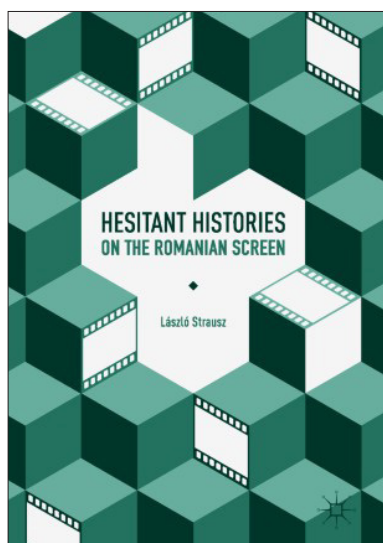


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The Hesitations of Modernity



Review of:

Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen,
László Strausz,
Palgrave Macmillan, 2017
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László Strausz's *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* represents a study dedicated to New Romanian Cinema filmic productions depicting the realities of the state's socialist period. The work is centred on the concept of *hesitation* that becomes a basic theoretical node within the research, through which the analysis of cinematographic productions is realised. *Hesitation*, states Strausz, lies in "uncertainty", "a mode of representation that visualizes an uncertainty about the status of the profilmic that these moving images, revolving around social-historical topics" (Strausz 2017, 1). However, this theoretical concept is not only used as "a visual mode", but also as a means of investigating the "historical context" of the selected film and media productions (2).

In addition to the presentation of the book's theoretical background, within the first part there

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are also mentioned the categories of works the author focuses on. For example, through the concept of *hesitation*, there are analysed both “the films on the past” and “films on the present”, meaning “the films examining social change” (4). Moreover, New Romanian Cinema productions are perceived through the lens of concepts such as *national* and *transnational*. Comparative analyses are made along László Strausz’s study, tackling especially on the distinctions between Hungarian and Romanian media broadcasts. Thus, from this point of view, there could be observed “the second main topic” of the book, namely “the social production of space” (6), a concept initially used by Henri Lefebvre. By seeing hesitation “in the construction of lived space”, the author is able to present the main spatial distinction that he uses: “a dialectical relationship between the physically perceived space of the everyday and the cartographic-geometric space of the abstract” (6).

The book has a clear and well-organised structure, being formed by eight main chapters, including the first one — the *Introduction* — that is dedicated to conceptual and methodological explanations, as already presented above. The second chapter is dedicated to presenting views that sustain different interpretive strategies of *hesitation*. Along his theoretical background, the author considers *hesitation* as a “realist-modernist cinematic trope”, as his intentions imply a distinction between the concepts of realism and modernism: “my intention is to move away from a simplistic notion of realism and make visible the connecting points that realist film theory has always had with modernism” (13). Thus, the “construction of the real” is observed through the analysis of both modernist cinematic productions from “the Ceaușescu era” and “the contemporary works of New Romanian Cinema”. (18) The author offers the examples of *Miorița*, a Romanian ballade representing “a rural spatial matrix” (32–33), and he also mentions the frequent depiction of the city of Bucharest in the 1980’s films, as a symbolic “sphere of the urban”, in order to emphasize the manner real space is created and also the social transformations that took place in the transition of the Romanian population from the rural originary spaces to the urban ones. *Hesitation* therefore coincides with modernist evolutions within the cinema and one of the first interpretive categories is *modernist hesitation* (38). Another hesitation type Strausz mentions is *legitimizing hesitation*. It is related to the images of the Romanian Revolution of 1989 and the function they have: “the dissemination of hesitation and ambiguity for political benefit” (39). The last type of hesitation related to New Romanian Cinema is the *performative hesitation* and it represents “the movement between various interpretive strategies of the past and the present” (42, 43). In connection to this one, seen as dynamic and performative, there are mentioned two other theoretical concepts, namely Oushakine’s *aphasia* (which allows a “mixing of various voices” and thus a hybridization of language (43)) and Price’s *bewilderment*.

