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20 YEARS SINCE THE REVOLUTION: THE EMERGENCE OF THE ROMANIAN CINEMA

Abstract. The Romanian cinema after communism has conquered the west, but not the east. With this statement the author is following a film analysis designed to address some of the most important cinematographic productions in contemporary Romania. Interpreting the narratives in the movies of Caranfil, Mungiu, Porumboiu, Puiu, Munteanu, Mitulescu and Nemescu, Alexandru Istudor draws connections between these cinematographers, while putting them into the context of the regional and international film productions. Using the comparative method in film analysis, this paper provides a deep depiction of the social mechanisms influencing the Romanian cinematographers.

Notes from the audience and backstage

2009 has been a unique moment among public debates, marking the pass of 20 years since the fall of the Romanian communist regime, which has led to a general contemplation of everyday realities. Obviously, the most discussed have been the social, economic and politic spheres (Silviu Brucan's affirmation on how it will take 20 years for Romania to become a democracy seems full of meaning today and, according to some analysts, the author was too optimistic when stating this). From this point of view, the cultural sphere remains secluded in a peripheral corner, as it is being considered either meaningless in these debates or inadequate to be broached in the present context. What I am trying to accomplish in this paper is the analysis of a niche of this cultural sphere, namely the Romanian cinema in the 20 years of transition, focusing on the new wave of Romanian directors. One thing is certain: the Romanian

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cinema emerges in a space characterized by paradoxical cleavages. Despite the unfavorable local context (with everything it implies: the lack of financial resources or their poor management, the fact that theatre school and film school are often being mistaken and the promotion of stars that lack artistic skills, but, instead, they are renowned by the public), the Romanian cinema has managed to win more awards at prestigious film festivals that it did throughout its entire history. In other words, we have conquered the west, but not the east.

A New Hope: Nae Caranfil

Released in 1993, *E pericoloso sporgersi* is Nae Caranfil's first feature film, made in co-production with France, the reasons being well understood in the light of the 1990s cinema possibilities. What kind of impact does it have on today's audience? We can say that the film has several flaws: the inability to be clearly framed into a register, whether tragic, comic or playful, the faulty performance of the actors and the infantile atmosphere of certain scenes. Still, there is a technical detail that draws attention and that makes up the paroxysm of the film: the multiple perspectives on which the storyline is built upon. The narration is presented three times, in three different chapters – the student, the actors, the soldiers – creating a sense of otherness and providing the opportunity of seeing the same event through three perspectives. From this point of view, Caranfil's film astounds through its technical means, thus being

related to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. The difference is that in Caranfil's film its divisions are enlightening through the internal construction, whereas the Japanese director tries to create a feeling of "uncertainty and insecurity" (Currie, 1995) regarding the truth that the audience awaits.

From his first cinema-related experience and until *Filantropica*, the motion picture that can be seen as the result of the director's maturity, Caranfil has approached several themes, refusing to be stuck in a limited source of inspiration: the street, modernity and the effects of communism. All of these ingredients have placed Caranfil's films in the category of films that focus mainly on reality, on social and political facts, replacing the exceptional with the meaningless aspects of life in Romania.

Seeing *Filantropica* has "forced" me to analyze it in a comparative manner, using an Argentinean film as reference, *Nueve Reinas* directed by Fabian Bielinsky, one of the few films that provoked varying degrees of controversy at *New Directors/ New Films Festival* in New York, 2001 (Chin, Qualls, 2002). *Nueve Reinas* is the story of two swindlers, Juan and Marcos who try to make a living in a fraudulent, yet comic way. Their tricks are played in restaurants, gas stations, on the street with a certain theatricality that the audience will understand only in the end.

In *Filantropica*, Buenos Aires becomes a much more divided and opportunistic Bucharest. The act of begging, seen as the sad story that the reaching hand tells, is



an ingredient of the Balkan scenery. In this local reality we find a modest high school teacher, Ovidiu Gorea, who has failed his career as a writer, but now has to improvise in order to increase his budget and win much younger Diana's heart. Having to deal with this problem, he meets charismatic Pepe (played brilliantly by Gheorghe Dinică) the man behind the beggars. The relationship between the two characters, Ovidiu and Pepe is a typical Prince and the Pauper relationship, master and disciple, but also an unpredictable one, that finally leads to a scenario in which fiction generates reality. From this point of view the end of the film is enlightening, since the characters can no longer control the game and they cannot play their parts anymore because these have become their own lives.

If in *E pericoloso spergersi* the main innovation is a matter of narration, in

Filantropica paroxysm emerges from the way in which Caranfil applies Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *de-familiarization* on the subject, the beggar's world, which he presents as a parody, a fantasy rather than a pathetic drama.

