

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Post-Communist Romanian Cinema: Context and the Turn to Realism

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Introduction

"Romanian cinema needs to start again from scratch. It has to regain a sense of everyday reality and it has to render truthfully an important slice of recent history which has been horribly falsified. A blast of Neorealism is practically a moral obligation for our cinema at this time in its history."

~ Eugenia Voda, film critic, 1995.

Romanian film critic Eugenia Voda has made this nearly prophetic statement only five years after the end of Romania's communist regime. Yet more than prophetic, her remark was an appeal to filmmakers, and their conscious as well as conscientious sense of truth. Although more than ten years have passed since, her words often resonate in close association with recent Romanian films and their honest representation of social reality, unique in the history of Romanian cinema.

But to what extent is recent Romanian cinema a national cinema? Given the Western history of analysis of foreign cinematic productions, any current examination of non-Western films within a Western theoretical context must be carried out in relation to the prior theoretical developments, debates, and conclusions within the national cinema framework.

Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" resides as foundation in the process of defining what is national (Anderson, 1983). When speaking of nationalist media, Anderson claims that while a nation is portrayed as a community, it is only an imagined one. Members of a nation do not all know each other, "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p.6). From this perspective, cinema's popularity and ease of distribution has led to films becoming part of mass communications, and thus it can easily play a role in disseminating both national and nationalist ideals.

persisted as a theoretical framework during the development and establishment of film studies as a Western academic discipline.

However, increased globalization, migration, and decolonization occurring after 1980 have resulted in changes in the conceptualization of the nation-state within social sciences and humanities. Notions of hybridity, liminality, transnationalism, multinationalism, national and ethnic identities, have come to form a problematic in defining what is national, including national cinema. Thus, foreign cinema theorizing was inevitably impacted, leading to an analogous and necessary reconfiguration of the national cinema framework which places at its center the questioning of the nation-state construct and its problematic assumptions. It was only after 1980, and the beginning of the disintegration between nation and state, that the concept of national cinema itself was viewed analytically for the first time.

In his seminal text examining the concept of national cinema, Andrew Higson asserts that "[h]istories of national cinema can only ... be understood as histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation" (Higson, 1989, p.37). Christopher Faulkner also warns against the construction of national cinemas as unifying concepts which may "lend support to its erasure of difference and to the maintenance of a centrist and neo-conservative cultural politics" (Faulkner, 1994, p.7). However, while some theorists define national cinema as inherently based on the multiple restrictions of a nation-state (Hayward, 1993; Street, 1997; Higson, 1989, 1995), others such as Schlesinger (2000) and Sorlin (1996) see it as an interaction between various apparatuses in connection to cinema, which do not necessarily define a nation, but are merely outlined by its economic and geographic borders. A recent collection of essays edited by Temenuga Trifonova (2009) engage in a critical examination of European film theory. In its first chapter, Paul Coates emphasizes how the concept of nation has shaped the discourse of European film studies. He traces the history of film theory in Europe from crypt-nationalism and post-war anti-nationalism, to a current

post-structuralist trans-nationalist and internationalist stage (Coates, 2007). Thus, the construct of national cinema, while still highly debated, has reached a stage where it cannot be separated from the national and global, political, economic as well as theoretical contexts which inevitably influence it.

Therefore, a significant portion of this paper is devoted to defining the working contexts. Establishing the context of recent Romanian cinema will illuminate Western scholarship and may also aid in eliminating biases and any existing Orientalist attitudes towards Eastern Europe. Moreover, it is essential to ascertain the Romanian cultural, political and socio-economic context as it has played a fundamental role in shaping the content and aesthetics of Romanian cinema.

Hence, Part I of this paper will present the multiple contexts of recent Romanian cinema. I will begin with an exploration of the geo-political context of Eastern Europe, and a brief presentation of Western theoretical approaches to East European cinemas. Then I shall present the socio-economic context of Romania before, during, and after communism, and how the ideological and cultural conditions have shaped the production of cinematic works in each political period.

However, this paper shall not address to what extent new Romanian cinema is facilitating the necessary construction of a Romanian national identity, within or outside Romania, as traditionally prescribed by the national cinema framework. In spite of the problematic concept of nation and its affiliated concepts of national and cultural identity, I believe that this long-standing framework is still relevant, particularly for cultural settings in which national identity as a concept is promoted and also believed in by the general population.

While the recent expansion of the European Union is encouraging the construction of a European identity, it is also reinforcing the separate national identities of the participating countries. Concurrently, faced with a new political and economic system, as well as the sudden flood of Western cultural products, post-communist countries are now renegotiating their sense of national identity. This process is greatly needed in order to replace the previous national identity based on communist ideology and mass deception, and promoted extensively for over four decades.

The national cinema framework also continues to be useful in the examination of movements of resistance against dominating ideologies (Ruberto & Wilson, 2007). Although recent Romanian cinema is not a socio-political movement of resistance, it is greatly influenced by the content and form of dissident productions during communism, as well as by Italian Neorealism. Thus, by examining the films *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005) and *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) in Part II of this paper, I shall argue that their portrayals reflect the Italian neorealist philosophy of filmmaking, and its multiple legacies materialized in several East European new waves as well as the seminal Romanian film *Reconstruction* (Pintilie, 1968). I shall argue that their documentary approach to feature cinema, at once objective and subjective, does not avoid the depiction of negative aspects of physical reality; but without emphasizing them, the directors bring the viewer's focus on the more significant social and moral aspects of communist and post-communist reality. Thus, Part II will also examine the cinematic portrayal of a complex morality which is intrinsically tied to its psychologically oppressive context. The political and economic oppression of communism has led to a material and psychological frustration which was only prolonged by the economic inflation that emerged after the revolution. Embodied by each film, I shall argue that the effects of frustration on a collective cultural scale have shaped social reality, radically transforming morality and leading to a general attitude of resignation to one's oppressive conditions.

There are sparse publications on Romanian films before or after communism, and nothing yet on recent “new wave” productions, the focus of this paper. Western academics are just beginning to take an interest in the post-communist experience, and alternatively, there are only few Eastern theorists who are writing in English, targeting a Western academic readership (Iordanova, Trifonova, Imre, Popescu, Stojanova, Falkowska). Thus, as there has been little published on the context of post-communism both separate or in connection to cinema, even fewer works examine the representation of social reality in Romanian post-communist films.

Given its enclosed communist past, the Eastern European region has often been a mystery to Western researchers. Hence, this paper will aid in illuminating some of the social issues that arose as a result of the implementation of communism and the transplant of a capitalist system into a place with its own memory and ways of conducting social operations. Cinema has often been utilized by cultural studies and film studies researchers, as well as visual anthropologists, as a medium through which to understand the social realities of a culture. Hence, examining recent Romanian cinema, particularly productions which have aimed for documentary realism, will lead to a better understanding of a social reality which has often been misunderstood by the Western public. Moreover, as there are no scholarly articles written specifically on these two films, I believe that examining their unique representations of social reality will also aid in filling the literature gap of Romanian cinema research in the larger Western theoretical context.

While my own Romanian ethnicity makes me especially pleased to see the recent development of Romanian cinema and the positive attention it brings to my home country, I am personally as well as academically interested in uncovering the potential factors involved in the sudden emergence of honest and unapologetically realist cinematic productions. Having experienced Romania during and after communism, I believe that my unique position allows me to understand well the social relations and cultural habits of the

current Romanian context; while my present position as a Canadian resident allows me the distance necessary to detach myself from their effects, and thus view them with a valuable sense of objectivity.

Part 1: The Reality of Romanian Cinema

The cinematic experience was first envisioned by its innovators to be a delicate replica of the experience of reality. André Bazin has claimed that before its technological realization, the myth of cinema was of “a total and complete representation of reality [...] the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (Bazin, 1971, Vol.1, p.20). Co-founder of the influential *Cahiers du Cinema*, Bazin highly praised and examined Italian neorealism for its unprecedented cinematic representations of physical and social realities (Bazin, 1967). Indeed, Italian Neorealism is the first cinema movement characterized by the filmmakers' conscious attempt to represent the physical and social reality of the everyday as truthfully as possible. In the online journal KinoKultura, Romanian critic and theorist Petre Rado explores recent Romanian cinema and argues that it also manifests the “striking freshness of Neorealism”, socially, economically, and personally (Rado, 2007).

Given the film industry's censorship-ridden past, depicting a truthful reality of everyday life in Romania has been at the core of filmmakers' challenges during communism. For some it still continues to be a challenge but also an objective, particularly so due to a remnant sense of duty in telling a truth which has been consistently obscured during the régime. As I intend to argue in subsequent parts, these productions are characterized by a strive to realism unequaled in the history of Romanian cinema. Combined with a minimalist aesthetic and borrowing stylistically from documentary film-making, recent productions are remarkably distinct in their representations of Romanian social reality.

