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## Romanian Diasporic Cinema. Dislocation and Paraphrastic Forms of Expression in Recent Migration Films

**Abstract:** This contribution overviews the transformations of Romanian cinema by analyzing three recent films, used as case studies for describing a larger, typological change happening in contemporary national cinema. *La Gomera (The Whistlers, 2019)* directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, *Parking (2019)*, directed by Tudor Giurgiu and *Lemonade (2019)* directed by Ioana Uricaru are united by a common denominator, the fact that they are describing the experiences of Romanians living abroad from a new and personal perspective. These films are relevant for their production qualities, since they are shot entirely or partially in a foreign country, but also for their innovative contents. They are depictions of de-localized experiences which allow the viewers to establish a special relationship with the lives of their fellow countrymen living in another country. From a film criticism perspective, these productions are relevant as they clarify the conceptual distinctions between *migration* cinema, that is films depicting the experience of migrants at home, and *diasporic* cinema, productions that represent personal stories happening in a foreign social environment. These new narratives also disclose a shift not only in the national cinematic productions, as Romanian film crews are working in international contexts and the actors are using a multilingual form of expression, but also a transformation of larger cinematic forms of expression, from the vernacular to the paraphrastic and alingual forms of filmmaking.

**Keyword:** accented cinema, alingual, diasporic, exilic, localism, migration, national, paraphrastic, transnational, vernacular.

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## Migration experiences and cinematic representations

Migration is a recurrent theme in contemporary Romanian cinema, sometimes manifested only as a subtextual reference, as in *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (*The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, 2005), where the dying old man is left alone because his daughter has emigrated to Canada; or as an overt topic, as in *Occident* (2002), the first feature film of Cristian Mungiu, who explored the tribulations of migrants preparing to leave their country. As I analyzed this phenomenon in a previous study (2014), the main argument here is that migration and marginality remain central subjects for the development of national cinema during the last three decades. This paper is a continuation of an explicative effort designed to take into account the transformations manifested in recent movie making with respect to these narratives.

One reason for reviewing my previous explanations is that a paradigm shift is made visible in three new Romanian films, all produced and screened in 2019. *La Gomera* (2019) directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, *Parking* (2019), directed by Tudor Giurgiu and *Lemonade* (2019) directed by Ioana Uricaru can be used as case studies for the changes taking shape in national cinema representations. A close interpretation of all three films shows that they have a common denominator: they are describing the experiences of Romanians living abroad, almost entirely filmed in another country, spoken in a foreign language and, an aspect in and of itself is completely new, they represent a transnational reality. In the case of *Lemonade* another shift is visible, the appearance of *diasporic moviemakers* who are overcoming the national and localized cinematic practices of recent Romanian film industry. This is the first diasporic production not simply because the moviemaker is living abroad, because the narrative is linked with the experiences of migration. They are presenting a totally new perspective, based on their personal life and exploring in depth the troubled destiny of dislocated identities.

Before moving to the particular analysis of these films, I must point out first of all that there are multiple variations of the topics related to migration in the national cinema, and that they all provide an insight into the mindset of contemporary Romanian society. My approach is based on the premise that the social issues related to migration, the characters and situations presented by moviemakers and screen players must be linked directly to a social reality external to film representations. The main research hypothesis of this study is founded on the idea that large-scale social changes always generate ample transformations in the imaginary of communities, and in turn these have representational dimensions visible in artistic, literary and, in this case, in cinematic forms.

## Conceptual and methodological issues

A methodological problem with film studies and film interpretation has always been generated by the complex relationship between cinematic representations and social meanings. With cognitive film theory contesting any *ideological relevance* of cinema,

the issues of *social relevance* are extremely disputed. Authors like Bordwell and Carroll (1996) claim that the meanings of a film are created by the spectators according to pre-existing knowledge schemes. The ability of the film critics to use cinema as an instrument of understanding society, social and political problems is reduced to the existing cognitive abilities of the viewers. Others dismiss the relevance of films because all movies are fictional works of art, creations remote from any reality. These approaches are, in turn, contradicted by those who underline the *psychological relevance* of movie characters and film situations. As claimed by the Swiss critic Hugo Mauerhofer in the 1940s, the “cinematic situations” have a psychotherapeutic function. The dramatic actions seen in a movie are exerting a similar impact on the viewers as a treatment provided by professional psychologists. Hence the following issues must be dealt with: can we use cinema as an instrument of knowing the intricacies of the human soul and psyche, or can we learn about tolerance or can we acquire desirable social behaviors if we are watching social problems on screen? Even more problematic is the *political relevance* of cinematic narratives. While some argue that movies are capable of inducing and even promoting political transformations, the visual experience provided by a film is often too brief and emotionally charged to allow the formation of political opinions. Finally, there is the *cultural relevance* question, the conflictive theories of the field are split between qualifying cinema as only a form of mass amusement and the approaches claiming that movies have the power of cultural formation going beyond entertainment.

All these questions are important since migrant and diasporic films raise political, cultural, psychological and aesthetic problems. When we are watching a movie recounting the relationship between a migrant and his family left behind, can this representation provide access to the cognitive experience, does it provide a true understanding of the existence of migrants, does the film viewer comprehend the narrative or, by witnessing tragedies and sufferings will the spectator become politically aware and reach a new ideological consciousness, in favor of the disenfranchised and the dislocated? In the case of *migration films*, the impact of the emotional arousal of the spectator resides in the narrative, as are the troubles of a migrant mother who has abandoned her child and now that child is confronting his estranged mother – as is in Florin Șerban’s remarkable story from *Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier* (*When I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*, 2010). The empathy is different in *diasporic cinema*, as the situations depicted on screen are no longer fictional, with the autobiographical level increasing the impact of films in terms of real-life experience restitution. In both cases, what can we understand about a society by simply viewing its movies?

