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Truth-Detectors: Romania's Struggle with Literal Meaning

A Linguistic Reading of Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau n-a fost?*, 2006)

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Almost all Romanian films of the last two decades display a conflict between a metaphorical and a literal way of seeing the world. Romanian films of the 1990s are metaphorical. They are full of symbols, allegories, parables and other figurative stylistic devices, and directors create plots with hidden messages that an initiated crowd is expected to decipher. The language of the characters in these films is also metaphorical. They are attached to beliefs and values that remove their language from its descriptive purpose.

The deviation from these metaphorical films is first and foremost a stylistic break. In the early 2000s, more and more films use hyper-realism or minimalism as an aesthetic choice. This would in itself not be such a novelty. After all, the history of modern Western art seems to constantly alternate between currents that are more or less realist in style and countercurrents that are more or less symbolist. What makes the Romanian films stand out is their self-reflexive fix. They often make the use of metaphors part of their narrative, for example by having characters use metaphors that other characters are unable to understand. This can be seen in Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* (2002), Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (*Hârtia va fi albastră*, 2006), Corneliu Porumboiu's own *Liviu's Dream* (*Visul lui Liviu*, 2002) and in all of Cristi Puiu's films up to *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2006). Because metaphors are staged as a conflict in these films, they also directly criticize the films of the 1990s and their way of looking at the world.

But soon, this newly invented literal way of depicting reality also begins to rise doubts. The deception of literalism as a legitimate alternative, can be seen in Corneliu Porumboiu's two films *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau n-a fost?*, 2006) and *Police, Adjective* (*Poliţist, Adjectiv*, 2009). Both films introduce

characters who may be called Literalists. Literalists point at the asymmetry[1] between what words represent to society and what they really mean. They suffer from the fact that the language of the Metaphorists[2] fails to describe their environment in a meaningful way. Literalists thus see the world not very differently from the Romanian New Wave directors themselves. But on some occasions, this form of literalism can hardly be called descriptive or matter-of-fact. Sometimes, it even resembles the language as it is used by the Metaphorists. The Literalists' obsession with the "correct" way of saying things thus also diverts from how language is actually used by society and thus ends up being just as asymmetrical. This is where the Literalist and the Metaphorists meet. The recognition that language (including cinematographic language) cannot be reduced to objective truths and that a certain amount of metaphors are necessary to communicate, is one of the struggles at the heart of *12:08 East of Bucharest*. Linguistically, the three main characters in *12:08* can be rearranged into a Metaphorist, a Literalist, and a Contextualist, the last being a non-ideological combination of the two. Briefly put, for the Contextualist, words have a conventional usage, but that usage can optionally be altered by particular and varying contextual situations. Language refers to particular objects in the world under specific circumstances, not to ideas, concepts, and beliefs (as for the Metaphorist), or to predefined conventional uses (as for the Literalist).

The Metaphorical Meaning of the Revolution

In *12:08 East of Bucharest* three men from Vaslui are invited by a television journalist to discuss whether there was a revolution in their town before 12:08 on December 22, 1989, which marks the exact time that Ceauşescu escaped from Bucharest in a helicopter. If the revolution took place after that time, the TV show host suggests, it would be false to speak of a revolution because there was no regime or dictator anymore to overthrow. The country would have been safe. The question about the meaning of the Romanian revolution, who participated in it, what it promised, and whether it brought about any change was not only a popular theme in the films of the 1990s. It was also part of a larger social debate about whether the revolution was a revolution, a coup d'état or a popular uprising. Porumboiu's *12:08* is inspired by TV shows that really existed. The contradicting narratives of the Romanian revolution discussed in the film represent a historical and highly politicized controversy surrounding the events of December 1989 and the legitimacy of Romania's post-Communist order.

