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## Modern Romanian Cinema or Modernity and Modernism Unfinished

**Abstract:** As this issue of *Ekphrasis* is dedicated to an in-depth discussion about contemporary Romanian cinema, from the perspective of contextualizing notions like modern, modernism, modernist, modernistic and even more broadly, modernity, the main hypothesis of this contribution is that modernism remains an unfinished project. Using *Malmkrog* (2019), the most recent production directed by Cristi Puiu, one of the most acclaimed Romanian cinema makers today, as a starting point, this paper questions the limits of Romanian modern cinema. Asking how modernity and modernization, which are ongoing social and political processes in Romanian society, have influenced recent films and, more importantly, what are the true modernist resources of this cinema, the author discusses the problematic relationships between modern culture, the principles of modernist art and modern cinema. With several modernistic storytelling practices and modernized worldviews integral to what constitutes today the essence of the Romanian filmmaking, a debate is directed towards the film theories considering that the films created by authors like Cristian Mungiu or Cristi Puiu and many of their fellow cinema makers have produced a “modernist turn” in the national cinema. This contribution questions the theoretical and practical dimensions of the modernism in Romanian films, and provides another explanation, suggesting that Romanian films are marked by a specific thinking, one dominated by what can only be described as a *metaphysics of modernity*. Ultimately the authors claims, following Bruno Latour, that we must take into consideration the fact the Romanian films have never been modern, since the never-ending search for the impulses of modernity makes them forever non-modern moderns. Also, paraphrasing Habermas, this paper understands modernity as an eternally unfinished project.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics, modern cinema, modernist, modernity, modernism, Romanian cinema.

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In 2022 the majority of the Gopo film awards, the most important accolades offered by Romanian film industry, were bestowed upon Cristi Puiu's costume drama *Malmkrog* (2019). The movie won almost all categories, from best director to best cinematography, best main actors, best screenplay, best scenography, best make-up, best sound, best editing, best costumes. Twenty years after the same filmmaker made his remarkable debut with *Stuff and Dough* (2001), a realistic depiction of post-socialist Romania, Puiu was once more recognized as the most appreciated creator in contemporary Romanian cinema.

Nevertheless, the fact that his movie making practices remain widely appreciated presents the film critics with a difficult task. In order to evaluate his particular mode of cinema making, which influenced an entire generation, several concepts were proposed. Yet a terminological consensus was never attained. Much like the debate about the labelling of the movies made by the new generation of filmmakers in Romania after 2000, which were called either a "new cinema" or a "New Wave" (see more in Pop 2014), there is another terminological confusions between some other notions widely used: *modern*, *modernist*, *modernism*. Since in my previous studies (Pop 2020) I overviewed the discussions about the conceptual framework of Romanian film criticism, here I will focus on the problems derived from the efforts to define the national film productions as *modern cinema* or *modernist films*. The instability of the terms derives from larger issues, most of them afflicting film theory in general, due to the changeable nature of the concepts themselves in literary theory and art criticism.

This discussion must take us back to an older conceptual debate, which is not easily resolved, with *Malmkrog* showcasing a quick and suggestive clarification. At a first glance this production can be easily categorized as a *modern film*, since it deals with several issues related to modern existence. On one hand, as it is placed in a key historical moment, representative for *modernity*, the beginning of the 20th century, the film also qualifies as modern. Being an adaptation of a Russian philosopher's work, Vladimir Solovyov's text entitled "Three Dialogues: War, Progress and the End of World History with a Brief Tale of the Anti-Christ", published in 1900, it becomes intrinsically linked to *modern philosophy*. On the other hand, cinematographically speaking, the images created by Tudor Panduru have an intrinsic *modernist* dimension, they provide the viewers with a Resnais-like sensation. Supported by a minimalist mise-en-scène and the highly staged interations between strange and eerie characters, the Romanian moviemaker uses a more traditional approach, thus challenging our expectations. This philosophically elaborate film, which brings reference to tragical contemporary events, providing the viewers with a profound context for philosophising and self-reflection is abandoning the typical techniques of the post-neorealist discourse, so typical for recent Romanian films. Inspired the dialogue about the "Anti-Christ", it is also anti-modern and it raises complex questions about the relationship between the *modernist* dimensions of Romanian cinema, its *modernity* and the *modern* relevance of such creations.

## Modernity and the problems of modern man

As noted before, the terminological confusions between these three notions (modern, modernity, modernism) brings subsequently more tensions between various pairs of concepts, such as between modern and modernism, between modernist and modernity, which are a constant source of misunderstanding in art criticism, in literary theory and, by extension, in film studies. The plethora of works dealing with these subjects cannot provide the necessary conceptual agreement, since there is no consensus about the simplest chronological evaluation.

