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Looking beyond the margins.

Thomas Ciulei and the modernist narrative practices

Abstract: This article explores Thomas Ciulei's feature documentary films *This is it (Asta e, 2001)* and *The Flower Bridge (Podul de flori, 2008)*. It analyses how the director uses diverse documentary styles and various narrative practices in order to explore the character's world. Ciulei's documentary universe revolves around people who find themselves in a precarious situation, leading a marginal existence, living their lives in forgotten places that have been condemned by the neoliberal new order to menial existences. The director uses a specific structure which privileges affective experience and contemplation, reflexivity and a poetics of revelation in order to put forward his argument – paradoxically, the characters who have accepted their menial, low paid positions, the ones who can make due with what nature and their own labour can provide are the ones who manage to dodge the dire effects of the modern capitalism transition. Ciulei uses pictorial imagery in order to generate new ways of investigating the stillness of the marginal world, while also using observational techniques where the historical reality reveals itself to him and his camera. In the end, by blending different narrative and documentary styles, the director helps viewers develop a deeper relation with the world he documents, granting us gratification by the comprehension of the fable through parametric filmic techniques that comment on the marginal's world – hardship of living bears down on people, but a certain security and community unity exists within these hardships.

Keywords: art cinema narration, parametric narration, pictorialism, observational documentary, precariat, Romanian transition, modernism.

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Humanely exploring a precariously marginal world

Thomas Ciulei was born in 1965 in București, Romania and he later moved to New York in 1979, where he studied photography at the School of Visual Arts. In 1990 he studied documentary filmmaking at the University of Television and Film in Munich and graduated the Film department of the New York University in 1992 (Ciulei webpage). He produced between 1995 and 2008 several documentaries and fictions films in his home country, Romania, and in neighbouring Moldova, documenting the modern Romanian transition. In the book titled *Screening Modernism, European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (2007), András Bálint Kovács observes that modern cinema is not a critique of reality, but a mental correction of the illusions of physical representation (43), Ciulei's documentary style follows this path as the director uses a blend of observational practices and pictorial compositions, with staged events. The director works as an active meaning maker, manipulating parts of the reality he observes through camerawork and editing. With Ciulei, the camera is not only following the social-actors in their activities, it rather anticipates and places the scenes in certain images systems, designed to construct and present the director's ideas to the viewers by means of cinematic subtext, what John Grierson called the "creative treatment of actuality" (Eitzen 12). In his documentary works, Ciulei follows a specific type of individuals that can be described as marginals belonging to the precariat class, modern cinema anti heroes who embody the idea that "everything just happens" (Kovács 65) around them, not having a particular mission or guiding force, being subject to the forming new realities of a world in socio-economic transition. In his work titled *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, British sociologist Guy Standing defines the precariat as the broad category of all those who have no anchor of stability and have been pushed into a precarious existence by the mass adoption of seductive neoliberal tenets such as competitiveness, meritocracy and flexibility in capitalist economies (23). The modern precariat needs a job to live from one day to another, it is opportunistic (in that it accepts what is offered by the market and has no clear occupational identity), and lacks major safety nets (such as sufficient family, enterprise and state support when in need) (Standing 24).

Large parts of the Romanian society were pushed towards the fringes of existence, they were forgotten by the liberal state, by the new Yuppies and by the mainstream media (which was mostly interested in the miserabilist side of their existence). Thomas Ciulei works with the newly formed precariat class. Through his feature documentary films *This is it* (2001) and *The Flower Bridge* (2008), the director manages to offer spectators an in depth look into the lives of his characters, building modern cinematic narratives around the stillness of the marginal world, finding points of shared humanity and constructing bridges of narrative identification between characters on-screen and viewers. The director's work functions as a tool for processing the effects of the Romanian transitional period. In their book titled

Nașterea Cetățeniei Democratice. Femeile și Puterea în România Modernă, sociologists Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu observe the fact that neither Romanian women nor men had the experience of a state apparatus that offered government services, instead they all experienced “a state provider of care services in exchange for the exercise of unconditional paternalism” (252). During the 1990s and 2000s Romanians had to deal with privatisations that left 52% of the population near the poverty limit, newly established enterprises favoured non-unionised workers, temporary work contracts were introduced and the large communist subsidised industries failed one after another. Between 1989 and 1996, capitalism developed mainly through the privatisation of enterprises. The management greatly underestimated the value of the factories and sold them to phantom companies that all its members had created and owned (Bucur and Miroiu 255–256). Thus, the former communist working class faced a dramatic downfall, as relationships between people dramatically changed in the context of job insecurity and capitalist driven pursuit for survival. Consequently the precariat class slowly substituted the working one.

