

**Cristina Vatulescu, *Reading the Archival Revolution: Declassified Stories and their Challenges*, ISBN: 9781503641020 (paperback), Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2024, pp. 291**

“As you like”, said Ivanov. “But you’re putting us both in an embarrassing situation that forces me to play the bureaucrat with you...”. He reached into a drawer and pulled out a bundle of files.

“Let’s start with 1933”, he went on, spreading the files across the desk. “The onset of the dictatorship and suppression of our party in Germany – the land where it seemed closest to victory...”<sup>1</sup>.

As you remember, your explanation, which could also be called a confession of regret, closed with a sharp condemnation of the opposition and an unconditional declaration of... faith in the person of Number One”.

“Enough”, said Rubashov hoarsely. “You know how such declarations come about. If not, all the better for you. Enough of this theater”<sup>2</sup>.

In *Reading the Archival Revolution: Declassified Stories and Their Challenges*, the literary scholar Cristina Vatulescu replaces the powerful portrayal of dictatorship depicted in Arthur Koestler’s nonfiction novel *Darkness at Noon* with the complex, dark reality of totalitarianism. Vatulescu examines how declarations, like Rubashov’s, could be extracted by the secret police. She explores the methods by which the secret police archives of Romania, Poland, and the former Soviet Union concealed their records of power from the public, utilizing them as tools of coercion and intimidation. Through compelling case studies, archival veteran Vatulescu highlights the significant issues posed by these now long-declassified archives. After her initial excitement about obtaining research access at the onset of the archival revolution, Vatulescu realized that

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<sup>1</sup> A. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, with an Introduction by Michael Scammell, New York 2019, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

these archives are extremely difficult to read, often illegible, containing huge amounts of material teeming with disturbing gaps and awkward silences, and encompassing a multitude of languages, mediums, and technologies. These types of documents left her wondering what reading could accomplish. Undeterred, Vatulescu asserts that the reading of the archival revolution occurs along a continuum and concerns the boundaries between documents and fictions, as well as between people and their recorded representations. We read words, images, faces, and silences in ways that deeply intertwine and inform each other. For example, the ways in which secret archives circumscribed the reading of personal files impacted how people viewed each other in the past and present (p. 2). According to Vatulescu, this approach reinterprets the significance and objective of reading, especially for the examination of declassified secret police records. Her analysis of the archival revolution begins with the onset of post-World War II Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and extends to the present (p. 27).

In Chapter One, "Silences: Foucault in Poland", Vatulescu recounts philosopher Paul-Michel Foucault's first visit to Poland in 1958. Upon his arrival, Foucault, considered the father of Western archive theory, made a vow to document the "history of [the] language" of power and to study "the archaeology of silence". Foucault's approach to studying the history of language is called the archeology of knowledge, which examines the rules and conditions that govern the production of knowledge and discourse within specific historical periods, rather than tracing a linear or progressive history of language. Foucault, in turn, discusses "archaeology" as the analysis of a statement as it occurs in the historical archive<sup>3</sup>. The "archaeology of silence" analyzes how societies construct and maintain silence around certain subjects by examining the discourses and practices that exclude, marginalize, and surveil them<sup>4</sup>. Foucault believed that this commitment forged within him an inextricable bond to the archives of the Eastern Bloc (p. 37). This section, co-authored with fellow literary scholar Anna Krakus, dissects the archival remnants of this tangled tie by focusing on the perplexing and instructive silences in the archives. They discovered that archives of power not only suppress the voices of victims but also expose the shortcomings and silences of secret police operatives. Vatulescu and Krakus, however, resolved

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<sup>3</sup> J. Powell, *Understanding Foucault for Beginners*, New York 2013, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 28, 48.

this duality of silence by stressing the importance of analyzing intermediary concepts like gossip and slander to solve the disquieting interpretive ambiguity that defines existence in police states, as illustrated by the silence of Foucault's lover, translator, and informant.

