MARTOR

Title: *"Now Is the Time to Include the Films Produced by the Alexandru Sahia Documentary Studio in Our Conversations About the Communist Past." An Interview with Adina Brădeanu*

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How to cite this article:
Mareș, Ionuț. 2019. "'Now Is the Time to Include the Films Produced by the Alexandru Sahia Documentary Studio in Our Conversations About the Communist Past.' An Interview with Adina Brădeanu." *Martor* 24: 194-202.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Național al Ţăranului Român* (National Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/

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Martor is indexed by:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of Martor has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).

V. Fieldnotes and Dialogues

During the socialist period, the Alexandru Sahia Film Studio was one of the core institutions involved in creating cultural material. While its products represented a minor genre—small-scale documentaries, reportages and journal-type films, all concentrating on documenting realities of the socialist era and being shown in cinemas before the main feature—they enjoyed a guaranteed position of their own. The institution which for almost four decades had been synonymous with Romanian domestic documentary film was privatised shortly after the fall of the socialist regime in December 1989. Becoming an autonomous authority in 1991 and then a commercial company in 1996, the studio lost its connection with the film distribution franchise network and, like so many other such entities, went bankrupt. In the middle of the decade 2000-2010 the Sahia archive of documentary material was placed in the National Film Archive. Relatively little interest was shown in it by any researcher until Adina Brădeanu undertook to curate it in the course of her doctoral studies; her research took concrete form in a series of five DVDs, each with its own theme, released by One World Romania. The deliberate aim of these was to introduce the Sahia films into cultural debate as an aid to decoding the constraints and practices of documentary film-making in relation to the social history of the period in which they appeared. We took the decision to allocate space in this issue of *Martor* to a long interview that Adina Brădeanu recently gave to the film critic Ionuț Mareș, our aim being to bring the case of Sahia into the wider discussion about processes characteristic of the post-socialist period in regard to the use of archives.

(Bogdan Iancu)

Adina Brădeanu has been working on the subject of documentary cinema since 1994, initially as a researcher at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest and later as a doctoral student (her thesis was on the professional culture of the Bucharest-based "Alexandru Sahia" studio) and visiting lecturer in the Contemporary Media Practice department at the University of Westminster (London). She subsequently worked as a Web and Project Consultant at DocWest, the Centre for Production and Research of Documentary Film at the University of Westminster. She is currently Subject Consultant for the Romanian collection of the Bodleian Library, Oxford and Research Associate for a project based at the Linguistics Faculty, University of Oxford ("ISTROX: the Istro-Romanian Language and the Oxford University Hurren Donation").

She co-programmed the One World Romania Documentary and Human Rights Festival (Bucharest) between 2012 and 2018. Since 2014 she has curated the SAHIA VINTAGE DVD series, released by One World Romania. According to the booklet which accompanies the first DVD in the series, this collection, launched on the 25th anniversary of the fall of Romania's communist regime, was conceived as an archaeological engagement with (both) the output and the production culture of the Alexandru Sahia studio, which was socialist Romania's only studio specialized in documentary production.

For almost four decades (1950-1989) the studio operated on the basis of a political mandate which required the documentary film-makers to immerse themselves in the daily life of the country and record its dramatic transformations under the political guidance of the communist party. According to the introduction written by Adina Brădeanu to the booklet accompanying these DVDs, "As this was the only studio in Romania that specialized in documentary cinema, it became identified with documentary practice itself; today, the history of the documentary cinema produced in socialist Romania - is, with only a few exceptions, the history of the Sahia films."

Most films produced by the Sahia studio were short format (approximately ten minutes long). They were usually shown in cinemas as "support" films to the feature-length fiction films. Four DVDs have been published as part of the series so far with the following themes: "Documentary, ideology, life," "work," "children," and "political commissioning." The fourth DVD was released in March 2018, during the One World Romania documentary festival. Apart from publishing these DVDs, the festival includes a curated Sahia programme every year, which introduces Sahia films, not included on the DVDs.*

In the following interview, Adina Brădeanu explains the relevance of this collection, the meaning of the term "vintage" which describes the DVD series, the value of these films today, and the curatorial process behind the DVDs.