The following interpretations are based on an in-depth analysis of Ciulei’s feature documentary films, *This is it* (2001) and *The Flower Bridge* (2008). I will analyse the dramatic mechanisms used by the director in order to build the character’s world as I will also focus on the camerawork and montage techniques used in order to visually represent the fables, as Ciulei’s narrative process moves self-consciously between fictional and documentary modes of representation. Alex Lykidis (2021) points out the fact that modern art cinema employs an intellectual mode of address, facilitating critical judgement in a time of crisis, pointing out democracy’s vulnerability to Neoliberal practices (3). Parliaments have less and less to say over policy because corporate and elite interests are slowly taking hold and globalisation, deindustrialisation and automation have eroded the working class sense of solidarity and identity (Lykidis 11). Employing various modern cinematic techniques like authorial commentary, psychological realism, minimalist narrative development and ambiguity, Ciulei opens up a space of cinematic in-betweenness, where viewers are called to critically judge these new realities, understanding the effects that the Neoliberal logic has on small communities in transition by following the various documentary practices the director brings into play.

A Community Undergoing a Neoliberal Change

The feature length documentary titled *Asta E/This is it*, directed by Thomas Ciulei in 2001, is the first feature directed by the filmmaker. The documentary uses a multi-narrative plot structure in order to tell the stories of its main characters: Ionuț, the couple Toni and Varvara, Nicu and Pal. We are invited to follow the everyday lives of the main

characters, the narrative progression seems to be entwined with the natural passing of time and seasons, each time of the year bringing new challenges to the social-actors. While most of the characters seem to be quite content with their marginal way of life, the youngest member of the “cast”, Ionuț, desires to get out of the port-town of Sulina in order to move to Bucharest, Romania’s capital city. Ionuț is part of the younger generation who understand the possibilities offered of a bigger city, accepting all kinds of odd-jobs in order to survive. The couple Toni and Varvara live a peculiar marriage, fuelled by alcohol and toughened by the daily hardships of agricultural labour, in the end the couple end up showing acts of love towards one another in surprisingly and particular moments of affection. Nicu seems to live a life akin to one of a hermit who has turned his back towards the modern day society, embracing a hard and natural *modus vivendi* as he resides on an isle in the middle of the Danube Delta’s marshes. Pal acts as a local philosopher, appearing for short scenes throughout the documentary.

The first shot of the film portrays Pal, a side character, walking towards the camera and gazing into the lens. He approaches the tripod mounted camera enough for Ciulei to film a close-up of Pal’s figure, gazing right into the lens. This first shot gives the key in which the director wants the viewers to see the documentary, he is not a fly on the wall but an active creator of meaning, interacting with the social-actors and manipulating the form of the film in order to construct the argument. Right after this first shot, the director edits in a long take depicting a man who chases a pig. As the man catches the pig in the end and heads with it back to the pen from where the animal escaped, the camera makes a panoramic move towards Pal. The man is laying on the ground and singing a sailor’s song, about the places where he has been while working as a sailor — Haifa, Beirut, Las Palmas and Nouadhibou. The director blends different filming modes and documentary categories, developing a modernist approach to cinematic style. This preference for modernist experimentation favours what Nichols (2001) calls an open-ended treatment of space and time, consequently dealing less with resolving the real issues represented while offering more of a challenge to the “definition and priority of the issue per se” (Nichols 594).

Thomas Ciulei is also the director of photography of his films. From the first shots in *Asta e* we observe his preference for a deep depth of field composition and long takes. André Bazin noted that the depth of field is a replacement of montage, being based on a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and its duration (2005, 34). Ciulei understands the role of deep depth of field, his reductionist narrative style invites a more profound exploration of the spaces the characters inhabit. *Asta E/This is it* is filmed in the town of Sulina (Romania’s easternmost point situated at the margins of the Danube Delta) and in the marshes and bogs surrounding the town. The places Ciulei explores with his camera have slowly drifted into a still and menial existence due to lack of infrastructure, marginal geographical positioning and the collapse of the communist economy. Ciulei’s characters are trapped in the stillness

of Sulina, by employing long takes and deep depth of field, the director manages to enmesh them into the scenery.

