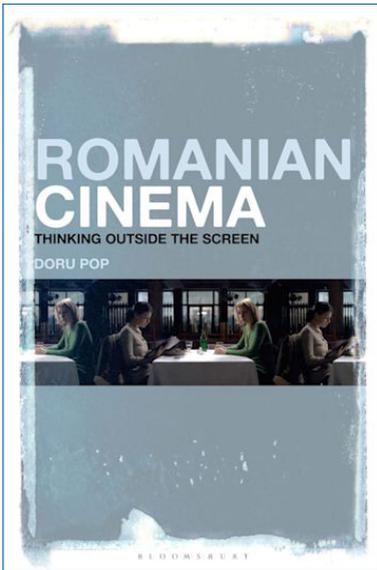


Mihai DRAGOLEA

Can Cinema Think Outside the Screen?



Review of:

Romanian Cinema: Thinking Outside the Screen,
Doru Pop.

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

Romanian Cinema: Thinking Outside the Screen, raises the question whether cinema can generate a new form of thinking situated outside the screen, engaging the viewers in a form of non-cinematic and non-philosophic meaning making practice. This review is written by a filmmaker, very much interested in understanding the ways in which cinema operates and transmits knowledge. Doru Pop's compelling and complex analysing is revealing instruments through which linkages that allow for circuits of meaning are formed, circuits that are not present in the images but belong to the outside mode of thinking generated within the intervals opened up by the filmmakers. Pop's endeavour opens up a whole new level of filmic understanding and reflexion for film critics, viewers and practitioners alike. By the acknowledgment of a new way of understanding cinematic narratives,

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EKPHRASIS, 1/2022

MODERN, MODERNITY AND
MODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY
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achieved by exploring the in-betweenness and the off-screen space, the art of cinema vindicates a new dimension — cinematic thought engages viewers in a new dialogue with the movies, taking place after the viewing time, beyond the movie theatre, developing and discovering truth long before the ending credits scene. In his analysis, the author uses the film works of internationally recognised Romanian directors Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu and Cirsti Puiu.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, titled *The Eternal Flickering of the Film-philosophies Quarrel*, dwells into the problematic of cinema, philosophy and film thinking. Pop argues that by coining film directors as philosophers we are missing one important aspect - the fact that directors and their films instigate thinking through images that function as “nooshocks” (stimulants of thinking) overshadows what is left unspoken, un-filmed and off-screen (81). Filmmakers and film-viewers work with philosophical notions when understanding a narrative, but these thoughts belong to a base of knowledge that is pre-acquired, it isn't intrinsic to the film itself. Pop argues that there is thinking beyond this type of rationalisation, a thinking that stems from the unspoken and not shown parts of films, and this type of thought formulation is essential to cinema as art and language. The second part of Pop's book, *Offscreen Cinema: The Aesthetics of the Non-cinematic*, revolves around Cristian Mungiu's body of films. Here we are presented with Mungiu's universe of *the undisclosed* (113) and *the triumph of the minimalist model* (87). *This Is Not a Film You Are Watching: A Visceral-Conceptual Response* is the next part of Pop's work, revolving around Corneliu Porumboiu's filmography. Pop observes how Porumboiu's films have evolved from ironical and critical commentaries about the Romanian society, towards less realistic and more conceptual films. The author draws parallels between the Dada movement and Porumboiu's ability to de-naturalise elements of life, such as speech, in order to comment not only on a character's situation but society at large. The last part of the book focuses on Cristi Puiu's means of meaning making beyond the screen. Titled *A Magical Mystical Tour into the Romanian Cinematic Mind*, this part of the book investigates how the Romanian way of being is enmeshed in Cirsti Puiu's films. The Romanian identity characterised by in-betweenness, analysed by Romanian philosophers like Lucian Blaga, welcomes an exploration of cinematic thinking placed in the gap and transitions of Cristi Puiu's films.

As I have mentioned earlier, I happen to be a documentary filmmaker who's just starting out working with fiction. The world of fiction does opened up for me a whole new arsenal of meaning making mechanisms, Pop's exploration of the non-cinematographic and non-philosophical acquirement of knowledge being one of the most thought provoking and desirable form of generating meaning for a filmmaker, in my humble opinion. The author advances the idea that cinema can represent meaning by either an endoscopic or an exoscopic modes (15). The exoscopic referring the typical presence of the camera while the endoscopic is dealing with the activation of meanings that are in-between, meanings that often result