If scholars were confronted by a textual tsunami in the early decades of the archival revolution, they are now facing the revolution's second tidal surge – visual materials. In chapter two, "Intermedia: The Files, Film, and Photo Albums of a Socialist Bank Heist", Vatulescu shows how these archives make meaning and wield power through intermedia, in the crafted collusion of various mediums. Intermedia challenges our specialized discipline- and medium-specific – archival methodologies and forces a rethinking of current archival philosophy (p. 28). She draws inspiration from such archival philosophies as the second "archival turn" and the work of Eastern European visual artists and filmmakers to develop methodologies for this intermedia challenge (p. 71). The second "archival turn" came to be associated with academia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to postmodernism and the influence of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's writings. Over time, this movement developed to examine the concept of "the archive." Vatulescu, for example, examines Intermedia through the film "Reconstituirea" ("Reenactment", 1960) (p. 72), produced by the Securitate, the Romanian secret police, which depicts a 1959 bank heist. By analyzing "Reconstituirea" along with its scripts and other archival documents, Vatulescu revealed some overlooked stories. When cellmate informer reports were compared to other case materials, for example, they showed that torture was common and that questioning records were being deliberately covered up. This dynamic triggered concerns during the evaluation of other records due to their distinctive visual and hybrid characteristics (p. 86).

In the intermedia context, Vatulescu proposes further that "attending" is a more appropriate term than "reading", as it more accurately characterizes our interactions with the archives and highlights the process of addressing archival requests as an expression of care (p. 95). She asserts that the artists studied employ diverse techniques for engaging with and rehabilitating secret police archives, which assist us to read, understand, question, and discuss these records (p. 100). Vatulescu adds that the most underappreciated archive is ourselves. While our memories of the past can be mediated through paper, textiles, painting, and photography, they must and will always be processed through our "sensorium" with the assistance of visual artists. The sensorium are those parts

of the brain responsible for receiving, processing, and interpreting external world impressions (pp. 100–101).

The third and fourth chapters follow the uneven conflict between the Securitate's imaginary inventions of Herta Müller's *doppelgänger*, designed to compromise the Romanian-German novelist, poet, essayist, and Nobel laureate. She not only uncovered these manipulative tactics, but also wove them into her literary work – transforming personal trauma into powerful meditations on memory, identity, and systemic oppression. Vatulescu stresses that the fiction of disinformation requires careful reading in conjunction with Müller's early writings, which are fragmented, mistranslated, and relentlessly condemned within her dossier and continue to affect the archive and unsettle its dominant narrative. She sets these arrested literary fictions against Müller's captors. Vatulescu argues that, when examined closely, these fictional elements can shift from being obstacles to interpretation into valuable guides for reading Müller's literature (p. 29). She asserts further that Müller was conscious of the adaptations, paraphrases, and translations made to her writings. And Müller would have had to put up with having mistranslated sentences flung at her during interrogations. The text demonstrates the general characteristics of her writing style, which the better readers among the informers have frequently mentioned: the extraordinary attention to detail, the estrangement effect, and the transformation of the everyday into the grotesque (p. 113). For example, in the novel *The Appointment*, Müller analyzes both her own writing and the distorted words used by informants to incriminate her. As a result, she took on a dual role – as both the author and the critic of the book. She delayed its publication in order to include the text *On This Day*, as well as excerpts from her secret police file and an account of her encounters with the Securitate (pp. 119, 121)<sup>5</sup>. Vatulescu claims that the prominence of writing – maintaining written documentation – in these interrogations may appear surprising; nonetheless, it aligns with the internal Securitate directives of the Romanian police state regulating the informer network. They mandated the documentation of informant reports (p. 126). According to one incomprehensible Securitate directive, for example, before writing on others, the candidate would draft “the informant agreement

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<sup>5</sup> For an example of this incorporation, please compare the scene in both stories, where the boyfriend Paul calls the protagonist crazy. See: H. Müller, *An diesem Tag (On this Day)* [in:] *Barfüßiger Februar (Barefooted February)*, Berlin 1987, p. 34. See also: eadem, *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet (The Appointment)*, Hamburg 1997, p. 26.

and an autobiography”, contingent upon their approval to serve as an informant. If a candidate declined to compose the recruitment contract and autobiography, regulations mandated that they “write a biography” instead, making them the object rather than the subject (p. 127).

Vatulescu also highlights Müller’s claim in her brief work, *Cristina, or the Double*, where she describes how she got and read her file, stating that the Securitate altered it and removed any important information, including its supposed missing beginning (pp. 29, 123). Müller immediately began an effort to correct what she regarded as missing from the file by putting its contents in chronological order (p. 123). Müller’s literature predominantly explores the brutality she suffered under Ceausescu’s dictatorial regime. Her writings illustrate that the unrecorded was sometimes lethal, frequently life-threatening, and nearly always life-changing for its subjects. Müller emphasizes that she provided these experiences with language instead of a voice, as they were aspects she could never articulate herself, but instead were expressed in her Nobel lecture, “as a command to write” (pp. 126, 131)<sup>6</sup>.

