Television has played a pivotal role in the Romanian revolution. For the first time, a revolution was broadcasted in real time across the globe, and television viewers came out into the streets to participate in the event. Pavel Câmpeanu has argued that in Romania a new revolutionary subject emerged in 1989: «the TV audience, acting as a community of TV viewers». It supposedly inherited its role from the working class and then the student community of the 1960s.¹ What was television’s role as historical agent in Romania?

Different media have played different roles in revolutionary movements. The explosion of pamphlets, prints and sermons in late 1640s England is thought to have been the ideological impetus behind the outbreak of the English Revolution.² In 1780s France, reading practices arguably contributed to the erosion of authority and the shaping of revolutionary spirits.³ In Russia’s civil war, the Bolsheviks used newspapers as a tool to assert power over society by shaping a common language and shared purpose.⁴ From the mid-twentieth century, electronic media left their mark on popular uprisings. In the 1950s and 1960s, the American civil rights movement used press photos and television broadcasts to put the white South on trial, circulating to large audiences images that both recorded protest and provided evidence against local powers.⁵ In the 1980s, telerevolution became a modern revolutionary form. As described by Timothy Garton Ash, the telerevolution operated via electronic networks of communication, from radio to telephone, telexes and cassette recorders, spreading rapidly across re-

Television as Historical Agent in the Romanian Revolution

The Solidarity movement in the early 1980s was one example of this, as strikes were organised and mobilised by electronic means throughout the country. And it has been argued that the fall of communism in Eastern Europe was another case of *telerevolutions*, with the flow of images provoking a chain reaction of collapsing regimes.\(^6\)

In the cases described above, different media have been assigned different types of impact on revolutionary movements. They are said to have informed and raised the awareness of civilians (as in the English Revolution), to have destabilised authority (as in the French revolution), legitimised the rise of a new power order (as in the Russian Revolution) or mobilised a popular uprising (as with the Solidarity movement). The different media have served as platforms for information, critical thought, political support or political struggle.

In historical accounts, media have been described as instruments, their content has been discussed, yet the medium itself has rarely been analysed. «Reading is endowed with such power that it is capable of totally transforming readers and making them into what the texts envisage,» argues Roger Chartier in relation to the 1789 French revolution.\(^8\) Similarly, Krishan Kumar states, «Notoriously difficult as it is to assess the effects of the mass media, there can be no doubting their importance in the making of 1989.»\(^9\) Although the importance of the media in revolutions has been recognised and celebrated through terminology (see *telerevolution*), the media themselves and their workings often remain invisible in historical writings. Investigations of the power of different media – their power of dissemination, recording and providing evidence – tend to stay vague because a methodical analysis of how that particular power works and impacts the others is often lacking. Writing about media as historical objects, Lisa Gitelman argues that «specificity is key. ... Media, it should be clear, are very particular sites for very particular, importantly social as well as historically and culturally specific experiences of meaning.»\(^10\)

This paper will analyse television's agency during the 1989 Romanian revolution. Agency, according to Bruno Latour, is the force to affect change, translation or distortion on mediated acts or meanings.\(^11\) It is the result of interactions between different agents, rather than a dominant force. It is situated both spatially (across social interactions) and temporally (via prior interactions). Moreover, agency is performed by both human actors and non-human actants (such as technology). Understanding Romanian television in this way means to acknowledge the role the medium played within the popular movement.

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\(^8\) Chartier, «Do Books Make Revolutions?», 68.

\(^9\) Kumar, 1989, 122.


The Romanian revolution differed from other Eastern European revolutions. In Czechoslovakia there had been a «velvet revolution», in Hungary a «negotiated revolution», and in other countries similar non-violent movements dominated. In Romania, however, a live televised revolution turned violent. And neither the televised form of the Romanian revolution nor its bloody character was coincidental. They were the climax of a decade-long process in which television audiences rebelled against Ceauşescu. Analysing the agency of Romanian television in the 1980s reveals new facets of the Romanian revolution.

So far, interpretations of the event in the Romanian press have taken three main directions. Liberal newspapers speak of «the stolen revolution», a coup d'état performed by the new political power that emerged from the revolution. Supporters of nationalism grounded in the Communist past identify a «false revolution» manipulated by foreign secret services. Sympathisers of the new power argue the case of a «spontaneous revolution scenario». Up to today, «many tantalising questions still remain unanswered about the revolution, including the identity of the terrorists, the role played by the Soviet Union, the identity of those who gave the order to open fire on the protesters, and the origins of the National Salvation Front (FSN) which took power on 22 December 1989».

Within the historiography of the Romanian revolution, there have been few attempts to understand the role of television. In The Romanian Revolution of December 1989 Peter Siani-Davies addresses television only in passing, describing it as mobilising the masses and legitimising the new power. Television called people into the streets and it «familiarised previously unfamiliar faces, cementing their authority and turning them into icons of the revolution transmitted into every Romanian home». Steven Roper sees Romanian television as an instrument in the hands of the new power. Nestor Ratesh pays more attention to the role of television, dedicating a full chapter to the «tele-revolution» in his book Romania: The Entangled Revolution. But he merely depicts the «tele-revolution» as yet another form of the political events, treating television as a tool of dissemination. There is only one scholarly work that understands television as discourse and an instrument of information, legitimisation and mobilisation, and writings on the Romanian revolution have all failed to account for television’s particularities and its specific workings in the revolution. They have deprived television of its historical agency.

13 Ibid., 15.
The failure to account for the medium of television in discussions on the Romanian revolution underscores what Nick Couldry described as «the myth of the mediated centre». This notion indicates that dominant media representations conceal their constructed nature, conflate the variety of agencies at work and thus advance a view on the media as if they were «the society» itself. Watching television, reading the newspaper or using the internet have become such integral parts of society that these media have gained the status of what Latour would call a «black-box», referring to successful social networks that have stabilised and endured over time, becoming a natural part of everyday life.

