

**Moments**  
**In The Destiny Of Romanian Culture In Communism**  
**– Theater And Film –**

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**A “re-theatralization” of the theater**  
(attempts to relieve the theater performance from ideological guardianship)

Although the theater functioned on the basis of an imposed and strictly supervised repertoire, employing an artistic personnel which was forced into humiliating conditions by officials<sup>1</sup>, it managed to keep up its status as a refuge for Romanian culture. Despite the Zhdanovism between '48 and '53, the public did not abandon theaters, and thanks to the “abilities” of Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, the Municipal Theater in Bucharest, which bears her name today, lived through one of its great periods of creation between 1947-1949.

After the war, the Romanian stage gathered three generations of remarkable names; first, there were the artists of the inter-war period: Ion Sava, Victor Ion Popa, G. M. Zamfirescu, Ion Aurel Maican; then those who affirmed themselves between the years 1945-1947: Marietta Sadova, Ion Sahighian, Val Mugur, Ion Olteanu, or theoreticians like Petru Comarnescu, Alice Voinescu, Aurora Nasta; and actors like Mihai Popescu, Nicolae Bălăţeanu, Aura Buzescu, Ion Finteşteanu.<sup>2</sup> Then, after the '50s, there were also directors fighting for the constraint of *The Art of Performance* against any attempt of impinging upon the truth. They were members of the circle of young stage-managers: Victor Ion Popa, Liviu Ciulei, Sorana Coroamă Stanca, Lucian Giurchescu, Vlad Mugur, George Jora, Dan Nasta, Miron Niculescu, Horia Popescu, George Rafael, Mihai Raicu, Radu Stanca, George Teodorescu, Tony Gheorghiu, Dinu Cernescu, and Mihai Dimiu. The fact that their subsequent work proved to be very diversified mainly expressed their personal options, the limits

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<sup>1</sup> The 6 June 1948 issue of the review *Rampa*: “The list of actors who have the right to profess. The result of the second review examination of the *Romanian Artists' Syndicate*”.

<sup>2</sup> Information from Sorana Coroamă Stanca.

of their personal skills, and only to a lesser degree the hindrances presented by the ideological program.

Under these circumstances, the syntagm indicating the public attention given to them, the famous “re-theatralization of the theater” borrowed from Charles Dullin, was put forward by Radu Stanca. He wrote in an article bearing the same title, published in 1956<sup>1</sup> and which was meant to complete L. Ciulei’s essay on theater painting: “even the director himself, forgetting his tasks, formulates his rebellious pretense to supremacy. And, since his mission was exactly the “theatralization of the theater”, that is, placing it on the solid ground of collective cooperation, the director found himself the promoter of “dis-theatralization” of the theater. Inviting a marionette for the place of an actor (Craig), and reducing the text to the level of a pretext (Meyerhold – see the staging of *The Inspector General*, etc.), the director claims the performance exclusively for himself, and thus within such an ideology the performance becomes an artistic expression modality for the art of stage-directing exclusively”.<sup>2</sup>

The “pretext” for a performance can also be found back in Hitler’s Germany, when the modification of theater plays, even classical ones, was a habitual practice for propaganda purposes. This “technique” was well practiced by both the creators of the Stalinist years, and later ones, when the purpose was the demonstration of an anti-totalitarian attitude. Regarding our years however, the text’s pretext still served the purposes of the imposed ideology. Therefore Radu Stanca felt constrained to motivate his approach, convergent with the artists of the time: “The director must resign himself to what makes the beauty of his art: its anonymity. The lack of tangible materiality of his means (...) Four factors seems to me as decisive for the theatrical character of a performance: the poet, the actor, the director, and the public (...) The director fixes the quantity of theatrality in a performance, and it is him again who has the ability to “theatralize” it. Therefore the responsibility of a modern director is huge (...) he always has the task to find the most “theatrical” forms of expression for a performance; he thus always has the task to “theatralize theater”.

The debate over the “theatralization of the theater”, or in other words “re-theatralization of the theater” captured not only the field review *Teatrul* (The Theater, 1954-1957), but also other cultural publications, in the first place that of the *Contemporanul* (The

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<sup>1</sup> In *Teatrul* (The Theater), 4 (1956), 52.

Ibid., 54.

