

The Revolution Will Be Performed. Cameras and Mass Protests in the Perspective of Contemporary Art

Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium)

E-mail: kruchels@vub.ac.be

Abstract. This article offers an analysis of *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) by Harun Farocki and Andrej Ujicã and *The Pixelated Revolution* (2011) by Rabih Mroué, which both reflect on the role of amateur recordings in a revolution. While the first deals with the abundant footage of the mass protests in 1989 Romania, revealing how images became operative in the unfolding of the revolution, the second shows that mobile phone videos disseminated by the Syrian protesters in 2011 respond to the desire of immediacy with the blurry, fragmentary images taken in the heart of the events. One of the most significant results of this new situation is the way image production steers the comportment of people involved in the events. Ordinary participants become actors performing certain roles, while the events themselves are being seen as cinematic. This increased theatricality of mass protests can thus be seen as an instance of blurring the lines between video and photography on the one hand and performance, theatre and cinema on the other.

Keywords: performativity of images, amateur videos, revolution, mass protest, theatricality.

Between the Autumn of Nations of 1989 and the Arab Spring of 2011, a certain transformation in the role of image production and dissemination took place. This article focuses on two instances in that transformation captured in two distinct works of art.¹ The first, *Videograms of a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution*, 1992) by Harun Farocki and Andrej Ujicã was made entirely out of found footage from the so-called Romanian Revolution of 1989. The second, *Pixelated Revolution* (2011) by Rabih Mroué is an ongoing project reflecting on the videos from the civil war

1 I would like to thank Susana Martins and Jeroen Verbeeck for their helpful remarks and comments on earlier versions of this text.

in Syria. Through these two instances a certain shift is visible in the position, role and impact of the camera image. In it, technology, image, theater and performance intermingle to collectively create a new, mediated reality. Both *Videograms* and *Pixelated Revolution* proceed by an era in which claims to political issues are suspended in order to focus on the role of the images alone. Yet their aim is not to reassert our belief in images as a truthful or adequate representation of reality. Rather, it is to demonstrate how images become actors in that reality, influencing the handlings of their makers and changing the parameters of the visual media.

Cameras and Participants in the Historical Events of 1989

The velvet revolutions of 1989, which swept through Eastern Europe, occurred at the moment in history when technology of film and video recording became easy, cheap and widespread enough to be all-present. The effects of that development could be perceived on several occasions, for example in Czechoslovakia (Dayan and Katz 1992, 51–53), yet there is one particular history of a regime collapse which stands out. In December of 1989 in Romania, the people, the citizens, amateurs or semi-professionals filmed all stages and facets of the violent protests which resulted in the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's escape, subsequent capture, trial and execution on the 26th of December. For their film on the revolution, Farocki and Ujică deployed solely found footage from the private and public archives of Bucharest. These fragments range from official television broadcasts, through professional recordings done outside of the official television system, to amateur registrations of street and private events made in that very intense period of six days between the 21st and 26th of December. Yet, quite surprisingly, these recordings are so abundant that it was possible to construct a chronological narrative as if there was a director orchestrating the various, in reality unconnected, camera operators in public and private spaces.

Two different modes of image-making appear crucial for the shaping of the events: the television – as a medium and a site of power struggle – and the amateur, hand held camera. In the course of the revolution, the television is transformed from being the instrument of the authoritarian propaganda to a site of struggle in the effort to topple down the dictatorship. The amateur, or semi-professional, camera joins in to register the events from the public and the private perspective, intuitively foreseeing a future for such images.

The moment of rupture in the official protocol of image production happens live on television. *Videograms* shows the awkward moment in Nicolae Ceaușescu's

last public speech on the 21st of December, when the usually peaceful and orderly crowd on the square in front of the Central Committee building starts hissing and jeering at the dictator. Ceaușescu interrupts his speech, suddenly overtaken by a strong sense of a menace in the crowd. And although the peace and order are quickly restored, allowing Ceaușescu to resume his speech, the short sparkle of dissent causes the strictly controlled live image to generate a chain of extraordinary events. In accordance with the safety protocols, the camera operators stopped the broadcast at the first signs of civil unrest. Farocki and Ujică uncover the recordings made by the cameras while the broadcast was interrupted. Thus, we see the static image of the dictator perturbed and subsequently broken down into grey horizontal stripes, whereby the camera pans into the air. At the very beginning of the mass protests, there is a technical disturbance.

