

Doru POP

THE AESTHETICS OF THE NEW WAVE, ACCORDING TO CRISTI PUIU

Abstract. Cristi Puiu is one of the most important movie makers in the contemporary Romanian cinema. The director has reinvented himself and, in the process, reinvented the whole contemporary Romanian film has reinvented an entire aesthetic. This papers is dedicated to explain his role in the history of Romanian film as well as in the global cinema making.

Key words: Cristi Puiu, Romanian New Wave, aesthe-tics, mizerabilism, naturalism.

What was first, Puiu or the New Wave?

Cristi Puiu's role in our contemporary cinema has been described in several ways, from Alex. Leo Șerban's laudatory metaphorical manner: "Puiu planted the seed, Porumboiu watered the plant and Mungiu collected the fruits" (Șerban 2009), to the minimizing and contempt full declarations of Sergiu Nicolaescu who stated that he "has not heard" of Cristi Puiu, and that he should make "a movie or two" before being considered as a filmmaker (2006 press release), yet neither of these descriptions do justice to the director. Not only that Cristi Puiu "planted" the seeds of the new wave, but he is the director who kept invented himself and, in the process, was reinvented the contemporary Romanian film as a whole. Moreover, Cristi Puiu synchronized the national cinema with the European cinema and he imported styles and techniques that were assumed programmatically, thus making him a master, not a pioneer.

From the camera direct style in *Stuff and Dough* (2001), to the minimalism in *Cigarettes and Coffee* (2004) back to the

Doru POP

Babeș-Bolyai University
E-mail: doru.pop@ubbcluj.ro

observational, documentary style of filming in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), to the expressionism in *Aurora* (2010), Puiu's influence on Romanian film making are major and should be re-evaluated, because these effects are visible in almost all films made after 2000. The shooting style from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* was assumed in films like *4 Months, 3 weeks and 2 days* (Mungiu 2007) or *Police, Adjective* (Porumboiu 2009), even the story of this film has been imitated, from the sequences of *The Other Irina* (Gruzsniczki 2009), to the recent film made by Adrian Sitaru, *Best intentions* (2011), where the theme is repeated and re-contextualized explicitly. Imitated, copied, or only "truncated" the "Puiu cinema style" did not make the director himself to repeat it. He was always been one step ahead of his colleagues, he moved into areas little explored or exploited, and was followed, most often, in those direction he started working in. Puiu has set standards for the cinematic success in post-2000 Romanian films, and he also set the standards for success in relation to the pre-Revolution films, from the communist period. Of course, as Puiu says himself, the aesthetics of the new wave is the result of making movies, the side effect of the emergence of several film production, not vice versa (interview with Doru Pop 2011).

In fact there is no single aesthetic specific to Cristi Puiu, because the director who brought contemporary Romanian film at the same level with the other European "new cinema", had the capacity to constantly improve his approach, and

each of the three feature films he made are exemplary for different styles and cinematic techniques. Re-invention is not only with regards to the films made before him (in Romania and internationally), but also by reference to the cinematic tools he himself has been using. If in *Stuff and Dough* (2001) the director chooses a fluid diegesis where the movement of the camera is within the film story, in his next film, *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004) Puiu is using a "fixed" cinematic technique, returning to compositional inflection of narration. Then, after *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), which he choose to build as story presented through a continuous narrativity, in *Aurora* (2010) he breaks again the continuity and the character-centered approach, negating any causal relationship in the development of diegesis.

Even at the level of themes and subjects, the author of the first international award-winning Romanian film after 1982, has influenced his contemporaries. One can speak even of a "Father complex", which Puiu created in *Coffee and Cigarettes*, which has become a fit for all scheme in many films, some which are only close facsimile. Even the actors used by Cristi Puiu were "stolen" in other films. As the same father-son couple, Rebeniuc and Brănescu starred in two films made by two different directors – *Medal of Honor* (Netzer 2009) and *Tuesday after Christmas* (Muntean 2010); even Dragoș Bucur, who became the main actor of most of the New Wave Romanian films, was noted after his first important role in *Stuff and Dough*, until then he enjoy only marginal roles

in films like *Paradise Terminus* by Lucian Pintilie (1998). However, Puiu did not repeat his own success stories (nor those of others) and continued to experiment, to push the boundaries of contemporary Romanian cinema aesthetics further. This is a quality as author, but also the quality of the aesthetics of his movies.

Another quality of Cristi Puiu is purely "biographical", and it stems from the fact that he was not educated in the Romanian academic film system, and therefore had no reverence for the traditions, customs and common areas of this system and style of making movies. As he himself acknowledges, after the arrival in the "home country", in several talks with the Romanian students or the graduates of UNATC (the national film school at the time), they all claimed that the film made by "hand held" camer is "ugly", and that, if a director of photography will shoot in this style, will be accused that he does not "know how to shoot" (interview with Doru Pop 2011). The fact noted by other commentators, is that Puiu's aesthetic is not conceived following the "art rules" taught in the UNATC film school and is not based on "beautiful shots" (Popovici 2011) as defined in the mainstream cinema, so it shows a new artistic path, one describable by just watching how a film is made by Cristi Puiu.

