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Shot and never seen again: Videotapes as waste and merchandise in post-socialist Romania

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Abstract

What if videotapes were considered as either waste or commodity – to be forgotten, or sold and reused and re-recorded? This is the question raised by this text, which gives an account of a multi-sited ethnographic project that follows the human and material circulation of amateur analogue video technologies in Romania since the mid-1980s. At the intersection of anthropology and media archaeology, this text aims to show how videotapes have been an important part of a post-socialist Romanian media infrastructure, that distributed pirated media, home movies, and local television productions.

Keywords: anthropology, home movies, media archaeology, piracy, video

In film history as well as in anthropology, videotapes are conceived solely as recording media – as ‘consumables’ – on which images of greater value are stored and left for the posterity. During my inquiry on the fate of recorded video images in post-socialist Romania (1990–2010), I encountered people – resellers, former cameraman, former clients – for whom, on the contrary, videotapes were objects, neglected as waste, or valued for their quality, their origin, or their social lives.[1] Videotapes were never conceived as an archive. Pirate videos, home movies, and downloaded music files were all treated the same way. How could I engage with these videotapes without being caught by the archive fever? And if they were remains, abandoned in a barn or garage, or, on the contrary, sold at the flea market as merchandise, what were they the remains of?

This text argues that home movies, ‘commissioned home movies’,^[2] the semi-professional devices that equipped the first local television stations in the 1990s, and pirate videos were forming an informal media infrastructure and an important part of the material culture of the post-socialist transition in Romania. The analysis of the circulations and uses of videotapes reveal a vast circulation of skills, people, and tapes, but also a variety of affects and social practices. Vulgar remains or merchandise, videotapes form the remainder of a media infrastructure^[3] which extends from the 1980s until the advent of the digital images. By apprehending videotapes from the perspective of what Steven Jackson has called a ‘broken world thinking’,^[4] can we imagine it as a revelator of a historical period made of forgetting, rewriting, muddling through, and breakdown?

Since the end of the communist regime, video technology has embodied both an ideal and a model for the transition to democracy, and a commodity within a market economy. This is particularly evident in the role that amateur video recordings and television played in the 1989 revolution, and in the explosion of an audiovisual market that saw the creation of hundreds of local television stations.^[5] The sudden emergence of video technologies in the public domain made for the subject of several films, highlighting these two social imaginaries of the videotapes. *Videogramme einer revolution* (Farocki and Ujică, 1992), and *Chuck Norris vs. Communism* (Calugareanu, 2015), among the most recognised, respectively chronicle the events of December 1989 and the emergence of a real VHS underground business in Romania, that smuggled Western films into the country starting from the mid 1980s. In different ways, these films show how the technical regime of image production of analog video constituted the media infrastructure of both regime and economic change. However, apart from these films, most accounts in the humanities and social sciences on the media infrastructure of Romanian post-socialist society have dealt exclusively with television.^[6] Following in their footsteps, media studies research in Romania covering the 1990s and 2000s has mainly focused on the circulation of representations and television formats (soap operas, K-dramas, or Turkish telenovelas).^[7] While the pirate studios of the 1980s (and 1990s) participated extensively in these first transnational media flows within Romania, no publication has yet focused on the history and analysis of this loose, unstable, poor amateur video production regime.^[8] and its subterranean trajectory from the communist to the post-socialist era.

Studying it will surely produce a less normative account of the changing media infrastructure that accompanied this period of economic and political transition.

By following the videotapes and the people using and selling them – in a Roma neighborhood, on digital platforms, and in the urban area of Bucharest – this research aligns with recent works showing how the collective memory of the socialist regime and the material cultures of the post-socialist worlds constantly oscillate between memory and oblivion, between the archive and waste, between presence and erasure.[9] Thus, rather than a linear chronology, this text gives an account of the multiscalar character of the informal media infrastructure built around videotapes by focusing more specifically on their social and cultural functions, in three different fields. First, I propose that videotapes could be considered as virtual and material remains of home movies, which embed affects that oscillate between a vivid memory of the atmosphere produced by the camera and a progressive forgetting of the recorded images. Second, I show how videotapes are also historical artifacts that could be sold, reinterpreted, even erased. Finally, recounting the long history of videotapes, I propose to apprehend them also as commodities that follow patterns of circulation (both of goods and humans) characteristic of the former Soviet Bloc.