*) One more DVD has been published between the moment when this interview was originally published in the Romanian language and will be re-published in an English translation. This DVD focuses on the so-called "ephemeral production" of the Sahia studio, that is the films commissioned by a wide range of institutions of the Romanian state, such as the National Tourism Office (ONT), the Ministry of Education, and industrial plants and factories.

"Now Is the Time to Include the Films Produced by the Alexandru Sahia Documentary Studio in Our Conversations About the Communist Past." An Interview with Adina Brãdeanu[1]

Ionuț Mareș
Metropolis Cultural Daily, Bucharest, Romania
https://www.ziarulmetropolis.ro/

ABSTRACT

An interview with researcher Adina Brădeanu (University of Oxford) around the topic of curating film heritage. Since 2014, Brădeanu has curated a DVD series (SAHIA VINTAGE) which rediscovers the output and the production culture of the Alexandru Sahia studio (1950-1990), which was socialist Romania's only studio specialized in documentary production. Brădeanu discusses the relevance of this collection, the curatorial process behind the DVDs, and the meaning of the term "vintage" in the context of a project that invites reflection on Romania's socialism as lived experience.

KEYWORDS

Film archive, curation, film studio, documentary cinema, Romanian cinema, collective memory.

Ionuț Mareș: Why is it important for these films to be rediscovered through the means of a DVD collection?

Adina Brădeanu: Firstly, because the films are part of Romania's cinema heritage. They have been largely forgotten so far, for reasons that include the complex baggage of associations connected to the Sahia studio in the 1990s (following the 1989 anti-communist revolution), given its former role as a "political propaganda" studio that had acted as a mouthpiece for the communist regime. More than a decade had to pass before documentary film as a genre was able to rebuild its place in the Romanian public consciousness, as evidenced by the extreme paucity of Romania's documentary production in the 1990s, a time when the country was in most need of documentary film-makers willing to record the changes in the country. I believe the time has come for the Sahia films to be brought back into present-day conversations about the past, mostly via a thematic, rather than an author-focused curatorship, in order to show these films to today's audiences.

These films not only belong to the history of Romanian documentary cinema, but they also outline a social history of Romania—that is, a country that is still struggling with unsettled memories, both nostalgic and traumatic, of the communist period, in an attempt to reach an acceptable perspective on the past. I believe the Sahia films can work as *aide-mémoires* for a nation interested in reconnecting with its past and in reconsidering this past beyond the various labels that have been attached to it in recent decades. These films invite reflection on both an individual and a collective level.

Apart from the potential relevance of these films for lay audiences, we started publishing this DVD series for the benefit of students and scholars whose research topics, within various disciplinary frameworks, touch on the experience of lived socialism—that is, on issues such as work, housing, everyday life, gender and childhood experience. For them, some of these films, as official representations produced in the past, may be able to introduce new perspectives or nuance existing ones.

For this reason, the DVDs are accompanied by booklets that contextualize not only the films but also the production culture of the studio. The rationale for this is that our aim with this series is not only to rediscover a number of documentaries produced in Romania between 1950 and 1990,

1) This interview has originally been published on 19 April 2016 in Metropolis Cultural Daily, as "Adina Brădeanu: 'A sosit momentul ca filmele Sahia să fie reintroduse în conversațiile culturale.'" [It's time for the Sahia films to be reintroduced in cultural conversations].The text and its title have been amended for clarity and concision. See https://www.ziarulmetropolis.ro/adina-bradeanu-a-sosit-momentul-ca-filmele-sahia-sa-fie-reintroduse-in-conversatiile-culturale/.

but also to pay attention to the way in which documentary film became institutionalised at the Alexandru Sahia studio. The role of institutional structures is crucial in the media and the creative industries, as in time these institutions can shape entire domains of production. Their ethos and development influence production in the long term within specific creative fields, so that over time they may catalyse dramatic changes in the way one field or another works. This also applies to the relationship between the Sahia studio and documentary film practice in Romania, where the evolution of the studio constantly impacted the understanding and practice of documentary film on a national level. From this point of view, our DVDs aim to uncover the complexity of an institution and of a number of individual professional paths associated with it during its four decades of cohabiting with the communist regime, as well as the concrete results of this cohabitation in the form of the films produced by the studio.

