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## **'The Romanians are Coming': Labour Migration and the Politics of the Observational Documentary**

### **Klara Kemp-Welch**

Of the 'four freedoms' central to the EU project, the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital, the right for EU workers to reside freely across member states has been the most contentious in the UK. Following the EU expansion programme of 2004, a majority of EU8 migrants moved to Ireland and to the UK; Romanians and Bulgarians, who joined in 2007, initially moved for the most part to Italy and Spain. Well before they were given full employment rights in January 2014, after the expiry of an extended embargo on working in the UK, the right-wing populist media went into panic-production mode.<sup>1</sup> 'Sold Out! Flights and buses full as Romanians

<sup>1</sup> The EU enlargement programme of 2004 included the so called A8 countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It was followed in 2007 by the accession of the so-called A2 countries, Romania and Bulgaria, and, in 2013, by Croatia. Albania, Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey have also all formally applied for membership.

and Bulgarians head for the UK’, announced a *Daily Mail* article published in December 2013, predicting that 29,000 ‘new Europeans’ were on their way to steal British jobs, take advantage of the National Health Service and milk the benefits system for scarce council housing and overly generous Tax Credits.<sup>2</sup> In the event, only one new migrant arrived on the first Wizz Air flight to land at Luton airport. Aged 30, Mr Spirescu had reportedly come to the UK ‘on a whim’ and was doubtless bewildered to be greeted at Arrivals by a host of reporters and the MP for Luton. The press interrogated him about his intentions vis-à-vis work and his rights to claim benefits. Keen to make some kind of a strong out of this non-event, one year on, the *Daily Mail* ran another story about Spirescu, confirming that migrants were right to identify Britain as a land of golden opportunities: Spirescu was now reportedly earning £60,000 a year installing ventilation ducts, and sending it all home to Romania.<sup>3</sup> Such tabloid stories clearly fed into the UK Independence Party’s xenophobic electoral campaign in the run up to 2015, prompting a change in the Conservative policy around an EU referendum, leading to the Brexit vote. While, immigration to the UK from EU member states peaked in 2016, figures from the National Office for Statistics suggest that citizens of the EU8 are now leaving in greater numbers than they are arriving. It is against a backdrop of on-going debates around xenophobia and Brexit that this article seeks to explore the narrative framing and visual representation of Romanian immigration.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jon Danzig, ‘13 Reasons why I am taking the *Daily Mail* to the Press Complaints Commission’, available at: [www.britishinfluence.org](http://www.britishinfluence.org) (Jan 20 2014) Available at:

<http://www.britishinfluence.org/13-reasons-taking-daily-mail-press-complaints-commission>

<sup>3</sup> The paper also reported that the man was considering returning home and had ‘had enough’ of Britain: “the girls, they drink so much here. On a Friday night, the girls are so drunk and I don't agree with that. You don't see that in Romania. I am scared of the English girls. I miss the culture of Romania, the traditions”. He wistfully shows me photographs of his mother wearing heavy, knee-length traditional dress’. The journalist pokes fun at Romania’s traditional (read: un-progressive, sexist) values. Natalie Clarke, ‘British girls are so noisy and drunk I can't wait to go home to Romania...’, *Mail Online*, (2 Jan. 2015). Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2894905/British-girls-noisy-drunk-t-wait-home-Romania-eye-opening-interview-Romanian-arrive-Britain-year-ago-reveals-s-s-earning-60-000.html>

<sup>4</sup> ‘EU net migration has fallen since 2016, although more EU citizens arrive long-term than leave; this is because of a gradual increase in EU citizens leaving as well as a decrease in those coming to the UK over the same time period. / The fall in immigration for work has mainly been because of a decrease in EU citizens coming to the UK looking for work, particularly those from the EU8’. See ‘Main points’, *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, November 2019* (28 Nov 2019). Available

My focus is on the modes of address and tactics deployed within art-world film productions concerned with documenting the experiences of immigrant communities, but my title is borrowed from the fly on the wall Channel 4 series *The Romanians are Coming*, billed as presenting ‘the truth behind the headlines about immigration’, screened in the months leading up to the 2015 general election. My case studies are a co-production exploring the history of Romania through the history of the Dacia car, *My Beautiful Dacia* (2009) by Romanian artist Ștefan Constantinescu and Spanish documentary maker Julio Soto and a short film by the British artist Adam Chodzko called *The Pickers* (2009) made with a group of young Romanian seasonal workers in Kent. The projects are compared within the framework of issues raised by the Channel 4 series, on the one hand, and, on the other, in relation to TJ Demos’s work on the pitfalls of the reification of migrants in documentary image-making more globally.<sup>5</sup>