Ciulei explores the effects that depth of focus has on the spectator, bringing him or her into a new relation with the image, closer to that which viewers enjoys with their historical reality. As a consequence of the realistic trait, the spectator develops a deeper and more active mental process in watching the cinematic narrative. David Bordwell (2015) noted the fact that when “the camera is not a delegate for the spectator” it becomes an instrument for “the transforming the profilmic event so as to maximise effect” (31). Ciulei’s cinematography and directorial view follow the aforementioned notion, but he takes things a little bit further. When introducing a new character the director opts to show her or him in a photograph like still medium shot, holding a particular object in hands and looking directly into the camera lens. For example the couple Toni and Varvara appear holding their wedding picture. After this first shot, the camera starts to pan abandoning both characters into the hors-champ. Toni will appear a bit later into the frame, tidying up things around the yard. The camera continues the panning movement and we slowly discover that Varvara is also going about her business in the yard. The panning movement stops after doing a 360 degree turn, ending on the first frame of the shot. The characters reappear from the hors-champ and enter the house. This choreographed scene is Ciulei’s mode of sidestepping the given reality, he makes sure we understand that his rendering of the real world is actually a reconstruction of it. *Asta E/This is it* is Ciulei’s way of commenting on present day events, his camera being an active generator of meaning. As Toni and Varvara are moving around their yard, in a comically choreographed and mechanised manner, the director is trying to hint the spectators towards the fact that all their life is centered around the household, both of them toiling around the premises for as long as they have known each other. Right after the yard scene we enter in the house of the couple and witness a dialogue between the two, bickering with one another over small tasks that need to be done around the house.

The same cinematic scheme is used to introduce the character of Ionuț. In the first shot we see him holding a flaming piece of dung in his hands, laughing right at the camera. After this introductory shot, Ionuț is climbing up the ladder of a watch post while talking with Pal, who is again sitting relaxed on the ground. Ionuț reaches the top and points towards the directions of Sulina, Bucharest and San Francisco. After Ionuț points towards the direction where he believes the American metropolis is situated, Ciulei edits in a wide shot of a flaming field, the smoke baring our gaze into the horizon. By editing in the shot of the field, Ciulei uses montage in order to construct the notion that Ionuț’s desires of seeing new worlds are obstructed. Ionuț climbs down the tall watch post and disappears into the thicket. The next scene depicts the young boy with his father. They are filmed indoors, the father laying on a bed while Ionuț sits on the side. The father tells his son to sing a song and Ionuț starts humming a melody about love and the harshness of life. Ciulei’s camera is fixed on

a tripod, filming the entire scene in one take. In the first plane of the composition we see Ionuț singing while in the second plane the father listens. The deep depth of field lets us see the reactions Ionuț's father has to the song, the man seems to cry and feel great sorrow while listening. Ionuț finishes the song and gazes out of the frame while his father is sobbing in the background, the son glances at him and then turns his gaze onto the camera and the operator. He smiles and rolls over his eyes, suggesting that his father is overly sentimental and somewhat fake. By using a composition which has a deep depth of field, Ciulei doesn't need editing in order to show us the reactions of the two characters. Moreover, montage would have distanced the two, setting them apart while the composition in which both are present creates a clear relationship between the two.

Ciulei's cinematography and direction help create an art cinema narrative by using the moments in which the narrational act interrupts the transmission of fable formation and highlights its own role. Bordwell notes that "the self-consciousness of art cinema narration" is constructing a coherent story world through an "intermittently present but highly noticeable external authority, through which we gain access to it" (209). Thus Ciulei's narration becomes an object of spectator hypotheses making, unlike the classical film form which usually makes the pro-filmic event less self-conscious, foregrounding the fable. Ciulei's narrative construction processes help spectators complete the protagonists biography. For example, when introducing a surreal sequence in which we follow a young man who lives onboard a suspended ship, Ciulei introduces for the first time a voice over accompanying the image montage. The voice over belongs to the inhabitant of the ship, we hear him as he reads a handover report. The camera pans and we see the city from the viewpoint of the suspended ship that's towering over it. Next we follow the activities of the man who seems to live onboard, tidying up his living quarters. Ciulei will revisit this particular character later in the movie, in a short sequence depicting the man training with nunchucks inside the suspended ship and later reading from a book. Ciulei uses these sequences in an associative manner in order to construct meaning, editing voice over with the visual representation of the ship, alternating martial arts training with reading activities and exterior shots of the broken down and suspended ship. Ciulei makes his presence as a filmmaker felt as his camera isn't only following the characters, it is moving and discovering compositions that speak of the characters. Ciulei creates what Laura Rascaroli calls a space of in betweenness (32), where the audio monologue gives the images a new meaning and dimension. As spectators, we are invited to fill in the gaps left open by the director, the character living on the ship is somehow suspended, much alike the ship, from reality. His activities seem comic and totally estranged from the daily hardships that the other inhabitants of Sulina face. The character from the ship seems to be preparing for a new sea voyage, the only problem being that the ship is in no condition to sail. The hopeful sailor and his ship are actually stuck in the past, much alike the whole country of Romania at the time.