Therefore, the search for the aesthetic resources of Cristi Puiu's films means returning to the conceptual roots of his techniques, namely the fact that he started his career as a painter and not as a filmmaker. This quality for a director,

quite rare in Romanian (and universal) film making gives Puiu a good hold, even subconsciously, on a set of aesthetic tools that can be implemented in cinema, yet not being essential to traditional films. Identifying the various levels of this aesthetic, which is a complex and deeply conceptual for a cinema director as Cristi Puiu, does not necessarily mean to go back in time to Plato and the concept of mimesis, or the classical theories of cinematic art, but still compels us to put into question the fundamental conflict between two types of understanding arts (visual and otherwise): one approach believes that truth is the ability to mimic reality, the capacity of visual arts to create a fantasy that seems real, which happened in most of the Romanian cinema, even after the appearance of "the new wave"; and one which belongs to the natural truth. Simplifying, the films can either "fool" us, as perfect or imperfect illusion, or may be "the world itself." Puiu expresses precisely this latter trend, for him to build reality means making "imperfect" films (interview with Doru Pop 2011).

Separations and meetings at the border of the anthropological film

As stated in the discussion we had about cinema, Cristi Puiu affirmed that to be making a film involves to be doing anthropological research, and his way of filming and the style of storytelling is a line with the effects of an almost ethnographic research, and, moreover, it is a side effect of this imperfect attempt to represent life. Hence the aesthetic of the "observational

documentary", evident in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, which was internationally noticed, must be understood as a narrative style that Puiu already implemented as a solution in *Stuff and Dough*. Puiu says that at that time he was "looking for solutions in cinema making" and cinema direct, the moving camera, the freed camera from the tripod, offered the exact options that he needed: the access to the inner world of the characters.

Identified in various ways in the literature on movie making, be it as the "candid cinema" (innocent lens), or the "uncontrolled cinema" (liberated from control), or observational cinema (observation as key way of looking) or cinema verité (linked to the truth), this style of making "true" films must be linked to what is called the new realism in British cinema, and later the "kitchen sink" cinema (the kitchen sink realism). The aesthetics of the "kitchen sink" started in the British films of the '50s, and has entered into the new Romanian cinema through Puiu's efforts. Yet, until Puiu's arrival, such realism was practiced in the Romanian film in two ways, either as the socialist realism, which, at its turn, ideologically influenced the British film we are talking about, especially by introducing the characters from social categories of disadvantageous condition, and the post-revolutionary "miserabilism".

Puiu argues that the division between "documentary" and "fiction" is "unfair" because the documentary is seen as a "poor relative" of fiction movies, when in fact it must be considered as the real

source of truth in movie making. So is the anthropological film, which includes capturing the relationship between life and reality, the relationship between what is documented and that which is filmed. Therefore this is why Puiu says that, in order to reconstruct reality, the director requires a "research" approach, the film becomes "an anthropological tool" (interview Doru Pop 2011). This understanding allows the integration of the "classical" elements of anthropological documentary or the "pure documentary", with the techniques of anthropological authenticity. Obviously for Puiu the films are essentially forms of anthropological practice, the most explicit is the case of the film about Dante Lăzărescu, which was anticipated not only by the documentary efforts, based on the "case Nica," the real story of the sick man dying in hospitals, but also from a real documentary made by Cristi Puiu in Craiova, with Andreea Păduraru. If we add here that Puiu's father worked in a hospital, and that his personal experiences, the illness during the festival in Berlin, traumatized him, integrating these experiences into a single visual experiment, make cinema a tool for "self knowledge", for the knowledge of human nature.

From socialist realism to social realism

On the one hand, with Cristi Puiu, the Romanian film breaks definitively with the socialist realism imposed by Soviet type of cinema, when the only way to make art accepted publicly by the communist authorities was by following the aesthetic

realism of Soviet movie making, or the aesthetics of revolutionary realism. Dziga Vertov, one of the pioneers of such realism, was, just like Cristi Puiu, in search of the essences of "naturalism" and began to shoot "real" people who were working in mines, in factories, in hospitals, old drunks in pubs and churches, all being "surprised" by the appearance of the camera, designed to produce "effect of the real", as opposed to the "fiction" of the oppressive capitalist cinema, an illusory and deceptive style. Being against the "melodramas" of capitalism, which were forms of obedience to the "imperialist exploitation", Vertov proposes a new art, one that is not "fictional", "built" or even "manipulative", an art without "drama, actors and script". Vertov distinguishes between movies "played" ("igrovoi") which were opposing to movies "not played" ("neigrovoi"), those which are directed and those which are not staged in any way. "We do not need actors to play the role of workers", said Vertov, "but the workers themselves must be genuine in front of the camera".