Ștefan Constantinescu and Raphael Soto’s feature length film, *My Beautiful Dacia* (2009), collages together narratives related by individuals from a wide spectrum of Romanian society: a wealthy businessman, a self-employed funeral parlour director, a famous footballer and a pair of farm labourers. The camera records these men telling stories about their present and historical relationship with their cars: in so doing, they reflect on the relative merits and drawbacks of Romanian-style communism from the perspective of the capitalist present, examining their experiences of ‘transition’. The framework for the film is metonymic: the Dacia car is contiguous with Romanian communism, with all its internal contradictions, successes and failures. All the men recorded are to some extent nostalgic for the erstwhile promise of the Dacia, despite revealing conflicting feelings about Ceaușescu’s regime. Longed for and tirelessly worked for, for many years, the Dacia is presented as having served as a symbol of freedom, if only the freedom to make regular trips on the weekend, with family, to the countryside. For many of Constantinescu and

at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/november2019>

<sup>5</sup> TJ Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documenting During Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p xvii

Soto's protagonists, the labour regimes of capitalism would make it an unthinkable luxury to take time out in this way now: time, under capitalism, is money, in a way that it was not, before. Their present is all about labour, not the leisure promised by the Dacia. Even the successful businessman appears visibly despondent about transition. He points out that foreign investors snapped up 90% of Romanian assets in the 1990s, ruining the national economy. Filmed in nouveau-riche splendour, he concedes that in many ways, the old system was better. Footballer Miodrag Beloducini, meanwhile, tells the story of how he left Romania in 1988 to seek asylum in Yugoslavia, crossing the border in his Dacia with his mother, claiming to be visiting relatives. It became commonplace for people to leave the country at that time, he says: 'because we didn't have freedom, we couldn't progress our lives'. He recalls, in particular, the blow to Romanian sport when gymnast Nadia Comaneci fled the country in 1986. Constantinescu and Soto film Beloducini crossing the border in his car. Nowadays, he has no trouble. The guard checks his passport and recognises him. 'How's the football?' he asks. 'Fine'. 'Doing better than your Dacia then', he jokes.

In the penultimate scene, an old Dacia is crushed by heavyweight machinery at a scrap-yard. The owner's expression of mourning, as he stands by and watches events taking their course, is visceral: the effect is ostalgie to say the least. The extinction of the car stands in for the extinction of communism. The brutality of this ending recalls the brutality of the execution of Nicolai and Elena Ceauşescu, in 1989. Constantinescu and Soto document how that year marked both the end of a nightmare and the end of a dream, embodied, here, by the Dacia, a relic whose promise has been scrapped. The final shot is of a man in a bare office putting up an embroidered image of a Dacia above his desk, gazing at it, lost in past images and memories.

The hopeful moments in the film are all associated with migration. The camera accompanies a pair of young men driving their old Dacia to Spain to join family and engage in seasonal work. When a security guard stops them at the Hungarian border and asks why they are being filmed, we hear Constantinescu explain that he is filming the history of the Dacia car and from its perspective the history of Romania. The border guards tell him to turn the cameras off and to hand over the

tape, but he only pretends to. The spectator is placed in a typical dream theatre setting, as though in the back seat with the artist, eavesdropping on the somehow riveting conversation of the pair in the front seat, as they drive their well maintained vehicle along German autobahns and arrive in Spain without any mechanical trouble. Their coming is marked by a joyous reunion with family already living there who put on a big spread. Dinnertime conversation centres on the pros and cons of staying abroad in the long term. Although the younger children say they have got used to Spain, an older boy, who arrived as a teenager, confesses that he regrets not having stayed in Romania. His cousins, who are seasonal rather than permanent migrants, tell him off for having let his studies slip since the move. We then jump from the interior to scenes from a fruit-packing factory, where the workers are sorting and packing Kumquats, travelling brightly along a conveyor belt. Our protagonists have on green work shirts and appear in their element. They pose for the camera in front of mountains of stacked, packed, boxes of 'Clever' oranges.