As demonstrated by the classic study elaborated by Siegfried Kracauer (1947), who was focusing on German cinema before the installation of the Nazi regime, the meanings of films are not produced only in their storytelling, their visual expressivity or the innovative cinematic techniques. Films are recipients of a group mentality, providing the opportunity

of cultural critics to perform social diagnostics on that society. Just as the predisposition for psychological terror in Weimar cinema was anticipating the monstrous attraction of authoritarian rule and the fascination of irrationality, the permeating dominance of madness before the coming to power of the Nazi regime, was visible in plots and characters which had explanatory power beyond their aesthetic or narrative functions. A movie like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), directed by Robert Wiene, was foreshadowing the sinister political transformations of German society, with many other similar cinematic productions offering a window into the mindset leading to the establishment of the Third Reich. Narrative forms and cinematic imaginary formations are thus able to provide us with an introspection into the social imagination. As the demoniac attraction in the German films was anticipating the fascination of the social evil presented by Hitler, the presupposition here is that Romanian directors not only integrate the issues of migration and immigration in their fictional works, they are also recreating an imaginative environment in which cinematic representations mediate social traumas and disclose the structural transformations taking shape in the minds of their fellow countrymen.

When overviewing the typologies of migration that appear in contemporary Romanian films one immediate observation is that they constantly follow the structural transformations visible in the social conditions of the millions of Romanians who have spread across the world, at least during the last three decades. While under the communist regime the emigration was mostly seen as a political statement, in the early 1990s migration became determined by “economic” reasons. After 2007 other types of mobilities started shaping lives of Romanians moving across the national borders. Contemporary moviemakers were sensitive to these changes, offering the viewers access to stories of people who have left their country either in search for a better life, or for political reasons, or in an effort to change their social condition, to improve their livelihood and the lives of their families by looking for jobs. These themes related to such social movements are recurrent, and they remain present in the three films used as examples here. For instance Adrian, the Romanian poet who lives at the margins of Córdoba in *Parking* (2019) is accepting a menial employment as a night guard, while *Mara*, the nurse in *Lemonade* (2019), accepts a job as a private caregiver in the United States and hastily marries her patient, Daniel.

What is remarkable about these productions is their difference from previous films about migration. For instance, in the case of Cristian Mungiu’s *După dealuri* (*Beyond the Hills*, 2012), the trope of departure is linked with a tragic destiny, while the main character and the subsequent situations are marked by misfortune. The three films discussed here indicate a transformation of the mindset regarding migration. While characters like Alina, the young woman in Mungiu’s story about the victim of exorcism ends up dead as a result of her decision to come home and convince her girlfriend to emigrate, are often depicted as social failures, either unable to adapt back home or as victims abroad, we can now identify a

major category of narratives describing the powerfulness of migrants. In *Lemonade* Mara is facing troubles, but she is not a victim: she takes charge of her destiny and fights back. Also, unlike those films presenting the effects of coerced migration, either connected to sexual exploitation (illustrated by *Loverboy*, dir. by Cătălin Mitulescu, 2011) or linked to various criminal activities (as in *Francesca*, dir. by Bobby Păunescu, 2009) the heroin, although abused by men, refuses to complacently consider the abuse as normal.

Generally the Romanian migration movies can easily be divided into two major categories, each clearly displaying the stereotypes about migration in society. Both are expressing acknowledged attitudes towards the effects of recent massive migration, and deal with two opposing societal reactions. One is the conservative way of understanding the situation of migrants, that is considering that only “the poor” and the downtrodden leave their country as the very notion of “diaspora” is publicly connected to a negative typology. This attitude was best illustrated by a local politician, the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Ioan Rus, who in a television interview disparagingly treated his fellow countrymen working abroad, claiming that their absence is turning their children and wives into “tramps and whores” (“Ministrul Ioan Rus”). Some movies, with the distasteful recent example of *Miami Bici* (dir. by Jesus del Cerro, 2020), continue to promote these stereotypes of migrants linked to criminality and prostitution. Opposing this biased view are the integrative representations in which the migrants and migration are described more empathically. Some are pointing to the positive effect of transborder mobility, as an exercise of universal human rights. Others see it as a result of the expansion of European citizenship and its beneficial social and economic dynamics, or maybe as an experience with far-reaching consequences in improving the quality of life.

When these attitudes are translated into cinematic tropes, the various themes are repeatedly used. One of the most frequent occurrences is the disturbed family structure, together with the exploration of the effects of migration on family life and interpersonal relationships. It is not by chance that these stories appear in contemporary Romanian cinema, as they reflect directly one of the most terrible consequences of mass migration in society. According to the official statistics, more than 159,000 children in Romania are “affective orphans,” having one or both of their parents living abroad. Sometimes abandoned and raised by other relatives or effectively left behind to fend for themselves, these children are truly *migration orphans*. The data provided by the Ministry of Education shows that there is even a larger number of children in this terrible situation, with many parents leaving to work in the West as undocumented migrants (*Impactul*). In 2008, the estimates were that more than 350,000 children had migrant parents, and 126,000 had both their parents abroad. In 2018, the National Authority for Protecting the Rights of Children and Adoption (ANPDCA), estimated a lower number, with “only” 94,991 children with absent parents, out of which 63,891 having only one caregiver to raise them.

For obvious reasons, many narratives in recent Romanian films deal with the issues related to abandoned children (*Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier*, dir. by Florin Șerban, 2010), of single parents raising their children (*Dincolo de calea ferată* [By the Rails], dir. by Cătălin Mitulescu, 2016). Many other repetitive topics in Romanian migration cinema are based on such common experiences linked to migration and the dissolution of relations. By telling the story of the painful return of a family member (a mother or father, or a child and sibling), movies like *Felicia, înainte de toate* (*First of all, Felicia* 2009), where an expat Romanian woman, who is married in the Netherlands, returns home only to have an estranged relationship with her mother, or *Dincolo de calea ferată*, where a husband working as a bartender in Italy, comes back home for one night, where his wife is raising their child by herself, in a house next to a railway station, are indicative for the “diasporic family” (Berghahn, *Families* 21-22).

