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## THE ICONOCLASM OF THE NEW ROMANIAN CINEMATOGRAPHERS

**Abstract.** The religious imaginary in cinema exists from the very beginnings of the new medium, and the connections are not only narrative, but also at the level of the philosophy of cinema making. The main questions of the author in this essay are concentrated around the ways the visual representations of today are linked to the iconic and to the iconoclastic attitude towards images. It may seem paradoxical to speak about iconoclasm when speaking about cinema, but the irreverence towards transcendental representations of God are to be found in the New Romanian Cinema.

**Keywords.** Icons, iconoclasm, religion, cinema, semiological interpretation.

### *Religious imaginary backdrop*

In a recent study made by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, published March 30th, 2010, the polls indicated that 87% of the Romanians consider themselves as religious, 81% usually attend to church and 60% go to church regularly (several times a week 12%, 48% several times a month). This is one of the highest rates in the European Union, and, in this context, we must draw the attention that the Eastern part or Romania, Moldova, is one of the most “spiritual” regions of the country, with the highest numbers in church attendance. Most of the opinion polls conducted since 1989 show that churchgoing and publicly expressing religious beliefs is higher in Moldova than in any of the other regions of the country. Of course, this religious fervor has also some set backs, since it was in a Moldavian monastery that the last case of exorcism in Europe (followed by the death of the exorcised woman novice) was recorded (in 2005, the case in the Tanacu monastery made into international news).

In a brief canonical reference, it is also relevant that, in the tradition of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the bishop of Moldavia becomes the new Patriarch in Bucharest, and this has been so since the creation of the modern Romanian state in 1859. These are a couple of sociological reasons why I decided to use as the main interpretation object the works of two young Romanian cinematographers, Corneliu Porumboiu (born in Vaslui) and Cristian Mungiu (born in Iași) both coming from this “Orthodox” province of contemporary Romania. Although they never publicly expressed any religious meaning of their movies, this imaginary background provides plenty of suggestions that icons and religious culture is a part of their cinematography.

### ***Brief considerations on film and religion***

The history of cinema, from the very birth of the new medium, is connected with the transposition of biblical or moral stories, and while some of the first movie productions were based on religious dramatizations (Enrico Guazzoni, *Quo Vadis?*, 1912), filming passion plays and presenting heroic figures of Christianity (Carl Theodor Dreyer, *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*), 1928), the subject of moviemaking gradually grew more profane. Yet, as Melanie J. Wright suggested, religion and cinema are closely connected, and the relationship between film and religion is as old as the cinema (Wright 2007) and continues to be an important reference in contemporary moviemaking – the success of Mel Gibson’s

*The Passion of the Christ* (2004), made after almost a century from Alice Guy’s Gaumont production *La Vie du Christ* (*The Life of Christ*, 1906) indicate the permanence of this connection.

There are two questions here, that need to be addressed before moving forward: one, if we can produce an analysis of film content, based not only on “religious” subjects, but also on spirituality emanating from cinema, and the second, if this transfer from theology to spirituality is possible, what are the methodological aspects of this interpretation, how can we analyze elements that are not “religious”, but belong to a similar imaginary source. The first answer comes from the fact that, although not directly religious, or explicitly linked with religious narrative, many contemporary cinematographic productions can be identified as “spiritual” or “transcendent” in their intent, be it critical or even blasphemous in terms of Christian canons, nevertheless with a transcendental reference. This can allow the expansion of the “religious” to films that embed any type of religious symbolism or theological point of view, be it critical or explicitly proselyte, that needs to be followed by a methodological approach.

It is my contention for this paper that an iconological approach combined with a semiologic analysis – this separation is going to be further developed – can provide the necessary methodological basis for understanding the internal mechanisms of producing signification in the contemporary Romanian cinema.

***Moral issues, religious subjects  
and cinema content***

In terms of theological explanation of the world today, the problem with the contemporary human beings is that the resemblance with God has faded away – in a sense that allowed many theologians to consider the contemporary man as an icon that shows no signs of the “original” figure. While the icon is, in theological terms, a portrait (*icona, imago, effigies*) of Divinity, the destruction of the “*eikon*” in humanity is at the very core of some of the major movies in European cinema, and, using what Thomas Elsaesser identified and explained in the case of Italian neo-realism as an “aesthetic-moral agenda”, which included a political engagement, a social conscience and a humanist vision (Elsaesser 2005: 146), this can be described as the central moral and spiritual agenda for the Romanian cinema.

