# Another Realism: Ion Grigorescu, Photography and Document in 1970s Romania

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## Abstract

In the Romanian context of the 1970s, how was it possible to produce a work of art that the authorities deemed too realistic? How can one understand the critique of an excess of realism when in 1971 the doctrine of Socialist Realism was re-established? This essay examines the notion of realism as forged by Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu. Drawing on recent writings in the theory of photography, it helps us understand how Grigorescu used the photographic medium to produce works, which, whilst adhering to realism's principles, contravened the regime's prescriptions. The use the artist made of the term "document" to circumvent official injunctions along with the national and international artistic sources of his work are among the questions addressed in this article to show how, even in a Communist country, dissent could walk on the paths of realism.

# The Portrait of the President

[1] Someone must have been playing dirty tricks on him, for in 1980 the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945), who had always avoided official commissions, found himself required to make a portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu.[1] The Party leadership of the Municipality of Bucharest had launched a competition in order to find the best paintings to be offered to the president on the occasion of his forthcoming birthday celebration. Finding it impossible to refuse the assignment, Grigorescu got to work (Fig. 1). He painted three Ceaușescu disagreeing with each other in front of a model of the "People's House", as the enormous Palace of the Parliament is known, which had been ordered by the president, at the cost of widespread demolition in the centre of the capital and population displacement. According to the artist, the idea for the composition stemmed from the fact that there was only one person who could contradict Ceaușescu, namely Ceaușescu himself.[2] Therefore, the only way to depict the debate surrounding these architectural ambitions was for the president to figure multiple times in the painting. As Grigorescu expected, his portrait was rejected. "Everybody who lived under Ceaușescu can easily understand that it was impossible to have three Ceaușescu in one work",[3] he explained. Still, his unique composition did not strike anyone as harbouring latent criticism. On the official advice of the Visual Artists' Union,[4] Grigorescu prepared a second version, removing the two Ceaușescu that stood on either side of the central figure (Fig. 2). This modification did not suffice, however. The revised painting was also rejected.[5]

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[1] Ion Grigorescu interviewed by Daria Ghiu, in: *Dilema Veche*, no. 275 (May 21, 2009), https://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/7758/Daria-Ghiu-Ion-Grigorescu/Sa-fim-sinceri-si-sa-vedem.html (accessed February 7, 2019).

[2] Ion Grigorescu, "Subversive Art as Viewed in Eastern European Romania", lecture given at the conference that accompanied the 2009 exhibition "Subversive Practices" at the Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart. Extracts of the conference proceedings are published in: Alina Şerban, ed., *Ion Grigorescu. The Man with a Single Camera*, Berlin 2013, 338.

[3] Ion Grigorescu, in conversation with Anders Kreuger at the Goethe-Institut, New York, August 2009, https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/5125554/wyoming-transcript-ion-grigorescu-anders-kreuger-ludlow-38 (accessed September 23, 2021).

[4] On the role of the Visual Artists' Unions, see *ArtMargins Online*, special issue "Creating for the State: The Role of Artists' Unions in Central and Eastern Europe", eds. Raino Isto and Caterina Preda, published October 19, 2020, especially the contribution by Caterina Preda, "The Role of the Romanian Artists' Union in the Production of State Socialist Art" (accessed October 4, 2022). On the history and establishment of the Visual Artists' Unions, see Magda Predescu, "Uniunea artiştilor plastici în perioada 1954–1963: între 'aparat de stat' şi 'dispozitiv'", in: *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 17 (2017), no. 3, 269-291.

[5] Grigorescu thought better of keeping a representation of the president in his studio. All that remains of this work are the photographs the artist took before destroying it.

1 Ion Grigorescu, *The Triple Portrait of the President Nicolae Ceaușescu*, 1980, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm. Destroyed by the artist (photo: courtesy of the artist)



2 Ion Grigorescu, *The Portrait of President Ceaușescu Alone*, 1980, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm. Destroyed by the artist (photo: courtesy of the artist)

[2] The strangest aspect of this situation was the censors' reason for refusing Grigorescu's painting. After the initial rejection, when the artist resubmitted his painting with the multiple figures of Ceaușescu erased, what was the censors' next move? They criticised the portrait for being "too realistic".[6] But how could realism be considered excessive in a country that had reinstated the Socialist Realist doctrine in the early 1970s?[7] Providing insight into the history of the application of Socialist Realism in Romania can certainly shed light on this question. However, the reversals in Romanian cultural policy that I examine below are only partially illuminating. First, we must ask ourselves about Grigorescu's notion of realism, explored by the artist on two fronts: in painting and photography, and in writings published in magazines. How did Grigorescu manage to throw official injunctions into crisis despite being committed to the principles of realistic representation? How was he able to challenge the prescriptions of the regime while at the same time positioning himself under the banner of realism?[8] What means did Grigorescu use to forge a notion of divergent realism? What role does the term "document" play in his work? And what meaning does this notion, which occupies a central place in American conceptual art, take on in the context of Romania? If there is a purpose to the study of this field of East European art history, it is above all to try to understand a paradoxical fact: how was it possible for dissent in a communist regime to choose the path of realism?

[3] Born in 1945, Grigorescu studied at the Bucharest National University of Arts, where he was enrolled in the painting program. After graduating in 1969, he chose to earn his living as a fine arts teacher in schools and in youth centres rather than accepting a position as a state artist.[9] In the 1970s, his artistic activity developed in two parallel directions that would sometimes intersect. On the one hand, Grigorescu was keen to explore oppositions such as spirit and matter, the internal and the external, male and female, using his own naked body to make actions and performances filmed in the privacy of his studio.[10] On the other, he endeavoured to depict the reality of the political, economic and social situation in Romania. He belongs broadly to a generation of Romanian artists who during their formative years experienced a liberalisation of state control,

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[6] Ion Grigorescu, "Subversive Art as Viewed in Eastern European Romania", in: Șerban (2013), 338.