Many characters in these films are leading a *trans-bordered* existence, in the sense that they lead a dislocated life. Like Radu, the hero in Mitulescu’s 2016 film, they are freely crossing borderlines, and have a double existence. Perfectly adapted in his Italian workplace, Radu is trying to keep his relationships intact back home. Even if *Dincolo de calea ferată* and other similar productions are addressing the issues of trans-border mobility, they are lacking the first-hand experience of the moviemakers themselves. Unlike international authors like Asghar Farhadi, who created a type of cinema providing personal insights, the Romanian migration films remained limited to describing the perspective of emigration from a local point of view. Also, none of these films are representative of what Elssaeser identified, paraphrasing Peter Wollen, the passport-less cinema (28), where the de-centering of national cinema practices are joined by anti-narrative and neo-narrative modes of expression. While describing an “in-between” reality which Ballesteros (2015) considers a condition specific to diasporic cinema, part of the “New Europe cinema,” these films lack a cinematic aesthetics of the modernist, avant-garde in-betweenness.

### **The nomads of Europe: the stories of an emigrant-nation**

The specificity of the Romanian migration cinema remained dependent on the social foundation, which is at the core of all these films. With the Romanians constituting the new vagrant nation of Europe, with almost a quarter of the entire population now living abroad, the so-called “Romanian diaspora”, often used as a generic term in media and the discourses of the politicians, was hardly represented in films.

According to a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Romanians are the fifth largest group of migrants in the world today (“Raport International”). However, as the new coronavirus pandemic showed, more than a quarter of the “Diaspora” is in fact living without settling down in their adoptive countries. During the first days of the epidemic outburst almost 950,000 Romanians

came back home (“Între”). In a matter of days one million people have left behind their belongings and returned home, the Prime Minister of Romania estimated that 1,7 million people returned home from February 26 to June 1<sup>st</sup>. In only 24 hours, between 11 and 12 March, 107,000 people crossed the national borders, a wave of people moving fluidly from one country to another. Out of the 9,7 million Romanians living outside the national borders, 5,6 million are migrants, and the demographic catastrophe of this nation becomes explicit when compared to similar situations. Only Syria after the civil war recorded such a large depopulation in recent history, as 17% of the Romanians have left their country only in a single decade.

The massive number of Romanians leaving their country is unprecedented and the phenomenon has multiple explanations. One possible justification was that the European Union enlargement and integration offered many people the possibility of changing their lives and economic status. Official data provided by Eurostat indicate that the Romanians are today the nation with the largest number of emigrants living in other European countries, in 2018 Romania had the highest share of national immigrants in the EU. In 2019, the Romanians represented the biggest group of EU-27 citizens living in other EU-27 Member States, followed by the Polish, the Italians and the Portuguese (*Migration and Migrant Population*).

The OECD Report (2019) confirmed that the surge of Romanian migrants happened between 2007 and 2008, due to the free mobility of citizens beginning with 1 January 2007, peaking at 560,000 migrations to EU countries in a single year. This trend continued between 2009 and 2016, with 26% of the Romanians in Romania expressing their intention to leave their country in the near future.

The cultural impact of this large social transformations, its consequences on identity and the representations of self-identity remains to be understood. Clearly such a massive movement of people affected the social structure of families, with decades of familial displacement induced by migration producing effects on the personalities, behavior and social psyche. An entire generation was touched by this process and it caused profound transformations not only in the social structure, but also in the imagination of this community. Romanian society was radically transformed politically after 1989, with millions of people displaced from their homeland, not because of wars and not by coerced displacement, but in a benevolent collective action. The demographic explanations must be followed by analyzing the cultural repercussions.

The central premise of this study is that an interpretation of the representations of migration in cinema would bring important clarifications on the dynamics of the migrant culture. While my previous evaluation of the categories of migration sub-themes in Romanian cinema (Pop, *New Wave Cinema* 81-6) was comprehensive, the transformations in recent film productions makes it necessary to add a couple of new meanings. Even though

the Romanian diasporic communities were extremely large, the fact is that they were not properly represented by filmmakers, who were exploring mostly the experiences of returning migrants (*Felicia înainte de toate*, 2009; *Căinele japonez*, [*The Japanese Dog*], dir. by Jurgiu, 2013; or *Dincolo de calea ferată*, 2016). Another trait is that most often the migration experience was presented as an unhappy or even tragical, with stories about young women coerced to migrate by the international sex-trafficking (in *Cealaltă Irina*, *The Other Irene*, dir. Gruzniczki, 2009; or *Loverboy*, dir. by Mitulescu, 2011), or describing the effects on criminality (in *Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier*, 2010). Some of the narratives were focusing on the political migration stimulated by the restrictive communist regime, such as *Hawaii* (dir. del Cerro, 2017) or *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii* (dir. by Mitulescu, 2006), describing the desire to run away from one's own country motivated by ideological reasons. Last but not least, there are the burlesque and comedic representations of emigration, as in *America, venim!* (dir. by Savescu, 2014), where the derisory depictions of the transborder mobility are mocking representations of migrants.

Nevertheless, the real voices and lives of the millions of Romanians living abroad were not investigated by cinema makers, even if in literary culture there were many novels describing migration, such as Mălaicu-Hondrari or Gabriellei Adameșteanu who were offering their readers a first-hand the experience of living in another country. If the global dispersion of Romanians happening during the last decades was not represented fully in films, this situation changed in 2019, when three remarkable films were screened – *La Gomera* (2019), *Parking* (2019) and *Lemonade* (2019) indicate a change of perspective.

