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INTRODUCTION. WHO'S AFRAID OF FEMININE / FEMINIST STUDIES IN VISUAL CULTURE?

The current issue of Ekphrasis is entitled "Femininity, feminism and female identity in visual representations".

My paper on "Feminine discourse and the representation of women in the new Romanian cinema" opens the discussions about the theoretical influences of feminist theories on cinema-making. The interpretation follows the possible connections between the new Romanian cinema and the "first wave", the "second wave" and post-feminist theories, starting with the hypothesis that there are signs of a "women's cinema" in the "Romanian new wave". Analyzing movies made by female directors, like Ruxandra Zenide in *Ryna* (2005) or Melissa de Raaf in *Felicia înainte de toate* (First of All, Felicia, 2009), I ask the question whether the transformations of the Romanian society of a male centered mentality, dominated

by a Father-Leader, towards a society missing a well-established center can be linked with perspectives specific to the "women's cinema". While discussing the "old" narratives of the cinema made before 1989, the interpretation also puts into perspective the changes of narratives and the troubled relationship between the viewer and the subject in productions like *Legături bolnăvicioase* (Love Sick, 2006), and then focusses on a very important theme of the feminist cinema: the rape. Looking at productions such as the "movies about rape", *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days, 2007) or *Katalin Varga* (2009), the third question comes from the concepts of "the look, and the gaze", referring to the sources of power in society. Here I move from the problems of homosexuality and rape, towards narratives concerned with power issues as is the case in *Cea mai fericită fată din lume* (The Happiest Girl in the World, 2009), *La source des femmes* (The Source, 2011) and *Loverboy* (2011).

The main focus is to find if there is any ideological link between the changes of narratives in the new Romanian cinema and the return of female protagonists in the contemporary moviemaking. Using concepts from classical authors in feminist cinema theory like Laura Mulvey or Claire Johnson, such as fetishism, cinematernity and representation, I address issues like male chauvinism, exploitation of women, gender stereotypes and femininity as subjects for movie-makers and as keys to understanding the development of the "new wave" of film-makers in Romanian cinema.

In his study on the relationship between cinema and photography, Ioan Pop-Curșeu approaches the discourse from the point of view of aesthetic theories of realism. Discussing realism as an expression of the historical and social context, the author puts the problem of how photography and cinema emerged as violent ways of seeing/watching, while they were often supposing a symbolical crime, where woman is a main topic of the visual act, and often the ideal victim. Pop-Curșeu goes further away in the interpretation of the violent relationship between femininity and cinema (photography) by taking a look at the starting point of the new technologies of capturing reality. He puts into perspective the apparition of photography and the effect the new invention had on artists and intellectuals, and claims to answer a couple of fundamental questions regarding the new medium's influence on culture and the changes produced

at a level of perception, at the level of aesthetic discourse, and at the level of ideological representation.

The study starts with the review of some of the most important modern authors on photography (Baudelaire, Delacroix, Benjamin), presenting the difficult relationship the new medium had in confronting the already established aesthetic discourses, especially the dialectic of arts like painting and the criticism of literary theory and philosophy. The classical aesthetics and the traditional theoretical tradition viewed photography according to a derogatory bias, as having the "bad" reputation of merely capturing a "*tranche de vie*" (slice of life), and thus exaggerating the aesthetic rules of realism and of realistic representation. Ioan Pop-Curșeu is then taking this debate to cinema and its apparition in a specific historical context – movie-making was early on considered to be a legitimate heir of photography. The author analyzes the effects of this perspective in classical films such as Luchino Visconti's, *La Terra trema* (1948), Michelangelo Antonioni's, *Blowup* (1966).

Discussing of the relationship between the violent contestation of a photographic realism in cinema, and putting into perspective the "impurity" of the medium, the author links this problematic relation between cinema and reality with the problematic relation between women and the camera. Following some classical works, such as Michael Powell's, *Peeping Tom* (1960), R. Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, *C'est arrivé près de chez*

vous (1992), or Steven Soderbergh's, *Sex, lies and videotape* (1989), the paper leads us towards the implacable conclusion that the invention of the new technological means of visual expression, which marked the nineteenth century and later the whole contemporary culture must be seen as having strong links with a history of voyeurism and the "death instinct", manifested in the criminal practice gaze, through the secretions of a deadly eye, objectified in the creations of the industry and dominating the bodies in society.

Nicoleta Popa uses the cinema of Kim Ki-Duck as the main object of interpretation, where she places some of the most important concepts of feminist theory in order to reveal the connections between cinema mirroring feminine identity and subjectivity. This is a case study on the movie made by the South Korean director Kim Ki-Duk, *Time*. Following the story of the main feminine character, Seh-hee, as she uses plastic surgery in order to change her face, hoping to reinvigorate her relationship with her husband, Ji-woo. The author emphasizes, in terms of ideology, a vision of time, love, and identity, using the backdrop of the specificity of Asian cultures, the representation of femininity in cinema.