Contemporary), which for a long time was the echo of official directives. The performances which caused such discussions are worthy of attention. First of all: *Apus de soare* (Sunset), created in 1953 by Marietta Sadova and M. Zirra in the Bucharest National Theater. The same year 1953 marked the fame of the Cluj National Theater, where Marietta Sadova and the young stage designer Liviu Ciulei had been working since 1949. The *Othello* of the Cluj National Theater was a performance kept on the repertoire for several seasons. After the tour in Bucharest in 1953, "the stage design of the young Liviu Ciulei was repeatedly amended for what proved to be more viable over the years."<sup>1</sup> *Intrigă și iubire* (Intrigue and Love, 1953) also staged in Cluj by director Ion Dinescu and stage designer Mircea Macaboji was criticized for the "insufficiency of direction"<sup>2</sup>. The reviewer Florian Potra referred not so much to the director as an agglutinating factor of theatrical elements, but to his quality as a censor. Either way, the performance enjoyed a great public success.

In fact the debate about the "theatralization of the theater", which was to consolidate the autonomy of the *Art of Performance* in Romania even to this day, developed on two levels: the theoretical one discussed in the press, and the one applied on the stage, which led to programmatic performances. We mention thus: *Ioan Vodă cel Cumplit* (The Ruthless Voivode Ioan) at the Romanian Opera directed by Ginel Teodorescu; *Inspector de poliție* (An Inspector Calls) by Priestly in Baia Mare directed by Horia Popescu, and *Domnișoara Nastasia* (Miss Nastasia) by the same director at the Giulești Theater; *Ultima oră* (The Last Hour) directed by Mihai Dimiu; *Bărbierul din Sevilla* (The Barber of Sevilla) directed by Vlad Mugur at the Theater and Cinematography Institute in Bucharest; *Peer Gynt* also directed at the Institute by Dinu Cernescu; *Casa inimilor sfărâmate* (The House of Broken Hearts), *O scrisoare pierdută* (A Lost Letter), *Steaua fără nume* (The Star Without a Name), *Gaițele* (The jaybirds), and *Maria Stuart* in Sibiu directed by Radu Stanca; *Vrăjitoarele din Salem* (The Witches of Salem) at the former Nottara Theater directed by Sorana Coroamă Stanca, who also staged *Hotelul Astoria* (Astoria Hotel) by Alexandru Stein and *Hagi Tudose*, and the *Pogoară iarna* (Winterset) by Maxwell Anderson at the Iași National Theater in 1957; *Jurnalul Anei Frank* (The Diary of Anne Frank) directed by Ginel Teodorescu at the State Jewish Theater; *Omul*

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<sup>1</sup> In *Teatrul Național Cluj-Napoca* (The Cluj-Napoca National Theater), A monograph edited by the Cluj National Theater. 1994, 135.

<sup>2</sup> Review by Florian Potra, in *Almanahul literar* (The Literary Almanach), 11 November 1953.

*care aduce ploaia* (The Rainmaker) by Richard Nash, directed by Liviu Ciulei at the Municipal Theater (now Bulandra); *Zile obișnuite* (Common Days) staged by György Harag at Baia Mare; *Învățătoarea* (The Teacher) directed by M. Tompa in Târgu Mureș; *Preludiu* (Prelude) directed by Crin Teodorescu in Galați, etc.

A true invigorating urge overran the stages and the reviews. As an example: the debates about directing continued all throughout the years 1956-1957, by persons like Val Mugar, Mihai Raicu, Sorana Coroamă, Ion Șahighian, Victor Eftimiu, Radu Stanca, Sică Alexandrescu, Lucian Giurchescu, and even G. Călinescu, followed by Șt. A. Doinaș, Petru Comarnescu, I. D. Sârbu (until his arrest in 1959), Florian Potra, Ecaterina Oproiu. Most times polemical, the comments of the reviewers managed to impose authenticity: “For what is a “performance” after all? A creative synthesis achieved by the director.”<sup>1</sup> “Authenticity involves style, the so much chanted style. Finding a style by any means does not yet reflect authenticity.”<sup>2</sup>

The “iconoclast” attack was directed both against the earlier psychological tendencies in the art of performance, and preceding that, the infusion of dogmatism which paralyzed theatrical activity after 1948. Here is what they said at the Council of Theater Artists in 1957<sup>3</sup>:

“The dogmatic understanding of the principles of socialist realism and the essence of Stanislavski’s system is one of the main causes of uniformity observed lately in our theater. The dogmas have this specific quality to cure people of thinking with their own means and to make them indulge in a sweet and comfortable conformity.”

