



# Polyphonic Echoes of Memory: *Between Revolutions* (2023), an Affective Epistolary Film

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**Abstract.** This study uses Bakhtinian methods to examine how the essay film *Between Revolutions* (*Între revoluții*, Vlad Petri, 2023) portrays the polyphonic nature of memory and trauma in narratives about revolutions, focusing on two women’s experiences in Romania and Iran through the epistolary form. The author aims to explore the relationship between individual and collective memories, emphasizing how these narratives, free from media dominance, challenge prevailing belief about revolutions in Iran and Romania. This polyphonic approach – where multiple, independent voices and perspectives coexist within the narrative – allows the film to interweave personal and historical narratives through a diverse array of voices, both female and male, public and private. By blending political and intimate perspectives, it amplifies the voices of ordinary citizens from Romania and Iran. The intermediality of image, voiceover, and music enriches the polyphonic structure, employing archival footage, protest sounds, and interviews juxtaposed with moments of silence and personal letters. The research highlights the film’s dialogic approach to memory, analyzing how the combination and juxtaposition of personal stories and archival footage enriches cultural memory.

**Keywords:** epistolary film, polyphony, memory, revolution on film, found footage.

## Introduction

“You need imagination in order to imagine a future that doesn’t exist.”

Azar Nafisi<sup>1</sup>

People often hold diverse perspectives and recollections of the past, a concept powerfully illustrated in *Between Revolutions* directed by Vlad Petri, a Romanian

1 This quote appears as a text at the beginning of *Between Revolutions* (Petri, 2023).

documentary film that premiered at Berlinale 2023. This film, acclaimed in various film festivals, uniquely intertwines 16 fictionalized letters, based on actual correspondences, with archival footage from Iran and Romania, spanning events from the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran to the 1989 revolution in Romania. It focuses on the experiences of women and the working class during these tumultuous times, including the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq war and Ceaușescu’s communist dictatorship in Romania. The film is noted for its non-comedic, serious tone, and is described as a docufiction, using an epistolary approach to contrast two distinct revolutionary contexts – one rooted in Islamic ideology and anti-imperialism, and the other in opposition to communist ideology.

The study aims to analyze how *Between Revolutions* uses the epistolary format and archival footage to enhance its polyphonic narrative of these revolutions through a Bakhtinian lens. It will explore Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony, which highlights the presence of multiple, independent voices within a text, and argue that the film embodies this concept by presenting diverse voices and experiences. This approach challenges the singular narrative often found in historical documentaries and enriches the narrative by acknowledging the complexity of human experiences during these revolutions.

The term “polyphony,” derived from musical theory and adapted by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, signifies “many sounds,” facilitating the narration of intricate stories. In music, polyphony involves the simultaneous combination of multiple tones or melodic lines. Bakhtin extensively explored this concept in literature, especially in his analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels, which contrast the conventional three-act, character-driven storytelling structure, typically culminating in resolution. In contrast, Dostoevsky’s narratives are open-ended, often posing questions rather than providing answers (Braemer 2023). Specific examples from the film will be analyzed to demonstrate how the epistolary form and the juxtaposition of personal letters with historical footage allow individual voices and experiences to coexist and interact, respecting their distinctiveness in line with Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, which refers to the presence of multiple, distinct voices or perspectives within a text, each with its own worldview and autonomy.

The film’s distinctive approach is likely to resonate with audiences drawn to explorations of cultural memory, revolutionary histories, and the impact of political shifts on personal and collective identities, as well as those interested in affective intermediality. This affective approach – combining archival footage, voiceovers, and evocative soundscapes – also appeals to viewers engaged with

women's narratives and transnational perspectives, as it delves into themes of displacement, resilience, and memory across national and ideological boundaries. Audiences with these interests will find opportunities for both emotional and intellectual engagement, as the film bridges complex histories with deeply personal experiences.

The study will conclude by discussing the relevance of Bakhtin's polyphony in the context of the Iranian and Romanian revolutions, showing how the film's polyphonic structure captures the nuanced socio-political and cultural dimensions of these events, providing a deeper understanding of these complex historical periods.

## Navigating the Letter-Films

*Between Revolutions* showcases the nuanced dynamics of epistolary cinema, blending 16 fictionalized letters with archival footage between Zahra, an Iranian woman, and Maria, a Romanian woman. In his analysis of epistolary films, Naficy (2001) identifies three distinct forms: film-letters, telephonic epistles, and letter-films. Film-letters involve the portrayal of letters and the act of reading and writing them by diegetic characters. Similarly, telephonic epistles focus on the depiction of telephones, answering machines, and their usage by diegetic characters. In contrast, letter-films embody epistles addressed to someone, either within or outside the diegesis, and do not necessarily require the use of traditional epistolary media (Naficy 2001, 101). *Between Revolutions* specifically aligns with the category of a letter-film, as it presents letters being read by the author solely through audio. The audience does not see the characters but hears them as they read or write.