«Media are often treated as sources of rock-solid facts, but they too are only comprehensible to us through the figurative language of metaphor and metonymy. In spite of their complexity as social and technical achievements, communications media are identified either through metonymy, as when a medium is defined solely by its technology (radio, television), or metaphorically, in terms used to describe their operation (broadcast, transmit), institutional structure (chain, network, World Wide Web) or the social relations they support (audience, nation, virtual community). In part each of these terms carries meanings that influence and eventually constrain our ability to think about electronic communication, because we forget that the terms are (or once were) figurative and begin to perceive them as irreducible facts.»

This article aims at deconstructing the medium of television and rendering it visible for historical investigation. Why was there a live televised revolution in Romania and what was the specific function of television in the regime change? To investigate the medium’s agency in the political events of 1989 in Romania, a variety of sources will be used: Securitate documents and audio-visual materials, interviews with employees of the Romanian television and the transcript of broadcasts of the Romanian revolution as edited in the collection Revolutia Romana in direct.

1. The Revolution Begins

It was a failed live broadcast of Ceauşescu that marked the start of the Live Romanian Revolution. Several days after anti-regime protests had started in the northwest of the country in Timișoara and rumours of the events had been circulated back into Romania by foreign broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe, Ceauşescu decided to calm the situation by addressing the nation live on television. He ordered a mass rally in front of the building of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party which was to be broadcast live from 11.59 to 12.52 noon as

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19 Latour, Reassembling.
21 Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia Romana in direct, Bucharest 1990.
part of a special morning programme on 21 December 1989. On the evening of 20 December, he delivered a special address in front of the cameras from his own personal Studio 1 located on the premises of the Central Committee. Ceauşescu spoke of the social unrest in Timişoara, dismissing it as fascist and terrorist in nature and as having been instigated by foreign espionage services. He announced the live broadcast of the mass rally that was to take place the next day.

On 21 December at midday, the live broadcast of the last public appearance of Ceauşescu as leader of the country began. The transmission started as usual, showing panoramic views of the masses gathered to cheer for Ceauşescu on the balcony of the Central Committee building. Minutes into the dictator’s speech, the event was disturbed by shouts from the crowds which eventually caused the transmission to be interrupted. The broadcast was resumed minutes later with an image of Ceauşescu looking visibly troubled and anxious. It was the first time that audiences at home had had confirmation of the anti-Ceauşescu revolt on public television. After this rally, the protests intensified. Riots spread around Bucharest, while the local Militia and the Army attempted to disperse the demonstrators. The next morning, thousands of people took over the Central Committee building and the premises of the Romanian television. At 12.06 noon on 22 December, Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu fled the Central Committee by helicopter, while at 12.25 the first civilians were spotted at Radiotelevision. At 1 p.m. Romanian television was preparing to go live with the first transmission of the revolutionary events. The moment marked the start of the Live Romanian Revolution, a label bestowed on the events by the broadcasting institution during those days. From now on, Studio 4 inside Romanian television became the epicentre of the events.

The transmission on 21 December had far-reaching consequences. It unfurled a revolution live on the television screen, but also mystified the role of the medium in the events. The immediacy of the live broadcast gone wrong emphasised the spontaneity of events and anticipated television as the natural and expected medium that would keep the nation informed about the street revolts. Under the effect of the live broadcast on 21 December, no one questioned how Romanian television became the epicentre of the events, nor whether the medium had any role other than being the immediate transmitter of the popular revolt. Television’s role as an agent of power, rather than a mere transmitter of events, faded into the background.

The power of television in 1989 manifested itself through three different instances of agency: localisation, naturalisation and figuration. These different

22 Ibid.
23 Tape RRD 3168, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucharest.
24 Tape B 48195, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucharest.
25 News of the riots in the city of Timişoara were broadcast to Romania as early as 17 December via Radio Free Europe, but there was no mention of the events in the Romanian press.
agencies illustrate the historical process behind the Live Romanian Revolution. They articulate how television became the centre of the revolutionary events, how its power mechanisms were mystified and rendered invisible in those events and how in the live broadcasts old Communist structures were staged as the new political force.

2. Localisation of the Revolution

It was no coincidence that the Romanian revolution happened live on television and that on 22 December 1989 Romanian television sided with the revolutionaries. Television in Romania had earned its status as organiser of anti-Ceauşescu dissent throughout the 1980s. In an institution that Radio Free Europe described at that time as having «the rare privilege of being a private television, a state television representing the viewing taste of one family» and which was ridiculed at the OIRT (Organisation Internationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision) meeting in Prague for making television programmes for one man, the shift of power from Ceauşescu to the revolutionaries could not have happened overnight. In fact, the 1980s had seen a prolonged power struggle between television audiences, the Securitate and Ceauşescu, in which the Securitate had established control over the ways television channelled dissidence. Far from being an act of immediacy, the live televising of the Romanian revolution from 22 December onwards was localised within a longer historical process of tensions between Ceauşescu, the people and the Securitate.

