

A Family of Images

Turning the pages of this publication, the reader will poignantly find his/herself faced not with *images* that operate independently from one another, but with *a family of images*¹ whose inquiring nature and pictorial quality reveal a certain way of seeing and recording the world—essential to the construction of the photographic message underlying Matei Bejenaru’s project. Flowing at a steady or quite random pace, the images seem at first to overwhelm the reader with information. The quiet presence of the hills, the idyllic reflections of the land, bathed in sunlight or blanketed in gelid winter air, the quietude emanated by the houses, the cramped, time-worn interiors, the seasonal occupations, the travelling fairs, the silent faces of the elderly, the bored attitude and aged appearance of the teenagers: all these reconstruct a contemporary rural landscape that is familiar to many of us, and yet deeply and unexpectedly altered. What the reader perceives through a process of image association is undoubtedly difficult to sum up at first glance, although s/he will easily identify a series of recurring events pertaining to an everyday existence in which people work, rest, spend their spare time, and take part in community celebrations. The present encountered here and the experiences it evokes are far from confronting the reader with an eloquent, literal imprint of our times. Through the distinct photographic idiom proposed by Matei Bejenaru, a world takes shape. But even so, photography is more than a mere evidence to a way of life far from the hubbub of urban centres, a document or a “transparent window”² onto the world. Rather, it is a vehicle conveying the moods of a *locus*—its inner aura, its social energies, the residues of the old persisting in the equation of the new. What then does Matei Bejenaru tell us? What is the source-image of this family?

“The most powerful elements of an artwork are often its silences,” writes Susan Sontag.³ These intense silences can also be discovered in the family of images that Bejenaru unpretentiously titles PRUT. The pauses scattered throughout this photographic series, reflected in details which retain a seeming independence from the context, in daytime moments that take on an almost poetical cast and in the isolated, almost unreal, experiences lived by the people, are sources of information that the reader gradually decodes as s/he moves beyond

1 See W.J.T. Mitchell “What Is an Image?,” in *New Literary History*, vol. XV, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 503–537.

2 *Ibid.*, 504.

3 Susan Sontag, “Despre stil” [On Style], in *Împotriva interpretării* (Bucharest: Univers Publishing House, 2000), 51.

the naturalism of representation and comes to understand the artist's personal choices. Once they have been revealed to the viewer's gaze, they directly explain the genuine subject of the photographs. Having moved beyond our immediate impression, we notice how Bejenaru focuses his attention on one region only, taking one single landmark: the Prut River. The Prut River and its neighbouring area become the core of a painstaking visual cartography of the rural world, initiated by artist in 2011, which year after year has accumulated dozens of negatives. Much like a *family*, only when taken together do they project the main concerns of an important part of Romanian society since its accession to the European Union. The insistence shown by the artist in reading certain fragments of daily life, the seriousness with which he approaches the reality of the small hamlets and villages strung along the Romanian side of the river, his total involvement in acquiring knowledge about the social transformations taking place in people's everyday lives, as well as the decency he shows in his interactions with them, are indicative of the twofold regimen of the project undertaken by Matei Bejenaru.

On the one hand, PRUT is a personal, internalised foray into a world shaken by the syncopated modernisation of recent years, by the bracketing, against the troubled backdrop of post-communist Romania, of an entire social class that has remained faithful to its *locus*, but which has found itself underrepresented, left to find its own forms of adaptation and instruments of survival. Thus, PRUT intuitively traces the recent histories of a *locus*⁴ and, by extension, the late history of social thinking in the Romanian space. Page after page, the images depict phenomena and routines of daily life and material culture typical of communities from the Prut area, explaining how they have been able to negotiate their position under the pressure of the new economic and social mechanisms of the neoliberal order. On the other hand, the PRUT project functions like field research, with a very thin line separating art from anthropology. This is probably why the type of text proposed by this photographic discourse cannot be overlooked. And this is because each of the photographs of the PRUT series, in which we contemplate the premises of this underpopulated world, marked by precariousness and (in)adaptation to the aggressive demands of the global (labour) market, imply an anthropological gaze. Here, the camera is directed toward both people and the space they cohabit. The compositional rigour, the pictorial intensity of the light, the sense of distance and closeness to the subject, as well as the documentary quality of the representation, all converge to anchor a number of specific traits in a specific territory. People, farmsteads, roads, agricultural plots neatly follow upon one another. With every trip that Bejenaru takes, the territory is observed and photographed; with every return to the territory, it is rediscovered and re-photographed. People, farmsteads, roads, agricultural plots—stuck in time or changed. In some villages or communes, the local customs appear to operate according to a different rhythm from one year to another. Houses disappear; new ones are built. The muddy country roads of yesterday have been asphalted in

4 Ernest Bernea, *Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român* [Space, Time and Causality for the Romanian People] (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 2006).

the meantime thanks to E.U. funding programmes. People, too, respond to the unpredictable and to economic choices. The young have chosen to go abroad to work; the elderly, left behind in the city, have chosen to return to their parents' homes in the countryside. However, most of the time, the photographs confront us with a feeling of de-temporalisation, due to the failure of (past and present) political doctrines, and to the reshaping of the social horizon of expectations. For this reason, the nature of the relations established within this universe is mainly governed by economic factors. In PRUT series, constant reference is made to (physical) labour, to the mobility of those who work, to the circumstances in which labour is carried out and to the obstacles it entails.

