

Documentary Film

Between Exploration and (Re)presentation*

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UNTIL 2002, when the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (UBB) in Cluj-Napoca created its undergraduate program in anthropology, the only universities offering such programs were those in Bucharest and Sibiu. The history of documentary film¹ is therefore tied to a great extent to the slow and shy beginnings of anthropology as an academic discipline in Romania. In addition to being short, the history of documentary film was not a particularly happy one, either. For a long time used as a means of manipulation and propaganda, Romanian documentary film is currently struggling to reach equal footing with its sibling, fictional film. Seen as a marginalized field, there were very few substantial, sustained and successful projects centered on documentary film that could help create the context for the emergence and development of a fully fledged generation of filmmakers. With one noteworthy exception, though, namely Dumitru Budrala's 1992 project to create a department dedicated to film at the ASTRA Museum in Sibiu, which eventually led to the creation of the largest and longest running documentary film festival in Romania, the *ASTRA Film Festival*. More relevant details about this "adventure" to conquer the Romanian scene and audience are to be found in Adina Vărgatu's article (2005). And since in this article I discuss the notions of exploration and (re)presentation in film, a visual history of the ASTRA Film Festival project is told in *A Brief History of Astra Film*.

Now, one could safely say, documentary film didn't fare much better outside Romania either. While for a long time the scientific tradition maintained that the camera records reality "objectively" (Mead, 1975), documentary filmmakers today fully acknowledge the subjectivity of their approach. In so doing, they take an important step forward in building a place for documentary film in the academic sphere. Having relinquished its traditional objectivity, documentary film is currently forging a new path for itself within the field of anthropology. However, the story of defining documentary film caught between *objectivity* and *subjectivity* is far from being over, as debates are ongoing (Ruby, 2000). Nonetheless, Pandora's Box has been opened. As Jay Ruby said in 1996, there is no denying that mass-media played a central part in forming cultural identities in the latter half of the twentieth century (Ruby, 1996). In this light, the role that docu-

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mentary film has been playing in portraying various identities and in exploring and (re)presenting them is well worth investigating.

Exploration and (Re)presentation

“I believe that it [documentary film, my note] is reality seen through someone’s eyes. It cannot be objective. It has very much to do with the experience of the person seeing that reality; that person sees it through his or her personal lens and no one can change this. No, I don’t believe in objectivity” (Mihai, 2005).

AS AN anthropologist, I find it impossible to take off this identity when I watch a documentary film. Each new screening brings with it an expectation that the film will open a window onto a new world and, should this fail to happen, you can read it plainly on my face. Although I used to watch most films in the comfort of my home, that is, in privacy, where no one could see the look on my face when a film failed to show me a new world, in time I gave up this habit. And now I go once a year and watch films with other people and so I get to watch them through their eyes as well and focus on the story that begins only after the closing credits roll. In the following text, I will tell my “after-the-screening” story for some of the films I have watched at various editions of Romania’s largest documentary film festival.²

Filmmakers have taken an interest in the topic of ethnicity, in understanding and representing the Other who lives in our close proximity, and the list of films I have watched at ASTRA Film Festival is a solid proof of that. These are films documenting the lives of Germans, Jews, Lipovans, and Ruthenians, but also of some other groups of immigrants to Romania, such as the Chinese. This article is meant as a discussion of these films from a mosaic-like perspective, a picture painted in the language of film in which I believe strongly and in which I will never cease to believe.

The first in my subjective lineup, telling the story of Transylvanian Germans in the language of film, is Radu Muntean’s *Lindenfeld* (1994). This is a documentary I would place in the category of films that guide the viewer through the use of symbol-images—shots of ruins, bricked up windows, empty village streets that take us into a world undergoing a process of dissolution. Had I read that in 1994 the village had only three inhabitants left, I couldn’t have really pictured it, but the documentary images very well made up for any lack of imagination on my part—the rundown cemetery and, most of all, the final shot of the church about to collapse any minute and of the two men and one woman praying inside could not have been better spelled out than in the visual language of film. After *Lindenfeld*, there came quite a few other documentaries on the same topic of villages abandoned by their ethnic German inhabitants, with slightly changed but not altogether opposed focuses. Tudor Giurgiu’s *Hausmeister* (2000) brings to the foreground the story of yet another German village in Transylvania, Gherdeal, where all the stories are told in the past tense—I used to be, I used to have, I used to do... As this past-oriented setting becomes alive once a year, people start to show up in the