Unique to this film, the characters are defined exclusively through their voices, with both being present as non-diegetic voiceovers, yet the audience is never visually introduced to either the author or the reader, the sender or the receiver. Contrasting Naficy's categorization, Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez (2021) argues that not all letter films fit neatly into the category of epistolary films. She posits that the modern letter-film, primarily focused on the subjective expression of the addresser, transforms into an epistolary film when it includes the presence of the addressee, thereby emphasizing the importance of alterity. According to Ibáñez, a film must meet five criteria to be considered truly epistolary: firstly, a film becomes epistolary through the reading of a set of letters (2021, 436–438), a criterion met by *Between Revolutions* with its sixteen letters. Secondly, the

epistolary “you” must be the protagonist, as seen in Zahra and Maria’s roles, resonating with Rascaroli’s discussion on epistolary subjectivity (2017, 154). The third criterion involves following the film’s literary model, a structure that unfolds through written correspondence (Ibáñez 2021, 437) – in *Between Revolutions* this criterion meets through Zahra and Maria’s letters and additional narrative voices such as the male voice in letter nine. In that letter, Maria writes to Zahra, expressing her feelings about being transferred to a large hospital. She realizes, however, that it isn’t much better there, as she still has to follow strict rules. This is compounded by her fearful sense of being under surveillance, to the point where she is even “afraid of words.” As the audience, we hear her voice over various yet coherent archival footage matched to the audio. The footage includes scenes from hospitals, operating rooms, doctors, and nurses at work, followed by formal gatherings and street scenes.

In this letter, we also hear another voice, separate from Zahra and Maria. This male voice introduces a polyphonic layer, providing a third perspective and intensifying Maria’s sense of being under surveillance. The order of voices in this letter is as follows: Maria, then the unfamiliar male voice (resembling a journalistic voice-over), and finally Maria again.

Fourthly, the film should feature filmic correspondences, showcasing intersubjectivity (Ibáñez 2021, 438), a criterion clearly manifested in the film as the narrators read the letters. The fifth criterion is the creation of layers of hybridization and complexity, achieved in *Between Revolutions* through the integration of various cinematic elements such as editing and sound designing (Ibáñez 2021, 437). Rascaroli emphasizes the intermediacy of the epistolary form, balancing distance and proximity (2017, 153). *Between Revolutions* employs this through its essayistic style and familiar addressing such as “Dear Zahra,” “Dear Maria,” “My dearest Zahra,” “My dear.” Therefore, *Between Revolutions* both adheres to and transcends Naficy’s and Ibáñez’s criteria, creating a rich tapestry of narratives that highlight the depth and versatility of epistolary cinema and affect. The juxtaposition of music, sound, and selected archival footage with the voices of Maria and Zahra enhances the epistolary quality and deepens the empathy a viewer feels toward the letter’s writer. The audience can easily envision themselves in the role of either the writer or the reader. For example, in the tenth letter, Zahra, with a tone filled with despair, turmoil, hopelessness, and distress, informs Maria about the disappearance of her father. She says, “I can’t stop looking for him. Sometimes I see him in the street. I run, I touch him, and he turns around. But it’s not him. My father, who was my revolution. The one who

taught me hope. The power to imagine the future. Now I can't imagine anything anymore." These words are heard over scenes of oil fields (helicopter shots), burning refineries (filmed from a moving car), home movies, family gatherings, a bride and groom, family and friends together, as well as a young man holding a girl, and other similar footage. The ambient sound accompanying this letter is noisy, evoking the 1970s with indistinct music mixed with car and train sounds.

## ***Between Revolutions* as Polyphonic Epistolary Film**

*Between Revolutions* skillfully combines polyphonic narrative techniques, where multiple, distinct voices contribute equally and independently to the story, weaving together a diverse range of perspectives. Using the epistolary form, the film offers a unique cinematic exploration of personal and collective memories. This approach allows various emotional and intellectual viewpoints to coexist, intertwining individual experiences with historical upheavals and capturing the intricate interplay of memory and revolution. The essence of *Between Revolutions* is encapsulated in its letters, introducing two pivotal characters, Zahra and Maria, both alumni of the University of Medicine in Bucharest during the 1970s. Zahra dropped out of the university just before the graduation to join the revolution in Iran. Her departure from Romania to Iran, driven by a quest for hope and change, inaugurates their epistolary exchange, with the first letter penned by Maria. The film masterfully interweaves individual memories with collective narratives, thereby contributing to the construction of a new cultural memory, a term coined by Jan Assmann. It refers to the external dimension of human memory that is shaped and controlled by societal and cultural contexts, rather than just internal brain processes. While we often think of memory as an individual, internal function, cultural memory involves the ways societies organize and transmit shared memories, values, and histories through rituals, symbols, and texts. It is these external conditions – imposed by culture – that determine how long these memories last and how they are maintained (Assmann 2011, 5). This concept resonates with Hedges' assertion that stories, when documented across various media, become integral to cultural memory (2015, 6).

Employing a rich tapestry of voice-overs, captions, poetry, indirect interviews, music, and meticulously selected archival footage, the film crafts a multi-layered narrative. Approximately three and a half minutes into the film, a voiceover

recites Nina Cassian's<sup>2</sup> poem, *They Cut Me in Two*, amidst scenes depicting college life. This moment marks a stylistic transition to an essayistic film form.

