

# MARTOR



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## The Astra Film Sibiu Experiment (1991-1996)

**Dumitru Budrală**

*Astra Film, Sibiu*

I am going to present you a personal experience that reveals the necessity of Astra Film Studio in a post-totalitarian Romania. I am to deal with technical aspects only, as my paper is meant to be a brief history of – should I dare say? – the beginning of Visual Anthropology to Sibiu and, maybe, to Romania.

A wind of change came over Romania in 1991, which made the re-construction of ASTRA Museum in Sibiu possible, a new institution to match the new era that was just beginning.

The structure of the museum comprised an Audiovisual Department, a real premiere for a country just escaping totalitarianism. Formerly, the museum had only three major directions to focus on: to collect, to preserve and to display its collections. Exhibitions were the only means of communication with the public, while other MEDIA were regarded as utopias or at least incompatible with a museum.

Dr. Corneliu Bucur, director of the ASTRA Museum, was working hard to develop a dynamic institution (fairs of the artisans, conferences, traditional wood-carving symposia, summer camps, folk festivals etc.). Therefore, he created a new department, designed to take over the visual dimension of the museum activities (photography and film), the Audiovisual Department.

Due to my 10 years experience in ethnographic research and film-making, I was appointed head of the new department. The equipment consisted of a home VHS videocamera and a video-recorder. The museum was a new institution, facing huge difficulties, therefore a suitable location for the new department was out of question. But I was free to make plans, that seemed rather unrealistic at the time:

- a proper location,
- equipment,
- a car for field research,
- participations at international events,
- awards,
- even a film festival in Sibiu.

None of these dreams were compatible with the classical structure of the Romanian museum, focused exclusively on the preservation and display of museum objects.

Another obstacle was the Ministry of Culture itself. The staff working at the Ministry of Culture in that time were in a constant opposition every step of the way. During the following years, the staff changed several times, but the attitude remained the same.

My only chance to achieve our goals were Money. But the Ministry of Culture budget was much too limited to afford the huge costs of film-making. This is how a new battle started, a per-

manent and invisible battle for sponsorships. Today, after 6 years, everything ASTRA FILM owns comes 80% from sponsorship while only 20% has been supported by the state budget.

The first of the new department was formed in 1992. Together with Simona Bealcovschi and with the help of Vasile Bebeselea, we edited the first 4 promotional films about the museum. It was then when the idea of a film studio came into our minds, not only for the production of documentaries, but also as an opportunity for field research and archive.

We called it ASTRA FILM.

At this point, we needed a new development programme for the ASTRA FILM Studio and in drawing it up, we had to consider the very small team who was expected to achieve the goals. We had to do everything: from research to field work, from shooting to editing, with low budgets or no budget at all.

We identified our mains goals:

1) Record and preservation of the traditional cultural phenomena into a Visual Data Base (which we started on VHS, then on S-VHS and BETA, aiming to transfer the information on CD and CD-ROM in the future.) It was important to start the programme as soon as possible, as traditional life-style was beginning to die out with the start of the transition in Romania. All these data could be included into a Visual Encyclopaedia.

2) Production of documentaries

3) Organisation of a Film Festival in Sibiu

4) Organisation of a National Centre of Visual Anthropology

While in 1992 in Romania, a film studio in a museum was considered to be strange and useless, museums in Western Europe and United

States already had years of experience in this respect.

Moreover, the huge field of image and sound (photography was invented in 1822, sound recording in 1890 and cinematography in 1896)

was regarded by the Western museums not only as a new technology, but also as a new source of museum collections.

These were the reasons why we needed a strategy of development for a complex department, with three important developing directions: archive, film-making and audio-visual research..

With a low budget, lack of information and a small team, this goal was a mere utopia.

And yet...

### The Astra film Studio development strategy

#### Location

There were 3 main stages of development:

1. at first, we had no location at all

2. in the second stage, my home became the location of the Studio. I remember the arguments I had with my neighbours, who wouldn't tolerate the noise, when we were editing at the most unusual hours, mostly during the night

3. the third stage lasted from 1994 until September 1996. We finally had a location, but it consisted of 2 small rooms, totally inappropriate for a film studio.