Being the youngest character, Ionuț is the one who has a progressive narrative development. Ciulei follows him in his trips around the town to collect scrap metal from discharged and abandoned vessels, burning the rubber off the cables he finds in order to sell the valuable copper. Ionuț is part of the newly formed precariat class, as he seeks every opportunity that he finds in order to make money and survive. Nichols (2001) notes that “narrative not only facilitates the representation of historical time, it also supplies techniques by which to introduce the moralising perspective or social belief of an author and a structure of closure whereby initiating disturbances can revise satisfactory resolution. Such resolution gives an imprimatur of conclusiveness to the arguments, perspectives, and solutions advanced by the film” (591). Consequently, the sequence in which Ionuț collects scrap metal cables from the fishing ships is relevant for the character’s biography, as Ciulei observes and films the teenager gradually becoming part of the shadow economy. Ionuț might seem as an independent teenager but his actions of stealing only work in the short run, looting scrap can only get him so far and the easy money he earns estranges him from educational goals. The precariat is defined by short-termism which could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career (Standing 21).

In order to grasp and explore Ionuț’s character’s development, the director employs causality as the prime unifying structural principle. This also motivates temporal principles of organisation in what regards Ionuț’s linear narrative. Spectators view sequences where Ionuț’s father is complaining about his son’s night life behaviour, only later to see the father figure asking his son for money, knowing that Ionuț was out to Carol during the winter holidays. In one of the last scenes with Ionuț as a main character, Ciulei films him having a conversation on the phone with the staff of a restaurant situated in Bucharest. Ionuț expresses his desire to go back to the restaurant where he had worked for four years in the past. The manager, named Gelu, cuts the young man short by telling him he can’t provide any answers to his inquiries. Ionuț expresses the fact that he can’t stand living in Sulina any longer, longing for the life he had formally experienced in Bucharest. Most of the scene is filmed using a wide angle lens, the camera is placed close to Ionuț, boxing the character in the phone booth from which he makes the call. This composition also blocks the character’s eye direction by placing him close to the left frame, suggesting the fact that his horizons of getting to Bucharest are slim.

Ciulei’s last scene with Ionuț breaks slightly with the classical narration pattern so far established. Ionuț is filmed laying on his bed, covered with a blanket and staring at two nude paintings on the wall. After this shot — reverse shot scene beat ends, the director edits in various details shot from different angles of Ionuț’s face. This particular alternation of detail shots works as a parametric narrative because the stylistic procedure take over the causal narrative factor, pointing our attention to a different, deeper reality — Ionuț’s angst, defeat

and desperation caused by the refusal received from the restaurant manager, combined with the hardships of being a teenager in transitioning Romania. We have followed the character's drama, using what Bordwell calls prototype schemata (identifiable types of persons, actions, locales, etc.), template schemata (principally the canonic story) and procedural schemata (a search for motivations and relations of causality, time and space) (49), and thus we come to feel emphatic towards Ionuț as his goal is shattered in the end. By the before-mentioned expressionistic editing angles depicting Ionuț's face, suggesting the character's inner turmoil, Ciulei means to visually depict what Guy Standing describes as the chronic insecurity associated with members of the precariat class. They are alienated from their labour and work, and are anomic, uncertain and desperate in their behaviour because people who fear losing what they have are constantly frustrated (24). By following Ionuț's development as the single character who wants out of Sulina, Ciulei comments on the fact that the younger generation starts weakening its sense of social memory. Social memory arises from belonging to a community reproduced by generations, but the Sulina community has been abruptly shattered by the fall of the communist regime and Neoliberal emerging socio-economic logic. There is no general purpose to revolve around, most of Ciulei's characters only feel a void where purpose once stood. Ionuț is different from the character who lives on the suspended ship as he wants out, but he doesn't realise that he is really much like the latter: trapped, suspended in a broken down town.