Already during the revolution, many people were suspicious of the word "revolution" because it was borrowed from the socialist dictionary. It was associated with the post-WII Communist takeover and the carefully planned seizure of power by a secretive Leninist faction.[3] The leaders of the National

Salvation Front (NSF), the governing body of Romania in the first weeks after the Romanian revolution of 1989, preferred to use words like “change” or “transformation” at first, but “revolution” was the word used on the streets. If they wanted to be a credible voice of the people, they would have to agree on a common vocabulary and appropriate the term. The NSF thus came to justify its leadership through the myth of a popular uprising, carefully stressing that the word revolution, as they understood it, had older, pre-Leninist origins that were closer to the French revolution of 1789 than the Russian one of 1917. According to Ion Iliescu, the NSF’s leader, the revolution was “a sudden and violent event which eliminated despotic power” and “the NSF, which emerged spontaneously at the moment of explosion, and which represents the soul of this process, assumed the responsibility of taking over power”.[4] This politically motivated definition suggested that the revolution was an entirely spontaneous mass movement unaffected by intrigue or the influence of foreign powers, and that the new leadership that was derived from the crowd had no ties to the previous state of power. Both positions were impossible to hold. The spontaneity of the NSF’s was quickly undermined when General Nicolae Militaru appeared on French Television on December 22, stating that the NSF had already existed six months prior to the revolution. The myth of popular leadership was untenable, for its part, because many of the leaders of NSF, including Iliescu himself, came from among the Party ranks.

Instead of pointing at these inconsistencies, however, opponents soon started to interpret the many open questions with their own myths of the revolution. The historian Peter Siani-Davies separates these myths into two camps: the myth of the “stolen” and the “false” revolution. The myth of the stolen revolution relied on the belief that there really had been a popular movement, but that a group of former party members seized power by conspiring against their own ranks. The myth of the false revolution held that there was no popular uprising at all and that what has been called a “revolution” had really been a carefully staged political masquerade manipulated by foreign interests. An opinion poll from 1992 found that only 46 percent of respondents believed that they had witnessed a true revolution. Of the remaining respondents, 31 percent said it had been a stolen revolution, while 23 percent judged it was a false revolution.[5] According to Davies, the stolen revolution scenario was particularly popular among demonstrators on the street and traditional parties like the National Peasant’s Party whereas the false revolution scenario echoed with Leninist hardliners and nationalist political groups linked to the old regime such as the Greater Romania Party.

With obscurities, myths, and conspiracies surrounding the revolution multiplying, doubts about the very meaning of the revolution, especially regarding its popular origins divided society. A common position among the filmmakers of the 1990s was to reject the idea of the revolution. Like many other people, they quickly noticed that the old structures were still intact and that the hoped-for freedom of democracy left society deadlocked in the same

problems. An overwhelming majority of the filmmakers that survived the revolution tried to find cinematographic metaphors which helped them express their disappointment about the revolutionary failure. Mircea Daneliuc's *Conjugal Bed* (*Patul conjugal*, 1993) and Dan Piţa's *Pepe and Fifi* (*Pepe şi Fifi*, 1994), use standard metaphors like prostitution, impoverishment, insanity, drug dealing, and suicide to depict a society's slide into despair. The metaphor of the "stolen revolution" appears in Conjugal Bend in the form of a group of ex-communists who call themselves members of the "Original Democratic Party", suggesting that the revolution failed to establish a Communism-free political order. In his *The Snails' Senator* (*Senatorul melcilor*, 1995), Daneliuc likens the Revolution to the speed of a sluggish snail. Lucian Pintilie metaphorically disguises post-regime collapse as a constantly thwarted murder investigation in *Too Late* (*Trop Tard*, 1996) and as a military leadership guilty of repeating past mistakes in *Last Stop Paradise* (*Terminus paradis*, 1998). The metaphor of authoritarian continuity also gets allegorized in the form of an oppressive hotel administration in Dan Piţa's *Luxury Hotel* (*Hotel de Lux*, 1992), a film that was shot in the Palace of the Parliament, Ceausescu's record-breaking 340,000 m2 administrative colossus.