Pirated media, home movies, and downloaded music files

My exhumation and analysis of videotapes recorded or sold during the post-socialist era in Romania started in 2019 and is rooted in my previous inquiries made during my doctoral research, in the streets of the village of Dițești, 80 kilometres north of Bucharest, between 2007 and 2012, where the majority of the Roma population of this particular municipality (*municipalitate*) live. This research, through participant observation, sound and video recording, coupled with the collection and conservation of vernacular videos, also resulted in me picking up a camera and participating in the situations of shooting videos for my interlocutors.

This first inquiry opened up the field for the present research, making me discover the peculiarity of vernacular images: their temporality and their material instability, their propensity to be marked by ‘*damages, errors, and defects*’,[10] their accidental or intentional rewriting. Pirate copies of diverse movies, downloaded music, and home videos were circulating under a same

regime of reproduction. Stored on optical media and sold in village grocery stores individually and without a plastic box, DVDs and CDs are stacked on the DVD player, on the TV or in drawers. Due to their rapid degradation, they usually last for a year or two.[11] This defect of the digital media is so endemic that my interlocutors regularly entrusted me with the task of keeping and copying videos of family celebrations that they had recorded elsewhere. This is how my ethnographic inquiry gradually included fragments of (digital) videos produced before my arrival, or between my different stays, within its corpus of data, until 2010, when the combined arrival of smartphones, high-speed internet connections, and the use of social networks allowed everyone to make their own domestic images and to control their duplication.

The accumulation of these media residuals was not limited to the media storage kept in the sheds and barns of the inhabitants of the village of Dițești. It was completed by two phenomena. Around 2010, I observed diverse practices of backing up through publication of media on digital platforms, such as YouTube, or through the multiplication of copies. Concurrently, certain media formats were progressively disappearing in the ‘Gypsy Hood’ (*țigănie*) – the term used by my interlocutors to designate the streets of the villages where members of their families live. Videos initially made on magnetic videotapes – mostly VHS (the cheapest and most accessible format in the decade following the 1989 revolution) – still seemed to escape from this vernacular practice of image conservation and maintenance. Indeed, many VHS tapes, on which family celebrations were recorded in the 1990s, can no longer be viewed. Due to technical obsolescence, VCRs have disappeared from homes in the Roma neighbourhood where I was active for years, and the copying of these tapes onto DVDs is generally no longer feasible. This lack of consideration for old magnetic videotapes is also observed in the Gypsy Hood among former video makers who made videos with VHS or MiniDV cameras, tools that were very often nearing the end of their lives. Matei[12] described to me, some years ago, the hundreds of tapes which are somewhere in his barn, used both for the duplication of rented VHS tapes during the 1980s and 1990s and for the various film shoots in the Gypsy Hood. Even more fundamentally, while Matei had some idea of where the tapes might be, he had doubts about whether it was possible to distinguish between tapes that were used for copying television programs and those used for video recordings of family celebrations. The diversity of residual media in Matei’s barn suggested they played an important role in the development and the transformation of a post-socialist Romania media infrastructure.

Residuals and forgetting: Home movies on videotapes

My first observations and the accounts I gathered of these tapes stored among the debris and waste of the household, partly replaced by copies on DVDs or on digital platforms, seemed to echo a common idea of the history of video as ‘a cemetery of formats’.[13] The pattern seemed at first relatively linear, following the limited life span of an obsolete technology. However, the dispersion and difficulty in clearly locating these videotapes sketches a rhizomatic infrastructure, stratified in multiple temporalities and bifurcations, very far from the linear pattern of obsolescence. While the remains of the home videos hidden away in barns seemed to be the clearly localised, on a material level they actually turned out to be quite evanescent, even atmospheric.

In fact, my discussions with my interlocutors in the Gypsy Hood, regarding where the videotapes were stored or abandoned, in order to digitise them and make backups, led to dead ends. To my questions regarding their videotapes, several of my friends and contacts gave me evasive answers: the baptism or wedding tape does exist, it seems, but it is ‘somewhere’ (*unde va*), and searching for it would take time. Even more fundamentally, several interlocutors replied that they are not quite interested in the idea of seeing these images again, as in the case of Cristian and Camelia, who treasure the photographs taken at their wedding in 2007 with a disposable or consumer camera (Figure 1), but vaguely remember that the video had disappointed them.



Fig. 1: Cristian and Camelia's wedding photograph, in front of the town hall (2007).