Localisers delineate the transported presence of places into one another, the present articulation of other interactions distributed elsewhere in time and space. These localisers work as past predispositions that frame present social interactions. A theatre room, Latour exemplifies, accommodates staged performances and a specific behaviour of artists and audiences because it was built in a certain way long before artists and audiences set foot in it. The concept of localisers is important in our case because any potential negotiation, subversion or challenge of political power in dictatorial Romania was transposed to other places and other times outside the public sphere of Ceauşescu’s control. As the following discussion will illustrate, anti-Ceauşescu dissidence emerged within the private spaces of television. It also emerged outside the regime’s etatised broadcast time; that is to say, outside the temporal restrictions that Ceauşescu had placed on the television schedules, which were reduced to two hours on weekdays and three to five hours at

27 Nota nr. 334, 3.05.1985, Radiotelevision Files, D 135, Vol. 81, p. 84, Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), Bucharest.
28 Informare, 29.05.1986, Radiotelevision Files D 135, Vol. 81, p. 26, CNSAS, Bucharest.
29 Latour, Reassembling, 194.
30 By etatised time Verdery (1997) refers to the state’s seizure of people’s time, which had as its main cause the economic shortages in the country and which took many forms, from immobilising people in food queues to power cuts at specific hours in the day to reducing television consumption by limiting schedules.
weekends. The concept of localisation is particularly useful for mapping these other places and other times of dissidence in the context of coercive regimes. Localisation helps not only to look into alternative spaces of agency, but also to contextualise television beyond the broadcast programme and understand it as part of its own history and social network.

Television became an outlet for audience dissidence throughout the last decade of Ceauşescu’s regime. The power struggle between television audiences, Securitate and the dictator began in the 1980s, when the Securitate launched operation Malicius to identify television viewers with anti-regime attitudes.\(^{31}\) During that decade, television schedules were reduced to a few hours daily and limited primarily to propaganda programmes and coverage of Ceauşescu himself. In response, viewer audiences voiced complaints to the broadcaster, criticising both the poor programming and the regime itself in letters and phone calls. Audience dissidence mounted in the summer of 1982 when Ceauşescu ordered that the World Football Cup was not to be broadcast on Romanian television.\(^{32}\) Letters and phone calls by viewers abounded that summer. Antennae mushroomed on domestic roof tops, which alerted authorities to the fact that Romanians were tuning in to neighbouring countries’ channels. In June 1982, Tudor Postelnicu from the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported on dissident practices among television viewers. He drew attention to the growing number of antennae on residential buildings; the mass production of two types of signal amplifiers by the Electronica factory in Bucharest; and the collective excursions of citizens carrying portable television sets onto hills which allowed them a better reception of World Cup games on neighbouring countries’ television.\(^{33}\) Such new reception infrastructures as roof antennae, amplifiers, portable sets and elevated viewing locations transformed television viewing in Communist Romania from a domestic activity into a public act of dissidence. In response, the Securitate together with the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications began to investigate the reception of neighbouring countries’ television on Romanian territory. The results were alarming. In a country of twenty-three million inhabitants, six to eight million people in the south watched Bulgarian television, three to four million in the south-western territories watched Yugoslavian channels, and audiences in the north and east viewed Soviet programmes.\(^{34}\) The Securitate noted that neighbouring countries targeted the Romanian audience with programmes outside the broadcast times of Romanian television. Moldavia provided daily shows from 7 a.m. to 12–1 p.m., often in Romanian language. Bulgarian television addressed its audiences with the salute «Dear Bulgarian and Romanian viewers».\(^{35}\) The Novi Sad radio station in Yugoslavia supple-
mented its broadcasts with a 30-minute programme in Romanian, and Hungary launched a local studio in Debrecen broadcasting in Romanian language.\textsuperscript{36}

The Securitate's response was operation Malicius – a platform to document, register and monitor dissidence among television audiences. The name of the operation came from the interception equipment connected to the telephones of the Romanian broadcaster. It allowed to track down phone calls and identify anonymous callers. Malicius dissidents voiced complaints against the unsatisfactory television schedules, the economic deprivation in the country and against Ceaușescu's regime. A letter sent to the Romanian television read: «I am an officer in the Romanian Army and I would like to hear on the radio and see on TV competent and well-thought-out programmes, rather than the rubbish you are serving us every day. ... I and the entire nation are fed up with you telling us about the Comrades Ceaușescu, about their and the Party’s ordinances (the Party being a bunch of crazy, paranoid, sclerotic, old men). ... They brought the country to a state of cruel misery and dearth as never before. ... I am warning you that if you do not change the programmes on TV ... I am in the position to destroy the television building and any other buildings.»\textsuperscript{37}

A Malicius caller threatened to bomb the public broadcaster at the news that the football match Steaua Bucharest vs. Glasgow Rangers would not be transmitted.\textsuperscript{38} «S.T.», reportedly calling under the influence of alcohol, demanded that «liars» – namely party and state leaders – should no longer appear on television.\textsuperscript{39} A civilian phoning in from a food supply institution in Bucharest communicated: «Our television should learn from Bulgarians how to subtitle a movie. My condolences!»\textsuperscript{40} «B.R.» was dissatisfied with the quality of shows: «It is a catastrophe! We will go mad»\textsuperscript{41} «T.G.» complained about too many programmes being dedicated to Ceaușescu's birthday: «Christ was born in one day and died in one day. How many times was [Ceaușescu] born?»\textsuperscript{42} «O.I.» called in to say: «There will be a Lech Wałęsa in Romania as well, just like in Poland.»\textsuperscript{43} «M. G.» threatened a civil war in Bucharest and emphasised that hunger makes people lose their temper.\textsuperscript{44} «M.M.» complained about the undersupply of heating and warm water and concluded: «We will come and set fire to the Central Committee.»\textsuperscript{45} A fireman soldier from the Ministry of Internal Affairs introduced himself as the head of the Ministry of
Transport and Telecommunications and complained about the «rubbish» broadcast on television.46

