*Doru POP*

# Comparing Waves. Cultural and Aesthetic Similarities between Recent Romanian and Hungarian Cinemas

**Abstract**. This paper addresses the issues of cultural identity and aesthetic specificity, as manifested in cinema-making practices of the Romanian and Hungarian recent films. The main questions are if the Romanian film makers tell different stories from their neighboring colleagues, or if the contemporary movies are showing similarities, which allows us to describe related tropes and even shared imaginaries. This paper is discussing those Romanian and Hungarian films and directors that had a major impact, using authors like like Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu or Radu Jude and their counterparts in the region like Károly Ujj Mészáros, Kornel Mundruczo or Nemes László. The author raises the problem of a possible and impossible cinematic dialogue between these two cinema cultures by asking if we can talk about an East European cinema style, or can we identify a shared film tradition of regional cinemas (when it comes to Romania and Hungary) and if there is a larger trend that influences the cinematic expression. Another aspect would be the discussion of cultural strategies in the two countries, and how did these impact the development of their particular film industry, film consumption and film reception. In the same time, the EU integration of the two countries has created similar problems, with dissimilar solutions, as the cultural similarities and the transition from a homogenized cinema of the Socialist era lead to transformations that have influenced separately the two cultural environments. Finally the problem is if there can be a "Romanian style" of making movies opposed to a "Hungarian way" to film art, or if contemporary Hungarian and Romanian cinemas are part of a European mode of representation?

**Keywords**: national cinema, regional cinema, Eastern and Central European waves, film styles and film schools.

What is the relationship between the contemporary Hungarian and Romanian cinemas, have they been constantly competing, ignoring or mirroring each other, as they are clearly in an international competition for recognition, positioning and global relevance? While the Romanian moviemakers had a major impact in international film festivals from as the early as 2007, when the Romanian new wave director Cristian Mungiu has received the highest award at Cannes, combined with

**Doru POP**
Babeş-Bolyai University
Email: popdoru@gmail.com

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the global "conquest" of the films made by authors like Cristi Puiu or Corneliu Porumboiu, in the last couple of years, it seems that the new Hungarian cinema makers are taking the lead, with Nemes László awarded an Oscar in 2016 and more recently Ildikó Enyedi, Károly Ujj Mészáros or Kornel Mundruczo also receiving international recognition. Is there a relationship between this tandem of cinema schools, are the two "competing" cinemas part of a common, Central and East European cinema, or a wider, European filmmaking tradition?

From this perspective, the overall purpose of this analysis is not only to identify the common elements between these filmmakers, while discussing what makes them different, but also to clarify some methodological problems which allow the interpretation of different cinema cultures, film industries and imaginary representations of neighboring countries. There has always been a historical dialogue between the two cinema cultures, mostly developed during Communism, when the "brotherly states" where coerced to cooperate, yet history represents both a challenge and a barrier between the Romanians and Hungarians (as well as for other nations in the region). So the difficult question is if we are uncomfortable neighbors, or we can speak about a shared patrimony, which goes beyond Romanian and Hungarian specific social and political backgrounds. Another issues is that of present time evolution, since after the EU integration the two countries suffered important (and similar) transformations in terms of cultural strategies and the way in which each film industry was impacted. Although the film consumption and film reception is important, as there are structural differences between the Hungarian and the Romanian film industries there is a clear gap between the two, generating different experiences. Such phenomena would also provide relevant comparable case studies, nevertheless when following a cultural, post-literary comparativism, the methodological values of the comparative method expanded in areas such as cinema are more suggestive when it comes to contents.

## Exercises in comparative history
## through cinema representations

The first and most important methodological instrument, which provides a framework of analysis in cinema remains the historical comparativism. By using history as a tool of understanding societies, it allows exploring the common spaces and cultural tropes linking societies beyond their national identification.

Thus, when discussing the specificity of representation structures in national film industries and the respective identity formation in contemporary cinematic structures, movies become expressions of shared historical experiences, together with their impact on societies. Here one of the most direct ways of discussing cultural similarities and identifying the common grounds between two cinemas is by questioning their historical determinacy. The Romanian and Hungarian movies have their roots in the homogenized cinema and cultural environments of the Socialist and, previously, Stalinist moviemaking. Even during the post-communist transition we can de-

scribe how the film industries of the two countries have followed similar paths and how did these transformations influenced the two cultural environments.