Produced by an acquaintance of the neighbourhood (in exchange for reimbursing the cost of the tapes), the sequences showed above all the friends of this amateur cameraman and the backstage of the ritual, sometimes too insistently showing the 'lacks' (*lipsuri*) of the household and the couple, the work in the courtyard, the poorly furnished rooms, the few friends who had come to the town hall, etc. In their recollection, these video images are characterised first of all by these lacks and this emptiness – filled today by all kinds of goods and furniture. This corroborates my clients' fears, years earlier, in 2010, when they saw me filming the crowd, the delirious children, and all possible ethnic markers of impoverishment. Such disparaging comments have never been made in relation to the portraits, whether of couples or groups, which were taken at the same time. The care with which they are arranged and the elements of the decor (in the church or the town hall) do not let any of these markers show through. Fairly systematically, the discussions around the old videotapes that could not be found, or were deliberately ignored, provoked the same reactions as those that my interlocutors had in front of my images: 'we were ugly' (*eram urâți*). This imaginary world of a time when material goods were scarce, when domestic space was more rudimentary, and bodies were thinner, was thus very often opposed to my research aims – and this even if my proposal to digitise and save the tapes did not involve any financial compensation, contrary to what was customary. What Cristian and Camelia question is ultimately the weakness of the scenography carried out by the cameraman.

The special attention that the sponsors of wedding and christening films pay to their appearance is reflected in the constant scrutiny they place on the work of the cameraman (the profession was exclusively inhabited by men). Not only does the cameraman have to pay attention to the value of the goods and people in the frame, but he also has to participate in the scenography, even to the point of sometimes becoming an asset on display for all to see – thus showing that the party obeys certain standards. In the course of my practice of commissioned home movies in the Gypsy Hood and in the course of my observation of other professional cameramen, I realised how much the position of the cameraman, filming the guests from within the circle formed by the dancers (*hora*), is paradoxically less that of a *supervising observer* than that of a *supervised provider and a value on display* (Figure 2). In no way do the characteristics and skills attributed to the cameraman by his clients endow him with 'the power to witness the *totality* of [the] event'[14] – which is commonly the filmmaker's privileged position in observational documentary

and ethnographic film. All commissioned home movies are thus marked by an overabundance of instructions to guide the cameraman's work. When I ventured to shoot the crowd, the children standing silently watching on the side-lines of the party – in order to have the wider context of the action being filmed –, my clients immediately pulled me aside and asked me to stop. They were motivated by the desire to spare the recording of these images from impoverishment and ethnic markers – the Gypsy Hood refers both in the eyes of my interlocutors and their *gagi* or *români* (non-Roma) neighbours to the representation of an ethnic and social enclave from which one must distinguish oneself *at all costs*.



Fig. 2: The cameraman in the middle of the hora.

These instructions were also designed to preserve videotapes. During the 1990s and 2000s, the price of the service was in fact indexed to the total duration of the tapes used. Defined by their market value and by the value of the material goods displayed in front of the camera lens, the tapes were treated from the beginning of my inquiry as a commodity: 'an item with use value that also has exchange value'.^[15] However, the negotiations engaged with my clients revealed another value, 'display', in the sense defined by Gernot Böhme:

However, goods are increasingly becoming things that are not used after their purchase, but remain in a way display objects. They are goods whose use value consists in their contributing to the staging of a certain lifestyle. It makes sense to speak here of a new type of value, the display [*Inszenierung*] value.[16]

In these situations, as in others, the amateur video device and the cameraman are used as ‘mood generators’.[17] In his theory and aesthetics of atmospheres, Gernot Böhme departs from ‘our ontological tradition [in which] we characterize objects in terms of matter and form’, and instead conceives of an object as a ‘sound box’; ‘its external particularities’ are then characterised in terms of its ‘tonality’, ‘what emanates from it’, its ‘way of irradiating space’.[18] In a way, as historians of home movies have observed about the agency of the filming device, ‘it is [indeed] the presence of the camera that incites the family to display its familialism’,[19] and ‘what happens during filming is often more important than the film itself’.[20] The importance of the video device for the organisation and the atmosphere of the filmed situation also explains why these images are most often carefully examined by my interlocutors (and clients) several times immediately after receiving the videotape or the DVD. After this intensive use, the images can be ignored or even forgotten for a while.

