

Cultural Intimacy and Family Ties in the New Romanian Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

### Cultural Intimacy and Family Ties in the New Romanian Cinema

Ioana Tarbu

After the fall of communism in 1989, Romania emerged as the country with the most prolific film industry in Eastern Europe. Directors like Cristian Mungiu, Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Radu Muntean and several others have won numerous prizes at international film festivals, including the Cannes' Palme d'Or, and their films are now referred to as the "New Romanian Cinema". They are known for the documentary realism and the focus on everyday incidents and ordinary people, set in powerful stories of the communist past or of the postcommunist transition period.

Looking at Cristian Mungiu's *Graduation* (2016) and Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016) I explore the sense of shared cultural intimacy which captures "those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (Herzfeld, 3). The relation between family membership and national belonging is used to create a measure of shared awkwardness and vulnerability that functions as a bond of cultural kinship for the Romanian viewer. The exploitation of the rather unflattering and vulnerable aspects of the Romanians' way of living and behaving shows a complicity between filmmaker and the audience that is created in the very act of castigating these realities. My analysis shows how these films offer a feeling of cultural intimacy as an artistic compensation for the crisis of filial and collective intimacy to a nation seen as a "community in anonymity", to use Benedict Anderson's formulation, finding its bearings during the postcommunist transition period.

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## Introduction

*People say we're destroying Romania's image. But what is that supposed to mean?*<sup>1</sup>  
Cristi Puiu

At the end of a public screening of Cristi Puiu's first feature *Stuff and Dough* (2001) in Vienna, a member of the audience came up to him and asked him why he didn't film the mountains: "Our country is beautiful!, " he added, to which Puiu replies in an interview as he retells the story: "I don't make films for tourists. (...) We are too much at home in truths that are make-ups." (Puiu interview, "Cristi Puiu on Romania") Similarly, on a screening of Cristian Mungiu's first feature film *Occident* (2002) in Paris, a Romanian viewer looked him in the eyes severely and said : "You shouldn't expose people's lives on screen like this! Do you know us from somewhere?" (Mungiu interview, Marius Chivu)

These reactions represent some of the first manifestations of cultural intimacy that accompany the New Romanian Cinema. The viewers can accept the realities presented and the way the characters speak and behave, mockingly or in a resigned manner ('this is how we are as a nation, there is nothing we can do about it'), or they can reject them, as the Romanian in Paris, or the one in Vienna, who did not wish to identify with the cultural heritage the films presented. However, a strong reaction can only be proof that an uncomfortable feeling of belonging has been stirred by the depiction –often times tinged with irony—of the unflattering national traits and local realities the films engage with. These stories that involve the viewers in the bittersweet act of self-recognition form a parallel discourse to the official narrative of the state. During 2002, when *Occident* was launched, the official discourse emphasized Romania's organic belonging to the

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<sup>1</sup> "Cristi Puiu on Romania, its cinema, and his own work" (East European Film Bulletin, vol. 7/July, 2011)

family of European nations, in view of the impending EU accession, while films like *Stuff and Dough* and *Occident*, joined a variety of alternative discourses that voiced the more ambivalent attitudes about the nation and its people. In this thesis, I am less concerned with how the film discourse interposes in the official narrative, but rather with what the New Romanian Cinema creates and brings up at the level of the postsocialist viewers and in what ways the films create a community with a feeling of belonging – that is, a sense of cultural intimacy.

An examination of cultural intimacy in the context of the New Romanian Cinema, or even, an examination of the New Romanian Cinema per se, most likely entails a discussion of the after-effects of Communism, as these films present a post-communist reality that necessarily makes reference to the past, directly or indirectly. Moreover, the filmmakers, regard themselves as products of the communist age and of the '89 Revolution — “I am a direct consequence of the communist system, of the fall of communism, of the University Square and of everything that followed”, says Puiu in an interview (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* 147). Both films that I examine bring to light aspects from the communist past and characters that are either nostalgic or, on the contrary, condemn the communist period and its effects as a grim page in the country’s history. I have tried to stay away from both extremes in my analysis of the films’ message, as it was not my intention to demonize communism or to recuperate it under a nostalgic aura. Part of the contemporary critical discourse on communist Romania regards phrases such as “the evils of Communism” or “the legacy of Communism” as expressions demonizing communism whose overuse has rendered them meaningless (Popa; Chelcea). However, while I avoid the phrase “the evils of Communism” when talking about the negative effects of the regime, I do use the phrase “the legacy of Communism”, for example, as I see no danger of its desemantization as long as its reference is made clear; neither do I believe it automatically carries a negative connotation. For example, the

blocks of flats that both films touch upon, formally and/or narratively, are what we can safely call one of the legacies of Communism. This particular legacy has both good and bad parts. On the one hand, urbanization was an important social enterprise of Communism and it helped house many people and turn a mainly rural country into a quasi-urbanized one. The subway line in Bucharest dates from the communist eighties and it is an important mark of modernity for the city. On the other hand, people were *forced* to “urbanize”, their houses were torn down and they were crammed in very small, unaesthetic and uncomfortable apartments, and saw their lives completely deracinated. It was not an organic process, but a violent, traumatic one. This is just an example of how many such legacies of Communism can be viewed in a Manichaeian fashion — or a Marxist-Leninist one...— and I believe that specifying one’s standing can perhaps be more helpful than avoiding to mention them. Even if my analysis touches upon the deleterious effects that Communism had on the morale and morality of the Romanian population throughout this thesis, I endeavored to remain objective in my analysis of the films and the way they speak of Romania’s history. I equally tried to maintain what I would call a grave attitude on what Communism meant for Romania and its population. I echo the filmmakers of the New Romanian Cinema in considering this solemn stance a moral imperative to hold.

\*

Part of the Romanian scholarship and criticism on the New Romanian Cinema stays away from these extremes; another part, however, reflects these divergent positions vis-à-vis the after-effects of Communism, sometimes without directly engaging with them.

As the Romanian New Wave is a relatively recent phenomenon, comprehensive diachronic studies on it are not numerous. A large part of the writing produced on the Romanian New Wave

/ New Romanian Cinema happened rather in synchronicity with it. Since the scholarly discourse needs time and distance to coagulate and produce its necessary critical assessment, an overwhelming number of secondary sources are informal, published in film magazines, cinema reviews, student-run cinema publications or on specialized blogs.<sup>2</sup> However, several book-length histories, introductory studies and collections of essays –a large part of them in Romanian-- whose viewpoints vary from national to comparative and transnational, intermedial and media-theory perspectives, provide a good starting point for my research.

The historical studies and the collections of essays examine the way the social and political climate before and after the 1989 Revolution is reflected in the productions of the New Romanian Cinema (NRC), with special focus on socialization behaviors, nostalgia, parent-child relations, and the directors' obsession with recent history (Corciovescu and Mihăilescu eds., 2011; Șerban, 2009; Gorzo and State eds., 2014; Căliman, 2017). Alex Leo Șerban's *4 decenii, 3 ani si 2 luni cu filmul romanesc* (4 Decades, 3 Years, and 2 Months with the Romanian Film) is among the first books to engage with the NRC critically and to discuss its characteristics together with the newness it brought to the national cinema. Șerban is also among the first to popularize the phrase "New Romanian Cinema" in his collection of short essays. *The Politics of Film* (2014), edited by Gorzo and State, is a book of well-documented essays on some of the most important NRC filmmakers (with the exception of Mungiu, who only appears in half a chapter) from different perspectives: phenomenological, colonial, reception based, etc. Alex Cistelean's essay "Popularoid. The Golden Age of Collective Memories" is essential to my analysis of Mungiu's *Graduation* in

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the most prestigious film and visual media online magazines and blogs are: *All About Romanian Cinema*, a magazine edited by the National Union of Filmmakers in Romania (<http://aarc.ro/en>), *Film Menu*, created and supported by the Bucharest University of Theatre and Film (<https://filmmenu.wordpress.com/>), *Scena 9* (<https://www.scena9.ro/>) and *B-critic* (<https://www.b-critic.ro/>). One of the blogs on films of the New Romanian Cinema that I have used in my research is Andrei Gorzo's *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (<https://andrei gorzoblog.wordpress.com/>).

Chapter III through the concept it proposes: *the secondary public space of intimacy*, which is a by-product of totalitarian regimes and refers to the informal resistance of society to state oppression through the creation of transgressive practices and various pockets of collegial solidarity and support. I use this concept to examine the backroom deals that represent the core aspect of Mungiu's *Graduation*.

A volume on which I draw in Chapter I is Doru Pop & Ioan-Pavel Azap's *Tales from the Silver Screen Age* (2019). The first part is Pop's introductory study on the mechanisms of state socialism and the effects of Marxist cinema on Romanian film, and the second is a survey on the communist cinema memories of several Romanian film critics, essayists, writers and artists conducted by Azap. Pop's section offered relevant material for contentualizing the various film genres during the communist age and their connection to the dogmatic aspects that gained ground in the different stages of communism. The second part proved a good resource for understanding the informal film culture that emerged in the 80s through the VCRs and the existence of spaces of negotiation within the official culture. Claudiu Turcuș' *Against Memory. From Socialist Aesthetics to the New Romanian Cinema* (2017) analyzes the Romanian cinema of the past five decades within the larger framework of Eastern European cinema. The book offers an insightful analysis of the main tendencies of Romanian film during the communist age, especially on the contemporary propaganda films which helped shape a mythology of the socialist everyday.

As to books published in English, three overview studies will be of particular relevance to my thesis. The first, chronologically, is Dominique Nasta's *Contemporary Romanian Cinema. The History of an Unexpected Miracle* (2013) It is the first history of the New Romanian Cinema and the first book in English to provide detailed analyses of landmark Romanian films from pre- to post-1989 (Pârvulescu, "Romanian Cinema"), and it is of great relevance to my first chapter

especially for the overview of the communist cinema; the book also offers close readings of some of the most important Romanian films and an interpretation of their minimalist aesthetics. Doru Pop's *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction* (2014) provides stylistic and thematic readings on aesthetics, humor, marginality, the representation of women as well as the international reception of the Romanian New Wave. Especially relevant is Pop's discussion of the aesthetics of these film productions as part of the New Waves of the Western and Central-Eastern European cinemas; this discussion opens the contextualization of the films beyond the national context privileged by some historical studies published in Romania. It is also instrumental for the section on the conceptual differences between the Romanian New Wave and the New Romanian Cinema from Chapter I. Finally, *The New Romanian Cinema* (2019), edited by Christina Stojanova with Dana Duma, is the most recent and brings together essays written by fifteen scholars on aesthetic, ethical and philosophical aspects centered around the existentialist realism of the New Romanian Cinema. Ioana Uricaru's chapter on minimalism and melodrama is particularly useful, both for my analysis of *Sieranevada* and of *Graduation*. The book actually offers two different views on minimalism in NRC that have informed my analyses: Ioana Uricaru's and Irina Trocan's. Trocan focuses on minimalism as a tool for stimulating the viewer's critical awareness, whereas Uricaru discusses the minimalism of NRC in opposition to the excess of melodrama and the filmmakers' insistence on the ambiguous, the absurd and their "distrust of the melodramatic promise of moral decantation." (60) Stojanova's "Historical Overview of Romanian Cinema" has also been particularly useful for my outline of Romanian cinema in Chapter I, especially for a discussion of the 'old wave' films that can be considered precursors of the NRC. Aside from these three critical studies, Marian Țuțui's *A short history of Romanian Cinema*, which is a bilingual illustrated history of the main developments in Romanian cinema is another source for the

historical overview from Chapter I. While I do not share the book's slightly protochronist<sup>3</sup> bias in presenting the achievements of Romanian society and cinema, its outline of pre-WWII cinema has been useful for my study.

Aside from the above mentioned syntheses, my research will be guided by the theoretical scholarship on the New Romanian Cinema. Andrei Gorzo's *Things That Cannot Be Said In a Different Way. A Way of Thinking Cinema, from André Bazin to Cristi Puiu* (2012) will be the main theoretical foundation for my analysis of Puiu's aesthetics. Andrei Gorzo, one of the most prominent Romanian film scholars and critics, discusses the influence of Bazin's theory of cinema on the NRC. He examines the aesthetics (depth of field, long takes, real time duration, sound) of several prominent Romanian films after 1989 to distinguish an emerging coherent style in Romanian contemporary cinema, promoted by director Cristi Puiu and subsequently adopted most successfully by Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu and Radu Muntean, among the most reputed filmmakers. Gorzo investigates the New Romanian Cinema within the paradigms of modernism, realism and existentialism, and situates its aesthetics between the Bazinian realism and modernism; this is, as Gorzo argues, a rather anachronistic preference, especially in Puiu's radical adoption of the observational realism, but the Romanian scholar explains it by quoting the concept of *new realness* (Hoberman) that both European and Hollywood-made films display during the first decade of the new millennium. While my analysis of Puiu's aesthetics does not engage with Bazin's theory, it acknowledges points of crossover regarding Puiu's "cinema of duration" and the ambiguity of the real. Cristian Ferencz-Flatz's book on the New Romanian Cinema from a phenomenological perspective (Ferencz-Flatz, 2015) complements Gorzo's theoretical focus with insights into the mise-en-scene and close attention to concepts such as *realism* and *situation* that

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of *protochronism*, see pp. 33-4, 39.

will help me analyze Puiu's formal techniques and the urban space as a space of experience in *Sieranevada* in particular.

Some books have been written on specific topics connected to the Romanian New Wave, such as *space* from a sociopolitical perspective as *disciplinary space* (Batori, 2018) and a sociocultural perspective combined with film studies theory, as the *space of the kitchen* (Deaca, 2017). Deaca's book, *A movie-like kitchen: The scenotope of the kitchen in the New Romanian Cinema*, is a comprehensive study of the post-1989 films that is particularly relevant to my research, in terms of its thematic focus. Deaca focuses on the space of the kitchen as a unifying trope in the New Romanian Cinema, and on the realist representation of space, characters and social background. He offers close-readings and analyzes the cinematic language of both *Sieranevada* and *Graduation*, and reveals the relation between the characters' environment and their affects. There is also a well-documented auteur study on the director that started the New Romanian Cinema: *Cristi Puiu* (Filimon, 2017). Monica Filimon's book provides close readings of all of Puiu's films made until 2016 as well as a social history background on them. It is a valuable source in my exploration of Cristi Puiu's poetics and his view on cinema's potential for revealing the sensitive matter of the world. The book also includes an ample interview with the filmmaker, which is most enlightening for the examination of his aesthetics, his obsession with observational documentary, and his preoccupation with the meaning of history, among many other aspects.

László Strausz's *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* (2017) is a conceptual and theoretical approach centered on the notion of hesitation as "critical subject position/mobile subject position", which Strausz uses to discuss the attitude of NRC towards history and social construction. Both Chapter II and Chapter III draw on its main concepts, as well as on the formal



analysis of the films and the notion of “detached empathy”. Strausz also discusses the evolution of the NRC from flaunting self-reflexive gestures and attitudes to a suppressed modernism—a point on which my analysis differs, as I argue that the films of the NRC have evolved in the opposite direction: from more suppressed forms of modernism to the self-reflexivity of *Police, Adjective* (C. Porumboiu, 2009), *Aurora* (C. Puiu, 2010) and *When The Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (Porumboiu, 2013).

Two book-length studies are quite useful to the discussion on the national and supranational (European) identity in relation to a large number of Romanian films, from the socialist to the postsocialist era. Florentina Andreescu’s *From Communism to Capitalism: Nation and State in Romanian Cultural Production* (2013) falls into the social science transition studies and is instrumental in linking the film industry developments to the economic, political and cultural transformations post 1989. Onoriu Colacel’s *The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism: Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle* provides ample data on the historical epics popular during the communist era. Both studies provide a better understanding of how the films I analyze make sense of the changes related to political power, social classes and national identity brought about by the transition to democracy.

There is a number of articles from a feminist and feminist-anthropological perspective, which focus on Mungiu’s 2007 Palme d’Or winner *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*—a drama of abortion in communist Romania—through diverse angles, from biopolitical resistance and the creation of spaces of dissent (Cazan, 2011) to melodrama theory (Gaines, 2014). Another essay debates issues related to the representation of women and trauma post-1989 and cinema’s role as a tool of remembrance (Adam and Mitroiu, 2016). This article was particularly useful for the idea of mediation and empathy that Mungiu’s *432* creates and I link it to the films’ work of collective

remembrance that helps create a cultural and affective bond with the audience.

Finally, one of the most important sources of inspiration for my thesis is Diana Georgescu's article "Marrying into the European Family of Nations: National Disorder and Upset Gender Roles in Post-Communist Romanian Film" (2011). The article chronicles gender and nation from a gender studies perspective and traces the use of gender as a metaphor for the nation as well as a rhetorical device to situate Romania's place in the post-1989 geopolitical context. It revolves around the highly gendered plots and family tropes of two films (*Go West* (Mungiu, 2002) and *The Italian Girls* (Napoleon Helmis, 2004)) in connection to Romania's efforts to be accepted into the European family of nations. It was particularly inspiring for its use of Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy" in relation to the feeling that two Romanian films—which do not belong to the NRC aesthetics-- achieve for the viewers. While the focus of her article is not on Herzfeld's concept, Georgescu's attention to the viewers' relatively new experience of being acknowledged as viewers by a director's strategies and her suggestion that the sense of cultural intimacy is enhanced in the very act of castigating domestic realities was an important source of inspiration for my focus on cultural intimacy.

Although most of these studies briefly engage with the family and society / nation-state interrelation from their diverse perspectives and provide a valuable starting point for my analysis of family ties in the New Romanian Cinema, none of them discuss the subject in significant and sufficient detail and from the point of view of the cultural intimacy the films engage with and activate for the audience. I hope that the current project fills a part of that gap.

## Methodology

From the perspective of film criticism, I combine two methodological approaches in my thesis: the first is a structuralist approach which focuses on the socio-cultural underpinning of the films discussed and their relation to Romania's recent history and the economic situation which they depict; the second falls into the semiotic studies of the realist tradition theorized by André Bazin, where the message of the film and its specificity comes from the realist manner in which the narrative is presented: long takes, depth of field, location shooting, sparse soundtrack. My analysis will pay attention to the sociocultural foundation of the films as much as to the way in which the visual techniques contribute to their message. I will also use the filmmakers' opinions on their own art and artistic principles expressed in interviews in the specialized and popular press, in their film commentaries and public appearances, and in a much-referenced book of interviews published at the start of the New Cinema phenomenon: *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema* (2006) by Mihai Fulger.

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, my exploration of family ties will mostly use an approach from the social-anthropology of postsocialist transitions. I believe the term "cultural intimacy" theorized by anthropologist of post-socialist transitions Michael Herzfeld offers the best avenue to examine the two films chosen and the way they depict local realities. Herzfeld's social anthropology study *Cultural Intimacy* (2005) explores the tension between the discourses of national exaltation and a sense of shared cultural intimacy which captures "those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (3). The concept also describes certain familiarity and connivance with the national discourse and the power structures that "assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce

the effectiveness of intimidation” (Herzfeld 3). There is therefore an ambivalent private space of the collective self that is created as people internalize the national narrative on the one hand, and counter it on the other. Using Herzfeld’s theory, I will analyze the way cultural intimacy is achieved by presenting painful and embarrassing aspects related to family relations, the self, and the general institutional and social instability in Romania during the transition period. Herzfeld points out that the narratives of national belonging use the language of intimacy to commend loyalty and suppress dissent. He notes the frequency of bodily and familial metaphors, and of everyday idioms in the discourse of the nation-state. For rhetorical reasons, political leaders and representatives of national-state powers endeavor to ground their address to the people in social experience at the most intimate levels. Herzfeld gives the example of metaphors of intimacy and familiarity such as “the body politic”, “our boys and girls”, “mother country”, “*Vaterland*”, as well as the trope of the tourist as a family guest that have been used throughout time in the public discourse of political leaders as well as in commercials (Herzfeld 5).

The idea of the nation as a community of familiar faces brings us to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”, to which Herzfeld refers in his theorization. Anderson’s influential theory in social sciences and anthropology posits the nation as a social construct of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by which colonial powers started to establish who could and who could not be members of their communities. He explains how the main institutions of power of the colonial state --the census, the map and the museum—were used to categorize people, give them a sense of legitimacy and delineate borders. The nation, Anderson argues, is thus a social construct imagined by people who claim belonging to a common group, and not the given, divine entity it was held to be during the age of monarchies.

Herzfeld builds upon this theory and brings an important modification to Anderson’s

concept: instead of a rather top-down approach, which focuses on the nation-state's influence on the people, he analyzes the influence that ordinary people can have on the practice of nationalism. He grounds his account in the details of everyday life: family, friendship, commensality (the act or practice of sharing food at the table, or of eating as a social activity). I will use this approach when analyzing the films with special attention to intergenerational and couple relations.

## **Chapter Structure**

Chapter One (*Romanian Cinema from World War II to the New Romanian Cinema*) is an overview of the main trends in cinema during the state socialism period (1947-1989) and up to the decades following the '89 Revolution. The strict ideological and economic control of the film industry by the state and the unrelenting censorship made it very difficult for Romanian filmmakers to make productions that were not in line with the communist propaganda. This also explains why there was no New Wave in Romanian cinema in synchronicity with the New Waves of Eastern Europe. However, there is a generation of 'old wave' masters that made some landmark films during the communist regime, who have been considered predecessors of the NRC. The first section also discusses the role of the Romanian Cinematheque in building the aesthetic canon during the 70s and 80s and in creating a community of cinephiles. This, together with the major films of the 'old wave' filmmakers, represent the spaces of negotiation that allowed for the formation of certain sensibility of some of the NRC representatives. The New Romanian Cinema section details the context, ethical stance and the aesthetics of the movement, alongside a clarification of the concept of "national cinema" and of the two designations used interchangeably: the Romanian New Wave and the New Romanian Cinema. Showing truths forbidden during communism and depicting reality with all its implications became a moral imperative of the films

made during the 2000s. The movement prioritizes ethics at least as much as aesthetics and, as such, stands in stark opposition to the previous ideological instrumentalization of film. The appendix to this chapter brings a short survey of three filmmakers who are considered precursors to the Romanian New Wave: Mircea Daneliuc, Alexandru Tatos and Lucian Pintilie and a discussion of a film made by the latter (*The Reenactment*, 1970).

I analyze in Chapter Two (*Together but Apart: Family Dynamics Through Observational Cinema in Cristi Puiu's Sieranevada (2016)*) the cultural markers, the materiality of space and the formal techniques used to reveal the complicated family dynamics and its relation to the larger social undercurrents during post-communism in Romania. Cristi Puiu tries to preserve national memory and build cultural intimacy through the attention to the specific details that make up the everyday interfamilial relations as well as through his filming technique, which foregrounds a hesitant, anthropomorphic camera. The de-voyeuristic gaze allows for the viewers' embarrassing recognition of shared vulnerabilities without identification with the characters. Puiu's film achieves a sense of cultural intimacy and connivance with the public by showing aspects of embarrassment and vulnerability that spectators recognize not as a national reality that needs to be penalized, but as something ambivalent, ambiguous and profoundly human.

Chapter Three (*Living Through Proxy: the Secondary Public Space in Cristian Mungiu's Graduation (2016)*) dwells on the public side of intimacy, as opposed to the private one foregrounded in Puiu's *Sieranevada*. I draw on Alex Cistelean's notion of the "secondary public space" created during Communism to show that the negotiation of the official normative codes that triggers the protagonist's drama is a contemporary illustration of the transgressive rituals that define a secondary space of intimacy that was created during the communist age. I argue that this particular practice represents the manifestation of cultural intimacy in Mungiu's film. The second

part of the chapter is dedicated to the music used in the end credits, which provides a nostalgic commentary. Using Svetlana Boym's study on *The Future of Nostalgia*, I discuss nostalgia as a "historical emotion" typical of modernity that emerges as a defense mechanism and a critical appraisal to the challenges of the present. This form of nostalgia triggers the yearning for a community with a collective memory which relates to the cultural intimacy the film activates, not without irony – what I discuss, following Boym, as "reflective nostalgia."

The Conclusion emphasizes the NRC's ethical view in which film helps preserve national and collective memory through its artistic mediation, establishing a connection with the audience through the act of remembering. A form of togetherness and a feeling of belonging is created in the bittersweet acknowledgement of unflattering national traits and collective vulnerabilities, which represents the cultural intimacy that the films activate for the viewers. The last part of the chapter looks beyond NRC, at the films released in recent years, which reflect the internationalization of film production and society, through their heterogeneous topics, themes and style. The de-localization of narratives and settings, and the focus on generic human relations show that the very cultural and social markers of cultural intimacy have changed in recent years, moving away from the imperatives of the New Romanian Cinema.

