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## The Kitchen as Cinematic Topoi

**Review of:** Mircea Valeriu Deaca. *O bucătărie ca-n filme. Scenotopul bucătăriei în Noul Cinema Românesc* (A movie-like kitchen. The scenotope of the kitchen in the New Romanian Cinema), Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2017



The academic studies dedicated to the kitchen as a representative space in the New Romanian Cinema, either described as mise-en-scene or sometimes an enactment of trauma were already dealt with in several film theory approaches (see Mihai Chirilov, “Stopcadre la masă” / “Freeze frames at the table” in Cristina Corciovescu, Magda Mihăilescu, *Noul Cinema Românesc. De la tovarășul Ceaușescu la Domnul Lăzărescu*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2011; or the respective chapter from Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema, An Introduction*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014).

Yet the remarkable approach of Mircea Valeriu Deaca is that the author dedicates a full theoretical interpretation to this specific space in recent cinema. For Deaca the kitchen provides plenty materials for a substantial analysis and he develops in *A movie-like kitchen. The sceno-topos of the kitchen in the New Romanian Cinema* (Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2017) an exhaustive overview of one of the most important spatial determinants of contemporary moviemakers.

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For the author, as we are cautioned from the very beginning, this project is a “pretext for film analysis and more general considerations. The core of this book project is the critical investigation; partly a cinematic analytical exercise (how to break down a cinematic scene, and what to look for on the screen), partly a critical interpretation exercise” (Deaca 7).

For the coherence of the approach, Mircea Valeriu Deaca identifies four common elements, or as he calls them “signification constants”, which are characteristic for all the kitchen scenes. His case studies include many examples from the Romanian New Cinema, but also from the films of their precursors, such as those of Lucian Pintilie or Mircea Daneliuc. The author will work with these examples throughout the book: “The effect relationship between the protagonists of the kitchen scenes (manifested as *eros* and *agape*), the conflict relationships (described as *agone*) and the relationship of the cinematic with the film as medium (placed under the *hymen* category) are described as themes, then resumed as rhetorical figures. The argumentation is articulated and growingly configured with each film, and with each particular example the considerations get a more nuanced dimension. These notions are designed as indicators for relevant aspects of the dramatic situations, as they are represented in the films.

Using a key term, borrowed from Fredric Jameson – that of *scenotope* – which is “a particular combination of what we recognize as a *topos* and an unique form of perceptual-cognitive-emotional organization” (Deaca 9), the author carries out, with the acrimony of an investigative journalist, an in-depth research into the sometimes fuzzy history of the Romanian New Cinema.

The kitchen, understood as a cinematic *topos*, and the act of eating, described as an element of scene development, range from the simple food devouring in front of the camera, to the refined or grotesque banquets. These are not “innovations” of the “new cinema”. In fact the earliest manifestation of this “genre” may even be considered the classical “Repas de bébé” of Louis Lumière (1895). And, as it is appropriate, before entering into the specific manifestations in the Romanian moviemaking, the author provides a brief, but relevant incursion into the vast “cuisines” and the “banquets” of Jean Renoir, Federico Fellini, Luis Buñuel, Marco Ferreri, Peter Greenaway, Paolo Sorrentino, Spike Jonze, Orson Welles, Michael Haneke, Blake Edwards, Bernardo Bertolucci, Sofia Coppola, Adrian Lyne, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ridley Scott, Sergio Leone, Steven Spielberg, Pedro Almodovar, etc. Revealing their dimension, which ranges from the grotesque, to the thanatic and even spiritual, the author develops extensive chapters in which recent Romanian films are analyzed in a connection with older titles such as *Sunday at 6 o'clock* (Lucian Pintilie, 1966) or *The Conjugal Bed* (Mircea Daneliuc, 1993).

A simple enumeration of each chapter title would be enough to raise the interest of any reader for this false “cinematic cookbook”, which is simultaneously a partial guide through the universe of the Romanian New Cinema. The author presents “A study on eating patterns in the Romanian film”, discusses the trope of the “Serial

kitchen(s), presents the “Serialized cuisine”, or the “Pharmakon thriller” (with emphasis on Cristi Puiu’s films), overviews the theme of “Father and son: home alone. The Avatars of the Father” (from the *Senator of the Snails*, by Mircea Daneliuc, 1995, to *Metabolism*, by Corneliu Porumboiu, 2013, passing through *12:08 to Bucharest* (2007), *Police, Adjective* (2009) also by Corneliu Porumboiu, or *The Medal of Honor*, by Călin Peter Netzer, 2010). Similarly interesting are the chapters on “The Kitsch Battlefields and Hostility in the Family” (dealing with *Everybody in our Family*, Radu Jude, 2012, *Illegitimate*, by Adrian Sitaru, 2016, or topics like “The Parody of Minimalism” in *Friends for Friendship*, Radu Jude, 2011), “The Figure of the Wife and Home Maternity” (treats *Sunday 6 o’clock*, by Lucian Pintilie 1966, *Occident* by Cristian Mungiu 2002, *Felicia, Above of all*, by Mellisa de Raaf, Răzvan Rădulescu, 2009, or *Marilena from P7*, by Cristian Nemescu, 2006. A paradigm shifting moment is described in the “visualization” of the women in the recent Romanian film, which the author considers to be found in *The Child’s Pose*, by Călin Peter Netzer, 2013

Another space is the Communist kitchen, or the space as inherited from Communism, which is paralleled by the post-communist one (as in *The Child’s Pose*, by Călin Peter Netzer, 2013). Relevantly enough, the book describes the kitchen in the recent films of the Romanian “New Cinema” as more than a “playground”. The kitchen is also the expression of a specific mentality which discloses the role of the women (as women are often the main characters in the Romanian New Cinema, unlike in most of the pre-Revolution films). This approach allows an understanding of the traditional roles in Romanian society, and the way in which we witness a transformation (once more *The Child’s Pose* is illustrative). We also have access to the relations between the members of the family, we see the husband-wife relationship, the dynamics between children and parents, or between siblings. By extension, the kitchen is the symbolic space of conflicts, a universe of macro-social convulsions, an image of the Romanian society seen as a whole.

*A movie-like kitchen. The scenotope of the kitchen in the New Romanian Cinema* is a book that teaches us how to “taste” a movie, how to appreciate its “frangrance” by understanding its mechanisms and by deciphering its symbolisms. Going beyond the inherent, and most frustrating, Bazinianism of the realism, Mircea Valeriu Deaca’s book, very well articulated theoretically, is extremely nuanced and brings cognitive approaches and structuralist methods into play. Finally, in order to deliberately incite to reading this work, here is just a title of a most relevant subchapter: “Was it or was not the New Cinema a Realist one? The allegorical Realism”). All the book lends itself to a minute and detailed analysis, many of the commentaries are ample, and the entire work is in and of itself an “object of research”. Mircea Valeriu Deaca is one of the most important film theorists in our cinema culture and any invitation to read his interpretations is certainly enriching both the academic field, but also the spectators, who can become more passionate critics.