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The Radio, Exiled Voice, and the Mute Poet in Communist Romania

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Imagine This: An Object Starting a Revolution: The Radio, Exiled Voice, and the Mute Poet in Communist Romania

Irina Popescu

Abstract
This paper analyzes the role played by Radio Free Europe in redistributing sound inside Romania, a country which experienced one of the most repressive communist regimes in Eastern Europe. By following the work of Monica Lovinescu, a cultural critic and writer, and Ana Blandiana, a poet, and leaning heavily on the theoretical framework provided by Giorgio Agamben, this paper uncovers the potential of disembodied voices. Voice, therefore, drives the revolution, providing the Romanian population with a means of escape, a means with which to reclaim their words and thus begin making demands for change. Two types of sounds/voices will be discussed in this paper, exiled sound and muted sound. This paper challenges the prevailing notions that Romania was a country without an effective intellectual/cultural public sphere which thus prevented it from fully partaking in the “Carnival of Revolution” of 1989.

Introduction

Imagine this: whispers, murmurs, secrets, noiselessness, rumors, hints, undertones, silence. Now this: literature, sound, voice, music, news, politics, discussions, poetry. If each of these imaginings makes up two distinct worlds, the first introduces a muted space, made up of taciturn individuals, silent bodies walking as if they had lost their voices to disease or a gunshot wound. The second world introduces the space of intellect and creativity, the space for voices to argue and receive one another, made up of individuals which communicate through words, written and spoken, through sounds, musical and linguistic.

What happens when the second world interrupts the first with its sound-filled presence? This is the question I will address throughout this paper. In using the radio-object as the medium of transmission which allowed for the redistribution of sound in Romanian households during the late communist era, concentrating especially on the mid-1980s, I will discuss how the exiled voices of men and women who were no longer in the country physically but who, in taking on a new body (i.e., the body of the radio itself), continued to “act” politically. Since communist regimes, in Romania and most other Eastern Euro-
pean countries, were determined to eliminate all potentializing sound, this paper will analyze how Radio Free Europe redistributed sound inside the country, becoming the political vehicle actively un-silencing the public, and thus, to use Giorgio Agamben’s (2006) terms, “reunite[d] life to its form” (p. 156) by reuniting voice to the body. The paper will be divided in two distinct parts each centered on one type of sound transmitted by the radio: (1) Exiled sound: the exiled voices, the voices without physicality. Those in Germany and France, specifically Monica Lovinescu’s, whose numerous journals, Short Waves, will illuminate how voice took the place of literature, allowing the literary realm to intersect with the political, and (2) Muted sound: the poets and writers in Romania who, in order to be heard, had to send their words into exile, using Ana Blandiana’s poem “Everything” as a prime example. Throughout these “parts” I will discuss how these two “sounds” used the radio as a means of transporting the written word and transcribing it upon a different medium (i.e., the auditory), forcing the reader to become the listener. In redistributing sound inside the country Radio Free Europe became the political vehicle which propelled the democratic revolution of 1989. The radio, an object intersecting sounds with words, literature with politics, the west and east, and, most importantly, exiled bodies with exiled voices propelled and constructed the mass voices which finally erupted in December of 1989. Imagine that, an object starting a revolution.

Before fully engaging in the analysis on sound which is central to this paper, I would like to provide a theoretical framework on which this whole discussion pivots. In his book, The State of Exception, Giorgio Agamben (2005) writes, “it is this no-man’s-land between public law and political fact, and between juridical order and life, that the present study seeks to investigate” (p. 1). This study seeks to investigate a similar space, one existing between the public political sphere speaking from the West and the private sphere of the silent individual listening from the East. Although Agamben’s philosophy concentrates on the West, his definitions of “state of exception” and “bare life” help illuminate what most Romanian historians and philosophers considered to be the foundation of communism in Romania: making the state of exception the norm. After the revolution, Petre Tutea, perhaps one of the most renowned Romanian philosophers of the period, published a book entitled “322 memorable sayings of Petre Tutea.” From A to Z the philosopher began defining ideas, concepts, religions, adjectives, emotions, governments, countries, and individuals. In this mini-dictionary of terms and concepts the word communism was defined as “the greatest waste of time in human history” (Tutea, 2000, p. 26).1 communism, he writes on the following page, “means the negation of the individual as a whole,” a “social cancer,” spreading violently upon a country and its people through the use of psychological and physical force (p. 27). Of the revolution, he writes that “‘89 was not a revolution but a restoration,” a movement from the state of exception to the “natural order” of the past (p. 25). The cancer finally underwent chemotherapy, restoring health to the body.

