



Archive Footages, Re-enacting and (Auto)biography in Andrei Ujică's "The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu"

Armando Rotondi

Institute of the Arts Barcelona; Babeș-Bolyai University. Barcelona, Spain; Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Email: a.rotondi@iabarcelona.es ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5887-514X>

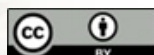
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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of history through archival and found footage in Andrei Ujică's documentary, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (*Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu*, 2010). The three-hour film, constructed from 1,000 hours of original footage from the National Archives of Romania, covers 25 years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's life, offering an intimate portrayal rather than a traditional historical analysis. This study begins with a general overview of the role of archival footage in re-enacting history, drawing on frameworks by scholars such as Michael Zryd and Vivian Sobchack. It then contextualizes Ujică's approach in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* by comparing it to his earlier work, *Videograms of a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution*, 1992), co-directed with Harun Farocki. The analysis focuses on Ujică's use of archival footage, sound elements, and narrative structure to build a nuanced portrait of Romania's dictator. The paper aims to explore how Ujică's method transforms historical documentation into a subjective "autobiography" thus contributing to the discourse on the cinematic re-enactment of history.

Keywords

Archival Footages; Documentary; Re-Enactment; Romanian Cinema; Nicolae Ceaușescu; Romanian Revolution; Autobiography; Andrei Ujică; Media Studies; History



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Архивные кадры, реконструкция и (авто)биография в фильме Андрея Ужикэ «Автобиография Николае Чаушеску»

Ротонди Армандо

Институт искусств Барселоны; Университет Бабеша – Бойяи. Барселона, Испания; Клуж-Напока, Румыния. Email: a.rotondi[at]iabarcelona.es ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5887-514X>

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается репрезентация истории через архивные и найденные кадры в документальном фильме Андрея Ужикэ «Автобиография Николае Чаушеску» (Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu, 2010). Трёхчасовой фильм, созданный из 1000 часов оригинальной хроники из Национального архива Румынии, охватывает 25 лет жизни Николае Чаушеску, предлагая скорее интимный портрет, чем традиционный исторический анализ. Исследование начинается с общего обзора роли архивных кадров в реконструкции истории, опираясь на концепции таких исследователей, как Майкл Зрид и Вивиан Собчак. Затем анализируется подход Ужикэ в «Автобиографии Николае Чаушеску» через его сравнение с более ранней работой «Видеограммы революции» (Videogramme einer Revolution, 1992), снятой совместно с Харуном Фароки. Основное внимание уделяется использованию архивных кадров, звуковых элементов и нарративной структуры, позволяющих Ужикэ создать сложный портрет румынского диктатора. Цель статьи – исследовать, каким образом метод Ужикэ трансформирует историческую хронику в субъективную «автобиографию», тем самым внося вклад в дискуссию о кинематографической реконструкции истории.

Ключевые слова

архивные кадры; документальное кино; реконструкция; румынское кино; Николае Чаушеску; Румынская революция; автобиография; Андрей Ужикэ; медиаисследования; история



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Introduction

The use of archival and found footage in documentary filmmaking has long been a significant method for representing historical narratives. By repurposing existing visual and auditory material, filmmakers can offer new perspectives on past events, sometimes challenging traditional historiography. However, while much scholarship has examined the role of archival footage in reconstructing historical events or collective memory, less attention has been given to how such materials can be recontextualized to construct subjective narratives that blur the boundaries between biography, autobiography, and propaganda. This paper addresses this gap through an analysis of Andrei Ujică's 2010 documentary, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (*Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu*).

Ujică's film, which spans three hours and utilizes 1,000 hours of original footage from the National Archives of Romania, provides a unique case study for examining how archival materials can be used to construct a historical figure's self-representation. Unlike traditional historical documentaries, which typically aim to provide an objective or chronological account, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* transforms what could have been a straightforward biographical account into a subjective "autobiography" constructed entirely from Ceaușescu's own recorded appearances and speeches. This approach invites viewers to interpret Ceaușescu's life and regime from his own curated public image, raising questions about the intersections of historical documentation, self-presentation, and myth-making.

To situate Ujică's process within broader scholarly debates, this paper begins with an overview of the role of archival footage in documentary filmmaking. Drawing on the works of Michael Zryd and Vivian Sobchack, among others, it explores how archival footage can be recontextualized to create new meanings, challenging traditional modes of historiography and cinematic representation. While existing studies have predominantly focused on the role of archival footage in constructing collective memory or offering counter-narratives, this paper highlights how Ujică's work diverges by using archival materials to create a singular, introspective portrait of a historical figure.

Moreover, Ujică's approach in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* is contrasted with his earlier collaborative work, *Videograms of a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution*, 1992), co-directed with Harun Farocki. While *Videograms of a Revolution* examines the collective memory of the 1989 Romanian Revolution through a montage of television footage and amateur recordings, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* focuses on a singular, subjective narrative that reflects Ceaușescu's self-perception as mediated through state-controlled visual and auditory archives. This contrast underscores Ujică's evolving engagement with archival material and its potential to reshape historical narratives.



The analysis of *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* in this paper is structured around three key elements: the use of archival footage, the integration of sound, and the narrative construction. The archival footage, sourced from state-controlled media, is repurposed to reveal both the public image Ceaușescu sought to project and the underlying tensions of his regime. The sound design, which includes Ceaușescu's speeches and public addresses, plays a crucial role in shaping the documentary's narrative and emotional tone. Finally, the narrative structure, which eschews a straightforward chronological progression in favor of a thematic and episodic approach, allows Ujică to create a multifaceted portrayal of Ceaușescu.

By examining these components, this paper demonstrates how Ujică's film not only documents historical events but also reinterprets them through a subjective lens. In doing so, it addresses a gap in the existing scholarship by illustrating how archival footage can be used not just to reconstruct history, but to critically engage with the processes of self-representation and myth-making. This analysis contributes to broader discussions on the cinematic reenactment of history and the transformative potential of archival material in documentary filmmaking.

Methodology

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the paper adopts a multifaceted qualitative methodology to analyze Andrei Ujică's *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* as an exemplary case study in the use of archival and found-footage documentary filmmaking. The methodological framework combines theoretical engagement, archival analysis, comparative study, and audience reception theory to unravel the intricate layers of Ujică's approach to historical representation. Specifically, the following are the core elements of the adopted methodology.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in key contributions from film and media studies, particularly the works of Vivian Sobchack and Jaimie Baron. Sobchack's phenomenological approach to documentary filmmaking expands the understanding of how archival footage operates not only as a visual record but also as an experiential encounter for viewers. Her concept of documentary as a mode of consciousness is particularly relevant here, as Ujică's film invites the audience to engage actively with the material rather than passively consuming it. Baron's notion of the "archive effect" further informs this analysis by exploring how the viewer's recognition of archival footage as an artifact of a different time creates a unique tension between the past and its cinematic representation. This theoretical foundation enables a nuanced exploration of how Ujică's film transcends conventional historical documentaries to construct a layered, subjective narrative.



