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**“WE GAINED OUR INDEPENDENCE, BUT WE LOST OUR MOTHERS”:
DOCUMENTING POST-COMMUNIST FEMALE MIGRATION THROUGH HOME
VIDEOS IN OTILIA BABARA’S *LOVE IS NOT AN ORANGE*¹**

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Abstract: *Constructed as a collection of interlaced home videos arranged into a narrative that explores the development and legacy of post-communist female migration, Otilia Babara’s documentary Love Is Not an Orange represents a veracious and profoundly emotional investigation of gendered transnational practices. The film not only delivers intimate accounts from the lives of several families affected by female migration from Moldova into Western Europe following the country’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and its subsequent economic crisis, but also gives insight into the unique capability of home videos to mediate transnational family ties. Using a multimodal analysis framework to investigate how archival footage is used to construct a layered narrative of family separation, adaptation and evolving identity, this study highlights the employment of home videos as “microhistorical” devices that offer intimate insights into the social realities of migration, and explores their role as non-monetary reverse social remittances.*

Keywords: *female migration, post-communist migration, documentary film, home videos, microhistories, reverse social remittances*

1. Introduction

Independent documentary films have the power to provide unique ways of observing global events and challenge conventional narratives, offering a fresh lens through which to view the world, argues Bill Nichols (2010). Within this cinematic format, screen productions that

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touch upon the topic of migration offer a particularly persuasive and emotionally gripping perspective, revealing the human dimensions of the large-scale social transformations triggered by this phenomenon. The current paper focuses on the documentary *Love Is Not an Orange* (Babara, 2022), which examines post-communist female migration through the experiences of Moldovan transnational families. The film constructs its narrative through interweaving archival footage recorded by families in Moldova with footage recorded by migrant mothers in their host countries, thus highlighting the challenges and adaptations of geographically dispersed families. The gendered migration dimension and its related interpretative angle should be foregrounded from the beginning, especially as motherhood in transnational contexts is central to the film's theme. The use of home videos helps create an alternative historical narrative in this documentary, a form of "microhistory" in which personal events provide a lens for understanding broader historical and social contexts (Cuevas, 2022).

The present study uses an analytical framework that combines representation categories from Machin and Mayr's (2023) multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) with film analysis categories inspired by Pollack (2008), which specifically address how the film's elements aim to create a relationship with audiences. This combined approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the film's portrayal of transnational family dynamics, by analysing visual and lexical elements to reveal how transnational family ties evolve over time and how home videos function as "microhistorical" devices reflecting post-communist migration to Western Europe. Additionally, this approach acknowledges Nichols' (2010) understanding of the documentary as neither purely fictional nor entirely factual but as a "creative treatment of actuality," balancing personal perspective with respect for factual data.

Focusing on archival footage, with intimate conversations and unpolished home recordings, *Love Is Not an Orange* builds a layered narrative that transcends conventional migration storytelling and provides an intergenerational perspective. Its chronological structure juxtaposes domestic scenes set throughout the 1990s with vignettes from family conversations and everyday rituals from the 2000s, thus facilitating a long-term perspective and inviting viewers to reflect on the evolving nature of family separation and transnational identity. Facilitating the study of several characters over almost two decades, Babara's documentary looks at how family relations affected by economic migration evolve from initial enthusiasm to inevitable deterioration.

The first part of the paper draws a brief literature review explaining how documentary film can function as a means for exploring the socio-cultural implications of the migration

phenomenon, and it is followed by a contextualized look into the case of post-communist migration. Consequently, I explain the choice for using multimodal analysis as a methodological tool for an in-depth examination of the film *Love Is Not an Orange*, and then proceed to a detailed observation of how this documentary depicts two decades of post-communist female migration through home videos. Finally, in the concluding part, I discuss how Otilia Babara's film manages to integrate microhistorical events into a larger macrohistorical frame, presenting a narrative of migration that functions both as a collection of personal journeys and an account of a historical phenomenon.

2. Documentary film as a means for exploring migration

Through their use of a wide-ranging set of tools for investigating reality (interviews, audio-visual archives, documents, field observation, re-enactments, etc.), arranged in a compelling narrative structure, independent documentary films have become “the flagship for a cinema of social engagement and distinctive vision,” successfully bringing “a fresh eye to the events of the world” and counterbalancing the formulaic agenda of major media corporations, as Bill Nichols contends (2010, pp. 1-2). The “Golden Age of documentaries” that began in the 1980s and continues unabated, according to the author, has also been characterized by a rethinking of the conventional norms of this type of filmmaking, at times blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction – one aspect which is evident in the film on which the current paper is centred upon (Nichols, 2010, pp. 1-2).