frames. The former inhabitants, now living in Germany, return to their home village on this one occasion to celebrate Pentecost. But, despite the community coming back to life on Pentecost, the words of one character cannot but stick to your mind: “*one can no longer keep to the proper old ways.*” And this, we gather, is the clearest sign that an entire world is on the brink of extinction. *The proper old ways* are the proof of the community’s existence. Only two years pass and the people stop coming back (not even to celebrate Pentecost) and our character, our guide in this world, speaks about the ultimate sign announcing the death of a community: “*Nobody comes anymore... They all have their families buried here but they die over there...*”—a metaphor that matches very well the ruins of Lindenfeld.

The first two stories are told by Romanian filmmakers and I wonder if this is a mere coincidence. Their register is rather nostalgic and the angle is pretty much the same, as the stories are seen through the eyes of two arguably good directors and not from an anthropological perspective. The next films in my lineup will further flesh out the stories of these Transylvanian villages. In Anne Schiltz’s *The Sweet Life and All That Goes With It* (2002), we see the story of two ethnic Germans, Michael and Rosi Müller, father and daughter, who go on living in their ancestors’ village, Alzen, a village not far from the city of Sibiu. They didn’t leave with the wave of immigrants from Romania to Germany and they have no intention to do it. We do not see the Germans who left through a nostalgic lens, there is no moral to the story, and the director’s design is barely visible. The narrative is built in the purest ethnographic style, arising out of the exploration of the everyday life of people-characters and of how they keep alive and reproduce their ethnic identity (paraphrasing the words of the filmmaker in an article published later, “Filming Ethnicity in Southern Transylvania”). Studies of interethnic relations in Romania show that the majority population, and some minorities, associate the following positive qualities with the ethnic Germans: civilization, entrepreneurship, hard work, good maintenance of households, trustworthiness (Lazăr, 2009). Anna Schiltz uses the visual language of film to depict both these stereotypical representations and the inevitable changes occurring in the community to which the two key characters belong. Next on my list is Eva Stotz’s *Earth in Your Hand* (2004) whose focus is still the migration of Transylvanian villagers to Germany and what is left in its wake, but from a somehow different angle—the same empty shuttered houses, an empty church, and the narrator’s voice speaking about a past when the Saxons first built these villages now decaying and how they then left them to set up home elsewhere. But their real *home* remains the ground in which their parents are buried. With Dieter Auner’s *Leaving Transylvania* (2006) and Gerald Igor Hauzenberger’s *Beyond the Forest* (2007), a new angle is introduced, allowing the viewer to come even closer to the people. The former tells the story of the migration to Germany—a landmark in the history of all ethnic German communities in Romania—, following Hans and Maria Kenzel, who decided to emigrate despite being in their 60s. I was of course intrigued—what was the point of yet another film about the Saxon migration at a time when the ethnic migration wave had pretty much receded?—by the director’s choice of story, but once I read his biography I came to see it differently. This could have very well been his own story. Born in Mediaș, in a Saxon family, Dieter Auer emigrated to Germany in 1990. Most likely it was his emic rather than etic per-

spective that informed his filmmaking debut. The latter, *Beyond the Forest*, takes the camera ever closer to the characters, that is, to the main figure, the old Mister Johann Schuff who lives not far from Sibiu. In an interview, the director said that this was a film “about a huge European crisis, about the biggest crisis of the Saxon community ...” (Hauzenberger, 2007) (*Cultura* 150/2007). We no longer deal with a projection of the “typical Transylvanian German” but with an image that gradually emerges from the film, the image of the character just the way he is, a mix of light and darkness. He speaks very bluntly about his choices, his private life, the demographic strategies of the Romanian and Roma populations as opposed to those of the ethnic Germans, about the relations between the majority and the minority populations. Little by little, the director manages to create an intimate relationship to his character. We can say that this is another filmmaker more concerned with observing and getting increasingly closer to the characters than with directing. As for the story of old Mister Johann Schuff’s life, a life about which he says that “it was neither beautiful, nor easy” and “... had I had a choice, I’d rather I hadn’t been born at all,” you will have to judge for yourself. In other words, this is an open invitation to watch the film yourself.