Archival Analysis

At the heart of the methodology there lies an examination of the archival footage utilized in the film. Ujică worked with an extraordinary collection of over 1,000 hours of material from Romania's National Archives, distilling this into a three-hour documentary. This monumental task required a careful process of selection, exclusion, and contextual reframing of state-controlled propaganda footage. The analysis foregrounds how Ujică engages with archival documents not merely as records of the past but as raw material for creative reinterpretation. Drawing in the theoretical framework review on, e.g., Michael Zryd's distinction between "archival" and "found" footage, this study investigates how the filmmaker's manipulation of these materials generates new meanings. In doing so, it questions traditional notions of archives as static repositories of historical truth, presenting them instead as dynamic, malleable sources for artistic and historical inquiry.

Comparative Analysis

To contextualize Ujică's works, in the first part of the case study analysis, the paper compares *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* with his earlier collaborative work, *Videograms of a Revolution* (co-directed with Harun Farocki, 1992). While both films employ archival footage as a central element, their approaches diverge significantly. *Videograms of a Revolution* assembles a montage of television broadcasts and amateur recordings to chronicle the collective experience of the 1989 Romanian Revolution. This method emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives and the chaotic immediacy of revolutionary events. In contrast, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* narrows its focus to a singular figure, presenting a curated narrative constructed from Ceaușescu's own media appearances. This comparative lens highlights Ujică's shift from collective memory to individual portraiture, offering insight into how archival strategies can serve different narrative and ideological purposes.

Narrative Construction and Re-enactment

The study also delves – both in the theoretical framework review and in the case study analysis – into the film's narrative construction, which eschews traditional chronological storytelling in favor of a thematic and episodic approach. By juxtaposing moments of Ceaușescu's public grandeur with subtle cues of underlying discord, Ujică creates a complex portrait that oscillates between adulation and critique. This narrative strategy is examined through the theoretical lens of re-enactment, referencing works such as Marvin Carlson's *Living History, Re-enactment* and Jennifer Allen's exploration of re-enactment principles. Allen's assertion that re-enactment often seeks to recover a "lost totality" is particularly pertinent, as Ujică's film methodically reconstructs Ceaușescu's self-styled image while simultaneously deconstructing it through the accumulation of historical contradictions. The concept of the "witness," whether embodied by the filmmaker, historian,



or spectator, is also critical in understanding how the fragmented elements of archival footage are reassembled into a coherent yet interrogative narrative.

Sound Design and Emotional Resonance

A key methodological focus is the role of sound in shaping the documentary's narrative and emotional tone. Ujică's sparing use of music and reliance on Ceaușescu's speeches and public addresses intensifies the film's immersive quality. The analysis explores how the juxtaposition of visual and auditory elements amplifies the tension between the dictator's carefully curated image and the realities of his regime. The sound design thus becomes an integral part of the storytelling, reinforcing the film's dual function as both a historical document and a cinematic critique of authoritarian propaganda.

Viewer Reception and Interpretive Dynamics

Finally, the methodology considers the role of audience reception in constructing the film's meaning. Building on Sobchack's phenomenological framework, explored in the specific theoretical chapter of the article, the study examines how *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* engages viewers as active participants in the interpretive process. The absence of external narration compels audiences to piece together the story themselves, fostering a reflective consciousness about the interplay of image, sound, and history. This mode of reception aligns with broader trends in postmodern documentary, where the emphasis shifts from presenting objective truths to inviting subjective engagement.

By weaving together these methodological threads – archival analysis, theoretical engagement, comparative study, narrative construction, sound design, and audience reception – the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Ujică's *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* transforms archival material into a profound exploration of historical memory and cinematic representation.

Archive-Footage Film and Re-enactment: a Theoretical Framework Overview

The literature on archival-footage cinema emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the mentioned “archival” and “found” documents. Traditionally, “found footage” referred to film reels discovered in unconventional places like the street, trash, or flea markets, while “archival footage” was reserved for films found within official archives. However, the expanding notion of an archive, particularly with the advent of digital archives, challenges this dichotomy, blurring the lines between what is traditionally considered “archival” and “found”. The interplay between the archival and the found, the distinctions between the two, and the evolving nature of archives in the digital age contribute to a complex landscape where the boundaries between reality and representation are continually renegotiated.



Michael Zryd's argument adds a layer of nuance to this discussion by highlighting the distinction between "found footage" and "archival footage" (2003, pp. 41–61). Zryd argues that the archive separates historical records from outtakes, emphasizing a sense of exclusion within the archival process. However, the evolving nature of archives and their contents, coupled with the diverse uses of even the most "official" documents, blurs the boundaries between these categories. From this point of view, instead of opposing the terms "found" and "archival", the concept of "foundness" is, in fact, inherent in all archival documents, irrespective of their origin, challenging the traditional dichotomy.

This re-evaluation of the distinction between the two is crucial in understanding the complex relationship between documentary and experimental appropriations within cinema. Following this perspective, the discourse carries several implications relevant to our study, particularly in redefining the concept of the "appropriation film." This term, borrowed from visual arts – where "appropriation" or "citational art" are common – offers a more precise characterization than the more conventional terms *appropriated film* or *film comprised of recombinant (or archival) material*. The "appropriation film" is a reception-dependent phenomenon that enriches the understanding of cinematic works engaging with archival documents. Central to this concept is the viewer's recognition that a film incorporates archival documents. These are identified as such only when perceived in a context distinct from their original time and purpose.

This reconceptualization introduces the idea of the "archive effect," a term coined by Jaimie Baron (2012), which underscores the film's ability to evoke a particular awareness in the viewer. Through this effect, archival materials are recontextualized to generate a consciousness that goes beyond their historical or original intent. This awareness transforms the viewer's engagement with the material, adding layers of meaning and redefining the role of archival documents in cinematic storytelling.

Phenomenological approaches to media studies, as proposed by Vivian Sobchack, redefine the concept of "documentary" by moving beyond its objective features to include a subjective relationship between the viewer and the cinematic or televisual text (1999, pp. 241–254). In this framework, documentary and docudrama are not merely film genres characterized by specific formal attributes but are instead modes of reception and experiential engagement. Sobchack (2004, pp. 258–285) emphasizes that this involves a distinct mode of consciousness. In this scenario, the viewer identifies with and becomes immersed in the cinematic image, experiencing it as both representational and affective. This perspective highlights the interplay between perception, emotion, and interpretation in shaping the documentary experience.

