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From the Nostalgia of Aestheticism to the Rediscovery of Ideology. Romanian Literary and Film Criticism After 2000

Abstract. This essay's aim is to outline the main directions of Romanian critical discourse after the year 2000, pointing out the specific differences—in terms of, on one hand, the refunctionalization of ideological grids and, on the other, the appeal to theory in cultural reception—in relationship with the aestheticist-formalism imposed by the reformist criticism under communism. The first part of the paper outlines the socio-political context of the socialist era. The second part is focused on analyzing a few methodological solutions offered in some of the most important studies belonging to the young generation of critics emerged in the last ten years.

Keywords: Synchronism, Ideology, Aesthetic autonomy, Filmology, Literary theory, Romanian Criticism.

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EKPHRASIS, 1/2013

ON CRITICISM

pp. 9-24

In the interwar period, Romanian literary criticism acquired somehow mimetically the French cultural model to the point at which the defining concept of the age – the synchronism, imposed by literary critic Eugen Lovinescu – seemed fully legitimized. However, the postwar period will be characterized by the ideological and political impossibility to synchronize with the Western values and cultural forms. The Socialist regime perceived the West as decadent and unworthy to follow; however, if we were to synchronize with a spirit of the age, it would have had to be an international and revolutionary one. In the scheme of artistic creation, the dominance of the Socialist Realism in the 1950s – an “impossible aesthetics” (Robin 1992) – meant a real compromise in terms of the freedom of speech, but it meant also, inevitably, the birth of a simulation of criticism. If, from a practical perspective, artists had to comply with an imposed theme and a prefabricated nar-

rative scheme, the criticism was left incapable of functioning.

Romanian Criticism before 1989

Therefore, for two decades (to the end of the seventies), Romanian criticism fought a battle of “tranches” (Goldiș 2012) in favor of obtaining aesthetic autonomy and to justify the autonomy of its methodological means. During this period of smoldering conflicts with the official ideology, the subversive discourse of the Romanian critics was, in a way, constrained to ignore numerous Western exegetical interdisciplinary directions. Any methodological openings to philosophy, sociology, anthropology or psychology became risky, because it could have been dialectically overthrown by the official discourse. However, what criticism has borrowed in the last two decades of Socialism constituted elusive hermeneutical models which did not bring the problematization of the relationship between art, ideology, society, but only the modernist relationship between the creator and the interpreter (see for instance, the concept of textualism, pertaining to the poststructuralist branch, or the criticism of consciousness, imported from the Geneva School). In this way, there was a failed synchronization with the cultural studies’ methodologies, from psychoanalysis to feminism. The context is crucial in this situation. Another suggestive example in this sense is the fact that while Edward Said was putting the foundation for postcolonial studies in the US, through his famous

concept of Orientalism, in Romania nothing seemed more important in critical discourse than maintaining the principle of aesthetic autonomy. The reason behind this somehow bizarre option was entirely coherent before 1989. Although it seemed to ignore – most of the times because of a lack of access to information – precisely those things which it should assimilate, Romanian critical discourse tried to preserve its principles of legitimization. All the Western schools of thought, from structuralism to postmodernism, were metabolized in their aesthetic dimension, as local versions with various malformations imposed by the socio-political environment in which they were transplanted: “The political non-adhesion becomes in the context a political attitude, no matter how mediated”. (Martin 2004:18).

Although suitable for a culture formed by civilization leaps, synchronism functioned only partially under communism. Guessing its potential, the Socialist regime credited instead an absurd rival: the protochronism. Of all the Romanian cultural complexes that generated theoretical trends, this was certainly the most harmful. Amid Ceaușescu’s nationalist expanding project during the seventies, the communist party’s interest was to demonstrate not so much that synchronism was unfounded, but that it could only be applied to other nations, considering that Romania was responsible for almost all the innovations in terms of art and civilization. Accepting synchronism as a socio-intellectual project, but denying its applicability in Romanian culture, proto-

chronism changed the diachronic terms of European cultural biography. A crude forgery which shows that all the great works of the old continent are late imitations of some obscure Romanian creations.