## Chapter One: Romanian Cinema from World War II to the New Romanian Cinema

*There are no memorable Romanian films. At least we know where we're starting from.*<sup>4</sup>

Cristian Mungiu, 2006

The New Romanian Cinema has positioned itself on the contemporary film festival circuit as a “new cinema”, begging the question: what is it new in relation to? This question has not been discussed very often, hence for us to engage with the movement, it is first important to understand where these filmmakers are coming from and what the tradition behind this new way of making cinema is. The first history of the New Romanian Cinema, written by Dominique Nasta and published in 2013, is entitled *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*. The title is relevant for the sense of surprise and wonder that this newly emerged movement in Romanian cinema generated. It suggests that what came before it could hardly have prepared the ground or anticipated its achievements, which are therefore, all the more remarkable. Being the first history of the movement, the book also voices the excitement and thrill that film critics and historians felt when the New Romanian Cinema was launching its landmark films.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first is an overview of Romanian Cinema before 1989, more precisely of the cinema during the communist period, in which I discuss the development of the industry and outline the main directions of film during the four decades of Communism. I also point out some of the films and filmmakers who are generally regarded as ‘old wave’ masters, and possible predecessors of the Romanian New Wave or the New Romanian Cinema. The second part is a short discussion of the nineties cinema, whose main developments precede the New Romanian Cinema. The third part is a more detailed discussion of the latter, from

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema*, Mihai Fulger, pp. 85-6. (my translation)



outlook and aesthetics, to the postcommunist historical context, to theoretical issues related to the concept of national cinema and finally to a clarification of the two notions: Romanian New Wave and New Romanian Cinema, which are used in the critical discourse. The Appendix to this chapter contains a short discussion of the films of three filmmakers generally considered precursors of the New Romanian Cinema (NRC).

### **Brief Overview of Romanian Cinema before 1989**

*It's nothing... They filled me with holes!*

(Commissioner Miclovan in Sergiu Nicolaescu's *With Clean Hands*, 1972)

#### *Communist Regime and Film Ideology*

At the end of the Second World War the communist regime took control of Romania under the pressure of the Soviet occupation. In December 1947 King Mihai of Romania was forced to resign his position as head of the state. A new constitution was adopted in 1948 by which monarchy was abolished; so was political pluralism, and the power was taken over by the communist forces. All public property, be it houses or economic enterprises, were seized by the state (“nationalized”); all agricultural private property were taken by the state and turned into state-owned farms. Communism also brought a severe oppression of the representatives of the old political and intellectual class, who could have influenced the people to stand up for their rights or rebel against the regime. A few politicians ruled the country between 1947 to 1989, the most (in)famous being Nicolae Ceaușescu, who is officially the first Romanian president. His rule was also the longest: 1965 to 1989. The secret police (“Securitate”) was established as the main repression instrument of the regime and functioned under the direct supervision of the Soviet agents. Within its purview fell the strict control of the population and of potential adversaries, especially the intellectuals.

Culturally, censorship was introduced in all fields of creation and intellectual activity, and the most significant intellectuals were marginalized or imprisoned – most of the intelligentsia at that time, educated in the West and with francophone sympathies, was decidedly “anti-Russian and anti-Soviet” (Liehm and Liehm qtd. in Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 252). Education, publishing houses, the radio and the television were closely controlled and subordinated ideologically to the communist directives. The state-driven centralized production mode of cinema specific to socialist economies in Eastern Europe was introduced in Romania in 1948 by Decree 303, which nationalized the film industry and regulated its commerce. Since the finance and production mechanisms were centralized, only certain types of films and content were possible. Films were subject to the same control and supervision that brought about film censorship, mutilation and the banning of certain films that did not align with the Party views. (Sava 24) Like in most socialist countries after the Second World War, cinema became an important instrument of propaganda, a tool for spreading the socialist ideals through the aesthetics allowed: socialist realism in the fifties and a version of that in the decades that followed.

A brief note on the state of film industry before WWII will help to better understand the changes that came with the new regime. Before the communist takeover, the Romanian film industry, while not particularly developed, was quite diverse: fifty feature-length narrative films, out of which thirty silent and twenty talkies had been produced “semi-commercially or independently” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 250). These productions were mainly comedies of manner adapted from playwright I.L.Caragiale, and melodramas. Several documentaries were also produced, of which a few internationally recognized.<sup>5</sup> The National Cinematographic Office

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<sup>5</sup> Țuțui notes that the first sociological films in the world were made in Romania during this time, thanks to Prof. Dimitrie Gusti and his team of sociologists, who contributed to: *Romanian Folk Customs* (1928, Mihail Vulpescu), *Life of Romanian Village* (1929, Paul Sterian and Nicolae Argintescu-Amza), *The Land of Motzi* (1938, Paul Călinescu) and many others. *The Land of Motzi* was awarded the Bronze Plaque for the best documentary at the

was set up in different steps between 1934 and 1941 as a state institution whose main responsibilities were the creation of the material basis and the funding of national film productions. Its first studio became functional in 1937.

Once the communist regime took charge, state institutions were set up <sup>6</sup> responsible for socialist film promotion and for the import of films from the neighboring communist countries under the supervision of the Agitprop section. Any film made during that time had to be approved by the Political Bureau of the PMR (Romanian Workers' Party), not only by the specialized institutions. As Doru Pop notes, starting from this time and for the next four decades, cinema in Romania was controlled by the mechanisms of state socialism (*Tales*, 38-9).

The first period of communism, from 1947 to 1956 was the harshest, also known as the Stalinization period. It was a time of totalitarianism and isolation, in which directors highly regarded in the pre-communist period were marginalized (Sava 24), while others were sent to the USSR to be trained in socialist film techniques. (Nasta 12) By 1948 all cinemas and production houses were already nationalized and showed mainly Soviet films.<sup>7</sup> Of course, even within the Soviet films category, not all films were considered useful for the creation of what Christina Stojanova calls “a totalitarian genre paradigm” (“Historical Overview” 253). She notes in this respect that “Romanian viewers were not shown avant-garde works by Eisenstein, Dovzhenko or Vertov, or even the sincerely naïve, but captivating Socialist Realist works from the 1930s”, but rather “works made during the most severe Zhdanovist period (1946–54), known as *malokartinie* (or restricted film production) (...)” (Historical Overview 252)

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Venice Film Festival (1939). (26)

<sup>6</sup> The first two were *Cinexfilm* established in 1948 and *Romfilm* in 1949.

<sup>7</sup> In 1948, out of the total of 715 films shown, 428 were Soviet and only 37 American

([https://www.digi24.ro/special/campanii-digi24/1989-anul-care-a-schimbata-lumea/cinematografia-transformata-de-comunisti-in-unealta-de-manipulat-istoria-340317?\\_grsc=cookieIsUndef0&\\_grts=54211730&\\_grua=7ce51ed33e5eae03c91dc9183820f592&\\_grrn=1](https://www.digi24.ro/special/campanii-digi24/1989-anul-care-a-schimbata-lumea/cinematografia-transformata-de-comunisti-in-unealta-de-manipulat-istoria-340317?_grsc=cookieIsUndef0&_grts=54211730&_grua=7ce51ed33e5eae03c91dc9183820f592&_grrn=1))

### *Development of the Industry*

The communist regime came with an insistence on cinema as the perfect means for propaganda, for educating the masses in line with the Party's ideology; from this perspective, cinema was an efficient way of combining the useful with the pleasant. Due to its newly gained importance as well as to the politics of centralized socialism and its strategies of accelerated industrialization, cinema developed rapidly during the communist age. For a quick comparison, we should note that in the first years of socialism only one film per year was made, whereas between 1965 and 1985, when the industry was rapidly developing, roughly 400 films were made in Romania (Pop, *Tales*, 36). The 5-year plan drawn up in the 1950s stipulated the need for "an increased production of films with a high ideological and artistic level" (Pop, *Tales*, 39). This is the period when the Buftea Film Studios — a replica of the Mosfilm studios— were built. By 1956 part of the studios was already finished. They were the largest in Eastern Europe and included pools for underwater filming, an investment higher than in any other socialist industry (Pop, *Tales*, 39).

A good illustration of the regime's efforts of making cinema a popular entertainment choice everywhere in the country was the movie caravan — a way of bringing films to the people in the rural areas who did not have access to cinema. Screenings were followed by discussions on the main topics of the film, a kind of an education and an awareness raising session in communist ideology. These topics were mostly: collectivization, industrialization, the creation of the new man and of a new history. The first film in a long series treating these topics, and considered the herald of a new era, was *Răsună Valea* (The Valley Resounds, 1949). Directed by Paul Călinescu, the film focused on the class struggle between the peasant brigadiers working on building sites and

the former landowners, alongside connected topics, such as the construction of socialism.

### *Four Decades of Communist Film*

The 1950s was a period of strict control of the national cinema, but it was also a time of growth of the industry, in line with the Leninist view that cinema was the most important of the arts. The number of cinema theatres increased and specialized film institutions were created, such as the National Film Archive (1957), whose responsibilities included the film exchanges with international film archives as well as the organization of events and the promotion of cinema culture through the two cinema theaters known as the Cinematheque. The fifties decade saw the first generation of film graduates from the newly founded IATC (The Institute of Theatre and Film Art). The late fifties came with a diversification of the cinema offer, as mass films emerged: thrillers, comedies, animation films, and sketches from reputed playwright I.L. Caragiale, as well as other adaptations from classical writers. The adaptations from classics or authorized contemporary writers (Ioan Slavici, Liviu Rebreanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ion Agârbiceanu, Mihail Sebastian) were a steady practice throughout the communist age, especially since the late 60s.

Socialist realism was the aesthetic standard in both film and literature – and art in general - in the fifties in Romania, by which artists had to comply with pre-established themes and narrative templates. In film, by altering reality through stereotypical visual representations, socialist realism showed a positive image of society meant to mobilize people to behave in ways worthy of communist citizens. Any film made in socialist Romania needed to illustrate the ideal behavior of the working class (Pop, *Tales*, 91) and, thus, the aesthetic function came secondary to the film's moralizing purpose. This formula was deemed a necessary improvement of reality meant to project the communist ideology in attractive contents (Pop, *Tales*, 21-2). Socialist realism

showed the working class in their exemplarity, and sometimes in their exceptionality, as in the films glorifying the revolutionary heroes of Communism. It meant to show the energy and optimism of the ordinary people united in the common goal of building a new history and a new man. The socialist films were also meant to foreground a counter-aesthetics to that of the postwar European New Waves, such as the French New Wave, plagued with existentialism and depressive thoughts – proof of the corrupt and corrupting nature of the capitalist systems. An important element of socialist cinema was the representation of the working class. Initially, this was done through the films set on construction sites, which showed the flourishing industry of communism as well as through the co-operativization/collectivization films, which described the transformations of the agricultural production. In most of these films, the decaying and mean bourgeoisie “was defeated by the happy working class or the enthusiastic peasantry”. (Pop, *Tales*, 98)

The Soviet army withdraws from Romania in 1958, and starting from 1965 Ceaușescu gradually and firmly delineates his politics from that of Moscow. As a result, the national-communism born in Romania during Ceaușescu’s autarchy was very different, and even in a significant contradiction, with the values of socialism and its international aspirations, as they come out of Marx and Engels’s writings. (Pop, *Tales*, 8, 17) This is the period when western co-productions replace the Mosfilm ones (Pop, *Tales*, 15), a period that can be regarded as the Romanian Thaw. During this time Franco-London Films gets involved in the making of *The Dacians* (1967) and *Michael the Brave/The Last Crusade* (1970) — from the historical epic series — both directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu. Also, Western celebrities such as Orson Welles and Jean Marais, among others, come to shoot at the Buftea film studios (Pop, *Tales*, 44). Contact with filmmakers abroad existed before this time, but it was mainly French left-leaning directors who

came to make films in Romania, for example Louis Daquin with *Bărăgan Thistles* (1957) and Henri Colpi with *Codine* (1963), both of them fascinated with the work of socialist Romanian writer Panait Istrati, whose novels they adapted for the screen.

A landmark film of the sixties and of Romanian cinema as a whole is Liviu Ciulei's *Forest of the Hanged* (1965), which is an adaptation of Liviu Rebreanu's eponymous novel and considered among "the few antecedents of the existentialist realism of New Romanian Cinema". (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 259) Appeared in this period of cultural relaxation and diversification, the film won Ciulei the Best Director Award at Cannes in 1965. It focuses on the drama of a Romanian officer in the Austro-Hungarian army during WWI as he decides to desert to the side of the Romanian army and face the death penalty for treason. An year later, another film, Mircea Mureșan's *The Uprising* (1966) which was also an adaptation from a Rebreanu novel about the peasant uprising of 1907, won the Best Film Award at Cannes in 1966. The sixties liberalization brought other artistically valuable films for Romanian cinema: Lucian Pintilie's *Sunday at Six* (1966) and *The Reenactment* (1968), Mircea Săucan's *Endless Shore* (1962) and *Meanders* (1966), which were formally daring art films of a radical aestheticism.

At the opposite end of art films, the genre diversification of popular cinema continued throughout the 60s with the cloak and dagger romances, the so-called Haidouk films (films with outlaws) that became quite popular with the audience (*Haiducii* (The Haidouks), Dinu Cocea, 1965, *Răzbunarea haiducilor* (The Revenge of the Haidouks) D. Cocea, 1968, with several sequels having been produced from 1965 to 1968). Later, in the 1980s, a new series was produced whose attractive hero, played by Florin Piersic, became very well-liked: *Mărgelatu* (*Road of Bones* 1980, *The Yellow Rose* 1982, *Mysteries of Bucharest* 1984, etc.). These Haidouk films represent a communist version of the westerns as they combine shootings, stunts and the various adventures

specific to the genre with the anti-bourgeois spirit of Marxist ideology. (Pop, *Tales*, 66) Their heroes (Amza, Șaptecai, Mărgelatu) fight against social injustice and lawbreakers and expose the human exploitation of capitalism while doing so. Compared with the Western exploiters, who are on the brink of moral decay, the Eastern peasants and workers are ethical, hardworking and respectful of each other.<sup>8</sup> Encouraging class struggle and denouncing the evils of capitalism was actually the purpose of socialist films, be they Eastern Westerns, comedies, musicals, or children's fantasy tales.

A few comedies became very popular at the outset of the seventies, known as the *Brigada Diverse (BD)* series (Brigade Miscellaneous): *B.D. în alertă* (Brigade Miscellaneous on Alert, 1970), *BD în acțiune* (Brigade Miscellaneous Steps In, 1970), *BD la munte și la mare* (Brigade Miscellaneous in the Mountains and at the Sea, 1971). This series of three situational comedies of the detective genre directed by Mircea Drăgan between 1970-1971 after a screenplay by Nicolae Țic enjoyed huge popularity not only during the communist regime, but also decades after, to the present. These three films are still shown on TV and people quote lines from them “at the market or in the tramway” (Fulger, “From Curatorship to the Canon” 224). They are ambiguous enough in their treatment of the subject matters to allow for opposite viewpoints on their merits and message. Doru Pop regards them as propaganda material which showed the socialist police force as benevolent, yet firm; according to him, the humane policemen presented in these films made more bearable the aggression of the socialist state toward its own citizens (*Tales*, 92-3). He sees them as didactic in their cultivation of class fight and denunciation of the flaws of capitalism (*Tales*, 92). However, it is undeniable that most part of their success was due to their comic

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<sup>8</sup> This comparison comes out plainly in three films about Romanians who went to the Wild West which are among the best rated action and adventure films in Romania, with a total box office of 17.6 million lei (Pop, *Tales*, 69): *The Prophet, the Gold, and the Transylvanians* (Dan Pița, 1978), *The Actress, the Dollars, and the Transylvanians* (Mircea Veroiu, 1980) and *The Oil, the Baby, and the Transylvanians* (Pița, 1981).



treatment of the police force, which they ridiculed “in the style of the 1960s French films about the hilariously incompetent Inspector Juve (Louis de Funès).” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 263) The Buftea Studios Facebook page posted on Oct. 16, 2021 close to a hundred photographs from the indoor and outdoor shooting sessions of the BD series.<sup>9</sup> Over 5.800 users liked the post and hundreds of them posted comments of appreciation or quotes from the film. This manifestation of nostalgia that brings people together even after fifty years from the release of the series is an example of the cultural intimacy that some of the films of the communist past create with the viewers, an aspect on which I will expand in my chapter on Mungiu’s *Graduation*.

The period that followed, situated between the variety and enrichment from the sixties and early eighties, came with a much tighter supervision in all aspects, from politics to society and culture. Following Ceaușescu’s visit to North Korea in May 1971, the July Theses<sup>10</sup> were drafted — a document which clearly specified that culture and all sectors of artistic activity must become an instrument of propaganda similar to the role they had in the Stalinization period. Liberalization ceased and a personality cult of Ceaușescu was instated. Two topics became prevalent in all things culture-related: the continuity argument, which promoted a false idea about the Romanian territorial continuity for two thousand years, and the idea of a strongly ideological art, be it literature, film, theatre, etc. (Nasta 28) The first gave rise to what was termed *protochronism*, considered “among the strongest manifestations of national ideology under Ceaușescu.” (Verdery, *National Ideology*, 168) The term literally means “first in time” and was launched by Edgar Papu in an article on the domestic literature entitled “Romanian Protochronism” published in 1974. Papu argued that “the national literary tradition was not largely inspired by western forms but was highly

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/studioulbuftea/posts/1121535301932383>

<sup>10</sup> The full name of this document, which represented initially a speech given by Ceaușescu in front of the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist party, was “Proposed measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity, of the Marxist–Leninist education of Party members, of all working people”.

original” and that “Romanian literary creations had often anticipated creative developments in the West (such as surrealism, dadaism, and so forth)”, even though they did not receive rightful appreciation because they were little known to the rest of the world. (Verdery, *National Ideology*, 174-5) This idea gradually spread from the literary field to other cultural and social fields. Protochronism went hand in hand with Romania’s closing to the rest of the world and becoming self-reliant. Its reflection in cinema was the historical epic, which I discuss in a separate section.

The seventies also came with the promotion of a new type of film that focused on everyday issues of contemporary reality. These present-day propaganda films became a priority of the cultural politics of the Party and after 1975 they even competed with the national cinema epics (Turcuş 82). In these films of the contemporary everyday,<sup>11</sup> even the most private aspects of life, such as sexuality, “needed to be inscribed in a pre-established visually ideological template.” (Turcuş 83, my translation). The presentation of sexuality was devoid of eroticism and used only marginally, in ways that showed conventional marriage relations that lead to the construction of a fertile socialist environment. Any deviations from the conventional sexual norms were considered dysfunctions and condemned as such, like in Alexandru Tatos’s *Astray* (1978), in which the lesbian party that the heroine --a Romanian immigrant-- happens to attend in Germany is a symptom of the social dysfunctionality of the West. (Turcuş 88)

By the mid-seventies, the economic situation drastically declined, censorship became stricter, and authors and artists either resorted to self-censorship or to “a complicity with an audience whom they could satisfy by means of parabolic, encoded hints about the ongoing absurdist situation”. (Nasta 41) Dan Pişa and Mircea Veroiu made a few films together, such as

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the most well-known films of this genre are *Puterea și adevărul* (Power and truth, Manole Marcus, 1971), *Mere roșii* (Red Apples, Alexandru Tatos, 1975), *Zile fierbinți* (Hot Days, Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1975), *Rătăcire* (Astray, Alexandru Tatos, 1978).

*Stone Wedding* (1973) and *Lust for Gold* (1974) whose formal experiments qualify them as escapist and calophile, with a focus on symbolic incidents and details. They were subtly subversive not only through their excessive formalism and aestheticism, but also through the “fascination with death” and “harsh mysticism” which “posed a coded defiance of the new eschatological myth of radiant communist future.” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 261)

The eighties came with a reiteration of the requirement that art must contribute to the shaping of the socialist consciousness of the citizens, as shown by the report of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (Pop, *Tales*, 76). This is how historian Neagu Djuvara describes the social climate: “The regime imposed a system of terror that is hard to imagine for anyone who did not live through it. People thought one thing and said another. To use a psychiatric term, it was a kind of national schizophrenia that lasted for 45 years.” (339) People would watch the films on TV or in theatres with a clear awareness that not everything one saw was true (Şerban 59-60). Sometimes, the writers’ and filmmakers’ Aesopian language managed to deceive or bypass the vigilance of the ideological censors and certain subtle hints and subversive messages would pass through to the public. Gradually, people developed the skill of reading between the lines and they looked with great satisfaction for such feats of insubordination and resistance around which an invisible solidarity was built. Few directors managed to make films that are really valuable through their lack of conventionalism and the original way they approach the topics of everyday reality, such as Mircea Daneliuc (*Microphone Testing* (1980), *The Cruise* (1981)), Alexandru Tatos with *Sequences* (1982), and Iosif Demian with *A Girl’s Tear* (1980). Interestingly, these films appeared shortly after the productions of the Polish “cinema of moral concern”, whose major works, like Andrej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* (1977), Kieslowski’s *Camera Buff* (1979), and Zanussi’s *Camouflage* (1977) must have influenced the Romanian filmmakers.

These films, whose precursor is Lucian Pintilie's *Reenactment* (1968/1970) "became signature works of the 'old wave' and encouraged a significant NRC following." (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 266) The Appendix to this chapter discusses three of these films. Many of the filmmakers of the old wave generation started their career with a documentary about the floods of the 1970s — *Black Buffalo Water* (1970), which was a collective work done by ten graduates of the Institute of Theatre and Film in Bucharest (IATC)<sup>12</sup>. Some of these filmmakers will turn out productions that go beyond the boundaries of ideologically correct films through various means, like *double entendre* and the psychological and stylistic treatment of their topics, as in the films made by Pița and Veroiu. *Filip the Kind* (1974) for example, considered "Pița's contribution to the Delinquent Youth genre" is remarkable for the "authenticity of 'bleak, miserable Romanian city life'" (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 266) This generation from which the old wave appeared, also offered a "psychologically diverse portrayal of Romanian society from the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 267)

Aside from the generation of young filmmakers whose debut it embodied, the *Black Buffalo Water* is also important due to its "attempt to restore to the camera a fundamental dignity – that of the testimonial" (Littera, 168). In a very short review of the film published in the *Cinema* magazine in 1971, critic George Littera considers *Black Buffalo Water* a gesture of moral engagement from a generation that rejects the older approaches focused on escapism and local superstitions and is determined to get involved in the here and now of people's lives. (168) From this point of view, the film is a precursor of the NRC ethical stance. *Black Buffalo Water* is also a significant achievement because the documentary was regarded as a subaltern form of cinema in Communism, even if it was during the communist regime, in 1952, that the Sahia Film Studio —

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<sup>12</sup> Youssouff Aidaby, Pierre Bokor, Andrei Cătălin Băleanu, Iosif Demian, Stere Gulea, Nicolae Mărgineanu, Roxana Pană, Dan Pița, Dinu Tănase, Mircea Veroiu

the only documentary film studio in Romania— was built. During that time, the documentary film was a marginal film form, mostly represented through shorts. The lack of attention given to the documentary during the communist regime is important because it makes the NRC aesthetics and Cristi Puiu's achievements all the more remarkable. Puiu's insistence on a close resemblance of the fiction film's formal techniques to those of the documentary in a film culture in which the latter was not particularly held in high regard is quite audacious.

A few films of the 1980s are worth mentioning, all of them screen adaptations of well-known Romanian novels. Pija's *Chained Justice* (1984), for example, is a historical revolutionary film based on Sadoveanu's *The Place Where Nothing Ever Happens*. Out of the three films Daneliuc made during the eighties, two were based on literary adaptations: *Glissando* (1982) adapted from Cezar Petrescu's *The Dream Man*, rife with surrealist and expressionist imagery, and *Jacob* (1988), based on a Geo Bogza novel with the same title, considered by Stojanova "one of the darkest films made in communist Romania", prefiguring a tendency of post-1989 films towards a naturalistic-nihilism. ("Historical Overview" 271) Stere Gulea, one of the old wave directors, also made a screen adaptation of the first volume of a beloved Romanian novel by Marin Preda, *The Moromete Family* (1986). The film shows the hardships of peasants' life before WWII and "subverts the *totalitarian genre paradigm* aesthetically via its modernist-expressionist black and white visuals" (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 271-2). In 2018, Gulea will adapt for the screen the second volume of Preda's novel, whose action takes place during the communist regime, as *Moromete Family: On the Edge of Time*. The film's success with the public, with box office numbers close to 200.000 viewers the year it was launched, is partly due to its being a continuation of a beloved film made in the eighties.

A very popular series of films of the eighties was the *Liceenii* series (The High Schoolers)

directed by Nicolae Corjoes from a screenplay by George Şovu. Three out of the five films from the series appeared during the communist age (1985-1988) and focus on various aspects of teenage love, joys and sorrows. Just like the *BD* films, the films from the *High Schoolers* series are still shown on TV and have gathered a community of nostalgic viewers around them. Their actors were much-loved by the audience: Teodora Mareş and Adrian Păduraru in the first film of the series, *Confessions of Love* (1985), and Oana Sârbu and Ştefan Bănică in *High Schoolers* (1986). For the latter, the music composed by Florin Bogardo was also a major ingredient of success, an aspect which I discuss in my chapter on Cristian Mungiu's *Graduation*.

### *Historical epics*

The historical epics of Soviet inspiration was a genre extensively represented in Romania starting with the sixties, and often with huge budgets. The series of full-fledged national epics<sup>13</sup> started with Mihnea Gheorghiu's two-part film *Tudor* (1963), whose script Gheorghiu wrote. *Mihai Viteazul* (Michael the Brave/The Last Crusade, 1971) directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu — one of the most prolific and favored directors of the communist regime and a master of the historical epic— was the most expensive Romanian film made during Communism. A four-hour-long historical epic about a beloved 16<sup>th</sup> century national hero who first united the Romanian principalities, *Michael the Brave* echoed Sergei Bondarchuk's epics from the same period (Nasta 29) and became a model for the national epics to come. It was also a hugely popular film with the viewers, together with *The Dacians* (1966).