Throughout the documentary, Ciulei films and follows various stories and types of characters. One of the most visually striking narrative follows Nicu and his friend. They are two trappers who live in the middle of the marshes that make up the natural Danube Delta. The two men inhabit a small hut on a remote island, living off poaching and animal herding. Ciulei introduces Nicu's character late into the movie, almost at half-time. We see Nicu holding a swan in his hands, petting the bird's head. From this first introductory shot we understand that Nicu is closer to the wilderness of nature than to the town of Sulina, or surrounding villages. We follow Nicu during wintertime and summer while fishing, hunting and taking care of his animals. Alexandra Gulea, the editor of the documentary, edits in a sequence depicting Nicu ice fishing. Ciulei's cinematography is hand-held as he follows the fishing activities. We can describe this ice-fishing scene as purely observational, the director/camera-operator is witnessing reality unfolding in front of his lens. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz argue that "observational cinema is a way of exploring human relations in the world from the perspective of skilled practice, using observation (seeing, hearing, feeling) and interpretation (what sense can be made out of this), the viewer, like the filmmaker, develops a complex relationship with what is being represented" (125–135). Following this logic, observational cinema can become a way of acquiring knowledge in its own right. Fredrick Wiseman stated in an interview with Cynthia Lucia for the magazine *Cineaste* that: "When the observational technique works, it puts you in the middle of the events and asks

you to think through your own relationship to what you're seeing and hearing, which I think is more interesting for the viewer. The real film takes place where the mind or the eye of the viewer meets the screen and interprets, in a sense participates in, what they're seeing and hearing." (Crowdus and Francesco 1994).

Ciulei manages to use time in order to convey meaning and to describe character traits. For example, while pulling fishing nets in his boat, Nicu catches a fish. Using a close-up, long take, the camera follows the whole process of harvesting the fish from the net. Viewers are exposed to a long and violent scene, as the fish fights in order to brake free but to no avail. Right after, a wide shot of Nicu sitting in his boat with a duck on his lap is edited in. The man is feeding and petting the duck, the camera remains focused on the character for the whole time period of feeding the duck a banana. This wide shot composition is a lot more peaceful than the previous close up of the fish. From the editing of scenes we conclude that this is the natural way of things, Nicu only harvesting what he needs to live, being capable of emphatic relationships with the world that surrounds him.

Much alike iconic filmmaker Fredrick Wisemann, Ciulei is interested in building a mosaic narrative structure, where editing follows the logic of metaphors and patterns of poetic association. For example, Ciulei follows Nicu around his small hut home as he skins a few ferrets. The man calls in his pigs, who roam around freely, and feeds them one skinned ferret, giving the other to his dogs. Ciulei films the feeding of the dogs from a moving boat, employing a wide shot composition and a tracking movement, following the character walking on his small island in a long shot, depicting the marshes in the foreground and Nicu's isle in the back. After this scene we cut directly to a similar shot, from a compositional point of view, of Sulina's apartment blocks facing the Danube. Large chunks of ice are slowly passing by the river, while the blocks are still, no camera movement is used. Right after this extreme long shot of the river and the apartment blocks, Ciulei edits in a wide shot of a cemetery followed by a set of extreme close ups of mortuary pictures taken from the graves. The director uses these editing juxtapositions in order to put forward a new idea, probably concerning the bleak future of the town of Sulina. Ciulei is creating an image system that is requiring the viewer to actively explore connections and resonances that emerge within and between the different parts of the film. Gustavo Mercado (2010) defines cinematic image systems as "the use of recurrent images and compositions in a film to add layers of meaning to the narrative. The repetition of images can be powerful tool to introduce themes, motifs, and symbolic imagery that might or might not explicitly be dealt with within the plot of the film" (21). While Nicu's life in the wilderness is active although it may seem immobile at a first glance, the town is totally motionless, incapable of escaping its death, just like the people who had their photographs glued to their funerary crosses.

Right after the short urban scene, Ciulei edits in a sequence in which Varvara and Toni are picking up Colorado bugs which are attacking their potato plantation. The characters

are shown bickering as they toil around their household. Ciulei's multi-plot structure and various characters revolves around the principle of repetition and patterning. Toni and Varvara seem to have the same bellicose dialogue while they are always performing tasks around their house, Ionuț is shown trying to make some money in two separate sequences while Nicu and his partner are always filmed while caring for or hunting animals in the Delta marshes. Ciulei constructs a general, unifying and underlying idea through these separate, repetitive sequences. Grimshaw and Ravets observe the fact that "observational cinema is an expression of the filmmaker's assumption that social events are multiply-caused, and must be analysed as a web of interconnecting influences and patterns" (47). One of the consequences of this methods of filmmaking is that Ciulei's documentary is, paradoxically, both open and closed. For there is, at one and the same time, the sense that the filmmakers is withholding judgment and conveying to us the strength of feeling about what has been observed. We arrive at our own conclusions regarding the characters, finding humanity in all of them. For example, Nicu is living of the land, sharing a harmonised relationship with nature. He has left society and now leads a new way of life, tending for his cows and in a scene even using his own blanket to cover an animal that is viciously attacked by mosquitoes after it fell into a bog. Toni and his wife Varvara are always bickering but Ciulei manages to film moments when bickering invites loving and tender gestures. By using repetition, parametric narration achieved through specific image sequences, the director manages to put forwards the ideas he desires us, viewers, to understand.