Such open criticism marked the rise of social opposition against the regime. There were two striking features of the Malicius operation. First, its secrecy: the department of audience research at the public broadcaster did not know of Malicius. Pavel Câmpeanu, head of audience research at the time, makes no mention of Malicius in his article on TV audiences in the 1980s.47 While the Malicius operation was active, the public broadcaster was ordered to organise «meetings with viewers» where broadcast and political authorities travelled to factories and public institutions to interview people about their viewing experiences.48 The meetings were a success in the sense that positive feedback from viewers was gathered. This contrasted sharply with the complaints intercepted via Malicius and perhaps served as a public test of the private dissidence of television viewers. It became clear that the dissidents were primarily and perhaps exclusively television viewers, rather than workers or citizens. It was the status granted to them by television watching that shaped expressions of their dissidence. The viewers themselves were unaware that they were monitored: «If there were many [people] like me, things would change,» thought the caller «D.I.»49

A second striking feature of the Malicius operation was the tolerance the Securitate displayed towards dissidence. «Confronted with this defiance, the Securitate could have reacted with its customary brutality, destroying the installed antennae. ... But such «normal» reactions did not occur,» argues Pavel Câmpeanu.50 Instead, the Securitate engaged in dialogue with dissidents. Securitate informers would pay home visits to Malicius callers, but would also gather information about them from their neighbours. A typical report on such a home visit read: «On Sunday, I went to his house ... together with my son. He was sober. The house was modest, but clean. He avoided any political discussions, maybe because of my boy being around. I found out that ... he comes from a family of Communist workers, that he was himself a Communist, without a membership card, because he had been excluded from the Party by those at the ... factory where he works. ... I realised that he read primarily history books. He lent my son three of his books as he also liked reading the same type of books. G. had called in for the first time complaining about a programme on a visit of our state leader, criticising the discrepancies between what we showed and the social reality (meaning the food shortages in shops).»51


Personal talk with Ştefan Dumitrescu, former sociologist at the department of audience research, 24 August 2009, Bucharest.


48 Personal talk with Ştefan Dumitrescu, former sociologist at the department of audience research, 24 August 2009, Bucharest.


50 Campeanu, «Romanian Television», 113.

While not counteracting anti-Ceauşescu protest in any form, the Malicius operation offered the Securitate the chance to monitor and identify social spaces of dissidence in dictatorial Romania. The secret service exploited this knowledge by defining and documenting specific social profiles which would later be used for constructing key characters in the Live Romanian Revolution.

The procedure behind Malicius was to identify dissidents by name and address, to spy on them and their social circles and then draft a report on each dissident. The organisation of information in the reports, the prevalence of certain pieces of information over others and the recurrent language used are telling. Each report described the social status of the dissident (job, family details) and his or her social behaviour (peer relations, moral and civic attitudes). Particular social typologies were dominant in these reports: individuals with prior political records (former members of other political parties), ex-convicts, mentally disturbed individuals, alcoholics, hooligans and the simply dissatisfied, apolitical viewers. The Securitate provided the most extensive reports on drunks, delinquents and the mentally ill. Such descriptions read as follows:

«C.A., 35 years old, employee at the Factory for Car Repairs ‘Grivita’ [is] a morally decaying element, alcoholic and impulsive. Between 1970 and 1972, he was under Securitate’s surveillance because he contacted Radio Free Europe to request the broadcast of specific songs.»\(^{52}\)

«T.G., 51 years old, technician at the Romanian Railways, [was] sentenced to four years in jail for complicity to theft. [...] He listens to Radio Free Europe and is often under the influence of alcohol, which is when he adopts a hostile attitude towards the regime.»\(^{53}\)

«P.A. is known as a quiet, respectful, sociable and communicative person in relations with neighbours. In discussions with peers, she avoids negative comments about political events in our country. [...] She is not a depraved person. [...] She is not known for having relatives or relations abroad, she has not been seen in the entourage of foreign citizens, nor has she received foreign correspondence.»\(^{54}\)

«G.M.G. is known as a generally respectful person, but reserved in his relations with the neighbours. [...] He usually consumes alcoholic drinks, despite his modest finances. [...] Both he and his wife are mentally sick. [...] His main occupation in his spare time is to read fiction, or technical or philosophical literature.»\(^{55}\)

«I.O. [is] known for his inappropriate behaviour, being characterised as an alcoholic and trouble-maker. [...] When he is under the influence of alcohol, he listens to foreign radio programmes hostile to our country.»\(^{56}\)

\(^{52}\) Anexa Nr. 0051.113, February 1988, Radiotelevision Files D 135, Vol. 83, p. 162, CNSAS, Bucharest.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 162–163.


Malicius reports functioned as character references which were to be reiterated during the Live Romanian Revolution. As shown later, the «terrorist» in the televised events repeated these social categories in the language of the Malicius reports. The Malicius operation marked the beginning of a process of power negotiation between civilian television audiences, Ceaușescu and the Securitate. Within this triangle of negotiation, the Securitate ensured their dominance by tolerating the emerging dissidence in the country. «Present everywhere, [the secret police] controlled everything, from the obstetric state of women to the use of typewriters and the repertory of musicians hired to play at private celebrations. Most people adapted to this exhaustive control by developing a strategy of feigned obedience. But with the antennae on the roofs, pretence was impossible.»⁵⁷ In addition, the Securitate accumulated knowledge about the growing unrest in the country. With the dictator’s personality cult at its peak, the criticism and verbal abuse that was voiced against him via the phone lines of the public broadcaster was most likely never brought to Ceaușescu’s attention. Otherwise, there would have been a harsh crack-down; these dissident practices could not have been tolerated throughout the 1980s.

The failed broadcast on 21 December articulated precisely this triangle of power negotiation in which the Securitate had already consolidated its hegemony. The Securitate dominated the situation because audiences were unaware of being monitored and documented, and neither did Ceaușescu know about the extent of civilian dissidence already present in private spaces. The broadcast on 21 December worked to secure a link between the private space of dissidence and the public space of dictatorial rule, for the first time transporting dissident elements from the private into the public arena.