Sorana Coroamă wrote back in 1956<sup>4</sup>:

“In the warm atmosphere in which some of our theatres bathe, artistic compromise and conformity shake hands. It is difficult to establish under such conditions who is talented and who is not; which director mutilates the author’s text, perverts the public’s taste, falsifies the actor’s play out of stupidity and incompetence, and which director is forced to do so by the “objective” conditions at the theater where he works.”

In 1957, all the attention of the cultural world seemed to have polarized over the theater, a situation natural, if we think about a possible “drawer-literature”, musical compositions having the same fate, or even

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<sup>1</sup> In *Contemporanul*, June 1, 1956, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> In *Teatrul*, 3 (1957), 33.

<sup>4</sup> In *Contemporanul*, March 23, 1956, 3.

the works of fine artists dusting in their studios... On the other hand, theater does not suffer postponing. And this explains the blaming of bureaucracy when it hinders creation: "the truth peculiar to any specific theater is its artistic belief, its perspective program... We cannot create performances which are in general realistic, in general party-spirited, or in general popular, but only which are based on the solutions that each of us believes in."<sup>1</sup>

Also in 1957, the review *Teatrul* (The Theater) housed a debate about the *National Theater*<sup>2</sup>, in which the parties were: Radu Beligan, Sorana Coroamă, and Horia Lovinescu. The comment of the latter shows an unusual pathetism for those years: "There are in fact institutions which, having fulfilled a long spiritual role, manage to integrate themselves into the history of a nation and to serve the establishment of its physiognomy in the course of time. The French Comedy, the MHAT, the Scala, etc. cannot any more be separated from the moral countenance of the respective nations. Wherefrom the natural cult that surrounds them (...) The elevation of the National Theater to its old authority represents not only a simple pious duty, but also a necessary act of cultural policy, a gesture of lucidity."

The consequence of the long debates, discussions, and even of the Council of Theater Artists (1957) was, among other "facilities", the enrichment of the repertoire with pieces of world drama, as seen also in the case of "programmatic performances" previously mentioned, and also a more careful selection of national drama – which involved a reconsideration of the esthetic value of plays, especially of those based on Romanian history – and above all an extraordinary emulation of stage managing and acting.

In 1957, Liviu Ciulei staged *The Rainmaker* by Richard Nash. The reviews of the time recorded it as an event maintained as such throughout several theatric seasons of the Municipal Theater.

"It is the harmony, the balance which surprises in the case of Ciulei as a stage manager. The stage directing is intelligent, but the wittiness does not sterilize the zone of affectivity. (...) The stage direction is romantic, but never romanticizing, it breaths refinement, but refinement is never ostentatious, and not for a moment does it repress the frame. How curious! Such a balance is generally the privilege of maturity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In *Contemporanul*, January 25, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> In *Teatrul*, 1 (1957), 47.

<sup>3</sup> In *Teatrul*, 6 (1957), 84-85.

It is worth noting the titles (and subjects) that Liviu Ciulei offered. In *The Rainmaker* hope is given credit; despite any evidences, and thus any “objective” reality, in the end... it rains. In 1959, Ciulei staged G. B. Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, a performance which also enjoyed a great success throughout several seasons.

“Liviu Ciulei has offered us with *Saint Joan* a daring expression of modern scenic art. The irony of the iconoclast, the so characteristic and frequent anachronisms in the language of Shaw’s heroes have transformed into a refined duel of ideas, into an artistic “dramatized debate”, the contemporary resonance of which has faithfully served the author’s wish.” Nevertheless, the reviewer continues cautiously: “It is of course premature to try to define, based on these two plays, the dominant features of Ciulei’s stage management, as it appears that the director has only committed himself to the stage on the basis of these two performances”<sup>1</sup>.

Ciulei’s contribution to the stage design of his own or other’s performances (*Othello* in Cluj) should also be highlighted; it was so special compared to the “dusty” style of the age that it provoked, besides others, an inclination towards the “theatricality” of stage-design. One of the most enthusiastic fighters for “the theatricality of the theater” in this field was Petru Comarnescu. His comments seem today embarrassingly trivial. Unfortunately, in the time they meant the courage to place normality back into its rights, and therefore these comments signaled an artistic necessity minimized not only because of financial reasons: “Very often can one find in our performances inexpressive setting, with three walls placed in right angles with the ceiling representing an interior which can circulate from one show to the other without any modification, or different reproductions of an illustrated postcard. The plain copy of reality is set up with the ease of its artistic expression, of the suggestive eloquent image. There is a poetry of painting, which is extremely necessary in theater painting in order to be in harmony with the dramatic text.”<sup>2</sup> A perfect illustration in this respect remains Ciulei’s *Cum vă place* (As You Like It) at the Bulandra Theater (direction and stage design).