Technology fails, but by virtue of its failure signals the epochal change. This formative role of the disrupted television image – the image which was meant to entrench and strengthen the regime, but which unintentionally helped in its collapse – is captured in an amateur recording found by Farocki and Ujică.² In the footage registered by the film directing student Paul Cozighian, we first see the television screen in a living-room while the same live speech is broadcasted. At the crucial moment of the disruption, Cozighian decides to pan from the TV set to the window and onto the street in order to see if anything of the germinating protests can be perceived in the behaviour of the passers-by. As crowds are gathering and the collective protest takes its form, this cameraman decides to film from the rooftops, to register the clashes between the army, aided by the Securitate, and the demonstrators. His recordings are then shown by foreign news rooms, thus entering the mainstream circuit of images. In a short interview on the BBC in January 1990, Cozighian says he started filming because he thought this might have been the only day of the revolution and therefore he wanted to register it and show the images to the rest of the world.³ In the subsequent

2 Even if almost all aspects of the so-called revolution in Romania have been subject of heated debate, there is one fact which seems to be uncontested. Ceaușescu's public address on the 21st of December, for which large numbers of workers were brought to the capital, and which was transmitted live on television, unleashed the protests and precipitated the regime's demise. See for example Tismăneanu and Călinescu 1991, 281–82.

3 The interview was part of the BBC *Panorama: Triumph over Tyranny* broadcast on 8 January 1990. The broadcast is archived online: http://news.bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_8424000/8424361.stm. Last accessed 03. 03. 2015. In other interviews, made twenty years later, Cozighian changed his account of these crucial moments, saying that he already felt these events were groundbreaking and a real change was coming (see: Regizorul Paul Cozighian, despre Revoluția din '89: Oamenii aveau starea propice de a ieși în stradă, www.b1tv.ro.<http://www.b1.ro/stiri/eveniment/regizorul-paul-cozighian-despre-revolu-ia-din-89-oamenii-aveau>

days, many other citizens in possession of a camera go down in the streets to participate in – and to record – the revolution. Some of these documents deliver little visual information, as is the case of the footage from the late night protests. Some leave us in confusion as to what is really taking place, as for instance, in the scene of a capturing of an alleged terrorist, who pretended to be with the protesters. While the film is not an investigation into the political meanders of the revolution or into the different theories of a staged or internationally orchestrated toppling down of the dictatorship, it does show the perplexing unreadability of the spontaneous and direct images. At the same time, it catches a significant change in the character of image-making. From that moment on, all facets of the events, private or public, are being filmed by the participants themselves. The resulting visual records are direct, random and ubiquitous, giving the spectator the sense of having an access to the events in an unaltered form. Yet the pictures prove to be opaque and chaotic – just as, to use Siegfried Kracauer’s words, “the half-cooked state of our everyday world” (Kracauer 1995, 58).

The Rebellion of the Television Viewers

The iconic moments of the transformation are registered in the now-famous Studio 4 in Bucharest when people storm the television station – the Bastille of 1989 – and announce, in the first, heated, spontaneous broadcast, the triumph of the revolution. The crowd of protesters, equipped with flags, proclaim: “We are victorious, the television is with us.” In this historical moment, television is and remains the main means of news dissemination and has a crucial importance for the success of the revolution.⁴ It is important to see this re-appropriation of the television as the main means of communication in the context of the highly politicized broadcasting practice in Romania in the 1980s. In the period directly preceding the tumultuous events of 1989, the broadcasting time was limited to 16 hours per week, leaving little space for anything else than propagandistic news. As Pavel Câmpeanu has argued, the limitations imposed on television programming combined with restrictions on the energy use and the virtual isolation from any foreign contacts provoked Romanian citizens to install special antennae on the rooftops of their houses and apartment blocks in order to watch television from the neighboring countries. The

starea-propice-de-a-ie-i-in-strada-video-17430.html, Last accessed 03. 03. 2015). This shift of perspective demonstrates the need to see coherence and purposefulness in the events which, from the immediate perspective, seemed chaotic and open-ended.

4 As Anne Jäckel observes, the television was limited to almost exclusively ideological messages and hardly delivered any genuine information or entertainment (Jäckel 2001).

ostensive presence of these antennae in the urban landscape of Romania was the first – even if relatively small – act of collective resistance to the all-controlling state power.⁵ Câmpeanu thus advanced the idea that this practice led to the forming of the new community of television viewers, the community which was activated again, more forcefully, in December of 1989 (Câmpeanu 1993, 114–115).