Produced the same year as Constantinescu and Soto's longer film, Adam Chodzko's short study *The Pickers*, focuses on picking, rather than packing fruit, another moment in the hyper streamlined EU agricultural production cycle. Here too, the Romanian experience is the focus, and here too, the present situation is contextualised and historicised, this time in relation to the changing patterns of agricultural labour in the UK. The film's location is a metal and glass strawberry farm building in Kent, staffed by young men and women wheeling trolleys that glide methodically along purpose-designed tracks, as though imitating the action of a panning camera. Each works silently and deftly, isolated in his or her own lane, to a steady roaring soundtrack of warm air pulsing through plastic tubing that inflates and contracts as though it were a living organism. The oversized fruits are electric red and their sharp green leaves drip moisture.

Chodzko spent time with around 40 or 50 people working on the farm, almost all Romanian, a few Bulgarian. Four of the pickers, Estera Boguş, Mihai Boguş, Ionuţ Roşu, Remus Bujor, said that they were keen to work with him. He explained that he wanted people to participated because

he ‘wanted to check they were ok with what I was doing’.<sup>6</sup> They became involved in parts of the editing process and he used some of the sequences that they helped to make in the final version. Chodzko also gave them archival footage of older forms of British agricultural labour from archives and collections such as the Screen Archive South East at the University of Brighton. The young people were able to compare their high-tech working conditions with those of hop-pickers filmed between the 1930s-1960s / early 1970s. These, too, were migrant labourers, but British, mostly South-East Londoners escaping the city smog for the summer with their families for a working holiday. The footage of sun-drenched rows of hops presents an apparently harmonious vision of an idyllic working British landscape. An image of one of the contemporary pickers pulling a trolley between rows of strawberries is spliced with an image of a horse pulling a plough between rows of hops: the montage draws a Vertov’ian parallel between the overworked picker today and the carthorse of yesteryear. As the pickers watch the footage in a dark editing studio, the drift of their conversation suggests a gradual coming to consciousness. They reflect collectively on their own experiences of labour migration and discuss the changing patterns of British agriculture. They comment on how happy the Londoners seem to have been: the workers look relaxed, they say, ‘as though they were playing’. One of them ventures: ‘Without a quota and a time limit, in the end, it would become a state of tranquillity’. They discuss (in Romanian) how, if conditions were different, picking strawberries might even be therapeutic. But it is clear, as they load their trolleys with strawberries and wheel them along the metal tracks, that they are working on a manual-labour conveyer belt. Echoing the protagonists in Constantinescu and Soto’s film, they say: ‘Now work is work and relaxation is relaxation—if you have time for it’.

At one point the camera lingers on an inter-title taken from an archival film. It is a dedication ‘to all those that labour on the land’. The respect and dignity attached to this sentiment serves to further stress the alienated conditions of labour underpinning high-yield farming today. When they see an image of an expert of some sort in one clip, there is confusion as to who exactly

<sup>6</sup> Author’s email exchange with the artist 13 March 2015.

he might be; they speculate that he can't be a manager for 'it must have been a collective; there are too many people working there for them to all be working for the same man' and propose that the workers must have been 'working for the state', like on the collective farms in Romania. As the young people project their collectivised agricultural history onto Britain's past, political regimes and time zones are scrambled. Only the need for manual labour remains a constant. They imagine that in the past people would have sat around with friends and told stories as they worked, and call to mind their own childhood memories of travellers selling home made ice-cream in canisters as they linger for a time on a series of shots of children eating ice-cream and posing for a collective portrait, looking like they are loving it. 'We look much more grumpy, discontented, unsatisfied', they comment: 'If they filmed an Englishman working, they would look happier than us', one of them says. But another points out that 'the British don't really seem to work much in agriculture in their own country'. Or perhaps they do, says another, 'they just don't work as fast as us. They work with machines: technology not manual labour'. One of them asks: 'Imagine if they [the British] came to us (...) if *their* economy collapsed'; '... this is just imagining now'. The girl says: 'it would be interesting if they came to work for us. Yes. I would like it. To develop our country. We wouldn't have to go away anymore. Then they would see what it's like to be away from home'.