The poem:

“The river and the moon are splitting me in two  
 And the night is like blood flowing from my mouth  
 We used to be one, we used to be one  
 I never knew cliffs could be so wild  
 Falling like in a dream of sickles, there is a moon  
 And the river splitting me in two,  
 I say it again We used to be one, we used to be one.”

By bookending the film with this poem, it exemplifies Bakhtin's polyphony, employing repetition to articulate contrasting viewpoints. The poem adeptly introduces themes of otherness and fragmentation, echoed in the imagery of the dividing river and moon. This interplay of voices and the exploration of otherness enrich the poem, aligning with Bakhtin's views on the complexity of language and the dynamic interplay between self and others. Following the film's title sequence, a polyphonic style is established, permeating the entire film. In an interview<sup>3</sup> with Jan-Felix Wuttig, director Vlad Petri cites the influence of poets Nina Cassian and Forough Farrokhzad on Lavinia Braniște, who wrote the fictional letters based on documents found in the archives of Romania's Secret Police.

In total, the film features 16 letters, read over archival footage, with Maria's letters particularly imbued with a sense of longing. The film both opens and concludes with Maria's correspondence. Initially, these letters evoke friendship, love, and separation, poignantly acknowledging the physical and emotional distance between them. Maria's tone particularly conveys a deep yearning.

Maria: “Now, most of my memories include you. I've brought you into all of them, even my old ones. It feels like the voice in my head has always spoken with you. As I sat on the beach, I gazed into the distance, and I imagined you... I will hold your hand.” (Letter 3.) (This voiceover coincides with archival footage of women leisurely enjoying nature, swimming in the sea, birds flying freely [Fig. 1].)

2 Nina Cassian was an exiled Romanian poet who sought refuge in the United States after her poems satirizing the regime of President Nicolae Ceaușescu fell into the hands of his secret police.

3 See the video on the Teddy Award Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ef0kU6usIo>. Last accessed 04. 11. 2024.

As the narrative unfolds, the letters deepen into poignant reflections on the socio-political shifts surrounding them, capturing broader collective concerns. For Zahra in Iran, these include the ideological changes in the Islamic Republic following Khomeini's return from France, the imposition of compulsory hijab on women, and the repression of both individual and group dissent. In Romania, by contrast, the letters reveal Ceaușescu's glorification of communism through national media, the rising public dissatisfaction and protests, the fall of Ceaușescu, the influence of Western ideals, and the economic struggles that followed the revolution. Maria, however, exposes this glorification as merely a façade, highlighting the resilience and survival of ordinary people beneath it all.

Zahra: "The ones who came to power have initiated a crackdown. They are targeting intellectuals and leftists." (Letter 6 and letter 7.) (This is paired with images of fervent Muslims praying collectively, and women protesting against the compulsory hijab. [Figs. 2 and 3.]

According to Altman's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, the epistolary author has the option to emphasize either the connection or the separation between the sender and receiver, given the letter's role as a bridge between two distant points (Altman 1982, 13). El Hamamsy further posits that letter writing can act as a bulwark against despair (El Hamamsy 2010, 157). *Between Revolutions* harnesses this form of resistance by encapsulating the act of remembering as an antidote to forgetting. Here, tangible objects play a critical role in preserving memories, standing in for fading words and recollections:

Maria: "Sometimes, I wear the earrings you gave me when you left. I look in the mirror and imagine you getting close to me. But I can't remember your voice." (Letter 13.)

Maria: "When I imagine you talking to me, I'm not even sure it's your voice I'm hearing." (Letter 16.)

Additionally, the film transcends the portrayal of a mere geographical and emotional separation between two friends. It acts as an excavation of history over two decades, interlacing personal recollections with historical events. Huysen notes that memory, whether lived or imagined, is always partial and virtual (2000, 19). Films that delve into unresolved historical traumas, buried utopian dreams, or the formation of identities not only craft memories for viewers but also contribute to the creation of new cultural memories. As Maria writes in the sixteenth letter, "I can't remember your voice...I look at our photos...When do people start to fade away from paper? We are fading together."

To avoid monotony and infuse unpredictability, the film intersperses segments devoid of Zahra's or Maria's voice-overs with archival footage from Iranian and Romanian TV reports and newsreels. For instance, the film bridges the third and fourth letters with footage of Iranian protests in 1979, marked by fervent slogans. Similarly, the transition between the fifth and sixth letters shifts to Romanian life under State Socialism, underscored by a male voice-over. *Between Revolutions* adeptly demonstrates that, despite cultural divergences, the essence of life remains a constant. This echoes Stuart Hall's views on emerging Caribbean cinema, which, he argues, does not merely reflect reality but also brings forth powerful forms of representation that shape new subjects and perspectives (Hall 1989, 80). Higgins and Fowler in *Epistolary Entanglements in Film, Media and the Visual Arts* (2023) observe that non-mainstream media often embrace a diverse array of audio-visual forms (Higgins and Fowler 2023, 24). This trait is exemplified in *Between Revolutions*, which draws from real-life experiences of Iranian students in Romania during the Communist era, represented through fictionalized letters.

