ANTHONY GARDNER
Revolutionary *Mise-en-Scènes*: Democracy and the Television Screen

ABSTRACT

How are we to understand the nexus of art, televisual imagery and the politics of democracy in the early twenty-first century, at a time when "democracy" has supposedly reached an apotheosis in global politics, and documentary imagery on television screens has returned as a core trope within contemporary art? And what role is art sometimes made to play in promoting certain political discourses within problematic contexts? In 2004, these questions emerged as central to the inauguration of the Muzeul Naţional de Artă Contemporană (or the National Museum of Contemporary Art) in Bucharest, Romania – a museum whose location and date of inauguration were dictated by Romania's then-Social Democratic government, in the run-up to the country's important 2004 elections and its accession to the European Union. Invited to participate in the museum's inauguration, two Swiss-based artists, Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, devised an untitled installation that took "democracy" as its subject. A close examination of this work reveals a subtle critique of television's place, and installation's potential, within histories of postcommunist art and politics, as well as of the various presumptions made – of the artists, of television, and of encounters between "East" and "West" – in the name of "democracy".

Introduction

We could almost be forgiven for thinking that neither Daniel Boorstin nor Jean Baudrillard ever existed. For decades, their writings have cultivated a deep cynicism toward televisual images, and particularly toward news events presented through television, as highly staged, as designed for little purpose beyond their reproduction and dissemination along the global vectors of network television. For Boorstin, these televised news events were more accurately "pseudo-events"; for Baudrillard, they were, of course, "simulations".[1] More recent discourse has seemingly shed such cynicism, however. The medium of television no longer appears to hinge on manipulation and the diffusion of dubious information; instead, televisual dissemination has arguably regained some of its past values of trust and truth, most notably for its cultivation and documentation of democracy. In part, this is due to the geopolitical consequences of the terrorist attacks in America on September 11, 2001. Even in the era of YouTube, the domestic television screen has remained the dominant means of presenting images that document the so-called democratisation of Afghanistan and especially of Iraq: images of people tearing down monumental statues dedicated to authoritarian leaders, and of Western polities "victorious" over their adversaries; and images that are redolent with the euphoria of populaces rising against their oppressors in the name of socio-political change. For neo-conservative ideologues in particular, such televisual images are not only purported to be democratic in their content, but also in how they are disseminated, and to whom: to anyone with access to those global vectors of network television, and thus in effect to anyone at all.

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[1] Boorstin, 1961, pp. 9-44; Baudrillard, 1994b, pp. 1-42, 79-86.

Such a conception of television as doubly democratic – as a democratic medium best suited for disseminating democratic content – is curiously shared by a growing number of left-wing critics and activists as well. For the art historian David Joselit, as well as Vienna-based artist-activist Oliver Ressler, self-made or 'do-it-yourself' programs designed for televisual display are an ideal medium by which to counter television's usual corporate control with alternative information delivery.[2] Indeed the television screen, whether broadcasting public access channels or as increasingly located in cultural institutions like art galleries, has (re-)emerged as an important means of projecting images of anti-corporate activism. Ressler stands as one of the key proponents of this aesthetic, relying on the white cube of the gallery as the main space for presenting his single-channel programs about such events as the protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization conference in Seattle (the so-called Battle of Seattle). Used in this way, the television screen gives viewers an ostensibly immediate and intimate engagement with activist politics, showing viewers that such activism is 'what democracy looks like', as the protesters have frequently declared, and as Ressler titled one of his best-known works.[3] Furthermore, the televisual image of anti-corporate protest, by being self-made, is itself deemed a protest against television's normative corporatisation, and potentially provides a means to shift civic dialogue from the Habermasian public sphere to the more audience-friendly 'public screen'.[4]

