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ESSAY

The Art of Being Camp

Radu Jude and Christian Ferencz-Flatz's *Eight Postcards from Utopia* (*Opt ilustrate din lumea ideală*, 2024)

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E*ight Postcards from Utopia* consists of as many bundles of advertisements each introduced by a thematic heading. From the "History of the Romanians" through to a segment on gender roles entitled "Masculin Feminin" and an epilogue on nature's revenge on humanity, the filmmakers present over an hour of material that they combined into loose composites. At times appearing unabridged, at times unrecognizable due to editorial intervention, the commercials speak to the historical context from which they arose – in large part 1990s Romania – but also to the judgmental gaze of the filmmakers, who revel in the material's comic potential and self-conscious undertones. In-between hyperbole and idealization, the ads contain moments of genuine insight regarding the historical moment their makers found themselves in. One ad asks viewers to buy the newspaper "Universal" before it goes bankrupt, while others openly celebrate the advent of free speech and consumerism. Advertisements, too, are artifacts, the filmmakers remind us, allowing us to discover the historical and cultural context from which they arose, and to seek meaning in them beyond their *advertising* something or other in the proper sense of the word. To the extent that commercials tend to be nothing but dumb, they are outgrowths of utter commodification. In principle though, nothing bars us from trying to produce a meaningful ad, or from gleaning meaning from already finished advertisements. *Eight Postcards from Utopia* can be understood as an exercise in that – treating (archival) advertisements as something meaningful.

The first segment, "History of the Romanians," opens with a big-budget commercial that introduces Romanians as a flattering "paradox." As per the narrator, who speaks with a deep trailer voice that befits the heavily stylized, ancient fighting scenes, they are heirs to the Dacians, yet descendants of Rome. Then, a man in an ancient Roman uniform adorned with the Pepsi logo stops a leather ball with his foot, describes the conditions of a prize draw involving colorful bottle caps, and kicks back the ball. The short sequence,

which was used for the teaser of *Eight Postcards*, encapsulates the layered historical moment that the makers of these ads found themselves in post-1989. There is the reach for a national mythology, the influx of Western consumerism, and the promise of a lottery ticket to unheard-of riches. Some ads will comment on this historical moment tongue-in-cheek, such as a telecommunication ad in which a ringtone interrupts a speech of Ceaușescu's before a large assembly, followed by swathes of people leaving the assembly with their phones in hand. Others will reveal it inadvertently, say in the clumsiness of early 1990s advertisements, some of which reek not only with kitsch, but also with amateurism. Many an ad featuring whole paragraphs of glowing lettering appears to have been selected primarily for how ridiculous it looks, bearing the stamp of collective inexperience. This is what you get when a whole society suddenly awakens to the demands of a market economy. It is hard not to notice in the selection how abruptly these demands became exigent, and that the advertisers' main response was instilling hopes that people could turn rich fast by benefiting from privatization programs, buying company shares, and taking out loans.

It is in dealing with the advent of capitalism that the filmmakers reveal themselves to be more than mere chroniclers. After an ad features a woman stating that she will invest all the 12.5 million she just won in the Romanian Investment Fund, the film cuts to a man burning heaps of money in his chimney. And then to bank after bank and credit company after credit company vouching for their own credibility. The filmmakers also appear to have chosen particularly hyperbolic advertisements for this second segment entitled "Money Talks." In more than one ad, the money is so plentiful we see people and objects drowning in it. While the film will venture into yet more themes and become increasingly playful as it progresses, the historical contextualization introduced through the first two segments informs the rest of the film. Whatever else is going on in this film, the advertising material originates from a time when a country living under a Communist dictatorship embraced capitalism from one day to the next.

It is hard not to sympathize with Jude's and Ferencz-Flatz's ironic distance towards this blind embrace of the Western promise. After all, the ads communicate an End of the History moment that has become utterly obsolete. Not even Francis Fukuyama, who once articulated the idea that the defeat of Communism in the East heralds a time of peace and prosperity, believes that liberal democracy has won out anymore.[1] Meanwhile, the prosperity promised by capitalism has escaped your plain Jane in the West, especially in the past forty years.[2] While the situation across the former iron curtain is more complex, the post-Communist embrace of capitalism was utterly devastating for millions of people. Yet the ease with which Jude and Ferencz-Flatz arrive at their conclusions belies a fundamental tension of their film. On the one hand, they are interested in writing an alternative history of the past with the help of forgotten artifacts that are supposed to speak for themselves, curating whole

collections of ads to help us see the truths that they hold. On the other hand, they approach the material as auteurs who have their own handwriting, and who can for that reason be credited, interviewed, and lauded for the film that they made. Which is it? If the film let the ads speak for themselves, and their only contribution is coming up with a selection and thematic arrangement that helps us see parallels between the individual products, Jude and Ferencz-Flatz would be mere curators. If it is only through their montage that meaningful connections are made in the first place, then the material is a mere occasion for the auteurs to unleash their creative potential and thus interchangeable – in other words, the material is then not that which holds meaning, but that onto which it is projected.