## Utterance, Dialogism, Addressivity

In examining the polyphonic epistolary narrative of the film *Between Revolutions*, this essay delves into the intricate interplay of utterance, dialogism, and addressivity, as conceptualized by Mikhail Bakhtin, to unravel the multifaceted communication and socio-political commentary embedded within the film.

In the context of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, the utilization of letters in the film becomes a powerful vehicle for the exploration of diverse voices and perspectives. Letters, such as those in *Between Revolutions*, serve as symbolic intermediaries, bridging the gap between individuals who desire to be heard – a concept elucidated by Fowler. The epistolary form, as Fowler suggests, inherently fosters listening – an essential component of Bakhtin's dialogism which refers to the idea that language, and specifically literary texts, are comprised of a multiplicity of voices, each with its own perspective, ideology, and meaning (Fowler 2023, 64).

Moreover, dialogism encompasses the relationship between a speaker and a listener in all conversations, literary or verbal, involving the negotiation of meaning within personal, social, historical, and political contexts. As cited by Sheinman, "everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of



conditioning others (*Dialogic* 426). For Bakhtin there really is never a monologue, or ‘neutral’ speakers, as a ‘responsive listener’ is always present, reacting to any given text” (2014, 179).

As an example, in the seventh letter, Maria reminisces about a time when Zahra described Mosadegh.<sup>4</sup> In this letter, memories of their past conversations narrate their previous dialogue within a political context, reflecting the status quo. In response, Zahra confesses, “we all believed it was a new beginning, better, more dignified.”

This act of listening establishes a dynamic relationship, akin to a conversation, between the author, the filmmaker, and the audience, mirroring Bakhtin’s assertion that every word is a two-sided act, influenced by both its originator and its intended recipient. This interactive process enriches the polyphonic nature of the film, creating a multifaceted web of relationships among various elements. The viewer, the film itself, historical contexts, revolutions, the unique socio-cultural milieus of Iran and Romania, the filmmaker, the characters, and even linguistic aspects are all interconnected. Each element contributes its distinct voice, perspective, and ideological stance to the ongoing dialogue within the film. This multivocal matrix is the pattern of *Between Revolutions*.

Furthermore, each speaker is multivocal, regularly employing various intracultural “languages” related to class, gender, occupation, and religion. Furthermore, this chorus of languages is not limited to the purely verbal, as verbal communication is “always accompanied by social acts of a nonverbal character – the performance of labor, symbolic acts of ritual, or ceremony” (Sheinman 2014, 179). All of these elements are exemplified in *Between Revolutions*, including archival scenes without voice-overs, such as the performative dance of labourers superimposed with fire and iron smelting furnaces, between the eleventh and twelfth letters [Fig. 4].

Lynne Pearce has noted the significance of telephone conversations (1994, 1–6), where intonations and word choice play a crucial role in establishing the meaning of a communicative act, especially when physical signs are absent (Allen 2006, 20). In contrast, in letters, words take precedence, and the only presence is an

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4 Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh was Iran’s prime minister elected as such by the Iranian Parliament at a time when parliamentary elections were in fact considered legitimate in Iran. For millions of Iranians he symbolizes Iranian sovereignty and patriotism. During his short tenure in office (April 1951 – August 1953) he managed to implement the legislation (which he had spearheaded in Parliament) that nationalized the oil industry, ending almost 50 years of British monopoly over Iran’s petroleum excavation, extraction, research, marketing, and sales. <https://www.neiu.edu/academics/college-of-business-and-technology/mossadegh-initiative/who-was-mohammad-mossadegh>. (Last accessed 11. 05. 2023.)

imagined voice, which may sometimes fade. As Maria expressed in the last letter, “when I imagine you talking to me, I am not even sure it’s your voice I am hearing.” Here, there is no visual expression; everything relies on words, interpretation, and imagination. However, for the audience, this experience differs. When the author reads her letter and it is portrayed in the film as a voice-over, the tone of reading conveys feelings – such as longing, sorrow, or apprehension – which are especially impactful when experienced audibly. These feelings are enhanced by vocal nuances, pauses, and the pacing of speech, which add depth to the emotional experience that cannot be captured in written text alone. The subtle silences, variations in pitch, and pauses within the voiceover affect the viewer’s sense of anticipation, intimacy, and empathy, creating a heightened emotional atmosphere that written words alone would lack.

Additionally, epistolary forms in the film highlight the concept of addressivity. The Bakhtinian concept of addressivity is considered as the discursive logic, which dictates that an utterance is always addressed to someone, real or imaginary. For Bakhtin, addressivity is seen as a characteristic of language itself. However, it is important to remember that addressivity is a matter of degree, and utterances in a film may be oriented towards the spectator to varying degrees (Montero 2012, 120). As Bakhtin argued, a word is a two-sided act, equally determined by both its originator and its intended recipient (Volosinov 1986, 95). Each word expresses “one” in relation to the “other,” shaping verbal communication from the standpoint of another’s perspective, ultimately reflecting the cultural memory of the community to which it belongs. The concepts of surveillance, control, censorship, the potential for confiscation, and the themes of change and hope all exemplify addressivity.