Some of these epics are characterized by *protochronism* – they rewrite the past from the

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the most important films in this series are: *Tudor* (Lucian Bratu, 1963), *Neamul Şoimăreştilor* (Mircea Drăgan 1965), *Lupeni 29* (Mircea Drăgan 1963), *Columna* (Mircea Drăgan 1968), *Dacii* (Sergiu Nicolaescu 1967), *Mihai Viteazul* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1970), *Burebista* (Gheorghe Vitanidis, 1980)

point of view of the present so as to use the latter for propagandistic reasons. In other words, the purpose of these epics was to rewrite Romania's history to present a version of the past that was idealized in view of the communist agenda. The protagonists' discourses were reinvented so that every fight for a better life and every resistance to invaders had a proletarian-revolutionary nature, centuries before communism came into existence. For example, Sergiu Nicolaescu's *The Dacians*, from a screenplay by Titus Popovici –a master of screenwriting during Communism-- foregrounds the fight of the Romanian ancestors as a fight against imperialism and for equality, even when the Geto-Dacian tribes were slave tribes (Pop, *Tales* 95). Political figures or revolutionaries such as Tudor Vladimirescu (the initiator of the Wallachian uprising of 1821), in *Tudor* (1963), were made to look like “exponents of socialism and promoters of Marxist-Leninism before Marx.” (Pop, *Tales*, 96) Many films from the 70s-80s period contributed to the extension of Ceaușescu's personality cult, as most of them focused on a historical leader: Mihai Viteazul, Ștefan cel Mare, Vlad Țepeș or Mircea cel Bătrân. They “were surrogates of the supreme Leader himself” (Pop, *Tales*, 94) who was placed this way in line with the nation's great leaders, as the guarantor of historical continuity for the Romanian people. As historian Adrian Cioroianu remarks in a documentary made by the Romanian Institute of Recent History, the main purpose of these epics was the legitimation of the communist present through a periodical return to the past, creating thus an intimate link between the heroic past and the heroic present. (“Epopoea Națională Cinematografică”/ The National Cinema Epic).

*Romanian Socialist Cinema in European Context and European / International Cinema in the Romanian Socialist Context*

The revival of nationalism that dominated the seventies and the eighties —when funds were directed exclusively to propaganda films— also explains a lag in Romanian cinema, since it prevented a synchronism with the European New Waves and the emergence of a Romanian New Wave in line with the other Eastern European countries. These two decades were dominated by the contemporary propaganda films and the historical epics, which were meant to shape the mythology of the socialist everyday (Turcuş 200) and to legitimize it. Also, in Romania, the acts of resistance to the regime were isolated and not strong enough to generate a movement— nothing like the Solidarnosc in Poland or the Charta 77 in former Czechoslovakia was ever created. In these circumstances, it was hard to conceive of a film movement similar to neorealism or to the new waves of Europe.

Looking at the number of films that some directors were allowed to make, Valerian Sava notes that even before the seventies' turn towards isolation and extreme nationalism, the regime greatly limited the activity of the most important Romanian directors. Since the mid-fifties, filmmakers Jean Georgescu, Liviu Ciulei and Iulian Mişu, for example, were allowed only one film in five years, whereas in the other countries from Eastern Europe there was no state regulation when it came to the number of films directors could make. (Sava 262) Auteur cinema of a unique, individual vision was not encouraged — on the contrary, the radical aestheticism and nonconformist approach of Mircea Săucan's films for instance was disapproved, forcing him to eventually emigrate to Israel. Also, there was no discussion on the direct or observational cinema of the sixties in Romania. The country was closed off to these cinema experimentations and in the eighties no investments were made to keep the film technology up-to-date; no imports were carried out either.



On the other hand, the growing isolation of the last two decades of Communism and the autochthonism Ceaușescu gradually imposed on the country following the July Theses, had the opposite effect when it came to arts, and cinema in particular, among certain segments of the population. Cinephiles and art students found ways to get together and enjoy the masterpieces of European and international cinema in places such as the Romanian Cinematheque arthouse, which was always full during the seventies and eighties and showed several films in a row until late at night. Part of the National Film Archive, the Cinematheque had an important role in the configuration of the aesthetic canon and in shaping film culture during Communism through its curatorship. Mihai Fulger notes that between 1962 and 1989 those who selected the films and were in charge of the Cinematheque's program were just as influential in shaping the national cinema canon as the most reputed critics of the *Cinema* magazine ("From Curatorship to the Canon" 226). The goal of the Cinematheque was to illustrate the history of national and international cinema through landmark films, to represent certain film genres and to familiarize the viewers with well-known directors, actors and screenwriters. In Romania, as well as in other Eastern European countries, the director that occupies first place in the aesthetic canon is Andrey Tarkovsky, closely followed by Federico Fellini. (Fulger, "From Curatorship to the Canon" 235) The pantheon of cineastes of that time also included names like Antonioni, Visconti, de Sica, Renoir, Bergman, Mikahlkov, Eisenstein, Wajda, etc. Hence, the films that mainly made up the aesthetic canon were the European art films of the sixties and seventies. However, many of these films were not shown in their original length, as they were subject to censorship, which operated sometimes as many cuts as to bring a film to almost half its length<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Călin Boto mentions that it was not only the western films that were censored, but also the products of the Marxist internationalism, like for example Márta Mészáros's films about class relations and women's condition under socialism (<https://www.scena9.ro/article/cinematoteca-eforie-daramata-arhiva>).

In a recent interview for Sight&Sound with Thomas Flew, filmmaker Cristi Puiu talks about the cinema culture during that time in Romania and mentions two ways in which communities were formed around a cinephile culture. The first took shape around the Cinematheque. Puiu remembers the time he spent there as an art student with a background in painting and mentions four films that changed his perception of cinema from a “vulgar art” to cinephilia: Buñuel’s *Exterminating Angel*, Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger*, Mikhalkov’s *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, and Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (Puiu qtd. in Flew). There was, expectedly, a stratification of society even during that time, and Puiu mentions that, coming from a proletarian family, the high society of bourgeois cinematheque-goers seemed intimidating. People behaved like members of a select club of cinephiles, thrilled to talk about the latest art films they watched: “Have you seen *Seven Samurai* [1954]? No? The shame! This is Kurosawa!” (Puiu qtd. in Flew) A voracious film culture was built, with huge queues outside the two arthouses of the Cinematheque and people buying tickets sometimes at double the price, just to get a chance to see the masterpieces of neorealism, Tarkovsky and all the other European/international art films. The second way in which pockets of cinema culture were built was more informal, around certain people’s VCRs at home, which gave rise to a kind of underground cinephilia tailored on more recent productions: for an affordable fee, people could watch several films in a row from filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Pedro Almodóvar, etc.

Puiu emphasizes how important those rare moments and places were for the people, as they created possibilities of being together in a community where the relationship between cinephiles and cinema was quite impressive. His nostalgia echoes that of an entire generation of filmmakers that grew up in the seventies and eighties: most of the filmmakers interviewed by Mihai Fulger in his book *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema* (2006) mention their experiences as students

watching films until late at night at the cinematheque<sup>15</sup>. They give voice to a nostalgia for a time and space when cinema mattered, even if “it was a way of escaping darkness.” (Puiu qtd. in Flew)

A certain community of cinephiles took shape in that time of drastic shortages on all fronts, a community animated by a belief in the artist as the one whose duty was to offer something else than state propaganda. This belief in the heightened role of the artist is something that filmmakers like Puiu feel it has been lost on the viewers nowadays, who, faced with a rich entertainment offer, have abandoned the cinematheque. Ultimately, the formal and informal communities of cinephiles and cinephile culture that were created during the communist age, together with the landmark films of the ‘old wave’ filmmakers, testify to the existence of some spaces of negotiation that allowed for the formation of certain artistic sensibility for future filmmakers. However, one must note that when it comes to acknowledging the decisive influences on his work, Puiu, whose vision itself influenced the NRC filmmakers, does not quote the names promoted by the Cinematheque, but rather those that he discovered as an art student at the *École Supérieure d'Arts Visuels* in Geneva: documentarists Frederick Weiseman, Raymond Depardon and Richard Dindo, together with director-actor John Cassavetes. These were names that were not known in communist Romania, simply because they were not part of the Cinematheque’s repertoire<sup>16</sup>. Filmmakers like Mungiu, Porumboiu and Muntean on the other hand, graduates of the University of Theatre and Film I.L. Caragiale in Bucharest (UNATC), absorbed much more of the repertoire of the Cinematheque, because its film canon coincided with that of the UNATC.

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<sup>15</sup> The book, quoted later in this chapter, includes interviews with Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Radu Muntean, Corneliu Porumboiu and Tudor Giurgiu, among others.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the two who launched the NRC, Cristi Puiu and screenwriter Răzvan Rădulescu, are not graduates of UNATC. (Rădulescu is a graduate of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and of the Music Academy in Bucharest). The other artists associated with the NRC, from directors to screenwriters and actors, are in an overwhelming number graduates of the same university: UNATC.

## **The nineties**

The harshness of the regime triggered a radical reaction against communism in Romania in the decade following the 1989 Revolution, unlike in other Eastern European countries where communism was milder. The trigger of this reaction is to be found not only in a look at the past though, but also in a look toward the future, as Romanians were eager to disavow and condemn a past they wanted to break away from in view of the forthcoming European Union integration. As Claudiu Turcuş remarks, anti-communism was a “proactive rhetoric” in the public sphere of European integration, not only a reactive ideology or a radical methodology. (195)

Less than 60 films were produced in Romania during this decade (Turcuş 143). It was a bleak time for the national cinema industry and for filmmakers, who suddenly saw themselves go from “‘teleological distributors’ to independent artists with little to no financial support” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 273). There was also a drastic reduction not only in the number of domestic film productions, but also in the number of film theatres. Thus, from roughly 600 theatres that were functional in 1989, only 68 remained by 2010. (Robé 3). The system based on cinema studios from the communist age was abandoned and replaced with a national funding agency called the Romanian Film Centre (CNC) – a new system based on the model of the Centre National du Cinéma in France. Ţuţui notes that it took the CNC “almost a decade to become fully functional” due to the little support film production got from the government during that time. (56) There was no support from the European film agencies either, such as Eurimages, which offered ample assistance to Romanian cinema in the following decades, but none in the nineties.

It is nevertheless the era of an obvious thematic disinhibition and, as a result, of a virulent

reaction against the social relations established by the totalitarian regime. This is translated in film through a grotesque atmosphere, whose main purpose seems to be exposing the squalor, misery and the dysfunctionality of society – aspects which could not be shown before. (*Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* (The Earth's Most Beloved Son, Șerban Marinescu, 1993, *Balanța* (The Oak, Lucian Pintilie, 1992), *Hotel de lux* (Luxury Hotel, Dan Pița, 1992), *Senatorul melcilor* (The Snails' Senator, Mircea Daneliuc, 1995)). The underlying message of all these films seems to be that the communist heritage spreads over the transition period, which it slows and damages, but at the same time some of them, like *The Earth's Most Beloved Son*, voice the hope that the suffering is over and “the ‘return’ to civilized Europe is imminent.” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 275) The West as a mighty civilizing force is still present in the Romanian imaginary, stronger than ever. The films articulate and contribute an anti-communist discourse in art and the public sphere, which is either accusatory or victimizing. (Turcuș 171) This black and white anti-communist filter is the most obvious change in cinema, found in most films of the nineties; aside from this, the films still retain some practices from the communist period, like the allegorical treatment of the subject matter and the preference for symbols instead of a realistic treatment (*A unsprezecea poruncă* (The Eleventh Commandment, Daneliuc, 1991), *Hotel de lux*, Dan Pița, 1992, etc.).

The hierarchy of filmmakers established during Communism collapses. Directors censored before, like Mircea Daneliuc, Lucian Pintilie and Dan Pița make several films during the 90s, alongside two filmmakers favored by the Communist regime: Sergiu Nicolaescu and Andrei Blaier. These former dissident filmmakers reintroduce Romanian film in the international circuit: Pintilie with *The Oak* (1992, Official Cannes selection) --which takes a look at the contemporary milieu disfigured by forced industrialization-- *Un été inoubliable* (1995, Official Cannes selection) and *Terminus Paradis* (Grand Special Jury Prize, Venice Film Festival, 1998); Dan Pita won the

Silver Lion at Venice with *Luxury Hotel* (1992); Daneliuc's *The Snails' Senator* was part of the Official Cannes selection in 1995 and helped put an end to the "miserabilist self-exotisising of postcommunist Romania he launched with *The Conjugal Bed* (1993) and *Fed Up* (1994)" (Stojanova, "Historical Overview" 276) However, most of these films were not very popular with the viewers, as they seemed somewhat pretentious, through their laboriousness and the heavy and dated treatment of the subject matters. (Sava 27) Pintilie's *Un été inoubliable* is nevertheless important because it sets a precedent for an atypical approach to issues of national identity that anticipates Radu Jude's films (*Aferim!* (2015), *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018)), an approach that shows Romanians as oppressors, not just bearers of trauma – in the case of *Un été inoubliable*, it is the Romanian aristocrats who oppress the Bulgarian farmers during the interwar period.

One of the filmmakers that stands out in the nineties as well as in the new millennium is Nae Caranfil. Son of renowned film critic Tudor Caranfil, he is in-between the old-wave generation and the NRC filmmakers of the new millennium: younger than the former and older than the latter. But what really makes him stand out from either of the two categories is the way of making films, which disregards both the hysterical anti-communism of the nineties and the NRC thematic and aesthetics. His two films made in the nineties, the debut *È Pericoloso Sporgersi* (1993) and later *Asphalt Tango* (1996), established him as an auteur of comedies in the classical style, which aim to entertain by using classical editing techniques and showing a lyricism that is unassuming and endearing to the viewers.

As the decade came to a close and the local currency kept depreciating, Romanian cinema entered its "year zero", as zero is the number of films that were produced in the year 2000. With all its drastic changes and near-bankruptcy experience, this decade was important in paving the

way to the NRC. It allowed filmmakers to tackle their subjects in the only way they saw appropriate at the time, aggressively pointing the finger to the oppressors, in a hitherto repressed outpouring of accusations and anger. In the wake of the nineties, the NRC filmmakers made their appearance with sufficient distance from the fierce victimizing and blaming of their predecessors to create films that look reality in the eye more dispassionately and reflexively and were thus able to render its texture in a way that is sensitive to its ambiguities and its poetics, while not losing sight of the moral endeavor involved in the act of telling the truth.

### **The New Romanian Cinema**

*“I don’t believe that a filmmaker should offer solutions or give hope. (...) I made my point and I tried to do it as well and as powerfully as possible, like any creator who wants to kick the viewer in the stomach, to touch them first at the viscera and then at the intellect.”<sup>17</sup>*

Radu Muntean

#### *Brief History and Context*

Romania emerged out of communism in a worse manner than its neighboring countries. Unlike Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia where a civil society as well as a market economy were gradually being born, in Romania the ideological and political control over society and economy became tighter in the last years of communism and the material deprivations of the population harsher, as discussed in the previous section. This explains why Romanians had the only revolution of blood and violence in 1989 from the countries of the East Communist Bloc. Around 1200 people died in bloody street battles on December 22, 1989,<sup>18</sup> as Nicolae Ceausescu

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<sup>17</sup> *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema*, Mihai Fulger, p. 109. (my translation)

<sup>18</sup> There have been both official and unofficial victims. The official number of victims is 1165, based on the statistics published by the Institute of the December 1989 Romanian Revolution, the Books of the Revolution, No. 3 (52) /2014 (<https://www.irrd.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Caietele-revolu%C8%9Biei-num%C4%83rul-52.pdf>)

personally ordered troops to fire on demonstrators. As historian Lucian Boia explains, there were no bases on which to negotiate and no partners of negotiation. Besides the communist structures, there was nothing else on which to build a system in Romania<sup>19</sup> and the brutality of the change in regime was deeply felt at all levels of society. How can we explain, then, that Romania yielded the most prolific film industry in Eastern Europe since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This section attempts to give an answer to that.

The near collapse of the national film industry in the nineties was followed by a series of films that have made Romania more visible on the cultural map of Europe and the world. Starting with the first decade of the new millennium, three Romanian directors won the Palme d'Or, awarded by the prestigious Cannes Film Festival: Cătălin Mitulescu for his short film *Traffic* (2004), Cristian Mungiu for *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007), and Marian Crișan for the short film *Megatron* (2008). In 2016, Romania had the third largest number of films shown at Cannes, after the US and France, which is quite a feat for a country whose population is roughly three times smaller than that of France and fifteen times smaller than that of the US. Cristian Mungiu won the Best Director Award with *Graduation* (2016) and Bogdan Mirică, the FIPRESCI Award with *Dogs* (2016). During a little over a decade, Romanian films won the five main prizes at Cannes on several occasions, giving contours to what has been termed the next European movement after von Trier and Vinterberg's *Dogme 95*: the Romanian New Wave or the New Romanian Cinema (Rydzewska 167-170).

It is generally accepted by film critics that the Romanian New Wave or the New Romanian Cinema started with Cristi Puiu's *Stuff and Dough* (2001) – a film about youngsters trying to find

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<sup>19</sup> Lucian Boia, *România, țară de frontieră a Europei* (Romania, Borderland of Europe). Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012, pp. 141-2.



their way through the primitive form of the capitalist market that was taking shape after the '89 Revolution. The film got the special prize at the Cottbus Film Festival of Young East European Cinema and the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique (FIPRESCI) prize in Thessaloniki, the year it came out. Then, in 2004 Puiu is awarded the Golden Bear in Berlin for *Cigarettes and Coffee* – a short film. The same year Cătălin Mitulescu wins the Palme d'Or with the short mentioned earlier. A year later, Puiu won the Un Certain Regard Award in competition with Kim-Ki-Duk and François Ozon with *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, a film about the realities of old age, solitude and the hospital system in Romania. This first stream of prizes fostered a competitive spirit and a productive atmosphere among the young filmmakers. New productions were launched alongside those of Puiu and Mungiu: Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest (A fost sau n-a fost?, 2006)* which won the Camera d'Or the same year; Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin' Endless (2007)* won Un Certain Regard. Two years later, Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective (2009)* would win the same award (Un Certain Regard) alongside the FIPRESCI one. During this time other films won various prizes at several European festivals outside Cannes <sup>20</sup> contributing thus to the creation of a coherent movement in contemporary Romanian cinema.

### *Outlook, Ethical Stance and Aesthetics*

The filmmakers of the Romanian New Wave share the desire to tackle the truths forbidden for a long time and for recuperating the stories that could not be said during communism. (Șerban

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the most famous films to have won prizes outside Cannes are: *Tales of the Golden Age* (Hoffer, Mărculescu, Mungiu, Popescu, Uricaru, 2009) won the Best Film Prize at the Stockholm Film Festival, *Boogie* (Muntean, 2008) won the prize of the jury at the Essonne Film Festival in France, *The Paper Will Be Blue* (Muntean, 2006) – the special prize of the Jury at the Namur Film Festival, *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (Șerban, 2010)—Jury Grand Prix and the Alfred Bauer Prize at the Berlin Film Festival.

101). The choice of subjects and approaches is a direct response to the weight of the social changes that Romanian society has been going through. Depicting everyday reality with all its implications became a moral imperative of this cinema. Thematically, most of the films of the Romanian New Wave explore either the hardships and the abuse that people endured in their search for liberty during the communist dictatorship, or life in the emerging democratic society after 1989, with the challenges of free market capitalism and the postsocialist transition.

“I don’t think a filmmaker should offer solutions or give hope,” says director Radu Muntean. On the contrary, what he should do is to “kick the viewer in the stomach, to touch them first at the viscera and then at the intellect.” (Fulger, *New Wave* 109) (my translation) This is a very unsympathetic type of cinema, focused on waking up the spectators instead of lulling them into a false and dangerous sense of certainty and complacency. Mungiu states that his goal is to make an uncomfortable film for himself (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 17). Hence, he is interested in making viewers confront truths they would rather avoid than to present them with an escapist, feel-good movie. The film is an attempt to understand the world and a powerful tool with which ambiguity, personal choice and responsibility in an absurdist world can be investigated; these aspects speak to the existentialist element of the movement. The subject matter investigated should have a personal relevance to the filmmaker in a way that it brings reflection and self-reflection. In Puiu’s words, it is “an attempt to understand what happens around you, not some conclusions delivered to the viewer.” (Fulger, *New Wave* 51) (my translation) The austere and realistic approach is frequently tinged with irony and black humor.

In terms of form and style, the New Romanian Cinema is often characterized by a documentary realism which uses “the hand-held camera, the shaking image, the imperfect framing” (Ferencs-Flatz, “Aurora” 35) and a sparse soundtrack. The films focus on a simple,

poignant and true story often giving us just a glimpse into a specific event in a character's life that unfolds over a short time span (usually 24 hours). This realist and minimalist approach comes as a reaction to the films of the communist regime, whose goal of obscuring reality made it favor parables (symbolic stories), historical epics and mythological tales (Șerban 101-2, Căliman 426-30). New Romanian Cinema directors have embraced a particular language of realism in order to give expression to truths obscured by past practices and the communist censorship. The ordinary people caught up in everyday incidents are often filmed using a handheld camera, and there is no diegetic music. Even if many of these films focus on a single day or a single action, they have a loose ending refusing conclusiveness or definitive answers. Directors like Puiu, Mungiu, Muntean and Porumboiu created an ethical cinema more than an aesthetic one, which stands in clear opposition to the previous ideological instrumentalization of film.

### *National Cinema Issues*

Is the NRC the embodiment of a national cinema or a transnational/European one? The question has been fertile ground for debate, as I will show in the section on the RNW vs. the NRC. We could call this a European festival-born film movement and its directors the “Cannes moviemakers” (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 10), given the fact that most of the films were shown or launched at Cannes and have either won prizes there or at other European film festivals. Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu and Radu Jude, to name just a few, acknowledge the fact that these festivals have made the contemporary Romanian filmmakers known worldwide. Puiu stated in an interview: “The Cannes Film Festival helped a lot of Romanian cinema. The history of Romanian cinema—this New Romanian Cinema—has to be told with this festival as a part of it, because the festival made possible this Romanian cinema. This is a fact.” (Rapold, 2016).

On the other hand, the films of the NRC are not popular with the Romanian public. While they speak of national history and traumas, it is not evident that they have been made for a national audience and even less that the Romanian audience appreciates them. Puiu voices this doubt in the same interview: “The perception that Romanian audiences are having about the films we are making is not a gentle one. I mean, for a large audience, cinema is American cinema.” (Rapold, 2016). A quick look at the statistics will corroborate this. The international film festivals did help Romanian filmmakers gain national notoriety. Figure 1 shows the directors who are the most popular nationally. The first three names that come out are: Cristian Mungiu, Cristi Puiu and Corneliu Porumboiu. These are also the most well-known Romanian directors abroad. This fact illustrates the paradox that Andrew Higson mentioned in his exploration of the concept of national cinema, which is that “for a cinema to be nationally popular, it must also be international in scope” (40)



Figure 1: Best Known Romanian Filmmaker

Source: *Barometrul de consum cultural / Cultural consumption barometer, p. 203*

Secondly, statistics about the most frequently watched films by country of origin confirm Puiu’s statement that most Romanian viewers equate cinema with America cinema. Figure 2 indicates that an overwhelming 83 % of Romanians between the ages of 21 to 27 watch American films and only 4% from the same age group watch Romanian films. The main reason for watching a film was “to make me laugh”, as shown in Figure 3.