Building on Sobchack's notion, the term "appropriation film" is redefined to highlight that such films are not defined solely by their formal characteristics or



filmmaking strategies but by the effects they produce and the consciousness they evoke in the viewer. The recognition of a film as an “appropriation film” hinges on the viewer’s perception of its use of “archival documents,” which gain their archival quality only when identified as belonging to a different time or context of use. This perspective aligns with Jaimie Baron’s (2012, pp. 102–120) reconceptualization of the “archival document” as an experiential encounter. It underscores the viewer’s active role in engaging with these materials, framing them as both historical artifacts and cinematic elements. This approach involves a specific mode of consciousness and identification with the cinematic image, which is crucial for representing and re-enacting history and historical events.

Contributions such as Marvin Carlson’s essay “Living History, Re-enactment” (2004) or Rebecca Schneider’s volume *Performing Remain* (2011) are among the fundamental studies on this topic. To these, we can also add Agnew’s contribution on the relation between historical re-enactment and the role of the “present” (Agnew, 2009, pp. 299–312) and the work on re-enactment and contemporary art (Blackson, 2007, pp. 28–40; and Wees, 1993). However, we consider even more interesting some considerations and a definition of re-enactment as in the volume *Re:akt! Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Re-reporting* (2014), edited by Antonio Caronia, Janez Jansă, and Domenico Quaranta. Particularly in the chapter “Einmal ist keinmal. Observations on Re-enactment” (2014, pp. 17–26), Jennifer Allen outlines eleven fundamental points for defining “re-enactment”. Among these, points number 3 and 4 are relevant for our definition.

In point 3, Allen argues that “the process of re-enactment frequently seeks to uncover a sense of lost completeness or totality” (p. 19). She uses the example of a crime re-enactment to illustrate this, where fragments of evidence and information are meticulously pieced together like a puzzle. Through a methodical reconstruction of events, the re-enactment aims to capture the essence of what occurred, shedding light on motives, actions, and consequences. Each recreated detail plays a crucial role in constructing a more comprehensive understanding of the event, revealing nuances and truths that may have been overlooked or obscured. This process not only seeks to illuminate the past but also serves as a means to explore complex narratives and the intricacies of human behavior and experience.

Building on this, in point 4, Allen highlights the role of the witness in re-enactments, stating: “Whenever the search for a lost totality takes place in the re-enactment, there is always a witness – specialist or spectator – who turns the many parts into a total sum” (p. 20). This perspective underscores the importance of interpretation, as the witness actively synthesizes fragmented elements into a cohesive narrative, bridging the gap between past events and their present representation.

In point number 5, Allen also notes that:

The presence of witnesses guarantees that something complete has taken place, even if the reenactment deviates in its portrayal of the original event. What is repro-



duced is not only a series of past occurrences but also an experience of duration, which gives the past a clear beginning and an unmistakable ending. In contrast to the chaotic unfolding of the original event, the re-enactment knows what will happen and, more importantly, when this happening starts and finishes. In the eyes of the witness, the original event becomes historical by taking up time, and it claims its status as history by appearing as a discrete event with a finite duration. In other words, the re-enactment gives the origin a definition and an identity that it may not have had for itself. The witness casts a particular gaze at the re-enactment of the origin: not looking, nor seeing, but recognizing something that has already happened, even if the event was never experienced firsthand by the witness. In recognition, the gaze fulfils the promise of instant knowledge while legitimizing this knowledge as recurring truth. (p. 20)

As noted by Allen, re-enactment ultimately “always presupposes a missing body” (p. 19), and it “uses the body as a medium for reproducing the past” (p. 19). In using archival footage, there is not necessarily a process of merely representing or reporting history, but rather a re-enactment of history through a filtered, personal, and subjective lens. This distinction is crucial in understanding the impact and intention behind documentary filmmaking that relies heavily on archival materials. When a filmmaker like Andrei Ujică utilizes archival footage, the goal is not simply to present historical events as they occurred, but to interpret and reframe these events, thereby creating a narrative that is imbued with personal perspective and contemporary relevance.

Archival footage, by its nature, is a repository of historical moments, captured and preserved as evidence of the past. However, the act of selecting, editing, and recontextualizing these images transforms them into more than just historical documents. These materials are re-enacted to construct a new narrative that reflects the filmmaker’s vision and interpretation. This process involves a deliberate choice of what to include and what to omit, how to sequence the footage, and what emotional or ideological tone to convey.

This is a re-enactment process that is rooted in a dualism that exists between a first text (represented by history itself) and a second text (the film as a re-enactment of the past), using the archival footages. This dualism establishes a critical approach that is informed by the temporal distance from the events being depicted and the re-staging of those events in the present context. The historical text provides the raw material, while the re-enactment, as a second text, offers a reinterpretation that is shaped by contemporary perspectives, insights, and sensibilities.

In this context of using archival material and re-enact situations, however, it is important to note that, while Ujică exercises considerable control over what is presented, he simultaneously offers the spectator substantial interpretive freedom. This intricate negotiation between filmmaker and audience allows the work to resonate differently depending on the viewer’s level of prior knowledge. For those spectators already familiar with the historical and cultural contexts, the film may evoke a more nuanced reading. However, for others, this open-ended approach



serves as an invitation to delve deeper, fostering a more comprehensive investigation and encouraging a personal exploration of the film's broader implications.

One concept that could deepen this analysis is Susan Buck-Morss's expansion of Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image" (Buck-Morss, 1991). According to Benjamin, the dialectical image is one that gains new meanings through the historical and social developments that occur between its recording and its reception. Buck-Morss builds on this by emphasizing how the temporal gap between these moments can radically alter the spectator's interpretation, as shifting political, cultural, and historical contexts reshape the way images are understood. This idea is particularly relevant to Ujică's work, where the footage invites varied interpretations depending on the viewer's knowledge and the evolving socio-historical backdrop.

Case Study: The Intimate Re-enactment of History in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* by Andrei Ujică

A key component of exploration of the use of archival footage in historical re-enactment is exemplified by *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010). This film does not conform to the conventions of traditional documentaries, and it explores themes of megalomania, propaganda, and the role of cinema in shaping public perception. Ujică refrains from providing direct historical explanations or a straightforward commentary. Instead, he allows the archival footage to speak for itself, constructing a narrative that delves into the self-aggrandizing world of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu is the final installment in Andrei Ujică's hypothetical trilogy dedicated to the end of Communism. The trilogy also includes *Videograms of a Revolution* co-directed with Harun Farocki in 1992, and *Out of the Present* (1995), which focuses on Soviet cosmonaut Sergei Konstantinovich Krikalev.