With *Village of Socks* (2006) directed by Ileana Stănculescu, we step into new territory and, I have to admit, a territory that felt much more welcoming for the anthropologist in me. The director finds a village not far from the town of Sighișoara, Viscri, a village very present in the media due to Prince Charles’ frequent visits to the community there. The way she tells the story of this place is similar to the way Gerald Igor Hauzenberger discovers his character: little by little. The film focuses on the present and not on the past, as it sketches out what it means to live in this present: this is a village which, despite its “Saxon cultural heritage,” is dominated now by Roma and Romanians who learn German from Herald, the entrepreneur, and where ethnic identity has a very small part to play in everyday interactions. The director makes it clear that the world she found there was very different from the world depicted in the newspapers: “But there I saw for the first time a place where there was no difference between Roma and Romanians, they were all peasants, owned houses, cows, oxen. At the village bar they sat together and talked about their work. On the contrary, the journalists who came to Viscri were looking for scandals and filth” (Varga and Stănculescu, 2007). The viewers are given the time to get accustomed to this world, through the observational shots, but, from the very first minutes, we are concomitantly presented with a story told in the present tense: the shots of the village in winter, followed by those of the sheep in their shed “wearing” their wool that, many peasants complain, has become useless but here we find it used to make the sheepskin coat, vest and hat of the character speaking and the woolen socks that he proudly shows us. But how does the filmmaker put together all these elements to successfully tell the story of *the village of socks*, where two Germans settled and started a business that now puts Viscri woolen socks on the feet of people around Europe? It is all about the fine observational spirit that the director uses when she looks at her subjects. That present-day Romania is full of stories fit for documentary films is something that must cross the mind of every anthropologist every now and then; with her film, Ileana Stănculescu manages to prove this and to open for us not merely a window but a door into the innermost workings of this world. There doesn’t seem to be a lock on this

door, except maybe of the kind that can be opened with the key of curiosity which you either have or you don't.

On the whole, the documentary films focusing on the experience of Transylvanian ethnic Germans that I discussed can be arranged on a timeline, they change in time. While the first two films, *Lindenfeld* (1994) and *Hausmeister* (2000), speak about the past or the ruins which bear witness to this past, the ones that come after them, by contrast, use the observational method to depict ethnicity and its aspects through an exploration of everyday life and the portraits of characters. In the latter, the past is there just for the sake of contextualizing the present, illustrating the continuity of the becoming and transformation of a community. To sum up, the story of Transylvanian Germans as told in the visual language of the documentary begins with the bleak landscape of empty villages, goes on following the red thread of migration, and ends with an exploration of the beginnings of a new way of life (see *Village of Socks*).

The portrait Björn Reinhardt makes of the Ruthenians in his two films about Maramureș, *Obcina* (2006) and *The Last Violin* (2010), is one of a kind. Undoubtedly, this director has fallen in love with Maramureș and there is a lot of material to prove it.³ His approach is one of constant exploration, focusing on details and creating a close and intimate feeling around his characters. Björn Reinhardt's documentaries are not shot during one long visit and they do not show fragmented slices of life; the key points of his films are reminders of how important it is for documentary filmmakers to have a deep understanding of their characters. The director lives among the people and records the passing of time without asking intrusive questions meant to satisfy his directing needs. He just observes in silence, he records. His films are portraits that show the extent to which he understands human nature, a culture different from his own that he approaches with awe.

