



History In The Backstage Of Romanian Television Archives

Dana Mustata

University of Groningen | Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26
9712 EK Groningen | The Netherlands | d.mustata@rug.nl

Abstract: The historical value of audiovisual archives lies as much in the documented collection they have to offer as in the losses that history has imprinted on them. Controversial material that has been confiscated by the secret police in communist Romania or records of programmes that have been destroyed due to economizing practices of 'taking the silver out of the pellicle' are important facts in the history of Romanian television. Equally important for history is the 'leftover' material filmed during the Romanian revolution, which now lives in the shadow of the screened footage. Pursuing the life story of an archival institution and understanding its relations with history forms an important preliminary step for the historian in assessing the documented history within the archive.

Keywords: Romania, television archives, Arhiva Multimedia, Romanian Revolution, Ceausescu, Securitate, communism.

Readers around Europe may rightly associate Romanian television with its live screening of the revolution in December 1989. However, the story told by the Romanian television archives goes far beyond the screened event. This is an article about Romanian television history built on the loss, contradictions, conflicts and challenges that have been brought to the surface through the story of its archives. It is a reflection on history from within the archives. It is an article that asks the question: where do we find history within a television archive and how does the historian go about pursuing it?

In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault states that the archive is a 'practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge', a practice situated between discourses that justify the selection and categorization of documents and the corpus of archived documents.¹ An archive comes with 'rules of practice' and a 'general system' by which statements emerge and are re-evaluated. The rules of practice are as much a necessary corpus of analysis for historians as the archived documents. Indeed, as Lynn Spigel observes, although historians enter the archives in search of envisioned evidence, often all they end up with is an insight into how the archives work, document and categorise.² After all, audiovisual archives are not simply a collection of facts; their importance not only lies in what they have to tell us, but what they keep secret.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, 1972, p. 102.

² Lynn Spigel: 'Our TV Heritage: Television, the Archive and the Reasons for Preservation' in Janet Wasko, eds, *A Companion to Television*, Blackwell, 2005, p. 68

Before thinking about the 'rules of practice', it is necessary to look into an archive's life story as it tells us a great deal about life outside its institutional routines and sedimentations. Searching for direct contacts between the archive and history creates room to search outside the defined box of what the archive has to offer. This is even more relevant in the case of Romanian television archives as they remain caught up in the dynamics of a recent past that is still alive, in which eye witnesses still have a voice, in which memory and history are yet to be set apart and in which emotion cancels the distance of time. The 'rules of practice' characteristic of any archive are in this particular instance undermined by a developing life story that is still busy coming to terms with, finding and interpreting its own past.

Before diving into the rationale of these archives, it is necessary for the historian to stumble upon and make sense of its life story. Traces of this life story are contained in absences and traces that linger over the audiovisual collection present at [Arhiva Multimedia](#) of Romanian television.

1 Taking The Silver Out Of The Pellicule

In the 70s, the programme [Reflector](#) became an institution of social justice in Rumania as it investigated cases of social offense and political corruption.³ It also became famous for launching the television reporter and the investigative television journalist in Romanian broadcast institutions. For example, in the early 1970s, the programme showed Party officials as they drove away in black limousines, refusing to respond to charges of corruption thrown at them by Reflector reporters.⁴ In its glory years, [Reflector](#) became a platform for an entire generation of television professionals, such as: Carmen Dumitrescu, Rodica Rarau, Anca Arion, Cornelia Radulescu, Alexandru Stark, Florin Bratescu, Stefan Dimitriu and Mircea Giosanu. *Reflector* stayed popular with its audience until the end of the 70s when it transformed into a political programme at the service of the Party.

In the 1980s, a new economising practice was born due to the poor economy: taking the silver out of the pellicle as a way of recycling. This practice was placed at the service of political interests and under its umbrella, inconvenient programmes, such as Reflector, were destroyed. As a result there are important parts of Romanian television history that are missing from its archive. According to *Reflector* reporter and programme maker Stefan Dimitriu:

*By the end of the 1980s, many records of Reflector from the 70s were destroyed. Under the pretext of taking the silver out of the pellicle, they destroyed first and foremost Reflector programmes. We are now left without some of the most important documents of that era, because indeed some of them were professional masterpieces, but also valuable documents about things that would happen in a society pretending to be perfect... That was the true history of Romania, not the triumphalist reportages.*⁵

The same economising rationale left its imprints on practices of archival re-use in Romanian television production in the 1980s. Any programme, other than those dedicated to dictator Ceausescu, had to manage with a 1:1 pellicle usage ratio. That means the amount of filmed pellicle had to be the same as the amount used in the end production. In the 1980s this led to practices of archival re-use in internal production, a practice based on cutting out pieces of sound or image from original film and taping them into new productions on the manual editing table. This explains why one can often discover canned film without matching sound and image at *Arhiva Multimedia*, resulting in distorted archival documents that are missing audio or visual parts and in which the two are no longer synchronised. Such practices of destructive re-use are also to be explained by the lack of an institutional cadre for archiving inside Romanian television. The lack of an institutional culture for archiving left practices of re-use at the mercy of individual producers inside the broadcast institution until the setting up of Arhiva Multimedia in 1990 at the initiative of programme maker Stefan Dimitriu.

³ Daniela Mustata, *The Power of Television: Including the Historicizing of the Live Romanian Television*, PhD Dissertation, Utrecht University, 4 February 2011.

⁴ This is what former deputy director of Romanian television remembers in the collection *Viziune Tele* (1996) edited by the broadcast institution on the occasion of its 45th anniversary.

⁵ Stefan Dimitriu. Interviewed in Bucharest on January 17th 2008.

