

Books reviews

How did cinema spread Communist propaganda in Romania?

The doctoral thesis of Cristian Tudor Popescu, one of the most important opinion journalists in Romania, is a systematic dismantling of the mechanisms that made possible the imposition of the ideological terrorism, by the Communist regime in Romania (*Filmul surd în România mută: politica și propaganda în filmul românesc de ficțiune (1912-1989) / The deaf cinema in dumb Romania. Politics and Propaganda in Romanian fiction movies*, Polirom, Iași, 2011). Since the very beginning Cristian Tudor Popescu proposes a very general purpose and a very courageous premise. He wants to study no less than “the report of the Romanian fiction film with the political propaganda” in a period which includes both the Communist time and the prewar era. It must be said here that, beyond the obvious qualities of this study, there is a faulty scientific argument at the basis of this comparison, since the two periods are not conceptually comparable. Much more, the analyses applied to the period 1912-1944 are superficial and fleeting, without the depth needed for an academic study. It would have been sufficient if the author would have focused on the Communist propaganda (1948-1989), which would have allowed him to dispense with the conceptual inadequacies, like the comparisons between Soviet propaganda (represented by authors such as Dziga Vertov), the Nazi propaganda (with the examples of Leni Riefenstahl) and the movies made by D.W. Griffith. It is simply a research error, which pushes Popescu to make some totally hazardous statements, such as calling Griffith as a “Bolshevik propaganda precursor to”, and also a “Nazi *avant la lettre*”.

Obviously being afraid that he could not refer to the “classic Soviets” and his beloved authors, such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin, he did not limit his study to the Romanian propaganda films during the Communist dictatorship. The book might as well start with Chapter 4, where the film critic and the film historian meet happily, and where we have a well documented presentation of the Soviet propaganda film in Romania. From here on the author aims to prove how the mechanisms of propaganda are extended in the Romanian cinema from the Soviet model, which in turn derives from the ideas formulated by Lenin himself: “Of all the arts, cinema is the most important for us.” The author shows fluently how Communism has used since the very beginning the seventh art as a tool for propaganda and agitation, and by putting into context the achievements of the group



informally called KEPVD (Kulešov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, Dovjenko), C.T.P. demonstrates how the techniques discovered by Soviet filmmakers, from constructivism and intellectual editing, to kinoglaz, were in the service of the Party ideology. The best sections of the book are those in which C.T.P. analyzes sequences from the movies of the Communist era. This happens when he comments productions such as *Strike* by S. Eisenstein (1924), *Earth* by A. Dovjenko (1930) or *The man with the movie camera*, by D. Vertov (1929).

Yet the author is also able to become a true scientist, when he goes to documents, archives and first hand information. Here his study is turned into a textbook study of film into social contexts. Excellent, for example, are the comments on the material called *The noble duty of filmmakers*, developed by the Communist (Workers) Party in Romania, where the main routes of propaganda are identified in the ideological Romanian film of that period: the golden rule of socialist-realism, the social criticism of capitalism, the refusal of aesthetic formalism and the constant fight against idealism and individualism.

It is here when C.T.P. gives examples of what he means by (the very well termed) "deaf film", a type of cinema specific to the '50s, where the movies "speak for themselves", creating only the illusion of sharing information with the audience, where the mechanical "propaganda" is more important than anything else in the movie production. As the author suggests, the political and

ideological control over the films became total. In this section C.T.P. produces excellent interpretations of vintage films like *Resounds in the valley*, by Paul Călinescu (1950), *In our village*, by Victor Iliu and Jean Georgescu (1951), or *Mitrea Cocor*, by Victor Iliu and Marieta Sadova (1952), and many others of that time. Using the case study as a research tool, his interpretations become very productive, and this is allowing the author to identify concepts that made possible Romanian Communist propaganda film: film-anesthesia, film-valve, or film-models.

C.T.P. excels when it comes to historical classifications. According to the author, the second period of Romanian film begins in 1960, amid the so called "independence" of Romanian Communism in its relationship to Moscow. Here C.T.P. uses subtle shades of political history, suggesting, in fact, that this process began before the coming to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1964, during the regime of Gh.Gh. Dej. Similarly, C.T.P. proves that the cultural "freezing" begins at least three years before the so called "theses of July 1971", actually with the banning of a film like *The Reconstruction* by Lucian Pintilie. The author shows very well how the political changes have generated some major changes in the content of cinematic production. He identifies more new issues in the Romanian fiction film during that time and is discussing the way Communist propaganda was using films to launch the new doctrine of Ceaușescu, the national-communism, with the movies like *Neamul*

Șoimăreștilor, *The Dacians* or *The Column*. And here, unfortunately, we see again creeping the journalist, instead of the researcher, because one might ask if the “description” of a movie like *Forest of the Hanged* (which is extensively analyzed) within this category is an error analysis, or only the expression of a large dose of subjectivity. Regrettably there are more expressions of yellow journalism – just when asking an academic question about a movie like *A film with a charming girl* the author speaks like this: “What happens in the end with this young girlie, with the pussycat?”

However, in this part of the book, case studies are the preferred tool (and well-mastered) by the author. Reviewing productions like *The Thirst* by Titus Popovici and Mircea Drăgan (1961), or *A midsummer smile* by Geo Saizescu (1963), C.T.P. discusses important concepts of the way manipulation was practiced during that time. Noting the “marketing” transformations of the Communist film making, the author uses this as an opportunity to identify the another important concept, like communist kitsch. This is one of the most important qualities of the writing put together by C. T. Popescu, the ability to discover or rediscover conceptual frames, like the re-birth of aesthetic formalism, or the changes produced in Romanian film by the return of the anti-hero, which in turn, allows him to develop some of the best parts of the book, like the case study on *The Reconstruction* by Lucian Pintilie (1970). It is here that C.T.P. shows that he masters the who-

le arsenal of available research instruments of film studies (and which, regrettably, he does not use everywhere). Pintilie’s film is politically contextualized (its completion during the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the riots in Paris), it is compared with similar productions in other Communist movies (such as movies by Bacso or Jasny) and it is dissected by formal interpretations (discussing the major role the film played in the future developments of Romanian cinema, the apparitions of the anti-system films).