[7] Mirela Tanta considers official Romanian art between 1970 and 1989 as "Neo-Socialist Realism", but this slightly different appellation does not invalidate the problem posed here. See Tanta, "Reenacting the Past. Romanian Art since 1989", in: *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 6 (2018), DOI: https://doi.org/10.54533/stedstud.vol006.art10.

[8] In his book *In the Shadow of Yalta*, Piotr Piotrowski includes a chapter entitled "Un-Socialist Realism". Grigorescu does not appear in it. In any case, this title fails to capture the complexity of his work, which interweaves an interest in social issues with a rejection of propaganda. See *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989*, London 2009.

[9] On the status of state artists, see Caterina Preda, ed., *The State Artist in Romania and Eastern Europe: The Role of the Creative Unions*, Bucharest 2017.

[10] For more on this, see Ileana Pintilie, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: A Contextual Analysis of Ion Grigorescu's Work", in: Șerban (2013), 11-35; Amy Bryzgel, "Against Ephemerality: Performing for the Camera in Central and Eastern Europe", in: *Journal of Contemporary and Eastern Europe* 27 (2019), no. 1, 7-27; Corinna Kühn, *Medialisierte Körper. Performances und Aktionen der Neoavantgarden Ostmitteleuropas in den 1970er Jahren*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2020.

which had been draconian during the early period of the communist regime. Nevertheless, when he decided in the early 1970s to paint "what he saw", he perceived Socialist Realism, as described by Piotr Piotrowski, as propaganda that was anything but realistic.[11] My intention here is to describe, through a close examination of Grigorescu's works and texts, how he succeeded in producing a realism completely foreign to official art.

[4] As with most research into Eastern European art, the horizontal history envisioned by Piotr Piotrowski is decisive.[12] Piotrowski challenged the relationship between the centre and the margins. He showed that Eastern European artists' interest in Western art movements did not necessarily make them their followers, imitators or peripheral extensions. In order to discuss their work, we need to be able to examine it without copying notions from Western art, adopting a geographical perspective that respects its specificities. Research into Eastern European art has recently focused on cultural transfers, transnational exchanges and the circulation of ideas, not only between the two blocs of East and West, but also between the various countries in Central and Eastern Europe.[13] In Grigorescu's case, a somewhat different approach is required. There is not one reference, either in his writings or in interviews since the 1990s, to any artistic exchange with colleagues from another Eastern bloc country. His curiosity in artistic matters seems to have focused exclusively on practices in Western Europe and the USA.

[5] The political situation in Romania forced Grigorescu to take a roundabout route in order to realise his artistic project. Thanks to its contradictory nature, photography assumed the role of an ally in this undertaking. The artist acted as if photography were a simple process for recording

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[11] Piotr Piotrowski, "The Global Network: An Approach to Comparative Art History", in: *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, eds. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Farnham 2015, 149-167: 161. For some historical background on Socialist Realism, see Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, "Introduction: Geography of Internationalism", in: *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, eds. J. Bazin, P. Dubourg Glatigny and P. Piotrowski, Budapest 2016, 1-28.

[12] Piotr Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", in: *Umění / Art* 56 (2008), no. 5, 378-383 and Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, London 2012, 15-52.

[13] See on this topic: DaCosta Kaufmann, Dossin and Joyeux-Prunel (2015); Bazin, Dubourg Glatigny and Piotrowski (2016); Tomáš Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World*, Zurich 2017; Mathilde Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la guerre froide*, Paris 2018; Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, Cambridge, Mass./London 2018; Beata Hock and Anu Allas, eds., *Globalizing East-European Art Histories. Past and Present*, New York 2018; Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, eds., *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, New York 2018; Maya and Reuben Fowkes, *Central and Eastern European Art since 1950*, London 2020. See also two ongoing research projects: "Resonances: Regional and Transregional Cultural Transfer in the Art of the 1970s", (2021–2024), https://resonances.artpool.hu/; and Katalin Cseh-Varga, "Behind the Artwork. Thinking Art Against Cold War's Bloc Polarity", (2019–2025), https://www.akbild.ac.at/en/research/projects/research_projects/2019/behind-the-artwork. Artistic exchanges between Central and Eastern Europe and African and Middle Eastern countries were also examined in two colloquia: "Die globale DDR. Eine transkulturelle Kunstgeschichte (1949–1990)", Dresden, June 2022; and "Equal and Poor. A Comparative Perspective on Art in Communist Europe and the Global South", Poznań, March 2023 (all accessed January 12, 2024).

reality, but this was to avoid censorship. To study Grigorescu's concept of realism, we must also examine the place of photographic theory in his work. By drawing on photography to make realist art, he was, in some way, returning to the founding myth of the medium. Indeed, photography had been considered capable of recording reality without distorting it, as if it were directly imprinted onto the surface of the photograph. However, this unmediated effect could not hide the fact that photography was just as much about representation and thus codified. Tension was created between two opposing sides: on the one hand, photography appeared as the result of a process that some have not hesitated to qualify as natural; on the other, it only accounted for reality within its own framework, artificial as it was.[14]

## Romanian Culture in the Postwar Period

[6] Romania had been governed by terror for two decades, from the moment of its absorption into the Soviet sphere of influence until 1964. The first communist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1901–1965), was an adept of Stalinist methods and did not allow the de-Stalinisation of Romania even after the Soviet tyrant's death in 1953.[15] However, a year before his own death, he announced the independence of the Romanian Communist Party from Moscow. The prison gates were opened and political prisoners freed. The rise to power of Ceaușescu, who was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1965, a few months after Gheorghiu Dej's death, affirmed this loosening of controls. It was to be but for a brief period. Starting in the early 1970s, state control became more apparent; in the cultural sphere, measures were re-introduced to curtail artists' autonomy.

