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New Filmic Waves in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: Allegories or Stories about Flesh?

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Abstract. Presupposing that historical and generational resemblances allow for a joint reading of their films, postcommunist Hungarian and Romanian (also nicknamed "New" and "New Wave") directors' films are examined (Radu Muntean, Szabolcs Hajdu, Attila Gigor). The proposal of allegorical reading is made, with specific filmic locuses highlighted as creating cinematic allegories out of (graphic) isolation and intermedial mixes.

Overview

My chief aim is considering the phenomenon of the Romanian New Wave and the Hungarian Young/New Film, in the working stage of a research project focused on those Hungarian and Romanian filmmakers who began their careers in the post-communist period.

Hungary and Romania are neighbouring Eastern-European countries; yet, different historical trajectories and, therefore, different EU accession dates (2004 and 2007) characterise their existence. However, both being former Soviet satellite states, with their cultural and filmic production structures corresponding to socialist cultural policies and developing along different routes after the changes occurred in their post-1989 social regimes, their study offers the possibility of multifaceted conclusions.

The somewhat arbitrary (yet, of course, historical) date of 1989 defines the outlines of mainly two (distinct) groups of film-creators:

a.) those who already had a career before the collapse of the socialist regime, and, consequently, continued their career in the post-socialist era as well. Although we will make references to such authorial names (from Dan Piţa to Lajos Koltai), our interest and the focus of our analysis lies elsewhere;

b.) those who began their filmic career after the year 1989, so, for whom socialism and communism is, at best, a vivid childhood and teenage memory, and whose artistic-formal sensitivity developed in the post-1989 media environment, characterised by the plurality of available sources (as compared to the one TV-channel and one, state-controlled movie theatre-chain), the growing dominance of commercial television, internet usage and fragmentary-spectacular genres such as videoclips and advertisements.

In the absence of acclaimed critical consensus and widely accepted gestures of canonisation, it is hard taking for granted that New Waves or New Films exist at all in these two neighbouring countries. Or, better said, that these labels are anything more than well sounding and marketable labels in festival or mass media contexts eager for sensational news. What is, however, certain, is that there are a number of filmmakers – both in Hungary and in Romania – who definitely began making shorts and features after the 1989 changes in social and political structures, in a "postmodern postcommunist period" as Christina Stojanova names it. The fact that these filmmakers were coming of creative age (more or less) simultaneously with the processes of postcommunism allows us to presuppose a generational resemblance and a common sensibility in their working and creating methods, and the poetical functioning of the films themselves.

At this point I advance one of the working hypotheses: namely, that the novelty and the "new wavism/new wave quality" of these films resides only partly in their formal creativity in using the filmic medium. "The freshness and the astonishing quality" of these movies (and here I am citing newspaper and poster slogans) is equally deriving from their innovatory style or mode of representation, and from the stories told as well as the objects, sites, places and human bodies represented. In short, mise-en-scène, or the self-enclosed diegetic world must be considered and mentioned à propos their "New Wave" quality besides narration and audio-visual qualities creating diegesis. Actually, this was more or less the case with the French New Wave in the 1960s or the Hong Kong New Wave in the late 1980s-early 1990s as well (see Abbas 1997).

Trying to find a point of entry common enough to the various films of various filmmakers of Hungarian and Romanian New Wave/New Film background, I consider that the idea of cinematic allegories being created on screen is one worthwhile. Therefore I proceed with examining how allegorical constructions are created, and to what end, in some of the films in question.

Allegory in Moving Images

Creating allegories and relegating subtle meanings into allegorical realms is a well documented and deeply researched process à propos (post)modern nations and countries with dictatorial and war experiences when and where censorship is unusually active. As Ágnes Pethő writes in connection with Mircea Daneliuc's *Glissando* (1984): "There is nothing surprising in the fact that, in times of dictatorship and a general ban on individual and artistic freedom, a work of art deploys techniques that raise the concrete elements of the story into the realm of the symbolic and tries to convey a message to its audience through the language of parables and allegories." (Pethő 2005, 166) Thus it is even redundant to state about Central and Eastern European, and, moreover, Balcanic films, that they resort to allegorisation, visibly a critical commonplace ever since such corpuses are supposed to exist and exert an influence in world cinema (e.g. the post WWII era). Still, keeping up with allegorical structures in films made well beyond the shadow of communist-socialist dictatorships, in a global climate of "laissez-faire" and "everything goes", seems to be a more curious choice.