A third category of documentaries always present in the ASTRA Festival lineup are films about the Romanian Jewish experience. I have chosen three such films for illustration: *Rumenye, Rumenye* (2006), *The Tale of Nicolai and the Law of Return* (2008), and *We Were Not People, We Were Numbers... Auschwitz* (2008). Each of them depicts a moment in the history and the becoming of Jewish culture in Romania. With a Kletzmer music soundtrack, Radu Gabrea, the director of *Rumenye, Rumenye*, takes us on a journey to the beginnings of this culture, i.e. to the historical and social context of the Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on Romanian Jewish culture. Beyond the cheerful rhythm of the music, the viewer discovers a fascinating world born out of a very special context, carrying an equally powerful message: no community and no cultural act can be born or exist in isolation from the other surrounding cultures; what matters is to find bridges that connect it with the other cultures, at the same time celebrating its uniqueness and specificity. *We Were Not People, We Were Numbers... Auschwitz*, directed by Mia Elman, focuses on a tragic episode in the history of the Romanian Jewish community, the Holocaust. At the center of the documentary is the figure of Elie Wiesel, a Jewish philosopher, writer and journalist born in Sighetu Marmăliei, in northwestern Romania. Tracing back the story of this one character, the film pieces together the shared history of Romanian Jews, as an homage to this tragic history. *The Tale of Nicolai and the Law of Return* takes us to another level, a very topical one, that

of the present-day life of Romanian Jews, their search for, their discovery and acknowledgment of their ethnic identity and everything that comes with that. Nicolai is a Romanian immigrant who, like many others in his community, works in Israel to support his family. The story of how he regains his Jewish identity is generally retold with a lot of humor, so the viewer is somehow distanced from the experience. The director knows one important rule of documentary filmmaking—the viewers are more interested in people than in abstract laws. This is how he approaches and discusses a story in many ways very complicated (historically, socially, in terms of identity building, etc.), the story of how Nicolai's Jewish identity is established based on the Jewish *Law of Return*. The law is presented in the context of a particular human life, the film following the way it is ultimately applied to Nicolai.

Danube Delta's Lipovans are the subject matter of two documentaries screened at ASTRA Film Festival over the years: *Old Believers* (2002), directed by Dumitru Grosei, and *Birds' Way* (2009), co-directed by Klara Trencsenyi and Vlad Naumescu. The former traces back diachronically, with the help of an expert narrator, the history of the Lipovans in parallel with the present-day wedding ceremony of a couple from the community. The documentary "... is dedicated to this community's extraordinary resilience, in that they managed to keep their language, customs and religion, and found the strength to resist in their faith in God,"⁴ to quote the director on his blog. In my view, this was precisely the filmmaker's overall goal; despite being shot in one of the villages with the largest Lipovan community (if my visual memory serves me right, it is Sarichioi, a village on the shore of Lake Razim), it was not intended as an anthropological film but rather for TV broadcasting. Watching it, I remembered the clay roads of Sarichioi, the sun setting on the shore of Lake Razim, and how that place makes it easy for you to believe that time has stood still for the Lipovans living there. This nostalgia-infused and past-oriented imagery is however balanced by the second documentary in this category, *Birds' Way*. What could be called a *creative documentary*, *Birds' Way* is built on an open exploration of present-day life in the Lipovan community. It does that through a mix of classic observational and metaphorical shots, often resulting in impressionistic landscapes, scenes that appear to unfold between two rings of the church bell. In my view, the great quality of this film is that it opens many doors for the viewer, the same way *Village of Socks* does. Further, I need to emphasize the great achievement of filming in a community known to be quite closed—and this is no filming "from behind the fence" but in the privacy of homes, courtyards, and everyday life scenes, revealing the changes undergone by a community not long ago deemed the standard *Lipovan traditional community*.

Last but not least in our tour of documentaries about minorities come the ones focusing on migrants—the first film in this category talks about those who choose to come to Romania (ethnic minorities which are not included on the list of national minorities), and the second about Romanians who leave their country (and thus become minorities in their destination countries).

Katharina Copony's *Big Ocean* (2009) follows the story of three Chinese immigrants and manages to paint a remarkably subtle and quite realistic picture of the life of this community. The images build a complex representation: from life in the privacy of the home to public everyday life, with short interludes made up of the characters' testimonies

about and thoughts on their experience as immigrants. Importantly, a portrait of the Other, in this case the majority population, emerges as if reflected in a mirror and we see how the paths of the two communities cross. The director also manages to subtly insert small signs of the official authorities' incapacity (or unwillingness) to adapt the legislation to this novel social fact, i.e. the wave of immigrants from Asia to Romania. This is a story about the experience of adapting to a new culture, peppered with metaphors that depict this reality with the most profound understanding. This is no longer just a window open onto a new world but a *big ocean* of possibilities there to be explored.