### Cinema and migration, a conceptual framework

A distinction between several notions created in film theory is necessary in order to account for the multitude of representations of migration and for the complex relationships described in cinema regarding the migratory experiences. Without a unified conceptualizing effort, film critics use freely various terms describing similar phenomena, which leads to confusions about the analyzed categories. Hamid Naficy (2001) proposed one of the most important distinctions between the experiences of migration, considering that exilic, diasporic and post-colonial filmmaking carried a specific aesthetics and narrative strategies disclosing a form of “accentuation,” which was identified as an *accented cinema*. Quickly embraced by postcolonial studies, the idea that films can be distinguished by their “accent,” which made their style different from the dominant cinema (23), became popular in film studies. The formula was followed by various other definitions and concepts proposed to further explain the differences within the presumed “accented” cinema. Jane Mills (2014) identified the existence of a “sojourner cinema,” while Thomas Elsaesser added the notion of “hyphenated identities” (27), suggesting that the European post-national cinema was made possible by authors with a double identity. The development of a European transnational

film culture was clearly driven by directors who had a “double occupancy,” and their quality of hyphenated Europeans (German-Turkish, like Fatih Akin or French-Magrebian, like Abdel Kechiche) was undisputable. In the post-national Europe, as argued by the regretted German film theorist, these migrant filmmakers were creating a special form of accentuation (Elsaesser 108).

Other studies continued to use the traditional conceptualization, thus using *immigration cinema* as a generic term which included the *accented*, the *diasporic*, in the same group with the *exilic* films (Ballesteros). However, as Berghahn and Sternberg (2010) pointed out properly, *migrant* and *diasporic* cinema function as distinct categories, and we need to take into account the differences between movies that only recount the experience of migration, narrations created by screenwriters and directors who never had a personal knowledge of displacement, while diasporic must be a term restricted to those filmmakers who actually went through with a personal participation of their own with migration (4). This is why I recommend using the same distinction when discussing recent Romanian films who, from a thematic and personal perspective, can be separated into *migrant cinema*, that is films containing issues related directly or indirectly to migration, and another group of films that are part of the *diasporic cinema*, with forms of expression based on a personal awareness of the directors, screenwriters or actors.

The three Romanian films used as case studies here indicate the conceptual lines along which we can establish clearer nuances between *diasporic cinema*, a cinema not only made by directors and authors actually living in a foreign country, but also their distinction from *exilic cinema*, that type of movie making practiced by authors who forcibly left their country in order to be able to practice their craft, or to express their ideas. In the history of Romanian national cinema there are several important examples of exilic artists who created films and modes of expression impregnated with political meanings, marked by the tragical or the bitter dimension of coerced dislocation. Forced to abandon their homeland, especially during the 1980s when the Ceaușescu regime became increasingly dictatorial, remarkable directors such as Lucian Pintilie or Radu Gabrea had to move abroad and were constrained to make a type of “nostalgic” cinema. For example, Radu Gabrea, after his creations were censored in Romania, emigrated to West Germany. There he worked as a television director in the 80s and his first German language feature film, *Fürchte dich nicht, Jakob!* (*Fear not Jacob*, 1981) was based on a Romanian novel written by Ion Luca Caragiale (*O făclie de Paște*, 1899). In a remarkable similarity, Lucian Pintilie, who also left Romania in 1975, returned home in 1979 only to shoot yet another adaptation of Caragiale’s play *D-ale carnavalului*, resulting in a masterpiece, *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică* (*Carnival Scenes*, 1984).

When comparing the exilic cinema, the migration films and the diasporic narratives a transformation of the cinematic forms of expression is easily observable. Romanian films moved from the vernacular filmmaking practices to complex *alingual* and *paraphrastic*

representations. These recent films are not simply presenting the problems related to immigrants or hardships of their lives, nor do they make reference to the ideological burden of displaced identity.

While some authors (e.g. Ostrowska and Rydzewska) observed properly that the Romanian New Wave cinema was “moving” the cinematic border eastwards, this push towards the East is now reversed. Many Romanian directors are shifting the location of their narratives towards the West, and this change is more than simply following a demographic tendency, with the increased number of compatriots migrating to Western Europe, it also produces a change in the modes of expression.

### Diaspora, dislocation and paraphrastic forms of representation

The distinction between exilic filmmakers, like Lucian Pintilie or Radu Gabrea, and the new generation of Romanian film directors working and living abroad is illustrated by Ioana Uricaru. *Lemonade* is a form of storytelling that is no longer located in Romania, with the references to the native country of the director less important than the authentic account of the drama of a young woman who tries to make a living across the Atlantic. As acknowledged by Uricaru in an interview (“Interview”), the emotional turmoils of a female protagonist trying to cope with a new social reality caused by her dislocation are based on autobiographical experiences.

This film about a young mother, who moves to the United States in order to work as a caregiver, by leaving her son behind, is disclosing the *paraphrastic* dimensions of diasporic cinema. The title itself is an explicit paraphrase of the typical American expression: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Here the metaphor for the bitter and sour taste of migration does not remain the central narrative of the movie, and it is not just the direct or ironic reversion of an optimistic proverb. In a critical twist, relevant for the understanding of *paraphrastic storytelling*, the “bitter pills” of life are connected to other popular culture stereotypes, with the most notorious example being Beyoncé and her 2016 album also called *Lemonade*, which is associated with the trauma of toxic relationships and of violence against women. Hence by paraphrasing the famous American expression about life and lemons, the existential lemonade that the main character is trying to squeeze out of her own life in a hostile world is in fact related to its bitter taste, which is also reflected by her name: Mara is an alliterative form of “amar”, literally meaning bitter in Romanian. The film director and co-writer of the screenplay, herself teaching cinema in the United States, has publicly admitted that she was using her own experience as a source of inspiration for creating the character, thus *Lemonade* can be considered a paraphrase for a profound autobiographical account.

The film has another paraphrastic dimension, manifested at the level of cinematographic production. Although the story takes place in the United States, the production itself is dislocated, as the entire production is shot in Canada, first and foremost for economic

reasons. Yet what Uricaru manages to do with this relocating of the visuals in Canada, is to create a paraphrastic version of all the “Western” cities. Hence the drama of the young mother trying to survive in a hostile new environment becomes a paraphrase for innumerable other similar experiences of parents leaving behind their offspring while trying to make a better life abroad, which subjects their children to immense trauma. Numerous obstacles Mara attempts to overcome, such as trying to reunite with her son, fighting to get a green card, dealing with the difficulties of adapting in a new environment, facing male abuse and institutional violence, expose what is perceived as her cultural and personal inadequacies within her new environment.