The Transition to a Late Synchronization

Inevitably, the principle of aesthetic autonomy hindered the synchronization with European and North American critical methodologies from the sixties to the eighties; on the other hand, protochronism managed, through falsification, to excite a nationalist background, that had strong echoes even in the cultural politics of the nineties. As a result, in the first decade after 1989, Romania was disconnected from the effervescence of Western debates on the condition of critical discourse. For instance, neither the *methodological opposition* between culturalism and aestheticism¹ problematized extensively in American universities, nor the *hierarchical opposition* between criticism and theory², with its repercussions on film studies, or the *functional opposition*³ between the academic nature of critical discourse in contrast to its social role, entered Romania. Before 1989, all methodological strategies of criticism were thought in relation to the communist censorship, and not in relation to a free flow of thinking. The only version of liberalization seemed back then the "aesthetic autonomy". Because there was no alternative, the theoretical combustion was fully depleted in pleading for this principle.

Considering that cultural studies did not become popular in Romania immediately after 1989 – traveling to the West was still hard because of visa restrictions and there were almost no grants for humanistic research – aestheticism remained the sole option. However, after 1990, when everyone wanted to speak freely, to establish newspapers and to change the society, criticism lost its audience. Literature (through the influx of memoirs) and cinematography (through failed cultural policies) found themselves in the same situation. Nonetheless, the compression of the audience was not compensated by an intensification of the reflection.

Practically, the nineties were characterized by a single opposition: that between *ethic* and *aesthetic* (Cernat 2011). For a decade, important intellectual local figures, from Monica Lovinescu to Nicolae Manolescu, Gheorghe Grigurcu or Ion Bogdan Lefter guided from this manicheist position the debate on the conditions of critical discourse. After forty years of mystification and "survival through culture", the ethical function of criticism was again activated. Aestheticism was accused of evasion, and the biographies of artists who created under communism become a subject of investigation. The transition from aestheticism to ethicism reimposed, practically, the confusion between biography and work, but, unlike what happened in the US (as we can see from Paul de Mann's case, for example), in Romania the end of the inquiry had a strong political stake. The principle that states that "Ethics does

not solve problems, it structures them" (Harpham 1995) was apparently unknown to Romanian critics of the nineties.

Only after the year 2000, a new generation of critics, who completed their studies during the nineties, addressed Romanian cultural phenomena from a perspective that was much more connected to the international debates. In the case of literary criticism, the research focused in great part on the interwar period, mythicized under communism by liberal voices in exile, and praised almost by all after the fall of the dictatorship. A great attention was paid also to the postwar period, where ambiguity of the socio-political context and the passion of previous approaches demanded a perspective more conceptually articulated. At the same time, in the absence of a theoretical reference point in the previous period, the film criticism was conceptually articulated only in this decade. Amid bibliographic aridity, the lack of translations, but also with an absent academic tradition, the new generation was obliged to concentrate on the investigation of the New Romanian Cinema – a recent trend imposed thanks to the success of film directors such as Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu or Cornel Porumboiu.

Taken together, the "new wave" of Romanian critics is distinguished by two essential features: *the recourse to ideology* and *the recourse to theory* in the critical discourse. Both these features prove that the Romanian critical discourse is now synchronized with the Western trends, but not in the sense of mimetic acquisition,

but in the sense of maturing the methodology. It could be said that we are dealing with a Western perspective on Romanian cultural phenomena, conceptually valid and peripheral only from a linguistic point of view. Alternating a nostalgic aestheticism (but ironic in relation to the communist model) with elements systematically taken from the cultural studies and American new-historicism, the Romanian critical discourse abandons the autistic nationalism after 2000, opening itself up and contributing to integrate the Romanian culture in an European circuit of thinking.

The portrayal of the authors that I will make in the following lines can create the effect of a dictionary. The difference being that, unlike any traditional dictionary entries (respectable in their aspiration to make an inventory of heritage), I am not very interested in the informative aspect (I let aside any biographical or editorial details, as well as any summaries). However, I am interested in the interrogative aspect: an evaluation of the validity of their critical constructions, not only a description. That is why I don't make any comparison between the critics (the contextualization relies on focusing, not on reporting), being preoccupied instead in understanding and engaging with them individually. In such a "contemporary" space, I preferred not to go into any strategic historiography.

Back to Ideology

Because of the ambiguity of socialist rhetoric, the word ideology was seman-

tically saturated before 1989 to the point where it meant nothing, precisely because it could refer to any domain, from agriculture to education or cinematography. In the last decade, Romanian critical discourse rediscovered the term. Art started more and more to be received through an ideology filter: from the recontextualization of the critical system of Romania's most important critic, George Călinescu (Terian 2009), and from the exploration of a bodily ideology (Sora 2007), to the documented description of the concept of protochronism (Tomiță 2007), or to the interpretation of Mihail Sebastian's work in the context of a generation dominated by adhesions to the extreme right movement.