In the very first days after the television headquarters have been taken over by the protesters, the medium is used by the people to communicate with the people. Citizens of different walks of life come to the studio to make public pronouncements for the revolution. These day and night broadcasts are spontaneous, chaotic and unpredictable (Morse 1998, 51–55). Also politicians, dissidents and self-proclaimed leaders of the revolution find their way to the television headquarters, the democratic broadcasts become the site for the forming of the new political elites. The change is visible in the gradual transformation of the news broadcasting, in which the large crowd of people is slowly reduced to a few leaders, eventually showing Ion Iliescu alone.⁶ This centrality of television for the development of the events in Romania has led theorists to call it the first tele-revolution (Kittler and Rau 2010; von Amelunxen and Ujicã 1990). The term “first” would suggest the beginning of a new tendency. Yet Mroué’s contribution shows a different course of development, in which the opposition between television as the medium reserved for the authorities and the amateur footage as the instrument of the protesters becomes more and more apparent.

A Revolution of Mobile Cameras

More than twenty years later, in Syria, another wave of protests is being captured by the – mostly anonymous – citizens. As Rabih Mroué observes, citizens and activists assume the task of journalist reporting. Using mobile devices, often

5 It remains a puzzling question why the all-controlling state apparatus with an army of informants and the secret police allowed for the spreading of this obvious practice of resistance, visible in the presence of the external television antennae on private houses. A similar question has been asked by Harun Farocki with respect to the presence of the amateur cameras in the country in which every typewriter was registered and controlled by the state. Both Câmpeanu and Farocki suggest that the regime was probably too slow in realizing the possibilities of the new technologies for forming significant acts of resistance (Farocki 2001). Other authoritarian regimes were careful not to make the same mistake. As shown in the documentary *Burma VJ. Reporting from a Closed Country* (Anders Østergaard, 2008), opposition journalists in Burma can film only in secret and are immediately arrested when their cameras are discovered (this documentary is discussed later in this article).

6 The crowded television studio, during the heated announcements of the revolutionaries, gradually turns into the usual setting for a single person speech, corresponding to the power seizure by the new government.

phones or other small cameras, they record and – what is important – disseminate information on the conflict. This phenomenon, which has been called citizen journalism, crowd-sourced or grass-roots journalism, is obviously not limited to this particular geopolitical moment (Allan 2007; Gillmor 2004). The short, unsteady and often blurred records of any kind of incidents can immediately be uploaded on the internet, making it possible for the whole world to see or even participate in the events on a scale unknown before. It is on the internet that Mroué finds the examples of amateur recordings which he then analyses in his *Pixelated Revolution*. More than twenty years after the events of 1989, the internet thus becomes the main medium to spread messages outside of large media circuits. As Mroué contends, the television has become (again) a tool in the hands of governments (Mroué 2013c, 254–55). The path of a democratic television station, which surfaced for a short moment in Romania, seems forever closed. The protesters, the militants, the people have only the “poor images” at their disposal (Mroué 2013a, 106; Steyerl 2009). *Pixelated Revolution* is also not a single, completed work, but instead mutates and develops in various stage and exhibition formats. Similarly to its source, the internet, it is an unstable and evolving entity encompassing video, installation, theatre performance called non-academic lecture, reenactment and a written text. All of these forms approach and remediate the video material from the Syrian revolution found on the internet.⁷

A lot has been said about the limits and risks of citizen journalism, especially about the unreliability of such resources, the lacking or incomplete context of the images, and the easiness of staging or faking of such poor visual materials. Yet even the mainstream, large media corporations, including the main television stations, embrace such poor images as records made by bystanders or participants. This tendency can be explained both by economic reasons and by a larger shift in the news style and aesthetics.⁸ These issues are not the main focus of *Pixelated Revolution*'s reflection, although they are acknowledged as being an indelible element of crowd-sourced reporting (Mroué 2013b, 379). For Mroué,

7 My analysis is based on several installments of *Pixelated Revolution*: the Documenta version from 2012 (the 20-minute video of the non-academic lecture), the published and extended text from 2013 (Mroué 2013b) and the exhibition in Museum Tot Zover, Amsterdam, 2014, which included installation, photography and video.

8 Julian Stallabrass indicates the economizing rationale behind such development: “Economically pressed news organizations often prefer to provide cameras (but little training) to willing locals rather than fly professionals out to some scene of conflict” (Stallabrass 2013, 43). Alfredo Cramerotti stresses the participatory character of such inclusive news broadcasting, placing it among the new tendencies in the mainstream media to give the viewer the possibility to make the news (Cramerotti 2009, 26).

it remains of deep significance that this type of journalism eschews the official, mainstream media channels, delivering a direct, unmediated, non-orchestrated reporting from the very epicenter of the events. *Pixelated Revolution* focuses on one particular type of recordings found on the internet, namely the instances in which the camera-man registers a sniper or soldier aiming exactly in his direction. An exchange of shootings takes place – the camera shoots images, the gun shoots bullets. Often in those short videos, the image collapses as the camera is being dropped from the protester’s hand while he films his own aggressor. This has led Mroué to begin his inquiry by quoting a sentence, apparently uttered by a friend, that Syrians are filming their own death. This strong, unsettling body of video images gave the incentive for the artist to address the role of images in the revolution. Ensuing from that analysis, Mroué also restages this scenario, filming the “double shooting” on a different location (in Lebanon) and with actors instead of real protesters. He thus unsettles any clear-cut division between what is real and what is merely theatre.