[7] The liberalisation of state control after Stalin's death, or "the thaw" as Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967) called it, did not have an immediate effect on the life of artists in Romania.[16] Socialist Realism continued to be the only authorised mode of artistic expression. Nevertheless, changes in the dogma began to appear. Indeed, a few years after Stalin's death, Romanian Socialist Realism shifted away from the Soviet model to draw from other sources as well. On the one hand, artists were able to refer to national realist painters from the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Nicolae Grigorescu (1838–1907) or Ion Andreescu (1850–1882).[17] On the other hand, they were permitted to study art made outside the Eastern bloc,

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[14] Without once again going over the famous writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes and Rosalind Krauss, I would like to point out the following work: Hubert Damisch, "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image", in: *October* 102 (1978), 70-72. For recent work on this dual nature of photography, see Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2006; Peter Geimer, *Theorien der Fotografie zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2009; John Roberts, "Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic", in: *Oxford Art Journal* 32 (2009), no. 2, 283-298; John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations,* New York 2014; Diarmuid Costello, *On Photography. A Philosophical Inquiry*, London/New York 2018.

[15] For further reading on Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej's regime of terror, see Dennis Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948–1965*, London 1999, and Lucian Boia, *Romania, Borderland of Europe*, London 2001.

[16] On the De-Stalinisation of Romania, see Predescu (2017).

[17] *Arta plastică* no. 5 (1956).

albeit with the explicit proviso that it was created by artists who were not merely politically engaged on the left but also supporters of the communist party. As a result, the Romanian artistic scene became acquainted with the work of Western realist painters such as the Italian Renato Guttuso (1911–1987) and the Mexican artists Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974).[18]

[8] Circumstances continued to evolve slowly, with a clear change of direction occurring some ten years later. There is no room for doubt in Romanian art historiography about the date on which Socialist Realism was officially jettisoned.[19] In February 1965, during the Writers' Union annual conference, voices were raised against outdated restrictions on writers.[20] They made themselves heard, and the movement spread to artistic circles as well. A new generation took over the management of the cultural institutions, replacing those who had been relieved of their positions. A few weeks after this conference, Nicolae Ceaușescu replaced Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej as General Secretary of the Romanian Workers' Party, and he abandoned the path that had hitherto been imposed on all literary and artistic expression and increasingly backed a plurality of styles.[21] The second half of the 1960s was experienced in Romania as a period of relative openness, during which artists were able to access information on trends in Western Europe and the USA.

[9] The year 1965 is important for Romanian art history for yet another reason: it was the year in which exhibitions of abstract painting were officially authorised. The suspension of the ban on abstract art was implicitly understood during Ion Ţuculescu's retrospective, because it also included a number of his non-figurative works from the 1940s which had never been seen in public before (Fig. 3).[22] Romanian artists, who had never ceased making abstract paintings in secret, were allowed to reproduce them in publications or exhibit them starting in the second half of the 1960s. However, as the parameters of the Romanian artistic landscape were ambiguous, we should be ready to envision the coexistence of abstract art and Ceaușescu's insistent guidelines, who, even during the early years of his rule, recalled on various occasions the artist's responsibility for the content of his work, admonished its inclusion in a socialist cultural framework, and declared the unacceptability of an art which wanted to be autonomous or independent of society.[23]

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[18] *Arta plastică* no. 6 (1955). For the role played by "peripheral realisms" in the construction of a communist art, consult Jérôme Bazin, "Socialist Realism and its International Models", in: *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 109 (2011), 72-87.

[19] Magda Cârneci, *Art et pouvoir en Roumanie: 1945–1989*, Paris 2007, 128; Adriana Copaciu, "Anii '40–'60: de la arta angajată a suprarealismului la arta dirijată a realismului socialist", in: *Arta in România între anii 1945–2000. O analiză din perspectiva prezentului*, ed. Călin Dan et al., Bucharest 2016, 14-36: 33; Caterina Preda, "The State Artist in Romania and Eastern Europe: A Theoretical Outline", in: Preda, ed. (2017), 19-33: 24.

[20] Cârneci (2007), 128-129.

[21] Cârneci (2007), 120.

[22] Cârneci (2007), 130. On this exhibition, see also Cătălin Davidescu, *Ion Ţuculescu. Reconstituirea*, Bucharest 2020.

[23] Cârneci (2007), 120.