Mara leads a typical trans-bordered existence, as she is removed from the confines of her cultural, social and linguistic determinations, she leads a constant *paraphrastic* life. Because she does not fully understand her new environment, and due to the fact that the people surrounding her do not understand her, their relationships are always approximated by dislocated meanings, which often alter the real purpose of her actions and gestures. The dramatic climax of the film is indicative of this type of situation. Coerced by her American visa supervisor into an improper meeting, she leaves her son with her friend, Aniko. The off the record discussion with the green card supervisor ends up as an excuse for sexual abuse, with the man asking for sexual favors in exchange for his support, as he was under the impression that the young woman married her American patient only to get citizenship. The situation escalates and Mara is unable to get back in time to pick up her son, and this is when the local police is notified for an “Amber alert.” Somebody called in for a child abduction emergency, and Mara is completely unaware that this could happen. It is this incapacity to understand her new social reality that pushes her to constantly act out of place. Something that she would normally do at home, for example to leave her child unattended for a couple of hours, is turned into a criminal case of child abandonment in the US.

Such paraphrastic actions and gestures are recurrent in all diasporic films as paraphrasing is a form of expression most common to migrants. For example Mara, in *Lemonade*, tries to explain to her American supervisor why she is placing small cotton balls in her ears, to prevent the “draft” from entering her head, thus protecting herself from sickness. Naturally, the American man does not understand why “air” can be bad for the teeth. Such small incongruities of meanings are marking the differences between locals and migrants. In a totally paraphrastic scene from *Parking*, the migrant poet tries to explain his Spanish lover, Maria, what the summer ritual called “Sânziene” means. As he recounts the ancestral rites and superstitions, which are acted out around them, he begins to speak Romanian, although Maria does not understand a word of what he is saying. Other forms of differentiation that accentuate regional identities are foods and drinks, as is the case of the main character in *Parking*, who underlines the fact that he is from Transylvania, and he does this by offering his new Spanish friends a taste of the local alcohol called “țuică.”

This relationship between identity and the deep dependency on language, often studied in socio-cultural approaches to linguistics, becomes important in understanding diasporic cinema and national or even transnational filmmaking practices. The presence of authentic voices of the migrants, the depiction of their experiences induced by the changes of their social milieus, described by Naficy as “accentuation,” deserves a more nuanced explanation.

### *Vernacular cinema and heteroglossic filmmaking practices*

This transnational trend in Romanian filmmaking was previously discussed by many film critics, and I also overviewed this process in another work (“Transnational Turn”). I must note that there are two trends in the national film industry. One is represented by directors like Nae Caranfil, who made a movie about Stalinist Romania which was spoken entirely in English (*Closer to the Moon*, 2014), with an international casting, and designed for international audiences. The other is illustrated by the approach taken by Adina Pintilie, a young filmmaker awarded by the Golden Bear in Berlin for *Touch Me Not* (2018). With a multinational distribution including the English born, French actress Laura Benson, and Tómas Lemarquis (born in Iceland), this remarkable film was shot in multiple locations (mostly in Germany, Romania and Bulgaria). Although the actors (and the director) are speaking in English with a heavy foreign accent, the linguistic displacement is a conscious heteroglossic rather than a commercial decision, and an instance of a multi-accented narration and a cinematic mode of representation.

The notion of *heteroglossic cinema* is an expansion of the classical term elaborated in the 1930s by Mikhail Bakhtin, and published in his seminal study on modern novel writing (*Dialogic Imagination*). Expanding on the metaphor of the Tower of Babel, the Russian literary theorist suggests that a “distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre” (300) can be identified in heteroglossia. And, since modern cinema has inherited this trait from prose writing, as compellingly argued by Sergei Eisenstein among others (“Dickens”), movies are fundamentally heteroglossic art forms, mixing multiple speeches in a single medium.

While classical cinema is dominated by monoglossia, as the main language of hegemonic filmmaking has become the specific modes of expression developed by Hollywood movie making practices, the heteroglossic cinema explores new forms of movie vernaculars. Following the insights put forward by Miriam Bratu Hansen (“The Mass Production”), who used the concept of “vernacular modernism” in analyzing American classical cinema, we can identify a form of film language that is now integral part of globalization, as a bi-product of a social reality that was in turn extremely specific to the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Hollywood vernacular was countered with the re-vernacularizing productions created by the European New Wave cinemas, of which the Romanian contemporary cinema is an integral part. Thus we must not equivocate vernacular cinema as a replacement

term for national cinema. In fact quite the contrary, the vernacular describes particular characteristics, localized accents refusing the coerced coherence of dominating discourses and narratives. In other cinemas, such as the British or the Spanish, the relationship between the national and the vernacular is more easily observable, and the differences between the Scottish and the Catalan are manifested in particular filmic vernaculars.

When it comes to the Romanian national cinema, even if this phenomenon has not been analyzed or researched by film scholars, there are important differentiations, disclosing the same issues. Although some authors hastily describe as “Romanian national cinema,” a wide heterogeneity and heteroglossic film productions, that might share the same national language yet are presenting a completely different social reality. In fact a vernacular of the Romanian New Wave has been created by locally specific productions. While the purpose of this paper is not the in-depth analysis of the vernacular dimensions, the issues of vernacularity become even more relevant when dealing with recent diasporic cinema.

We must understand that, although the Romanians are typically described as a homogeneous ethnic group, they have lived for more than a millennium in separated states, with each autonomous principality belonging at some point to a different foreign empire. Thus the national cohesion, which was maintained throughout history by coagulants such as linguistic and religious identities, did not erase the natural heterogeneity of Romanian communities. The effort of nation building, which was for the last couple of centuries the most important political, social and cultural project of the Romanians, came to fruition only in late modernity. It was after 1859 when the first form of a national state was created, with two of the disparate groups of Romanians – the Moldavians and the Vallachians – coming together in a single political entity and created the “United Principalities.” The transformation of the tripartite Romanian nation into a single nation-state was completed after the First World War, when this process was accelerated by Wilsonian politics, by the pressure of international agreements and accords, when two more provinces joined the Romanian principality (with Transylvania and Bessarabia).

