# TELEVISION AND REVOLUTION OR A NEW LITERARY CONUNDRUM IN RECENT GERMAN AND ROMANIAN PROSE NARRATIVES

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This paper aims to examine the way in which authors from two post-totalitarian countries, Romania and the ex-GDR, reacted to the historical events of 1989 by choosing to insert fictionalized descriptions of the anti-Communist revolutions in the corpus of their novels dealing with the recent past. Mircea Cărtărescu's *Aripa dreapta* (*Glaring 3*), the last volume of the trilogy *Orbitor* (*Glaring*, 1996, 2002 and 2007), and Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes Like Us*, 1995) thus play their own role in the vast on-going socio-cultural process of 'coming to terms with the past' which is common to all post-Communist countries[1].

Both in Germany and in Romania, the public discourse about 1989 has contributed to the creation and preservation of a revolutionary myth (needed as symbolic foundation for the new democratic society), while at the same time an opposite tendency, which contests this myth, has also emerged in both countries. Authors, for instance, have used satire and parody to record the failure of the social revolution's metamorphosis (as a victory of popular fury over a despotic regime) into a new founding myth of the nation.

The mass media's pivotal involvement in these particular revolutions, which came to challenge the traditional revolutionary scenario, is also, perhaps paradoxically, one of the reasons leading to the weakening of the revolutionary myth. Writing in 1990, the journalist and historian Timothy Garton Ash coined the term *telerevolution*: 'Both externally and internally, the crucial medium was television. In Europe at the end of 20th century all revolutions are telerevolutions' (Garton Ash 1989: 94), justifiably holding that 'future historians of these events will surely have to spend as much time in television archives as in libraries' (*ibidem*: 348). The Romanian revolution is 'the first revolution broadcast live'

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[1] This is the commonly accepted translation of the German term 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' (*Vergangenheit* = past; *Bewältigung* = mastering, coming to terms with).

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(Amelunxen, Ujica 1990: 8)[2] and the fall of the Berlin Wall represents 'the first historical event broadcast globally,' while Vogt (2004:36) believes that the fall of the Wall is probably 'the best recorded event in the history of humankind'. This, paradoxically, has not led, as many might have expected, to clarity regarding the unfolding of events, but, rather to a 'ghosting' of facts which vanished behind images, to reiterate Elke Brüns's term (2006: 87). Brüns also quotes the filmmaker Harun Farocki's conclusion to his documentary depicting the fall of the Berlin Wall: the peaceful GDR revolution is 'a revolution which rather hides within images, than is mirrored by them'. The Swiss director and author Milo Rau, who staged the play *Ceausescu's Last Days*, emphasizes the same feeling of the impenetrability of the image blocking access to the historical referent which it expresses: 'Everything is visible, and this has happened, I think, for the first time in the history of revolutions. Everything is overtly there. Yet, after watching all these images, there lingers an unpleasant sensation, a sort of paranoia. As if this entire hysteria, this Securitate hysteria, these appeals to protect the television station against Ceauşescu's loyal forces, were all but a show, and behind images…'[3].

I shall analyze the implications of this phenomenon when dealing with the two novels, each of which reflects, in its own way, the theme of the revolution as a show and addresses the topic of media simulacrum. When discussing the postmodern character of post-Communist Russian society, the distinguished Harvard professor Svetlana Boym (1994: 222–224) points out an aspect which can be applied to the whole post-Communist space: 'the condition of simulation', which defines different levels of life within the public space, making it almost impossible to imagine a real historical transformation, a disaster or a catastrophe. This is an outcome of the 'vanishing of Soviet/socialist meta-narrative' as both deliverance and profound source of anxiety. But this also implies a theoretical refinement of postmodernism, which has been confirmed by the media experience of revolutions: that audio-visual techniques fail to ensure objective access to reality; moreover, they not only reflect or broadcast events, but also play a role in their making. As Astrid Erll stresses (2004: 5), 'mass media are not neutral carriers of information, relevant in the case of memory. Rather, what they seem to encode – existing versions of reality and of the past, values and rules, identity concepts – is made by them. […] Unlike historical events in themselves, the dimensions of the past which are, from the viewpoint of the culture of remembrance, effective and important, are not external to the media. They are media constructs'. In our case, the manner in which revolutionary events were 'represented' in the mass media has influenced, on the one hand, their unfolding and, on the other, the building of different versions of the collective memory. Both novels address this theme and reflect upon it.