But what is the social reality that recent Romanian cinema appears to be so devoted to? And throughout its history, how has Romanian cinema depicted the realities of its political, economic, and socio-cultural environment?

In exploring these questions, I will begin by presenting the geo-political and theoretical contexts of East European film. I shall situate Romania within Europe first by establishing the multiple demarcations of Eastern Europe within Europe, and by exploring the conceptual relationship between Eastern and Western Europe; then, I shall contextualize Romania within Eastern Europe. I will further explore how East European cinema has been conceived by Western researchers, and how these conceptions are changing with the recent contributions of East European scholars. In addition, I will argue for the necessity of a new theoretical framework, one which takes into consideration the cultural characteristics shared by post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Contexts

For the European countries of the Eastern Bloc, the installment of communism led to a shared cultural and socio-economic context both during and after the communist régime. They have in common four decades of communism which entailed a radical change in political ideology, accompanied by the installment of agricultural and industrial infrastructures modeling those developed in the Soviet Union. Economical subservience to the Soviet Union ended as each state began a transition from communism to capitalism, specifically from centralized economy to market economy, and from an unofficial dictatorship to an official democracy. Hence they also faced, often collaboratively, the imposed isolation from the West. Alongside their parallel political and socio-economic transformations, the countries of Eastern Europe also have

analogous cultural practices, from customs, values and mentalities to similar traditions of cultural production, such as literature and the fine and performing arts.

However, readily grouping these countries under the umbrella term “Eastern Europe” due to their shared history should not be done without first establishing what this label represents. Within film studies, the region has received several designations; functioning on an East-West axis, “Eastern Europe” was most prevalent during the Cold War era when the Iron Curtain led to an emphasis on East versus West. Signifying a necessary shift from Cold-War conceptualizations, North-South distinctions have surfaced since. As a result, the region was figuratively divided into the currently used designations, respectively East-Central Europe and the Balkans (Iordanova, 2003). Included in East-Central Europe are Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, while the Balkan region is commonly associated with Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and former Yugoslavia. Perhaps due to its westernization by reuniting with West Germany, East Germany is paradoxically not included in East-Central Europe (Iordanova, 2003); East-German film is thus examined as separate from East European film. Often left out of the discourse on East European¹ cinema are newly formed states and former Soviet territories such as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Estonia, Lithuania, Georgia and others, which scholars attribute to Soviet cinema, while Soviet cinema scholars exclude from their analyses which tend to concentrate on Russian film (Iordanova, 2003).

The diffused responsibility of articulating an international discourse of East European cinema is shared by scholars in a seemingly unaware manner. While some may be conscious of the ideological

¹ For the purposes of this project, I will occasionally use the term “Eastern Europe” to refer to former communist states within Europe, while being aware of its history and ideological significance; “East European cinema(s)” will refer to films produced in these countries by national film-makers (following the example of Aniko Imre in her introduction to *East European Cinemas*, 2005).

significance of geographical designations as well as omissions which may ensue, others may not even take into account their own ideological biases. Thus, it is essential to call attention to past traditions of thought, particularly in relation to how they have been influenced by their ideological context.

Within the greater European continent, Eastern Europe's relationship to the West has been one of Otherness. The "Other Europe" (Iordanova, 2003), has been conceptualized in the West as a backward yet exotic place, while European cinema most often signified Western European productions and film-makers. Conversely, East European attitudes towards the West have consistently considered Western Europe as its *better* Other. The Iron Curtain has exacerbated these mentalities by allowing few cultural products and knowledge to traverse it and further shrouding Eastern Europe in mystery; while only commercial cultural products from the West, albeit few (generally in music, cinema and fashion trends), penetrated the Eastern states. After 1989, the official fall of the Iron Curtain allowed commercial Western cultural products to enter and dominate Eastern markets and for the better part of the last two decades the cultural exchange has been one-way. Examining the Balkan region, geographically, politically, economically, and culturally, Mestrovic (1994) argues that it displays a dynamic mix of East and West, from the Westernization of the East to the gradual "Balkanization of the West", to Western postmodernism and Eastern post-communism. Thus, the East European context is still defined by economic and cultural changes which affect all levels of existence, from individual lives and personal concerns, to storytelling and cultural production – such as the thematic, but also the structural aspects of the national film industries. By including most former communist states, the recent expansion of the European Union signifies an official gesture of acceptance. However, the Iron Curtain still exists as a figurative demarcation between West and East and their ongoing contrasting perceptions of Otherness.

With few exceptions, well into the 1990s Western scholars continued to have a limiting Orientalist (Said, 1979) approach to examining East European culture. Imre (2005) argues that Western theorizing of East European film adhered to the binary of Cold War ideology long after the fall of the Iron Curtain. However, as Europe experienced an ideological divide, Coates claims that European film theory lost track of its pre-War East-Central European traditions, and succeeded in "cementing an Anglo-Saxon and West European parochialism" (Coates, 2008, p.9). During the Cold War era, most Western interest was garnered by films which represented resistance to the socialist ideology, while the rich production of films in other genres received no attention from the West, critically or commercially (Imre, 2005). In fact, the films which masked a dissident tone also came to represent East European cinema as a whole, often by directors Andrzej Wajda, Miklós Jancsó, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, István Szabó, Agnieszka Holland, Jiří Menzel, Márta Mészáros (Stojanova, 1993). The result was not only the maintenance of a biased perspective which inherently valued a capitalist over socialist ideology, but there was little to no cross-over of film studies theory developed in the West in the examination of communist East European film. Approaches such as psychoanalysis, feminist theory and theories of spectatorship were neglected in favor of the (dissident) auteur theory (Imre, 2005).

After 1989, the industries of East European cinemas underwent a forced restructuring due to the sudden reduction of state funds. The hastened transformation from state socialism to capitalism affected all aspects of film-making, from conception, to production, to distribution (Imre, 2005). The result was an acute decline in the number of films produced. However, while production levels have since increased, there has been little Western interest in post-communist East European cinema. Imre argues that the fall of the Iron Curtain has been routinely conceptualized in the West as significant of the triumph of global capitalism. Thus, ironically having lost the highly restrictive oppositional political context, in their new-found freedom East European cinemas were considered less impressive than their previous dissident socialist productions

(Imre, 2005). Moreover, while European film theory – mainly referencing only Western European films – developed the national cinema theoretical framework, which then shifted from national to transnational and post-national paradigms, until recently adherents of these approaches have neglected post-communist East European film. Hence, recent essay collections such as *East European Cinemas* (2005), edited by Imre, or the Balkan film issue by Cineaste, present a novel approach to East European film. A mix of Western and Eastern scholars apply Western theories not yet utilized in examinations of Eastern productions, while concurrently moving beyond the binary ideological approach maintained by the legacy of the Cold War period. Examples are the examination of the relationship recent Czech cinema has with its history (Peter Hames, 2005), and the exploration of the narratives of recent East European films and how they reflect both the multi-faceted fragmentation of culture (Stojanova, 2005), as well as the ever-present communist past (Deltcheva, 2005).

However, while Eastern European cinema initially received theoretical attention mostly concerning the Czech and Polish New Waves of the 1960s and 1970s (Hames, 1985; Haltof, 2002; Iordanova, 2003), the development of post-communist national cinemas led to a slow increase in theoretical examinations. Leading film studies researcher in the field of Eastern European and Balkan cinema, Dina Iordanova has examined extensively the content and context of post-socialist Eastern and Central European films (2001, 2003, 2007). In her monograph, *Cinema of the Other Europe* (2003), Iordanova pinpoints the exclusion of Eastern European cinema from the general term European cinema. She examines how the political context of former communist countries has shaped the stylistic and content approaches of Eastern European films, during and after communism, while continuing to be part of the European film tradition.