Finally, in September 1996, we moved to our new location, in the attics of a medieval building. The place has been restored according to a modern concept and includes:

- conference hall
- videolibrary
- offices for researchers



ASTRA FILM Videolibrary

- off-line editing room
- on-line editing room
- audio lab

The present location, both modern and functional, qualifies the ASTRA FILM Studio as a possible visual anthropology centre for the next century.

#### Professional equipment

In 1991, we only had a VHS C videocamera, a videorecorder and a colour TV set. I completed the existing equipment with my private TV set and videorecorder. This is how we edited the first 4 promotional films about the museum (if we can call them films).

In 1993, the Museum bought a S-VHS videocamera, a transcoder, a Samsung in 1994, we obtained a sponsorship and were able to buy an editor and a Sony TV set. A S-VHS editing line was finally complete. Sponsorship enabled us to buy also an audio line.

Finally, in 1995 we obtained money (sponsorship again) for a BETA camera, a tripod and a microphone. The first stage of ASTRA FILM development from the point of view of the equipment was no longer a dream, it was a success.

#### The Astra Film Videolibrary

##### *Visual Data Base*

We had the idea of a visual data base from the very beginning, but it took 6 years to achieve it. During these 6 years, the archive has been constantly growing up to 500 documentaries we could offer to students and to the audience in Sibiu.

The new location of the Studio offered new opportunities for our archive. The schools in Sibiu and the University can use documentaries as props for their classes.

We have built up a collection on the same principle as the famous European collections (the film collections in France, initiated as early as 1925).

The archive comprises over 1000 hours

footage on VHS and BETA:

- cultural events in the museum
- contemporary aspects of Romanian traditional society
- rituals of the solstices
- sheep-breeding: economy, social institutions, rituals, every-day life etc.

##### *The documentaries*

There were some important stages in the development of the archive of documentaries:

- in 1991, we brought from France 24 documentaries. Later, they were bought by the Museum

- the 3 editions of the Film Festival brought new entries

- donations from the British Council, from anthropologists (Michael Stewart, Curt Madison, Jeremy Warren), donations from other museums and in a very small percent, purchase

- exchanges with other institutions

Most of the films (over 500) have been acquired without any financial effort from the part of the Museum.

##### *Audio Data Base*

The audio archive consists of 100 magnetic tapes and 50 audio tapes containing recordings during fieldwork as well as 30 CDs with traditional music.

##### *Literature*

We needed films, but we also needed books very badly. The information we had access to was both old and insufficient. We focused our efforts to put up a small visual anthropology library, with articles and courses (London School of Economics, Granada Centre Manchester, Oxford University, ULB Brussels, IWF Gottingen, NAFA British Council) and books of anthropology (a donation for the ASTRA Museum from schools and universities in the US).

We have also developed a programme for the translation of the most important works, in collaboration with the University in Sibiu. This is going to

be a long-term programme, but some of the important titles have been or are being translated.

#### Production of films

We have also produced a number of films *in* and *about* the Astra Museum, as well as visual anthropology research films. Some of them were praised at national and international festivals and conferences, helping us to improve our contacts abroad. Here are some of the Astra Film Studio productions:

##### *Lovage*

1994, 13 min.

Simona Bealcovschi, Dumitru Budrală

Forty days after Easter, on Ascension Day, the community of a transylvanian village performs a ritual that preserves its Pagan character even after the triumph of Christianity.

The Cross and the plant called lovage are at the core of the celebration. Lovage is a magical plant, with therapeutic and protective virtues. This celebration is part of the fertility rites and rituals of initiation.

##### *Day of the Water*

1995, 18 min.

Dumitru Budrală

Winter ritual in South Transylvania. The entire community takes part in the celebration. The main characters are the young unmarried men of the community. A juxtaposition of a Christian holiday over elements of ancient rites of fertility, purification and celebration of water as a sacred element.

##### *Transylvanian Winter*

BETA SP, 1996, 35 min.

Dumitru Budrală

The film was shot in the Carpathian Pastoral communities of Southern Transylvania. The Winter Rituals take place between December 20th and January 7th. At every New Year, at every symbolic renewal of the annual cycle, people celebrate. On occasions like this, ancient Greeks and Romans used to sacrifice animals, organise

games and banquets and give each other gifts. The rituals and the ancient songs of the Carpathian communities seem to us to show a certain resemblance with those of the ancient world.