3 Ion Ţuculescu (1910–1962), *Composition (with Folk Art Objects)*, undated, oil on canvas, 49 × 70 cm. Muzeul Național de Artă al României, Bucharest, 87.270/1424 (© Muzeul Național de Artă al României)

[10] The tenor changed in 1971. It was no longer a question of guidelines, but of measures introduced to drastically reduce the relative openness from which artistic expression had benefited during the preceding years. Traditionally viewed as a sudden reversal of Ceaușescu's cultural policies, these restrictions have more recently been considered as part of a continuum which had been slowly maturing since the second half of the 1960s.[24] Provisions announced during a speech in July 1971 and officially published that autumn by the Romanian Communist Party signalled a tightening of state control on artistic production, which was now to serve an exclusively ideological purpose. "Stylistic diversity" and "creative freedom" were disallowed and works "without a political message" or only tenuously linked to "the construction of contemporary Romanian society" came in for criticism.[25] The value of a work of art was never higher than when it portrayed the "realities of the socialist system". "All artistic production steeped in bourgeois morals or spirit will be firmly rejected."[26] The terminology used dated back to the 1950s, and Romanians felt as if they were transported back to a period that they thought belonged to the past for good. However, despite the threatening tone of these announcements, access to Western art continued throughout the 1970s, and the period saw neither an abandonment of abstract art nor a return to Socialist Realism. In the words of the art historian Ioana Vlasiu, "the gains of the second half of the 1960s could not be reversed".[27]

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[24] These differing perspectives on the study of the Ceaușescu regime resulted from the publication by three Romanian historians of documents that were part of the final report by the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. See Mihnea Berindei, Dorin Dobrincu and Armand Goşu, eds., *Istoria Comunismului din România. Documente Nicolae Ceauşescu 1965–1971*, Bucharest 2012.

[25] "Tematica pentru Raportul ce va fi prezentat la Plenara CC al PCR privind activitatea ideologică, politico-educativă si cultural-artistică", 26 July 1971, Bucharest, in: Berindei, Dobrincu and Goşu (2012), 643.

[26] Berindei, Dobrincu and Goşu (2012), 644.

[27] Ioana Vlasiu, in conversation with the author, Bucharest, February 2018.

[11] Founded in 1954, the periodical *Arta plastică*, later entitled *Arta,* was like a seismograph in the way it recorded the changes taking place in the Romanian cultural field during the communist period. As the organ of the Visual Artists' Union in Romania, the journal was subject to official censorship, and from the outset it was clear that it would be a tool of propaganda.[28] However, because it was the only specialist publication exclusively dedicated to the visual arts, *Arta* was always much more than an instrument of ideology. Even during the periods of cultural containment, art critics and artists managed to circumvent censorship, notably by hiding articles on Western art in the middle of issues, which from 1974 on regularly began with series of photographs of Ceaușescu and editorials echoing the official line.[29] While the measures introduced in 1971 were not effective in reinstating control over the artistic landscape to the levels seen in the 1950s, they did mark the beginning of a personality cult that would manifest itself with increasing virulence until 1989.

## "I Paint What I See"

[12] In 1972, Grigorescu created a work entitled *Reporting from Gorj* as part in a competition organised by the Visual Artists' Union (Fig. 4). He wanted an opportunity to present his work to a wider public than his circle of friends. His submission was accepted, and *Reporting from Gorj* was included in an exhibition whose theme could be summarised by the title "Art and Actuality".



4 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj*, 1972, mixed media, 184 × 292 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

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[28] Bogdan Iacob, "Tipuri de discurs în critica de artă în revista *Arta (plastică),* din anii '60 până la căderea regimului comunist", in: *Arta in România între anii 1945–2000*, 186-201: 187.

[29] Cârneci (2007), 141.

The artist opted for a subject that conformed entirely to the government's demands for realism. *Reporting from Gorj* depicts the daily lives of farmers. The Gorj is an agricultural region in western Romania, and the series of sixteen canvases that *Reporting from Gorj* brings together in a single, screen-like object can best be described as a collection of scenes from country life. But although the artist was prepared to choose a subject matter that would satisfy the authorities, his approach sets it apart from the works that were commonly accepted. It is enough to observe the warm tones, the orange-yellow hue of those 1950s and early 1960s paintings promoting a prosperous countryside (Fig. 5) to comprehend the gulf that separates them from *Reporting from Gorj*.



5 Brăduţ Covaliu (1924–1991), *The Harvest* (from the *New Life* cycle), 1962, oil on canvas, 108 × 136 cm. Muzeul Național de Artă al României, Bucharest, 67.648/601 (© Muzeul Național de Artă al României)

[13] Grigorescu's fields are grey (Fig. 6). The stables, also grey, are empty (Fig. 7). At the weighing of the harvest, a handful of peasants are seated in a semi-circle, yet there is only one sack which occupies a marginal position in the left-hand corner of the painting (Fig. 8). In the countryside, Grigorescu sees only dispossession. A goods wagon takes away the harvested grain (Fig. 4). Some peasants are busy in the fields, but many more are dressed in suits (Fig. 9). With suitcases in hand and their backs to the viewer, they walk away towards the horizon; they are abandoning the countryside for white-collar jobs. The blackened shovel of a digger is seen in close-up (Fig. 4): "even the earth is taken from the peasants".[30]

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[30] Grigorescu, interview with the author, Bucharest, 5 February 2018.

6 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (Wheat Silo)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)
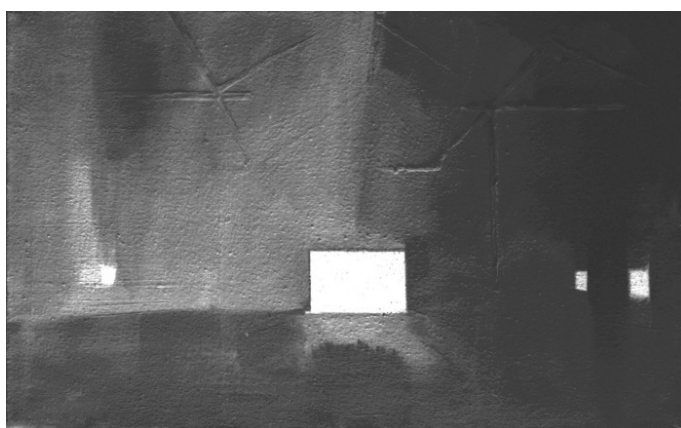


7 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (Stall Interior)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)



8 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (The Weighing of the Harvest)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

9 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (Heading for the City)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 38,5 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

[14] Grigorescu emphasises the isolation and poverty in the countryside by including in *Reporting from Gorj* two scenes which are foreign to rural life. One, a collective portrait, shows a group he calls "the village intellectuals" whose features are recognisable (Fig. 10), in contrast to a row of peasants with indistinguishable faces in the fields (Fig. 4). Unlike these muted pictures, the other depicts a garden of lush vegetation in which a couple are lounging after a meal, indicated by an abundance of coffee cups and bottles of wine and brandy (Fig. 11).



