

VCR, VHS, and RCP: Reflexive (N)ostalgia in Gabriel Achim's *Visul lui Adalbert* Liri Chapelan

Arguably, obsolescence is a flawed, ideologically-charged concept, whose mere usage may denote a tacit complicity with the economic system that endorses and perpetuates it. As a purely analytical category, which aims to describe the declining rate of operations happening between entities—usually between animate subjects and inanimate objects—it proves useful as a springboard towards a sociology of consumption habits in a particular time and place. If one settles on its meaning as organized commercial strategy needed to resolve the contradiction between excessively productive industries and a type of relationship between the masses and the material realm still characterized, at the end of the 19th century, by what Susan Strasser calls *stewardship*, its origin is easier to determine.¹ Otherwise, its wider, more diffuse original significance defies fixed associations, while also requiring delimitation from related—yet subtly distinct—notions such as outdatedness or deterioration. Obsolescence overflows the category of mere material processes; it can more accurately be described as a fluid, wide-ranging social phenomenon, its legibility depending on temporal categories and their associated emotional capital, which are undoubtedly historically constructed. Despite its ambiguity, it often determines vehement counterreactions which are largely rooted in affect, not least because what obsolescence unrelentingly attacks is precisely the emotional bond that unites man and its tool, whatever may be the latter's function and level of complexity.

Accordingly, nostalgia is inextricably weaved into the fabric of the process of falling into obsolescence, a process which nests at different stages of development in every object and therefore is present in any individual's eve-

ryday experience. John Durham Peters underlines this aspect when he notes that “[o]bsolescence has an importantly different sense than disappearance or destruction—it is precisely the persistence of the thing in a strained or muted role, not its vanishing, that defines obsolescence.”² Historically, nostalgia has demanded material signifiers for people to cling to. The growing wave of dematerialization is already beginning to thoroughly modify nostalgia, delocalizing it from things themselves to virtual environments that our sensory memories can still link to fading real circumstances. But for the time being, nostalgia still predominantly dwells in palpable, manipulable items; therefore, obsolescence—both of a specific material object and of the full, broad tactileities that digital technologies have discarded—and the persistence of its “victims” in the shadows of the new material idols of the day create a most favorable environment for the formulation of discourses of longing.

In the present article, I demonstrate how the association between obsolescence and nostalgia is complicated in the case of a particular class of objects (image-recording devices) and of a particular context (the aftermath of a collective traumatic experience, which can, however, also be remembered in a more positive light by certain segments of the population delineated by demographic and socio-economic variables). Departing from Svetlana Boyms’ splitting of nostalgia into *restorative* and *reflective*, according to its holistic or fragmentary perspective of pastness, I will propose a third category, which I call *reflexive* nostalgia.³ Reflexive nostalgia diverges from the other two insofar as it does not feature a nostalgic subject and a temporal object of desire, but fuses both through the mobilization of a self-analytical medium. I develop this concept by analyzing the Romanian feature-length film *Visul lui Adalbert* [*Adalbert’s Dream*] (Gabriel Achim, 2011), which comments upon the status of the audiovisual apparatus during the communist regime while simultaneously reactivating dated image-recording devices by exhibiting them and their associated social practices in ways prone to elicit reactions of *ostalgie*.

Due to its ability to refer to the past by explicitly (re)presenting it, audiovisual media is capable of polarizing, or even imposing, historical narratives; cinema, in its quality of “prosthetic memory” *par excellence*, has succeeded in structurally modifying the individual as well as collective sense of identity and origin by carving out a place for itself as the main producer of “a secondary memory, more likely to create shared reading grids than officialized memorial projects which make use of monumental, and therefore inaccessible, memory.”⁴ These very characteristics have also motivated its confiscation by

totalitarian governments situated at both extremes of the political spectrum, but maybe more systematically so in communist states, as an echo to Lenin's coronation of cinema as "the most important of the arts." The most discussed effects of the collectivization of cultural industries in socialist countries are of course the limitation imposed on the freedom of artistic expression, a topic which leads further to the organization of the state apparatus of controlled production, artists' modalities of resistance, and the reception of their works by the general public. Yet, in many East-European countries, the regulation and centralization of filmmaking enterprises also meant the establishment of an actual film industry; in the same breath, its fringes, that is to say, amateur and semi-amateur production, opened up to the masses.