The film *Love Is Not an Orange* constructs its narrative by juxtaposing archival footage recorded by families from Moldova for the purpose of being sent to migrant mothers with footage recorded by the mothers in host countries. In the case of the former we are introduced to family rituals and conversations represented through the use of diegetic sound, and usually including children and other family members, while in the case of the latter, mothers film settings and objects from the country where they have migrated, but never appear in the videos themselves. The sound in this latter case is represented by monologues spoken in a female voice, which were entirely written by director Otilia Babara, based on letters, interviews, or even vocal messages sent between home and migrant family members that she encountered while researching the film. “Starting from actual communications, I wrote [the monologues] in the collective voice of all mothers, which is why the narrator sometimes uses the plural to refer to herself,” says the director in an interview (Mihăescu, 2023, my translation). This imagined

sound intervention on the archival footage was meant to both highlight and technically compensate for the invisibility of mothers in this film – they are among the main implicit characters, but never film themselves for reasons connected to guilt, shame or the impossibility of situating themselves physically in a world in which the lack of any social status made them feel they did not belong, the director further adds (Mihăescu, 2023, my translation).

While using a collection of imagined or reconstructed monologues might situate this movie outside the normative rules of documentary filmmaking, Nichols supports an inclusive understanding of this filmic form as “neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction,” but drawing on and referring to historical reality “while representing it from a distinct perspective” (2010, p. 7). One of the first definitions of the documentary, given by John Grierson in the 1930s, was that of “creative treatment of actuality,” suggesting the balance that filmmakers have to achieve between a personal approach and respect for factual data, thus combining responsibilities both related to a journalist and a historian (Nichols, 2010). A similar point is made by Cuevas (2022), who contends that documentaries focused on personal histories generally use “flexible and innovative narrative strategies” in their effort to reconstruct the past, including “essayistic features, where the filmmaker’s voice, either explicitly or conveyed through formal strategies, permeates the discourse” (p. 32).

Although it can be challenging to provide an exhaustive definition of the documentary, as its form depends on the temporal, geographical and cultural context in which it is produced, as well as on other factors, such as the institutions that support film production and the expectations of audiences, Bill Nichols establishes three characteristics that I will use as arguments to clearly differentiate *Love Is Not an Orange* from a fiction film. Firstly, the documentary deals with something that “actually happened,” with people and historical events that belong to the world we live in and not to an invented narrative universe. Therefore, the documentary builds its credibility and solid connection with reality by providing factual data and verifiable evidence. Secondly, this filmic form is about real people, who do not play a role, but “play themselves,” functioning as authentic social actors in their own lives (as opposed to non-professional actors who might appear in fiction films or reality television shows and whose roles are strongly shaped by the director’s fictional vision). Thirdly, the events, situations, and people are part of a story, that is, a coherent chain of episodes, containing a beginning, a middle, and an end, and recording the changes that a character, a community, or a state of affairs goes through in the real world. Although based on solid, accurately selected factual data, documentary film remains a form of audio-visual narrative, which uses tools and strategies

typical of persuasive rhetoric. In other words, it is not a simple reproduction of reality, but an “expressive representation” of it (Nichols, 2010, p. 13).

In fact, the documentary film’s strong connection with reality and its ability to provide accurate factual data have been disputed by researchers such as Keith Beattie (2004), who argues that such films are not necessarily based on solid or objective information, as they inherently involve manipulation techniques in their production, such as selective editing, framing, and narrative construction. While documentaries do operate through a “contract” of trust with the audience, promising authenticity, this contract can be broken or bent, as such films often blend fact and fiction, dramatize events, or use reenactments without clear disclosure. Through stylistic choices such as the use of handheld cameras or minimal editing, documentaries create an illusion of direct, unmediated reality, even though the final product is a constructed narrative, adds Beattie (2004, pp. 11-13).