Even if the Romanian directors discussed here never publicly expressed any religious fervor or theological predispositions – as are Rossellini’s moral virtues and his religious criticism, or Fellini’s explicit references – their work is relevant for a certain imaginary that has to do both with religious/spiritual and moral issues. It is obvious that moral issues are fundamental for the Romanian contemporary cinema, and also this is what makes it an expression of European cinematographic treatment of post-Holocaust era (Elsaesser 2005), the questioning of moral responsibility.

On one hand, as is the case with most Central and East European cinematogra-

phers, the experiences of a totalitarian regime stimulate the discussions on the relationship with authority and authority figures, which is recurrent in these movies. Exposing the moral misery of a (post) totalitarian regime, although not discussed in religious terms, hits very deeply theological and ontological questions. All these movies have in their center male figures that are either morally degenerated or are challenged at the level of power relations. These men are “fathers” who do not fulfill properly their social roles, they are incomplete fathers, thus downgraded images of the Father, the Creator.

On the other hand, as in the case of the New German Cinema (represented by authors like Herzog, Syberberg and Wenders), moral dilemmas are not of tragic dimensions, but reasons to search for answers to the very much spiritual issues, which puts these films in the borderline of religious debate. As it is for most of the European cinematographers, for the young Romanian filmmakers moviemaking is about morality – and every film discussed here has a moral of itself and a moral purpose – in every case questioning moral values, moral rectitude and moral handling the history of recent time is a way of exposing the “evil” of the past.

As noted before, in a very much Manichean approach to their cultural mission, the Romanian moviemakers deal with moral dissolution, not only at the level of character building, but also at the level of narrative. In *12:08 East of Bucharest*

(*A fost sau n-a fost*, 2006), the spectator sees the story of three characters caught in the middle of the Romanian Revolution in a small provincial town, all of them leading a degrading way of life. *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și două zile*, 2007) is a movie about abortion – during the last years of the Communist regime in Romania two student girls are caught in a tragic encounter with a false doctor, who performs the abortion on one of them, and rapes them both. *Policeman, adjective* (*Polițist, adjectiv*, 2009) is the story of a cop who is assigned a small case of drug consumption in a school, who confronts the moral dilemma if he should follow the orders of his superiors, or should he follow his gut feelings, and give the young suspect a break. In *Policeman, adjective* this moral setting is explicitly stated at the very core of the narrative of the movie – the final discussion, that leads to the “dictionary” explanation of the term “policeman” (thus the title), starts with the discussion about the term “conscience”. Three men, three officers of the law discussing moral questions, dealing with issues of the soul and of belief, this is a part of a representation structure belonging to an imaginary that is common to religious, or at least with a moral strand having Christian background.

### *The migration of images and imaginaries*

One direction approaching the interpretation of the cinematic imaginary is to build upon the paradigmatic nature of images. The concept of the familiarity of images, borrowed from perceptual

psychology, can be transferred into the understanding of contemporary cinematographers’ imaginaries: they belong to an amalgamated imaginary.

This happens in a similar way the Madonna iconography of the early Christian art borrowed from the various representations of both virgin and mother goddesses like Persephone and Isis. The multiple sources of the image of the Mother of God, be it Cybele, Isis with Horus in her arms, make it obvious that some qualities of these pre-Christian figures were exported to the early Christian representations (Belting, Jephcott 1994). For example, the bear breasted Mother feeding the child that recrudesced by the late Renaissance is likely to be taken from the images of Isis breastfeeding Harpocrates on her lap, while Isis and Horus constituted a reference for the early representations of the Virgin and child. This cross-cultural view of images migration allows the interpretation of imagology in contemporary cinema from the vantage point of iconological influences.

It is obvious that Christianity has imported (and exported) many of the visual structures belonging to other religions, but even more relevant is the fact that this transfer of images and imaginaries, which began in the earliest manifestations of Christian visual culture, continues today – as David Morgan extensively proves it with examples from India, to Indonesia, Japan or Nigeria, Christianity remains one of the most important source of visual transmutation today (Morgan 2005). This

imaginary is widely circulating and, even if sometimes (most of the times) is not anymore sacred, religious imagery and imaginary structures are continuously appropriated and inculturated. This is the main reason why we should then perform a paradigmatic interpretation of images in the cinematographic language. For example the young student girl in *4 months...*, who aborts her child is nothing but a Madonna with a dead fetus, while running the streets to abandon the child of her roommate, the second girl is in a reverse movement than the “original” Holy Mother, running from place to place to give birth to her unborn son, the Messiah.