#### The Film Festival in Sibiu

The ASTRA FILM Studio, Department of Visual Anthropology of the ASTRA Museum, initiated and organised 3 editions of the Film Festival:

1993, 1st Edition (national festival, participants from abroad)

1994, 2nd Edition (international festival of anthropological film, participants from 14 countries)

1996, 3rd Edition (international festival of anthropological film, participants from 23 countries)

The 1st edition brought together Romanian ethnologists and film-makers and some important names of the European ethnology and anthropology, as jury members or observers. This first foreign participation was very important for the development of the festival.

At the 2nd edition, participants came from England, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, USA and Romania. The jury was international: Florian Potra (Romania, President of the Jury), Frode Storaas (Norway), Ulrich Roters (Germany), Jean-Luc Lioult (France), Cristina Nichitus (Romania) and Corneliu Bucur (Romania). The prizes of the Festival were given by the Delegation of the European Commission (10.000 ECU) and the County Council of Sibiu (5.000.000 lei). The budget of the Festival was supported by the Ministry of Culture (23.000.000 lei), The County Council of Sibiu (15.000.000 lei) and Sometra SA (10.000.000 lei). The organisers were Dumitru Budrală and Simona Bealcovschi.

The 3rd edition marked a new stage in the development of the Festival, both in participation and as a concept of organisation. Thus, this edition was the first festival-Conference of anthropology in Romania: this time, we had participants from 23 countries.

The jury was international: Paul Henley (England, President of the Jury), Colette Piault (France), Asen Balicki (Canada), Curt Madison (USA), Corneliu Bucur (Romania). The prizes were given by the Delegation of the European Commission (3.000 ECU), The British Council (2.000 £), The Soros Foundation (2.000 \$), The Theatre „Radu Stanca“ from Sibiu (5.000.000 lei), The Deventer-Roemenie Foundation (1.000 Guildens) and the Foundation for Visual Anthropology (1.200.000 lei).

The budget of the Festival was supported by the Ministry of Culture (40.000.000 lei) and by International Broadcast TV, Sometra SA and the Foundation for Visual Anthropology Sibiu. Organisers of the Festival: Dumitru Budrala and Simona Bealcovschi.

*Why a Festival of anthropological film in Sibiu?*

For a new visual anthropology department, the contact with anthropologists from important centres is vital. On the other hand, interesting results are bound to come out when Western and eastern cultures meet. The Sibiu Festival made such a meeting possible.

*Why have we offered prizes at the Film festival in Sibiu?*

Sibiu is not on the same position with the famous Western cities. Sibiu is a rather small town in the middle of Romania, a former communist country with no tradition in visual anthropology. Furthermore, the country did not have the best and most realistic image abroad during all these years. Therefore, many anthropologists hesitated when they were invited to come to the Festival. We sent hundreds of invitations to anthropology centres, institutes and foundations and I have to stress that we got answers only from those who already knew us.

Personal contacts played a major role. We got substantial help from anthropologists Michael Stewart, Asen Balicki, Curt Madison, Colette Piault and others.

And all the time I knew that only a perfect organisation, a good selection of the films, a jury

with big names in visual anthropology, discussions between participants, translations, publications and money prizes could make the Festival in Sibiu an interesting event for anthropologists and documentarists world-wide. It is interesting to say that many Romanian film-makers have started to prepare their films for the 1998 edition right after the 1996 edition was over.

Documentarists from Eastern Europe were offered the opportunity to meet important people, whose names they only knew from the few books available in Eastern Europe in this field.

## Conclusions

ASTRA FILM – *vanity or necessity?*

A Studio of visual anthropology needs a lot of money and some people might say that taking into account the dramatic situation of the Romanian economy, it is only a vanity.

But still...

– 80% of the equipment was bought with money coming from sponsors

– the videolibrary now includes the Visual Data Base, the archive of documentaries, the audio archive and the library of visual anthropology

– the documentaries produced by ASTRA FILM can bring their contribution to an European Encyclopaedia of visual anthropology

– we have contacts with anthropologists world-wide and have participated to many important events

– our present location is modern and functional

and let us not forget

– the organisation of the Film Festival in Sibiu.

All these programmes make up the ASTRA FILM Experiment.

Can this experiment be regarded as the beginning of visual anthropology in Romania?

We will find the answer to this question in the future.

1/3 Dec. 1995