This way of looking at the territory, of reconstructing it, consolidates a trend in photography which is not so much inclusive, as selective: rather than reiterating the immediate reality, it augments moments, expressions, moods, gestures, whose rhetoric is so familiar that they escape the eye. With Matei Bejenaru, the politics of photography and implicitly his specific way of looking underline an engaged content that rejects aestheticisation, and which instead historicises the image, locating it inside a collective narrative and culture. The world of PRUT is not that of an "abstract humanity,"⁵ rather it is the world of precarious communities whose way of thinking and (re)acting reveals the uncertain relationship between old experiences and new expectations, between the old historical logic and the new. In other words, the rural in which Bejenaru is interested is one of paradoxes, where the twisted patterns of the post-communist transition and the cynical forms of the free market meet. In this respect, the five distinct categories, selected by the artist as sub-chapters of his research—Territory, Habitation, Economy, People and Daily Life—paint a valid picture of the Romanian rural world, despite the fact that it is confined to this one particular area. Adjoined to them are the artist's factual or contextual notes, consciously refusing to comment on the image in terms of good or bad. They set forth the meanings of the human actions and encourage us to imagine what lies beyond the photographic frame. But even so, such a stance does not restrict the rationale of this project to the establishment of a photographic archive, susceptible to becoming a source for a future research into mentalities and behavioural patterns in this part of the country, although a number of themes laid claim to by the social sciences do tend to accumulate. The process is different. Matei Bejenaru is not involved in any sociological campaign, unlike photographers such as Iosif Berman or Aurel Bauh. His narrative is not linear, organised according to a sociological scale or a repertoire of themes. For the time being, he is a loner. In his case, the act of taking photographs is simultaneously a method and a point of view, as well as a way of validating his intuitions and of granting this world its due respect. For Bejenaru, taking photographs is a social act. Above and beyond the pictorial vision of the representation and the poetic mood springing from the analogic quality of the photographic film, there is a certain common meaning to this *family of images*: a social meaning,

5 Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 473.

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fundamental to understanding the visual concept underpinning the PRUT project. For this reason, any attempt to detach the photographic image from its social character⁶ is difficult. The social image provides a key to reading the entire project; it is the source-image of this family. Animated not by a desire to contemplate and formalise the modalities whereby the new Eurocentric values are expressed, but rather by a desire to understand the epistemic horizons of a local social and economic process, of collective mutations and the possibilities for opposing certain models, PRUT cultivates a photographic language guided by the ethics of commitment, thus shifting the inherent meanings of the image from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere. From this position, PRUT begins to develop a point of view. Indeed, the polyphony of the relations that take shape in each photograph, as well as within the family as a whole, enables the emergence of a dense structure of meanings and arguments about an austere, unfinished world. The camera studies and isolates moments. The images capture the polarities, the process of isolation, the effects of an abbreviated modernisation, shaped by the resistance of the political sphere to change and by the serious errors of integrating *the new* into the culture of *the old*. It also inevitably calls our attention to the impossibility of going back to what rural society once was. Nevertheless, Bejenaru is not concerned with an idealistic representation of the village, but with the (tacit) destruction of a collective force (important for the Romanian social sphere) and the loss of its (economic) autonomy against the backdrop of pressures such as profitability and “overinvestment in labour.”⁷ Thus, PRUT becomes a subtle and complex analysis of adaptation to the determinations of “moral Darwinism”⁸ internalised by the new economic system, recounted from the perspective of the “loser,” of the one who lost in this process of transition from communism to capitalism.

The stance taken by the photographs (and the photographer) is far from neutral. It could be described rather as ambivalent: both critical and poetic, pragmatic and social. Its directness serves to augment our awareness of the irreversible. But even so, beyond the constraints and disillusion of the present, beyond the distressing poverty and the morphological affinities between various places, individual gestures and daily activities, Matei Bejenaru also dares to posit an ethical question, described with the help of the specific links established between humans and *locus*. His humanistic concerns are neither moralistic, nor didactic; rather, he demands attentiveness from his interlocutor: the attentiveness of looking openly and critically at the contemporaneity right next to us, familiar and yet unknown; the attentiveness of tracing the way small anonymous histories become part of the broader recent history; the attentiveness of discovering “behind” the imprint of time and space the small liberating gestures that enable one to hope for an escape from the “formidable abstraction”⁹ of the economic order.

6 Ibid., 467.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, “Esența neoliberalismului” [The Essence of Neoliberalism], in *IDEA artă + societate*, no. 18 (2004), <http://idea.ro/revista/?q=ro/node/40&articol=231>, accessed on October 10, 2018.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.