In *Between Revolutions*, the story unfolds secrets and revelations, leading to a twist towards the film’s conclusion. Maria grapples with uncertainty not only about her own experiences but also regarding the revolutionary changes in Romania. Zahra’s observations provide insights into the Islamic revolution and its deviations. This sense of uncertainty permeates the letters exchanged between them. Also, towards the end, by discussing a doubt raised by Maria that perhaps Zahra chose the safer path by leaving to protect Maria, the puzzle of sexual orientation is subtly hinted, leaving the audience with its interpretation. Yet, based on Petri’s interview, the film intentionally avoids providing further information to answer this question, allowing the audience to have its own interpretation. This style enriches the hermeneutic aspect of the film.

This concept of communication and self-disclosure aligns with Bakhtin's perspective, emphasizing that linguistic communication occurs within specific social contexts and among particular groups of language users (Allen 2006, 15). It highlights the interpersonal and interlinguistic dynamics at play, making the film emblematic of a conversational dialogue through letters. This dialectic feature spans a period witnessing fundamental changes in two countries.

In the sixth letter, Zahra points to her fear of the Islamic Republic: "That scares me. The ones who came to power have started the crackdown. They are after intellectuals, leftist, People who wanted something else, like my father. Last week they shut down my father's organizations..."

Similar fears are reflected in the ninth letter, in which Maria talks about the uncertainty of changes in Romania: "I am afraid of innuendos; I am afraid of words." Then in the thirteenth: "We try to convince ourselves the cold is just a state of mind, controllable by willpower. But it doesn't work anymore. Romania is not the place you used to know. It's gloomier, darker. A lot has changed in these 10 years..."

In the fifteenth letter she writes as follows: "I remembered your stories about Iran. That energy in the streets... Things are happening so fast. We are supposedly free now, but I know from you that victories can be confiscated."

In the sixteenth and the last letter, the uncertain tone of Maria's voice is intensified while reading the letters in post-revolutionary Romania: "We were so happy about the fall of the regime. We felt free. But it's been a year, and our money is becoming worthless. We can't afford anything anymore. I quite hesitated to ask you, all this time I thought you left for your revolution. But maybe there were other reasons. Maybe you chose the safer path. Maybe you thought you protect me by leaving... I can't remember your voice. We are fading together. When I imagine you talking to me, I am not even sure it's your voice I'm hearing."

In epistolary literature, each letter or correspondence is an individual utterance, and the entire work is a collection of interconnected utterances in the form of letters. Each letter is a unique utterance, shaped by the character's voice, context, and intentions. These letters often respond to previous letters or anticipate replies, demonstrating the dialogic and responsive nature of utterances.

Bakhtin and Medvedev emphasize the historical and social significance of utterances, stating that "not only the meaning of the utterance but also the very fact of its performance is of historical and social significance, as, in general, is the fact of its realization in the here and now, in given circumstances, at a certain historical moment, under the conditions of the given social situation. The very presence of the

utterance is historically and socially significant” (1978, 120). As Allen articulates, no word or utterance is neutral in Bakhtin’s perspective (2006, 18).

In the context of Bakhtin’s theories on language and utterance, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 1989 Revolution in Romania, which create the foundation of *Between Revolutions*, can be considered exemplary instances of utterances. These revolutions, in the way described in Maria and Zahra’s letters, are responses to each other. The Islamic revolution in Iran is against imperialism, as Zahra directly says: “united, we will defeat imperialism” in the second letter, while the Revolution in Romania embraces Western influence. They are seemingly in contrast, but their chaotic aftermath complements the essence of a revolution. Bakhtin’s perspective emphasizes that utterances are not isolated, neutral expressions but rather dynamic and socially situated acts of communication.

Moreover, Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia, which refers to the presence and diversity of linguistic and social dialects within a text and discourses, can be applied to these revolutions. This concept highlights the interaction between different speech types or voices, reflecting varied social classes, professions, or cultural backgrounds. These uprisings involved diverse groups with varying ideologies such as leftists and Islamists, and classes reflecting the heteroglossic nature of the social and political landscapes during the revolutions. As Nora M. Alter notes, this concept challenges attempts to standardize language and, by extension, history – a regularization that is deeply linked to nation-building and imperialism (2018, 260).

In essay films, images are approached as visual utterances, firmly rooted in heteroglossia. The concept of heteroglossia foregrounds the idea of “differentiated speech,” emphasizing that utterances belong to social life and are, therefore, inseparable from their context. In fact, as Bakhtin explains, context should be considered an integral part of any utterance, as people from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds speak differently. The kind of visual heteroglossia that essay films bring to the forefront focuses on contradiction and visual play. The general aim is to understand how certain images are generated, circulated, and consumed, their purposes, and how they impact our experience of the world (Montero 2012, 57).