Home videos in documentary films have been described as a means of creating alternative historical narratives, namely forms of “microhistories” in which personal events captured through home footage provide a lens for understanding broader historical and social contexts. As opposed to traditional historical studies that focus on the macro level, “microhistorical research proposes a reduction of scale for the purpose of developing a different understanding of the object of study”, aiming not to offer “examples” or “case studies” of general theories, but “to discover, through a ‘microscopic’ analysis, realities that have gone unnoticed [...], in order to better explain a particular era” (Cuevas, 2022, p. 24). By focusing on the experiences of ordinary individuals and families affected by large-scale social processes, the “microhistorical” data included in *Love Is Not an Orange* offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of the human cost of migration and the ways in which transnational families negotiated and adapted to changing post-communist realities. In this context, it is worth clarifying that a distinction should be made between home videos as used by transnational family members themselves and the way they are incorporated into the documentary, as part of an editorial and artistic process. The current research focuses primarily on the latter, taking into account the symbolically constructed nature of documentary film and the fact that the director’s “expressive representation” of reality is reflected in the selection and arrangement of home videos, as well as in several other choices connected to the creative process (Nichols, 2010, p. 13).

3. Post-communist migration and transnational families

Following the fall of communist regimes and the ensuing democratization processes in the early 1990s in many Eastern European countries, several grounds for emerging labour migration practices started to take shape. Among them were economic instability, increasing unemployment, inflation, corruption, and a general decline in living standards. In countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Poland, or the Czech Republic, various forms of economically motivated migration started to appear, often including clandestine travel and work practices facilitated through incipient migratory networks, and frequently involving social actors with poor educational capital and low living standards (Beciu et al., 2018). The first wave of migrants from the early 1990s was motivated by a general disappointment with the political system and various forms of state failures in their home country, as well as the hope for professional improvement in Western Europe and for enhancing the living standards of families left home via monetary remittances. Their migration practices often included periods spent abroad followed by returns to the sending countries, as part of temporary and circular migration patterns dictated by seasonal work demand and various other economic circumstances (Diminescu, 2009).

The large-scale migration from Eastern European countries led to the emergence of transnational families, a concept explored by Vertovec (2009), involving family members who live across different countries but maintain close emotional, economic and social ties, as part of a larger transnational social field (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), in which migrants simultaneously sustain connections with their home and host countries. Particular attention in the analysis of migratory patterns and effects has been granted to the gendered dimension of migration flows, highlighting the influence of global economic and political structures, as well as of gender policies, on the experiences, opportunities and vulnerabilities of migrants (Kofman, 2000; Mora & Piper, 2021). Aspects such as the aging population of Western countries and the privatization of care work have led to an increase in the demand for female migrant labour as domestic workers or caregivers – a phenomenon rooted in the gendered ideologies that associate such work with women, resulting in the devaluation of this type of labour and to exposing female migrants to vulnerabilities such as low wages, uncertain contracts or social exclusion (Mădroane, 2017).

Remittances play a central part in the definition of transnational families, and are understood as “the migrants’ *practices* of regularly transferring economic, sociocultural and

political capital between the host countries and the country of origin within transnational social fields, as well as the *resources*, in a broad sense, that constitute the object of such transfers, e.g., money (including the contributions made by migrants upon return), ideas, values and practices” (Mădroane, 2016, *italics in original*). Research has explored how remittances function at various social levels in home countries and with various purposes – including the funding of basic needs for family members, supporting community projects, such as schools of hospitals, and fostering economic development through investments (Goldring, 2004) –, and how social remittances in particular impact home communities and can lead to innovation and change, as well as tension and challenges (Levitt & Nieves, 2011). Within the specific context of the documentary film discussed in this paper, it is worth noting that Moldova’s GDP and overall economic structure are heavily reliant on financial remittances due to significant scale emigration, with the World Bank consistently including this country among the top remittance-dependent countries in the world in past years (World Bank, 2024).

Reverse remittances have also been a topic of research in the past years inside the frame of circular migration studies, mainly focusing on the two-way flow of financial capital between sending and receiving countries (Ortensi & Belgiojoso, 2024; Gill, 2025), or on the socio-economic activities through which non-migrants in home countries ensure support networks for migrants abroad by taking care of children and elderly family, supervising migrant businesses or investments, managing constructions of buildings financially supported from abroad, or assisting migrants in obtaining the necessary documents for remaining abroad (Ampah, 2023; Mazzucato, 2010). Less interest has been granted to analysing non-monetary forms of support sent from non-migrants with the aim of enforcing emotional and cultural connections.