The exhumation of videotapes of home movies, from the storage room as well as from the memories, reveal very contrasting socio-cultural functions, affects, and care for their materiality. If they reveal an attachment to the presence of the camera in situation – and to the recording of videotapes consulted in a compulsive way quickly afterwards – it also shows how the forgetting of these images is organized around values of different types. This porosity lies between memory and oblivion, between the lived experience of an atmosphere and images of homes that are considered today as empty.

As Laurentiu told me: ‘too many videotapes of empty images’. Surprisingly, the ‘active negligence’[21] at work around videotapes does not concern material culture or the remains and ruins of the communist regime – as Francesco Martínez shows very well for Estonian society. Here, it is the images and artifacts of the transition years that are the object of this game between presence and absence, between archive and waste.

Digital platforms and the re-writing of amateur video history

Videotapes encountered a new bifurcation since the 2000s, particularly perceptible on digital platforms. Since the arrival of high-speed internet connections and terminals in Romanian homes, these platforms have been the privileged place for the circulation of digitised images recorded on magnetic videotapes from the 1990s, but also of their material substratum, with cassettes put on sale on e-commerce platforms.

The VHS tapes recorded in the 1990s, especially in the southern part of Romania, including Prahova County and the Gypsy Hood of Dițești, are the subject of significant reuse and reediting. For several years now, commissioned home movies have been widely distributed on YouTube through users who digitise and post online fragments of videotapes recorded in the 1990s and 2000s. While browsing YouTube with one of my interlocutors, we discovered a video titled *Live at a wedding from Dițești, 1997* (*Live la nuntă în Dițești, 1997*), published by a former cameraman (Figure 3). The title of the video does not mention the groom or the bride, as would be customary, and instead names the two well-known *lăutari* (Roma musicians): Neluța Neagu and Ștefan de la Bărbulești (from Bărbulești). Nicușor finally recognises the marriage of Costel, a friend *lăutar* of Dițești, because of the formation of the orchestra. The tapes recorded by two cameras have been digitally edited, the end credits name the musicians, and subtitles indicate the names of the melodies or songs (*cântări*). The images recorded from the stage, where the musicians are located, never show the room and apart from the two professional dancers invited for the occasion, no women appear in the centre of the image, although they are of course present in the audience. Through publishing them online, a real digital rewriting of the visual history of amateur films and videos is taking place. This leads to the discarding of entire sections of images and human experiences – at both a local and national level. The digitisation and the publications of these videos online produce a partial history, putting men and musicians at the centre, whereas the original images of these events were much more diverse. This digitisation and recycling of the images of the video tapes, removing the experiences and the female bodies from the recorded images, is almost always carried out by men.



Fig. 3: Live at a wedding from Dițești, 1997.

This bifurcation of images, put into circulation according to a principle distinct from their initial use by collectors and YouTube users, can also be observed on other digital platforms. The tapes are not digitised; this time they are put on sale on e-commerce platforms, notably Olx and Okazii, the most used in Romania. Diverse documentary and educational films, or even home movies shot on celluloid (Super 8, 8mm, 16mm), are for sale on these platforms. Even if the precise content of the film is not described by the seller (some of them do not have a film projector), the monetary value of the film is always indexed to the rarity of the presumed content filmed or photographed, in addition to the metric length of the film. Thus, Robert,[22] one of my contacts, a film enthusiast and collector, is able to precisely describe the entire film collection that he has built up over the years by frequenting flea markets (*piețe de vechituri*) in Bucharest (such as Târgul Valea Cascadelor[23] [Figure 4]). It was notably through these channels that he bought a large stock of 16mm copies of educational films produced by Alexandru Sahia Studios under the communist regime in Romania, films that were sold at a discount in the 1990s as the factories where they were shown and stored closed.[24]



Fig. 4: Târgul Valea Cascadelor, a flea market where videotapes (mostly VHS) and DVDs are available for sale.

The sale and purchase of analogue videotapes (such as VHS, video8, or Hi8) and digital videotapes – MiniDV – is a completely different matter. Unlike films, video recording media are sold for reuse. The price, fixed by each seller, is indexed to the quality of the technical components of the tape. The first criterion, following a utilitarian logic, is of course the resolution of the format, i.e. the amount of information that can be recorded on the tape – VHS tapes have only 240 lines of horizontal resolution, while video8 and Hi8 tapes contain 280 and 440 lines respectively, so they are more expensive. Next comes the length (in minutes) of the tape, and finally the rarity and reliability of the brand and model. This price scale is set by all sellers with the prospect that the tapes will be reused or, more rarely, displayed as decorative knick-knacks in shops, never to be actually put to use. None of my contacts had met customers interested in magnetic tapes for what they contain. During our telephone conversation,[25] Sorin, a collector and dealer of various rock sub-culture artifacts and hi-fi equipment, explained to me that TDK brand audio (and sometimes video) tapes, including MA, MA-X, MA-XG (MA for Metal Alloy) tapes, are known for their robustness and precision by collectors who wish to have a model missing from their collection. It does not matter if the tapes are blank or already used. The images recorded are never mentioned