For both the left and right wings of politics, then, television serves as a medium whose ostensibly democratic ontology would seem to fortify the democratic claims of its content. As such, television becomes a battleground between explicitly conflicting conceptions of politics. More implicitly, however, both sides of politics have also rejected the once-influential criticisms directed toward television by the likes of Baudrillard. Television is instead presumed to be a medium of good faith, and one that reinforces and naturalises its democratic content. But can those criticisms be so easily jettisoned? Can they instead help us to unpick a knotty condition in which "democracy" has become a highly contested signifier in terms of content – a contestation that thus warrants me bracketing the signifier in scare quotes – even as we are supposed to take ontologised presumptions of "democracy" at face value? The questions are particularly pressing these days, given that signifiers of "democracy" have proven pivotal to the legitimation of deeply problematic politics, especially on the international geopolitical stage. For some of the most important philosophers working today, from Giorgio Agamben to Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou to Mario Tronti, the dicey conflation of ontology and political ideology should not be reified in the manner outlined in the above paragraphs; rather, this conflation in the name of "democracy" should, these philosophers argue, be forcefully critiqued or even, according to Badiou's and Tronti's recent discourses, rejected altogether.[5]

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[2] Joselit, 2007, pp. 28-30; Ressler and Begg, 2007, http://www.ressler.at/content/view/112/lang,en_GB/, accessed June 12, 2007.

[3] Gržinić, 2002, http://www.ressler.at/content/view/38/lang,en_GB, accessed June 12, 2007; Schrager Lang and Tichi, 2006.

[4] DeLuca and Peeples, 2002, pp. 127-137.

[5] Agamben, 2000, pp. 109-110; Badiou and Sedofsky, 2006, p. 248; Tronti, 2009, pp. 97=106; Žižek, 1993, pp. 200-207.

Such critiques of the conditions and conflations of contemporary "democracy" are shared by the case study presented in this article: namely two Swiss-based artists, Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, who were invited to exhibit an installation in Romania during the lead-up to the country's Presidential elections in 2004, and who turned to the television screen to critique various presumptions made – of them, of television, and of encounters between East and West – in the name of "democracy". As we will see, the crux of Büchel and Motti's work lay not simply in its critiques of Romanian socio-political contexts in 2004 (though these were undoubtedly important), but in the ways that their work allows us to extend those critiques from Romania out to the more globalised frames in which discourses and politics of "democracy" have been practised in recent years. In particular, the artists' work allows us to do two key things: first, to return to Baudrillard, and particularly to his own critique of the infamous role that television played in the 1989 Romanian revolutions – what he labelled a 'revolutionary *mise-en-scène*'[6] – so as to untangle the knots between ontology and ideology, television and "democracy" that were played out more than a decade later; and second, to re-evaluate the various forms of representation and misrecognition that arguably subtend the "democratic" encounters between peoples and polities that, though once strictly transatlantic, are actually much more global in effect.

Of Art and the Parliament

On October 29, 2004, Romania's National Museum of Contemporary Art (or MNAC, as it is popularly called) opened in Wing E4 of Bucharest's Palace of the Parliament. And while the champagne flowed freely on this auspicious occasion, so too did criticism of MNAC, its administrators, and the incumbent Romanian government for what was perceived to be the explicit exploitation of contemporary art for politically expedient purposes. Two reasons stood out. The first related to MNAC's purpose as a form of mourning within the Palace, a building more infamously known for the legacy of dictatorial oppression and violence that it signifies as the House of the People (Fig.1.) Even during its construction in the 1980s, the building served as a monument to the former Communist leader Nicolae Ceauşescu, and his desires to transform Bucharest into his own nightmarish fantasyland regardless of the human or financial costs involved.[7] MNAC's location in the Palace was thus intended by its directors to evacuate the building of its historical symbolism, and to exorcise its ghosts by putting it to a new use.[8] Yet numerous Romanian artists, including Dan and Lia Perjovschi and Vlad Nanca, rejected that idea: 'there is nothing you can do to this building to make it all right', Nanca declared.[9] MNAC, it seemed, would merely redecorate rather than eradicate the Palace's totalitarian past, remobilising its affectivity of trauma into a tourist attraction legitimised by culture.

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[6] Baudrillard, 1994c, pp. 54-61.
[7] Salecl, 1998, pp. 79-103; Costinaş, 2004, http://www.idea.ro/revista/index.php?nv=1&go=2&mg=47&ch=29&ar=48, accessed February 15, 2007.
[8] Balaci and Ionescu, 2004, http://www.mnac.ro/interview.htm, accessed February 16, 2005.
[9] As quoted in Paul, 2004, p. G9.