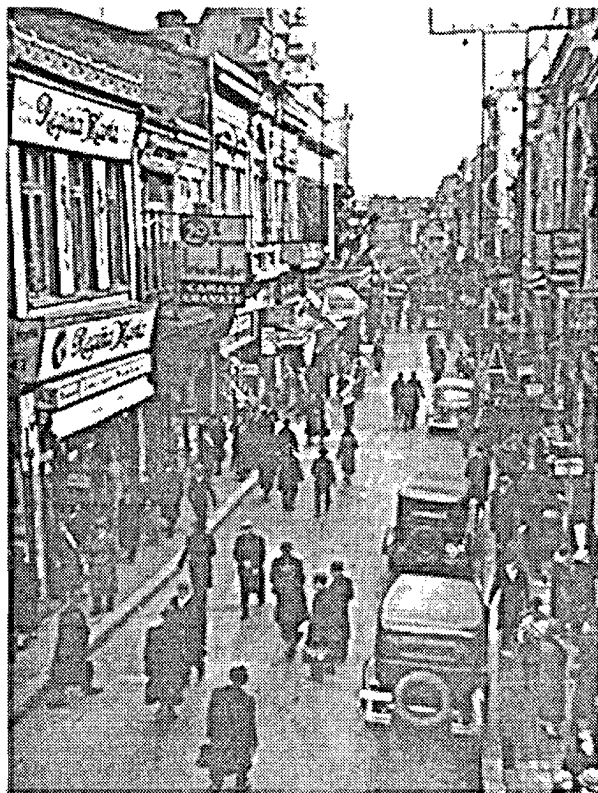
However, the initial lack of interest in post-communist East European cultures is mirrored in other fields such as sociology. In their *Introduction to Sociology of Eastern Europe*, (2003) Keen and Mucha

emphasize that little has been written in Western journals about the transformation of East European states; at the same time, East European sociologists are underrepresented at Western conferences, demonstrating that Western researchers and conference organizers view the transformations of East European states as unimportant (Keen & Mucha, 2003). The authors also point toward the likely specificity of East European sociology. In so far as there are theoretical differences between American and European sociology, East European sociology may also prove to be theoretically constructed in accordance to its post-communist settings (Keen & Mucha, 2003). This means two things: firstly, that the post-communist environment and what it entails – socially, culturally and economically – should come first in any analysis and cannot be a substitute to a Western context, should one employ Western sociological theory and methods in East Europe. Secondly, the local research of East European scholars should be considered at least as significant as that of Western researchers on East European subjects. Their first-hand experience with the cultural and socio-economic context might give rise to novel theoretical concepts and paradigms which will enrich the discipline as a whole. I believe these implications are valid for the field of cultural studies as well.

Pre-Communism

Prior to the installment of the Soviet-style socialist régime in 1947, the economic atmosphere in Romania at the turn of the century and following the First World War was one of prosperity. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires following the First World War resulted in Romanian populated regions being adhered to the country; they formed the largest the country has ever been, consequently known in

the interwar period as Greater Romania. Its political apparatus was a constitutional monarchy² and followed a capitalist economic model. A top producer in fuel and grain, Romania's economy flourished; modernization was also greatly influenced by French culture at the time (Tutui, 2003). Architectural resemblance with the French capital rendered Bucharest the title of "little Paris", while its artistic scene modeled that of France: a growing bourgeois society and a vibrant, often French-educated, intellectual community.



Lipscani, busy commercial area in
downtown Bucharest, 1930s

² From 1881-1947, Romania was governed by a line of descendants of the German Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen family, who transformed the country into a kingdom following the exile of popular leader Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the second to ever successfully unite Transylvania, Moldova and Walachia and form the state of Romania.

Although there was a significant contrast between social classes and urban and rural populations, there was a strong national desire to emulate Western nations – economically, industrially, culturally, as well as cinematically. To be in line with the productions in the West meant not only a conscious strive to rise to the established Western standards, but even surpass them if possible. And given its economic stability and growth, prior to WWII Romania seemed well on its way to achieving these national goals.

As a result of its links with the French intellectual community and culture, the cinematograph came to Bucharest in May 1896, less than five months after the Lumière brothers revealed their beloved wondrous toy to the Parisian public. The first Romanian feature was the 1911 debut of director Grigore Brezeanu, titled *Fatal Love (Amor Fatal, 1911)*. In 1912, he also completed the film *The War for Independence*, a vast production depicting Romania's long-awaited and attained independence as a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), and employing actual war veterans as extras. Numerous films produced afterwards were based on Romanian novels and plays (*Revenge/Razbunarea, 1913; Sin/Pacat, 1923; A Stormy Night/O Noapte Furtunoasa, 1942, Leiba Zibal 1930*), while others were modeled after Hollywood productions at the time, with similar comedic, dramatic and romantic plots (*Duty and Sacrifice/Datorie si Sacrificiu, 1925; That's Life /Asa E Viata, 1927*).

The first attempts at realism were seen in documentary productions as well as historical feature films starting with Brezeanu's second feature, *The War for Independence (1912)*. However, given its early stages and reduced access to footage it is difficult to speak of Romanian cinema at the time in terms of its representations of social reality. Productions increased in number during the Second World War and afterwards, however the installment of communism radically changed social reality, as well as how it was depicted on film.

Communism and After

The Second World War brought with it not only a loss in human lives and a depletion of natural resources, but also a new political apparatus. Based on communist versus capitalist political and economic ideologies, the second mid-century reconfiguration of Europe divided the continent in half: geographically, politically and economically. The states closest to USSR became politically subservient to the Russian power; socialist ideology, legislature, and economic infrastructure were implemented in each state, after the sudden expansion and official electoral success of local communist parties.

In Romania, communism was installed in 1947 following the forced adjudication of King Michael, the last of the German Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen descendents to rule the country. After officially winning the elections, the impromptu communist Workers' Party gained power under the lead of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and in 1967 Nicolae Ceaușescu became its undisputed leader until 1989.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of stability and relative prosperity. Internal systems of industrial and agricultural production were developed, modeled after those of the USSR (ie: the Five-Year Plan³). They allowed the country to have a self-sufficient system of production, while also providing goods for export. The state assigned residences to workers after erecting thousands of apartment buildings in newly formed industrial towns and expanding municipalities. All employment was provided by the state and the workers' salaries were aimed at meeting but not exceeding the costs of fulfilling basic needs. Yet what these needs were and the standards to which they were met were also predetermined by the state. In deciding the comfort level of residences and the variety of food and goods often available through rations,

³ The Soviet Union developed its first Five Year Plan in 1928, which aimed for rapid and extensive industrialization during the period proposed; similar projects of varying durations and scope were subsequently reproduced in the Eastern Bloc countries as well as the Soviet Union.

the objective was not to provide the best, but the 'minimally good enough'. The aim was for it all to be sufficient, and perhaps for some it was, but that's all it was. As a Westerner might evaluate the newly built apartments, "they were made well, but they weren't great"⁴.

However, the nature of oppression did not lie solely in centralized decisions which directly determined individuals' daily existence. Diversity in political stance was fiercely sentenced, and it began with the nation wide incarcerations of non-communist intellectuals as political prisoners. Romanian citizens were also restricted from leaving the country or opening private firms.

An exhaustion of natural resources in the late 1970s, coupled with higher world interest rates, led to a sharp increase in Romania's foreign debt. In his desire to achieve economic independence from IMF and World Bank, head of state Nicolae Ceaușescu began implementing a plan of reducing individual consumption of water, heat, electricity, food, and material goods. These necessities were made unavailable on a regular basis, and although Ceaușescu achieved his goal of eliminating the foreign debt by early 1989, he sacrificed "his people's" standards of living for more than a decade.

However, as communism ended with the 1989 Revolution, the accumulated expectations for a better quality of life were not satisfied right away. Overturning the communist régime meant an abrupt transition to capitalist economy. As industrial, agricultural and other forms of production lost state ownership, the decentralization of power led to great job loss and reduced national production. The result was an economic inflation which persisted for fifteen years, diminishing only in 2005. The discrepancy between prices and incomes continued for almost two decades and is still palpable today, prolonging the frustration

⁴ Thomas Lahusen, professor of comparative literature, communicated in a lecture from the course "The Soviet Cultural History of the 20th Century", Fall 2004, University of Toronto.

individuals had with the material deficiencies of the 1980s. Thus, while some benefited from a free market economy and the recent acceptance in the European Union, financial and material difficulties have not ceased for many individuals since the Revolution, a period of almost nineteen years. In relation to the discussion of films to follow, Chapter 2 will further elaborate on the everyday frustrations of the harsh final decade of communism, as well as those of its subsequent transition to capitalism.

The Mode of Film Production

In her monograph *Eastern European Cinema and the Totalitarian State* (2003), Christina Stojanova examines the post-war cinemas of Eastern European countries. She argues that post-war communist films of the Eastern bloc have evolved following the Soviet cinematic model, and thus their content and aesthetic were inevitably shaped by the ideological oppression of Soviet-style communism. Similar to the film industries of the neighbouring Eastern bloc states, cinema in Romania also fluctuated as a result of political, economic and socio-cultural changes. Consequently, realist cinematic representations have been simultaneously shaped by political ideologies and their respective economic conditions. During communism, filmmakers were heavily constrained regarding their subject matter. The state financed productions⁵, expanded the number of cinema theatres and built the Buftea Studios, but concurrently dictated and censored content. Even comedic content was sometimes attacked by critics, who often argued that the film “does not disclose the positive attributes of the régime that removed the bourgeoisie from power” (in Liehm & Liehm, 1977). The results were films of propaganda, both documentaries and fiction (*The Valley Resounds/ Rasuna Valea*, 1950), historical epics (*Michael the Brave/ Mihai Viteazul*, 1970; *Stephen the Great/ Stefan Cel Mare*, 1974), films based on canonic literary works (*Forrest of the Hanged/*

⁵ In order to prevent the irretrievable loss in profits of certain productions and thus maintain high production levels, the communist régime also introduced the law of legal deposit (Tutui, 2004).