Both *Videograms of a Revolution* and *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* are documentaries that exclusively utilize archival material, both professional and amateur, in unconventional ways with differing methodologies.

The Revolution of 1989 stands as one of the most significant events in Romanian communist history, rivaled only by the 1977 earthquake and the subsequent transformative changes in Bucharest. In the previous *Videograms of a Revolution*, Ujică and Farocki craft an experimental documentary with multiple interpretative layers, focusing entirely on the Romanian Revolution of 1989, specifically the events from December 21 to December 25, 1989. In her analysis, Martina Olivero describes the film as an "experimental documentary" where "the two directors produced a significant cinematic example of the relationship between media and political power at the end of the Cold War" (2014, p. 30).

The directors abandon traditional representation methods to create a new aesthetic experience. Olivero notes that a new non-narrative form emerges through



the combination of archival footage, historical films, and both institutional and amateur videos with dramatic and non-fictional work. Specifically, Olivero states that what emerges from the collaboration and the production of these two authors, beyond a political attention to what was happening *on the fringes* of Europe, is a new status of the image. There are no longer images that record history, but images that have taken power and have assumed control over history itself (Olivero, 2014, p. 30).

The central aspect of the recurrence of history in Ujică and Farocki's work lies in their use of archival images. These images, sourced from about 125 hours of available footage, include official, institutional, and amateur material. By meticulously selecting and utilizing this diverse range of archival footage, the directors aim to reconstruct the significant days from December 21 to December 26, 1989. This period spans from Ceaușescu's final speech to the broadcast of his trial and execution on television. The film also includes a preface about a woman who survived the riots and reprisals in Timișoara.

Ujică and Farocki's goal is not merely to depict the revolution. As suggested by the title, their focus is on how reality, as captured in *Videograms of a Revolution*, can be preserved in memory. They explore the power of these recorded images to convey the authenticity and gravity of historical events. Through their work, the directors delve into the role of media in shaping collective memory and the enduring impact of visual documentation. By presenting these archival images in a carefully constructed narrative, they highlight the intersection of media and political power, illustrating how historical reality is both captured and remembered.

On the contrary, in the final film of his trilogy on Communism, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, Andrei Ujică takes a markedly different approach from his earlier work, *Videograms of a Revolution*, though he continues to employ the "compilation documentary" format composed entirely of archival footage. Unlike the multi-layered experimental documentary style of *Videograms of a Revolution*, which focuses on the Romanian Revolution of 1989 through various interpretative lenses, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* presents itself as a historical narrative centered on Ceaușescu himself.

By focusing predominantly on Ceaușescu, Ujică offers a unique lens through which to view the history of Romanian Communism. The film examines how Ceaușescu crafted his image and wielded cinema as a tool of propaganda. Through this meticulous assembly of archival material, Ujică reveals the power dynamics and psychological underpinnings of Ceaușescu's regime, offering viewers an immersive experience that emphasizes the narrative and emotional impact of the footage. The film becomes a powerful exploration of how historical reality is constructed and remembered, without the interference of overt expository narration, thus encouraging viewers to engage critically with the material and draw their own conclusions.



Rachel Webb Jekanowski, in her essay *Confronting the Archive: Found Footage Filmmaking, History and Archival Practice in One Man's War and The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2013), underscores that the use of archival material in “compilation documentaries” challenges the conventional role of documentary films both visually and investigatively. She notes that Ujică’s method of selecting, recycling, and juxtaposing archival images serves to discuss not only periods of historical trauma but also the very act of filmmaking itself (Webb Jekanowski, 2013, p. 3).

Ujică’s approach in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* exemplifies this technique. By weaving together a vast array of archival footage without direct commentary, Ujică invites viewers to critically engage with the material, thereby questioning how history is recorded and remembered. This method highlights the power and subjectivity inherent in archival images, suggesting that the process of filmmaking can be as much about interpreting and reconstructing the past as it is about documenting it. Through this innovative use of archival footage, Ujică opens a dialogue about the reliability of historical narratives and the role of cinema in shaping collective memory.

Drawing from Catherine Russell’s positions in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999), where Russell proposes that archives serve as “visual evidence of history” (Russell, 1999, p. 240), Webb Jekanowski views Ujică’s approach in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* as experimental with history, resulting in a non-conventional documentary. Ujică’s work brings out the “discrepancies between the image’s original and recent functions” and highlights “the appearance of history itself” (Webb Jekanowski, 2013, p. 15). The distinction between Russell’s “visual evidence of history” and Jekanowski’s notion of being “experimental with history” can be clarified by focusing on the nature of viewer engagement. While “visual evidence of history” suggests a more direct presentation of historical events, Jekanowski’s “experimental” approach emphasizes the creation of an interpretive space where meaning is not prescribed by the filmmaker’s voice but left open for the viewer to construct. This shift from exposition to experimentation transforms the spectator from a passive recipient of information to an active participant in shaping historical understanding, allowing for multiple interpretations influenced by personal and historical contexts.

This perspective aligns with Armando Rotondi’s analysis of Milo Rau’s theatrical re-enactments, specifically *The Last Days of the Ceaușescus*, which explores the function of history and its implications in the present (Rotondi, 2020, pp. 69–77; see also Rugi, 2023). It is notable that Milo Rau conducted an interview with Ujică, which, along with Alex Leo Șerban’s essay *The Third Eye of Ceaușescu*, is included in the press kit for the film’s presentation at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival.

However, while Webb Jekanowski’s essay provides a compelling theoretical discussion, it overlooks several crucial points essential to understanding the representation of Ceaușescu. For instance, Webb Jekanowski briefly addresses the struc-



ture of the film and the videos shown but neglects an essential element such as the use (and absence) of sound.

The sound design in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* plays a critical role in shaping the narrative and enhancing the emotional impact. Ujică's use of sound, including the original audio from the archival footage and the strategic silences, creates a powerful atmosphere that underscores the psychological and emotional dimensions of Ceaușescu's regime. This auditory layer adds depth to the visual experience, allowing viewers to engage more fully with the historical material. By focusing on the sound, Ujică not only reconstructs a visual history but also immerses the audience in the auditory experience of the past. This approach amplifies the discrepancies between the original and contemporary contexts of the images, making the historical narrative more poignant and reflective. The omission of this analysis in Jekanowski's essay leaves a gap in understanding the full impact of Ujică's experimental methodology.