The second reason related to the physical and possibly philosophical proximity between MNAC and the then Social Democratic government of President Ion Iliescu and Prime Minister, and would-be President, Adrian Năstase. This concern lay in the fact that it was the government that (in effect, unilaterally) determined MNAC's location and when it would officially open: in the same building as the current seat of government, and one month before Romania's 2004 Presidential elections for which Năstase was a candidate.

Fig. 1: Palatul Parlamentului, Bucharest, Romania (Photograph by the author.)

On one level, MNAC thereby risked submitting art to political governance in a variation of Romania's recent histories of socialist realism and overwhelming control of culture by state bureaucracy. On another level, the government's interest in MNAC emphasised the good faith of its political ambitions and its support of democracy both formally and culturally, and regardless of the criticisms by Romania's leading cultural figures about the government's actions. Indeed, MNAC's apparent substantiation of the government's "good faith" was desperately needed, for it deflected attention from the many controversies then befalling Iliescu and Năstase (and which threatened to derail Romania's inclusion into the European Union), including repeated allegations of corrupt transactions between government and corporations, and the ongoing persecution of Romania's minority groups, such as the Roma who had complained to the European

Court of Human Rights in 2000 about ongoing police brutality.[10] As former MNAC curator Mihnea Mircan has confided, the museum's main purpose was 'to do a democratic facelift on the House of the People':[11] not just architecturally, but also in terms of the government's appearance; and not primarily for domestic interests either, but for international audiences seeking confirmation, however platitudinous, of Romanian investments in "democracy".

MNAC's international legitimation through "democracy" was manifest on a more micro-level as well, in terms of whom to select as the museum's board members and the curators of its inaugural exhibitions. Despite being a *national* museum, no Romanians were invited to the board; it instead comprised only Western Europeans renowned for their advocacy of contemporary art's bases in democracy. Key figures included curators René Block and Ami Barak, the editor of the French magazine *Art Press*, Catherine Millet, and another Paris-based critic Nicolas Bourriaud, whose theories of 'relational aesthetics' identified him as the leading aesthetician of democracy in Western art circles, and who played a pivotal role at MNAC as both board member and one of its inaugural curators. Such purposeful invitations extended to the inaugural artists as well, a list that included Wang Jian Wei and Yang Fudong, two Chinese artists renowned for their distrust of communism, and whose works were shown in a touring exhibition from Paris called *Caméra*; and also Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, whom Mircan selected to perform a site-specific critique of the building and its histories, so as to endorse its new 'polemic function'.[12] But though Büchel and Motti took MNAC's contexts of "democracy" as the content of their untitled work, this did not mean that they therefore approved of or legitimised the 'democratic facelift' of either the building or the Romanian government. Instead, they presented a calculated critique of those intents, as well as of the expectation that the artists would serve as symbols of Western approbation of MNAC and its minders.

As Mircan has claimed, Büchel and Motti's installation appeared at first glance to be representative of 'the perplexed buzz of a rudimentary, nascent democracy' (figure 2).[13] Two flags – one for Romania, the other for the European Union – stood alongside makeshift tables scattered throughout the installation. Atop the tables sat posters, pamphlets, and cheap television monitors, each one presenting policy speeches made by the candidates for the following month's Presidential election (and whom the artists had interviewed in the week before MNAC opened). But while the installation initially seemed supportive of MNAC's political appeals, it was a deceptive first glance for a number of reasons. The artists hid the installation deep within MNAC's basement, a location known to few visitors beyond its Ceauşescu-era myths (in the 1980s, it was presumed to be *inter alia* a hidden treasury, a torture chamber or the entrance to a tunnel to Moscow should the Ceauşescus need to flee). Those visitors who did know the basement's location then had to negotiate an obstacle course of sorts, for it was accessible

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[10] See, for example, BBC News Online, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4691704.stm, accessed May 12, 2007; and Human Rights Watch, 2001, pp. 308-309.
[11] Mircan, 2007.
[12] Mircan, 2007.
[13] Mircan, 2005.

in only two ways: either by rickety ladders that threatened to collapse under their users' weight; or by a freight elevator operated, according to one shell-shocked French critic, by 'an ill-tempered and unwilling operator who abandoned his passengers down below'.[14] And when those knowledgeable people willing to risk the descent finally accessed the work, they did not find the careful laying-out of separate policies as expected of informed decision-making at elections. Instead, each television's volume was set at its loudest, creating within the echoic bunker a cacophony of speech, none of which was subtitled or easy to discern aurally.