Padurea Spanzuratilor, 1965; *The Uprising/ Rascoala*, 1966, both based on novels by Liviu Rebreanu, and each director winning a prize at Cannes, Liviu Ciulei and Mircea Muresan respectively), films based on children's stories (*The White Moor / De-as Fi Harap Alb*, 1965), and comedies (*Operation Monster/ Operatiunea "Monstrul"*, 1976; *Bucharest Identity Card / Buletin de Bucuresti*, 1982) (in Tutui, 2004). Reality was thus represented as either the prosperous political ideal, as the glorious past, as carefree and lighthearted, or only as fantasy. However, in addition to such representations were also a few films which aimed to represent the social reality of the time, carrying an unmistakable, but often allegorical, message of resistance. Here are several such productions: *Contest/ Concurs*, 1982 and *Sand Cliffs/ Faleze de Nisip*, 1983, both directed by Dan Pița; *The Cruise/ Croaziera*, 1981, by Mircea Daneliuc; *Reconstruction/ Reconstituirea*, 1968 and *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitica?/ De Ce Trag Clopotele, Mitică?*, 1981, both by Lucian Pintilie (Tutui, 2004).



Forrest of the Hanged, Liviu Ciulei, 1965.

After the end of the communist régime, filmmakers such as Pintilie seized the opportunity and made films without imposed state censorship. The results were dark existential narratives, unrestrained in their portrayal of Romania as a grim desolate place (*The Oak*, 1992, Lucian Pintilie; *The Conjugal Bed*, 1993, Mircea Daneliuc). However, their pessimistic portrayals alienated a vulnerable public who was not yet prepared to see itself represented at its most deplorable state, particularly in a cinema theatre, a space traditionally conceptualized as a place of entertainment. These films were once again few among the numerous which dominated the box office, mostly Hollywood productions and Romanian comedies with a general self-deprecating tone in their depictions of a society which longed to emulate the West. Director Nae Caranfil dominated the genre with films such as *Don't Lean Out the Window/ È Pericoloso Sporgersi* (1993), *The Sweetness of Doing Nothing / Dolce Far Niente* (1999) and *Philanthropy/ Filantropica* (2001), followed by Cristian Mungiu's *West/Occident* (2002) and others. In contrast with these productions was Cristi Puiu's debut *The Stuff and the Dough/ Marfa si Banii* (2001), a road movie unique at the time in its theme as well as its cinema-verite style.

However, with the development of a multi-network television industry, a resulting general low cinema attendance led to the closing of more than half of cinema theatres throughout the country; only 155 theatres were still operating in 2004 compared to the 432 in 1997⁶, an ironic downturn in distribution from 1896 when moving images were showing in Bucharest less than five months after their invention. Reduced ticket sales inevitably impinged on production, which reached its lowest point in 2000 when there were no Romanian films released⁶. Yet starting with 2004, Romanian shorts and features have consistently won international awards, including a series of prestigious Cannes prizes and prompting film critics to eagerly claim the existence of a Romanian new wave, a notion vastly contested by the filmmakers themselves. The most notable of these productions are: *Traffic*, Catalin Mitulescu, 2004; *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, Cristi

⁶ Statistics archive of the Romanian National Center of Cinematography (CNC) website.

Puiu, 2005; *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006; *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, Cristian Mungiu, 2007; *California Dreamin' (Endless)*, Cristian Nemescu, 2007; *Megatron*, Marian Crisan, 2008.



12:08 East of Bucharest, Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006

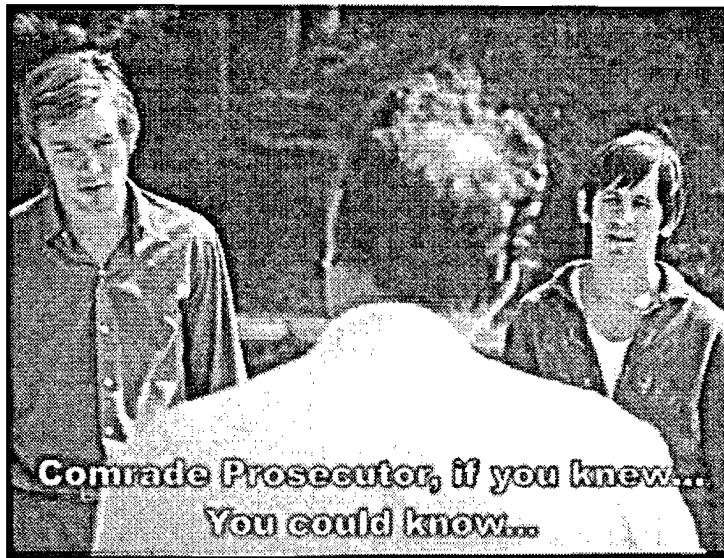
Part II: Realism

The themes and style of recent Romanian cinema are products of both its past and present contexts of psychological oppression. The perpetual transition from communism to capitalism has transformed Romania in a space where its real past and its imaginary future co-exist. The present is visibly chaotic, containing the memories and often the materiality of the past, but also the constant longing for a change which has begun but is far from being complete. And while the recent communist past is present in the culture's collective consciousness, its manifestations in everyday life are mirrored by contemporary cinematic portrayals.

The two most notable productions of recent Romanian cinema are Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005) and Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007). In the following, I shall examine their realist representations in light of the Italian Neorealism movement, their depictions of communist and post-communist space, and the complex morality that each film creates. These two films were selected due to their unique approaches to representation in the historical context of Romanian cinema, as well as their highly influential status in recent Romanian cinema. Analogous to the Italian neorealist cinema movement, these two productions have the potential to initiate a Romanian cinematic trend which provokes in filmmakers a refusal to conceal unfavorable social truths, yet without casting an overt blame on the political system that most likely produced them. Moreover, even though both films were based on real events, it is the striking realism of their portrayals that determines their significance.

Origins

A variety of films were produced during communism, and its ideological shaping of artistic production was not particularly rigorous in its efforts to produce propaganda films. Yet, there were strict censors regarding the production of works which hinted towards any negative aspects of communist ideology and its material implementation in Romania. More than four decades of communism and its denunciation of freedom of speech, including cinematic political expressions, have left their marks on the film industry as well as on the collective consciousness of Romanians. Thus, a thirst for accurate representations of social reality and of having an uncensored discourse of everyday life has persisted for filmmakers and the general public for almost two generations. Also emphasized by Romanian film critic Alex Leo Serban (2007), it is this enduring unfulfilled thirst that is responsible for the filmmakers' drive to portray everyday life as accurately as possible.



Reconstruction, Lucian Pintlie, 1968

Among these seminal film-makers, and also the one which achieved most international acclaim, is Lucian Pintlie's *Reconstruction* (also translated as *Reenactment*). Produced in 1968 and censored shortly after its release, its narrative depicts the reenactment of a student fight, as public officials are in charge of producing an educational film about violence and alcohol, and ironically cast in it the original student offenders themselves. The construction of reality itself becomes the subject matter of the film, as the supervisors and the filmmaker are each uniquely motivated to recreate the most "real" representation, regardless of the cost. Stylistically, the film is characterized by a minimalist documentary approach to realism, which encompasses the strict use of diegetic sound, natural high contrast lighting, and the direct portrayal of a day in the life of two young people. These attributes are reminiscent of the French New Wave as well as of the more political work of East European directors, such as Miklós Jancsó (*The Round-up*, 1965). Taking place on a perceptibly hot and sunny afternoon, the tone of *Reconstruction* is mostly of dry comedy, occasionally interrupted by elements of monotony and unexpected episodes of both humor and to some extent the grotesque. The ending, however, comes abruptly as one of the students dies from his best

friend's repeated punches, in the attempt to achieve the perfect reenactment. The absurd permeates the entire narrative of the film, from comedic to grotesque to tragic moments, depicting a reality which reveals life and freedom as meaningless for most of its characters; and by inference, the everyday life and freedoms of individuals during communism.

While the film makes no direct references to the communist régime and its systemic oppression, the implicit highly symbolic approach in revealing its influence led to almost instant state censorship after its release. However, in spite of this measure – or perhaps because of it – and in conjunction with its television debut shortly after the 1989 Revolution, *Reconstruction* became part of the collective consciousness of both the general public and present filmmakers. In her monograph, *Cinema and Nothing Else* (1995), Romanian critic Eugenia Voda succinctly summarized the extent of its effect: "scenes, dialogues, images from *The Reconstruction* are now part of a collective conscience; they are real memory reflexes." (p.19) Its legacy of existentialism, the absurd, realism as well as symbolism, and the pointless struggle of one individual against oppressive social conditions, persisted in post-communist cinema shortly after the Revolution, and resurfaced in recent productions including *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Puiu, 2005) and *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Mungiu, 2007). Dominique Nasta argues that recent Romanian filmmakers have shown "a strong belief in the virtues of textual and visual messages that are both very close to the ironic and absurdist Romanian psyche", recognizing the invaluable debt they owe to Lucian Pintilie (Nasta, 2007, p.3).