3. Naturalisation of (Live) Television

The failed broadcast which marked the beginning of the revolution was of paramount importance also because it inscribed a myth of liveness into the subsequent televising of the Romanian revolution. The connotations of the term «live» are rich and complex, but «even the simplest meaning of ‹live› – that the time of the event corresponds to the transmission and viewing times – reverberates with suggestions of ‹being there […] bringing it to you as it really is›».⁵⁸ In doing that, live television «smoothes out spatial and social distances, it presents itself as a continuous sequence that overcomes fragmentation, replacing it with a sense of wholeness and immediacy».⁵⁹ In other words, it conceals its own mechanisms of construction, the spaces and social groups it draws upon and those it leaves out, framing a

⁵⁷ Campeanu, «Romanian Television», 113.
⁵⁹ Feuer, «The Concept», 16.
sense of being there. Because liveness «is generally treated as «natural», it is also ideological», says Nick Couldry.60 This generates a «myth of the mediated centre» in which occurs the «mystifying effacement of the vast linkage of networks that make up the media process».61 In such cases, the medium is treated as being «the society» itself, just like the Live Romanian Revolution has been regarded as the Revolution itself. Therefore deconstruction is needed, using Latour’s concept of mediation. Mediation is a force of transformation and distortion of original intentions or the original social referent, drawing attention to the fact that outputs are contingent on interactions between different actors.62 If one is to understand a particular output, such as a televised programme, one needs to render visible and disentangle the dynamics between the relevant actors. There were two mediation processes at work in the live broadcasts on 21 December and from 22 December onwards. In the first one, live technology played the dominant role, whereas in the second one the Securitate became the leading actor.

As live television was recognised as a vulnerable site that carried the risk of transmitting spontaneous criticism of the regime, strict measures of control were set up from 1975 onwards.63 Their role was to prevent any anti-regime incidents from happening in real time on air. The measures were intended to protect live coverage of Ceauşescu, party officials and state events, the live transmission of sport events and the news bulletins. The main points of control concerned the live cameras, the live microphones, the outside broadcasting (OB) vans and the editing rooms at the Centre for Distribution and Control. In case of undesired incidents, the cameramen had to zoom out as they had limited possibilities of choosing or changing frames while being on air. A politically responsible editor had to be present in the OB van and insert into the programme any appropriate image captured with his live camera. A second, carefully selected editor was on duty in the editing rooms at the studios. Another point of control was at the Centre for Distribution and Control where anyone in charge could interrupt the live broadcast by the projection of a fixed image appropriate for the specific programme. In addition, two people with solid political training were watching programmes as they were broadcast on television. Furthermore, the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications and the Ministry of Internal Affairs exerted additional control over live broadcasting. The tenth floor of the Telephone Palace, where television signals were sent into the ether, was reinforced with extra security measures. Personnel from the Ministry of Internal Affairs ensured the security of microphones and of outside

60 Couldry, Media Rituals, 99.
62 Latour, Reassembling, 39.
broadcasting vans at live events. A Securitate scheme dated 24 November 1975 illustrated the entire process of broadcasting live from OB vans. The images from the different OB vans together with images from the studios were sent to the editing room inside Radiotelevision. From the editing rooms, the content went to the «general check-up» cabin. It was then circulated via the cabin for the final content check-up before it was sent to the Distribution Centre, part of the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications. Interestingly, this Securitate scheme shows that on top of the Distribution Centre, on the premises of Romanian Radiotelevision, there was a place where the entire broadcasting process could be interrupted by means of a remote control. Only after passing through all the control areas was the content sent out into the ether via the television transmitter situated on top of Casa Scânteii, the publishing house of the main Communist newspaper.

The live broadcast on 21 December became what former news presenter Nicolae Melinescu called the «aborted appearance of Ceauşescu». It caused all the mechanisms of control to collapse, turning from a pro-regime manifestation into an anti-Ceauşescu event. On that day the live event had been arranged in line with Ceauşescu’s protocol of control. The General Television Director Constantin Petre and the News Editor-in-Chief Ilie Ciurescu supervised the activity in the OB vans, while Vice-Director Traian Puşcaşu was in the studio. The event was filmed with three cameras. It started out with panoramic views of the crowds cheering and holding oversized pro-Communist banners and portraits of the dictator. As Ceauşescu began his speech, the cameras captured him frontally. Shortly afterwards, the live microphones picked up rioting from the crowds. The central camera fixated Ceauşescu’s reaction of shock. Fractions of a second later, it transmitted shaky images. «Neither the personnel in the OB vans […] nor we at Studio 5 realised what was really happening in the square. The personnel in the OB vans, feeling the pressure of the crowds, asked via the radio stations if there was an earthquake.»

Seconds later, the cameras turned away and were fixated on the sky, following the control protocol for live transmissions. That was the moment when the broadcast was interrupted on the home screens. «During those approximately three minutes when the transmission was interrupted, two cameras no longer transmitted any images (the cables had been broken off by the crowds surrounding the metal towers on which they had been set up) and another fixated on the sky, somewhere near the Telephone Palace.» When live transmission was resumed, Ceauşescu made efforts to finish his speech, stuttering and forgetting his words while the masses


65 Ibid.

66 Interview with Nicolae Melinescu, Bucharest, 27 August 2009.


68 Ibid., 25.

69 Ibid.
frenetically chanted for him. The broadcast ended with the cameras zooming out on the crowds carrying Socialist banners.\textsuperscript{70}