Exorcising the Avant-garde

From this perspective, Paul Cernat's book, *Romanian Avant-Garde and the Periphery Complex* becomes symptomatic. Aware that "there are many things that can be said *differently*" (Cernat 2006) about the beginnings of Romanian avant-garde, the critic clarifies in the preface the sense of his approach. The volume does not propose a new interpretation of the aesthetic phenomena of the beginning of the last century, but rather investigates the multiple identitary, critical or political discourses which made the phenomena possible. The critic concluded that the oppositions or the explorations of art's boundaries are by no means free artistic acts, but prove to be the surface of various branched ideologically relationships of cultural legitimization, that

have an important social implication. Therefore, Cernat's deconstruction institutes an adjustment of perspective of the cultural-imaginary dimension and marks another language setting of Romanian literary phenomena. Treating the extra-literary as a symptom for the literary and exposing the aesthetic axiology (which invests itself with meaning, but cannot explain the causes, let alone the effects of art), the author decomposes and compiles an inventory of the arsenal of mystifications that have filled the first avant-garde wave with the mythical burden of the precedent. It could be said that Paul Cernat makes a documentary exorcism of avant-garde reception, out of which the phenomenon itself seems to gain the most. Therefore, his contextualization targets not only the ideological product resulted after the installation of inferiority complexes of Romanian culture (Martin 2002), but also the process, the pragmatic resorts that have fed and intensified a national consciousness that feels itself as being peripheral. Harmless avant-garde incidents, brilliantly reassembled by Cernat, add credibility to the belief that intellectual constructions with identitary stakes in Romania are based on an inferiority complex. Also, because he connected the Romanian avant-garde with similar Eastern European phenomena, Paul Cernat understands that the cultural history becomes impossible as a form of cultural isolationism, especially since avant-garde is probably one of the most "internationalist" direction of the twenty century. Peripheral communicating ves-

sels, Eastern European avant-gardes seem to embody, in the critic's point of view, a virtual aesthetic community.

The Liberalization of Criticism under Communism

A unique perspective over the way in which the official ideology modified the critical discourse under communism is brought by Alex Goldiș's book, *Criticism in Trenches. From the Socialist Realism to the Reinstatement of Aesthetic Autonomy*. The big question to which Goldiș answers in detail is: how concrete can the abstractions become in a totalitarian regime? Analyzing history in detail to recompose the whole socio-ideological-cultural atmosphere of the age, the author detects some essential moments through which the triple crisis of Romanian criticism after 1948 – that of the object (indexing fundamental works), of the institution (the oligarchic structure of the unique political party) and that of the method of manifestation (the socialist realism criticism) – will be gradually resolved. The organically delayed disappearance of the socialist realism was decided on the “neutral ground of a veiled confrontation” (Goldiș 2011). The first half of the sixties represents the interval that justifies the title of the book. Goldiș places the entire dispute not under the auspices of a chivalry clashes, but under the spectrum of draw, of the velvet fight with two pairs of gloves which, at the discourse's level, is translated into a difference between rhetoric and message. That is why the critic avoids using words such as resis-

tance, dissidence or survival, alleviating them through the phrase “reformist impulses”. It is true that Goldiș slips at one point the term subversion, one which I find well suited to describe the context after 1960. The highlight of the debates about the postwar criticism is located by Goldiș in the year 1966. The real problem back then was not who is right, but what kind of righteousness is pragmatically worthy to be spoken. Moreover, through what kind of discourse can literature and criticism be separated from the socialist ideology? Speaking about the impressionists of the aesthetic autonomy, but without socio-philosophical foundations, theorists such as Nicolae Balotă (who later emigrated to France) postulated the need for an opening of the aesthetic towards other values, but did not had the intuition of assuming the ideological risk. How can you reclaim again the need of a philosophical framework, when the idea of autonomy of art has just been adopted? “The always awaken suspicion – writes Goldiș – in relation to the possibility of reinstatement of dogmatism removes useful perspectives aimed at a nuanced understanding of the literary phenomena in the field of criticism.” Therefore, the young critics active after 1967 define themselves as non-systemics. However, this aesthetic direction affirmed itself when it managed to strategically decrypt the stakes of the ideological game. They adapted a French critical instrument (the thematic-existentialist criticism) without ever contextualizing it; they have learned, through confluence, complementa-

ry critical languages, and they did not limit themselves to a single method. This is how the “criticology” was born. A “committed Impressionism”, as Goldiș names it, an intentionally fluid ideology, I would say.