The figure of the amateur filmmaker in socialist regimes cannot be dissociated from two other dimensions of the issue of representation: first, the more conventional question of content, which was supposed to transmit ideology directly and to act, quite paradoxically, at once as a mirror of a supposedly already-balanced, functional, and forward-moving order and as a blueprint for the proper attitudes to adopt in the new social configuration, oscillating between claiming that socialist utopia was already firmly established as well as that it needed to be painstakingly built; secondly, the question of agency and cultural visibility, as the new arts were designated to avenge the previous invisibility of the proletariat. The democratization of culture and the witch hunt against elitist forms of artistic expression, which was one of the most dramatic manifestations of the desire to reform the very structure of the symbolic fabric of society, intersected in the figure of the amateur artist. An entire network composed of libraries, photographic laboratories, screening venues, film caravans, amateur film festivals, etc. was built around this everyday man of culture, whose role was not, however, to "author," but to word the new official narrative.

It must be noted that, despite systemic similarities, East-European communist regimes have varied widely according to the nature of their ties with the Soviet Union, their geostrategic localization, the orientation of their leadership, their national historical specificities, etc. Even when narrowed down to a limited timeframe, the transversal study of any single motif across the Eastern Bloc may result in oversimplification. Drawing from Althusser's concept of "Ideological State Apparatus," Piotr Piotrowski insists that

if we take into account [the latter] as a system of institutions in a particular country, we have to think about real material practices in particular moments and places; in

other words we have to speak about cultural policy, real politics towards art and culture (as far as cultural Ideological State Apparatus is concerned) in a particular country and at specific historical moments. These practices are more important than a general ideological system as such, which—as Marx has pointed out—“has no history”...Ideological State Apparatuses, appearing in particular Central-East European societies through cultural policies, differed from each other, and [therefore] art produced in such particular political contexts in the region had different meanings in each country.⁵

In Romania, the film industry was built after the soviet model, on the frail framework of the efforts of the previous regime to establish a small state-owned studio and a public film fund.⁶ Its organization consisted of three branches, each possessing specific production and post-production facilities, dedicated to fiction, documentary, and animation films, respectively. Despite the theoretical centrality of the audiovisual medium, the recording of the real never bloomed into a viable commercial practice: the documentary studio, “Alexandru Sahia,” mostly produced short films that functioned either as additions to fiction programs, or as didactic material which was not intended to be seen outside of clearly-delimited reception contexts. Regarding this second category, Adina Brădeanu remarks on

the impressive number—one [which is estimated] to be in the thousands—of films commissioned by various state institutions for in-house use (i.e. within specific professional fields) or for cinema distribution under the umbrella, and fulfilling the agenda, of the commissioning institutions in question. For example, the Ministry of Education commissioned educational films, the Ministry of Health commissioned health awareness films, the National Tourism Office (NTO) and Publiturism, its media agency, commissioned promotional tourist films for the domestic and international markets, while various plants and factories all over the country produced health-and-safety films for training purposes.⁷

These “minor” audiovisual products have suffered to this day not only from the marginality generally ascribed to utilitarian (or “useful”⁸) films at once by the public, by their own makers, and by purist film theorists, but also from their association with the regime, which plagued the entire production of the “Alexandru Sahia” studio to the point that the institution was practically dissolved after the 1989 Revolution.