Fig. 2: Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, Untitled installation for the exhibition series *Under Destruction*, 2004. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable, exhibited at Muzeul Naţional de Artă Contemporană, Bucharest, Romania (Image courtesy of the artists and Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Zürich. Photograph: Christoph Büchel.)

The difficulties and disruptions associated with locating the installation were clearly crucial to the artists' attempts to destabilise, or even to withdraw from, MNAC's rhetorically 'democratic facelift'. Yet, so too was their specific use of television as a medium through which to present that destabilisation. By 2004, television had not only become a purportedly "democratic" medium, as I have already outlined; the artists' nexus of television and "democracy" at MNAC also instantly recalled the established and deeply problematic history of that nexus and its specific associations with Romania. In

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[14] Leydier, 2005, p. 73.

order to tease out the important implications of Büchel and Motti's critical intervention and the use of television in their installation, then, we need to chart briefly the significance of that recent history in Romania and television's part within it.

Romanian "Democracy" on the Television Screen

Nearly two decades after the events, it would seem that Romania's December 1989 revolutions are still largely perceived – at least in cultural circles – as little more than media phenomena. In the important Romanian journal *IDEA*, critics Ovidiu Tichindeleanu and Konrad Petrovszky called television 'a symbol-object of the transition' from communism to neoliberal "democracy" during the 1990s, a medium whose 'unquestioned credibility… as the main means of transmitting information' stemmed from the central role it played in the world-wide dissemination of images of the revolutions, and the consequent 'legitim[ation of] the authority and symbolic capital' of Romania's political aspirations.[15] The critics' observations had a renewed pertinence given the imagery of the post-9/11 interventions in Iraq, which to an extent uncannily echoed images televised over a decade earlier. These included the extraordinary images of Ceauşescu delivering his final oration down to swarms of people in Bucharest's Piaţa Palatului on December 21, 1989, of his faltering as screams, chants and dissent from the midst of the crowd interrupt his monologue, and of the interruption of that dissent in turn as state television cut its live national transmission momentarily. Subsequent images showed protesters being beaten, shot and crushed by tanks in public squares across Romania, as well as dissidents in control of the state television station as they transformed it from a Ceauşescu soapbox to pro-democracy headquarters. Or, most notoriously of all, the images revealing the hasty trial and execution of Ceauşescu and his wife, Elena, on December 25, 1989, in the town of Târgovişte, three days after their flight from Bucharest.[16]

In apparent contrast with Iraq, however, Romania's 'media phenomenon' emblematised cultural critics' cynicism toward the television-democracy nexus. That cynicism was filtered through a transatlantic dialectic between East and West, the Cold War undertones of which have seemingly still not dissipated. On one level, according to recent analyses by Margaret Morse and Andaluna Borcila, Romanians used television as a strategic means for local and particularly international audiences to recognise and legitimise the revolutionaries' actions.[17] Both Morse and Borcila contend, though, that this international imprimatur hinged on distortion, for it was a 'misrecogni[tion by Eastern Europeans of] the West's spectral/televisual images as the reality of the West'.[18] In other words, the East mistook television as an index of, and a tool for approbation from, the West and its misrecognised, misplaced values. A second and converse argument appears in the work of Jean Baudrillard and Roxana Marcoci, both of whom have suggested that Western

[15] Tichindeleanu and Petrovszky, 2005, http://www.idea.ro/revista/index.php?nv=1&go=2&mg=55&ch=170&ar=659, accessed February 14, 2007.
[16] Siani-Davies, 2005, pp. 82-143; Kifner, 1989, p. A1; Mollison, 1998, pp. 131-132.
[17] Morse, 1998, pp. 48-61; Borcila, 2004, pp. 44-50.
[18] Borcila, 2004, p. 48.

views of the revolutions were equally distorted.[19] For these two writers, the West largely presumed that the revolutions' televisual mediation automatically equated with democracy and freedom, to the extent that, in Baudrillard's words:

> Rumanians [*sic*] have fooled us and, willingly or not, taught us a good lesson. They taught us a lesson about freedom, not by reaching it but by trapping us in a false process of political liberation indexed in fact to our Western demand that they be free. With their pretended revolution they have gently performed what we were expecting from them, using the mirror trick of conformity, which blinds its victims – and we were blinded.[20]