[2] All translations from German and Romanian belong to me.

[3] Milo Rau in dialogue with the researcher Friedrich Kittler; the conversation was included in his book *Die letzten Tage der Ceausescus*, Verbrecher Verlag, 2009 (Kittler, Rau 2009).

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Noting that both *Glaring 3* and *Heroes Like Us* can be read as examples of postmodern historical novels, my working hypothesis is offered by Linda Hutcheon's thesis, according to which one of the most important strategies of historiographic metafiction in the post-modern age is its strategy of 'installing and subverting conventions' (Hutcheon 1988: XII). In both narratives, as realist conventions are instituted, they are simultaneously subverted: novel, television and film are reflected as media which filter and manipulate reality, whereas this reality is depicted in apparently exact and objective (television) and authentic and plausible (literature and film) terms.

## *Glaring 3.* The Romanian Revolution

The moment at which the, fairly realist, depiction of the revolutionary events is cut off occurs towards the middle of the novel (Cărtărescu 2007, III: 225), when the prosopopeia of Revolution itself becomes manifest and, with it, the satirical dimension of what has thus far been only a chaotic mass of facts and interpretations is ordered along the axis of a 'central meaning', i.e. that of the stolen revolution. A detail often overlooked by critics proves to be pivotal from my perspective: this moment coincides with a gigantic meta-narrative subplot, which is meant to deconstruct the realist narrative of 22 December by means of the subversive insertions of a hyper-authoritarian narrator. Moreover, this debunking of the realist techniques which have so far been employed to generate the impression of authentic reconstruction of the revolutionary days is accomplished through a non-literary medium, the audio-visual one. The readers are thus invited to identify themselves with the paradoxical perspective of a narrator who, from a vantage point (a balcony), observes the crowds overflowing from all over Bucharest towards the Palace Square. This perspective is paradoxical because, on the one hand, it is meant as a pastiche of the literary tradition of the omniscient narrator, translated into the text in the first person plural ('we started this chapter in a happy mood, but we confess that we turned morose in the interim' – *ibidem*: 233), who is able to see what is going on within flats and characters alike. On the other hand, this narrator assumes the form of a cameraman, recording events from an exterior angle which would correspond to the external narrative perspective. Yet the narrative instance is constructed in an even more convoluted manner. Just as the narrator, in the good old textualist fashion employed by Cărtărescu, tells us how he chooses a character from among the crowd to particularize him only to propel him into instant oblivion, the cameraman isn't just recording, he's also turning the reader into a witness to the transformation of the real into a media product: he tells us when he 'increases the screen resolution', alternates the angle of filming or focuses the lens on certain faces in the crowd (for instance, on Mircea's).

Obviously, these are all old postmodern tricks, especially when one is familiar with Cărtărescu's fascination with optic systems and filters, be they natural (the eye) or artificial (the magnifying glass). Nevertheless, through the omniscient

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narrator-cameraman superposition, denouncing the 'authenticity' of the realist style, and at this precise moment of the novel, they acquire a special significance. If, like the narrator-cum-magician of the book, I could interrupt the writing of these lines in order to project to the reader the first ten minutes of Harun Farocki's and Andrei Ujica's documentary *Videogramms of a Revolution* my point would suddenly – effortlessly – emerge. This film is, in fact, a compilation of anonymous and official recordings, whereby revolutionary events are chronologically (re)constructed from the perspectives of the cameras which documented them. An off-screen voice accompanies the images, thanks to which we understand that the revolution is little more than the film which the cameras recorded in those few days. 'From the window of a student hostel in Timisoara, an amateur camera is recording the protesters as they are marching towards the town centre', etc. The documentary shows the Romanian revolution as representing a turning point in contemporary history, a terrible confirmation of those suspicions already voiced by postmodern authors: that history exists only insofar as it is recorded and turned into image (just as Cărtărescu's characters and their world only exist insofar as they enter the scope of the author's gaze). This accounts for the deep interest in the unfolding of the Romanian revolution among postmodern philosophers and media theorists alike.