Intermedial Situation

Both *Videograms of a Revolution* and *Pixelated Revolution* disclose a collation between the making of an event, or at least participating in an event, and the filming of that event. The stakes of this conflation can be unfolded when these two visual works of art are seen as instances in which the double logic of hypermediacy and transparency are played out against each other. As Bolter and Grusin demonstrated, the process of remediation between old and new media takes place in a constant oscillation between hypermediated and immediate experience of the real (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 19). Both *Videograms* and *Pixelated Revolution* investigate the role and functions of the new types of images in the unfolding of the collective and historically significant events. *Videograms* show (semi)amateur footage and the revolutionary broadcasts from the first and the most tumultuous days of the Romanian revolution. *Pixelated Revolution* is a theoretically weighted investigation of the anonymous, amateur recordings from the protests and fights in Syria. They thus operate at an intersection between video, film, television, performance and documentary.

Bolter and Grusin show how the development of the media, and particularly the process of replacing of old media by the new ones, includes complex operations in which elements of the old media are included or imitated in the new ones in the general striving for a better, more saturated, comprehensive experience. This

development takes place in two separate yet intertwined movements. On the one hand, the new media expose their hypermediated nature, demonstrating how they are constructed as signs of signs. On the other hand, they strive for a greater transparency and ostensible immediacy, promising to give access to an authentic experience. These two seemingly opposite movements are in fact two sides of the same process. Hypermediated forms act through their oversaturation while the seemingly transparent media are always mediated. One clear example of that logic is the replacement of photography by film, where the mechanical reproduction of reality in photography has been “improved” by including movement and, subsequently, sound in the image. Yet film offers a skilful artifice, showing us a well-framed and edited section of the reality which it carefully (re)constructs – in fiction cinema as well as in most documentary films. When television “replaces” cinema, it offers a more direct and all-present medium for experiencing the world in distant locations and times. In the live broadcast of world news, viewers are transported to any place in the world in real time, by which the gap between the reporting of the events and participating in them seemingly collapses. These increasingly mediated forms of experience – even when outwardly inviting to immerse oneself in pure simulacrum, as in virtual reality – aim at reconnecting us with the real.

Both *Videograms* and *Pixelated Revolution* deal with variously understood documents of real events and place them in a new intermedial situation. By focusing on movements of collective passion resulting in civil unrest, demonstrations and, eventually, military conflict, they offer a glance into the role of images in a transitory, as yet undetermined moment. They both show how the act of recording by protesters and participants has a crucial impact on the development of events. Visually, these images might strike as quite similar. Yet it would be inaccurate to equate the shaky images from Romania with today’s overabundant image production. These recordings, apart from a few exceptions which made it to the mainstream television, were never shown to a larger public. They were found by Farocki and Ujică in local archives in Bucharest. Some materials were stored in the art school archives, where they were donated by their makers not knowing what better to do with them.⁹ In the perspective of today’s developments in imaging technology and practice, it can be argued that in Romania we witnessed a first, intuitive impulse to record all facets of the revolutionary events, while at that time it was still unclear what role such images might subsequently fulfil.

9 Only some of these materials find their way to the internet now, but this is a different, historicizing tendency appearing with the temporal distance. For example, the aforementioned Paul Cozighian published an edited compilation of his own footage on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf4E2iaVR6s>, last accessed 03. 03. 2015)

At the moment when Rabih Mroué turned to the immense and ever expanding archive of moving images from the Syrian revolution, the situation significantly changed. The wave of protests and revolutions which swept through many Arab nations took on a significantly visual form. In some cases, the small mobile cameras remain the only “weapon” protesters have at their disposal against the live ammunition of the police and military forces. An iconic Egyptian graffiti, which depicts a machine gun aimed at a camera, adequately summarizes this conundrum.¹⁰ The amateur recordings of the events also found their way into numerous feature films. For instance, the acclaimed documentary *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country* (2008) by Anders Østergaard shows the efforts of citizen-journalists, so-called video-journalists (or VJs) to grab the attention of an international community by persistently reporting on their struggle against the authoritarian regime. The film exposes the footage made during the protests and manifestations which would otherwise go unnoticed by the mainstream news. Its narrative revolves around the lives of a number of people engaged in the clandestine reporting and disseminating of the independent material, showing episodes from both their private and public lives. Such a documentary form, however, necessitated a reconstruction of events which were not recorded or the recordings of which were lost. Thus, the film interlaces original footage with reenactments, but neglects to make clear distinctions between the two. The viewers are thus instructed about the dire situation in which VJs in Burma risk their lives to capture real images, but at the same time no special value is given to those actual records of real events as distinct from reenactments.