Although Puiu denies this form of authenticity, used in the Italian neo-realism, and very successfully put into action a few years later by Florin Șerban, because he rejects the political-ideological nature of this type of realism, he expressed his personal search for "reality" in the acting process. Yet some of the most important films belonging to the communist period, as *Reverberating Valley* (1950), made by the "living classic" Paul Călinescu, of the movie made by Andrei

Blaier, *The mornings of a Sensible Youth* (1966), are neorealist movies taking place on "communist working sites", where the hero is always a "party activist", always victorious in battle with his enemies in the struggle of class. This model will be criticized ironically by several directors of the "new wave", by Mungiu in *Stories of the Golden Age* (2009) or, in a tragic twist by the *Kino Caravan* (2010). But the socialist realism was practiced even by the directors considered to be the precursors of the "new" film, and example being Lucian Pintilie, which began his career with *Sunday at 6* (1965), a production where communist "illegals" were fighting against fascism, without any comparison with anti-fascists of the Italian neorealist films.

On the other hand, looking for "normal" people is the major difference between the kind of realism practiced by Puiu, following the anthropological approach, and the realism of the Romanian directors working immediately after 1990, the so-called "mizerabilists" (especially Danieliuc, but also Pița and partially Caranfil). Puiu's heroes are weary but they are not brutally against the society they live in. In order to understand how Puiu's heroes are "true", we must return to Vertov and the ideas that influenced him, that is constructivism and its central concepts, as they appeared in the "Realistic Manifesto" published by Naum Gabo (1920). Following this line of thought, Vertov considered the filmmaker as nothing but a "worker", one that works with other tools, but still a proletarian creating objects, and

that art should be made useful to society. Supporting the idea that cinema can become a true universal language, one to be understood all over the world, Vertov wants to create a "cinema eye" (kinoglaz) to capture the "facts of life" as they truly are. Thus "life as was" could be captured only by filming people without their realizing, without events to be staged. And this is the "cinema of facts", where being factual means being truthful. This is why the principle that Vertov starts from is "film-truth" or Kino-Pravda (from the communist propaganda newspaper, Pravda), Vertov's first film series was even called Kino-Pravda. Although it was surprising the facts of life, the socialist realism of Vertov's films received a bad evaluation from the propagandists, due to the new avant-garde roots of his de-subjective "reality", and Vertov's films, during the Jdanovist time were labeled as "vanguardist" and therefore subject to the ideological rejection.

Yet these ideas were taken up later by the father of the "new wave", Andre Bazin, who said that the filmmaker "extracts" from "the ocean of life" the truth, he reveals pieces representative for life itself. In his turn, Jean-Luc Godard took even further Bazin's arguments, when he defines cinema as "truth 24 times per second". This total absolutism of truth in the films, based on the logical connections leading from verism to verisimilitude and then to truth, becomes a standard in moviemaking, and can be achieved only through a set of specific cinematic instruments. What Bazin called the "main objective" of the

neorealist style, that is to reach "totality by simplicity" proposes the "poverty" of means as a guarantee of authenticity.

It is this context that the '50s British film occurs, looking for an alternative, because, unlike socialist realism, "social realism" was able to propose a visual product which was not under the "control" of the state institutions, but rather based on a negative reaction to the social system, rather than on an optimistic, positive view of the worker utopian socialist realism.

A bittersweet mizerabilism

The mizerabilism of the British cinema, represented by authors such as Karel Reisz (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1960) and then later Mike Leigh (*Naked*, 1993), or Andrea Arnold (*Wasp*, 2003), which present the sad and unhappy life of the working class, defined by poverty, alcoholism and family abuse. This is not that far from the Romanian movies, inhabited by monstrous figures, by sinister and reckless characters, with free sex scenes and political parables about the void of identity, full of grotesque and coarse language, profanity and scatology, built around primitive heroes, demonizing the "Wallachian nothingness" and the sub-humanity of the new Romanian "democracy".

The mizerabilism, which appeared first in the post-revolutionary literature in Romania, was characterized by parables and cruelty, by perversion and exhibitionist display of cynicism, and heavily influenced the cinema after the Revolution. As in prose and poetry, the mizerabilism

in film was concerned with human misery, with specific moral and ethical issues, marked by the decay of transition. Razvan Popescu is one of these new writers, and it is relevant that he became the writer of some of the most famous movies of that time, like *Terminus Paradis* or the *Famous Paparazzo* (1999). Also relevantly, his screenplays were adapted after his own novels, carrying titles like: "The human with beak and claws", or "The Subhuman".