2 Audiovisual Material In Private Hands

At the 12th Congress of the Romanian Communist Part in 1979, Party member Constantin Parvulescu gave a highly critical speech against dictator Ceausescu. Confiscated by the Securitate once the Congress ended, the recorded images of Parvulescu's public act of dissidence never made it to Romanian television. Although an important document in the history of the communist regime in Romania, these images remained in the possession of Securitate members. Decades later, with the rise of sharing technologies such as Bit torrent and You Tube, images of the [Parvulescu versus Ceausescu](#) incident began to reappear in public and through these channels made their way back into the Romanian television archives.

The close supervision of the Securitate over television under Ceausescu led to the confiscation of audiovisual material from the broadcast institution. It also produced an excess of written documentation on the broadcast institution under communism and ensured the transfer of written documents from Romanian television to the Securitate repositories. From this time important documents were classified under the name 'Dosarele Radio-televizunii' (the Radiotelevision Files) at the [Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives](#) (CNSAS) in Bucharest. Employment files, institutional reports, samples of internal press as well as informative reports and notes drafted by the Securitate themselves on the Romanian television can now be found at CNSAS.

Once the Securitate shed its institutional jacket in 1990, these written and audiovisual documents were left at the disposal of private individuals formerly associated with the secret police. A private appropriation of historical documents by former members of the Securitate occurred. The re-birth of Securitate figures into new power positions after 1989 also took place on the basis of a private control of these documents. Such documents were used primarily for concealing new political leaders' relations with the communist past, but also in blackmailing individual players on the political or economic arena.⁶ Under these circumstances, the Radiotelevision Files at the CNSAS do not appear to be complete, certain documents show signs of manipulation, while new documents continue to 'reappear' and be retroceded to the CNSAS.

3 Revolutionary Heritage

What else is there to offer the historian from behind the scenes of Romanian television?

The [televised Romanian Revolution](#) remains a worldwide known legacy of Romanian television. In 1989, the live event made [headlines](#) around the world. The global reach of the revolution promoted a standardised representation of the event with Romanian television being the only one filming inside its own institution and distributing the coverage to foreign stations. The effect of this is a specific repertoire of images, which have become an audiovisual legacy of the Romanian revolution on television. This is not just specific to Romanian television. It is in fact a default characteristic of the live medium, which works to universalise a dominant representation, standardise its use of images across different productions in different countries and naturalise its self-selected audiovisual repertoire.

The historical value of the audiovisual legacy on the Romanian Revolution lies in the 'left-over' broadcast material. This is material that was filmed, but not broadcast or material that remained within the ephemeral live, as it did not rise to an iconographic status.

Images of [Ceausescu's shooting](#) are known all over the world, but the history of those broadcasts, which are documented at the Multimedia Archives, is perhaps less well known. The trial and the death of the dictator were shot entirely by the Romanian Army. The tape catalogued under the reference number RRD 3172 shows a dispute over the phone between actor Sergiu Nicolaescu, news presenter Victor Ionescu on one side and an Army general on the other. Shot inside Romanian television, [the phone conversation](#) does not show the Army general, but makes the content of dispute clear: the Army refuses or, at best, wants to delay the transport of the filmed tapes of Ceausescu's execution to the television centre. The pretext used is that the material could get lost on the way and that the unedited version of the material could jeopardise the safety of the execution platoon. Eventually, the tape was sent to Romanian television in an edited version and actor Sergiu Nicolaescu further edited the film, cut images of the moment of execution and removed the faces of the executors. This phone conversation provides important insight into the Romanian Revolution.

⁶ This is an argument which Securitate historian Marius Oprea makes in his 2004 book *Mostenitorii Securitatii* ('The Heirs of the Securitate').

There was a surplus of material filmed inside Romanian television during the revolution, which perhaps adds to the historical value of a live revolution. This surplus constitutes raw, unedited filmed material, which does an excellent job of providing historical clues. Television cameras travelling quietly along the corridors of Romanian television during the events may not provide good material for spin-off productions on the revolution, but they offer a valuable resource for the historian. [Cameras witnessing staff meetings](#) or sneaking in on trivial conversations inside the broadcast institution during the fever of the events are not necessarily of high enough quality for screening but are useful to the historian. What is clear from this is that there needs to be an awareness of the medium's ways of working to discover the real value of the archive; to get past the screened history of a live revolution and suspect, anticipate and search for its added value to history.

4 Television Archives And History

Television archives and the search for history have a tantalising relationship to one another. They may befriend each other and trade their resources but they also have their own 'rules of practice'. It is not solely a matter of the historian trying to understand the rationale of the archive as much as reflecting on the history within the television archive itself. In other words, before studying the archived history, it is necessary to understand the preliminary rules of research in which the relations between the particular archive and history are established and understood. Such relations are better accessed through the losses and absences of the archive, through the challenges, conflicts or contradictions an archive has to offer. These preliminary pursuits provide a contextual entry, which can be the necessary step towards understanding the archival medium in order to assess what counts as a historical record in the context of a particular medium. Perhaps in the case of television, this is even more vital if archivists or historians are to dive beyond the primordial function of production and its re-use that is imprinted into the bulk of audiovisual collections. The losses of the archive, their traces outside the archive itself, the place of the medium in history and only, in a final instance, the understanding of the archive's rationale of choice and classification can shape the researcher's search for history within the television archive.

Biography

Dana Mustata is Assistant Professor in Television Studies and Journalism at Groningen University and researcher on the [EUscreen](#) project at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She obtained her PhD degree with a dissertation on a first history of Romanian television entitled: 'The Power of Television: Including the Historicizing of the Live Romanian Revolution'. She has previously worked on the Video Active project. She is a member of the [European Television History Network](#) and of the Television Studies Commission of the [International Federation of Television Archives](#).