Undoubtedly, utilitarian films were among the purest signifiers of the social order which the Romanian Communist Party sought to establish, while also addressing specific issues such as knowledge advancement and dissemi-

nation, institutional communication, public relations, and building popular trust. They intertwined cinema and labor, asserting that the first was subsumed to the second, not only insofar as filmmaking was an integrated instance of socialist work, but also because it was considered a tool for shaping communities and ingraining opinions and behaviors, not an end in itself. Walter Benjamin commented on the question of auteurship and of the control of the means of production by drawing a parallel between film and literature. According to Benjamin, the latter was showing the way by dissolving the frontiers that had been maintained for so long between writers and readers and by introducing specialized work as a field of expertise which legitimized the worker's claim to communication through written expression. Soviet film was following through, as "[s]ome of the actors taking part in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves—and primarily in their own work process."⁹ Utilitarian film, to an even greater extent than Soviet fiction cinema, traded regular forms of spectacle for the visually unadorned, but ideologically charged, sight of working bodies, aiming to strengthen through audiovisual means the central discursive paradigm revolving around the conceptual as well as embodied unity of the proletariat. While their actual content still remains largely invisible today, despite recent efforts to reappraise them,¹⁰ the plural, diffuse entity this body of films and the practices surrounding them constitute is resolutely part of the decontextualized pieces of "common knowledge" about socialist cultural policies that are in circulation today, similarly to the poetry circle "Flacăra" or the youth song contest "Cântarea României"—two landmarks of the Romanian socialist project of the accessibilization of art.

It is precisely the emotionally-loaded identity of these films that interests Gabriel Achim in his feature-length debut, *Visul lui Adalbert*. In a typical post-modernist fashion, *Visul lui Adalbert* is steeped with historical considerations regarding the status of the image during the Romanian socialist rule. These reflections are strung together by the tight diegetic timeframe and by a homogenous comic rhythm, which is brimming with intertextual references and that gleefully exhibits the pieces of memorabilia that fill its frames, including obsolete image-recording devices. Achim's film chronicles a day that is particularly charged with meaning for all characters involved: it is May 8, 1986, the day after the Romanian football team's hardly believable victory at the European Championship against Spain, and on the 65th anniversary of

the Romanian Communist Party (RCP)—an event that is to be celebrated with the appropriate solemnity in all the factories across the country.

The protagonist, Iulică Ploscaru (Gabriel Spahiu), is the Health and Safety Chief of such a factory, and is therefore designated to direct two films for the occasion. The intrigue seems first to revolve around whether his atypical artistic attempts will cause a stir at the official festivities, but the narrative preponderantly meanders among the numerous complications, both private and professional, that cumber Iulică's routine: his wife's discontent; his mistress' demands; his immediate superior's oscillating attitude, shifting from boisterous amicability to dominance; illicit activities such as organizing paid projections of pornographic films in his living room, or instructing his subordinates to make cutlery for his child's school mistress—in short, the small humiliations of existence and the tricks one performs in order to maintain one's impression of getting even with a derisive destiny, not to mention with an authoritative power structure which infiltrates all dimensions of existence. Iulică's day starts with the teary-eyed remembrance of the victory of the previous night and his attempt to take the couple's video cassette recorder to work without his wife noticing. It continues with numerous organizational hurdles, culminates with the presentation of his artistic productions, and ends with a double work accident: first, that of one of his subordinates, who cuts off his hand while manufacturing a table knife at his demand instead of partaking in the festivities; and second, his own, which happens during the procedural reenactment of the unfortunate event, when he is made to stand in for the victim and is likewise injured.

The closure is an explicit reference to one of the most stringent cinematic critiques of the Romanian communist rule, Lucian Pintilie's 1968 *Reconstituirea* [*The Reenactment*], which followed the local authorities' efforts to make an educational film about the dangers of drunk behavior starring two young men involved in a brawl—efforts that eventually lead to the accidental death of one of them during the reenactment of these events for the camera. But the similarities between the two films exceed the superficial level of cinephilic tribute. The temporal sensibility of Achim's film resonates with Pintilie's narrative structure: the duration of the action is short and syncopated when considered as a whole, but the sequences are given ample time to develop, foreboding a crisis approaching at a leisurely pace. In a more politically-inflected reading, this rhythmic construction may be said to render the chronological perception of a subject under dictatorship, as it fuses quotidian

temporality and rigid, overarching power structures that predetermine the development of personal, as well as national, histories.

