Voinea considers that it “was an anti-monument which, instead of delivering a definitive statement, called attention to the biased position from which most accounts of the troubled postcommunist history of Romania have been given. The work was thus an appeal against judging based on selective memory.”⁵



Documentation photographs of *Monument (History/Hysteria 2)* (2007), Dan Perjovschi, courtesy of the artist

In a similar vein, I was not interested in 'what happened,' but in composing through temporalities in the event, and the formation of relations between event and image, as both document, and monument. Also, in the capacity of the image to be or become anti-document or to compose, through montage, an anti-monument of the event. In a larger sense, a reflection on the relations between aesthetics and politics, and the possibilities of moving images to decolonize imaginaries of and around the event, as well as of and around the time that followed.

In his piece, Dan Perjovschi did not fix any meaning to the event, he just slowed down the remembered or imagined gestures and postures of the Mineriads, or rather, of the images (still and moving) that we have of those events. He then animated these imaginaries and these images through bodies, and in that sense, his work is an anti-monument. In the tradition of performance and video art equally, Perjovschi experimented with both duration and presence. The bodies being there in the public square were moving only as their corporeal functions would require, essentially *tableaux vivants* of gestures and postures. His was a work on gestures and the on how the memory of the events had been shaped, in dualities of 'us' against 'them'. "This is why the 'monument'. That's why the non-action. Two living sculptures side by side, face to face, back to back, 3 days and about 8 hours a day. No podium, no postament, passer-by perspective, marginal location within the square."⁶

Having remembered Dan Perjovschi's piece only after I had finished the initial rough editing stage, it is now clear how I somehow also turned to the same 'tactic': slowing down the image, looking as it unfolds slowly, marking points when heads would turn, when arms were raised, bats lowered on a body, an old man waving to the miners, all together with the gestures accompanying the televised political addresses.

Temporalities and Images: Superimpositions. Anachronisms. Aberrations and Apparitions

Nous sommes toujours avec/ We are always with, or on the side of, democracy – says Prime Minister Petre Roman in his speech, given in broken French. These are the last scenes of the study film, and where it takes its title from. The paradox, the clash between image and speech, between violence and declaration makes being with the image once more a necessity. Being faced with the image, being with the image, and in the image – not in the sense of being on its side, but working with the image and the temporalities it has to offer. And more, as an act of following its temporal 'impurities,' its compositions between acts of speaking, making, and seeing, as responsibilities. "The history of images is a history of objects that are temporally impure, complex, overdetermined."⁷ Being before the image as being before time, or rather, becoming before time because of being before the image is being before the law, and this presence necessitates and urges one into responsibility of taking on the image, together with its temporal impurities – the layers of

pasts, presences, promises of futures past, and pasts of memory.

Research note: Working with archival footage, I wanted to capture all of these concerns, to compose with images, and to research through them, to stand responsible of putting them together, and breaking them apart, of quickening their pace, or slowing them down to make visible gestures, and actions. The intention was to re-search the images, to make visible what might appear from suturing scenes together with words. Editing the images into a relative timeline, almost didactically, aiming for clarity, then working with temporalities in the image, I arrived at aberrations, and apparitions, in and between the images; I also became aware of superimpositions of image, political power, and subjectivity, in the event and beyond it.

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," in *Time*, ed. Amelia Groom, Documents of Contemporary Art (London : Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Gallery ; MIT Press, 2013), 34.

² Joanne Richardson, "Memoirs of a Video Activist," 2006, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/richardsoncontext3.html, n.p.

³ Ibid, n.p.

⁴ Bogdan Ghiu, "The Uncosumated Revolution - a Dream of Consumerism," in *Romanian Televised Revolution. Contributions to the Cultural History of Media*, ed. Konrad Petrovsky and Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Refractions (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2011), 220.

⁵<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/public-space/public-space-raluca-voinea.html>

⁶ Dan Perjovschi, email conversation with the artist from 24.09.2013.

⁷ Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," 37.

This article is part of *Looking at Images: A Researcher's Guide*:
<http://blog.soton.ac.uk/wsapgr/looking-at-images>