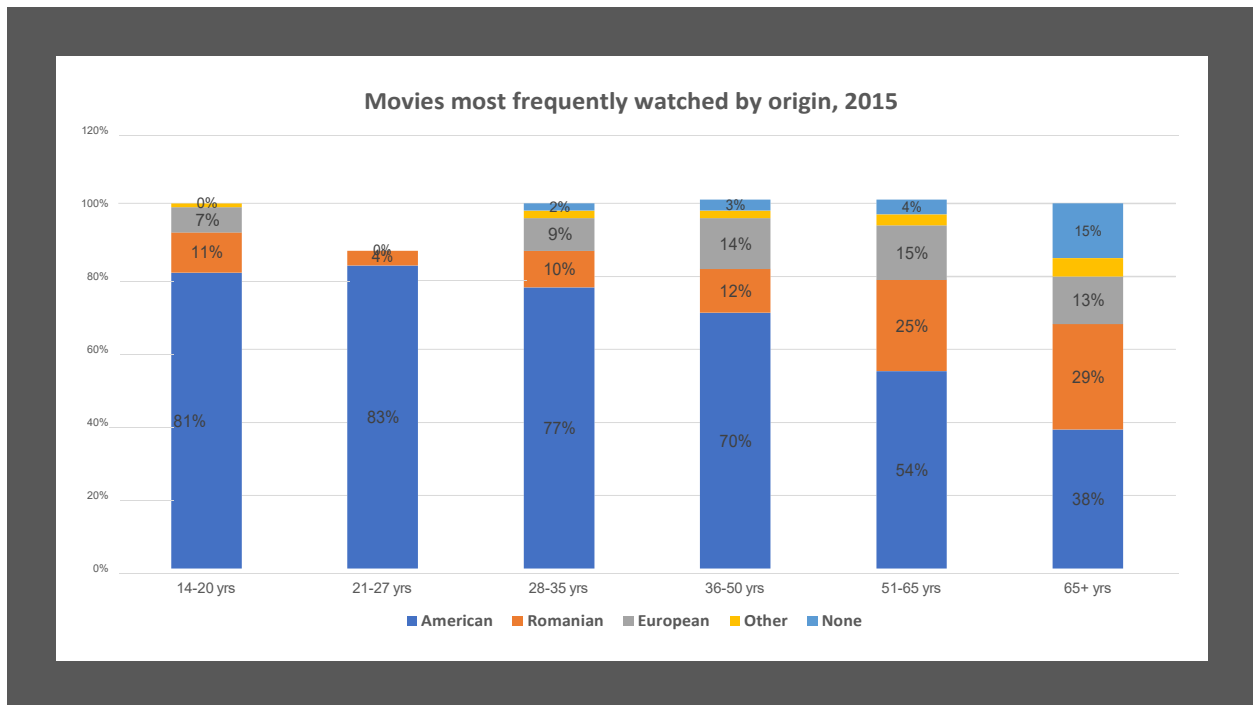


Figure 2: *Movies most frequently watched by origin, 2015*

Source: *Barometrul de consum cultural / Cultural consumption barometer, p. 201*

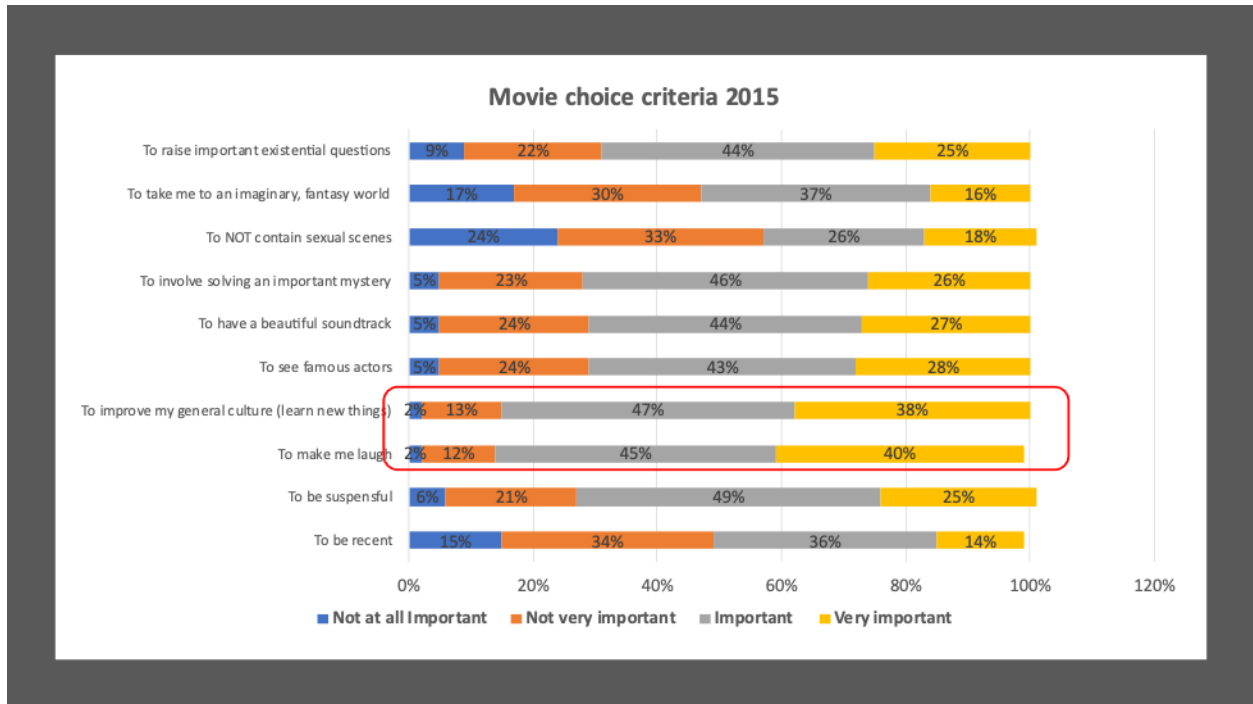


Figure 3: Movie choice criteria 2015

Source: *Barometrul de consum cultural / Cultural consumption barometer*, p. 200

So, is NRC really representative of a national cinema? This question raises in turn a question about how we define national cinema: is it the subject matter of the films, the origin of the filmmaker, what the national audience watch or, rather, what comes out as nationally representative in European art festivals — an extensive debate that cannot be exhausted in this short section. However, there are at least two issues that need to be clarified here. On the one hand, the concept of national cinema is in itself tricky because it suggests a coherent monolithic identity, which has never been a reality, much less in nowadays' global context. In the case of the current Romanian cinema, there is a constant relation with other European nations which reflects the

dialogical phase of the post-communist transition, in which Romania has been trying to establish an identity for itself (both pre- and post- the 2007 European Union integration), an issue which I will expand on in the next section. On the other hand, ever since its invention, cinema has been used as a tool in the creation of a coherent national identity and in giving a sense of belonging to a community. Bearing in mind these caveats, we can say that these films reflect a national identity as much as they contributed to shaping it during the post-communist transition and giving a sense of belonging to a community. The current study explores how this sense of belonging is achieved through the two films analyzed.

#### *Making Film in Post-communism: The European Eyes*

In 2007, Romania joined the European Union, among the last of the postcommunist countries in the Eastern European bloc, alongside Bulgaria. The official political discourse emphasized Romania's organic belonging to the European family of nations; by contrast, public discourses, ranging from newspaper articles, televised talk shows, and film productions gave voice to more ambivalent attitudes about Romania's place in Europe. (Georgescu 134) During the first decade of 2000, when the first films of the Romanian New Wave appeared, the entire nation was consumed by hopes and anxieties as to the changes to come. The films of that period reflect this national narrative as well as a dialogue with the Other, as Romania looked at itself under Western eyes and tried to negotiate its place in the symbolic geography of Europe. It is interesting to note that 2006 saw the release of three thematically related films: Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* and Cătălin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World*. All three explore events connected to the 1989 Revolution and carry out direct interrogations of those historical events and their significance. They represent a testimony to the

predominant social climate of ambivalence and anxiety, triggered by the national and supranational changes.

The portrayal of Romanian society is shaped dialogically and takes into account a Western European audience for which Romania was Europe's Eastern Other, a category marked as different (Todorova, 63). As long as we consider the process of redefinition of Eastern identities through their contact with the Western Other (Tzvetan Todorov) in the postcommunist period, terminology from the Orientalist discourse and the postcolonialist perspective (Edward Said) is inevitable. National identity is indeed performed and imagined in a context in which Western eyes are paramount and in which the communist view of the monolithic nation crumbles. The political and social discourse after '89 and especially during the first decade of the 2000s highlighted Romania's belonging to the family of EU nations, but also chastised the Eastern, unruly character, which needed to be mended – a testimony to this are the films of the nineties discussed in the previous section. Through the process of self-orientalization qualities such as *unreliable*, *irrational* and *primitive* are taken to define *Romanianness*, in opposition to the qualities of the Western Other: *reliable*, *rational* and *civilized* (Said). While the critique of self-orientalization can be brought to the mass-media discourse and to some of the films produced in the 1990s and early 2000s, most of the films of the Romanian New Wave are not interested in orientalizing their subjects or in national caricatures. However, even if the films that fall in the New Romanian Cinema aesthetics offer a view which is different from the self-orientalization present in the dominant discourse and in the more popular Romanian comedies and TV shows, they still address these cultural stereotypes present in the popular mentality.



## *Romanian New Wave or New Romanian Cinema: Conceptual Clarification*

“There is not, not, not, not, not a Romanian New Wave,” Cristi Puiu emphatically stated in an interview with A.O. Scott published in *New York Times* in 2008. Two years earlier, interviewed by Mihai Fulger for his book *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema* (2006), director Tudor Giurgiu said about him and his fellow filmmakers: “It’s not a generation, it wasn’t conceived like that, (...) there is no program that links us, so it is all an accident.” (Fulger, *New Wave* 141). None of the filmmakers interviewed by Mihai Fulger —among whom Mungiu, Muntean, Porumboiu, Mitulescu —acknowledge the existence of such a wave in contemporary Romanian cinema. The critical discourse would be one point of contention lighter if critics agreed with the filmmakers themselves. As things stand though, Doru Pop amply argued for the movement to be called the “Romanian New Wave” —a term which was first popularized through Mihai Fulger’s book quoted above—while other critics, like Andrei Gorzo, Christina Stojanova and Dana Duma prefer the term the “New Romanian Cinema”. Most frequently, these two terms have been used interchangeably by critics, but they entail slightly different connotations.

The “Romanian New Wave” was first used in the reviews from the local magazine *Observator Cultural* (Cultural Observer) by critics like Valerian Sava, and by Mihai Fulger in his book of interviews with Romanian filmmakers *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema*. In 2014, Doru Pop published a book called *The Romanian New Wave* in which he explains that the films released since 2001, represent “the latest addition to the history of European cinema” (14), more precisely, to the European New Waves. His argument is built around the Europeanness of the phenomenon. In Eastern Europe, the New Waves, as artistic movements, were part of a larger political, cultural and ideological resistance against a totalitarian regime. The other countries of the Eastern Communist Block like Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia had a resurgence of

their cinematography during the 1950s-1970s period, in synchrony with France and Britain, for example. Romania, on the other hand, did not have a resistance movement in the 50s and 60s. Its strict communist regime, based on harsh censorship and relentless nationalism, did not allow for such cultural synchronicity with the rest of Europe. The Romanian New Wave of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes therefore as an overcoming of a cultural and historical lag, a late synchronization with the European New Waves in cinema, with which it shares a similar aesthetics and auteur politics (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 7-30). It was made possible by European funds and the support of European institutions whose goal was to create a pan-European system of production and a cinema market that foregrounds the art film and that could compete with the American conglomerates and the commercially popular American cinema (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 13-15).

Another characteristic that brings Romanian contemporary cinema closer to the European New Waves is the “author-centered” productions (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 16), which means that the filmmakers are writing, directing and sometimes producing their own films and many of them have set up their own production companies<sup>21</sup>. For these authors, film is a “political statement about society” (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 16), in the tradition of neorealism and the French New Wave. They also share, according to Pop, a political view on cinema’s role and “the preferred filmmaking practices” (25) similar to *la politique des copains* that linked the French New Wave directors.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the haunting of memory is another feature that makes it part of the European cinematic tradition (Pop, *Romanian New Wave*, 16). It refers to recovering recent national memory and recording contemporary historical events with their profound effects on individuals.

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<sup>21</sup> Cristi Puiu own production company Mandragora, Cristian Mungiu – Mobra Films, Corneliu Porumboiu – Km 42 Film, Cătălin Mitulescu – Strada Film, Tudor Giurgiu – Libra Film.

<sup>22</sup> Pop mentions a series of connections and collaborations between the Romanian directors in terms of screenwriting and production. Cătălin Mitulescu co-wrote scripts with Florin Șerban, Răzvan Rădulescu – the main screenwriter of the NRC-- wrote for Puiu and Radu Muntean’s films, while Puiu wrote for Bobby Păunescu, who co-produced Puiu’s films. Director Tudor Giurgiu produced several films made by his peers. (*Romanian New Wave*, 26)

The alternate term, the “New Romanian Cinema”, was first promoted by late critic Alex Leo Șerban, who supported enthusiastically in his reviews the new generation of successful filmmakers, from Puiu and Mungiu, to Muntean, Porumboiu, Jude and many others. The term was then used in *Kinokultura* in a Special Issue published in 2007 and edited by C. Stojanova and D. Duma and in several international reviews on the movement. Andrei Gorzo explains his use of the phrase and clarifies some main aspects in *Things That Cannot be Said in a Different Way* (2012). The NRC identifies an aesthetic formula that involves choices regarding drama and style of directing shared by a series of Romanian films with international success (265-6). One of the reasons for which this movement is nationally specific, not generally European, according to Gorzo, has to do with the movement’s national-cultural identity — what he refers to as its general spirit, its sensibility and way of seeing the world informed by Romania’s particular history (266).<sup>23</sup> Also, these Romanian directors do not make a new wave in the sense of the French new Wave, or any other European new wave, because they are not cinema theoreticians or critics, like Godard, Truffaut or the other French new wave directors. They explore their theoretical preoccupations in their films, not in writing, and rather independently of each other. If we use the RNW as a conceptual term, says Gorzo, we can only use it to refer to a biological generation: these directors were all born between 1967-1975 and have in common the ambition to break up with the recent past: with what was commonly accepted as the artistic failure of the 90s cinema. (267) This distinction is important, because there are filmmakers who belong to the RNW without belonging to the NRC, which means they are of the same generation, but do not adhere stylistically to this way of making films,<sup>24</sup> and tend to make more commercial productions.

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<sup>23</sup> Gorzo mentions the specific humanism that derives from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, as an example of a particular worldview or sensibility, an aspect which I touch upon in the first chapter.

<sup>24</sup> Gorzo mentions Cătălin Mitulescu (*How I Spent the End of the World* (2006), *Loverboy* (2011)) as an example of a filmmaker who adheres only superficially to the NCR aesthetic norms, as he is concerned with melodramatic efficacy,

While I agree with Pop's arguments that the movement has a European component and it was made possible by European funding, I believe the Romanian films that fall within this aesthetics put forth a national identity, even if they are made with an eye toward European audiences. I hold that it is still as national productions that they look towards a European integration. Both Puiu and Mungiu, for example, have repeatedly stated in interviews that they make their films mainly for a Romanian audience or Romanian language public, an aspect which I discuss in Chapters II and III. I will use hence both terms in my thesis, the Romanian New Wave especially when I discuss the realism of European descent of these films, and the New Romanian Cinema, by which I acknowledge a national component, in terms of sensibility and worldview.

### **Appendix: Three Predecessors to the Romanian New Wave: Mircea Daneliuc, Alexandru Tatos and Lucian Pintilie**

There are three filmmakers whom the critics usually cite<sup>25</sup> as precursors of the Romanian New Wave to a certain degree: Mircea Daneliuc with *Microphone Test* (1980) and *The Cruise* (1981), Alexandru Tatos with *Sequences* (1982), and Lucian Pintilie with *The Reenactment* (1968), through their attention to a version of realism, be it that of neorealism or of the European New Waves of the time. I will briefly mention the first two filmmakers and discuss the third in more detail.

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classical decoupage, etc. (267-8). Another example of a filmmaker who adheres only partially to these norms is Călin Peter Netzer (*Medal of Honour* (2009), *Child's Pose* (2013), *Ana, Mon Amour* (2017))

<sup>25</sup> See Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (Things That Cannot Be Said in a Different Way), Humanitas: 2021, (229-242); Marian Tutui, *A short History of Romanian Cinema*, Noi Media Print: 2011, (59), Mihai Chirilov, "Stop cadre la masă" (Freeze-frames at the table). *Noul cinema romanesc. De la tovarășul Ceausescu la domnul Lăzărescu. 10 abordări critice*. Cristina Corciovescu, Magda Mihăilescu eds., Polirom, 2011, (78); Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction*, McFarland, 2014, (22-26)

Mircea Daneliuc's *Microphone Test* (1980) focuses on a cameraman and a television reporter who are doing a reportage at the Bucharest Railway Station, interviewing people who were caught without a ticket on the train. These law breakers would then be shown –or rather *exposed*—on public television to teach them a lesson in morality and civic responsibility; the very first scene shows a fragment of the “behind the scenes” of this reportage. Discussing Dan Pița's *Contest* (1982) and Daneliuc's *The Cruise*, Christina Stojanova notes that they anticipate the main stylistic and conceptual approaches of the NRC: the tragic-ironic and the comedic-ironic as they “call into question the ethics behind the pre-eminence of the collective over the individual as a basic principle of communism.” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 267). This assessment can equally apply to *Microphone Test*, which foregrounds the same skeptical attitude towards the purported superiority of the collective over the individual, from the very beginning of the film.

Gradually, a love story develops between the cameraman and a half-heartedly repentant lady, whom the cameraman wants to protect from public exposure on TV. In terms of aesthetics, Daneliuc, “the most consistently iconoclastic representative of the ‘old wave’” (Stojanova, “Historical Overview” 267), has a preference for filming on location and in a style reminiscent of the observational cinema of neorealism. For example, in a scene halfway through the film, the protagonist has a quarrel in the middle of the street with a woman; the people whom we can see in the film are most likely casual passers-by, filmed with a hidden camera. This becomes quite clear at one point in the scene, when one of the passers-by obstructs visual access to the protagonists by placing himself in front of the camera for a few seconds. This betrays, in Andrei Gorzo's reading, Daneliuc's preference for an aesthetics that can incorporate the little incidents of life, reminiscent of the Bazinian contingencies, a directorial view that certainly goes against an aesthetics in which everything is carefully staged (Gorzo, *Things* 237). This preference is specifically suggested in a

scene filmed at the seaside, when the cameraman (played by Daneliuc himself) wants to show his boss that he can shoot a scene in Claude Lelouche's style and the two of them end up chasing a dog on the beach to be able to catch him properly in the frame. *Microphone Test* intimates, through its focus on an aesthetics foregrounding real people in real everyday situations, that "life is too rich to be confined inside the moralistic forms and formats demanded by the political regime and applied by the man-with-a-movie-camera protagonist." (Gorzo, "Concerning" 8)

Often compared to Truffaut's *La nuit américaine*, Alexandru Tatos's *Sequences* (1982) shows three episodes from the life of a film crew, each describing an independent story but "subsumed to the idea of transfiguring real facts into art" (Caranfil, 185) (my translation). Apart from a realistic glimpse into the life of a director — viewed by the communist party structures as a functionary — *Sequences* foregrounds a persistent questioning of the distinctions between reality and fiction. Like Daneliuc's *Microphone Test*, Tatos's film openly makes the case for a more realistic cinema than what Romania had back then.

Lucian Pintilie's *The Reenactment*, made in 1968 and released in 1970 in Romania and at Cannes, is the film which most critics agree anticipated the Romanian New Wave and provided a brief synchronization with the European art cinema of the time.<sup>26</sup> The film is shot in a mountain town, on the terrace of a summer pub in the course of a day during which two teenagers, Nicu and Vuică, are required to re-enact a brawl they had a few days before, when drunk, at the same location. The purpose, dictated by the Party cadres, is to make an educational film in the presence of the prosecutor, a colleague of the prosecutor, the police officer, a teacher and the cameraman.

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<sup>26</sup> From the many sources on this topic, I will cite two lesser known sources: Marina Roman, "Priza directa la realitate" (Direct Grip on Reality) in *Cele mai bune 10 filme filme romanesti ale tuturor timpurilor* (The Best 10 Romanian Films of All Times), Cristina Corciovescu and Magda Mihailescu eds., Iași: Polirom, 2010; Bogdan Popa, "What's Wrong with the Romanian New Wave? Auteur Cinema, the Communist and the Production of the Violent Working Class", *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 9:1/2018, 89-102.

Doing the re-enactment will spare the boys three years in jail.

There is little ambiguity about the fate of the two boys. Whereas neorealist films like *Ladri di Biciclette* keeps the viewer wondering if the protagonist will find his bicycle, *The Reenactment* prepares the ground for a tragic ending. When the authorities involved in making the film tell Nicu to push Vuică down with more impetus to make the fight look authentic, we can anticipate his tragic end. The boys, with their uncontained freedom, will by necessity be crushed by a system which systematically curbs free will and autonomy. The “authenticity” required by the authorities leads, unequivocally, to death. The bold criticism of the communist regime –more specifically of the Stalinist period – caused *The Reenactment* to be banned in Romanian theatres shortly after its release, and Pintilie was forced to choose exile; he went to France, where he remained until the overthrow of Ceaușescu’s regime in 1989.

I would like to focus on one scene that can be regarded as a statement of realism against illusion in cinema. It shows a policeman giving a speech to the two boys; he is explaining how they should act in the film, like a director to his actors. I will quote his speech below, for a better illustration:

“Lads, which is our task here? Our case: we have to show the whole thing with the booze. It must be exactly as it was. For example [he takes a glass]: you broke the glass – you will break the glass! You sang – you will sing, comrade! You broke the bottle – you will break the bottle. But, pay attention: don’t you imitate! That is, don’t fake it! You’ll put all heart into it when you break the bottle! But you mustn’t scream like crazy, either. Neither must you be too soft. You must do it exactly like in real life. If you don’t do it like in real life, you have ruined my film stock. You must do as we tell you, for this is the state’s money. This is an educational film. It has a purpose: the people will come to the club, to draw the

conclusion for themselves, to see where alcohol consumption leads!” (my translation)

At first glance, it looks like a plea for unmediated realism as cinema’s true vocation, reminiscent of the Bazinian concern with achieving a total mimesis of the world. However, if we consider that it is uttered by no other than the policeman, the scene takes on an entirely different meaning. The officer is not worried about the right style for depicting reality, but rather about the style in which the reality he is dictating would be rendered: doing things exactly like in real life, actually meant doing them as you were told. When the officer asks the two teenagers to sing the song they sang when they got drunk, they answer that they are not able to sing on command, as they are not in the mood. The officer replies: “You’d better be able!” The police dictates what reality is and its texture, and the police comrade acts as the film’s director. This situation was certainly intended for a reading between the lines which hinted at “the realism” of socialist realism as being heavily manipulated. Mircea Deaca explains that “what at a first reading appears as the transcription of a profilmic [event] is, at a second reading, a form of antiphrasis” , the use of a message in a sense that runs counter to its overt meaning. (Deaca, “Power Allegories”) (my translation)

*The Reenactment* avoids a Manicheistic view of the protagonists, even if it still operates within a logic of types. The boys are not turned into positive characters to create a more eloquent opposition with the power structures they defy. They are rather uncouth and unruly in their behavior, but also too innocent for their own good. The policeman underlines this in his characteristically blunt manner when he asks them: “Boys, why are you stupid?” in an attempt to make them comply with the instructions they are given; all they need to do is to re-enact the fight, and they will be saved three years in jail as a result. The police comrade is not interested in



changing or reforming the boys; he just wants to discipline them, to make them obey. In chasing a semi-naked girl who is sunbathing by the river, and in running through the woods wondering what it would be like to climb the top of the mountains, Vuică and Nicu refuse to be broken into compliance. However, their refusal is not one that comes from awareness, but rather from ignorance – they simply prove unable to understand their predicament and to act in their best interest.

Although the film avoids stark oppositions and gives interesting portrayals, it does not escape the temptation to prove a thesis – and, as a subversive film, it cannot escape it. It is a critique of the regime, no matter how allegorical and, as such, its meaning resides in its dissidence. This kind of film cannot privilege ambiguity or the accidental nature of life when its purpose is to take a stance against the clearly biased nature of the reality it is critiquing. Neither can it achieve a complete realism in Bazinian terms as “the recreation of the world in its own image – an image upon which the irreversibility of time and the artist’s interpretation do not weigh” (Bazin 2009, 17). Such realistic aesthetics was impossible to achieve in the cinema of the communist era, even in the films against the regime, because in those films, the artist’s interpretation and their rhetorical intervention were the elements that made the difference and taking a stance in the representation of reality, one way or another, was unavoidable.

All three films discussed above also show considerable stylistic differences with the Romanian New Wave. One essential difference is that none of these directors give up the analytical montage and the norms of classical cinematography that entertained the illusion of temporal continuity between frames. Also, in terms of their treatment of space, all three directors allow themselves a larger freedom of movement through montage than Cristi Puiu or any of the directors of the Romanian New Wave. Neither Pintilie, nor Daneliuc or Tatos show any particular concern

about what Bazin regarded as the essence of cinema: the “simple photographic respect for the unity of space” (Bazin 2009, 79). In *The Reenactment* for example, the action jumps from a scene happening on the pontoon where the prosecutor is basking in the sun, to a scene in the woods where the two boys are running and back to the prosecutor on the pontoon. In Puiu’s films, for example, the spatial movement restrictions are those that characterize a human observer. The setting itself is treated differently in terms of aesthetics. While the action in *The Reenactment* is apparently filmed on location, the setting is arranged so as to look almost like a stage set, with an “elegant indeterminacy” (Gorzo, *Things* 234) (my translation) pointing to an aesthetics of stylization that Puiu’s films do not share.

While they take a moral stance against the injustice of the system and have a preoccupation with telling the truth, which may anticipate the themes of the New Romanian Cinema, these filmmakers have an aesthetics that is framed within the restrictions of the time. I agree with Andrei Gorzo that they represent however a synchronization with the European art cinema in the way they draw attention to the process of filmmaking and producing representations. This implies the appropriation of the modernist idea that flaunts the artifice in an attempt to teach viewers self-reflexivity and a critical attitude to the representation of reality (Gorzo, *Things* 232-3).

## Chapter Two: Together but Apart: Family Dynamics Through Observational Cinema in Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016)

*The film –be it documentary or fiction—is beyond the story, beyond the identity of the characters, beyond the events presented. Yes, I believe cinema is beyond the story.*<sup>27</sup>

Cristi Puiu

Cinema is not only beyond the story for Cristi Puiu, but it should go against entertaining the audience, as entertainment is nothing but the mindless lulling of sense and sensibility, or, as he calls it: “the offspring of ‘bread and circus.’” (Fulger, *New Wave*, 55) Cinema is an attempt to understand what is happening around you, Puiu believes, not some conclusions delivered to the viewer.