Two seminal authors of recent Romanian cinema, Cristi Puiu and Cristian Mungiu have been influenced by Lucian Pintilie's work as much as by the Italian neorealist movement and the multiple legacies it developed, including the French New Wave, the Czech and Hungarian new waves of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Polish cinema of moral concern of the 1980s. Puiu and Mungiu's devotion to objective

representations of reality can be unmistakably traced back to the Italian neorealist philosophy of film-making, and its defining techniques of representation: the use of everyday language including slang, non-actors, natural lighting, long takes, unobtrusive editing, the lack of non-diegetic music and the use of diegetic sound. Thus, I shall proceed to explore the (neo)-realist representations of recent Romanian cinema in the most recent films by Puiu and Mungiu.

In *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (henceforth *Lazarescu*), writer and director Cristi Puiu depicts an older man's unending journey from hospital to hospital, and the perpetually crowded and inhospitable emergency room. As his condition inevitably deteriorates, his paramedic's involvement and frustration increase along with those of the viewer's. With a unique stylistic approach within the historical context of Romanian cinema, Puiu's is one of the first Romanian features to borrow heavily from the documentary style, but which continues to be a fiction film. While only loosely based on a real event, this film reinforces, perhaps even initiates, the most significant trend in recent Romanian cinema: a crude realism which has not been attempted during communism, nor immediately after its fall.

However, although he does not hire non-actors in true neorealist fashion, Puiu does everything in his power to ensure that his actors will perform as realistically as possible. When interviewed about his casting practices, he reveals that he chose his actors primarily according to their own personalities, "so that they have to be themselves" (Puiu, Director's Interview, 2005). He also modified the original script in order to adjust the narrative to Ion Fiscuteanu's Transylvanian accent, the character's birthday was changed to his own, and the sister's phone number is actually his own phone number. Thus, Puiu strove to create an illusion of reality for his main actor, in order to obtain a naturally realistic enactment, and not a performance. He also cast his wife and daughter under their real names as the two neighbors passing by Lazarescu in

the building's hallway. Thus, his quasi-neorealist approach to casting and preference for underplaying reveals his dedication in portraying individual behavior, and hence its narrative, as realistically as possible.



4 Months 3 Weeks And 2 Days, Cristian Mungiu, 2007

However, while the narrative of *Lazarescu* takes place at an undetermined time after the end of the communist regime, *4 Months 3 Weeks And 2 Days* (henceforth 432) conversely illustrates a fragment of life which occurred during the communist period. In fact, it narrates a story which could only be approached in Romanian cinema after 1989: obtaining an illegal abortion prior to the fall of the regime. The narrative depicts a university student aiding her friend through an abortion by making all the necessary arrangements: obtaining a hotel room, contacting the so-called "doctor", and supporting her materially and emotionally. However, her own loneliness and self-reliance stand out in sharp contrast to her friend's, as well as to the lack of understanding from others in her life. The director's realist approach is evident in his choice of narrative, based on a real event, but also in his visual depictions of socialist environments.

4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days begins with a black screen. The text "Romania 1987" in its lower half readily identifies a pre-1989 setting in the later years of communism. The opening shot is a trembling hand-held close-up of a table. At its center, a small fish tank with a picture of a Western city as its backdrop, and two goldfish – one moving restlessly at the water's edge, almost to the rhythm of the audible tick-tock of a clock nearby. The frame lingers on the screen, as the goldfish also continues its restless and perhaps meaningless movement, before the camera moves in a backward motion to eventually reveal the two protagonists. We are in a student dorm, witnesses to speedy but careful preparations for the unusual events to take place later in the day.

The metaphoric power of this opening image is eclipsed only by its striking realism. The compact fish tank and its accompanying two-dimensional black and white vision of the West, placed underneath the window as a representation of the outside, without a doubt symbolize the enclosed existence of two young individuals in a politically and materially oppressive system. As citizens were not allowed to leave the country, freedom, much like the West, is only an illusory image. The various items surrounding the fish tank are representative of the protagonists' everyday existence, and in choosing them Mungiu ensured that they are also representative of the Romanian economy before 1989. The state-owned internal industry the lack of market competition resulted in little to no variety in consumer products. Thus, the items on the table – a cup of coffee, an ashtray with a cigarette burning, a soup plate, a cosmetics bottle, cash – and their surrounding objects – the plastic table-cloth, the food items on the windowsill, the heater visible under the window, also used for drying clothes – all produce an image instantly identifiable as common of Romanian households at the time.

Lazarescu's first images also depict a place of residence characterized by a remarkable authenticity. The opening shot is a nocturne exterior of an old apartment building, followed by the image of Lazarescu in

his kitchen, dotingly feeding one of his cats. Once again, the familiar plastic table-cloths are covering the table and one of the counters. The living room is visibly cluttered, with several tall stacks of newspapers in two of its corners. Taken as a whole, the apartment is not old nor poor, but also not new nor lavish. As the camera is focused more on the actors and less on their surroundings, Puiu makes use of dialogue to impart unappealing experiential aspects of the apartment, and thus deliberately avoids visually overwhelming the viewer. Some examples are the comments made by Lazarescu's neighbors: the man disapprovingly calls attention to the stacks of newspapers and the dirt and dust they have gathered, while his wife points out the uncleanness caused by Lazarescu's cats in the kitchen and criticizes his way of living.

Partly due to their common cinematographer (Oleg Mutu), Mungiu's stylistic approach follows that of Puiu. The elements of cinema verite camera movement, location shooting, and natural low lighting construct a reality increasingly difficult to contest, echoing Zavattini's claim that such aesthetic choices aim to induce the viewer in reflecting on reality. He states, "the task of the neorealist artist [...] consists in bringing them to reflect (and then, if you will, to stir up emotions and indignation) upon what they are doing and upon what others are doing; that is, to think about reality precisely as it is" (in Overbey, 1978, p.67-68). Both films portray a crude realism through the use of documentary techniques, forcing the viewer to face a reality that could have been their own.

However, it was Puiu who first chose to introduce an overt documentary style approach to the production of feature films. His 2001 debut, *The Stuff and the Dough*, was filmed entirely with one hand-held camera, and was produced at a time when Mungiu was making a comedy about the Romanian transition to capitalism. His film *Occident* (2002) was popular domestically and rivaled productions by Nae Caranfil, a master of the genre (*Don't Lean Out the Window/ È Pericoloso Sporgersi*, 1993; *The Sweetness of Doing Nothing / Dolce Far Niente*, 1999; *Philanthropy*, 2001). However, while Mungiu aimed for

commercial success, Puiu was eagerly experimenting. *The Stuff and the Dough* (2001) is a road movie, the first of its kind in Romanian cinema, and documents the adventures of three youth as they transport a parcel from one city to another. They are not informed of its contents, nor do they know its recipients, and are most likely contributing to the local mafia's trafficking patterns. Puiu's documentary approach is evident through the use of a hand-held camera whose movements make the palpable presence of the cameraman. For example, the scenes in the car are always captured from the same angle: the backseat, right side. It is almost as if there is another character in the film, an invisible observer who non-judgmentally witnesses the events taking place and the characters' responses. His following film, the short *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004), is a Golden Bear winner which also presents to the spectator-witness a fragment of everyday life in post-communist Romania: an encounter and monetary transaction between an unemployed humbled father and his financially successful yet unaccommodating son.

However, in the making of *Lazarescu*, Puiu becomes more sophisticated in his documentary approach to realism. The viewer is once again physically introduced into a tangible environment, his presence embodied by the noticeable movement of the camera and its perspective at once objective and subjective. Thus, the viewer becomes an observer and the only one who witnesses and would be able to evaluate the entire account of Lazarescu's death. In the interview accompanying the DVD release, Puiu explains his approach to cinema: for him, "cinema is a testimony; neither truth nor lie, but a testimony. But it is subjective no matter what." (Puiu, Director's Interview, 2005) Thus, while acknowledging subjectivity, Puiu nonetheless wants to attempt to recreate reality, even if it is true for only one individual; particularly when there is no one left to recount it.



The Death of Mr. Lazarescu, Cristi Puiu, 2005;
arguing before leaving with the ambulance.

The real incident which inspired Puiu in producing his film entailed the case of a patient similarly rejected by several emergency rooms, and eventually abandoned by the paramedic who subsequently was convicted to jail for her decision. Perhaps in an attempt to ascertain how the incident occurred and led to the unfortunate outcome, Puiu recreates the complex moral situation and offers the point of view of a potential witness – such as the presence of a documentary filmmaker. Thus, the film's cinema verite style reveals a reality which is documented and represented with an objectivity concurrently limited by the inescapable subjectivity of the filmmaker. Yet, Puiu ultimately creates the witness that Romanian post-communist reality does not offer – an undocumented reality in which acts of kindness or immorality may often be unrewarded or unpunished, even unnoticed, and certainly not remembered.