On one hand, by searching for parallels between the two film industries and film cultures, the historical themes and problems that cinema makers use in both countries become extremely relevant. There are many examples of films displaying similar relationships towards the communist past, and often nostalgia is manifested in the two cinema cultures in a comparable way, but not alike, as similarities are associated with many differences when it comes to the common totalitarian past. Among the former Soviet Union countries, which almost all share a predisposition towards anti-communism (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), the Hungarian and Polish societies had a longer tradition of resistance against communism, while in Romania this was limited to the "mountain resistance". Clearly such lack of political homogeneity for the cinemas of the Socialist countries produced cultural dissimilarities.

Another approach can be to overview the cinema-makers take on the recent past, by searching for similarities or differences found in the way the directors deal with social trauma and the manner of dealing with the past. Here using post-communism as a shared experience can prove illustrative for dealing with cinematic modes that are not limited to a space (Eastern Europe), but rather a political experience (communism). A very nuanced approach is exemplified by Lars Kristensen who is describing a "post-communist mindset", as the critic argues that the Eastern European cinema has nothing but disappeared (Kristensen 5), making way to a common reality dealing with the new social conditions. Comparable productions are dealing with the year 1989, such as Corneliu Porumboiu's *A fost sau n-a fost* and *Moszkva tér*, the 2001 production made by Török Ferenc, which provide arguments for using history as a link between cinematic representations.

Nevertheless, by using the historical backgrounds also gives rise to more problematic relationships, as the Romanian and Hungarian film cultures, which have their roots in our historical commonalities, also are re-configuring the common past differently. Here the way in which cinema is processing the memory of past experiences through cultural representations and the re-inventing of history through cinematic means is suggestive. Some of the most relevant issues of imagining the common past and the problems stem from the differences of perspectives. The films dealing with traumatic memories of the Holocaust are providing the best narrative and aesthetic examples. When comparing *Son of Saul* (2015) by Laszlo Nemes, and two Romanian moviemakers dealing with the Holocaust (*The History of Love* 2016) by Radu Mihăileanu and *Inimi cicatrizate* (2016), by Radu Jude it becomes clear that we tell similar histories, but by different takes on the stories. These recent movies show that while there are related historical narratives, shared imaginaries and common visualities are not necessarily similar, as we are dealing with the trauma of the past differently.

The question is if we can we go beyond the fact that both national cinemas have created their own cultural identity and aesthetic specificity and, most importantly if

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we have tools of dealing with national identity formation through cinema representations.

When trying to compare two modes of moviemaking an important element is given by the uncommon traits coming from their particular identify formation practices. And, although nation formation is no longer the most important purpose of cinema in nation building, national specificities are still carried on by cinema-makers. In this context it becomes relevant to ask if there a spacial, temporal and cultural connection between the cinemas in the region, and, at a larger scale, if generally there are the common issues of the Central/ Eastern European countries. By looking at differences and resemblances we can discover relevant information about the "Romanian style" of making movies or the "Hungarian way" to contribute to film culture.

## Comparing national cinemas

Although the very existence of national cinematic cultures is disputable in the contemporary economic environment where co-productions and multinational investments are at work in almost all film productions, the difficulties of comparing specific national film traditions becomes more apparent when trying to classify particular cinemas within a given cultural space. What makes even more problematic the already difficult cinematic comparisons between neighboring cinema cultures (such as the Romanian and the Hungarian ones), and their subsequent interpretation, is the impossible theoretical agreement on their commonalities. Many film critics have elaborated several categories which provide divergent perspectives, by establishing analytic categories and drawing conceptual lines that organize the regional film production practices and contents in overlapping groups.

Some authors have supported the idea that we must accept the notion of regional cinema based on geographic affiliation, generating a transnational identification coupled with some elements of social affinities. In a an effort to bring together neighboring countries and film industries which apparently shared commonalities, their narratives and aesthetics are forced together, which leads to a first contradicting paradigm. Here the best and most suggestive example is the category of the so-called "Balkan cinema", which allows comparisons between movies made by diverse authors, from countries that range from Greece to Bulgaria, from Romania to Albania.