In 1960, Ciulei staged Maxim Gorky’s *Azilul de noapte* (A Night’s Lodging), being responsible for the stage management, costumes and stage design. The reviewer, Florian Potra morosely observed the “ideological” deviations of the direction, but the man with taste whom he ultimately was, gave way to honest admiration, allowing for the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Teatrul*, 7 (1959), 54.

<sup>2</sup> In *Teatrul*, 3 (1959), 38 (Petru Comarnescu)

understanding of the director's somber vision, not at all "following the line"<sup>1</sup>: "consistent, of an elegant attitude. But, unfortunately, he stopped here (...) The truth is that the setting of acts I, II, and IV (the lodging itself) was excellent despite the deviances from the author's indications (...) The artistic metaphor is always expressive without being ostentatious, up – the false light; down – death, the hole; in the middle the almost equal, uniform compartments of a cave-dweller's existence: The recent performance of the Municipal Theater left the impression that the director Ciulei was less interested in the problem of "recuperability" of the Gorkian heroes, and more in the objective reality of a human decline with no return (...) Assuming such a limit, Ciulei organized a homogenous performance, always a lodging of despair, a suffocation with no escape".

Several pages have been written about Liviu Ciulei's artistic activity, but the comments such as that of Ion Caramitru (I do not know any other) so bluntly accusing the subcultural mutations of the system which forced Ciulei to work for too many years abroad were rare:

The fact that the great beginnings of modern theater opened in the '60s and under the direction of Liviu Ciulei at the Municipal Theater, later Bulandra, was the beginning of a road, of a great successive victory of the Romanian theatrical school (...)

Under Ciulei's baton the performance becomes unique, a construction which not only has something to say, but which also fights something. His performances fought either with a tradition frozen into a form, or with a political dimension of the time passed. The history of the "Bulandra" theater, from the interdiction of *The Inspector General* until today, the entire history of this theater was the history of a permanent battle for truth and spiritual freedom (...) The directorate of Liviu Ciulei at the Bulandra meant, besides his great performances, also those of Pintilie, Penciucescu, Moisescu, Esrig, or Andrei Șerban (...). Liviu Ciulei's dismissal as the director of the Bulandra Theater at the beginning of the seventies is one of the cultural crimes which cannot be prescribed. This dismissal is probably part of an irresponsible, yet equally tenacious policy which has impoverished the Romanian theater for almost two decades, removing Pintilie, Esrig, Penciucescu, or Andrei Șerban.<sup>2</sup>

The devotion of the young towards the "forerunners", lacking any envy, seems admirable even today. For example, Lucian Pintilie

<sup>1</sup> In *Teatrul*, 3 (1960), 74.

<sup>2</sup> *România Literară*, year XXVI, 26 (1993), 16-17.

wrote in 1960: “we, young directors, have a lot to learn still from the masters of the Romanian stage. We cannot easily forget, for instance, the great demonstration of modern theater offered in this season during the Lucia Sturdza Bulandra ten-day festival of Romanian theater.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to demonstrate the “normal unfolding” of cultural life, beyond any “pretended restrictions”, the authorities allowed the National Theater to go on a tour to Paris in 1957. The illusion of freedom was maintained later on by the visit of Western theater companies – an event surely not forgotten by those who saw it (as many as there are left). The event was commented with a critical intelligence and a certain amount of courage by Mircea Alexandrescu on the pages of the *Teatrul* (1960)<sup>2</sup>: “today’s audience discovers the liberation from humiliation with the same poetic intensity with which he discovers Beethoven, Tolstoy, Eisenstein.” The *Vieux Colombier Theater* presented in Bucharest Anouilh’s *The Lark*, and J. Giraudoux’s *Tiger at the Gates* (Original: *La Guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu*), and the Piccolo Teatro from Milan Gioldoni’s *The Servant to Two Masters* directed by Giorgio Strehler.