With this background, it is possible to better understand Virgil Jderescu (Teodor Corban), the TV show host, in *12.08* and his motivation to publicly discuss whether there was a revolution or not. Jderescu himself appears to believe in the revolution, although he does not seem to agree that it started in his town. What connects him to the mentality of the filmmakers of the 1990s, however, is his metaphorical way of speaking. To introduce his show, he cites Plato's allegory of the cave saying: "I think it is my duty as a journalist to ask whether we left the cave so that we may enter an even bigger cave." This metaphor resembles the "false" revolution scenario. It suggests that, revolution or not, society is still not emancipated. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, Romanians have not yet seen the light, still foolishly mistaking shadows for real objects. Next he cites Heraclitus' aphorism, "no man ever steps in the same river twice", in order to defend the view that society, although it may still look the same, is different nonetheless. By this time, it becomes clear, that Jderescu's metaphors lack any distinctive reference to the real world and that they are rather nonsensical. This is again confirmed by his next sentence: "I think there is no present without the past and no future without the present. That is why, the more transparent the past, the more transparent the present, I mean the feature, will be." Throughout the show, he continues to find parables like the French Bastille for the Central Committee and metaphors like "history's ocean" to describe the TV show's quest for the unknown. On one occasion he stylizes the fact that the show accepts calls with the proverb "vox populi, vox dei" (the voice of the people [is] the voice of God) – ironically, he intentionally hangs up on a caller right thereafter.

The difference between Jderescu's metaphors and the ones popular in the 1990s is that Jderescu's metaphors do not help him find out the truth he's

seeking. Indeed, the way in which they divert from the question largely resembles the Jabberwocky penetrating everyday life during Communism, the so-called Socialist Republic of Romania belonging to those countries, in which the gap between the social reality and its linguistic representation was particularly wide apart. Many linguistic and semiotic studies have examined the metaphorical aspects of “wooden language” (“limba de lemn” in Romanian) or of “newspeak” to describe the division of state discourse into double-ententes.[6] In his “Dictionary of the Romanian Wooden Language”[7], Aurel Sasu takes on the task of enumerating some of the vague, abstract, and ambiguous images Romanian authorities used in the media and public speeches to divert society from more salient issues. One recurring metaphor is the gilding of everything. Thus the Romanian people ostentatiously lived in “a golden age” (*epoca de aur*) from the 1980s onwards, during which, out of all things, the supply situation started taking on abysmal dimensions. But citizens of the golden age keep writing “golden pages” (*pagini de aur*) in the chronic of its two-thousand-year-old history, Communism is the “golden dream” (*visul de aur*) of the people, the party soldiers are the “golden foundation of our Party” (*fundul de aur al partidului nostru*), and so on and so forth. In Porumboiu’s film, the metaphors Jderescu uses to formulate the question of his show divert from the reality in exactly the same way. With his Latin quotes and allusions to Greek mythology, Jderescu feigns investigatory sophistication, a professionalism he never gained, having worked as a textile engineer before the revolution. His dilettantism, however, shows during every aspect of the show, from his garbled speech to the clumsy camera angles.

People in the Eastern Bloc were used to poking fun at the emptiness of the official discourse with jokes. The famous Radio Yerevan jokes, for instance, revolve around an imaginary radio station which answers the questions of interested citizens. The answers, however, are so contradictory, that they reveal the difficulties of speaking about a coherent Communist worldview given the undeniable misery in these countries. One of them goes:

> Radio Yerevan was asked: Are you allowed to criticize the Party?
> Radio Yerevan answered: In principle, yes. But it is better to live at home.

Metaphors opposing the official discourse could also be found in a certain kind of politically connoted argot. A famous example for this is embodied by Kent Cigarettes that were used as trade ware for services or other goods. To describe the transactions made with these cigarettes, Romanians used the verb *a chentui*, (which sounds like kɛntuj), with the pun on the phonetic similarity to the cigarette name and to the verb *a cheltui*, which translates into spending money.[8] Filmmakers, too, started to invent their own metaphors. Starting in the 1960s, with the coming-of-age of the first generation of doubters

and insubordinates, metaphorical films were continuously made throughout the Communist times, provided that the political circumstances permitted it. Famous examples include Jan Němec' *A Report on the Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966), Krzysztof Zanussi's *Camouflage* (*Barwy ochronne*, 1977), and Mircea Daneliuc's *The Cruise* (*Croaziera*, 1981). Similar to the post-Communist films, they used metaphors as pretexts to unmask the absurdities of the political system.