The recording of events is, however, not just an external, neutral one: broadcasting the revolution meant that this audio-visual medium meddled with the events, thereby manipulating them. The population at large believed that the takeover of the national television building represented a sort of a 'fall of the Bastille', a guarantee of the fact that, once everybody all over the world could watch the revolution unfolding, the latter really existed ('We have won!', 'The TV has joined us!'). But just as many of the population came to believe that the images broadcast on the television were the absolute truth, the same television became the instrument of the greatest media 'scam' in history. Failing to realize that they were again locked behind a wall, this time that of the TV screen (cf. Ujica) and that instead of being victorious agents of democratic change they had been turned yet again into a passive mass, Romanians were the actors and the witnesses of a new film directed, through the medium of television, by the political group that acquired power to legitimate its own actions. The result was a film of global relevance, with the corresponding array of *leitmotifs*: the people rising from slavery, the crimes of the Carpathian tyrant, the compassionate public from the Western democracies and the historical happy ending with the triumph of democracy. In his essay, *The Timisoara Massacre*, Jean Baudrillard discusses the situation along similar lines: 'Spectators become exoterics of the screen, experiencing the revolution as exoticism of images, themselves exogenous, tourist spectators of a virtual history' (Baudrillard 1992: 56).

At this point one must emphasize the two dimensions of the fictionalization of the revolution by means of the technical medium. On the one hand there is the factual manipulation of history through television, a plot devised by the new agents

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of power, and on the other the historical events are manipulated through the specificity of the medium itself, which causes *every reality* to be hidden by the image, to be absorbed by the 'signifier', which thus, the postmodern philosophers argue, becomes more real than the 'signified'[4] (Baudrillard). This is what the novel *Glaring* keeps saying. Mircea's call to his mother, 'Come and watch, mother, there's a revolution on TV' (Cărtărescu 2007, III: 252), introduces the idea of revolution as a media phenomenon, which will be reflected in the novel until the final moment, when the people as a whole are engulfed by the power of the media. Throughout several pages, the revolution is presented not live, but filtered through the TV screen. Just as the narrator of *Videograms of a revolution* explains the technical details of the recording and the way in which the event is transformed by the camera into a film cut, the novel narrator keeps pointing to the simulacrum character of the broadcast images. The perspective is aestheticized; reality exists only as fiction, fashioned according to every person's interpretation, ranging from a piece of romance to a war or horror film. As Ujica notes, unlike the film, which stages fiction as reality, television stages reality as reality: thus, the illusion it effects is much more dangerous. The dramatic moment when violence erupts again, in the evening of 22 December, is reflected in a similar fashion: bathed in floodlight, the balcony speakers seem carved in stone, their breathing is 'a phantasmagorical ballet of steam'; when the camera pans, one can notice the streaks of bullets in the sky (*ibidem*: 349). To drive the point home, i.e. that fiction becomes the master of reality, Cărtărescu radicalizes the procedure. The recording of the Ceausescu trial is not commented upon during its TV broadcast, but is projected as a film in a vision shared by the members of the future National Salvation Front: a simulacrum of a simulacrum. The execution of the couple is depicted in cinematic terms, i.e. the *bullet time effect*, patented by the Wachowski brothers in the post-modern chef d'oeuvre *Matrix*: the spectator can notice how bullets flow through the air and penetrate the bodies in *slow motion* (*ibidem*: 461).

From this perspective, not only does the novel invites its reader to reflect upon this problem which is crucial for the world we live in (post-history), it also issues a serious warning: by believing in the ability of broadcast images to reflect reality objectively, people will always let themselves be manipulated by the political power. Cărtărescu's novel explicitly articulates this theme: one comes across a four-page long, Pynchon-like dissection of the TV set, depicted as an infernal factory in which light is transformed by the secret service of the diminutive transistor clerks into a flux of spectral electrons, then into pixels, so that the 'correspondence between the real scene and the flea circus on the screen was more than dubious'. The repeated conclusion, written in italics: 'never had there been such a cunning, treacherous and poisonous intermediary between the world and myself' (*ibidem*: 253–256).

[4] The terms have been coined by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to explain the dyadic model of the sign: the 'signifier' (*signifiant*) is the form of the sign and 'signified' (*signifié*) is the concept, the meaning that the sign represents.

