

UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ-BOLYAI CLUJ-NAPOCA

FACULTATEA DE ISTORIE ȘI FILOSOFIE

ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ

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ABSTRACT

JUDGMENT, WARINESS AND CENSORSHIP:

FILM ON CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTS IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA (1965-1989)

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ABSTRACT

Between 1965 and 1989 roughly 550 films were produced in Romania,¹ of which slightly more than half are known as “films on contemporary subjects”.² According to the official definition, issued in 1968, this type of film is “inspired by different areas and aspects of reality”.³ Despite its vague character, the definition establishes a direct relationship between the communist everyday reality and the stories supposedly presented by this type of films. An official statement from 1976 brings further clarification by suggesting that films on contemporary subjects should highlight “the leading role of the party in building socialism, the figure of the new man, of communism, the participation of the masses in the elaboration and implementation of the Party’s policies, in the management of society, the process of educating working people in the spirit of ethical norms of socialist equity”.⁴ Therefore, this cinematographic genre has the obligation to attract as many spectators at home and must circulate abroad, if possible throughout the world, in order to promote Romanian socio-economic achievements. Cristian Tudor Popescu notes that films on contemporary subjects had the task of disseminating Romanian national-communist ideology and therefore remained subordinate to propagandistic purpose.⁵ The idea that films on contemporary subjects had no other quality outside their ideological goals is shared by most of the researchers who included in their work a discussion of this thematic line; among them are: the aforementioned C.T. Popescu, Bogdan Jitea⁶, Călin Căliman⁷.

There has been no extensive study on this type of film, which at best is mentioned in attempts to write a history of Romanian cinema from its beginnings, but in such syntheses it is normal for

1 *Total Spectatori Film Românesc la 31 Decembrie 2018*, conform Centrului Național al Cinematografiei, document publicat în iunie 2019. Disponibil online: <http://cnc.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TOTAL-SPECTATORI-FILM-ROMANESC-LA-31.12.2018.pdf>

2 Aurelia Vasile. *Le cinéma roumain dans la période communiste. Représentations de l’histoire nationale. Volume 1*, Teză de doctorat, Universitatea din București, Facultatea de Istorie, 2011, p. 167, p. 240, p. 265. În urma bilanțului realizat de istoricul Aurelia Vasile, în perioada 1960-1970, 50% din filmele de ficțiune realizate în România sunt pe subiecte contemporane, în perioada 1971-1979 vorbim despre un procent de 49%, iar în 1981-1989 procentul crește, ajungând la 64%.

3 ANIC. DS 88/1968, Fond CC al PCR. Secția Cancelarie, Stenograma ședinței Comisiei ideologice a CC al PCR din ziua de 23 mai 1968, p. 132.

4 ANR. Fond CC PCR Cancelarie, DS. 78/1976, *Program de măsuri pentru aplicarea hotărârilor privind munca ideologică ale congresului al XI-lea al Partidului și ale Consiliului educației politice și al culturii socialiste*, p. 40.

5 Cristian Tudor Popescu. *Filmul surd în România mută. Politică și propagandă în filmul românesc de ficțiune (1912-1989)*, Iași, Polirom, 2011, p. 130.

6 Bogdan-Alexandru Jitea. *Dizidență și conformism în cinematografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu*, Teză de doctorat. Universitatea din București, Facultatea de Istorie, 2012.

7 Călin Căliman, *Istoria filmului românesc 1987-2000*, București, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000, p. 147.

this subject to enjoy limited attention. Scholars who have taken steps in this direction are Dominique Nasta,⁸ Valerian Sava,⁹ Călin Căliman,¹⁰ Tudor Caranfil,¹¹ Bujor T. Rîpeanu,¹² Marilena Ilieșiu.¹³ They discussed the film on contemporary subjects alongside historical films and kept a fairly general perspective on the matter. Their books are mere overviews of Romanian cinema and attempt thorough coverage of the matter, from *Independența României / The Independence of Romania* (directed by Aristide Demetriade, 1912, the first Romanian feature film) until the present.

Films on contemporary subjects are also mentioned in works on the New Romanian Cinema (coagulated in the 2000s and known by the acronym NCR), which also include brief references (with antithetical value) to communist cinema. Authors may have felt tempted to write about this “miracle” of the Romanian New Cinema (as Nasta calls it in the title of her book¹⁴), and thus provided a bird’s eye view of the period, which does nothing but strengthen the impression that nothing remarkable was produced at that time, that communist cinema is worthless and therefore what is happening now is all the more exceptional, born, as it is, out of a void.