Alex Goldiș succeeds, in a spontaneous-systematic manner, to reconstruct a narrative that pays attention to the socio-ideological morphology of the critical forms in the first two decades of Romanian socialism through the extent of its construction, through the relevance of its analogies and the sophistication of its dissociations, and, in the end, through a transitive writing.

Soft Feminism

Most of the books reviewed by Bianca Burța-Cernat in her volume *Group Photography with Forgotten Female Writers, The Interwar Feminist Prose* belong, indeed, to some female writers that are almost unknown today. Alongside with Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Cella Seghi and Henriette Yvonne Stahl other somehow resonant names are mentioned, although most of them insufficiently tackled by criticism. The names and the reception of other postwar novelists such as Ticu Archip, Sanda Movilă, Lucia Demetrius, Anișoara Odeanu, Ioana Postelnicu, Sorana Gurian is almost entirely absent. However, no matter how tempting the female literature could have proved to be, Burța-Cernat’s study elegantly avoids the hard revisionist discourse, preferring the recovery of ignored artistic figures but of those with

rather notable profile at the time. Worthy to note is that her approach is made with discernment, by resorting to thorough socio-mentality contextualizations, doubled by an exigent reading of the works discussed. Therefore, there are two stakes for this exegetical approach. The first one is the *conceptual* nature, targeting both to reporting the landlocked approaches proposed by the “difference feminism” (Burța-Cernat 2011), and questioning the interwar elitist conception that “literary history is a history of values”. The second is the *axiological* one, an interpretation nuanced by Bianca Burța-Cernat by articulating strong critical judgments.

The conclusive chapter, entitled “Out of the ghetto,” is relevant in this context. Denouncing the gender dichotomy when it comes to literature, the author observes that the marks of feminine or masculine “determine, in different doses, *What* the work contains, and to a lesser degree, or even absent, *How* it contains”, taking on the “obsolete” perspective (the author herself uses the term) on sexually neutral creative subjectivity. The fact that the gender differences, as well as the identity ones (racial, ethnic, religious) are part of the literary work cannot constitute a relevant criteria of artistic legitimatization, but possibly be one through which the thematic specificity emerges. Precisely because she has a thorough aesthetic and critical consciousness, Bianca Burța-Cernat rejects the enclavisation of feminine literature, contradicting even Virginia Woolf and her idea that it is desirable that the female writer have a “separate room” in a

mixed house, but not in a house inhabited exclusively by women. The categorical statement that “there is no literary work outside the concept of aesthetic value” assigns the study an assumed conservative approach. But at the same time, Bianca Burța-Cernat finds herself obliged to reconcile with the methodology of the object of her research. In the “Introduction” she states: “the literary history selects values of the second and the third level, and it does not define itself only as a sum of individuals [...], but essentially as a narration that pays attention to phenomena, contexts, tectonics, relations.” The observation apparently contradicts the distinction between the literary history (which imposes the hierarchy of works of art, retaining exclusively “absolute values”) and the cultural history (which records the phenomena of the public space or reconstructs the mentality of an age). By interpreting the concept of value in a flexible way, the complementarity of these two types of history seems more important to the researcher than their clear dissociation (“the respect paid towards a scale of aesthetic values does not contradict the examination of the social component that is included in the literary body.”) It is not the indulgency toward inferior works that imposes such an opening principle, but, on the contrary, the critical lucidity, whose axiological verdict shapes itself after the investigation of a widened field of socio-literary phenomena. For Bianca Burța-Cernat not every literary attempt becomes relevant *a priori*, her focus (only) on these eight female writers indicating a

strict process of selection. The group photo captures only the symptomatic marginality, the female writers with a definite artistic potential that is not confirmed or that is often suppressed, writers that are integrated “in a stream of history (and of literary life) in which they participated with the other writers, and not separately.” Biana Burța Cernat’s study is an ingenious hybrid that contains substantial pages of literary history (the subtlety of her interpretations, the relevance of her value judgments legitimates such framing), scholarly contextualizations and biographic portraits that make her book an exciting work of cultural history.