A severely edited version of that broadcast was re-run on television later that evening. By then the streets of Bucharest were taken over by revolutionaries. The next day they occupied the Central Committee building, forcing Ceauşescu and his wife to flee. The revolutionaries moved on to the premises of the Romanian Radio-television and at midday 22 December entered the institution. That morning, the news presenter George Marinescu made four consecutive announcements of Ceauşescu’s order to initiate a state of emergency on the territory of Romania. That was followed by a transmission break. «Around 1–2 p.m., there re-appeared on the screens of those who had not turned off their television sets (and there were many), the logo of TVR against a classical music sound track. This image, which usually did not communicate anything, intrigued an entire country: it was clear that something had happened in Bucharest.»\textsuperscript{71} Studio 4 was preparing to start live televising of the Romanian revolution as the general check-up cabin was waiting for the territorial relays to be re-opened. The first broadcast showed two public figures, the poet Mircea Dinescu and the actor Ion Caramitru, surrounded by a crowd of civilians. They communicated that revolutionaries had taken over the television building, that the Army had joined the anti-Ceauşescu insurrection and that the dictator was on the run. Mircea Dinescu made an appeal to the Securitate to surrender their guns, and the first scene of the Live Romanian Revolution ended in a collective voice: «The television is with us! We won! We are here! We won!»\textsuperscript{72}

The failed broadcast on 21 December is of particular interest, as it underscores on the one hand the ways live television was a site for power negotiation and on the other hand the way live, «immediate» television is naturalised to the extent that it renders invisible its own mechanisms of construction. Live television in Ceauşescu’s Romania was the output of a strict protocol of control and surveillance. The incidents captured by live recording demonstrated the agency of broadcast technology in subverting Ceauşescu’s power. «Live television [...] lives off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment very much as we do in actual life», says Herbert Zettl.\textsuperscript{73} However, the agency of the live infrastructures on 21 December was the outcome of interactions with other actors and of power negotiations. Why was the live transmission on 21 December not interrupted by means of the remote control available at the Centre for Distribution and Control, designed specifically for such incidents? Why did the cameramen follow the control protocol by diverting their cameras away from the site of action and onto a neutral image, while those in charge of the remote control, higher up the line of responsibility, did not react?

\textsuperscript{70}Tape B 48195, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucharest.
\textsuperscript{71}Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 20.
\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{73}H. Zettl, «The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics», in: Journal of the University Film Association 30 (1978) 2, quoted in Feuer, «The Concept», 13.
4. The Figuration of the Live Romanian Revolution

When live television is viewed as «natural», hiding the power negotiations and the mechanisms of construction that bring it about, what is left of television is its figu- rative character. According to Latour, figuration is the visible embodiment and materiality of a performed action. Television is by default a figurative medium, rendering visible representations of action without necessarily disclosing the agencies that work behind the scenes at their construction. While every agency has a figuration, figurations cannot be reduced to, nor be mistaken for actual agencies. Therefore, it is important to decode figurations so as to consider their relations with actual actors. The Live Romanian Revolution was merely a figuration of change. Among those who appeared on that screen and had a central role in constructing a figuration of change were Teodor Brateş (the main moderator of the live events), Ion Iliescu (the leader of the revolution and future president of Romania) and the «terrorists».

The first broadcast of the televised revolution on that early afternoon of December contrasted sharply with the aesthetics of the Communist television of just a few hours before. The rigid and over-elaborated representations of the regime were replaced by improvised transmissions, with civilians crowding in front of the cameras and noted cultural actors in the spotlight. From the beginning, a short man with glasses, the News Vice-Editor-in-Chief Teodor Brateş, distinguished himself as the moderator of the events. Neither his face nor his name was known to the public. Many called in to ask who he was. *The New York Times* even inquired if he was the new prime minister or the new television director. Brateş camped at the centre of the live transmissions and during the Live Revolution became the new face of the Free Romanian Television. But Brateş had been one of the main pillars of the regime in the news department under Ceauşescu. Former news presenter and editor Nicolae Melinescu confessed: «Teodor Brateş was Stalin’s admirer, he was even nicknamed ‘little Stalin’ and he would wear boots and trousers just like him. He remained a very good journalist, but he was a convinced Communist. That was the doctrine he believed in. [...] When he would have to give me the visa [e.g. forms of approval for a TV programme to ensure that everything was according to political regulations before being broadcast] for a programme about Great Britain, he would insert into my text: ‘the Comrade said’ or ‘just like the President of Romania said’. Or if I would bring him an interview with a guest from abroad and the guest would say: ‘I was in Romania and I had a meeting with the Romanian authorities’, he would correct it and say ‘a meeting with the president of Romania, Nicolae Ceauşescu’. That’s who he was.»

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74 Latour, *Reassembling.*
77 Interview with Nicolae Melinescu, Bucharest, 27 August 2009.
Brateş’s position within the Communist power structures of the news department propelled him to the centre of the live events, while the public’s unfamiliarity with him helped him to become the face of change during the revolution. It was Teodor Brateş who introduced to the cameras Ion Iliescu, the future president of the country: «Esteemed viewers, we have the great joy to host here in the studio Ion Iliescu (applause) [...] Mister Iliescu is the son of a revolutionary, of a patriot, being himself a patriot.»\(^78\) Before his appearance in Studio 4, Iliescu’s name was repeatedly mentioned in the live broadcasts. Army Captain Dumitrescu invited Iliescu to come to the broadcast institution: «I am asking Comrade Iliescu, my former colleague, to come to the television. We have to organise ourselves, comrades.»\(^79\)

Throughout the broadcasts, Iliescu’s televised persona as a suitable political leader was sold to audiences. From his first television appearance, he left no doubt that he was in charge of the revolt. He announced that he had ordered the Army to cease fire and informed viewers that a new interim governing body was to be formed. He strongly dissociated himself from the previous regime: «The main person to blame is Ceauşescu. [...] He ended up in the dramatic situation of [...] ordering shootings against the people.»\(^80\)