in the online ad, and a large number of the sellers do not know the content of the tapes. What they do know is the *social trajectory* of their merchandise, the place where the tape was purchased and the conditions under which it was stored. Usually, the only information about the recorded contents is limited to the few words written on the sleeves or the tapes themselves – when they are not erased by the seller, in order to give the object the newest possible appearance (Figures 5, 6).



Fig. 5: Classified for Hi-8 tapes on the Romanian e-commerce platform OLX, mentioning their price, brand, and length.



Fig. 6: Sorin sold me the tapes he had bought from an acquaintance, before leaving Romania to settle in Germany. Banat Swabian, the former owner, wrote the information on the tapes in German.

The erasure of the traces of previous recordings on boxes and cassettes, and their reuse, literally contribute to the rewriting of the history of amateur or semi-professional filmic practices. This rewriting of history is not the only one that applies on digital platforms. It only takes a different form depending on the medium. Unlike videos, whose social trajectory is little valued (or even erased) in the determination of their exchange value, films and photographs are valued by their content, to the point of sometimes even being the object of speculation. For some Super 8 films, and several collections of slides or negatives, the dealers (essentially men, as is the case with collectors) accompany their photos with some captions that describe as much as they fabricate the origin of the images. A first classified ad states (in Romanian):

A batch of 100 slides from Western Europe in the 70s. They are unique, made by amateurs, meaning they are not mass-produced industrially; of collection; are absolutely unique snapshots of the real life of the 70s. Family pictures, landscapes, monuments, etc. Probably from a family of the Securitate [the secret police of the communist regime]; because only they could go to the West [at that time]...

Another one states:

There are 223 slides with a gentleman, made in 1968 in the US, Mexico, Chile, some of them are written with a pen. But he made others on a communist anniversary in the Soviet Union, the date does not appear. I think we all understand what the gentleman was doing for a living [implying he was a member of the Securitate]. All would be at 300 lei in total, sent with Romanian post office.

Responding to my request for information, the seller specifies:

I don't know which anniversary it is, but the faces of Lenin, Marx, Stalin can be seen on a giant poster. And there are more pictures taken with locals with Russian hats with ears. I bought them from an antique dealer in Bucharest but he didn't know the details.

While these are sometimes the same people who sell videotapes, their valuation of film and analogue film and photographs is different from that used for magnetic tapes. This sheds light on the material specificity of the video infrastructure, while at the same time showing that the 'restless items'[26] of the socialist past can be traded rather well – here the scarcity of a commodity is indexed to the imaginary of the Securitate, the secret police that has mobilised passions in Romania for the past 30 years. The analogue videos of the post-socialist transition period, on the other hand, are often considered as

waste or remains, rarely invested with any memory, history, or value other than exchange value.

One of the reasons for this lies in the specificity of the video medium, its *rewritability*. Since the cessation of the production of equipment and consumables, the discovery of this informal economy around old magnetic media contrasts with the obsolescence usually associated with videotapes. Many online tape and video resellers see their stock bought by people who choose to film their family celebrations with a camera and Hi8 videotapes before having them digitised and edited on DVD by service providers (such as my contact Robert), who have kept the appropriate VCR models. This entire operational chain costs much less than paying for a cameraman, and it shows the vitality of so-called obsolete techniques (gestures as well as technology) in social worlds that are somewhat out of sight both to historians and to museums or archival institutions.

From pirate studio to suitcase trade

The exchanges with my interlocutors at Dițești, the work of collecting, buying, and digitising the videotapes bought on e-commerce platforms, and the informal interviews with the tape re-sellers revealed several patterns of circulation that shifts the established reference points. The circulation of magnetic tapes as well as the trajectory of the people at work on the several activities described earlier (pirated media, commissioned home movies, local television stations) offer a contrasting portrait of this conception of the video medium.