I should add that while responsibility for the content of the DVDs rests with me, fundraising and production were covered by my colleagues and friends from One World Romania. I am very grateful to all those involved for their hard work on this project, which in recent years has expanded to include film screenings in high schools and in a number of Bucharest neighbourhoods.

What does the term "vintage," which you included in the title of this DVD series (VINTAGE SAHIA), mean in context?

We included it as a friendly warning regarding the risks of a present increasingly dominated by a seductive nostalgia for the (communist) past—a nostalgia that, I believe, needs to be handled responsibly. "Vintage" is a term in common use today, frequently employed to define quality objects or styles characterized via their intersection with historical time, a reason why it is readily applied to a range of products from fashion to wine. At the same time, it is a term used to chart the intensification of our relationship with the technology and media of the past: that is, the way nostalgia infiltrates popular culture and creative practice, or the way various forms of media display nostalgia for types of content or aesthetic that are associated with the earlier stages of their existence—take, for example, today's nostalgia for the analogue as a vintage media format. We are living in a time defined by an increased interest in archives; today we are easily impressed by such black-and-white images from the past.

Speaking of the nostalgia that interferes with our experience of these "vintage" Sahia films, I cannot help thinking, for example, of the delight with which one of the films released on our first DVD was shared on Facebook by hundreds of people, after somebody uploaded it on Youtube. The title of the film is *Pentru strănepoți, încă ceva despre București…* [For Our Heirs, More Stories about Bucharest…], Paula and Doru Segall (1980). It is quintessentially the kind of film that invites you to take a trip down memory lane through the Bucharest of the 1980s.

And since we are discussing our vulnerability vis-a-vis these images from the past, I should also mention that, after we published this film on DVD and started this hype around it, a TV station (Antena 3, considered by many Romanians a somewhat partisan TV station) broadcast it accompanied by captions such as "The Secret Film Left Behind By Nicolae Ceaușescu" and "Documentary Images Kept Secret For 25 Years!" This kind of fake news was indeed fit for our "post-truth" era! Of course, the film had not been "left behind" by Ceaușescu, neither was it ever kept secret. Rather, it had simply been forgotten, as have been most of the other Sahia films.

We rediscover the Sahia archive while Romania undergoes a complex memorial process that has started a while ago and continues in the present—namely, the reconsideration of socialism as lived experience. In parallel with this process, we are rethinking the perspectives or frameworks of analysis that we have normalized so far with regard to this period of history: from the focus we put on works or modes of expression that were subversive or censured in the past, to the "visceral" anti-communism of the 1990s that has endured almost unchanged up to the present day. This memorial work that happens in the background makes the reception of these films

today even more interesting as it adds new layers of meaning to our encounters with them: these are not only encounters with forms of cinema from the past, but also confrontations with that (still disputed) past.

In fact, this is what the title of our DVD series hints at: the memorial ambivalence that becomes part of our project. On one hand, we acknowledge the seductive power of these films for today's audiences, but on the other we point to the risks implicit in this seduction, that is, to our vulnerability as an audience located in time and space, and coming with a specific memorial luggage regarding this portion of our historical past.

Just like us humans, films are objects vulnerable to context—this is the reason why they need to be revisited regularly with an open mind. For instance, the production of certain documentaries (which include archive footage) is directly connected with broader historical and memorial contexts: a documentary essay such as *Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceauşescu* [The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceauşescu] (Andrei Ujică, 2010) could not have been conceived of immediately after the fall of the Ceauşescu regime. Firstly there had to be a realignment of our collective relationship with history and, by implication, with the film archive, a realignment which happened in stages after the year 2000.