In spite of the palpable presence of an observer, Puiu's narrative illustrates the existence of a complex social situation in which casting blame is not an easy task. While the narrative carefully reveals what happened, we still do not know who or what is at fault. Bluntly put, "a man needs help and those who

are supposed to help go about their jobs.” (Sklar on *Lazarescu*, 2006, p63). Thus, the narrative device of the witness places the responsibility on the viewer to reflect on what he is shown and to discern culpability. As Millicent Marcus stated in regards to neorealism, its aim is to “force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the ‘others,’ be they persons or things, with all the ethical responsibility that such a vision entails” (Marcus, 1986, p.23).

Mungiu’s feature *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* also depicts a previously undocumented fragment of life with an interplay of objective and subjective elements: a point of view objectively observing Otilia’s subjective experience. Her visual and psychological points of view are created as the camera often follows her directly and displays close-ups of her emotional expressions. Yet, at other times the camera is fixed, often illustrating an increase in objectivity through wide-angle composition. Thus, the tension between objectivity and subjectivity are more evident in Mungiu’s production, as his emphasis on Otilia’s internal experience demands an increasingly subjective approach. In the interview accompanying the DVD, he emphasizes his direct approach to depicting the reality of his character’s psychological state. He asserts that he wanted the viewer to have access to Otilia’s emotions, thus depicting reality “ideally from the perspective of the main character, and not to tell or transmit our opinions as authors” (Mungiu, Director’s Interview, 2008). Thus, he also succeeds in creating a witness, yet due to fewer camera movements, it is one whose presence is not felt on screen to the same extent as in Puiu’s *Lazarescu*. Here too the witness exists solely through the viewer, but unlike the witness device utilized in *Lazarescu*, who is accompanied in his journey by the paramedic, in *432* the viewer is the only one who is aware of Otilia’s intentions, experiences, and obstacles. For example, at the dinner party, her visible discomfort which goes unnoticed by her boyfriend and his family, is in fact the focus of entire scene. The result is an increased sense of misplaced indignation toward the other characters who do not attend to Otilia’s distress. However, they are not to blame for her psychological condition. By portraying Otilia’s internal state, Mungiu’s witness device is

increasingly more intimate than Puiu's documentary camera style. Yet, both films create a spectator-witness who is left to reflect on the complex culpability implicit in each narrative: the flawed social system which allowed the seemingly unusual situations to occur.

Hence, the directors' documentary approach to the production of feature films is characterized by a strive for objectivity, yet without concealing its subjective origins. However, the tension between objectivity and subjectivity is not limited to the characters' and the cameraman's point of view. The films' realist depictions of physical environments are also carefully negotiated. While Italian neorealism revealed that cinema could – and perhaps should – represent unfavorable social truths, the resulting neorealist productions deliberately emphasized the negative aspects of social reality and its visual manifestations in everyday life. However, subsequent to the intensely dark, violent and grotesque themes of productions which followed the 1989 Revolution as well as the multitude of self-deprecating comedies.

The Visibility of Post-Communist Space

In terms of individuals' everyday material conditions, the last ten years of the communist system were qualitatively different from its more prosperous beginnings. Coupled with numerous political and personal aspirations, Ceausescu's distinct ambition to eliminate the country's national debt resulted in a material oppression which blatantly manifested itself in everyday life – water, heating and electricity were discontinued regularly; food was often not available, particularly meat and dairy products; and there was also a shortage of fuel. These systemic material conditions were present on a daily basis, a constant and often frustrating reminder of individuals' singular helplessness against them. Thus, on an individual basis, Romanians were forced to reconcile themselves and accept a situation which they could not change. The

result was a prolonged period of material and psychological frustration, one which was envisioned would end with the 1989 revolution.

However, while the revolution brought with it hope, for many Romanians it was not fulfilled. The pervading sense of frustration only increased as it was followed by severe inflation and job losses. Although a greater variety of goods were available, as well as the right to private property and unrestricted travel, most individuals could not afford to exercise these rights. Many maintained the same places of residence and life-styles they had during communism, also reflected by the retired Lazarescu and his apartment which could easily function as décor for a film with a communist thematic. However, the visual aspects of his life *have* a communist thematic. The apartment buildings characterizing the communist era are still in use, in spite of their unkempt appearance, and even for individuals who do not reside in them, they are a constant visible reminder of the oppressive past. But they are also a reminder of the disappointment of a present which has not been able to distance itself yet. Thus, realist cinematic portrayals of post-communist spaces have the power to trigger in Romanian viewers this perpetual state of disappointment.

While inflation ceased in 2005, the prices of goods, including food, are yet to correspond to salaries, which most often do not reflect international standards. However, even with eventual salary increases, very few individuals will likely be able to change their places of residence. The necessary change in political system from communism to capitalism needs to eliminate the influence of the old regime from negatively impacting individuals' lives on a daily basis. (Of course, the visible marks of the past should not be entirely erased but perhaps they can exist in historic sites and museums, where individuals can seek them instead of being forced to face them each day). Environmental psychologist Jack Nasar believes that a negative visual perception of one's environment is likely to evoke an unpleasant emotional state; it may even act as a stressor and lead to avoidance (Nasar, 2000). In so far as an unkempt communist aesthetic is still

present in Romania, it follows that its realistic representation in cinema, an often conceptualized place of entertainment, is not a welcomed one. In fact, it is likely to act as a frustrating reminder that the changes which have been expected since the 1989 revolution are yet to take place.



Kieślowski's gray tower blocks from *The Decalogue* (1988).

Referring to the overall tone and atmosphere depicted by the cinemas of Eastern Europe, Dina Iordanova pinpoints to what she calls "the grayness of everyday life" (Iordanova, 2003, p.93). East European films have often been characterized by the use of natural lighting, but also a tendency towards a gray colour scheme to depict the communist architecture of urban areas or dark interiors, such as Kieślowski's tower apartments in *The Decalogue* (1988). Aside from functioning as realist representations of the often dimly lit interiors of public and private spaces, and the deteriorating exteriors of bureaucratic as well as residential buildings, Iordanova believes that the grayness characterizing East European films is also a metaphor for everyday life under state socialism. "It was life that was supposed to be gray and colorless, monotonous and dull, murky and ominous" (Iordanova, 2003, p.93).

However, as the “grayness of everyday life” has persisted long after the end of the communist regime, encountering it in a cinema theatre is often not welcomed by the Romanian public. Thus, the enduring visibility of the communist past accounts for their aversion to realist and glib portrayals of post-communist spaces. Their daily encounters with such spaces as conscious (though most likely unconscious) triggers of the past would only be further reproduced in the movie theatre, a space traditionally conceptualized as a place of entertainment. Here, faced with images of their daily existence, the disappointment with the present is brought to the forefront of their consciousness, and difficult to dislodge at will.

Continuing in the monochromatic tradition of East European cinemas, the preference for a monochrome palette is evident in the artificial lighting dominating the narrative of *Lazarescu*, but especially in the grays, blues and greens of 432. Yet, unlike the exceedingly drab depictions by Pintilie and Daneliuc shortly after the revolution, filmmakers Puiu and Mungiu each display a noticeable negotiation in their realist portrayals of physical spaces.

Specifically, Puiu’s portrayals of Romanian spatial settings reveal a deliberate avoidance of prolonged depictions of their negative aspects. The home of a man who is retired, ill, and lives alone is represented without any attempts to conceal the unappealing aspects of his environment, yet simultaneously without overwhelming the viewer with their existence. Perhaps the director’s intent was to demonstrate that the negative aspects of Lazarescu’s living conditions are not the most significant or representative of his life or his personhood. Thus, his representation counteracts the common judgmental assumption made upon entering Lazarescu’s unkempt environment, a reaction embodied by the characters of his neighbors and their disapproving comments. The result is the start of a portrait of Lazarescu as an individual entitled to the same basic human rights as any other, ranging from the right to healthcare to the

right to consume alcohol or not clean after his cats. Subsequently, the narrative gradually reveals Lazarescu's own awareness of these rights, as he attempts to defend them in his encounters with healthcare professionals.

While he locates almost the entire first half of the narrative in Lazarescu's home, Puiu continues Lazarescu's journey by alternating images of hospital interiors with the brief but significant ambulance trips between them. Perhaps to increase its significance as an essential social space for the three individuals, Puiu places the camera in the back of the ambulance car, offering a wide view of Lazarescu in the foreground, and the driver and paramedic in the background, while the streets of the city at night are vaguely observed through the front window. While the depictions inside the ambulance seem to primarily serve the purpose of illustrating the social relations developing between the three "team" members, images of hospital interiors are less explicit. Emergency rooms are increasingly crowded, noisy, and they all share the same sterile aesthetic: an almost monochromatic appearance composed mainly of the white of the walls, the blue of nurses' uniforms and bed curtains, and the contrasting orange of the two paramedics' uniforms. The characteristic hospital smell of medication is almost perceptible, as is the general absence of happiness, with no colorful wall artifacts to mask it by acting as decorative diversions. Yet, the camera does not linger on these aspects of the medical environment. They are perceived in passing as the focus remains on the main characters and the obstacles they face. Thus, by avoiding its prolonged representation, Puiu does not exoticize the Romanian physical environment, nor the political forces that have shaped it.