In 2001, when Puiu made *Stuff and Dough*, after a script he co-wrote with the one who was to become the main scriptwriter of the NRC, Răzvan Rădulescu, no one could anticipate the influence it would have over the following years in Romanian cinema. Puiu's next film, *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005) won the prestigious Un Certain Regard at Cannes, and together with *Stuff and Dough*, initiated the New Romanian Cinema.<sup>28</sup> They brought a new and surprising way of looking at the world that privileged the documentary realism to the detriment of the cinematic techniques that emphasize dramatic story telling. These two films focused less on a story and more on a study of gestures and behaviors and a subtle observation of the space the characters move around, offering a different view and insight into the Romanian society after the '89 Revolution. The wealth of details about the characters' apartments, gestures, verbal and behavioral mannerisms does not contribute to advancing the plot or to creating narrative tension but to revealing the texture

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<sup>27</sup> *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema*, Mihai Fulger, pp. 58-59. (my translation)

<sup>28</sup> There is a unanimity of voices declaring Cristi Puiu as the father of the New Romanian Cinema, a style initiated by his 2001 *Stuff and Dough*. Two of the critics who have written extensively on this are Andrei Gorzo (*Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel* (Things that Cannot Be Said in a Different Way), Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012 (193-272)) and Doru Pop (*Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2014 (42-73)).

of reality or a fragment from the flow of life. The filming, done in long takes with a handheld camera, simply contributes to showing events as unobtrusively as possible in a narrative that is based on accumulation of facts or on the natural progression of events rather than on dramatic tension. Some of these elements, like the insistence on documentary realism with its focus on the long take done with a handheld camera<sup>29</sup> and the imperfect framing were quickly adopted by directors like Cristian Mungiu, Radu Muntean, and Corneliu Porumboiu, among others.

Winner of the most important prizes at the Gopo Awards – the national Romanian film awards – among which Best Feature and Best Director, *Sieranevada* is the third in a series of *Six Tales from the Outskirts of Bucharest* (preceded by *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005) and *Aurora* (2010)), a series which focuses on interactions from a neighborhood in the eastern part of Bucharest – Balta Albă. The film centers on a dinner which gathers the family members in commemoration of a departed family patriarch. The main purpose of the reunion is a memorial service to be officiated, following the Eastern Orthodox tradition, by a priest. Most of the film shows the characters shuffling from one room to another during a little less than three hours of tireless conversations that sometimes degenerate into conflicts and betray muffled tensions. The relations between the characters are not clear from the start and it is only gradually that some of them are revealed. Due to the film's centering on an act of waiting and an indefinitely delayed feast critics have likened its plot with Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* and with Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The handheld camera was a technique used by Puiu in his first films before switching to a steady camera, like in *Aurora* or *Sieranevada*. This also heralds a widening of Puiu's interests to "human consciousness and inner space", even if his focus remains on "historicized social reality", as Wang Yao remarks. (55)

<sup>30</sup> See Jordan Cronk (2016) "Sieranevada (Cristi Puiu, Romania/France/Bosnia and Herzegovnia/Croatia/Republic of Macedonia)", *Cinema Scope*, no. 67. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2020 from <https://cinema-scope.com/spotlight/sieranevada-cristi-puiu-romaniafrancebosnia-herzegovniacroatiairepublic-macedonia/> and Peter Bradshaw (2016) "Sieranevada review – Food for Thought (But Not For the Mourners) In Romanian Oddity", *The Guardian*, Retrieved Nov. 20, 2020 from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/12/cannes-2016-film-festival-sieranevada-review-cristi-puiu-romania>.

Bearing in mind the trope of the family as stand-in for the nation, my analysis will show the way family relations reflect larger societal changes and national anxieties which the viewers can recognize as their own. In my analysis of the formal techniques and cultural markers (space, conversation topics, characters' behavior and idiosyncrasies), I will resort to the term "cultural intimacy" which anthropologist of postsocialist transitions Michael Herzfeld uses to characterize the tension between national discourses and the private space created in places "that have themselves been strikingly marginal to the international power structures." (Herzfeld 129) Herzfeld focuses on Greece, but from the perspective of marginality, his analysis applies very successfully to a country like Romania. Starting from Cristi Puiu's statement that *Sieranevada* was made having in mind a Romanian language public (Puiu, TVR2, 09:25-9:36), it is my contention that the film reactivates the viewers' sense of community and cultural belonging otherwise shattered in post-communist Romania – a sense of cultural intimacy and connivance with the public – by presenting aspects of embarrassment and vulnerability that people can recognize and identify with.

To determine how cultural intimacy is achieved, my analysis looks at the conversation topics that reveal the obsessions and traumas of the characters, then at the space of the apartment and the gestures that speak of the interactions between the protagonists. Next, I discuss the implications of Puiu's observational cinema and the way it creates a feeling of intimacy with the viewers. The last section examines a confession of infidelity in relation to family trauma and collective history. But firstly, I will focus on a description and analysis of the camerawork, as an essential element for creating cultural intimacy.

## A Horizontal Perspective and an Anthropomorphic Camera

### *First two scenes – preamble to the story*

A medium shot of a narrow, crowded and noisy street corner in downtown Bucharest: trolleys, taxis and courier cars pass alongside passengers; a man is trying to park his BMW and, for lack of space, he leaves it in the middle of the street; a DHL truck soon finds itself caught behind the BMW, and the driver starts laying on the horn; random graffiti scribblings cover the building on the street corner and a construction tape around the adjacent sidewalk warns the passers-by: “Danger of explosion” (Figures 4 and 5). This first scene of the film is made up of a single long take that lasts for almost seven minutes. The camera is situated at eye-level, and the medium shot ensures a sufficient distance from the actors to prevent us from making out what they are speaking given the abundant background noise. Things have been happening for a while before we can get a surreptitious glimpse of the universe the individual characters inhabit.



Figure 4: Crowded street corner



*Figure 5: Lary's car and the DHL truck*

Aesthetically, this style of filming is important for two reasons. Firstly, it frames the film in the realistic tradition of observational cinema based on long takes. Puiu states that cinema is a kind of anthropological device meant to record reality as an external observer (Lupsa). From this perspective, any cut is a lie operated in the continuum of perception and he emphasizes it as such in his films: the few shots that are cut are deliberately linked in a manner that highlights the ellipsis and their discontinuity, as when we plunge in the middle of a conversation, with somebody's arguments in full flow. The relative lack of editing and of close-ups outlines an aesthetics which does not highlight the action of the story, but instead, it positions this action as part of the uninterrupted flow of everyday life from which we are shown a fragment. The action of the story is, if not immaterial, at least secondary to the feeling the viewers get when they watch this slice of life and have access to its immediate texture. Secondly, Puiu's cold open narrative technique which

jumps directly into the flow of the action suggests an exemplary story, not an exceptional one. The technique is quite typical of the New Romanian Cinema whose narratives capture everyman and everywoman in situations that have been unfolding for a while. This scene, which precedes the opening credits, also anticipates the main themes of the film and its message. The chaos of the street, with its disorderly traffic, the construction work all around, and the back and forth of the couple define a world whose main mode of existence relies heavily on sensorial overload and makeshift solutions, a world where people do what they can to get by.

The hostile environment from the street is translated to the inside of the car in the next shot, which begins in the middle of a conversation, highlighting the editing. Laura (Cătălina Moga) and Lary's (Mimi Brănescu) heated discussion about a mix-up of the school celebration costume for their daughter plunges us into a world of conflict and prejudice, self-seeking interests and little dramas consumed within the enclosed space of the car and set against an equally agitated outside. The traffic jams, the rows of apartment buildings, together with the series of excavator tractors that succeed one another in front of the dimmed windscreen of Lary's car complete the picture of the city. Puiu chooses a rather horizontal perspective over Bucharest, one that perceives it as an entity fleeting by the window and adds a dynamic quality to the otherwise heavy, old and oppressive space of the neighborhood. This perception of the city as a mobile itinerary, frequently met in the films of the New Romanian Cinema, makes it part of the flow of experience (Flatz 158) and, often, of some situations that have been unfolding before the film starts. The rest of the film will build on this horizontality and on the agglomeration of details with its sensorial overload, as Laura and Lary arrive at their destination and we are made privy to the inside of a family apartment.



## *The Dead Man's Eyes*

Together with Laura and Lary, we enter a crowded, poorly lit apartment, in which the gathering hosted by Nuşa, the widow, takes place. The camera is often placed in the central hallway of the apartment, a quasi-dark and narrow space, situated at the crossroad of a few rooms and their closed doors. From this witness position, it can watch stealthily whatever comes before its eye-level lens, whether it's a silhouette or someone's legs, like a secret guest who can only have limited access to the spaces of the apartment. The various family conversations and interactions are connected to each other by the characters' comings and goings: when someone walks out of the room where a conversation took place, they cross paths with another who is heading in a different direction and the camera follows the latter. Due to its position in a space of transition, sometimes the camera is a prisoner of its own intermedial condition, waiting for a character to give it access to one of the private spaces of the apartment. For example, when Laura and Lary arrive at the apartment, the camera follows Lary's movements from the hallway, as he goes to the various rooms of the apartment to greet everyone present (Figure 6). When Lary enters one of the rooms and is no longer visible, the camera pans in another direction and remains focused on the living room entrance, from whose open door only the legs of a man sitting on the couch are visible (Figure 7). Distracted by the sound of an opening door, the camera moves in yet another direction.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> This scene of a little less than five minutes, which starts when Laura and Lary arrive at the apartment, is analyzed in detail by Andrei Gorzo on his blog: *Things That Cannot Be Said in a Different Way*, <https://andreiGORZOBLOG.wordpress.com/2017/12/15/mica-introducere-in-arta-lui-cristi-puiu-doua-cadre-din-sieranevada/>.



*Figure 6: Lary greeting the family in the door*



*Figure 7: Living room angle of Sebi's legs*

Puiu's style does not depart from the unobtrusiveness of the observational realism established in his previous films, but he introduces an anthropomorphic nuance to the camera gaze in relation to the characters. In an interview with Patrick Holzapfel, discussing the elusiveness of

truth and the filming technique he used, Puiu states that he decided to build on the technique developed in his previous film *Aurora* (2010), which involved putting the camera on a tripod and moving it as far as a human head can move, without any tele-objective, zooming or change in the focal length. The camera in *Sieranevada* uses, in Puiu's words, "the same eyes as the eyes we are born with" (Holzafpel), a statement that should not be taken literally, but rather in a way that refers to the camera's lack of omniscience, limited to human observation abilities. The camera lingers in the hallway and in various corners of the apartment, like an uncomfortable bystander, going back and forth, sometimes in doorways, other times inside the rooms. Puiu tries to suggest through the camera movement and angle the gaze of the departed paterfamilias contemplating from an intermedial position the lives of his family members. To this effect, the characters are sometimes filmed *contre-jour*, like shadowy silhouettes (Figures 8 and 9). Christian Ferencz-Flatz calls this movement of the camera "something similar to an 'attitude', a positioning which is not to be determined only through spatial distances, but also through the 'interhuman' closeness and distancing" ("Direct Cinema"). Ferencz-Flatz argues that *Sieranevada* returns thus, to the humanism and the empathetic relation with the characters from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, but it also takes from *Aurora* the self-reflexive refinement of the filming style, leaving aside its radicalism. Trying to filter reality through the eyes of the departed father, who watches from a distance the tribulations of his family members, Puiu guides the viewers' perception to a humanistic, empathetic perspective that invites recognition without identification.



*Figure 8: Shadowy silhouettes of Lary and Simona*



*Figure 9: Sebi's silhouette against the living room window*

## Cultural Intimacy

To better clarify the implications of recognition for the viewer, I will take a look at the concept of “cultural intimacy” developed by Michael Herzfeld, which helps explain the act of bonding both within the filmic fiction and outside of it, with(in) the audience. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld explains that cultural intimacy captures “those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (3). Herzfeld points to a “rueful self-recognition” (3) and an “inward acknowledgement of cultural intimacy” (3) that occurs when people recognize certain features that belong to their collective self as members of a particular culture with a specific shared history. A form of intimacy takes shape through this recognition of shared vulnerabilities and collective traits. This form of intimacy is something that “all the top-down accounts of the nation-state miss” (Herzfeld 6), but that, nevertheless, artistic products, with their focus on everyday individuals, incidents and settings, are able to encapsulate. Puiu’s *Sieranevada* activates this cultural intimacy for the audience by allowing them to engage with these forms of self-recognition. This engagement requires a deciphering spectator, one that is able to read the elements of the *mise-en-scène* and their cultural specificity, but also to relate to their significance.

### *History Revisited or How Do People Bond?*

An important part of *Sieranevada*’s meaning as a conversational film derives from the topics the characters engage with, the way they engage themselves and each other in conversation, and their attitudes towards each other. By examining the topics of conversation and their implications, I intend to show that part of the cultural intimacy that this film activates has to do

with the way the viewers recognize themselves and their close ones in the characters' traumas, the obsessions they give voice to, and in the way these conversations unfold.

After the more or less casual dialogues carried out in the dining room, a bitter discussion about Communism follows between Sandra --Lary's younger sister, a woman in her thirties-- and Evelina, an elderly woman who seems to be a long-time friend of the family. Two opposite points of view collide about what Communism meant for the country: the communist point of view and the neoconservative-liberal one, which many educated young Romanians adopted as a stance against the wrongs of a totalitarian regime. The two women are both standing in the kitchen and carrying out their repartee on adversarial positions, very much unlike the previous dialogues. This repartee is about what people stand for and, more profoundly, about the different histories imprinted on people's minds, bodies, ways of being and behaving. The white fox fur hat that Evelina is wearing – used in many American period movies to portray Russian women—was very popular in Romania during communist times (Figure 10). It looked imposing and it was one of the things the working class and the party activists shared. It has since become an image of communist backwardness for which especially younger people in Romania have developed a distaste. Evelina keeps wearing the hat inside the house which makes her and the ideology she stands for even more conspicuous. Guardians of pre-1989 revolutionary cultural memory, the people of her generation are sidelined by history, as they become increasingly redundant in the new social and political order.



Figure 10: Evelina's white fox fur hat

Katalin Sándor draws attention to the space in which this discussion takes place; the “postcommunist view on the ideology of communism and the relationship to the achievements of communism” is a thorny matter that must remain hidden behind the kitchen door (Sándor 6). The kitchen becomes a repository of past suffering, as it is the most hermetic space of the house, whose door must stay closed at all times – Sandra’s gesture of closing the door emphasizes this repeatedly. The difference between the manner in which the discussion on the 9/11 attacks unfolds compared to that on Romania’s legacy of Communism is striking. The first appears as a rather benign obsession entertained by Sebi, to which the others amusingly or casually bring counterarguments, while the second comes out as a wound or a national trauma. By bringing competing discourses and subjectivities together and recording them as they unfold in front of the camera, Puiu succeeds in conveying a sense of what is casual as well as what is traumatic in the national psyche.

Most dialogues in the film have a dichotomic character. Neither Sebi, nor Sandra or Evelina, or any of the characters who express their point of view on the various issues at stake, seem comfortable to live with partial truths. Things that are neither here, nor there, but rather in the middle, are dismissed as irrelevant. Discussing minimalism and melodrama in the New Romanian Cinema, Ioana Uricaru links the good/evil dichotomy to the Marxist-Leninist ideology dominant in Romania until 1989, and its Manichean ethos. This ethos positioned the members of the communist party on the side of the good, striving to build a ‘golden future’ against the enemy, which was Capitalism with its bourgeois, imperialist ideology (Uricaru 59-60). This oversimplified fight between good and evil, with its binary logic pervaded all strata of society during Communism. The dramatism and the occasional aggression in the relations between family members portrayed in *Sieranevada*, together with the conspiracy theories, are indirect consequences of this political and historical heritage. Understanding the gray zones means taking a distance and accepting uncertainty. It is what Mr. Popescu (Marian Râlea), a middle-aged math teacher, friend of the family, points to, when he expresses his position about the different interpretations of historical events. Mr. Popescu declares himself equidistant and highlights the importance of listening to opposing opinions and questioning the received truths before articulating your position: “I, for one, don’t know who’s right. But examine and judge for yourself all the given hypotheses!” Voicing Puiu’s concerns with the elusiveness of truth and the meaning of history, Marian Râlea’s character, from his observer position, draws attention to our own allegiances and preferences, and sometimes to our bias for what is spectacular, making us question our entrenched ways of thinking. László Strausz argues that Popescu “articulates the attitude central to new Romanian cinema toward history and social construction: hesitation as a critical subject position” (Strausz 228). When Popescu listens to the clashing accounts and opinions about



the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, he enacts through his response a form of hesitation as a critical subject position. He refrains from passing judgement or expressing his opinion, which, however, attracts the mockery of his table companions. To them, he does not seem to have a personal opinion, his own truth, or he does not have the courage to express it. He appears lackluster, a suggestion also present in his name, as “Popescu” is the most widely spread surname in Romania, equivalent to “everyman”.

Most opinions on the events discussed come out in the form of interpretation grids that the characters have adopted “to construct, interpret, domesticate or legitimize what counts as “real” at a given historical moment” (Sándor 10). However, the characters do not appear lacking in depth, despite their schematic portrayal. Puiu’s observational cinema invites the viewer to see competing sides of the same person, which makes it difficult to side with one character or another; the film situates the viewers on a higher plane than mere identification or partisanship, facilitating an understanding of the characters in their inherent heterogeneity and hence, in their humanity. The conspiracy theories that Sebi endorses may betray a mind prone to paranoia and attracted to spectacular explanations, but they also point to the difficulty of living with uncertainty about the major events in one’s collective history and, in the case of the 1989 Revolution, they suggest the void in coherent national explanations. When Sandra laments the atrocities the communist system perpetrated against innocent people, one is tempted to side with her humanistic outlook, but seconds later, she splutters an anti-Semitic cliché when she mentions “Marx, Lenin, and other notorious kikes” (Gorzo, “A Death”). Such contradictory attitudes prevent us from jumping to conclusions or formulating a stereotyped opinion about the characters, as Puiu constantly reminds us of the complexity and ambivalence integral to the act of living. Truth rarely lies in people’s utterances, but rather in-between the lines, in their behavior, reactions and in the tension that is

created in the small spaces they inhabit.

The filming technique helps convey this idea. The panning movement of the camera which renders the back and forth of the characters creates the impression of horizontality, which László Strausz identifies as a fundamental perceptual trope of the film “illustrating how the bewildered camera barely scratches the surface of the recounted events while it attempts to locate their significance”. (230) This horizontal movement reflects the choreography of the characters’ movements, and “their disconnection from the real by their resorting to hysterical accounts and emotional narratives that are immediately exposed as contradicting each other”. (230) The movement parallels the horizontality of the urban landscape from the opening scene and suggests an avoidance of probing the deeper layers of history, as reflected in the conversations between the family members; and the elusiveness of truth. The ideologies the characters debate and embrace, and their own beliefs, whether it’s royalist, like Sandra’s, or communist, like Evelina’s, conformist (Lary) or skeptical-paranoid (Sebi), underscore the basic ambiguity of the historical events’ significance. They also “prevent one from seeing the world and seeing the other”, in Puiu’s words, (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu*, 132) an idea which is also suggested by the uneasiness of the camera gaze.

Gathering the characters around the table and showing their behavior in conversation has often been the perfect occasion for a study of behaviors and mentalities. Through the family reunion, *Sieranevada* holds a mirror to the current state of a society after twenty-six years of transition to a neoliberal order. Traumas are buried deep, but their effects come out unexpectedly in casual conversations or in silent interactions, and they represent the common ground on which people bond. The conversations and the traumas they give voice to, and the way the characters react to them, represent one of the aspects on which cultural intimacy with the viewers is built. It comes out especially through “a sense of vulnerability and distrust in history” („Narratives” 533)

that all dialogues foreground, which, as C. Pârvulescu remarks, is a marker of the present political and social imaginary of the East-Central European countries.

### *The Materiality of Space and Gestures*

*(...) realism in cinema can be summarized with what Roland Barthes called “effet de réel”. It’s a question of details, of participating with something happening under our eyes.<sup>32</sup>*

Cristi Puiu

The apartment that hosts the family gathering becomes a main character through its enhanced materiality. Puiu doesn’t let the viewers forget that the memorial happens in a communist flat, with low ceilings, narrow hallways and precariously isolated rooms. There is hardly any open space, and the topography of the apartment points to secluded areas, connected by the poorly lit hallway. The space betrays a mindset of the past that is still perpetuated, one of separation and isolation and gives off the feeling of claustrophobia. Characters go in and out of the small rooms, in which different family members or guests live their own stories and give voice to inner tensions. Nușă’s bedroom is probably the most intimate space of the apartment, where aunt Ofelia sobs in a corner, Lary and Nușă can have their mother and son little squabble, and where Sandra can taunt her elder brother and express her affection for him. But even this room doesn’t seem to keep its private character for a long time, as a semi-conscious, probably drunken, Croatian girl is brought unexpectedly by one of the cousins and deposited on Nușă’s bed. This makes everyone come by and wonder as to source of her intoxication, in an episode in which the outside world intrudes on the domestic dramas of this family.

Throughout the film the doors open and shut repeatedly, suggesting that every space in this cluttered apartment hosts bottled-up stories. Sandra makes a point of obsessively closing the

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kitchen door every time someone leaves it open (Figure 11). In conjunction to its practical function, which is to reduce the spread of noise in a small shared space where every sound can be heard, this gesture also indicates a traditional habit of segregation, frequently based on gender. The kitchen is often the space of women, and sometimes of men who gather to have a cigarette or a snack. On the other hand, the discussions on politics and terrorist attacks make the living room a preponderantly masculine space, as the affairs of the world at large remain men's territory, and their excuse for evading the feminine space.



*Figure 11: Sandra closing the kitchen door*

The objects that decorate the house or merely bring people comfort also contribute to the materiality of the space. They are visible at the level of details that betray personal beliefs or a certain life experience, like the fox fur hat that Evelina wears, or the objects crammed in the apartment from the large rectangular mirror hanging on the wall in the dining room, framed by stacks of books and various paraphernalia, to the family photos placed in the corners of painting

frames and the many boxes that are crammed on the vertical shelves in the narrow hallway. The lackluster paint of the walls and the gloomy light of the cramped rooms with the perpetually closing doors complete a picture of the apartment as a repository of history with its various layers. These reminders of the past coexist with newer objects and devices, like the electric home appliances visible on the kitchen counter. The private and the political dimensions of history come together in these small, segregated spaces of family intimacy where the communist past and the post-communist present are juxtaposed, just like the young and the old, creating what Puiu refers to as the “*effet de réel*” .

Cultural intimacy extends to the gestures and practices that the characters perform. Puiu explains in an interview the significance that “a look, a just timing, a gesture, a word here and there” have on his cinema as ways in which “glimpses of the ineffable” can be conveyed (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* 131). In an early scene, we can see a woman carrying a pot of *sarmale* from the apartment across the hall to the apartment where the commemoration takes place; the Romanian and Eastern European viewer can easily understand the implications of this gesture, as a reminiscence of communist times, when people would help each other in times of penury, either with borrowing certain ingredients or resources (like making use of the oven, in this case) from each other. This practice of neighborly socialization for very practical purposes comes as a remains of the communist era culture, whose collective character is still perpetuated by the elderly in the otherwise individualistic nowadays culture.

The texture of everyday interactions comes out through these small, apparently insignificant gestures, which contribute to a more concrete perception of intimacy by the viewer and render certain immediacy to the experience of watching the film. *Sieranevada* (just like *Stuff and Dough* or *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*) is a keen testimony to a form of intimacy that can best

be communicated through gestures, an intimacy that speaks of a shared social and cultural history. Puiu's 2005 *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* is replete with such gestures in relation to the title character, like in the scene when his neighbors are making efforts to dress him with a pullover and a cap before he leaves in the ambulance, creating a tragicomedy of helplessness through this act of vulnerable exposure. Puiu's debut feature, *Stuff and Dough* (2001), also has many such expressions of intimacy, especially between the two friends and protagonists: Ovidiu and Vali. In an early scene, Vali comes to Ovidiu's house, enters the kitchen, and, after greeting his mother and grandmother, asks Ovidiu if the coffee cup on the table is his and then quickly takes a sip. These are in and of themselves isolated gestures of familiarity and they do not advance the action or the drama in any way and do not provide clear-cut meanings and interpretations for the viewer. They define Puiu's cinema as "a "cinema of process", in Collin McArthur's words quoted by Christina Stojanova ("Authenticity" 129), or as a "cinema of duration" or a "truly realist cinema of time" to use Bazin's words (76), one that is not primarily guided by the imperatives of action – on the contrary: gestures and everyday behaviors speak of mentalities, emotions and relations between people more than the action does. Gestures, tastes and smells, are all part of the experience of watching a film by Cristi Puiu; they acquire a significance of their own, and hence, their own materiality. Discussing the realism and the "density of details" in Puiu's film, Andrei Gorzo states that "*Sieranevada* is a film in which, for example, siblings feel like siblings, parents and children look like parents and children – their common history makes itself felt continuously in their interactions." ("A Death") Cinema in the way Puiu conceives of it may not lead to clear-cut solutions and easy understanding, but it can nonetheless show us an open door to a life that is more encompassing than we can see and make us aware of how much of it is unknown to us; this is a revelation which classical cinema, with its claims to understanding and controlling the world

represented, cannot offer. In this respect, “Puiu’s impulse is corrective, haunted by the idea of a hidden totality, which the standard approaches to storytelling and representing the world maim, dilute and flatten” (Gorzo, *Things* 211) (my translation).

The film’s ability to convey the common histories and bonds not only through the verbal but also through the nonverbal is what contributes to the feeling of intimacy that *Sieranevada* achieves for its postsocialist audience. Cultural intimacy comes from recognizing these traits and mannerisms, as well as the little details that make up the everyday of these characters; they are representative of every woman, man and family. In these characters, their relations and the events they go through, the Romanian and Eastern European viewers can recognize their inherent contradictions and ambivalence and the necessity of living with them. From this perspective, I argue that Puiu tries to preserve national memory and build cultural intimacy through the attention to these specific details that make up the everyday interfamilial relations as well as through his filming technique.