The current paper explores how videos recorded at home and sent to family members working abroad, with footage of domestic rituals and everyday events, can be regarded as forms of reverse social remittances as they maintain a sense of belonging, of cultural identity and emotional support. They serve as reminders of familiar settings, objects and rituals, which can have a great value for migrants facing the challenges of living in a new country. In this sense, they serve a similar purpose to financial remittances, albeit non-monetary, by providing support and maintaining family ties. They are an emerging part of the “polymedia” communication environment analysed by Madianou and Miller (2012) in a book that links migrant transnationalism with the unprecedented rise of communicative opportunities provided by new media. The two authors use the term “polymedia” to describe a complex setting where individuals access and utilize various communication media, making choices influenced not

only by technological possibilities but also by social, moral, and emotional factors. While their research is focused on the particular case of the Philippines diaspora and thus explores past and present media forms that helped foster transnational families in that particular context – including letters, cassettes, and present-day internet-based media, from emails to instant messaging apps and social media –, home videos, which were typical forms of transnational communication for Moldovan migrants in the 1990s and 2000s (Mihăescu, 2023), could certainly be included in this “polymedia” environment. Before the era of affordable internet, such videos functioned as crucial mediators of a sense of intimacy and continuity between dispersed family members, creating a stronger sense of co-presence between sender and receiver than letters or cassettes. They also highlight the important shift technology produces in how migrant parents and left-behind children stay connected (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

The role of technology in transnational families is also a key focus in the research of Baldassar (2016) and Nedelcu (2017). Baldassar uses the concept of “care circulation” and highlights how new communication technologies enable family members to sustain care and emotional bonds across distances through mediated co-presence. She shows that media technologies transform traditional caregiving and allow for reciprocal exchanges that transcend physical proximity. Nedelcu (2017) complements this by demonstrating how digital communication facilitates transnational grandparenting, enabling grandparents to be emotionally and practically involved in childcare despite geographical separation. Both studies emphasize that technology supports ongoing emotional connection and redefines family roles and care practices, challenging the primacy of physical co-presence in family life.

Labour migration into Western Europe has been the topic of several documentary films in the past decades, with directors often engaging in the complex dynamics of transnational families and exploring the gendered nature of migration. Films such as Ana Căpățână-Juller’s *Aici...adică acolo* [*Here... meaning there*] (2012) and Teodora Mihai’s *Waiting for August* (2014) offer ground-level perspectives on the impact of migration, often emphasizing the role of technology in maintaining familial connections across borders, and use technology-mediated intimate insights into the protagonists’ experiences to reveal broader socio-economic changes in the post-communist space (Dragolea, 2024). As in the case of the two documentaries named above, Otilia Babara’s oscillates between a primarily critical and a detached stance on transnational family life, highlighting the traumatic effect of the migrant family member’s physical absence. At the same time, it offers a nuanced portrayal of cross-border family dynamics, showing both hardships and adaptive strategies. This critical mediation increases

awareness on the emotional costs and inequalities of separation, while encouraging viewers to reflect on the complex human and gendered implications of transnational family life.

4. Using multimodal analysis to uncover implicit meanings in documentary film

The current paper analyses the documentary *Love Is Not an Orange* using Machin and Mayr's (2023) framework for multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), focusing on lexical and visual semiotic choices in portraying social actors, objects, and settings. The two authors' proposed set of tools for conducting a systematic and detailed analysis of visual communication goes beyond a mere descriptive undertaking and is aimed at uncovering issues connected to power and ideology that are embedded in the representational practices of social actors. By asking questions connected to the lexical choices that can be identified in a text (*e.g.*, What are the connotations of the vocabulary used? Is overlexicalisation of certain words present in the text? What are the structural oppositions the text constructs, *i.e.*, contrasting pairs of concepts that reveal underlying ideological positions? Whose point of view is primarily represented?) and to the visual ones (*e.g.*, What kind of people, objects and settings are represented and what kind are missing? What do they implicitly convey?), as well as exploring whether the textual and visual mode of expression offer similar or different perspectives, MCDA provides an investigative kit for a thorough exploration of symbolic meanings and representations in the film *Love Is Not an Orange*.