Agamben (2005) reminds us that “one of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its “close relationships to civil war, insurrection, and resistance,” stating that “the entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years” (p. 2). Likewise, communist control of Romania can and should be considered as a state of exception that lasted 44 years, disappearing only when voice was

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1 Note: All translations from Romanian to English are provided by the author.
reunited with the body. Agamben (2006) makes sure to remind us that even in these states of exception “intellectuality and thought” exist as the power which “incessantly reunites life to its form or prevents it from being dissociated from its form” (p. 155). Intellect and thought comprise the only political actions the individual has at his or her disposal in a communist regime bent on controlling the body, preventing any political action from materializing. How can individuals act politically when their bodies and the body of literature are imprisoned by the state? They cannot turn to words, since, as Monica Lovinescu (2007) describes in the first chapter of her political novel Cuvintul din Cuvinte [The Word from Words], one can be “accused of [even] the letter L” or the letter A.2 They turned instead to the one thing produced by the human body which resists capture: voice. Voice detached itself from the bodies living in Romania and began crossing political borders, using the radio as their means of transport - it was only when the voices found their bodies again on that December afternoon in 1989 that the fence of exception collapsed underneath the people’s feet.

Now we may begin.

Exiled Voices in the Living Room

A radio placed on the corner table of the living room is turned on. Two or three people gather around in silence to listen to the voices. As the voices enter the room a new type of reading begins, one no longer relying on the eyes as vessels transmitting language. The radio cannot be too loud, for the fear that someone else is listening, so the volume constantly undergoes adjustment. The radio often moves around the room or rooms, the two or three people follow it in an attempt to find the pure signal, the one wave that the state had forgotten to jam. And when that one wave is finally found and the voices are finally clear, the listeners begin to listen.

“Radio art,” Jacki Apple (1993) writes, “is about the voice as instrument, the voice as place, the voice as emotion, the voice as spirit, the voice as body, the body of the voice, the place of the voice, the feel of a voice” (p. 307). Unlike a printed page, “radio can use sounds as language.” The voices on Radio Free Europe organized a discourse for the Romanian public, one which combined literature with politics, as if the two had never once acquired a separate existence. Each morning, on the tram or the street, at breakfast, men and women gathered to whisperingly discuss what Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca, Noel Bernard, and many others had said the previous night.3 Gabriel Liiceanu (2006), a prominent Romanian theorist and philosopher, in speaking of two of these voices after the revolution, wrote as follows:

Two people fought this war against an entire army of several thousands, organized by ideological machinery and repression. The radio

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2 From Cuvintul din Cuvinte (p. 17), by M. Lovinescu, 2007, Bucuresti, Romania: Humanitas. Note: It was in fact illegal to own a typewriter in Romania (at the time) that was not approved and monitored by the State. Lovinescu’s novel, which consists of 21 loosely-connected chapters, outlines the absurdity of the communist regime. Chapter one, from which this line was taken, reminds the reader that the state controlled the letters themselves and thus the writers of the country had to invent new ways of communicating with their public.