The surprising lack of scholarly critique of these dialectical arguments – indeed, their persistence into the twenty-first century – should not prevent us from recognising and criticising their reductive approach to Romania's revolutions. The first viewpoint delimits the revolutions' blood-letting to media spectacles designed primarily for Western audiences. This position, reiterated as recently as 2005 by Tichindeleanu and Petrovszky, almost wilfully ignores the actuality of the hundreds of Romanian lives lost in the name of socio-political change, lives which are commemorated in the cemeteries and innumerable monuments throughout Romania – and even in the form of protesters' graves located in the city centre of Braşov in lieu of traditional monuments. The second view, and especially that of Baudrillard, narcissistically identifies Western audiences as the real victims of the bloodshed, a supposed lesson about blindness that is itself exceptionally myopic. And both views reduce the agency of protesters and distant audiences alike to the seemingly pacifying and unshakeable thrall of television, as though criticality were impossible when faced with the glow of the screen.

But while we can criticise certain limitations in this dialectical reasoning, I do not believe that we should ignore it altogether. What it reveals is that intercultural encounters *via* televisual imagery, and even television as a medium, are potentially (perhaps invariably) founded on misrecognition and distortion. As media theorist McKenzie Wark alerted us soon after European communism's collapse, television can have multiple distorting effects. It may give viewers access to distant events, but it can thereby conflate "access" with immediacy, transparency and openness, rather than reveal how "access" is packaged for local news services. It can domesticate distant suffering, transforming that suffering into images that flash across home television screens, suggesting that representation equates with knowledge and that sympathy equates with experience. Television's creation of 'perception at a distance' – what Wark called 'telesthesia' – may give the feeling of global connections and encounters, but in reality often constrains within readymade narratives, presumptions and stereotypes those who are geographically distant, and thus of course oneself.[21] Just as importantly, though, we should not limit the effects of misrecognition solely to television's presumably uncritical viewers. As the previous paragraphs suggest, misrecognition can equally affect those who rely on television to analyse world events, for while the dialectical analysis of Romania's

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[19] Baudrillard, 1993, pp. 61-71; Marcoci, 1995, pp. 15-23.
[20] Baudrillard, 1993, 67-68.
[21] Wark, 1994, pp. vii, 43-44.

revolutions in part identifies this misrecognition explicitly,[22] its reductive conflation of 'media and history, real and fake', as Marcoci argues – based as it is on presumptions emanating from the television screen – is itself symptomatic of the telesthesic misrepresentations it claims to critique.[23]

Nonetheless, if misrecognition and distortion can be deeply problematic effects, they can also be productively remobilised, transforming the presumptions that stem from distant perceptions and pushing them toward new ends. Indeed, it was precisely this remobilisation that underpinned Büchel and Motti's critique of the predicament they faced at MNAC. Although not necessarily derived from television *per se*, the museum's Romanian administrators still clearly relied on distant perceptions to lock the Swiss-based artists into stereotypical and essentialist representations: most notably as presumed representatives of "the West", whose site-specific engagement in Bucharest would "therefore" authorise MNAC's 'democratic facelift' on aesthetic, cultural and political levels. Such presumed approbations, we might recall, were the chief motivations for inviting particular, and particularly Western European, curators and administrators – Bourriaud, Millet, Barak and others – to join MNAC's board, and for bringing specific artists to Bucharest with certain politico-aesthetic purposes in mind. We might further recall, too, that the reduction of such art-world figures to ciphers of "democracy", as an *image* of "democracy", sought international legitimacy not just for Romania's new museum, but also for its old and increasingly controversial government in the lead up to local elections and especially EU accession. The tethering of contemporary art to "democracy" may well have given the former a new political use-value, but in the process transformed it – and, arguably, democracy as well – into an excuse-value, into an expedient obfuscation of the government's actually problematic politics and actions.