Unlike the protagonists of Soto and Constantinescu's feature-length film, who perform and reflect on their every-day experience, accompanied by the camera, the young people in Chodzko's shorter study also collaborate technically in producing their own representation. The artist does not pretend that this changes their status in the global scheme of things, however; access to the means of representation is an increasingly significant factor in entrenching inequality. One of the young men remarks causally: 'I have an editing programme at home, but it's strange, it doesn't have a 'save' option'. 'It must be the test version', another replies. They inadvertently point to the unequal opportunities that go with unequal access to expensive software, potentially drawing parallels between the ways in which globalised capitalism dictates who migrates to work and who does not, who can afford to buy certain software and who cannot. By including these conversations, Chodzko

makes postproduction a focus of production itself. The impossibility of the young man to store his images may even be taken as a metaphor of the struggle for self-representation and rights among migrant communities more broadly.

Something along the lines of a dialogical, collaborative approach to representing migrants is also attempted in the observational TV series *The Romanians Are Coming*. The boundaries between news reporting, documentary television, and film art are less distinguishable than we might believe, I think, and all these forms can potentially serve to contribute, in their own ways, to offering more equitable representations of the experience of migration. By comparison with the historical dimensions of the two works previously discussed, the series is undoubtedly amnesiac about the history of divided Europe. Interestingly, though, this oversight can be taken to echo the experience of living in an urgent, precarious and accelerated present, and *The Romanians are Coming* focused on the particular issue of economic migration to the UK from Romania after 2014. The protagonists appear too involved in struggling to meet their basic day-to-day needs to linger on their experiences of the history of Romanian communism. There is no time to stand back and to see how their lives and the history of their nation are intertwined: they live, for the most part, in an all-consuming present.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the implementation of economic austerity policies fused with the TV version of the art world's 'documentary turn' to deliver new frontiers for reality TV. The brief fascination with the MPs expenses scandal (one purchase of a 'floating duck-house' in particular, making waves) was soon supplanted by a vigorous focus on those towards the bottom of the economic pile. Channel 4's series *Benefits Street*, set on a Birmingham street with an unusually high proportion of unemployed benefit claimants, attracted 4.3 million viewers, and was labelled by *The Sun* 2014's 'most controversial show of the year, which 'divided the country over whether the residents are scroungers or victims'. Building on this success of this spectacular form of public scrutiny, Channel 4 followed up their study of lives lived on benefits with a series offering a window into the lives of immigrants from the expanding EU. The three-part series *The Romanians*



*are Coming* was billed as ‘exploring the lives of Romanians trying to make a new life in Britain and as presenting ‘the truth behind the headlines about immigration’, screened on prime-time television in the months leading up to the 2015 general election.<sup>7</sup>

The spectator’s guide to the experience of Romanians in London, Alex Fechete Petru, speaks excellent English. He sleeps rough in a multi-storey car park next to Victoria station, helps new arrivals settle in London, working as a street sweeper in Westminster and other boroughs on zero hours contracts. This means, in practice, that he has to show up for work at 5.30 each morning to be told whether and whereabouts he is to work that day, if at all. Alex introduces the show as follows: ‘There are maybe a hundred thousand Romanians working in the UK, and I’m going to tell you the stories of some of the assholes like me who came to take your jobs.’ With the exception of occasional framing by Alex, the series producers dispense with external narrative analysis in favour of appearing to let the subjects speak for themselves, and, by extension, appearing to encourage spectators to form a judgement by themselves. Such fly-on-the-wall-style documentary tactics seek to seduce viewers into suspending cynicism surrounding ‘authorial’ BBC-style documentary practices, in line with a more widespread contemporary British rejection of the role of the ‘expert’, against a backdrop of social-media propagated populism, instead pretending to offer a new form of neutrality that can more directly allow spectators to arrive at personal conclusions about the issues represented.

Alex observes: ‘in a sense, we are taking jobs from people, but shit jobs. Like car washers and street cleaners, working with asbestos. If you ask me, there would be no one else doing that if we weren’t here.’ He also offers his thoughts on UK mores; Alex proposes that Romanian care workers are only needed in the UK because the British don’t want to look after their old people themselves. ‘We, unlike you’, he notes, ‘do not send our parents away to be looked after by strangers’, although, he adds sardonically, he sees that ‘this is perhaps one sort of a solution if you

<sup>7</sup> Screened on UK TV Channel 4 on 17 February, 24 February, 3 March 2015. See: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-romanians-are-coming/videos/all/the-romanians-are-coming-trailer?sa=X&ved=0CC4Q9QEwDGoVChMI2MrJo9P9xgIVo2fbCh0ceAkL>

have a lot of money and no time'. While arguably operating with and for the most part confirming stereotypes about Romanians, the series also allows the Romanian protagonists to push-back: posing uncomfortable questions about the British way of life on prime time TV. Alex's interjections about dysfunctional and alienating features of British society go beyond the limits of the trope of the personal interest story and begin to open out into an interesting comparative analysis of cultural values. Though this is not explicitly developed, the theme remains a constant throughout the series.