When is the beginning of *modernity*? Does it start with the Renaissance, as claimed by Jakob Burckhardt (1914), or should we link modernity with the Enlightenment project (Habermas 1980/1992)? Some theorists have even rejected the validity of considering modernity as a historical category, with Berman (1982) famously calling it “an experience” rather than a period in the Hegelian sense of a chronological divide between Ancient, Medieval and Modern times. Habermas, also noted the dialectical nature of the modern project, the tension between the “societal modernization” and the “cultural modernity”, as the German philosopher properly observed how anti-modern tendencies are inherently incorporated in modernity.

We cannot even establish when does modernity begin in history, nor can we say exactly when modernity is accomplished, or even if it is over since many have claimed we have entered a postmodern world. One solution could be to adopt Frank Kermode’s (1968) proposed understanding of modernisms multiplicities, accepting the chronological separation between various moments of modernity, the “paleo-modernist”, the “neo-modernists” after WWII, and the “postmoderns” today dividing the timeline. Such separations are complicated by the use of other competing terms, like high modernism, metamodern, or post-postmodernism, which are adding to the problems already at hand. It is not the point here to establish an even nuanced perspective about the various stages of the modern age, this would bring more complications in an the already complex debate.

An added problem with tracing the exact genealogy of concepts such as modernist or modernism, which is always a highly dubitable attempt, is presented by the efforts to define modernity from a political point of view. By putting the “when” of the intellectual paradigm of modernity behind, it would seem that we can describe the “how” of modern society. Some authors have suggested that, because we cannot understand modernity in chronological order, we must use political terms. The apparition of the modern states and the modern institutions provides sufficient proofs that modernity exists or is at work. Linking *modernity* with *modernisation*, these theories are predominant in social sciences. In some cases, as it was for Eastern Europe the *ideology of modernity* was transformed into a *revolutionary modernity*, driven by the forces of Soviet communism. When linked with the development of Western

bourgeoisie, *modernity* can be understood as a historical period linked with Westernization, industrialization and urbanization, easily traceable back to the first industrial revolution in England during the middle of the 18th century. Thus by *modernity* historians describe a larger phenomenon, one that made possible *modern* life and society, and which encompasses all other manifestation of modern expression, including *modernist* aesthetics and *modernism* as a worldview (see Fig. 1). Modernized and industrialized societies were characterized by an accelerated urbanization, which in turn brought alienation and an inherently negative experience, one that is specific to the “modern man”. As humorously illustrated by the famous Charlie Chaplin scene in *Modern Times* (1936), in modern societies man becomes a cog in a machine, the rhythms of modern existence are governed by mechanisms that transform our nature, even threatening to destroy our humanity.

If we understand the *modern* as linked with the notion of *Jetztzeit*, as used by Walter Benjamin, the unavoidable presentation of the “now”, of actuality makes the definition of modernity similar with contemporaneity. While we can describe some of the Romanian films as “contemporary films”, as they present issues strongly related to the present time (unemployment, prostitution, domestic violence and so on), they are not *modern* nor *modernist* only due to their narratives. Some topics are no longer “contemporary”, while they maintain their intrinsic modernity.

### Modernity and Modernism in Romanian culture and society

Here we are confronted with a first inflexion point, particularly relevant in the case of Romania society, with profound relevance in cinematic production. The modernization of our society went through a long process of transformation, the modernising efforts began even before the creation of the modern Romanian state, as the local Wallachian and Moldavian elites were gradually adopting Western habits and slowly abandoning their Oriental clothes and behaviors. This political modernization of Romania, as pointed out by historian Neagu Djuvara (1995) who painstakingly reviewed this transformation, has met a lot of resistance from several institutions, including the Orthodox Church. As the wide modernising processes were affecting not only our political institutions, but also Romanian writing, language, literature and culture, after the birth of the “modern Romania” in 1859, the country went through several “modernisations”. From Alexandru Ioan Cuza, who was the first to introduce a systematic program of modernising the administration and the army, to president Traian Băsescu, who was invested in 2009 with his own project for modernisation, Romania was a country of continuously failing modernisations. The 2007 integration in the European Union represents only the most recent attempt to bring into modernity a society marked by an ingrained backwardness.

How modern is contemporary Romania, two centuries after the creation of the modern state in 1859 when the first united Romanian principalities were created? In 2020, according to the data provided by the World Bank, the rural population of Romania was still at 45.81%. By comparison, using the official Eurostat data, within the EU-28 the rural population represented only 22.8%, and in countries like the Netherlands only 14.7% of the people were living in rural areas, many of these “rural” areas more urban than many Romanian so-called towns. When looking at other development indicators, Romania has a more terrible lagging behind record. Almost 40,4% of the rural population is in a high risk of poverty, with 29.0% living in severe material deprivation.