Another problem comes from the fact that most of these “adaptations” of Christian imaginary are not “orthodox” in their use and practices. Nonetheless the reference to the Christian source is intact, as can be proved with Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, which is one of the most “exported” cultural goods in modern media. From The Beatles to the sci-fi movie *Battlestar Galactica* or the HBO series *The Sopranos*, from book promotions (as is the case of George Carlin), or fashion design (the advertisements for Marithé and François Girbaud) to various comics, they were promoted with the help of a Christian visual archetype. Visual artists have always recanted “old” imaginaries; photographers, painters and cinematographers are notoriously borrowing mythological and theological narratives and turning them into new aesthetic discourses. This is the case

with Susan Dorothea White’s *The First Supper*, where Jesus and the apostles were substituted by various women of various races, or with David LaChapelle’s version of *Last Supper*, in a totally mundane and burlesque context. This is also the case with *Viridiana*, made by Buñuel, one of the classical cinematic re-enactments of this religious subject matter.

The table scene in *4 months...* belongs to the same elaboration of the symbolic stage – the *Last Supper* here is not explicitly put into place (we don’t have the exact number of “apostles” and we do not have a male Christ), yet the paradigmatic dimension is present. We can interpret this scene as a symbolic transformation of the Eucharistic message – the consumption of food and drinks in the middle of a tragedy is the exact reverse of the archetypal consumption of Christ’s body and blood for the purpose of salvation.

Cristi Puiu’s most recent movie (*Aurora* 2010) is also constructed around the same paradigmatic mutation of figures – the director himself plays the role of a man who ends up killing his in-laws and former boss, and who is portrayed as a demented Christ. The way his facial expressions are constructed is symbolically tied with the expressions of the Christ non-painted by a human hand (*acheiropoetos*). A silent, almost ascetic figure, with compassion and filled with humanity, proves to be a cold blooded murder. He is a Christ-like figure who does not save anybody, not even himself. Incapable of producing any miracle, the protagonists in the new Romanian cinema are surrogates of the Archetypal Hero, Christ the Saviour.

### *Icons and cinematic screen*

An icon is, in fact, the only “true image” of the Christ, the only possible access human beings have to the “seeing” of God. The invisible and immaterial God has presented himself in a visible form to his chosen ones (Moses, Abraham and the prophets) and later, in the form of Christ, God became flesh. The Veil of Veronica was used as the first example for the material support of “fixing” this image of the Unseen, into the very much materiality of human perception. The very essence of the icon is based on this initial “copying” of the original – the veil of Veronica, who wiped the face of the Christ on Via Dolorosa constituted the basis for any reproduction into the real of the immaterial. This later turned into the physical reverence towards the holy images, by veneration of the iconic representation of the divine. Here the face is an icon (eikon) which allows the development of a “theology of the face” (eikon), as Vladimir Lossky suggests it, which defines the Christian Orthodox imaginary (Lossky 1967). The man is an *imago dei*, made after the face of God (Exodus 1:26). When this face is not transfigured, but disfigured we enter the realm of physical iconoclasm.

The Eastern painters of icons describe their work as a depiction of “the being” and, supernaturally, of the “well-being” (*blagobytie*), of the divinely inspired life. Opposed to the Western approach to theological painting – manifested, in Florensky’s view, by Dürer –, Eastern Orthodox art is “spiritual” in that it is not

based on logic, but on “metaphysics”. Using the critique of Walter Benjamin, Florensky attributes to the mechanically reproduced images a negative quality – they are soulless (Florensky 2002). The opposition is between *archeipoetos*, a term coined by the supporters of the icons in the middle of the iconoclast wars in Byzance – the image of God is not made by human hands, but by the intervention of the Spirit within the painter himself (just as it was for the writers of the Old Testament), and the material substitution of God in images. The icons, as visual representations of the divine are not paintings, but forms of communicating the essence of the person or persons they represent. At this second level, icons are “visual practices”, instruments by which the believer takes contact with another reality, one that is not only theological, but also practical usage. For Pavel Florensky icons are “symbols of the beyond”, they are able to take us beyond our everyday life.

In the same way the icons “capture” an essence that is beyond the reality of this world and the materiality of the support, cinema’s essence is beyond the reality it needs in order to transmit a message. Like the icon, cinema is projected on a surface – the screen is only an intermediary between the viewer and the reality (never present) that is viewed. In Eastern European cinema icons and icon references are a constant reality; one of the most explicit use of icons is in the Tarkovskyan imaginary, in *Ivan’s Childhood* there is a Mother of God painting, in *Stalker* there are constant references to John the Baptist and Christ

the Lamb of God, while in his later movies the symbolical takes over the iconic.