Puiu's films, however, are not populated by "subhumans" but rather with ordinary people, and their aesthetic ugliness is not demonized, but supportive, as does the British social realism, using empathy towards the disadvantaged social strata represented. The bitterness of the mizerabilism practiced by authors like Danieliuc is "sweetened" by Cristi Puiu's films (and then later by all the other young filmmakers), and becomes a form of "bitter sweet", tragic-comic realism, specific to the Romanian new wave. This change of tone is crucial to understanding why the new Romanian cinema refuses to join a mizerabilist style - because it is over dramatic, because that is still dependent on a vision that is artificial and theatrical in the approach of cinematic reality. However, many themes of "Romanian New Wave" are inspired directly or indirectly from the classical "kitchen sink" cinema - the theme of the angry youth (*Look Back in Anger* and *The Fury*) abortion issue (*Saturday Night*, and *Sunday Morning*), or the theme of love as utility (*A Taste of Honey* and *Loverboy*). The connection between what was called

"kitchen sink" cinema, from the painting of the British artist John Bratby, and a type of cinema concerned with the domestic scene, which is a reaction to the "beauty" and "truth" of the high artistic level, concerned above all with the "regular" and real people remains deeply rooted in the movies of Puiu, and of the new Romanian cinema.

Minimalist promises

In the interview I conducted with Cristi Puiu, the director asked rhetorically, "what is, in fact, minimalism? It is just a label that we need." Of course, at first sight, minimalism is merely an effect of small budgets, without proving any presence of a film aesthetics. It is true, most of Puiu's films were made with small budgets, even limited ones, and this "financial sobriety" has become a characteristic feature of the Romanian new wave. Puiu, Mungiu or Porumboiu have received awards and international recognition for production made with budgets less than 500 thousand euros.

However, minimalism is not just a way to make cinema, it is, as Puiu proposed it, part of an aesthetic question, which stems from realism, and is actually a sign of integrating the critique that Brecht brought to theater and, later, spread to cinema making. When speaking of minimalist art, Rosalind Krauss described it as the fundamental aesthetic of de-substantiation (Krauss 2010), which is truly the means by which art can escape from captivity of explicit narrativity, sometimes even with the emptying of its narrative

content, where even the absence of the substance is allowing the content creation. The minimalism in European film art and aesthetic take over this very function, as András Bálint Kovács has shown (140-41) because it enables an expressive style in which the elements are "systematically reduced" in order to generate attention to the content. Kovács speaks about various forms of minimalism: analytical (in Antonioni), expressive (in Bergman), but also a minimalist austerity. Authors as Ozu, who strongly influenced filmmakers as Robert Bresson, make films marked by austerity, and this was identified with a metonymic minimalism by Kovács. In fact this kind of minimalism characterizes the new Romanian film, in which the part takes the place of the whole, and becomes sufficient to express the overall significations.

Being characteristic to prestigious European filmmakers, like Jim Jarmush or Aki Kaurismäki, this type of minimalism is based on the use of space metonymically, by "hors cadre" (offscreen, off-screen), the elliptical narrative and a kind of acting void of passion (Kovács 141). As Mungiu has done in *4 months...*, where narrative is not carried out always on the central part of the screen, but outside it, which causes changes in the composition, the cutouts and the framing being "mutilated" intentionally, Cristi Puiu does in *Aurora*. The reduction of the redundancies and the limiting of visual information to as few external references as possible is essentially part of the minimalist aesthetics.

Some commentators defined the minimalism of the young Romanian film-

makers as stemming from the internal, structural, elements. These films are considered to be minimalist because they have a simple mise-en-scene, that music is rarely used, and the intra-diegetic sound prevails, and from the fact that any extremism in the narrative or the comic or the melodramatic are avoided (Nasta 2010). For other authors, as Goracz Aniko (2010) the minimalism is a feature of the "revolutionary" nature of these directors, in that it requires a style opposed to a previous cinematic style.

Although these arguments are valid, I think we should see things from the perspective proposed by the art critic Michael Fried, who argues in his seminal article, first published in 1967, entitled "Art and objecthood" (1998), that we must understand that minimalism is a form of "literalism", actually using our ability to "be present" as viewers in the object we look upon, without an external intervention, without any conventional or formal actions to be taken in order to make art. For Puiu giving up the traditional film techniques as staging of reality, means simply the cancellation of theatricality and artifice, even allowing us to "make ourselves present" in the action of life as it goes. Therefore, there is not enough to define minimalism as a style, as does Dominique Nasta does, by being limited to the avoidance of the comic or melodramatic exaggerations.