A related thought is that these films can be read in different ways at different times (as long as the interval between these times is sufficiently generous); in the 1990s, when we were still close, historically speaking, to the communist regime, many of us might not have been able to follow with the amused interest of today a sequence from an experimental documentary musical such as *Tehnologie nouă, oameni culţi* [New Technology, Educated People] (Alexandru Sîrbu, 1963; lyrics by Nina Cassian), where the soloist of the "Electronica" Factory agitation brigade sings directly into the camera something like: "My boyfriend is an engineer, / We never know enough/ There's always one more riddle to solve/ So that eyes are clearer, and shoulders/ straighter, and the forehead purer." This "my boyfriend is an engineer" (in Romanian: "iubitul meu e inginer"), spoken softly into the camera by a nicely coiffed young woman, delights today's audiences, partly because it is simultaneously sensual and ideological (in context), and therefore it confuses our expectations about the forms of expression representative for that historical moment.[2]

This film—which I find particularly interesting for the way in which it integrates, on an aesthetic level, the notions of social and technological progress—was "forgotten" by the canonical history of Romanian documentary film on account of what was regarded at the time as an excessive revolutionary fervour on the part of the film-maker, which was evident in the film. Today, more than half a century since its production, time had applied a "vintage" patina to it. Paradoxically, in the meantime the director of this film had himself come to regard it as natural that it should have been consigned to oblivion. When we announced him that we were considering inclusion of his film on this DVD, his first reaction was to plead for us to let the film remain "buried in the archive" as it was "not worthy of saving." Luckily, he changed his mind and we could include this film on the second DVD of the series.

What is the value of these films today, given that their original purpose was strictly propagandistic, which means that documentary cinema was abandoning its mission to question reality?

The value of these films is constantly open to renegotiation. This process is part of an ecosystem which includes our opinions, the opinions expressed by the film critics, the journalists and the lay viewers who encounter these films. The circulation and availability of the films is therefore crucial, as it allows them to become part of wider cultural conversations. We should not limit ourselves to fiction film when discussing the cinema production of the communist era and we should also make these films available on the market for the general public, to test their experience and memories of that time against these representations which belong to that time.

Quite often, what happens in the background in these documentaries is more significant than

2) Proof of the said delight is the fact that this sequence has been included in a recent documentary *(Distanţa dintre mine şi mine / The Distance between Me and Me,* Mona Nicoară, 2018) about the life of poet Nina Cassian, who composed the music and lyrics of *New Technology, Educated People.*

the carefully curated stories that we see in the foreground. That is, beyond the more or less ideological "message" that these films are meant to carry forward, they inevitably capture day-to-day life. Look, for example, at the streets and squares in *Letopisețul lui Hrib* [The Journals of Hrib] (Slavomir Popovici, 1974) or *Seraliștii* [Evening Classes] (Copel Moscu, 1982), the life of the work colonies captured in detail by films such as *Cota Zero* [Elevation Zero] (Laurentiu Damian, 1988) or *Pe Valea Frumoasei* [Along the Frumoasa Valley] (Felicia Cernăianu, 1986), the prostitutes and so-called "social parasites" (the political jargon of the time) in *Iarna unor pierde-vară* [The Winter of Summer Idlers] (Iancu Moscu, 1974), or the sweater with the hammer and sickle *and* the American flag knitted into it that one pupil is wearing in *Ședință cu părinții* [Parents Meeting] (Paula and Doru Segall,1980).

Certainly, political pedagogy was a central objective of the studio *qua* institution. But when we are speaking about individual films, we are speaking about an intersection between specific production contexts and the personal agendas, whether aesthetic or ideological (or both) of the film-makers, which means that these films are always more than mere illustrations of a party programme. It is time, I believe, for us to look at these films differently, firstly by moving beyond the binary model in which we are still living, which still prefers to operate with the oppositional pair "dissident"/"collaborator." It is time we accepted that in the area of film-making, as in other areas of cultural production, between these two poles of one's relationship with the ideology of the time, and with the political bureaucracy, there was a myriad of daily negotiations, small complicities, survival or adaptive strategies that need to be considered if we really wish to understand what being a film-maker entailed at the time. In addition, let us not reduce the whole equation to one's relationship with the state; let's try to also take into consideration other determining factors and relationships that influenced the production and public visibility of films in that era.