Viewing the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 1989 Revolution in Romania through a Bakhtinian lens allows us to appreciate them as more than just historical events. They become utterances rich in historical, social, and dialogic significance, embodying the complex interplay of voices and ideologies

within their respective contexts. The film portrays the interpretation of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as a complete failure, evident in the letters and in the archival footage. Similarly, the 1989 Revolution in Romania, while not depicted as a failure, did experience some economic setbacks evidenced by the film's narrative, such as currency devaluation in the midst of the regime change. The Islamic Revolution in Iran led to the confiscation of dignity, including the neglect of women's rights and the marginalization of minorities and ethnic groups such as Baha'i people, while Romania faced the possibility of a similar outcome.

Moreover, at the core of Bakhtin's work there lies the argument that the dialogic and heteroglot aspects of language pose a fundamental threat to any unitary, authoritarian, and hierarchical conception of society, art, and life (Allen 2006, 30). In the context of *Between Revolutions*, this argument is manifested through the revolutionary power of language itself, wielded through the medium of letters. These letters carry historical connotations of resistance against dictatorships in two distinct geographical locations: Iran and Romania.

This concept vividly comes to life in the film *Between Revolutions*, where linguistic diversity becomes a powerful tool for storytelling. While Bakhtin's theory primarily emphasizes verbal interaction, he acknowledged the profound importance of non-verbal communication, advocating for the equal consideration of both visual and verbal systems of communication (Montero 2012, 43). As Montero points out, this multilingual approach is evident in the visual footage, placards, street announcements, subtitles, and captions throughout the film. The linguistic diversity mirrors the broader cultural and class differences present in the main protagonists, Maria and Zahra, hailing from Romania and Iran, respectively. However, the film goes beyond individual characters and delves into the social fabric of both nations.

In Romania, the archival footage captures women from various social classes, ranging from labourers to those primarily responsible for child-rearing. Simultaneously, the scenes from Iran portray men and women from diverse social backgrounds actively participating in protests, standing in voting queues, engaging in wars, and protesting against compulsory hijab. Romania's transition from communism to a semi-presidential republic contrasts sharply with Iran's shift from monarchy to an Islamic republic. In other words, the glitz, glamour, and Western symbols like Coca-Cola and Pepsi in Romania stand in stark contrast with the Islamization of Iran and the dominance of black in women's clothing and formal attire, as seen in the selected archival footage in the film. It's as if Iran

is falling into the situation Romania experienced before the revolution, while Romania is transitioning to the condition Iran faced before its own revolution.

By integrating this linguistic and cultural diversity, *Between Revolutions* embodies Bakhtin's dialogic framework. It illuminates how the clash and amalgamation of languages, cultures, and classes serve as a lens through which the intricate layers of society are revealed, echoing Bakhtin's assertion that genuine cultural richness emerges in the interplay of diverse voices and perspectives.

Ultimately, *Between Revolutions* emerges as a profound cinematic exploration of Bakhtin's concepts of utterance, dialogism, and addressivity. Through its epistolary structure, the film masterfully weaves together diverse voices, perspectives, and historical contexts, showcasing the transformative power of language and communication in shaping our perceptions of social and political landscapes. This narrative approach not only enriches our understanding of the film's thematic depth but also underscores the ongoing relevance of Bakhtin's theories in interpreting contemporary media's role in reflecting and influencing the cultural and societal dynamics of our era.

## **A Visual and Auditory Juxtaposition in *Between Revolutions***

In *Between Revolutions*, the utilization of found footage and archival materials crafts a complex tapestry, intertwining memory and history through visual and auditory juxtaposition. *Between Revolutions* does not seek to provide direct, indexical access to the past through its found footage; rather, it assembles these visuals under a montage principle, creating a relationship with the past that diverges from the denotational claims of individual photographic images. In this context, the archival elements assume a figurative rather than referential relationship with historical events. Russell (1999, 238) highlights this by asserting that the film's intertextuality also serves as an allegory of history, a montage of memory traces allowing the filmmaker to engage with the past through recall, retrieval, and recycling. Thus, found footage filmmaking in *Between Revolutions* unfolds in a space between documentary and fictional representation, embodying characteristics of performative documentaries that oscillate between fact and fable. Moreover, Russell suggests that in compilation films, the found image stands as both historical truth and fiction, simultaneously a document and an unreliable piece of evidence (Russell 1999, 238). This duality

amplifies the interpretive nature of such documentaries, potentially influencing their credibility (Bell 2004, 6).

The film's metaphorical use of juxtaposing footage – like Khomeini and Ceaușescu waving to crowds [Figs. 5–6], or the depiction of street protests – alongside historical narratives supported by literature on both revolutions, such as works by Ervand Abrahamian, Michael Axworthy's *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, as well as the *Iranian Oral History Project at Harvard University*, grounds the film's historical realities. This approach is mirrored for Romania through comprehensive texts like Henry F. Carey's *Romania since 1989: Politics, Economics, and Society* (2004), and Tom Gallagher's *Modern Romania: The End of Communism, the Failure of Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation* (2005).

The selection process in found footage films – choosing specific images or audio clips – parallels the act of choosing words in a narrative, with each element bearing inherent “otherness,” specific speech genres, and traces of past utterances. In *Between Revolutions*, the letters, while primarily auditory, are supplemented by visual components incorporating archival footage. This melding of sound and sight amplifies the utterance's impact, making it profoundly resonant for the audience, even if the original addressees are absent. The quality of the voiceover, encompassing elements like timbre and cadence, further deepens the film, enriching both its narrative content and emotional impact.