But *Visul lui Adalbert* includes two other layers of chronological complexity: first of all, there is the real time of extra-diegetic events which, in the particular case of the Romania-Spain football match, is also a time of collective rejoicing that involved the instantaneous mythicization of the event, its enshrouding in the specific aura of consecrated national historical landmarks. The grandeur of these often-seen and highly connotative images of Romanian sport history is however counterbalanced by the dominance the character Iulică exercises over them, through the intermediary of his video cassette recorder, which allows him to replay the game at will. Quite ironically, his technologically-induced mastery of a public event that was far from ideologically neutral is mirrored by another type of rewind: the reenactment of the work accident, during which he is unintentionally yet dearly made to pay for his infractions by the state apparatus, under the unblinking eye of the camera.¹¹

Secondly, the entire construct, with its spirited interplay between real and fictional, and textual and intertextual temporal categories, is engaged in a constant dialogue with the larger cultural context of the moment of reception. The vast majority of national as well as international commentators of the film have emphasized its sustained efforts to reconstruct the decorative and sensual dimension of the epoch it describes, although there was no unanimity concerning either the underlying motivations or the effect it produced in critics and audiences.¹² While there were frequent mentions of the technical specificities of the production, namely of Achim's use of 8mm and VHS to reproduce the media-generated look of 1980's Romania, there was no deep delve into the double-edged nostalgic potential of the image-recording technologies that figure both in the making of the film and within its diegetic frame, despite their double status as tools of liberation and instruments of state control.

In order to identify what type of attitude towards the past Achim's film cultivates, one may turn towards Svetlana Boym's field-defining study, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Boym proposes two kinds of nostalgia, *restorative* and *reflective*, that are neither static nor pure, but prove remarkably useful for recognizing the conditions they describe as divisive, dynamic, utopia-generating social phenomena, instead of mere products of individual psychology. To put it simply, restorative nostalgia is employed to designate all absolutist endeavors

to actualize the past, which imply a suspension of historical consciousness and a tendency to oversimplify its object of desire, in order to make it communicable to others—because most of the time, restorative nostalgia is a dynamic force, likely to coagulate in intellectual and (para-)political movements, such as nationalism and conspiracism. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia is relativist, indulges in playing endless games of permutation with fragments of time and memory, avoids naming the precise nature of its longing, all the while attaching itself to signs of pastness rather than to the past itself. As Boym summarizes,

[n]ostalgia of the first type gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture. Nostalgia of the second type is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself. If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.¹³

These two types of nostalgia are symbiotic with mass media, but mass media also generates a distinct type of retrovision that overflows both of Boym's notions; while it can gravitate ideologically towards each one of these attitudes, this third instance of nostalgia nonetheless retains its particularity, namely a fascination with its own past lives. Accordingly, I will call it *reflexive nostalgia*. Reflexive nostalgia can only be produced by world-building objects—objects which do not solely occupy a space and evolve in time, as simple material objects do, but that articulate a virtual, representational space-time continuum which is distinct from the one they inhabit. In technological media, this space-time continuum depends on the nature of the apparatus, which is concretized by specific pieces of equipment that are present at different stages of the trajectory of the media object, from production to consumption. Reflexive nostalgia opposes teleological enframings of technological progress; instead, it focuses on the particular social rituals having surrounded past media equipment and acknowledges the constitutive role of these rituals in the formation of a negative space which quietly persists in all configurations of new media. In its turn, new media uses certain aesthetic cues as artificial Proustian *madeleines* that have the distinct taste of post-modern remediation.