To return to your question, it was not documentary, as a genre, that abdicated its mission, but rather some of the documentary film-makers—actually, a significant proportion of the Sahia community, the closer we come to the end of the 1970s. In time, they developed a wide range of evasionist or adaptive practices which shaped documentary practice in Romania in the long term. See, for example, the practice of creating some sort of "covers" for their films—that is, sequences affixed in the beginning or at the end of a film, which were crudely political, often incomprehensible or unpalatable (e.g. quotes from N. Ceaușescu's speeches), but which ensured a measure of flexibility and freedom of expression throughout the film. Felicia Cernăianu's *Pe Valea Frumoasei* begins with a totally obscure monologue about Empedocles, "the power of the elements" and "the communist production plan," but continues as an entirely believable and truly remarkable film about an engineer (Ștefan Pop) who is also the head of the Oașa Reservoir (which was under construction at the time).[3] This film made by film-maker Felicia Cernăianu in collaboration with her husband, Director of Photography Willy Goldgraber, was a subtle engagement with their political mandate to portray the collective effort of the working classes to build a Romania of the future. They filtered this mandate, and kept themselves both inside and outside it. For instance, in the final minutes of the film, Pop condenses the reality of the reservoir as a work site where socialism was genuinely being built day by day, without, or even despite the political jargon of the time: *And on the subject of Party achievements, if we're not building socialism here, then where else?* This comes naturally, almost as a joke in Pop's monologue, and therefore it is credible and even somewhat funny in the way it is said in the original.[4]

When we look carefully at the ways in which the film-makers positioned themselves vis-a-vis official expectations, we see an entire spectrum of behaviour, rather than the aforementioned binary model of dissenters and collaborators. I curated the fourth DVD of the series with the intention of providing a range of examples of such different positionings. Speaking of this, I believe that today we are not talking enough about the genuine political enthusiasm shown by some of these film-makers to the

3) See an interview, in Romanian language, with Ștefan Pop, now retired: https://www.scena9.ro/article/adina-bradean-sahia-vintage-stefan-pop.

4) Romanian language: *Și dacă tot e vorba de fapte de partid, păi da' mai construit de socialism decât la noi aicea, unde poate să fie?*

new regime while it was still in its early years. A question I am asking myself at present—triggered by a somewhat animated discussion during the launch of this fourth DVD—is why, in 2018, almost three decades after the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, we are still making strenuous efforts to attach notes of political subversiveness to some of the truly remarkable personalities affiliated to this studio, and when we will be prepared to acknowledge their initial political commitment—which was, indeed, in most cases followed by disenchantment with the regime that they had trusted in their youth. I am thinking here of some of the luminaries of our film industry, such as Victor Iliu and Slavomir Popovici. This is the reason why I have not only included on this DVD the film which epitomizes the latter's political enthusiasm at the beginning of the '60s (*Uzina* / The Plant, 1963), but have also allowed myself the curatorial licence of including a film produced by the RomFilm State Company before the Sahia studio was established (*Scrisoarea lui Ion Marin către Scînteia* [Ion Marin's Letter to The Spark—the official paper of the Communist Party], Victor Iliu, 1949). This is a documentary that occupies a central place in the national imagination relative to Romania's collectivisation of agriculture. In fact, the film is a docudrama, based on the true story of a peasant who sends a letter to *The Spark*, in which he pours a triumphalist version of the collectivization narrative. The part of peasant Ion Marin is played by peasant Dragu Vulcan. The political bias is straightforward: nothing of the political violence that accompanied actual collectivisation filters through to the screen. Yet the film has remarkable aesthetic appeal - the trademark of the camera operator, Ovidiu Gologan, and also of Iliu's own perspective, shaped by his studies at VGIK (The All-Soviet State Institute of Cinema) in the late 1940s. Six years after this film, the same team produced one of the essential films of Romanian cinema, *La moara cu noroc* [The Mill of Good Luck] (Victor Iliu, 1957).