Cristi Puiu's minimalism was best described by a single sentence, which was made by the jury who awarded him with the "Golden Bear" at the short film section

of the Berlin Film Festival, in 2004: "low budget, simple story, fantastic dialogues, maximum impact" (quoted by Blaga 2011). The minimalist mise-en-scene of *Coffee and Cigaretts* (2004), a short film that takes about 13 minutes, filmed in a single fixed frame, with two main characters and a supporting secondary character, may seem boring to someone accustomed with large narratives in cinema-style, with the kind of fictional realism of the classic cinema.

From a purely aesthetic, obviously, the minimalism is a return to simplicity and austerity, to the "simple" art object. Extracting its resources from the Italian concept of "arte povera", minimalism proposes the returning of the viewer, and of the object itself, to the basic processes of film making, the basic processes of narrative in cinema. Yet, as it happens in Otto Preminger's film, *Exodus* (1960), where the film is reduced to the "master shots", which are actually the foundations of any film developments in terms of cinematography (by changes in framing, angles, shots, etc.) in this short film Puiu is using minimalism as a reaction to a certain type of narrative. The aesthetics of the "two shot", taken from the classical cinema, is even more austere in a very early version of the film, made since 1999, together with Ovidiu Gyarmath as the director of photography. In this early version, the immobility of framing and angles is almost complete.

So Puiu's minimalism is not just stylistic, the mise-en-scene is only the

context in which the direct nature of addressing is practiced. The interaction of the two characters, the father (Victor Rebengiuc) and his son, Vlad (Mimi Brănescu) is built around our participation into the narrative. In the movie made in 2004, the diegesis early on, from the second 48, when the titles run on black screen, yet we can hear the sound of the street and the action starting. After this we are in an establishing shot, seen from inside the restaurant, where we observe the "Father" arriving, seeming lost. Unlike the 1999 version of the film, where the camera was outside, now the camera set allows us to see all three fields of vision: in the background we see the street movement, the environmental plan is the father, and in the foreground are aliens on the table. All the movements of the characters are precisely calculated, because, while the waiter moves to the left, the father goes in the reverse direction, generating a tension close to that from classical paintings, only to return to the main door and enter our visual space.

Here, besides the indirect irony to our cinema history, which transpires in reference to the comical sketches made during the communist period, we find that the humor is not free of relevance in narrative, it has the same narrative function as the minimalism. On the restaurant window it says "Graceland", explicit reference to America and the type of story "American" cinema develops (which was used with a similar irony by Nemescu in his *California Dreamin'*).

A minimalist shot analysis

A short structural analysis of the film becomes, in this context, self-explanatory. We have five shots, two general shots, one two-shot, two "over the shoulders", two camera movements, one horizontal pan, and a final vertical tilt, for punctuation. I use the following abbreviations for the shots: Shot A (the general view of the restaurant) – pan – Shot B (the general view of the table by the window) – "two shot" (shot C) – over the shoulder with the son (Shot D) - over the shoulder with the father (shot E). At minute 1:13, in shot A, when the father is entering the restaurant, the camera makes the first move, a short left pan, to bring us into the second shot, where the son is waiting at the window (1:26). After the reply of the father: "I'm late", to minute 1:36, we have the first cutting, and we go to the classic "two shot", shot C, where the two characters are captured in an classical American shot, while sitting face to face. This shot is used repetitively, because the oppositions began to build from the early interactions between characters: the son has a black, business bag, and he is placing the documents he studied in the meantime, while the father takes out of a typically "communist" net, the required objects. The father does not eat, while the son has already reached to dessert. It is relevant that at min. 1:55 in a reverse shot, we can see the son eating dessert, then we switch to a lower angle, slightly shifted to the left, in the manner of the Dutch angle, suggesting the moral position of the father. Additionally, the low angle is deepened

when the son asks if he really ate safe, while the responsible father (02:00) reacts: "Now really, if I say that I'm not hungry", yet the waiter brings the menu, 2:09, while the son, shot D, is eating undisturbed, in the shot starting at min. 2:15, his father starts accusing him, but is confused and contradictory: "I took, as you said, the 104 bus, but if you take the 66 is better", shot D in min. 2:28, the son announces that he does not have time; while at min. 2:38 the obedient father, in shot E, announces that he lost his job, the son listens, min. 3:04, shot D, to their own life story, and he is detached from his father, shot E, min. 3:15, the father complains that he is no longer needed because "It's finished with the UCECHIM plant" plan D 3:47, the son receives coffee, 4:00 min., plan E, the father does not know what to answer to the avalanche of offers from the waiter, and son also orders another portion of "more crisp" cookie, while the father asks for a glass of water, the son decides for him what brand; 4:22 back in shot C, "Chirică, peas, Greeks, I do not care" – the father wants two more years of work on his work slate, in order to retire. "I brought coffee and that pack of Kent", 4:44 (shot D), the son replies "you want to be a driver or you accept something else"; 4:52 (shot E) "Driver!", the father does not seem to understand, "driver on a 'teveu', but I'll go on a "shoe" also; 5:02 (shot E) "What else can you do?"; 5:13 (shot D) the waiter comes with the water, the son quarrels the father, 5:25 (shot E) the son presents him with the offer to be a night watchman; 5:31 (shot D) the father proposes to be a