A major point of interest for Achim seems to be the capacity of now-obsolete image-recording technologies to be mediators and points of rally for another concept Boym develops, namely that of “cultural intimacy”:

Cultural identity is based on a certain social poetics or “cultural intimacy” that provides a glue in everyday life. This was described by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld as “embarrassment and rueful self recognition” through various common frameworks of memory and even what might appear as stereotypes. Such identity involves everyday games of hide-and-seek that only “natives” play, unwritten rules of behavior, jokes understood from half a word, a sense of complicity. State propaganda and official national memory build on this cultural intimacy, but there is also a discrepancy and tension between the two...National memory reduces this space of play with memorial signs to a single plot.¹⁴

In *Visul lui Adalbert*, cultural intimacy weaves itself between the imperfect socialist subjects who try to navigate the troubled waters of the last, most dismal years of the Ceaușescu regime, and who exchange subtle signs of recognition with one another. Among them we find the attitudes listed by Boym—the resilient sense of humor at the darkest hours of history being a common trait East-European nations use to ascribe to their peoples—but also a particular form of communal spirit the image-recording technologies featured in the narrative give rise to. The video cassette recorder is exceptionally brought to the factory in order to collectively re-live the football match, but its habitual function, which is verbally thematized in a dialogue between Iulică and his superior, also points to a type of sociability of proximity that reunites friends and neighbors for the projections of various movies (the two characters mention pornographic movies, but also the names of Cousteau and Alain Delon, testifying to the cultural lag that separated the two sides of the Iron Curtain), a custom that can be said to derisively mirror the regime’s attempts to democratize culture. One may perceive a trace of nostalgia, but also of irony, in the depiction of the scantiness of privately-owned, censorship-free audiovisual devices and the communal spectatorial experience which necessarily derived from it. Instead of shaping a community through the strict regulation of its imaginative resources and the levelization of its self-narratives, the communist regime succeeded in spawning solidary cultures of resistance sometimes built around the most prosaic of activities.

More largely, the discontent concerning the alleged degradation of interpersonal relations within the neoliberal system is derived from a persistent impression of being deprived of one’s individuality, of being an interchangeable cog, a standardized product of the social machinery. Such a disillusioned self-perspective, which may manifest politically through a disengagement from the communal decision-making process, also constitutes the shared fuel

for all forms of nostalgia, and most decidedly for *ostalgie*. In recent history, *ostalgie* is arguably one of the phenomena that serves best to illustrate the entanglement of personal and political renunciation. As a fusion between the German *Ost* (East) and *Nostalgie*, it was first used to describe a regressive (and generally seen as reprehensible) longing for life in the German Democratic Republic, and was later extended to comprise similar attitudes springing from other parts of the former Eastern Bloc. There seems to be a general consensus regarding the reasons, both material and immaterial, which underlie these sentiments. Maria Todorova lists, as examples,

the longing for security, stability and prosperity [but also] the feeling of loss for a very specific form of sociability, and of vulgarization of the cultural life. Above all, there is a desire among those who have lived through communism, even when they have opposed it or were indifferent to its ideology, to invest their lives with meaning and dignity, not to be thought of, remembered, or bemoaned as losers or “slaves.”¹⁵

Behind these general, largely affect-based explanations lies the reality of de-professionalization, of the obsolescence of industrial labor in a service-centered economy. For once, it is not the fall into obsolescence of the tool that mirrors human ephemerality, but the ideological obsolescence of state communism which refracted on its technological infrastructure. What unites man and tool is not only a symbolic bond, but concrete causality that becomes evident in the case of former socialist countries, where the transition from one form of labor to the other has been particularly abrupt.

The fetishization of the industrial past, from the urban exploration of derelict factories to the collection of pieces of machinery picked from the ruins of the communist “crown jewels,” is no simple expression of a specific form of “aesthetic of the ugly”—or at least of the brute and unadorned—nor of an updated luddism which is now protecting, instead of destroying, semi-automated means of production dwarfed by more contemporary technologies. It is also a critique of a system that establishes “a two-sided coin of dependency and exploitation, [transposing former socialist nations] not into the (even more modern) capitalist future but back into a pre-socialist past.”¹⁶

