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### Monographist! Monographist!

**Review of:** Monica Filimon, *Cristi Puiu*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Monica Filimon's book, a monographic essay published at the University of Illinois, in 'Contemporary Film Directors' collection, (collection dedicated to important names in the field: Kiarostami, Coen brothers, Almodóvar, Chris Marker, Jarmusch, Polanski, Iñárritu, Trier, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Lynch, Dario Argento, Francis Ford Coppola, Kusturica, Agnès Varda, etc.) analyses Cristi Puiu's filmography (the first Romanian name on the list), "one of the innovative contemporary voices in filmmaking" (Filimon, 1) as the author distinguishes her subject of investigation from the very beginning. Motivated by the Puiu's statement: "I do not think that realism exists; it is merely a label", and highly convinced that "the faithful depiction of the surrounding world is [...] only an effect, and not the goal of Puiu's endeavors" (2), Monica Filimon attempts to overcome most of the previous features Romanians critics had associated with Cristi Puiu's aesthetics, chiefly regarding the filmmaker attachment to a "minimalist" tag, and in order to proceed to the enrichment of the field of interpretation, she bravely introduces few terms provided by the



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history of ideas: the sacred, the profane, the ineffable, the epiphanies. Therefore, she quotes Doru Pop which remarks in *Romanian New Wave: An Introduction* (2014) that Puiu's interest "is not in the cinematic as simple art object but in the revelation it may invite" and mixes this idea with one of the filmmaker statements itself that "the camera is an anthropological instrument", quite sure that Cristi Puiu's cinema "seeks to inspire the viewers' brief epiphanies about the sacred dimension of the profane world", by causing them "ineffable" experiences, she explains as "gradual desensitization of the secular world toward the spiritual realm that lies beyond it"(2).

Thus, in the following eight chapters of the book, each dedicated to the corresponding Cristi Puiu's cinematic event, Monica Filimon attempts to initiate her readers in the "ineffable experience of the profane world" induced by the Romanian filmmaker artistic experiences, to investigate the failed initiation journey of the film characters, "wretched human beings"(9) and still, aware that these experiences are merely a consequence of the sociological context in which these films were born, she revisits the improper ethical and socio-political aspects, which had direct consequences over the film production and distribution before 1989 and after, in postcommunist Romania. In the following sections, dedicated to Cristi Puiu's cinematic experiences, from the outset documentary, *The Retirement Home*, to the last movie, *Sieranevada*, (which was released almost at the same time with the book), Monica Filimon envisages the main typical features of the director's filming experience (long takes, hand-held camera), his preference for common characters, his immediate affinity with other major international film directors John Cassavetes, Jarmusch, Kiarostami etc. She also questions the link between the city, the space and the memory in these movies as well as the direct and various interactions between the camera and the subject. Here, Monica Filimon speaks about a "haptic" attribute that labels all things (images, camera, and viewer experience) by repeating the term until saturation, never replaced with a synonym (kinesthetic communication, for example), as well as the revolt against the father, which became a leitmotiv that infuses the entire book, grounding various interpretations, from the political movements of 1989, to the main characters' motivations. Still, exploring the connection between the space and the memory in *Retirement Home*, using Lefebvre interpretations could seem a little far-fetched, since Foucault has such a precise definition for the heterotopian space. Otherwise, no matter how enthusiastic (there are no arguments to associate young Ovidiu, the main character from *Stuff and Dough* and the Roman poet Ovidius, exiled at Tomis aged 51, excepting the name coincidence!) and appropriate any peculiar details, associations or parallels may seem, if they strike the sphere of over-interpretation they shade all the other innovative ideas by putting all of them into question.

Besides these remarks, Monica Filimon's analyses are remarkable through their aspiration to completeness, thereby she denotes each film with the most suitable label: *The Retirement Home* is the "celebration of human endurance", a documentary that "becomes a cultural site of memory"; *Stuff and Dough* is "a fraught initiation jour-

ney" of "young people oscillating between socioeconomic exclusion and integration", and "a consistent and detailed chronicle of the rise and disillusionment of the precariat in a postnational, postpolitical world"(45); *Cigarettes and Coffee* is "an exercise in austere, effective aesthetic expression"(53) and the two opposite portraits of father and son echoes two different responses to the "social transformations around"(55) them; *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* is "an event for the viewer, encouraging empathy with the protagonist"(70), "transforming a grim situation[with dark humor] into an occasion for contemplation"(72), *Aurora* "offers a complex, multilayered gaze at an individual in crisis by means of several intersecting discourses (on the conflictual relationship within a brand new capitalist world, the inner workings of a man's psyche, and the makings of an auteur)"(76); *Three Exercises of Interpretation* "continues the director's forays into the relationship between fathers and children, the existence of a transcendental world, and the relationship between cinema and life itself"(100); *Das Spektrum Europas* is "an ephemeral fragment of memory and history constructed with a tender, yet critical eye to human weakness"(116); *Sieranevada* is "a desacralized world, populated by people blind[...] to the cosmic dimension of their existence, even at the most sensitive moments in their lives"(116). The next two reunited interviews with the filmmaker, that succeed Monica Filimon's previous approach are meant to complete the indeterminate areas of interpretation, if there are any left, by revealing Cristi Puiu's main cinematic influences and many spicy details behind the scenes.

If the reader's attention could bear the Romanian phraseology from the first seventy pages, his kindness will be further rewarded with much lighter expressions and with more ingenious and intelligent interpretations. Besides all these, by being the first monograph of Cristi Puiu, one of the most important filmmaker in contemporary Romanian cinema, Monica Filimon's study should worth a lot not only for the Romanian readers but also for readers and film lovers from all over the world.