Assuming a thoroughly different strategy, the 2013 film *Uprising* by Peter Snowden is, just as *Videograms of a Revolution*, constructed exclusively by means of found footage. It combines images from different protest movements and revolutions in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt and Syria in a montage devoid of any comment or special editing. Various images of differing quality and length are grouped together in an impressionistic portrait of mass protests. Despite the fact that the various languages spoken in the footage are subtitled, it is virtually impossible to understand the exact meaning and context of each particular situation. The only narrativizing structure is introduced by means of intertitles, grouping the fragments in seven days preceding the outburst of an imagined, global revolution. The resulting string of images conjures the universal

¹⁰ This graffiti became the icon and the main idea of the documentary film *The Weapon of Choice* (*Une arme de choix*, 2012) by Florence Tran, portraying a number of young Egyptian filmmakers in their efforts to wage a struggle against the regime. The camera thus becomes their “weapon of choice.”

quality of many different mass struggles in the world but steers clear from any political commentary or a contextual interpretation. Seen from this perspective, *Pixelated Revolution* sets forth a different engagement with the amateur footage. Abandoning a larger filmic narrative, it analyses the selected footage from a particular standpoint.

A Lesson in the Making and/or Filming of a Revolution

Resembling Farocki's earlier film *Inextinguishable Fire* (*Nicht löschesbares Feuer*, 1969), in which the filmmaker reads out a statement while seated at a table, Mroué chooses the format of a lecture which seemingly indicates a pedagogical project of a sort. The lesson begins with pragmatic instructions for the public on how to correctly shoot images of mass protests against authorities. A number of rules should be followed to prevent the subsequent use of the images by these authorities to pursue and persecute protesters. Thus, images of riots and uprisings should show as much as possible without revealing too much of an identity of its makers. Mroué advises that one should try to film from afar, preferably from an elevated position, in order to give a broader view of the scene. At the same time, the faces of protesters should not be shown to avoid easy identification.¹¹ Only in case of an assault on a protester, faces of the aggressors should be filmed, whereas the director of the film should never be credited.¹²

While drafting the guidelines on the correct filming of protests, Mroué discovers similarities with the manifesto entitled *Vow of Chastity* issued by the Dogme95 group (Mroué 2013b, 380–81). This Danish movement of radical filmmaking, gathered around Lars von Trier, established a set of rules which were meant to increase the degree of authenticity of the film such as hand-held filming, the lack of artificial lighting, filters or other effects, and shooting on location. Surprisingly, the manifesto for the fiction film and an instruction for the recording of historical events merge into each other. The videos recorded and disseminated by the Syrian protesters are intended to make their struggle known to a broad public. They are also meant to authenticate their charges against the brutal and undemocratic regime. Their shaky, fragmentary, pixelated quality

11 It became clear in the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1968 that journalist images, spread in the West, served the communist authorities to identify and capture the protesters. This lesson is learned by Mroué.

12 Here we see how the difficulties with identification and contextualization of such videos are a result of a conscious effort not to disclose the identities of the protesters, as a means of ensuring their safety.

strengthens this effect, assuring the spectators that they are being transported closer to the real. Seen in terms of remediation theory of Bolter and Grusin, these videos expose their mediated nature in order to provide – paradoxically – a sense of immediacy. Yet, in a reverse movement, they call forth an association to a filmic aesthetics. Surely, it is a special kind of aesthetics one invented in order to break away from the stultifying “cinematic” effects which distance filmic reality from lived reality.