The New Romanian Wave:

Mungiu, Porumboiu, Puiu, Munteanu, Mitulescu, Nemescu

2006 – year of the Revolution: *The Paper Will Be Blue*, *12:08 East of Bucharest*, *How I Spent the End of the World*

Inexplicably, 2006 was the year of revolution in the Romanian cinema, since no less than three greatly appreciated by the critics and awarded films have broached the subject of the Romanian Revolution. In a country that has a well developed film industry, such a fact could seem redundant, but the three young directors – Radu Muntean, Corneliu Porumboiu and Cătălin Mitulescu – have managed to provide an original view of this event, without having recurring elements in the three films, except the one that still marks today's Romanian society: the 1989 Revolution.

The Paper will Be Blue begins with a scene that invades the audience and will haunt it until the end – early in the morning two young men get out of a troop carrier as their military patrol is going through a routine check and after a few seconds they are shot dead, falling victims to the 1989 events. The film tries to retrace the preceding events of this incident by presenting two young men, who are anonymous at first, through

their relationships with the family, their superiors but also through their opinions and ideas about the Revolution.

Radu Munteanu's film does not try to unravel the mystery of the Revolution or to show how a serious number of people have died, although some of the ideas that appear in the film are still discussed today: the presence of terrorists, the poor communication between the armed forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the lies about poisoning the water and the presence of Arabs in the country. Instead, the focus is on the five persons that were patrolling on the night of the 22nd of December, among which were the two victims and we can observe the director's attempt to create the drama of the victim of the Revolution, which, for us, is just another one in the total number of victims, but for his family it is a trauma and also an absurd event.

A big part of the action takes place in the troop carrier that rides along the streets of a chaotic Bucharest and the events are perceived through the inside of this claustrophobic, but sometimes comforting space, that gives the five characters a vague sense of security. This technique of perceiving an event from the inside of a vehicle is fully exploited by the Israeli director Samuel Maoz in his film *Lebanon*, winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2009. The difference is that the comforting feeling disappears in Maoz's film and it is replaced by insecurity and lack of precision.

Corneliu Porumboiu seems to show clearly that he is an adherent of minima-

lism, from two different points of view. Firstly, he proves himself as a minimalist judging by the subject of his film, *12:08 East of Bucharest* which follows a well constructed thread that is in no way altered by details. Secondly, his minimalism is visible from a technical point of view through his comprehensive, immutable and immovable frames that rarely become close-ups.

In *12:08 East of Bucharest* the 1989 Revolution appears as a recurrent memory, even if 16 years have passed since then, but one that is being approached from a provincial point of view, as the one of the characters, Pișcoci says: "We have participated in the revolution by our own possibilities." Another example would be the images of the town's lights that gradually turn on and off just like the revolution's logic works (Cesereanu, 2007). Obviously, we would be naive if we thought the aim of the film is to answer the question in its title. In Porumboiu's film the reminiscence of the Revolution is merely an excuse to have a subject in a debate on television, doubled by the director's attempt to create a comedy from this debate that involves three characters vaguely outlined: an alcoholic school teacher, an amateur journalist and a character that used to play Santa Clause before and after the Revolution. Thus, to wonder if there actually was a revolution in Vaslui, the town where the action takes place, is like wondering about Santa Clause's existence. The effect of the film is far beyond the interrogation in the title and its possible answer, due to the young

director's ability to create an exemplary comedy from a series of dull events, the climax of the film being the television show scene.

From a certain point of view, the scene of the television show which exceeds more than half of the film's 85 minutes, gives the audience an aesthetic emotion similar to that caused by Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men*. Such comparison may seem unfair since the themes are antagonistic and so is the fervour the films transmit, but from a technical point of view, the dialogue, the clever lines and the ingenious communication between the characters makes the expression of paroxysm in both films.

There is another element that is worth mentioning and also appreciating in both Porumboiu and Munteanu's films. Both directors manage to create a clear image of the 1989 events for those who do not know what happened then because of their age or the fact that they have been manipulated during the Revolution (Cesereanu, 2007).

Cătălin Mitulescu's *How I Spent the End of the World* offers a sweetened version of the Revolution, although it is presented in an indirect way. In Mitulescu's motion picture we can observe his tendency to reconstruct part of the Romanian society in the upcoming event of 1989, the achievement surpassing, in my opinion, the aesthetic in *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *12:08 East of Bucharest*. What also produces this effect is the different technical method used by Mitulescu to film and construct the

motion picture. Unlike the other two films, in *How I Spent the End of the World* we can observe the elimination of long shots and their replacement by detailed and moving close-ups. In addition, we can see that Mitulescu relies greatly on the power of images, there is an austerity of dialogues in this regard which leaves room for the image to talk and suggest. Of course, we can find the usual ideological contradictions of the communist era in Mitulescu's film: pioneers, patriotic songs, but they are not the main focus of the film.