Even with the great industrial “leap forward” initiated by the socialist authorities, which created a profound demographic transformation, this process of industrial modernization was slow and difficult. The 1930 census indicated that 79,8% of people lived in rural communities, and these disparities persisted as in 1985, after decades of coerced industrialization, only 50% of Romanians lived in urban communities. Confronted with the slow modernization and urbanization, in March 1988 Nicolae Ceaușescu announced an even more aggressive plan, designed to reduce the number of villages, with an estimated a reduction from 10.000 to about 6.000, which was anticipated to happen by 1995. Socialist planners were also envisioning that the number of cities in Romania would double by 1990.

Clearly these projects were never accomplished, nor finished. After two decades of accelerated “systematization” of the Romanian villages, which meant imposing a radical plan of forced urbanization, demolitions, relocations, coerced migration and resettlements, our society was still largely rural and *non-modern*. The resistance to modernisation took a more radical political turn, as it became a propaganda tool against the socialist regime of Ceaușescu. Foreign media, including the “brotherly” Hungarian newspapers and journalists, denounced the Romanian leader as a destroyer of traditions, his actions comparable only to Hiroshima, as LA Times used the label “Ceushima” (Gillette 1985). French journalist Josy Dublié made an widely distributed film entitled „Roumanie: Le désastre rouge” (Romania, the Red Disaster), among other things accusing the regime of indiscriminate bulldozing of villages and monuments. After the screening of this propaganda documentary, in Bruxelles a special NGO was created, called “Opération Villages roumains”, with the declared purpose of defending the Romanian villages. By March 1989 the “systematization” of the villages became a political instrument against the Ceaușescu regime, and the famous “Letter of the six” dissidents included it as an accusatory denunciation of the abuse on society.

In cinematic terms this meant that the divide between the urban and the rural remained a constant issue. This is a phenomenon which is relatively ignored by film critics, as there is a strong *rural inclination* in Romanian cinema, which can be considered a *rural cinema*. Many movies were representing the life of peasants and the village existence in a positive way, as peasant life remains integral to our collective imaginary. Even a production like *The Stone*

*Wedding* (1973), labelled by many as “modernist”, acquired by the New York Modern Art Museum, is profoundly *rural* in its visual and narrative structure. In fact the most popular film of all times in Romanian remains *Uncle Marin, the Billionaire* (1979) with more than 14.6 millions of spectators, centered around a popular comedic character, a peasant from Oltenia who goes on a vacation at a Black Sea resort and enters a series of misadventures involving an American billionaire. Following the success such popular figures such as *Păcală* (1974), directed by Geo Saizescu, also reaching more than 14 million viewers, the interest for rural characters contrasting urban storytelling and city life, marks the formation of the Romanian “modern” cinema.

When watching the recent Romanian films, it might seem that our society is relatively modern and moderately *cosmopolitan*. Unlike many movies made during socialism, when rural spaces were also depicted, the majority of the Romanian movies made after 2000 are placed in urban environments, which could be indicative for the modernisation of the nation. However this urbanity is uncertain and our modernity is vague or “uncertain”, as some film critics have observed. The fundamental intellectual paradigms of modernism, such as ambiguity or irony, are present in many films, but often the characters lack a certain “modernness” to their overall atmosphere. Cristian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* (2012) provides a relevant example for this double nature of representations, with many characters living between the urban and rural lifestyles.

### Modernity as attitude and the modernist paradigm

A major problem comes from the alternative attempt to distinguish the components of *aesthetic modernity*, a debate which brings added confusions when applied to film theory. In the history of art, *modernity* begins with Édouard Manet, who is considered to be the first truly “modern painter”, with his provocative “Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe” (1863), presented at the “Salon des Refusés” and then rejected by the established order, providing an example for how the provocation of the antiquated structures of representation can be used a pathway to *modernism*. Using this work of art as signpost, many have concluded that, in order to be a *modern* artist, it suffices for a creator to embrace the newest forms of expression, to promote new techniques and materials, to use new subjects and approaches or narrative forms, to make way for new technologies which are allowing a structural revival of the art itself.

Modernity, as Foucault (1984) claimed, is not only an epoch, but also an “attitude”, a “mode” of interpreting reality. Using the example of Baudelaire, Foucault identified several traits of modernity - the need for novelty and the breaking with traditions, an ambiguous relationship with reality, a special relationship with oneself, and all made possible in art. Foucault follows the explanations of Baudelaire about the modern man, characterized by

the need of “producing himself”, to always question his own existence, to be the creator of his own identity. Of course, Baudelaire (1893) envisioned an uncertain modernity, as an “unidentifiable something”, characterised by “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent”. Baudelaire’s modernity (*modernité*) was a creation of the modern life, taking place in modern and urban contexts, architecturally and structurally determined by an anxiety of urbanity, driven by an uncontrollable alienation.