10 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (The Village Intelligentsia)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

11 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (Rest in Snagov)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

[15] Grigorescu did not use painting alone to construct a notion of divergent realism. He also turned to writing, producing a number of texts. In two articles published in *Arta* in 1972 and 1973, he explained the artistic path he had embarked upon at the outset of his studies. His preference for realism is clear from the first sentence of his 1972 article entitled "Debut": "I paint what I see […]."[31] Terse as it may seem, the phrase encapsulates a complex artistic project. In effect, Romanian artists who set out on their careers in the first half of the 1970s had two options: to create abstract art which continued to be tolerated by the authorities, no doubt because it did not seem offensive to them; or to curry favour with the authorities by seemingly toeing the official line. For Grigorescu, being a realist artist meant above all distancing himself from abstract artists.[32] Grigorescu was not interested in a discipline disconnected from the social realities which allowed artists to indulge in pure art for art's sake. He also clearly rejected the second option by refusing to benefit from advantages granted to those who appeared to bend to the will of the Party. Not having the state support which came with official artist status, he accepted the post he was given at the end of his studies and began teaching visual arts at a school in a provincial town 150 kilometres from Bucharest.

[16] What type of realism was expected from artists in the early 1970s? When asked this question during an interview in February 2018, Grigorescu's reply was instantaneous: "It so happened, realism was no longer wanted."[33] Art critics praised pictorial qualities of "transfiguration" and "transformation" and the government encouraged artists to sing the regime's praises. The official version of realism corresponded more – to use Grigorescu's words – to "an embellishment of reality".[34] It was against this backdrop that the full complexity of Grigorescu's work emerged. In

[31] Grigorescu, "Debut", in: *Arta* nos. 8-9 (1972), 48-49: 48.

[32] Grigorescu, "Despre artistul realist", in: *Arta* no. 12 (1973), 22-23.

[33] Grigorescu, interview with the author, Bucharest, 6 February 2018.

[34] This statement recalls Albert Camus' description of Socialist Realism which he made in 1957 in Sweden after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature: "Finalement, cet art sera socialiste dans la mesure exacte où il ne sera pas réaliste." Albert Camus, *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 4: *1957–1959*, Paris 2008, 256.

his 1973 article, the artist upped the ante with proposals that theoretically should have been considered favourable to Socialist Realist doctrine: "I'd like to film a worker non-stop for 24 hours."[35] Yet a realism configured along the lines of the statement "I paint what I see" could only displease authorities, who were seeking works which praised the regime and flattered its leader. Grigorescu countered the embellishment of reality in propaganda painting with an immediate recording of reality. His work as an artist, as he presented it, was thus reduced to the minimum, namely to setting up his camera and letting it record without modifying what he observed around him.

[17] In the 1970s, Grigorescu published several articles in *Arta* on artists who had travelled to the front in 1877 and used drawing and photography to produce visual documents of the Romanian War of Independence.[36] He also wrote, notably, about the painter and photographer Carol Pop de Szathmári, who is sometimes regarded as the first war photographer.[37] Of particular interest to him in this genre was the possibility to do away with the idea of style: "How could importance still be attributed to style when what mattered was to communicate information?"[38] Once information took precedence, concerns about the ways of representing no longer played a role. Moreover, it was not solely photography that could claim its immediacy. In his 1973 article, Grigorescu noted that for him, realism was defined by a refusal to impose a style on the representation of reality.[39]

[18] Style is an artist's prerogative. As soon as Grigorescu linked photography with information, one can posit that he was denying it any artistic quality. We would once more be faced with the alternative options of the early days of photography: it either had epistemic value or it was a work of art.[40] Although he focused on its informative qualities, Grigorescu was far from excluding it from the artistic domain. On the contrary, he campaigned vigorously for photography to be recognised as an art. Indeed, this was not the way it was viewed on the Romanian artistic scene and the artist recalls the contempt with which photography was regarded, namely as ugly and artless. In order to be classified as art, works had to be made by hand and bear an artist's personal style. When the Visual Artists' Union refused to exhibit his submissions, Grigorescu

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[35] Grigorescu (1973), 23.

[36] The term "Romanian War of Independence" refers to the participation of the Romanian principalities in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, in which the Ottoman Empire fought against the Russian Empire, which was allied with Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. Following this war, Romania proclaimed its independence from the Ottoman Empire.

[37] Carol Pop de Szathmári, who was born in 1812 in Cluj and died in 1887 in Bucharest, was an Austro-Hungarian painter, lithographer and photographer. Some historians maintain that Szathmári arrived at the Crimean War front before Roger Fenton. See Lawrence James, *Crimea 1854–1856: The War with Russia from Contemporary Photographs*, New York 1981, 9-11; Paul Kerr, *The Crimean War*, London 1997, 20, and Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, "Szathmári, a Great Documentary Artist", in: *RIHA Journal* 0070 (2013), DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/riha.2014.0.69846 (accessed March 16, 2021).