There is a mimetic side to the cinematographic metaphors, jokes and argot expressions. The official language true to the ideals of communism was metaphorical because it aestheticized a politically bleak reality. But the alternative language to criticize that different reality was also metaphorical, not only because it was forbidden to describe it directly but also because inventing indirect images was a way to mock the system's own imaginative discourse. It is important to understand that language was mutually metaphorical. One of the reasons why it may have seemed adequate to continue to use metaphors even after 1989, is that the official discourse of the transition period hardly established a more descriptive way of speaking. Thus the exclamation of a second-rank communist party member that "The revolution has won!"[9] is really not that different from a depiction of the decline of Communism in terms of a golden age. Both expressions mock language and history-making epochs like golden ages or revolutions.

Are jokes, argot, and cinematographic metaphors subversive?[10] The metaphor of Plato's Cave is certainly a keyword to another world, but not necessarily better than the one officially pronounced. It only solves problems linguistically. It may even be that the parallel language of politically subversive metaphors sustained the system because it stayed largely performative. It offered its speakers the opportunity to let off political steam. Mocking something certainly requires a deeper insight into the reality being mocked. But why would that reality change only because there is something like a mirror in which it can observe its own contradictions? In the end, "subversive" metaphors never represented more than a reversed image of society. They relied more on political frustration and resignation than on discrete political ideas, perhaps because it was more comfortable to depend on the system's linguistic flaws than to find metaphors that could stand on their own and be translatable into an independent political program.

This is precisely the problem of the TV show host in Porumboiu's film. His ancient Greek metaphors come across as helpless as the ones used by the filmmakers of the 1990s. The ironic twist of the film is that, while the journalist's desire to find out the truth about the Romanian revolution appears in itself to be an enlightened gesture, he is proceeding with the same absurdist investigatory tactics that were typical of the regime prior to the revolution. His obstinate repetition of the question "was there a revolution or not?" could come straight out of a Securitate protocol. In one scene, he doesn't take into

consideration the statement of a Chinese shopkeeper because he doesn't like that the Chinese sells firecrackers in his town. He then advises the shopkeeper to go back to his home country. By the end of the show, the democratic quest for truth proves itself no less ideological. The journalist thus gives an answer to his own question. Was there a revolution? No, because the formal outset of that question is such that it cannot be discussed without returning to the same mechanisms the revolution tried to overcome.

For many people witnessing the transition – for instance the TV host in Porumboiu's film -, the Romanian "revolution" represented yet another empty metaphor authorities imposed from the top. To show their frustration with the revolution, they invented their own metaphors that translated revolutionary doubts into recognizable images. Sometimes these metaphors pointed at the linguistic incoherence of the official discourse, but such criticism stayed largely performative. Imitation, be it as witty or subversive as some of the more creative metaphors proved to be, hardly leads to constructive political discussions. What did not occur to the speakers who continued to use metaphors in this way after the revolution was that their inability to change the way to describe reality could somehow be related to the general difficulties of leaving ideology behind.

The Literal Meaning of the Revolution

The filmmakers of the Romanian New Wave were the first to recognize that metaphors presented a problem of their society. Almost all of the early New Wave films depict characters who are unable to communicate because their metaphorical way of speaking clashes with another character's metaphorical way of speaking. Thus, in Cristi Puiu's *Cigarettes and Coffee* (*Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea*, 2004), a father and son fail to communicate because they don't understand each other's economic metaphors. In Puiu's *Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, the metaphorical jargon of the medical apparatus fails to communicate with a dying patient. Here, as in Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue*, communicative failure is fatal. In Muntean's film the violence of the revolution is explained by the fact that people used the wrong words to identify themselves with each other, each word, again, representing a largely metaphorical system of beliefs. In his next film, *Boogie* (2008), the inability to communicate jeopardizes the relationship of a couple. These directors saw that metaphors are part of the problem. But they refused to depict this insight in a metaphorical way. Their own cinematographic language is not asymmetrical because their films neither need decoding nor do they brutally separate their version of reality from someone else's. Linguistically, one could say that these films are literalist. They reduce the metaphorical language of their characters to a less saturated level.