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The problematic also displays a philosophical component: as seen in a previous chapter, for Cărtărescu, the vanishing of reality behind the sign does not depend exclusively on the specificity of the image and its proliferation. In fact, regardless of the way it is reflected, reality is but a fiction. Cărtărescu is not only Baudrillardian, but also Flusserian. In his essay, *On Fiction*, Vilém Flusser attacks Baudrillard's thesis by arguing that what the French philosopher describes as the involution of the contemporary world is, in fact, a state which has always existed: reality can only exist as a simulacrum, not in the sense that it doesn't have a proper existence of its own, but in the sense that the aforementioned existence cannot be known (cf. Finger, Guldin, Bernardo 2011: 110)[5]. Let us remember Mircea's repeated reflection upon the fiction of reality: even as a participant in the fighting, and not as a spectator in front of a screen, he 'felt as if he were in a war film, even more, in a night shooting of a shooting scene' (Cărtărescu 2007, III: 222). The problem which arises is that this acknowledgment of the simulacrum, both in Baudrillard's and in Flusser's sense, has ethical implications: the former states that television leads to indifference, distance, skepticism and unconditional apathy, whereas the latter emphasizes the blurring of distinctions between truth and falsehood, fiction and reality, good and evil.

All these phenomena block Mircea's ability to act in reality and to react to another person's suffering. When people are hurt or die around him, he is obsessed with metaphysical dilemmas: 'How can another's toothache hurt us and how can we know whether the person crying or shouting before our own eyes is not an actor or a fake?' (*ibidem*: 222). It is thus that the novel problematizes a crucial aspect of post-history: unable to make a difference between the reality of pain and death and fiction as spectacle which has been instilled by both film and television, people are transformed into post-modern voyeurs, who are used to watching the horrors of war indifferently. This is sociologist Stjepan G. Meštrović's dark conclusion (1994), after analyzing the reaction of the West to the war in former Yugoslavia. The same opprobrium of the image as a vector of fictionalized suffering is voiced

[5] See also Flusser's position in an interview conducted by Miklós Peternák: 'What I want to say is the following: The reality of the objective world is in question. We know now that we do not have to be Kantians to know that there is no sense in speaking about an objective world; we have no access to the objects. What we have are the impressions which our nerves receive. To say that the images we now produce are simulations does not make much sense. Concretely they affect us just like objects do. This is my constant, let's say, dialogue with Baudrillard.

Baudrillard believes that we are living in a world where the simulations hide reality. I think this is a nonsensical proposition. I believe that we are in the middle of a world which is either concrete or abstract. And those images are just as concrete as is the table on which your machine is standing now. We do not have any ontological tool any longer to distinguish between a simulation and a non-simulation. The critical tool which we have to use is concreticity as opposed to abstractness. No longer can we distinguish between science and art. We used to define science as the discipline which analyses the real, and art as a discipline which produces artificial things. However, now we tend to believe that the world which science analyses is an artifice which is produced by science itself' (Flusser 1988).

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by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), which is concerned with the case of war photography.

## *Heroes Like Us.* The Fall of the Berlin Wall

Not an autobiographical work, according to its author, Thomas Brussig's novel may be included in the category of fictional autobiography due to its first-person narrative form (German narratologists would speak of an instance of *Ich-Erzählung*). The protagonist, Klaus Uhltzscht, narrates his own life in an interview with an American reporter for the *New York Times*, Kitzelstein. The reader is offered not only the story of his individual destiny, but also a satirical description of what life was like in the ex-GDR, culminating with a highly individual perspective on the events which eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to re-unification. Barely a few pages into the novel, the reader learns that it is, in fact, Klaus Uhltzscht who is responsible for this momentous occasion, rather than the peaceful uprising of his fellow countrymen. Specifically the soldiers in charge of patrolling the Wall were forced to retreat and allow citizens to climb the Wall, terrified by the sudden exhibition of the hero's gigantic penis – herein are rooted the shocking, satirical, scandalous and grotesque aspects which represent the indelible mark of the novel and translate, in fact, the violence and brutality of this original breaking up with the past.