A more comprehensive understanding of the use of sound in relation to footages is given by Blos-Jáni studying the use of Medium-Specific Noise in general Eastern European found footage films (Blos-Jáni, 2018, pp. 137–163).

Coming back to Ujică's work, in the introduction to the Romanian DVD version booklet, we can read that *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* is not a documentary in the classical sense, but a historical, epic on megalomania, propaganda, becoming and cinema (Mureșan & Budeancă, 2010, p. 1). From this perspective, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* does not seek to be an expository film about the communist era nor to provide a comprehensive overview of historical periods. The hundreds of Romanian and international characters – some of them well-recognizable, others less so – serve a secondary role to Ceaușescu, who is the film's sole protagonist. This approach starkly contrasts with *Videograms of a Revolution*, where technical explanations through voice-over were central to the narrative. As mentioned, *Videograms of a Revolution* is a scientific, analytical film, while *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* is likely the most intimate and psychological work concerning Ceaușescu among those analyzed.

This psychological focus provides a different lens for understanding the historical narrative, emphasizing the individual's role in shaping historical events. The film, thus, becomes an exploration of megalomania and the power of propaganda, offering insights into how Ceaușescu viewed himself and sought to be viewed by others. Through this intimate portrayal, Ujică invites the audience to consider the complexities of Ceaușescu's character and the impact of his leadership on Romania's history.

An obvious question arises when considering the title, prompting us to ask why it is called "Autobiography" instead of "Biography". To answer this, as previously noticed (Rotondi 2020, p. 87), we must look at the film's structure. The film has an almost perfectly circular structure, and it begins and ends with the same historical situation: the trial of the Ceaușescu couple on December 25, 1989. The parts of



the trial chosen by Ujică are not random. The film opens with the commencement of the trial, showcasing the Ceaușescus facing their accusers. This scene sets the tone for the narrative, immediately placing viewers in the climactic final moments of Ceaușescu's regime:

JUDECĂTORUL: Ai auzit care sunt învinuirile care ți se aduc?

CEAUȘESCU: Nu răspund decât în fața Marii Adunări Naționale. Puteți face orice mascaradă, nu recunosc!

JUDECĂTORUL: Mascarada ai făcut-o dumneata timp de 25 de ani. Asta este mascarada pe care ai făcut-o și ai dus țara în pragul prăpastiei.

CEAUȘESCU: Nu vreau de loc că... dar tot ceea ce s-a spus e fals... sunt peste 3,5 milioane de apartamente etc.

JUDECĂTORUL: E fals? Da. Nu recunoaște învinuirile ce i se aduc.

CEAUȘESCU: Nu, n-am spus nimic. N-am dat nici o declarație. Nu mai dau nici o declarație, nu mai răspund nici un cuvânt, decât în fața Marii Adunări Naționale.

JUDECĂTORUL: Nu recunosc învinuirile ce mi se aduc, vă rog să semnați.

CEAUȘESCU: Nu voi semna nimic!

JUDECĂTORUL: Situația se cunoaște, situația dezastruoasă a țării nu o cunoaștem numai noi, ci fiecare om cinstit din această țară, care a mocrnit până în ziua de 22 decembrie 1989 când au apărut zorii libertății. Cunoaștem situația cu toții, lipsa de medicamente, care din ordinul dumatile inculpat a făcut ca să moară oameni, să moară copii, în spitale fără medicamente, fără hrană, fără căldură, fără lumină, nu te-ai gândit la acest lucru? Acum discut cu inculpatul Ceaușescu Nicolae. Din ordinul cui s-a făcut genocidul de la Timișoara? Inculpatul refuză să răspundă.

It is interesting to note how the official version of the acts translated into English by the "U.S. government's Foreign Broadcast Information Service" – and based on the footage of the trial broadcast by Austrian television – is clearly shorter and missing some points:

PROSECUTOR: Did you hear the charges? Have you understood them?

NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU: I do not answer, I will only answer questions before the Grand National Assembly. I do not recognize this court. The charges are incorrect, and I will not answer a single question here.

PROSECUTOR: Note – He does not recognize the points mentioned in the bill of indictment.

NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU: I will not sign anything.

PROSECUTOR: This situation is known. The catastrophic situation of the country is known all over the world. Every honest citizen who worked hard here until 22 December knows that we do not have medicines, that you two have killed children and other people in this way, that there is nothing to eat, no heating, no electricity.

As the film progresses, it meticulously pieces together archival footage to reconstruct the life and rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu from his own perspective. By doing so, it mirrors an autobiography, where the subject recounts his own life



story, albeit through the lens of Ujică's selection and arrangement of footage. The use of the term "autobiography" reveals inherent risks, particularly its tendency to veer into hagiography or deceptive self-celebration. The autobiographical form often allows for a self-serving narrative that can obscure critical realities, especially when it revolves around figures like Ceaușescu. While Ujică's shaping of this narrative is clear, his manipulation of Ceaușescu's own delusions of grandeur transcends a mere recounting of personal history. By reframing Ceaușescu's image in this way, Ujică taps into a larger, trans-historical narrative that reflects the Romanian people's complex reconciliation with their former autocrat. The film thus becomes not just an exploration of a political figure but a mirror for the nation's ongoing process of coming to terms with its authoritarian past, inviting the audience to critically engage with both the figure and the form.

The circular structure, culminating once again in the trial, reinforces the idea of an "autobiography". It suggests a self-contained narrative arc where Ceaușescu's life and downfall are intertwined, leading back to the pivotal moment of his judgment:

CEAUȘESCU: Răspund în fața Marii Adunări Naționale.

JUDECĂTORUL: Lasă placa asta veche. Am auzit-o și știm încăpățânarea de care ai dat dovadă până în prezent.

CEAUȘESCU: Refuz să răspund la întrebarea cine este autorul genocidului de la Timișoara.

JUDECĂTORUL: Istoria, națiunea a făcut-o, n-ai făcut-o dumneata.

CEAUȘESCU: Pentru istorie, Marea Adunare Națională va afla adevărul și nu cei care au organizat lovitura de stat!

JUDECĂTORUL: Am organizat lovitura de stat? Ai uzurpat puterea. Răspunzi numai la întrebările pe care ți le pun eu!

CEAUȘESCU: Nu răspund!

JUDECĂTORUL: La București cine a ordonat să se tragă în mulțime, în tineri, nu cunoașteți, nu cunoașteți situația de la București? S-a tras în Piața Palatului în mulțime, ești străin de acest lucru? Și acum continuă să se tragă în oameni nevino-vați, în bătrâni, în copii, în locuri, de niște fanatici. Cine sunt acești fanatici? Cine i-a plătit?