The same cannot be entirely said about Mungiu's 432, which – given its multiple urban scenes, the communist time period, and the internationally controversial subject matter of abortion – depicts a narrative arguably chosen for its potential to appeal to international audiences. However, analogous to Puiu's

documentary approach, Mungiu also does not dwell on unnecessary negative depictions of Romania. They exist, but are always in a background which does not persist, nor is it masked. The realist representation of the physical environment is evident throughout the film as various locations are depicted without sparing any unattractive details, such as broken sidewalks and streets or unkempt playgrounds and apartment buildings. The director depicts a reality that is bleak, but its settings never persist at the forefront of his narrative. Images of a physical manifestation of oppression almost always maintain their background role, including the blurred image of a restless grocery store line-up, a common occurrence of everyday life in communist Romania.

The directors' negotiations in representing a reality yet to be documented clearly reveal a restraint – and thus a distinct absence of self-pity – in depicting environments negatively shaped by an oppressive political system. It is important to point out these efforts because they show not only each director's attempts to distance his narrative from the Romanian context and thus allow his film a universal message; but they also signify a definite shift from what Romanian film critic Alex Leo Serban calls "mizerabilism" – a post-1989 cinematic focus on the neglected aspects of the post-communist physical environment, achieved either through self-deprecating humor or in association with the violent and the grotesque (Serban, 2007). Hence, minimal negative representations reflect the personal preferences of these directors in depicting their own environments without excessive signifiers of miserableness, and showing a concern for the responses of the Romanian public whose stories are depicted. The results demonstrate not only a restraint from indulgence and exotification, but a deliberate emphasis on the social reality and morality of the post-communist context.

Moralities

Speaking of post-war Italian cinema, Andre Bazin asserts that "Italian films have an exceptionally documentary quality that could not be removed from the script without thereby eliminating the whole social setting into which its roots are so deeply sunk." (Bazin, 1971, Vol.2, p.20). The oppression of communist but also post-communist economy resulted in an endurance of the material and psychological frustration of the 1980s long after the change in political system. Accurately represented in *Lazarescu* and *432*, the effects of frustration on a collective cultural scale have shaped social reality, specifically by creating a system of altruistic behavior but also immorality and a general attitude of resignation to one's oppressive conditions.

As a psychological construct, frustration is generally defined as "the blocking of goal-directed behavior" (Myers, 2002, p.383). In other words, frustration ensues when one's behavior does not produce the expected result due to an impeding factor. The classic frustration-aggression theory asserts that frustration is likely to resolve through aggressive behavior towards the impeding factor (Myers, 2002). However, fear of punishment may lead to the individual displacing his or her aggression towards a safer target (Bebe's physical aggression towards the two women; the doctors' verbal aggression towards Lazarescu). The material oppression of the communist regime as well as the financial difficulties which continued after the revolution have often been impeding factors to satisfying the basic needs of individuals. The consistent discontinuation of water, heating, electricity, as well as the lack of food on the market, thus led to blocking the satisfaction of goals which were essential to individuals' existence. The resulting frustration shaped how individuals related to one another, creating a social reality which endured beyond the end of the communist regime, along with its representations in recent Romanian cinema.

Perhaps the most significant effect of oppression and the ensuing psychological frustration is their transformative power on individuals' morality. Unusual situations may lead to individual responses which are outside of the norm, and these may range from extreme altruism to uncalled-for immorality. In fact, as we move past their striking realism, I believe that a portrayal of morality lies at the heart of the narratives of both films. Indirectly referring back to the Polish Cinema of Moral Concern, specifically Kieślowski's *Decalogue* series (1988) as well as Eric Rohmer's *Six Moral Tales* (1963-1972), both films represent an ambiguous morality, but with clear, often unfortunate consequences.

Referring to films produced in Eastern Europe, Iordanova brings attention to what she calls "totalitarianism's moral damage" (Iordanova, 2003). She asserts that communism and its various forms of oppression -- from political trials and persecutions, to material shortages and corruption in everyday life -- have increasingly challenged individuals' moral systems, even resulting in sacrificing morality for an acute practical sense in ensuring minimum material necessities. In *432*, this is illustrated by the non-negotiable attitude of the main character, whose lucidity in carrying out the illegal -- and perhaps immoral -- task becomes her strength. In *Lazarescu*, immorality can be seen in medical staff who do not consider patients a priority, as well as in the paramedic's apparent acceptance of their attitudes.

However, while instances of altruism also occur, altruistic behavior always has its limits which can become visible in unexpected ways. For example, the wife of Lazarescu's neighbor is initially unmistakably eager to help his condition, unrelentingly offering medication, food, or any other assistance. Yet when the paramedic informed her that the hospital is more likely to register Lazarescu if someone would come with him, she promptly refused to accompany them to the hospital by suggesting that her husband would not approve. Alternatively, while her husband initially seemed reluctant to help Lazarescu with offering medication, he surprisingly was willing to join him and the paramedic to the hospital; at the dismay of his

wife who privately scolds him, "so you were going to leave me alone on a Saturday night, weren't you?"

Hence, each negotiates individually the level of altruism they are ready to extend to their neighbor, as can be observed in their different approaches.

Conversely, for the protagonist of *432*, the limit of helping is observed at the opposing extreme.

Otilia's willingness in aiding her friend reaches a critical point when Bebe threatens to leave unless he engages in sexual intercourse with both women. Although she initially hesitates, Otilia's ultimate decision to help her friend illustrates a high level of altruism which may not have existed without an oppressive political system to create the causal situation.

Moreover, while asking another for help may be of use, assistance is not guaranteed when requested from one who is paid to do so. The hotel receptionists in *432*, and some of the doctors and nurses in *Lazarescu*, were unexpectedly uncooperative with the protagonists. Their lack of professional motivation may be explained by the low wages they receive, which in a socialist economy are not dependent on whether clients are satisfied or not. However, as a medical professional's job is to ensure the well-being of others, a refusal to perform it becomes a moral issue. However, even when being moral is part of the job, the variety of doctors' responses to *Lazarescu*'s condition, as well as Bebe's subsequent immoral stance, further demonstrate that the oppression of communism has produced an individually negotiated morality.

However, as each film expresses a morally ambiguous situation, the most significant aspect of these films' sense of morality is the apparent amoral position of the film-makers. Neither film expresses an overt judgmental viewpoint, while subtly casting blame on the larger situation, and by extrapolation to the system that produced it. Rossellini made clear his approach to cinema: "for me, neorealism is above all a moral position. It then became an aesthetic position, but at the beginning it was moral." (in Verdone, 1995, p.43)

However, neither Puiu nor Mungiu assert their moral position in depicting their narratives. One of the central figures of the Polish Cinema of Moral Concern, Krzysztof Kieślowski directed and co-wrote *The Decalogue* (1988), ten one-hour long films, each illustrating one of the Ten Commandments, and produced "in the [socialist] context of imposed excessive politicization of the personal domain" (Iordanova, 2003, p.95). Although the theme is morality, in each film his own moral position is almost imperceptible. The characters tend to display a morality which is not consistent, while the narratives do not always articulate culpability. Prohibited from taking a political stance against the communist ideology or its visible effects, Kieślowski chose to depict the latter, which includes the transformed morality of individuals. However, his explicit focus on morality gained him the reputation of the ultimate apolitical director. Iordanova claims that during communism films were deliberately apolitical, in order to "assert the individual right to be indifferent to politics" (Iordanova, 2003, p.93). However, by depicting the effects of communism, such as the "gray" communist spaces or the complex moral situations which were created by the regime, films such as Kieślowski's *Decalogue*, *Lazarescu* and *432*, all deliberately betray their hidden moral stance. Hence, their moral position is aimed not at the characters, but at the larger system which produced the situations depicted. Therefore, their position is subtly but profoundly political.

However, Otilia's physical and social punishment for helping Gabita, as well as Mioara's unsuccessful prevention of Lazarescu's eventual death in spite of her ongoing efforts, both point to the meaninglessness acquired by maintaining moral integrity in the communist as well as post-communist Romanian context. In returning to the concept of frustration and its potential resolve through aggression, I believe that repeated unsatisfied goals can also lead to a demoralizing resignation caused by learned helplessness. Initially developed as a behavioral construct, psychologists define learned helplessness as a passivity observed in depressed or oppressed individuals, due to the belief they gain that their efforts have no effect (Myers, 2002, p.55). In fact, a common example of learned helplessness is within the hospital

setting, wherein patients' lack of control over their condition leads to passive resignation (Myers, 2002).