3 These were some of the most well-known voices of Radio Free Europe.
programs were transmitted by Radio Free Europe from Munich, but to prepare for them they prepared here, in their living room, where Monica Lovinescu clarified the vocal scores, combining the text with music, after which Virgil Ierunca, improvising as the pharmacist of sound, chose the musical substances which would best react with the contact of words. (p.114)

Aside from Nicolae Ceausescu’s, Monica Lovinescu’s voice was perhaps, the most familiar voice in Romania throughout the 1970s and 80s. In Alexandru Solomon’s (2007) new documentary, Cold Waves, he interviews a woman who ran into Lovinescu after the revolution. “It seemed to me that I knew her,” the woman stated, only later to realize that it was not Monica she knew, but her voice. Voice took the face’s place as a means of representation, a marker of unique identity. Lovinescu and her husband, Virgil Ierunca, were responsible for the cultural-literature program, entitled “Thesis and Antithesis in Paris,” in which they and others discussed literature and politics from the East and West, focusing especially on contraband Romanian literature. Her voice discussed the literature Romanians had been fenced away from for years, poems written by Eastern European dissidents, journals and letters written by professors in Bucharest and Timisoara, the philosophies of Sartre and Camus, and thus her voice, enabled by the radio-object, metamorphosed into a type of audio book. Yet, aside from that, her voice also reminded the public that a line of communication, as Liiceanu (2006) recalls, “in the form of murmurs, whispers, and gossip” (p. 114), existed between the two worlds, connecting the body of the Romanian citizen with the exiled voice. The anonymous letters and rumors they received from the country represented a communicative lifeline for the exiled voices, connecting them back to the bodies of the muted millions.

“Thought,” writes Giorgio Agamben (2006), “is form-of-life, life that cannot be segregated from its form,” (p. 154) but what happens when thought cannot be communicated? Thought alone can “become the guiding concept and the unitary center” (p. 154) of political newness, he goes on to say optimistically, establishing that political discourse (especially the kind that theorists engage in) can guide the individual, and then the group, out of the state of exception. Yet the question remains: what happens when those “potentiaIizing” thoughts cannot be spoken or written? This may be precisely why Monica Lovinescu left Romania for France, orchestrating a self-imposed exile in 1948. If she had stayed, communication would have been impossible and without communication, no potential to reorganize the political realm remains. The voice, in taking the place of the body, withstands capture by freely floating across political boundaries as a global citizen not requiring a passport to cross into new territories. “Her voice,” writes Smaranda Vultur (2008), “made itself heard without hesitation and loudly spoke everything that needed to be said, defending against democracy and truth. Her power rested...in a microphone.” In a country where mouths were separated from their voiced thoughts, where writing samples were taken of an entire nation to prevent letters of frustration or anger from appearing, Lovinescu’s voice set out to create a noise that could resist the power of the state.\(^4\) This noise entered the body of an object, concealing the boundaries between flesh

\(^4\) Many letters attacking Ceausescu appeared in the 1980s, circulating through underground networks. Some were sent to the dictator himself, and some were read on Radio Free Europe by Monica Lovinescu and company. Such letters provoked the state to have the populace provide writing
and machine, erupted in living rooms speaking the thoughts held by many, as if it knew how to “compile [the listener’s] affective edifice” (Liiceanu, 2006, p. 101).

In his book entitled Noise, Jacques Attali (1985) discusses the power of sound, stating that “noise is the source of these mutations in the structuring codes. For despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information” (p. 33). Although noise, whether through music or voice, can restructure a society, it can also exist as the means through which that society is oppressed. Through the management of noise, the Securitate (i.e., the Romania secret police) gained the power to imprison voiced bodies, controlling the country’s sounds much like the sounds from the radio are controlled by lowering the volume. Since voice and its transmitter (the body) belonged to the state, a new transmitter and new voice came into life. The radio-body existed as the means of transporting unconstrained human voices, as if the voices were searching for the bodies they had left behind. In this way “the paradox of sovereignty,” detailed by Agamben (1995) in the first chapter of Homo Sacer, is exploited. Since the voices outside the state of exception find their way back inside yet still manage to leave their bodies on the outside, resting “outside and inside the juridical order,” as citizens and non-citizens of the country, individuals such as Lovinescu used the paradox (literally acting it out) for their own empowerment.5