### **Observational Cinema and Intimacy**

*You think that only your mind exists, and that only your mind is capable of producing some unique vision. I think it is enough to witness. If your testimony is real, then your film will reveal enough truths that you yourself did not see.*<sup>33</sup>

Cristi Puiu

This section brings together the filming techniques used by Puiu in *Sieranevada*, the way they achieve intimacy with the viewers, and Puiu’s ideas on observational cinema to explain the humanistic outlook of the film.

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<sup>33</sup> “Cristi Puiu on Romania, its cinema, and his own work” (East European Film Bulletin, vol. 7/July, 2011)

### *Recognition without identification*

Talking about his preference of fictional cinema to the documentary, Puiu stated that he is interested in delivering one's intimate life through the reconstruction that fictional cinema makes possible (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* 135). This type of intimacy is not possible with documentary cinema, where the subjects filmed are known to automatically alter their behavior in front of the camera. According to Puiu, a fictional cinema with a camera-observer used the way he and DOP Barbu Bălăsoiu do in *Sieranevada*, allows the viewers to see a representation of their "cultural, emotional, intellectual acquisitions, that is, everything that you, the observer, are." (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu*, 138)

The camera in *Sieranevada* has no privileged position, it observes the intimacy of the family, like a hesitant bystander and at the same time participates in it. As discussed in the first section, it is anthropomorphic, and speaks of the gaze of the departed father who is watching his family with a distant eye, but also with care and attachment. This gaze is transferred to the viewers, who become part of the private space, as a secret family member. They can both recognize themselves in the gestures and interactions between the characters on screen, and keep a distance, through this way of filming that allows only partial visibility to the story and to the spaces, both public and private.

Puiu's style of filming that foregrounds partial access and a hesitant camera ceases to be voyeuristic and invisible. The viewer is constantly aware of there being a camera recording the action on screen. This awareness prevents identification with the characters, since the viewers are never completely drawn in the space of the apartment; the de-voyeuristic gaze allows the spectators both to recognize their worries and idiosyncrasies in those of the characters and to perceive them as amusingly familiar, just as the man in whose memory the feast is held might recognize them.



The eye of the camera contributes thus an understanding that goes beyond mockery or criticism. The unruly domestic traits that come out and the embarrassing recognition of shared vulnerabilities do not point to a Romanian reality that needs to be penalized, but to something ambivalent, ambiguous and profoundly human.

### *Observational cinema and the instability of meaning*

Asked about the title of the film, Cristi Puiu has offered a multitude of answers, as many as the people interviewing him. In an interview he gave to Christoph Huber for Cinema Scope, Puiu stated that he was interested in a wider resonance, something that goes beyond local realities, but its deliberate misspelling points to “the idea that in order to feel comfortable we humans are building stories that are comfortable to us but that have nothing to do with real life, with the facts, with the actual events” (Huber 11). Huber points to the two genres that are suggested by its resonance, the Western and the road movie, that have no connection with *Sieranevada*, and he underlines the parodic intention behind the use of the title in its misspelled version (11). At the TVR2 Romanian television channel, Puiu explained that the title can refer to Bucharest’s skyline, whose communist blocks of flats covered in snow in the winter look like the tops of a mountain range (Puiu 06:45-07:58), an explanation which is, at best, as good as any other. Discussing the film at ARTE Cinéma and asked about the significance of the traditional rituals related to the transition of the soul of the departed, Puiu said: “J’ai pas un avis là-dessu.”(Puiu 02:35-03:05) All these answers show Puiu’s elusive way of approaching the significance of his work and a certain reluctance to provide the viewer with a ready-made interpretation. The explanations he provides actually destabilize meaning, in an attempt to direct the spectator’s attention towards performativity and hesitation as tools through which he can approach the film actively and create

his own process of interpretation.

By witnessing the family intimacy as a hesitant guest, the viewer can understand the subjectivities presented, without identifying with them. Strausz argues that Puiu's position "summarizes New Romanian Cinema's epistemology and addresses the cinematic conditions of the possibility of knowledge" (230). While I agree that Puiu's preoccupation is to show in his films the texture of reality juxtaposed to the human possibilities of knowledge, I argue that this style of investigating reality through cinema and the degree to which it has been taken are exclusively Cristi Puiu's. Doubtlessly, many of its features are to be found in the New Romanian Cinema which he initiated, but this way of telling a story that is very faithful to observational realism distinguishes Puiu's cinema from that of Mungiu, Muntean or even Porumboiu. Cristian Mungiu, for example, likes to show an eloquent story, and while the story certainly highlights ambiguity, he does tie the threads together at the end to give that *fil conducteur* which points the viewers in a certain direction. He is also glad to discuss the significance of his films in interviews, nationally and abroad, and articulates his artistic intentions unhesitatingly. Puiu, on the other hand, states that "film -- documentary or fiction-- is to be found beyond the story, beyond the identity of the characters, beyond the events presented" (Fulger, *New Wave* 58-9) He is interested in cinema as an observational practice and a way of investigating reality, not reproducing it (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* 171) and his main concern is with the ideal place for the camera as witness: "If cinema is not a form of testimony, I am not interested in it." (Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* 133). He is not concerned with giving explanations and making political statements with his films. Unlike Cristian Mungiu, he doesn't seem to have a politically-moral intention, wanting to expose or redress past national traumas. Staying true to observational realism, the message of his films is hence more elusive, drawing on the ambiguity and perplexity inherent in the act of living.

## Family and the New Patriarch

At one point in the second half of the film, Lary is called downstairs to help Laura out of a conflict over a parking spot and has a fight with a neighborhood thug. Lary comes to the scene of the conflict as a man and a husband, a position that in itself has more weight when it comes to settling street fights in a society still very much traditionalist and male-ruled. In the confined space of the car and visibly shaken by the incident, Lary sobs and starts telling Laura about a childhood incident involving his younger brother, Relu, who was caught smoking by his father. Relu came up with a childish story --a thief came to the house and forced him to smoke-- which his father did not question. Remembering how his younger brother managed to deceive his father with such an obvious lie, Lary wonders about how dishonesty can coexist with credulity. How could his father, who had been cheating on his mother throughout their marriage and was skilled at telling lies, be so gullible when it came to his ten-year old son? Then, he suggests that, just like his father, he has also been occasionally unfaithful. The meaning of this scene does not lend itself to an easy reading and Lary's sudden impulse to confess his infidelity in the claustrophobic space of the car remains open to speculation. The confession comes as if to counter the atmosphere of the family reunion oblivious to the departed and the embedded realization that the living tend to the living.<sup>34</sup> The incident that Lary recounts is the only instance in which the father is remembered in a story that brings his memory to the fore. Lary's recollection also reveals an unspoken, repressed family history, as Katalin Sándor argues (9). It describes an entire collective history during and after the communist age, where families had to stay together and were kept whole by appearances and lies.

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<sup>34</sup> This is an interpretation offered by several critics, among whom Andrei Gorzo in "A death in the Family: Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada*. Retrieved April 17, 2020 from [https://www.academia.edu/30270768/A\\_death\\_in\\_the\\_family\\_Cristi\\_Puius\\_Sieranevada\\_](https://www.academia.edu/30270768/A_death_in_the_family_Cristi_Puius_Sieranevada_).

What is most important is that the parking lot confrontation seems to have acted as the trigger of more humble thoughts for Lary and of a certain reconsideration of the machismo present in many daily interactions. Paradoxically, Lary's confession is an attempt to deny that he is part of a clan of duplicitous men that starts with his father and uncle and continues with the men of his generation, an attempt to distantiate himself from something that is as entrenched as learned behavior or education. It suggests a refusal to carry on the tacitly accepted duplicity of the patriarch, whose place he must take.



*Figure 12: Lary's confession in the car*

The scene juxtaposes the immediacy of the conversation to the limited access we have to the characters' facial expression. Lary and Laura are in the front seats of the car, while the camera films them from the back-seat, with partial visibility (Figure 12). This style of filming, in which the camera both observes and participates, as a third, back-seat passenger, is very effective in

juxtaposing “the immediacy, the corporeality and the audible excess of the cathartic sob with the limited visibility of space and the inaccessibility, the mediatedness of the face shown through the rear-view mirror” (Sándor 10). The partial visibility speaks of the partial truths that we have access to and of the brief moments that intimate an unexpected connection. If the apartment can be regarded as a metaphor of society, the car becomes a signifier of the self, the locus of a heartfelt confrontation with one’s memory and inner truth. The urban background that can be glimpsed through the windshield functions as a symbolic *mise-en-scène*. The horizon is blocked by an apartment building, and there are structures under construction both to the left and to the right. The protective scaffolding of the construction site to the right foregrounds a series of high poles which rise through the air like menacing weapons, warning about the dangers that follow the attempt to go deeper into one’s family trauma and history. The verticality of the urban image in this scene comes in contrast with the horizontality of the city image at the beginning. Confronting one’s history and memory is a painful process that cuts deep, to the core of one’s being; the construction site that makes the background of this scene though, also spells the hope of rebuilding or starting anew, an endeavor often preceded by suffering.

By the end of the day the guests who are not part of the family have left; only the relatives remain to finally eat and share in the feast. Despite all the tensions and disputes, the family has its inner redressal mechanisms and seems to hold, which betrays a rather conservative view, as Gorzo has remarked: “We are in a fallen world. The old ways are in crisis. (...) They are corroded, corrupted, drained of meaning. (Nor were they ever necessarily “good”.) But – in Puiu’s powerfully conservative vision – they’re all there is: the gathering of bickering relatives, the empty rituals, the traditional gender roles – because of them, the world is at least organized.” (“A Death”)

Puiu’s view of the family is indeed traditional. Men seem to have a wider range of

possibilities for expressing their emotions than women. They can turn from laughter to anger to crying and can express more affective nuances as well: jocularly, mockery, playfulness, irony, and a sensibility to the absurdity of situations. The seriousness and the unidirectionality of women is quite striking by comparison<sup>35</sup>. They attend very meticulously to all the aspects related to carrying out the commemoration, from preparing the food to organizing the ritual donning of the suit to liaising with the priest and supervising the overall proceedings. They are the ones who preserve the rituals and the traditional social order, whereas the men simply obey women's directions about the enactment of rituals and their organization. This points to a traditional structure of the family unit that reflects the larger ethos used in the formation of nations, in which "women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural)" in contrast to men who "represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-looking, potent, and historic)" (McClintock 92). My intention is not so much to offer a critique of nationalism and its familial metaphor, but rather to draw on this analogy to show how the family presented in *Sieranevada*, with all its trials and tribulations, can pertinently be regarded as an expression of the nation and a traditional one at that.

From the point of view of the traditional family values, the film is about the revival or restoration of the family by the symbolic instatement of a new paterfamilias through Lary. As in any patriarchal society, the family needs a male head who can be called upon to regulate family disputes – an authority figure who can give the law. Lary has his flaws as a father and as a husband, he is inattentive to both his daughter's requests and to those of his wife and he is unfaithful, but in spite of all these, he mediates conflicts and appears to be the most trustworthy in a world whose

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<sup>35</sup> The gravity of women compared to men's capacity for humor in this film is also discussed by Cristina Hermeziu in "Cine râde la Sieranevada" (Who Laughs at Sieranevada) in the online magazine LaPunkt (<https://www.lapunkt.ro/2016/09/cine-rade-la-sieranevada/>)

everyday reality is in crisis. However, he is ambivalent about taking this role upon himself. His confession of infidelity suggests a refusal to carry on what seems like the tacitly accepted duplicity of the patriarch.

## **Conclusion**

When evening has already fallen beyond the windows of the apartment and dinner is finally served, another commotion disperses the family members to one of the rooms. Only Lary and Relu remain at the table and burst into prolonged laughter. Lary, who has been hungry all afternoon and in a rush to eat, now contemplates the *sarmale* on his plate and just plays with the fork without touching the food. At the end of the day, laughter seems the only comfort. It suggests the futility of it all, from the rituals performed without sincere devotion or understanding of their significance, which turn the commemoration into an absurd spectacle, to the incessant chatter and conflicts.

Laughter has a moral role, as it tries to correct behaviors, by exposing them. But while doing so, it also has a cohesive role, bringing people together in a recognition of their shared foibles. We make fun of people because they are unaware of their vices, while we are aware of them. Similarly, laughter in *Sieranevada* is a gesture that makes the spectators aware of their various forms of rigidity. In the tragicomic style of the NRC, laughter is the corrective that Puiu proposes for the stubbornness of mind and character whose spectacle we witnessed. It is a way for the family and, by extension, for society to regulate itself, eliminate excesses and lubricate its relations. In the end, the characters' laughter becomes the viewers' laughter, at recognizing themselves in these characters, in their collective past and in their claims to self-importance and truth. What is perhaps even more significant –and this is an accomplishment of the Romanian Cinema that came with the new millennium -- is that this laughter is openly achieved *with* the viewers, as a sign of solidarity and bonding.

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In this chapter I examined the way cultural intimacy is activated in Puiu's *Sieranevada*, by looking at two main aspects: verbal and behavioral (the conversation topics and the way they are carried out), and spatial and behavioral (the materiality of space and gestures). A part of the analysis focused on how the family is portrayed and the way it reflects larger issues by painting a picture of a multigenerational microcosm of society in post-communist Romania and its moral crisis. These two sections were anticipated and interspersed with an analysis of the camerawork, whose movement and peculiarities are crucial to the creation of intimacy. The section on Puiu's understanding of observational cinema examined the way he uses observational techniques to express his view on cinema's role and to create a spectator who is active, empathetic and who recognizes themselves in the characters and stories presented without being invited to identify with them. The core idea of the analysis highlights that observation, even if it does not automatically lead to understanding, can lead to a form of empathy that comes from recognizing oneself and one's peers in the individualities presented, their foibles, their points of view, and, most importantly, in their collective history -- a form of cultural intimacy that Puiu's film creates.



### Chapter Three: Living Through Proxy – the Secondary Public Space in Cristian Mungiu’s *Graduation* (2016)

*I’m not only a director; for me the story is essential and the way I choose to tell it matters the most.*<sup>36</sup>  
Cristian Mungiu

Halfway through the film, Romeo Aldea (Adrian Titieni) tells his London-bound teenage daughter: “When you’re there in Kensington Gardens with all those squirrels chasing you, the world here will seem so far away, you’ll wonder if it was real”. Leaving Romania is the only way the eighteen-year-old Eliza (Maria Draguș) can shelter herself from a life of scheming and corruption, Romeo believes, and he does everything in his power to make this happen. The implications of a life of moral compromise for the middle-aged generation in contemporary Romania and the contradictions involved in the way this generation educates their children guide the film *Graduation*, which, like Cristi Puiu’s *Sieranevada*, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, and brought Mungiu the Best Director Award.

Cristian Mungiu’s fourth feature brings a shift of focus, from his engagement with youngsters at the start of their career and their unacknowledged dramas – *Occident* (2002), *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007) and *Beyond the Hills* (2012)—to the story of a respectable middle-aged doctor and his parental quandary. Romeo and Magda’s daughter is a stellar student who has won a scholarship at Cambridge, UK, conditional on high grades at her high school graduation exams. The day before the examinations, she falls victim to an attempted sexual assault on her way to school. She is physically injured — she gets a cast on her right arm— and psychologically shaken. Romeo, a well-connected surgeon, insists that she take the exams despite her trauma and, after her first exam does not go as expected, he starts trading influence to ensure that she will get

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<sup>36</sup> *The New Wave in Romanian Cinema*, Mihai Fulger, p. 82

a good score and not lose the chance to go to England. His main goal is to make sure that, despite her hesitations, Eliza leaves the dismal Romanian reality behind.

If in Puiu's *Sieranevada* cultural intimacy appears in its private manifestations —the back and forth of the relatives, the space of the apartment as a repository of communist memory and the domestic favors rendered by the neighbors— in Mungiu's *Graduation* it is the public manifestations of intimacy that take center-stage. The personal is imbricated in the political (Romeo's personal request sets in motion an entire system of quid pro quo and backroom dealings) and there is no escape from being tainted by the system of trading favors and endemic corruption. In this chapter, I argue that the negotiation of the official normative codes that gives rise to Romeo's drama shows the transgressive rituals that define a secondary public space of intimacy in Romania. By secondary public space, I understand the space created by illegally trading services and goods by people especially in the materially deprived eighties in Romania. The dramatization of this practice represents the manifestation of cultural intimacy in Mungiu's film.

### **Opening scene – a pit, a stone and the grey apartment buildings**

Like in Puiu's *Sieranevada*, the first scene sets the tone of the film and anticipates the main themes. The first three shots that I will briefly describe are altogether no longer than two minutes and a half.

The shot that opens the film, close to half a minute, functions as an establishing shot and displays a narrow street surrounded by several greyish Communist apartment buildings in a derelict state. It is a wide shot that shows in the foreground, on the right, someone digging a hole with a shovel; the pit is large enough to cover its maker completely (Figure 13). The sound of birds chirping and children's voices in the background is accompanied by the thumping noise of earth

hitting the pavement rhythmically. The story is set in a small town in the west of the country (Victoria).



Figure 13: Communist apartment buildings and a burrow in their midst

This shot is reminiscent of what is by now a well-known characteristic of post-communist Romanian cinema: *miserabilism* (Stojanova, “Introduction” 6; Pop, *Romanian New Wave* 57-61), suggested especially through the image of the (in)famous apartment buildings that have become a house brand not only of the Romanian films after ‘89, but of urban life in Eastern Europe in general. This image has been used as a metaphor of the Communist uniformization of the masses in the countries from the Eastern European area. The crammed blocks of flats were built throughout the Communist age with a state-functionality in mind — i.e. to house as many people as possible in a small space — with no consideration for aesthetics or the personal comfort of their inhabitants. This reality is still very much alive in post-communism, an age that has inherited all the sorrows of the past and has come with very few viable ideas to redress them. The society emerging in the aftermath of Communism is in a continuous negotiation with very resilient past realities. The oscillation between East and West, the communist past and the post-communist present and the complex and contradictory reality it creates is a central idea of Mungiu’s film. This state of in-betweenness that characterizes Romanian society in the present “allows glimpses into an instable

and densely layered world experienced.” (Pethő 18)

The next shot switches the focus from a public manifestation of intimacy to a private one, a living room where we can see an extended couch with a pillow and a neatly folded sheet on top — someone has been sleeping there—, a few pieces of furniture, some books, and many picture frames hanging on the walls (Figure 14). It looks like the living room of a respectable family with claims to status, but with a rather modest standing, judging by the stylish but dated furniture, and by the faded wall paint. The monotonous hum of a radio that can vaguely be distinguished in the background is disrupted by the loud noise of a rock that suddenly hits the glass pane. A middle aged man hurries toothbrush in hand, to the living room.



*Figure 14: A stone breaks the window in Romeo's apartment*

The third shot follows the man downstairs and into the street, as he frantically looks left and right trying to spot the perpetrator. He crosses the street to a railway where he thinks he has caught a glimpse of someone but, just then, a train is passing and he loses sight of what is ahead. To the sound of chirrups and children playing, the vroom of a motorcycle rushing by is added, on top of

bicycle horns, dogs barking, the train whistle and the clanking of the train wheels. From the very beginning, the cacophony of sounds is anxiety-inducing, a mood highlighted by Romeo's fretful breathing, as he chases the unknown source of danger (Figure 15). This last shot also establishes the filming technique present throughout *Graduation*, the over the shoulder shot similar to the thriller camera angle, a few steps behind, mostly in medium or close-up shots, a technique which adds to the feeling of danger and foreboding prevalent in the film. Romeo will be looking for various potential aggressors, without being able to find them. He behaves as if he knew what he wanted to do, but the path ahead always seems obstructed or difficult of access, like in this scene, when the train blocks his view of the possible perpetrator; he seems to lack the ability to see what lies ahead, as the incidents that follow will reveal.



Figure 15: Close up and medium shot of Romeo from behind, establishing the filming technique

These angles and mobile way of filming also set a tone of fretfulness and anxiety, while creating a feeling of “detached empathy” (Strausz 234) in the viewer – a technique that brings to mind the films of the Dardenne brothers –who have co-produced this film—and that has become a characteristic of Mungiu’s style. He used it first, with the same anxiety-inducing effect, in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and Two Days* in the famous scene when Otilia roams the streets at night trying to get rid of the aborted fetus. Tudor Vladimir Panduru – who replaces Mungiu’s usual director of photography Oleg Mutu – achieves this state of detached empathy by not using the point-of-view shot and placing the camera at a slight distance behind Romeo. This way, the viewers “contemplate

his dilemma by avoiding identification and emotionalization, and focus instead on the presented topic of corruptibility.” (Strausz 235)

As with *432* and *Beyond the Hills*, every scene in *Graduation* is shot in a single take. This is partly why Mungiu refuses to work with amateur actors and casts only professionals: after the twentieth take, the amateur leaves, he says. (Fagerholm) The dialogue is very polished to appear natural, but there is no improvisation; it “quotes realism” as Mungiu explains. (Mungiu, *Special Features*) Subordinated to the idea of quoting realism, time is not spectacular or condensed: it has its dead moments (pauses, small reactions, etc.), that the director chooses to show, as in real life, where not every moment unfolds with a sense of urgency.

### **Moral Dilemma**

“*Here*” vs. “*there*”

Romeo and Magda (Lia Bugnar) returned to Romania –we’re not told from where—in 1991, after Ceaușescu’s regime fell. “We thought things would change and we would move mountains”, Romeo tells his daughter. He also warns her that she mustn’t repeat the same mistake, that of staying in Romania — “Because if you do, it means we would have lived for nothing.” In the old-time Romanian idiom of parents making a case of their sacrifices for their children, Romeo lets Eliza know, albeit in a benign manner, that part of the responsibility for his happiness as a father living vicariously is now on her shoulders.

The different future that Romeo wants to provide for his daughter is by necessity linked to a different place: Western Europe. There is a stark difference between the East and the West, or “here” and “there”, in Romeo’s mind. Here, everything is difficult and it is achieved with strife. There, if you are good at what you do, you do not need connections to get by. Here, we struggle for survival. There, squirrels will chase you, and you will wonder if this world here was real. When

he is driving Eliza to school or going to the hospital, we can hear arias from Purcell and fragments from Vivaldi, which are set against the grim visual background of the dark-grey buildings and the desolate streets of the provincial town. Mungiu places the camera next to Eliza on the back seat to record the stagnant realities of a small town where the public spaces are left to crumble. The classical music from this enclosed personal space juxtaposed to the realistic clatter and ambient noise of the everyday delineate Romeo's idealization of the West and his desire to distance himself from the decaying surroundings. His car represents a cocoon of the Western world, an oasis of freedom, and, by contrast, the outside – a prison, from which one needs to get away in order to live with dignity: “The only thing that matters is to escape and get to live in a normal world.” Romeo's view of the East and West is strongly dichotomic; it brings forth a schematic understanding of the West and a stereotypical approach of the differences between the Eastern and the Western cultures. This is significant inasmuch as it makes him an everyman, whose flaws, dreams and desires are easy to empathize with. The West is unequivocally better – there is no dilemma on this issue for Romeo. How can he get Eliza to go West without exposing her to moral compromise? This is where the dilemma lies for him. Most of the scenes in the film highlight different aspects of Romeo's inner torment and moral dilemma, however two scenes are particularly significant to show the implications of his predicament: the conversation between Romeo and Eliza in the latter's bedroom and the scene of the police line-up.

*“We need to fight using their weapons”*

The conversation in which Romeo asks Eliza to cheat in the exam makes for one of the most emotion-filled moments in the film. The two-shot close-up frame from Eliza's bedroom shows Romeo and Eliza as both opponents and allies covered in the soft warm light of a bedroom

lamp. Romeo sits on the bed close to Eliza, speaking in a low voice, that reveals closeness and secrecy (Figure 16). His plea links corruption to necessity, and necessity —leaving the country for a better future— to a form of filial obligation. “We live here and sometimes we need to fight using their weapons. There is no other way”, he explains. Romeo thus justifies the cheat and also provides Eliza with an eloquent assessment of the reality she must leave behind. The sound of rain falling rhythmically against the window pane highlights the implacability of the reality he describes.



*Figure 16: Romeo talking to Eliza in her bedroom*

There is a sense of self-righteousness about Romeo in the way he schemes for things to go the right way – his way. He ignores Eliza’s softly spoken reticence regarding her departure from Romania: she has friends that she will lose (“You’ll make others!”); she has a boyfriend (yes, but his low-achiever potential doesn’t make him a loss). He ignores his wife’s beliefs as well, as she opposes the scheming involved in getting Eliza good grades. In everything, he seems to know better. But in this scene when he describes the Kensington Gardens reverie, his soft voice and his



half-laughter point to an implied admission that his drama is not only about having had to live in a crooked society, but also about having to live with the awareness, and the associated guilt, that he had made the wrong decision. A sense of powerlessness and a desperate desire to right the wrongs of his past are both packed in this confession dressed as an invitation to dream of a carefree world. In the same softly-spoken tone, he then urges Eliza to cheat and resort to the old-time tricks of the world she should repudiate. Romeo becomes thus also the one who initiates Eliza in the practice of corruption, not just the one trying to save her or to deliver her from future suffering.