### *Icons, signs and significations*

Here we need to address some crucial questions: In what way the visual representations of today are linked to the iconic? What is the nature of the icon and how can we connect such changed iconic representation (of which cinema representations are part of) with the traditional theology of the visual? An answer comes from Tarkovsky, for whom cinematographic art is similar to the "art of the icon" in the sense that they both have to represent "the ideal". This is fundamentally moral ideal, as the Russian cinematographer expressed it: "Art could almost be said to be religious in that it is inspired by commitment to a higher goal" (Tarkovsky 1986: 168). Even if it is devoid of spirituality, art carries its own tragedy within it, for recognizing the spiritual vacuum of the times in which he lives, the artist shows an understanding that is beyond his own work. In this respect the true artist always "serves immortality", in the sense that he is striving to immortalize the world and man within the world. As it was the case, Tarkovsky's works were perceived as "religious" by the Goskino and the Soviet authorities who demanded, in the case of *Solaris*, the removal of all religious or fate connected references (cited in Bird 2008). As Nikolai Sizov, head of the Mosfilm studio told the director, there is "no need for evangelical tendencies" in Soviet cinema. If even the censors of USSR perceived these elements

of significance as "moral and evangelical" issues, we can expand the fact that the personal integrity of the human beings and the integrity of their characters can be equated with a higher spiritual and religious theme.

The problem with cinematic treatment of icons (and of theological references) is that the meaning is not connected at the surface of the sequence or of the frame, but at the profound level of the internal structure, while the external references do not always converge in creating new meanings. I think this divide can be filled if we clarify the relationship of the signified with the signifier, as it is done in the general linguistics theory. While in icons the signifier is made transparent by its relationship with the signified, this is not the case with cinematographic treatment of images. Icons are theologically defined as "images with power", a power that comes from the power of the represented Object, that is the Divine – the fundamental "signified". This power is evident even today in the Orthodox world, in moments of environmental disasters and of social conflicts, icons are taken out of the churches to protect the community with they imbedded divine force. Icons are used to "heal" people, and certain icons in various monasteries and churches in contemporary Romania are still famed for their "curative" capabilities. People use the images as their link with a significance that is above them, yet at hand.

How can we analyze iconographic transformations of these "powerful" images into the secular? One explanation

could come from a pure semiologic point of view, straight from the works of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. De Saussure's classical distinction between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the content), that is between the material and the conceptual is fundamental in image interpretation. If, in terms of iconic representations, this union between the signifier (the representation of the divine) and the signified (the Divine, God himself) is perfect – as it is the case in the theology of Orthodox iconography where the icon is the “seeing of the unseen” – the simultaneous representation of the human and the divine, the semiological approach needs to start from the fact that modern representations of iconic sources are based on a fundamental split between the signified and the signifier. As Paul Evdokimov expressed this relationship, the icon entails the difference of *nature* between the representation and that which is represented, the icon is *not Christ*, it is the real presence of the Symbolized in its symbol, a *consubstantiality* of the image and its model (Evdokimov 1981).

The transformation happens in a references system, like in our modern and post-modern world, where the signifiers loose their “transcendental” signification, they loose the link between matter and form. As Jacques Derrida has argued, the signified is *always already in the position of the signifier*, due to the very logocentrism of the Western world, encumbering a close connection between the signified and the material presence. The consequences are that, if there is no transcendental signified

at the end of the chain of references, there is no meaning but that which is disembodied (Derrida 1976: 55).

As it is obvious from the examples presented and from the fragment discussed from *4 months...*, the link is still intact at the level of the signifier, but at the level of the signified the meaning is completely reversed. The fake supper in the movie is a representation of the emptiness – Christ is no longer represented as a male figure, but substituted by a Christ-like woman, Gabriela is a student girl who sacrifices herself for her roommate, a sacrifice that in the end is meaningless and void of consequences. Here the supernatural that comes out of the ordinary in the icons, of the worldly so to speak, is turned into the non-spiritual manifestation of the absence of anything spiritual.