While it seemed relevant to distinguish vernacular video productions from copies of industrial productions on VHS (or other media), the outcome of my inquiry rather encourages us to consider them together. Moreover, the initial temporal separations between, on one hand, the ‘relics’ of homes movies shot on celluloid during the communist era[27] and, on the other hand, the explosion of interrelated uses of photography and video starting from the 2010s, are in reality much more fluid. The emergence of video practices is part of a longer history that began, for many people, in the 1980s. It is both the story of Sile’s (my privileged interlocutor) pirate studio [Figure 7], through which many fictional (or more rarely erotic) films were reproduced on VHS, and that of Matei who, at the other end of the chain, borrowed VHS tapes from Bucharest to produce copies for himself first, before circulating

them in the neighbourhood and the homes equipped with television sets and VCRs, after the fall of communism.

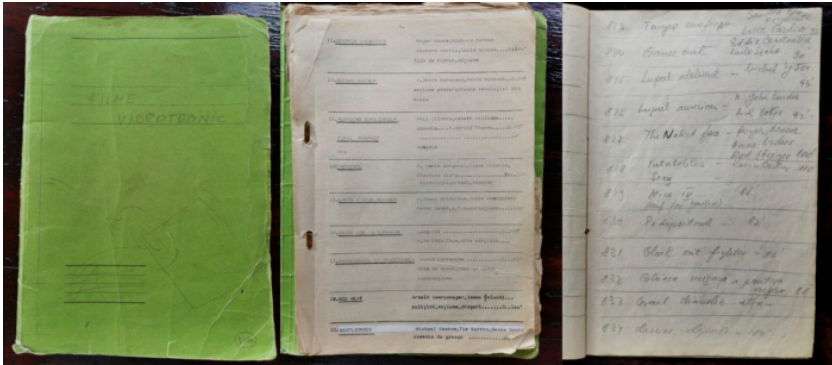


Fig. 7: Fragments of the catalogue of pirated copies of VHS tapes that Sile produced and distributed through his company (Videotronic). Developed at the end of the 1980s, shortly before the revolution, the catalogue was enriched over the years (the photograph on the right is among the last pages).

Sile's professional trajectory is exemplary of this long and intricate history of video practices. Building on the experience of his pirate studio, Sile collaborated with TV SOTI (Societatea pentru Organizarea unei Televiziuni Independente), a local and independent television channel broadcasting from Bucharest between 1991 and 1994. These four years were a real experience of technical training for him, especially in shooting and the organisation of a video control room. When the channel stopped, he recovered some of the video equipment, video copies of several programs on professional formats (S-VHS and Beta SP videotapes notably), to establish his own studio and specialise in the realisation of commissioned home movies.[28] The 1990s were the boom years. Half a dozen cameramen or editors who passed through its premises now work on their own or for a communications company. Parallel to the work at his studio, Sile continues to dub and duplicate commercial videos on DVDs, an illegal activity that he is gradually reducing with the legislative evolution in Romania.

A first halt in his pirate activity is marked by the passing of the law concerning copyright in 1996 (Legea nr. 8/1996), and its actual application, according to him, in 2004 – which probably corresponds to the implementation of a complementary law (Legea nr. 285/23 iunie 2004) – ends up obliging him to completely cease this activity. In 2012, he closes his studio as the digital HD format and its recording media on cards and hard disks impose them-

selves in the workflow of commissioned home movies with much more advanced equipment (multiple cameras, jibs, external sound devices, laptops, etc.). In conjunction with this technical evolution, which requires a significant financial investment to acquire equipment and remunerate the teams, the increasing control and tax pressure on small companies forced him to cease all activity. The cessation of his studio shows how all its activities correspond to the historical arc of the use of magnetic tapes in Romania. From the mid-1980s until around 2010 all his videotapes were ‘traveling under [a same] regime of reproduction’[29] – one of low-resolution images, even if he started to work on HDV by the late 2000s.

Today Sile works as a plumber and is the owner of an important video collection which, like his trajectory, covers all the practices of videotapes in Romania, showing the human and material circulations between worlds (television, home movie, pirate infrastructure), which video media histories consider most often in isolation. Its trajectory also perfectly illustrates the uncertain future of a rewritable medium, which is at the same time the residue of a ‘display value’ that is sometimes forgotten and left to decompose, or else resold and reused for its ‘exchange value’ to the detriment of the recorded images.