In the very last scene of the documentary, filmmaker Ciulei re-introduces Pal's character. We have seen Pal in the very beginning of the narrative, singing a sailor's song. Ciulei introduced a short scene at half-time, in which Pal is humorously describing his way of preparing and drinking medicinal alcohol, while visually following the character in the process of actually doing it. The very last shot of the documentary follows Pal down a dusty road. The camera is facing Pal, he is filmed using a wide angle lens, medium shot. The camera is moving along with the character, probably being mounted on a steady-cam rigging system. Pal is looking directly in the camera lens, addressing the viewers. The audio track is a mix of intra-diegetic sounds and a pre-recorded monologue belonging to Pal. We hear the character philosophise on the effects that Sulina and the surrounding Delta have on the inhabitants: "The delta changes people a lot. Civilisation is limited. For example, if a human being lives in solitude, he limits himself to what he sees, reeds, water, nothing else. That's the law of nature. From Nature, we learn to live ... When a person is so used to solitude, then he becomes wild. At some point he realises that he needs no other people. He realises he became a wilder being. That's above all" (01:21:56–01:23:42). Ciulei inserted this monologue piece in order summarise vococentrically, what he has been building up cinematically through the whole documentary. Pal's philosophical standpoint sums up the modern predicament in which Sulina and its inhabitants find themselves.

Through his documentary *Asta E/This is it* Ciulei comments on the Romanian status-quo during the early years of the transition. The subject matter, theme and argument proposed are very relevant today, as communities around the world are affected by Neoliberal change and transitional periods still occur. Ciulei can be considered among the first modern Romanian documentary filmmakers, as he employs a mix of narrative and cinematic practices in order to comment and develop his argument regarding the historical world. By alternating observational scenes with carefully choreographed staged ones, by addressing the characters directly or observing them dialoguing with one another, by constructing carefully composed shots and alternating them with realistic, hand-held cinematography, the director opens up a space of documentary in-betweenness where viewers are in a unique position — Ciulei clearly puts forward his argument through his active and participative meaning making cinematic practices, making sure viewers clearly perceive this fact. Simultaneously, viewers are being encouraged to reflect on his argument making, critically engaging with it from within this cinematic space of in-betweenness. By exposing his argument, commenting on it through documentary cinematic practices, Ciulei invites viewers to develop their own rationalisation vis-à-vis the argument alongside the reality he depicts. Thus, the modernity of Ciulei's practice does not only stem solely from his contemporary subject matter, but also from the practice of foregrounding the cinematic means through which he constructs an argument about the world, allowing viewers to critically engage with it from within the film.

The Flower Bridge (2008) — Neoliberal logic and family ties

The Flower Bridge (2008) is Ciulei's second feature documentary. The film comes seven years after his first feature was released and takes place in a small village situated in Moldova. Costică Arhir stakes his honour on bringing up his three children well while his wife has left to work abroad. He supervises Maria's, Alexandra's and Alexie's studies, cuts their hair, reads to them and mobilises them on the farm. The mother's absence is offset by this collective organisation, but cracks do appear in the family as the father, Costică, finds it harder and harder to cope with the absence of his wife.

Ciulei is again exploring a fringe world situation, filming the family as they go about their business in the small Moldavian village. The camera seldom leaves the family's yard, focusing on the relationships between the father and his children. The director favours a pictorial cinematography, most often framing shots that are carefully composed. We have seen these techniques in his previous documentary feature, *Asta E/This is it* (2001), the difference now being that Ciulei's authorial voice is less present, as he now follows a single story line which has a narrative causal progression. The Arhir family is followed during the period of

one year, thus we have a clear time progression. As the months pass, the family experiences various challenges, mostly managing to overcome them. *Ciulei* includes a causal logic to the story, the father and his children have to hang on until their mother is able to provide the documents they all need to move abroad. The director follows this predicament until the very last scene, where we see Costică's hopes shatter as his wife tells him clearly that she can't provide the papers. *Ciulei* uses a story driven structure to explore the family's universe, his camerawork strives for pictorialism, permitting viewers to concentrate on the individuals and their existential struggles, not drawing a lot of attention to the cinematography or inner mechanisms of film-making. Eric Rohmer sees cinema's modern character in its capacity to represent the physical world as it is (Rohmer in Kovács 35), cinema is thus an art form that can fully render contemporary reality, witnessing its development. *Ciulei* explores these traits, following the hardships the modern family faces.