To briefly conclude this historical section, while the Romanian nation functions as a geographically determined and culturally similar social group, there are several identifiable differences audible in language. There is a clear separation between the major dialects of the Daco-Romanian language, and they still carry a historical distinction which makes it easy to differentiate between a Moldovan and a Transylvanian accent.

A scene from the beginning of *Parking* is illustrative for this *vernacular* dimension of diasporic cinema. Adrian, the main character of the movie, confronts a group of thieves. The members of the gang stealing from a car near his park prove to be his fellow countrymen, who are then quickly identified by their Southern accent, while the main hero is constantly identified as being “from Transylvania.” This local patriotism is later recurrent in the storytelling, as his Spanish lover, Maria, expressed her desire to visit Sângeorz-Băi,

his birthplace. In fact, both Tudor Giurgiu, the director of the movie, and Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, the screenwriter and author of the source novel of the film, are Transylvanians, and their dialectal approach to the narrative must be seen as propitious within the national context. These are not stories purposefully used as a form of local differentiation. More importantly, as indicated by Celia Applegate's study of German national identity (*Nation*), we must interpret the relationship between local and regional pride, which are integral to the formation of a larger national cohesion, as a process of vernacularization, where regionalism or local patriotism denote a special sensitivity to locality and individualization, related to smaller communities, yet restricted to the confines of the national identity. The vernacular is naturally opposed to the international or the global, yet the vernacular is also easily adaptable, with the features of this adaptability present in diasporic cinema.

*Parking* also discloses another important dimension of the diasporic approach, which is the inherent *heteroglossia*. As previously noted, this is an outstanding production because it was based on the personal experience of the screenwriter, himself a migrant in Spain for almost a decade. The novelist who co-wrote the screenplay of this production is recounting his own diasporic life experiences, thus marking the necessary distinction between the diasporic and the migration narratives. Relevantly enough, in *Parking* we are not only exposed to a typical migrant perspective. The spectators are provided a profound "diasporic optic," as Sujata Moorti suggested, with the diasporic image generated by specific cinematographic techniques. This is a mode of representation situated within the "rhetoric of the interstice" (357), a new "way of seeing" positioned in interstitial spaces, always between the national and the transnational, depicting a natural state of in-betweenness by which people in the diaspora are negotiating multiple identities (359). Moorti's compelling arguments are easily identifiable in Tudor Giurgiu's movie, as heteroglossic modes of filmic expression are explored. This is illustrated by the nostalgic flashbacks depicted in a home video style, in which Adrian reminisces his hometown in Romania. They are freely juxtaposed with similar flashbacks of the main character and his love encounters in Spain. In fact, we can describe this as a trait of the *diasporic imaginary*, which discloses a multiple articulation, a heteroglossic dimension.

It is important to point out that, when describing the various national cinemas of Europe and the world, one of the major traits separating many productions which are aesthetically similar remains their language. Often this *vernacular* dimension of movie making provides locality and identity to cinematic narratives and characters. Stories which have a transnational dimension or situations depicting similar contexts are distinguishable by their vernacularity. This is the case with Maren Ade's *Toni Erdman* (2016), the story of a German expat living and working in Bucharest, which would be indistinguishable from other typical Romanian New Wave productions without the language spoken by the main characters. The vernacular dimension of films becomes an important factor when considering recent

European cinema, transforming quickly in the larger context of European integration many national film industries are subjected to a process of transformation.

As indicated by György Kalmár, who properly notices the transformation of European filmmaking practices after the migration crisis of 2008 (“Narratives”), new narrative forms are developed dealing with otherness. Using *Morgen* (2010), a Romanian recent film as an example for the transformations happening in European cinema, Kalmár identifies as a “crisis of communication” in post-2008 film. The fact that Nelu, the Transylvanian local guard, and Behran, the confused Kurdish migrant, cannot communicate is for me an indicator of the cinematic turn from the national *vernacular* to the localized, even dialectal form of expression. The story of the Kurdish immigrant who is lost in a small border town in Western Transylvania, directed by Marian Crişan, himself born and raised in the same border community, becomes a relevant illustration of the heteroglossic dimension of cinema. In *Morgen*, the foreigner who does not speak Romanian and who is able to say only “Alemania,” in attempt of explaining that his final destination is Germany, and his ultimate purpose to reunite with his family, is in fact communicating with Nelu, the local guard of a small supermarket who speaks with a heavy Transylvanian accent. The universal language both men are using places their relationship beyond the vernacular, the national or even the transnational, while also making explicit the ability of cinema to transcend borders.

### **Bilingualism, diglossia, and the issues of polyglot cinema**

One of the biggest problems for all migrants remains their linguistic adaptation, since learning a foreign language and speaking it properly generates major mental strains and even challenges the self-identity of each person forced to abandon his or her native tongue. These tensions between national specificity and diasporic identity, are accelerated by linguistic dislocation, and they can dramatically lead to the loss of the sense of belonging or, in an intermediate phase can lead to a double identity.

In case of migrants who abandon their country, and in diasporic films describing their upheavals, maintaining linguistic identity represents one of the most important components of preserving national identity. Language, together with a geographic sense of belonging, with religious affiliation or cultural heritage, has always been an important determinant for national separateness. While the biological similarities between various peoples can be highly disputable, and political or cultural identities can be easily adopted by foreigners, a stable commonality of a national group remains their language. As indicated by the Benedict Anderson’s influential *Imagined Communities* (1983), national identity and national language were used during modernity to institutionally build the nations as we know them today. These “imagined communities” were created with massive help of the printing press and development of national literatures, in turn made possible by the vernacularization of particular languages.