CEAUȘESCU: Nu răspund la nici o întrebare, pentru că, vă rog să nu considerați ca răspuns la întrebare. Nu s-a tras în Piața Palatului în nimeni, dimpotrivă au fost ordine clare să nu se tragă.

JUDECĂTORUL: Din partea cui, ai dat dumneata ordin să nu se tragă?

CEAUȘESCU: Da. Eu am dat ordin să nu se tragă, inclusiv la televiziune, inclusiv la teleconferința care este înregistrată.

JUDECĂTORUL: Consemnați, vă rog.

CEAUȘESCU: Nu. Nu recunosc decât în fața Marii Adunări Naționale. Tot ceea ce s-a spus în jur sunt falsuri, provocări.



The same discussion from the previous note applies in this case as well. In fact, the official English “transcript” also has some “dramatic” differences compared to the official Romanian transcript:

Elena and Nicolae reject this. Another question to Ceaușescu: Who ordered the bloodbath in Timisoara. Ceaușescu refused to answer.

PROSECUTOR: Who gave the order to shoot in Bucharest, for instance?

NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU: I do not answer.

PROSECUTOR: Who ordered shooting into the crowd? Tell us!

At that moment Elena says to Nicolae: Forget about them. You see, there is no use in talking to these people.

PROSECUTOR: Do you not know anything about the order to shoot?

Nicolae reacts with astonishment.

There is still shooting going on, the prosecutor says. Fanatics, whom you are paying. They are shooting at children; they are shooting arbitrarily into the apartments. Who are these fanatics? Are they the people, or are you paying them?

NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU: I will not answer. I will not answer any question. Not a single shot was fired in Palace Square. Not a single shot. No one was shot.

This repetition emphasizes the cyclical nature of his story and the inescapable conclusion of his leadership.

By starting and ending with the trial, Ujică underscores the subjective experience of Ceaușescu, framing the film as if Ceaușescu himself were recounting his life up until that definitive end. This approach invites viewers to experience the events from Ceaușescu’s viewpoint, thus justifying the title “Autobiography” rather than “Biography”. It is a portrayal of Ceaușescu’s self-image and propaganda, curated through the archival footage, offering an introspective look at his megalomania and delusions of grandeur.

From the end of the first trial fragments to the return to the trial, the entire film unfolds in a meticulously structured circular manner. The introduction concludes with a reference to the uprisings and government reprisals in Timișoara in December 1989, setting the stage for Ceaușescu’s subsequent speech urging responsibility among the citizens of Timișoara. This segment marks the film’s final passage before its tragic conclusion returns to the trial (on this point see Baudrillard, 1993, pp. 61–71; and 1994, pp. 54–61).

The symmetry within the film continues with the footages showing the funeral of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu’s ascent to power, immediately followed by a scene where he inspects bread in a supermarket – a symbol of the perceived opulence under successful communism. In the scene preceding Ceaușescu’s speech on Timișoara, which serves as the film’s conclusion, Ceaușescu is again shown visiting food stores and bakeries that appear prosperous despite Romania’s evident decline. This initial symmetry underscores the broader thematic contrasts and parallels woven throughout the film.



However, the film's symmetry and narrative technique extend beyond mere visual juxtapositions. For instance, the final "line" from the initial trial fragment – "Whose order was the genocide in Timișoara carried out? The defendant refuses to answer" – marks a pivotal moment where an audio track is introduced for the first time. This technique, integral to Ujică's filmmaking, plays with the audience's perception, initially appearing to depict voices in turmoil related to the Timișoara uprisings, only to reveal they are actually mourning the death of Gheorghiu-Dej (presented with silent archival footage of the funeral). This subtle manipulation of sound and visuals connects back to the initial trial fragment, drawing a parallel that deepens the film's thematic exploration.

Returning to the question of why (auto)biography, Ujică's technique constructs a profound parallel between Ceaușescu's life and the trajectory of Romania itself. The film portrays not just Ceaușescu's personal narrative but it also mirrors the broader narrative of the country, juxtaposing the illusion of grandeur perpetuated by propaganda with the stark realities faced by its people. This illusion forms a significant part of Ceaușescu's internal world, shaping his perception and actions.

By framing the film as an (auto)biography, Ujică delves into Ceaușescu's subjective viewpoint and the propaganda machinery that sustained his regime. The narrative unfolds as a circular tragedy where Ceaușescu's denial of reality and the actual events converge, leading inexorably to the film's dramatic conclusion. Through meticulous editing and thematic juxtapositions, Ujică illustrates how Ceaușescu's personal mythos intertwined with the nation's fate, ultimately portraying a compelling portrait of both the dictator and the era he dominated.

The entire film revolves around this pivotal trial moment, offering a unique interpretation of Ceaușescu's psychology and historical narrative through the lens of his psyche. This focus on Ceaușescu's perspective on Romania defines why the film functions as an "Autobiography" rather than a straightforward "Biography". Ujică employs archival footage not merely to recount Romania's history but to delve deep into Ceaușescu's personal perception and portrayal of that history.

As highlighted in the DVD booklet, the film also delves into the nature of cinema itself. The previously-mentioned trial fragments exemplify a dynamic interplay and conflict between fiction and reality, different interpretations of reality, and the dichotomy between history and narrative. This meta-cinematic approach, coupled with the farcical nature of the trial, renders the work as both meta-historical and meta-theatrical. In his analysis of *Tribulation 99* by Craig Baldwin, Zryd (2003) defines meta-history as the process by which historical events are reframed, not as objective truths, but as constructions that reveal the biases and ideologies of those interpreting them. This contrasts with Craig Baldwin's approach, which often foregrounds parody and pastiche, using found footage to challenge dominant historical narratives through satirical exaggeration. In this context, meta-history refers to the act of deconstructing the mechanisms of historical representation itself, calling attention to how histories are shaped, revised, and consumed.



By connecting Ujică's work to Zryd's notion of meta-history, the film can be understood as not merely representing history, but actively engaging with the processes by which historical meaning is constructed, contested, and reinterpreted.

Within the film's circular structure, certain moments serve as "rites of passage" in Ceaușescu's biography, akin to Van Gennep's concept (1909) and later theatrically explored by Victor Turner (1982 and 1986). These rites of passage include, as noted in one of my previous works, significant events such as:

1. The death and funeral of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, marking Ceaușescu's ascent.
2. Ceaușescu's appointment as President of the Republic.
3. The 1977 earthquake, represented uniquely through sound over a black screen.
4. Ceaușescu's visit to Pyongyang.