When scanning the female writers’ assertion that embodies in different styles the “rebel’s profile”, the researcher evokes, at the same time, two sources of failure: one manifested at the personal level (their insufficient determination, their insufficient consistency), the other that is linked to the contextual level (“unfavorable historical conjuncture: the rise of the communists, after the forged elections in November 1946”). Although her comment that the female writers who started in the thirties “had to enroll in the new ideological commandments” is questionable, her observation about their “devotion” to social-realism is certain. This is why only by descending into the troubled literary life from the interwar period, by carefully correlating the aesthetic with the documentary and the anecdotes, she manages to retrieve the relevant perspective on these creative and unfulfilled biographies. Biana Burța-

Cernat notices that, by taking as a model Katherine Mansfield's writing, and not Virginia Woolf's, the poetics of the female writers from the interwar period subordinates itself to the authentic formulae of that time, therefore helping to emerge a literature "of sophisticated sublimation that rarely transgresses (the great exception being Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu) the shortsighted perspective of a subjectivity obsessed with the self". The effort toward self and interior elucidation is, however, in a competition with the effort of a partial objectification; but "by oscillating between a type of fatalism in accepting their own minority and their even stronger rebellion against their own condition", the female writers take with difficulty the road to emancipation, including the level of narrative construction.

Hard Theory

If the works I have already referred to contain large ideological incursions in the Romanian literary discourse of the twenty century therefore resizing its reception, the role of the theoretical approaches is to recover the conceptual background of the present. The French influence over Romanian culture led to ignoring the theories from overseas, therefore their taking over wasn't mimetic anymore, but somehow descriptive and evaluative.

In Search of the Lost Subject

Mihaela Ursa's book, *Writing-topia or The Fictionalization of the Authorial Subject in the Theoretical Discourse*, aims to familiarize the Romanian readers with the

main directions in American literary theory, without embracing any one of them in a dogmatic way. Cultivating the critical illusion that writing (about other's texts) facilitates the encounter with the author behind the ideas, the author re-makes diachronically the succession of the main conceptions regarding the author-critic relationship. The author comments famous studies like *The Death of the Author*, by Roland Barthes or *What is an Author?* by Michel Foucault in which the disappearance and the return of authorial subjectivity are interpreted as a relation of textual/ontological powers that are differently developed in the post-structuralist European space than in the North-American one. Ursa notices that in the American thinking – from Stanley Fish's reception theory, Demanian/Bloomian deconstruction or Brook Thomas' "New Historicism" to Austin's theory of speech acts – there is "a refunctionalization of the subject", which is no longer biographic, homogeneous, artificial, pre-structuralist, but rather "vulnerable, hesitant, heterogeneous and discontinuous" (Ursa, 2005).

This means that no matter how much one would postulate the impersonality of a speech, or despite any effort to express the fiction "in the most scientific language", the critical act is still dependent on catching the authorial fantasy as if "the fantasy of an interpreter is implied by any work". Critical knowing, Mihaela Ursa maintains, fictionalizes and calls the theories of possible worlds, but excludes the ones that do not offer visibility to the subject. Sharing the

same opinions with Toma Pavel and following Lubomir Doležel's vision, the author points out that "in today's cosmology the category of possibility is more and more used when describing the world". Therefore, fiction gains a global sense, because it becomes "a chance of the era in which we can only act like we would know". Taking alterity as the main reference point, Mihaela Ursa's study transposes the categories of artistic subjectivity over the ones of critical discourse, in order to demonstrate that capturing subjectivity in a scientific text is not just the expression of a phantasmatical curiosity, but, in fact, the uncontrollable fiction that many try to disguise in the language. In other words, the fiction of the authorial subject institutes the interpretative relationship as if it would be possible even without accepting fictionality. This report has a crucial epistemological function, because it remains the only possible option to credit the authority of a speech.

The Dawn of Filmology

As I already stated in the present essay, Romanian film criticism has no strong theoretical tradition. After 1989, the most important Romanian film critic was considered to be Alex Leo Șerban – a cosmopolitan journalist, with a solid modernist culture, whose essays, written in a careful, informed and stylistically refined manner, are regarded as an important antechamber of film theory. Among his writings we should mention his article "Romanian Cinema. Form Modernity to Neo-Realism", published in *Film Criticism*

(Șerban 2010) – a valid and synthetic view of Romanian film history, his essays from *Why We See Movies* (Polirom, 2006), and the monography *Lars von Trier. Movies, Women, Phantoms* (Idea, 2004), written in collaboration with Mihai Chirilov and Ștefan Bălan. Another important author, an academic and appreciated theoretician with an interdisciplinary training, is Doru Pop. Among his most important contributions to the theorization of the New Romanian Cinema is his essay "The Grammar of the New Romanian Cinema" (Pop 2010), followed by several articles in which the movies of NRC are commented, thus building a conceptual platform to approach the Romanian cinematic phenomenon by contextualizing a potential local and European tradition.