Filmic Narrativization and Theatricality

If there is no coincidence in the fact that a theatre-maker turns to visual documents of the Syrian protests and that he associates these documents with an artistic manifesto for an authentic aesthetics in film, then this is perhaps because a particular intermingling of fiction and document takes place during these events. As a result of that process, the recording and the making of history cannot be dissociated from each other, while theatre or play-acting intersects with documentary image-making. *Videograms* captures the two crucial moments of that development. On the one hand, Farocki recalls that he and Ujică embarked on the project with the intention of initiating a debate on the ubiquitous images of the revolution. Upon seeing the visual material in detail, they changed their minds and decided to construct a filmic narrative, which, conventionally, must have a limited number of characters reappearing in different settings and guises in order to assure the continuity and coherence of the plot (Farocki 2001, 264). The sheer abundance of available footage allowed, or perhaps even demanded, such treatment of the historical material. It is as if the random and autonomously videotaped fragments of historical events naturally crystallized in a filmic structure. In one of the most enigmatic moments of the film, the voice-over concludes “Camera and event: since its invention, film has seemed destined to make history visible [...] Film was possible because there was history. Almost imperceptibly, like moving forward on a Moebius strip, the side was flipped. We look on and have to think: if film is possible, then history too is possible.” The camera recording thus seems to precede the historical event and precondition its appearance in our perceptual field.

On the other hand, many of these recordings disclose instances of reality becoming theatrical. In the heat of the Romanian revolution, various groups appear in the occupied Studio 4 in Bucharest in order to articulate their support for the revolution and appeal to the fellow citizens to join in the popular

movement. This urge to appear in front of the camera features on many instances in the footage found by Farocki and Ujică. Various “actors” of the revolution consciously perform in front of the camera, dragging the collaborators of the regime before the popular tribunal of the screen. Memoirs and accounts of many people witness to an intense feeling of having to play a completely new role without knowing the script (Cristea 1990). The omnipresence of the cameras and the importance of television in advancing the revolution created a new reality in which the events are made in front of and for the camera, thus becoming part of history in the making. This urge to act in front of a camera entails the necessity to rehearse or repeat utterances and statements deemed particularly important. In *Videograms* we see the resignation of the communist prime minister repeated three times. The terrified politician is brought by a large crowd to the balcony of the Central Committee in Bucharest, where he is expected to utter his resignation. Yet he is asked to repeat the utterance twice, to which he submits in passive surrender. Apparently, the cameras responsible for the live transmission were not ready and so the media event could not and did not take place when it was not properly recorded and broadcast.¹³ People believed in the revolution because they immediately saw it being recorded and broadcast. Cameras triggered the progression of the events themselves, but, on the reverse side of that process, reality became theatrical.

This effect of theatricality caused by the presence of the camera has been identified already by Roland Barthes. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes phenomenologically investigates his own reaction to a camera lens, recognizing, not without abhorrence, how he tries to strike a pose and anticipate the image which is about to be taken of him. Thus he already becomes an image even before the photograph is made (Barthes 1982, 10–11). In photography theory it has been acknowledged that the event of photography, which reconfigures the agents involved in a situation into those photographing, the photographed, and the spectators, takes place even when a camera is only suspected to be present (Azoulay 2012, 23). Through *cinema vérité*, on the other hand, it became apparent how the act of filming can trigger surprising reactions or confessions of people filmed. In brief it can be said that the abundant use of the camera as a source of more direct, authentic images of reality has elicited a significant transformation of that reality.

13 Media events, as theorized by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, appear to be very similar to fiction films in their staging and the dramatized form (Dayan and Katz 1992, 114–15).

The Double-Edged Effect of Image Performativity

On the one hand, images thus become operative in reality, which means they move beyond the dimension of representation to take on a performative role.¹⁴ On the other hand, reality itself appears to be increasingly theatrical. The term performative is useful here because it indicates both the agency of images and their relation to the theatrical. The camera images are thus performative similarly to utterances, which can – in the sense established by J.L. Austin – be performative. It means they not so much show a section of the reality but also make something happen. The many instances of the Syrian protesters filming their assassins on their mobile phones despite the danger for their lives can be seen as performative, in the sense given to that term by Judith Butler, since they are repetitive and citational with respect to the filmic antecedents (Butler 1993, 12–13).¹⁵ Yet while these images can be said to act in and upon reality, they also cause the events to appear as fictions.

When the term fiction or theatricality is used with respect to reality, it generally has a negative connotation. It suggests pretence, artifice and perhaps even fabrication (notably, a term of preference for Mroué). Performance and performativity have in fact often been enlisted in order to criticize theatricality, the first being a positively connoted term, introduced to replace the latter, which was discredited on the grounds of its association with deceit and masquerade (McGillivray 2009). Yet it seems that both positive and negative facets of these terms are useful in trying to understand the current dealings with lens-based images, as they stress different aspects of the same evolution. When Janelle Reinelt states that we live in theatricalized times, by which she means that public events and political handlings are increasingly being designed as spectacle, this is not to lament the loss of authenticity (Reinelt 2010, 27–28). Instead, it is an invitation and an urge to analyse reality as already partially theatricalized or staged.