And still, some years later Pintilie is forbidden to finish his staging of Teodor Mazilu’s *Proștii sub clar de lună* (Fools Under Moonlight). As the most rebellious of theater artists, the dare-devil of Romanian theater and film-production (in film succeeded by Mircea Daneliuc after the 80s), Lucian Pintilie conceives the most iconoclast of performances. For example *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Pintilie in 1967 (and reworked in an “additioned” version at the Arena Stage, Washington, in 1988), brings Chekhov into the actuality of the seventh decade in Eastern Europe. “The profound subject” of *The Cherry Orchard* in Lucian Pintilie’s staging is clearly and powerfully traced out, it is the topic of the “swallowing”, overwhelming of the subjective by the objective, of the impossibility to detach oneself from the chain of necessary determinations; the fact of being “cut off”, “separated” from reality is dearly paid for (...) Pintilie is not giving us a “comedy of sad heroes”, of whose wailing of the past one can freely laugh, but the real and strange, comic and troubling drama of happy suicides comfortably settled into their incurable unconsciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

D’ale Carnavalului (*Of the Carnival*) was rightly catalogued by Mitei Călinescu as a “theatrical essay”:

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<sup>1</sup> *Teatrul*, 7 (1960), 77, and 8 (1960), 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Teatrul*, 1 (1968), 44.

Pintilie's essay corresponds to a new reading of Caragiale (...) The second text created by Lucian Pintilie lends the piece its human valences. It is NOT doubling or overloading, but stripping. These marionettes, absorbed in the automatism of linguistic clichés, lowered in the precise sordidness of the suburb, acquire thus their contour of suffering. The vacuum can still cover thus an authentic pain. And the laughter slowly becomes of guilt. It is as if a derision of derision had the gift of opening our eyes (...) David Esrig was the first to be seen in the West with his *Troilus and Cressida*. The view that he cast upon Shakespeare was modern, yet hard to separate from Jan Kott's (...) Lucian Pintilie in his turn had no assistance in his successful attempt to wipe off the dust from Caragiale. Watching his first film, *Duminică la ora 6* (Sunday, at 6 o'clock), it seemed to us that despite an often distasteful script, the camera was "seeing" for the first time in Romania.<sup>1</sup>

Otherwise, the period between 1965-1970 of the so-called "relaxation" (by way of the admitted and directed critique of the "obsessing decade") witnessed an unprecedented growth of the value of the theatrical performance, the top of which was in that period Pintilie's *Revizorul* (The Inspector General, 1972), and also his film *Reconstituirea* (The Reconstitution), both banned before entering public consciousness. In this respect N.C. Munteanu justly noted that authenticity and timeliness in Romanian performances had come to its rights:

More than ever before, representations tend towards a real creative homogeneity, expressing and defining a live, authentic, contemporaneous theatrical idea. The tendency is more and more the performance which involves the reality known to the viewer, and which concerns him. This tendency to imprint a steady sense of ideas, of debate, of an active scene on the performance is owed first of all to the (true) animator, the learned, sensitive and intelligent director. Liviu Ciulei, David Esrig, Lucian Pintilie, Radu Penciulescu, Crin Teodorescu, Lucian Giurchescu, Dinu Cernescu, Valeriu Moisesescu, Andrei Șerban.<sup>2</sup>

True enough, the directors mentioned by N.C. Munteanu assailed the stage, transcending their masters. For the same period, in

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<sup>1</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte: jurnal indirect* (Short waves: an indirect diary), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990, 351-352.

<sup>2</sup> *Teatrul*, 5 (1968), 37.

Cluj should be noted: Radu Stanca, Sorana Coroamă, Vlad Mugur, György Harag.

In 1968, the Teatrul Mic (The Little Theater) enriched its repertoire with the unforgettable *Baltagul* (The Axe), script and direction signed by Radu Penciulescu (protagonist: Olga Tudorache). The same director stages here, for the first time in Romania, Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango*:

"This tragic and unfortunately much too real contemporary story, geometrically exposed by Mrożek receives in the performance at the Teatrul Mic a quality of white burning (...) It is a vivisection of the undisturbed "freedom" of the intellectual, closed up in fact irretrievably in the prison of barren words that he himself has built."<sup>1</sup>