In examining the visual layer of discourse, the analytical framework also draws upon Pollack's (2008) proposed set of criteria for analysing verbal and multimodal aspects in documentary films, with a focus on the four levels of context he suggests: (1) the context produced by the filming representation itself, through the interaction of the elements it is constructed from (*e.g.*, cinematography, sound design, editing, text, narrative structure etc.); (2) intertextuality through use of different sources of film material (such as archival footage or home videos, in our case); (3) the institutional context of the film's production and launching / broadcasting; and (4) the broader socio-political context that the documentary refers to (p. 93). Taking these levels into account, the in-depth analysis of *Love Is Not an Orange* will provide an examination of the documentary film as a complex example of multi-layered visual communication, covering aspects such as the gendered nature of migration, the role of technology in fostering connection in the case of geographically dispersed families, as well as

how home videos function as part of a symbolic transaction in transnational families, as reverse social remittances that define the domestic space.

Starting from the two analytical frameworks presented above, the current paper will undertake a qualitative analysis focusing on the following interconnected questions:

- What are the social actors in the narrative and how are they visually represented via cinematography and film editing?
- What are the lexical features of spoken and written text?
- What objects and settings are predominant and what do they connote?
- How is the visual narrative built and how does it construct the dynamics of transnational families?
- How do home videos, as “microhistorical” devices, serve to reflect the larger context of post-communist migration?

5. *Love Is Not an Orange*: Documenting two decades of post-communist female migration through home videos

The documentary *Love Is Not an Orange* uses a chronologically structured narrative to document two decades of post-communist female migration, offering a unique perspective on how the dynamics of transnational families evolve over time. By interweaving home video fragments from the 1990s and 2000s, the film creates a layered narrative that captures the emotional shifts experienced by Moldovan families as they experience the challenges of separation and migration. This structure facilitates dialogue across time and provides insight into how long periods of economic migration affect family relationships and identities. Through its intricate arrangement of archival footage, the documentary builds a timeline that highlights both the initial optimism of families involved in migration, when this process is seen as a solution for their economic difficulties, and the gradual emotional toll of the mothers’ absence on family bonds.

The film opens with a visual metaphor subtly announcing its topic: the camera offers an extreme close-up shot of a bird’s nest, with several eggs and young chicks sitting alone inside it – fragile, insecure, vulnerable, possibly in danger. “The mother is somewhere around. [...] She must be very worried,” (Babara, 2022, 1:22) someone off camera says. Machin and Mayr (2023) discuss visual metaphors as powerful communicative devices through which one thing

is represented through the imagery of another, creating a symbolic connection that communicates ideas or emotions indirectly. The key components of a visual metaphor are the source domain (the image/concept being used metaphorically) and the target domain (the idea/theme that the metaphor aims to represent). In the case of the opening scene from the film *Love Is Not an Orange*, the source domain of the bird's nest with an absent mother (who is probably away to find food) is used to represent the target domain of children affected by labour migration, growing up alone at an age when they are weak and defenceless, while their mothers are away working to provide for their families. The extreme close-up shot suggests from the very beginning that this will be a film focused primarily on the children left at home due to labour migration, while mothers – although they are “somewhere around,” *i.e.*, they make their presence felt through how they support the families from a distance – will remain invisible to the camera, despite the fact that their “worry” is an implicit presence.

The analysis follows the film's storyline, which traces the changes within transnational families during the years when mothers were living abroad, focusing on how the children's feelings evolved from the initial enthusiasm of receiving gifts to longing for a complete family and eventually to hating the objects received. “The progressive change of how children perceived their mothers' absence became the film's main narrative structure,” says the director (Mihăescu, 2023, my translation).

5.1. Early 1990s: Imagining the West as a place where “everything exists and everything is possible”

The first few minutes of the film function as a standard introduction in which the narrative is set at a specific time and space, announcing several prevalent settings, characters and themes. Domestic scenes, using predominantly medium and close shots, alternate with official archives presenting mass demonstrations connected to Moldova's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, where crowds of people are filmed in wide shots, suggesting the author's attempt to balance between the “microhistory” reflected by home videos (Cuevas, 2022) and the larger frame of the socio-historical context in which it is embedded. A scene with several young couples dancing in the woods to diegetic music, with children around, including verbal and non-verbal cues that suggest a happy gathering in nature among friends, is followed by one in which the turbulent political background of the 1990s in Moldova is briefly pictured. A narrator's voice describes how the enthusiasm connected to the country's

freshly gained independence was quickly replaced by the frustration of the ensuing socio-economic turmoil: at home everything seemed “upside down”, while abroad there was “the other world where everything exists and everything is possible” (3:02). A few factual details about the economic and political crisis in which Moldova started to sink deeper are used to justify migration and to represent its gendered nature in a collective narratorial voice: “Men ruled the country, while we, the mothers, migrated to the West to feed our families” (4:04).