from the clashing of two or more elements. One such example is given by Pop when analysing Mungiu's film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007). Exploring scenes such as the last one of the movie, where Otilia and Găbița are taking dinner after their ordeal has apparently ended, Pop observes how the absence of talking, the refusal of Otilia to elaborate on what should they do next, is activating meanings that are placed in-between, that are situated in the unspoken part of the film. The author observes how when the waiter enumerates what's on the menu to the two female protagonists, mainly various kinds of meat dishes, Mungiu is inviting viewers to make a connection with the aborted foetus that Otilia just got rid of. As spectators we are almost experiencing a haptic reaction to what passed, this being achieved in the non-cinematic interval that is created by association made by us, viewers, in the non-cinematic space placed beyond the confines of the story-world, at the borders of the film space. Pop analyses how Mungiu manages to generate deeper meanings by frustrating visual access to the one of the most important scenes of the film. When Mr. Bebe is sexually abusing Otilia, the director prefers to stay and film Găbița who is smoking a cigarette in the bathroom. A few moments later Otilia walks in the bathroom and Găbița needs to go and suffer the abuse. The camera doesn't leave the bathroom, we are now seeing Otilia violently and desperately washing herself. Mungiu creates new meanings, new experiences for the viewers who are obliged to imagine what has occurred off-screen and to ponder on the mental trauma of the characters. By filming Găbița waiting for her friend to be raped in a long shot, the director invites us alongside the character to experience and think about her thoughts, only to do the same when Otilia's character walks in the bathroom and Găbița leaves. Pop observes how the cinematographic language becomes more profound when it does not depend on the camera anymore, when meanings are not produced by the lenses, but rather by the incapacity of the photographic objective to capture the entire reality (189).

Pop elaborates a very interesting notion as he observes how the counter-narrative, non-cinematic devices employed by Mungiu design the entire movie as an interlude (54). Thus, the whole film is actually devised in such a manner that it will progress after the screening, in the mind of the spectators. This leads me to Pop's analysis of Cirsti Puiu's film universe. The author dives into the specifics of the Romanian psyche, observing how various national thinkers elaborated common philosophical notions that are relevant to this peculiar country. For example, Vasile Conta's notion of "universal undulation" that is very close to Lucian Blaga's theory on the "undulatory space" (208). The alternating Romanian geography can be conceptualised as a space of in-betweenness, an ever changing geography that invites a status of suspension and alternation of existence and meaning. Moreover, the Romanian geo-political space has always been at the margins of empires, the nation evolving at the fringes of clashing ideologies and civilisations.

These national traits are inevitably manifested by some Romanian filmmakers. Pop points to the fact that Puiu's filmography revolves around the ritual of the passage and

death, which is explored by the director as a process (The Death of Mr Lăzărescu), as a series of acts of violence, either inducing several deaths (Aurora), as a ritual absence of the dead (Sieranevada), or a meditation about the end of the world and the death of human kind (Malmkrog) (215). The parallel between Puiu's fascination with the manifestation of death and the undulations of the Romanian space is fascinating as Pop points out the fact that Puiu's characters are most often existing in the interval between two worlds, in a state of *între* (inside/outside) (Noica 1996: 31–40; 370–5), simultaneously dying and living (Pop, 218). This *între* existence is also achieved by the locations in which Puiu's narratives are taking place: ambulances, on the road between Constanța and Bucharest, in restaurants, at the dinner table or in the back-alleys of Bucharest. These spaces are transitional spaces, meant to be passed and left behind. By sub-framing, stalling background information regarding his characters, pointing out the incapacity of explanations, the director Cristi Puiu constructs a particular cinematic space, inviting us alongside his characters in a deterritorialized world of suspended existence. By placing audiences in the gap of liminality, Pop argues that Puiu's films are crating thoughts outside the cinematic world. Following Pop's line of thought, I believe that Puiu manages to actually invite us spectators in such a state of in-betweenness, exploring the world from the *între* point of view, that's specific to the Romanian space.

In his analysis of Corneliu Porumboiu's work, Pop continues his exploration of the *între* non-cinematographic space. In the movie titled *The Whistlers* (2019) Porumboiu deals with the alingual, exploring cinematographically with the language of whistling. Pop describes the substitution of the spoken communication with another form of sonority as a displacement happening within our profound nature, a distancing (*écart*) from the basic condition of mankind, leading to both the alienation of the protagonist and an unsettling strangeness for the spectators (169). The author points out the fact that the main character, Cristi, is actually losing his identity by having to learn the bird language in order to communicate with the shady characters that he's in cahoots with. Consequently, Cristi finds himself in a transitive stage, an alingual phase in which he alters his speech and his identity. While Cristian Mungiu uses the offscreen space in order to bring viewers in a state of non-cinema thinking and Cristi Puiu employs the *mise-en scene* and narrative constructs in order to generate non-cinematographic thinking, Porumboiu makes usage of new way of speech, a non-cinematic practice, in order to bring viewers in a particular state of strangeness from which new meanings can develop. By shifting spoken language into a whistled one, viewers are placed in an interval from which they make out half of what is communicated, activating thinking from within the new spot of in-betweenness the films situates them in.

Being one of the youngest art forms, cinema has many traits that need to be explored, discovered and then used. Pop manages to point our attention towards a new mode of thinking that can stem from films, a very important finding for our times. As major studios, streaming services and festivals seem to repeat themselves by promoting and producing

similar productions, the non-cinematic and non-philosophical mode of thinking can be a new element that if cultivated and honed by filmmakers can engage viewers in new and complex ways. Pop's analysis of Mungiu's, Puiu's and Porumboiu's works operates both as an exploration of where non-philosophical thinking takes place and a handbook for filmmakers and viewers to understand these fascinating processes.