The years 1967-1971 (and 1972) were the richest in outstanding performances, from which we select: *Iuliu Cezar* (Julius Caesar) directed by Andrei Șerban; *Regele Lear* (King Lear) at the Bucharest National Theater, staged by Radu Penciulescu; *Procesul* (The Trial) at the Teatrul de Comedie (Comedy Theater) directed by György Harag; *Nepotul lui Rameau* (Rameau's Nephew) at the Bulandra by David Esrig; *Cum vă place* (As You Like It) at the Bulandra by Liviu Ciulei; *Livada cu vișini* (The Cherry Orchard) at the Bulandra by Lucian Pintilie; *Lungul drum al zilei către noapte* (Long Day's Journey into Night) at the Bulandra by Ciulei, and at Cluj National Theater, staged by Crin Teodorescu and stage designed by Ciulei. *Gluga pe ochi sau Întunericul* (Hood on the Eyes, or Darkness by Josif Naghiu) directed by Valeriu Moisescu at the Bulandra in 1970; Camus's *Caligula* directed by Vlad Mugur at the Cluj National Theater, and finally, exceeding our time-limit (1945-1971), *Revizorul* (The Inspector General) by Gogol at the Bulandra, staged by Lucian Pintilie. This last performance, although created in 1972, deserves our attention since it followed the "theses of July" 1971, both as a culmination point, and as the closing up of a hoped time of cultural rebirth, which proved in fact possible, with great sacrifice and paradoxically, first and foremost in the theater. Liviu Ciulei himself defined Pintilie's performance as "a mile stone which marks the point of full maturity of the Romanian theater". Matei Călinescu thinks that the director seized the diabolic nature of mediocrity: "The infinite mediocrity of the lie which is the secret of its endless capacity to proliferate"; and Monica Lovinescu adds to these comments:

[When Lucian Pintilie turns the finale of the *Revizorul* (The Inspector General) into an apocalypse, not only does he observe a hidden

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<sup>1</sup> *Teatrul 1* (1965), 50.

meaning of Gogol's work, but also remains faithful to himself. We have also seen it in the Reconstituirea (The Reconstitution) and the D'ale carnavalului (Of the Carnival): for Lucian Pintilie stupidity, mediocrity, the laziness of thought have a tragic resolution, always ending in a more or less local apocalypse depending on the power of mediocrity. The grotesque is also there in Caragiale: he was like our suburbs, sad, insignificant; he crawled weakly also in the Reconstituirea, inevitably walking towards murder. In the Revizorul it finally takes the dimensions of the fantastic.<sup>1</sup>

### **The battle for the image** (aspects of Romanian film, 1960-1970)

In the years after 1948, or rather between 1945-1965, there were very few films which proved a minimum of staging art and which enjoyed the more or less professional treatment of criticism: *Răsună valea* (The Resounding Valley), *Desfășurarea* (The Unfolding) directed by Paul Călinescu; *Moara cu noroc* (The Lucky Mill), with Liviu Ciulei as assistant director; *Comoara din Vadul Vechi* (The Treasure of the Old Crossing), directed by Victor Iliu; *Viața nu iartă* (Life Doesn't Forgive) by Iulian Mihu and Manole Marcus; *Setea* (Thirst) and *Lupeni 29* (Lupeni 29) by Mircea Drăgan; *Soldați fără uniformă* (Soldiers Without Uniforms) and *La patru pași de la infinit* (Four Steps to Eternity) directed by Francisc Munteanu; *S-a furat o bombă* (A Bomb Was Stolen) and *Pași spre lună* (Steps to the Moon) by Ion Popescu Gopo; *Secretul cifrului* (The Secret of the Code) and *Tudor* by Lucian Bratu; *Străinul* (The Stranger) by Mihai Iacob; *Erupția* (The Eruption, 1957), *Valurile Dunării* (The Waves of the Danube, 1959), and *Pădurea spânzuraților* (The Forest of the Hanged), all directed by Liviu Ciulei. Before Ciulei, Gopo was the only film artist remarked for his originality and awarded abroad, perhaps also because of his recognition in the field of animation, a genre little more permissive than a full length film. Thus, this is the reality which entitled Lucian Pintilie to declare in 1965 that the time has come for directors to build in the spirit of the truth: "Otherwise films will reflect nothing but a false emulsion of optimism, applied over the natural emulsion of the film. And we easily get accustomed with this sweet and unhealthy optimism, and do not violently shout out that we are dealing with a film which presents a deformed and idyllic life. We cannot start making good films unless we admit that we have done nothing or almost

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<sup>1</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *Seismograme. Unde scurte II* (Seismograms. Short waves II), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993, 33-34.