It appears that the re-conceptualisation of our understanding of allegories might help us to see better the need for using them in contemporary Hungarian and Romanian films made by postcommunist, young filmmakers. As Ismail Xavier summarises in his theoretical overview, it was Walter Benjamin's change of perspective at the beginning of the 20th century which made possible the reconfiguration of allegory – vis-à-vis the symbol: "in this new theoretical framework, the romantic opposition symbol/allegory, which degrades allegorical expression as arbitrary, nonorganic, mechanical, is reversed. The idea of an unmediated experience of meaning embodied in the symbol is now seen as an illusory attempt to deny the mediation of language, and allegory is redeemed as the discourse that immerses itself "into the depths which separate visual being from meaning" (Benjamin 1977: 165)." (Xavier 2007, 346.) From a mechanical and dull process of multiplication allegory has been turned into a method adequate for expressing "the crisis of culture in modernity," "not only a language trope but also a key notion in the characterisation" of this crisis. (Xavier 2007, 333.) Xavier has a further observation which allows us to redirect (re-position) the notion of allegory in the context of the specific audio-visual medium of the moving image: "one strong reason for its [allegory's] reawakening in modern times is the fact that it has always been the signifying process most identified with the presence of *mediation*, with the idea of a cultural artifact that requires specific frames

of reference to be read, quite distant from any sense of the 'natural.'" (Xavier 2007, 333.) Such an overlapping between the activities of "mediating," "creating mediations" and "creating allegories," "allegorising" allows me to go one step further in trying to understand "the need for allegorisation" in young Hungarian or Romanian cinema. Thus if resorting to allegorical doubling rests on the idea that cultural crisis, shock, or trauma are better represented while "specific frames of reference for reading" are supposed, with "senses of the natural" being suspended for the sake of "mediation" coming to the forefront, we might have a firsthand, rough answer to the question I began with: why such an "allegorical" need in a climate of acceptance and (much) milder censorship?

Applying the structure/trope of allegory to the specific filmic medium of the moving image helps us to approach the concrete examples themselves. In her mentioned essay Ágnes Pethő writes that "allegorical representation means in this case, as it always does, a systematic multiplication of meanings on different levels of the cinematic text." (Pethő 2005, 166.) Ismail Xavier is even more specific in this respect: "When conveyed by a narrative film, allegory is not simply produced by a storytelling process involving agents and actions, but also results from visual compositions that, in many cases, establish a clear dialogue with particular iconographical traditions, ancient and modern. Depending on the particular editing strategy adopted, a filmmaker can privilege the horizontal, narratological, succession of shots to create specific space-time structures of action, or can privilege the vertical relationships created by the interaction of image and sound, or by the intertextual connections between the film's pictorial composition and cultural codes deriving from painting and photography. Therefore, reading films allegorically is always a multi-focal cultural gesture." (Xavier 2007, 337.)

(Graphic) Isolation as an Allegorical Source

If allegorical processes may be going on different levels, structures and medial channels of a movie, interpretation has several pillars to rest on. For the time being I intend to speak about two possibilities for/of allegorisation that appear in young Hungarian or Romanian cinema of the 1990s and 2000s, both of them resting on the idea of "isolation," once in a visual and once in a concrete, spatial sense.

Based on the mentioned work of Angus Fletcher and also Miriam Hansen's interpretation of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (as summarised by Ismail Xavier) we may identify the "graphic isolation of images" as a visual-compositional

method dependent for its decoding on an allegorical eye, and I quote: "Fletcher cites surrealism and the work of Eisenstein as vivid examples of the principle of allegorical juxtaposition, emphasising their common anti-realist techniques of isolation (the perfect delineation of contours, the relative autonomy of each image forming part of the montage)." (Xavier 2007, 347) Meanwhile, Miriam Hansen is speaking about "an impulse toward allegorical constructions based on the "graphic isolation" of images." (Xavier 2007, 353.)