The fictionalization of the past begins even as events unfold and are experienced by Klaus, for even then what is perceived is already shaped by subjective interpretations. Thus, according to Klaus, all protesters were happy that the Wall had been breached, little understanding what had really happened: 'those standing behind or having arrived late were convinced that had they been in front then they would have opened the gate, whereas those in front believed that they had opened it, because, truly, the gate had been opened' (Brussig 1995: 319). Brussig shows here that both the individual process of remembering and the collective memory may find it hard to tell fact from fiction. In his study on the social construction of reality within the collective memory, Berek (2009: 117) emphasizes that 'what is transmitted as historical reality changes permanently, for it is constantly re-negotiated by society. It is, therefore, impossible to learn whether a certain memory is *true* or *false*'. This is one of the reasons why photography (in modern society) and photography and television (in contemporary society) have come to assume the role of objective instances in dealing with reality. Even newspapers base their reports on visual documentation of reality, which helps to create and sustain this idea of objectivity. Through photographic or videographic recording of events and their almost simultaneous broadcast, the spectator is instilled with two illusions: that he has direct access to events, to the naked truth, and that he can thus take part in history *in the making*, despite past historical events being only knowable as a result of historical construction. To quote Susan Sontag's words from *Photography: A Little Summa*: 'In a modern society, images made by cameras are the principal access

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to realities of which we have no direct experience. And we are expected to receive and to register an unlimited number of images of what we don't directly experience. The camera defines for us what we allow to be "real"' (2007: 125).

In the case of *Heroes Like Us* (and any historical fiction whose plot is set in contemporaneity), this aspect cannot be ignored. Klaus adds specific details, regarding the way events were related by the media, to his account of the 1989 revolutionary process. Western newspapers are his obsession as, ever since he was a child, he had dreamed of seeing his picture, lavished in praise, on the front page of every German journal. Beyond the megalomaniacal dimension of this fancy, there lies a truth, dimly perceived by Klaus and clearly formulated by Susan Sontag in the afore-mentioned essay: 'In the modern way of knowing, there have to be images for something to become 'real'. Photographs identify events. Photographs confer importance on events and make them memorable. For a war, an atrocity, a pandemic, a so-called natural disaster to become a subject of large concern, it has to reach people through the various systems (from television and the internet to newspapers and magazines) that diffuse photographic images to millions' (Sontag 2007: 125). At the same time, the peaceful revolution occurs not only on TV, but *through* TV: Schabowski's slip of tongue during the live international press conference leads to the erroneous interpretation of the complete opening up of frontiers, which becomes the official version, circulated in the media. Watching *Tagesschau* on the West-German TV channel *ARD*, one hour later, the GDR citizens find their hopes fulfilled and Berliners gather in front of the Wall to put the new regulations to the test. The intervention of mass media in the unfolding of historical events is, therefore, hardly neutral: on the one hand, live broadcasting becomes an interfering factor able to alter the course of events, on the other, the claimed objectivity is just a myth for the naïve who fail to understand that television can only produce simulacra of reality.

The first case is illustrated not only by the real story about Schabowski, but also by two fictional events, which Brussig makes up following the example of Schabowski's famous gaffe in order to show that: 1. history is chaotic, and 2. this chaos is brought about by the very instruments which claim to be its documented proofs. In the atmosphere of euphoria which followed the opening up of the Wall, when a reporter pushes a microphone to Karl's face, the hero, half mad with joy, can only utter one word: *Maaadness!* (*Waaahnsinn!*), the word most frequently heard those days, which became part of the Wall legend itself. But Klaus also has darker broodings: the specter of recently gained freedom unveils fear and insecurity. '*What will happen to me in this new world?* is the fearful question, and, when facing another camera, he shouts a word which sprang from the deepest marshes of his soul: *Germany*!'. This is the moment when Brussig sets his critical weapons against West Germany as well, for no one is spared the debunking tsunami which his novel unleashes upon the German lands:

> '*Germany*, again uttered in fear! The West Germans have taken it literally, but disfigured it with an important detail: they acted as if all who said *Germany* meant

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> *West Germany*. […] Not that I believed that West Germany was a bad thing, but the country was not perfect, so that one may not have thought of a better one! And how could I suspect that the entire GDR nation would feel bound to take up my confused cry for Germany' (Brussig 1995: 322).