These moments punctuate the film, utilizing archival footage of speeches, official visits, celebrations, private leisure moments, mass gatherings, and meetings with international political figures. Collectively, they depict an image of Romania oriented towards a future under flourishing communism until its eventual decline. Notably, the film conspicuously omits coverage of the 1989 Revolution and largely excludes Elena Ceaușescu from its narrative. From this perspective, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* intricately weaves together personal and national histories, employing a narrative framework that reflects Ceaușescu's self-image and the constructed reality of his regime.

The absence of the 1989 Revolution, prominently featured in *Videograms of a Revolution*, underscores its irrelevance to Ujică's focus on depicting Ceaușescu's psyche, which inherently denies contrary evidence. Elena Ceaușescu's limited presence, apart from the initial trial scene, emerges prominently only after Nicolae Ceaușescu's 1974 appointment as President, symbolized by the transition from black-and-white to color footage. The solitary speech, delivered on her birthday, extensively acknowledges Nicolae as her life and work companion, emphasizing her role solely in service to his narrative. This reinforces that the autobiography is fundamentally about Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Sound, as previously noted and now to be explored further, plays a crucial role in shaping the film's narrative. Each speech within the film is either delivered by Ceaușescu or is about him, with all other aspects portrayed in silence. This brings attention to Ujică's meticulous use of sound, which surpasses visual elements like the striking sequence of Ceaușescu's visit to Pyongyang, focusing instead on various modes of auditory expression to convey meaning.

Ujică employs a spectrum of sound types, excluding those associated with the trial at the makeshift military tribunal, which represent pure historical reality. Typically, a film's sound channel encompasses voices, ambient noises, and musical



compositions, influenced by spatial orientation, framing within the narrative, and source credibility. Throughout *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, Ujică integrates Ceaușescu's speeches, ambient noises that evoke a festive or traditional atmosphere, thunderous applause, and related sounds alongside moments of silence. This deliberate blending creates ambiguity, challenging viewers to discern whether a sound is entirely diegetic, extra-diegetic, or positioned as in, off, or over the scene.

In essence, Ujică's nuanced use of sound not only enriches the sensory experience of the film but also serves as a narrative tool to evoke and manipulate emotions, heightening the film's exploration of Ceaușescu's constructed reality and the theatricality of his regime's propaganda machinery.

The functions of sound in cinema are well known and studied. In a simplistic way, they serve to create atmosphere, convey narrative elements, enhance immersion, and evoke emotional responses (see Chion 1985). In the opening sequence of the film, news of Gheorghiu-Dej's death is accompanied by murmurs from a potentially tumultuous crowd. Overlaying Ceaușescu's face during the trial, this sound initially invokes memories of the Timișoara revolts. However, it soon becomes apparent that the sound actually refers to another historical event – the death of Gheorghiu-Dej. This sound occupies a unique space, described by Sergio Miceli as a “mediated level”, where it is neither strictly extradiegetic (outside the narrative world) nor intradiegetic (part of the narrative reality), but rather an artistic construct shaped by the director's intention (Miceli, 2009).

The accusation of genocide in Timișoara, which concludes the first segment of the trial, triggers a memory process in Ceaușescu that begins with auditory recall and transitions into visual memory. Here, the viewer gains insight into Ceaușescu's psyche through the echoes of mourning for Gheorghiu-Dej – a pivotal moment marking Ceaușescu's ascent to power – echoing the tumultuous cries of Timișoara that ultimately contributed to his downfall.

Throughout the film, Ujică employs contrasts in sound rather than relying solely on visual juxtapositions. Each powerful auditory moment, whether a speech or mass jubilation in Ceaușescu's honour by the people or members of the Great National Assembly, is often followed by profound silence. For instance, the sound of Gheorghiu-Dej's death starkly contrasts with the silence that envelops his funeral scene, amplifying the solemnity and gravity of the occasion.

In this manner, Ujică's deliberate use of sound not only enhances the narrative cohesion but also deepens the viewer's immersion into Ceaușescu's world and psychological state. By manipulating auditory cues, Ujică constructs a layered auditory landscape that complements and enriches the film's exploration of Ceaușescu's constructed reality, emotional turbulence, and the dramatic trajectory of his regime's downfall.

From this moment, the film predominantly navigates through auditory contrasts rather than visual ones: a moment of robust sound, whether a speech or



celebratory applause from the people or members of the Great National Assembly honoring Ceaușescu, often yields to profound silence. This auditory rhythm is exemplified by contrasts such as the solemn sound of Gheorghiu-Dej's death juxtaposed with the silent reverence of his funeral.

The film's sequences oscillate between fully immersive moments, like Ceaușescu's reinstatement as party leader or his visit to Pyongyang, and predominantly silent scenes, such as his meetings with De Gaulle, Nixon, or the visit to London with Queen Elizabeth. These auditory choices serve dual purposes: they provide a historical perspective on Ceaușescu while also offering insights into his psyche. Positive visual memories depicting a prosperous or evolving Romania under a benevolent Ceaușescu – counteracting the narrative of the trial – are mediated through Ceaușescu's psychological lens, as is the use of sound, functioning almost as an extension of his character. Simultaneously, these choices reflect the director's deliberate intentions, often withholding audio to allow viewers to internalize and reflect on the preceding scenes, akin to Brechtian techniques. The absence of sound invites viewers to process and contemplate the unfolding historical narrative, fostering a deeper engagement with past events in a contemporary context.

Ultimately, sound plays a pivotal role in shaping the viewer's interpretation of Ceaușescu's image, often contrasting the visual grandeur with underlying dissonance. A particularly striking example occurs during the scene of Ceaușescu's visit to a factory, where he delivers a speech extolling the virtues of socialism and industrial progress. The archival footage presents a carefully orchestrated spectacle: Ceaușescu stands confidently before an audience of workers, flanked by banners and symbols of the Communist Party. However, the sound design subverts this imagery. Ujică manipulates the audio by isolating and amplifying ambient noises – shuffling feet, sporadic coughing, and muted applause – that punctuate Ceaușescu's oration. These subtle auditory elements disrupt the intended impression of unanimous support, exposing the cracks in the façade of the dictator's authority. Furthermore, the lack of a traditional score heightens the discomfort, forcing the viewer to focus on the unnatural quiet that surrounds Ceaușescu's words. This deliberate use of sound not only undermines the propagandistic tone of the footage but also reflects the tension between the regime's projected strength and its underlying fragility. Through this juxtaposition, Ujică transforms archival material into a critique of Ceaușescu's self-presentation, revealing the hollowness behind the spectacle.

