The Remains of a Dying Culture: Dieter Auner's *Leaving Transylvania* (2006)

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Résumé*: Présenté au* Festival International du Film Documentaire *et de l'Anthropologie Visuelle de* Sibiu, *Astra Film Fest, en 2006,* **Leaving Transylvania** *jette un regard nostalgique sur la vie des communautés saxonnes de Transylvanie, qui, après la chute du régime communiste, semble avoir été condamnées à la ruine et à une lente extinction non seulement par le déclin économique mais surtout par l'exode de la jeune génération pendant les années 1990. Pour les vieux Saxons qui sont restés en Transylvanie, la vie dans la société roumaine en transition est devenue un combat assidu contre la solitude et les problèmes financiers qui finissent par les combler un à un, tout en restant des témoins impuissants de la mort de leur culture séculaire.*

Notre article s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une recherche menée dans le projet international **Gender, Migration and Intercultural Interactions in the Mediterranean and South-East Europe: an interdisciplinary perspective (7ᵉ PC - Ge.M.IC.).** *Nous y proposons une étude imagologique, étayée par les éléments d'analyse du texte filmique, des représentations de l'identité d'un petit groupe de vieux Saxons roumains que l'histoire (la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, l'essor et le déclin du régime communiste) et les différences ethniques et socio-économiques ont remodelés, parfois par des expériences traumatisantes. La décision difficile de rester ou d'émigrer est incessamment remise en discussion tout le long du film.*

Mots clés*: migration, identité, appartenance ethnique, film documentaire.*

The process of transition from the Communist regime to democracy and capitalist market economy that followed the 1989 Revolution in Romania entailed radical changes at all levels of the Romanian society that, among other things, boosted mobility across national borders. Driven by an increasing feeling of social and financial insecurity, many Romanian citizens sought to take advantage of the liberalization of passport administration and international travel, and assumed the risks of displacement and of the encounter with the other on foreign ground through emigration to different (non-)European destination countries. Thus, throughout the first post-1989 decade, migration outflows underwent significant modifications as the number of emigrants from Romania increased and the reasons behind migration – whether perceived as 'adventure' or 'exile' – shifted from mainly political to mainly economic ones (even in the case of the asylum-seekers[1]).

In this context of constantly evolving dynamics of permanent and temporary, legal and illegal emigration flows, there was, at least in the early days of post-Communist Romania, a slightly different category of emigrants, for whom economic reasons for migration added to the strong awareness of cultural differences against the background of a troubled past. Thus, growing numbers of ethnic minority Romanian citizens – chief among which the Saxons[2] – chose to leave Romania in favour of destination countries to which they felt more or less bound by their sharing the same cultural roots. The consequences were devastating, especially in the rural areas: breaking out vigorously in the early 1990s (i.e., 1990-1993) to decrease then until more or less ceasing in the early 2000s[3], the Romanian Saxons' exodus caused entire Transylvanian villages to die by depopulation, thus seriously damaging the economic potential and the cultural heritage of the region.

Leaving Transylvania (2006), Dieter Auner's documentary film, focuses precisely on the circumstances that led to the slow decline of the Saxon communities in post-Communist Transylvania. The first directing experience of a Saxon exile[4], this film blends personal narratives (some of which are most likely very similar to those of the filmmaker's relatives who decided to emigrate in 2001) with the meditation on "the last deep breath of [Transylvanian Saxons'] cultural existence"[5]. Casting a nostalgic look on his grand-parents' village Arbegen/Agârbiciu, Dieter Auner attempts to re-establish a link with his

(once) homeland and sets out on a quest for his "'own' Saxon heritage", "construct[ing] a visual essay articulating the loss of collective identity"[6]. Thus, the inner conflict of individuals foregrounded by documentary-specific storytelling strategies is symbolically intended to invite the exploration of a universal theme of disorientation when facing the dissolution of a centuries-old community.