Very few viewers knew back then of Iliescu’s relations with the old Communist structures. He had worked at the Ideology and Propaganda Department of the party’s Central Committee and had been leader of the Communist Youth Union and Minister for Youth Affairs and Secretary of Ideology at the Central Committee.\(^81\) His split with Ceauşescu occurred in the late 1970s when he opposed the cultural reforms that Ceauşescu introduced. In 1984 he was deprived of all his functions within the party and became a simple director of the State Technical House in Bucharest. But by that time he had already gained the political capital that made him «a natural candidate for the highest office, a relaxed, understanding and enlightened party boss» in 1989.\(^82\) The figuration of Iliescu on the television screen served to conceal his Communist power capital and propagate him as the new democratic leader. Brateş’s mention of Iliescu’s revolutionary descent when first introducing him to the live cameras placed Iliescu within a revolutionary tradition.\(^83\)

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the need to decode figurations is the case of the «terrorists» during the Live Romanian Revolution. The terrorists served to explain the bloody character of the events. In the broadcasts after 21 December, audiences were kept up-to-date on the latest criminal acts of the terrorists.

«Don’t interrupt the broadcast...! To the television there are coming 2.000... terro... antiterrorists... the antiterrorist brigade... help us... people come outside... 2.000 terrorists... The Army...helps us, helps us, the Army help us, someone help us!»\(^84\)

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78 Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 41.
79 Ibid., 40.
80 Ibid., 42.
81 Ratesh, Romania, 48.
82 Ibid., 52.
83 Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 41.
84 Ibid., 65.
«If you allow me to say a few words, we were informed a few minutes ago that in the basement of the television station there was found a bomb, which was fortunately deactivated by specialists. There might be other such criminal attempts,» said former news presenter George Marinescu.85

«I want to tell you that we received some more news about the water... Be careful... Criminal elements poisoned the water in certain areas... don’t drink... be careful with the children, let us not be the ones who kill them,» communicated Teodor Brateş.86

The figuration of the terrorist on television helped to justify the speedy execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu. «I remember [...] an individual who was captured and who had declared that as long as Ceauşescu was still alive, they would not give up. [...] This life loyalty of some to Ceauşescu prompted us to take the decision for the trial», said Ion Iliescu after the revolution.87

The question of who these terrorists were has persisted in investigations of the revolution, without any satisfactory answer to date. This research argues that the terrorists were televised figurations used to perform a translation of old Communist actors into the new regime.88 The violent character of the events staged a strong opposition between the new revolutionary leaders (who in fact were old Communists) and the old dictator. It thus helped to legitimise the new leaders as different from the previous regime.

During the live transmissions, captured terrorists were shown to the cameras. Their figuration on the screen assigned a face to what remained a mysterious character. Poorly dressed civilians, rebel teenagers, women were shown in close-up in areas of gun-fire. Hostages held in the corridors of the television building were presented as terrorists.89 Their visibility was enhanced by close-ups, but also by the tactics adopted for presenting them to the cameras. Alleged terrorists captured inside the Romanian broadcast institution were asked to show their ID and name their workplace in front of the cameras. This built up a figuration of concrete, material existences. Paradoxically, despite their visualised faces and identities, it remained unclear who these terrorists really were. Gabriel Paciurea, a civilian who at the time was on the sixth floor of the television building, «looked with pity at the people arrested. They were no older than twenty years and seemed to come from a technical school. They were dirty and poorly dressed. [...] Probably we didn’t look any better, either.»90 Maria Borza, office manager for the managing director of television at the time, recalled: «During those days, a lot of suspects were undressed

85 Ibid., 76.
86 Ibid., 63.
87 Ion Iliescu in Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 225.
88 See also M. Oprea, Mostenitori Securitatii, Bucharest 2005.
89 Tape 08539, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucharest.
90 Televiziunea Romana (eds), Revolutia, 175.
and kept hostage on the [eleventh] floor – we were walking among them without any fear.» At a morgue, a doctor showed dead bodies to the cameras, explaining: «this one was a terrorist», «this one was a revolutionary», «this one was a Securitate member, a terrorist and a drug addict». What exactly differentiated a terrorist from an unfortunate civilian was unclear. According to the new political power, the terrorists were last-minute pro-Ceaușescu warriors.

On-screen, terrorists became palpable realities. Rumours about terrorists were spreading continuously. «In the evening and night of 22 December, there were many moments of panic inside the television. I remember a young girl, very nice though, who was busy being a lift attendant and who came up every time with news about terrorists breaking in to different floors of the building. After a while, she had managed to cause general panic,» said Silviu Brucan, political dissident and former vice-president of the Romanian television. The portrayal of terrorists on and off camera was constructed around typologies that included socially disadvantaged individuals, people with illicit behaviour and people with foreign connections. Exemplary terrorists were depicted as «an individual of about 33 years of age, carrying no ID, well-built, round face, drunk, wearing a fur coat, no gun, but having bullets in his pocket», «a dark man of about 35 years of age, skinny, having a gun, no belt, multiple IDs and a bunch of keys, among which a universal car key» or «a young man, unarmed, but with no ID». Someone described «a man having electronic equipment and foreign currency on him» while another person said terrorists looked like «Arab mercenaries, judging by their skin colour and equipment».

The construction of terrorists on- and off-screen carried the signature of the Securitate. The visual and verbal focus was on outlining their social spaces (ID, work-places, social relations, inadequate clothing, foreign connections) and depraved habits (drinking, thieving and criminality, suggested by incriminating objects such as «multiple IDs», «universal car key», «electronic equipment» or «bullets»). The portraits of «terrorists» during the revolution and of Malicius dissenters throughout the 1980s followed the same descriptive structure. They both linked political dissent with social depravation and singled out social habits such as drinking, stealing and engaging in criminal acts. The anti-Ceaușescu Malicius caller seemed to have become the pro-Ceaușescu fighter during the revolution, with little distinguishing the one from the other. The «terrorists» just like the Malicius

91 Ibid., 254.  
92 Tape RRD 19813, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucarest.  
93 Silviu Brucan in Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 217.  
94 Nicolae Stefan Soucup in Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 133.  
95 Ibid.  
96 Vasile Gheorghe in Televiziunea Romana (eds.), Revolutia, 173.  
cius callers were social outcasts, coming from the lower strata of society and exhibiting deviant behaviour.