*Between Revolutions* emerges as a rich repository of archival and found footage, portraying societal transformations over a 20-year period across Iran and Romania. This amalgamation of professionally and amateurishly captured footage forms an assemblage, aiming for expressive potency and probing authenticity rather than merely serving as evidential proof. The film director employs several techniques to create a unified intermedial polyphony that bridges letters, locations, and time periods, seamlessly blending various media and voices to convey a multifaceted narrative. Music serves as a powerful connecting element; for example, between the first letter written by Maria and the second letter written by Zahra, nostalgic Persian music by Marjan, a former pop singer, ties together two distinct urban spaces in Romania and Iran, making the transition both smooth and emotionally resonant. Sound effects also play an important role. Between the second letter by Zahra and the third letter by Maria, the sound of footsteps on a crowded street gradually merges into the sounds of the sea and waves. This non-verbal shift allows the audience time to process the change in scene and emotion.

Similarly, between the third letter by Maria and the fourth letter by Zahra, the diegetic sounds of Iranian protestors' evocative slogans add a powerful layer of immediacy, with the camera traveling through the crowd to capture the intensity of the moment. Another nostalgic element is introduced between the fourth letter by Zahra and the fifth letter by Maria, where black-and-white scenes of a swing carousel accompanied by playground sounds evoke childhood memories, bridging the past with the present.

As the film progresses, the polyphonic structure is emphasized by the use of multiple perspectives and voices beyond Zahra and Maria. For example, a journalist's voice appears, interviewing people about their views on voting and participation in elections, offering a glimpse into the public opinion of the time. Additionally, a narrator representing pro-Islamic Republic women is heard over propaganda footage showing Iranian women dressed in black scarves and full-body coverings, learning how to use gas masks – imagery that reflects the preparation for wartime Iran. This scene humorously cuts to similar propaganda footage from Romania, where men and women in a stadium celebrate collectivism and parade in praise of communism. This pairing, around the 42:53 mark, juxtaposes conceptually similar sequences from Iran and Romania, providing the audience with perspectives beyond Zahra and Maria's voices and underscoring the film's layered, polyphonic quality.

As the film nears its end, silence is used between the fourteenth and fifteenth letters to give the audience a moment to pause and reflect after an intense sequence of imagery and sound. For instance, the transition from Khomeini's chaotic funeral to a still scene of students in uniform creates a contemplative moment without overwhelming the viewer.

Narration, particularly in the eleventh letter read by Maria, provides continuity across various types of footage. Her voiceover, layered over colorful and black-and-white imagery and ambient sounds like a train, guides the viewer through transitions and maintains narrative flow. Together, these techniques – music, sound effects, silence, additional voices, and narration – blend disparate footage and uphold the film's intermedial polyphony. This approach allows the audience to experience multiple perspectives, moving smoothly between different times, places, and experiences, while capturing the complex, multi-layered history of the revolutions in Iran and Romania.

Additionally, in selecting the archival footage, there is a deliberate absence of discrimination between different types of footage, whether in framing or titling. The director does not favour one side, giving both countries equal opportunity to



narrate their histories of change. While the letters presented as voice-over convey the personal histories of the characters, the footage provides a broad representation of the collective memory of Iranians and Romanians. This includes a wide range of imagery, from intimate moments in home movies to official broadcast archives; from private scenes like family gatherings, weddings, and vacations, to public events such as protests, military maneuvers, wartime footage, and elections.

As Catherine Russell (1999, 240) expounds, “in the process of being appropriated, the original image gives over its meaning to the new text and is manipulated by the new filmmaker on the level of the signifier.” Therefore, within the found footage film, the meaning of the archival elements employed by the filmmaker is transformed as these images are compiled into a new narrative.

Desmond Bell, referencing Joachim Paech, notes the enduring power of archival images: “The ephemeral historical moment becomes a permanent presence in the moving image in these archives of history” (Bell 2004, 1). This echoes Bazin’s observation that photographic images, whether still or moving, preserve history by offering a “second-degree original” through their visual traces. In contrast to traditional television documentaries, where photographic sources are often treated as transparent representations of historical reality, found footage films like *Between Revolutions* encourage a more complex and nuanced interpretation.

The final sentences of Maria’s last letter, reflecting on the haziness of memory, resonate with Cathy Caruth’s description of the psychological impact of trauma, which includes an overwhelming sense of immediacy coupled with a collapse in comprehension, resulting in an inability to process the experience (Hedges 2015, 6). This is mirrored in Zahra’s experiences, particularly in her reflections on the blurred lines of her memories following her father’s disappearance – a suspicious event she recounts to Maria in the tenth letter. This disappearance leaves Zahra deeply unsettled, and in the twelfth letter she confesses that her memories have become tangled, stating, “their lines are all blurry. Time is wearing thin.” This voice-over accompanies footage from the Iran–Iraq war, a source of lasting trauma that affected many Iranians, both those directly involved in the conflict and those indirectly impacted. The combination of Zahra’s blurred memories with the war footage highlights the collective trauma experienced by Iranians, intertwining Zahra’s personal loss with the larger historical turmoil. Therefore, the discursive strategy of *Between Revolutions* is to create a montage of voices and images, compelling viewers to actively engage in the construction of meaning.