Visul lui Adalbert reunites the three threads of *ostalgie*, obsolescence, and reflexive nostalgia in technological media through its thematization of the pragmatic as well as symbolic, and of the sanctioned as well as subversive usages of different instruments and languages belonging to the audiovisual sphere, from the video-cassette recorder and the 8mm camera used in film-making divisions within factories to the fraught genre of the health-and-safe-

ty documentary. The issue of the ideological weight of the image and the systems devised to administer it in communist states was confronted at the time by many East-European filmic meta-narratives, and their respective ways of dealing with it suggest shared concerns about the depersonalization of the artistic venture. All productions belonged to the state and, theoretically, there were no private images, as there was no private property—people used image-recording equipment as rural communities employed agricultural machines in the new collectivized countryside, as a state loan that they had to repay by fructifying it. Neither the tractors nor the crops were theirs, in the narrow sense capitalism has given to the notion of possession. Images, however, obey other rules, as they are the direct expression of the individualities of those behind and in front of the camera, individualities that may overflow the ideological mold—as such, there is a looming motif of repetition in socialist metacinema that transforms the habitual professional gesture of multiple takes in a metaphor for the contrived construction of the new man, which can culminate not only with the ideological, but also with the physical erasure of those unfit, as it happens to one of the unruly young protagonists of Pintilie's *Reconstituirea*.

While oppositional images undoubtedly existed, either subversively ingrained in censor-approved audiovisual products or circulating in private or limited circles such as the underground art scenes that appeared in most socialist states, thematizing their act of production was difficult, as it essentially formulated a straightforward critique of the state's control over images. Andrzej Wajda's 1977 *Człowiek z marmuru* [*Man of Marble*] constitutes an example of such an explicit narrative of the unfolding of a resistance strategy through the actions of viewing and making films, but only its focus on injustices perpetrated during the 1950s made possible its integration in an official discourse which had gone through de-Stalinization.

In contrast, the focus of Achim's film does not fall on the creative act and its originator or originators—whether it is the lone figure of the misunderstood filmmaker or the film crew as collective generative force—as is often the case in instances of metacinema. The distance that separates Achim from what would conventionally be his alter-ego, the diegetic filmmaker Iulică, is not as much temporal as it is contextual: democracy has dramatically modified the status of cinema, removing state control and substantial state support conjointly, and deflating its cultural exceptionality by opening up the media market to all players. Instead of musing on these transformations

from the perspective of the artist, Achim effaces himself in favor of the cinematic apparatus itself, which directly addresses its past configurations by exhibiting its different formats and textures, the social situations they aggregated, and the specific gestures the use of former image-recording devices entailed. Within an analysis focusing on the original form of *ostalgie* which targeted life under the German Democratic Republic, but which also holds true for its geographically extended versions, Tatiana Astafeva underlines its tendency to take hold of the empty shells of obsolete everyday items:

the thesis that *ostalgie* manifests itself mostly in the realm of everyday life and consumer culture was for a long time regarded as a consequence of the impossibility of talking nostalgically about the GDR in public discussions: political and social topics connected to the GDR were laden with problems such as state atrocities, that is why everyday culture has become the only realm to express nostalgic longing for... *ostalgie* historical experience focuses on the everyday, small fragment of the past and in this way confronts the “homogenizing force of grand narratives” and “feeling of the past”: “Their magic lies in their partiality, which emphasizes their metonymic relationship to a whole that is gone forever and whose traces are also flickering their last.”¹⁷

Amateur image-recording devices may be seen as belonging to the sphere of the everyday inasmuch as their typical aim is to preserve fragments of it. Yet for this very same reason they are also beyond it, as the act of documenting the mundane only rarely also involves calling attention upon its own toolkit. The particular context of Achim’s narrative does not diminish, but certainly complicates their status as *locus* of *ostalgic* memory, as even fairly accessible consumer items such as the 8mm camera were mobilized by “the homogenizing force” of the Communist Party’s “grand narrative,” as evidenced by health and safety films such as the ones the protagonist directs, which were most often shot using small-gauge devices. *Visul lui Adalbert* fuses the two paradigmatic expressions of socialist-era image-making—the audiovisual state apparatus and the confidential production and circulation of subversive images—through the protagonist Iulică’s dual status, at once integral part of the worker elite (he is a department head, has a very cordial relationship with the manager, and is in charge of the audiovisual output of the factory) and petty lawbreaker with a strong individualist ethos.