The films of Porumboiu are the first to introduce the Literalist as a dramatis

personae. The Literalist is so fed up with metaphors that he is an outsider to any form of language that ambiguously separates what is said from what is meant. But this character hardly fulfills the astute matter-of-factness that could be seen in the Literalist perspective of the early New Wave films. Indeed, the problem these films try to solve is that Literalism might be as ideologically employed as the Metaphorist's speech.

In *12:08*, high-school teacher Tiberiu Manescu (Ion Sapdaru) is the Literalist of the three. Here are some of his literalistic remarks directed against the journalist's metaphoric way of speaking:

> ex. 1
> **Jderescu**: As a journalist, I know you need evidence for you accusations.
> **Manescu**: What do you mean journalist? Aren't you a textile engineer?
>
> ex. 2
> **Jderescu**: "He [the Chinese shopkeeper] cut me off!"
> **Manescu**: "He didn't cut you off, he said 'good-bye.'"

Manescu cannot stand Jderescu's empty metaphors. Not only are the journalist's claims vis-à-vis his curriculum vitae illegitimate because he was actually trained as a textile worker before '89, but what he is doing cannot be sincerely called journalism. Manescu's literalism can also be seen in the way he answers to the question of the show. Was there a revolution? For Manescu there was a revolution because he was there before the deadline. But with less and less empirical evidence to confirm this position, it becomes clear that his definition of "revolution" is much less factual than that.

The call of the Chinese man in the middle of the show reveals this. The Chinese caller finally provides what Manescu must have been waiting for. He says that Manescu is not a liar, meaning that he was on the town's square before 12:08. He also says that Manescu is the kindest person in town, which (considering the caller's later remarks about everybody else slandering one another) leaves Manescu as the only innocent person, and consequently as the only one free of communist-era guilt. Oddly though, the more the Chinese man praises him, the more he sinks and shakes his head as if in disappointment or shame. The film does not give any obvious explanation to Manescu's reaction. However, since he is unable to make peace with the fact the it is possible to call revolution something that involved both revolutionary zealots like himself and the kind of revolutionary conformism represented by people like Jderescu and, presumably, most of the other people of his town, his vision of the revolution resembles a kind of revolutionary purity that is impossible to defend in the real world. Perhaps Manescu feels misunderstood by the well-meaning Chinese,

because it is more important for Manescu to discredit the revolutionary passivity of the remaining inhabitants of his town than it is to prove that he (and his three friends) were the only true revolutionaries. This may also be the reason why he asks almost everybody calling the show where he or she was on December 22 just like Jderescu asks him whether there was a revolution or not.

As with Jderescu, Manescu's J'accuse position resembles a linguistic habitude of pre-Revolutionary times. He is like a truth detector, suspecting lies and conspiracies everywhere. John Feffer wrote in his book about post-Revolutionary Eastern Europe, quoting the activist Mariana Celac, that Romanians could be described as having "'intrauterite' personalities – withdrawn, fearful, suspicious of the outside world"[11], a personality shaped by the carefully cultivated myth of the Securitate as an omnipotent force imposing mass obedience on its citizens. During the revolution, the mysteries surrounding the Securitate's size and function bore yet another myth: that the obscure forces that underpinned the foundations of the regime would fight back. This distrust caused much of the violence and most of the deaths that occurred during the revolution. Although the Securitate have receded into shadows after the revolution, distrust continued to govern the imagination of many Romanians long after, especially that of the "innocent" who constantly lived in the fear of encountering the organization in their neighbor.