Described by many local and international film critics as a particular type of moviemaking, this so-called Balkan mode of cinema-making is circumscribed by "stylistic and thematic affinities" (Iordanova 2006) of the authors in this controversial region. Thus, when using this regionalization of cinema representations, several Romanian film critics considered normal to include in the paradigm of the Balkan films the most important national productions. When analyzing moviemakers like Pintilie and Puiu, they appear to be part of this type of cinema. They share a "special sensibility" and they represent the "particularities" of the region (Țuțui 83). The very idea of the inherent "Balkanism" of cinema-makers that share cultural values, like a predisposi-

tion towards ruralism or the depiction of the "haidouks", combined with the obsessive recourse to history or the thematized denouncing of dictatorships, can bring together a large number of productions. Clearly this paradigm would definitely put the Romanian cinema in another cultural dimension than the Hungarian films, which would make the comparisons exclusively contrasting.

Other interpreters, like Anikó Imre, prefer a larger definition, describing a particular form of expression in the "East European cinemas", as this broad definition takes into consideration the fact that there is a cohesive mode of cinema-making characterized by processing history in "self reflective, allegorical film style" (Imre xii). By dismissing the pejorative concept of "Eastern European", a way in which national cinemas are narrowly ethnocentric, with the directors associated with "tribal" or even "patriarchal" nationalisms, the critic proposes a perspective that goes beyond the national character and the repetitive concepts of cultural homogeneity in this diverse political space (Imre xiv). Another nuance in this change of perspectives can be described as the "postcolonial approach", which was proposed by Mazierska, Kristensen and Naripea in "Portraying Neighbours on Screen". Here the authors support the idea of an Eastern European cinema, which is including any country from East Germany to the West Mongolian, thus making a map of cohesive cinematic expressions that is perhaps too broad.

Such wide-ranging vision about the cinemas of the East, which is looking at these productions from a post-Cold War perspective is rather political. We should also be careful to understand that these movie makers can be described as part of a "cinema in transition", as is with the concept advanced by Catherine Portuges and Peter Hames, who argued that Central and East European film industries are moving from state owned to private market economy, thus the changes of within the respective film industries can be explained through their competition with the established cinema cultures of the West. This is visible when looking at the Hungarian film industry, which is clearly one step ahead its Romanian counterpart, as major international productions were developed in the last decades in the studios of Budapest, as 299 movies were produced in Hungary only in 2016 (Lajtai-Szabó 2017). As indicated by the most recent example, *Blade Runner 2049*, the internationalization of a national cinema brings financial resources that can be then redirected to support local moviemakers.

All these explanations, ranging from the narrow regional view to the all-embracing historical and political perspective or the reality of a new cinematic culture of co-productions are indicating a final argument, which is supporting the idea of a post-national cinema. The framework of national films within a regional limited range of topics must be abandoned as the promises of a national, or ethnic specific cinema are no longer dominant. Many filmmakers of the "East" are abandoning the "national narratives" and are increasingly integrating their vision in the European and even global cinematic discourses.

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## Methodologies of cultural comparativism
## and cinema stereotypes

When relevant differences and similarities between Romanian and Hungarian cultural environments are researched, some of the most relevant elements which make these countries (and their people) comparable are provided by cross-cultural inquiries. Following the tradition of the classical studies on suicide in Western Europe elaborated by Durkheim (1897), there are many studies searching for the difference between various cultures, with suggestive applications in media case studies, such as the study on popular television in Eastern Europe edited by Havens, Imre and Lusty (2013).

Using another important concept, that defines nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), we need to describe how nations use projections of self-identity and how these projections are mirrored in the similar cultural productions of others. A methodological instrument for such cultural comparativism, which establishes inter-relationships between cultural manifestations is the factual based cross-cultural model. As intercultural exchanges are more difficult to identify, when looking comparatively at the Romanian and the Hungarian cultures several cultural identity formations become transparent by evaluating statistical data.

Richard L. Lewis provided an example of how comparing cultures can use the frameworks of statistical data such as the World Values Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp). Lewis overviewed the communication between various cultures from a pragmatic perspective and classified cultures following a series of stereotypical modeling (linear-active, multi-active and reactive), which allowed comparisons and differentiations (Lewis 39) and the elaboration of an interpretative method. The British social theorist finds arguments for contrasting cultures that collide and cultures that converge, leading to cultural conversations and communications based on the idea that communities are driven by social and psychological differences.