In case of Romania a vernacular version of the Daco-Romanian dialect became the dominant literary language (in a process similar to German or Italian literary languages), eliminating all other versions from the official use. Throughout modern history, the development of national languages produced a strong sense of identity, and language still represents an important factor in diasporic identity-making. Since the members of the Romanian national community do not share the same religion (Western Romania has a large non-Orthodox communities, while Eastern Romania is extremely religious and dominated by a Eastern-Orthodox majority), the migrants from different parts of Romania, who would never have come together at home, coalesce into coherent communities abroad due to their linguistic affinities. As underlined before, Romania is particularly relevant because Romanians who historically lived divided into three separated states developed distinguishable forms of political organization, local cultures and, importantly, distinct dialects.

Relevantly enough, the Romanian migration during the last decades followed a clear linguistic path, with the highest number of migrants from Romania settling in Italy. Officially there are 1,16 million Romanians in Italy, which makes them the highest percentage of emigrants in the peninsula, accounting for over 23% of the total of migrants. The second largest community is in Spain, another Latin language speaking country, where there are 683,800 Romanians, representing 15% of total migrants – according to the data collected by the Spanish Internal Affairs Ministry, the total population is larger, close to one million (“1 milion”).

Developing on a notion previously proposed by Chris Wahl (2005), who coined the notion of a “polyglot cinema,” Berger and Komori advanced the idea that some migration movies in which multiple languages are spoken accumulate into a special genre of their own (*Polyglot Cinema*). Identified as *polyglot cinema*, an entire category of movies which are taking place in multilingual communities, such as those existing at the political borders of national states, where plurilingual dialogues come naturally and in which the use of multiple languages is widely practiced, can be easily outlined.

Once more, the Romanian migration to Western Europe presents us with an exceptional situation, a very peculiar linguistic phenomenon related to the massive presence of Romanians in Italy and Spain. As the Romanians manifested as preference for these Romance speaking countries, their massive presence lead to the creation of new diasporic languages. The immigrants have invented two new Latin dialects, one called rotaliano and the other rumañol (“Vorbești rumañol?”). These languages with double markers are characteristic for the double identity of Romanian migrants, especially in Spain where the language affinity resulted in a new sociolect characteristic of a free commutation of the linguistic codes between the two Latin source vocabularies. The rumañol, today a sociolect identifying Romanian migrants in Spain (Buzilă), allows strange forms of diglossia, a bilingualism mixing the official language, functioning as an exoglossia linguistic reference, and the native language operating as endoglossia.

So, when compared with a typical *polyglot film*, like *Morgen*, where the Kurdish immigrant stranded at the Western Romanian border is speaking his own language and his helping local is trying to communicate with him in another language, or the classical bilingual productions, such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963), where code-switching is resulting in a form of diglossia, the use of two languages simultaneously is very rare in cinema.

An illustrative case for this linguistic uncanniness is represented by Adrian, the male hero in *Parking*. Arriving in Spain only with a piece of paper on which there is note with the message “busco trabajo” (looking for a job), he is found by Rafael, his future employer and friend who teaches him Spanish. As Rafael's lover Mercedes tells Adrian, “a language is easy to learn when you have somebody with you” and the loner poet, dreaming to write a successful book, is living in a car park where animals like the dogs and the rats, the cats and locusts are communicating amongst themselves. Adrian, in a poem read later by Mercedes, acknowledges that his language is “the Spanish of emigrants,” nevertheless he maintains bigot views about foreigners, as he declares that Dutch is not a language but “a throat disease.” Relevantly enough, although this Romanian movie is mostly spoken in Spanish, there are several inflection moments when Adrian discloses his diglossic predisposition.

Similar to many other migrants who, during the integration to their adoptive countries and their linguistic codes are made to renounce their native languages, and are thus forced to undergo a psychological and personal transformation, Adrian suddenly starts speaking a mixed form of Romanian and Spanish when after a shady deal on behalf of Rafa his car is stolen. The same happens when his Romanian Cristina unexpectedly arrives with Christmas presents and home food, only to find out that Adrian has a relationship with the bohemian guitarist, Maria. Just like the characters in the adapted novel entitled *The Closeness* (*Apropierca*), which is a slightly more complex narrative than the movie, migration imposes on people a trans-bordered identity, one shared by millions of Romanians living abroad.

### For an alingual cinema

A 2002 *Washington Post* story disclosed an extremely disquieting phenomenon, typical for mass immigration. As reported in the news story (“Trapped”) many children who have no native language are unable to communicate properly in any form of human communication, thus they are *alingual*. Some immigrant children were actually naming “red” as “west,” since one of the characters in a popular media they were watching was red. Without words from an existing language, they began naming colors with media-induced terms.

This strange phenomenon can be linked to Ludwig Wittgenstein's “picture theory” of language. In a famous conclusion about language from the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, the Viennese philosopher described our attempts to capture reality through language as indicative of the limits of what we can actually express in words. “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence,” claimed the philosopher, as his entire system of thinking

was developed in a close relationship to the notion of the limits of language (Appelqvist). His philosophical notations are important in cinema, as explained by Szabados and Stojanova (2011), since the sense making in film is not so much an issue of speech or textual explaining, it is a matter of showing and not of telling (xiv-xv). Many avant-garde artists attempted to liberate cinema from the captivity of language, in an effort to explore meanings exclusively through visual means. By simplifying the reasoning of the great modern philosopher, if words are pictures of reality, and cinema enables representations of that reality, then the words are only reducing our ability to understand the one already pictured.

Nevertheless, as cinema has developed its own modes of communication, which are best illustrated by hegemonic films, where a combination of simplified dialogues and actions are the result of the attempt to address large audiences, movie making has also inherited a vernacular predisposition from literature. Again, as Hansen observed properly, classical Hollywood cinema, which seems to be an instrument of internationalization, is based on forms of narrativity limited to a localized dimension. Almost all classical Hollywood genres are a “provincial response” to the provocations posed by modernity to American society. Actually, all national cinemas are results of a conditional relationship between language and a provincial culture. Spoken in a formal language and promoting limited cultural forms all films are products of vernacularity. While this appears to be a natural occurrence, as the linguistic identity of actors or the words spoken in dialogues and other identifiers of nationality are “authentic,” they remain highly coercive and are inducing artificiality.