In literature, the modern novel was linked with this tendency to innovate and transform the modes of expression of the craft. A controversial apparition, that of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), was considered to be a model for the *modernist paradigm*, although some critics claim that the birth of *modernism* must be considered the publication of Charles Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). Virginia Woolf, in “Modern Fiction” (1925), used Joyce to identify the qualities of modern novels by pinpointing to the ability to bring closeness to life and the deep sincerity, with the sordid yet veridic representations which can take the readers into the “dark places” of the human soul. The *modernists* practiced various forms of innovation are often described by other literary critics as “high modernists”, as their revisions of the norms and practices, the contesting of conventions and breaking the rules are coherent with a particular group. Leonard Diepeveen (2003) describes them as “difficult modernists”, practicing purposefully difficulty as an option.

Many of these traits, easily identifiable in several Romanian contemporary films, makes the identification of such productions as *modernist*. The broad discontent of modern artists and writers with the traditions of their craft, the inherent criticism of traditions and the rejection of existing authorities is clearly present in the toolbox of our cinemamakers. Nevertheless, we must ask if this provides sufficient explanations for separating modernity and modernism in the national cinema. Could it be not enough characterize a filmmaker as modernist by simply contesting the traditions, or are they only “good moderns” by doing so.

The questions related to these concepts have been widely debated in the Romanian public sphere for a long time. Literary and cultural critic Adrian Marino (1969) published a seminal study on the relationship between “modern, modernism and modernity” and one of the most cited books internationally related to these topics was written by a Romanian literary critic, Matei Călinescu (1987), who emigrated to the US in 1977. Both authors insist on the connection between *modern*, which is in its most basic and etymological meaning linked to “newness”, as “modernus” was used as a label for everything which was recent, different from the past, opposing everything considered to be outdated, and modernist. This broad definition makes everything *modern*, any attempt to bring originality and introduction of fresh ideas and practices qualifies as such. Matei Călinescu also traces the history of the key concepts (“modern”, “modernity”, “modernism” or “modernist”) and identifies “two bitterly conflicting” modernities (7) — an *aesthetic modernity* (which includes all the avant-gardes, decadent art and even the kitsch) and a *bourgeois modernity*.

This expansion allows, in its broadest sense, to describe as *modernist* any work of art going against traditions, either by refusing the existing practices, or by destructing (as the Dadaists did), possibly by displacing (as it was for the early Modernists), the techniques and artistic practices. To be *modernistic* means to explore radical experiments, both in art and in literature. Thus, according with its earliest uses in the Latin literature and philosophy, the notion of modern is linked with the novelty, the total opposition to antiquated ideas, so, by extension, to be anti-modern means to oppose innovation and reject any upheaval.

In film theory the consequence of defining an *aesthetic modernism* meant that various European New Waves, of which the Romanian cinema was a late addition, were quick to be described as *modernist*. The seminal work of András Bálint Kovács (2007) advanced the main arguments for this connection. Based on an analysis of selected movies from the filmography of Antonioni or Bresson, the Hungarian film theorist presented the composite notion of “modern art cinema”. *Modernism* was defined by Kovács as a “style”, characterized by minimalism, various *cinéma vérité* practices, auteurism and post-neorealism. These notions were then quickly integrated in the debate about contemporary Romanian cinema. Unfortunately such concepts borrowed from art history and theory and exported into film theory are counterproductive. Among these is “minimalism”, which is integral to the modernist movements in art. It allowed labelling the Romanian filmmakers after 2000 as “minimalists”, since some critics considered that their use of the “minimal” resources available in the national film industry makes them a cinematic version for the reduction to essences practiced in arts. Obviously there is no comparable “minimalism” in cinema with the abstract art of Sol LeWitt, for instance.

As illustrated by the first international book about the national film industry, written by Dominique Nasta (2013), these concepts were adopted in the interpretation of Romanian films. Movies like Ciulei’s adaptation *The Forrest of the Hanged* (1965) was “modernist” due to its editing discontinuity, but also Pintilie’s *Sunday at Six* (1966) is considered to be “highly modernist” even “the harbinger of a new tendency” since modernism was missing from the cinema in Soviet countries and this film was a “goodbye to the Stalinist heritage” (Nasta 88). Nasta continued to support this thesis in other works (2019), suggesting the continuity of a presumed “Romanian modernism”, even the existence of a cinematic “common genome”, linking modern auteurs like Ciulei and Pintilie, with latecomers like Cristian Mungiu or Radu Muntean. The chronological evolution of the national cinema, however, contradicts such assumptions. For example Ciulei’s black and white adaptation predates Pintilie’s metacinematic work, thus the this “tendency” was already present in Romanian cinema. Nasta also freely uses notions such as postmodern, attributing its characteristics to several movies made by Pintilie, Daneliuc or Caranfil, by identifying any self-reflexive scenes as relevant proof.