One of the episodes explores what is driving migrants to the UK, emphasises the plight of the Roma, a carefully paced thread in the series. We see a man pick up a broken and discarded plastic child's scooter on the streets of Liverpool, and then later see the same sorry object being ridden by Roma children, having been deftly mended, upon the man's return, almost but not quite empty handed, after giving up his search for work in the UK. While the younger relatives who accompanied him on his outbound coach trip fared somewhat better than the disappointed *pater-familia*, Sandu struggled in the UK without the language, but we see him being warmly welcomed back into the bosom of his family, who live, crowded, in a derelict-looking burned-out block. The last episode focuses on racism in Romania, and shows Roma being evicted from their homes, so that they can no longer work locally, but are forced to rebuild their communities on the outskirts of town, often on landfill sites.<sup>8</sup> One such landscape serves as a backdrop for reflection on uneven development: 'Isn't it absurd', the narrator asks, as he watches a man riding bareback across a rubble-filled Roma settlement, 'that man is ready to travel to Mars, but Romanians are still riding horses?'

By way of contrast, we are introduced to a middle-class nurse, who misses her family and the creature comforts of her home life when she spends six months in England living in a cramped shared house in Sheffield to work with the elderly in the community as a carer. Her inclusion is an

<sup>8</sup> This strategy has been echoed around Europe in recent years: among others seeing the dismantling of Roma communities, the bulldozing of settlements and forced repatriation of over 8,000 people in France by Sarkozy in 2010, in contravention of EU laws on the free movement of EU citizens. France received only a bureaucratic warning from the European Commission over these actions and a written request for greater legal clarity over its Roma policy.

anomaly, as she is better educated than most of the other protagonists, which adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, hinting at the domestic impact of economic migration in the form of ‘brain drain’, though class relations are not scrutinised as such. Her case is the only one to offer a positive view of life in Romania; her garden is full of grape vines and her home spacious and well equipped, though her teenage daughter complains of the lack of opportunities. This notwithstanding, the fact that she is prepared to leave behind her family and her pleasant home serves to further highlight the economic incentive to seek work abroad. On the whole, the series consistently argues that Romania is worse off in economic terms, and that money is the bottom line in the post-socialist present. The story of the hero of episode 2 is particularly heart-wrenching in this respect: he works at hand car-washing for £30 a day and saves almost all his pay to send home to his widowed mother to support his younger siblings. Despite having a young wife in Romania, he is able to visit just once a year. While there, he is evasive about his living conditions in the UK. He is filmed camping out under a bridge to save money, with rats regularly scurrying around as he sleeps.

Responses to the series were polarised. *The Daily Telegraph* noted that ‘The argument made by the film was that the majority of Romanians come to Britain with the sole intention of working to escape lives of grinding poverty back home’, proposing that while this, in itself, was ‘thought provoking, as was the statistic that fewer than 2,500 Romanians are on benefits in the UK’, in view of the fact that ‘most of the Romanians in the film were either on benefits or waiting to qualify, this seemed hard to believe’. The critic concluded that the series ‘painted a picture of Romanian immigration that was pretty much the opposite of what it claimed, and completely failed to present (...) any evidence whatsoever for its argument that “immigration from other EU countries makes money” for Britain’.<sup>9</sup> *The Guardian*, meanwhile, called the series ‘funny, balanced, and tinged with tragedy’, directing a tongue in cheek aside to the leader of UKIP: ‘Whatever your feelings are

<sup>9</sup> Gerard O’Donovan, ‘The Romanians are Coming, Channel 4, review: ‘unconvincing’’, *The Telegraph* (17 Feb 2015). Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/11418589/The-Romanians-are-Coming-Channel-4-review.html>

(Nigel) about the migrant strain on the NHS, no one with a heart can fail to be stirred by one father's journey and quest to try to get his little girl fixed up'.<sup>10</sup> The critic was referring to the story of a man whose that's broken leg was so badly reset in Romania that she was living in constant pain with no hope of a cure. As the family could not afford the routine bribes needed to guarantee adequate treatment in the corrupt Romanian healthcare system, he had taken the drastic step of leaving his wife with their three children, to find work in England, with the aim of bringing his daughter over for a free operation.