Klaus emerged as the architect of re-unification, just as he had been the main agent responsible for the fall of the Wall.

As a historiographical metafiction, *Heroes Like Us* concurrently proposes (and this is the second dimension of my analysis) a subtle critique of the idea of objective history documentation through modern audio-visual techniques and historiographic methods which are based, inevitably, on the materials furnished by the former. On the one hand, Brussig, too, uses the ability of photos or films to certify events: Kitzelstein, the journalist, identifies Klaus based on the analysis of the video material, which renders any attempt of denial on the hero's part useless (*ibidem*: 7). Furthermore, Klaus wishes to present his version of events in the pages of the famous *New York Times*, aware that it is only the press which can make his *own* story famous. On the other hand, the entire official historiography is, thus, discredited. Historians are ridiculed: without knowing the real cause which provoked these historical convulsions, they circulated a whole series of highfaluting analyses and interpretations concerning 'the end of German division', 'the end of European post-war order', 'the end of the short 20$^{th}$ century', 'the end of modern era', 'the end of the Cold War', 'the end of ideologies' and 'the end of history', which enables Klaus to hail himself as 'the gravedigger of history' or 'the valiant little tailor': 'seven at one stroke!' (*ibidem*). In fact, Brussig offers his own metanarrative of the 1989 moment (see Widmann 2009: 229), but since, to this end, he deploys satirical strategies meant to subvert the voice of the narrator, he manages to pulverize the reader's trust in these *grands récits*. Of course, one may equally ask oneself, as Bremer does (2002: 252), whether Brussig's method of taking up and ironically exaggerating every stereotype is, indeed, a way of discrediting them, as the author seems to believe, or whether this merely perpetuates and fortifies them. Personally, I believe that nobody who laughed with and at Klaus, the buffoon of the fall of GDR, could possibly adhere naïvely to the identity clichés circulated by the media and built up in the German social imagination after re-unification.

The central question posed by my essay is: how can the pinnacle point of the 1989-revolutionary events, the fall of the Wall, become material for a narrative, once these events have been stored in the archive, via photography or video, radio or television broadcasts? And, starting from here: what role can literature still play in a society in which books play but a smaller part, being overtaken by mass media and the internet? How can an author defend himself against this crushing conflict? To try to offer a tentative answer to the first question: firstly, both novels draw the reader's attention to the processes which, as a result of technical documentation, transform historical events into pieces of a puzzle which the science of history orders by offering a unified interpretation of them, and secondly, both novels

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deconstruct this official version, by opening up new interpretative possibilities which go beyond the established criteria and the collective stereotypes by means of language. Because literature's advantage is linked to or epitomized by style: a rich and mobile, multi-perspectivist function of the language, whereby the reader is offered a totally different type of communication with himself and the world, thanks to which himself, his life and the life of the collectivity are put in perspective through the specific mediation of literature[6].

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[6] David Roberts'conclusion, in the introduction to a collective volume, suggestively titled *Writing after 1989* (*Schreiben nach der Wende*), stresses the same idea: '[…] despite all kinds of media competition, literature remains the irreplaceable medium through which the imaginative confrontation with historical experiences and the process of society's critical self-interrogation take place' (2001: XVI), even if its influence remains limited to specific social groups.

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## TELEVISION AND REVOLUTION OR A NEW LITERARY CONUNDRUM IN RECENT GERMAN AND ROMANIAN PROSE NARRATIVES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my paper is to investigate the fictional representation of the revolutionary events of the year 1989 which led to the collapse of the communism in East Germany and Romania. I discuss two of the most acclaimed novels dealing with the 1989-Revolution in both countries, Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes Like Us*) and Mircea Cărtărescu's *Orbitor. Aripa dreaptă* (*Glaring 3*). My main interest concerns the way in which the novels depict and reflect on the role played by the media in the events which came to be known as the first televised revolutions of the world. Another important topic that I address in this context is of a more theoretical nature and examines the specific problems faced by writers dealing with contemporary historical events when mass media coverage has become literature's more successful competitor.

**Keywords**: *Mircea Cărtărescu*, *Thomas Brussig*, *contemporary novel*, *Revolution*, *post-Communism*.

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