But the history of Sile is not only exemplary for its historical depth and the way in which its technical systems have intertwined different domains of audiovisual production. It is also exemplary for the multiple cross-border circulations of equipment and tapes that have structured its activity over the years. His experiences and stories of smuggling VHS tapes and VCRs, necessary for the production of analogue videos, in the 1980s marks the beginning of a series of cycles where artists, pirate studio owners, and then suitcase traders used tricks to introduce these technologies into Romania and then to trade them. This sometimes-complex path of video technologies to enter communist Romania is mentioned in the monograph dedicated to the two artistic events titled *house pARTy* and organised by Decebal and Nadina Scriba during the summers of 1987 and 1988. The video camera brought by the doctor Ovidiu Bojor to their home, in Bucharest, where the event took place, came from Kathmandu.[30] Around the same time, at the end of the 1980s, Matei acquired a VCR from South Korea – he is the first person from the Gypsy Hood to have owned one. Sile, from whom I acquired a large part of the videos produced by his video production company (between 1994 and 2012), as early as 1983 had a whole set of technical equipment from Germany allowing him to dub films (in versions already dubbed in French, English, or

German of films coming from outside these three countries) in a pirate studio in the very centre of Bucharest.

This material and human circulation took an astonishing form in the 1990s. For nearly ten years Sile and his collaborators made video recordings and home movies of family celebrations (such as weddings or baptisms) or more informal situations, both in Romania and abroad, in several countries. As the images recorded on his old VHS-C, video8, and Hi8 videotapes attest, his company's small team of operators and editors ('his business', *afacerea sa*) travelled all over Romania, but also collected materials from Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, the United States, Greece, following the migratory movements of the 'Romanian diaspora' (as he calls it [Figure 8]).

This practice of shooting and editing video footage from the diaspora is rather exceptional among the dealers and collectors I have come in contact with. However, his long practice of smuggling pirate copies and the difficult routing of videotapes into Romania (copies to be duplicated as well as blank tapes) is a vanguard before the explosion of the suitcase trade in Romania in the 1990s. Indeed, with the end of the communist regimes in Europe, an increased ease of access to passports, but a feverish market economy (inflation, lack of basic necessities), many citizens of Eastern Europe engaged in 'trader tourists'[31] activity. Using tourist visas, they make short trips to Western Europe or Turkey to import consumer goods that are then sold informally in their country of origin.

At the time of my inquiry, several of my interlocutors, encountered on digital platforms like OLX and Okazii, have years (even decades) of experience with this suitcase trade, which includes other goods than electronic equipment. Living in the region of Arad and Timișoara, a border region of Western Romania, many of them buy second-hand tapes abroad, mainly in Germany, where they sometimes go as frequently as every two or three weeks to buy 'merchandise' (*marfa*), and then resell it in Romania at flea markets or on e-commerce platforms. For various administrative and geographical reasons, the practice of suitcase trade developed particularly in the border regions since the communist period.[32] As for Sile, he never really gave up this practice of trading with a suitcase. He takes advantage of each visit to his son in Belgium to go to the markets and a few stores, to get his hands on the rarest videotapes, and to resell them in Romania.

The object of numerous cross-border movements of people and goods since the 1980s, the trajectory of many videotapes is largely a reflection of

the ordinary material culture of Romania over the past thirty years. The durability of these circulations for the productions of pirate videos or home movies, or for their resumption and resale on digital platforms, shows how much these different practices belong to the same media infrastructure.



Fig. 8: Stills of a VHS-C video, showing different layers of recordings, in Romania in 2002 and Morocco in 1999.

Conclusion

By following the disappearances, affects and, temporalities linked to magnetic videotapes in Romania we can see how they are ‘a technological object whose materiality and significance is allowed to linger in time, as opposed to a commodity with a limited life span that must necessarily be discarded and upgraded’.[33] Building upon this hypothesis, this text has chosen to consider videotapes as both remains and merchandise characterised both by its instability and its dispersion, circulating between different spheres of video practices: home movies, pirated media, local television stations, digital platforms. Despite this diversity, the videotapes are a prominent media infrastructure of the transition period in Romania.