nothing so far about certain enormous debts.”<sup>1</sup> From the titles listed above there is one clearly outstanding, the *Pădurea spânzuraților* (The Forest of the Hanged), which still resists today, and which was completed in 1964, broadcast for the first time in Bucharest on March 16, 1965, and was awarded the *Prize for Stage Direction* in Cannes, in the same year. The *Pădurea spânzuraților*, the third and last film of Ciulei, cannot be included into the category of “good contemporary films” in Pintilie’s preferences, but is even today maintained in public consciousness and criticism as the birth certificate of the Romanian artistic film. Beyond the intelligent script and the plasticity of the image, the *Pădurea spânzuraților* is more than a valuable cinematographic creation – it also has a polemical weight, already noted in that age<sup>2</sup>: “The director’s seriousness sometimes takes up an offensive, almost polemical tone. Hence the reluctance to be pert, to hover among soapsuds of enthusiasm (...) The serious eye dilates the contours of everyday life scenes and changes their specific weight.”<sup>3</sup>

It was probably Iordan Chimet who made the most pertinent observations about Ciulei’s work in a colloquium on stage direction organized by the magazine *Cinema* in 1966, citing, besides the classical structure of his films, their profoundly dramatic meanings, and their resounding actuality:

Ciulei is not the script writer of his own films, and thus the procedure is even more complicated. Nevertheless, acting even on such an uncomfortable substance, and mingling all his works, as much as is permitted (...) the outlines of his world are being revealed. It is a tense world, always alert. A humanity which passes through a baptism of fire, in all the meanings of the expression, and which is threatened both in its physical integrity (by the war) and moral integrity (the acceptance of defeat in *Erupția* (The Eruption), cowardice or treason in the others). His characters are confronted with the supreme problem of existence: good or evil. His heroes are captured in their exceptional moments of decision, and they have no time to delay their choice (...) They now have to choose the most difficult way, which few people escape – and, truly enough, Mihai and Bologa, Muller and Cervenko die in order to save the pure flame of human spirit which dwells in them. In the background of their drama death is traced out (...) The threat is there more as a latency, as a principle or an argument, and from time to

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<sup>1</sup> *Cinema* 1 (1965), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Cinema* 3 (1965), 3 and *Cinema* 5 (1966), 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> *Cinema* 3 (1965), 3. An article by Valerian Sava.

time is concentrated on the second plan. The director avoids bringing it directly to the scene (...) His work, humanistic in its spirituality, emanates in the best of its moments a spirit of seriousness and graveness.

In the absence of an Eisenstein or Pudovkin, who would have motivated and artistically sustained the battle for social justice within the official ideology, Ciulei's contribution to an eloquent treatment of the image and a perfectly balanced dramatism of the cinematographic construction constituted a "real event". But he distanced himself from the approach imposed in the age, outlining for himself a discreet, yet firm attitude of artistic independence.

At the time when Milos Forman created his *Loves of a Blonde*, Pintilie was working on his first film, *Duminică la ora 6* (Sunday at 6 o'clock, 1966). Disregarding the fairly "artificial" script, the film follows the line of the formal choice, of the quests and experiences of the modern film. It is that freedom behind the camera that Pintilie felt as a drug, along with the cameraman Sergiu Huzum, which shows through here, even in spite of the pseudo-fantastic story of two young people in love, who are both inevitably of an illegal rightwing orientation, demonstrating the positivism of the characters of those years. The artist escaped the rigors of theatrical convention and the "tyranny" of the text in order to discover the fluidity of the real, the composition and mobility of frames with the resources of the counterpoint – the audio-visual elements being employed with such a confidence that not for a moment did they seem to be evasive.<sup>1</sup> An article in an issue of the Hungarian magazine *Filmvilág* (Film World) from the same year comments: "His debut places the Romanian director among the new, most valuable figures of contemporary cinema".

With the *Reconstituirea* (The Reconstitution, 1969) the Romanian film seemed to leave behind the orbit of artistic-thematic abdications of the totalitarian system. The film combines in a then (1969) unprecedented way the visual quality of the contemporary film image with the powerfully contesting message. No ambiguity can confiscate the dramatism of the polemics, and the almost perfect composition ensures its esthetic sovereignty. The premiere of the film was on January 5, 1970, but as is well known, it was banned only a few weeks after its broadcast. Enough to create a legend. Moreover, it did not receive the approval of the authorities to be presented at Cannes. Still, on the edge of the 1971

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Victor Iliu, *Cinema*, 5 (1966), 2-3.

festival, in the framework of the *La Quinzaine des Realisateurs*, it was selected among the ten out of three hundred films shown at the Paris National Popular Theater. Critic Henry Chapier wrote in the newspaper *Combat*: "The film still present at Cannes, despite the non-consent of Romanian authorities, reminds one of the case of the Soviet film Rubliov."