In a study published in the seventies, Romanian critic Eugen Simion used an inspired phrase, "the morning of the poets", to refer to the Romanian artists who founded, at the "dawn" of the nineteenth century, the Romanian modern poetry. About Andrei Gorzo's book, *Things that cannot be said otherwise. A way of thinking the cinema from André Bazin to Cristi Puiu*, we can say the same thing. It marks, both at the theoretical and exegetical levels, the morning or the "dawn" of Romanian filmology.

Four polemic perspectives can be detected by following Andrei Gorzo's conceptual-analytical research. The first one is somewhat technical, the subject matter being the montage (analytical cutout) and the long shot. Along with Bazin, the critic notices that the montage

subordinates the integrity of reality to the meaning of the action. Under the shelter of narrative and formal teleology, by manipulating temporality and pulverizing reality's homogeneity, the montage facilitates access to a simplified universe, alongside with the claim that it has been already assimilated and understood. It is true, Gorzo rarely talks about other authors who support a different point of view – Eisenstein, for example; he only invokes their conceptions, and then he confronts them with the abundance of quotations from Bazin. The French theorist finds in the Romanian young critic a follower with a strong judgment: after a first descriptive part, the Bazinian conception is evaluated and elaborated. Admitting that with digitalization the Bazinian reasoning doesn't hold up (in fact, cinematic image cannot claim anymore the status of "referent's emanation"), Gorzo identifies the relevance of the plea for the long shot in the argument of spatiality. Therefore, showing an event which takes place in space is superior to telling a story through images. This means that showing is more relevant than telling, instead of reality's review it is preferred its filtering. Dedramatization (dropping the epic) recovers life's temporality, and the integration of moments which could have been absent, generates at least the effect of referentiality. Gorzo demonstrates that Bazin isn't just an old radical because he only shifts the focus from the director's intentions to dividing the spectator's attention who would have the real task of "montage". The "supple-

ment of realism" becomes necessary and decisive for any "supplement of abstractization" (Gorzo 2012). The plea for realism becomes, inevitably, a plea for a certain artistic difficulty. It's like a theoretical struggle – fought long ago in literature – for the unaltering of reality's ambiguity, for these films in which the spectator feels the greatness of cinematic effects when searching for the causality.

The second polemic perspective of *Things that cannot be said otherwise* has a strong historical mark. Once the issue has been circumscribed, Gorzo relates Bazin's realism to Brecht's school, and then pursues – like a true modern, from the perspective of Noël Burch or Noël Carroll – the confrontations, the metamorphosis and the decline of Althusserian-Lacanian methodologies radicalized in many cultural studies. As concisely and persuasively as he invokes them, as bluntly Gorzo delimitates himself from these approaches, whose ideological frames he considers reductive. However, he does not hesitate to indirectly express his adhesion to post-theoretical approach (promoted, for instance, by the well-known David Bordwell). As blamable as the universalist thesis of "contingent regularities" (i.e. the cinematic conventions that are to be founded on transcultural life events) – would be, the critic takes an inspired Bordwellian principle that will serve him in the analysis of the New Romanian Cinema as an ideological and aesthetic phenomenon: "«ideas are the ones that guide our observations, but the observations test our ideas»" (Gorzo, 2012).

Therefore, after the effort to circumscribe and delimitate, which assures him a rigorous contextual cutout, it is time for the critic to step forward. The truly original part of Gorzo's work is represented by his analysis on the NRC films.