Well delineated, strongly separated images with emphasised contours, graphically isolated, might find their correspondent on the narrative level and in the mise-en-scène in stories of characters cut off from social turmoil, living through personal-emotional dramas in isolated places and spaces, this latter itself an archetypal topos of/for creating allegories about malfunctioning communities or disintegrating countries and nations. As Christina Stojanova summarises in her essay about, as she calls it, "young cinema in Central and Eastern Europe:" "In such a world [e.g. chaotic postcommunism], community, traditionally based on emotional commitment and reciprocal responsibility, is all but impossible, and if marginally present, is either hostile or ironically distant or just plain indifferent. This explains young directors' penchant for tight claustrophobic shots, disengaging the world of the protagonists from community and environment, whose inconsequentiality is reflected in casual details and a scarce number of extras." (Stojanova 2005, 216)

An adequate example in this respect, both in the sense of isolated place, cut-off community and extremely well-delineated contours is the introductory sequence of Szabolcs Hajdu's 2004 *Tamara*, the story and drama of four eccentric characters, mirrored and commented by the farm animals around them, a full blown allegory in itself.

Graphically isolated from the rest of the world, composed in tight, claustrophobic shots, a preference for casual details: these are features which may be also cited à propos many of the well known titles of the so-called Romanian New Wave: *Traffic (Trafic),* Cătălin Mitulescu's 2004 short film, *Sick Love (Legături bolnăvicioase),* Tudor Giurgiu's 2006 feature, *432 (4 luni, 3 săptămâni şi 2 zile),* the 2007 feature by Cristian Mungiu, and finally *Boogie,* the 2008 feature by Radu Muntean.

A good example is the end discussion between husband and wife in *Boogie*, a 2008 movie directed by Radu Muntean and co-financed by one of the biggest commercial television channels in Romania, Antena 1. The title character, Boogie or Bogdan (Dragoş Bucur) is at a Romanian seaside resort with his pregnant wife, Smaranda (Ana Maria Marinca) and their 5 year old son. Accidentally, they meet

with his former college friends, none of whom has established a family yet. Constant rows and reproaches from his wife, as well as nostalgia for "days of being wild" result in a noisy night out, with drinking and a prostitute. The sequence analysed is the ending, where Boogie comes home to find his wife awake.

The "formal-narrative entity" which emerges can be seen as characteristic of all of these examples to a certain extent, and may be described by

– the employment of static cameras;

– which are shooting from a lower level than normal eyesight,

– while the filmed mise-en-scène is usually the dramatic-climactic height of the conflicts

– and these conflicts are concretised in intimate discussions of two or three characters.

– Further, shot-counter shot construction is avoided for the sake of what may be called medium or American totals of groups of people, thus all of the participants in the dialogue remain still and in place during whole sequences as long as 10 minutes.

What we remain with is the memory of two-dimensional pictures of living characters as no camera movements and no cutting interrupts or dissects the scenes. These are theoretically long takes, yet without the real effect of this method, since the different planes lose their relevance as the camera and the viewer's distance from the scene seen is very little.

Paraphrasing Angus Fletcher's observations about "allegory as a symbolic mode," Ismail Xavier also points to the fact that fragmentary texts, with no obvious codes offered for interpretation, or simply enigmatically composed – as was the case with modernist collages or Eisensteinian intellectual montages – are more probable to invite allegorical readings, opacity favours allegory. This may be a last reason why young directors, usually at their second or third feature, favour processes that allow one to speak about the allegorical dimension of Hungarian and Romanian New Wave films.

Instances of Reality

Questions about "the real" (and its filmic representations) in the post-communist Eastern European region are not innocent ones and are not lacking deeply ideological foundations. The postcommunist region, thanks to nearly commonplace historical reasons, appears to be "closer to real experiences" in several cultural discourses, and here I have specifically in mind film and literary

criticism, or film history as such (as an example we may think of Bordwell and Thompson's *Film History*, and its account of Hungarian cinema). Furthermore, we cannot overlook the fact that filmic representation to be decoded as "realist" eases such suppositions, and the realist features of Hungarian film (or Eastern European cinema, for that matter) have not gone unnoticed since István Szőts's remarkable film from the 1940s, *People on the Alps* (*Emberek a havason*). What "reality" is and how it may be represented emerged as a key question in another recent context: namely the "screen culture" born out of technological developments of the post-media age, affecting Central and Eastern Europe, and in conclusion contemporary Hungarian film too.