The painful cost of independence is rendered from the point of view of left-behind children, a generation who was deeply impacted by gendered migration: “We gained our independence, but we lost our mothers” (4:22). The transactional ritual meant to ensure that geographically dispersed transnational families maintained close bonds is also presented here: migrant mothers would send “cardboard boxes full of presents and objects the kids could only dream about in those days” (5:35), while families at home would send back videotapes. Samples from these videos are interlaced as a narrative that illustrates the enthusiasm connected to the migration in the early 1990s, with children ecstatically opening gifts from abroad and presenting them in a performative ritual in front of the camera. Handheld camera and imperfect framing appear throughout the footage used in the entire documentary, and function as devices that create intimacy and authenticity. The unpolished, sometimes shaky camera movements and the abrupt zooms make the home videos seem spontaneous and relatable, emphasizing their subjective perspective, and evoke the nostalgic aura of personally lived experiences.

The visual semiotic choice of focusing predominantly on material things in these scenes (clothes, shoes, toys) and on the characters’ fascination with them (at one point a child screams with delight “Money, money, money!” (7:36) as she discovers some banknotes with foreign currency sent by the migrant mother) serves as a device that explains the initial push factors that drove migration. As the narrative evolves, this choice also helps shape the structural opposition between the growing nature of the material capital, which starts to characterize families at home, and the shrinking nature of their emotional or relational capital. This opposition is suggested from the very title of the film, highlighting that the support and care that contribute to a family’s emotional well-being and resilience cannot be replaced by material objects – the “orange” in the title is a metaphor standing for imported and “exotic” goods that were expensive, rare and generally considered luxury items during the turbulent transition of Moldova from the Soviet planned economy to an independent market system.

5.2. Late 1990s and early 2000s: The migrant experience “is beautiful, but not as I imagined”

The film’s chronological progression through the 1990s and 2000s captures the gradual fading of the initial enthusiasm surrounding migration, mirroring the director’s own biographical perspective. While the narrative does not reflect her own experience directly, but that of several of her friends, she confesses: “At a certain point I noticed all my friends’ mothers started to disappear and this marked my childhood [...]. I initially thought it was very desirable to have your mother abroad, to receive all those packages from there. Only later on, as my friends and I started to share our family problems, I realised they ended up hating all those objects. They were living a trauma, and they wanted their mothers back” (Mihăescu, 2023, my translation).

While the home video samples from the early 1990s show ecstatic children performing in front of the camera for their mothers, engaged in imaginary conversation with them, prompted by another adult, displaying or wearing their gifts, dancing, and telling stories, footage selected from the early 2000s reflects a different perspective. A climactic scene in this sense is that of a school choir performing a song celebrating mothers (possibly sung as part of Mother’s Day festivities), during which a young girl and a boy in the front row start crying desolately. Shortly after, filmed images of food sent from Italy are accompanied by comments regarding how Moldovan food is better, and a little girl refuses to perform for her mother in front of the camera. She covers her face and does not want to be filmed.

The recontextualization of labour migration as the film progresses chronologically also becomes evident through a change of tone registered in the scenes where a narrator impersonating the collective voice of the mothers describes the size of the migration phenomenon – “All the mothers from our street work here” (18:33) – and her personal experience: “it’s beautiful, but not as I imagined. The beauty fades among strangers” (18:15). The structural opposition between material and emotional or relational capital continues to function as a pervasive theme in this section, with the maternal narrator engaging in an imaginary dialogue with children left home and assuring them that “from now on, you won’t lack anything” (19:12), while also acknowledging that the boxes with gifts she sends home cannot compensate for her actual presence: “The box has everything. I just couldn’t fit myself in it” (34:05).

Initially captured on camera as children, several female characters gradually appear as they pass through puberty and adolescence, forced to talk about sensitive issues such as growing armpit hair, starting to wear make-up, or having a boyfriend, with maternal substitutes, such as an older sister. In one of the film's iconic scenes, two sisters – one entering puberty, the other a more mature teenager – film themselves spending New Year's Eve alone, dressed seductively, drinking champagne and dancing, obviously lacking the parental supervision needed at this sensitive age.