The critic considers that, unlike Cristi Puiu, the other young directors (Cristian Mungiu, Radu Muntean, Cătălin Mitulescu) did not have a very refined theoretical/aesthetic conscience, they just wanted to "save" themselves from "the general cinematic bankruptcy", after graduating university (around 2000). At the beginning, he says, they were mimetic, being radically influenced by Puiu's debut film, *Stuff and Dough*. Such dissociations allow the descent in the third controversy, this time an aesthetic one, which has been argued with an entire newspaper jargon, that attributes the paternity of the New Romanian Cinema to directors like Lucian Pintilie (*The Reenactment*), Mircea Danieliuc (*Microphone Testing*) or Alexandru Tatos (*Sequences*). By deconstructing comparatively the myth, but at the same time adequately justifying the association, Gorzo emphasizes Cristi Puiu's originality. Overcoming the director's unfounded radicalism – too easily validated when he affirms that "the story is primitive" – Gorzo valorizes *Aurora* for the ambiguous fidelity, assumed as a totality from which little can be seen, and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* for the refinement with which the *mise en scène* is elaborated. However, a question remains relatively unclear. The director states unequivocally that he is part of those who

"believe in reality", so not in the image. But doesn't the visual transitivity from *Aurora* – with its long shot obsession – become self-referential? When he observes that Puiu customizes "an old school, but highly evolved essentialism", is Gorzo trying to say that he is updating Bazin or that his dogmatic realism is inevitably a formalist one?

Finally, the last polemic has a strong methodological nature. The question would be this: how do we watch NRC films? The scandal was started by a few articles published in *CriticAtac*, a Romanian platform with a left political orientation, by the theorists Vladimir Bulat and Florin Poenaru who are pleading, more or less, for an "integrating perspective" over the cinema. In other words, are these movies saying something fundamental about politics, about identity and social realities of a people? Are they inducing an effect of a certain ideology? Their answer is, of course, yes. On the other hand, Andrei Gorzo is intrigued and replies that those theorists' attempt to attribute ideological patterns to such individualized aesthetic products is useless. His argument is that the first ones do not have the techniques to watch/decode a film. So, it's a confrontation between two types of arrogance: one invokes the argument of authority (we are epistemologists, aesthetics is nothing but a branch of philosophy, and the cinema is just customizing universal things), the other one is reclaiming the argument of specificity (in order to say something truly relevant about a film, you have to be able to assimilate it as an unre-

peatable aesthetic form). The “theorists” accuse the aestheticizing impressionism, and the critics accuse the “illiterate” autism. Anyone who has become a part of an argument like this knows that there is no friendly way out. In his review, Cristi Rogozanu has tried to approach a conciliatory perspective: talking about Kracauer, he is suggesting the fact that realism can’t be reduced to long shots because it is also a series of narrative, thematic feature films with a community impact (*From Caligari to Hitler* is still a benchmark in this regard). It must be said that Gorzo’s analysis is not isolated from the social/community, but his point of view is mostly aesthetic. It is true that his interpretation avoids formulating unitary judgments on the mentality impact of the films he has commented. It is also true that Gorzo limits himself to talk about the paradox that, although the NRC productions are festival material, they have often been perceived as mainstream (in the absence of anything else). The role of the general public – easy to spot even on the thematic level, the types of comic and burlesque, or the identity clichés – was not investigated in this book, maybe because his purpose was that of canonizing the NRC directors. However, doesn’t Harold Bloom warn us that in the canon “you enter only with an aesthetic force”?

Endnotes

1. Returning to a somewhat abandoned road, theorists like Marjorie Levinson, Nicholas Birnhs, Caroline Levine refunctionalize an approach that is centered on art’s formal complexity that precedes/determines

Despite any objections one might have, Andrei Gorzo’s book endorses its author as a solid film theorist/critic. *Things that cannot be said otherwise* is our first filmology “treaty”, the first essay that establishes a local cinematic poetic.

Conclusions

As I hopefully demonstrated in the above lines, the synchronization of the Romanian criticism with the Western methodologies after 2000 customizes itself by a paradoxical advantage. Although some theoretical directions – feminism, new-historicism, psychoanalysis – are approached with a delay of a couple of decades, Romanian critical discourse has the chance to elude the excesses the Western cultural world had sometimes experienced. Interpreting with discernment in the ways that have been for a long time used in Western cultural environments creates the premises for that methodological balance that comes from mixing the critical conscience with the mimetic one. It becomes important, however, the fact that this late but productive synchronization doesn’t constitute a simple theoretical fashion (like had often happened in the interwar period) or a pragmatic objective (for the purpose of getting research grants), but a refreshing expansion of Romanian criticism.