The lack of previous substantial analyses regarding films on contemporary topics gives this research its original character. The subject brings forth a less used source to recover the history of Ceaușescu’s regime, promoted in the period as the “Golden Age”. Consequently, this study has used films on contemporary topics as historical documents. Placed in the contemporaneity of the moment, this audio-visual product can document not only “socialist reality” imagined by the regime's authorities, but also daily life during Ceaușescu’s era. Many researchers from the international scholarly community have adopted similar approaches regarding their countries; this certifies the fact that films focused on that period contain enough information about that time to be accepted as documents with historical potential. Péter Apor writes about Hungarian films as a

8 Dominique Nasta. *Contemporary Romanian Cinema. The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

9 Valerian Sava. *Istoria critică a filmului românesc contemporan* (vol. I), București, Editura Meridiane, 1999.

10 Călin Căliman. *op. cit.*

11 Tudor Caranfil. *Dicționar subiectiv al realizatorilor filmului românesc*, Iași, Polirom, 2013.

12 Bujor T. Rîpeanu. *Filmat în România, vol. I. 1911-1969*, București, Editura Fundației PRO, 2004.

Bujor T. Rîpeanu. *Filmat în România, vol. II. 1970-1979*, București, Editura Fundației PRO, 2005.

13 Marilena Ilieșiu. *Povestea poveștii în filmul românesc (1912-2012)*, Iași, Polirom, 2013.

14 Dominique Nasta. *op. cit.*, titlul cărții.

true mirror of reality,¹⁵ Joshua Feinstein¹⁶ and Sonja E. Klocke¹⁷ present East German productions with proletarians and discuss the differences between the presented social situation and the factual reality of daily life; Darko Tadic¹⁸ explains how Yugoslav directors had to find a balance between socialist reality and the aesthetic but also social influences of Western culture. Each scholar looks at how films made during the communist regime relate to everyday life and the messages that the authorities were trying to convey to the public through cinema.

Taking a similar approach, this study aims to discuss cultural policies during the communist regime, but also to explore communication between authorities and population. We are interested in film production, because by analyzing it we can better identify the subjects commissioned by the political authorities and how the creators chose to approach them inside their films. With the coming to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1965, the attention of the political authorities towards cinematography increases. The First Secretary is aware of the ideological strength of this audio-visual environment and asks the filmmakers to consider that their projects must aim at educating the masses in a socialist spirit.

Therefore, the central question of our research must be the following: What do these films tell us about the era in which they were produced? The question opens a discussion about the evolution of Romanian cinema in Ceaușescu's regime between the functions imposed by the authority, the political imperatives of the moment, the daily interferences and the agendas, much more difficult to control, of the actors involved. This type of film can, of course, be viewed as the result of a certain political system, but also with real interest for those who have worked within the domain. In addition to its specific status as propaganda vehicle, this type of film discusses people and situations that exist, to some extent, in society. We are talking about audio-visual products with which a number of generations have (been) identified in different measures, depending on their

15 Péter Apor. „Spectacular History: Photography, Film and Exhibitions in Representations of the Hungarian Soviet Republic after 1956”, in *The Hungarian Historical Review*, Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2014, pp. 337- 362.

16 Joshua Feinstein. „Constructing the Mythic Present in the East German Cinema: Frank Beyer's "Spur der Steine" and the 11th Plenum of 1965”, in *Central European History*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1999, pp. 203-220.

17 Sonja E. Klocke. „Risen from Ruins”, in *Colloquia Germanica* , Vol. 50, No. 1, Themenheft: New Perspectives on Young Adult GDR Literature and Film, 2017, pp. 101-122.

18 Darko Tadic. „Yugoslav Propaganda Film: Early Works (1945-52)”, in *Journal of Film and Video*, University of Illinois Press, Vol. 63, No. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 3-12.

power of penetration, but also on the cultural, social and professional origin of those who consumed them.

Therefore, the study aims to explore the relationship with the reality imagined by the authorities, the “socialist reality” constructed in party documents and the discourses of the authorities – a relationship that has been most of the times read as propaganda in favor of the communist regime. At the same time, we intend to analyze the relationship with the political reality of the Ceaușescu regime, including the perspective of cultural policies, and, finally, to understand the relationship films have with life during Ceaușescu's regime, a reality which most times appears to occur involuntarily in these films.

The study will thus approach in parallel the level of intention, materialized in the educational mission of cinematography, drawn by authorities, and that of implementation, revealed by the produced films. More concretely, taking into account the didactic role intended for cinematography by the communist regime, the research aims both to reconstruct the way that cultural policies work within this field and the way they are applied in practice, at institutional, programmatic and strategic level. Discussing films on contemporary topics, from the project phase to its implementation, the research focuses on the production and promotion of the artifact as well as on the product itself. Discussing the impact of the Soviet model on Romanian cinema, essentially the power of attraction of socialist realism, in parallel with the timid penetration of Western models, especially from French cinema (*ciné-verité*), this research will explore the role played by the aesthetics of the film in its effectiveness as a vehicle of communication.