The dominant characters are Hans and Maria Kenzel, a Saxon couple in their sixties. Their life is inextricably related to that of the significantly diminished Saxon community in Arbegen: they take care of the old Saxon church and cemetery, and contribute to the preservation of the Saxon traditions and way of life. But, despite their age and profound attachment to their homeland, they decide to migrate to Germany. The narrative thread that develops around the reasons why they eventually make the difficult decision of leaving behind the village where they lived their entire life and the steps they take in order to legally migrate is constantly interrupted and completed by interviews with other Saxons from Arbegen, friends and neighbours of the Kenzels like: Jutzi Stuehler, a very close friend who helps Hans and Maria fill in the papers they should submit in order to get a passport and who is also to migrate in December 2001; Jirk Schneider, Hans's closest friend, who helps him take care of the church and the cemetery; Inge Petru, a younger neighbour, probably in her early fifties; Maria and Misch Wolf, who range among the eldest members of the community; and, last but not least, Hans Hatt, a clergyman who comes occasionally to take the local priest's place, when the latter is ill or cannot organise the religious service.

Out of the kaleidoscopic presentation of these people's life experiences and 'philosophy' of the self/other interaction, the film constructs a more complex picture of the Saxons' migration. All the interviewees are aware that the exodus of their Saxon fellows in the early 1990s had disastrous effects on the community, which is now in danger of becoming extinct. (There are only 22 Saxons left in the village.) Yet, they react differently to contextual and in-group changes and have various opinions with regard to the reasons why the majority of the Romanian Saxons chose to migrate to Germany. Through the juxtaposition of their more or less divergent discourses on migration, identity and economic, social, ethnic/cultural differences, the film develops its main underlying patterns sustained by the Saxon/Romanian, East/West, rich/poor, rural/urban, young/old dichotomies.

For instance, Hans and Maria Kenzel advance the dramatic decline of their local Saxon community as one of the reasons why they intend to leave as well: since there is almost nobody left to visit and to socialize with, they would rather go to Germany. In addition, the two bring to the foreground of their stories economic reasons that can hardly be ignored. Hans has at least a small pension, but Maria does not. They worked hard over the years, growing corn, selling pigs and eggs to make and save some money, but that was not enough.

Moreover, the narrative therapy that these two subjects willingly submit to subtly reveals their frustrations related to Saxons' life under the Communist regime. Maria remembers that her family was well-off and owned vineyards, sheep, bulls, but in 1945 the Communists took everything away from them. So Maria had to work hard her entire life. As she and her husband are growing old and can no longer strive to earn their daily bread, they see no other way out but to join their relatives who migrated to Germany – to Augsburg, to be more specific – and who might help them through their old age. Naturally, they find it very difficult to leave behind the house in which they lived for decades and they are aware that they will probably die longing for their home in Romania, but they do their best to overcome their fear of displacement and are convinced that they can manage, just as Maria's sister Bini (who was older than Maria – 79 – when she left) did. Eventually,

the reluctantly accepted idea of leaving home – Romania – to return home – to the space which they share with their family members and 'cultural peers', i.e., Germany – seems to be the only 'solution' to the couple's problems.

The same social and economic reasons, with a particular stress on the social ones – i.e., on family reunification – determine Jutzi Stuehler to migrate as well: she has her children in Germany, so she intends to join them.

Jirk Schneider is, however, convinced that the exodus of the Saxon community was rather motivated by the defective policies of the Romanian state with regard to the restitution of the property confiscated by the Communists. He claims that, after 1990, the Romanians got their lands back, but the Saxons did not, and he believes that, had the Saxons recovered their forefathers' land, as the Romanians did, nobody (here including his friends Hans and Maria Kenzel) would have migrated.

With the eldest of the interviewees, Maria and Misch Wolf, the debate on migration and cultural differences is taken much further and the economic reasons become rather secondary to the ethnic (and political) ones when set within a larger historical frame that encompasses the rise in power of the Communist regime and inter-ethnic conflict in the aftermath of World War II, when, on account of their German otherness, many Transylvanian Saxons were persecuted and deported "to redeem by working their 'German' guilt"[7]. The couple's comments seem to sustain – just like Maria Kenzel's and Jirk Schneider's – Dumitru Sandu's argument according to which, in the 1990s, the Saxons did not migrate *primarily* for economic reasons: they were partly motivated by the frustrations accumulated during the Communist period[8]. Yet, with Maria and Misch Wolf, more than with any other characters in the documentary, the sense of identity is defined by generalizing oversimplifications and negative representations of the Romanian Other. After they nostalgically evoke the good days and the beautiful traditions of their Saxon community, Maria and Misch Wolf reveal their having evolved over the years towards a rather xenophobic attitude in relation to the Romanian majority. They bitterly remember the days when, in 1945, the Romanians took them all the land and animals, causing a lot of hardships to the Saxon minority. Though not entirely siding with the Saxons who left because their exodus brought to ruin a once strong community with an 800-year-old cultural and historical heritage, Maria and Misch Wolf consider migration regretful, but fully justified and, hence, do not wish for their fellow Saxons' return:

> "Maria Wolf: Always the Saxons, the poor Saxons! Why was it only the Saxons who were deported to Russia in 1945? Why not deport other ethnic groups? There were many other nationalities at the time. They selected the Saxons for deportation…
> Misch Worlf: Herded up like sheep. The Romanians did. Yeah, the Romanians. Now they say that they are sorry that the Saxons are gone."[9]

The frustration-engendering xenophobia emerges in the old couple's narrative, without however, entailing any violent manifestation towards the Romanian community they have to share the village with. Their attitude is one of bitter resignation and refusal to mingle with the Romanian out-group.

At the opposite pole, the film presents, though as rather marginal, the attitudes of Saxons who, having lived as migrants, changed their opinion of the 'benefits' of migration or who simply do not embrace the 'solution' of such cross-cultural dynamism. Prior to their departure to Germany, the Kenzels are visited by an unnamed Saxon friend, who emigrated after 1990 but then returned to make a living in a Romanian town. He claims that life in Germany is not so different from that in Romania and strongly believes that, since they have all they need in Romania, Maria and Hans Kenzel should not emigrate.

His opinion seems to be shared by Hans Hatt who occasionally comes to replace the local priest. He acknowledges that migration to Germany might have its financial advantages, but it threatens the very existence and cultural heritage of the Saxons in Romania, so it is better to stay. ("It is true that the Saxons in Germany have some wealth, but those who stayed have their homeland."[10]) For him, "identity is defined in terms of belonging to a community whose spiritual unity, built over the centuries, must be maintained in spite of all changes at the social and political level."[11]

The artistic framework in which the characters' personal narratives are set draws the viewers' attention upon the director's undeniable creativity and, at the same time, highlights, through the skilful play on oral testimonies, visuals and sounds, the dynamics of image-making unravelling at the intersection between ideological, socio-cultural and aesthetic aspects of discourse. Thus, "to refer to reality symbolically"[12], Dieter Auner chooses to lay particular stress on iconographic representations of the dichotomically conceived spatial frames of countryside and town, East (Romania) and West (Germany). There is a certain irony in the way in which the film juxtaposes images of the natural landscape, almost idyllic in autumn and generous with the people who work hard and who are rewarded with rich crops, and the desolate look of the houses abandoned by the Saxons, of the old Saxon church and of the bad road that connects Arbegen with the neighbouring villages. The locked, crumbling houses, invaded by vegetation, the old church in ruin, the almost abandoned cemetery visually emphasise the disastrous consequences of the Saxon exodus; these are the remains of an 800-year-old cultural heritage that is slowly lost and forgotten. As long as there were people like Hans and Maria Kenzel to work the land, to take care of the Saxon church, to sweep the floor, to toll the church bell, to organise parties in the Saxon style, this heritage was preserved; with their departure – which means that one more house is locked and there will be no one left to care about the community's spiritual life (as most of the few Saxons still living in the village are too old) – the continuation of the Saxon way of life in Arbegen seems impossible.

Several typically ethnographic sequences that are essential for the representation of the sense of identity of the local rural community provide hints with regard to women's roles in the small, closed group of last ageing Saxons in Arbegen. Maria and her female friends (Jutzi Stuehler, Inge Petru, etc.) seem to spend most of their time in the kitchen or the canteen, close to ovens and stoves, when not helping men in the fields or tending to the poultry, pigs, cattle, etc. Yet, without turning gender identity into a major theme, the film occasionally seeks to escape the universal, patriarchy-dominated constructions of femininity, showing Saxon women in the position of companions, not subjects, to their husbands and of preservers of the Saxon traditions.