Rather than ignore such expedient and telesthesic distortions, though, Büchel and Motti staged a highly reflexive critique of them, over-identifying with MNAC's rhetoric of "democracy" so as to withdraw from its underlying presumptions. Indeed, if the artists were expected to present an image of "democracy" in Bucharest, then they used the 'mirror trick of conformity', in Baudrillard's words, to make those expectations senseless. This they did by returning to the historically blinding nexus of television and "democracy" in Romania to critique that "democratic" image, and by turning the televisions' volumes to their highest levels to create a near-deafening cacophony, thereby making the electoral candidates' policies extremely difficult to discern and transforming the speeches into little more than noise and the mouthing of empty words. Similarly, if "democracy" and television signified access, as Wark claimed, then Büchel and Motti made access to their televisual installation something visitors had to fight for. They buried the installation in MNAC's basement, with few directions signalling its location and with eventual access to the basement provided only by completing a relatively treacherous obstacle course through the guts of the Palace. If the government's top-down demands on MNAC to provide a "democratic" makeover had, in turn, enforced weighty expectations of MNAC's inaugural artists, then it was a weight that had (at least metaphorically) resulted in Büchel and Motti's burial of "democracy" beneath the

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[22] Borcila, 2004, p. 48.
[23] Marcoci, 1995, p. 20.

museum's main displays, and which viewers (quite literally) needed to move from the top down to encounter.

Consequently, if MNAC was intended to give the much-needed appearance of Romanian 'democracy' to local and international audiences, then Büchel and Motti responded *in extremis* to those intentions. They conformed too much to the various distortions produced through telesthesia – most particularly, to certain Romanian cultural and political administrators' expedient appeals to "democracy", and to the artists' calculated invitation to Bucharest to produce "democratic" art. But that over-identification produced its own distortions, what we might even call a kind of disruptive feedback produced when intention and its reception or, to cite Baudrillard again, 'an event and its dissemination [come] too close together and thus interfere[e] disastrously'.[24] While the Presidential candidates' televisual screaming match transformed political intent into an overt form of feedback noise, its unhinging of "democracy" equally distorted and displaced the intention that the artists would serve as symbols of Western approbation at MNAC. To subsume either the artists or their work to the museum's expedient purpose was thus to misrecognise their identities and arguably their political intents. In other words, the artists' branding with a presumed ontology by virtue of their work-bases – bases perceived through their distance from Bucharest – was fed back through its telesthesic distortion so as to critique its misrepresentations.

It was a distortion made all the more explicit and self-reflexive by its expression through television. On the one hand, Büchel and Motti's distorted representations of politics and identities clearly mirrored those arguably produced by televisual 'perception at a distance', and which were most notably argued about the birth of Romanian "democracy" fifteen years before its supposed facelift by MNAC. The artists' specific turn to television was thus knowingly site-specific and historically informed, while highlighting the ongoing centrality of telesthesia to more contemporary international relations. On the other hand, that return to television's site-specific history, using self-made programs about "democracy" designed for televisual display, produced a further distortion and displacement. It displaced the growing number of contemporary claims that, as we saw in the introduction to this text, perceived television as an inherently and ontologically "democratic" medium. Büchel and Motti thus used television against itself, against its presumed contemporary ontology, so as to critique ontological presumptions in general – whether of the artists, of their practices, or of the use-value (and increasing excuse-value) of the name of "democracy" in the early twenty-first century. Television was therefore not a simple or expedient means for Büchel and Motti to attain their political ends. Its contemporary and historical connotations instead played pivotal roles in the artists' attempts at de-ontologisation, and their use of over-identification and the feedback it produces to critique the nexus of television and "democracy", telesthesia and identity to which Romania has been – and still is – attached.

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[24] Baudrillard, 1994a, p. 6.

Ontology, Ideology, 'Democracy'