The third chapter begins with a short historical description of Ceaușescu’s communist years of domination in order to create a proper background for the analysis of the four main

films the author proposes in this part of the book: *Reconstruction* (Lucian Pintilie, 1969), *Microphone Test* (Mircea Daneliuc, 1980), *A Girl's Tear* (Iosif Demian, 1980), and *Sequences* (Alexandru Tatos, 1986). According to the depicted level of control exercised by authorities, the author classifies the cinema productions in two main groups: *coercive* and *revelatory camera*. Within the first one are included the films *Reconstruction* and *Microphone Test*. This group is characterized by the fact that the viewer “realizes” and at the same time “resists” the film crew’s “attempts to create an entirely fabricated image of events and characters” (56). The common point of the two productions relies in the way “discursive tactics of the authorities” were outlined:

Both films depict the ways behavioural norms are manufactured, and the production of these norms models how identities were forcibly rewritten. Both films ambivalently encourage audiences to consider various descriptions of each character, which include the perspective of the institutions and the authorities, their social network, or the vantage points of their individual motivations (68).

The strategy of *revelatory camera* is related to *A Girl's Tear* and *Sequences* and is defined by the crew’s “intentional or unintentional” discovery of an image of event “that they did not know existed”, “that would otherwise have remained hidden”. Different aspects of “a given slice of social reality” (73) are constantly revealed once with the production of meaning. Thus, all four discussed films share the way filmmakers contributed to “modernist debates about the production of the past and the cultural canon” (56). In this specific point hesitation could be observed, as it concerns “historical connections between given screen media texts” (81).

The following chapter is dedicated to the investigation of television and the role it had in the production of history. Entitled “Television as a Factory of History: The Broadcast of the 1989 Romanian Revolution”, there is discussed the manner in which a distorted perspective upon the 1989 Revolution was created through images and television and at the same time how they were presented to the public audiences as reliable and trustworthy historical facts. The author states that the new power formation at that time, the National Salvation Front (NSF), used “the rhetoric of the quotidian street-level discourses and actions in order to legitimize itself” (84). It represents a process László Strausz calls *legitimizing hesitation*. In order to emphasize hesitation on this specific level, the author realizes a comparison between the Broadcast of the Romanian Revolution and those of similar historical events in Hungary. He tackles especially on the events of June 16, 1989, when the national television broadcast the death of the leader Nagy. The significance of the media event was outlined by its symbolic meaning: “this media event offered an extremely condensed opportunity for society to grieve for the decades of dictatorship and its victims” (89). Comparatively, the Romanian media transmission of the Revolution was, in author’s view, “less confident representation of

the regime change” (93). The footage of the official camera was collected in *Videograms of a Revolution*. However, as the situation went out of control during Ceaușescu’s speech towards the crowd, the official cameramen chose to record only the façade of the buildings around. Therefore, the anonymous videographers who were also filming offered in fact the realist images of the event: “After the disintegration of the dictator’s authority, and as a result thereof, the image of history became hesitant” (111). Therefore, hesitation is mainly caused by the missing of coherence in interpreting a historical event.

The fifth chapter focuses “on the films about the past”, the author leading once again his investigation through a clear delimitation of productions into two main groups: “the films about the state socialist era”, and “the films that are set during the fall of the regime” (115). What the two categories have in common is a “rethinking” of the “dominant canon”. Within this chapter are discussed productions such as Cristian Mungiu’s 2006 *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, *Tales from the Golden Age*, Radu Muntean’s *The Paper Will Be Blue*, Cătălin Mitulescu’s *The Way I Spent the End of the World* and Corneliu Porumboiu’s *12:08 East of Bucharest*. Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is perceived as a modernist multiplicity of frameworks offered in the production and interpretation of history: “The frequently oppositional visual elements (large depth of field and shallow compositions, on-screen and off-screen space) highlight that new Romanian film’s signature style [...] is a means to the end of hesitantly dissolving the canon of the past” (135–136). The six episodes of *Tales from the Golden Age* create a similar perspective of space as Mungiu’s film, but the modernist strategies used are nonetheless fewer. Both cinema productions “recall a pre-1989 world” (139) characterised by lack of coherence when coming to (re)producing the image of the past. *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *The Way I Spent the End of the World* are analysed so that the author expresses a critical view towards their depiction of the fall of the regime. *12:08 East of Bucharest* is regarded as “a film about the past” as it “performs” the “remembering” of the revolution and can therefore be included in the same thematic category.