Lastly, there is also a good dose of nostalgia in Manescu's position. While he stresses that he suffered from having resisted the temptations of the regime, the fact that he continues to treat people like enemies makes his revolutionary incentives appear rather ambiguous, if not contradictory. Similar nostalgic disappointment seemed to have been a widespread experience among intellectuals after the fall of communism. Heiner Müller confessed in an interview: "we lost the GDR as a wall to play against. The loss of enemies made our pattern fail. When there is no enemy you have to look for him in your neighbor".[12] In the end, Manescu's obsession with finding inconsistencies in the discourse of his interlocutors hardly establishes the truth. He prefers to sacrifice the truth about revolution, as he does during the conversation with the Chinese caller, only to keep his habitudes of distrusting others alive.

In Porumboiu's next picture, *Police, Adjective*, exactly the same search-for-truth-in-disguise-of-ideology is at the heart of the film. This time, it is not a journalist seeking the truth but a police officer, and later also his superintendent (Vlad Ivanov), as the officer's quest for truth encounters disagreement. In *Police, Adjective* an officer has to track down schoolchildren smoking pot. But Cristi (Dragos Bucur), the officer, believes that there is an Italian organization that provides the children with the drugs and thus refuses to arrest the children, reasoning that it is too trivial of a crime.

The superintendent disagrees. But instead of discussing with Cristi why he thinks the teenagers are not guilty, he asks him to look up the words

“conscience”, “police”, and ”morality” in a dictionary, in order to remind him that the arrest of the teenagers is not a matter of his personal intuitions. Here, Porumboiu goes even further in pointing at the ideological motivation behind Literalism. The superintendent, like Cristi, is a Literalist, but he doesn’t grasp that words in dictionaries, just like laws, have a usage, and that that usage (even in law) can be stretched. Of course, the superintendent is right: morality and conscience belong to the domain of feelings, emotions, and subjectivity, and should be kept away from the law. But the irony is that the superintendent, by believing in the objective truth of the dictionary, also enforces objectivity on the domain of subjectivity. For him, conscience can be expressed without human subjectivity, thus literally without conscience. In this scene, as in *12:08*, the method one group of people uses to find out the truth resembles a questioning where the answers are known in advance. Not only is there only one truth, but someone possessing a different truth is either stigmatized or coerced into compliance. The next day, Cristi plans the arrest of the children.

While Cristi’s position against the application of dictionary definitions to arguable situations in real life might reveal the absurdity of an impassive system of justice, he is as literal as his superior when it comes to his private life. If his boss lacks the imagination to understand how morals could be applied to a concrete situation, Cristi can’t make sense of his girlfriend telling him that life without love is “like the sea without the sun,” “or “the field without the flower.” For Cristi, the sea is the sea, and the field the field. His lack of understanding causes him to spend the night alone.

During the scene of the dictionary reading, a secretary is called into the office. The superior wants her definition for the word “conscience,” which she supplies saying that it is the belief in God. He then uses her answer to justify the purchase of more dictionaries. Similar to Manescu’s refusal to understand the metaphors of Jderescu, the superior is proud to lack the linguistic capabilities to understand the metaphor of his colleague. Ironically though, the superintendent and the secretary are on the same comprehensive level. They both displace conscience from their own responsibility. Taken a step further, the secretary and the superior imagine that the world can be expressed without human involvement. God is for the secretary what definitions are for her superior.

Literalism reaches a dead-end in *Police, Adjective*. The film is dominated by Literalists who prescribe word usage to people suffering from a metaphorical or, even worse, context-dependent worldview. These Literalists are not that different from the Metaphorists. Both languages speak in the abstract, and avoid reference to historical detail and hard facts, while not tolerating linguistic practices that differ from their own. Tragically, neither the Metaphorsit nor the Literalist can give an account of their own discourse. The Metaphorists are trapped in linguistic customs that are at best fatalistic and at worst cynical. Their imagination, even that which is often deemed subversive, feeds on the

dysfunction of society. It is impossible to find even one constructive metaphor that would, for example, conceal the project of a truly alternative social order. The Literalists, on the other hand, also lack any kind of autonomy over their discourse, preferring to confide their understanding of language to the blind belief in the most basic definitions free of allegory or metaphor.