Compared to previous attempts to write about communist cinema in Romania, this thesis approaches the subject in a different way. As previously mentioned, almost nothing was written about the film on contemporary subjects. The few works that did refer to these films placed them among purely propagandistic products. Cristian Tudor Popescu is the most fierce and sharp accuser of Communist cinema.¹⁹ The author includes the subject of propaganda in all chapters of his research – from propaganda in the history of mankind, to propaganda in cinematography and, finally, in the Romanian fiction film. The selection of films he makes is meant to reinforce the idea of a national cinema that has made, without exception, purely ideological films.

¹⁹ *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române (ediția a II-a revăzută și adăugită)*, Academia Română, Institutul de Lingvistică, Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2009. Disponibil online: <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/propagandă>

Stimulated by this idea, most of the existing research uses a schematic analysis of the ideological narrative structure, where the *new man* eventually prevails, the system is thus improved and socialism consolidated. It is true that this narrative structure is prevalent in many films of the period, qualifying them as propaganda, defined as an action carried out systematically in order to spread a political, religious doctrine, theories, and opinions, to make them known and accepted, to gain followers.²⁰ However, that does not mean that these films are devoid of any other content: often details that appear in the background are able to say something about living in communist Romania.

*

Taking into account the purposes of this research, the structure of the thesis was dictated by three *P* – that is, the production, the product and the promotion of the film in the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, subjects that establish the three parts of the research.

The first part entitled *Film Production during the Ceaușescu regime* followed the film production during the communist period. Even if we were particularly interested in the Ceaușescu era, we also covered the period governed by Gheorghiu-Dej, in order to better highlight the changes that have taken place from one decade to the next. The first chapter of the first part entitled *Cinematography. Program, institutions, staff, topics* pursued the role of propaganda, cultural policies in the cinema – the evolution from the appropriation of the Soviet model to concern for national character –, the definition of the field as cultural but also economic, as it was widely recognized that cinema should be as much an art as an industry; control over the domain; its profitability; the desire to be internationally recognized. Also, we were interested in the program drawn up by the Party for the production of film and the outline of the two major thematic lines, the “national epic” and the “film on contemporary subjects” in the cultural policies designed for the development of cinematography. Also, here we sought to identify the favourite themes for the film on contemporary topics. We were also interested in the program drawn up in various types of documents and its evolution over time, if certain topics were prioritized depending on the moment. Another important point concerned the institutional infrastructure: how did the institutions meant to coordinate the activity of cinematographic production develop? How was the personnel working within these specialized institutions in the field selected and trained and to what extent they were professionals or Party activists. The second chapter of the first part entitled

20 Cristian Tudor Popescu. *op. cit., passim.*

Creators. The struggle for resources and the way to the product followed the course of a film from script to broadcast – the relationship between authorities and creators (directors, writers, and actors). We were interested to see how these individuals are seen in the specialized literature, what is the prevailing opinion about them, what are the labels that are applied to them: dissidents, minions of the system, obedient, opportunistic? At the same time, it is important to understand how the process of production looked from their perspective, what strategies they adopted in confronting the authorities. It is equally important to try to reconstruct the path of a film from the emergence of the idea to the diffusion of the finished product; here we divided the discussion into stages of production: approval of the script, filming, viewing, modifications, contact with the public, evaluation (through rating). Also within the chapter, we looked at various coping mechanisms, some more radical than others, such as the withdrawal from the field (Liviu Ciulei and, to some extent Lucian Pintilie), the option of making allegorical films to avoid ideological directives (Mircea Săucan, sometimes Alexandru Tatos, Dan Pița), the compromises that sometimes the creators had to make in order to be able to continue working, the open opposition to the system in local public statements or taking a stance in the western media, particularly on radio stations. The third chapter of the first part entitled *Control: the practice of censorship. Blocking and promoting the movie* talked about promoting or blocking movies. Here we were interested in following the institutions that ensure the distribution and promotion of films, those that apply censorship, the filters through which a film passes to reach the viewers, the mechanisms by which a film was promoted and, finally, the mechanisms by which a film was obstructed.