Relevantly enough, Kovács himself never mentioned any Romanian films as relevant for his hypothesis, while he is copiously referring to Hungarian authors such as Miklós Jancsó,

who is even described as an “astounding” example for modernist cinema, his arguments make difficult the evaluation of Romanian cinema. Here I must confess a special sense of indignation, amplified when reading more recent books about cinema, such as *The Routledge companion to European cinema*, edited by Gábor Gergely and Susan Hayward (2022) which contain no chapters dedicated to Romanian cinema, treaded as if it did not exist, even by now there are many contributions in the field today which deal with these films.

Perhapes Romanian cinema is for some only a marginal component of European cinema, but in film criticism the relative relaxation used by Kovács when interpreting movies, characterized by the free and interchangeability of concepts such as “modernist” and “modern cinema” is always prone to confusions. Broadly speaking, in the evolution of Romanian filmmaking, productions such as *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* or *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* could be expressions of a *modern cinema*, we can also identify them as *modernist* films, or manifestations of *modernism*, they are also depictions of *modernity* and *modern life*, examples of social and aesthetic *modernization*, yet they barely be compared with adaptations of modern prose, such as *The Forrest of the Hanged* (1965).

In fact we must blame Deleuze who, in is influential *Cinema 2* (213), single-handedly invented a dichotomy between the cinema of “movement-image” and the “time-image” cinema (represented by Resnais or Godard). The dichotomy became a separation between classic cinema, understood as American action films, and modern cinema, understood as artistic and European films, a presupposition is obviously contradicted by many independent American productions. Many critics have adhered to this linkage between modern cinema and the “time” paradigm, and by following Deleuze are intepreting the modern cinema as opposed to the “classic” cinema, narrowly any “American” film. So the filmmakers that are practicing a “modern style”, by this understanding long cuts and long takes, or the “irrational cuts” (in the Deleuzean terminology) or those who explore cinema’s ability to express the “undecidable”, become “modern” and “modernists”. This hypothesis was corroborated with Stanley Cavell’s (1981) suggestions about the “ontology of films”, which have the capacity to provided ideas into the minds of the spectators through cinematic experiences, which provides films with the quintessential qualities of “modern art” (14).

Undoubtedly, as argued by Thomas Elsässer (2019), who always supported the idea that European cinema has its own characteristics, the “modernist turn” in filmmaking, based on self-reference and distanciation (Elsässer 4–5) represents a proclivity to philosophise characteristic both to European cinema and thinking, a trend explicit in the natural reflexivity practiced by moviemakers like Antonioni or Rosellini.

For Hamish Ford (2012) who is properly identifying the traits of modernist cinema with the ambivalent nature of the European movies of the 1960s, there are several paradigms that link modernist cinema and contemporary European philosophy. The “post-war” philosophy, connected with Nietzschean nihilism, brings up the suffering of the “modern man” who

is a product of “modern ideas”. Ford is overviewing a group of four “exemplary” feature films (*L’eclisse*, *Last Year in Marienbad*, *Persona* and *Two and Three Things I Know About Her*) showcasing how these “philosophical films” embody a criticism of post-war modern society. Ford’s examples from the perfect quads, composed of the four “kings of cinema” (Antonioni, Bergman, Godard, and Resnais) is also exposing the limitations of modernism in a similar fashion with Alain Bonfand’s explanations about the cinema of Antonioni (2003). Observing that the transcendental dynamics of Antonioni’s characters are driven by anxiety, which is allowing the protagonist to glide from reality into an experience that belongs to a “transcendental ego” (Bonfand 109), these films are presenting us with an ambivalence (and pessimism).

The uncertainty and undecidability of modern films seem to validate the argument advanced among others by Strausz (2017), who is reasoning that hesitation and instability are specific for Romanian films, a traits he convincingly overviewing as part of the profoundly modern identity of the national cinema. The “modernist hesitation can be identified in the unstable representations of the social self, which is coupled with cinematic techniques that are specific for the stylistics of the “New Romanian Cinema”, in turn deeply linked with the traumatic experiences of the Romanian society. The Hungarian critic considers that this “local form of modernism”, which comes with its own “spatial practices”, identified as “the hesitant imaginations of space”, is driven by hesitation, understood as a type of vagueness having cultural-historical resources. Even if the representational vagueness in contemporary Romanian films could be related to the modernist dimensions of the cinema practiced by Antonioni for example, the “postcolonial” dimensions of hesitation in these films elude understanding.