On the whole, UK critics did little to dispute or to challenge the image of Romania or Romanians presented by the programme. One popular UK media outlet summarised: 'Children playing in skips, a child who admits he won't eat if he doesn't find some scrap metal to sell, the sights of derelict buildings everywhere, a child crying as his father leaves for another country, a man collecting cardboard to keep himself warm at night. Life in Romania'.<sup>11</sup> The bad PR prompted the Romanian Embassy in London to launch a counterattack; the Ambassador accused the producers of 'reinforcing negative stereotypes'. *The Daily Mail* recorded that 'In a letter sent to *The Observer* by the President of United Romania Party, and a series of MPs, officials protested that the documentary is wrong in 'every respect' and demanded that 'The affront brought to the Romanians living in the United Kingdom must stop immediately, as it will encourage xenophobia and will prejudice our citizens in a direct manner.'<sup>12</sup> An unsavoury parallel was proposed: 'We kindly ask you to consider what your reaction would be if TVR, the Romanian public television channel, would launch a campaign of denigration pointed towards the British citizens in our country, generalising cases of alcoholism and paedophilia displayed by some British citizens (cases we are

<sup>10</sup> Sam Wollaston, 'The Romanians are Coming review: funny, balanced and tinged with tragedy', *The Guardian* (18 Feb 2015). Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/feb/18/the-romanians-are-coming-review-channel-4>

<sup>11</sup> Katie Baillie, '6 Reasons why the Romanians are coming is definitely worth a watch, *Metro.co.uk* (17 Feb. 2015) Available at: <http://metro.co.uk/2015/02/17/6-reasons-why-the-romanians-are-coming-is-definitely-worth-a-watch-5066453/#ixzz3hBgG32IV>

<sup>12</sup> Jenny Awford, 'Romanian fury over Channel 4 Documentary', *Mail Online* (8 March 2015), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2984925/Romanian-fury-Channel-4-documentary-MPs-ask-programme-saying-Brits-alcoholics-paedophiles.html>

sure you are aware of), and turning them into the general image of all British citizens in Romania'.<sup>13</sup>

The reaction from the Romanian community in London and in Romania was divided, though. A host of Romanian organizations, including the Association for the Defence of Human Rights in Romania – Helsinki Committee (APADOR CH) announced their solidarity with the Producers of the series, saying that, unlike the programme's detractors, they were grateful to Channel 4 for presenting 'extreme poverty' as 'the principle cause of the emigration of the Romanians' and cited figures from Eurostat demonstrating that 'Romania is the second poorest country in the EU, surpassed only by Bulgaria. Around 41.7 per cent of the population of the country (eight million persons) are subject to the risk of poverty and social exclusion', they wrote. They concluded that the protagonists of the programme were

the victims of a catastrophic Romanian Government and a consistent post-Communist mix of policies, which has seen the polarization of rich and poor, a collapse in equality of chance, a total absence of social mobility and the formation of a wide scale underclass. These are not thieves or beggars, but those on the road to despair, who are looking for a solution for survival for themselves and their families.<sup>14</sup>

The open letter proposed that the indignation of Romanian critics of the programme was a symptom of

a terrible hypocrisy, that attacks you for exposing poverty – a poverty which those who purport to be representatives of our country strive to ignore or hide. Those Romanians with successful careers in the UK who have protested were not, in truth, included in this programme. But we believe they should address their anger exclusively towards the Romanian Government, who are the authors of this social disaster and who have prompted the need for such citizens to emigrate.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Awford, 'Romanian fury over Channel 4 Documentary'.