Sergiu Huzum's camera was meant to dissect through his lens and present a panorama of everyday reality. His talent, meeting the director's imaginative fever, "manufactured" some floors of reconstructing a national tragedy: the individual's aberrations, institutional perversion, the disappearance of the referential-formative human model, the insecurity of existence, the sordidness of life and death. Horia Pătrașcu's short story, easily published in the "liberalization" atmosphere of the '70s, acquired the explosive features of a parable of Romanian actuality when transplanted into a film. Yet, as a type of performance intended for a large audience, the film was always regarded in communist regimes as the first instrument of propaganda, therefore it is not surprising that it was banned. What is surprising is the very possibility of its creation, even in those years (1969-1970). The press of the time commented on it with enthusiasm, yet without insisting on its subject disputing social reality. Consequently, it was not the media which consolidated its fame, but its interdiction. The only correct reading of directional intentions in the age belonged to Monica Lovinescu, and it was broadcast on Radio Free Europe: "The *Reconstituirea* (The Reconstitution) is not a satire. *Reconstituirea* means something else: the description of disorder, born from an existence which left behind its meanings. From here on, everything can happen. Even murder. Murder for indifference, murder for boredom, murder for haste, murder for the desire to repeat the real according to set patterns, murder for stupidity. Stupidity and its endless vulgarity; stupidity and the conformity that it gives birth to, stupidity and its incurable lack of imagination, stupidity and its fear from any gesture different from the mere repetition of a pattern, stupidity as heat, as numbness, stupidity which only listens to order, stupidity and its apparent generosity (indifference, in fact), stupidity as a defense, stupidity born out of the monotonous discharge of meaningless words from an existence which turned into an endless "meeting", stupidity which is tearful and winks at every glass of soda wine – this stupidity pours out from the first to the last image of the film, which thus becomes a kind of symphony over a single theme. Words are besmeared, sweat runs on the bodies, the look is blurred, everything melts

in the afternoon heat of stupidity (...) It is only significance that speaks in the *Reconstituirea*. Only that is chosen which has a meaning in the action, or rather in the parable. Even the mountain. It is not grand, it is only the support of the only dream an adolescent can allow himself, stuck in the heap of mediocrity which people around him call "life".<sup>1</sup>

When twenty years later, in 1990, the film was re-launched, younger generations of critics easily understood the violence of the protest, the suggestive power of the technique of treating the film within the film: "and that other film is transformed into fiction, into pure reality, "correcting" it, and adding to it (by replacement) its tragic dimension without which it would not have been anything else than a simple anecdote."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the absence of the positive reference, resolved by the (filmed) rerunning of the unapproved behavior – a reconstitution with an "educational" purpose seemed to me as decisive in the hierarchy of the semantic levels. The inertia of the young men was maintained by the lack of competent, stimulating authorities, inciting admiration converted into creative activity. Instead of this, we were offered equally incomplete alternatives of authority: the judicial and the educational. Justice was represented by the attorney, the Goring type of a Balcanic kind. The background of complaisance and asthenic lamentation hid the obtuseness and inflexibility of a statesman of the system, maintained by fraud and fear. He did not mean to restore justice, but to maintain indifference by insinuating a false good intent – and obviously the teenagers did not trust him, only feared him. His gestures served the ritual of the moment in the absence of any perspective.

The impotence of the school authorities was captured in the personality of the professor, a fellow with a humanist inclination, of a neurotic sensitivity, hyper-reactive and egocentric, and thus far from being a guarantee for the principles in the name of which he justified his existence as a teacher. As the carrier of an extinct "nobleness", embarrassed and inefficient, his complicity to the ill-treatment of the two teenagers, including his contribution to his own marginalization was largely expressive about the destiny of the intellectuals in those years.

Consequently, we were confronted with some disclosed truths, easily recognizable for the authorities, and this explains the banning of the *Reconstituirea* in the logic of its own time, exactly one year before the theses of July 1971.

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<sup>1</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte...*, 489.

<sup>2</sup> In the magazine *Ecran* (The Screen), 1 (1990), I. year, 7.

The French critic Michel Mesnil wrote in an essay dated about the same period: “What sovereign hadn’t dreamed of controlling even the dreams of his subjects, and especially those dreams in which he appeared? (...) In a totalitarian society there is no place for cinematography.”

The eternal irony of fate decided however that in Romania one of the most coherent protests against the totalitarian system before 1971 was articulated in the language of cinematography.