The Malicius records informed the televising of the terrorist. His figurative construction can be traced back to the Securitate and confirms the decisive role of Ceaușescu’s former secret services in seizing the new revolutionary power. Mircea Dinescu, who featured in the first transmission of the Live Romanian Revolution, confirmed that some generals switched sides on condition that «serious politicians took power instead of a few crazy poets and intellectuals. [...] Had Iliescu gone on TV one hour later, the revolution would have failed.»98 Iliescu was the «serious politician» desired by the Securitate, and voices prior to the revolution recommended him as «the natural candidate for the highest office».99 In this triangle of revolutionary struggles between the people, the Securitate (with their desired candidate Iliescu) and Ceaușescu, the speedy removal of Ceaușescu became imperative for a successful transfer of old Communist actors into the new era. Elena Ceaușescu's last words at her execution (in response to accusations of Nicolae Ceaușescu having ordered the shootings) were: «Those are the people of the Securitate, they are not ours. We are here in this condition, what power do we still have? You have the power! Ask those who have the power!»100 Although nobody reflected upon Elena Ceaușescu's last words at the time, they are telling.

Constructed by means of figurations, the Live Romanian Revolution served to transform televised representations into social realities, concealing the actors that determined the political change and the nature of their agencies. Agency was confused with figuration, where figuration was the embodiment, the visibility of agency and not the agency itself. Actors such as the Securitate and the entire process of power transfer behind the Live Romanian Revolution remained hidden under the facet of visual representations.

5. Analysing Television as Historical Agent

Although the impact of different media on revolutions has been recognised, historical accounts have discussed the media mainly in regard to their ability to disseminate information, mobilise the masses or legitimise social actions. The case of Romanian television in the 1989 revolution shows that television’s agency went beyond this.

As a historical agent, television does not only provide an understanding of revolutionary events, but it renders visible the broader social and historical processes that construct them and the relation between these processes and the televised image. Television is a localised, naturalised and figurative medium. As a localised medium, it carries with itself agencies that are distributed in other times and

98 Ratesh, Romania, 52.
99 Ibid.
100 Tape 101320, Arhiva Multimedia, Televiziunea Romana, Bucharest.
Television as Historical Agent in the Romanian Revolution

Television audiences did not spontaneously transform into revolutionaries on 21 December 1989. Rather, their decade-long private revolt was moved into the public arena by the subversive live infrastructures of television. Localisation serves to contextualise and historicise televised events, as a first step in understanding the televisual image.

Television is also naturalised. It has become so successful in being an integral part of present-day social life that the very mechanisms by which it distinguishes itself as being different from society are left unquestioned. Television itself habitually conceals its mechanisms of constructing social reality (or political change in this particular case). Awareness of the television as a naturalised medium presupposes the deconstruction of production practices behind television broadcasts. The production protocol behind live broadcasting in Communist Romania helps to understand which actors were involved in making television, as well as the relations and power struggles between them. Those in charge of live microphones and cameras at the live broadcast on 21 December subverted Ceaușescu’s control mechanisms, and other actors played supporting roles by not stopping the broadcast with the remote control.

Last but not least, television is a figurative medium par excellence. Television shows, impersonates and materialises agency without being the agency itself. Here, historical research needs to distinguish between a representation and its social referent. The Live Romanian Revolution was a televised representation whose greatest impact on political change rested precisely in confusing its representations with real agencies. This confusion performed a transfer of power by representing revolutionary actors as figurations of a new regime, while – as the cases of Ion Iliescu and Teodor Brateș show – their agency can be traced back to the higher power structures of the Communist regime. The Securitate historian Marius Oprea has described the «transformation of Securitate uniforms into Armani suits» after 1989. The live televising of the Romanian revolution was the springboard that launched this transformation process of old Communist actors. By means of figuration, specific types of television audiences were represented as «terrorists» and used for justifying the bloody character of the Romanian revolution. The double figuration of television audiences in the events – as revolutionaries and as terrorists – concealed the agency of the Securitate as the main architect behind Ceaușescu’s overthrow.

Television was the central agent behind the stolen revolution in Romania. Its agency consisted in localising a decade-long process of power struggles between audiences, Ceaușescu and the Securitate, in naturalising the spontaneity of the revolutionary events and in concealing by means of figurations the architect of the revolution and the mechanisms by which the stolen revolution took place.

Oprea, Mostenitorii, 20.
The article analyses the role of television in the 1989 Romanian revolution. Based on documents of the Romanian secret services, audiovisual material and interviews with former television employees, it sheds new light onto the revolutionary events. The participation of television in the overthrow of Ceaușescu should be understood as the climax of a decade-long process of power struggles between audiences, Ceaușescu and the Securitate. The televising of the revolution was a central act in transferring elements from the Communist regime into the new era and representing them as the new democratic leadership. The article argues that television is a localised, naturalised and figurative agent. In order to understand the role of television in historical events, these different instances of televisual agency need to be addressed.
tations du nouveau pouvoir démocratique. Dans le cadre de l'article, la télévision est considérée comme agent localisé, naturalisé et figuratif. Afin de comprendre comment la télévision influence des événements historiques, il est nécessaire d'examiner ces différents aspects de la force télévisuelle.

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ABSTRACTS