World, Seen Through Camera Lenses, Cinematically

In an analogy to that theatrical metaphor, film theorists indicate that we increasingly understand the world in cinematic terms, which suggests that from the perspective of film studies, our experience of the everyday life is already, to some extent,

14 Farocki talks about images which produce the revolution instead of reproducing it (Farocki 2001, 260). He later uses the term “operative images” (Farocki 2010, 66).

15 Mroué analyses the similarity of one of these videos with a scene from the film *The Time That Remains* (2009) by Elia Suleiman (Mroué 2013b, 390).

mediated and remediated by the filmic imagination (Elsaesser 2005; Rodowick 2007). The use of authentic images in *Videograms* and *Pixelated Revolution* testify to art's (be it film, performance, installation or exhibition) obsession with capturing the real. At the same time, they capture essential characteristics of that real which mutates and is constantly reinvented. The intermedial approach to these two works of art makes it possible to expose different analogies for the experience of reality. If performance studies use performativity, theatre studies theatricality and film studies the cinematic as a dominant metaphor for reality, then the insights provided by Farocki, Ujică and Mroué suggest that these approaches should be combined. Each of these analogies seems to add to the pervasive sense of reality being already fictionalized to some extent.

In Mroué's investigation of the "double shooting," a thought-provoking instance of such fictionalization of reality is uncovered. It remains an unsolved riddle why the protesters who spot a sniper aiming at them continue filming instead of running away and avoiding death. On the one hand, it can be said that the protesters attempt to catch up with the raw reality in order to make their visual documents more authentic. In this effort, they go even as far as to risk their own lives to deliver a proof of their struggle. Although they create yet again a video footage, at the same time they transgress the theatrical towards the real. On the other hand, Mroué suggests, they seem to be caught in the internal logic of the image. They start to see their situation only through the mediator of the small camera, which they use as prosthesis of their own body. When during a film screening the spectators see a nozzle of a gun directed straight towards them, they can be certain that the scene will not end with real bullets reaching targets outside of the frame. "[The bullet] will not make a hole in the screen and hit any of the spectators. It will always remain there, in the virtual world, the fictional one. This is why the Syrian cameraman believes that he will not be killed: his death is happening inside the image" (Mroué 2013b, 387). The real struggle of Syrian protesters is being transposed onto the image. Therefore, Mroué argues, "it seems that it is a war against the image itself" (Mroué 2013b, 387). This war is waged on aesthetic grounds too: the regime keeps hold of the official, large, professional image of the mainstream news TV. The militant opposition reverts to poor, imperfect, shaky images of the small, mobile camera. The poor image clearly displays its makeshift manufacture. Yet it is aimed to disclose the fabrication of the official image.

In his reflections on infancy and history, Giorgio Agamben sees the ubiquitous use of cameras in the twentieth century as a sign of a loss of real experience. Yet this remark is not meant to deplore this new condition of deprivation but

rather take note of it and prepare for the emergence of a new form of experience (Agamben 1993, 14–15). When Hito Steyerl returns to these reflections, she suggests that we should expect and anticipate the reappearance of experience somewhere “in the twilight zone between reality and fiction” (Steyerl 2006). Wojciech Marczewski’s film *Escape From the Cinema “Liberty”* (*Ucieczka z kina Wolność*, 1990), staged in communist Poland, shows how the fictional characters of a film screened in a local cinema rebel against the censored, conservative script in which they are supposed to play part. They “leave” their roles and embark on an on-screen protest, which causes an unwanted stir in the cinema’s public. The local censor, initially engaged in quelling this odd form of dissent, changes sides and joins the protest by literally stepping into the screen of the film. Seeing this escape into fiction, the communist party secretary present in the cinema theatre tries to dissuade the renegade censor from joining the rebellion by using the typical intimidation and threats. The censor looks back from the “inside” of the film onto the cinema audience and retorts to the baffled party dignitary “you look so unnatural!” The escape into the fiction of the film allows the censor – this “real” character who chose to inhabit the screen – to see the reality as something less real than it pretended to be. This is perhaps the indirectly formulated but repeatedly – performatively – identified intention of the Syrian protesters who keep filming their own death – to reach the inside of the image from which to criticize the reality becoming less and less real. The enigmatic statement of the voice-over in *Videograms* about the reverse side of the Moebius band finds here a new postscript. “If film is possible, then history too is possible” seems to suggest that it is through fictionalization and theatricality of the image that a new experience of the historical event can occur.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience*. London and New York: Verso Books.
- Allan, Stuart. 2007. Citizen Journalism and the Rise of “Mass Self-communication.” Reporting the London Bombings. *Global Media Journal*. Australian Edition no. 1: 1–20.
- Azoulay, Ariella. 2012. *Civil Imagination. Political Ontology of Photography*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, Roland. 1982. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