Using the famous Hofstede classifications, Lewis identifies various traits of collective versus individualistic, masculine and feminine cultures, which are then projected into life values and habits. While the Hungarians exhibit clear signs of self-confidence and individualism, with a predisposition to glorify their military prowess (Lewis 289), the Romanians are rather accepting paternalistic leadership. This is transparent in the self-expression of the two communities. While Romanians tend to describe their country as "the garden of the Mother of God" (Grădina Maicii Domnului), the Hungarians refer to the Magyar conquest of their territories with unhindered pride. All these elements of cross-cultural comparison are also explicit in cinematic representations. When comparing the New Hungarian films, such as Kornél Mundruczó's *Tender Son: The The Frankenstein Project* (2010) with the representations of the failed fathers that populate the Romanian recent cinema, it becomes overtly clear that the two cinemas are illustrating different imaginaries.

We can also approach the comparative effort from the perspective of political sciences. Using the research of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2005), who elab-

orated on the data provided by the World Values Surveys, we can follow the visual representation neighboring countries in a larger, global map of values. While Lewis is simplistically distinguishing between passive and active cultures, the cultural map offers a more complex basis, by exploring self-expression values, like religiousness.

One of the most important dimensions of this cultural map is that it clarifies the elements of contrast, such as the theory supported by the Huntington hypothesis which separates the clusters of cultural cohesion existing among the Orthodox countries (Bulgaria, Romania) and the Catholic countries of the region (Hungary or Croatia). Inglehart and Welzel corroborated this rift between the Catholic and the Orthodox, with a more nuanced information from extracted from the cross-cultural variations among the compared groups (66-67). Overviewing the World Index data (http:// www.indexmundi.com/ factbook/compare/ romania.hungary) we can observe that Romania is predominantly a mono-religious society, with 81% of the population declaring themselves as Orthodox. This, compared to the 37% Catholic and 11% Calvinist population of Hungary, added with the more secular dimension of the Hungarian society, where only 45% declare that they find comfort in religion, with more than 76% of Romanians finding religion an important part of their livers, makes possible an in-depth analysis of cinema productions.

Once again the recent movies produced in the two countries display a different approach to religiousness, that can be coupled with another major cultural factor, the prominent differences between the two nations in terms of urban – rural distribution of population. While 71% of Hungarians live in urban environments, the Romanians are less urbanized, with only 56 percent living in the cities. Also the quality of life differs, as 11% of the Hungarians are living in poverty, compared to a higher number of Romanians, almost 22% below the poverty standards.

In terms of cinematic representations these data are transparently thematized in recent films. While several Romanian productions are centered around superstitions (*Sieranevada* describing the ritual of the dead man's suit and the 40 days remembrance), life in convents and monasteries (*După dealuri* 2012) or the corruption in the Orthodox seminaries (*Un pas în urma serafimilor* 2017), the Hungarian cinema is placing spirituality in urban environments. Once more, Kornél Mundruczó and his remarkable parable from *White God* (2014) provides a mirroring cinematic example.

As argued by Homi Bhabha, cultural comparison is made possible specially in the contexts of "cultural translation" (Bhabha 1994), that is when the cultural products of various ethnic communities are "crossing borders". All manifestations of the "social imaginary" of neighboring social groups can be therefore compared by their subsequent collision.

Cultural stereotypes become even more transparent when looking at the ways of *portraying the Other*, or as argued by Cunningham (in Mazierska et. al), when there there is a clear indication that the "Other" is the neighboring "enemy". Here

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another relevant component of cinema comparisons is provided by the different ways in which the ethnicity of the Other is represented. Just as in Marian Crișan's *Orizont* (2015), where the evil character is Zoli, the head of the forrest cutting Mafia in Transylvania, the Hungarian characters are negatively centered, while in *Katalin Varga* (2009), the Romanians are presented as killers whereby Katalin, the abused and raped woman living in a majority Hungarian community, is murdered by two Romanian fake policemen. Such a visible dichotomy of representations is more abrupt in Dallas Pashamende (2005), a Hungarian-German-Austrian production taking place in Romania, in a Rroma community living near a garbage dump-site. The director, Robert Pejó, is an ethnic Hungarian who was born in Romania and emigrated in Austria. His image of the Hungarian speaking Gypsy community, existing at the fringe of society, is mirrored by the Romanian mobster who exploits them. This projection of the Romanian society, which mixes the corruption of local Romanian policemen (who funnily drive cars with Bulgarian license plates), an orthodox priest who assists a parodical funeral, with the tragical life of the minorities, takes an explicitly political dimension. "The Other" carries negative traits that make possible our own identification with a positive image.