The sweetening effect of the period before December 1989 is accomplished by the fact that the film focuses on the characters' aspirations, adolescent love, playful childhood (showed especially by little Lalalilu Matei's fanciful submarine travels or his desire to kill Ceaușescu because he was making people suffer) and particularly the existential problems of the character Eva Matei. The film is therefore a combination of a cruel, abusive and unfair reality and the dreaming effects that compensate everyday life, hence the fact that the Revolution is portrayed as a positive change, without all the drama and debates that we find in *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *12:08 East of Bucharest*.

Romanian Palme D'Or

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days has become the film that set the seal on the new Romanian cinema wave not just because it was awarded the 2007 Palme D'Or, but mainly due to the enthusiasm that it produced in reviews, both in

Romania and abroad. Naturally, we can say that Alex. Leo Șerban (2009) was right when he said that this award wouldn't have come if it had not been preceded by other similar awards at Cannes. One thing is certain: this film has placed Romania on the cinema map for good.

Director Cristian Mungiu's interest for the "Golden Age" has materialized so far in two completely different, but complementary films: *432* and *Tales from the Golden Age*. Although *432* was originally destined to be a part of *Tales from the Golden Age*, its complex subject made it suitable for a feature film with a story that cannot be only reduced to the abortion issue in the communist era. And while we are on the subject, one can only observe that this theme has been addressed with plain objectivity, without sending a one side message on abortion politics, thus being a politically correct film.

Rather than being considered another motion picture about abortion, Mungiu's film can be given the credit of recreating, through the power of images, an absurd system that was functional before 1990 and whose influence is felt by characters in every scene, Mr. Bebe being the exponent of this reality and, probably, its typical villain. Therefore, we can say that *432* is a drama that has been conceived and filmed as to be perceived like a documentary, but to be lived as a thriller (Gorzo, 2009). The system's impact on the individual is presented in an aggressive and tense manner, since the characters are under strain not because

of the abortion itself, but because of the repercussions that can appear if it is discovered.

In *432* the recalling of the period before 1990 is a tragic and shaking one and also a painful reminiscence for those who have lived in those times while unprecedented for the western audience.

The Romanian film and the (media) news

Two of the Romanian new wave films are based on unusual pieces of news that have appeared in the mass-media: Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *California Dreamin' (endless)* by late Cristian Nemescu. This "coincidence" might imply one of the characteristics of the contemporary Romanian film, the fact that it has a significant component of *cinéma vérité*, reflecting the Romanian directors' desire of addressing film as an entity which has both an artistic and documentary value.

This characteristic is more visible in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, a film which suggests that any of us could be Mr. Lăzărescu (even the name is a common one) and which also tries to highlight the alteration of the Romanian society and the Kafka-like universe of its hospitals. In fact, the film relies on the effect produced on the Romanian audience, but not only, by its identification, not so much with the Lăzărescu character, but with the situations he goes through.

However, Cristi Puiu's film is not confined to the social aspect that is undoubtedly present, but offers the audi-

ence a structure that defies the classic *road movie*. Usually, this kind of film suggests an initiating journey, under the influence of the archaic journey of Odysseus and the events are focused on the maturation process of the characters and on finding the meaning of their lives. In the classic road movie “the end of the journey is its continuation, or a new journey” (Laderman, 2000). By contrast, in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, the *road movie* is a reversal of valences in which the character begins, in fact, a journey towards his death and not in the least towards a significant event for his future life. One of the innovations of this movie is the fact that it is mostly constructed on the same item: after the scenes in Mr. Lăzărescu’s apartment, the film becomes a journey between hospitals, the entrance and the exit in and out of each of these being redundant in space but authentic from the characters and the story’s point of view. The washing and shaving at the end of the film carried out silently and cleverly by two women symbolizes not his saving but the ritual for his last journey (Rado, 2006).

California Dreamin’ (endless) is distinguishable by the fact that the news at the bottom of this story captures a rather silly accident: a train carrying NATO and American military equipment to Kosovo is stopped in a station by its master, with the pretext of legislative inaccuracies in their papers. Nemescu, however, does not make a film that presents this fact in a truthful and accurate manner, but uses it as a pretext to construct a well built,

sometimes sinuous story, alternating between narratives from 1999 and the 1944 bombardments.