While in the first discursive field (aka "real experiences of history") what is "real" might equate accounts of historically significant events and panoramas of postcommunist everydays, in the second sense "the cinematic real" would mean correspondences with "realist modes of representation in the cinema," and also oppositions with "non-realist" paradigms. Finally, in the third discourse, "the real" could emerge from for example Barthesian definitions of the medium of photography as "indexically pointing to the real" (see Wells 2003), and in contrast with other media that have no "real" referent whatsoever: this opposition may be translated and simplified as the "analogue-digital binary."

Needless to say, the above sketch is disputable, and it should only serve the goal of contextualising the meaning of "real, reality, the real" as connected to the cinema. Thus, in the cinema, something "being real, belonging to reality" may be constituted by any of the above sketched methods, and I re-iterate them:

– depiction (re-staging) of historically accurate events (that had a correspondent referent in the past reality)

– documentation of geographically or ethnically "exotic," current phenomena (which have a correspondent referent in existing reality)

– adherence to a loosely understood "cinematic realism" (as defined in famous "realist" trends by location shooting, amateur actors, routine, everyday happenings "spiced" by chance, moving or shaking camera, absence of post-production soundtrack)

– definition of "the real" in the current turmoil of mobile and tactile multimediality by favouring one type of media-coding over the other as supposedly more faithful in reaching "reality."

"Real" Allegories

However, a number of more or less recently seen filmic instances from New Hungarian Cinema seem to create "a sense of the real and reality" not by favouring the possibilities of one media over the other and suggesting that for example a painting or a photo is "more real" than filmic representation. Rather such a clash of differently mediated representations is created that the viewer is urged to meditate and generate for herself what may be classified as "real or reality" in these cases. It is important that the clash of different representational modes is realised by confining all these to a single, possibly continuous interior or exterior space, thus signposting the impossibility (therefore: non-reality) of the scenes in an unmistakable manner.

In Attila Gigor's 2008 *The Investigator* (*A nyomozó*) a highly unresponsive, resigned and unfriendly pathologist is hired by a one-eyed man, Cyclops, to kill a physicist after the latter attends a mandolin concert at the Music Academy. The pathologist, Malkáv, accepts the offer because he may save his ill mother's life with the pay. However, as in any film noir pastiche, the victim turns out to be the killer's half brother after he is already dead, and a web of intricate happenings unravel, naturally. The sequence when Malkáv, the fresh killer opens the letter sent to him by the man he murdered the night before is especially illuminating.

The tightly composed night scene of the pathologist's reading the letter lightens up and the eye-level camera is transposed to a high angle as if surveying the scene from above, the latter losing its exact spatial context created by the apartment – so well known by this point, therefore able to generate "a sense of the real." We re-gain the view of the two protagonists, victim and killer, half-brothers, in an obviously de-contextualised, therefore abstract setting: they are treading on the carpet-like magnified letter the pathologist is reading during the scene. This verbally coded printed page, which in the introductory sequence is an object in Malkáv's hands, changes its dimensions and position in space, and it is also re-configured aurally, as the simultaneous, eloquently theatrical monologue of the victim. Thus letters, words and embodied utterance meet and clash, literally.

I choose to compare this extract from *The Investigator* to another genre-movie example, namely the famous "Welcome to the desert of the real!" sequence of the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), where a profound recognition must occur in the mind set-up of hero Neo as re-configured by hacker Morpheus. While in *The Investigator* Malkáv faces a huge printed page in the abstract white space, in *The Matrix*, in similar surroundings, a visibly outmoded television set acquires

the same role. Namely, of enlightening the hero who must undergo a traumatic re-cognition or understanding of self if he is to continue training in the matrix, a process equalled by the "unsought" quest in Gigor's genre pastiche movie.