### *Ally and tormentor*

In the shot of the line-up organized at the police station, we see the faces of four potential suspects; in the right corner, at the end of the line, Romeo's reflection is visible in the window that separates the suspects from Eliza. Her face is completely turned away from us, as she looks at the men behind the glass, and we can see the four suspects in line with her father (Figure 17). He is both beside her, comforting her, and opposite her, through his reflection, which, for a few seconds, aligns him with the potential perpetrators of trauma.



*Figure 17: Romeo's reflection in line with the suspects*

This setting suggests Romeo's place in relation to Eliza, a position which shows a very delicate balance, oscillating between ally and tormentor. Ioana Uricaru identifies this dual position as characteristic of the aesthetics of minimalism in the New Romanian Cinema. Minimalism --“the excision and avoidance of excess in aesthetic form as in narrative modality and in character development”—becomes a way of recuperating the complexity of reality and its ambiguous nature obfuscated by the good vs. evil dynamic of the melodrama (Uricaru 60). Romanian minimalism “explores the limits of narrativisation, the territory where the tormentor is also your only ally, where the daily grind precludes heroic gestures and transformations, where morality is not legible but has to be fished out from murky waters that inevitably soil you.” (Uricaru 62) Romeo's drama comes from his dual position, that of savior and oppressor at the same time, and from this liminal space in which he steps, where redemption also entails a downfall, both for him and for Eliza.

### *In-betweenness and ambiguity*

Things are not clear-cut or black and white, and truth is hardly knowable. The New Romanian Cinema –and Mungiu’s and Puiu’s cinema in particular, although in very different fashions—emphasizes the ambiguity present in everyday actions and interactions as well as in the motivations of the characters. *Graduation* lays bare before us different lives and viewpoints and it shows how difficult it is to judge or to get to the bottom of things. Even if we are always confronted with Romeo’s subjective perspective, we are still aware of the world around and apart from him. The story itself deals with control and its limits through a series of acts of aggression and scenes which remain unsolved and whose interpretation is up to the viewer. It opens with a gesture of violence: a stone breaks the window of Romeo’s apartment. Minutes later, Romeo hits a dog with his car, while driving his daughter to school and he sees the injured dog taking to the woods by the side of the road. That night, he roams the woods in a state of despair. The incident is not brought up again. Later, someone tampers with his windshield wipers and later still, one of his car windows is shattered. No perpetrator is ever found. We can find explanations for these mysterious incidents in the economy of the film, but they remain unaccounted for, open to the viewer’s speculation, true to life and eventually pointing to the illegibility of reality.

The state of in-betweenness is suggested by the title of the film as well, which points to an interstitial realm and a change of status. In Romanian, the title is “Bacalaureat” and it refers to the diploma one gets for graduating from high-school. Getting very high grades in this exam is almost like a class marker, because it often separates the upper-middle class students from the rest. It’s a passport to the future, but in this case it’s a passport that gets Eliza from innocence to experience.

## **The secondary public space of intimacy**

The episode of the favor trading around which the film's plot revolves points to deeper issues connected to the social fabric of communist Romania that have been perpetuated in post-communism. I will discuss two different kinds of public spaces which I call primary and secondary, to explain what I consider an essential idea of *Graduation*.

During Communism, the official social space required individuals to assert their compliance and allegiance to the dominant political ideology. I will refer to this space as the primary public space, a realm where the homogenization agenda of the Party was strongly enforced. Instead of accommodating the individuals' needs, the state required the individuals to adjust to the prescribed behavioral norms. Discussing how homogenization worked in totalitarian regimes, Gail Kligman explains that "by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of private domains of interaction, the state extend[ed] its tentacles of control into the bodies and minds of its citizens" working to make their lives uniform and suppress dissent. (Kligman 34) The state's intrusion in the private lives of the people with the purpose of controlling and regulating them created a schizoid self, disconnected from its thoughts and emotions.

A secondary space took shape as a reaction, a space in which pockets of solidarity and resistance could manifest through transgressive practices by which people could reconnect with their thoughts and feelings and with each other in a meaningful way. This secondary space was public inasmuch as it was collective and allowed for informal proximal transactions. I draw on Alex Cistelean's essay "Popularoid. The Golden Age of Collective Memories" to explain the existence of this secondary public space that was born during the communist era and to examine its implications. Cistelean argues that "the most unexpected products of totalitarian regimes are a rich series of gestures, practices and affections related to the sphere of a secondary, intimate

public space” (195); these gestures and practices represented the emotional presence of society in conditions of totalitarianism, from the subculture of jokes and intra-community solidarity to service trading and collegial complicity.

The trading of goods and services was illustrated with a comical tinge in the omnibus film *Tales from the Golden Age. Romanian Urban Myths of the 80s*<sup>37</sup> written and produced by Mungiu and shown at Cannes in 2009. Mungiu regular Vlad Ivanov, who plays the chief of police in *Graduation*, plays the protagonist in the last story of this film (*The Legend of the Chicken Driver*), a story that takes place in a period of extreme economic shortage in Romania and political oppression – the nineteen-eighties<sup>38</sup>. The backbone of the story is the barter economy that flourished during the eighties, an economy in which people would trade the goods they had access to in their line of work. As the caption at end of the story indicates, people survived in the eighties by pilfering the products they could get hold of and commercializing them as best they could -- in this urban legend the star products are eggs from a chicken factory, peddled by the driver. An entire underground economy was born in these exchanges and it included both favor trading and products that were sometimes smuggled — from coffee, cigarettes, whiskey and oranges to the most basic Western products such as stockings or deodorant that, when acquired, gave their owner a most coveted whiff of capitalism and its decadence. These utilitarian interactions created the space for an informal resistance to power through people’s refusal to be disciplined.

*Graduation* shows how this secondary space still survives in post-communist times. In

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<sup>37</sup> The six stories presented in the film were directed by Hanno Höfer, Răzvan Mărculescu, Cristian Mungiu, Constantin Popescu and Ioana Uricaru.

<sup>38</sup> The 1980s was a period of utmost penury for the population in all aspects of everyday life, from food, to electricity and heating, as Ceaușescu wanted to pay off the entire amount of the external debt of the country (around 10 billion dollars) to ensure Romania’s complete independence from other nations. (Boia, 184). See also the account given by Katherine Verdery on the 1980s in Romania: “limited food supplies; cold apartments; days sent home from work without pay, for lack of production materials; limited electricity and gas for cooking, reading, socializing, or watching TV; anxiety about secret police surveillance. (3)

what follows, I will take a closer look at how the favor trading process is set in motion in Mungiu's film by analyzing the way the initial request for help is worded; this will shed light on the implicit practices and biases that help clarify the implications of the secondary public space. When, from his office, the chief of police, Romeo's long-time friend, starts the chain of backroom deals and phones Bulai, the deputy-mayor, he frames his request in terms of helping someone in difficulty: "My colleague, doctor Aldea, has run into some trouble. Can you help him?" Three words are particularly important in the police chief's request.

Firstly, the word "colleague". Romeo and him are obviously not co-workers. Perhaps they used to be colleagues at school but since then, a long friendship has brought them together and "friend" would be more appropriate to describe their relationship as adults. His word choice is intriguing, as it points to a past practice when work relations were crucial to shape a public space in which "people share[d] the same conditions of submission and resistance both in relation to the immediate individual needs and to the state apparatus." (Cistelean 205) The use of the appellation "colleague" was widespread in the communist era as it was suggestive of a life of equals, lived under the same conditions – similar to "comrade". It also carried an affective charge that had to do with everyday complicities; the exchange of goods and services was a way of getting by that bound people together—even if for utilitarian means—which developed "as a form of passive resistance to the intrusion of the official norms in the private lives of individuals." (Cistelean 206) This space was secondary because it was unofficial and hidden, and public because it developed within the sphere of work relations, therefore in a public milieu.

Secondly, foregrounding Romeo's title—"doctor"—is a safe way of suggesting that the service Bulai would render will be properly rewarded, since the doctor will be able to speed up Bulai's liver transplant surgery. Job titles were essential in communist times, as they showed the

different ways in which people could become useful to each other.

The third word is “trouble”. The entire chain of transgressive solidarity was set in motion because of the “trouble” that people ran into. It is a reminder of a life of hardship and precariousness in which individuals helped each other because of the various shortcomings in their everyday life and against the state. In an interview for *Sight & Sound* with Nick James, Mungiu said about his generation: “We were raised to survive, because when we were growing up it was all about survival and, in order to survive, anything went.” (47) To get out of trouble or withstand a life of oppression, any means were considered acceptable. Petty corruption was a justifiable reality. A consequence of this is that people considered themselves basically honest since, no matter the schemes they resorted to, they were eventually legitimated by the struggle for survival. This explains Romeo’s view of himself as an honest man, despite his complicity in the system of corruption and his having a mistress — a former patient. Romeo’s particular situation makes a compelling argument for Romanian society at large where the distinction between honest/dishonest has been compromised by decades of totalitarianism.

### **Cultural Intimacy**

Shortly after the launch of *Tales from the Golden Age* in 2009, a popular entertainment guide in Romania, *Șapte seri* (Seven evenings), published a short review on the film with the title: “Comrades, life is beautiful!” The title is taken from that of a communist song that runs with the film’s end credits and also serves as the subtitle for the first part of the omnibus (the six stories that make the film are split in two parts). The author, Iulia David, claims that the mixture of comic and nostalgic in the tone of the film is either proof of a sufficient distance from the past to allow for laughter on the idiosyncrasies and shortcomings of the communist era, or “maybe it’s an

opportunity (one of the few) *to be together again* as in the old times.” (my translation and emphasis)

What does “being together again as in the old times” mean in light of the film’s accomplishment? From the perspective of cultural intimacy, it brings to life this secondary public space in which collegiality and complicity became ways of circumventing a system of surveillance and control in a time when work relations were often times invested with an intimacy usually reserved to the private sphere. It is no wonder therefore that the favor-counter-favor dynamic is perpetuated in private. In *Graduation*, Sandra (Mălina Manovici), Romeo’s mistress, who is an English teacher, helps him get inside the school on the exam day, so that he can speak with the principal; in a later scene, Sandra reminds Romeo reproachfully of his promise to find a speech therapist for her son. The secondary public space extends its reach beyond the work relations and contaminates the private sphere in a way reminiscent of the influence peddling from the past.

Around the time *Tales from the Golden Age* was launched, in 2009, Romanian Twitter users initiated a thread whose hashtag translates exactly as the title of the film (#amintiridinepocadeaur) where hundreds of users recount various stories from their youth or post pictures of objects commonly used in the communist era (toys, trinkets, food items, etc.).<sup>39</sup> Twelve years later, this thread is still active, as many users keep posting their memories of childhood or youth associated with the 80s era. From the perspective of the all too chaotic present, Communism is considered in these tweets as the childhood of the community, a lost oasis of authentic collectivity. Some speak of the time when they stood in line to buy milk, before the break of dawn, and told each other stories at lantern light, oblivious now to the way these realities were felt during those times and to their own experiences of oppression<sup>40</sup>. Others post clips or screenshots from *Tales from the Golden*

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<sup>39</sup> <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23amintiridinepocadeaur>

<sup>40</sup> A similar reaction is described by Svetlana Boym in the post-Soviet population of the nineteen-nineties, whose



*Age*, which bring to life memories of everyday games, practices and unwritten rules of behavior from the communist past. These associations and memories contribute to the creation of an intimacy based on a common social context with which the viewers can relate.

Whether the film generated an online communal nostalgia for the old days of Communism or it merely spurred it, what comes out as noteworthy is the longing for “being together again as in the old times” (David) despite the darkness –literally and figuratively--, the penury and the oppression. This collective longing is the manifestation of cultural intimacy and it has succeeded in coagulating an affective community; the shameful and painful realities brought to life, both in *Graduation* and in *Tales from the Golden Age* bring people together in a common recognition and in the acknowledgement of a life lived together under duress, a life they can now contemplate with a curious mixture of nostalgia and laughter (*Tales*) or nostalgia and ruefulness (*Graduation*). Mungiu reworks this idea in a more somber approach in *Graduation*, by showing how the tendencies and social practices from the communist past are still active in the present and exploits this cultural recognition that represents intimacy for the viewers among themselves and with the film.

### **Music and Nostalgia**

Mungiu uses two Romanian songs for the end credits: “Ani de liceu” (High school years), a hit from the communist era, and “Anii de școală” (The school years), a *manea* from the post-communist period. The first is also used as part of the diegetic music in the last scene of the film, which shows Eliza’s graduation ceremony and blends into the end credits. A brief examination of

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nostalgia for the Brezhnev era was spurred by old Soviet movies that were shown on TV. Boym links this nostalgia with the disillusionment of the nineties post-soviet decade and notes that viewers “began to believe that Soviet life resembled those movies, forgetting their experiences as well as their ways of watching those films twenty years earlier, with much more skepticism and double entendre.” (61)

both songs will help to better explain the message of the film in terms of the cultural intimacy that it builds with the viewers.

### *“Ani de liceu”*

Composed by Florin Bogardo, “Ani de liceu” is the soundtrack for the most beloved teen movie during communist Romania — *Liceenii* (The High-Schoolers) made in 1986. Asked about the song, Mungiu framed his choice in the paradigm of realism, as “Ani de liceu” is the song usually played in Romanian high schools for the graduation ceremony: “It’s regular to play this and to have the flag and everything else. So I thought that as long as this is regular I would use it, because it’s part of this ceremony and it brings a lot of nostalgia for people my age as well.” (Rizov 75) As an end-credits song, it engages the affective memory of the Romanian spectators from Mungiu’s generation, those who lived during the communist times and were of the same age as the heroes from *Liceenii* when the film was released. However, beyond the requirements of realistic aesthetics, using “Ani de liceu” both diegetically and for the end credits is a deliberate choice, one through which Mungiu enters a dialogue with the audience and elicits certain emotion. From this perspective, I am asking two questions in looking at *Liceenii* and *Graduation*: First, how can we explain this choice of end credits music in a minimalistic film which, like Puiu’s *Sieranevada*, has no non-diegetic music and shows no sentimentality? Secondly, what does the relation between *Graduation* and *Liceenii* contribute to the message of the former in terms of the “nostalgia” that Mungiu mentions? To answer, let us take a look at the film that “Ani de liceu” references.

*Liceenii* is the 25<sup>th</sup> most viewed Romanian film of all times, according to a ranking published in *Jurnalul* magazine in 2006 by the Romanian Filmmakers’ Union,<sup>41</sup> with 5.521.128 local viewers

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<sup>41</sup> <https://jurnalul.ro/stiri/observator/top-nea-marin-miliardar-cel-mai-vizionat-film-7458.html>

(for a quick comparison: the most prominent film of the New Romanian Cinema, Mungiu's Palme d'Or winner *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* gathered under 80.000 local viewers).<sup>42</sup> The film is a teenage love story, part of a series of five teen movies, all scripted by George Șovu and directed (with the exception of the last one) by Nicolae Corjoi. The first three were released between 1985 and 1988,<sup>43</sup> and were the most popular of the series. On the contrary, the two released in the first years of post-communism (*Liceenii Rock'nRoll* (1991) and *Liceenii în alertă* (Mircea Plângău, 1993)) proved big flops on the market and serve as good counterpoints for a brief analysis of *Liceenii*.

Alex Cistelean explains *Liceenii*'s popularity mainly by the fact that it managed to construct a plausible narrative to which the viewers could relate (198). The hero is a boy from a working class family who finally manages to find his way to the heart of the heroine against a rival from a family of bourgeois intellectuals who enjoyed a life of privilege with heavily questionable merit. The film was thus the natural compromise between the plot requirements of the teen love story and the requirements of communist censorship and morality, which necessarily included a class conflict. The drama of teenage quandaries is carried on in the other two instalments, which "flooded the cinemas with tears when they were released" (Cistelean 198). The affective charge and intimacy from the first three instalments can no longer be found in the two pictures released after 1989 though, even if the code of the communist propaganda and its moralizations ceased being the mandatory guidelines. The newly acquired political and artistic freedom of the nineties did not come with the craft to replace the old intimacy gained during communism with a new one; it merely replaced it with an overall loosening of morals in the protagonists, a loosening which was supposed to celebrate freedom but ended up describing a society of mayhem and confusion, a

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<sup>42</sup> Catalin Olaru, *Al doilea val*, 252.

<sup>43</sup> *Declaratie de dragoste* (1985), *Liceenii* (1986) and *Extemporal la dirigenție* (1988).

characteristic shared by most Romanian films in the very first years of transition to a neoliberal order. There was no tension that could bind viewers together or make them relate to the narrative on screen.

Both *Liceenii* and its two post-communist sequels have a considerable degree of artificiality, but their sources and effects are different, as Cistelean explains. During the communist era, artificiality was the result of the mandatory compromise between the artistic conventions and the political strictures. This actually created a complicity between the film/director and the audience, since these films were watched with the clear awareness that not everything one saw was true; despite this, the films made in that period were still able to render a picture of the social realities of the time (Cistelean 200). The lack of verisimilitude from the post-communist instalments in the *Liceenii* series comes from a mere clumsy copying of the cliches of Hollywood teen movies without a real ability to paint a social picture of the era, or to represent socially the collective experience of an age that was not yet legible.

More than two decades after the first post-communist films, *Graduation*, alongside many other films of the New Romanian Cinema, succeeds in painting a social picture that people can recognize as part of their everyday reality; it also succeeds in creating a sense of connivance with the viewers, and it does so by appealing to their sense of belonging to a bygone era — the communist age, but also the age of youth. This nostalgic glance back that it invites is part of the cultural intimacy that the film achieves with the Romanian spectator.

*Why do we feel nostalgia and for what?*

In discussing the emotion triggered by the end credits' music, I am adopting Svetlana Boym's view on nostalgia as a historical emotion and not an individual feeling of melancholy. Exploring the rise of nostalgia in recent years, Boym argues that nostalgia is a "historical emotion" typical of modernity — "a symptom of our age" (Boym vxi). The era of the birth of nations comes with a new, secular legitimation of communities. The world is no longer imagined based on divine grounds and the community is no longer congealed around an oral culture; both are imagined, to use Benedict Andersen's formulation, based on the idea of progress and print capitalism. Nostalgia comes thus as the byproduct of the new world order, a longing for a time and space of experience that is no longer congruent with the new social requirements. As Boym argues, it becomes a defense mechanism through the desire to go back to a simpler time, which is equated with the time of innocence or the childhood of society (xv). Nostalgia as a historical emotion appears thus especially in times of upheavals as "an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world." (Boym vix)

The Twitter thread initiated following the launch of *Tales from the Golden Age*, in which people recall their experience during the Ceaușescu era, and communism is regarded as the age of innocence, is an instantiation of nostalgia as a historical emotion triggered by collective memory. Similarly, in *Graduation* the nostalgia triggered by "Ani de liceu" comes very close to cultural intimacy; there is a longing for a lost collective intimacy that was born out of the clash with a repressive political system. The collective affective memory and the unwritten rules of behavior describe the sphere of cultural intimacy that the film activates. In a way, this nostalgia is a revolt against the acceleration of time and a yearning to return to a time of childhood and youth.

“Anii de școală” and “manele”

“Ani de liceu” is followed in the end credits stream by a *manea* composed by Dovleac Florin & Cotoi Ion and performed by Frații Pește. *Manea* (pl. *manele*) is a pop music genre—a fusion of Balkan musical forms and elements of Ottoman music—mostly created by the Romani minority in Romania, which became very popular in the last three decades with several categories of people: the working-class youth, the poor and underprivileged, but also with members of the underworld, the *nouveau riches* that had emerged after 1989 in Romania (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 1-4). The *manele* genre consists mainly of syncretic merging of music, text and dance and it is usually performed at parties. Anca Giurchescu & Speranța Rădulescu in their descriptive analysis of *manele* offer an eloquent summary of the message and the connotations associated with this musical genre: “Through an ambiguous discourse that *maneliști* [the *manele* singers/composers] construct with all of the expressive resources available to them, they attract several categories of patrons, including wealthy individuals, whose successes in life (measured by money, power, and prestige) they extol, and impoverished youth, in whom they instill the hope that an ostentatious way of life is within reach.”<sup>44</sup> (“Music, Dance Performance”)

Because of all these implications, *manele* music is generally looked down upon by middle class intellectuals who regard it as vulgar. The word “manelization” has been coined as part of their discourse and used by politicians, men of culture and journalists as a way of characterizing the transformation of society in post-communism and labelling it disparagingly. Manelization of society refers to its transformation into a society lacking formal education and defined by “swearing, antisocial behaviour, lack of class adequacy, [and] dilettantism.” (Breazu & Lucacs)

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<sup>44</sup> I am using two different sources for Giurchescu and Rădulescu’s chapter: the first is the published hardcopy of the book, and the second is a website which gives a condensed version of the book by chapters and which I cited in-text as “Music, Dance Performance” (<http://manele-in-romania.ro/ch1.php>)

The *manele* music was spread as a result of the musical democratization after 1989. Given the Oriental origins of the manele music, the worry about the manelization of Romania in post-communism also echoes the politicians' and intellectuals' fear about the country becoming again too Eastern, too Oriental, when concerted efforts have been made to head it in the opposite direction.

If we are to make a quick comparison between the two songs that Mungiu chose, "Ani de liceu" is a song about the beauty and innocence of teenage years and their ephemerality. It celebrates the uniqueness of adolescence, its ups and downs and ideals in a rather naive way. "Anii de școală" on the other hand is a *manea* about saying goodbye to the school years in the excessively sentimental tone of the genre. It refers to a pre-1989 time ("we had uniforms / we were happy") and laments the bygone time of youth. Mungiu undermines his nostalgic impulse with the overly sappy song that follows it, deriding nostalgia in the first place. While the first song brings the viewers together in a collective memory of youth and growing up in communist times, the second brings this nostalgic drive into question by speaking of a shared intimacy that it fails to achieve. The juxtaposition of these two songs with very different associations is the manifestation of *reflective nostalgia*. According to Boym, reflective nostalgia "reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection." (Boym 49) It underscores the ambivalences of the nostalgic impulse, of the longing and belonging, in a self-aware discourse that turns into a critique of the present<sup>45</sup>. What comes out is a nostalgic narrative that is "ironic, inconclusive and

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<sup>45</sup> Mungiu uses music with a similar effect in his first feature *Occident* (2002), when the end-credits song is a famous communist patriotic song: Noi, în anul 2000 / We, in the Year 2000, composed by Horia Moculescu in the 1970s. Conceived from the perspective of young children addressing their parents, it speaks of a bright and plentiful future that awaits them when they reach the year 2000: "We know that you're laying out the road for us,/Endless flowers and palaces,/For us to have plenty of gold and bread tomorrow/You are heroes,/But one day we'll be too." This last message of the film contrasts ironically with the tragic situation of children in orphanages and the utter decay and corruption of the transition period illustrated in the film.

fragmentary” (Boym 49). Implicitly, the juxtaposition of these two songs is a commentary that Mungiu passes on the state of things in present-day Romania. In a way, the two are contrapuntal, as they put the past in dialogue with the present. Making reference to *Liceenii*’s hit “Ani de liceu” is a way of falling back on a time of collective memories away from the present disappointments, but in a postmodern fashion, Mungiu derides his own sentimentality — together with that of the viewers themselves— and inserts “Anii de școală”, a *manea* sung by Pește brothers.

### Conclusion

The last shot of the film shows a group of high school graduates – a picture of Eliza’s class taken by Romeo (Figure 18). For the first time, the perspective changes, from a camera focused on Romeo and his actions to a gathering of young smiling faces, suggesting a future in which the father has no place.



Figure 18: Final photograph, before end credits



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The smiling faces are oblivious to his dilemma, unable to understand the anxieties of the father about the future and to share his “narratives of urgency and intervention” (Pârvulescu 546). They smile blissfully to a future that, from their vantage point, looks picture-perfect, or at least very different from what Romeo imagines.

In this chapter, I first analyzed the protagonist’s moral dilemma and his idealization of the West, which makes him a tormentor as much as an ally for his daughter. I discussed the favor trading process that he sets in motion and argued that this practice delineates a secondary public space of intimacy with roots in the unofficial service and goods trading practices during communist times that created a space of mutual help and intimacy between colleagues and coworkers. The recognition of these practices creates a cultural intimacy with the viewers. To support this argument, I also examined the implications of a Twitter thread that congealed a community of communist nostalgics and spurred cultural intimacy by reactivating collective memories from the communist eighties. Finally, I explored the implications of the two end-credit songs and argued that the first brings into focus a form of nostalgia as a historical emotion that speaks of a desire for continuity in a changing world, while the second is the embodiment of a reflective nostalgia by which Mungiu derides the first nostalgic impulse. In a postmodern discourse, Mungiu simultaneously displays and ridicules sentimentality, and this juxtaposition passes a commentary on the current state of things in Romania.

## Conclusion

### Cultural Intimacy

*Filmmakers use cinema as a tool, like scientist's instrument. They ask questions about human existence, human nature, and the world. The camera is an anthropological instrument. If it's not that, then it doesn't interest me.*<sup>46</sup>

Cristi Puiu

One of the questions I had before starting this thesis project was: How is it that films as different from each other as *Sieranevada* and *Graduation* trigger in me the same feeling of familiarity and belonging upon watching them? I kept recognizing myself or my close ones not only in the discussions and the way they were held, but also in the behavior, gestures and the more subtle expressions of the characters. I came to realize in the process of writing this thesis that between Puiu's "I'm not interested in the story" and Mungiu's "The story is essential" the New Romanian Cinema's repertoire of cultural intimacy has developed.