In his most recent production, *La Gomera*, Corneliu Porumboiu explores a particular aspect of the use of language, in close relation to Wittgenstein’s observations about language as a game-like activity. The film also raises the issues of language distortion in the lives of migrants, as language exposes the difficulties of adaptation and generates barriers and confusions. Learning a second language is problematic for majority people away from their homeland, and the acquisition of a new language leads to profound changes of their identity.

These extremely problematic issues are placed by the Romanian director on the island of La Gomera, part of the Canary Islands, in a typical police investigation plot. Cristi is an undercover policeman (notably the main character from another Porumboiu movie is also named Cristi) who tries to infiltrate a gang of international money laundering criminals. This led some film critics, like Leslie Felperin from *The Hollywood Reporter* (2019), to describe the production as a “noirish crime thriller” (“The Whistlers”).

Yet beyond the conventional narrative mechanisms of the criminal investigation and its suspenseful twists, Porumboiu’s film manages to raise more than the typical questions about moral ambiguity. On the island of La Gomera, Cristi learns a new method of communication, which presents him and the viewers with unexpected consequences. Assuming under false pretense the identity of a migrant, the corrupt policeman faces a life changing situation, one in which he is moved from the spatial dislocation of migrants, to the identity dislocation

induced by the new learning he is forced to acquire. Cristi abandons altogether the human speech and learns a whistled language. Like the “sfyrizo” in Greece, the whistled version of Spanish called El Silbo has ancestral roots, lost in prehistoric times, and is a cryptic form of communication in which letters are transformed into musical trills.

On one hand, this is a return to a pre-linguistic, pre-modern condition, since whistled speech is one of the most ancient forms of language, and it can be linked to sheep herding and life in mountainous regions, where communication over larger areas was made impossible. Almost all isolated human groups use a form of whistling in order to communicate, from the Greeks in Antia Island, to the Gavião population in Brasil, the Béarnais in the Pyrenees, the Ari in Ethiopia, or the inhabitants of Kuskoy in Turkey. On the other hand, as noted by René-Guy Busnel (1976), who for many years researched whistled forms of languages, it is relevant that the different populations using whistled speech is that the technique that people “speak” an unspoken language, in which the physical sounds associated with human language production are replaced by whistling. The entire essence of human communication being substituted with another form of sonority, closer to birds, subverted the humanity of the whistler. Porumboiu transforms this linguistic alteration into the subject of the movie, we are not only witnessing Cristi learning a device of transmitting secret information or a tool for interactions between shady characters. The Romanian director explores a profound problem, that of the loss of identity, and his estrangement from the basic human traits.

The movie makes a direct reverence to an influential book written by one of the most popular Romanian philosophers, Andrei Pleșu, who argued that the primordial language, the one existing before the spoken languages of mankind, was the language of birds (*Limba*). Considering that our existing languages are a form of separation, of division along ethnic lines, Pleșu quotes the Q’uran and Saint Francis of Assisi, suggesting that a return to the original language, one that was used before the Tower of Babel, can bring humanity to a higher level of understanding. Without going into the intricacies of this philosophical text, which basically discusses a Platonic dialogue, the idea of a language of the birds is extremely important in order to understand Porumboiu’s intentions. Even if the Romanian philosopher did not bother to make any reference to the theory enunciated by Bertrand Russell in *Principia Ethica*, where the British thinker elaborated on the “celestial” or “ideal” language, the only one that could solve all our human problems, the conclusions are the same. We become competent speakers of a “native language” in early childhood, and it is through this language that we develop connections with the world around us. However, the communities sharing the same language soon impose on our brains and bodies restrictions altering our essence as human beings.

This is what happens to Cristi at the end of the movie: after the adoption of a language similar to that of the birds and their forms of communication, he is hit by a car, which affects his ability to speak as a normal human being. Locked in a hospital, without speaking, Cristi

involuntarily and incessantly whistles. The director masterfully uses direct and explicit connections during the movie between bird sounds and their natural whistles, overlapping the musical elements with the shrieks of acute sounds. The denaturalization of verbal speech, happening by the acquisition of this new identity, leads to the re-articulation of the identity of the main character. With words no longer connected to his mind, and the whistling taking over his relational mode, his social and moral identity are lost. Consequently Cristi goes rogue and decides to help his erotic companion, Gilda, the wife of a local mafioso.

I propose that *La Gomera* should be considered as a movie that challenges the limits of “accented cinema,” a concept which was developed to identify unique ways in which immigrant directors are “pronouncing” their particular cinematic meanings. My conclusion is that we must describe a different type of films, created by moviemakers who choose to speak a *substitutive language*, and for this reason I suggest introducing *paraphrastic cinema* as a prospective and working concept. These are films in which one or more forms of representation are replaced by other forms of communication, with the most radical manifestation being the total removal of speech, in an *alingual cinema*. By alingual cinema I do not understand the silent cinema or its recent re-enactments, such as Michel Hazanavicius’s *The Artist* (2011), or the refusal of speech through the physical incapacity of the characters, as is the case of the Ukrainian film *Plemya (The Tribe)*, dir. by Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy, (2014). Alingual films describe altered states of identity whereby the characters’ transformations are induced by the change of their linguistic condition, a process which is manifested through cinematic instruments. While linguistic diversity remains an important feature of Europe, a continent divided into more than fifty countries, some of which are using two or three national languages, the ideal of an alingual understanding is also a European utopia. A cinema without speech, a cinema liberated from the captivity of dialogues and literature, one of the supreme ideals of avant-garde filmmaking, is now re-evaluated by a new generation of movie directors.

As Rancière noted “The ability of words is no longer the model that must be regarded as the norm for pictorial representation. It is the fortune that breaks through the presentation area to make the pictorial expressiveness visible” (Rancière 2005, p. 91).

It is a way in which things themselves speak and are silent” (Rancière 2006b, p. 13).

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