<sup>14</sup> ActiveWatch, RomanoButiQ, APADOR CH – Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania – Helsinki Committee, et.al., 'Open letter to Ms Katie Buchanan Producer of "The Romanians are coming"', *Apador.org*, 4 March 2015. Available at: <http://www.apador.org/en/scrisoare-deschisa-doamnei-katie-buchanan-producatoarea-reportajului-the-romanians-are-coming%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8/>

<sup>15</sup> ActiveWatch et.al., 'Open letter to Ms Katie Buchanan'

Romania's situation as a post-communist nation goes unremarked by the *Channel 4* series, and the causes of the economic situation of Romania are neither explored holistically nor historicised. The particularities of uneven development in Romania and the West's complicity in first providing vast loans to Ceaușescu and then demanding their repayment, which he delivered at speed in the 1980s by starving the population, go unmentioned, as does the selling off of state assets as part of democratising neoliberal project of 'transition' to a 'free market' economy. Although the individuals represented complain bitterly about the lack of opportunity and poor standards of living in their country – the Roma community in particular voicing grievances about policies introduced to marginalise and isolate them by forcing them out of their homes in cities – there is no clear sense of who should be held responsible for such programmes or their consequences. Likewise, it remains unclear who exactly is responsible for the exploitation of cheap labourers paid below the minimum wage in the UK, where people such as Alex are filmed being hired by middlemen and agency staff in shabby offices. The series may be affectively powerful, then, but it lacks the sort of critical analysis carried by programmes such as Al Jazeera's *People and Power* series, which often brings together investigative journalists with local legal representatives to address globalised labour market abuses or expose people-trafficking networks.

Art historian TJ Demos has argued that mass media depictions of migrants tend to 'reify victimhood' and work through 'sensationalist images corresponding to an easily consumable repertoire of human-interest stories'.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach, he argues, 'fails to examine the political and economic framework that explains the causes of migration', on the one hand, and on the other, 'in its desire to portray the objective reality of the journey, suppresses the journalist's participation in the unfolding events'.<sup>17</sup> This is in line with the tradition of the documentary project more widely, he proposes: 'to engender a compassion for the struggling and disadvantaged that conveniently overlooks the viewer's situation and potential complicity in the unequal political and economic

<sup>16</sup> Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xvii

<sup>17</sup> Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p 206

arrangements that drive migration in the first place', focusing, instead, on 'offering an emotional portrayal of the plight of one individual'.<sup>18</sup>

*The Pickers* seems to me to be exemplary of what Demos calls 'a new mode of address' that highlights the 'transformative capacity of representation to shift perspectives and invite collaborative and creative interpretation'.<sup>19</sup> By explicitly combining contemporary and historical footage, Chodzko offers insights into changing patterns of labour in the agricultural sector in the UK, thereby causing viewers to consider the transformations brought about by globalisation. Though *My Beautiful Dacia* invites us to empathise with the stories of particular individuals, it also tells a wider story by incorporating its study of labour migration into a history of Romania under socialism and exploring the lives of its citizens in relation to 'transition'. With the exception of the moment in the back of the car at the border crossing, the camera follows people who tell us their stories without appearing to be interviewed, as such, following the tropes of 'observational' documentary. Constantinescu and Soto's picture of Romanian migration is one that represents migrants as pragmatic and resourceful agents of their fate who come and go, as they need to, without necessarily seeking to start a new life abroad. On the whole they remain committed to their nation and are invested in returning there.

*The Romanians are Coming*'s stated aim of following Romanians 'trying to make a new life in Britain' is, in itself, far from neutral, then. Researchers on patterns of migration between Romania and the UK suggest that these are far more liquid than assumptions about migrants seeking to remain indefinitely would allow. Labour migration in Europe tends to be circular, entailing movement back and forth across former East and former West. One study concludes that: 'Interviews with (...) migrants showed that their objective was not to flee Romania in order to build a new life elsewhere but, rather, to temporarily compensate for the deficiencies of a faulty social and economic system'.<sup>20</sup> Sociologist Swanie Potot has argued that, for many, migration is 'a way of

<sup>18</sup> Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p 206

<sup>19</sup> Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 209

<sup>20</sup> M Morokvasic, M, 'La mobilité transnationale comme ressource: Le cas des migrants de

life that involves movement back and forth between a relatively comfortable home and an undefined elsewhere'.<sup>21</sup> She notes that such 'temporary business trips to richer countries are associated with an older habit of 'shuttling' between city and countryside, which once 'enabled the inhabitants of rural zones to improve their living conditions by commuting to work in the city, without entering entirely into the urban economic circuit'. Potot proposes that the 'parallel with current international mobility is clear in that the objective still consists of extending one's activities to a new territory without socially or economically breaking from the former'.<sup>22</sup> Other authors have also discussed how 'transnational activity is one of a number of survival strategies used by Romanians to counter the economic hardship that has ensued since the 1989 revolution', arguing that 'these new economic strategies are the prolongation and modernisation of informal activities developed during communist times'.<sup>23</sup>