I introduced this text by recalling the importance of television as a media infrastructure of the post-socialist transition – an importance that is based, among other things, on a normative narrative of regime change (economic and political). In a text on the images of the film *Videogramme einer revolution*, Harun Farocki fittingly describes what is at stake in some of the sequences broadcast on television – or behind the scenes of this broadcast. Reflecting on the State television’s Studio 4 announcing the victory of the revolution that will circulate wildly, he says:

It is hard to avoid the thought that the cameramen of the revolution wanted to use their work to apply for jobs in post-revolutionary television. With the future political elite in front of the camera and the future television elite behind the camera, we observe the attempt of both these groups to rid themselves of their amateur status.[34]

The study of videotapes – whatever the recorded images – offers the possibility to elaborate an alternative narrative of this post-socialist transition, where the forgetting and the rewriting of the history does not concern so much the stories, the experiences of the communist era as the one that succeeded it. The *rewritability* of the videotapes seems to embody this endless transition. These videotapes intersect with cultures of everyday life, broader material culture, and ordinary uses of media hardware in Romania. Thus appears a media infrastructure, quite different from those of the main television channels. The videotapes constitute a prism through which one can observe both a ‘broken world thinking’ at work, in the circulation of goods and people, and to account for the multiple scales of a media infrastructure, which finds possible parallels in the former Soviet bloc countries. The heuristic of videotapes opens a fascinating and still less travelled research ground.

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Notes

- [1] On the social and cultural life of commodities see Appadurai 1986; Bonnot 2002.
- [2] 'Commissioned home movies [...] work in the domestic circle [but] they are not home movies in the sense that they are not amateur movies (by non-professionals)'; Aasman 1995, p. 105. Unless noted otherwise, all the translations from French and Romanian to English are from the author.
- [3] Centred around the 'unique *materialities* of media distribution [...] on global, national, and local scales' (Parks & Starosielski 2015, p. 5), critical studies of media infrastructure are concerned with the flow and circulation of the audiovisual signal, the diverse task necessary for its maintenance, and the environment which hosts these systems.
- [4] Jackson 2014.
- [5] Pélissier 1996
- [6] Published in the immediate post-revolutionary period, or in the following two decades, the texts compiled by von Amelunxen & Ujică 1990 as well as Petrovsky & Țichindeleanu 2009 perfectly illustrate the concentration of analyses on television images and studios as *the* site of a normative narrative of transition.
- [7] On the adaptation of a South American programming schedule see Drăgan & Mărinescu 1998. For the popular success encountered by K-drama or Turkish telenovelas, see respectively Mărinescu 2011 and Larcher 2018.
- [8] Larkin 2008; Steyerl 2009; Larcher & Leyokki 2018.
- [9] Bach 2017; Martínez 2018.
- [10] Bordina & Venturini 2013, p. 257. *Italics included*.
- [11] Larcher 2019.
- [12] His first name, like all those mentioned in the text, has been changed.
- [13] Carou 2020, p. 134.
- [14] MacDougall 1998 (orig. in 1975), p. 129. *Italics included*.
- [15] Kopytoff 1986, p. 64.
- [16] Böhme 2001, p. 21. Translation from German into English by Alo Paistik.
- [17] Böhme 2008, p. 226.

- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Aasman 1995, p. 108.
- [20] Odin 2008, p. 258.
- [21] Martínez 2018, p. 23.
- [22] Telephone interview, 09 January 2020.
- [23] The photographer Nicu Ilfoveanu realised a very beautiful visual documentation of this market at the turn of the years 2000 and 2010; Ilfoveanu & Avramescu, 2011.
- [24] For an ethnography and history of the Sahia studio see Brădeanu 2011 (orig. in 2009).
- [25] Telephone interview, 16 January 2020.
- [26] Bach 2017.
- [27] Blos-Jáni 2013; Blos-Jáni 2016.
- [28] The relationship between the many local television stations which appeared in the 1990s and quickly expanded following the liberalisation of the television market in Romania, and the vernacular filmic practices at that time, often relied on the use of the same devices (the camera, the spotlight, and the microphone) and the same cameraman for both vernacular and professional productions (conversation with Melinda Blos-Jáni, 6 August 2018).
- [29] Larkin 2008, p. 218.
- [30] Gibescu & Mihăilțianu & Scriba & Voinea 2016.
- [31] Konstantinov 1996.
- [32] This border practice has a long history, as Norah Benarrosh-Orsoni shows: 'Issued as early as the mid-1960s, the "small trade" (*micul traffic*) passport was a privilege reserved for villagers living within 20 km of the borders. It allowed them to leave the country within a limited radius of 30 km, for a maximum of twenty-four hours, only once a month'; Benarrosh-Orsoni 2017.
- [33] Parks 2007, p. 33.
- [34] Farocki 2001, p. 252.