Robert Holt (1958) reminds us of another voice existing alongside that of the exiles, the voice of the state. “In its simplest form,” he writes, “jamming consists of setting a noise machine in front of a microphone and broadcasting hoots and howls on the same frequencies as the undesired broadcasts. A slightly different approach is to have the jamming transmitter play loud and boisterous music to drown out the signal” (p. 115). The barbaric voices of the state howled in anger at their inability to control the bodiless sounds emanating from an object they had simply overlooked as having the power to change the minds of millions. As these howls interrupted the voice of Lovinescu (among others), the silent audiences merely took their radios in hand and moved around their apartments and homes, hoping to find that one wave of uninterrupted sound.6

On December 12, 1980, Lovinescu (1994b) transcribes, in Short Waves, a few comments printed in the Romanian literary magazine, which stated that “the writers, creators of art...should bend toward working on the art of the nation” the art which works alongside party lines (p. 165). She angrily proceeded to attack the idea that literature could simply smile back at its oppressors, nodding its head like a political puppet. Much like the poet Mircea Dinescu, she too believed that “the mission of literature is not to provide solutions but to point out the problems” in hopes of creating a space for un-monitored

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Note: It is as if the voices themselves, in order to combat the state of exception, had learned to mimic it, creating another kind of state of exception, one which blurred the boundaries between the body and voice.

6 The state took up arms against the voice itself, attacking Lovinescu several times, leaving her for dead outside her Paris apartment, following Ceausescu’s orders to silence her bitter criticism.
Voices to restructure society, one living room at a time (Deletant, 1995, p. 280). This space forced the individual to sit and listen, reenacting an unusual therapy session. When writing of Paul Deharme, Anke Birkenmaier (2009) recalls that,

to Deharme the radio's promise lies in its independence from vision and everything associated with it....in his theory, the transmission of the words through radio is more evocative to the listener than the written work. Radio-speech can even take on the role of a psychoanalytical dialogue, in the sense that the anonymity of the radio voice makes it an ideal way to elicit individual fantasies and traumas from each listener. (p. 363)

Voice entered the living room as a therapist to its listener. Much like a musical composition can transmit therapeutic powers when heard, a piece of art when viewed, or a poem when read, voice became the piece of art that could save a culture, a country even, by pointing out the biggest problem: the listener's lack of courage. In May 1983 Lovinescu did a broadcast entitled “the courage of art,” in which she spoke of a writer named Mirea Iorgulescu, who wrote that “it is not that important when Romanian literature starts [up again], but how it starts: as an act of will” (Lovinescu, 1994c, p. 46). This “act of will” happened as soon as words began to relocate their courage, leaving their prisons behind. It motivated Lovinescu to use literature as a means of educating her listeners, showing them that courageous words are brought into existence only when a writer writes or a speaker speaks.

Lovinescu (1994c), in October of 1984, asked if individuals can actually live inside their historical periods or if they exist only on the outside looking in, hoping that the past will answer any questions they have about the present (p. 135). Such a question may seem trivial, too wrapped in post-modern garments to illicit a response of any kind. However, for the man or woman sitting in a closet or bathtub where they had finally found the best reception, the question played a different role, similar to the one discussed by Deharme. Voice, as Liiceanu (2006) agrees, represented “whether we kn[e]w it or not, the layer of protection that help[ed] us pass through life” (p. 101). Voice became the only therapy that could, on one hand, mend the physical and psychological wounds, through its calming familiar presence, and on the other hand, the mouthpiece enabling the period of rehabilitation by situating the individual within his or her historical present, within his or her trauma. The state of exception, as Agamben (2005) notes intensely throughout his work, “is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold...where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (p. 23). The state of exception works only by keeping the individual unaware of his or her historical present, maintaining blurring boundaries over concrete ones. The therapy session served to make the listeners come to terms with that present, take a good look around, and finally, take the words out of storage allowing the mouth to find the courage to create the phrases of resistance. It is only when the individual steps back inside history, no matter how traumatic that history may appear, that he or she can begin to redefine it. Lovinescu’s question, “can one live inside history,” demands a response from the silent listener, as if the voice on the radio is tired of not receiving any
response, tired of the one-sided discussion. Such a response was provided by a poet named Ana Blandiana who took all her words out of storage in 1984.7