welder; 5:41 (shot E) he is reminded by his son that he was one a night watchman, and is giving him the last tender; 6:06 (shot C) with the son saying categorically that he must be a "night watchman", tacitly accepted by the father, "I brought the work slate", he says, and the son bluntly refuses, "how is mother?", he says, "As you know", "As I know how?", "In her bed"; 6:46 (shot E), the father brings in the information about the sister, who brought a doctor, and the son corrects him, we discover that the mother is paralyzed; 7:07 (shot D) while the father says he has no money for medicines and maintenance, the son eats a second dessert; 7:17 (shot E) The father say he only has money for food, but the son replies that he always payed for the drugs, "Come on Vlăduț", the father protests; 7:39 (shot C), the son takes his fathers' bag, where he finds a massage device for the paralyzed mother, and gives the father a demonstration; 8:10 (shot D), the son speaks with contempt about the wooden object and discovers that his father has bought "ness" and not "Lavazza"; 8:35 (shot E) "Well, I only found this" (shot D); 8:50 the son puts the pack of Kent in the bag; (shot E) 9:05, the father wonders if the a job as night watchman requires so much "tip", how much would one have to give to be a "tram driver"? The son banter, "luckily for you that you did not intended to become a tram motorman", the father laughs "Yeah!... Nothing has changed"; 9:34 (shot D), the son reads the bill and repeats what the father just said: "nothing has changed", then the father repeats what the son said

"you go home", "I go home"; 09: 59 (shot C) the son offers to give his father a "ride to the subway". The stage remains empty a few seconds (10:50 to 11:00), then the camera makes a vertical tilt without any apparent signification. The intra-diegetic sound continues, and the credits roll on while the narrative continues, in the logic of minimalism, outside the narrative and visual display of action.

The aesthetics of realistic cinema

It was Currie who (1995) identified three fundamental types of "realism" film: the reality as simple reproduction (based on the photographic nature), reality as resemblance and reality as illusion. Of these, two "directions" are essential in order to understanding the functioning of cinema: "realism" and "fictionalism". Even if there are continuous crisscrosses, since in documentary films the "photographic" realism prevails, they are also fictions, in the sense that they are processed by an author, while in fiction the "reconstruction" of a reality prevails, yet they are made by "true and real" people, we made clear distinctions. Although there are not only oppositions and contradictions between these two terms, but a permanent change – as happens in *Gone with the Wind* where realism is a support for running a fictional story, or vice versa, in *Citizen Kane*, where fiction is support for the real story (inspired by the life of William Randolph Hearst), film theory imposed this dichotomy on understanding the concept of realism.

The first part of this theory, borrowed from Kendall Walton, may be contained in the term transparency. The cinema

suggests a reality by which "we see", as through a mirror, the world around us. A second form of realism is that of similarity. Cinema gives us images "like" the images that we perceive as normal. This similarity, as Bazin argued, is based on the camera's ability to use the same techniques as the human eye, that mimics the depth of field, or the long sequences (used in the new wave cinema). Therefore, the reality is here very realistic, in that it is the quality of being real. The third type of reality is the illusory reality, that reality that, knowingly, any filmmaker constructs, and whose boundaries are difficult to define. This illusory realism, which exists only in our imagination and can not be understood otherwise but by the logic of the film, is rejected by Puiu.

At the opposite end is one of the most vehement critics of these theories, represented by Colin MacCabe, who opposes to Bazin's theory the idea that reality cannot be represented, and that cinema may not be considered as an art of reality, precisely because it has got no tools of producing the real. Reality is more than what we see, it is composed of beliefs and our knowledge about what the real is. MacCabe therefore introduces a new theoretical distinction, dividing the realist films into four categories: "classical" realistic films, progressive, subversive and revolutionary films.

Following this logic we can say that, on the one hand, a film like *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* performs various functions of the realistic movie. It was Cristi Puiu's visual reaction to the "functional choreography"

of films like "ER", and also a subversive form designed to insert into the rebuilding of perfect fictional something which is missing, exactly the imperfection, which is par excellence "human" (interview Doru Pop 2011). On the other hand, the search for imperfection, for failure and the awkward, as happens in *Aurora*, are typical for the natural and, in fact, characteristic to the deeply naturalist aspect of the "revolution" that Puiu brings into the Romanian film making.