This aligns with Eisenstein’s montage theory and Corrigan’s description of essay films as a “creative rearrangement and play” of ideas and images (2011,

22). For example, the film repeatedly employs propaganda footage with ironic undertones to critique official narratives. At the end of letter five, as Maria expresses concern for Zahra's safety during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we see Romanian propaganda videos depicting scenes of idyllic life: women performing household chores, working in factories, freely walking the streets, and caring for their families. Accompanied by a male voice-over extolling Romania's perfection, this footage appears disingenuous, contrasting sharply with Maria's own anxieties about her lack of safety and sense of constant surveillance. Here, multiple voices are given expression through montage – the deliberate arrangement of shots, voices, sounds, and historical footage – allowing viewers to actively interpret and question the juxtaposition of personal and political realities.

While watching *Between Revolutions*, films such as *Videograms of a Revolution* by Harun Farocki (1992) and Kianoush Ayari's *Taze Nafas-ha* (1979) come to the viewer's mind. In *Videograms of a Revolution*, the film refrains from providing a clear-cut argument on the intersection of images, media, and politics in the Romanian revolution, highlighting instead what has been described as “an Archimedean point” or “a point of im/perceptibility” (Montero 2012, 115). This approach allows images to retain their autonomy, rather than being used merely as evidence. However, in *Between Revolutions*, the inclusion of fictitious letters changes this style, though it still allows for intermissions where images maintain their autonomy. Conversely, *Taze-nafas-ha* showcases the atmosphere of Tehran post-1979, further complementing this stylistic approach.

Ultimately, *Between Revolutions* skillfully navigates the realms of found footage and archival materials, melding them into a powerful vessel for memory and history, and inviting audiences into a rich, polyphonic world where visual and auditory elements coalesce to create a profound narrative experience.

## Conclusion

As Azar Nafisi aptly stated that “you need imagination to imagine a future that doesn't exist.” *Between Revolutions* embodies this sentiment, serving as a catalyst for imagination, albeit in a narrative that remains intentionally incomplete. The film traverses two pivotal historical moments: the emergence of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and the Romanian Revolution of 1989. Despite the ideological divergences of these revolutions, the film employs them as reflective mirrors, highlighting departures from their original ideals. It poignantly portrays the Islamization in Iran, the stifling of dissent, the marginalization of women, and the

political threats that ensued. In contrast, the Romanian Revolution's aftermath is left more ambiguous, allowing room for interpretation within a Bakhtinian polyphony of an open structure. This artistic choice underscores the power of imagination in filmmaking and the vital role of interpretation in understanding history.

The film's use of archival footage and found images is not a mere retrieval of a vanished past but a reassembly within a discursive world of cinematic signs and meanings. The montage based on found footage in *Between Revolutions* presents a figuration of the past rather than a simplistic indexical representation. This approach challenges conventional historical narratives, inviting viewers to contemplate the role of visual representation in shaping cultural memory.

Central to the film's narrative is its epistolary form, creating a dialogic network that intricately connects the sender, receiver, and audience. The letters, as key elements within the film, deepen the narrative's polyphonic quality, creating a rich discourse that fosters a profound emotional connection with the audience. This narrative structure aligns with Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, highlighting the diversity of voices and perspectives that enrich the film's layered narrative.

*Between Revolutions* juxtaposes images and voices from disparate times and places, prompting viewers to reflect on the construction and negotiation of cultural memory. It raises critical questions about the power of visual representation in forging and shaping cultural narratives, further emphasizing the dynamic interplay between personal recollections and collective history.

In conclusion, *Between Revolutions* is not merely a film employing the epistolary form as a narrative technique; it is a manifestation of a Bakhtinian polyphonic space. This space honours and amplifies the diverse voices and experiences of the revolutions, offering a nuanced and dynamic interpretation of history. The film stands as a testament to the power of imagination, the intricacies of historical narratives, and the influential role of cultural memory in shaping our comprehension of the past. It is a vivid reminder of the complexity inherent in interpreting history and the significance of diverse perspectives in enriching our understanding of historical events.

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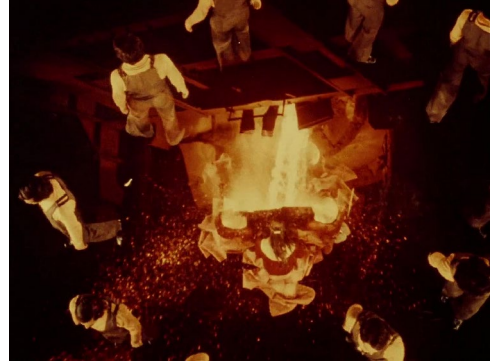
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**Figure 3.** Women protesting against compulsory hijab at the beginning of Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran. **Figure 4.** Performative dance of labourers superimposed with fire and iron smelting furnaces.



**Figures 5–6.** Khomeini and Ceaușescu waving to crowds.