The last type of hesitation Strausz theorizes is the *performative* one. This analytical strategy is highlighted in the sixth chapter through the review of *transnational* films. Set in post-1989 Romania, the cinematographic works are discussed from the point of view of “social production of space” as symbolic characters such as the fugitive, the outcast, and the migrant become “important signifiers” in the reproduction of social mobility. Once with the ending of the communist regime, Romanian citizens gain the possibility of free travel and movement. In consequence, there could be noticed significant changes in the “post-socialist” identity construction and films depicting such imagery reveal social processes of border crossings, movements within the country’s borders or simply human’s trauma regarding the phenomenon of migration: “In the films, characters cross regional and national borders, move in-between urban and rural spaces, and in the process redraw the patterns of performative spatial practice” (157–158). Thus, the “prophetic” films presented are Marian

Crișan's 2010 *Morgen*, along with Cristi Puiu's *Aurora* (2010) and *Stuff and Dough* (2001), Bogdan George Apetri's *Outbound* (2010) and Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* (2002). These creations are investigated through the way they depict "spatial hesitation" as it "encourages a meaning-making attitude in audiences, one that takes into consideration the shifting social-political specificities in the diegetic spaces crossed" (180).

The last two chapters also address a sort of performative hesitation, but seen this time with different thematic orientations, namely "regulatory institutions", such as the hospital, the prison, and the convent perceived as "primary instruments of social control", and also "the changing image of the family with its transforming generational and gender roles" (158). Therefore, the seventh chapter is dedicated to New Romanian Cinema representations of "the authorities that regulate and control the human body" and the main purpose of such an analysis is to emphasize "the transitional structure of post-1989 society" (183). There are investigated four contemporary films in this chapter: *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005), *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (Florin Șerban, 2010), *Best Intentions* (Adrian Sitaru, 2011), and *Beyond the Hills* (Cristian Mungiu, 2012). The hesitation effect is extended towards the viewers through "camera movement and framing by the creation of a mobile subject position for audiences" (195). All depicted social institutions reflect a "regulation of the human body" (205) with the help of well-outlined methods of objectification used by filmmakers.

The purpose of the last analytic part of the book is to question the position of masculinity in post-socialist society. The chapter addresses "New Romanian Cinema's constructions of masculinity in the sphere of the family" (209). The author does not aim to produce an overall view of gender representation in Romanian national cinema as it is an "institutional nexus" that would require a larger spectrum of investigation. However, the main focus of masculinity comes from a collective trauma generally produced by patriarchal coercive leaderships in Eastern Europe and family seems the suitable context of manifestation when coming to gender differences and masculine's both domination and crisis. "The focus of my investigation will be the performative construction of the shifting roles of masculinity" (209), states the author when coming to the investigated productions (*Boogie*, Radu Muntean, 2008, *The Happiest Girl in the World* Radu Jude, 2009, *Tuesday, after Christmas*, Radu Muntean, 2010, *Everybody in our Family*, Radu Jude 2012, *Child's Pose*, Calin Peter Netzer, 2013, *Sieranevada*, Cristi Puiu, 2016, and *Graduation*, Cristian Mungiu, 2016). The analysis follows certain typological identities formed during the state's socialism like "the romantic artist / clown / intellectual, the violent Balkan man, but also the figures of the stern Party official and the heroic worker" (211). The selected films show how the instance of "paterfamilias" is perceived in their "unwillingness and / or inability" (213) as father or husband. Hesitation therefore also represents "a mobile subject position" offered by the filmic in order for the viewers to "considerate" upon "characters' dilemmas" (234).

Eventually, the book ends with an *Epilogue* dedicated to the interaction between the “expectations of domestic audiences” and the “emerging generic narratives” (240) that New Romanian Cinema productions offer. There are emphasized the main distinctions appeared along time between the success and acknowledgement films received abroad and the lack of interest showed by domestic audience. The author identifies the cause as being “a palpable thematic shift” from the depiction of the coercive socialist reality and the fall of the regime towards “the representation of contemporary themes, such as social institutions like the hospital, the police, or the shifting gender norms and the crisis of patriarchy” (243). As a conclusion of his study, Strausz claims that filmmakers managed to form a “recognizable, signature language” through creations such as those analysed as part of New Romanian Cinema. Their major credit is having created an actual “national cinematic tradition” (246).

Thus, to conclude, László Strausz’s *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* provides a well-documented and theoretically sustained analysis of a rich cinematic imagery. Through his perceiving of hesitation as a diverse conceptual strategy, the author tackles on its importance by discussing both “films of the past” and productions depicting the Romanian contemporary world. In a clear-cut and very well thought structure, Strausz’s book offers a certification of the significance that New Romanian Cinema filmic productions gained along the years.