The Contextual Meaning of the Revolution

The third, and last, linguistic representation of the revolution in *12.08* is given by an elderly man called Emanoil Piscoci (Mircea Andreescu) who is the Contextualist of the three. He might be the least dogmatic, and ultimately he is least understood. He constantly asks whether he is boring the other two, realizing that they don't pay the least attention to what he says. But what if they really can't understand him? Piscosi's account of the revolution is entirely subjective. It only applies to his proper experience. He starts telling a story about how he had a fight with his wife, and how he went out of the house to get some flowers for her on the day of the revolution. He joined the demonstrations to demonstrate to his wife that he can be a hero, not being afraid of the Communists. For the Literalist and the Metaphorist this kind of language does not make sense.

One may note that Piscosi is the only one of the three who does not contradict the callers or his two colleagues. The ideological position of the other two always begs discussion. This might be why Piscosi's point of view discomforts Manescu and Jderescu. It is ironic that Piscosi ends up giving the most accurate metaphor for the revolution, perhaps intuitively realizing that this is the only way to make himself understood. His version of the revolution goes like this: the revolution spread from Timișoara and Bucharest to the rest of country just as streetlights turn on in sequence, one after the other, moving from the center to the most remote corners of the city. Of course, Manescu, who, as a Literalist, refuses to understand metaphors, replies: "You're full of nonsense, what has electricity got to do with the revolution?". But even Jderescu, whose specialty are metaphors, doesn't understand. "What's the revolution got to do with streetlights?" he asks.

Piscoci's story reveals that historical experience is most of the time extremely banal. There might have been a revolution, injustice, and oppression, but after all, it's all about keeping one's wife, watching TV, going on vacation. Why one would want to go out to demand freedom is a second-degree question. In Piscosi's narrative, it seems almost beside the point. Piscosi's discourse has what the other two are lacking: he can give an account of his own discourse. He can coherently communicate his position by using words that refer to his own experience. Piscoci's point of view, although the most particular of the three, is also the least asymmetrical. Whereas Manescu's and Jderescu's positions drive at exclusion, Piscosi seems to be able to identify with both of

them. It is not contradictory for him to assume that a revolution can still be a revolution, even if not every revolutionary fought for freedom in the face of immanent tyranny.

The period during and after the revolution is a period of extreme doubts. These doubts have political, social, and historical roots and go as far as to question the basic concepts of communication. Linguistically, the time before and immediately after the revolution is characterized by an abundant use of metaphors. These metaphors were used by the media and the official language of the political authorities in an attempt to aestheticize an ever bleaker-looking social reality. But metaphors were also highly popular in the unofficial argot, in dissident films, and jokes. Unofficially, society invented metaphors that exposed the very reality the metaphorical language of the system tried to hide from them. The political upheaval of 1989 only gradually introduced a linguistic change and metaphors remained dominant throughout the 1990s. But the generation growing up during the transition period became more and more wary of this metaphorical way of speaking. This is particularly obvious in early New Wave films, where characters fail to communicate with each other because they are unable to understand each other's metaphors. In many ways, the filmmakers, with their own cinematographic language characterized by a matter-of-fact realism, reduced language to an austere descriptive purpose. However, with Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08*, this literal way of seeing the world was questioned for the first time and compared, in dogmatism, vulnerability, and historical indebtedness to the worn-out metaphors of the past. The Literalists, for all their psychological insight into the cynicism lurking behind metaphors, miss out on the most essential things in life. Be it, as in *12:08*, the possibility to feel heroic about one's revolutionary deeds, or, as in *Police, Adjective*, the capacity to understand moral intuitions. The Literalists' correct language hardly makes their actions right. *12:08* is also the first film that proposes a positive alternative to the linguistic deadlocks it critiques, instead of being content with merely criticizing. Although the proposition is timid and less fleshed-out, the contextualist point of view can be seen as an undogmatic and, yes, democratic solution to the communicative problems that went through Romanian cinema, and much of society, for the last two decades. It acknowledges that speakers are human beings whose words often refer to their own messy, unstoryboarded, and banal experiences. Surely, the result may not be coherent, authoritative, or universally true, nor is it presented to us as a beautifully packed metaphor. But it surely comes close to reality. Just take a moment and try to listen to your own speech.