If access to missing or classified documents was the initial barrier in the first years of the Eastern European archival revolution, chapter five, “Data: The Iron Curtain’s Origins and Translations”, confronts the current obstacle: the overabundance of documents created by increased digitization. Vatulescu buttresses her argument in two parts. First, she argues that this archival excess is most severe in the Eastern European context because of the unsurpassed reliance on propaganda, writing, and recordkeeping by the region’s former “graphomaniac” police states (pp. 155–156). Second, Vatulescu asserts that the large number of digitization projects undertaken by such companies as EastView has increased access to thousands of publications previously unavailable to researchers. She fully acknowledges that digitization both magnifies and alleviates this archival overflow. Vatulescu, however, does not back down. She confronts the complex problem of digital excess head-on by adopting a truly unique research method that utilizes the EastView databases to search for the most politically charged metaphor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Iron Curtain (p. 156). In brief, EastView includes thousands of central and local publications in Russian as well as many other Eastern European languages. Researchers, in turn,

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<sup>6</sup> See: H. Müller, *Every word knows something of a vicious circle (Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis)*, “Nobel Lecture” 2009, December 7, p. 7.

are able to track individual and combined words and phrases in the full body of millions of texts. Utilizing this function, Vatulescu combined data analysis with close readings of the rhetorical war of words and the translation difficulties surrounding the term Iron Curtain. She reviewed both official government statements and political cartoons from the moment the Iron Curtain fell between the West and the East to its reappearance as “Iron Curtain 2.0” during the war in Ukraine (p. 159). Vatulescu demonstrates that using digital tools and archives can uncover not only long-term patterns that are difficult to see up close but also reveal that digital records often strengthen established power centers (p. 187).

In conclusion, Vatulescu has given the archival profession a beautiful, incisive reflection on archival reading. Although reading can appear to be a lonely task, she has shown that the interpretive work provides inspiration and moving reminders of the potential to remediate the archival encounter, starting with our own reading. This inspiration is valuable because to truly remediate the archival revolution, archivists must rectify our reading practices (p. 106). Vatulescu contends further that the archival revolution is an intermedia encounter, which plays a significant role in achieving transitional justice – a turning away from allegedly illegible instruments of power and a movement toward a publicly accessible collection of documents that can count as evidence against terror and lead to understanding and healing (p. 5).

Is the archival revolution Vatulescu so eloquently describes even possible? Unfortunately, no. Her meticulously rendered case studies do not portray an archival revolution, but rather artists, researchers, and scholars engaged in a series of unending battles. The harsh realities of power politics and their skilled practitioners, however, thwart their aspiration to achieve a true revolution. In Chapter Five, “Data”, for example, she lays out in fine detail the coldly choreographed bureaucratic maneuverings of the likes of a Joseph Stalin and a Nicolae Ceaușescu in controlling the term Iron Curtain among their citizenry, in effect transforming a politically charged metaphor into a benign expression. Dictatorships are not the only brutal controllers of information. Democracies are not immune to criticism and engage in similar manipulations. For instance, in the United States, President Lyndon Johnson and the political and military elites introduced the infamous phrase “Domino Theory” to the American public, positing that if one country succumbed to communism, it would lead to the collapse of neighboring countries, akin to a row of dominos cascading upon

themselves. They used this faulty premise as their key justification for U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

Although artists, in turn, can provide unique interpretations of archives for both professionals and the general public, their intermedia art forms cannot overthrow the entrenched power elites and the potent levers they wield. To demonstrate, in Chapter Three, "Fictions", Vatulescu recalls Müller's valiant efforts not just to restore simple chronological order to her Securitate files but also to gain some understanding about all the agonizing consequences she endured under the Ceaușescu regime<sup>7</sup>. In the end, Müller failed. She eventually chose silence, stating: "...what can't be said can be written. Because writing is a silent act, a labor from the head to the hand. The mouth is skipped over"<sup>8</sup>. Although it is harsh, in the end, even Müller's powerful prose did not transform either the Securitate archives or the way researchers interact with them. And the expectation that unmediated truth lies within the documents of the state, no matter its label, will remain eternally elusive to Müller, to researchers, scholars and to archivists. Despite our ongoing battles, achieving the archival revolution will continue to be a distant victory. In the meantime, Vatulescu has offered us a penetrating meditation to prepare ourselves for the long fight and overcome the "Darkness at Noon".

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.