[38] Grigorescu, "Artişti în războiul pentru independenţă", in: *Arta* no. 5 (1977), 3-5: 3 (my translation).

[39] Grigorescu (1973), 22.

[40] Costello (2018), 2-5.

began to show his own photographic works at home, as early as 1974, alongside those of colleagues and other photographers, including the art critic Radu Bogdan (1920–2011) and the composer Ştefan Zorzor (b. 1932). Above all, Grigorescu's defense of photography could be found in the columns of *Arta*. Over a period of two years, from 1975 to 1977, no fewer than seven articles by the artist were published on the subject, all appertaining to his efforts to close the gap between art and photography.

[19] In an excellent text about Szathmári, Grigorescu shows that there is no justification for thinking of drawing and photography as antithetical. According to him, Szathmári used drawing to make up for the technical shortcomings of the wet collodion process. The method required long exposure times and immediate development before the emulsion covering the glass plates dried out. Despite the amount of time required by the process, Szathmári not only used it: he made the most of it by letting it inform the way he drew; according to Grigorescu, "he used his hand and his eye like a camera, only quicker".[41] The medium was shattered by the use of a technique that was not its own: Szathmári employed the means of drawing to produce photographs.

[20] Grigorescu likewise shook up the medium when he claimed that photography, as soon as it attempted to depict reality, helped the artist to dispense with style. The point of this remark was to turn photography into a theoretical model that can work beyond its boundaries and be transferred to other art forms, namely painting. So it was possible to paint like a photographer. Grigorescu borrowed from photography a way of painting that gave direct access to what was represented. In order to understand what was represented, the spectator was no longer faced with the obstacle of style.

## Use Value of the Document

[21] In his writings, Grigorescu repeatedly used the word "document". Describing the works of artists invited by the Ministry of External Affairs under Carol I to join the 1877–78 War of Independence campaign, he wrote: "a group of works of art with *documentary* characteristics".[42] In another article published on the occasion of an exhibition of portraits that the French photographer Nadar had begun producing in 1854, he defined "reportage" as work which was equally art and document.[43] The informational content of the document does not disengage it from art. On the contrary, Grigorescu constantly sought to bring these elements together. When he wrote for *Arta*, he was not only discussing the paintings and photographs of the second half of the nineteenth century – he was also creating a space for his own work, one which had not previously existed in the Romanian art world and which sat at the crossroads between art and document.

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[41] Grigorescu, "Carol Popp de Szathmary fotograf", in: *Arta* no. 4-5 (1975), 48-57: 48 (my translation).

[42] Grigorescu, "Artişti pe frontul războiului de independenţă", in: *Arta* no. 1-2 (1977), 13-15: 15 (my translation, Grigorescu's emphasis).

[43] Grigorescu, "Expoziţia Nadar", in: *Arta* no. 4 (1977), 28-29: 28.

[22] The notion of document holds a specific place in the work of conceptual artists, especially those from North America.[44] Though some dismiss their use, deeming that documents should in no way be considered works of art, others believe that they have a crucial part to play in accounting for concept.[45] Given the importance that the notion of the document occupies in Grigorescu's thinking, it is worth asking whether or not he might have had the possibility of acquainting himself with contemporary conceptual practices in the US, Western Europe and in some Eastern Bloc countries like Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland.[46] There is little doubt that Romania remained on the margins of this movement. Conceptual art only had a limited airing in this country.[47] It does not seem that any studies or articles were published on the subject, and even in retrospect, there are few artists who could be rightly linked to this movement. However, Grigorescu did find a way to learn about artistic trends in the West. As he has recalled in a number of interviews, his first wife was a curator at the National Art Museum in Bucharest and it was through her that Grigorescu, from the early 1970s, had access to periodicals, particularly American ones, to which the museum subscribed.[48]

[23] However, this way of getting informed has influenced the information obtained. For Grigorescu, periodicals like *Artforum* or *Art in America* were, above all, a window onto the contemporary Western art scene; and yet, it is impossible to grasp conceptual art from photographic reproductions alone. Whilst the journals certainly gave an idea of what was happening in Western art circles, they did not contribute to an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the movement. To Grigorescu, the value of these magazines must have resided primarily in the fact that they offered him the opportunity to ascertain the dominant position that photography held at that time. Everything else was probably of secondary importance. Thus one can imagine that when he came across a work like Dan Graham's *Eleven Sugar Cubes*, Grigorescu would not have concerned himself initially with the note in which the American conceptual artist maintained that "the presentation constitutes the intended work of art, which was designed to be mass-produced in a publication".[49] This process of liberating the artwork from the notion of uniqueness and unrepeatability possibly mattered less to Grigorescu than the series of

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[44] See Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art*, Berkeley 2001.

[45] Douglas Huebler answers Patricia Norvell thus: "And the documents have to exist, of course, to carry the idea […]", in: Alberro and Norwell (2001), 148.

[46] On the subject of conceptual art in Eastern Europe, see László Beke, "Conceptual Tendencies in Eastern European Art", in: *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat., New York 1999, 41-51; Piotrowski (2009), 315-340; Zdenka Badovinac et al., "Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I", in: *e-flux Journal* no. 40 (December 2012), and Zdenka Badovinac et al., "Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part II", in: *e-flux Journal* no. 41 (January 2013), (accessed June 6, 2020); Klara Kemp-Welch, "NET: An Open Proposition", in: *e-flux Journal* no. 98 (March 2019), (accessed June 8, 2020).

[47] See Cristian Nae, "Notes on the Concomitant Subversion, Revision and Solidifying of an Alternative Art Canon", in: *Revista Arta*, no. 20-21 (2016), 4-8: 7.