Naturalistic resources of the new cinema

Using the words of the father of naturalism, Émile Zola, narrative is the victim of conventions, of the fireworks which prevent the reader to be in touch with the story. Fighting with "the last citadel of falsehood", the naturalism is, in fact, fighting against any "well-done drama" (Zola 1881). This aversion to any "tricks" in art is identified by Puiu, in the interview I conducted with him, in the fact that he can not watch an opera show precisely because it contains the "magic formula" meant to produce the artificial "life". That is why, in one of the most discussed (and debatable) film scenes from his most recent movie, Cristi Puiu, himself in the role Viorel, the murderous father and the killer husband in *Aurora*, is filmed by a long shot in the shower room, while he is slowly washing his genitals. The exposure might seem for a unadvised viewer as gratuitous. I believe that, in this context, Puiu's approach is in no way miserabilist, precisely because it

calls into question the foundations of the miserabilism widely used in the post-revolutionary Romanian film.

"To be always in the present tense", this is the philosophy of the neorealism, which is endorsed by Cristi Puiu. But authenticity is not something sought, nor is it a sarcastic way of dealing with reality, or the daily problems, nor is it a question of disgust or even criticism, as in Danieliuc's or Caranfil's films. Without exaggeration, with no histrionics, with no desire to convince the audience, without any symbolic hidden agenda. A good counter-example is the character of Bebe (Horațiu Malaiete) in Danieliuc's film, which ends up expressing nausea generated by the Romanian society while doing an allegorical gesture, having sex in his car, while the national anthem is played: "Awake Romanians!", where the sarcasm is forced to limits of endurance. Danieliuc will continue this approach even after the appearance of the "new wave" of films (*Ambassadors looking for a Homeland*, 2003; *The Nervous System*, 2005; *The Foreign Legion*, 2008; *Marilena*, 2009; *Those who float*, 2009). The most suggestive example comes from *Marilena*, where the miserabilist approach is pigmented with the most abrasive jokes, in a brutal treatment of the human relations. "Oh God!", exclaims the main character in *Marilena*, "how ugly is this world".

In this context, the naturalism of Puiu's film might seem redundant, as is happening in the already discussed "sequence in the shower", where, for a minute and a half, Puiu (aka. Viorel),

naked is washing. But, more importantly, he is examining his your own body, and this is exemplary for the naturalism of the "living" we are talking about. It is the "slice of life" Puiu speaks about and practices in his films, this "slice of life" has become something of a commonplace in the Romanian new wave. The concept, however, was created for the criticism of theater works by the French playwright, a follower of naturalism himself, Jean Jullien. Called "tranche de vie", the concept implies the existence of a "living theater" (theater vivant). As Zola's disciple and advocate, Jullien criticized any form of "rosserie", any representation of "false smiles" (Jullien 1892, 1998), in order to obtain what Puiu reached in *Stuff and Dough*. Make movies is not so much being concerned with "colour" and even less with was achieved by the "post-communist transition film", based or not on the "aesthetics of the ugly" (as stated Mircea Dumitrescu about Puiu's film). It is rather a return to realism and naturalism as opposing both to the aesthetics propaganda of "old cinema" - as, for the neorealists the abandoning of the Cinecittà studios in Italy meant the separation from the fascist ideology - but is also opposed to the "miserabilist" way of making cinema.

Taking Cassavetes as his model, following his "raw realism", Puiu moves into the life of his stories by using the deep focus, as in *Stuff and Dough*, which he later abandons in *Coffee and Cigarettes*, or by returning to direct realism in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, but all these changes in cinematography are designed mostly to

build the sensation of immediate time and space. All these movies and, following Cristi Puiu, the other New Wave films, follow the logic of compressed time and space, as in the documentaries. As Bill Nichols says in his study of the narratives in the documentary films, any documentary features some key characteristics stemming from the way it treats time and space (Nichols 1981). Accordingly, in a typical "documentary" approach, the time of the movie coincides with the "real" time, the only one able to offer the opportunity to catch the moment, to capture in motion pictures the "here and now" which in life is never repeated. Therefore, as is the case with *Stuff and Dough*, which starts with a following shot outside a block of flats, until the first naturalistic line: "Shall I give you American Coke or Coca Cola?", the camera, using the device of abrupt movements, follows each movement of the characters, each noise, each micro-action. When "Mr. Marcel" Ivanov enters the stage (Razvan Vasilescu) we go with him in Ovidiu's universe (Papadopol). We first see the kiosk of his parents, then the camera enters the room, then the bathroom of the parents and eventually the bedroom of the young man. The camera, being in constant motion within the scene, performs horizontal and vertical displacements, and stops only when the character interaction with another character.