Interesting enough, the story of this film does not end there. Twenty-five years later, young film-maker Nicolae Cabel, a former student of Iliu, travelled to Sudiți village to seek out the peasant who played the part of Ion Marin in the film directed by his former professor. In this second film (*A doua scrisoare* / The Second Letter, Nicolae Cabel, 1974), one is struck by the gulf between the melancholy tone of the musical soundtrack and the crude political commentary, as well as by the visual flair of the sequences where the film-maker ignores his political mandate and follows his own agenda, by trying to establish an aesthetic dialogue with Iliu's œuvre. Cabel's film is essentially an elegy for Iliu disguised as the odyssey of a Romanian village under communism. It is in this sense that I would speak of the complex ways in which the professionals from inside the studio positioned themselves in relation to the political: they were always doing more than simply following official indications and producing "propaganda."

How should we view these films today?

I am trying to approach these films from two angles: firstly, in relationship to their histories and contexts of production from the past, which I cannot overlook, and secondly, by trying to always be open to what these films can tell us today, if we go beyond our habitual ways of interpreting material from the communist era. By this I mean that I am trying to resist the "compulsory" enthusiasm in the face of a film which was subject to censorship in the past. While I always acknowledge this kind of production context, I am trying not to read them by default as a sign of value. Rather, I am trying to approach these films at the point of intersection of what or how they were meant to be (if I have access to the sources which allow me to learn about that) with what they are, concretely, in the present.

Let us take the film *Adolescența* [Adolescence] (Florica Holban, 1970) as an example. This is a somewhat conventional educational film which was meant to teach parents how to treat their teenage offspring. Most films produced by Sahia portrayed children and adolescents exclusively in institutional contexts such as schools and nurseries, but this one includes that very rare thing, a sequence showing adolescents in the private space (a party in the block), and also some memorable street interviews about the lack

of sex education in 1970s Romania.

When we screened it in a number of Bucharest high schools in 2017, the film drew smiles for it appeared anachronistic, but it also provoked genuine concern around the lack of sex education in schools in Romania in the present day and the fact that so little had changed since 1970. And apropos of the datedness of this film, a sequence featuring a "girls only" conversation on a balcony[5] became a favourite of the adolescents who watched the film, and I include here my own daughter.

To return to your question about how these films should be viewed: first and foremost, with genuine yet critical interest, resisting the temptation to cast them in the role of stories whose main use should be to validate our prejudices about the past. These films can tell us more than (we think) we already know. Take for example *Elevation Zero,* a fairly well-known film that gives us an insight into the process of ideological vetting at Sahia. I included it on the second DVD of the series not so much in order to perpetuate the "censored film equals good film" approach, but rather to take advantage of an opportunity that came up at the last moment. As the DVD was ready to go to production, I found out that the director had kept a VHS copy of the original version of the film before it passed through the censorship screening and the subsequent rounds of re-editing. After I consulted with Alexandru Solomon (the head of One World Romania), we decided to invite a comparative viewpoint by including on the DVD both versions of the film: the official version, available as the standard copy held in the Romanian National Film Archive, and the director's cut, complete with VHS aesthetic.

I do not know of any other case in the history of Romanian cinema where two such versions exist: virtually everything has been changed from one version to another, from the visuals, where segments which were essential in the original version are missing, to the soundtrack, where the striking juxtaposition of Nina Hagen / Michael Jackson / Armenian duduk flute from the director's cut is entirely expunged and replaced by a harpsichord and a poetic ideological commentary that actually silences both the film-maker and the human community that he wanted to represent in his film.