In another example, *Bibliothèque Pascal* by Szabolcs Hajdu (2010), we face the traumatic life-story of a young single mother, Mona Paparu, embedded in the conversation she is having with a state official in order to regain the custody of her daughter. When supposedly recounting the occasion of meeting the father of her child, who has taken her as a hostage since he is pursued by the police, we are witnessing, together with Mona, an interesting sequence.

As Mona wants to flee from the derelict beach house, ill-lit and tight, strange creeping noises make her look at the cheap plastic covering of the walls, and the soft smoke whirling around his guard's sleeping figure. Parallel to the golden covering's tearing apart, a similar abstraction of the redundant spatial markers occurs as in *The Investigator*, the camera moving backwards to reveal a profile view of the two heroes sitting at a table, with huge flower wreaths framing their faces. Fascinating bugs and butterflies fill the air, and the shots go on to include the "real" Mona watching and participating in the scene at the same time, again, in a manner similar to Malkáv's being a spectator of the letter and an actor in its being performed. In *Bibliothèque Pascal* we witness the embodiment of Viorel, the hero's "love dream," as explained later, since he has "the condition" of his dreams being projected on the space surrounding him while he sleeps. No such diegetic explanation is offered for Malkáv's being transposed to "abstract" theatre-scenes along *The Investigator*.

In the last of my examples, Szabolcs Hajdu's 2004 *Tamara*, the already highly theatrical filmic space – a faraway farm house and a cast of four isolated characters playing stories of love and marital infidelity – is further expanded to include stages within the main stage. The four actors speak Hungarian, while the animals living on their farm have a nonsense language of their own, of which they make good use as voiceover commentators, and their often humorous, sometimes rather pompous commentaries are being translated to us as Hungarian-language subtitles.

Because of their "non-real" role as commentators, we would not classify the speaking animals as part of the diegetic world, nevertheless, the continuous, uninterrupted moving camera and their appearance along with the human heroes, as in the sequence seen, suggests a similar inclusion in the reality of the diegesis of a non-real (imagined, allegorical) element, as the materialised letter or the embodied dream in the previous examples. However, a strange detachment is prevailing in all three mentioned sequences: the white abstract space, the glowing,

over-heated room of unidentifiable geometry, and the cheerful, unnatural colours of the animals do not allow for total immersion in the respective worlds of diegesis.

Certainly, the examples did not catch my attention only thanks to their innovative beauty, although that could have been simply the case. Rather they seem, to my mind, to reverberate (remind of) an idea I have been considering for a long time, and accurately summarised by David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in their 1999 *Remediation, Understanding New Media*. Here they state the following: "Media function as objects within the world – within systems of linguistic, cultural, social and economic exchange. Media are hybrids in Latour's sense and are therefore real for the cultures that create and use them." (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 58.) More visible and tangible – in our post-media screen cultures – than ever, media have a reality of their own and they truly generate and/or constitute our sensations of reality as well as experiences of "the real". Instead of simply representing or mirroring the real images and objects that stand as models for them to copy and imitate, in Bolter, Grusin and Latour's idea contemporary media go beyond representation as mimesis or imitation, to become themselves constituents of our real worlds – which they have, of course, always been, as material objects.

In this context, it becomes more complicated to understand and define "the real"/reality as that which opposes the represented, the mediated, the imitated, since in specific cases exactly what and how is represented adds up to constitute reality. By highlighting a few – and perhaps even incidental – sequences from films belonging to New Hungarian Cinema, I meant to suggest that current filmic discourses from Central and Eastern Europe may be questioned for their definitions of what is real, what is reality, and "answers" given are very much reminiscent of the above citation. Intense moments of mediation and remediation – in Bolter and Grusin's sense (that is, the representation of one media in another media) – that create inter- and multimedial constructions in these filmic sequences allow for proposing that in New Hungarian Cinema mimesis and representation do not always counterpoint the real and reality. By juxtaposing what may count as real and what may be seen as imagined in the same spatial surroundings, "the real," "reality" is forced to emerge in the viewer's minds in these specific filmic instances. Interestingly, "the real" is not represented so much along the commonplace post-media age differentiation of "the analogue/ the digital," but it becomes articulated in medial structures that use theatrical scenery (make reference to the theatre, to dance or to the museum), and are prone to be interpreted as allegorical. This is an idea articulated by others as well, and also worth further considerations.

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