**Words Sent Into Exile - The Mute Poet Protests**

A mute poet sounds like paradox since poetry, from its onset, has always been attached to sound. With the invention of the printing press, poetry slowly began losing its sound, moving from a loud medium into a silent one, from a form of public entertainment to a private pleasure. George Orwell, in an essay entitled “Poetry and the Microphone,” writes that “it is commonplace that in modern times - the last 200 years, say - poetry has come to have less and less connection either with music or with the spoken word. It needs print to exist at all” (Apple, 1993, p. 166). What happens to the poem when print also disappears? Does it give up? Or does it continue to search for the medium on which to exist? How far will literature go to be heard? In using the radio as its new medium of transmission, poetry persevered throughout the country, turning back to sound for its distribution, leaving the printing world behind as if, fed up with its own silence, it had finally packed its bags full of printed words, leaving only their sound flickering in the air.

Ana Blandiana answered Monica Lovinescu’s question and chose to live inside her historical present. A volume entitled “The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945,” which lightly sprinkles out the names of Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Yugoslavian, and Czechoslovakian writers onto its pages, labels Blandiana as “apolitical” (Segel, 2008, p. 249). The only response I have to such a claim is taken from a poem that Blandiana wrote in 1984, entitled *Eu Cred* [I believe]: “I believe that we are a vegetal culture/Who has ever seen/A tree rebel?”8 These lines, read by Monica Lovinescu in February 1985, not only completely dismantle Blandiana’s “apolitical” branding, but show that the poetry in Romania existed as politics reenacted on a page, politics which rhymed and rested inside metrical arrangements. Ana Blandiana turned to poetry, not instead of politics, but because of politics - poetry, and its ability to, as William Wordsworth put it, *meter the passions*, helped Blandiana organize a protest through verse.

In a poem entitled “Totul” [“Everything”], Blandiana catalogues everything found inside the country, from the weevil-filled flour to the dirt-tasting coffee, leaving the reader to imagine, out of the collage of objects and events residing over their everyday lives, everything residing outside of the country, such as unadulterated food and fast-moving grocery lines. The printed poem reads much like a grocery list, as if the poet merely took

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7 I would like merely to state that many Romanian intellectuals provided such an answer. My decision to concentrate on Ana Blandiana is based particularly on the fact that she was a poet above all else, and her poem, “Everything” was in fact the first samizdat piece of writing in the country. Her poem was published in 1984 in an underground Romania literary journal and rapidly banned in about four hours time. How the poems traveled to Radio Free Europe is still unknown, perhaps through an underground mailing system, or, most likely, through that class of people which were able to travel between the East and West and thus distribute information. I choose Ana Blandiana as my example not for the lack of alternative choices, but simply due to the fact that four of her poems (*Totul* [Everything], *Eu Cred* [I believe], *Cruciada copiilor* [The Children’s Crusade], *Delimitari* [Delimitations]) published in a student journal in 1984 entitled *Amfiteatru*, existed as the one of the first acts of samizdat literature in Romanian culture. The poems of Blandiana come from the online archive of Romania Poetry which is listed in the bibliography.