In accordance with this last trait, his artistic attempts rank low in terms of interpersonal bonding. In the tradition of Kieslowski’s seminal *Amator* [*Camera Buff*] (1979), amateur filmmaking is presented as an ultimately solitary

experience—despite the fact that the protagonist is surrounded by colleagues who compose the technical crew and the cast, he seems to be the only one emotionally invested in the successful outcome of the shooting and the subsequent projection for reasons other than the necessity to comply with official guidelines. “Adalbert’s Dream,” the title he chooses for the more experimental of his two directorial efforts, is quite telling, both of his ambitions and of their incommunicability: asked to explain the choice of such an unusual first name, Iulică curtly replies that “it sounds foreign.” The camera itself is, undoubtedly, less innocuous than the video cassette recorder, which was simply a catalyst of cultural intimacy and, only slightly more subversively, the object of small-scale capitalist transactions. Contrarily, the same camera transitions through different circles of power, registering enactments and reenactments that function as modalities of expression or of repression, and sometimes both at the same time (for example in the case of Iulică’s first film, which insensitively uses his mistress’ disability following a work accident to compose a highly idiosyncratic warning about disrespecting health and safety regulations). Once projected, the images reclaim their role as objects of collective enjoyment, and the mass of workers, now turned into spectators, momentarily acquire the decisional power (expressed through their boisterous approval or disapproval of the events on the screen) that is theoretically granted but practically refused to them in the political realm.

Reflexive nostalgia gains substance when it is considered as a specific product of representational media, which cannot be subsumed to either reflective or restorative nostalgia, not least because it fuses the producer of the nostalgic discourse and its object. Self-reflexivity, however, may well be the hidden common thread that runs through every possible form of nostalgia. But while restorative nostalgia rummages through history for ideals to retrieve, and reflective nostalgia delights in the aftertaste of the passage of time, reflexive nostalgia, especially when it is formulated through technological media, evokes the past more vividly, thus acquiring a significant degree of latitude to either critically deconstruct or illusionistically reconstruct it that none of the other types of nostalgia has. As mentioned previously, beyond the diegetically-framed reflection on audiovisual technologies as part of both explicitly political and infra-political rites, Gabriel Achim’s film also offers another strata of interpretation by choosing not only to exhibit obsolete image-recording devices, but also to mobilize them for its own making. *Visul lui Adalbert* was shot using 8mm, 35mm, VHS, and digital technologies. If the

8mm and 35mm approximately correspond to the work-safety films and to diapositives of authentic work accidents that regularly punctuate the narrative development, the decision to predominantly use VHS for the diegetic action is more open to interpretations. At first glance, such a choice seems to uphold the uncritical connection that unites historical periods with their specific representational means in the collective imagination, but VHS does not qualify as the distinctive image-recording technology of mid-1980's Romania. The film itself highlights the multiplicity of formats and techniques that characterized the era, reflecting the centrality or marginality of each product's discursive function. VHS is associated with private use, as illustrated by the recording of the football match, but also with the television aesthetic, which is highly charged with signification not only in relation to the socialist state's absolute control of that means of communication, but also, in the particular case of the Romanian experience, to the so-called "first televised revolution," which put an end to Ceaușescu's rule. Once again, image-recording technologies escape normative assignments of meaning, contesting not their status as vessels of ideology, but as vessels of a *single* ideology. Assuredly, nostalgia is fueled by this inherent ambiguity, which allows it to avoid any categorical political positioning and to revel in the sensorial, evocative qualities of the medium.