Conclusions: Biography, Subjective Autobiography, and Reinterpretation of Historical Material

Despite its title, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* is not an autobiographical documentary in the conventional sense, as the “seer and the seen” are not unified in the person of the filmmaker. Instead, the film occupies a liminal space between biography and autobiography, employing elements of both to construct



a complex narrative about the former Romanian dictator. Theoretical explorations of autobiographical documentary, such as those by Trent Griffiths, emphasize the subjective presence of the filmmaker as a means of connecting historical representation to personal experience. However, in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* the filmmaker's presence is absent, and the subjectivity emerges from the assemblage and juxtaposition of archival propaganda footage. This absence challenges the conventional dynamics of autobiographical filmmaking, where the filmmaker's dual role as observer and observed defines the narrative structure.

In autobiographical documentaries, the filmmaker often self-shoots, confronting their dual identity as both the “seer and the seen.” Tony Dowmunt discusses how this practice raises essential questions about power relationships between the filmmaker and their subjects. These dynamics are overt and reflexive, highlighting the filmmaker's role in shaping reality through representation. However, in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, this relationship is subverted. Andrei Ujică, the director, operates as an absent author who curates Ceaușescu's life through propaganda footage. The absence of Ujică's physical presence in the frame distances the film from traditional autobiography and situates it more firmly in the domain of biography. Nevertheless, the film's editorial choices and narrative construction imbue it with a form of subjective authorship, where the interpretation of history is inseparable from the filmmaker's perspective.

Archival footage further complicates the boundary between autobiography and biography. As Iván Villarrea Álvarez argues, archival materials offer two readings: as authentic visual traces of the past and as cultural constructs requiring interpretation. Ujică's use of state-produced propaganda reframes the footage, exposing the constructed nature of Ceaușescu's image. This approach resonates with Hayden White's theories on historiography, which highlight the narrative mediation of historical events. By exposing the fissures and contradictions in Ceaușescu's self-presentation, the film destabilizes its titular claim to autobiography, revealing it as a critical interrogation of how history and identity are fabricated through media.

The film's performative structure further bridges elements of autobiography and biography. Bill Nichols' concept of the performative documentary highlights how filmmakers use personal and collective experiences to explore historical and social truths. Although Ujică does not appear in the frame, the film's narrative techniques – the careful curation of archival materials, the absence of commentary, and the reliance on visual storytelling – evoke a performative engagement with history. The audience is invited to inhabit a dual role: as witness to Ceaușescu's constructed image and as participant in its deconstruction. This interplay between the biographical subject and the filmmaker's authorial control situates the film within a broader discourse on the fluidity of historical representation.

Ultimately, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* challenges conventional notions of autobiographical and biographical documentary by blending elements of



both forms. While it lacks the direct presence of the filmmaker as a subject, its self-reflexive engagement with archival materials and narrative construction invokes the theoretical concerns of autobiography. Simultaneously, its focus on Ceaușescu's life situates it within the realm of biography, albeit one that interrogates the reliability of its subject. This hybrid approach enriches the film's contribution to documentary theory, offering a nuanced exploration of how personal and historical narratives intertwine in the representation of the past.

In his book on the performing arts in Romania during and after the Communist era, Rotondi highlighted the connection between the presentation of Romanian history and its portrayal as a tragedy. Specifically, according to Rotondi, the tragedy encompasses the experiences of the people (as Orlando Figes noted for the Russian Revolution in his 1996 book) and the dictator (Rotondi, 2020). In Ujică's work, this underlying tragedy is evident but remains implicit; it is situated within the trial's frame rather than within the images of the revolution or its fundamental causes, as Ceaușescu's memory and psyche challenge the reality presented at his trial. The film's silent interludes offer viewers moments to reflect on and interpret Ceaușescu's historical trajectory, aligning with Stuart Hall's theories of "encoding-decoding" and "audience positioning" (1973). This theoretical framework allows for a range of interpretations, from preferred readings that align with the director's intent to negotiated readings that offer different interpretations and oppositional readings that challenge the director's perspective altogether. What emerges is an autobiography as a personal tragedy without a catastrophe, an upward trajectory without a corresponding descent.

This model, though classic and somewhat dated, applies well to *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*. However, a pertinent question arises: who is the author of the encoded message? On one hand, it is clearly the director, Ujică, but the perspective conveyed is that of Ceaușescu. Ultimately, Miceli's concept of the "mediated level" of sound is also pertinent here, suggesting a film interpretation that involves two "authors": the actual author (Ujică) and the perceived author (Ceaușescu).

In *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, the term "autobiography" takes on a deeply ironic tone, serving as a negotiation between the image Ceaușescu would have approved of and the subtle exposures of his self-constructed myth. Rather than a straightforward personal account, the film reveals the fractures in Ceaușescu's carefully curated persona, exposing moments where his delusions of grandeur are undermined by historical realities. This ironic use of "autobiography" stretches beyond its conventional meaning, transforming into a space where self-representation collides with external critique. By allowing the audience to witness both the performance and the unraveling of Ceaușescu's self-mythology, Ujică's film invites viewers to engage with autobiography not as a transparent self-narrative but as a contested terrain where power, image, and historical reckoning intersect.



From a broader view, Ujică's work underscores the value of embracing the poetic and phenomenological dimensions of historical representation. The use of archival footage, stripped of overt commentary, creates a space for viewers to engage with history as a lived experience rather than a pre-digested narrative. This approach aligns with Robert Brent Toplin's assertion that historical films can serve as "poetic speculations about the past," offering interpretations that are no less valid than traditional written histories. It demonstrates how subjective storytelling can provide nuanced insights, allowing audiences to connect emotionally and critically with historical events.

Historians, in turn, can glean practical implications from Ujică's methodology. By understanding the cinematic language and narrative strategies employed in films like *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, historians can better interpret how these works construct historical meaning. As Alicja Syska notes, films can function as both primary and secondary sources, providing evidence of their own time while interpreting the past through visual and rhetorical means. Historians must approach such films critically, recognizing their artistic subjectivity while appreciating their potential to illuminate aspects of history inaccessible through traditional academic texts.

Ultimately, Ujică's film highlights the evolving role of the filmmaker as historian, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the past. By integrating visual media into the broader historiographical discourse, both filmmakers and historians can contribute to a more comprehensive and multifaceted representation of history. This collaboration calls for an acceptance of subjectivity, a focus on complex narrative forms, and a commitment to fostering historical consciousness that resonates with contemporary audiences. Such practices affirm the unique and complementary power of film in preserving and interpreting our collective past.

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