Ciulei alternates his pictorial, controlled, directing style with observational cinematic techniques. This happens mostly when the situations filmed involve new events that can cause a shift in the planned actions. For example, the father, Costică, asks his children to start doing chores around the house. While younger Alexie has to broom the yard, the daughters are given cleaning tasks around the house. The chore assigning scene is shot in one take, the characters look like they are almost choreographed in their positions, with Costică being situated in the right side of the frame, enjoying more space and towering over the other three characters, clearly a position that enforces his role as *pater familias*. Right after this scene, the director edits in a montage sequence showing all kinds of activities being done, only to finish with a single long take scene of the father and his daughter, Alexandra, fighting. Costică is upset because the daughter didn't fulfil all her chores, he even has a violent outburst, yelling at Alexandra. Costică seems to be overwhelmed by the tasks that need to be done, especially the ones concerning housekeeping. His outburst and fight with Alexandra are filmed using a long shot framing, the camera is handheld. The director clearly did not foresee this situation development, it just happened. Consequently, he decided to film the scene in the manner which would allow him not to miss any actions, as the film camera becomes what Doru Pop (2014) described as "the preferred instrument for generating actuality and authenticity" (63). These bits of unfiltered cinema of reality give us deep insights into the characters psychological state.

A similar scene is edited in at the end of the documentary. The children are talking on the phone with their mother who is calling from abroad. The mother asks her daughters and son generic questions regarding their school performances, sometimes scolding them as she hears they have difficulties with mathematics. Costică asks to speak to his wife. He inquires about his wife's situation and if the papers needed for him and the children to move abroad are ready. Costică's wife answers there is nothing she can do in order to get the papers. *Ciulei* prefers wide shots in order to film the whole scene, with deep depth of field so that

we can see both Costică and his children in the frame. While Costică is talking to his wife in the foreground, the children are giggling in the background, maybe reacting to their fathers desperation. After hanging up the phone, Costică finds himself in dismay. He is troubled because his children are laughing while his wife just informed him that they won't be together as a family for an indefinite time. Ciulei's camera is handheld, a long shot composition is used, designed to encompass all the actions that are taking place in the frame. In these particular tense moments the director is favouring the historical reality over cinematic formalism. In his work titled *Romanian New Wave Cinema, An introduction* (2014), Doru Pop observes that "the purpose of realism is to plunge the viewer into an emotional understanding of the real, having access to the profound tragedy happening on the screen" (51).

For the next scene, the very last, Ciulei returns to his preferred formalist directorial style. He reads a fairy tale to his children. The father is reading in the foreground while his daughters are sleeping in the background. The father's body position creates lines that focus our eye trace towards the frame's centre, on his figure and the daughters faces. The scene is carefully lit so we can observe all the characters in the composition. In the article titled *Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)*, Allan Sekula points towards the fact that pictorial presentation of certain realities contributes more to spectacle and voyeurism than to the critical understanding of the social world (588). Ciulei can be accused of the mentioned critique, some of his images being a pictorial spectacle of voyeurism. But through careful blocking, expressionistic compositions and narrative framing, the director manages to go beyond and construct a scene where we can clearly observe and feel the fact that the father is also capable of being a mother, offering his children moments of affection and comfort. Costică's body direction is pointing towards the frame's left margin, he is alone in the foreground of the composition, the children being in the background. The director framed and blocked the scene such in order to suggest an upsetting fact, Costică is left all alone in raising up his children.

As a director, Thomas Ciulei prefers combining various modes of storytelling. In *Bridge of Flowers* the director mixes staged scenes with observational ones. He also uses interviews in the documentary. As seasons pass and the filming team return to the household, Costică is filmed addressing the camera while being interviewed. The father's interviews usually inform of what has passed while the film crew wasn't around. These inserts have a comical note, as the father seems to be stating the obvious. Through the stylistic patterns he foregrounds, Ciulei is cueing us to construct the fable of the movie. Ciulei is exploring with classical narration, art cinema narration and parametric storytelling. He follows the family in scenes that are causally driven, like the ones where the children need to do chores. In some cases, the filmmaker allows the historical reality to take hold of the style of the documentary, observing how the characters act in moments of tense exchanges, revealing psychological issues and moods. As in the previous movie *Asta e/This is it*, *The Flower Bridge* is constructed by editing

together scenes that often depict the same activities. For example Ciulei introduces more than a few short scenes where the father asks his daughters about their school grades, as they get home from school. The filmed family activities vary between household tasks, enjoying meals together and the children doing their homework. By these repetitions, the viewers are introduced not only to the Arhir's way of life, but they are accustomed to the absence of the mother figure.