Instead I would attribute this to an indeterminacy, which is easily mistaken for hesitancy or instability, and which is explained by Bauman (2000) with the notion of “liquid modernity”. The term, also used by Umberto Eco (2017) as “liquid society”, covers a wide variety of phenomena specific for the practices of late modernity. In cinema the characteristics of this “light modernity”, such as indignation and incoherence, helps the movie directors, who are often also screenwriters and sometimes even actors, to purposefully ask unanswerable questions, leaving the viewers guessing for the true nature of events or relationships. By sharing absurdist interactions, as Cristi Puiu does in his movies, the story induce an instability of meanings, making them part of what can be only described as the *metaphysics of modernity*, a notion on which I will elaborate later.

## Cinema and the machines of modernity

Undeniably, cinema is a manifestation of modernity, as filmmaking is the biproduct of the most representative technologies of modern times. In one of the most suggestive explanations, proposed by Martin Jay (1988), modernity has created a particular “scopic regime” that function as a coherent ocular centric civilization, part of a mechanised and dispassionate way of seeing reality. Cinema was from the very beginning an industrialized form of creating meanings, a machine of producing images, and a mass productivity machine designed for the production and consumption of significations. There is a vast literature on the links between the technologies of film and modern existence. Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (1995), among others, underline the link between the modern displacement of time and space, to the human experience provided by the automatization of sensations made possible by film, who are detaching us from any authentic living. This view comes with a great confidence that the forms of expression made possible by cinema are able to generate a mode of understanding which is fundamentally modern. Once more, this idea is found in a famous reference from *Cinema 2*, where Deleuze expresses his confidence that “modern cinema” has the capacity of to restore “our belief in the world” (172). In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) further linked the modern machines with the filmic machine, with cinema considered to be one of the “worldwide ecumenical machines”, able to generate the “modern psyche”. When Kierkegaard is presented as a “precursor of cinema” (Deleuze and Guattari 281), filmmakers (together with painters or musicians) are now the philosophers of the modern time.

More importantly, I would disagree with Larry Witham (2013), who claimed that “the battle for the soul of modern art” was over. The struggle between Duchamp and Picasso was not lost when Duchamp gave up painting, confronted with the competition of cinema. This conflict, dating back to the dawn of the twentieth-century art and culture, was never been fully resolved and cannot be resolved.

While accepting that cinema is a creation of modernity, this does not make any movie automatically *modern*, nor for that matter *modernist*. At best it indicates the “polymorphous” nature of the term (Latham Rogers 2015), with the concept itself constantly shapeshifting and incorporating various meanings. For Latham and Rogers (3) “modernism” simultaneously means very much and in very little, and is able to include everything from early modern experiments to postmodernism and the new modernisms today. Modernist cinema includes Chantal Akerman’s experiments in slowness and Maya Deren’s experiments, but also realist productions such as *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), directed by Vittorio De Sica.

The instability of these terminological battles was transferred into the language of film theory, together with the observations of André Bazin. Bazin’s definitions on cinematic realism remain influential and his ideas are easily understood by many first year students in

cinema studies. Yet the notion that Romanian filmmakers after 2000 are somehow using “bazinism” and the use of an implicit ontological link between cinema and photographic realism is simplistic. While Bazin remains an important film critic, his career was limited to the movies made during the 1940s and 1950s, thus when explaining movies made during the 21st Century through the lenses of a theory created 50 years before is obsolete, to say the least. While he was the co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the most important film journal that later promoted the French “Nouvelle vague”, Bazin never saw any films made by the new French filmmakers. In fact Truffaut’s feature film *400 Blows* (1959) was screened a year after the death of the film critic and by 1953 grandiose color films like “The Robe” were conquering the big screens of the world, while Bazin was still discussing about color in cinema in terms of painting.

My suggestions (Pop 2018) is to consider “bazinism” a modality which provides the viewer with a cinematic experience based on authenticity. Brian Henderson (1972) previously pointed out that the interpretation of the “photographic nature” of film is outdated. Even Bazin’s seminal paper about “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), first translated into English by Hugh Gray for *Film Quarterly* in 1960 is a relatively short piece. More importantly, the vision about modernism, which Bazin related to modern painting is following a narrow understanding, considering that photography, and by extension cinema, are only gratifying the “obsession” for realism of Western civilization.

### The unresolved issues Romanian modernism

This confusion can be traced back to the most important Romanian film critic and enthusiastic supporter of the new generation of filmmakers, Alex Leo Șerban. Șerban (2010), who coined several famous aphorisms about the new generation of filmmakers, among them the split in the history of Romanian cinema between two chronological “orders”, published a 2010 article in the special issue of *Film Criticism* where he tried to deal with the same incertitudes.