8 Ana Blandiana, *Eu Cred*, from the online archive.
a scrap of paper and began listing that which she herself would find on the streets of Bucharest. Yet, the poem, when heard by that man or woman sitting on the couch next to the window overlooking the street where thousands of people walk each day, to buy milk or flour or a banned book, for that man or woman, the poem, when heard, becomes exponentially more affective. Because to hear something, anything, in Romania at the time, besides the voice of Ceausescu or that of his wife, was the only sense of empowerment that man or woman on the couch had left. So when Monica Lovinescu read “Everything” out loud for the first time, and the words “Gypsies with Kents, eggs from Crevedia,/Rumors, the Saturday night TV show/Substitute coffee,/The fight of nations for peace, choirs, Production by the hectare, Gerovital” were heard, they (the words) created what Jonathan Flatley (2008) would call an “affective map,” guiding the listener “through [his or her] spatial environment” (p. 77). In other words, the radio-listeners were repositioned inside their world, the world filled with bad coffee and long hunger lines, and this repositioning, this loud remapping, brought them face to face with their feelings about the present moment. And thus a revolution begins - when people finally realize the mask they decorated with anxious fearfulness masked nothing else but their own discontent. Monica Lovinescu knew what she was doing when she asked the public that day if they lived inside their own histories. She also knew what she was doing when she began to read Blandiana’s poem, forcing the listeners to finally see that the disheartening world they hear about on the radio represents nothing else but the world they themselves inhabit.

“Then,” writes Lovinescu (1994c) after reading all four of Blandiana’s poems on the air in 1985, “[I] allowed them to explode on the radio waves,” knowing that the only power the individual has in a world such as this one “is to refrain from choosing the path of open dissidence” (p. 177) to choose the pen over the gun, the poetic voice over a shout. The explosion was of the non-violent type, one reverberating through radio waves, allowing the words to become pistols of sound echoing through the listener’s private space. As soon as the ears heard Blandiana’s list, the eyes began to see the Kent labels, the Coca-cola, “the Saturday night TV show,” and the mouth began to taste the “eggs from Crevedia.” The senses slowly overlapped as voice provided words with the visual properties usually supplied by reading. And the listener, in learning how to read voice, began to hear the echo of his or her own thoughts, an echo of resistance.

Agamben (2006) asks a question that seems central to this analysis: “in what way does the living being have language?” How can one “have language,” or better yet, how can the living being maintain his or her contact with language when he or she is not allowed to write, to speak, or even to draw anything that may offend the state? (Agamben, 1995, 8). “The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it,” Agamben (1995, p. 8) writes, reminding us that politics exists only because men and women have, through language, been able to compile the political cannon. And through language, through words, through phrases and combinations of sounds, those same individuals can begin redefining politics. Blandiana’s poem represents a beginning, one which used printed words to textually enact a protest that the streets were not ready to hold yet. As soon as the visual words were attributed with sound, the poem abandoned its textual confinement, erupting from wave to wave, echoing, reminding the listener of that the poet rested inside the country and was able to find a voice to her words.
There “were people in Romania that lived tied to their radio program as astronauts in space are tied to their oxygen source” (Liiceanu, 2006, p. 115). There were people that fell asleep to the radio, allowing the lullaby of sound to tuck them in. There were families that gathered for dinner, placing the radio near the table, as if it too required sustenance. But listening is not enough. The people got tired of listening on December 16, 1989, and finally started searching for their voices. Timidly at first, they gathered, looking frantically throughout the streets, hoping to find a road sign directing them to their unique sounds. Unsure whether or not the sounds they emanated made sense, they nevertheless began to speak, as if for the first time. And at that moment, the radio had finally been taken out of the living room and placed in the middle of the city, its volume turned high enough to energize even pavement to action.

References

*“The Romanian revolution began in Timisoara, sparked by the courage of one man, the Reverend Laszlo Tokes, a pastor of the Reformed (Calvinist) Church and a member of the Hungarian ethnic minority. Despite repeated harassment by the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, Tokes had been an adamant champion of human and religious rights. On December 15, 1989, when secret police agents tried to evict Tokes forcibly from his parish house, thousands of people - Romanians as well as Hungarians - formed a human chain and unleashed a massive anti-Ceausescu demonstration.”- taken from Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel (p. 232), by V. Tismaneanu, 1992, New York, NY: The Free Press."