The second part of the thesis entitled *Films produced during the Ceaușescu regime* explored the extent to which film production reflected the program drawn for cinematography and therefore followed the way in which the program dedicated to cinematography was put into practice. This part of the thesis followed the convergence between the discourse of the authorities and the production of film. It specifically captured the transition from idea to production and assessed whether interest in a topic, at discursive level was reflected by the theme of the films that were actually produced. This part of the thesis tried to make a connection between political developments during the Ceaușescu regime and the prioritization of certain topics. We aimed to reconstruct the Ceaușescu era, as it was designed by the authorities, with the help of these visual documents, so we tried to identify the major issues addressed in Romanian films, to assess the

ideological level of the messages transmitted, the propagandistic and / or didactic function with which films were invested, at least at the level of intention, the aesthetic quality of these films that could increase their effectiveness in mass education. The first chapter of the second part entitled *The Road to the “Golden Age”: Transformation of Romania into a socialist state* followed the way in which films produced in the Ceaușescu era reflected the program of transformation of Romania into a socialist state, through nationalization, cooperativization, industrialization, modernization, social uniformization and the acquisition of an international reputation. The second chapter entitled *The Making of the New Man* traced the evolution in the film of the new man and the relationship between party directives and the on-screen transposition; the relationship between film and “socialist reality”; the priorities of the regime during these decades, social homogenization and integration, dedication to work, taking on a modernization mission in industry and agriculture, promoting the family, “the basic cell of society”; the themes set for these films reflect the following realities: young people in school, young people in the field of work, dedicated workers, activists engaged in change. The third chapter entitled *Enemies of the system* identified opponents of the regime as defined at the level of party discourse (through official documents), at the level of thematic directions drawn for cinematography and finally at the level of films produced. In this chapter we identified the typologies of the enemies of the system and we attempted to see whether from one decade to another they changed in some way.

The third part of the thesis, entitled *Promotion and censorship of films during the Ceaușescu regime* followed the course of a film after its production has ended, promoting or blocking it, trying to reconstruct the mechanisms involved in this process. The first chapter entitled *Power and Truth: a national project promoted as such* started from a case study and identified the mechanisms for promoting a film with a strong ideological message and mission drawn by authorities, such as the project signed by the couple Manole Marcus (director)-Titus Popovici (screenwriter) in 1971. The second chapter of Part Three, entitled *Obstruction of Movies* identified films, whose dissemination was blocked, either by banning them altogether, or simply by keeping them away from the public eye. We explored the motivations of the authorities for these decisions. At the same time, alongside the justifications, we were interested in the mechanisms of obstruction of a film after it was produced. The third chapter entitled *Movies with a Normal Path: starting from Saturday Night Ball* built a case study around the film directed by

Geo Saizescu in 1967 and tried to detect what makes the difference between a highly promoted project and one that enjoys moderate attention. The discussion was all the more interesting as we could find in *Saturday Night Ball* almost all the topics promoted by propaganda: modernizing the country, transforming the individual into a new man, emphasizing the importance of the family, building a major infrastructure objective.

*

The question from which this research started places the investigation at the intersection between the field of history, more precisely of cultural history, and the field of film studies. Thus, from the beginning, this thesis fosters a different approach from that of film critics or film study specialists. Wanting to add at least one extra layer to the idea that communist cinema was to some extent subordinated to the authorities, we set out to find the main themes of the films of the period and to see how they communicate with each other, what defines them as propagandistic, which of their details can be considered veiled critiques of the regime, but also how they preserved the memory of that time. This research also took into account films where the directors did not intend to produce a propaganda film; where they were openly critical of the regime. At the same time, there are films with high propagandistic content, which nevertheless have an important artistic value (for example, *Imposibila iubire / Impossible Love*, *Puterea și Adevărul / The Power and The Truth*), and the question we asked ourselves is if the quality of this type of product can make it more convincing and therefore more effective. On the other hand, our approach differs from that of the historians who dealt with films on contemporary topics, because they insisted on their function without analyzing in detail the product itself. Although this doctoral work analyses in detail only a sample of the films made during this period, we worked with a much larger number of productions (105), in order to better understand the general context and the thematic lines that were important for the authorities. In this way, we could compare on the one hand the content of the films, their theme in relation to the plan drawn up by the decision makers, and, on the other hand, we identified in what way the films are connected with reality, what events are sufficiently important to become subjects for scripts (for example, promoting rural life in the 1970s and 1980s or large infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the Bucharest subway or the Danube-Black Sea Canal). It is through this approach that we seek to make a contribution to this field, which is between history studies, cultural policy studies and cinematography studies. The detailed analysis we made reveals the presence of realities that are

not intentionally shown, but involuntarily, and speak about the communist system led by Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Because it opens up interesting questions about life in communism, we believe that the present study can facilitate new discussions and approaches regarding the film on contemporary subjects made under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Using this source as a historical document that has the power to reveal a world, we tried to show an additional, auxiliary and / or different method of research on communism in Romania. Without presuming to have exhausted the subject, the study of film on contemporary subjects and cultural policies can be further developed. At the same time, the present research tries to shed light on the films of the time, so that they are no longer viewed as propaganda and nothing else, but cultural products that, due to the context in which they were made can represent an important source for any historical, political and aesthetic study of what the Ceaușescu era represented. By giving them time and attention, we can better understand and appreciate the creators, their struggles and creations.