The third great period of the propaganda film begins, according to Popescu, in 1971, with the “rules of July”, the aesthetic commands of Nicolae Ceaușescu, imposed on all cultural products made in Communist Romania. Ideas like the emphasis on industrialization, the development of fake positive realities, the manipulation of reality so that it can meet the interests of the Party, the glorification of the Supreme Commander, the absolute ruler, are, again, well put into contexts. The fourth period, when some of the Romanian filmmakers become inoculated by the “sickness of the metaphor”, or others become instruments of personality cult, is placed between 1980 and 1989. Suffering from “symbolitis”, the filmmakers of that period take refuge into Tarkovskianism and are avoiding any references to social reality, but C.T.P. considers critically that films such as *Sand cliffs*, by Dan Pița (1983), are well below others like *The Reconstitution* or other Communist productions like Polanski’s *Knife in the water*.

An important section, well structured in C. T. Popescu's book, is the discussion on the censorship mechanisms applied to the films imported from the West or from other Socialist countries, which become suggestive for the mechanisms employed by the regime to control the way the films at that time should function in a propaganda environment. Removing some dialogues, "correcting" Fellini's films, eliminating sequences from Polanski's films or "operating" on productions such as *Black legend Charlie* are references to the control techniques imposed by "absent" censors of Romanian Communism.

The quality of Popescu's book resides in the subtle analysis applied to films, a good command of the information available and the reading of documents

from that time. It is also his journalistic flair, allowing him to come up with concepts like deaf-mute Romanian cinema which makes this reading exciting, while remaining a relevant study. And it is the author's conclusions which are shocking – also as a usage of journalism in a good way. Out of 550 films made during the communist period, over 40% were pure propaganda, the rest being movies for children, simple comedies or light entertainment films. Yet, as trenchantly notes C.T. Popescu, none of the directors who were part of the Communist propaganda machine, have recognized their "contribution to the hatred" and their role to the cultural and ideological terrorism imposed by the Communist regime.

Doru Pop

«Premier Plan» – ou lorsque le mot du film passe au second plan

Premier plan (*Prim-plan*, Editura Tracus Arte, 2011), c'est une anthologie de films qui fraie lentement son chemin à travers le système nerveux de la pellicule, entraînant à la fois la substance blanche (c'est-à-dire les films roumains, avec leur importance socio-culturelle) et la substance grise (c'est-à-dire les films étrangers et leur dynamique déroutante). L'objectif du critique Ioan-Pavel Azap se meut rapidement, sans incertitudes, utilisant parfaitement un encadrement théorique général pour des jugements de valeur sur les films roumains, mais en perdant un peu pied en ce qui concerne les films étrangers trop variés. Il est vrai que ce volume représente, par sa nature même, juste une sélection et qu'il est impossible d'épuiser un champ trop mouvant, trop vivant. Azap ne refuse cependant aucune grille censée lui permettre de bien voir un film.



Dans la première partie du livre, l'auteur réalise une sorte d'histoire *sui generis* des films roumains de la période 2006-2010, en soulignant les manques d'un système qui n'accorde pas suffisamment d'importance au cinéma national, ce qui conduit à une grande ignorance, surtout auprès des jeunes. L'auteur aborde toute la production roumaine, depuis pellicules de la *Nouvelle Vague Roumaine*, parfois incomprises par le public, jusqu'à des films «rares», restés inconnus par le public et la critique, ou bien jusqu'à des films commerciaux, truffés de clichés spectaculaires ou mélodramatiques, destinés à séduire plus facilement les masses. Dans ce panorama quasi-exhaustif, l'absence de Cristi Puiu, avec son travail sur le réalisme, est d'autant plus étonnante. Le niveau d'interprétation dépasse, dans *Primpian*, le passage en revue du conflit et des traits des personnages principaux, pour se concentrer notamment sur le discours narratif, sur les stratégies de réalisation ou le style des réalisateurs, etc.

La deuxième partie du livre rassemble une gamme étendue de films étrangers, sélectionnés du même intervalle, 2006-2010. On ne peut pas dire que la compréhension des options de l'auteur est aisée, mais en général il choisit ce que le public relativement avisé considère comme de bons films.

Avec cela, certains films célèbres ne se situent pas, selon Azap, plus haut que les autres. Deux exemples de jugements qui me semblent risqués: *Inglorious Basterds* est pris ici pour une «blague cinématographique», tandis que Lars von Trier est présenté malicieusement comme «un faiseur de films qui manque d'idées». À propos de Tarantino, une certaine «superficialité» est mise en évidence, sans un questionnement sur la réutilisation des éléments de la culture pop ou de la bande dessinée, plaqués sur des dialogues sophistiqués et des thèmes banals, où la violence reprend le discours des revues des années 80. En dehors des jugements de valeur, Azap communique aux lecteurs beaucoup d'informations dans un espace limité, ce qui rend sa démarche précieuse, mais aussi risquée.

Ioan-Pavel Azap désigne son livre comme une «tentative éditoriale» par laquelle il veut montrer son soutien pour l'éducation cinématographique. Le livre pourrait atteindre son but grâce à la précision et à la netteté, sinon par une pénétration critique extraordinaire et une impeccable évaluation des films du point de vue historique, car l'auteur veut regarder à la fois l'extérieur et l'intérieur du mécanisme cinématographique.

Claudia Cojocariu