- Bolter, David J. and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Câmpeanu, Pavel. 1993. Romanian Television: From Image to History. In *National Identity and Europe. The Television Revolution*, eds. Drummond, Philippe, Janet Willis and Richard Paterson, 110–116. London: British Film Institute.
- Cramerotti, Alfredo. 2009. *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.
- Cristea, Mihaela. 1990. Die erste live übertragene Revolution der Welt [The First Revolution in the World to be Transmitted Live]. In *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen. Ein Symposium aus Budapest* [From the Bureaucracy to Telecracy. Romania in Television], eds. Keiko Sei and Peter Weibel, 16–18. Berlin: Merve.
- Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz. 1992. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 2005. Harun Farocki: Film-maker, Artist, Media Theorist. *Afterall* no. 11 (Spring/Summer). <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.11/harun.farocki.filmaker.artist.media.theorist>. Last accessed 03. 03. 2015.
- Farocki, Harun. 2001. Substandard. In *Nachdruck/Imprint: Texte/Writings*, 248–267. Berlin: Vorwerk.
- Farocki, Harun. 2010. War Always Finds a Way. *Gagarin* no. 21: 60–72.
- Gillmor, Dan. 2004. *We, the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc.
- Jäckel, Anne. 2001. Romania: From Tele-revolution to Public Service Broadcasting, National Images and International Image. *Canadian Journal of Communication* no.26:131–137. <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1200/1144>. Last accessed 03. 03. 2015.
- Kittler, Friedrich and Milo Rau. 2010. So wird man Historiker. Ein Gespräch zwischen Milo Rau und Friedrich Kittler über die rumänische Telerevolution, die unterschwellige Kraft der Bilder und Reinhart Koselleck in Russland [This is How One Becomes a Historian. A Discussion Between Milo Rau and Friedrich Kittler About the Romanian Telerevolution, About the Power of Images and Reinhart Koselleck in Russia]. In *Die letzten Tage der Ceaușescu: Materialien, Dokumente, Theorie* [The Last Days of Ceaușescu: Materials, Documents, Theories], eds. Milo Rau, Nina Wolters and Jens Dietrich, 143–152. Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag.

- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1995. *History: The Last Things Before the Last*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers.
- Mcgillivray, Glen. 2009. The Discursive Formation of Theatricality as a Critical Concept. *Metaphorik* no. 1. <http://www.metaphorik.de/de/journal/17/discursive-formation-theatricality-critical-concept.html>. Last accessed 03. 03. 2015.
- Morse, Margaret. 1998. *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mroué, Rabih. 2013a. Eleven Years, Three Months and Five Days. In *Image(s), Mon Amour. Fabrications*, Rabih Mroué, 104–107. Madrid: CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo.
- Mroué, Rabih. 2013b. The Pixelated Revolution. In *Image(s), Mon Amour. Fabrications*, ed. Rabih Mroué, 378–393. Madrid: CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo.
- Mroué, Rabih. 2013c. Theater in Oblique. In *Image(s), mon amour. Fabrications*, Rabih Mroué, 250–257. Madrid: CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo.
- Reinelt, Janelle. 2010. Toward a Poetics of Theatre and Public Events: the Case of Stephen Lawrence. In *The Dramaturgy of the Real*, ed. Carol Martin, 27–44. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rodowick, David N. 2007. An Elogy for Theory. *October* no. 122: 91–109.
- Stallabrass, Julian. 2013. The Power and Impotence of Images. In *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images*, ed. Julian Stallabrass, 22–55. Brighton: Photoworks.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2006. Look Out, it's Real! Documentarism, Experience, Politics. In *Production Unit. Slowly Learning to Survive the Desire to Simplify. A Symposium on Critical Documents*, 23–26. Malmö: Nifca, Iaspis and The Nordic Culture Fund.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2009. In Defense of the Poor Image. *e-flux journal* vol. 10 no. 11. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/94>. Last accessed 03. 03. 2015.
- Tismăneanu, Vladimir and Matei Călinescu. 1991. Epilogue. The 1989 Revolution and the Collapse of Communism in Romania. In *The Romanians: a History*, eds. Vlad Georgescu and Matei Calinescu, 279–298. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Von Amelunxen, Hubertus and Andrei Ujică. 1990. *Television-Revolution: Das Ultimatum des Bildes: Rumänien im Dezember 1989*. [*Television-Revolution. The Ultimatum of Images: Romania in December 1989*], Marburg: Jonas.