Thus, *The Flower Bridge* speaks to us about the drama of the Arhir family, revealing a modern social issue that is more and more present around the world, the denizens and the precariat. As we view the film and understand the mechanism of the Arhir family, we get to perceive them as a working, unified community. In one interview scene, Costică is describing to the camera what needs to be done in order to get good crops, next he is filmed while teaching his son about agriculture. Although Costică states that agriculture isn't worth it in Moldova, he has a work based identity that helps him find the resources he needs to tend for his family. Ciulei manages to film and show a complex reality: hardship of living bears down on people but a certain security and community unity exists within these hardships. The only absent family member is the mother of the children, Costică's wife. She does not belong in Ciulei's family portrait, as viewers we don't get to identify her with the rest of her family. The telephone calls through which the family communicates with the mother seem off-beat and cold, the actual dialogue is formal and doesn't lead to any conclusions, the mother being alienated from her family and from her former occupational community. Costică's wife managed to find a job in Western Europe, having the papers needed to go abroad being provided by her employer. Meanwhile, Costică and his family can't reach her, due to lack of such papers that would let them immigrate. The wife's failure to provide papers for her family may suggest the fact that she actually doesn't have the right to get her family to live with her abroad. In his book titled *A Precariat Charter* (2014), Guy Standing observes how rights in the modern era have been diminishing, citizenship belonging now to a sovereign state nation, entitlement rights are thus seen as a function of that belonging (5). This is what Aristide Zolberg called the hyper nationalist version of citizenship, gradually leading to the nationalisation of rights (223). As viewers, we are invited into Ciulei's universe and shape, alongside the filmmaker, an argument regarding the theme. We are encouraged to use our own cognitive schemata in assessing if the family is off better living in the small village, toiling through life's hardships while still united, or would it be better if they all just migrate towards the Western world, where a whole new life would await them.

Conclusions

Thomas Ciulei's two documentary features, *Asta e* and *The Flower Bridge*, deal with the harsh realities of the Romanian and Moldovan transitional period. Being among the first to film and document the lives of the newly formed precariat class, Ciulei has observed how the mechanisms of Neoliberalism impact small communities and individuals alike. In his two feature documentaries, the filmmaker deals with a small town community hit by bankruptcy and privatisation, finding itself suspended in a strange loop from which its inhabitants can't or won't escape, and with the individual's drama generated by the erosion of family ties caused by the precariat's diminishing sense of social memory, increasing labour insecurity and labour opportunism. Characters such as the teenager Ionuț or the absent mother character from *The Flower Bridge*, pinpoint to the fact that an environment of infinite flexibility and insecurity must jeopardise any sense of cooperation or moral consensus. Ciulei's films take place in this climate of socio-economic insecurity, but in the end, the director manages to offer glimpses of humanity and hope. Paradoxically, the characters who have accepted their menial, low payed positions are the ones who manage to dodge the dire effects of the capitalism transition. For example, Nicu and his friend decide to make do to what the surrounding nature provides while the senior couple of Varvara and Toni are quite contempt drinking, bickering and labouring around their house. The Arhir family manages to deal with the absence of the mother, the father Costică working together with his children in order to make sure a low but steady income gained from agriculture keeps the family afloat. Some of Ciulei's characters withstand te consumerist temptation.

Ciulei's films involve a filmmaking praxis that incorporates what Cathy Greenhalgh sees as a specific structure which privileges affective experience and contemplation, reflexivity and a poetics of revelation (80). The filmmaker's active meaning making role reveals itself through his blend of narrational styles, covering certain storylines through classical narration forms where a causal drive guides us through the fable, or art cinema narration forms where the biography of the individual is explored. Ciulei's incorporation of observational cinematic techniques, staged sequences and on camera interview interventions show that the construction of the narration becomes the object of spectator hypotheses: how is the story being told? Consequently, viewers develop a deeper relation with the Ciulei's documentary films, gaining gratification through the comprehension of both the fable and filmic techniques that comment on narrative and argument sub-textually. Ciulei's preferences for combining documentary styles and cinematography techniques opens up a new space, as viewers we grasp the argument but then are encouraged to personally reflect on it while watching the film and understanding the various ways in which the mentioned argument is exposed. As the director creates repetitive and different image systems that reflect on similar historical realities, viewers are welcomed to critically engage with the subject matter in different ways,

often times gaining new knowledge or discovering new emphatic queues. Ciulei's practice is modern as it questions the authenticity of representation through conveying the historical reality in different cinematic manners. By using parametric narrative practice, the director exposes the fact that his films are not necessarily a critique of the historical reality filmed, but an exploration of the illusion of representation and argument making.

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