One explanation is that we are witnessing an “Eucharistic of the Profane” (Kearney 2010). While the Eucharist is “the word made everyday flesh” during the Liturgy and the communion is the transformation of the humanity by material and spiritual link with the original “signified”, the world of contemporary images lacks any connection with the source of meaning, thus becoming meaningless, a manifestation of phenomenological “absence”. The sacrament of transubstantiation is now only a profane depletion of any substance and consistency, as it also happens at the end of *4 months...*, when we witness a communion that is void of any spirituality, a sort of cannibal devouring of one's own emotions and feelings. The dehumanization of man-



kind is a reversed function of the humanity of Christ, we are part of a humanity emptied of any kind of transcendence, of spiritualization of any kind. There is no more sacredness in the flesh or in the bodies, the characters are merely subjects of a kind of bestiality which is trans-human, is no longer animal, nor carnal – as it is with the scene of the rape in *4 months...*, followed by the brutal abortion operation.

### *Semiological interpretation of visual narratives*

In this analysis I prefer using the concept of semiology (in the tradition of Saussure, and not that of Peircean semiotics) because, unlike semiotics, who attributes the icon a very narrow definition, this strand of visual interpretation is based on the notion that meaning is encoded, and applying this to cinema interpretation allows the search for deeply coded content, otherwise inaccessible. A semiologic analysis would provide access to those levels of meaning production that are concealed into apparently mundane transcriptions of reality – as it is often the case in the new Romanian cinema, a realism based on cinematographic means.

Following the interpretative path Roman Jakobson opened in art interpretation (Jakobson 1963: 62–63), the two fundamental concepts of semiotic analysis are “metaphor” and “metonymy” – in order to interpret the “hidden significance” of visual narratives (in the movies and in any other form of visual cultural product) the two terms

provide content for deep explanations of meaning. While metonymy is a form of association of significants and metaphor is essentially a form of substitution, where one element stands for another in order to bring forward a new significance, they both allow the surpassing of the problem announced in the beginning, that of discerning between explicitly religious reference and the “covert” significance, between the coded religious content and the profane manifestation.

In order to understand this, we need to refer to a fundamental concept in Orthodox iconography – *ensarkosis*, the coming into flesh of the divine, and this needed for the comprehension of the transformations often manifested in the visual representations of the new-wave of Romanian cinematographers which can be described as the absence of the manifestation of the divine, the pure materiality of a humanity depleted of its spirituality. This iconological shift is a re-contextualization of a divinity never present, while a morally decadent humanity follows no rule, but that of carnal pain.

This is the case of another Christ-like figure, that of Professor Tiberiu Mănescu in *12:08 East of Bucharest*. He is a drunkard and a liar, and, although he is a Teacher, he has nothing and nobody to teach, he is a Master that nobody listens to, and a mockery of everybody around him. He owns money to everybody and is considered a fraud by his fellows. The second character of the movie, Virgil Jderescu, the manager of the local TV

station is a "God" in his behavior towards his employees, and is addressed as "Father" by the wife he betrays, but he is a Father-figure who is void of power and of credibility, while the third character, Mr. Emanoil Pişcoci, who is first portrayed as an altruist neighbor, but one without "energy", an old man who is invited to the talk show only as a substitute for somebody that doesn't come – with a clear connotation to the role the Holy Spirit plays in the dynamics of Christian theology. It is also relevant that one third of the movie takes place in a TV studio, in a discussion about the events of the Romanian Revolution, that took place 16 years ago (the action is set up in 2005), permitting the director to close the screen in a frame much similar to an icon.

The other level of the analysis is the mythological aspect of semiotic interpretation. In *12:08 East of Bucharest* everything takes place on Christmas Eve – the symbolic connection with the birth of the Savior is obvious, only this Christmas is also void of significance, reduced to the costume for Santa Claus bought from a Chinese vendor, a substitute without substance. Trans-substantiation, a key concept in Christian theology, was changed into a phenomenological concept by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Ponty, transubstantiation is the visible manifestation of bodies into the painting, that is a multiple transubstantiation takes place when the perceiver becomes the painter, the body of the painter and the flesh of the world meet in the image, and the perceived world turns into the painting.

This "bodily exchange" between humans and the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 16) is by no means the transformation of the matter, but rather an absent meaning.

This absent meaning and, even more important, the absence of the signified characterizes most of the new Romanian movies. This is a universe where the signified is floating, shifts from one character to another – as is the case with the two girls in *4, 3, 2*, becoming successively the substitutes of the Holy Mother, but both of whom are childless mothers. As for the holy birth without materiality in the Christian mythology, they are a part of an unholy birth that throws them into the deepest material and even obscene. The same narrative incident takes place in *4, 3, 2*, at the ending scene, when the main character sits at the table and overhears the discussions about eating pork, and the fact that the fat is bad, then the conversation moves to the priesthood and the fact that the priest is the drunkard of the village, and the mother confesses she goes to church every Easter – the discussions are about an absent signifier, that of faith and the presence of God in the material world to transform it.