These inconsistencies were later recovered by many authors and were used, naturally, by many of Șerban’s young disciples populating the Art and Cinema University in Bucharest. His formulation indicate a basic insecurity even in terms of the precise chronology. He proposed at least two timeframes, one which he called BCP, the “before Cristi Puiu” era, and “AM” (Anno Mungii), that is any movie made after Cristian Mungiu’s award with the grand prize at Cannes in 2007 for *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. In any case, he considered that the was a so-called “New Romanian Cinema”, which must be understood as a manifestation of the 21st century, as it began surreptitiously with the first year of the new millenium, hence the Annus Mirabilis 2001, when the relatively unknown Cristi Puiu directed *Stuff*

*and Dough* (Marfa și banii) made his debut. Such a chronological division of the Romanian cinema “before and after” Cristi Puiu needs to be taken with a grain of salt, as are many of Șerban’s spectacular evaluations. Yet the consequence of this distinction between the “BCP-films”, with their inherent minimalism and overt predisposition for realism, and the movies made decades before Cristi Puiu, is noxious and definitely not exact.

More importantly Șerban also enounced another aporia: “Romanian cinema has always been *contemporary*, but it has been *modern* only since 1965 and not always afterwards”. By trying to introduce a division between “contemporary”, “modern” and “classic”, a group where this highly talented film critic included *The Forrest of the Hanged* (1965), he also intuitively realized that there was a rift in the Romanian “filmic modernity”. On one hand there are clearly some “traditional films”, including most of the adaptations made after famous literary works, which are basically *modern* creations — with Rebreanu’s novels obviously belonging to the modern literary canon. No matter how much some would try to connect the black and white aesthetics brought by cinematographer Ovidiu Gologan in Ciulei’s masterpiece, with its expressionist depth, to the visuality of the New Wave cinema, the comparison fails. Yet from here on the arguments become even more confusing, the Romanian critic mixes Antonioni and Bergman, Buñuel and Robert Montgomery, Godard and Alain Resnais, without explaining how do they connect with the aforementioned productions or with those made by Pintilie and Tatos. Also, the Romanian New Wave films (which Șerban calls neorealist) are characterized by “small budget, hand-held camera”, but also by “simple stories”, thus being both “modernist” and “traditional”.

Another issue, carefully avoided by Șerban and then by many other interpreters of the Romanian recent cinema, is the difference between *modern* and *postmodern* films and the absence of postmodern approaches in the national cinema. With the exception of Nae Caranfil’s *6,9 on the Richter Scale* (2016), *postmodernism* is more an absence than a reality in Romanian cinema. A few ironic hints here and there cannot accumulate in the category of the pastiche, described by Jameson (1991) as integral to the “logic of postmodernism”. In fact this more than a minor question, why Romanian cinema never made its transition from modernism to postmodernism, or even metamodernism? As Josephson-Storm (2021) describes *metamodernism*, this is a movement and an artistic effort designed to solve the tensions between modernism and postmodernism. In fact all the cultural elements that would have made possible the orientation towards such an “exaggerated reality”, perhaps close to those in the works of American filmmaker Wes Anderson, were available. Yet neither postmodernism, nor metamodernism, ever got any attention among the Romanian cinematic experiments. Parody and ironic formalism remained relatively unused. The attractive aesthetics that Kim Wilkins (2019) identified as an “eccentric cinema”, practiced by authors such as Charlie Kaufman or Spike Jonze, is favoring a self-reflexive mode of expression, and many meta-cinematic narration forms, defineable as metamodernist,

could bring new dimensions to a stale and comfortable realism. The “New Sincerity” of the metamodern approaches and its inclination towards introspection and nostalgia could have been an evolutionary step in Romanian film industry. Yet, just as it was the case with postmodernism, Romanian filmmakers remained “traditionally modern”.

With some film critics (Nasta 96) use the practices of self-referentiality and the occasional irony used by the Romanian directors, other (Stojanova and Duma (2012) properly observe that irony in these films must be considered rather a manifestation of modernity and not of postmodernity. Once more, we are faced with the same incertitude, which for my understanding is integral to our modernism itself.

Some theorists, like Ágnes Pethő (2019), narrowly identify as “modernist practices” any forms of authorial reflexivity. It would be too easy to pinpoint such a recurrent trait as a qualified trait for the Romanian films as “*modern*”. Pintilie’s *The Reconstruction* (1968), often used as a base model for the implied *modernist* dimension of the Romanian cinema, has to be described more properly as a metanarrative film, since it is lacking the deep self-reflexivity which characterizes for example Mircea Daneliuc’s *Microphone Test* (1980) or the remarkable *Sequences* (1982), later directed by Alexandru Tatos. To consider reflexivity and self-reflexivity as a main indicator for *modernism* is rather simplistic. Movies like *The Reconstruction* or *Sequences* (1982) might seem to qualify as “modern”, yet when we compare them, they do not even belong to the same paradigm. The trope of “the cinema mirror” and the conscious self-reflexivity about the camera capturing reality, the handling of the modern subject and subjectivity are not absolute traits.