Sometimes these meanings are less transparent, as is the case with Szabolcs Hajdu's *White Palms* (2006), where the role of the abusive coach is played by Gheorghe Dinică, a popular Romanian actor. This case is illustrating Stuart Hall's argument about signifying practices in cinema - political and ideological stereotyping works in all forms of fiction based on binary oppositions that lead to reductionist depictions (Hall 254-257). Even in movie where the national self images are not directly coupled with the negative projection of other we see that cinematic representation functions as a projection of a larger cultural practice. Here the image of the abusive father figure, who is a sadistic male, cannot be separated from the national identification of the actor.

## Cultural comparativism
## and the cross-national aesthetics

At another level, when dealing with the role of cinema in contemporary visual culture, the historiographic forms of comparativism also need to be revisited. As noted by Stanley and Elsner (2017), who refer to the practices of comparing art materials, art history must be reappraised in a global context (Elsner 2017). For our approach the most important question is raised when trying to elaborate a possible comparative study of the regional cinemas from an aesthetic perspective.

The difficulties stem from the hypothesis of a common aesthetics as many authors, among them Herbert Eagle (330) argued, there is a continuous "visual style", which was developed in Hungary and Poland during the 50s, then expanding Czechoslovakia in the 60s, later evolving in Bulgaria and Romania during the 70s. Can we identify a common narrative repertory and comparably similar visual strategies in these cinematic cultures which make them coherently similar?

A comparative approach to recent cinema shows that there are major differences between the filmmakers of the two countries, and that we can describe specific traits that come not only from the different cultural environments, but also from their aesthetic predispositions. In fact it is here that the "national competition" becomes relevant for our interpretation. By looking at the variations of representing reality in the recent Romanian and Hungarian films one of the most transparent elements is that each cinema has its own **peculiar versions of reality**. In fact we can say that they are providing forms of **incomparable realisms** and by using the term "incomparable" we circumscribe one of the most relevant inflections between the two cinemas: the way in which the two films traditions have practiced cinematic realism. While the Romanian contemporary filmmakers were developing a specific form of verism, founded on the stylistics of the **cinéma vérité**, their Hungarian counterparts evolved their own version of cinematic realism, which can be best described as **magic realism**.

This distinction is most explicit in recent productions like *Jupiter Moon* (*Jupiter holdja* 2017) by Kornél Mundruczó or On Body and Soul (*Testről és lélekről* 2017) directed by Ildikó Enyedi, and even *Liza, a rókatündér* (Liza theFox Fairy 2015) by Ujj Mészáros Károly. These wonderful stories are illustrations of how the Hungarian moviemaking practices the transformation of the ordinary reality into an extraordinary version. Meanwhile their Romanian counterparts continue to exemplify what I described as "austere realism" (Pop 67-68). Relevantly enough there are a couple of exemptions, such as the Romanian-Hungarian co-production directed by Nae Caranfil, *6,9 on the Richter Scale* (6,9 pe scara Richter 2016). The movie displays similarities with the Hungarian surrealist films, specially with the film of Ujj Mészáros Károly as the Romanian director uses the gliding into humorous forms of fantasy. Another example for the presence of magical realism in Romanian filmmaking is *Miracolul din Tekir* (2015), another international co-production. Ruxandra Zenide makes one of the few recent films in which reality and its deformation by magical intervention coexist, yet, just as is the case with Caranfil, the film is never fully developing into the type of surreal mixture that the Hungarian filmmakers practice.

Finally the question of cultural specificity is answered by this particular refusal of Romanian cinema to develop this dimension of representation, which was largely used in autochthonous literature and art. It is the hegemony certain tropes and themes and shared imaginaries of the recent Romanian filmmakers that push an entire generation to tell different stories, which are not necessarily related to a cultural project, but rather to cinema-making practices. The "Romanian style" of making movies, which was developed over two last couple of decades, just as the "Hungarian way", was the result of searching for modes of representation are a combination of political, ideological, cultural and aesthetic determinacies.

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