Using an array of methods to support the analysis (Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminist theory), the author engages this specific selection of methods in order to triangulate the idea that any film suggests a fantasy story, within the ideology of an era. In this context the main hypothesis, that the spectator assumes

a second-degree position, by his or hers culturally structured desires and visions, is revealed by an applied research on cinematography, as having implications not only at the level of producing images, but also at the level of cultural symbols and significations.

In a counter-reaction to the studies on femininity, Iulia Hasdeu is focusing on some recently produced animated films (*Toy Story*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Robots*, *Finding Nemo*, *Cars*, *Ice Age*) in order to identify the "new masculinities" developing in the genre, obviously in opposition to the feminine identity in the same movies. Considering cinema as a normative system that assigns roles and creates a different social status, by depicting unequal relationship between men and women, in a commonly male-dominated culture, based on the sexual division of labor and the symbolic construction of oppositions, the author undertakes a theme analysis of some of the most successful animation movies made by Pixar and Walt Disney Company.

Starting with the theoretical support of studies like that of Towbin and colleagues, showing that most of Disney's animations are biased in their depiction of marginals and of women (as needing protection or, if autonomous, of being cruel), Iulia Hasdeu provides a fresh view on the representation of ideas which express the traditional values of masculinity, like the *camaraderie* and brotherhood, considered to be core values of the patriarchal structure of modern European politics. The author concludes that we witness the

formation of a new ethos of masculinity as it is conveyed by the popular culture: the male characters are experiencing loneliness and vulnerability, feelings of helplessness and fragility, they have to be helped to express their emotions, they rebuild and reclaim the representations of motherhood, and they accept themselves as having faults, and even metaphorically as being emasculated. Even so, the male characters are still the ones who lead the action, who are right and win in front of their opponents, while the female characters end up bending to their needs, accepting their power and assuming their place: the keeping of the household and growing of children.

The second section of this issue of *Ekphrasis* is dedicated to the feminist theories, aesthetics and criticism of feminist concepts in other visual fields, like opera, photography, painting and advertising. This section is opened by the study of Anne-Laetitia Garcia, who discusses the style of operatic singing developed by Maria Callas during 1947 and 1965, which is seen not only as an unconventional style from the point of view of music theory, as it is reviving the bygone technique of bell-canto, but also the visual representation changes in her acting. The author discusses how the dramatic essence of the operatic genre was transformed by this new approach of the female body on the stage: the performing body was combined with the singing body, and the 'seeing' was combined with 'hearing'. The opera diva became then a sacred monster of the stage. The object

of the analysis is Luchino Visconti's five operatic productions with Maria Callas and the effects he had on her as a director. This relationship is understood as opening new paths to comprehending both today's reception of the visual opera. The author discusses a wide array of concepts, from the genealogy of public idols and the acting techniques to the problems linked with the notion of *Ut Pictura Theatrum*, by using analogical confrontations with various references from the performing arts, the fine arts and the cinema – and even the orthodox icon –, in order to reveal prospects for analysis and bring to light fundamental aesthetic notions.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu puts into discussion the representation of women as torturers' objects using examples from the dramatist Arthur Adamov and some pop artists in order to analyse how womanhood is being caught between love and eroticism. The woman, as a character or as a represented image, is depicted by most of the artistic tendencies in the second half of the 20th century as being transformed, and this transformation is taking place in the changing of couple's relations, at the social, sentimental or simply sexual level. Interpreting examples from the theatre of the absurd, covering the after-war period until the seventies, as well as the European and American Pop Art, New Realism included, which was born at the end of the fifties and crossed the century, leading to the contemporary kitsch neo-pop, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu analyses these currents as expressions of the transformations mentioned above.

These changes indicate a mixture of fear and fascination towards the woman's body, a paradoxical combination of machismo and the regression into childhood, a strange melange of genres, generated by the sexual liberation of modern women. The article aims at pointing out and discussing all these elements, while trying to explain the crisis and traumas of modern man, manifested as a character in the Adamovian theatre, when facing the ambiguity of his pair, the woman, as she does not correspond to traditional representations anymore.

In his study on the new identities of the woman artists in contemporary representations of the body, Liviu Malița's paper discusses the use of the human body as a material and artistic object. The main hypothesis is that the body is a part of a wider process of innovation and revolution in art. Following those artists who implement the creative act on themselves, using their own body, and those works of art which use the bodily fluids in the same manner, the author interprets desecration as the logical extreme of the emancipation of the artwork from its ritual submission to political practice. These practices are understood in their radical feminist criticism targeting Christianity, and other structures of dominance of androcentric and patriarchal society in which man-father holds the power. The uses of phallogocentric ideology are opposed to those public displays of nudity, intimacy, body-blasphemous by the association of religious symbols to excretory function,

which have an inherent component of protest.