her ideological implications. In an article suggestively named *Hating and loving aesthetic formalism*, Virgil Nemoianu takes philosopher Michale Oakeshott’s distinction between “the politics of skepticism” and “the politics

of faith". Applying this conceptual binomial in the discussion on art's approaches, the author writes: "It seems to me that hostility to the subtleties of formalist literary practice and critical analysis derives from this desperate yearning for simplicity. The hosts of form haters seek not to protect us from an excess of order, as they would have us believe, but to put all sectors of human activity and behavior, down to our smallest gestures, glances, and innermost thoughts, under the control of a single purpose: a "perfection" that I, like Oakeshott, think ought to be placed between quotation marks. By contrast, the "perfection" pursued by aesthetic formalism is one of openness" (Nemoianu 2000). The key phrase in Nemoianu's plea is that of "escaping from complexity", which he assigns it to "the school of resentment", just like Harold Bloom named the entire politicized direction of cultural studies. A more nuanced perspective on the return to the formalist dimension in interpretation is brought by Marjorie Levinson's article, *What is New Formalism?* She identifies "a practical division between (a) those who want to restore to today's reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form (traced by these critics to sources foundational for materialist critique: Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson) and (b) those who campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant, disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art. In short, we have a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism". Therefore, on the one hand, an "activist formalism" which favors a deconstructive hermeneutic ("model of dynamic self-negation") and on the other hand a "normative formalism" guided by the paradigm of Aristotelian balance. Beyond the

potential conflict between the two, it should be noted, however, that in methodological terms, they are governed by complementarity, meaning that the return to formal specificity does not require giving up the cultural, political or historical dimension: "text does not have to play against context" (Breger 2012). The "strategic formalism" proposed by Caroline Levine, that "uses form as a way to read culturally and politically Precisely WHERE materialist readings fail" (Birns 2012), is a viable approach in this situation.

2. Without the tradition and sometimes oppressive metamorphosis of literary criticism, American film criticism has known – after Andrew Sarris, the one who imported/legitimized in US the auteur theory - the full range of culturalist, psychoanalytical, feminist approaches of the Althusserian-Lacanian paradigm, for it to reach saturation in the nineties. But despite a campaign against anti-aestheticism supported by prominent theorists like David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, «film criticism has not yet gained much prominence in the academy.» (Perez 1998). The dominating preeminence of the theory led to an academic crisis of the critical commentary, left somehow to the cultural journalists to handle. Therefore, starting from an affirmation inspired by Carroll about Bazin - "What fails as theory, may excel as criticism" – the critic Gilberto Perez recalls the second important complementarity that I want to point out in this study: "The theory enabled the criticism's perceptions, just as the criticism enabled the theory's conceptions".

3. When commenting Rónán McDonald's book, *The Death of the Critic* (2007), Richard Posner finds a plausible explanation of social criticism's decline. Unlike McDonald, Posner rejects the idea that the specificity of criticism is related to its evaluative dimension, idea that has become outdated once the relativisation of canon: "There is no need to develop a litmus test for great literature. Critics can point to the features of literary works that they like or

dislike without assuming the authority to tell people what they should read. And Croce was right: you don't need evaluative critics in order to have a "canon" of great literature. The canon evolves in Darwinian fashion: writers compete, and the works that are best adapted to the cultural environment flourish. [...] But the problem is not that modern-day criticism is not evaluative" (Posner 2008). On the contrary, the major deficiency of the time - considers Posner - derives from the fact that, the American academic environment is choked by sterile theories and obscure artistical production, and therefore it does not produce those formatives and "readable criticism in the style of Cleanth Brooks or F.R. Leavis", which would put the reader in an unmediated contact with the great art. Such conservative view could be counterbalanced by Richard Rushton's essay in a neo-Marxist key, *The New Film Studies and the Decline of Critique: Cinema*

studies in the late 1960s and 1970s was not just offering an alternative to traditional university contexts and disciplines, it was also deeply engaged with trying to determine the stakes of an alternative cinema and, by extension, was also trying to imagine the possibility of an alternative order of things, a different society, an alternative way of life that could be fostered by or made possible by the cinematic alternatives those critics invoked. [...] Today's cinema studies agenda is one that cannot imagine a different kind of society, and nor can it imagine a different kind of political structure" (Rushton 2007). This philosophic-sociological setup, that invokes criticism's desire to change the world, not to interpret it, denounces audience's recent theories qualified as capitalist methodological levers, whose reflexive, social and axiological function is strictly diminished.

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