(Ironically, Lazarescu is an exception made evident by his enduring attitude of defiance towards the doctors who disrespect him).

Thus, the state of prolonged frustration present in Romania's communist and post-communist settings can also lead to an attitude of resigning oneself to the oppressive conditions. For Otilia, helping her friend leads to a physical and social punishment she resigns herself to; regrettably, it also leads to a lack of appreciation from Gabita herself, evident in the final scene as she appears unaware of Otilia's selflessness. The unfortunate outcomes of Otilia's altruistic actions indicate the futility of her efforts, a meaninglessness also characteristic of Mioara's efforts to obtain care for Lazarescu. For each, learning from their experience may lead to being less helpful, even unethical, in the future. Indeed, an argument of futility could have also been made by the uncooperative doctors in regards to Lazarescu, given his advanced age, his drinking, his lack of family, and his multiple health problems.



432, Dinner Scene

In both 432 and *Lazarescu*, frustration and subsequent resignation are also represented through the minimalist yet persistent circular nature of the narratives, the rhythm in which they unfold, and the manner in which resolution comes about. Several significant similarities are: both have the timeline of one day, two main characters, but in fact a protagonist for whom the entire situation is antagonist, both about dying, loneliness, and two different sides of the medical system -- the emergency room circuit, and the 'underground' medical system of illegal abortions -- both are systems where you would expect to find help without hesitation, not egotistical or monetary resistance. The circular nature of each is evident in the main character's constant return to the space where her course of action will be determined. For Otilia, it is the hotel room where her friend is brought and waits; for Mioara it is also a generic, impersonal and transitional non-space (Augé, 2000), that of the hospital emergency rooms.

The rhythm of each narrative is evidenced by an initial persistent pace, one which is characterized by the tension between moving forward and other forces which keep working against the main character's objectives. The result is an increased frustration which reveals itself as resistance and then resignation in the climactic scene of each film. For Mioara, her aggravation becomes evident when she urges the second-last doctor and his nurse to operate Lazarescu before it is too late. As they each successively oppose and offend her, she eventually ceases her efforts and resigns to their wishes.

However, Otilia's resistance to her oppressive circumstances, and her subsequent resignation, are significantly more personal than Mioara's. While Mioara is assisting a patient and the well-being of his body, for Otilia it is also her own body that is affected in the process. Her resistance to its violation becomes evident in her confrontation with Bebe at the hotel; yet she decides to resign to his demands, making a choice she may not have perceived as such at the time. Given the general oppression of the communist system, a tendency to resign to one's circumstances has developed alongside that of indirectly

resisting them. Thus, Otilia may have felt that ultimately she has no choice but to accept Bebe's conditions, an attitude of resignation which becomes even more evident when she attends the dinner party of her boyfriend's mother. Although she preferred not to attend, once there her strained social efforts are stunted by the behavior of the other guests, who either offend or neglect her. However, in this situation she experiences no frustration when her efforts do not lead to the expected social aim. Instead, the dissatisfaction leads directly to resignation, an effect of her personal resistance gradually being eroded throughout the events of the day – from her misunderstandings with Gabita, to obtaining the hotel room with difficulty, to accepting Bebe's demands. Thus, similar to *Lazarescu*, the representation of frustration and its subsequent resignation to the futility of one's efforts also become evident in the narrative structure of *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days*.

Hence, both films present a narrative which begins with altruism, continues with increasing frustration and the realization of futility, and concludes with resignation. Resulting from the oppressive communist and post-communist conditions and their increasing collective frustration, this reproducible narrative cycle signifies a morality which is radically transformed by its socio-economic context, and which becomes profoundly individually negotiated. The unexpected personal choices of selflessness demonstrate that oppressive conditions do not always damage morality, and in fact they can also result in the emergence of a heightened moral sense. However, the unjustified aggression also originating from an individually constructed system of morality reveals the futility in having superior moral integrity. The result is not only resignation to one's oppressive conditions; but also the formation of an open fluid morality which, when help is solicited, will be instantaneously negotiated and subjected to the self-questioning of "is it worth it?" and "for whom?".

Conclusion

“Such ideals gone to waste along with your fading body! For how many times, late at night, we built and re-built the castles of Spain! “We will bring the Romanian world into Europe,” you said, Grigore Brezeanu. And now death took you to a world where cinema never flickers. And the ideal was left widowed... “
~ Poet Emil Isac, speaking of his friend Grigore Brezeanu (in Caliman, 2006).

It is impossible to speak of recent Romanian cinema without looking into the severe political and economic reconfigurations of Europe which have radically shaped the country in the 20th century. In a cultural environment where the past is visible and co-exists with the present, cinema is equally shaped by its present-day socio-economic context as by its oppressive communist history.

I began Part I with a question: what is the social reality that recent Romanian cinema appears to be so devoted to? The relationship between cinema and its socio-economic and cultural context is profoundly intimate, and scholars have the ability to illuminate its complexities, but also to obscure them. The persistence of a Cold War ideology which favored anti-communist films of resistance began with overlooking a great number of East European productions during communism, and led to discounting most post-communist efforts, deemed less impressive without their oppressive ideological context as backdrop. However, East-West binaries are gradually transforming. Beginning with the changing discourse of geographical designations – “Eastern Europe” becoming “East-Central Europe and the Balkans” – and continuing with the development of new theoretical frameworks as well as the post-communist contributions of East European scholars to Western literature, the Western approaches to the examination of East European culture and cinema are undergoing a necessary long-awaited transformation.

These developments in the international arena of film studies have brought the communist and post-communist contexts to forefront of examinations of East European cultural products. In Romania, prior to the installment of communism the prolific early beginnings of film production – including the first-ever two hour feature by Grigore Brezeanu, *The War of Independence*, 1911 – demonstrated the early potential of Romanian cinema. However, with the exception of a few courageous films, the communist regime succeeded in shaping film production in accordance with communist ideological interests. And although Romanian cinema had reached its peak in production during the communist period, given the ideological pressure and its manifestations through censorship, truthful representations of reality were scarce before the 1989 Revolution. Post-communist Romanian cinema began with a bleak aesthetic which alienated its public, continued with comedies which were popular at the box-office, and recently resurfaced with realist representations of both communist and post-communist narratives.

The effects of communist oppression and the collective state of frustration are observed in, and also maintained by, the physical and social reality of Romania. In both *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Puiu, 2005) and *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Mungiu, 2007), the representation of reality is at once objective and subjective through the use of the narrative device of the witness, and depictions of negative aspects are made without unnecessary emphasis. Their documentary approach is unique in the history of Romanian cinema, and by not bringing excessive attention to the negative aspects of physical reality, directors Puiu and Mungiu achieve a representation of reality which distinctively lacks in self-pity; simultaneously, they uncover the more significant, positive as well as negative social effects of oppression and its prolonged material and psychological frustration. Among them are the transformed individually negotiated sense of morality which may lead to altruism as well as immorality, but also to an eventual resignation to one's oppressive circumstances following the proven futility of one's actions.

The Death of Mr. Lazarescu and *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* mark the beginning of a realist representation of Romania's social context and its production of liminal states. Should they become part of the Romanian public's collective consciousness in a favorable manner, their representations of social reality might also initiate a necessary reconstruction and renegotiation of national identity. However, the Romanian public has a widespread ambivalence towards negative depictions of everyday life in Romania (Serban, 2007). Thus, the less negative effects of communism depicted in these two films – altruism, patience, perseverance, acceptance – might serve as evidence that Romania's oppressive past did not fully destroy the spirit and morality of its people; and subsequently might aid in diminishing a low national self-esteem also generated by the communist regime (Popescu, 1999).

In examining the violence in two Romanian films, Popescu argues that external violent oppression has been internalized, leading to the production of violent dark films and a negative self-deprecating nationalism. Although *432* and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* are more recent and not nearly as dark nor violent, I believe that a low national identity justifies the continuing ambivalence that the Romanian public has for the darker grim aesthetic. While film industry members often recognize the value of these two films, neither has been entirely embraced by the general public, who often avoids potentially negative depictions of their social reality. But as was the case with Italian neo-realism, realist cinematic representations have the potential to create a new identity. However, the Romanian public and its ambivalence towards realist depictions of Romania is likely to lead to an a priori refusal of identification. And thus, paradoxically, by embracing realism, *432* and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* defy initial identification. Hence, the prolonged frustration with the slow economic transition to capitalism, and the survival of the everyday communist aesthetic, is likely to result in a refusal of identification with the new realist Romanian cinema, and thus a longer process of identity renegotiation.

However, these two films and their minimalist, realist, and non-judgmental yet morally ambiguous narratives, stand out as unique stylistic approaches in the context of the history of Romanian cinema; but most importantly they stand out as testimony in the real and chaotic, eagerly Westernized and yet still only post-communist larger social context of Romania.

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