The camera, firmly led by Silviu Stăvilă, always aims to find seemingly insignificant details, an observational technique which aims not only to see

each character's movement, including how one picks his nose, it also moves with ease from the objective to the subjective perspective, allowing the change of the character's points of view. This observational technique is accompanied by the naturalistic dialogues, with lines like: "I cannot shit anywhere but at home", or scatological descriptions: "I sit on something hard and I press the shit", or redundant abrasive questions: "When do you take your shit"? "Well, generally at night", are followed by a content line: "All who were taking their shit in the evening tried to pull my leg!" In this context, it must be said that, unlike the Romanian miserabilist cinema after 1989, the "vulgar" dialogues are inserted only when they are needed to make the "slice of life", and never to show something or to make ironical indications: "When would you kiss two thousand bucks, huh, dick?".

Puiu's uses the cinematic techniques of "realism" only for the quality that has been assigned to it in cinema since the very beginning of this art, that of representing the "living" - "C'est la vie meme, c'est le mouvement pris sur le vif" - is life itself, it's the movement caught live (this was the headline of *La Poste* newspaper, on December 30th, 1895, when the first "brutal" realism of the first moving images was evoked, the effect that the "Arrival of the train in the Ciotat station" apparently had on some people, who passed out in the screening room when they saw the metal monster approaching them, while others have fled in panick.

The aesthetics of the author's film

Puiu is always in search of the "pure cinema" and is, in this respect, making some of his most radical statements, such as there is "no Romanian film, there is only cinema, which in itself is a country" (Puiu, Doru Pop interview 2011). Although he is not a believer in the illusion of the "universal language" of cinema, based on pure image, the author of *Aurora* shows that he is in search for the "pure frame", a frame that is built not only by the pictorial space, the only one that provides, as noted by Rohmer, a source of meaning beyond the limits imposed by "framing" of cinema, but also by breaking the rules of the pictoriality. As it happens in *Aurora*, the action of the film is breaking with the conventions. Here the "conventions" between the audience and the filmmaker is only that we know that we are watching a movie, but while we look we realize that the author behaves as if he did not know this.

Puiu always testing the limits of the identification with the camera – as Jacques Aumont suggested it for the first time, by the implacable logic the camera: the lens belongs either to the character or the director, or the spectator, it cannot ever belong "to no one". It is very important for the Romanian director to attribute the camera to some point of view, which is always a "view" – it is the eye of someone who sees the setting from a particular perspective. Being par excellence a "monocular" view (as opposed to the "natural" sight of man, which is binocular), the camera is always in a "perceptual

selection", it will never show the whole reality.

Obviously, taking all this into consideration, in order to integrate Puiu's aesthetics in the Romanian and European film as a whole, we need to define its global context, in the discussion about the role of cinema art in contemporary cinema making. As Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover noted in their "Introduction" to the study of art cinema, "the new Romanian realism" should be compared with the new Iranian cinema, and Abbas Kiarostami is the most representative of all directors, since even the resurgence of the national cinema is due to the international circuit and the successes in international festivals (Galt and Schoonover 13). Puiu knows and recognizes that this "style" he brought into the Romanian film is just an "import", a technique invented in the cinema during the 50's and the 60's in some of the most important European cinemas, but when he places himself in the "author's cinema", in the sense described by him before, this kind of making movies is accepted not out of mimicry, but because is the only one where reality can be presented as perceived by the director himself.

Without going back to the history of *cinéma d'auteur*, we must say that Cristi Puiu accepts this tradition in its purest lineage, from the French new wave of directors, in the sense that the director is a "divine" and absolute controlling power in a movie production. Accused often that he was a "dictator" or even that he is "inhuman" on the set, Puiu declares that in

a movie there should be only "one hand, one cut, one voice", that of director, not from a tyrannical impulse, but because only the author knows what he wants to represent. *Aurora* is the film where "authorship" has become all present, almost nauseating. It must be said that the way Puiu's makes films is selfish – but selfish in terms of the directors objectives – to make a selfish (or egocentric) movie is motivated by the central argument that there is nothing but the self, the subjective nature of humanity. When Puiu's character is always in the spotlight, even when driving a car he appears in the rearview mirror, he is either sitting in the door frame of his apartments, or talking with other characters standing in the middle of the kitchen door, or in the middle of the room, allowing the partition of the frame, but always central (though never natural, never "normal"), it is because our attention

must be drawn toward this centrality of the human being. As in the typical author films, the male protagonist is the director's alter ego, and in this sense *Aurora* extends the boundaries of cinema, the limits of life and life itself within the limits of cinema. Recognizing the importance of "breaking" with reality and realism, concepts which he himself introduced in the Romanian cinema, by making a film like *Aurora*, a movie in "the door frame," Puiu makes an expressionist statement that follows the twisted life of the main character, Viorel, a bizarre killer and with a strange behavior, an unbalanced human. Again, the story is always the most important, if the storytelling requires to cut the hero from the context, then the cinematic cannons be damned. And so Puiu made a movie which challenges the entire generation of moviemakers, while the only question is his colleagues can match his provocation.

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