When examined alongside each other, these two versions give a revealing picture of the official expectations regarding the function and aesthetic of documentary film in Romania in the 1980s. Today, the film lives on independently of its history, undeniably traumatic as it was for its director, as a fragment of social and cultural history. It captures not only the conditions of life and work in a workers' colony (in the Poiana Ruscă mountains, Western Romania), but also a fascinating context of media history, when Romania lived out its "VHS moment" feverishly: that is, the years when the VCR (Video Cassette Recording, an early domestic analogue recording format) won over Romanian audiences from the capital to the remotest corners of the country, in response to the absence of entertainment on the national television. This is what film-maker Laurentiu Damian found when he went to Poiana Ruscă to document the lives of the workers: that those lives were divided equally between their hard daily work and their evenings spent watching bootleg videos. He put this in the original version of his film, but nothing was kept in the officially approved version. Today, his original film is significant as it points to a specific technological context, while these two versions taken together provide us with a revealing example of how films were transformed by the process of censorship.

After "documentary, ideology, life," "work," and "children," the themes of the first three DVDs, you chose "political commission" as the theme of the fourth DVD. How did you decide on this theme?

I endeavour to maintain a balance in terms of the attention that I pay to the output of the studio, and to the studio as an institution. One of the most striking aspects of my early encounters with this studio in the mid-2000s, when I started being interested in it, had to do with the dramatically different, even opposite ways in which it was remembered by its former members and by members of the film community who had no previous connection with Sahia as an institution. From the outside, Sahia was always

5) *Tell us then, do you love him? / I'm not sure whether I love him. What about you? / I definitely love him. I'd ask my mother, but she's never talked to me about love. / Mine neither!*

viewed through the lens of its official function as an institution involved in the propagation of an official social and political pedagogy. At the same time, the community formerly associated with the studio have wrapped themselves in a positive, nostalgic, memory of the studio, which they remember as a beautiful, happy family that stood up to the trials of history and was shaped by heroic confrontations between the film-makers and the political bureaucrats.

I have curated the DVDs released so far with the intention to allow room for the contradictions and ambiguities that become apparent at the point where these two perspectives meet. A good example of this would probably be the film I have included as a bonus on the DVD about political commissioning: *Noi la cinci ani* [Us, Aged Five] (Mirel Ilieşiu and the Sahia collective, 1955), is an oddity, an "institutional home-movie" of sorts, produced by the employees of the studio to mark Sahia's fifth anniversary. This film gives a surprisingly laid-back, self-deprecating view of the "private life" of this supposedly propaganda-focused studio in the midst of Romania's Stalinist decade as an institution pervaded by an air of *dolce far niente,* where nothing happens when or in the way it is meant to: the film directors roll into work around lunchtime, the cameramen get moving so slowly that they miss the events they are meant to be filming, and all involved seem to be aware that life has cast them in an absurdist game of chance where they feel as "Don Quixotes of Sahia" whose "glorious deeds in the service of lost causes would make Don Quixote of Mancha feel jealous." So *Us, Aged Five* looks like a jolly performance by a community which, only five years after it came into existence, seems to have a strong sense of belonging and is already constructing its own mythology as a studio-cum-family.

It is an amusing film, but at the same time a moving one, as it features some of the studio's most important figures: film-makers Mirel Ilieşiu, Alexandru Boiangiu, Paula Segall and Titus Mesaroş, and film redactor[6] Marion Ciobanu. At the same time, this film about the "small," private history of the studio casts an unexpected light upon "big" (national) history and upon the studio's own political mandate in relation to this history: just think about the fact that less than a year after the first screening of this film during Sahia's five-year anniversary party, three Sahia staff were sent to Budapest to cover what in the spirit of official history was to be termed the Hungarian "counter-revolution" (*Evenimentele din Ungaria* [The Events in Hungary], Herman Rabinovici, 1957)—a film to be found on the same DVD.

And still apropos of the theme of this DVD: a further reason for my choosing political commissioning was that the previous, third DVD of the series had had a somewhat sunnier theme —children and childhood. I came to the theme of that one by looking at the present, rather than at the past: while I was thinking about a potential theme, a powerful wave of nostalgia could be felt on social media—a nostalgia expressed above all by the 40+ generation (my generation) which somehow made me feel uncomfortable. I remember seeing somewhere on Facebook a post which combined a photo with a slice of moistened bread with sugar on it—an improvised dessert in the subsistence economy of the 1980s—and the following comment: "If you know what this is, you had a happy childhood!" I told myself then that this was a good time for us to try to compare our personal memories with what Sahia had left us in the form of documentaries depicting the lives of the children of socialist Romania. I mean, any of these films having been produced at the precise time when we, the 40+ generation, were ourselves children. At the time when these films were produced, many have been regarded as an easy way out of the political engagement which was part and parcel of the documentarians' work.