All in all, life in the Romanian countryside is obviously contrasted with that in Romanian towns, though the same sense of decay seems to affect the latter as well. As Hans and Maria Kenzel travel to Sibiu/Hermannstadt (once the very 'heart' of the Saxon community in Transylvania) to submit their papers for migration, the filmmaker does not seem interested in showing the better preserved central area of the town, but parts of the old town that have not been restored. These shots add to his representation of cultural decline that the Romanian society in transition, struggling to come to terms with its numerous contradictions, seems incapable to stop. Hans and Maria feel rather at a loss in the middle of the town crowd or in front of a clerk's counter at an otherwise poorly furnished, messy emigration office, where they are very disappointed to find out they need to submit a whole pile of papers from different Romanian authorities, before they could get the permission to migrate. The railway station equally provides a rather distressing sight.

The final sequence of the film allows for a contrastive approach to the Romanian and the German urban spaces, as Maria and Hans are interviewed in their new flat in

Augsburg. The visual material reveals the striking difference between the comfortable, well-lit and modernized living space to which Maria and Hans have to adapt (where they do not have to work, where they do not get dirty and where there is no dust to clean over and over again), and the old-fashioned, humble house where the couple lived in Arbegen. Moreover, there is an obvious disparity between the neatness and peace of the German town and the decay, noise and pollution characterising the Romanian ones.

Altogether, visual symbolism and the astonishing collage of (non-)musical sounds is systematically exploited in underlining the recurrent *ubi sunt* motif that emerges from the characters' speech. Images of the elderly Saxons who can barely cope with deprivation and loneliness, the stay-or-leave dilemma and the awareness of their loss of cultural identity, alternate with glimpses at a bull herd in the river that might be interpreted as an allegorical representation of the Saxon community endeavouring to resist the ravages of time and to preserve their culture. But the bulls leave, one by one, the river to climb the cliff and to return home; so, the Saxons make the decision to leave behind their Transylvanian home and to embark upon the journey to the West, now all the more difficult since they are old, in order to join their families in Germany, and to return thus to the cradle of civilisation from where their ancestors were initially displaced in a distant medieval past. Heavy silence is violently broken by high-pitched, dissonant tunes that change their rhythm to better highlight the protagonists' feelings or to make way for the live sound of the singing Saxons attending an unglamorous dinner or of a Saxon band in the end of the film, a faint echo of the songs and dances of 'the good old days'. The soundtrack sustains by its contrasts and melancholy twists the conclusion that one of Hans Kenzel's remarks summarises with poignant simplicity:

> "It's a devastating situation. Who would have ever thought? That a time would come when the Saxons would leave their homes. There were over 300,000 of us. There is only the song remaining about the Saxons who lived here: 'We're here for the past 800 years…'"[13]

Dieter Auner defines his *Leaving Transylvania* as "an extended chapter of [his] own history"[14]. Once an 'adventurer' daringly moving across national borders in search for better opportunities and education, the director casts a grim and doleful exile's gaze on his native Saxon community in Arbegen that radical societal changes and problematic inter-ethnic interactions have brought to ruin. This "love poem", as a critic calls it[15], is, however, structured so as to exceed the limits of individual case study and to address themes of a wider scope like the dying culture of the – rural and ethnic – margin, the identity-shaping interplay between self-perception and perception of the other, and the re-negotiation of the Transylvanian Saxons' understanding of 'home' in the context of migration. Cross-cultural displacement is here reflected upon from the perspective of a migrant director and that singles out the filmic text as different from other discursive representations of migration. Without being explicitly pessimistic, Dieter Auner does not rule out the possibility that the Saxon emigrants/exiles may return to Transylvania or that the Saxon community may one day regenerate. Yet, his creative documentary seems to ultimately suggest that, for this particular category of 'wanderers', there is, nonetheless, less hope left than for the majority of Romanian migrants: "To the question: where do we go? Novalis answered: always home! We, the *Transylvanian Saxons*, are left only with some memories of it..."[16] Ultimately, this filmic elegy invites the viewers to appreciate the recuperative power of film that can save from oblivion the 'remains of a dying culture' and to meditate on cultural dynamics from integration to disintegration and reintegration.