Thus, if for some interpreters of Romanian cinema to be *modernist* it means to be self-conscious and to use self-exploration and self-reflection, such markers of modernism could be expandable in absurd situation. By this standard the famous “Arnolfini Portrait” painted by Jan van Eyck in 1434 could qualify as *modernist*, and any *pre-modern* becomes more modern than the moderns. To add to the confusion, *aesthetic modernism* includes various currents and styles, from Futurism to Surrealism and Dadaism, each innovative practice could become an evidence to validate the modernist hypothesis.

Also, there is a long standing pejorative meaning for anything “modernist”, as famously proscribed by Pope Pius IX, who declared in his 1907 encyclical called “*Pascendi Dominici gregis*”, that religious liberty and “popular government” were diabolical and that modernism was evil as it brought together “all the heresies” which were leading humanity towards the annihilation of all religion. For the anti-modernist Pope, modernism was a dangerous doctrine, promising the creation of a “modern soul” and a new “modern civilization”.

### Stroboscopic observations for the *metaphysics of modernity*

My key assumption is that Romanian cinema indicates that the *modernist* project remains an unfinished aesthetic effort and that modernity is an incomplete political effort. This is why postmodernism is almost inexistent in Romanian cinema, while hipermodernism or metamodernism are also totally absent, unlike in other national cinemas from the region, such as the Hungarian or Serbian film industries. Unlike its neighbouring counterparts, the majority of productions created by Romanian film industry are deeply realistic and desperately anchored in actuality. One cannot avoid also asking why our moviemakers avoid surrealism and have no appetite for the avant-garde.

The answer is that this cinema is based on a particular metaphysics, a special form of understanding that goes beyond the aesthetic and political dimensions. As Berman (5) suggested, modern humans have created modernism in an effort to deal with the pressures of modernisation and generally by modern existence. To be a modern being is a difficult task, as our identities and subjectivities are often annihilated. The modern world becomes incomprehensible and impossible to handle, and realist cinema, either in its neorealist or cinema verité dimensions, helps us with the greater problems of being modern beings.

To be modern is both an ethical problem and an aesthetic option, which comes from a social and political inclination, in turn manifested into a type of discourse and experience that is best illustrated by this cinema. Thinking the world and interpreting the world as reality, questioning modern morality and ethics, confronting the structure of our inner selves as creatures of modern times, filmmakers like Puiu and other fellow cinematic moralists are *metaphysicians of modernity*. Although metaphysics is often considered to be an expression of pre-modern philosophy, a preoccupation good for Aristotle or perhaps Kant, as I tried to describe more thoroughly in another work (Pop 2022) cinema can be a powerful thinking machine with cognitive properties reaching beyond the traditional philosophical discourse.

Some philosophers (Steinvorth 2013) understand metaphysics as an older framework of thinking specific to the European world, cinema is a relatively recent instrument which provides us with an unprecedented access to levels of consciousness otherwise inaccessible. It is a machine we need in order to understand modern existence and to find meanings in a modern world, which often refuses meaningfulness. This machine provides possible answers that might be found in the metaphysical functions of cinema alone, among which some Romanian films stand out.

Many film critics had this intuition, for example Dudley Andrew (2016) noted that Romanian movies allow us to philosophise about life. Using as an example Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, Andrew observes here an illustration for the existentialist dimension of the Romanian author, who presents the viewers with meditations about life and death, with ideas about human nature, which are considered to be manifestations of the

“force of modern cinema”. This could give the wrong impression that every moral story in movies makes cinema a “modern” device. Some Romanian viewers and critics have questioned if these movies are uncovering our “true self” or discover our identity, critically denounced them as negative representations which make us “look bad”. But cinematic narratives such as 4 months... are part of a more complex cultural inclination that predisposes to self exploration. There is a strange liquidity in these films, a fluidity manifested in the “liquefaction” of everything which seems to be stable, from identities to storyline or meanings. Like the city spaces from Romanian recent films, which are fundamentally non-identifiable spaces, the absence of stable configurations allows the experience of a liquid modern self capable of crossing over the limitations of time and context.

As Bruno Latour (1993) famously quipped, I would suggest that only those Romanian films which have never been truly modern are actually modern. Furthermore, because the modern world never happens outside the movies, and it was from its very beginnings profoundly linked to the cinematic experience, the only real experience of modernity, which is both painful and pleasurable, is fully lived in the immersive relationship with the screen. The unique space and time where the two halves of the modern fully coexist is cinema. Cinema makes us **non-modern moderns** or, as Habermas pointed out in his 1980 lecture, it gives access to a modernity which is incomplete. Ultimately modernity remains an eternally unfinished project, both in its artistic manifestations and in our way of experiencing it. Modernity is not just an era, nor modernism only a literary current and an artistic movement. Modernism is a metaphysical approach and a way of thinking made real by moviemakers. It is a cinema offering its spectators access to an experience that enables a distinct form of thinking that is distinguishable from any other form of living time space and human condition.

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