### *Iconological interpretation of cinema motifs*

One important method of interpretation in cinema theory is the iconological approach – in the very sense Erwin Panofsky used the term, as opposed the iconographic depictions. Iconological interpretations, usually applicable to sacred art and to artistic objects that

have a sacred subject matter is well in place here, even if the “religious” theme is not explicitly manifested as such. The symbolic level of religious art, as Panofsky identified it in 1939, has soon become a part of film studies in the following decades, and, as Thomas Levin suggested, one key element in the Panofsky iconological approach is the transfer of art historical method to cinematic objects – simply put, one can interpret films as if it were an art object (Levin 1996). For the approach to be iconological and not iconographic (as Panofsky himself separated the terms), this means not only looking beyond the factual meaning of the image, and searching for an expressional meaning, but also to be searching for the “iconographic symbolism” in images, one that allows the connection between elements in the visual field to become the source for a new signification. For example a man sitting at a table, surrounded by twelve other men is a symbolic reference to Christ at the Last Supper. Certain attributes, behaviors and even visual forms have a symbolic content that can be carried from one image to another.

At the strict “iconographic” level, there is no connection, no links between the cinema sequences analyzed and their religious counterparts, the source icons. But at the iconological level the symbolic motifs and visual symbolization provide a narrative that can lead to a further understanding of the cinematographic message. An iconological approach to visual artifacts is, in fact, a search for symbolic values, hiding within the explicit

meanings. Alloway was one of the first who used a “patterns analysis” version of iconology in cinema analysis, finding thematic visual structures that allowed him to develop a critical interpretation of cinema according to recurrent “themes and motifs” (Alloway 1969). Alloway used the *mise-en-scène* as the most important place in cinematic imaginary where the iconological analysis can take place. This is where visual devices become instrumental for the completion or development of the narrative into an analytical construct.

Since there is always something else behind the immediate significance, and this where the notion of symptom comes into place – a symptom is an indication of an attitude shared by a group towards an idea, the manifestation of a nation’s concepts on religious or philosophical matters (Panofsky, 1970). The movies provide such “symptoms” for a general explanation of individual or social problems. The symptomatic (or the symbolic as it is for Panofsky) expression of images allows us to identify what is the cultural value of such a visual schemata – can it be justified only by the cinematographic or is it more than this. Looking for visual motifs in the films of the “new” Romanian cinematographers, there is an obvious predilection for certain categories of settings and visual contexts. Even if the meaning is not explicit and the mythological reference is completely reversed, we can still find the traits of their references.

The sampling method is based on identifying visual patterns that are

recurrent and redundant – this is the very case with the “new” Romanian cinema, several of the movies internationally recognized employ these “iconic” patterns and much more than this, these traits are identifiable at various cinematographers, in several movies. Not only Porumboiu, who has employed this scenery in his last two movies, but moviemakers of the same generation like Radu Muntean (in *Boogie*, 2008) and more recently Cristi Puiu (in *Aurora*, 2010) use these visual patterns as interpretative keys to their productions (here, for obvious interpretative reasons, I limited the study on only two movie-makers).

### *Semiology of colours*

Pavel Florensky identified some of the most important semiological meanings of color in Byzantine iconography, from a perceptual perspective (Florensky 2002). Azure is the color of celestial transcendence, and this celestial azure is the dominant color in the Trinity of Rublev. Using this “unearthly” color, the painter gives us the access to something that has no equal on earth. In his study *Celestial Signs. Reflections on the Symbolics of Colours* (Florensky 2002), the Russian art philosopher elaborates on the important symbolic meaning of color in icons, as defined by the three primary colors and their relationship with a metaphysical significance. The conventional nature of colors in Byzantine icon making is of semiotic value, and, as Umberto Eco indicated, the colors are culturally determined (Eco 1996). Going back to

Florensky, he considers that violet and blue are the colors of “absolute void”, while green is the balance between darkness and light, and red with pink are the expressions of the darkness.