While it is tempting to be happy with identifying such a tension and follow up with some trite formula ("in the end, the film is neither the one thing, nor the other"), I do not think that *Eight Postcards* lingers in eternal limbo. Yes, the selection that Jude and Ferencz-Flatz made is useful, and there are ways in which the viewer recognizes connections between the ads themselves, rather than through the filmmakers' guidance. Just as putting objects – anything really – in a museum makes people look differently at them, so here the recontextualization spurs us to actively engage with the ads rather than be enervated by them or take them in passively. But intellectually engaging with ads and seeing connections between them, is something I could also do while watching a VHS recording from the 1990s, or a YouTube collection of old ads. Why package that experience in a film, rather than turn off the screen and go to bed? The answer appears to lie in the very act of treating commercials as historically revealing material for a film. By constructing their work around ads, Jude and Ferencz-Flatz question both what kinds of material films can be composed of, and how we construct our history. Taking their film seriously means engaging with this act, rather than deliberating the limits of their possible auteurship, or of the insights that the ads themselves carry.

The idea that history must be challenged with the help of forgotten artifacts originates in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project. There, he describes his own method as a form of literary montage, whereby he "needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."[3] A central aim of this method is to challenge the idea of historical continuity both in the sense of a fundamental teleology, and of all phenomena – historical though they are – fitting into the same categories. The rags and refuse of history have a place in this project because grand narratives are selective, only acknowledging those phenomena that can be accommodated within them. While it is clear in what sense going through whole archives of advertisements is like going through "trash," as Ferencz-Flatz put it, the parallel he identifies between his and Jude's film and Benjamin's deliberations on refuse only seem to go so far.[4] *Eight Postcards*' critique of the nationalist mythology and turbo-

capitalist marketization that Romania was swept by in the 1990s is hardly news, while its remaining chapters – such as one about technological revolutions, or another one about the supernatural power of products as put into action by ads – are imaginative but largely orthogonal to our understanding of the post-Communist transition. In short, no challenge to prevalent grand narratives to be found here. That Jude and Ferencz-Flatz further fail to let the ads speak for themselves is an outgrowth of the above tension: their making an auteurial work pushes them towards interacting with the material in ever more intrusive ways, which culminates in a montage of complementary gestures and gazes in different ads. In the end, the narratives that they spin about commercialization permeating human existence from birth to death ("The Ages of Man"), about nature coming back at us ("Epilogue: The Green Apocalypse"), or even about the 1990s liberalization being a pile of false promises, are products of their editorial intervention rather than viewers' autonomous engagement with their film.

One may wonder how you could even let refuse speak for itself while staying an author. To answer that question, one should stress that Benjamin's concept of literary montage rests on the idea of *incorporating* artifacts rather than merely assembling them. (Whether these can be advertisements as well is a question I want to leave open – certainly, I do not take the film to have answered it.) Where Benjamin thinks of himself as a scrap collector who incorporates found snippets of text into his work, Jude and Ferencz-Flatz are like landscape architects rearranging a waste dump in their free time. If one can indeed let something speak for itself in a citation, a pile of rubbish is a pile of rubbish rather than mere rubbish because someone put all the garbage together in one heap.

To me, the truly relevant question is not how Jude and Ferencz-Flatz can be auteurs while letting the material speak for itself, but what they even mean by auteurship. The material in *Eight Postcards* does not speak for itself, and Jude and Ferencz-Flatz may admit as much. What I find curious is that their film is premised on communicating theses that can be articulated as such. Theses about ads being meaningful objects of study, about the post-Communist transition being a hoax, about people's existence being shaped by commercial interests, about the at times ridiculous nature of our collective imagination. And in this, I recognize the continuation of a turn that Jude made a while ago and Ferencz-Flatz certainly does not appear to have objected to, which is to treat cinema as a vehicle for messages that might as well be discursively articulated. At the latest, this development began with *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, a didactic film completely in line with the European intelligentsia whose insertion of explicit material including amateur porn appears like a desperate attempt to remain edgy. Having traded the Kantian marriage of art with intuition – as that for which no adequate conceptual articulation can be given – for today's obsession with taking sides, choosing material that high art avoids (social media, porn, AI) appears to be the only way to remain "avant-

garde.” For what else is there left to say when we have settled that fascists and the patriarchy must die, that the world is burning, and that capitalism will kill us all one way or another?

1. While Fukuyama is still committed to the notion of an end of history, he thinks it is one that must first be eked out by defeating authoritarianism. See Fukuyama, F. (2022, October 18). *More proof that this really is the end of history*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/francis-fukuyama-still-end-history/671761/ ↩
2. Nolan, B. (2020). The median versus inequality-adjusted GNI as core indicator of ‘ordinary’ household living standards in rich countries. Social Indicators Research, 150(2), 569–585. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02311-0 ↩
3. Benjamin, W. (1999). *The arcades project* (H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Trans.; R. Tiedemann, Ed.). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; p. 460. ↩
4. The parallel is drawn by the filmmakers in Isabel Jacobs’ interview that is also part of this issue: https://eefb.org/perspectives/radu-jude-and-christian-ferencz-flatz-on-eight-postcards-from-utopia/ ↩