As the selected footage progresses through the 2000s, the motives of migration presented in the mothers' confession-like monologues also change: "We have possibilities now, and if I go back, those possibilities will cease to exist" (1:03:01). Images of a family building a house in Moldova with the aid of financial remittances from abroad are juxtaposed with such confessions and mark a shift in justifying migration. In an imaginary dialogue with her children, the collective maternal voice is explaining further: "I'm sending you [things] to own because we never had much. [...] The Soviet power confiscated our parents' belongings. [...] I am saving up to secure your future" (48:01). The mother's insistence on material possessions is juxtaposed with a recording of a little girl crying when asked to say something to her mother on camera, thus highlighting again the structural opposition on which the film is based.

5.3. The digital era: "It's become simpler to stay in touch, but there's not much to say"

With interlaced footage structured chronologically from 1990 to 2008, the documentary captures the evolution of transnational families' communication practices along with the development of technology. As opposed to optimistic explorations of how the "polymedia" environment can offer a diverse range of platforms to maintain long-distance family connections, enabling a sense of co-presence between parents and children, despite physical absence (see Madianou & Miller, 2012 and Baldassar, 2016, among others), Otilia Babara's documentary suggests that the new communication technology cannot compensate for the disintegrated family ties. In the film's last part, the narratorial voice confesses the decisive change in the nature of transnational family bonds over almost two decades, from initial enthusiasm to complete estrangement. "Our children stopped sending tapes" (1:07:41), she says, and the reasons are not connected to video cameras becoming obsolete in the digital age,

but to the disappearance of relational capital: “It’s become simpler to stay in touch, but there’s not much to say” (1:08:02).

Instead of a conclusion, the film offers a reflective intergenerational perspective onto the process of transnational family disintegration, through the collective voice of the maternal narrator: “We gave you everything, but we never asked you what you needed. We never talked about our feelings, we talked about objects. We tried to heal the trauma of our generation, but we created another one” (1:08:20). The imagined conversation between migrant mothers and their children takes the form of a monologue, in which the recipient is absent due to her irreversible estrangement from the sender of the message, thus suggesting the permanent rupture of transnational family bonds.

The final scene depicts a picnic whose atmosphere recalls that of the opening sequence, with couples dancing in the forest as their children play nearby. By placing similarly themed scenes in the beginning and ending of the film, *Love Is Not an Orange* adopts a circular narrative structure, reinforcing its core message and intensifying its emotional impact. However, the cinematic choices of the final scene suggest an atmosphere that differs from the one in the beginning, lacking the happy undertone of a gathering in nature among friends. The camera is short of focus and seems to search frantically among people and objects, eventually moving so much that it becomes impossible to watch. This lack of focus and direction, with steps and heavy breathing that can be heard in the background, as if the person who is filming were running around aimlessly, reflects the confusion and trauma of the left-behind children. The scene ends abruptly with a final black screen presenting the names of the family members who appear in the film and some brief factual data framing the narrative, confirming that most Moldovan mothers spent over a decade abroad and some never returned, while many of their children became migrants themselves and Moldova has lost 37.2% of its population to emigration since 1990.

6. Multimodal devices that construct the experience of migration

Otilia Babara’s documentary *Love Is Not an Orange* has Moldovan migrant mothers and their children as central social actors, introduced through intimate home videos and reflective voiceover monologues. The cinematography relies on close-ups and medium shots in archived footage to emphasize the children’s closeness, intimacy and performative gestures. Imaginary conversations with migrant mothers who are physically absent are accompanied by

enthusiasm for receiving material gifts, particularly in the first part of the film, as well as moments of vulnerability and refusal to perform in front of the camera, as the narrative progresses over time. The mothers, absent from the frame, are represented through voiceover narration, their monologues juxtaposed with the children's recordings to underscore emotional and physical separation. Editing techniques, such as abrupt cuts between joyful performances and unfiltered, intimate moments, highlight the complex family dynamics over time, and gradually propose a recontextualization of labour migration as the film advances chronologically from the early 1990s to the late 2000s.

From a lexical perspective, the spoken and written texts are mainly affective and informal, embodying a mixture of longing, resilience, and resignation meant to transcend the geographical distance by which the speakers are separated. While overlexicalisation of certain words is not particularly evident, spoken text in the children's videos often seems scripted or performative, sounding like a report prompted by an adult who reminds the child to "look into the camera" and "say something to Mom," with phrases like "My chickenpox is gone. Yesterday was the first day of school after chickenpox." (06:25) reflecting their desire to reassure distant mothers. In contrast, the mothers' voiceover narration uses introspective, poetic language ("I exist in fragments. Neither here, nor there." (1:03:54)), conveying guilt and a profound sense of displacement.