In the two examples from Porumboiu, we perceive that the colors of the characters follow their un-substantiated nature, the scenes are dominated by earthly coloristic, while in the Rublev Trinity the division is clear – The Spirit on the right, wears a blue robe, referring to divinity and a green robe representing the new life of Christianity. The figure of the Christ in the center wears blue, a blue of divinity with a brown garment that refers to the earth – that is His humanity. The Father wears a blue garment almost hidden by a shimmering – ethereal robe. Following what Tarkovsky expressed about the dramaturgy of color in the Trinity, the chromatic distribution of the characters in the final scenes of *Polițist, adjectiv* and *12:08 Bucharest...* follow the sacred chromatic structure of Rublev’s Troika.

### *The significations of the Trinity*

Why is the icon of the trinity so important for the Christian imaginary? Although the most famous is the Rublev version, the Trinity visit of Abraham is one of the most important themes in Eastern Christianity. According to some ancient authors, one version of this painting was on the southern side of the Hagia Sophia church in Byzance and it was made on the very trees from Mamre, while one of the oldest representations was discovered in the catacombs of Rome (Jensen 2005). We



have another representation in a mosaic in the Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Rome, in the San Vitale church mosaic in Ravenna, and several in the Russian tradition of icon making. The one presented here is thus one of the earliest, called The Old Testament Trinity or The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah.

The Genesis 18 text, that refers to the three visitors of Abraham as a manifestation of the divine, was interpreted by later Christian theologians an explicit manifestation of the triple “persona” of God. The identity of God himself, be it in the subordinationist view of the Orthodox church (the Spirit coming from the Father but not from the Son), or the Arian view of the non-divine nature of Christ, is revealed here in a material form. The relevance of the Trinity in medieval iconography is utmost, because this is one of the few examples from the Old Testament where

we have a bodily manifestation of the unseen God. So in visual arts the Trinity becomes an expression of the incarnate God, the Word made visible, while in strictly theological sense God, although he is invisible, can manifest himself in a visible way in the world. In this sense the three visitors who speak to Abraham at Mamre are visual representations of the presence of God in the human action and activity. And this is a quintessence of *theophany*, the manifestation of the divine into the material – in a symbolic way, the Trinity expresses the presence of divinity in the entire human history.

The Divine Triad was a long debated issue – but it was Origen who first connected the act of seeing the Trinity at Mamre with the concept of vision – he suggested that the name “mambre” actually means “vision”, the ability of the human beings to perceive. Thus the icon of the Trinity is closely connected with the problem of the image (of God) in Christianity, linked with the concepts of resemblance and of substance. All these very problematic issues are concomitantly present in the icon of the Trinity. Here allegory is the instrument, used in interpreting theological meaning (Louth 1989), that can be used in the allegorical search for the profound significance within images (cinematic or not).

The icon of the Trinity, as suggested by Florensky, must be understood as a vision of spirituality, a view, beyond the restrictions of time, of an unmemorable event. Here the icon is the face (*typos*) of the truthful reality (*aletheia*) from the unseen.

The Russian theologian and philosopher goes even further to say that The Trinity is the most important expression of Byzantine (read Russian) Orthodox theology of art (Florensky 1995). Florensky uses the following syllogism in *Ikonostasis*, "If there is the Holy Trinity of Rublev, there is God", in the iconic world seeing the face of God is equivalent with seeing the Divinity at work in humanity. At the first (and basic) level of interpretation the icon is a simple artistic object, belonging to a museum. Still, as Tarkovsky puts it, the Trinity has a spiritual meaning, one that is transmitted from one century to another, from one world to another. This transcendental purpose of the "Trinity" needs to be underlined (Tarkovsky). The "Trinity" of Rublev (the Russian medieval painter, not the character in the movie) epitomizes for Tarkovsky "the ideal of brotherhood, love and quiet sanctity".

These three qualities, similar to the qualities of Christians in their everyday life, known as "christ-like" traits, can be turned upside down. The triptic of love, good and brotherhood is completely reversed in the Romanian cinematographic triptics: evildoing, meanness and lack of spirituality is allegorically transformed. As mentioned before, one clear code in the new Romanian cinema is the absence of the Father, or the representation of the father figures as decrepit, inept or powerless. The first level of interpretation is explicit – this is a criticism of the communist "father-like" leadership, based on a very much patriarchal terror over the individual. On the other level, the reference is made to a

fatherless world, a world of *Deus otiosus*, an absent God that has left his sons. This allegorical interpretation is easily applicable to at least two sequences in Porumboiu's movies. Both *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Policeman*, adjective have a long ending scene featuring three characters, positioned at a table or around a desk. Who are these three men? As the long debate in the Christian iconology St. Augustine suggests that all are angels, since none can be the Son, since he is not yet manifested as human. So, all of them are angels, but representing God on Earth as his image (*De Trinitate*). Yet, continues Augustine, the one staying behind with Abraham is the Father, while the Holy Spirit and the Son went on to Sodom and Gomorrah, since they are "sent" and one of the "angels" is not sent, but acts as an agent of will and of power.