It would be wrong to identify Büchel and Motti's deconstruction of television's supposed ontology as an entirely new phenomenon. Rather, such deconstructive urges appear to run in cycles, albeit with different ontological discourses in mind. Twenty or even ten years ago, that presumed ontology was television's claims to live transmission, to the impression that its information relays were immediate, unmediated and thus worthy of our investment of trust in the accuracy and innocence of the images it presented. As the media historian Jane Feuer claimed in 1983, and as Jacques Derrida reiterated over a decade later, such rhetoric actually masked television's very different realities. Not only had live transmission become increasingly rare by the early 1980s, but that sense of "liveness" was still selectively packaged and highly mediated even when it did take place.[25] Rhetorical claims to television's essential "liveness" thus strategically confused ontology with ideology, exploiting the fallacy of the former to obfuscate the reality of the latter. Büchel and Motti's own attempts to de-ontologise television suggest that similarly strategic confusions are at play today. But rather than produce 'a live effect [or] an allegation of live', as Derrida conjectured,[26] these contemporary confusions instead rely on more overtly political and resourceful ideology: of what we might call a "democracy" effect, or an allegation of "democracy". This was certainly the case at MNAC in 2004, the inauguration of which was intended by the (now former) Romanian government to give international observers the impression that local "democracy" was in good hands and in good health despite the claims of corruption and brutality made against it. As we have seen in this essay, Büchel and Motti's over-identification with MNAC's purpose was not a confirmation of this image of "democracy", but rather a reflexive critique of it, and especially of how the "democracy" effect can produce a number of highly problematic flow-on effects as well. On the one hand, it can revivify telesthesic presumptions stemming from the Cold War and especially its immediate aftermath – presumptions about what the distant yet dominant "West" expects of Romanian society, and of how those presumptions can be introjected or opportunistically refashioned by Romanian administrators, or presumptions about what artists from distant locations and different cultures will bring (both politically and aesthetically) to a local context. On the other hand, the perceived need to endorse and enforce those presumptions for the sake of international relations can induce top-down expectations as well, onto museum directors and curators in terms of whom to select to their institution and why, or even onto artists and the kinds of work they are expected to produce.

Little would appear to have changed, then, in the years since post-communism's infancy. As McKenzie Wark advocated more than a decade ago, and as Büchel and Motti's work also suggests, we still need to 'sustain a critique of *both* Eastern social reality *and* Western media in this encounter [between different localities]'.[27] Television remains central to the presumptions and differential power relations at play within telesthesia, and top-down impositions of "democracy" still affect relations between people and polities

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[25] Feuer, 1983, p. 14; Derrida and Stiegler, 2002, pp. 38-40.

[26] Derrida in Derrida and Stiegler, 2002, p. 40.

[27] Wark, 1994, p. 62.

across the old East-West divisions of the Cold War. However, we should not blind ourselves to the reality that those impositions have largely shifted further east of countries like Romania in recent years. Nor should we ignore the fact that as "democracy" once again flashes regularly across our television screens today, it is rarely accompanied by the criticisms of writers like Baudrillard as it was in the early 1990s. This is not to say that such criticisms are no longer relevant; in fact, they may now be more relevant than ever. Television and telesthesia, and the blindness they create toward ourselves and others, cannot be divorced from the inviolable and sanctified politics of contemporary "democracy", a politics that can be imposed upon others with seemingly limited critique, and a politics which is selectively used and abused at will by governments to excuse their problematic (or even illegal) actions. The claims made of television as ontologically "democratic", even by such left-wing critics as David Joselit or Oliver Ressler, do little to counter that nexus of television and "democracy", and may actually reinforce its attendant misrepresentations. Büchel and Motti's alternative approach, their de-ontologisation of televisual "democracy", should thus not be localised to contemporary Romanian contexts. The artists' simultaneous over-identification with, and dis-identification from, "democracy" provide much broader and more globally-relevant reminders: reminders that the rhetoric of presumed "democratic" ontologies may be little more than ideology; reminders of how post-communist era critiques by Baudrillard and others, if treated self-reflexively, can still inform contemporary political and screen studies; and consequently reminders of the continuum between the predicaments of post-communist histories and of contemporary neo-imperialism. We could even argue that it is precisely these reminders – and not Baudrillardian 'blindness' *per se* – that provide the real lessons to be learnt after 1989. Our vigilance about the multiple misrecognitions and distortions of telesthesia should not stop at the borders and the histories of post-communist Europe, but continue as an ever-present counter to the new encounters of "the global" and their echoes of the past, and especially to contemporary international relations (and invasions) and their own revolutionary *mise-en-scènes* of "democracy" framed by the television screen.

Dr Anthony Gardner is the 2010-2011 Research Forum / Andrew Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London. He received his PhD from the University of New South Wales in 2009 and will be an ARC Research Fellow through the University of Melbourne from 2011 to 2014. His writing has most recently appeared in the journals "Third Text", "The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art" and "Postcolonial Studies".

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