*Sieranevada* and *Graduation* chronicle a space of intimacy defined by family relations with various far-reaching ramifications. *Sieranevada* was conceived as part of a series of *Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest* from which Puiu's earlier *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* is the first. The preoccupation with showing the details of people's interactions, from family members among themselves, to neighbors and people in the street takes center-stage in *Sieranevada*, doubled by close attention to the physical space of familial intimacy in a story in which the camera becomes an anthropological instrument, in Puiu's words. By showing the idiosyncrasies of the characters and their vulnerabilities, the film activates a form of cultural intimacy for the audience, allowing them to recognize themselves, their peers and their collective history in the characters and their stories, and to engage with various forms of self-recognition. *Graduation* centers on how Romeo

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<sup>46</sup> "Cristi Puiu on Romania, its cinema, and his own work" (East European Film Bulletin, vol. 7/July, 2011)

mobilizes his collegial relations to solve a family problem and how the two –family and colleagues—come together to delineate a private sphere of intimacy. I referred to this private sphere as the secondary public space of intimacy, where solidarity relations are formed based on shared history and transgressive practices against state supervision —an underground barter economy that created the space for an informal resistance to communist authority through people’s refusal to be disciplined.

After more than four decades of communist cinema in which the family was generally the locus of soft conflicts between generations and a repository of traditional wisdom and morality, the films of the New Romanian Cinema bring forth an altogether different view. The typical Romanian postcommunist family whether working class or middle class —or upper-middle class, like in Călin Peter Netzer’s *Child’s Pose*— comes out as torn, belligerent and in crisis. As a microcosm of the nation and the nucleus of society, the family mirrors the national confusion, the instabilities and hurdles of the postcommunist transition. Hence, as Magda Mihăilescu points out, it is not so much the generational gap (i.e. the classical family disfunction) that is the relevant source of conflict in the films of the New Romanian Cinema, but rather “the rifts newly emerging in the personal interactions, the transposition of the dog-eat-dog relations from social life to the familial one, the not-at-all isolated dramas triggered by the phenomenon of migration abroad of one or even both parents in search of a better job, a better life, the crisis of legitimacy, the inconsistency of moral judgments, the narrowing down of the field of affects under the pressure of the values of an ostentatiously and chaotically pragmatic society.” (209) (my translation)

*Graduation* chronicles a way of surviving in a hostile world (“We need to fight using their weapons”) and the story weaves around the way Romeo tries to provide the means for his daughter to escape a world of no future. In *Sieranevada*, the conversation in the car between Lary and Laura

at the beginning of the film confirms this survival mentality, even when the two argue about a school celebration with Disney princesses. Puiu's film is in itself a transposition of the dog-eat-dog relations in the family sphere by taking its time to observe the social aggression that has contaminated intimacy as well. If in the communist cinema family conflicts were mainly swept under the rug, in the New Romanian Cinema they are shown plainly, emphatically, hitting the viewer in the stomach, to use director Radu Muntean's phrase, (Fulger, *New Wave* 109) with the force of their ineluctability. These outbursts of aggression prevalent in the films of the postcommunist transition mirror a social order in moral crisis, whose revelation on camera is a preoccupation of the New Romanian Cinema filmmakers. One of the main interests of filmmakers like Puiu, Mungiu, Porumboiu and Muntean in recording the everyday interactions with family members, neighbors and work colleagues is ultimately to expose how deeply moral corruption has permeated all levels of society. The existentialist take, the exploration of personal responsibility, authenticity and integrity, is often times accompanied by irony, in the tragicomic style characteristic of the NRC.

Both Mungiu and Puiu's films discussed in this thesis describe a neo-patriarchal society in crisis, in which traditional male-female roles still hold, while the masculine protagonists, Lary and Romeo, have a hard time upholding their authority as heads of the family. They fail as fathers and husbands, being inattentive to the desires of their daughters or unable to understand their needs, and unfaithful to their wives. They also lack a certain raw masculinity that is required to survive and protect their families. Both protagonists end up in a street fight at one point in the story, Lary with a neighbourhood hoodlum, and Romeo with his daughter's boyfriend, who insults him and violently tosses him aside when he tries to assert his fatherly authority. The two fathers are also the ones on whom the responsibility of heading the larger family falls, since neither of them have

fathers alive. They need to take care not only of their wives and children, but also of their mothers and take on the role of the patriarch. Lary assumes the mediator role when it comes to settling family conflicts, but by confessing his infidelity to his wife, he also rejects the privilege of the new family patriarch and the duplicity that comes with this status. Similarly, Romeo fails to persuade his daughter to do what he considers best for her, despite his efforts and compromises; in line with the NRC focus on personal responsibility in an absurdist world, he also fails to rescue his marriage and to guard himself from the various external aggression acts that he cannot make sense of. These repeated failures of the father portray “an ailing patriarchal society” situated “at a crossroads where the Word of the Father and his moral influence are suddenly contested”. (Filimon, “And Thy Word” 32) The contestation of the paternal authority figure, which can be seen in many films of the New Romanian Cinema—in some it even acquires vehement tonalities, for example in *At My Father’s Home* (Andrei Cohn, 2015) and *Child’s Pose* (Călin Peter Netzer, 2013)—has been associated by critics like Doru Pop with a rejection of the traumatic national past. Pop makes a connection between Ceaușescu, who referred to himself as the Father of the nation, and the presentation of paternal figures as abusive, absurd and pathetic in the films of the New Romanian Cinema (*Romanian New Wave* 123). By rejecting and contesting the authority of the father, the New Romanian Cinema also takes a stance and condemns the abuse perpetrated on the larger family of the nation by its leader and self-appointed father.

In the New Romanian Cinema’s ethical view, film helps preserve national memory; it is a “mediator of memory and empathy” (Adam & Mitroiu 10) establishing a connection with the audience through the act of recollection. In the last shot of Mungiu’s *432*, after the abortion is over and things fall back into place, Otilia tells Găbița that they are never to talk about what happened again. Then, she gazes at the camera in a moment that breaks the fourth wall of representation

taking the audience as witnesses of what is to remain in the past. What remains suppressed at the level of personal trauma, must be revealed at the level of collective remembrance through the cinematographic mediation. My analysis showed how the work of revelation at the level of collective remembrance helps create a cultural and affective bond in the audience that experienced the historical period the films reference. Re-experiencing the recent past through the mediation of cinema brings people together in various ways — nostalgic, resentful, even contented. What brought people together during the communist era was a feeling of resistance to the regime. That feeling was lost in the transition to democracy. In the decades following the 1989 Revolution, the intimacy generated by people's resistance to a common enemy has gradually been replaced with a new form of togetherness that derives from the bittersweet acknowledgement of unflattering national traits, an acknowledgement which creates an affective bond between people. The films of the New Romanian Cinema have eased and mediated the acknowledgement of this cultural bond and the form of togetherness that it fosters by presenting powerful stories about Romanians and their collective history.

In discussing how these films create cultural intimacy with the local audience, my analysis also highlighted the fact that films do not just reflect society and mentalities, but, as mentioned in the Introduction, they also contribute to shaping it. They take part in the creation of a social image, an imagined community, through their own stories and the “structure of fantasy” (Andreescu 50) that they help shape for the viewers. The structure of fantasy represents “the basic way in which society understands freedom, pleasure, social authority and its specific connection to “the other,” or the symbolic identity against which it contrasts itself as a nation”. (Andreescu 50) The examination of the ways in which *Sieranevada* and *Graduation* contribute to the activation of cultural intimacy for the audience has taken into account that films represent, as Ella Shohat

explains, a mediated version of a socioideological world that is itself already textualized and discursivized. (803) As such, they reflect society and the world around, but they also influence and mold its imaginary.

### **The New Romanian Cinema — Where To?**

Roughly a decade after the first film of the New Romanian Cinema (*Stuff and Dough*), a certain distantiation from its themes and style can be noticed, a “dispassionate disenchantment both with the past and with the present” (Mitchievici, “Nostalgia” 181). This is translated in a decreased interest in showing the injustices of the recent past, the hurdles of the prolonged postcommunist transition and the breakdown of state institutions. These are replaced either by a self-referentiality or intertextuality that enters a dialogue with the established norms of the New Romanian Cinema or, several years later, by an exploration of other topics than those related to the communist past or to some form of national and memorial relevance. Porumboiu’s *Police, Adjective* (2009) is one of the most well-known and relevant examples of films that make the transition to another phase in the New Romanian Cinema. Cristi, the protagonist of the film, is a policeman tasked with following a suspect and writing long reports detailing his actions. However, the detailed notes that we read about his stake-out bring no real information, hence observing the everyday life of individuals — which was the main goal of the New Romanian Cinema— is ridiculed or becomes meaningless. Andrei Gorzo remarks about *Police, Adjective* that “the accumulation of “real” time in which nothing much was happening took on the appearance of a joke, of a deadpan tease” and comes out as “an irreverent riff on some of Puiu’s concerns.” (“Realism”) Puiu’s own film, *Aurora* (2010), was itself “an act of criticism directed at the aesthetic formula derived by his followers from the *Lăzărescu* model.” (Gorzo, “Realism”). By creating a

film that was deliberately obscure as to the motivations of the protagonist and the relations between characters, Puiu made a statement against the practice of some of his fellow filmmakers to use an aesthetics borrowed from the observational documentary and apply it in a way that oversimplifies things for the viewer. *Aurora* becomes thus a plea against access to instant comprehension in cinema through the observational realism aesthetics. A few years later, Porumboiu's *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (2013) came out, a film that was strongly self-reflexive and metanarrative in its focus on the concerns related to filmmaking—for example, how to shoot a shower scene.

### **Beyond the New Romanian Cinema**

The number of films produced has increased in the last few years, as well as the number of viewers who watch Romanian films. If we look at the statistics before the pandemic, from 2018 for example, Stere Gulea's *The Moromete Family: On the Edge of Time*, a film that is a loose adaptation of a famous Romanian novel dealing with the communist period and a sequel to an earlier *The Moromete Family* (1987), had approximately 190.000 viewers compared to roughly 80.000 for Mungiu's *432* at the time it was launched. An easy comedy in English about teenage love, *Oh, Ramona!* (Cristina Jacob, 2019) had roughly 190.000 viewers as well, becoming the highest-grossing production at the Romanian box-office in 2019. A diversification of the cinema offer may be observed on at least two broad aspects: the topics, themes and genres, and the style and treatment of the cinematic matter. The films launched in the last several years no longer have an obsession with being observational testimonies to the communist past, or to the postcommunist present, and moral acts of national remembrance. Twenty-seven feature films were launched in 2018, bringing stylistic and thematic alternatives to the existentialist realism and grit of the New



Romanian Cinema.

*Topics, Themes, Genres*

One of the first aspects that are worth mentioning in terms of changes is that more women start making feature films; if the most famous films of the Romanian New Wave are made by male directors (Puiu, Mungiu, Porumboiu, Muntean), many of the films that came out in the last decade are made by women directors: Anca Damian (*A Very Unsettled Summer* 2013, *Perfectly Healthy*, 2017; *Moon Hotel Kabul*, 2018), Iura Luncașu (*Shut Up and Do It*, 2019), Iulia Rugină (*Love Building* 2013, *Another Love Building* 2014, *Breaking News* 2017), Ioana Uricaru (*Lemonade*, 2018), Adina Pintilie (*Touch Me Not*, 2018), Camelia Popa (*Pup-o, Mă!*, 2018) and deal with topics ranging from love and eroticism (*Love Building*, *A Very Unsettled Summer*), to the life of an immigrant woman in the US (*Lemonade*), to the fluid border between reality and fiction explored in a character's personal project about intimacy (*Touch Me Not*). *Touch Me Not* belongs to a certain tactile and corporeal cinema that foregrounds a type of sensorial sensibility not explored in Romanian cinema until this point. The diversification of topics is a major shift from the norms of the New Romanian Cinema, whether the films' directors are male or female. Personal stories take the place of the personal but generalizable stories that spoke of Romanians' idiosyncrasies and national traumas. Recently, several films that focus on LGBTQ+ topics were released and some of them manage to blend the personal with the social, such as *Soldiers. Story from Ferentari* (Ioana Mladenovici, 2017) and *Poppy Field* (Eugen Jebeleanu, 2020).

Directors that made films in the realistic paradigm, like Corneliu Porumboiu, Radu Jude and Florin Șerban, have shifted to new topics and formulae. Porumboiu's *Infinite Football* (2018) is a cross between documentary and essay about soccer, which focuses on the way in which a former Romanian soccer player redesigns the rules of the game. Porumboiu's more recent *The*

*Whistlers* (2019) is a crime drama conceived as a loose sequel to *Police, Adjective* (2009), a film in which the action takes place not only in the well-known dreary apartment buildings of Bucharest, but also in places from the Canary Islands, and is spiced with sex, mystery women, gangsters, kidnappings and twists of plot. Radu Jude's *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) is a critical examination of a sensitive historical moment from WWII — the Odessa massacre from 1941, when around 5000 local civilians (mostly Jewish) were killed by the Romanian army as retaliation for the blow-up of the Romanian army's headquarters from Odessa by the Soviet partisans. The film takes the shape of a metafiction which chronicles the making of an open-air theatre play. Cristi Puiu's latest film, *Manor House* (*Malmkrog*, 2020) launched in Romanian cinemas in September 2021, has nothing to do with the Romanian idiosyncrasies and sociohistorical concerns. The film is the adaptation of an essay-story written in 1900 by Vladimir Solovyov and, with the exception of two outdoor shots —the first of which is the establishing shot— takes place exclusively inside a 19<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic manor, where five characters engage in philosophical dialogues on war, morality and progress. The film is spoken mostly in French, with some German and Hungarian lines, and its leading actors are also French.

A mixture of New Romanian Cinema elements with loosely collected elements of popular cinema can be seen in many of the films made by directors whose names are not associated with the movement, like in Constantin Popescu's Jr. *Pororoca* (2017), a thriller with a moral allegory, in which Popescu reworks the structure of a classical kidnapping film using the New Romanian Cinema realistic style. In the last few years, many mainly commercial films have been made, due to the amplification of the marketing techniques that guide productions toward a certain popular taste (Pop, "Romanian Film", 22), from action thrillers, to love stories and comedies. For example, *U Get What U Kiss!* (Camelia Popa, 2018) is a comedy in which three lonely shepherds try to find

women who would be willing to marry them; *Charleston* (Andrei Cretulescu, 2017) is the story of a man who, in the wake of his wife's sudden death, starts bonding with her lover; *The Story of a Summer Lover* (Paul Negoescu, 2018), conceived as a tribute to Woody Allen, is about a university professor's flirtations and his discussions with his two best friends. What is most different in these films compared to the films of the New Romanian Cinema is that they do not attempt to explain how and why Romania and Romanians are different. They do not focus on the absurd of the everyday and are not "exotic, colorful and miserabilist in the Balkan fashion." (Mitchievici, "New Areas" 18) (my translation) Most of them focus on a well-defined story and absorb the viewer in the particulars of that story, without ambitions to national generalizations.

At the other end of the spectrum from the commercial cinema are the social awareness films. Radu Jude is the most well-known Romanian filmmaker who focuses on showing that Romania is not only a victim of history, but also an assailant. Before *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) mentioned above, Jude made *Aferim!* (2015), a film which deals with the exploitation and persecution of the Roma population in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania. His productions bring a certain ideologization of the film discourse, but at the same time they come with a fresh experimental style through the use of archive material (photographs, radio shows, etc.) and editing techniques that depart from the aesthetic of the long take of Jude's peer filmmakers. They focus on topics that have not been tackled before in cinema, leaving the viewer with a different kind of uncomfortable questions and dilemmas to ponder. Other films in this category, less experimental in style, are *Beside Me*, (Tedy Necula, 2018) — a story about the fire at the Collective night club in which 65 young people died and many more were gravely injured; the same topic is also the focus of the documentary *Collective* (Alexander Nanau, 2019), which was nominated at the 2021 Oscars for Best International Feature Film and Best Documentary Feature;

*Soldiers. Story from Ferentari* (Mladenovici, 2017) is a film about a homosexual relationship that develops in a marginal neighborhood of Bucharest, and *Poppy Field* (Jebeleanu, 2020) – a film about the drama of a closeted gay policeman.

Finally, many of the films made in recent years are not concerned with mapping sociologically and psychologically the Romanian space any longer, which is a natural reflection of the current changes in a society that has become not only more international, but also more fragmentary and eclectic. *Touch Me Not*, Adina Pintilie’s film that won the Golden Bear in 2018, for example, takes place in an unspecified European territory, the characters speak English with various accents and the main idea is accepting human sexuality and the diversity of human bodies, without anchoring this acceptance in a Romanian socio-cultural space. The story has nothing local, it does not focus on Romanian problems and shows very little to no national specificity. Meant for a transnational audience, it explores the fear of intimacy and the solitude of contemporary men and women. *Lemonade* (Uricaru, 2018) happens in the US and chronicles the sobering experience of a Romanian immigrant woman. Even some of the films whose action is set in Romania no longer pay attention to the particulars of the space and its imprint on the national psyche, like Ana Lungu’s *Self Portrait of a Dutiful Daughter* (2015) and *One and a Half Prince* (2018)) or Ivana Mladenovic’s *Ivana the Terrible*, all of them the reflections of micro-cultures. These films are based on a subjectivity which embraces and exhibits its own limits proposing self-fictions in which the protagonists are independent artists caught in their own world and fantasies.

The narratives and settings of these productions are increasingly de-localized and there is a clear shift toward stories that put forth generic human relations and “social identities that are part of a transnational form of capitalism”. (Pop, “Transnational Turn”, 238) Some of these films, like Cristina Iacob’s *#Selfie* (2014) or *Oh, Ramona!* (2019) , engage with a youth culture that has no

connections with the particulars of Romanian society and could be easily translated into any space and culture in the world. They reflect economic realities and human interactions that are decidedly different from those of twenty or even ten years ago, as well as the apparent changes in the viewers' social and media imaginary. Pop calls this new type of cinema a "transnational cinema" as it "allows the translatability of stories, scenes and spaces into other cultural contexts without the need for reinterpretation." (238) Transnational cinema "refuses the national while also resisting assimilation into a global, standardised representation." (Pop 238)

### *Style and Aesthetics*

New ways of making film that do not fall into the observational documentary aesthetic begin to emerge. They do not necessarily exploit the everyday or the daily news, and do not focus on showing the communist legacy when it comes to the apartment buildings and the space of the city. Many of the films that appeared in the last five years move away from the style and established norms of the New Romanian Cinema and from the "aesthetics of the sleeveless T-shirt and the chorba" (Mitchievici, "New Areas" 18) that is sipped in silence in the dismal kitchen. This brings a departure from an entire lackluster domestic universe circumscribed to the boundaries of bleak communist apartment buildings. The shots filmed with the camera placed in the car, in means of public transportation, or in the ambulance, making the perspective more dynamic have lost their newness quality. So have the street panoramas that offered a wealth of relevant detail in *12:08 East of Bucharest*, for example, or the teeming details from the opening shot of *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), inside the apartment building. This observational style represented spaces as part of the flow of experience of the people. Now the reality shown through these aesthetic techniques no longer engages the audience as freshly as it did in the mid-2000s. In some recent

films, this aesthetics is replaced by something quite the opposite, which makes the city look less as it is, and more as it could be, showing a desire to embellish the space, and therefore, one's experience of it. *The Story of a Summer Lover* (2018), for example, offers a glossy image with saturated colors projected on a city filmed from most flattering angles and neighborhoods, in contrast to the chromatic grayness of the New Romanian Cinema and its downtrodden neighborhoods.

The long take, a signature of the New Romanian Cinema aesthetics is another point of departure for recent films like *One Step Behind the Seraphim* (Daniel Sandu, 2017), and most of the films using genre tropes, such as thrillers, romances, comedies, etc. Puiu's *Manor House*, which is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the genre films, combines the filmmaker's well-established realistic observation with classical editing techniques such as shot reverse shot or reaction shots, as he shows the five characters discussing at the table. There is also a self-reflexive modernism reminiscent of the French New Wave that one can find in Radu Jude's films, particularly in *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) and in his latest film, which won the 2021 Golden Bear, *Bad Luck Banging or Looney Porn* (2021), both of which draw attention to film as film and to the reality hidden behind the camera.

## Reshaping Cultural Intimacy

*It's important to have a style. But there is a trajectory to that. You have to go on a path, but the further you advance, the more complicated it gets. You look back, and what made sense before no longer makes sense.*<sup>47</sup>

Cristi Puiu

To what extent is cultural intimacy still relevant to these new films? Do they actually point to how the cultural and social markers of “intimacy” have themselves changed in the meantime?

We watch the men talking about the '89 Revolution in *Sieranevada* and we understand their sense of a brutally schizoid making and unmaking of history. We hear Romeo in *Graduation* professing that “here” everything is achieved with struggle, but “there”, if you are good, you can succeed, and can relate to his anxious idealization of the West. We listen to inebriated characters singing communist songs and national anthems in many films of the NRC and we can recall a time when those songs were supposed to mean something (half-nostalgically), while at the same time we understand their out-of-placeness (half-mockingly). These are small, diverse register instances of cultural intimacy that create a bond with the viewers through the sharing of a traumatic past, just as during Communism what brought people together was the sharing of a traumatic present. The films of the NRC put forth as many intimate forms of processing these experiences. The feelings of oppression, surveillance and homogenization – what Chris Robé calls a “communist structure of feeling”<sup>48</sup> and its consequences in a post-communist world-- transpire not only in the narratives per se, but also in the formal techniques, like the long takes, the oblique angles, the distant framing, and the austere mise-en-scene.

*Sieranevada* and *Graduation* are most likely among the last films that can really be said

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<sup>47</sup> “Cristi Puiu on Romania, its cinema, and his own work” (East European Film Bulletin, vol. 7/July, 2011) Robé uses Raymond Williams’s term “structures of feeling” and builds on the latter’s view that “feelings are socially constituted and relate the lived relations that one experiences under a specific ideology within a historical moment”. (Robé 1)

to belong to the NRC (Gorzo “Lettre”). The breakdown of the nation, of the family and of state institutions, the haunting of the communist past, the desire to activate a form of cultural intimacy through collective memory and the shared history of trauma ---these no longer seem to be the obsessions of the more recent Romanian cinema. These very obsessions are actually what made the New Romanian Cinema ethos. The desire to chronicle and dissect identity predicated on a national space or the moral imperative to tell the truth about the past and retrieve collective memory seem to have already had their limelight and are now resurfacing from the backstage in isolated hybrid productions.

The ambiguity of reality that both Puiu and Mungiu are keen on representing in their films, albeit through quite different takes on it, is something that belongs to the existentialist realism and the moral dimension of the NRC with which recent films are less and less concerned. Puiu’s refusal to make a film with a thesis represents a rejection of indoctrination (Gorzo, “In the Name” 2) that can be read in light of the country’s political cinema of the communist past, not only as a problematization of understanding in film. “Wherever there is demonstration, there are lies, manipulation, propaganda,” says Puiu. (Puiu interview, “Cristi Puiu on Romania”) From his perspective any cut operated in the continuum of reality is a lie that short-circuits the viewer’s immersion in the dense ambiguities of the protagonists’ lives, and hence, it is a way of controlling perception and steering the viewers’ understanding in a specific direction. The same holds true for Mungiu who offers competing or multiple grids of interpreting an event and has repeatedly made a point of his rejection to manipulate the viewer through a preestablished interpretation. (Gorzo, “In the Name” 7) These are clear-cut positions against a propagandistic cinema with origins in the communist age.

Taking a look at these aspects, one can easily observe that many of the films of the last few



years are no longer therapeutic forms of processing trauma, and they do not reject the idea of film as mere entertainment. Neither are they concerned with the formal means of not-manipulating the audience. On the one hand, younger filmmakers have started making films and they do not share their older peers' moral imperative about cinema as a testimony to the wrongs of the past and the desire to create a community in the recognition of shared traumas. Most importantly, these directors do not share the same connections to the communist age as the older generation, and are less and less attached to a form of historical testimony. They can relate neither to the traumas, nor to the nostalgia of a life lived in communism. In the absence of nostalgia and trauma, Mănescu from *12:08 East of Bucharest*, for example, may be just a drunken history teacher who sings weird communist anthems.

The main screenwriter of the New Romanian Cinema, Răzvan Rădulescu, has recently been involved in a film project that centers on an ecology topic: a Bulgarian-Romanian co-production (*Fishbone*, Dragomir Sholev) to be released in 2022 that tells the story of a seashore camping manager who fights against the killing of dolphins. Besides confirming the socio-economic transformations discussed above, this collaboration is also a sign that the contemporary Romanian cinema values transnational recognition much more than the self-recognition inside a community of cultural intimacy.

Changes in society and in the film industry do not in any way detract from the continued relevance of the New Romanian Cinema for the history of Romanian and European cinema through its ability to actively engage the viewers with the legacy of Communism as well as with the obstacles of the transition period. In Puiu's words, "there is a trajectory to that" and the progression of the New Romanian Cinema as a form of testimony proves that the filmmakers have arrived at a certain point of completion. They have built a relationship with the viewer, through

the mediation of memory and empathy that the films carry out. This relationship is, unsurprisingly, traversed by extremes: from strong reactions and ambivalence to nostalgia and sentimental recollections. The work of historicizing social reality that these films achieve remains essential to national memory, whose voice the New Romanian Cinema stands to document.

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