Notes
1. The phenomenon of asylum-seeking considerably decreased over the decade 1990-2000, tending to reach zero level – from 116,000 in the early 1990s to less than 10,000 in 1996 (Ethnobarometer, 2004, section II.2)

– and it lost most of its political connotations. Studies of migration are unanimous in showing disbelief as to the genuine nature of the Romanian/Roma migrants' asylum-seeking motivations, suggesting that they rather served as a 'cover' mechanism to migration for labour. See M. Baldwin-Edwards, "Migration Policies for a Romania within the European Union: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis" in *Mediterranean Migration Observatory*, Working Paper no. 7 (December), Panteion University, Athens, 2005, p. 10; O. L. Simina, "Next in Line – Romanians at the Gates of the EU (emigrants, border control, legislation)" in *SISEC Discussion Papers*, No. II, Issue 1 (February), Universitatea de Vest, Timişoara, 2005, p. 9; L. Nicolescu and D. L. Constantin, "Romania's External Migration in the Context of Accession to the EU: Mechanisms, Institutions and Socio-Cultural Issues" in *The Romanian Journal of European Studies*, No. 4, Editura Universităţii de Vest, Timişoara, 2005, p. 56; and G. I. Colipcă and I. Ivan-Mohor, "Context Analysis and Methodology Review Report (WP2). Romania", *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction Ge.M.IC.*, 2009, p. 4.

2. Most of the studies on the migration trends characterising the first decades after the fall of the Communist regime, which tackle the intersection of economic decline and ethnic difference as the ground for permanent mass migration, refer to the Transylvanian Saxons and Hungarians. Roma migrants, as an ethnic group "which ended up being neither exchanged, assimilated nor tolerated", have not always been systematically recorded as Roma, hence the scarcity of data available regarding their migration. (M. Baldwin-Edwards, "Patterns of Migration in the Balkans" in *Mediterranean Migration Observatory*, Working Paper no. 9/ January, Panteion University, Athens, 2006, p. 6) See also G. I. Colipcă and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

3. For example, in 1990, out of the 96,629 Romanian citizens who migrated legally and settled their permanent residence abroad, 60,072 were Saxons. (Anuarul Statistic al României. Populaţie, 2006, section 2.30, p. 59) By contrast, in 2005, the number of Saxon emigrants was significantly reduced to 93. See G. I. Colipcă and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

4. Born in Transylvania (Central Romania), Dieter Auner migrated in 1990 to Germany. In 1994, he chose to move further to Ireland. He settled in Galway, where he has been working on Irish and international productions as a photographer, camera operator, film editor, and, more recently, film director. (*http://www.leavingtransylvania.com/the-director-dieter-auner.php*)

5. D. Auner, "Extras. Director's notes" in *Leaving Transylvania. A Documentary Film by Dieter Auner*, 2010, available at *http://www.leavingtransylvania.com/director-notes.php*.

[6] Ibidem.

7. G. I. Colipcă, I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitraşcu and M. Neagu, "National Case Study – National Identity and the Media (WP4). Romania", *Gender – Migration – Intercultural Interaction. Ge.M.IC*, 2010, p. 50, available at *http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/WP4-Report-Romania-final.pdf*.

8. I. Speteanu, "*Leaving Transylvania*, comunităţi în amurg. Interviu cu Dumitru Sandu", *Dilema Veche*, Nr. 181/ 26 iulie - 1 august 2007, available at *http://www.romaniaculturala.ro/articol.php?cod=4738*.

9. See the script of *Leaving Transylvania* (2006). Director and producer: Dieter Auner. Languages: Transylvania Saxon, German and Romanian. Duration: 52 minutes.

10. Ibidem.

11. G. I. Colipcă, I. Ivan-Mohor, M. Praisler, G. Dima, A. M. Dumitraşcu and M. Neagu, *op.cit.*, p. 50, available at *http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/WP4-Report-Romania-final.pdf*.

12. P. Aufderheide, *Documentary Film – A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, p. 3.

13. See the script of *Leaving Transylvania* (2006).

14. D. Auner, *op.cit.*, 2010, available at *http://www.leavingtransylvania.com/director-notes.php*.

15. C. Maguire, "Highly recommended", in *Leaving Transylvania. A Documentary Film by Dieter Auner*, 2010, available at *http://www.leavingtransylvania.com/highly-recommended.php*.

16. D. Auner, "Extras. Director's notes" in *Leaving Transylvania. A Documentary Film by Dieter Auner*, 2010, available at *http://www.leavingtransylvania.com/director-notes.php*.

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Filmography

Leaving Transylvania. Documentary, Ireland/Romania 2006. Director and producer: Dieter Auner. Languages: Transylvania Saxon, German and Romanian. Duration: 52 minutes.