Predominant objects that appear in the film include cardboard packages filled with material goods sent by migrant mothers, which are meant to justify migration and symbolize both economic aspiration and the commodification of maternal love. Domestic settings that appear in footage from the home country filled with family and friends – modest kitchens, cluttered living rooms – contrast with the mothers' invisible workplaces in the host country and with the impersonal spaces they film, often empty or filled with rushing strangers – shopping mall windows, holiday decorations –, suggesting their feelings of loneliness, longing and a fractured sense of belonging.

The film constructs its narrative through fragments of home videos, thus weaving individual stories into a collective portrait of transnational families and their generational sacrifice. Its chronological progression foregrounds the mothers' missed milestones, while repetitive scenes of package-unboxing rituals show the gradually unfulfilling nature of material goods sent from abroad. The videotapes themselves act as fragile channels for communication, their imperfect framing and lighting, abrupt zooms, grainy texture and at times erratic pacing mirroring the instability of transnational bonds. They can be described as reverse social

remittances, subverting traditional economic remittance flows by directing emotional capital from children in Moldova to migrant mothers abroad, and offering symbolic compensation for maternal absence. Such remittances are intended to become a survival mechanism for transnational families, preserving affection and shared identity despite geographic distance, and yet the film exposes how they cannot fully compensate for the emotional toll of separation.

The intertextuality in the film is exemplified through the strategic use of home video archives, which serve as both personal artifacts and cultural texts that reflect broader social trends in post-Soviet Moldova, interlacing individual experiences into a collective narrative. Through first-person archives and “microhistories,” the documentary challenges mainstream media narratives that reduce intra-EU labor migration to economic statistics or crisis rhetoric, exposing how structural shifts (post-Soviet collapse, EU labour demands) produce long-term trauma on mothers and children. It frames transnationalism not as a choice but a survival imperative, thus transcending the Moldovan context and offering a universal critique of how neoliberal labour markets affect family bonds. The documentary’s mixture of personal archives and experimental storytelling invites audiences to confront the human cost of post-communist migration – a cost disproportionately borne by women.

Home videos serve as powerful tools for reflecting the “microhistories” of migration, as they capture the lived experiences of individuals and communities often marginalized in official histories. In doing so, they “offer an alternative discourse that can serve as a complement to the dominant history” and can also construct “counter-hegemonic” narratives, challenging dominant historical accounts by prioritizing the daily lives and memories of ordinary people, as Cuevas (2022, p. 45) argues. The author adds that their key advantages include a reduced observational scale, a focus on human agency, and the integration of personal memories into historical reconstruction. In the context of post-communist migration, home videos provide a lens through which the challenges of displacement, adaptation, and identity formation can be explored, offering insights into how migration reshapes personal and collective histories. By focusing on these intimate records, Otilia Babara’s documentary provides a nuanced understanding of migration as both a personal journey and a historical phenomenon, connecting micro-events with macro-historical processes.

Situated at the core of the film’s thematic focus, transnationality is also what characterizes the institutional context of its launch, *Love Is Not an Orange* being the result of collaboration between Belgium, Moldova, the Netherlands, and France. The multinational approach to production and storytelling not only facilitated the film’s creation but also enabled

it to reach a diverse audience through screenings at international festivals, including the European Film Festival and One World Romania, which further underscores its recognition as a human rights documentary, framing its topic within a broader socio-political context.

7. Conclusions

The documentary *Love Is Not an Orange* provides a unique and deeply touching perspective on the complex reality of post-communist female migration and its effects on transnational families. Through an original mixture of archival footage and imagined monologues, the film offers a veracious portrayal of the challenges and adaptations faced by Moldovan families separated by labour migration. The multimodal critical discourse analysis carried out in this study underscores how the film uses visual and lexical elements to convey powerful messages about the human cost of migration. Ultimately, the film demonstrates the potential of home videos as reverse social remittances and “microhistorical” devices, capturing the intimate details of everyday life and showing the trials of families navigating the complexities of transnational living. By emphasizing the gendered nature of migration and the role of technology in sustaining family bonds, *Love Is Not an Orange* brings a distinctively creative contribution to our understanding of the socio-economic transformations in the post-communist space, from a deeply human perspective².

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² The final version of this paper was proofread using Grammarly to assist with suggestions regarding grammar and style. All final edits and content decisions were made exclusively by the author.

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