We can observe in *California Dreamin’* a desire to tackle history in a cynical manner, by focusing on some of the clichés that held the attention of the Romanian society and which exist, in a paradoxical way, in the present of the film. Firstly, they refer to the period following the Second World War, when the Americans were expected to come and to the Romanians’ desire to avoid the Soviet alternative. Ironically, the station master is one of those who had been waiting for the Americans for 50 years and when they finally arrive he refuses to permit them to leave, in a gesture that could be interpreted both as compensatory and vindictive. Secondly, the film intends to bring into attention certain specific aspects of the Balkans, thus being similar to Emir Kusturica’s films through its tone, atmosphere and the way in which it combines comedy with tragic notes. Bureaucracy, the party organized for the American soldiers by the village’s mayor, the girls’ fascination for the foreign soldiers are all typical clichés of this area as well as Captain Jones’s speech before the villagers, denouncing tyranny and arguing his role as a megalomaniac U.S. citizen in the “liberation” of the village from its influential station master. Even the violent acts from the end of the film suggest certain local realities, which makes Nemescu’s film an irony, a comedy and a tragedy at the same time, towards

the Balkan space and the identities that it creates.

Before he made his debut in feature film, Nemescu has experimented short and medium film, one of them announcing, in fact, the young director's flair.

***Marilena from P7* by Nemescu – *Malena* by Tornatore**

In the medium film *Marilena from P7* we can observe a combination of references to other films and the veracity of stories that take place in an urban area, dominated by violence and traffic.

The opening scene of the film – two children come out of a bus driven by their father – has the role of introducing the audience in a malign world and is similar to that in *A Bronx Tale*, where another father warns his son to stay away from the troubles in the neighborhood. The Bronx, fully exploited by American filmmakers, is replaced in Nemescu's film by the grey and peripheral block of flats of a nearly ghetto-like neighbourhood.

Another nexus of Nemescu's film, which we can find in the European cinema, this time, refers to its relationship with Giuseppe Tornatore's *Malena*. Young Andrei's fascination for Marilena, a prostitute is similar to Renato's obsession for Malena, but the Italian director's film has a magic component, that of the evocation of childhood in Sicily, that does not belong in the peripheral Romanian neighborhood. The comparison can continue by analyzing the perspectives of the two films. Both of them use adolescent candor, the tribulations of the two teenage characters, Andrei and

Renato and their fantasies in telling the stories since the two are the only characters that do not leave the victims, despite their decline. The differences between the two films are too great to be analyzed here, but one thing is worth mentioning: the space in Tornatore's film is benign and its characters get their redemption in the end, while in Nemescu's story there is a malign world, with no turning back for its characters. In *Malena* the return of the feminine character to her pre-war class status is subtly marked in the closing sequences where the wife reduced to prostitution during the German occupation buys fruit (Celli, 2004).

There is only one incongruous element in the internal construction of the film, Marilena's suicide, not because it lacks a motive, but because there is no prior evidence that could shape and legitimate this gesture.

2009 and Romanian film: *Policeman, Adjective*

The audience familiar with the minimalist technique from *12:08 East of Bucharest* is subject to a new attempt by the young director Corneliu Porumboiu, in his second feature film, *Police, Adjective*, winner in 2009 of a series of awards, including *A Certain Regard* and *FIPRESCI* Prize at Cannes. Porumboiu's technique from *12:08 East of Bucharest* is maximized here. Long, immutable frames with insignificant movements of the objective are legitimized by the story of the film and serve to suggest the tribulations that are being put on police officer Cristi.

In fact, the dialogue is minimal, precisely because the tension and the intensity of the film are transmitted through images and not words, as we would expect. From this point of view, the film presents a reality that is comparable to the one in Michael Haneke's *Cache*, where we can observe a largely static view and the audience follows the ways suggested by the director, thus developing a sense of insecurity and instability.

Another recurring element in Porumboiu's film refers to the final scene where the camera focuses on the climax of the dialogue between Cristi (played by Dragoș Bucur) and his captain (Vlad Ivanov), a debate, similar to the one in *12:08 East of Bucharest*, but shorter and with moral implications on the characters. The end scene offers a certain alteration in the internal construction of the film, but the story's minimalism – a police officer that has to decide if he will judge the facts from a moral or a legal point of view – proves to be unaltered since the audience is not offered the possibility to see the world in which the alleged hashish dealers live.

Corneliu Porumboiu deserves appreciation, mainly because he develops a personal minimalist film view, being the only Romanian director that remains faithful to this technique that constructs the narrative in a simple frame, designed to suggest rather than providing details to the audience.

Conclusion

There are several aspects that can be imputed to the modern Romanian film: the lack of a school for film actors, the poor management of CNC funds by financing projects that do not deserve it, the reduced interest of the Romanian government in supporting the cinema, but these obstacles have not stood in the way of making Romanian productions successful. Directors as the ones mentioned above have given a new spark to the post-communist Romanian cinema and there are signs that this creativity will not stop here. In addition, by winning important prizes the bar has been raised, which means that those who wish to state will have to overcome local inhibitions but also their predecessors.

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