Mihaela Urso as comparative literature approach in order to discuss the visual poetics in amorous fiction, described as a coherent "Eroticon". Her paper puts into debate the concepts of erotic fiction, through the philosophies of "the possible worlds", as it was developed in narrative theories, and applies it to classical literary works like *Lancelot and Guinevere*, by Chrétien de Troyes, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The author proposes the concept of *eroticon* as a means to better define the unique nature of love fiction. Unlike other forms of prose, erotic fiction uses the impact of visual poetics in order to describe love situations. With arguments taken from narratology, reading-response theories and theories of fictional worlds, the paper investigates the potential of amorous fiction in visual communication. For Mihaela Urso, *eroticons* are necessarily pictorial and exhibit their poetics in a visual manner. In order to develop an understanding of the imaginary of love stories (like that between Lancelot and Guinevere) one should follow the strong cultural obsession of our European erotic culture, founded in the visual solutions put forward by this *eroticon*.

Looking at the erotic art of Bruno Bisang and using the examples of some of his best known female nudes, Andreea Ciucan discusses how womanhood – traditionally seen as unique manifestation of beauty and sensuality – becomes a subject of critical re-evaluation in the field of visual arts. From literature

to photography, cinema or advertising, the female nude is perceived as a subject of critical debate and controversy. Most of the times interpreted as subjected to the desires of men, the woman body succeeds to push towards the surface of contemporary culture, thus leading a battle won by the struggle itself. Starting with the idea that the female nudity, be it captured in a picture or a photo, generates different interpretations: erotic art or pornography, femininity or desire, sensuality or obscenity, beauty or offer, creation or sale, are only the first impressions in a series that can cover entire pages, the author follows the main interpretations of eroticism in art and the following reinterpretations that challenge our most common perspectives. Without accepting the mistaken labeling of erotic art as pornography, Andreea Ciucian puts into perspective the role of the visual arts readers, whose role is to help those trapped in a narrow universe to find the way to understanding the message conveyed by the image, to reflect and to interpret, because art involves reflection and interpretation. Using a content analysis of photography, the author uses concepts from feminist criticism in order to re-define the relationship between femininity, beauty, erotic art and pornography.

Daria Ioan uses the photography of Cindy Sherman in order to discuss the characteristics of this new form of *pictorialism*. Taking some of the the film stills of Sherman as basis for interpretation, Daria Ioan discusses a series of feminine portraits which confronted visual arts'

world with some of the most powerful women's stereotyped imagery, carrying the social pressure's of the first decades of the 20th century. Sherman's critical perspective offers a fresh view on female's identity by exaggerating the features of a series of old common places as well as their absurdity in terms of natural human behavior. The article reviews various interpretations of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, and tries to explain their impact on modern feminine imagery, its sources in anti-photography, and, more important, the artistic relevance of the feminine identity quest.

In *The Seduction of the Gaze*, Marina Țupran uses the concepts of Laura Mulvey and the idea of the dominant gaze in cinema as a masculine gaze, in order to interpret the imaginary of the *femme fatale* in the earliest moments of photography and cinema. This female character, born together with the birth of the photographic camera, is analyzed by using a photo of the actress Theda Bara. The author interprets the connection between two fundamental verbs of the visual culture, *to see* and *to have*, and their connection to the formation of the modern gaze and their subsequent relationship between the visual technologies and the definitions of femininity. Using *The Medusa* of Carravagio as counterpoint, the analysis follows the classical interpretation of first wave feminist theories, showing how the dominant male gaze operates in the visual culture from the very beginning of the industries of photographic manipulation, and its role in the formation of visual pleasure in contemporary imaginary.

Using Tiziano Vocellio's early work, dated in 1511, entitled *Noli me tangere*, Laodamia Dascăl aims to show how multiple methodological points of view can provide insights into the investigation of a work of art. The author uses a comparative method for this painting interpretation as the guide and organizer of ideas. Starting with factual observation, hermeneutic investigation, psychoanalysis and finally feminism, the work of art is discussed as a possible example for various methodological approaches. Applying different techniques, from the visual narrative codes to the semiotic interpretation of the sign systems, the psychoanalytical perspective, and the empirical-factual observation, this is an example of how the comparative approach provides an objective evaluation of a well

known work of art, and it also provide validity for the information generated by applying different concepts on a classical piece of visual object. This multi-methodological understanding of the painting, manifested through an exercise of synthetic analysis presents also the qualities of phenomenological analysis, since it goes beyond the possibilities of scientific looking at visual facts, using Tizian's work from The National Gallery in London towards a deeply personal point of view.

The current issue of *Ekphrasis* is closed by an interview with one of the most important figures of the new Romanian cinema, the producer and director Tudor Giurgiu, who expresses some of his views on the future of the national film making industry.