So, once we published the DVD on children, I wanted to return to the political production of the studio which remains the most substantial section of its entire output throughout four decades of existence.

What selection criteria do you use when choosing films for each DVD?

When I curate the content for each of the DVDs I aim to remain faithful to the production context that I know from my previous research on Sahia and the archival context that I encountered during my preliminary research at the National

6) A position somewhat equivalent to that of today's commissioning editors, with less authority and more ideological responsibilities.

Film Archive (ANF). I try to place each of the films in the context of their time and also in the context of the Sahia production: for instance, by mentioning in my accompanying text whether a certain film is representative of a wider trend or, rather, an exception from what was regarded as the "norm" at the time of its production. On the level of the DVD series as a whole, I am keen on a thematic, rather than an author-based curation, as I believe that this keeps the series more open to the lay and academic public from beyond the field of Film Studies. I arrange the films in chronological order on each of the DVDs, as I believe that this enables the public to follow more easily the relationship between social/political history and the theme, approach, and style of the films. Also, I always look beyond the documentary canon, towards lesser known or forgotten films, or towards films which belong to so-called "minor" production categories (also known as "ephemeral" films).

I believe that these ephemeral films in particular carry a great potential for historical knowledge and for bringing fresh perspectives into our conversations about cinema and the communist past. Let's take Ada Pistiner's film *Protecția cui?* [Whose Workplace Safety?] (1992) as an example. The first topic that she submitted as a proposal to Sahia after her return from Israel, where she had spent the final years of the Ceausescu regime, was a film about the health and safety of those working in various industries of newly post-communist Romania. This may seem like a minor subject for somebody who returns to a country undergoing dramatic changes. However, Pistiner described this film as a "duty of conscience." *Whose Workplace Safety?* is a film that she felt she had to make: after her debut, in the mid-1960s, with a health and safety film, and a career marked by the industrial commission genre, Pistiner (who initially read Philology) wanted to make one more film that would deal with notions of health and safety — this time a "real" film into which she was finally able to pour all the experience accumulated during a lifetime spent examining the harsh realities of industrial Romania and being unable to make them public. On the one hand, this film looks back to a past when Pistiner as well as her peers from Sahia directed hundreds, perhaps thousands of health-and-safety films. Yet on the other hand it is also rooted in the present of the early 1990s, when she proposed this film: *Whose Workplace Safety?* is one of the very few films of its time which capture the newly uncertain position of Romania's industrial working class, whose pauperisation in the vortex of history had already begun by 1992, when the films was made.

Starting from the second DVD of the series, I have increased the number of so-called "minor" categories of productions included on each DVD.[7] This is, indeed, the least known segment of Sahia's output, which includes a wide range of educational, industrial and tourism films, and festival trailers. I am fairly confident that these films which are a sort of "periphery of the periphery" (that is, a fringe product of documentary film, itself on the fringes of feature-length fiction film), have a remarkable potential to open-up fresh perspectives both on "mainstream" documentary production of the time (one learns about the centre by looking at its peripheries, isn't it?), and on areas of social life that lay beyond the reach of mainstream documentary film-making.

Finally, one more thing about these films produced by this studio. Sahia is not an island; I have included on our DVDs a number of films which prove that the documentary film makers collaborated with major cultural figures from outside the studio such as Nina Cassian, Perahim, Marin Sorescu, Radu Cosașu and Ecaterina Oproiu, and also that occasionally their work intersected with the work of (future) international personalities—as in the case of film-maker Márta Mészáros, who spent several years in the studio and whose film *Să zâmbească toți copiii* [Let All the Children Smile] (1957) can be found on our third DVD.

8) The fifth DVD of the series, published in the year following the publication of this interview, is dedicated entirely to the ephemeral production of the Sahia studio.