I will end this journey into the realm of (re)presenting the Other with a film that convinced me (if I wasn't already convinced) that a documentary is more often than not born out of an almost alchemical mix of observation, emotion, involvement, and personal experience. *Waiting for August* (2014), directed by Teodora Ana Mihai, focuses on the topic of emigration. But, unlike most documentaries on the same topic, it tells the story from the perspective of those who stay behind and not of those who leave. As the director said in an interview, the film was intended as "a story to which many people can relate and in which they can find positive things" (Florescu and Mihai, 2015). The film is a complex illustration of the impact of migration on the family and family relations (Cingolani, 200()). With mastery and without excesses, the filmmaker tells the story of Georgiana and her brothers, of their lives here, missing and waiting for their mother who left Romania to work in Italy. From images that speak of empathy, emotion and also an attention for detail, the portrait of a family whose lives are split between *here* and *there* is built. A very well made documentary that could easily be turned into supporting visual material for academic research focusing on migration.

These filmmakers (and their films) made it possible to tell stories about the Other in new ways and from new angles, distinguishing themselves from anthropologists and other researchers who had worked on the same topics before them. But in using the complementary language of film, the purpose remained the same: understanding the Other and the world that makes him/her who he/she is and unique.

Open conclusions

THE STORY of Romanian documentary film has not been a happy one so far. The lack of an institutional framework that would support filmmakers and the lack of interest of the academic world for this field are just two of the main challenges. Apart from Sibiu, with the ASTRA Documentary Film Festival, there are no other noteworthy places on the map of Romanian documentary film.

The documentary films discussed above illustrate the plurality of angles from which a Romanian social fact, namely, ethnicity and interethnic relations, was portrayed, explored and (re)presented in these past twenty years or so. Each such film is a plea for the development and the creation of an institutional framework in this field.

As a documentary filmmaker in Romania, most often than not you have to accept a marginal and minor place in academia. Not even one Romanian social science research

institute has put on its agenda the creation of a line of research in the field of documentary film, thus validating (formally/institutionally) the significance of documentary films for social research. The creation of the institutional framework necessary for the development of new generations of documentary filmmakers should be a priority. □

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Notes

1. “You could ultimately argue that watching films is a weakness—just like any other compensatory fiction. You watch a film precisely because in your real life you don’t get to see any match cuts, editing or multiple kinds of shots. Life is more often than not out of focus, while film is focused” (Șerban, 2012).
2. ASTRA Film Festival (Sibiu) had its fourteenth edition in 2015.
3. See www.maramures.de
4. <http://dumitrugrosei.blogspot.ro/>

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Abstract

Documentary Film - Between Exploration and (Re)presentation

In this article, I explore the (re)presentation of identity and ethnic relations in documentary films screened at ASTRA Film Festival throughout the years. In addition, I discuss the place of documentary film in anthropological research and the need to develop documentary film as a field of Romanian anthropological research.

Until 2002, when the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (UBB) in Cluj-Napoca created its undergraduate program in anthropology, the only universities offering such programs were those in Bucharest and Sibiu. The history of documentary film is therefore tied to a great extent to the slow and shy beginnings of anthropology as an academic discipline in Romania. In addition to it being short, the history of documentary film was not a particular happy one either. For a long time used as a means of manipulation and propaganda, Romanian documentary film is currently struggling to reach equal footing with its sibling, fictional film. Seen as a marginalized field, there were very few substantial, sustained and successful projects centered on documentary film that could help create the context for the emergence and development of a fully-fledged generation of filmmakers. With one noteworthy exception, though, namely Dumitru Budrala's 1992 project to create a department dedicated to film at the ASTRA Museum in Sibiu, which eventually led to the creation of the largest and longest running documentary film festival in Romania, ASTRA Film Festival.

Keywords

documentary film, representation, identity