[48] The documentation centre of the Romanian National Art Museum (RNAM) in Bucharest still holds the – incomplete – collection of foreign language periodicals received in the 1970s. It is therefore possible to know the precise issues of the periodicals to which Grigorescu had access.

[49] Dan Graham, "Eleven Sugar Cubes", in: *Art in America* 58, no. 3 (May–June 1970), 78-79.

photographs which, under the guise of a comic strip, shows sugar cubes soaked in detergent dissolving in foamy seawater. Because of the importance he gave to images, Grigorescu probably attached as much relevance to a work like *Eleven Sugar Cubes* as he did to the simple illustrations in the magazines he read that accompanied articles on books about the architecture of Los Angeles,[50] billboards in Las Vegas,[51] or the seaside resort of Balboa.[52]

[24] Could the notion of the document have passed from the West to the East? It is worth noting that Grigorescu resorted to it at the very moment when conceptual artists were assigning it a central place in their reflections. Yet it is difficult to know whether or not what Grigorescu had learnt about Western art might have contributed to his interest in this concept. In any case, the origin he assigned to it was not Anglo-American conceptual art. He says he came across the phrase "the necessity of the document", which he used in the 1970s, in an article by Ion Condiescu.[53] The statement arose out of a context which sheds light if not on the meaning, then at least on the function that artists attributed to the notion of the document. In 1974, *Arta* launched a "survey" of engaged art. Six artists replied to the question in the article's headline: "What does engaged art mean, and what does it look like in the socialist construct of today?" The tone adopted by Condiescu is already present in the title of his response: "Look at the passion of my generation for the document."[54] It is as if the sculptor was defending himself for not producing sufficiently engaged works. It is true that his sculptures, which one could identify as being in the tradition of Brancusi, were not particularly figurative, as Grigorescu noted. Whilst he did not pursue this line of enquiry about the documentary nature of Condiescu's works, not least because the sculptor was basically expressing an interest that an entire generation of artists was thought to share, Grigorescu made the document central to his work. He understood Condiescu's response to be a ruse. As soon as the notion of the document took over from realism, it became possible to bypass the rules governing engaged art since 1971, which insisted on celebrating the achievements of socialism. This new emphasis on the pre-eminence of the document freed artists from their role as acolytes of the state. Grigorescu harnessed the response by Condiescu in *Arta* to retain from realism only the close relationship with reality.

## Realism, Photography and Suggestion

[25] *Reporting from Gorj* is testimony to the complexity of Grigorescu's relationship with photography. Most of the components of this artwork rely on photography. In one of the panels, called *The Tractor*, Grigorescu went so far as to apply oil paint directly to the photographic paper

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[50] Peter Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil", in: *Artforum* 11, no. 4 (December 1972), 67-76.

[51] Brian O'Doherty, "Highway to Las Vegas", in: *Art in America* 60, no. 1 (January–February 1972), 80-89.

[52] Thomas H. Garver, "Balboa and the Fun Zone", in: *Art in America* 59, no. 5 (September–October 1971), 58-67.

[53] Ion Condiescu is a Romanian artist born in 1943, who works mainly in sculpture. His works were exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1976.

[54] Ion Condiescu, "Observaţi pasiunea pentru document a generaţiei mele", in: *Arta* no. 4 (1974), 5.

(Fig. 12).[55] How can we interpret this? It goes beyond a mere exchange between the mediums: painting is embedded in photography. It is moored by it. *Reporting from Gorj* gains in authenticity by its contact with photography. Its documentary status cannot be denied. By giving his paintings a photographic basis, Grigorescu acted as if his artistic choices and decisions were out of his hands. It was as if reality were directly imprinted on his work. Another element reinforces the work's independence from its author. Grigorescu has said it again and again: he was not the one who took the photographs on which the work *Reporting from Gorj* is based. Although he knew the area well having stayed there frequently, he chose instead to work from photographs his brother had taken during his work as an agronomist in the Gorj region. In this way, he seems to deny himself any possibility of intervening as an artist in his work.



12 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (The Tractor)*, 1972, oil on photographic paper, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

[26] In this work, Grigorescu exploited the commonplace notion of the objectivity of photography. One could even posit that *Reporting from Gorj* is doubly tied to that principle. Thanks to its close link to photography, it looked like a record of the agricultural region's reality. Furthermore, the artist's subjectivity was no longer in question, as he was not the author of the photographs he used to paint from. But did Grigorescu think his work was objective? Did he adhere to the theory of photographic transparency? Grigorescu made sure that he could justify his work to the censors by capitalising on this commonly held opinion: presented with a photograph, no one "could say that the artist had made it all up, that it was pure invention or that reality was something entirely other."[56] Grigorescu used the idea that photography coincided with reality to justify his work to censors. To escape censorship, he relied on photography's ability to convey reality trans-parently.[57]

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[55] Grigorescu used photographic colorisation to produce several of his works, such as *My Mother with My Brothers* (1974), *Family Dinner* (1974), *Football* (1977), *Party I and II* (1977).

[56] Grigorescu, interview with the author, Bucharest, 6 February 2018.

[57] On the deconstruction of the belief in the testimonial dimension of photography in the work of Christian Boltanski, Jean Le Gac and Jochen Gerz, see Herbert Molderings, "Evidenz des Möglichen. Fotografie und Surrealismus", in: id., *Die Moderne der Fotografie*, Hamburg 2007, 93-154: 136.