Far from being merely a symptom of 'transition', migration can also be seen as having assisted the transition process: 'Romanian migrants have contributed in many ways to the economic restructuring of their homeland. By investing remittances in Romania and developing transnational culture and networks, they have actually accelerated the transformations of the country towards European lifestyles and standards', Potot claims.<sup>24</sup> The impact of Romanian citizens' transnationalism is not only economic, for migrants 'acquire behaviour, knowledge and skills that are also reinvested in their home regions. In doing so, far from the projects of international cooperation or the programmes of cultural exchange supported by the ministries, the migrant networks promote a European standard of living which is progressively penetrating the countries

l'Europe de l'Est', *Cultures et Conflits* 33-34, 1999, pp. 105-122. Cited in Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival: Romanian migration during the transition process' and Dumitru Sandu, 'Modernising Romanian society through temporary work abroad' in Richard Black et. al, *A Continent Moving West? EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010, p 150. See also: Dumitru Sandu, 'Modernising Romanian society through temporary work abroad' in the same volume.

<sup>21</sup> Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 150.

<sup>22</sup> 'According to Sandu (Sandu, D. (1999), *Spatiul social al transitiiei*. Bucharest: Polirom.) and cited in Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 155.

<sup>23</sup> Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 150

<sup>24</sup> Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 150



that have only very recently joined the EU'.<sup>25</sup> Portes concludes that what we may be seeing here is as much about transnationalism as it is about migration, and may be read as a form of 'globalisation from below'.<sup>26</sup> Others have argued that 'migratory networks create a 'transnational social field',<sup>27</sup> and that these link different places of passage, situated 'neither here nor there, but here and there at the same time'.<sup>28</sup> In this context, it is also noteworthy that Constantinescu is himself a migrant, living in Sweden, an art world nomad who may well have become the international artist he is in part because of his emigration.

Both Soto and Constantinescu's film and Chodzko's crucially historicise the present, and in so doing they politicise it ways that point to long-term processes. They open out onto wider debates about post-communism, globalisation, and film making itself – and although they do not foreground the intervention of the film-maker explicitly, they avoid making any truth claims about the possibility of merely 'observing' in the manner of the fly-on-the wall series. Chodzko quietly positions himself as a consumer, rather than a producer, at one point in the film; there is a shot of the artists' son biting into a deliciously ripe looking oversized strawberry. It is a moment of self-reflection on the artist's part, like the moment when we hear Constantinescu's voice justifying his presence in the back seat of the workers' car with his film equipment. Though we don't see the producers themselves in these cases, we are made aware of their hand in what we are watching, while *The Romanians are Coming* erases production in an bid to lure us into believing that our guide is also the author. As long as we remain on the level of the individual, however moving their story or however accurate its representational truth claims, we are not able to understand the full implications of the systemic change that took place in Europe in 1989 or address the intimately

<sup>25</sup> Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 155

<sup>26</sup> Alejandro Portes, 'Globalization from below: The rise of transnational communities', Princeton University Press Papers, Princeton, 1992, cited in Potot, 'Transitioning strategies of economic survival', p 154

<sup>27</sup> Nina Glick-Schiller and Peggy Levitt, 'Conceptualizing simultaneity. A transnational social field perspective on society' in Alejandro Portes & Josh De Wind (eds), *Rethinking migration. New theoretical and empirical perspectives*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 181-218.

<sup>28</sup> Alain Tarrius, 'Territoires circulatoires et espaces urbains', *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 59-60 (1993), pp. 50-60.

connected relationship between anxieties around class and changing patterns of labour in the United Kingdom and the rise in open xenophobia that has become so evident over the course of the past decade. By exploring how contemporary and historical experiences relate, the artists projects I have discussed help viewers to a better understanding the relationship between post-socialism and the globalised politics of EU labour, potentially combatting the xenophobia at the heart of the battle around free movement as a pillar of EU integration.