By analyzing the status of the image in the microcosm of an ordinary socialist factory, Gabriel Achim both interrogates its role in any process of ideological formation and utilizes its constitutive instability to elicit a form of infrapolitical, self-reflexive nostalgia, which gratifies the *ostalgic* longing while simultaneously avoiding its pitfalls. *Visul lui Adalbert* cultivates the aura of the past insofar as it jointly asserts the latter's divide with, but also its persistence in, the present. By doing so, it acknowledges its own place in the genealogy of image recording it comments upon, but also takes the liberty to briefly interrupt this development by employing obsolete audiovisual technologies in its fabrication, before letting itself be transformed into another volatile, infinitely manipulable, ideologically permeable world-image.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Susan Strasser, “Rags, Bones, and Plastic Bags: Obsolescence, Trash, and American Consumer Culture,” in *Cultures of Obsolescence: History, Materiality, and the Digital Age*, eds. Babette B. Tischleder and Sarah Wasserman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 41–60, 42–45.

² John Durham Peters, “Proliferation and Obsolescence of the Historical Record in the Digital Era” in *Cultures of Obsolescence: History, Materiality, and the Digital Age*, eds. Babette B. Tischleder and Sarah Wasserman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 79–96, 90.

³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁴ Allison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Caterina Preda, “Le rôle de la nostalgie dans la mémoire artistique du passé communiste dans la Roumanie contemporaine,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3–4 (2015): 268–83, 277; my translation.

⁵ Piotr Piotrowski, “How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?” *Third Text* 23, no. 1 (2009): 5–14, 9.

⁶ Călin Căliman, *Istoria filmului românesc 1987–2000* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000).

⁷ Adina Brădeanu, “Unseen, Unknown: The Ephemeral Films of the Sahia Studio,” in *Vintage Sahia V*, DVD Catalog (Bucharest: Asociația One World Romania, 2018): 25–31, 25.

⁸ Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008): 19–55, 34.

¹⁰ Adina Brădeanu’s fifth installment of her curatorial series dedicated to the output of the studio, appropriately titled “Unseen, Unknown: The Ephemeral Films of the Sahia Studio,” is one of the most consequent of such attempts in the Romanian context, and echoes a growing scholarly interest in utilitarian film production in the former Eastern Bloc, as evidenced by the works of Irina Tcherneva, Lucie Cesalkova, Maria Vinogradova, and Laszlo Strausz, among others.

¹¹ In the midst of political polarization at the continental as well as global level, a sporting victory of a representative of the Eastern Bloc over a Western nation was evidently recuperated by the Romanian communist regime; furthermore, the winning football club, Steaua Bucharest, was patronized by the army, and its unofficial chairman was none other than dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu’s oldest son, Valentin.

¹² For national commentators, see Andrei Gorzo, “Filme de artă & protecția muncii,” *Dilema Veche*, May 2012, <https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/15001/Andrei-Gorzo/Filme-de-arta-protectia-muncii-Visul-lui-Adalbert.html>; Andrei Luca, “O comedie romantică de întreprindere - Visul lui Adalbert,” *Film Menu*, June 2012, <https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/15560/Andrei-Luca/O-comedie-romantica-de-intreprindere-Visul-lui-Adalbert.html>; Doinel Tronaru, “Când Steaua câștiga la Sevilla... - Visul lui Adalbert,” *Adevărul literar și artistic*, May 2012, <https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/14983/Doinel-Tronaru/Cand-Steaua-castiga-la-Sevilla-Visul-lui-Adalbert.html>. For international

commentators, see Ronnie Scheib, “Adalbert’s Dream,” *Variety*, December 20, 2011, <https://variety.com/2011/film/reviews/adalbert-s-dream-1117946776/>; “Adalbert’s Dream: Film Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 20, 2011, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/adalberts-dream-film-review-203341/>.

¹³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

¹⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 42–43.

¹⁵ Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 7.

¹⁶ Frances Pine, “Retreat to the Household? Gendered Domains in Post-socialist Poland,” in *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 2002): 95–113, 111; Nicolas Offenstadt, *Le pays disparu: Sur les traces de la RDA* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

¹⁷ Tatiana Astafeva, “On the Wrong Side of History: Towards a New Approach to Ostalgic Cinema,” *Research in Film and History*, March 2021, <https://film-history.org/approaches/wrong-side-history-towards-new-approach-ostalgic-cinema>.