### *The (un)Holy Trinity*

Andrey Tarkovsky is one of the Eastern block cinematographers who was using extensively Christian (Orthodox or otherwise) images in his work. In his *Sculpting in time* (*Zapechatelnoe vremija*), the Russian cinematographer explicitly describes his technique of using paintings

(with religious content) as a source for generating meaning (Tarkovsky 1986). Since Tarkovsky's films became soon "classical" examples in the film schools in Eastern and Central Europe, the Bucharest School of Film and Theater being one of them, this language of symbols became a standard cinematic code.

Not only that Tarkovsky made a movie about *Andrey Rublev*, dealing with the personal history of the famed monk-painter who made the even more famous icon, but it is in the opening scene of the *Stalker* that Tarkovsky uses this clear visual metaphor: three men stand face to face, each representing one metaphorical characteristic – one is a scientist (fact oriented, pragmatic and practical), one is an almost naive figure, a sort of prophet, and the other is a writer, expression of the Word in a mundane way. But the metaphor is soon to be abandoned during the narrative for the direct reference, they are ALL representations of Christ: the Stalker is a manifestation of the Messiah (as Sacrificial lamb, as Guide of the believers), while the Writer wears a crown of thorns and the Scientist breaks the bread (in the mundane form of sandwiches). It is the same in the Trinity icon, where all the manifestations of the living God are homogeneously identical. The only difference is at a deep, symbolical level.

This "spiritual crisis" so feared in contemporary Russia can be paralleled by the spiritual void depicted in the new Romanian cinema. The three men in the police department are no longer connected with the representation of the Trinity.

Their world is no longer based on justice and humanism, but on a lack of humanity and a moral decay that is impossible to stop and is transmitted from one member to the other.

As for the image of the Woman, manifested in the icons of the Holy Mother, described as Hodegetria ("she who shows the way") – the specifically Byzantine artistic concept for the symbolic pointing of the Mother to the Child and presenting Him as a Savior, a metaphorical device meant to suggest that He is the path to salvation – is reverted into the mother who refuses to see her aborted fetus, as a symbolic way to show that there is no more salvation and that all hope is lost. This is a world without God – the communist regime being identified with the total rejection of anything that is religious, but also a criticism of modernity in its entire practices. While Otilia, the student girl who performs the abortion, actually points away from her child, removing herself morally (not only physically from this baby) a non-virgin (Găbița) carrying an aborted child, becomes the very reversal of the iconic image of the Virgin Mother with the Child. And the main story in 4, 3, 2 is in fact a story centered on the modern destruction of the relationship between mother and child and the loss of humanity that follows. The very essence of Christian faith about the Holy Mother of God is that there was no sexual consumption, and the Immaculate Conception following provides her with a certain moral aura. This is blatantly an-iconized by Mungiu in his movie, when the fake doctor rapes

the two young women as a reward for his abortion practices.

### *The iconic gaze*

At the end of *4,3,2, Găbița*, the main character, turns towards the viewer, staring at us with a gaze that travels across the screen (the painting, the icon) and sees the viewer while attributing him a certain position. As David Morgan has put it, the sacred gaze is fundamental in attributing roles in the visual religious practices (Morgan 2005). The icons are used to be looked at, and, in the same time, as is the case with the Pantocrator image, they are looking at the believer. This double gaze, implicitly requires a relationship between the seen and the seer – and this is a connection based on spiritual transference. Seeing, in the Orthodox tradition, is a very important part of the faith – the hymn

at the end of the Liturgy says “we have seen the true light, we have tasted the true faith”. Faith is a form of belief that does not require the act of seeing, but the trust in the fact that someone else, the apostles before, have seen the unseen. One of the legends of the Orthodox Church is that Saint Luke painted the Mother of God with Christ the Child from nature, having Mary as a model. If Christ is God manifested in a visible form, then visible forms can be expressions of his presence and/or absence.

But in the cinematic of the new generation of directors, using the reversal of roles, this gaze is emptied and lacks of any form of faith or hope. The crossing of the fourth wall becomes an expression of despair and of abandonment of one’s humanity and of any form of spirituality.

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