[27] If the artist took advantage of this common assumption, he was by no means fooled by it. And that is exactly what had been foreseen by those who rejected his portrait of Ceaușescu in 1980 (Fig. 1) on the grounds that it was too realistic. For what is excessive realism? It means going beyond the visible. Grigorescu said that he "had never met Ceaușescu".[58] He therefore had to use the documentation he had access to. But if his work was excessively realistic, it was not only because he faithfully rendered in painting what he had seen in photographs. Since the photographic portraits of the president had been edited, he went beyond what they presented. That was why, instead of editing out the marks left by time on the president's face, as was the norm in official portraits, Grigorescu did not hesitate to detail wrinkles, red blotches, drooping features and other defects, including his slack "white-collar" hands.

[28] The theory of photography's transparency shatters in the face of an excess of realism. Far from providing raw data on reality, the photographic image or painting goes beyond the visible by summoning up images it does not show. This is what Grigorescu was underlining when in commenting on *Reporting from Gorj*, he said that he saw in it more than was represented. A countryside vista, for example, where peasants were instructed to do excavation work (Fig. 13), became a sinister place for him: The rural landscape conjured up images of the camps for political prisoners who were forced to dig the Danube-Black Sea Canal.[59]



13 Ion Grigorescu, *Reporting from Gorj (The Canal)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 46 × 73 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

[29] Another work titled *The Great Demonstration of August 23* (1974) was executed in a photographic montage on plywood (Fig. 14). Grigorescu took advantage of the form of mural gazettes[60] to capture the marches and speeches that took place on the occasion of the Romanian National Day celebrations. Mimicking a schoolchild, he arranged his images in an orderly format, in four rows and six columns. This work was intended to go on public display in an exhibition

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[58] Anders Kreuger, "Interview with Ion Grigorescu. Bucharest, July 14, 2009", in: Șerban (2013), 281.

[59] Grigorescu, interview with the author, Bucharest, 5 February 2018.

[60] The mural gazette, a type of noticeboard made of cardboard, was a propaganda tool of Soviet origin that brought together text and images to communicate information internally within schools, factories and other institutions.

called "Art and History" organised by the Visual Artists' Union. Grigorescu sourced these images in the official broadcast of the demonstrations. He took pictures of his television screen. Similarly, the text he added under some photographs came from the official account of the event, as they are excerpts from Ceaușescu's National Day address which had been published in the *Scînteia* newspaper. According to the artist, he did not alter the images and texts before using them in the collage; they were included "as they were".



14 Ion Grigorescu, *The Great Demonstration of August 23*, 1974, photographs on plywood, 88 × 133 cm (photo: courtesy of the artist)

And yet this shift from one means of communication (television, the press) to another (mural gazette) profoundly altered what was shown. Even though Grigorescu said he faithfully reproduced the images in his work "as they were", there was more than meets the eye. As slight as these changes might have been, they still spoke volumes. The transfer from the television set to the noticeboard presented not a single screen but 24 of them, identifiable as screens by their rounded corners. The simultaneous effect is suffocating. Ceaușescu features in most of the photographs, either as a still from a newsreel or as a portrait held high on the participants' placards. The immensity of the square in which the dense crowd is parading, as a human masse dwarfed by the portrait of the communist leader, clearly suggests a society subject to the yoke of a dictatorial regime.

[30] "Finally" was the word that the artist let slip when recalling how, with *The Great Demonstration of August 23,* he managed to provoke a reaction from the censors. Why the impatience? In the work he intended to show publicly, Grigorescu never ceased wielding ambiguity. Yet ambiguous artistic means require the active participation of the spectator.[61] The

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[61] Dario Gamboni, "De Bernheim à Focillon: la notion de suggestion entre médecine, esthétique, critique et histoire de l'art", in: *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art en France au XIXe siècle*, ed. Roland Recht et al., Paris 2008, 311-322.

re-use of materials provided by the Party explains, according to Grigorescu, the difficulty the censors had in deciding whether they were "dealing with someone serious, who was complying with the wishes of the state, or with someone who was doing as he pleased, turning official orders on their head to contradict those who'd issued them."[62] All the artwork could do was suggest; it was up to the viewer to take the suggestion into account when reflecting on the artwork. Grigorescu was satisfied to see that the critical load in *The Great Demonstration of August 23* did not go unnoticed. He learnt from friends that, following a debate over this work, the board of the Visual Artists' Union banned all use of material quoting from television or the press for the creation of works of art.

[31] Grigorescu's notion of realism is the result of three main processes. First, the artist rethought realism as a document, to avoid having to produce the propaganda art that the authorities expected from those who embarked on the path of realism. Second, he relied on the belief in photographic transparency to bypass censorship and account for the social, economic and political reality of 1970s Romania. Third, he went beyond what he could openly show in his work, opting for ambiguity and leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions. Yet, if there ever was an artistic movement that uses suggestion, it was Symbolism.[63] It is certainly a great paradox that Grigorescu's art drew on Symbolist means to forge a different notion of realism. But for him, the power of suggestion did not reside in the work itself. Rather, it resulted from the switching between mediums (from photography to painting) or between modes of dissemination (from the television screen to the mural gazette). In the mind of his viewers, these shifts generated a torrent of imagery. What Grigorescu could not openly state, he suggested. When he introduced official photographic documents into his works, different images appeared alongside the propaganda with which Romanians were inundated under Ceaușescu's regime. The visible part of Grigorescu's work is thus coupled with an element of invisibility. The artist wanted a flood of mental images to trigger reality. Realism, as he had rethought it, also included what had not been shown.

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[62] Grigorescu, interview with the author, Bucharest, 5 February 2018.

[63] Gamboni (2008).

## Acknowledgements

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