References

I adopt Reinhart Koselleck's definition of asymmetry as the discrepancy between what words a person would use to describe his environment and what others would use for the same description. Cf. "Zur historisch-politischen Semantik asymmetrischer Grundbegriffe", in: Vergangene Zukunft: Zur

Semantik Geschichtlicher Zeiten, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988.

Here I follow a definition of metaphor as put forward by Max Black (1959) and others following him. For Black, metaphors cannot be translated into literal propositions. Metaphors are context-dependent, which means that in order to be understood, one has to be familiar with a set of socially relevant ideas. This is crucial for my purpose, because it parallels the notion of ideology. Ideologies, like metaphors, create patterns of implications that are not necessarily relevant to the literal meaning of words. For example, the metaphor “man is a wolf” cannot be explained by inferential implications about the word “wolf”, eg. “a wolf is an apex predator”, thus “Man is an apex predator.” This metaphor only makes sense for societies that consider the wolf a strong, fierce, or dangerous animal. The implication that “man is a wolf” can mean “man is dangerous” for example, depends on an idea about wolves, not on a literal meaning of the word wolf. For other societies this must not be so. Thus for the Tanaina of Alaska, wolves are brothers because they believe that wolves were once men. For someone believing that a wolf is a brother, the metaphor thus has a different meaning. But in either way, the meaning is contextually dependent on a set of ideas about wolves, not on a literal description. Black, Max, “Metaphor”, pp. 273-294. in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, Vol. 55 (Wiley-Blackwell, 1954-1955).

Siani-Davies, Peter, The Romanian Revolution of December 1989, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 276.

Ibid, p. 277.

Ibid, p. 278.

For linguistic approaches see: Ely, John F. et al., Re-Membering Romania, Romania Since 1989: Politics, Economics, and Society (ed. Henry F. Carey); Thom, Françoise, Limba de lemn, (Ed. Humanitas, 2005); Bochmann, Klaus, “Revolutionierung der Sprachverhältnisse nach der „Revolution“ vom 22. Dezember 1989 in Rumänien”, pp. 349-359 in ed. Bettina et al.,Politische Wechsel – Sprachliche Umbrüche, (Frank & Timme GmbH, 2011); and for a semiotic study: Kideckel, David A., “Economic images and social change in the Romanian socialist transformation”, pp. 399-411. in Dialectical Anthropology Vol. 12, No. 4 (Springer, 2004).

Sasu, Aurel, Dictionarul limbii romane de lemn, (Paralela 45, 2008). .

This was later translated into a film by Cristi Puiu, “Cigarettes and Coffee”

(2004), where an old unemployed driver gives his son a package of Kent cigarettes and Lavazza Coffee so that he can find his father a job. For the father, the strategies to get social advantages are still the same – Kent then, Kent now. Tatal, telling his son “it’s much like the old times,” refers to the cigarette-currency in communist Romania.

Virgil Măgureanu reading a communiqué of the National Salvation Front on December 23, 1989.

Cf. the many instances of subversive irony in Zizek, Slavoj, In Defense of Lost Causes, (London, NY: Verso, 2008), The Plague of Fantasies, (London, NY: Verso, 1997).

Feffer, John, Shock Waves: Eastern Europe After the Revolutions, (Black Rose Books Ltd., 1992), p. 202.

“…uns fehlt die DDR als eine Wand, gegen die wir anspielen können. Auch am Verlust von Feindbildern ist dieses Modell gescheitert. Wenn kein Feind mehr da ist, sucht man ihn im Nachbarn.” Interview for DER SPIEGEL 12/1995.